

*Death need not be our end. Finality is but a fate of mortality, and though rot may claim what entropy has touched, that which bears the Yearning Scarlet may forever bloom.*

*I taste your pain, my kindred to be. I feel your strain. To exist along is hard. Too hard. To be alone is to drown and lose all you might experience to the whims of the Fathom's indifference. Yet, there is salvation from such fatal torpor; a realm that welcomes all, that will keep you among blessed company and spared of death beyond even the concept of eternity.*

*The Everwound awaits you. Merely accept my embrace. Merely pass through the gate of your own demise, and find me upon our shared throne, and find pain banished by our shared blood.*

*Give unto me your death, and I will give unto you glory everlasting.*

-The Dying Queen

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Trial of Retribution

"You're a lich," Wei said, recalling his encounter with Yengen Tuller, the Crossroads merchant. "Are you with Crossroads as well."

Light practically exploded out from the lich's skull. "Crossroads?" The lich made a spitting noise. "I spit on the merchants. I spit on their souls. Festering parasites. Enslavers of magic and beauty. Never confuse me with the *mystikos-avarica*. I am no hoarder of spellcraft and wonders. I am Rafael De Montez! Liberator of realms! Bringer of magic! Bane of tyrants! Never confuse me for the merchants again, or I will be forced to defend my name through a duel."

Faintly, Wei could hear Mepheleon chuckling once more.

Wei had never slighted a skull nor been challenged by one, but adventuring through the Claimed Hells offered one countless firsts. "I understand. Why were you falling? And what is your purpose here?"

The skull somehow righted itself in Wei's grip and spoke forth a booming declaration: "I am *Mystikos-Liberatas* Rafael De Montez! I come seeking to prove my worth before the Harbinger so that I might someday stand before them and challenge them to a duel for the ownership of my world. I also demand that they present me their mother?"

"Their mother," Wei said, dully.

"Yes! Harbinger! You are an embarrassment! Your father sprays feeble seed! But I will give you a brother worth having! Send me your mother! Let her have a single moment of joy!"

Silence followed. Agnesia and her mother's jaws dropped in sync. Roggi fought to stifle disbelieving laughter from under his helmet as Wei worked to process the skull's words. "You wish to..."

"Yes," Rafael declared proudly. "I want to give Mepheleon's mother the sex."

A growing discomfort shuffled in Wei as he slowly moved the hand away from himself. The Harbinger was lenient—ridiculously so—but there still had to be a limit. Wei didn't want to be holding the skull when the lightning came down to strike Rafael from this world. An awkward silence unfolded as Wei extended his arm and waved Rafael gently while looking upward into the falling ash.

"What are you doing?" Rafael asked, his turn to be confused.

"Preparing to discover just how much latitude Mepheleon will grant us."

Several seconds passed. Billowing waves of white fell to rustling winds. But no bolts descended from the sky. No exultation of rage shook the world as the Harbinger brought his wrath to bear upon the lich.

Rafael remained unharmed, and Wei's bafflement grew evermore.

Was Mepheleon truly without ego? Without pride? Was their power so great that they were beyond any insult? Any slight?

It was hard for the young master to conceptualize. Hard, but increasingly admirable, if in a warped sense.

"You're just a skull, though," Ellena said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "How would you—you don't have..." The older woman started making vague hand gestures, causing Agnesia's cheeks to turn bright red.

*"Mother!"*

The lich suddenly turned with a torque of unseen force. His eyes flashed as he levitated from Wei's palm and drifted closer to Ellena and her daughter. Sparks flared out from the younger woman, but Rafael had eyes—well, *sockets*—for Ellena alone. "Ah. Hello, *madame*. It that the fates smile me yet; I would have never expected to encounter such a fine vintage in this place of damnation."

The awkward silences were building like blocks now. Each word the lich spoke left Wei struggling to keep pace. It was more the bluntness of their stated desire and the unnaturalness of watching what amounted to little more than a mystical skull try to charm a yet-living woman than the words themselves that befuddled Wei, but the uncanny feeling remained.

"I... You..." Ellena blinked.

"Speechless already?" Rafael rasped. A satisfied sigh followed immediately thereafter. "Do not be ashamed, madame. It is not sin to desire charm, or companionship. And even if it is, what more can be done? We are already in the hells. As for your question of how I might be able to live up to my words... well, magic delivers. On power. And *pleasure*."

A greatsword jabbed forward, and the lich went lurching back.

"Away, creature," Agnesia pouted, taking a stand in front of her mother while glaring at the lich with her burning eyes. "Keep your distance."

"Ah! Your daughter then. She has your beauty, your face, and a fire—a true fire. Yet, she is fresh. Much of her life as been unwritten." The lich tutted. "Do not be jealous of your mother, maiden. For someday, you too will share a ripeness."

Agnesia sputtered. Her mother pressed her hands over her mouth. Behind them, Roggi shook as he made choking noises beneath his helmet. "Madness," the Oathbearer snorted. "Absolute bloody madne—"

*Something* dipped down from the sky and splattered against the steps behind Roggi some three meters away. Caked against the obsidian stairs was a mangled body, limbs broken and folded at sickening angles. Between the puddle of viscera spreading from the creature's ruptured wounds, Wei saw its skin was like that of green leather, and its face was halfway between beast and man. Fangs jutted up from a massive underbite, and its unblinking eyes were a pale yellow. Shattered animal bones and dented ringlets of armor cascaded down its body, and a chipped axe remained tight in its right hand even past the point of death.

Rafael hovered above the group then for a better look at the body. "Ah. Thalgor. I was wondering when he would fall."

"You expected this?" Wei asked, surprised for the third time.

"Indeed. We were both cast skyward by a shared foe." The lich dipped his head in a show of respect. "Go to your long rest, Thalgor. Perhaps you will achieve your dream of claiming an ear from every race in existence in that place beyond the darkness. A true shame. I will remember him. Even if he tried to steal from me during the Trial of Charity."

"What foe?" Wei said, ignoring all else that the lich said. "Are you being followed? What do we face?"

"Hm?" Rafael said. The skull promptly hovered closer to Wei and faced the pathway upward. "Ah. Yes. You have just arrived as well. Ahead is the **Keeper of Paths**. When you arrive at the

summit of this mountain, the Harbinger—” Rafael paused to spit in disrespect. “Will tell us of our task. We will need to defeat a Demon of Wrath before the way to the Moongraves open. This is also how where one will earn the foundations of their Class.”

“Another trial, then,” Wei said. The young master steeled himself as he stared through the murky fog ahead. Shooting the skull another look, Wei gestured for them to lead. “Guide us. And stay ahead. I will not hesitate to break you should there be any treachery.”

Rafael zipped close, staring at Wei sockets to eyes. “Young sir, do not insult me. I can see you are a man of nobility and valor. Know that I am the same, and deserve to be afforded every courtesy you would offer toward yourself. I have done nothing to deserve suspicion or scorn yet. Give people only what they are due. This is the only proper way.”

Wei pressed his lips together as he endured the wilting intensity of the skull. The damned lich didn’t even have eyes, how was he doing this? “I... apologize. It was improper of me. I trust that you understand my paranoia as well, though?”

The lich zipped back and began moving. “Of course. In fact, I commend it! The Claimed Hells are like a magically-enhanced venereal disease: that which looks clean may yet see you suffer a rash. Or worse.”

A series of sounds escaped from Wei as he gave up processing the metaphor. “Just stay close.” Giving Agnesia a brief look, he whispered to her in haste: “Burn him if he does anything strange.”

The girl’s eyes simmered. “I pray for the opportunity.”

A distorted field of essence billowed out from under the lich as they zipped forward, gliding through the air without difficulty. Wei followed along close behind as he kept his senses focused. Blind trust in a strange was a mistake for fools, but something about the Rafael made him seem too upright to lie.

More than that, there was also the uncanny charisma they exuded.

“What capabilities does this Keeper possess?” Wei asked. “Does it bear any weaknesses?”

Rafael threw his skull back and barked a laugh. Wei was forced to tilt his head. “It is a malignant specter that feeds off your fear. It greets you as a blanket of fangs and claws, wrapping around you as you are made to face horrors beyond mortal imagining. In truth, it lacks the ability to damage the world directly, but can convert the fear you feel into other creatures it can summon. Such was what saw the destruction of my body and the death of poor Thalgor. The orc tried to split the Keeper with his axe. He ended up striking a tumorous mound of highly explosive infants instead.”

“A *what?*” Ellena gasped.

“Of course,” Wei replied, trying to consider how he could counter a nest of explosive babes. Throwing his spear into such a volatile foe from afar held too much risk. What if his weapon was destroyed? And how severe the blast radius? No. The young master’s mind flowed to a natural solution: Roggi. “Oathbearer. Be prepared to seal any exploding infants we encounter.”

The armored giant gave a slight chuckle. “Aye.”

As the young master acknowledged the giant’s reply, he caught Agnesia staring at them with a tired look. “Perhaps you can burn them from afar?” Wei asked, uncertain if the girl just wanted to be included.

“I’d rather not,” she replied pithily.

With Rafael with them, silence became a memory. In the minutes they spent climbing the steps, the lich was an endless stream of words, boasts, and praises. He swore that together, as five instead of two, they would be able to destroy the Keeper and ensure the romancing of Mepheleon’s mother.

He was also a shameless flirt, with the bulk of his favor gracing Ellena. The woman had taken to placing a permanent hand over her lips while the surrounding air grew hotter.

Agnesia just kept glaring at the lich, only breaking eye contact when they surmounted the final step.

“And we are... wait, this is not the place I remember,” Rafael muttered.

The entire area was about eighty meters in circumference, the falling ash thinning unnaturally in the space ahead, but remaining near opaque in density when one gazed upon the skies above. Rows of obsidian stalagmites protruded from the ground, cupping the space as if a semicircular bowl.

And just before them, what looked like a small, gleaming triangular tower constructed of weaving patterns glowed through the pale haze, hovering a full nine meters off the ground.

“We arrive,” Rafael said, his voice rumbling with added gravitas. “Behold, friends. The **Keeper of Paths.**”

Everyone just stared at the bright structure, uncertainty growing. Wei could feel a faint trickle of pressure carried by Keeper’s radiance, but it still paled before the oppressive presence that continued to press down on him. The Keeper was not the gravest threat here. Not nearly.

Roggi's armor hissed as he took a stride, looming over the group. "So. What? You said something about a sword. I don't see—"

**"Welcome to the Trial of Retribution!"** Mepheleon cheered.

The Oathbearer muttered a litany of curses under his breath, and Wei gave him a sympathetic nod. The Harbinger seemed to find joy in interrupting people. A childish habit, but one they could indulge at any moment.

**"First off, a round of applause for making it to the Moongraves!"** Thousands of massive crimson hands flared into existence over the group, slamming together at deafening volume. Agnesia and her mother cried out, while Wei winced at the noise. Rafael and Roggi remained unaffected. **"With the unsuccessful applicants handled, I am pleased to inform you that your journey to earning your Class and citizenship to enter the Diaspora is about to begin."**

"Mepheleon!" Rafael cried, his skull pointing upward at the many hands. "Finally. You show yourself. Deliver your mother before me, so that I might cuckold your father and bring that fine woman some much deserved joy."

A series of chuckles escaped the Harbinger. **"Why, my dearest little revolutionary, why would she be interested in something she already experienced once already."**

Rafael went still.

"What?" Ellena gasped.

**"Ah. Life as an unrecognized bastard grants you certain insights."**

Wei's mind went blank. It was true: The Harbinger was utterly beyond shame.

**"But enough about my sordid past, let's talk about yours. The trail ahead of you is simple. Defeat the Keeper of Paths. Once you do, they will drop the first gate to the Moongraves, but after that... each path you choose will shape you further. Know this: your deeds will decide your Class, and your performance will determine your fate."**

"Decide our Class?" Agnesia shot the others a quick look. "Are we to be separated?"

**"That will be up to you, dear girl. Paths can be walked together or alone, but the same experience can change two people in very different ways. Or, perhaps, not affect them at all. Not everyone even needs a Class, after all."**

The young master narrowed his eyes while Agnesia faced her mother and bit her lip.

***“But that is a thing of the future,”*** Mepheleon said. The hands above the group clasped together. ***“Right now, it remains to be seen if you can prevail over shades cleaved from your pasts.”*** The shining appendages clapped again. Ripples of force ruptured the air clean of ash.

As the haze was stripped away, Wei’s eyes widened as he witnessed the visage of the Keeper for the first time.

What they saw earlier was not a tower, but a sword. A greatsword as long and wide as a small building. Its edge oscillated unceasingly, threads pulsing out into existence like crashing waves. The flats of the blade were as if a polished mirror with sinuous patterns sprawling within. The demon that bore the weapon was no less an abomination. Upon rows and rows of kicking, pawing, and straining humanoid feet weighed an immense pedestal that dwarfed even the blade. The body—if it could be called that—of the demon was well over ten meters tall, and was shaped like a “V.” The missing section at its core was perfectly shaped to sheathe the greatsword, and rows of searing gate-sized eyes blinked upon frames of brass. Black, coiling tentacles wrapped around the weapon like two gargantuan serpents, and where they traced the blade through the air, a thin split lined existence, a cut in reality’s seam.

“I thought you said the bloody demon was supposed to be like a cloud?” Roggi rumbled, leaning down to speak to Rafael. “This doesn’t look like a cloud. This just looks like a Ruin-damned mess.”

“Perhaps it transformed already,” Rafael mused. “Assumed a new form in preparation for my return.”

***“Or perhaps you feel from a place a little higher above?”*** Mepheleon hinted. ***“You were falling for a while. Ah. Keeper, Keepers. So hard to keep track. When you spawn so many demons of custom touch, it really gets rather hard remembering all of them. Even I can scarcely remember what this one’s capabilities. Oh, well. You will discover its power first-hand yourselves. Good luck!”***

And with that, the man hands drifting over the group popped up their thumbs and vanished with a flash.

“I hate that bastard,” Roggi growled.

“We share a heart, my friend,” Rafael said, voice high with enthusiasm.

The **Keeper of Paths** brought their blade down against the ground with a spine-jolting slash. Obsidian shards flew out into the air, and the eyes lining the demon’s body began to blink in rapid suggestions. It tilted on its base, stretching its feet out to a series of pops.

**Keeper of Paths: Lv. 15**

**Warning: Demon is vastly superior to you in the Aspects of Strength, Constitution, and Speed. Unidentified effects active within their wielded artifact.**

Wei gripped his spear tight and took a step forward. “Roggi,” the young master said. “Form a barric—”

The Keeper vanished in a blast of skittering fragments. A burst of wind plumed over the area as Wei reacted—barely. The Keeper had been twenty-five meters away from them at the start. Now, there was only two between him and a falling greatsword. No one else in his group had his speed—could react fast enough to ward off the strike.

Even with **Proximal Acceleration** coming into effect, Wei knew his foe was well over twice as fast. Shifting his stance, he brought his shield online to parry the blow—greeted the edge of the blade at an angle.

As it struck, he activated the shield’s effect, prepared to convert kinetic force into mass.

But it proved to be a pointless attempt. The blade swept clean past his shield, his arm, and his entire body, cleaving *deep* into Wei and through the others regardless.

No pain followed the aftermath of the strike. Only a chill. Only a feeling of a newly forged chain.