

Alright. So, for whatever stupid reason, you found yourself a part of Mepheleon's Blood Games. The situation is not as bad as you think. Mepheleon's a clown, but they're not running a circus. There's a point to the game, and he's not just going to screw you over if you perform well. More likely, he'll reward you with all the boons you need to get through his trials.

The first three trials are meant to "thin" the crowds. No one is supposed to directly die in those, but if you lose, it's off to the Incubators with you. Another aspect of this is that it focuses on group cohesion and gives almost everyone a chance of passing even if you're no good at combat.

Only four trials might necessitate direct combat, but the opposition you face is going to be scaled in accordance to you and your group's capabilities. It'll be rough, but again Mepheleon is not trying to butcher you—again, they're grading on a curve. They want to learn who you are and be entertained. You should view this more as a fucked up citizenship test more than anything.

At the end of the day, Mepheleon is looking for people with high motivation and extreme self-control. The type that can stand resilient against the temptations of sin—or use it as an advantage. These are the people that will be rewarded. These are the people that will earn a Class under his System.

Drill this into your head: You are not signing yourself to slavery beneath a tyrannical emperor, but joining an enterprise under a being with all the powers of a god and almost none of the ego. I'm not going lie and kiss Mepheleon's ass and say they're good or anything like that, but out here in the Fathoms, they pretty much a unicorn among monsters.

-The Trespasser's Compendium

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The First Trial

Passing through the gate to the first trial felt no different from walking through any open doorway. Yet, Wei's System detected something he couldn't, lining his eyes with text and details he couldn't fully understand.

Sourcery in effect. Mepheleon System is imposing its structure over the stable dimensions of reality.

The concept was simple enough to grasp. Plenty of high stage cultivators possessed Soulspaces within themselves, and could shape the inner environments to some extent. Mepheleon, being an Ascended Elder or greater, was doubtlessly capable of far greater feats.

The chamber that greeted Wei immediately thereafter was a room split into three parts. Stepping beyond the quivering pool of essence, he found himself standing upon a color marble

mural that come together as an artistic representation of a dark robed man falling from the clouds. This first portion of the room ran for fifty meters—exact to the dimensions of a moving cell in the Filter. Then, bars leaking magma, ichor, and composed of brimstone halted anyone from attempting to clear this trial on their own.

Dimensional Level Threshold detected. You must pass beyond [Gate] 8 and reach Lv. 85 for a future ascension of your Might aspect to affect this threshold by force. You must pass beyond [Gate] 4 and reach Lv. 40 for your Logic aspect to understand its governing foundational ciphers.

The repeated use of the word “Gate” by his System caught Wei’s curiosity. *Is passing a “Gate” the equivalent of advancing one’s cultivation?*

It is far more fundamental than merely deepening one’s ability to internalize and synthesize aspects of their environment. [Gates] allow the System-Host to redesign and interface with the foundational pillars of reality. What you view to be Mind, Body, and Spirit are but reflections of the mental, material, and conceptual planes. Crossing the threshold of a [Gate] descend deeper and directly affect the relative fabric of reality.

The words of the System sparked a building thrill in the young master. Perhaps hunting his father wasn’t going to a battle quite so insurmountable, and through this fortune-claimed boon, he would exceed even the limits of cultivation.

Your Source Core is 7 levels of advancement away from being capable of opening the first [Gate]. From there, all your current attributes and aspects can be ascended further as well.

Another flood of anticipation followed, honing Wei’s focus as he continued taking in the chamber. This might be Mepheleon’s game, but Wei would sack this place for all its worth as well.

Past the bars, the marble flooring was replaced by panels of painted glass, forming a fresco that represented an inferno composed by nine layers of fire. It ran thrice the length of the marble component of the chamber and extended all the way to an obsidian pedestal on the opposite side.

There, a circular platform no larger than twenty-five square meters in area waited, and Wei watched as swirling lines of glimmering ciphers churned around the final section of the room.

Looking upward, he saw wisps of soft flame hovering far above in the darkness. He could not tell how high the ceiling was, for beyond the specks of brightness, it was as if a crawling abyss gazing back at him. The walls to both sides were also featureless, aside from two grand frescoes. The one on the right depicted an obese demon devouring humans. The one on the left showed the very same humans eating their way out of said demon.

“To be consumed by evil,” Wei said. “Then to consume the evil itself from within. Your philosophy on display, Harbinger?”

“The themes, anyway,” Mepheleon replied. ***“But I suspect you will learn to internalize these details more than most of the others when the trial beings. Has your System told you of the [Gates] yet? Are you descended your first threshold?”***

Wei narrowed his eyes. “Do you often ask questions you already have knowledge of, Harbinger?”

Mepheleon chuckled. ***“Yes. And no, I will not stop doing it.”***

“As is your right by virtue of power.”

“And there’s that good old begrudging cultivator acceptance.”

“The truth is the truth. What worth is there to deny it?”

“Comfort. Peace. Sanity.”

Something about the Harbinger’s words made Wei’s face twist in anger. “Treasures of the Pathless. The lot of the meek.”

“And you’re not burdened by the possibility of failure? Pain? Death? Imagine reaching your father, and not being strong enough to kill him. Imagine defeat after death. Imagine suffering death or worse.”

Worthless taunts and nothing more. “Imagine being capable of rising above the baseness of human mortality. Imagine the possibility of defying the heavens and imposing your virtue upon an orderless realm. Imagine being capable of shaping yourself, and shame of hesitating because you were too weak to surpass your fear and cure your weakness. Worth is it to be a man, then? I might as well have been born a dog.”

A note of glee leaked into Mepheleon’s words. ***“You really, really believe that, don’t you?”***

The first of the others were arriving through the portal behind. Wei spared them nary a glance, choosing instead to glare his scorn up into the abyss. “There is no other way to be. Acceptance is surrender. And the surrendered belong to fate. Two vows burn within me, Harbinger. I will break my father and hear from him the truth of his betrayal; and I will break your tower.”

“My Tower?” Mepheleon sounded confused. ***“This Tower?”***

“The very same.”

“I... I mean, I guess I understand. I'd rather you didn't. They're pretty hard to—”

Wei would not be turned from this. “I will make truth of my promises. Accept this structure as destroyed, Harbinger. I will see it laid to ruin even should tribulation fall from your skies.”

Mepheleon made a series of confused enunciation. ***“Right. Good luck. I'm... going to talk with the others and... announce the beginning of the first trial.”***

“Do what you must,” Wei stated. Turning, he regarded the other competitors trickling in around him. The mail-wearing humans entered first, forming a staggered line with six pikemen in front, two greatsword bearers behind, and a final four tightening strings on their bows.

The ponderous forms of the four stout giants appeared. Steam hissed from their joints with every step, and Wei sensed essence trickling through the articulations of their armor, circulating along all the decorative details. Hammers and fist-sized shields hung from their belts, and both weapons hummed soft melodies while emitting a radiant gleam.

Protected by the giants still were the lithe, long eared humanoids. Wei could still hear music coming from them, and they met his gaze with wariness and suspicion. Their reactions puzzled him, and he wondered if it was a problem with him or something else he represented.

The final people to enter were the two shrouded figures, followed by the remaining bandits. The rogues directed their gazes away from Wei after what he inflicted on their *fool*. Good. They knew their place now. Worthless. All of them. They belonged in the Incubators—their very presence here was an insult to Wei and the other worthy competitors.

“Hello, Sinners. And Wei.” The young master's glare into the darkness intensified thereafter. The others arranged themselves in their groups, keeping a healthy distance from their fellows as some searched for the source of Mepheleon's voice. ***“Welcome to the First Trial of the Blood Games. The Abyss.”***

“You already told us that when we were coming in,” came a rogue voice from the back. Heads turned.

“That was the pre-welcoming. Pre. Before. This is the formal introduction, and the moment I introduce you to your task. You are all here today because you have been chosen from the chaff. Chosen for the chance to receive a Class and become a part of this Diaspora between worlds; a member of my Claimed Hells. And now here you stand at the very start of the Blood Games to prove your merits and triumph over vice—”

“Then be fast about it,” the first among the four armored juggernauts spat. Their words rolled, and their voice rumbled like thunder. Wei eyed them again, and noted they had twin rubies slotted over their eye sockets. Each of the other three titanic figures were characterized by their

own gems. “We are here to offer fealty in exchange for the right to draft your demons. Every moment wasted on words—”

“Is another day the forces of the Unfallen One spends sacking your Ironhearths yes, yes—my god, what an impatient group we have today. Very well. I will spare you the theatrics and get down to the brass tax of things. This is the Trial of the Abyss. Your goal is to reach the other side of the room and stand upon the platform. You will have a limited time to do so, and the longer you take, the faster the darkness will descend from above.”

“And when it sweeps over us, we’ll all die?” the white-bearded human soldier asked.

“What? No. But the demons swimming in the darkness might.” And on that cue, the first monsters emerged from the shadows above, clambering down the sides of the walls as the bars blocking the first section of the room dissolved in a puff of smoke. ***“Anyway, good luck! Welcome to the Blood Games! Oh, and the panels of glass can’t take a lot of weight, so you dwarves might need to get clever!”***

And with that, Mepheleon went silent. Not that it mattered, since everyone was now reacting to face the new threats.

Everyone except Wei. The young master arched an eyebrow at the approaching demons as his System scanned them for details. They resembled cat-like monstrosities bearing tridents thanks to the two additional humanoid limbs they had growing from their shoulders, and a scorpion-like stinger where their tail should be. Rings of bronze armor protected their vitals, and they came forth in an endless tide, dozens at first, then hundreds across the entire chamber.

Annoyance filled Wei. He needed to improve his awareness. There were too many surprises lurking in this realm; he needed to be informed of his foes before they came.

Ashpanther: Lv. 5

Aspect of Celerity a single level lower than host. Capable of melding with shadows.

Separate cries of went up among the groups. From the bandits came disorganized volleys of arrows loosed and a boot thrown. Wei lifted his spear and tugged the strap of his pack one final time. The path ahead was clear, but one barricade was replaced with another as the Ashpanthers landed weightless upon the panels of glass, their fur oozing smoke into the air.

One opened its mouth to hiss at him. Its snarl was interrupted by a spear flung straight through its throat. The weapon sailed true, punching clean through one panther and two more. A fourth Ashpanther displayed its System-warned speed as it clamped its fangs around the accelerating spear’s haft, stopping it from killing another of its kind.

An almost human chuff of laughter escaped the creature—and broke off into a choke as Wei made a fist and tore his weapon back. A mystical tether manifested between the young master and his spear, and within a second it was returning to his open grasp, shattering the skull of another demon as it was caught mid-leap from the darkness above.

Might Advancement: 66%

Mastery

>Spearmanship: 5%

>Thrown Weapons: 20%

As the Ashpanthers fell like a rain, three voices sang as one, bringing forth a melodious song that sent shivers running up Wei's spine. With the sound came a veil of soothing brightness, and a radiant dome formed around the group, parting them from the demons.

Following the music, Wei found himself taking in the three sharp-eared humanoids facing each other. Their eyes were aglow with a golden essence he never witnessed before, and the floral armor protecting their bodies began to sprout crystalline branches and blossom vibrant flowers. Around them, the four titans stood with hammers and shields drawn.

Some of the human soldiers and bandits made gestures at the surrounding light.

"Witchcraft," the bearded soldier spat, directing a murderous look at three sharp-eared beings.

"Alright!" the ruby-eyed titan spoke, cutting off any comments. "I am Oathbearer Roggi! Sworn to guard this *Trine* of Faebloods." Ashpanthers crawled, stabbed, and slammed against the shimmering barrier of light. As the demons pressed, Wei heard the song grow faster, the notes grow higher, more desperate. "This Hymn of Protection will last a minute longer. No harm or evil can exist within the threshold of this veil. But the song will not last forever, and it will take time for the Trine to begin the Hymn anew. Prepare yourselves!"

Foreign essence swirled around Wei like a miasma. He tested the Oathbearer's statement by pricking his thumb using his spear. He frowned as a shroud of thickening light prevented him from achieve his desired goal.

A moment of uncertainty passed between the group. In their far corner, one of the shrouded figures, slumped over, began to shiver and cough violently.

"Right," the white-bearded soldier said. "I am Ser Angelous. This is my lance. I suggest we hold a corner until we can come up with a strategy to cross." But as he spoke, eight among the hundred bandits or so decided against waiting, and charged toward the edge of their protective barrier. "Wait, what are you—"

Wei expected several things: For the men to strike the barrier as if it was a wall; for them to be

incinerated by the brightness. He was surprised when they passed through the radiant veil as it wasn't there, but considerably less so when, after slamming into a literal wall of Ashpanthers, they only managed glancing slashes on two before the demons took them.

Hellish fangs shredded clean through mortal leathers, while stingers sank into shoulders and thighs. Cries rose from the fools as they struggled, but a flurry of claws rendered them mangled pieces of flesh. One after another, the bandits fell, and as they did, Ashpanthers did with them, sinking into the darkness alongside their prey.

The rest of the group stared in muted horror as Wei shook his head.

"Idiocy is ever-often a self-resolving ailment." his father once said. The memory of the man tightened Wei's grip around his spear.

Ser Angelous swept the remaining brigands with an annoyed sneer. "Were those the only idiots among you? Do the rest of you wish to live."

Loose pockets of "Yes" and "Gods, save me" and one case of "Well, I never really did like my brother much" came as a reply.

And as they spoke, the abyss above drew sank lower, touching the top of the frescoes built into the left and right walls.

"Can they sing and move at the same time?" A new voice entered the conversation. Wei found the taller of the two shrouded figures speaking to Oathbearer Roggi. The speaker had a low voice for a woman, and there was a peculiarity to her accent that—well, they all had strange accents.

The System has optimized their languages for your understanding, but their linguistic patterns are without varying intonations.

"Nay." Oathbearer Roggi's armor rang as the hulking warrior shook his head. "This Trine is young. Barely more than their first century. It is taking all the focus they have to channel the Hymns of Creation. They can offer only a reprieve, not a resolution."

Wei caught one of Trine frowning at the Oathbearer. The young master found it hard to tell what sex the creatures were; his judgment was made uncertain by the largeness of their eyes and the general softness of their features.

"Do they know any other..." Ser Angelous licked his lips. "*Spells?*"

"Nay," the Oathbearer said again. "This is the only Hymn they could preserve when their Canopy was put to the flame." A low growl followed the end of the warrior's words—everyone here had a story behind their arrival.

In that, Wei was not alone.

Ser Angelous gave the Ashpanthers lapping at their fortress of light an exhausted look. “Then it seems we’re *Omen-fucked*.”

Wei’s esteem of his comrades-by-circumstance fell by a magnitude. What a useless thing despair was. And they failed to consider even obvious solutions. “How fast can they start the song again if they are stopped?”

The Oathbearer regarded him for a moment. “They can begin immediately, but it takes time for them to reach the chorus and fully channel the Hymn.”

“I will give them time,” Wei replied. He turned and made for the threshold of the barrier, as the bandits did. He ignored shocked mutterings and the footsteps approaching him from behind. “Have them start singing only after they reach the middle of the room. I will open a path.”

An armored hand reached out for him from behind. Wei stepped aside and watched Ser Angelous close his hands around nothing but air. For a moment, the older man shot him a startled look, but quickly shook it off. “Are you trying to *die*, boy?”

Boy? Wei kept his ire in check. This Pathless was without manners, but he had little time to waste instructing them. “I wish to sample the Harbinger’s demons. I wish to properly wet my blade. Join me if you wish. Continue stewing in your despair if you choose.”

The man pointed out at the snarling wall of demons. “Did you not see what happened to the fools before you?”

Wei threw his head back and snorted. He met the old man’s eyes dead on as he spoke. “Yes. And the fact that you think me alike to them is an insult. They are Pathless. Worthless in Mind, Body, and Spirit. I will grant you leniency this time. Do not slander my virtues again.”

An absolute look of disbelief consumed the man’s expression. Wei left him there, staring on as he passed through the other side. Ahead, the demons were already biting at him—waves and waves of the creatures waiting to be properly greeted.

They started this day by burning his sect, by butchering his people. They hunted him across this damned realm, bled him and stalked him across kilometers and leagues. Wei had enough of running. He had enough of hiding behind arrays and barriers. Within him was a need burdened by two vows, and neither would ever become fulfilled lest he nursed his System on power.

It is strongly advised that you engage the demons with support. There are currently over four hundred—

Wei strode forth.

And came to a halt with half his body still behind the veil. His spear thrust out beyond the suppressive power of the radiance, the demons unprepared for his onslaught. The tip of his weapon snaked out and took an Ashpanther through its mouth for a second time that day. Blackened ichor burst free from the back out its head, while others of its kind turned to react, stingers rearing, their own tridents rising.

Wei shifted his grip and pivoted. His spear scythed wide, gliding across eyes, jaws, throats, and limbs. A space opened as a dozen or so demons went tumbling back. Sparks flew as their plates of enchanted bronze endured his blow. It didn't stop them from being cast prone by the force. It didn't stop them slamming into other demons behind them. It didn't save them as Wei went beyond the protective threshold, with spear blurring and intent murderous.

Strikes lanced through eye sockets and skulls. Demons began to shudder and spasm as the mortal wounds flowed. A screech came from above. One descended straight from the darkness above. Wei rolled and dodged a plunging trident with the aid of his **Evasion**—and then broke the neck of the attacking demon with a wheel kick using the same momentum.

The audacity of his ambush had worn off. Waves of Ashpanthers launched themselves over each other to get at him. As they came within a meter of his person, he felt their reactions turn sluggish, watched as their speed was eroded against his own. **Evasion** proved its worth once again as Wei retreated from the avalanche of monsters, stepping back through the threshold.

Might Advancement: 100%

Might Lv. 9: 7.5 TONS [Max Force Output]

Celerity Advancement: 100%

Celerity Lv. 9: 0.085/SECOND [MAX REACTION SPEED]; 179 METERS/SECOND [MAX VELOCITY]

Logic Advancement: 100%

Logic Lv. 2: 1.65x [BASELINE HUMAN PROCESSING/PATTERN COMPILATION EFFICIENCY]

Masteries Demonstrated

>Spearmanship: 100%

>Evasion (II): 2%

>Unarmed Combat: 100%

Masteries Achieved

Spearmanship (I): You are able to store 1 charge of (Celerity) in your spear equal to your current maximum velocity to accelerate your attacks.

Unarmed Combat (I): You are able to channel the fullness of your Might (Max Force Output) upon making contact with an entity or object.

Source Core Ascended

>Source Core Lv. 4

PROGRESSION TO NEXT FOUNDATIONAL SOURCERY [Sourceshaper]: 75%