

Before my reign, there were seven. Seven lords of the hells unclaimed. Seven masters who forged demons from sin. Seven Archdevils that guarded the nine circles of hell.

For years, they fed off the sins of all races and peoples, drawing in misdeeds through their towers across the realms, offering scourges of demons in return.

The first of the Archdevils bore many names from countless cultures, but the cornerstone of their atrocity was pride, such became their true name, as granted by me.

The other Archdevils were thusly named as well. Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, Envy, Wrath, Lust. Each of them held partial dominion over the shape of evil, and each of them in turn shaped evil, as was their wont.

Such a pity I found them so wanting. Before I claimed the name Mepheleon, before these hells were mine, I ventured up these black towers, same as any who seeks to join my circles, and I found them oh-so-wanting. Yes, there was gore, and pain, and deception, and cruelty but it just so banal.

So easy to predict that I started weeping when I got to the final circle. I wept. Because my heart was unfulfilled. Because all I imagined the supposed great adversaries to be was for naught.

Do you know what the greatest weakness of hell was? They hold no power of those who have long mastered themselves, who hold their own leash, who claim and wield their own sins. What more does Wrath have to teach me of anger? What allure is Lust, Greed, or Gluttony when I have experienced all three and found them more useful when inflicted upon another. And what use is Pride when I covet something far greater than the human ego could ever encompass?

The Archdevils never had a chance in the end. For all their unfathomable power, they suffered a sin fo their very own—something impossible for them to overcome, that enchained them to certain defeat.

They couldn't change. They couldn't choose not to sin. They couldn't choose not to act in Pride, or Wrath, or Lust, or Greed, or Gluttony, or Envy, or Sloth. It was impossible. They couldn't be otherwise. But I could. I could be all these things and more. And so can the rest of you.

-Mepheleon the Harbinger

Wei didn't have an answer for the Oathbearer. At least not immediately. Blankets of heavy ash fell around them, and the skies above resembled ruined wallpaper. Patches of the firmament sported wrinkled clouds that gave the look of blackened mold. The space between was like rotting parchment, and flashes of gray lightning left afterimages in their place, as if tears in reality.

There was a coldness to the air, and an oppressive essence beating down upon Wei alongside the chill. The whiteness of ash crept high around his feet, and through a haze of flaking white did he glimpse bones and obsidian crops jutting out from the ground.

A precipice loomed 40 meters away, and as Wei approached to look over the edge, he saw tumbling thunderstorms of crimson forming a turbulent sea. Through cracks in the cumulus, he saw a vast, round landmass spreading out from the base of the tower.

Realization struck Wei with the leaping of lightning. They were still along the tower, but far above the atmosphere, far above the outer ring of the Claimed Hells. Agnesia and Roggi arrived by his sides, both of them coming to the same conclusion thereafter.

"Ignium's Eye," Agnesia breathed.

"I'm starting to really despise this Ruin-touched place," Roggi grumbled.

Wei eyed the towering Oathbearer. "Starting?"

The giant shrugged. "You won't believe how much I can put up with if you give me a little drink."

The young master read Roggi's subtextual request and produced his flask once more. In seconds, the Oathbearer's helmet came off with a resounding pop, and he was taking sips directly from the container. After three hits, he smacked his lips and handed down—to Agnesia instead of Wei.

"Are you trying to offend me?" Wei hissed through clenched teeth as he looked between the giant and the girl. To make matters worse, she accepted without even asking his permission, taking a swig of her own.

"What?" Roggi said, innocently. "Were you going to deny the poor girl some liquid relief?"

Wei pulled his flask out of her mouth before she finished and slipped the lid back on. She shot him an offended look of disbelief as the young master scowled at both of them. "Not if she asked. No one has any courtesy here."

"Yes," Agnesia said, her voice a pitch higher, trying to convey offense, "I agree."

The young master ignored her. All of their functional equipment and artifacts were still with

them, left in a protective pile around Agnesia's wheezing mother. The older woman looked upon the trio with tired eyes and a lost expression. The other Oathbearers, Faebloods, bandits, Angelous, hive-kin, and more were nowhere to be seen.

It seemed they were alone here.

"What... happened?" Agnesia's mother asked. Her daughter rushed back to her, startled by her mother's change in condition.

"Mother? Are you—"

The old woman placed a hand on Agnesia's palm. "I am well. For now. The Taint has... I can feel it sleeping inside me."

Agnesia bit her lip. "It's getting stronger. The gaps between its slumber are shortening."

"Yes," her mother agreed. The woman afforded herself no lies. Wei could respect that. "Now. To things we can change: where are we?"

"In a Black Tower. Ascending the Claimed Hells." Agnesia scoffed. "We climb for the pleasure of this place's master, surviving in his perverse games."

"Lessons," Wei corrected. Both the girl and her mother looked upon him. He elaborated further. "The games are but a facade. They are trying to teach those who can learn lessons, and find those who can thrive in the Claimed Hells."

"Lessons?" Roggi said, sounding incredulous. "With how things have been, I've half a mind to request repayment in gold. I don't feel very instructed." He chuckled bitterly. "In fact, I feel like *someone* just stole me away from my Forgebrothers and charges." The Oathbearer looked up and promptly bellowed. "Mepheleon! Show yourself, you misshapened cur."

His voice echoed wide and high, repeating for several moments until the constantly wailing winds finally drowned it away. Only a single response came thereafter.

"Climb," Mepheleon whispered.

Wei almost scoffed at that. "Simple instructions. Delightful."

"Yeah," Roggi snarled. "Well he can shove them back up his arse. Mepheleon! You will get nothing more from me until you return my brothers! And my trine!"

The young master looked at the Oathbearer in disbelief. Was the fool really trying to coerce a being capable of casually crushing entire realms. If not for the Harbinger's paradoxical amount of leniency, Wei would have expected Roggi to be cut down by tribulation where he stood.

“Mepheleon!” Roggi shouted again, louder this time. Wei rubbed his ears.

“You should not be here, Agnesia,” her mother whispered. A separate conversation was happening between mother and daughter. The older woman looked tired, resigned, but most of all furious at her daughter. But Agnesia was resolute as well, her jaw set and eyes determined. Silvery embers danced from her person as she spoke.

“And what choice did I have? Should I have let father’s murderer turn you? Turn us? Let him embrace us as sacrifices to his Dying Queen and deliver me as a gift to one of his bastard sons.”

“You should have fled when I told you to,” her mother chided gently. “Dawnrest is lost. We fought. We failed. But you still have a future. You could have—”

“I could have what?” the girl snarled, her embers combusting with the arousal of her rage. “Let them sack and loot and defile my home? Let them take our people as blood-stock? Let them commit sacrilege against our dead by emptying our graves. We still live! We can still fight! We are not done!”

“We are broken,” her mother cried, cutting her off. The woman’s voice was nearly a sob. Wei revised his opinion of her: her prior statement of acceptance wasn’t one of stoicism, but an utterance of despair. “Your father... your brothers... You are all that is left of Dawnrest, Agnesia. You. You are the only thing worth saving now.” And then the first expression of hatred burned in her eyes. “The people deserve this. The people did this. They let those creatures into our halls. Them, and those *vermin* your father allowed into his parliament.”

“Mother,” Agnesia said, sighing.

But the woman didn’t stop. Her ranting continued. “They deserve the Dying Queen. They serve to be used as stock and prey for the Embraced. All we did for them, all your father sacrificed. For nothing... For nothing.”

A soft sob escaped the woman. Wei was no longer amused. And they were wasting time here. They needed to climb, to go forward. “The heavens are blind, and the fates are cold. Your tears are wasted here.”

Agnesia shot Wei an incensed glare as heat built around her. He ignored her petulant display. For the first time, however, her mother spoke to Wei.

“You. You are the one who protected us.” The old woman looked Wei up and down with uncertainty. “Do not take offense, but by your skin and appearance, you are clearly from one of the Ascender Cults. For what reason have you saved me and my daughter.”

“For the reason that letting that embarrassment of a warrior kill a defenseless woman offends my virtue.”

“And... that is all?” the woman spoke, breathless with disbelief.

“Need there be a grander reason? Why should I allow one both weaker and baser than myself decide the fate of another. Is this his world? No. He mistook his place. He should serve my desires.”

Roggi chuckled quietly. “You’re an odd little tyrant, aren’t you, Wei.”

Both Agnesia and her mother stared on at him, mouths slightly agape, uncertain what to make of him. “I see. Well. I am grateful for your aid. And for guarding my daughter. I know she can be handful.” Agnesia shot her mother a withering stare. “I am Queen Ellena of Dawnrest.” Her face fell. “Or I was.”

“We live,” Agnesia hissed. “You remain the rightful queen.”

Her mother’s gaze turned distant at that.

“You are exiles, then?” Wei said, putting together their situation from what few details he gleaned. “Driven from your home by a perfidious rival. A queen on the verge of death?”

“The Dying Queen is no mortal.” Ellena swallowed. Her face took on a haunted quality, and her eyes darted about, flinching at every shadow. “She is more than even a god. I hear her still, speaking to me in my blood. Her voice is soft, but there. She wills me to bend. She wills me to obey. She wills me closer to her embrace.”

“You won’t hear her soon,” Agnesia said, gripping her mother by the elbow. We are almost half finished with the Harbinger’s trials. We simply must climb now. Ascend, and he will grant you his grace.”

Ellena’s expression darkened even more. “You will have debase my soul further with the foul powers of hell? Let me banished entire of Ignium’s light?”

“The Harbinger has the power to contest the queen,” Agnesia pleaded. “And—and he will not take you for a slave. Perhaps we can even secure his aid.”

“Demons?” Ellena whispered.

“To punish the Kindred. To purge the traitors.” The air around Agnesia crackled and a growl of absolute anger entered her voice.

Roggi and Wei watched the two with rapt attention, before the young master shook his head. "Enough. You can walk now, yes?"

Ellena frowned at him. "Yes. I... I feel better than I have in—"

"Good. You stand in the middle. Roggi behind. Agnesia, you take the front with me. We go up, as the Harbinger directs. They promised me truer tests for my skill and will. Trials that will strain even me. I wish to make a liar of them. But first, I wish to find proper shelter so that I might meditate. Such will be our first goal."

Ellena stared silently at him once more.

"He's like a... questing knight, in a way." Agnesia said. Wei faintly got the impression that she was trying to defend his image before her mother somehow.

"I suppose so," Ellena said. Looking around, she took in the ash-strewn wasteland and sighed. But which path will we take?

Wei pointed behind her, past sheets of falling white. All the others looked in the direction of his spear, and Roggi let out a curious hum.

"And how do you reckon that's the right direction?" Roggi asked.

"Because I heard how your voice reverberated as it went upward earlier. There must be a wall or hill there. Something in the way."

The Oathbringer chuckled. "Well, look at you, lad. A smart little killer."

Wei frowned. "I'm not little. You're just large."

Roggi let out a booming laugh at that. "Aye. We're *dwarves* compared to someone." He sighed. "Right. Let's be off then. Soon we get up, the sooner I find my brothers and charges. Better be the case, or I'll be holding the Harbinger to account for that."

The Oathbearer was so very optimistic about his odds against Mepheleon. Perhaps optimistic wasn't the right word. Delusional might be more accurate.

Taking on the loose formation Wei suggested, they trudged forward as they were draped in cloaks of falling ash. An uneasy ambience formed between them, and to the rhythm of Roggi's rhythmic stomps, they progressed deeper into this new and strange section of the Tower. Bones and jagged teeth of ebony protruded in equal measure, and Wei made a habit of shattering them with his spear. Now, a clicking noise joined Roggi's heavy footfalls, and Wei kept his senses sharp, studied the oppressive essence washing over them, prepared to face any foe.

Wei wanted to meditate and reach his next Core Ascension, but he will not risk such a thing until he identified the source of the unknown essence and made certain he would not be ambushed while in his trance.

“I meant what I said earlier,” Agnesia spoke suddenly, her voice low. “Me and my mother... we have no means of paying you.”

“So you don’t,” Wei responded.

“But I won’t forget what you have done for us. What you continue to do.” He simply nodded at that. Wei could feel Ellena’s stare burning into the back of his head. The woman was watching him like a hawk, her movements anxious. She clearly harbored some ill feelings toward him. Likely the doing of these “Ascender Cults.”

Wei scoffed at that. What manner of cultivators were they that they could not conquer the likes of Angelous. Wei liked his odds against the old man and any of his soldiers even without his System. Embarrassments. All of them. They didn’t deserve their arms and armor.

“So. Why are you here?” Agnesia asked.

A corner of the young master’s lip twitched. He didn’t think of his mother’s head or his burning world this time. Instead, the face of his father flickered behind his eyes. Wei’s grip around his spear grew tighter. “My father betrayed my sect, lowered the array protecting my world, murdered my mother, and fled up this Tower.” Wei looked the girl dead in the eyes. “I’m going to find him. I am going to take from him the truth behind his misdeeds, and then kill him. And afterward, I will come back, awaken, and break this Tower.”

Agnesia blinked, her mouth opening slightly. “Oh. Wei, that’s... horrible.”

Something dull and cold panged inside him. It didn’t matter. Grief was worthless. Pain was worthless. The pursuit was everything. To continue was everything. “The heavens are blind.”

That was all he had to say about that.

They continued walking for a good while before an incline finally came into shape before them. Uneven stairs of rising obsidian extended upward into the plunging ash.

“This was artificially made,” Roggi said, pointing a hammer at the stairs. “Look at the edges. Too flat. Looks like we found our path.”

Wei narrowed his eyes and noticed a droplet of dried blood. Where did that come from? “I suppose we have. Be on your guard.”

Stepping on the stone, Wei felt a distant tremor pulsing from deep within the stone.

“You feel that?” Agnesia asked.

“Yes,” Wei said. “It’s like... something moving undergrou—”

His words went unfinished as he detected a new presence. Something brimming with essence—different from the oppressive weight that drowned this entire place—was approaching them fast from above. A keening wail was heard thereafter, rising in volume as it drew closer.

Flames burst out from Agnesia. Ellena flinched and ducked. Roggin expanded his shield over them, forming a translucent dome of force that became dotted with ash flecks in an instant. But Wei was moving, his senses beyond the others, able to see what looked like a falling ball dipping fast through the fog.

The object was but meters above when Wei discerned the noise it was making. It was a voice crying out in pure panic. Wei launched himself into the air, rising to get a closer look at the object before it impacted the ground. As he drew close, his **Proximal Acceleration** shrouded it in his essence, and its pace slowed rapidly.

Suddenly, Wei found himself face to face with what looked like a human skull. Its sockets were aglow with white embers and complex script was carved across its bones, with strips of gold lining its jaw and cheeks. Brilliant whorls of multicolor essence emanated from the skull, and it gave a confused “huh” as it noticed Wei as well.

The young master reached out and caught the falling head on instinct, preventing it from being dashed apart against the obsidian steps.

Speed — 14

>How fast one can react and move.

[7/5] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

As he landed with skull in hand, Wei felt a slight force yank at his arm, as he saw a hand of glowing blue manifest just behind his elbow.

The back of the hand trailed away into a chain of sigils and orbiting symbols. Wei blinked as he found himself taking in another complex display of cipher-craft, and *someone* suddenly cleared their throat.

“Well caught, friend!”

Wei looked around—as did the rest of his group. The voice came near them, but none of them—

“Over here.” Wei froze and then looked at the skull once more. “That’s right,” the skull said, sockets flashing, jaw moving with each word. “Now you see me.” The skull spoke with a thick, rolling accent, and there was no shortage of bravado in its voice. Drawing in a deep breath somehow, the skull continued speaking. “Now. Have you seen the *rest* of me anywhere? I hate losing bodies. That’s why I never get *attached*.”

Wei blinked.

“Is that skull *talking*?” Ellena muttered.