

The disintegration of the past has always had a deleterious effect on the presence. The downstream damages are becoming increasingly obvious.

I am sure many among you are aware of the growing problem of “relative temporal drift,” in which specific individuals—and entire cultures—experience the same incidents in history, but at drastically different points. Functionally, this should not make sense: how does one person’s past become someone else’s present?

Current theories presented suggest that chronology might be more “winding” for some people than “linear.” Finding proof for this, however, is hard, as all attempts at a comparative are destroyed by the encroachment of time.

What we do know is this: casting an object, entity, or concept backward into the time results in their near-total unmaking. Indeed, the few permitted studies we have done are only known because we listed the fact we performed those studies. Disquieting, the subjects that were sent backward can no longer be located, recalled, or found in any way. All attempts to retrace our steps have resulted in insanity or failure.

Even our best Sanctian researchers have failed to retrain any details during ont-shift perception testing.

As of right now, all damage left by shifting the present to the past are unmendable. Irreparable.

It is the closest method one has to outright killing a god or unmaking an entire portion of the tapestry. Theoretically, if enough Domains be held in place, we could potentially witness complete ontological collapse on a scale unfathomable...

-Agnes Frost-Moon of Line Jiang, 9th Knowing with Specialities in the field of Metachronology

26-3
Expert Testimony (I)

—[Zein]—

Zein smiled softly to herself as the weight of Naeko’s Soul returned. Her blade rang as it deflected an oncoming strike from a temporal echo. She continued circling time-made clone, not bothering to face her disciple when speaking. “Ah. Back so soon. Already have my words affec—

Another presence cut her off. Naeko was not alone.

“Hello, Zein. How’s prison.”

Ah. Her students were speaking. Doubtless, the plague had convinced her fool boy. Preyed on his emotional fragility. Such was her failing. She should have carved the weakness from Naeko; her mistake was assuming rage was the dominant emotion in him. In its absence, despair reigned and all the effort she instilled in him was lost.

Until now. Provoked back to action by the very beast that inflicted this confinement on her.

There was a second mistake: underestimating the Strix's creation. It was only hubris that blinded her from his threat. Avo's very legacy was one of deception.

"...Plague. Bold of you to come."

She dismissed her echo with a casual wave and finally faced her chosen students.

Naeko had that tired look on his face again. Pathetic. What was he weary about? He spent the past century running from war; he should be beyond vigor. More concerning was the plague's eyes. Avo was studying her, eyes pale and fangs clasped. There was something different about him again. Something different every time they parted, it seemed.

A knot of frustration twisted in her stomach. She needed to release herself. She needed to breach this pointless cage before all was lost. Who knew how pruned the Paths were now that Defiance's most were allowed to run amok, consuming minds and shaping to city to his whims.

For a few seconds, she simply let the tension between them simmer. Naeko had his arms folded, looking as if a boulder beside a pole, standing next to Avo's unnaturally thin frame. She would not give the first word if she could help it. They came to her for a reason: she would have them surrender their demands to her first before reacting in any fashion.

"Want to talk with you," Avo said first. The beast was always impatient. But it was also complicated; woven plans within plans. She hoped Naeko would have been the one to break the quiet. But that was never his nature. Always second to Veylis, her, or Jaus. Perhaps she should have forced the boy to spend more time with his love, hardened his rhetorical spirit further.

"Veylis. She left wounds on the Gatekeeper. Wounds of time."

The way its words resonated within her mind made her insides churn. What had it done to its mind now? Dead gods only knew what it had eaten or how it changed. At least now she knew what it sought though.

Temporal wounds. Cuts casting pieces of reality backward into the past. No truer means of destruction, no higher death to experience. Dying was one thing; rendered non-existent was another.

"Ah. You wish to mend my love's final creation, then?" She asked. She tapped her fingers against her glaive and considered her options. Streams of ghouls furred out from her, but there

was something wrong this time — a blur was growing around the ghoul. Her simulations could still guess at what he could do, but the strangeness about him leaked over into Path as well. It was like he was a metaphysical cataract of some kind—possible actions hard to perceive. Troubling.

“Something like that,” Avo said. Phantasmal tendrils rose from his gaseous halo like steam and she stayed wary of potential compromise. **“Can likely restore the ego. But still learning about chronological damage.”**

“Ah. So you came to seek an expert.”

The ghoul chuffed a laugh. **“No. Already met Veylis. Didn’t go well.”**

Muted surprise flowed through Zein. She expected Avo to speak with her daughter at some point, but the simulated outcomes of such a conversation was supposed to end in their demise and her reclaiming the Stillborn. Either he was lying, or he had survived the rupturing of his Liminal Frame, The former was more likely, the latter was more worrying.

Such was why she chose to believe him—Avo had proven nothing but worrying in all the time they spent together, after all.

“Did she break you?” Zein asked.

One of his Echoheads made a bobbing gesture. **“Closer to a maiming. But I got better.”**

“Yes. You do have a habit of doing that, don’t you.” The possibility of him surviving an encounter with Veylis solidified her choice. “No.”

“No,” Naeko deadpanned. He rubbed at his face in frustration. “Why? What do you mean ‘no’? Don’t you want to help Jaus?”

Zein all but scoffed. “This will do nothing to aid my love. Only victory will aid him. Victory, Naeko. Something that you can help me achieve if your mettle wasn’t so brittle. Alas, I might have left you in the fire too long. But still: no. The only person this information will serve is this *plague*.” She met Avo’s eyes and withstood its contempt. What an aggravating, wretched, and impossibly fascinating monster you have made, Defiance. “I know nothing of what you have planned, Avo. But I will not see them come to fruition.”

“Our goals are aligned on this,” Avo replied. **“Can use each other to hurt your daughter.”**

“Impossible. You will use anything you learn from me to further your own goals. Naeko. Hear me when I say this: you may loathe me now, but he will not be your salvation. He has his own designs on the future. His own designs on victory—”

“Designs. Like you did when you cut Jaus. How did that feel? Did it hurt you? Did you regret it?”

Chilling fire consumed Zein from the inside. She mastered herself before she could betray any outrage — stopped fingers from curling around the haft of her blade too tightly. “So. She showed you the insides of the latter as well.” She gave a bitter chuckle. “She must be quite taken with you.”

“She’s a cultist. Wants to make a god of her father. Going to let the Infacer bind the Sleeper to him. Make him a god above gods. Existence awakened. But I heard him scream. I hear him scream even now. Did you? Did you stay long enough?”

Oh. So, now it was taunting her. Trying to provoke her. Miserable, feeble, insolent beast. These tactics were no use on her: she felt the weight of every blow she ever struck, endured hellish rebukes, and eons of insults.

Only Jaus managed to stay her hands with words. Only Jaus, convincing her to spare him as they found themselves in the husk of that voidship. Convinced her to aid him in their exploration. Convinced her of more and more and more—

A sliver of iron-will strayed. She thought of the day in the Ladder, of drawing forth her dragon-glaive and through the structure to prevent her love’s damnation from becoming absolute. It wasn’t he that she cut, but the Ladder itself—his progression into the future. A gap would flow forever to the past, and it was only his screams—deafening and thought-consuming—that forced her into action.

She hadn’t even thought at the time. She just knew. Knew that if she did not stay his path, there would never be another chance to make things right, and she would never know his warmth in her life again.

Was it selfishness? Was it desperation? Was it pure animal fear?

It was all of these things propelling a slash that was only possible by centuries of skill and dominance over time itself.

Zein took a deep breath, and decided that she wished to return this torment. “Perhaps I can give you a first-hand understanding. Some things are beyond words—best that you learn them through action.”

Naeko shook his head at that. “Now, hold on—”

And to her savage satisfaction, she watched as Avo grinned as well. ***“Good. A wound to sample is infinitely more useful.”***

She adjusted the glaive in her hand, began to call upon the power of her Heaven once more. “I must warn you: I cannot guarantee the preservation of your Frame or life if this goes wrong. You should know this.”

Her focus was more on Naeko than the ghoul: he was the true obstacle in the direct sense; a mountain she could not lift to Avo’s growing wildfire.

Something she was altogether unlikely to put out by this point.

Naeko shot Avo a questioning look. “You sure about this?”

“Yes. Survived worse. Survived Veylis. Doubt the mother can exceed the daughter’s capacity for harm.”

And there was that delicious hubris again. It assailed her, but it also oozed from him. Truly, a fatal flaw that transcended man and monster both was an epic one. Something she would delight in exploiting. “Naeko. You are not doing your duty as an elder. It is best to keep your junior brother in his place.”

Naeko contemplated it for a second before shaking his head. “Nah. I wanna see this. The outcome might surprise you.”

That actually *stang*. Had they been apart for so long that even he doubted her? Well. Suppose this could serve as his reminder as well: some blows could not be parried; some wounds cannot be healed.

As she lifted her glaive, Akusande uncoiled around its edge, the dragon’s presence affecting the passage of time as if a tip of steel passing through still waters. Then, she stroked it back slowly, and a current began to rush. Time was shifting along her blade. Time she could carve *backward*. Back into the jaws of oblivion. “Be you ready, plague?”

Avo simply held out his arms and tentacles. **“Show me.”**

And from across space and time she hewed him, cleaving clean through flesh and ontology both. Soulfire detonated out from him, and the mass of a Heaven parted along the edge of her blade.

–[Kae]–

Kae had imagined standing beneath clear skies countless times since her burning. During her time in the Warrens, she yearned for the Tiers, yearned to reclaim the life she lost. Her greatest fantasy was for time to rewind. To a time when her cohorts were still alive, when Dawton was

still with her, before she ever made the mistake of accepting the esteemed Stillborn commission.

Now, everything around her felt like an illusion. A life she lived only in a dream.

She sat on a well-maintained bench as she took in sprinting children, listened to the shrill chirps of birdsong, breath in scents of mint fragrance. Here, dropped off by Draus within the No-Dragon district of Midfall, the city was a shroud of endless autumn, with houses fused into the trees of brown and red, where people were carried along brooks of pristine waters and on the backs of voluminous hawks.

The entire world took the shape of a nest around her. A paradise garden for families to find their leisure. A false cradle made by her like—the Agnosi—to dull the senses of those fortunate enough to be born citizens under a Guild.

All the melodies and laughter around her became but noise, all the colors were dappled smears. These people didn't know what was coming, and didn't care of all the death it took to feed their pocket of paradise. Just like she thought her work was going to change the world for the better, that every sacrifice was serving a higher purpose.

Delusion. Absolute delusion.

The sounds of a snapping twig bade her to turn her gaze. A few steps away from her stood a well-built woman—an Ori like her. Kare Kituhada cut an elegant figure, with intelligent eyes and that pointed jaw. The unease in her posture, though, was infectious. Even with Avo's phantoms layered over her face, she still felt exposed.

"H-hello," Kae said awkwardly. "Nice to meet you. Finally."

Even though versions of themselves existed as copies within a certain Overheaven's inner reality. Gods, what has her life become?

+Interesting, + Avo answered.

The Agnos pouted.

"Hi," Kare replied, stepping aside before a Sang-girl piloting the headless body of a two-ton nu-dog barreled past her. "Do you want to go on a ride?"

"Yes," Kae answered. "Yes I do."

The awkwardness persisted even as they seated themselves in Kare's aero. Dismissing her phantasmal disguise, as soon as she entered, the Agnos turned her attention out the window and swallowed.

Nervousness threatened to claim her. She was going to face Jakuta again—going to work with him once more and fix the Gatekeeper. This was a moment she dreamed of too, but only when the burn of the flames affected her the worst.

For so long, she wanted to know why he abandoned her, why the Agnosi just pretended like she never existed—did nothing to dispute the accusations against her.

Jakuta was compromised. Compromised, and doubtlessly forced to go along with the D'Rongo's attempts at covering everything up. Just another mark in a long list of failures. Just another transgressions upon a long line of transgressions. So much for the Guilds and their oaths. So much for Voidwatch's protection.

There were only two people that never failed her. One was a Regular. The other was a ghoul.

And now, because of them, she was going to Scale, mend the very construct that would judge her at the trial of the century, and if possible, restore and adapt it to be used against the Guilds.

"I'm sorry what happened to you."

Kae blinked. Pulling her gaze away from the passing wave of floral crimson rushing beneath her, she greeted Kare with a cough. "O-oh, sorry, I didn't mean to ignore you. I was just—"

"It's okay," Kare said, holding up her hand in a placating gesture. "You have a lot to worry about." A look of guilt lingered in her gaze. "And you've been through a lot. I'm sorry. We should have done our duties. For you and... and Paladin Dawton."

Hearing his name from another *hurt*. It was why Kae did her best to work these days. Work was focus. Work made her happy. Work kept her from thinking long. She didn't have a reply to give, so she simply nodded.

"I didn't know him very well," Kare continued. "Met him once. But he seemed like a good man. Kind. Humorous." The Paladin opened her mouth and hesitated. "Paladin Maru—my mentor—he said he never saw Dawton so happy as when he got assigned to work with you."

Kae began nodding faster, looking anyway but at Kare's face. "He was. He was a good man. It was a good life." She closed her eyes, let out a breath, and finally faced Kare. "But that's all gone now. All we can do is to save what's left."

Kare's stare took on a haunted quality of her own. "Yeah. *Yeah*. It's going to be war, isn't it."

“It always is,” Kae replied.

Paladin wilted. “I’m scared.”

Kae smirked at that. “Well, you don’t need to be scared alone.”