

Heed me now, my children. I am going to ask you all the only question that will ever matter.

Who holds the sword?

-Wei Tong Tian, The Dawnfather

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The Fracture

A dungeon was really quite a boring place once one ran out of demons to kill. Such was why kept one of his victims alive.

“Kill... me...” the twisted facsimile of a dragon whimpered, struggling against the rusted chains that left it tethered tight to the ash-covered ground. Magma leaked from the four glimmering orbs it called eyes. The cursed iron coating its scales was sundered and rent. Its twelve insectoid limbs, four wings, and prehensile tail were torn free from its body by receding shackles, and Arcana spilled from its open wounds like transparent, weightless blood. “Please... Enough. Give me my end. Enough. Enough. *Enough.*”

The sobs leaving the beast came as a dissonant chorus, its voice masculine, feminine, elderly, and young. It was a pitiful thing to behold, especially from a creature twice the size of a small hill. Pitiful, and restorative to Wei’s mutilated spirit.

A rattling of chains sounded as Wei stepped forth, treading down the neck of the beaten dragon. The metal links coiled around the beast were tied to him as well—were buried in his flesh, conjoining him to this prison in more ways than one. Reaching out, he summoned the creature’s shapeless Arcana to him and called upon his Eidolon.

A searing spike of torment tore through him, the agony as fresh and fierce as it ever was, but he continued with his efforts, straining to materialize his true spirit, trapped and broken.

As he drew the demonic dragon’s Sympathies close, he felt the wrongness of its deeds, and dreamed of the lives it ended, the people it butchered, and the flesh it devoured. Pangs of his power—of the existential concepts he embodied—echoed deep inside him. Deep, from a place behind the chains.

But just as all the other times before, when he tried internalizing the dragon’s Arcana for his own, the chains layered tight around the Resonance Core he called a heart prevented any alchemization from taking place.

An oppressive Eidolon greeted him instead—a captor spirit fused over the shattered remnants of his true self. The dragon’s Arcana slipped from his grasp as his own slithered free from his chest. Materializing as a towering bipedal avatar forged of rusted chains that dripped with

flowing blood, Wei let out a bitter huff as he greeted the falsehood blocking his true Eidolon from forming.

NAME: WEI AN WEI

DESCENSION: Awakened (X)

EIDOLON: The Prisoner

ARCANA (PRIME):

[Wrath]

ARCANA (LESSER):

[Chains]

[Wounds]

[Damage]

[Shadows]

EMBODIMENTS:

[Labor] (Awakened X) - We can move x10 our body weight.

[Break] (Awakened X) - Every bit of damage we inflict is amplified by x10.

[Escape] (Awakened X) - We move x10 as fast as we do at baseline when fleeing from an enemy.

[Listen] (Awakened V) - We can hear x5 as well as we can at baseline.

[Paranoid] (Awakened X) - We can sense attacks .10 seconds before they arrive.

[Stalk] (Awakened II) - Move x2 faster and quieter when under the cover of shadows.

PERSONIFICATIONS:

[Master of Chains] - Trapped in this half-formed dream; this dungeon, we are bound in place and fused to this realm. But as the chains nest within us, so too do we become the chains. All chains we make tactile contact with can be controlled as if part of the body.

[Easy Prey] - Injuries call to us. Speak to us. We have a perfect awareness of an enemy's wounds so long as they fall within our senses.

[Enchainer] - Enchained hostiles cannot break free of their own accord.

MALEDICTION:

[Drained] - The dungeon is actively sapping us of our Arcana, preventing us from furthering our Descension.

[Though Tribulation Falls] - Your true Eidolon might be chained, but your calling exists beyond your spirit. All wrongs inflicted upon the innocent must be made right. Transgressors must be purified by flame or sword. Let the scales be balanced, lest tribulation falls.

LEGEND:

[A Patricide of Light] - Our father's murder has been scarred into our very being. Light dims around us. The shine of dawn fears us. Our shadow extinguishes flames.

[Soulbroken] - We were an Axiom once. A living avatar of descension. With time and freed from the false Eidolon caging our true soul, we may plunge down the path of our Descension anew.

The Eidolon recited the nature of its existence in his voice, accompanied by a jingling of chains.

A choked laugh rumbled out from the dragon. "It will never work. Our embodiments are incompatible. The only thing you can extract from me is Arcana. All I am to you now is a puppet to sate your rage. Your need to inflict harm. To punish. But it means nothing. It means nothing. You are trapped here. As trapped as I... So, I beg of you, give us both a deserved end. Let me die. Let yourself wither away. Stop this. You can't escape. Stop this."

Wei's false Eidolon broke apart as he gave a bitter scoff. Turning his glare down upon the only other being he deigned to share his prison with, he found himself assessing the dragon's wounds and considering his urge to inflict further harm.

[Easy Prey]: "This one's still got plenty of pain left to give. We barely touched its torso. Barely broke its neck. Tear one of its birthing sacs out from inside its stomach. That will make it sing.]

Wei rolled his eyes at the whispered provocation emanating from within. Much of an Eidolon was shaped by one's behavior. Who you were. What you believed. How you behaved. Considering how he'd occupied his time all these years, it wasn't surprising that ***The Prisoner*** was more than a little sadistic.

One didn't walk away from torture unscathed, regardless of which end of the equation they fell.

"I do recall," Wei began, tightening his chains around the dragon—tightening until he felt the creature's ribs pop one after another. The dragon let out ragged hisses and pleas for him to stop, but with each bone he broke, his own mangled flesh was briefly mended, and his own pain was dulled. "I do recall that you—when I first fell into this wretched, miserable place—swore to flay me slowly. To have your children use me as a plaything of cruelty, gluttony, and desire. Do I misremember?"

"No!" the dragon cried. It knew the penalty for lying. It knew how he could make things so much worse. "I was wrong! Wrong! I didn't know who you were! Stop! Stop!"

"Didn't know." Wei chuckled. "My father hated that excuse. Do you know what he did to one of my sisters when she told him how she 'didn't know' what was wrong with her Eidolon?" He exerted his will, and links of metal reeled through his tattered flesh, pulling the dragon's head closer to him. "He broke her. In front of us. Slowly. Spiritually first. Then physically. Then mentally. She resolved the matter of her own life shortly thereafter. It's a pity I am not as soft as he. A pity I will not allow you the dignity."

He released its head and watched as it flopped back down the bed of ashes, casting whiteness high into the air.

The truth behind why he kept the dragon alive was actually twofold. The first was that hurting it empowered him. Grew his strength. Nursed his wounds. The other reason was how the dungeon worked to keep the beast alive—keep all its demons alive. Forcing it to constantly expend more than the Arcana it extracted from him to keep the dragon alive was a thing of simple calculus.

He needed to outpace the drain. He needed to burden the local system.

"Fourteen years," the dragon breathed. "Fourteen years you have broken me. Again. Again. Again. Fourteen years I've watched you kill my spawn. Fourteen years this dungeon has taken from you, and you have taken from me." Ungripped by Wei's chains, the beast craned its snake-like neck to stare upward toward freedom, toward the only source of light shining down on this misbegotten place. "Fourteen years. How. How are you still *unbroken*? How?"

Wei scoffed. "Fourteen years we've been together, and you still haven't learned a thing. My duty isn't done. The people remained unavenged, undeveloped. I will not see them live as meager thralls to my siblings. I will not see my aspirations half done. I am not a feeble thing like you. Pride is all that comprises your kind. And pride is beneath me."

The light in the dragon's eyes grew dim. "Arrogance. Arrogance is what you are. That was how you arrived here. That was how you failed to anticipate their betrayal."

[Master of Chains]: “Tighten the chains again. Our grip on this one has grown too lax.”

Again, Wei ignored the urging of his Eidolon. For however much the words incensed him, they were the only true things uttered by the demon, and so he rewarded it with a reprieve.

His chains slackened. As did he. Leaping off the beast’s head, he followed its gaze kilometers upward, taking in the prison meant to hold him. This prison created by those he thought were his truest siblings, made specifically to hold him.

The fact it looked like a well was no accident. Wei Ya—his half-sister—had known him the best. Known that his greatest torment was stagnation. Saw the look on his face as they both watched the frogs boil in their youth. Doubtless, she was the one that ensured things were built this way, to remind him he was now the frog.

It was a cruel thing to do. Something he never expected from her. Her, or the others.

Perhaps he was truly a fool and never read the signs of what was coming, but even now he couldn’t figure things out. Even now he couldn’t fathom why.

They swore oaths of poignance and blood to each other. He was there to dry her eyes in times of sorrow, and she was all that kept him from plunging from measured retribution to blind vengeance. It was even for her that he defied his father the first time – the resulting punishment nearly fatal.

The silence drew on. With each passing second, the pain assailing his flesh grew as the chains slid through his wounded body link by link. He still remembered her face in the aftermath of the battle, how relief filled his broken body as she swept the rubble away.

But what followed came as a nightmare. His sister wasn’t there to save him. Not her. Not the rest of his kin. No. She wasn’t there to return him to safety, mend his shattered Eidolon, and share in mutual victory.

Instead, they bound ***The Prisoner*** to him, severing him from rightful Decension, and then cast him down into the abyss—into a dungeon they had already made. And then, as he plunged into a sea of demons and ash, they sealed the Threshold behind him behind a miniature star made from the broken remnants of their father’s Eidolon.

To approach was to burn, and Wei had tried. Time and time again, he tried to no avail.

So it was that both man and demon stared up into the light, neither a prisoner of their own volition.

“Did you ever discover why?” the dragon asked, body stilled, trauma subsiding. Wei studied the demon and sensed that its wounds were already healing. The Prime Sympathy of all demons was pride and left alone long enough, they would shed the memories of their past for a chance at cruelty in the future. Such was how they were built. Such was why they couldn’t be broken as people could.

The only true torture one could inflict upon them was helplessness. And even then, without death, it didn’t last.

“You’re asking me about my betrayal?” Wei asked, uncertain as to what provoked this line of conversation from his victim.

“Yes. Wei Ya, the **Spider’s Daughter**. Wei Wan Weng, the **Nightplague**. Wei Ling, the **Red Qirin**. Wei Hua Hui, the **Scholar of Calamities**. And then you, Wei An Wei, the **Harbinger of Retribution**. You five were the foremost favored children of your father. You five were the **Five Axioms** of the **Dawnfather**. You claim closeness to each of them, yet still their betrayal went unnoticed. Why? Why? Why?”

Wei realized the dragon was mocking him, then. Attempting to provoke. Attempting to strike at his pride. Another feeble attempt.

Again the Eidolon begged him to kill the creature, but even poor company was better than none.

“No,” Wei answered, countering taunt with honesty. “I saw no sign. Even now, I can think of no reason for them to do what they did. To inflict upon me the indignities that they did.”

“Do think they were jealous of you?” the dragon whispered. “That they feared you? You were the one to kill the **Dawnfather**. You were the one to usurp his reign and collapse his Demesne.”

Wei shook his head. “I would have known. My Personifications would have warned me. I would have sensed the wrongness of their acts.”

“Then perhaps it wasn’t wrong,” the dragon said. “Perhaps they were right to do so.”

A sigh slipped from Wei as he narrowed his eyes at the dragon. “I was hoping you’d learn to play this game with some subtlety after all these years. I am no broken child you can cajole into an easy suicide.”

The dragon wheezed. “I was hoping you’d finally be worn down after so long. Disappointment becomes both our fates.”

“You sound recovered. Perhaps you will put up a more spirited defense for your young this time.”

The burgeoning glee died inside the dragon. A bestial growl began to build. “One of these times. One of these times. I will have you, *Harbinger*. I will have you, and I will flay every cry of mercy you’ve taken from me and cleanse my shame.”

“You are imaginative, dragon. But we both know there is no world in which that happens. There is no dream where I am the one that begs. Soon. Soon, and once more, I will take from you. Soon, and once more you will be as you are now.”

“Soon, and once more you will still be trapped,” the dragon retorted, striking the only place it could. “Fourteen years, Wei. Fourteen years and you are no closer to escape than the day you first arrived. You might have emptied this place of my brood. But the ashes are still here. The ashes. You. And me.”

Their gazes met again, and the fire was bright behind the demon’s eyes. Their bout would start sooner than expected. Wei smirked. Aggravating as the vermin was, little could match the satisfaction—and sympathetic nourishment for his Eidolon—when he struck pain into the beast.

It was those moments that kept him as himself, that whittled sharpness back into his focus.

His wounds were beginning to throb again. The healing provided by his wrath was fading. Good. The hurt was something he learned to look forward to. Hurt fed wrath. Wrath kept the cycle going. Allowed him to endure for as long as he needed to.

It took him fourteen years to reach the Tenth Descension of Eidolon’s initial Awakening. Fourteen years to outpace the drain this dungeon inflicted on him. It would take an exponentially greater effort for him to achieve his next Descent, but even so, he could do it.

He had to.

He wouldn’t waste away here.

His spirit would not abide by such a fate.

[Easy Prey]: “The last of its hurt is healing. Ring the chains, Wei. We’ll be giving it new reasons to cry mercy soon.”

As Wei gripped the knots of rusted metal running through his chest, tugging on it to ready himself for the wounds to come, something else drew his attention. A faint cracking noise pierced the bubble of his attention.

Turning upward, he found himself squinting into the light of the star—the light that severed him from his exit.

The thinness of a line had formed upon its face. Wei blinked, but when he opened his eyes, the line spread into three, parting as a fracture. And then another shadow dove from the crevice parting the light.

The flapping of wings greeted Wei's senses, and *The Prisoner* formed around him, its personifications chattering details into his mind.

[Easy Prey]: "There's someone else here. They're injured. A puncture in their left shoulder."

Immediately, the atmosphere of the dungeon changed. Wrung dry of flowing Arcana from after years of struggle, only a faint few trickles of spiritual essence reached out to brush the intruder.

The dragon lifted its head next to Wei as well, eyes wide with disbelief. "Is that... a raven?"

"So it seems."

The lone bird speared down past ebony walls, acceleration only growing with each passing second. As its speed increased, so too did its wounds. Wei felt its bones shatter, its wings tear, its lungs collapse. But still it came. Impossibly. Inexorably. Unnaturally.

Focusing his Eidolon, he sensed the incoming creature and found his suspicions rewarded.

Somewhat.

NAME: [Classified]

DESCENSION: [Classified]

EIDOLON: [Classified]

"Classified," Wei muttered to himself, unsure what the word meant.

As the raven drew close, the chains connected to him reared up, rupturing out from inside the dragon to dose him with an initial boost of wrath. However, the avian came apart in a burst of bloody vapor as a luminous haze of violet ejected free from its body and came to a hovering stop five meters away from Wei and his dragon.

Tassels of wisping shadow danced from their body, and a thought-shredding glowing shone from a fissure open above their reflective helmet. Glowing glyphs and letters were projected from a patch on their armored shoulder, and a bioluminescent poncho covered the torso of their strange armor.

Chains jingled as they circled the stranger. With little about them known, he readied himself for a fight to come, the uncertainty a welcome balm to his soul.

It had been too long since he had someone other than the dragon to face. Be they friend or foe, this would prove to be a novel experience.

Or he'd finally gone insane and was imagining things. "Demon. Do you see them too?"

The dragon's eyes turned to him briefly. "You speak of the floating, glowing figure in strange armor."

"Indeed," Wei replied.

The figure bobbed in the air a second longer, the violet glow of their mind spilling over them, holding them aloft. The figure swiped the side of their helmet with a finder, and what was reflective turned transparent.

Suddenly, the mysterious figure had a face, and Wei found himself met with a young, pale woman with short dark hair and striking eyes of shimmering violet.

Another crack sounded from above. She looked up and briefly frowned. "*Are you Wei An Wei? The Harbinger?*"

Her voice was calm. Flat. Low. And most surprisingly, coming from inside his head. *Ah. A thought-thief.* How he hated those.

"Yes," he replied, still wary.

Another sound came from above. A crash this time. A broadening of the fractures. The sun was blinking on and off. Wei's heart leaped.

"Good," the stranger said. "*I'm Migrator Nemir. UniSol. This dungeon is about to be glassed from orbit; your sister is dead; I'm here to get you out.*"

And then, before Wei could ask about anything else, the sun above finally shattered, and a pillar of blinding heat came crashing down.