

A Wound in the World

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B1C01 — A Wound in the World

The sand of Serephis ground under his armored boots with a sound like shattering glass. It glittered, a desert of shattered obsidian and splintered light stretching to an impossible horizon. The air was thin, smelling of ozone and the static that precedes a lightning strike. Miguel drew it deep into his lungs, a measured breath that did nothing to calm the storm within. This place was honest in its hostility, a purity of malice he almost preferred to the gilded lies of a council chamber. He almost preferred the clarity of this desolation. His hand, sheathed in a silver gauntlet, went to his hip, fingers curling around the phantom grip of a weapon he felt he *should* possess, a familiar weight he instinctively sought. It was the gesture of a soldier, a commander far from his legion, an old habit that died harder than faith.

He walked with an impossibly steady stride, the only solid thing in a liquid world. His profound isolation was a weight, but also a shield. Here, there were no hopeful young faces looking to him for answers he did not have. There was only the grit and the endless, shimmering waste. Why would anyone choose to come here? The question was a ghost at the edge of his thoughts, but he already knew the answer. No one chose Serephis. One was called.

Above him, the sky offered no comfort. It was a bruise of purple and ochre, smeared and indistinct, with no discernible sun to cast his shadow. The light was a diffuse, sickly glow that flattened the landscape, making depth a constant, wearying effort of calculation. He remembered skies of pure, harmonious light, the empyrean heavens of his home, and a pang of homesickness struck him, so sharp and sudden it felt like a physical blow. The feeling soured quickly, curdling into a quiet resentment for this exile, this mad pilgrimage. He squinted, not against any brightness, but against the sheer wrongness of the light, his shoulders tensed against the oppressive, empty canvas above. He felt untethered, adrift in a place where the fundamental rules of existence had been rewritten by a mad and indifferent god. What guided a man when the very light above him seemed to mock all order?

His guide was not sight or sound. It was a pulse, a low and steady thrumming that he felt not in his ears but in his bones, in the very marrow of his being. The world outside was silent save for the grinding of sand, but within him, a distant drum beat its inexorable rhythm. His head was cocked slightly, a listening posture that

had become second nature, though his eyes remained fixed on the horizon. His pace matched the pulse unconsciously, a forced march to a cadence only he could hear. Was it a divine call or a demonic deception? The question was the heart of his fear, for he could no longer tell the difference. This silent, internal beat was both his compass and his curse, a flicker of desperate hope in a well of profound dread. He was a puppet, and his body felt the pull of the string.

The source of the pulse, and of his journey, was the wound. It was not a thing of flesh and blood. No blade had pierced him, no fire had seared his skin. It was a wound in concept, a hollowness carved from the very idea of him. It was an absence. He could not name what had been taken, only that a vital part of his essence, the core of his celestial nature, was simply... gone. His gauntleted fingers hovered over the spot on his chest, not quite touching the burnished plate of his armor. He was afraid to press, afraid to confirm the emptiness that lay beneath. The air around that point felt colder, a pocket of absolute zero in the desert's shimmering heat. He could almost see the light of his own radiant form bending around it, like starlight around a dead sun. It was not pain, but a spiritual nausea, a feeling of being fundamentally incomplete. What could be powerful enough to wound a concept?

He straightened his back, the ingrained discipline of a commander warring with the slump of his exhaustion. He was Miguel, Supreme Commander of the Celestial Host. Or he had been. Now he was just a wanderer, a commander on a path he knew his duty forbade. A flash of faces, sharp as swords: the young, hopeful angels of his legion, their belief in him as bright and unwavering as their faith in the Divine. He felt a sting of shame, a bitter taste in his mouth for leaving them, for abandoning his post to follow this mad, internal call. The shimmering heat rising from the glass dunes created mirages on the horizon—phantom armies marching, spectral legions clashing in silent, endless war. He forced his gaze forward, away from the ghosts of the duty he had forsaken. What could possibly be more important than his duty to the Host?

The answer to that question terrified him. He feared this journey was not a holy quest but the final symptom of his faith unraveling, a slow, quiet descent into damnation. If this pulse, this wound, was a lie—a final, subtle corruption from the Enemy—then he would have damned himself for nothing. The thought was colder than the wound itself, a spike of intellectual terror that threatened to paralyze him. He stopped walking for the first time in what felt like days, his head bowed against a sudden gust of wind that kicked up the glass sand, its sting like a physical accusation. His breathing was steady, but it was the forced, measured calm of a man standing on a precipice, staring into an abyss of his own making. His certainty, once his greatest weapon, was now his most dangerous enemy. How did one fight a war against their own soul?

A memory surfaced, unbidden. It was like trying to hold smoke. There was no context, no face, no sound of battle. There was only the echo of a great light being extinguished, and a profound, ringing silence where a song should have been. The thrumming in his chest faltered for a moment, the desert's own quiet seeming to deepen in response. His eyes lost their focus, his gaze turning inward to that blank, silent moment of loss. He touched the spot on his chest again, this time not with confusion or fear, but with a deep and inexplicable mourning. A wave of grief so sharp it almost brought him to his knees washed over him, a sorrow for a loss he could not name. What was lost in that forgotten battle?

He shook his head, forcing the grief down. The past was a ghost. This sand, this heat, this ache in his joints—this was real. He could fight this. He focused on the tangible pain, the fine, glassy grit that had worked its way into the joints of his armor, a constant, grinding irritation that was almost a comfort. He took a deliberate, deep breath, inhaling the hot, static-charged air. He clenched and unclenched his gauntleted hands, feeling the familiar chafe of leather and steel. The grief receded, replaced by a grim, stubborn resolve. His body felt heavy, but it was anchored to the here and now. Physical endurance could be a shield, a wall against the phantoms of the soul.

Ahead, a massive dune of shimmering, crystalline sand rose against the bruised sky. Its surface was not solid but flowed like liquid, its crest constantly shifting shape. He saw it as a metaphor for his own faith. What seemed solid one moment was treacherous the next. The only constant was the pull from the wound. He approached with caution, testing the flowing ground with the toe of his boot before committing his weight. He moved with a low center of gravity, a warrior's hard-won caution applied to the simple act of a climb. The world's instability was a frustration, but the clarity of the physical challenge focused him, honing his purpose to a single, sharp point. What lay beyond this obstacle?

As he crested the dune, the wind died completely. The silence was absolute, so profound it had weight, pressing in on him from all sides. In that crushing quiet, a chilling realization bloomed in his mind. He was no longer praying for guidance from the Divine. He was listening to the ache in his chest. His compass was no longer the light of Heaven, but the darkness inside him. The admission felt like a final, quiet betrayal, a snapping of the last thread that bound him to his old life. He paused at the summit, his back ramrod straight, and looked not up at the sickened sky, but down at his own breastplate, where the pulse originated. The guilt was still there, but it was overshadowed by a terrifying sense of freedom. He was his own authority now. If not faith, what would justify this journey?

From the height of the dune, the stars were clearer. They pulsed with light, but not in unison. Some were fast, some slow, a chaotic jumble of competing rhythms that created a dizzying, arrhythmic display against the dark canvas. He used to navigate by the celestial harmonies, the great symphony of creation. Now the sky

was a beautiful ruin, a grand orchestra collapsing into noise. He tried to track one star with his eyes, to find its pattern, but it flickered and changed tempo, defying logic. He shook his head in a small gesture of surrender. He felt a profound sense of cosmic vertigo, of being disconnected from the flow of time itself. In a broken universe, what did obedience even mean?

A wave of weariness washed over him, deeper than before. He felt the light of his own being, usually an infinite wellspring of power, feel finite here. This desert did not just drain the body; it drained the soul. The ambient light seemed to dim slightly around him, the air growing colder as if the desert were actively feeding on his energy. He stumbled, a rare sign of weakness, catching himself on one knee before he could fall. He consciously drew his aura tighter around himself, a defensive posture against this slow, silent consumption. A flicker of genuine, physical fear touched him. He was not inexhaustible. His own light could go out. Could he reach his destination before this place consumed him entirely?

As if in answer, the pulse in his chest quickened. The low thrum became a powerful, resonant beat that seemed to vibrate in the air around him, making the fine glass sand at his feet shiver in time with the rhythm. The debate in his soul was over. The doubt, the fear, the weariness—all were silenced by the sheer force of the call. It was no longer a question or a plea; it was an imperative. His stride lengthened, his pace quickening as he descended the far side of the dune. A new, fierce energy overrode his exhaustion, his eyes locked forward. The fear was burned away by the heat of the call. What could be so close as to call this strongly?

He rejected the thought that it was merely a weapon. He had commanded legions armed with blades of righteous fire and shields of absolute faith, and they had not filled the void. What he lacked, what he desperately craved, was an answer. An answer to the hollowness inside him, to the silence where a song used to be. He wanted to be whole again more than he wanted to be victorious. His hand, which had so often rested near his phantom sword-hilt, now moved to his chest, a gesture of seeking, not of aggression. The air ahead seemed to clear slightly, the shimmering heat haze thinning to reveal the dark, solid line of a distant ridge.

The ground grew firmer as he walked, the shifting glass sand giving way to black, volcanic rock that felt solid and real beneath his boots. The final ridge was a stark, jagged line against the chaotic sky. The pulse was now a deafening roar in his soul, a sound that was both him and not him. He felt a moment of profound hesitation at the base of the ridge. The answer was just beyond this. Was he truly ready to face it? What if the truth was worse than the mystery? He placed a hand on the cold rock, steadying himself, and took one final, deep breath, holding it before beginning the last ascent. He felt like a diver about to plunge into an unknown abyss, a potent cocktail of fear and exhilaration coursing through him.

He made a silent vow. Whatever lay ahead—damnation or salvation—he would face it. This was his path now, and his alone. He would not turn back. The wind picked up again, but this time it felt different. It was not hostile, but expectant, as if the desert and the discordant stars above held their breath with him. He pulled himself up the last few feet of the ridge, his movements economical and powerful, the actions of a soldier with a clear objective. He did not look back at the desert he had crossed, at the life he had left behind. A feeling of cold, hard peace settled over him. The internal war was over; he had chosen his side. Now, committed and resolute, he crested the ridge to face his answer.