

*Naeko... Naeko...*

*Ah. Yes, yes, scream in pain. You've earned that. But scream while listening! I have something important to say.*

*To you as well, Veylis!*

*It is not enough to perform perfection.*

*Indeed, I have known many a talented warrior, and they all are embarrassments in the end, for perfection is something they merely feel.*

*The strokes, the slashes, the attacks, the maneuvers, the grapples, the transitions, the clenches, the shots, all felt instead of known, embodied instead of channeled or directed.*

*And what use is a master that cannot teach? And what worth is an artist that cannot offer their worth back to the world?*

*I pose this question to you because I've seen both of you attempting to achieve mastery.*

*So selfish, so deluded.*

*Do you think you will grasp something that no one else has, alone, swinging your sword idly on your own path?*

*No, you will see it after you've fought million-million duels and come out on both sides to know what it is like to be struck and while also striking another. Here. These blades are for you. The locus will let you feel everyone you kill. A blessing of mine, so you can witness the perspective of both slayer and slain.*

*This will give you full insight into how a battle is conducted, and allow you to imbibe more of the art than a mundane can experience in a lifetime.*

*You should kill as many as you can. The soldiers, blind the grand scheme. Their officers, straining to direct their fighting cattle. The commanders, with grand sights but feeble limbs. The logisticians! The faithful! The God-Touched! All of them!*

*Strike them to master all aspects of violence, the totality of it.*

*Everything, children.*

*Everything.*

*Be it alone or a commander, in unarmed combat or firing artillery.*

*Everything must be understood from the minutiae to the broadest elements. Above all, though, you have to know the fundamentals of being attacked, of attacking, of angles, of the structure of war itself.*

*Once you have mastered one body, do it across another. Do it using people who are under you. Do it with limbs missing. Do it with extra limbs. As many situations as possible, as many circumstances as possible, as dire circumstances as possible.*

*You do not get to call yourself a true blade until I find your refinement worthy. And you don't let a little thing like losing an arm stop you from fighting. Do you hear that, Naeko? You still have a jagged stump right now. You had me in a grapple! Plunge it into my neck! Don't topple over spraying and screaming. It's embarrassing.*

*Ah, but it is also beautiful. Even today, I would consider myself little more than a disciple, for day by day, I learn more ways to kill, more ways, infinitely.*

*You think that just because few people in this world can match you in combat, you are at the apex? No, the apex is beyond us, but we must strive to meet it every day.*

*For someday, we will meet something beyond our means to kill if we just stand still. And that is the greatest tragedy of all: To be slain because you never bothered slaying further enough.*

*Now, I am going to mend and then try to kill both of you again.*

*Try not to die.*

-Zein Thousandhand to Samir Naeko and Veylis Avandaer during Training (Circa 89934 Divinity [125 years before the Godsfall])

21-8

Sword and Plague (II)

Drawing memories from destroyed echoes was something Zein usually avoided. The danger that Veylis could have cast something back through its flattening threads—or that an infection of the mind would be passed back over to her could not be denied.

But in this instance, she simply *had to know*.

Many of her memories were partitioned. Divided across her various echoes upon reception. The dilution of her understanding made her a dangerous threat, an enemy capable of constant surprise—for there were times she cast ghosts forward into the future before wiping the recollections from her mind, alerting herself to previous plans just before the cusp of their enactment.

Through these means, she ensured the cover of her mystery, and evading her daughter's clutches demanded nothing sort of mastery.

As her struggle continued, though, as she continued battling against this *pestilence* afflicting matter, flesh, and thought, a gut feeling told her that she already knew who this was.

So, she took a chance once more. She pulled memories tied to the streams of a destroyed echo and *remembered*.

Everything came to her at once.

Everything.

Ah. Walton's *bastard*.

The ghoul with a Liminal Frame.

The one she briefly tutored herself at Ox-3 in the district of Xin Yunsha, likewise expecting to face the Hungers, only to sink her blade into one of their monsters instead.

Her echo had cast these memories away upon being discovered by Veylis, and she herself had followed suit, ejecting everything connected to that point in time, averting any chance of mem-lock in the paths.

Pride and more than little annoyance dawned on her.

Oh, Avo.

How the little dagger had grown.

Of course, she couldn't quite call him that anymore, considering the fevered fight he was putting up.

How had he changed this much in such a short time? Drawing additional memories associated with him, she recalled him being a strange merger between flame and mind.

The fires of his consciousness were quenched now. In their place drifted empty winds. False breaths exhaled by his mind, the *delusion* of his genuine sequences creating an absence, allowing him to embrace—or embody—any other cognitive structure he encountered.

Her true blade whispered again, but she needed to explanation.

Another warmind was active within him. Somehow.

But that meant he must have engaged low masters and come out victorious.

Fascinating. Unexpected. But pleasing. Very pleasing. To think the fools of Noloth would be brought so low by one of their former slaves.

The bitterness and humiliation left a delicious aftertaste in her mouth.

Nonetheless, she still needed to break him. It was simply the way of things. A predator was a predator, and to let him move emboldened was folly. He needed to re-learn who was the student and who was the master. More importantly, she needed to make sure he stopped being so *noisy* in the paths.

It was his fortune that she dove upon him. If not for Naeko, then Veylis would crawled down into the Warrens, certain to twist the future in her favor.

+Avo,+ Zein said, casting her greeting across all simulated futures. Her true self moved again, skipping across Sovereignities and districts, materializing only in structures of abandonment and dilapidation. *+It pleases me to see you. I am glad to see that you have grown substantially, even without my tutelage. Especially without my tutelage. Such efficient proactivity is rare indeed.+*

She felt his counterattacks coming. Sensed them across time. Her strikes flicked as she fought as a legion unto herself. Echoes moved in perfect synchronicity, each cut manifesting in concurrence, an army building with each blow. Reverberations shook through her as true time passed for her, the aftershocks battle greeting her finally.

Blades clashed against matter and lightning. Coiling essence leaped from the locus laced into her weapon. Masked splinters shaped from disguised ghosts shattered with every distortive burst. The loom of time wrestled against unraveling blood.

He allowed his body to break. Fall. Splatter. More simply grew from every drop of ichor he spilled, every bit of matter he converted. She maintained perfect economy, reknitting her echoes as fast as he could dissolve them. She tested a few probing cuts with Akunsande again, trying to entrap the ghoul in her garden. He abandoned those bodies without hesitation. Detonating them as if warheads, taunting her with his new Domain of Fire.

Torrents of lashing wind tunneled out to seize her. She pulled her echoes across time as a response, constructing counter-cyclones to deny his—storms internalized from her past experiences made material once more by the paths themselves.

She flung forth hurricanes, flames, explosions, bullets, radiation, and distortions of all kinds, repelling his attacks with ones she recalled from her history.

There was the benefit of living a long life. A storied one.

Just as there was to being a mind layered from countless other minds.

The duel between them continued, and she found herself genuinely enjoying herself, spending more effort than just casual strokes and brief stabs for once.

She countered battles by the heartbeat.

There were so few that lasted longer than one. Even fewer longer than two.

Of those who could endure the past three were only Godclads of superior skill or Spherage.

Foes who survived for a near-minute likely numbered less than a thousand across all of existence.

As she hewed out at him as falling blades across time, he riposted, the pattern of chronology splashing across his bodies as if he was accelerating up through a waterfall. What's more, the way he fought was entirely different now.

No delay in his true vessels. Action refined by instinct and practice. His attacks flowed of their own accord, and his mind was occupied by questions of thaumaturgic strategy rather than mortal struggle.

The skill he presented was unnatural. Even for a prodigious talent. Even if he was running neurosofts or cog-boosters. He fought as if someone with lifetimes of experience.

Constructs of blood met her blows. Flashing light rendered him indestructible in brief instances. Pulsing data spilled from his flesh with every thought-shredding blast she cast.

He was storm and plague at once.

She was blade, weaponry, and martial skill hiding in the future; a guerilla army across time.

The struggle continued with precision and care. Neither released the worse of the worst of their arsenals. To strike an unintended target was shameful, and more than once she caught him cocooning bystanders in their near vicinity in shells of matter and blood before severing their memories using his mind.

Zein smirked as she read the language of his body.

He moved with the focus and acceptance of a regular. No shock or surprise when he lost a body. No stumble or halt when she took a limb. She cut him down but he gave no ground, momentum maintained without stop. More fascinatingly was how he actually managed to *dodge*

a few of her strikes. Even slashing back her using her own glaive during an exchange. He fought like glaive. No. He was a glaive.

How many minds must be dwelling within him now? How many lives to make him a caldron of such skill?

It was almost amusing if she wasn't so offended.

Learning to fight and kill and prevail was the best part of the art.

And he had skipped almost all of it.

*+I see now my great mistake,+* she said.

All her echoes strode in at once, locking blades against Avo's Heavens—a temporal phalanx matching force against force, ripples of time threading out from their bodies, manifesting gauss fire, fusion burners, wildfires, spatial storms, and countless other phenomena she survived across her life.

Time was more than just a stream. Time was a canvas. And **Repetition** was an oft-seen occurrence in history. The forced use of her second canon offered her no small thrill.

A shame things were going to be ending soon.

For a heartbeat longer, they were stalemated.

A storm of blood, wind, and data clenched around each of her bodies. But she could feel his pressure waning. The intensity of his miracles thinning.

Her blades danced. Her echoes flowed like a stream: cuts leading to cuts leading to shots, bombs, grapples, takedowns, kicks, utility fog, roundhouses. Each echo divided, one strike dividing into another.

Avo's lesser selves twitched like marionettes. Constructs of blood lashed out, and were deflected. Wind tunneled, but she was elsewhere. His tendrils expanded in a cloud of shards and biomagnetism pried at her weapons and armor. She tackled him—abandoning her collection tools to remind him of the fundamentals.

Heads came free of bodies. Ceramite broke under her knuckles. Limbs were wrenched forward into time. The future trailed off her bodies like jetstreams, lanes of temporal acceleration composing more of her and unzipping parts of him.

Fewer and fewer of his bodies returned. The pockets of his resistance were crushed across the district, culled until only eight remained.

Eight puppets guided by two true masters.

That had been his downfall in the end. That, and his naked Rend inefficiency.

There, in a defensive circle made from quivering blood and shrouded by passing wind, his sheathes stood. At the base of the megablock's lobby—the place where this brief exchange started, things would reach their conclusion.

Her echoes manifested on the floors above, each standing on the edge of the structure's hollowed core. Eight percent of the structure was missing now, and the surviving structure almost resembled that of an amphitheater.

*+I understand my mistake now,+ Zein said. +I should have never left you alone after my destruction. I sought to lead my daughter away from you. To ensure she knew nothing of your presence. And so I kept my distance. I protected you from the periphery. But it seems like you have swelled regardless without my guidance. Nursed from audacity and experience alone.+*

His eyes glinted like slits of white through the torquing fog. He stared up at her, clicking his fangs, the Echoheads on his back parting and magnetizing in anticipation.

Her echoes planted their glaives through the plascrete surrounding them as one, and in doing so pierced through splinters projecting phantoms in mimicry of the destroyed surroundings. Ever the Necro. *+You are done. You are spent. It is your yield. No shame can come of such capitulation. You have come further than many others could ever hope.+*

The ghouls just laughed. *+That's not what you want.+*

Zein's eyes sparkled with mirth. What a precious monster. *+Ho? And you think you know what I desire?+*

*+Could get you some Suncloud.+*

*+Besides drugs.+*

He studied her curiously, letting a silence drag out.

A faint force brushed the periphery of her awareness. Trickle of crimson and gold were circulating around him. Time grew to become a vortex. A hive of blood began to expand. The gold of chronology tightened around it, masking Avo beneath rushing rapids.

Ah. He desired to force this into a siege.

+*Come now, Little Dagger,*+ she said, throwing the name more as a taunt than a title. +*All battles have their end. It would do for me to kill you for good. The idea of replacing you with Three-Eye repulses me now. To think they were our first consideration by merit of loyalty and skill.*+ Zein sighed. +*Oh, how insufferably pleased Strix must be to hear me say that.*+

+*Can't. He's dead. It's just me.*+ The ghouls were entirely within a haemokinetic shell now.

The fact that it lacked any luminosity told her he was conserving what remained of his Rend Capacity.

Zein checked her own and grinned.

### **REND CAPACITY [THE FISHER THAT WASN'T] - 34%**

This had been enjoyable if nothing else.

+*Painful truths leave you easily,*+ Zein replied. She looked down at the umbrella on her hip and considered drawing her true blade—granting him a glimpse of what true skill was. He deserved a reward, after all.

Instead, she had her echoes wrench their glaives free of plascrete.

There was still too much to risk. And Akunsande was due a proper feeding. Teasing her true blade with temporary murder was cruelty too great for even her.

+*Very well,*+ she said, casually. +*I will grant you an honored end. I trust that your true self is elsewhere? It wouldn't do for me to truly kill you.*+

+*Makes the both of us.*+

Perceptive creature. That did mean she had to find him as soon as possible after this. It wouldn't do for him to be captured or nulled, and shred her veil of mystery in the process.

+*So be it. Stand and deliver, Avo: I come bearing final end.*+

Chronology shivered.

All her ever-building echoes threaded a microsecond across time and thrust their blades into the ghouls' final fortress. But they did not strike with steel. Instead, wisping ghosts swarmed out in a disruptive tide, channeled from the vivianite in her blade.

And then, somehow, right back into her.

For the first time in fifty-three years, Zein's thoughts were torn clean from her mind.



For the first time in three hundred years, one of her blows was turned back unto her.

When sense next returned to her echoes, Zein found each of them seized by their necks—caught within the vice grip of a giant sculpted from moving glass.

+*Ah, I see,*+ she said, focus sharpening. Clever ghoul. Clever, clever ghoul. If oneself was not enough, then call for aid. And who else to rely on than the ever-dependable Captain Jelene Drau? +*Salutations to you, Captain.*+

The clicks and whirrs of several dozen guns sounded behind mirrored knights holding her bodies.

Zein blinked but declined to unravel her echoes. This was too novel an experience to avoid.

“Got a confession to make, Thousandhand,” the Regular drawled, speaking from every reflection in the room at the same time. “Been lookin’ forward to snuffin’ you from the day we met.”

The ancient Godclad cawed a laugh, and her amusement sang out from every echo.

A part of her knew that she should be done with this. That she should stride the paths and cleanse the memories from all who could have witnessed the battle between her and the ghoul.

But this was just too, too fun.

The Layer above them flickered, and in that instant, light struck the glass just right. She saw through the threshold a tide of guns primed and loaded, hovering in the tessellated abyss. She saw bioforms rushing forth, spawned from flame and flesh. Around the hollowed interior of the megablock, moisture peeled from the atmosphere as a maelstrom began to form.

The damnable ghoul had baited her. How delight—

And all the Regular’s guns fired at once.

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Avo watched Zein’s echoes come apart in a mess of severed threads. Around him, Draus replicas had formed a protective wall, each one armed and armored of glass, standing four meters tall and imbued with every gun she touched since gaining her Arsenalist.

Kae closed the world off, caging them in a dome of flowing water. Chambers and Dice both emerged from one of the replicas, the former spraying a stream of bioforms into existence, the latter cracking the world with every step, an icon of strength burning over her.

The last to join proceedings was Denton.

She wore only an exoskeletal vest made of interlocking plates and a formal suit underneath. No trace of her Heaven could be seen. No miracles emanated from her being.

Of all the cadre, she was the one he knew the least about.

As fast as they were destroyed, another echo materialized just before the turn of Kae's maelstrom. The Agnos was still within the passages—holding true to her role as Porter and overwatch, sparing her of direct combat.

"Well, then," Zein said, sighing as she laid her glaive across her shoulders. "I should have foreseen this. It was a cunning trick, using your Domain of Chronology to mask yourself and your cadre. Tell me: how did you obtain such a thing?"

Avo said nothing, unwilling to betray his advantage.

The future twitched. Zein shifted behind them.

And connected to Avo's splinters, everyone was ready and facing her when she re-emerged.

The Godslayer frowned like a child denied dessert. "It is more fun when you are all surprised."

"Speak for yourself," Draus said. "I prefer shootin' people. Like I did you just now."

"A unique demise," Zein said. "I thank you, Captain Draus. And I will return you the favor shortly." She regarded the rest of the cadre, and her eye froze on Denton. "Denton? You are among these roughs? I did not expect you to be a member of this assault."

"Team-bonding is important," Denton said, her tone flat. "Also: working with you has been miserable."

Naturally, Zein nodded in acquiescence. "Understandable. Alas, this is going to be a bitter experience, Denton. You may wear the colors, but you are not blade."

"No," Denton agreed. "But the rest make up for it."

"Do they now? I see the Regular. I see Strix's inheritor. I see..." She paused upon noticing Chambers. "You're still alive?" She turned to Avo—every Heaven past ninety percent, Metamind screaming at him to vent again. "You *kept* him? I expected you to have eaten him by now."

"Yeah?" Chambers said, left eyebrow raised, flames rising from his body. "Well. I got a habit of growing on people. Like a *rash*."

And then he invoked *Fucktopia*.

A long lump of biomass snapped out from his palm.

Casually, Zein cut it in half. Thousandhand looked unimpressed for a moment and then did a doubletake, head swiveling to stare at the severed member she just split in half. "W-was that a *penis*? Did you just throw a cock at me?"

Chambers glared. "Get fucked, you old sow. That's for whispering messed up shit about my dad to me when we first met. I mean, who the fuck does that."

Zein recovered from her shock and just shrugged. "Me."

"Yeah. Fuck you."

"Why, I'm so very old for you, child."

A sneer escaped from the half-strand. "I've gotten hard to things you people wouldn't believe."

A suffering squeak of "Jaus" escaped Draus' replicas. Kae's exasperation flowed through the entire group through Avo's splinters.

"Not him," Chambers said, throwing up his hands in sudden horror. The fact that he was lying made things worse.

An actual glare had found its way onto Zein's face. Her eyes skewered Avo again. "You should have eaten this one. I'm going to hurt him. Badly."

"Do your worst," Avo said. "He can take it."

Chambers managed two nods before he froze and stared at Avo with a look of betrayal.

"So," Zein sighed, swinging her blade, granting Dice with a brief smirk. "This is to be a day of new experiences."

"Consider it a performance review," Denton said.

"Denton!" Zein said, seeming shocked. "Was that actually a joke?"

"Just an analogy."

The ancient Godclad looked up and sighed. "Three new experiences in one day. Wonderful. Wonderful." She turned and regarded the maelstrom. "That keeps us contained, yes?"

“Yeah,” Avo said. “Planning on loading in more echoes?”

“No,” Zein sighed. “No. I will face you here. It will be more interesting that way.”

“Arrogant,” Avo taunted, snapping his fangs at her. “Stalemated you alone.”

“You *humored* me alone,” Zein corrected. Shifted her posture, but no new echoes came. Instead, a building presence approached and noticed the hooked shadow of a fish swimming across golden currents, diving down to bury itself into the echo.

And then, with a sudden shiver, Zein felt impossibly more material, more present, more whole.

The glaive in her hand had vanished. In its place was a folded umbrella—but within its folds thundered something *powerful*. Something analogous to the progressing currents of time.

“You have laid a lure, and I have come,” Zein said, declaring loudly. “I have stepped—*unwisely*—into the future to face you. All of you. As myself. My *true* self.” A soft smile played on her lips. “Be all of you so honored.”

*+If this talkin’ goes on for any longer, I’m gonna shoot her.+* Draus cast.

“But before we begin, let’s us make our bids,” Zein said. “A deal. You remember this, Avo.”

He fought the urge to groan. “What do you want?”

“Many things. What I want from you all is simple.” She pointed to Draus. “Defeat.” She pointed to Dice. “Teach.” She pointed to Chambers. “Castrate and *defile*.” Cold fear filled the man. She pointed to the maelstrom. “*Encourage*.” She pointed to Avo and clenched her fist. “Memories. The Low Masters... you stole a new warmind from them, did you not?”

Avo grunted. “Hungers.”

“The *Hungers* themselves,” Zein threw her head back and cawed. “Ah, what I wouldn’t give to see those memories...”

“Have some questions for you too,” Avo said. “About the Heaven of Truth. Noloth’s Ark. The Accords. And history. Things that actually happened. Not what’s been told to us by the Guilds.”

And suddenly, her amusement was muted. The lines of her wrinkles deepened and she offered a nod. “Very well. Knowledge bid for knowledge gained. That is the bargain.”

“That is the bargain,” Avo concurred.

Zein exhaled and brought her umbrella to bear like a glaive. "Leave a cycler empty. We do this to first death, as is tradition. As things stand, we will have three minutes before someone notices us. Things should be concluded before then. Avo?" She was prompting him to vent. He was waiting for the fight to begin.

"I'm in no danger," Avo said.

"Ah," she said. "*Coward.*" She taunted.

And then—faster than anyone could react—shew as upon them.