

*Kindred, one of our embraced, has been severed from my touch.*

*A Keter has been found: Concept-Breaker; destroyer, bringer of the end. He is in the claimed hells, ascending the tower to disappear into the harbinger's many rings. This cannot be allowed.*

*Seek him and destroy him. Destroy that malignant System that prevents us from experiencing this moment of everlasting demise. Destroy him before he hurts your queen once more.*

-The Dying Queen

34

Mercy

Wei's **Aspect of Omniscience** allowed him a glimpse of insight into how Mepheleon's portals work. These thresholds weren't mere bridges across time and space, but slices interposed between corresponding locations. It was like a cut allowing one section of reality to bleed over into another. Such was why Wei's **Omniscience** bled out over the gap into the nothingness between, a nothingness that bled out further into a realm of Source and primordial chaos.

But then he was through. He was standing in a sanctuary not too unlike the one he first arrived in after defeating the Gatekeeper. Immediately, his awareness filled the chamber, and he found its layout much the same as the first, aside from a few random additions. The first of the novelties was a glowing hand filled with gold and gems next to the dormant portals on the other side of the room. Wei recognized it as something similar to the Almost Invisible Hand of the Market from earlier, though this one was not hostile.

### **Merchant: Lv. 10 Demon of Greed**

What looked like a large map also encompassed the ceiling above them, showing them arterial trails leading up the Black Tower, into the Hearted Realms that they needed to pass through wherein they would face the Trial of Despair.

And then there was the floating skull trying to mount itself on a new body. Shattered glass coated the ground before a softly flashing spring. Rafael hovered there with Wei's Compendium floating close behind him, Wei's banner held aloft by one mystical hand, and Wei's staff clutched by another.

The body Rafael was trying to slot himself one clearly belonged to another guide. Moreover, the Path of Envy had left its touch on Rafael, coating his skull with an emerald green. A crown of wretched clasping hands ran along the top of the lich's head. The body it was trying to steal wore a brown beige suit of silk and cotton. The guide's original head was submerged in the spring — likely torn off by Rafael himself.

Just then, Rafael froze and turned to stare at the newcomers. A click resounded through the room and the skull locked itself in place. An awkward silence followed.

Wei glared at the one who had abandoned him, and Rafael's jaw fell slightly open. "I... my friend, you survived."

Wei struck the space between him and the lich, and suddenly he was right in front of Rafael. His hand shot out, he seized the lich by its forehead, and Rafael cried out with surprise. With a snarl he ripped the lich out of the display case and slammed him down on the ground. Time spilled around Wei as if air displaced by an arrow. The young master brought his Eidolon down in an instant. It bit an inch deep into Rafael's forehead. There, he rested the tip. Only then did ciphers begin to swirl, but Wei shattered Reference Circuits and Signs alike with a contemptuous backhand as Source flared from his being.

"Hello, *friend*," Wei replied, the words squeezed out between his clenched teeth. "So brave of you to flee, so brave of you to leave me and a defenseless woman behind."

Ellena took a step forward and looked between the lich and the young master. Her face was one of pure tension. Pure tension that promptly broke as the portal they arrived from flashed once more. Just then, the form of Agnesia strode through, and a tinge of flaming aura of silvery crimson coated her. The tips of her hair trailed with particulates of ash and more than the aura, her physicality was also drastically boosted, with her looking at least twice as muscular as she was before. The blaze at the center of her eyes was also more intense, and armored brimstone scales ran down the length of her limbs, and a hardened crest trailed along the curvature of her forehead. Her original outfit was burned and tattered in several places, and smoke rose endlessly from her. Wei felt a burgeoning aura spring forth from Agnesia, and he studied her level.

#### **Agnesia of Dawnrest: Lv. 4 Destroyer**

Roggi arrived a moment after, and as he squeezed through the portal, Wei felt his eyes widen. The formerly massive Oathbearer was at least twice the size he used to be, but he wasn't any taller. Instead, it seemed like his body had swelled with fat. Rather than walking into the room under his own power, he was carried forth by a hellish construct. To call it a machine would be inadequate. Parts of it were obviously made from living flesh, fitting the undead form of something between a snake or a lizard. Rotten ribs clutched Roggi's dangling body and held him aloft as if a twisted carrier for an overly large child.

As the ribs traveled along the back, however, they went from being bone to rusted brass, and a spine of obsidian chattered as if it was alive. The rest of the body festered with fungal growths and festering cancers. The entire mechanism itself trailed four times longer than Roggi was tall, and he plucked at sinews and shifted bones to control this new monstrosity that he piloted in place of his armor. At its very end a rot-tinged tail dripped with a strange oozing venom that sizzled against the ground.

Everything paused. Everyone looked over each other. "Agnesia?" Ellena said, breathing her daughter's name.

The girl touched by Wrath blinked a few times, and the rage behind her eyes dulled. Suddenly, her senses returned she turned and regarded her mother once more. "Mother? What has...?" She saw the golden regalia spilling out over Ellena's body and took in a breath. "You look like your queen again... You feel like you did before."

"The taint is broken," Ellena answered, shooting a grateful look at Wei. "Young Master Wei... he shattered it somehow. The Dying Queen... her voice is quiet in my mind. The fever is gone. I am... myself again..." A sob escaped from the older woman's throat, and she closed her eyes. "I feel at peace again."

Finally, Agnesia was in motion, far faster than she was before. The stones beneath her talon-like feet shattered with each step, and with impossible ease, she swept her mother up into a titanic embrace. Ellena became as if a feather in the clutches of a giant.

It was then that Roggi let out an annoyed snort, sweeping a wry, blood-red gaze across everyone present. His focus settled on Wei, and he sagged within his contraption. "Why is it that I'm the only one who got any bloody uglier?" He chuckled afterward. Then his expression flattened. "And why are you trying to kill the skull?" He craned his neck. The fat infused into him made the underside of his face bold with protruding rolls, leaving his beard caught within the crevices lining his face. "Where'd you get that spear?"

A slow exhalation left the young master. His **Omniscience** allowed him to keep track of everyone around him. The bulk of his focus remained on Rafael. If the skull attempted anything, he would sink his Eidolon all the way through.

"I understand," Rafael began very carefully, "that you are very angry at me. And I would be too, absolutely. It is a terrible thing to be abandoned in your time of need."

Wei waited for the word "but" to follow. If Wei heard a 'but,' he might just kill the skull.

Rafael continued. "With that being my argument, perhaps it would be just if my long journey was to come to an end right now."

No "but" arrived. Instead, the lich gave an argument for his own execution. Vexing. Wei's lip curled; the coward was making this justified murder a bit more difficult than it should be.

"Perhaps my death will give you the satisfaction that you desire," Rafael continued. "I have gone through the paths too. All of your artifacts I have kept, they can return to you. And I think I learned something useful. As I grafted myself onto this guide, I have also hijacked their knowledge. Whatever you need to know, I can tell you. We will be able to gain an advantage even as we walk the Moongraves—and without need to constantly consult the Harbinger's slave-dogs."

"If I choose to spare you," Wei said, summarizing the lich's pitch.

"Yes, if you choose to spare me. You and no one else."

Wei paused as he considered his options. It was a terrible thing to let a coward live. That he learned from his sect, an enemy was an enemy. There was only so much you could hate them. But to have trust betrayed was a deeper wound altogether. He hadn't known Rafael for long. But in the moments before the lich's escape, they'd affirmed their alliance. And words needed to mean something, needed to mean something.

Yes, everything he did needed to mean something, have some purpose. He could destroy the skull, but what would that get him? His main goal was to reach the top of the Tower. And with the knight chasing him, with the threats arrayed against him, he needed every advantage he could get. And that included the lich. Their death would only weaken him in this situation. There was much he could still extract from Rafael, but that didn't mean the lich could go free. Now he needed to suffer the weight of this failure, to know that there were existential consequences for choosing poorly.

Wei withdrew his flowspear but kept his fingers locked around the skull's socket. "You will live," Wei said. An audible noise of relief left the skull. But then Wei infused the lich with his **Intent** and captured the lich's **Aspect of Strength**.

#### **Conceptual Integrity of [Rafael's Aspect of Strength]: [5/5]**

Such was the least among the lich's Aspects and thus the most acceptable to lose. But as the young master's fist jabbed forth lightly, he dealt permanent damage to the lich's **Strength**, and a piecing howl escaped Rafael as something broke inside of him. Something broke, never to be healed.

#### **Conceptual Integrity of [Rafael's Aspect of Strength]: [2/5]**

"What? What have you done?" Rafael gasped, pure dread entering his voice for the first time. "What... what you *broken*?"

"Your **Strength**," Wei said, "you will always be a certain amount weaker than you were. Be glad I took this from you and not your mind. Be glad that I did not cripple you any other way. Be glad, for this is as close to mercy as I will get. You asked for your life. I gave it back to you. But mercy does not mean lenience. You are mine now. Your life is mine. Mine to give, mine to keep, and mine to take once more. Know this, and know that you fear the wrong person."

And with that, he let the skull go. He would be keeping a close eye on Rafael from now on. "Where I go, you go," Wei finished. "What I say, you do. Any hesitation, and I will break your **Mind** instead."

The grudge between him and Rafael temporarily settled, Wei turned his attention to the rest of the group. They were all staring at him. Roggi, Ellena, Agnesia. They all regarded him with new apprehension, though no one had stepped forth to stop him.

"So. What'd he do?" Roggi asked. It was only then that Wei recalled. The Oathbearer never got to see the Lich's cowardice. Indeed, Roggi was the first one to be flown through the portal, an act of mercy in retrospect on the part of the Knight.

"I abandoned him," Rafael said, suppressing his own terror. The skull peered at Wei, burning embers within its socket quivering, but the young Master didn't bother facing the Lich.

"The matter is done for now," Wei said, trying to keep the scorn out of his voice. "We have other things to attend to. The first part of our Trial of Temptation is complete. Mepheleon is still not responding to me, and I am being hunted," he paused. "Only I. The rest of you don't seem to matter."

"Who were they?" Agnesia asked. "They were powerful. They were..." The girl's face contorted in confusion. "Why can't I remember what they looked like? Why can't I remember their name?"

"A *geas*, most likely," Rafael answered. "It usually censors an idea. The Knight likely had a powerful enchantment placed upon them. The Inheritors, if I am to make a guess." Already, sparing the skull was bearing fruit, though Wei still didn't trust the Lich. Rafael had no reason to lie about this.

Another uncomfortable silence followed, but Wei broke it. He held his flowspear high, showing his Eidolon to everyone. "We are all Classed now. We have earned our place in these clean towns. It is time to take stock of what we can do and commit to a next course of action. Is anyone injured?"

A chorus of no's followed. Heads were shaken.

"My pride, mostly," Roggi said. Looking down at his newly-enlarged body, "Creator, what a shit Class. Breathing now feels like I've got rocks in me lungs."

Wei gave the Oathbearer a look of pity. It was an ugly thing to lose one's fitness. In past days, Wei would direct only scorn upon those who couldn't maintain a proper physique. But for the Oathbearer, this was beyond his power, more cursed than a blessing when he was forced through the **Path of Sloth**.

"I will see if I can make this right somehow, my friend," Wei replied. "Rafael," Wei said, turning his attention to the lich once more, "you claim the body of the Guide. Can you access the portals?" There were seven gateways standing before them once more. They were dormant, however, their faces nothing but dead obsidian, essence pools inactive.

"Yes, of course," Rafael said, a new vigor entering his voice. "I've managed to assume connection to the crossroads. They don't know I'm—"

Wei cut him off, "Good. But I want all information about these paths as soon as possible. We prepare fast and we move fast. We cannot wait in one place. The Knight of Lust managed to penetrate the sanctuary and I expect them to do it again. Idleness is death, so we must move quickly."

Regarded as idle on levels and studied the others in his group, "Let us convene and level ourselves. After that, we need to discuss our strategy and if we should pass through the same portal as one."

Nervousness and confusion swept through everyone present. "Are you planning on leaving us?" Agnesia asked.

"No," Wei answered, "but I suspect that my presence has already unbalanced these challenges." He shot Eleanor an apologetic look. "I suspect that if I did not pass into the same portal as your mother, things would have been much easier for her." The deposed queen gave no obvious reaction, simply nodding along. "Whatever the case, we need to understand each other's capabilities and then, only then, do we decide where we go, together or separate."

"Aye," Roggi said. "And let's see if we can find anyone else to help us. My son and my brothers are still alive. The Trine as well. If they pass through their trials, then they should be classed as well. More assistance would be good."

"Do you want to talk to them?" Rafael asked. The question cut through the group like a sweeping scythe.

"What?" Roggi replied, dumbfounded. "You can do that?"

"We all can now!" Rafael stated with excitement. "Your Classes, they come with additional community and chat functions. You can tune into what is being said across the Claimed Hells if you want." Wei recalled the chat function. That was something Schrödinger showed him early on. "If you desire this, I can see your connection be arranged."

And once more, Rafael slithered forth, proving himself useful, molting away from his shame of cowardice in a single fluid instant. Wei regarded the lich once more. This one was a snake, through and through.

The question was if Wei could make the lich his snake.