

*Many things begin with a wound, a death, a grievance, a loathing, an obsession. The wounds we inflict on others, and that are inflicted on us, echo through the world.*

*Reverberate.*

*They tie us together with the rest of existence in ways that most cannot fathom, most cannot see. But I have seen, and I have cut, and I have been cut, and with the alignment of damage, I was shown how to wound existence itself.*

*There are those that say that though we wear the vessels of fallen gods, all we do will be ephemeral. For we are mortal in passing, mortal in habit, and so too will our comings and passings be mortal in fashion.*

*I disagree.*

*I disagree with all these notions. They stare at things from parochial perspectives. All that we do echo onwards onto the future. All that we do is an act of eternity, because it pushes something else, it deviates the pattern.*

*All is always changed. Because you chose to move something. Because you chose to kill someone; save someone; or do nothing. The pattern is always in motion—the question is who will affect it.*

*My mother showed the beginnings of this truth to me when I watched her part a god. She reminded me once more when denying my final his final reward. I learned from this. I have understood this. And now I perceive through my actions, through my cuts, through my deeds eternal.*

*The splitting of time is more than just a wound. It is a window. It is a passage. It is me.*

*In this, the paint and the painter are one and the same.*

*-Veylis Avandaer*

26-4  
Wounds of the Past...

*-[Kae]-*

Kae's footsteps slowed as she ventured further into the depths of Scale.

The glowering red and oppressive heat that accompanied the vents and Rendsinks vanished, peeled by shifting bricks that reconstructed her surroundings with each step. A wall of

techno-thaumic reactors greeted her, exhaling miracle after miracle, a barrier before the Gatekeeper's final threshold.

In another life, in another time, the sheer thaumaturgic brilliance on display would have overwhelmed her, would have compelled her to delve into its secrets. Scale was an achievement of true artistry: a realm made possibly by a union of Guilds and cultures under Jaus.

Then, without conflicting masters and with loosened restrictions from Voidwatch, the Agnosi were committed to a single goal—making an unassailable fortress crowned upon the apex of New Vultun.

*Unassailable.*

Such was the hope.

Hope is a brittle thing. Easily broken.

Broken, like the Gatekeeper was, though its looming presence leaned down upon her, though its manifestation expanded another plane from its being, splitting existence itself into layers, unraveling the cavernous ceiling above to present shimmering trails of arcing starlight.

As she entered the threshold of the Gatekeeper, she felt her Domain of Space vibrating as she found herself entering a plane within a plane. Most Domains of Space and Geometry would not be capable of such a feat. The fabric of base reality's structure was already being strained by one manipulation. A second had too high a risk for paradox.

Yet, the Gatekeeper was no meager golem, not mass-produced ontologic for war. Call it a prototype. Call it a masterpiece. Call it by its true nature: a created being Ensouled with Ninth Sphere Frame festooned to the very apex of the city.

Kae swallowed as she felt its mass. It was pressure ineffable. It was power beyond reckoning. But still was it broken. And still was it important beyond measure. Important for the coming of the Ladder; important for her coming trial; important because it gazed and burned falsehood; important because it kept Noloth and the Deep Nether contained; important because she was going to help fix it.

She, Avo, and the Agnosi present—a group led by a man she knew a lifetime ago: Jakuta Ajayi. Her mentor, the High Agnos, a man she would have once considered father and friend.

But not no more. At best, he was a victim, at worst he was a traitor, and now she had no idea what to feel of him beyond discomfort and bitterness.

“I won't let anything happen to you,” Kare said, noticing her slowness.

Kae simply nodded meekly. All the bravado she felt along the way vanished, her confidence spiked and dipped. She tried to draw on her anger to strengthen her bones, but her nerves were as if a damaged aero, spiking high and diving low. Exhaustion ruled her mind before the work could even begin.

But the task could be delayed no more.

A war was coming. And they needed every advantage they could claim.

That, and she was here. Wanted to be here. Demanded it. She had to face him — him and her past. This would be nothing before what it took to stand against the Guilds. The future was coming. There was no escape.

She forced stride into her steps as she ventured further into the Gatekeeper's starlit expanse. Its galaxy shone above her, but it did not caress her with comforting hues of amber. Rather, it glared. It burned. It seared. And along those running rivers of wonder, she knew it was broken, severed, bleeding.

The reunion between her and Jakuta was an unceremonious one.

He stood beyond the others, clearly awaiting her arrival, shrouded by Avo and the Gatekeeper both. Beneath the twin Overheavens, the other two Agnosi stood close to Maru Sandrupal—a Paladin. Kare's immediate superior—who was staring off into quivering folds of inverted space. Within the expanse, the Chief Paladin and Avo were luring truths from Zein Thousandhand. Truths that came in the form of a slash. Something they could turn to being a palliative for the Gatekeeper's wounds.

As eyes turned to her and Kare, one set flinched away from her specifically.

Jakuta.

He looked no different than she remembered him. Even better in fact. It looked as if he purchased more treatments for his skin and features. A new outfit as well. He always did stress about his appearance.

"Aesthetics were a true expression of an artisan," he always said. "It's also what separates us from the gods. They cannot choose what their own decorations. They could not choose the culture that composed them."

Despite the pristine nature of his aesthetic more, it was his gaze that ruined his effect. His gaze, and the paleness of his face, the slickness of his sweat, the shaking of his hands. He looked wretched, sickened.

He looked like how she felt.

“Kae,” Jakuta said, barely managing the words.

For a few heartbeats, she simply drank him in, a vestige from his past, and offered no reply. The other Agnosi strayed from her, but they shot suspicious stares in her direction, exchanged thoughts through a Ghost-Link. They were lost in this scheme, lost in what was happening. She could not blame them. They, more than her, were merely bystanders.

“Jakuta,” she finally replied. Speech abandoned her again, thereafter. There were too many things she wanted to say.

*I hate you.*

*I missed you.*

*How have you been?*

*What is wrong with you?*

*Why did you betray your oath?*

*Why did you just leave me to burn?*

*Why couldn't you have just tried?*

*I'm sorry this happened to you.*

All these things at once. All these things, wounded though she was, kept her from using her rage properly. There was a lifetime between them, a lifetime since she was adopted into the Agnosi, since he noticed her potential as a child, took her on Commissions earlier than any other, taught her all he knew of the art, introduced her to other mentors.

There were moments she couldn't stand his arrogance, his absolute need to argue over every little thing, every little interpretation of ancient lores. There were moments she cried into his chest, weeping about heartbreak and failure, weeping while he just patted her back and listened. Quiet. Uncharacteristic. Unlike himself.

Her exhaustion grew. His seemed to match her.

“It's been a while,” she said.

“Yeah,” he replied, lamely.

She simply managed a slight sigh. “Life. It never quite goes the way we expect, yes? Just like our projects?” She looked past him to take a glimpse at the Gatekeeper. But by all the dead gods it was a wonder. “Only proper we are brought together by a serendipitous commission, yes?”

She was almost stammering her words. Repeating them. He was just nodding mutely.

He was the first to break, closing his eyes with a ragged sigh. “I’m sorry—I wish I...I...” He drew in a breath. “I made a mistake a few years ago. Project Legacy. Do you remember that one? The one that Calamity-Halter abandoned.”

Vague recollections returned to her, she offered but a nod. “Yes?”

It took him a mustering of strength before he continued. “I was... trying to awaken a god. Remake one—it was curiosity; I wished to see if such a thing was possible.” He almost smiled. “And I think I did it. I think I made one. Something truly esoteric and powerful. But... when I tried to... to break it... I couldn’t. And it broke containment. There were deaths.”

Kae winced. “Oh, Jaku...”

“There was a Seeker on call. He was—he didn’t know the specifics of what I was doing. Thought I was just testing someone on his Frame. He got his cadre together, and they managed to pacify what I unleashed. But I was done. I was certainly going to be executed for this. My act of hubris. My breach of the oaths. Yet... that didn’t happen. He offered another arraignment to me.”

“He was Clan D’Rongo.”

“Yes. He offered. I accepted. And no one remembered what went wrong. I gave them a way in that day. I lied to Voidwatch. I helped them bury so many truths. I was spared death or... or... but I was theirs from that moment on. I was theirs.”

Kae almost understood, but the absurdity of the situation made her laugh. A expression of confusion and hurt swallowed his features, but she simply shook her head. “I’ve seen that done,” she said as she looked towards Avo. “I’ve seen it done. The Stillborn project. It goes beyond all our wildest dreams. It exceeds us.”

“What?” he said, not comprehending.

She committed a small act of revenge then: she didn’t share the knowledge with him. The knowledge of her glory. The knowledge of her masterpiece exceeding his, being that which will restore the Gatekeeper. He would discover Avo’s nature when the restoration and be horrified.

Be shamed. Be awed.

And then he will gaze upon her with true jealousy and despair, knowing that his pride, his dream, was dwarfed by hers.

“Enough,” Kae said, “Let us get to work.” +Avo.+ The information came to her with a single thought. A window of memories played in her cog-feed, and she projected the details via phantoms, studying the cuts the High Seraph left in the Gatekeeper’s nebula.

“When... how did your mind get mended?” Jakuta asked.

She simply shook her head. She didn’t give him that answer either. He was a curious man, and she was going to starve him. This, she was never going to let him know. “Tell me about the state of the Gatekeeper. I see many cuts. They are counter-chronological damage?”

“Yes,” Jakuta said. “We made many attempts to restore the Gatekeeper. Rendsinks. Adjustments to its canons. We adapted its architecture to have more symmetry with the patterns of time in hopes of acceptable backlash to supplant the damage, but the rifts to the past remained.”

“Is it a micro-rupture?”

“Can’t be. We drained all the Rend more times than I can count. It’s a miracle. That, I am certain of.”

“Canon,” Kae said, wincing. A call to her attention shifted her focus across her Ghost-Link. Avo was looking down at the body of his decoy. A clean split parted the sheath, but upon their ontology, the damage was inflicted solely on the Heaven itself. A bifurcation parallel to the cyclers. She compared the harm Zein inflicted to the swarm of slashes left by Veylis. “Oh. Oh, I see.”

“See what?” Jakuta asked.

“Several critical segments of the Heaven are crippled. They’re tied to specific canons. Canons we can no longer update without risking severe damage. But the cycler is spared.”

“Yes,” Jakuta said. “I suspect the High Seraph wished to keep the Gatekeeper intact for her own use.”

He didn’t even know how right he was. “I don’t think we can fix this by simple updates. Not with so much of it permanently damaged. Have you tried putting in another Heaven?”

A flash of frustration emerged from Jakuta. “Yes. Of course. We even fully rebuilt the Heaven once. Attached it to another cycler and accepted the damage on what is present. But it was like the Gatekeeper *remembered* how damaged it was supposed to be. That’s why I suspected this

to be a problem of cognitive mending rather than thaumaturgical restoration.”

“Purely temporal wounds, I think,” Kae muttered. Her attention was in two places now. The first with Jakuta, going over the Gatekeeper itself, the second with Avo, watching as Soulfire gushed from the line Zein traced across the tapestry.

The patterns revealed far more than human senses could ever perceive. The damage was absolute. The ontological shape of Avo’s decoy was split. Would remain split from present to future from a wound turning their substance backward into the oblivion of the past. It took Avo shielding her mind from observing the nothingness for her to continue this study, and even then, he wards rattled more than once.

As she utilized his perception of the tapestry to her advantage, she felt her veins grow cold. It wasn’t just a wound left, but a new pattern. One that dictated the passage of time. An overriding pathway that commanded others onward unto the coming future.

Zein hadn’t just split time. She was *continuously* turning time backward. Using her Heaven to do so.

And if that was true, if Veylis’ cannon worked the same way...

“Oh, *gods*,” Kae said. “Jakuta... Veylis left parts of herself in the Gatekeeper. Her miracles, her Heaven, it’s scarred upon another.”

“Scarred?” Jakuta said, eyes widening.

“**Scarred.**” A third voice intruded into their conversation. A voice composed by legions of others. When it spoke, the Gatekeeper screamed. “**Quite correct, Agnos. Well done.**”

“The fuck—” That was as far as Maru got. Suddenly, without present or warning, he came apart in an eruption of viscera, shredded by unseen hands. Kare barely called out before she suddenly vanished from the world.

Above, the galaxy came asunder, as thousands of tiny cuts began to bleed writhing tendrils of gold, as existence groaned under the intrusion of another weight.

Kae’s stomach dropped to her feet. Something was wrong. Jakuta was stumbling backward. Something was terribly wrong. +Avo—+

Three things happened moment: Naeko and Avo returned; just in time for a thoughtwave detonation to sweep out from Jakuta; just in time for reality to tear open under Kae, for an unseen power to pull her down under coursing currents of time.