

Osjane Thousand: *Naeko. What do you want? The fires have settled. Nothing remains of our foes but ash and ruins. The slaves are unchained. The pantheons they fed are but fragments we bear within us. Our victory is total. More and more of our brethren are arriving from across the stars. Countless new horizons await.*

So why?

Why are you still so desperate to find a war? To find a foe? Why are you still seeking vengeance for a war that has already been won?

Samir Naeko: *Because that's what I'm for.*

Osjane Thousand: *War? You're more than just a destroyer. With your martial gifts, destruction can be protection. Strength can be turned toward... construction. Ah. Even made it rhyme.*

Samir Naeko: *Listen. Osjane. I don't want to disrespect you, so can we get to the point of this?*

Osjane Thousand: *[Sighs] Fine. So be it. I wish for you to treat people with more care. Prisoners. Citizens. Subjects. I have been getting... concerning reports about your behavior. You are rough with people.*

Samir Naeko: *Oh, this is about the piece of shit I killed.*

Osjane Thousand: *Yes. The one you beat to death using his own son. Naeko... the war is finished. You don't need to treat our people as your enemy.*

Samir Naeko: *They're not my people. But I hear your words. I'll heel. You don't need to—*

Osjane Thousand: *You're not a dog! I don't want you to heel, I want—I want you to be a person! I want you to dream! To wish for something better. Maru is getting married. Ya Wei is... she's making art.*

Samir Naeko: *Mordeinn's still a piece of shit.*

Osjane Thousand: *He's getting better. But, please. You're a person. You should have dreams too. You should have wants and desires. Of a life after the fires. We will not be Jaus' fists forever. And Veylis. What about her? What your lives together?*

Samir Naeko: *She's fine with me. She knows who I am. She knows I'm all for her. Her. Her mom. Her dad. The real dreamers. She knows I'll do anything to see this city shine and them happy. They're the best parts of us. Ah. You got me spitting sap.*

Osjane Thousand: *But what about you? What about Samir Naeko himself? You must want something. You must have some kind of hope. Some kind of idealization.*

Samir Naeko: *[Laughter]* I find that plenty in the Sister.

Osjane Thousand: ...Veylis. You said you stopped—

Samir Naeko: *I said I was gonna try. I stopped cutting her. I stopped hurting her that much. I just... relieve memories with her these days is all.*

Osjane Thousand: *That is not a well thing to do.*

Samir Naeko: *Yeah? It isn't? Okay. I get it. I understand. You're a real sweetheart, Osjane. You're better than your idiot brother in pretty much every way. But even he can tell what I am.*

Osjane Thousand: *And what are you?*

Samir Naeko: *I'm a hound. I'm a killer. I'm a fire. I'm a bomb. I'm the mean godsdamned bastard that comes at night to scalp your pa and burn your home. I don't have dreams. I close my eyes, I see the war, and I hear my pa—screaming for me, cursing at me for letting them cut him apart. That's who I am. I'm a hound, and I need my meat.*

Osjane Thousand: ...No.

Samir Naeko: *What?*

Osjane Thousand: *You're not a dog, Paladin. You're just a liar with a broken heart.*

Samir Naeko: *Fine. Alright. Anything else.*

Osjane Thousand: *Yes: A month's mandatory leave. Use it. And no, this time I do expect you to "heel." Use it and come back to me. And I'll be sending Maru to check on you. To make sure you're not spending all your time with your oldest "acquaintance."*

-Osjane Thousand to Samir Naeko (Circa 32 Post Godsfall)

22-3

Peace Broken

A layer above, in the Sanctus-majority district of Madruss, a young slave, left unfed in her cage for days, succumbed to hunger and took a bite from the dead puppy her master caught her playing with a week ago. As she sank the three unrotted teeth she had remaining into the flea-infested carcass, a supple retribution followed.

Eighty kilometers away in a Syndicate bar, the girl's master died screaming as she was bitten in half by something unseen.

Three hundred kilometers away, back down in the gutters, a group of twelve gangers cheered as they triggered their generator once more, preparing to shock the squire they captured one final time.

The jolt came. They fried instead.

A few hundred meters away, in an alleyway, an aratnid bit into its dying sister, seeking to find nourishment in the absence of its mother. Somehow, it tore into itself instead.

And back at ground zero, where Zein was breaking apart into echo after echo, where branching paths of gold poured from her being during one second and broke apart in the next, Naeko forced his fingers deeper into his former master's socket, relishing at the cracks he felt shuddering up his digits.

Echo clashed against echo, parrying blows away from Zein's true body. But with each act of force or violence she inflicted, an exponential opposite was returned, the magnitude of harm greater in every way.

Naeko watched his Rend plummet below twenty. Felt death after death, body after broken body touched by his venting Hell. As a miracle of time spilled out from Zein—her paths collapsing, routes of escape narrowing further and further—so too did miracles of violence emanate from Naeko.

She flowed like a raging river. He swelled like an expanding atmosphere.

And so it was for a moment that he was in the past again. A boy under her tutelage. A broken foe at her feet, staring up the length of her gleaming glaive.

A shift in the path splashed over him. Her dragon glaive moved on its own accord and slashed out from the right—opening to draw him into a pocket of space. His utility fog expanded around him, forming an armor of pointed fists. He struck the encroaching split in space, and from him formed a barricade of knuckles, washing outward in a tide.

Existence screamed. The gutters groaned. The ground fissured as blocks crumbled into opening chasms. Deeper still, the Penumbra that once housed the Low Masters and their ilk groaned, the hive of alloy fashioned into place by the voiders squealing as they came apart.

Naeko moved. The world succumbed. The world broke. There was no other choice. There was no other way.

Such as material reality. So for Zein.

Or it would have been if she hadn't used her reserve Heaven.

A droplet of rain fell three kilometers, spilling down from an opening in the Layers above to grace the windowsill of a toppled apartment building. She vanished. His hands closed. Zein was gone. Ah. *That* Heaven. The one she so loathed to use.

Rarely did Zein Thousandhand ever allow herself a retreat. An age ago, Naeko would have felt honored.

Now, it just fed his fury.

His misted fist grew, its shadow now stretching well over eight hundred kilometers. Rain dared not strike it. Light dared not trespass through the haze. For the second time, Naeko struck the gutters, and with the impact, he planted himself—and the *Daemon*—right on top of Zein.

The slanted structure she rematerialized broke in half, and Naeko barreled back into his once-master, their bodies crashing through plascrete, glass, plastic, and alloy like twin flechettes, the weight of his fist a moving apocalypse. Behind them, the heads of the *Daemon* displaced entire sections of reality. Naeko kept it held in place with a paltry effort as he fought, preventing the unneeded deaths of any subjects.

He could still feel them, scattered through the Warrens as they were. His fist felt everyone under its knuckles, and he alone decided who would suffer destruction.

A ripple exploded out from Zein. He tore the force from her body, forcing her to stay. A fog-formed elbow descended to break her, but her body turned fluid and she splashed apart, surviving with little effort.

+*Listen to me, boy,*+ Zein cast, her mind focused, her eyes pooling back together in her liquid form. +*We must speak.*+

+*Talk, then,*+ Naeko said, not bothering to retrain the hate he felt for her.

She was there. All these years, she was there.

And she never came.

Godsdammit.

Godsdammit it all.

Rend at eight percent.

The fog around him grew denser. Naeko followed the golden strings trailing free from her body and spread his influence even wider.

He knew her weakness. He knew her present determined everything. She couldn't move. She could predict everything that was going to follow, and still, she couldn't move. A flash of remembered violence exploded out from his being. An explosion of force blossomed within the cumulus fist, lancing down on Zein.

The blow was one of absolute harm. Something that could do nothing else but shatter whatever it hit into glass. Zein countered by offering an echo to die in her stead instead, the puppet of time burst apart into splitting glints as the Chief Paladin wrapped his fingers around her neck again—and caught her briefly vanished glaive using his utility fog as it tried to pierce him from behind.

"I expected you to be... out of practice, somehow," Zein said, straining out the words.

"I *am*," Naeko replied, every sinew in his body screaming for him to tear her in half.

The world beyond them was drowned by the susuring of crumbling rock and groaning infrastructure. Naeko's fog battled dust away, unwilling to share the space with a lesser obfuscation. The Chief Paladin stood a boulder of a man, his body bathed in crimson neon. They were down within the mangled guts of a subterranean megablock—in one of those old Wight-making facilities.

Spilling pillars screeched and broke around them as Naeko crushed a few hundred Syndicate enforcers in a stray thought some dozen levels above them. Those bastards were doubtlessly here to film a vicarity. Considering that he could feel any other moving bodies or active violence, he guessed they hadn't started.

Or were already done.

Pointless. Pointless and useless. Worthless revenge at best.

Just who he was now.

Naeko snarled and then sank his fingers through her armor, into her collarbone for purchase.

Zein, for her part, offered nothing in response. Not a sound. Not a wince. No. Instead, her cheeks puffed, and a buzzing field of static swallowed both of their skulls. It passed through Naeko's authority as if it wasn't an act of violence, its force insufficient to do harm.

As it settled into his pores and a wave of tingles danced deeper and deeper into his head, he instantly knew what it was. "*Suncloud!*" He spat, even as he felt the lightness began to build in his skull. A ragged hiss followed. Armor broke, and Zein came apart in near-halves from her collarbone down to her stomach.

Blood ran free in rivulets from between her cracked teeth. One of her lungs was popped—the ruptured organ visible to Naeko, tangled in a spool with her intestines. Her nanosurgeons were straining, her modified blood doing all they could to flow without the aid of her heart. *+For your stress. And so we can see an end to this tantrum, and talk like—+*

He felt it.

Another shiver. A ripple in time. His face contorted in rage as his fist billowed even wider. Two percent Rend. Back to the palm soon. “Veylis!” His voice echoed through the dim collapsing cavern. The presence of his former love was never faint. Never subtle. If anything, she was bolder than her mother ever was.

Perhaps she was watching them. Indulging in a moment of pleasure. But even she wasn’t a fool. She knew better than to strike now.

Still. He couldn’t stop himself. Years. He let this fester for years.

He needed to give the moment words.

“Veylis! Come out. Come out. Let’s be a *fucking* family again. I got her right here. She’s alive. Did you know that? Did you know all this time too?” He gave a bitter laugh. “S-she said she wants to talk. Imagine that.” He chuckled. It came out more like a sob. “She was there. She watched you butcher us. Watched your slave-bastard Osjon murder her sister. She was there and she did nothing.”

He was hyperventilating again. His hands were clenching and unclenching, just like they used to when he disappointed his father, when he failed Jaus, when he angered Veylis, when Zein criticized his weakness.

But Thousandhand wasn’t focused on him right now, instead, her gaze was locked upward, her expression tight.

He felt it again. Another twitch in time. This time, he knew exactly where it was. Fiery anticipation and panic gripped his heart in equal measure. To finish this in the gutters was so inauspicious, so messy and ugly.

But that’s what they all deserved.

The dream was lost. Jaus was dead. The future was slain.

Only ruins remained.

His fist struck, as he conferred an investiture of his accumulated force into what he thought was Veylis, the Daemon punched through the level above him with a chorused scream, thin traces of

gold unspooling from its winds. The last of its Rend faded as it sheared through the deforming plasteel ceiling, the Heaven whistling away as it unraveled from existence.

In its place, a disfigured figure fell. Entire chunks were missing from their sheath, but there was something about them that pulled his attention. His utility fog snaked out to reel in the corpse, and Naeko found himself frowning as he looked upon something that looked like—

The body promptly exploded. An explosion comparable to that of a tactical nuke blossomed in a ruinous wave. Naeko swatted it aside with a casual backhand, redirecting it into itself with ease.

But with it came an opening.

REND CAPACITY [SAGE OF THE SUNDERED SKY]: 0%

Naeko's Hell emptied. His fist shifted back to a palm. But the transition was a moment in time. A moment that could be struck. Honed instinct alone guided him, made him wrap himself in utility fog and twist his head.

Around him, time tore as echo after echo cleaved at him. A thrust crackled. The air shivered. Blood sprayed and teeth burst from Naeko's skull. Only the throbbing static provided by his Pain Editor implant told Naeko he was still alive.

A dissolving spear threaded through his cheeks, but he had bitten down on the edge, holding it in place using his wounds and Heaven to deny Zein her kill. He had felt the blow coming. Sensed it at the last moment—just like all those times training against Zein.

She had been waiting for an opportunity like this—the point where his Hell and Heaven swapped. A brief change of states.

A lightness passed through his body, but Naeko ignored it. With another clench of effort, he snapped the past-flung spear in half between his jaws, uncaring how they cracked his remaining teeth. A resurrection was due after this. A good death properly earned.

With his cheeks flensed open and lower jaw dangling on unresponsive sinews, Naeko let out a choked rasp as he struggled to laugh, storm clouds building behind his eyes.

Facing Zein, he saw the shine in her gaze. The pride. The weariness. *+Anyone else would have been mine.+*

+Almost,+ Naeko said. *+Who was that?+*

+A new discipline turned wayward rival. He has rejected my will.+

+Must be smarter than me then.+

+Naeko. I wish to tell you many things. There is--+

He didn't bother waiting for her to finish. He buried a fist into her disembowelment and wrapped his fingers around her spine. Whatever she had to say, he'd get it from her in interrogation. He was Chief godsdamned Paladin, not her pawn. Not her boy. No. Fuck that game. He was done. He was done.

He leaned in close so she could see him—see his hate. *+I called for you. Not anymore. When you come back, I'll speak. I'll speak, and for the first time in your worthless life you'll listen. And you'll tell me what you know straight.+*

And before she had a chance to argue, he sank his other hand inside her, released his Heaven, and tore in two different directions. She came free in halves, and both went sailing from his hands, painting the distant walls flanking him as mutual splatters.

A scab formed in front of him. A rare sight to earn from Zein Thousandhand. But Naeko wasn't satisfied. Not even close. She'd come back. She'd come back with Heaven manifested and the urge to fight.

That was all well and good with him.

He felt the fire again. The flames he thought killed all those years ago. He remembered why he did all this. Remembered what he felt, and why he felt it.

Chains from chains. Master to master. Leash to leash.

He was a dog. He was a dog, but he had no master, and he needed to pull something apart. To tear into this city for all the years it disgraced his brothers and sisters, to tell it he was done sleeping, that the slump was over.

+I told you,+ he said, casting his thoughts into the cavernous dark. *+I told you I surrender. You broke me. You won. But you're not there. You're not real. No one cares.+* He swallowed and snapped his jaw back into place. *+It's just me, isn't it? It's up to me. I have to do this. I have to do this.+*

Silence again. Silence and no answers to sate his hurt. Nothing but him. Nothing.

+Not just you. Courage, Naeko. Not alone. I see you. I see your struggle.+

Time quivered. Naeko froze. His Heaven rushed out from him, spreading wide to find the speaker. But there was nothing. And there was no one.

No one at all.

Maybe it was just his own mind. But he never sounded that sibilant. And his voice was never that deep.

There was someone else. Beside him and Zein, there was someone else watching.

No Veylis. It couldn't be whoever was using the Daemon—they were dead.

So who?

Who?

Who?

Naeko's mood worsened. He spat at Zein's anchor. Couldn't even come back without making things more complicated for him. A growl escaped him. Frustration built.

He settled for striking New Vultun across the face again, his palm remanifesting in the atmosphere before slamming back down, passing through the harmless without harm, and splattering the vicious as he had just done Zein.

This was the right thing. Enforcement. Enforcement. Enforcement.

He let himself sleep. But the city still didn't care. The Guilds still played their games. The closest thing he ever had a mother still thought him nothing more than a dog.

Godsdammit all.

In despair, Naeko found his mind drifting back to Osjane, to her question of what he wanted, to the dreams of the future.

Never to come.

It turned out he was right. It turned out the city did need a dog, and the Guilds a proper mauling.

He activated his session and linked to Maru, never taking his eyes off Zein's scab, or her writhing dragon. *+Maru. Pocket off this area. And get me some godsdamned cagers. I got a third for our trial. I got Thousandhand. I got her. I got her. I got her. I got her.+*

A lull followed. Maru sent him a nod. *+Hey. Are you alright?+*

And Naeko looked down at his hands—soaked in the gore of his master and “mother.” Soaked in blood like all those times before. It felt right. It felt warm. It felt like what he was for. *+I don't think I ever was.+*

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

WARNING: HEAVY TEMPORAL DISTORTION DETECTED