

*Alright, little elf—or whatever you are—explain to me how “Blood Games” sounds silly to you, because from my perspective—an empirically much larger and more insightful perspective than yours—there’s blood everywhere, and games are being played. What’s not to like?*

*I mean, besides the fact that you got bits of your younger sister all over you. Ah, god, I love the Bombstingers. Might be one of my best creations: all the size of a tarantula hawk with a sting that delivers kiloton yields.*

*Okay, so you don’t think that this should be called a game because... you find risking your life a serious matter? And death takes the fun out of things?*

*Listen, buddy, I think you’re doing a little something we call “appeal to pathos.” I understand that you might be feeling a bit upset right now, but you need to get out of your own head and think about how other people feel like me? Did you think of that? Did you think of how I might see things? No? What about all the other people watching this right now, enjoying your struggle, evaluating your performance—*

*You see, there you go doing it again. Calling us sick. Where does all this judgment come from? I don’t often criticize participants, but you really need to work on your empathy. I thought that was the whole deal with you elves?*

*You’re not an elf? What? But you got the ears and the thin face and the—Faeblooded? So, you are an elf, you just don’t like being called an elf? I mean, sure, okay, I’ll call you a Faeblood. Just know that I’m going to keep thinking of you as an elf.*

*Oh, no. Now he’s crying. I hate that. I hate this. Stop it. Stop it. Stop crying, now. You’re—you’re making me feel bad, guy, come on, stop kneeling in your sister’s goop, there are demons coming for you. Listen, will you get up out of that puddle if I promise to call you Faeblood or whatever? Yeah?*

*Okay, now you’re just being hurtful. Did I call you names? Did I try to insult your people? I said try to—I didn’t mean offense, so it doesn’t count. Hey, listen, you’re not here because some unfortunate mistake condemned you to suffering, you’re here because you and your sister are cannibals who like the taste of human babies. And dwarves. Weird combo, but I don’t judge. Honestly, I think it was pretty big of me to let you participate instead of just feeding you into an Incubator. Imagine how many demons I could have made from you. Actually, on second thought, maybe that’s for the best. Demons take on the traits of their progenitors, and with your whimpering, I’m going to get laughed at by the other System-Hosts.*

*Okay. I’m bored with this conversation. You want to keep talking? Fight off the Skull-Lover first. Yes, Faeblood. Yes, he has genitals growing out of his eye sockets: demons of lust have a peculiar aesthetic to them.*

*-Mepheleon the Harbinger*

9  
The Filter

Wei took in the arcane patterns engraved upon the haft of his new spear with increasing curiosity. He could feel the essence ebbing off of them, forming a specifically shaped pattern in existence. What fascinated him more was how the working on the spear and the ones on his bracelet felt to be one and the same. It was like a single pattern existing across two points of reality rather than merely being some kind of spirit-binding link as he once assumed.

The powers at work weren't entire alien to him. In a sense, they were like arrays, and he lived under such wards his entire life—his sect had been shielded by protections channeled through the sprawling Everblossoms. Yet, where arrays were constructs forged by cultivators using the essences they refined from existence, these Ciphers bore a Spiritual imprint of their own. It was as if the symbols themselves were awakened in some regard: living icons bearing their own awareness of existence.

Rather than being structured channels meant to express essence in a certain way, they were more akin to sources from which essence could flow. Arrays were merely ordered expressions of another's power, what he held shimmered as if the embodiment of a concept itself.

"Done staring at the goods," Schrödinger asked. Now only one goblin remained in the store. After one clone losing both games of rock-paper, scissors, he accused the other of cheating somehow and a brawl followed. A particularly nasty bite to the throat later, and there were now two bodies laying on the ground next to each other.

Wei's indifference to the sudden explosion of violence spoke volumes; he was already past his threshold of disbelief. No more was he stunned. Rather, a weary acceptance had cemented itself within his mind, encouraging him to just go along with things as they came.

"This technique exquisite," Wei said, gesturing to the spear's haft. "These bindings appear to be self-sustaining. I was taught that such a thing was impossible, that all techniques survived and died based on their user's refinement of essence."

"Yeah, that's what happens when you're playing in a sandbox someone else built." Schrödinger rubbed his nose at that before catching Wei's expression. "Listen, you call yourself a cultivator, but most of the Fathoms call you a Classed. Classed as in 'System-Classification.' Everything you can do has been shaped by a governing entity already. Your rules might be a bit more open, but you exist within a limited boundary of power. That's what makes you Classed."

**The other System-Host is correct, Wei's System chimed. Prior to our assimilation, you would have been regarded as a "fixed-structure entity" by most Systems. Your metaphysical restrictions are in the process of being unlocked. You should seek**

**opportunities to advance your Spirit Core as soon as possible to access your foundational system attributes.**

Wei frowned at that. *You mean to say that my cultivation was limited? That I was but an ape dancing upon a greater power's palm, even if I reached the Ascension Stage?*

**Correct. All your attributes are merely relatives to the rules of your realm. Once you achieve your first System update, your attributes will operate in opposition to the foundational pillars of any other System or world you find yourself, unchaining you from causal limitations. Once your first ascension is complete, you will be able to affect the very concept of strength and dexterity themselves.**

There were nuances he couldn't grasp, but Wei understood the breadth of what he was told. The System sought a break through, and upon reaching such a precipice, he would potentially be able to affect concepts. A thought followed: Was this why his mastery allowed caused his reaction and movements speeds to inversely affect foes within a certain range?

**Yes.**

"You done staring off into space," Schrödinger asked again.

Wei nodded, but his mind continued to turn. He was still just a frog in a well, but from all that he'd been told, this could change. He could learn and advance himself beyond the limits of cultivation itself. Despite all that remained unknown to him, this power might just allow the fulfillment of his sole desire: the defeat and capture of his father.

Answers could come afterward.

The goblin led him out onto the street immediately after, flicking a glowing Cipher at the door without looking back. Immediately, Wei felt space around the store's entrance thicken to the point of being Spiritually choking. His next breath only flowed when they were nearly ten meters beyond.

"How does one learn the art of the Ciphers?" Wei asked, curiosity and hunger growling within.

Schrödinger snorted. "Anyone with a System technically do it since it lets you access the Source of existence. After that, though, it's about knowing the right symbols and arguments to formulate an argument, and learning that doesn't come in a day. Hell, it doesn't even come in weeks or months. It'll take you a good goddamn while before you even learn enough signs to write a coherent description of the world around you."

"An argument?" Wei said, noting a group of children peering at him from a second floor window. He could feel the faintness of people around him, their Spirits like dim candles dancing upon his stream. None of them were truly awakened, but most possessed the potential. Yet, Mepheleon

was willing to let them languish with further refinement. This place was madness in more ways than one.

“Yeah, an argument. Ciphers about forcing reality to accept the impossible through the layering of different truths. It’s basically the art of creating shitty, sophistic syllogisms. Hell, that’s what most of its practitioners call it what it is: *Para-Sophistry*.” Schrödinger snorted. He led over a stone bridge toward a tunnel built at the center of a long section of interconnected houses. Nothing here rose beyond three stories, and while the walls of the structure were of hardened obsidian, the windows were roughly installed panels of glass, the roofs were thatched with scrap metal or straw. The soaring demons overhead only further expanded the dissonance.

What few people that shared the streets with them turned ashen and fled at the sight of Schrödinger. Wei studied the goblin, but they didn’t offer any overt response.

“You seem to strike fear into many,” Wei said, keeping his tone vague.

“No. What I represent scares the shit out of many.”

“The shadow of Mepheleon,” Wei said.

“Yeah. And the fact that every time I show up, the Harbinger might be playing one of his games, and most of the Classless know better than to get caught up in that.”

Emerging out from the overpass of buildings, Wei found a whirlpool of patrolling demons churning in the air. The Specters were the first entities he made due to his prior engagements, but there were also those ink-black birds, mountain-sized serpents with blood-red scales, three lashing tongues, and sizzling steam hissing out from the layer of eyes trailing both sides of its body. Countless more nightmarish forms assailed his senses, but they just held their position around the Tower, uncountable legions holding the airspace over the city.

“Insurance,” Schrödinger gestured at the demonic legions. “There’ve been a few times when some *enterprising* geniuses managed to break out of the filter and get into the city. They don’t usually get past the demons guarding the place, but they do earn the right to skip a trail once they’re placed in the Blood Games?”

Wei frowned. “The Harbinger rewards escapees?”

“He *loves* escapees. He loves people who tell him to fuck off.”

The way before them widened into an open straight of obsidian. The construction of housing were halted beyond a line marked with searing red. A patch of undeveloped territory extended one hundred meters forward and all around the cylindrical city. What awaited at the end were four vast gates forge alloys of blinding white. The radiance was made even more sight-searing

by the layers of swirling Ciphers inscribed upon the matter. The sheer complexity of interweaving essences made Wei's mind ache, and his System urged him to avert his gaze.

**Your Logic is insufficient to withstand the informational output. Adaption will only take place upon reaching Lv. 20 and passing through the second [Gate] to advance your Mind attribute and its related aspects.**

*Gate.*

**Consider it an advanced stage of cultivation.**

*My thanks for an understandable analogy.*

**You are welcome, host. We are glad to grant you a 0.15% stress reduction.**

*Glorious. How much better will I feel when my father is laying broken at my feet?*

**55%.**

Through the bitterness, a faint smirk tugged at the corner of Wei's lips. It was a dark thing, to be hunting one's own father and patriarch, but he would take motivation from wherever he could get it right now.

As the gates came into view, Wei squinted through the brightness to see them shaped like equilateral triangles with their tips connected to the Tower.

"Last bit of advice before I send you through," Schrödinger said, tracing at the air using that Spirit-bound blade he used to carve up his clone earlier. Interconnected patterns were painted together in a complex cascade of shapes, and the goblin constructed the Cipher at a pace Wei found dizzying. For once, he regretted not taking calligraphy more seriously. That would have made his mother happier, at the least.

*One never knows what is lost until they find need of it.*

"Are you going to tell me this advice, or am I to surmise from the various expressions you're currently performing for me?" Wei asked, losing his patience.

The goblin's tongue was halfway out as they were deep in thought. The creature looked constipated and ridiculous, and the changing of their facial contortions into a blank stare didn't help. What a wretched fate to be so ugly. "What, are you getting an attitude on me all of a sudden?"

"No, esteemed goblin, I am simply exhausted beyond caring and wish to know what other horrible absurdities await me. If you so choose to tell me, of course."

Schrödinger snorted. “Yeah, okay. Mepheleon’s gonna love that bone-dry demeanor of yours. And that’s just the thing I wanted to tell you: the Harbinger’s got their eye on you, and I mean that in a good way. Most of these Sinners and competitors? They don’t get noticed unless they do something that leaves an impression. You came in leaving an impression, so you hold on to that when you can. Don’t worry about offending or insulting them. The Harbinger’s not a tyrant—they’re the whole empire, and they love to be entertained. So. Keep them surprised. Keep them thrilled. That’ll give you an edge at some point. Or maybe they’ll just feed you into more ‘interesting situations.’”

Wei shot the goblin a flat look. “So, my greatest benefactor is a capricious ruler who takes no offense against slander and is beyond having pride.”

“Something like that, yeah.”

The young master directed his gaze upward and sighed softly. Cultivators often told themselves that the heavens were blind. Quite the opposite here, with a slight consolation in their overlord being little more than a clown.

Solidifying essence captured Wei’s attention as Schrödinger flicked off his Cipher. It sailed out from the tip of his Spirit-Blade, rising high to splash against the gate standing in their path. A spiral of other Ciphers brightened immediately thereafter, igniting the world in a painted spiral. Where the whorling signs spread, the structure of the alloy turned transparent, and Wei found himself halted by what wait on the other side.

Where the bulk of the anchor-city were composed of winding paths choked by clusters of low, sprawling houses and town squares, what waited beyond the Filter was a constantly shifting complex of gridded prisons. Fifty-meter wide cells packed full of various people were constantly in motion, snapping from place to place as if tiles on a board. Wei felt a tickle of essence from them, and his System fed him with context once more.

**Each cell is Spiritually-enhanced. Current protections are estimated to be equivalent to [Gate] 4 Lv. 45 of your Fortitude aspect.**

*And how durable is that?* Wei asked, seeking a measurement.

**They could survive complete planetary collapse without harm. They exist beyond pure physical limitations. Only entities at an equal level of Ascension can affect them. Or direct damage to their Source.**

*Such as my blood.*

**Such as the essence that is currently manifesting your shape.**

Also useful. The idea of using the essence sustaining his life to escape from one of these prison appealed, but it was a reactive option at best. With how many demons were patrolling overhead and how omniscience, Mepheleon seemed, any breakout he could attempt would be a limited action at best.

“Head on through, kid,” Schrödinger said, gesturing at the now entirely translucent gate.

**Spatial Ciphering detected: It is estimated that you will be able to directly force or break this structure open once you pass [Gate] 100 and reach Lv. 100 for your equivalent Might aspect. Contextually: Your strength must exceed the limitations of the material plane to affect this threshold.**

Wei squinted that the gate as another, darker thought occurred to him. *Was of the Tower that buried itself in my world?*

**Correct.**

Wei felt something *pop* in the back of his mind as his body involuntary shuddered. Flashes flooded his mind: his mother’s head; his burning sect; his breaking world; his father’s face; his mother’s head; his burning sect; his breaking world; his father’s face; hismothersheadburningsectbreakingworldfatherface.

Something broke inside him. Something broke. But he was fine. He was absolutely fine. He had to be fine.

“Hey, kid, you alright?” Schrödinger said, eyeing Wei with suspicion.

The young master ignored him. The goblin’s worry was irrelevant: there was a more pressing duty ahead.

Swearing vengeance.

*And will reaching such a stage allow me to damage the Tower itself?*

**Substantially.**

He nodded. “I will be back for you,” Wei whispered, breathing his hate at the Tower itself. Memories of it punching through the crust of his world burned in the back of his mind. For that, the structure earned his eternal ire. “In this life or the next, I will be back for you. I will break you down to the smallest fragment. And I’ll break every other Tower of your like as well. Know this. Know this.”

“Jesus Christ, son, are you threatening an inanimate object.” It was Schrödinger’s turn to stare at Wei, dumbfounded.

The young master shook his head. For all the aid the goblin provided, despite knowing so much of the wider realm and being advanced in their own cultivation, he was still a Pathless savage, ignorant to personal ethics and the power in vows. “An oath of vengeance is a living idea, Scho-dinger.”

“Schrödinger,” the goblin corrected.

Wei nodded, not sure what he mispronounced. He continued without apologizing. “It will be an oath I will pursue. It will feed my focus until I meet the goal—and surpass it.” He glared upon the Tower again. Hateful structure; vile structure. He would break it. He would find a way to awaken it first, and then break it; grant it consciousness, and then deliver oblivion as it begged him for mercy.

Just like his father.

**Host, the trauma you have recently experienced has likely left you with lingering symptoms of psychosis. It is recommended that you seek—**

“Silence,” Wei snapped. Schrödinger looked around them and blinked. The System obeyed. A soft satisfaction swelled inside Wei: he was the master of his Awakened Spirit. It had to heed his words.

*There is nothing wrong with me. I am simply harnessing focus. Your assessment was mistaken.*

**Willpower Lv. [Error] Overriding System parameters: Understood. The extreme shifts in your mind patterns are understandable; despite the high likelihood you are slowly spiraling beyond an extreme psychotic break has led to the System delivering a mistaken diagnosis. Your mental state has been updated to be [stable].**

Good. He would not abide his own Spirit daring to cast slander upon him. “Schrödinger,” Wei said, looking beyond the tower, into a vacant cell that awaited him. “My gratitude for all your aid. I will see you again once I ascend the Tower. You will teach me how to use these Ciphers. I put myself under your tutelage.”

He offered the goblin a quick salute as they just stared. “Now, wait a minute,” Schrödinger began.

“It is agreed,” Wei answered, as he strode forward, sparing the goblin any unnecessary talk. “There is no need for courtesy any longer. Our paths are joined. Your foes are my foes, my foes are your foes. This oath is binding, to bring only bolts of tribulation if broke. Our farewell will be brief, Scho-dinger. Our reunion will be soon.”



And then Wei thought no more of him, for all that mattered was the path ahead and the vows in his heart.

*My father must be broken and put the question.*

*The Tower must be fully awakened into consciousness, then tortured for its crimes.*

**Acknowledged, host. Marking primary objectives.**

Perfect. His System truly knew its place. Not all was bad. Not all was bad.  
Not all was bad his mother's head his burning sect his destroyed world his father's face.

Stepping through the translucent gate, Wei found it as if crossing a mirage. As he reached the other side, he found himself granted a cell all his own. Bars of obsidian shot up behind him, and the gate turned solid once more. No more could he see the broader city beyond. No more was Schrödinger there waiting for him.

He was upon his avowed quest now. And with this thought, his grid began to move, accelerating across open sections of land towards cages filled with sinners waiting in the distance.