

***[Operational Damage Report for Critical Sovereignties in the Spine]***

*1. Kainhal*

*Death Toll: Estimated 23 Million*

*Casualties: Over 120 Million*

*Damages:*

*Damage: Decimation of all major Syndicates; operational members, active enforcers, associated gangs, activated golems*

*2. Suldananapt-ladoir*

*Death Toll: 12 Million*

*Casualties: Approximately 64 Million, many missing*

*Damage: Major chrono-spatial launch sites damaged; mass drone-jock casualties*

*3. False Isle*

*Death Toll: 8 Million*

*Casualties: 63 Million, sections of city displaced. Need further review*

*Damage: Decimation of all major Syndicates; operational members, active enforcers, associated gangs, activated golems*

*4. Singhrid's Kennel*

*Death Toll: 29 Million*

*Casualties: Unknown, thaumaturgic shielding for employed Syndicates ruptured*

*Damage: Organ-Breeder operation completely destroyed; all mod-slaves freed or euthanized*

*5. Meldain-*

***[ENDING REPORT]***

*+I've seen enough. Issue a cast: All tertiary assets must go to ground. Do not do anything to draw the Chief Paladin's attention. Delay all overt operations and reduce noise for the foreseeable future.*

*Instancer Madrapu, set up a meeting with Convex "Wallflower." Tell them we need Incubi support. Tell them we would like to make a purpose to procure more proxies.*

*Samir Naeko just shook off his fucking malaise by dragging the back of his hand across the city's face. The easy days are over. A storm of shit is rolling in over the horizon. We need to hunker down.*

*-Augur Nyretei Yaeglis of Sanctus*

## Among Giants

There were levels to power.

There were gods beyond gods.

And then there were beings like Samir Naeko—a man bearing implacable power, seemingly capable of laying his hand upon all of New Vultun at once.

Avo beheld the devastation across his ever-spreading plague of splinters. He watched through cog-feeds on the ground, from drones crossing the sky, internalized damage reports flicking through mechanized combat platforms, and tasted the Rend spilling free of rupturing golems.

He witnessed Naeko's fury in a perspective more intimate and complete than any other in the city. He was there. From the gutters to Light's End. He was there to watch Naeko finish his fight with Zein. He was there, watching the tumbling clouds that formed the Chief Paladin's palm sweep through every Layer, pass through every being and building, press down upon every aspect of violence manageable across the tapestry of existence.

The coils within gauss guns whined. Missiles streaked. Fists landed. Miracles manifested.

And the shooters were cut down by their own flechettes. Explosions fizzled but the jocks guiding the missiles fried. Strikes folded in on themselves, arms and legs breaking, combat bioforms tearing into their own flesh. The golems made to break the world flinched, flared, and came apart physically and ontologically as their miracles were torn away from them.

Through dimming eyes and failing cog-feeds, Avo stole death after death, drank ghosts after ghost, and learned what it was to stand against Naeko as a mortal man. He watched from Light's End, the Throat, the Spine, and then the gutters. He bore witness from the perspectives of an unharmed bystander and an active transgressor.

The former merely walked on as embraced by a cloud. The others experienced the full retribution of their own actions. Magnified. Amplified. Their deaths justified.

**GHOSTS: [44,035,283]**

**THAUMIC OUTPUT - 81,935 THAUM/c**

Naeko's Heaven thundered down against the city like it was an anvil he sought to break, and caught in the radius, Avo suffered a turbulence that made him feel small. Reminded him he had far to rise yet as a Godclad, and that there were beings in this city who dwarfed him yet.

Zein was contained. At least that scheme had succeeded, but watching them fight, watching her use everything she could, but be rendered little more than impotent by his sheer power—unable to even kill him with a future-stuck thrust—was humbling.

And more than a little thrilling.

The Godslayer was contained. A problem for the Paladins to handle. Perhaps Naeko would finish killing her, but something told Avo the Chief Paladin still wanted to keep his former master alive, loathsome as she was, and enraged though he was. With all she knew, she could offer her memories. Give Naeko insight into Avo and the others. Reveal truths about Ninth Column. But such a thing would do more harm to her vaunted paths.

What's more, the dragon told of her memories. How she kept them siloed and stored. Some of her recollections burned within him. Moments of history crystallized into shape, the haze of the past clearing. Other gulfs remained, but Avo doubted anyone but Zein could find them. And with how totally he infested their Oversecs, whoever they dispatched to interface with her, he would compromise first.

The path ahead was dangerous, and Avo was under no illusion of the lines he crossed in attempting to kill Zein. But just as well. Even if Voidwatch severed him from support, he had a direction. A desire. The knowledge of what it took to enter the game as a true player.

He sought his own dream. His own path. His own idealization. For himself, his cadre, and all those he chose to bring with him.

Such a thing could not be realized as someone else's slave. Like Samir Naeko had been. From the few exchanges overhead between him and Zein, Avo knew he made the right choice. The sight of the Chief Paladin—a titan among enough Godclads—casting his despair into the darkness of the crumbling block, offering his surrender to a city that just didn't care was seared into Avo's consciousness.

Even as he felt his Daemon dissipate, even as he detonated his sheath like a warhead, Avo still tasted *them*. Naeko's emotions, bleeding into the Nether like a gushing wound. Beyond being overwhelmed, beyond the fact that Naeko stood a beacon of thaumaturgic power, there was also something else that compelled him to stay and watch. A soft note in the Nether that couldn't be ignored.

Sorrow.

Sorrow and fury screamed out in tidal-like timbres, washing through the vicinity, drenching Avo's Specter-disguised splinter with a flood of despair even as he offered his final words of encouragement.

The act was a thing more instinct than impulse, driven by an urge to understand Naeko better. And a growing pity that couldn't be denied.

How miserable it must be to hold all that power and still loathe oneself to such an extent? How long did it take to feel less than human living such a life?

Avo didn't ask the Paladin these questions, choosing instead to draw his ghosts away and finally leave the scene.

Zein's investiture of memories included insights into Naeko's abilities. One could jack into the Chief Paladin's mind. It would be a trifling act to Avo with his warmind of Delusion. The problem was he wouldn't be able to subsume the Paladin yet. Or even change him for that matter.

A miracle of impermeability layered the man's very being. No external force could compel him. Not physically. Not mentally. Not spiritually. Things could leave his mind, but that which changed against his will or caused harm to his ego would instantly alert him. Be turned back upon the inflicter in totality.

This, and the fact that Naeko would soon be in the presence of the Heaven of Truth made tracking the Chief Paladin through peripheral assets like Kare, Kassamon, or Naeko a better option.

No sense in risking himself further with his objectives mostly fulfilled.

At least not until the next window of opportunity came: the moment Naeko needed to shift between his Heaven and Hell. That would be the opening. The point when someone could strike at him as Zein did with her planned thrust during the transition between unfettered destruction and halting violence.

She failed in her attempt. Avo wouldn't.

For now, however, he had a final bit of business to attend before he returned to his cadre and divided the spoils. There was much they had to do. The dangers they faced were a magnitude greater now. They needed to be ready. And they needed to be *more*.

He cast the memories of his encounter over into each member of his cadre and updated Kare on what just happened in the gutters. Surprise bloomed from within the young Paladin, but he engaged with her no further, focused instead on mantling his base mind into the body currently extracting the Heart of Noloth.

***"Oh, delectable,"*** the Woundmother purred, studying how the once immense eye was tunneling into Avo now, spilling into him as ebony tendrils, drawn in by the Stillborn's rippling emanations without any chance of resistance. ***"Soon our greats will be made greater again. You will need to give unto us more blessings master. For if we are to rise among giants like the large child, we will need to climb much, much more."***

The Techplaguer concurred. ***"Upgrades are OPTIIMAL! Apply them WIS-ly."***

A morose neighing sounded from the Heaven of Air, and the Heart of Noloith's coming inclusion in the liminal orbit only increased its bitterness. ***"I was free. I flew. But only for a second. I flew."***

Avo empathized. Being struck down by Naeko mid-gallop was a tortuous thing. *+I know. We'll get back to the enclave soon. I'll make you better. And then I'll set you loose again. Let all of you have your time. Want to see what you'll do. Who you can be.+*

Each of the awakened gods paused inside him, a mixture of pleasure and surprise filling them. Avo expected Calvino to chide him for this encouragement but found the EGI missing from his Neurodeck. Perhaps he was back with Aegis, trying to explain things. Or maybe they were done. Voidwatch was cutting him free.

He hoped it was the former. It would feel wrong to not have a neighboring mind chattering at him from the inside, quipping about the world, telling him about lost histories, or ancient philosophies.

More than once, the EGI turned him away from a foul choice. More than once, Avo found himself enjoying Calvino's company.

It would be a shame for them to part this way.

**[They're likely just making a report or damaged,] Benhata said, sounding certain. [What just happened... that will take a lot of explaining. Especially with the question of who was at fault. This is a very subjective matter, and if my experience with the voiders has taught me anything, it's that they don't use people like we do, so I doubt you're just being thrown away.]**

Avo grunted his thanks internally, letting his thoughts go silent as his final task neared its end.

A translucent dome two hundred meters in area spread out around him, projected by the familiar Delta golems to guard what he was doing from prying eyes. None would lay eyes on him right now. None would glimpse the Heart or his sheath as he concluded his subsumption.

**REND CAPACITY [HEART OF NOLOTH]: 0%**  
**DOMAINS DETECTED (SHADOW/FORCE/SPACE)**  
**STABILIZING ONTOLOGY**  
**REPAIRS IN PROGRESS - 1%**

The primary golems he used to drain the rupture were the Haunter-patterns—a Breaker platform originally built under Ori-Thaum. The fifteen golems each resembled a black beetle with nine extended pairs of muscular human arms instead of wings. They stood twenty-five in length and

half that across, and each of them also sported subdorsally mounted fusion cannons charged and ready to burn.

Their Rendsinks, however, were at maximum capacity, and if not for the Shadowcrawlers Avo included among the five Knots he requisitioned from the Paladins, he might've needed to absorb some of the Rend into his Fardrifter for things to work.

As things stood now, his Soul was about to be twenty-six Heavens stronger. Twenty-five donated by the Paladins and Exorcists. One that was the Heart of Noloth.

Not a bad final—

### **WARNING: HEAVY TEMPORAL DISTORTION DETECTED**

The coming shock slammed down on him just as the last tickles of darkness slithered into his crackling Soul. The palls cast by the nearby foliage stopped clawing at the enshadowed matter, but a swelling of gold tore across existence, striking Avo's Frame with a ringing impact.

Where Zein was a river running the course of time, where her Fisher That Wasn't dove across non-linear streams, what was coming for Avo now was something akin to a continental avalanche. The metaphysical weight couldn't be ignored. Greater than Thousandhand. Greater even than Naeko.

Distant as it was, its coming was like the fall of a titan, the clouds displacing to announce its arrival, tectonic plates parting as they greeted the surface.

More significant perhaps was how it moved in relation to time. Zein leaped forward into the future. Skipping and skimming the surface of progressive chronology. This was something else. This was a parallel tide to existence itself. A second ocean of reality simulated from the first.

It washed through Avo, and he felt his Domain of Chronology rattle. His Frame lurched, and for a beat, he thought it was going to be torn from his sheath entirely. He stumbled as the world around him fractured into splitting stacks unto itself before resplendent threads stitched them back together.

He knew who this was. He knew *what* this was. The memories he consumed from the locus pillar sang out to him. A single name escaped with his breath.

“Veylis.”

*Leave. Leave now! **She's** reaching out for you! She's reaching through the paths! She felt you!*

Avo removed the urges of greed and gluttony from his mind and abandoned the golems he was planning to consume without effort. To stay here any longer would expose him. Give the High Seraph to tear him across time.

But it was still overwhelming. How fast she came. How fast she found him. How easy it was for her to remake entire sections of existence.

Zein was right. He wasn't ready. Not even close.

But he could run. He could escape.

His triggered **Haemification** on himself and burrowed through Draus' session. A splatter of blood blended with the crimson grass on which he once stood. Only a single submind remained active in New Vultun, diving the Nether, spreading splinters for the coming days. Physically, Avo was gone. Utterly vacating New Vultun before it was too late.

He thought himself quiet enough. He thought Naeko a good enough deterrent and his time apple.

He thought.

He thought.

He couldn't just think anymore. He couldn't leave anything to chance. Not with his enemies capable of turning time itself against him.

He needed better counters.

Protections.

**[Paths]** of his own.

Time to have another conversation with Kae.

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A second later, a reverberation pulsed through existence, and a second layer of reality snapped away from the first, vibrating even though it bore all the same aspects as its source.

The Paladin golems and courtyard where the minor disturbance originated were unspooled from baseline reality and taken.

And then just as fast as it came, just as fast as Naeko felt its presence, turned his palm back upward, it receded like a fleeing wave, collapsing back upward through the Layers, back upward at a speed unfathomable, back, back, and back to the apex of the Tiers.

In the span of a heartbeat, the streaming waves of gold crossed thousands of kilometers, and around them were the paths broken and rebuilt.

Within its grip now was a collection of golems and a space and moment in time. The paths twisted together and rebuilt the extracted portions, golems coming back into shape, the biothaumically designed garden walkway unfolding into shape. Jutting trees of pearly white protruded from swollen nubs of red. Bone ran on as walkways lined the fecund ground.

Brushing across the patterns of existence, she found it then. A smear of blood coating a patch of flattened grass. Intriguing. Fascinating.

A lesser echo was spawned. The entity materializes in the scene and through it, she touches the blood and strains her Heaven to turn back time. As much as it can before the nothingness.

The contours of a figure come into shape, but she can see that its death was immediate. Sudden. Unspeakably violent. A death only possible via thaumaturgic means. But still, there was no anchoring. No hint of death in her scenes or baseline reality. When her canon reached its limit, she studied the figure and found herself entirely at a loss as to who she was facing.

They stood too tall. Too thin. The blood spraying free from its parting body left it masked by an obfuscated facade.

But even with her ignorance of the subject's actual identity, she was already certain of one thing, a truth she vocalized, this reassembled world speaking in her stead.

***“My mother, you most certainly are not. So, mystery, who might you be? If you are not my mother, who might you be?”***