

+It was a miracle—+

+The palm! Did you see it?+

+We should have died. My aero hit that building at over 200 miles an hour...+

+He pulled the flechettes out of me. They were just... gone.+

+He stopped the flames from burning my children. He stopped it. He put it out. His palm fell and the flames died.+

+Fuck, consangs, I'm never talking shit about Naeko again. I don't care if he's a corner-dwelling bitchass slow-twitch point-blank-range-team-killing-objective-ignoring motherfucker, when a half-strand bitchslaps the Nether back into shape, you heel dog, heel.+

+Operative Loken? Loken? Fuck. His vitals are gone.+

+--Turned our flechettes back on us. Like we were shooting into ourselves.+

**OPERATION FAILED  
GOLEM-SESYPLEPHES STATUS: [DESTROYED]  
UNABLE TO DELIVER PAYLOAD DUE TO CHIEF PALADIN NAEKO  
WITHDRAW ALL SURVIVING REGULARS IN THE SOVEREIGNTY**

+Misery-2 is not responding. Misery-4 is not responding. Misery-8 confirmed nulled. Trauma inversion. Yes, ma'am. They were in the radius of Naeko's palm. His miracles were in full effect.+

+So, this is what it means to be Sphere 8... To tell the world no, and substitute it with a world bound to your Soul. Looks like I still have leagues to climb...+

+--Everyone in Southsex is dead. Everyone. His palm... it hit everything.+

+Everyone go dark. Incogs active. Go dark. Go dark. Go dark.+

{EGI "Only Way To Be Sure" here: please carry this missive directly to the Chief Paladin. Tell him I enjoy the Buddha re-enactment. No, I won't be explaining that, but I would like to challenge him to a soft war in the void. I got some bombs I want to test, and the rest of the wusses said I can't use it on the world.}

-Messages Filtered for Content Related to **[CHIEF PALADIN]; [SAMIR NAEKO];  
[STORMJUMPERS2ISBACKONBAYBEEEEEE]**

## Sword and Plague (I)

***“My kin are surfacing again. I feel them moving; time upon time, as rivers upon rivers.”***

Such was all Akunsande needed to say.

If there was a single characteristic that determined the Hungers, it was naked terror. The type befitting a creature, forever knowing itself to be prey. While it pretended to be a god, it lived as a worm, hiding beneath the waters, not even brave enough to embody the life of a carp.

Its Low Masters were little more than attendants; nannies for a gaggle of children unworthy of true power.

Zein had scorned them for the first day.

Jaus had always been too lenient with them, trying so desperately to include them in his plans, draw them into the fold. He yearned to consider them people, but they were a collective consumed by selfish desire, hungering for control, yet too impotent to see their world materialized without the strength of others serving in their stead.

What worth is a god that could not face the consequences of a rebuke?

What god could not endure a parry, a counter-attack, a retaliation in response?

What god refused to face the world and dreamed only of creating a cradle in which to hide? A realm where its delusions and yearnings were always right, and their every whim attended to?

No god.

No god at all.

Her Heaven manifested: the Fisher that Wasn't dipped into the flowing streams of the paths. Spreading her focus, she listened to the currents of futures forthcoming and felt the displacements shearing branches from the paths.

Quiet though the Hungers wished to be, their weight could not be denied. When you were the sea itself, every movement was seismic, every ripple grew to become a rising tide.

She had evaded whatever attack they attempted, launching her echoes across time to avoid the disruption. As she returned, she expected to find them on the offensive, attempting another ill-fated uprising perhaps—with even less success than the first.

Instead, it occupied specific corners of the paths, their divergent resonance singing from specific bodies. The paths shivered as entire passages tumbled into each other thunderously, as entire potential possibilities crumbled away, splashing into one.

The past was an ever-dissolving ruin, and the future was a broken construct, its paths a labyrinth leading onward, specific metaphysical rails and trajectories pre-built using Heavens of Probability and Possibility to ensure the fruition of certain events and desired outcomes.

Shattered fate, if one desired to comprehend it in such a manner.

Things were not meant to be this way. The paths were supposed to be locked into place with the arrival of the Ladder, and the Arks of every grand culture were to flow upward into existence, meeting one another at the mouth of a unified destiny.

Such had not been the case.

Jaus was undone; Veylis desired another outcome, and in the name of protecting her father from a mistake, she did the unthinkable and broke something unmendable.

Even now, fragments of memory remained missing within Zein. Multiple things happened within the Ladder that day, the roads that emerged from the vanishing ladder separated into paths of nine, and the architecture of the coming future lay irrevocably broken.

And now, they all lived in the ruins that remained.

Chains from chains. Corpses upon corpses. Histories upon histories.

Casting glimpses into the future beyond, information filled Zein's mind after a few seconds delay. The streams of time flowed around her as she extracted copies from her present self and flung them into the future. Every time she did so, she moved, cognizant that though her daughter seemed dormant, it was wise to never stay in one place, or linger too long at one point in time.

As her echoes skipped along pathways of futures adrift, she cried at a few characters of interest.

The leaders of the Guilds seemed to be shrugging over their disarray, moving to defensive footing in the aftermath of the unexpected calamity. The few she had cut were ignorant to what was happening, more lost than she about present circumstances.

More worryingly was Naeko—his ontological presence flaring in existence like a spire of awakening flame.

There lies her answer for why her daughter had been so quiet.

Muted pride embraced with gnawing annoyance. Her wayward disciple had chosen a strange time to rouse himself from his stupor. This too was unexpected. This too she would have to discover.

But only ever at a distance.

Distracted though he was, it would not do to draw his attention, for more than serving as a deterrent against Veylis, he bore a Heaven that would break hers: the denial of violence, the usurpation of force, the rebuttal to her philosophy entire.

Across time, a soft laugh slipped from an old woman, brushing stray ears as if a hallucination.

Naeko. Ever defiant. But no longer so rageful.

To think the cure was his breaking thrice over. First by his childhood masters, who defiled whatever innocence there ever could have been. Then by Zein, who struck her art into him, teasing his flame beyond control. And finally by Veylis, who doused love and hatred with betrayal, leaving only a simmering wound in its place.

A kindling had returned now. And threads rose from him line fingers of drifting steam, temporal trails that led to other Paladins, to the prey she sought.

It took effort to read the flow of time. More than a language, it was experience. To learn the shape of the world by drowning in it. But the answers came as her echoes followed the vibrations.

The first distortions rippled from a district in Yuulden-Yang, from a group of Godclads denied rightful violence, compelled to peace by an unseen hand in the district of Burner's Way.

An echo of hers had been destroyed here. Unmade utterly by Veylis. She should have stayed apart from the paths here longer, with Veylis certain to have left traps and dead-ends fused into false futures and the time it took to create a new chrono-puppet, to script enough behaviors into it that attained functional independence.

But with her daughter held at bay, she dared a glimpse and frowned at what she saw.

A battle that was certain to happen dissolved like smoke. The Paladins Kare Kituhara and Naeko's favorite dog, Maru, were to have slain two whole cadres as things spiraled from their control.

Less fuel for the fire to come. Miracles tried and lives lost vanished from the future. A thread leading to Scale—to the trial—was cut entirely.

The perpetrator of this deed lingered still, the ichor of a wounded dragon resonating in the blood of all Godclads present on the scene. Yet, as she studied them, it seemed that despite their placidity, they remained as they were.

The Hungers were using their warminds again. Broken facsimiles of Heavens and miracles. It had to be the case.

Another ripple tore her from her rumination. She sensed it coming a full minute before it arrived.

Drawing in information from the paths, the Fisher that Wasn't simulated new branches of probability, detailing an infestation of subverted minds and twisted thralls. A single thread stretched across time and space, connecting two minds in the district of Meddhamet to a megablock over two thousand kilometers away.

A sickness was incubating the mind of a lowly thug. Trickle of chronology flared within his veins while his thoughts flowed outward like a contagion, infesting the egos of his comrades—and spreading further.

The simulation continued. The world danced across Zein's senses through her echo.

If she did not strike now, a plague was going to spread. A possession of countless minds that would spark open conflict between the Guilds long before the desired outcome was engineered.

Briefly surfacing in an alleyway in the gutters, Zein sneered at an aratnid and lashed out with her glaive. The creature didn't get the chance to squeak. The edge flicked through its body and strands of vicious red spattered out. She flung both the organism's death and the strike delivered forward across time. Several more strikes followed, steadily building up to an arsenal of a few thousand.

She doubted the need for such overkill, but one could never be too hesitant with Noloithic infestation.

Especially if they were using one of their misbegotten tools again.

With that done, she dove into the paths again, never lingering in one place, safe as she thought she was for now.

She would observe her eradication of the Hungers from a distance. Choreograph a fight to alleviate her boredom. Fighting duels by striking across time into a simulated future was so unlike the real thing. Too much delay. Too much time to think. Like slashing into vague reflections of people passing beneath her as waves.

A few seconds later, the first of her echoes arrived in the megablock. Strikes flowed into thrusts as the progression of time itself wove evanescent vessels for her to enact violence.

Yet, her blows struck nothing but air in most cases, and she found herself catching glimpses of blinding brightness and melting alloys. Most of her desired victims were already gone. Vaporized.

And as she drove her blade into the single one that remained, Akunsande spoke a second time, an uncharacteristic uncertainty lining its voice.

***“No. Not my kin. But like them. Reshaped by their blood.”***

Instinct guided her. Horizontal sweep flowed.

The head of her victim was parted.

But the body refused to fall.

Instead, she felt something grasp her echo, shred it within and without using blood, matter, lightning, air, time, and mind.

Unseen splinters crashed into that iteration of her, and she severed its thread, culling the possibility of her becoming another’s thrall.

How unlike the Hungers.

How unlike the Hungers indeed.

Curiosity and thrill grew within Zein as she dispatched more echoes to face their threat—her victim already regrowing his lost head from strands of entwining blood, the flow bearing a tinge of gold—the hue of chronology.

\*\*\*

A storm of blood exploded out of Avo’s Duradel’s sheath.

Fissures akin to arteries and storms crept through the megablock. Blood converted the surrounding matter into haemokinetic projectiles. Mass was delivered by the tonnage into Zein from all angles, carried by curving whips of lightning through the collapsing infrastructure.

The blood within her burst in the same instant that his missiles struck. As did his splinters, piercing into her halo via his **Sanguinity**. A hurricane of wind swallowed them—the Fardrifter wrapping them in its streams. Even the Techplaguer was triggered, antennae deconstructing armor from flesh, working to create an opening.

His attacks flowed concurrently and consecutively, striking across the material, mental, and spatial.

It all amounted to nothing.

Her echo unraveled before he could achieve any effect.

Zein's body came apart into golden threads, straight into nonexistence with the progression of time. Faint flashes of fading deaths played out before him, possibility streams of chronology serenading his awareness before spiting him with deaths never to arrive.

In one, blood sprayed from her, arms and legs flayed away. In another, she was consumed in mind and flesh, drowned by his dominance. In the final, she had simply disintegrated under a tide of force.

Despite this, disappointment never touched him, for he caught a glimpse of the truth. Tasted the banishment of her construct.

Just as matter was his to shape, so too could she twist time to her whims.

Only now with his Soul drenched with the blood of dragons could he feel it. Sense it. This pattern was beyond him before. A thing he lived but never truly *knew*.

And now, the chronology infusing pulsed and shivered, his being a spiderweb being danced upon, vibrations passing through him.

**REND CAPACITY [WOUNDMOTHER] - 98%**

**REND CAPACITY [FARDRIFTER] - 93%**

**REND CAPACITY [TECHPLAGUER] - 63%**

**VENT! VENT! VENT!**

He didn't.

Not immediately.

He was waiting for a moment like this—and piloting a secondary body ensured he was far from true cessation.

As tremors of time grew unbearable, he struck back off instinct, forming a pocket of stasis in the collapsing hallway behind him.

A blow struck across time froze before it could hew him in twain. A rippling Zein hung in the air, features drawn in a feral smile beyond her transparent faceplate.

Good. Glad to see they were both enjoying this. After the Hungers, he didn't think he had the energy to put up with another tantrum from one of his supposed elders.

More strikes came. Some manifesting within him. He tunneled across space, shifting himself and enchainning each of her constructed selves. Another series of strikes followed. Blades and bodies unraveled against his **Withered Breath**.

A shroud of disintegration swept out from him. Narrow halls were made wide as he melted away walls and hab-cells and coffin apartments. He took care to avoid hitting any involved personnel but didn't stop fighting.

*{Can the dialogue begin now,} Calvin*o sighed, knowing Avo's forthcoming answer. *{“Zein, it's me. It's Avo. What are you doing here? How did you find me? What's with the impalement?”}*

*+Ask her if I can't win. Take answers from her if I do.+*

The EGI let out a noise that was pure suffering. *{Our fates lie in the hands of two psychotic children. Wonderful.}*

And it was.

His **Breath of the Withered** had eaten through more of the block than his nukes did in the scant seconds they were active. He kept his suppression far and wide as felt her recede.

Already, things were going far better than before.

Back in the Tiers, when he encountered her within the Trident, he was surprised as well but failed to achieve anything.

Instead, she killed him time and time again. Easily. Casually. Even slashing through him while he was a bolt of lightning.

Now, he was more than surviving. He was *fighting*. Forcing her to consider her options, and there were few drugs that could match the euphoria naked growth could provide—

A force swept clean through the entire floor, swallowing him and his withering gale. The few Zeins that were still enchained burst apart into slithering threads.

Avo found himself falling—tumbling down into Zein's garden.

Ah. This again.



A day ago, he wouldn't have any counter against this.

Now, he launched a new splinter from Duradel's sheathe, flinging it back over into the megablock as a Specter and burying it into a new body he was growing from a fissure of blood.

**REND CAPACITY [WOUNDMOTHER] - 78%**

**REND CAPACITY [FARDRIFTER] - 81%**

**REND CAPACITY [TECHPLAGUER] - 63%**

+*Who*+ That was all he heard her say; he converted Duradel's biomass into a fissile matter and detonated him.

Back three floors below where he was, tendrils of blood stitched a copy of his base sheath into existence.

But he didn't stop there.

Across every level of the megablock, he began fabricating new bodies—and directing splinters into them. He couldn't occupy any more than three with proper focus, but that wasn't the point.

If Zein thought she had quantitative supremacy, then she was mistaken.

Lightning reached out from the megablock and struck a collection of structures, fusing new spawn points into place. His Sanguinity began to expand from twelve new bodies—then one hundred and forty-four. His splinters were fragmenting just as fast, burying themselves all across the district.

*{You're more the virus than ever before,}* Calvino said, actually sounding perturbed for once.

Back in the enclave, Avo grinned and turned to his cader. "I found Zein."

Heads snapped to him. Denton's eyes actually widened.

"What?"

"She found me. Technically. Stabbed my other sheath first."

Chambers looked off to the side. Draus licked her inner cheek, staring at him as if she knew what he was about to propose.

Back in Meddhamet, Avo directed his hundred and forty-four bodies in concert, his cognitive capacity dipping from ninety-eight percent as directed his two subminds to focus on piloting one sheath each. The rest could be as if limbs grafted to a spine or tertiary lobbies, ready-made vessels to mantle a governing focus should the first be destroyed.

And destruction was exactly what followed.

Bodies forged by time hunted their blood-grown prey across the district. Where Avo was so followed Zein.

No longer did she strike at him as lightly. Casually painting strokes befitting a flat or lesser 'Clad. No. Disruptions cleaved forth. As did gouges in time, phenomena from the past bleeding into the present.

Though Avo could root himself across countless bodies, he could only operate three at maximum focus. The rest needed to be directed. No such limitation constrained Zein. All her echoes fought with fluid precision, her glaive now a length of shimmering vivianite—its edge *painful* for his mind to behold.

A second was all it took for Zein to reap her toll. Avo tasted a hundred and one deaths in that time. A hundred and one blows took him before he could even react.

Still his lightning jumped. Still more bodies grew. Still his splinters spread.

In hallways, across the skies, between the alleys, within tunnels, inside passing trash barges, two armies fought, both spawned from singular egos, both asymmetric in the extreme, one cutting across time, the other a plague of thought and matter.

And Avo directed the cacophony of violence directly into the minds of his cadre, his splinters broadcasting a vicarity of mass death never before experienced.

“Holy fuck,” Chambers murmured. Surprisingly, Tavers looked just as overwhelmed.

Kae looked like she was getting nauseous. Dice, somehow sensing this, patted her along the back. Denton furrowed her brow as a few of Sunrise’s drones landed on her shoulder.

Draus was the only one to anticipate what Avo wanted. What she wanted as well. She grinned at him, her expression not so different from Zein’s.

She waited for him to ask anyway, another hundred of his bodies coming apart before Thousandhand’s mastery.

“Want in on this fight?” Avo asked, already knowing the answer.

**Skins of Virtuality** prevented all his bodies from dying instantly, but Zein was beginning to attack him technologically as well, firing bursts of radiation into him that made the Techplaguer moan.

And not in painfully.

*{Oh, shit,}* Calvino cursed uncharacteristically. *{I forgot we gave her that.}*

The Avos died as fast as they spawned, and Zein's echoes unraveled as they were lost. The former bore the brunt of the losses, and though he spread fast, he was still slowed by his Rend-by his Heavens and cyclers.

Soon, he would run his limit, and then she would dislodge him from the district.

Unless 'outside' forces intervened.

"Fuck do you think the answer to that is?" Draus said, chuckling softly to herself. "Hells yeah. Hells yeah, I want in. Hells yeah I want a piece of Thousandhand. Fuckin' hated the sow since I first laid eyes on her."

Emboldened by her words, Chambers approached. He only had one question for Avo. "Rash?"

Avo nodded without hesitation as a squad of twelve Zeins parried bolts of lightning and dissolved trauma-mimicking splinters before they could approach.

He flared his **Fortress of Luminosity** for the first time, prolonging the death of that subself as he waited for the rest to agree.

"I... suppose it will be good practice?" Kae said, trying to sound upbeat.

"I am still upset and want to violently mutilate someone. Like I used to do to the dogs." Dice's words made Kae flinch.

Avo looked to Tavers but she waved him off. "Yeah. This seems like a 'you all die repeatedly' sort of activity. Bad for squires."

He grunted. "Alright then."

"I wish to join." All heads turned to stare at Denton now, surprise filling the room. The glaive cracked her neck and took off her coat, revealing the armored vest beneath. "It's been a rough time. And... Thousandhand's a bit of a... *bitch*." She smiled wryly. "Cas is going to be so angry he missed this."

"Alright," Chambers pumped his fist. "Another Godclads on the old lady gang-bang bus."

Kae closed her eyes in disgust. And promptly tore all the moisture from his body.