

*Contract received and accepted. The details are clear. The compensation is... most adequate.
My hoard appreciates this donation.*

*I will descend into the Blood Games. I will find this Young Master. He will not reach the
hearted-realms of the Archdevils. Heh. He will not even emerge from the Moongraves.*

*I will see him brought to you, and offer his corpse as proof and his Class untouched. Of this, I
give my oath as dragoness; as Knight to the Circle of Lust.*

-Severean Dreameater, Knight of Lust

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Paths of Ascension (II)

“Beginning to? Ha? I never liked them,” Rafael sighed. “Now. About the compendium.”

“Do you wish to read it?” Wei responded, uncertain what to make of the lich’s fascination with the book.

“No, no, friend... where are you *from*?”

Wei blinked. “I don’t follow.”

“Wei!” Roggi said, voice booming. Looking over, the young master watched a dozen trailing limbs scrub the Oathbearer down. His arm was still missing, but existing scabs were being peeled off his face and a vitality seemed to flush his visible skin. Well. What visible skin Wei could perceive beneath Roggi’s carpet of body hair. Beside him, Agnesia and her mother sat stiffly, fixing Wei with awkward expressions. “Come on. You need a good *rubbin’* too.”

Wei kept his gaze averted from the two women. Mentally, he cursed at Mepheleon for his impropriety. The sexes were to possess separate quarters. Such ethics were known even to illiterate peasants. Which meant the Harbinger inflicted discomfort upon the group deliberately. But Wei did not need to be a party to such degeneracy.

“There is no need,” Wei replied, waving Roggi off. “I have my own means of recovery. And when you are mended, perhaps you should leave the waters as well. Let mother and daughter have their privacy.”

The massive Oathbearer turned to stare at Agnesia and Ellena before looking around at the vast spring they were all submerged in. He gave a brief chuckle. “Why? They got plenty of space. Speaking of, why haven’t you two gotten out of those clothes yet? And why are you so close together.”

Disbelief filled Wei. His outrage arrived before Agnesia’s. “Oathbearer. This is highly improper.”

Now it was Roggi's turn to seem lost. "What? What'd I do?"

"One does not demand the undress of a woman. No matter her station. It is unbecoming?"

The Oathbearer's eyes grew wide and round. "Rustin' why? Why is that improper?" Frowning, he looked Agnesia and Ellena up and down, and their postures drew tighter as a response. "It can't be comfortable letting yourselves soak. Makes no sense to me."

Ellena cleared her voice. "Ser. It is not right for—"

A frustrated sound came from Rafael. "He's a *dwarf*, Wei. He's got—they're single-sexed! They have no women! They have no urges! He has no capable to appreciate the supple... the sweet."

Wei struggled to process that for a moment. "Oathbearers... are only men?"

Roggi gave a disgusted look. "Men? Pah. Please, brother, I don't mean you offense, but I was crafted by the Creator's Flames. Born from the heart of my Ironhearth. Not pushed out as a messy ball of screaming flesh from a tiny hole."

"I-Ignium," Ellena said, her voice filled with near-offended horror.

Once again, Wei blinked. In retrospect, he chastised himself: he assumed the giant had been some kind of warrior-eunuch to a holy sect, but it was clear that the actual case was infinitely stranger. "I see."

The lich drifted low between Agnesia and her mother. "Worry not, my matron, my maiden. He is incapable of lustful leering. But if it is appreciation you desire, know that my gaze is upon you: filled with adoration. And respect."

"Roggi," Wei began, "I would like formally apologize to you for my earlier assumption. I have assumed degeneracy of the wrong person. Rafael. Away from them. Leave them be."

"Wei," Rafael said, spinning as if the air was greased. "I respect your prowess, but it is wrong of a man to speak for another. Especially, those of the... fairer *disposition*." The lich drew closer to Ellena, who shrank back; Agnesia gave a weary snort.

"Skull," Agnesia said, her eyes burning bright.

"Ah. Your point is heard. I grant this space to you, maiden. Enjoy." Rafael sailed back across the room to Wei like nothing happened. The young master looked in incredulity as the lich returned to him, casual as can be. "So. Back to what we were talking about."

"What was that?" Wei asked, observing Agnesia and her mother from his periphery.

“That, my young comrade, is charm. And the slow smolder of affection.”

An intrusive thought assailed Wei, made him think of this floating skull trying the same “charm” on the young master’s mother. His death would have been swift. Or slow. Depended on how much offense was taken.

“But still. You can trust me.” Rafael barreled on, returning to their dialogue before. “Where were you from? You want me to go first?”

“I—”

“Fine. Before I became Rafael De Montez, Deliverer of Magic and Equality, I was... Sebastian Manuel. From Argentina. My death was a tragic one: I was pulled into traffic when my rottweiler, *Diablo*, saw his hated rival across the street. Thus ended 23 years of glorious life and the dawn of my career in IT.”

Words were being spoken by the lich, but Wei couldn’t put anything together. “What?”

“Okay, that’s me,” Rafael finished. “What about you? Where are you from? Where you Chinese before? Are you one of those who chose to experience a *little change*.” Glowing eyebrows manifested over the lich sockets.

Wei just kept staring. “What is... ‘Chinese’?”

Silence followed. The lich bobbed in the air for a few moments longer. “You’re not a Trespasser, are you?”

“No,” Wei said, trying to recall what he knew of the word. He frowned. “I was not killed. I did not cross over from another world... But you *are*. You said you died. You said you had a past life...” Opening his pack, he pulled out the *Trespasser’s Compendium* and showed it to the lich. Magical hands formed in the air to clutch the thick tome, but Wei held it tight. “Why do you want this book.”

“Because it lets us—uh, me communicate with the others.” Rafael paused. “Actually, if you’re not a Trespasser, who did you get this? Did you... take it from someone?”

“It was given,” Wei said casually. Useful, though Rafael had been, the lich had quite literally fallen into Wei’s life. He was, at present, still an unknown — an enigma who was actively worming for more information. Wei didn’t trust him, but there was an opportunity here as well; the lich clearly knew a great deal about the broader realms.

Releasing his grip, Wei gave the book to the lich.

"Wonderful," the lich breathed. Icons materialized and spun around the lich. Iron-bound locks shifted and clicked as hidden Ciphers infused into the metal triggered and cascaded over each other as whirling traces of light. As the book flung open, essence began to flow free, and Rafael flipped through the pages.

Standing behind the skull, Wei examined the contents of the book and found himself surprised. At the center of a page was a complex array of symbols and sequences. They were actively moving, animated portraits of ink that transformed, merged, and broke apart with each Cipher the skull cast into the book. Volumes worth of content flickered across Wei's vision. His System pulsed inside his mind and ran translations for foreign languages. The words were updated between blinks as incomprehensible scribbles became familiar characters to Wei.

As the flipping finally came to a halt, Rafael gave a low, chuckling laugh. A blossom of different Ciphers unfurled before the lich. "Yes, yes, this is exactly what we need. There are others, so many others, that pass through here. I knew it. There are others here with us."

Trails of ink extended out from the Trespasser's Compendium, painting lines through the air, piercing even the glass-like walls of the sanctuary. The energy they carried was faint, only a trickle of essence, but it led far, further than Wei could sense. Then, from places almost too far to perceive, ripples began to pulse around him, and the translucent traces of ink vibrated as if spiderwebs laden with prey.

"There are others here, others passing through the Moongraves with us," Rafael said. More acts of spellcraft spiraled around the skull, and a few of the Ciphers dimmed in response. "Damnation. The decay is setting in faster than I assumed. I will need to reconstruct these arguments."

Now Wei's interest in the skull was piqued. "You know much about Ciphers?"

"Much? No. The true masters of the highest craft are long dead. I am but a practitioner. Thankfully, that is more than most people can claim. I will need time to recreate and memorize my constructs. I sacrificed most of what I have to reactivate and augment your staff."

Wei shot the artifact left on the ground nearby, a look. "That was how you could cast it without charges. You fed its needs."

"More like I rebuilt its missing substance and improved its signs and reference circuits."

The young master considered what the skull just said. "And can you perhaps teach another this art?" His mind went back to Schrödinger, to the arrangement he had with the goblin. An apprentice should have many masters. In fact, it was preferable that an apprentice learn from many to diversify and amplify their experienced practices and marry different teachings while casting aside that which was useless. Such was the truest dialectic for enlightenment.

His question piqued the Rafael's interest as well. "You wish to learn? Wonderful! *Perfection!* The more people learn the highest craft, the greater liberty spreads. But be warned: though everyone can be granted access, few have the aptitude to truly perform."

"Such is the way of all things, is it not?" Wei replied.

The skull simply bobbed up and down in agreement. Just then, however, a tide of ink splashed over him from afar. Wei noticed that three ripples exceeded all others in activity, shuddering like distorted dots beyond the walls of their chamber.

"Ah!" Rafael cried, distracted from their current dialogue. "Message requests!"

"Message requests?" Wei asked.

The skull didn't respond. Instead, an ethereal tether snaked out from him and connected with one of the tome's many symbols. Suddenly, a ripping sounded and a page tore out from the back of the book. To Wei surprise, lines of text flowed, down the length of the page.

***Hey, guys. Just got past the Keeper and am now healing up in the spring. Rest of my group got dead. Staring at seven portals and wondering how shit-out-of-luck I am -
"Alec"***

***Well, that depends on what Class Mepheleon offers you and what gate you chose to pass through. I'm alone too. Rest of my group went their separate ways. Dividing interests.
-"Dawnless"***

Cool. Wanna group up? - "Alec"

No. Watched enough people die today. Came in with a few other guys during the earlier trials. They didn't make it. - "Dawnless"

Yeah, I get you. Still. I got a feeling that this might be it for me. Strange, you know. I thought I was going to be terrified—I was shitting my pants when I died the last time. Now? Now, whatever happens, happens. - "Alec"

That's how it goes after you die once. We all feel that on some level. What Classes you two going for, anyway? - "Nult"

Already selected mine. I went through the portal of Wrath. The starting Class there is Destroyer. Won't lie, being able to boost your Strength and heal by breaking things and hurting others? It's a real thrill. Only thing I don't like is the Rage Essence that keeps flooding my thoughts. I wanted to be "like" the Hulk, not literally be the Hulk. Been avoiding prolonged fight to avoid the madness. - "Dawnless."

Wait, how did you get your Class already? - "Alex"

Speak to the lich in the display case. They'll give you a rundown of the routes you can take. - "Dawnless"

Alright. Nice. Kinda wish Mepheleon told me that. - "Alec"

The Harbinger's an asshole. We're like rats in a maze to him. He likes watching us screw up. - "Nult"

Yeah, I got that. Any chance you guys can give a preview for each of the seven options? - "Alec"

Generally, if you want to boost your Constitution and Strength drastically and generally like breaking things, Wrath is for you. Lust is all about Mind and Will. It's got this weird spider-web to mess with emotions and control people too. Pride advances your Will by a ridiculous amount and allows you to temporarily distribute Will points to your other Aspects or drain them to feed your Will. All about boosting yourself. Sloth is the opposite. You can choose to "rot" some of your Aspects and make your enemy suffer constant decay to their stats as well. Greed is... confusing as all hell. You don't get Aspects, but instead run on "Liquidity." Seriously, whoever designed that Class must've been a banker or something because there's actual Wall Street terminology or something there. Envy turns you into this ghost like thing and lets you temporarily copy inferior versions of enemy Skills and Aspects. Gluttony, meanwhile, hyper-charges your Constitution and makes you capable of absorbing and getting experience from anything. So long as you can eat it somehow. - "Dawnless"

Holy shit. - "Alec"

Yeah. It's wild. - "Nult"

As the details went to the bottom of the page, Wei expected another to be torn free from the compendium. Instead, the text just continued to scroll. Wei's eyes widened.

"Flick to the back of the book," Rafael said, distractedly. "There's something there for you."

Wei eyed the lich.

"You wish to learn Cipher, no?"

The young master did as instructed. As he turned the pages, the expansive array the lich was connected to remained undisturbed. There, between embedded on the inside of the back-cover, was a single Cipher inlaid upon the page. It was shaped like a knife, and more, Wei had seen its like from somewhere...

His mind recalled Schrödinger, of the spiritual dagger the goblin pulled free from himself. The ethereal construct glimmered a clear, sky blue and compelled Wei to touch it.

"*Platonic Scalpel*," Rafael said. "More commonly known as an Editor. You will need this if you want to practice the craft."

Wei hesitated no longer. Reaching down, he tried to grasp the construct—only for it dissipate and drift into him. His System came alive then, and lines expanded across his vision.

Antediluvian Construct detected...

>[Platonic Scalpel]

Scanning for Conceptual Integrity

Conceptual Integrity: [Flawless]

Integrating Construct to System

Suddenly, a new presence flashed within Wei, and he found himself faintly aware of a weight stored within his chest. With an instinctive thought, his chest came aglow, and he reached into the brightness before extracting once inlaid construct.

Platonic Scalpel, active

Wei stared at the blade for a few moments. It was no longer ghostly blue but the shadow and pale of Source. As Rafael examined his blade, the lich hummed. "Odd color. But it fits."

"How does it work?" Wei attempted a stab with it. But the wind did not whistle or part. He tried to prick his hand after, but it slipped through without any damage. "It's not a weapon."

"No," Rafael laughed. "It's better. It will you create anything you need. If you can come up with the Signs, Reference Circuits, and have enough memory to contain the Cipher you've made. Try tracing the knife over to me and thinking 'connection.'"

Wei did just that, and this time, he did feel the knife cut. But rather than matter, it slid into the flesh of existence itself, and the monochromatic trail it left in existence was suddenly *tangible* to Wei. Like it was part of his body as well.

More than tangible, it occupied space in his mind. As if the cut had copied an existential concept into his own mind.

Platonic Scalpel

>Reference Circuit created - [1]

Wei controlled the Reference Circuit. The construct's length ran the gulf between him and Rafael and that way it remained. It was not a string, so its substance didn't bend. The slight shiver in its path left it with a perpetual crook.

“Good,” Rafael said. “I am glad to see that you are not an idiot. Now. Link your Reference Circuit to the same sign I have connected to. It is time you understand the full value of what we possess.”

Wei sank his construct into Rafael’s sign without a moment’s wait, and immediately, his mind filled with even more details as walls of incomprehensible text scrolled over his mind’s eye.

Interfacing with [Trespasser’s Compendium]...