

*After you defeat a Keeper of Paths, you'll find yourself in a Pale Sanctuary for a brief time. Here, the Springs of Forlorn Hope will mend you, you'll find a place to rest, and a Crossroads merchant will be on standby to trade in whatever Sins you have leftover from the **Trial of Charity**.*

*You should use this time to re-center yourself. Try to focus. The **Trial of Retribution** hits those with regrets the hardest, so you'll want to process your emotions before you do anything. You'll get a day for planning and recuperation. Mepheleon will explain all the details to you, but it's up to you and those you're with to plan ahead for what follows.*

*The key thing here is the seven Hellgates that lead beyond the Pale Sanctuary. Each one leads to another Moongrave up the Black Tower, but more importantly, the one you select will see you infused with power and a **Class** of the Claimed Hells. Your starting **Class** will always be based off the template of a demon, and the demons available to you are all tied to specific circles of hell. Depending on how you acted during prior Trials, your choices for a starting Class will be limited to specific circles.*

In total, the circles are Wrath, Lust, Envy, Pride, Gluttony, Sloth, Greed.

*They'll all provide different **Aspects** and **Abysal Invocations**—powers for you to command. Essentially, you'll step into the soul of a vivisected demon, and Mepheleon will seal it around you. Basically, you "possess" a demon instead of it being the other way around. After that, you'll effectively be a Servant of the Claimed Hells. A "free" citizen, in a sense, since you'll be able to access the **Chat** and **Community** functions through the Harbinger themselves.*

*And in the rare case that you might already have a Class you wish to keep, or more impressively, a System? Well, the Harbinger isn't a jealous lover, either. They won't force you to abandon what you already have. Instead, their philosophy is more. You'll get some kind of **Eidolon**: A demon completely devoid of mental processing and bound to your Will. They usually come in the form of some kind of possessed artifact, be it weapon, armor, or maybe even a mountable steed. You'll get to choose this as well.*

*After this, you'll begin your **Trial of Temptation**, and opportunities to further develop your **Class** will present themselves. Opportunities and risks. Plan wisely. Understand that the Claimed Hells aren't a place for you to be imprisoned, but a realm for you to be reborn...*

You can become anything, here. Anything. The only question is what is greater: You, or your ambition.

-The Trespasser's Compendium

The battered group stumbled into the comforting glow of the new room to the ambiance of distant cheers. Wei kept his **Lesser Hollow Mind** active as his **Sourceforged** mended with each step. Agnesia, Ellena, and Roggi well into the chamber already, a pall of silence hanging over them, barely taking in their surroundings, finding interest only on the ground.

A sudden cheer had infused Rafael. The lich soared and sailed around the new space, exploring its dome-like expanse. The floor and walls seemed to be made from pallid glass of some sort, and from them shimmered the soft glow of amber. Regarding the area of the room, Wei guessed that it was twice as large as the ash-field they faced the Gatekeeper on. Perhaps one hundred meters or so.

A quarter of the room was taken up by a softly splashing spring, with marble steps leading down into steaming waters. There were alcoves lining the nearby walls, nesting bedding compartments suited for three humans and a giant. Then, there were the additional fixtures: an unmoving skeletal figure placed within a display case across the room, behind which loomed seven inert obsidian gateways. Wei narrowed his eyes. This was a merchant of the Crossroads and paths that lead ahead, if he were not mistaken.

They were intended to rest here.

Most curious was the ceiling above. More strange artwork returned. It depicted a many-headed serpent devouring people, but also people eating their way free from the insides of the many headed serpent.

A distant, dormant part of the young master's mind appreciated the mural. To consume one's own sins for power appealed to him; resembled a triumph over weakness. Any cultivator could appreciate such mastery over the paths of vice. But it could just as well be a trap. A seed of planted temptation for him to stray from his path.

“Well done, Sinners,” Mepheleon's voice cackled as it intruded into existence again. A pause followed. Roggi's armor groaned as he straightened his back. Chipped and dented sections of his armor ground together as metal sawed against metal. Agnesia flinched briefly from the discordant noise and her mother began to stir on her shoulder. She brooked no complaint otherwise.

“Hm. Perhaps I should say well done Wei and Rafael instead. They seem to be the only ones capable of appreciating praise. What is wrong, Oathbearer? Princess? Queen Ellena? Why so dour? You have overcome the Seeker, have you not?”

Roggi's response came as a rageful shout and a hammer flung violently against the wall. The Oathbearer's strength was immense, even with but a single arm remaining, even with his armor and flesh sundered. His Hammer of Creation crashed hard against the brilliant walls, but though the material seemed like glass to Wei, it was the hammer that shattered into fragments rather than the wall itself.

“Oh dear. That's unfortunate.”

Again, Wei couldn't tell if the Harbinger was being deliberately mocking, or if they were sincere about this occurrence.

The blood masking Roggi's face blended with his red beard, but the dullness in his gaze was unmistakable between all the leaking cuts. The Oathbearer was angry. Now he was just drained. The fight was empty in him. He just stared where his hammer lay in shattered fragments against the wall, unmoving.

“Well. If it is any consolation, you won't be needing that once you receive your Class.”

Roggi remained rooted in place. “I don't want... a filthy Class from you, you worthless gobshite. I want... I want you to bring me back to my brothers. I want to be with the Trine. I want to finish delivering them where they need to go, and then... and then...”

The Oathbearer took a heaving breath.

“And then nothing. Your Hearth was destroyed. More of your homeland has been lost to the Unfallen. A dreadful turn of affairs, truly, but inevitable in many ways. The Deathless Demarchy will claim your world. And all the other worlds in your realm. You know this. Soon, they will have another Shard of the Creator and be another step closer to creating a System Foundry of their own.”

Wei scarcely followed the details, but the gist was not hard to grasp. The undead—whatever they were—were clearly an invasive force. Much like the Claimed Hells were to Wei's world. They were overrunning Roggi's world. Taking its creator for their own means... And a *System Foundry*.

Only entities rated Lv. 10,000 or above possess a [15.55%] of creating a Thresholder Foundry capable of altering Conceptual Phenomena. Current indications make this seem unlikely. Even the Harbinger has low odds of successfully recreating a Conceptual System.

“You bastard,” Roggi wheezed. His curse came with a wet rasp. “You cruel, wrong-made thing...”

“Oh, come now, dwarf. I understand how you feel. Truly. I do. I have been there myself. But you're not mad at me. Well. Not that mad at me. No. You hate yourself. You hate yourself for abandoning your elder forgebrother when the Unfallen broke into your hold. You still hear him screaming for you, begging for you to kill him somehow, to not let him be taken and turned. Sadly, you had to run, for what could you do? For how could you save what was already lost and betray your oath in the process.”

“Stop,” Roggi whispered.

“It wasn’t really your fault, anyway, Roggi. The Hearthflames birthed Gunthal as something special. He was even more the dwarf than you. A better warrior. A better crafter. Well, maybe not as funny and couldn’t quite get as drunk, but for most matters—”

“Stop,” Roggi said, all but pleading.

“Harbinger. Enough!” Wei’s voice cut above the Oathbearer’s. Slowly, he turned to face Wei. “Stop driving your fingers deeper into his wounds. It’s unseemly.”

“Hm. You are right, Young Master Wei. I apologize, Oathbearer Roggi. But it is not your fault. It will do you will to process this, lest a demon find a nesting place in your pain.” A beat followed. ***“Speaking of which, why are you all still standing there, bleeding? Get in the Spring of Forlorn Hope. Be mended of flesh and nourished of mind. Quick! Quick!”***

The Oathbearer did not move. Agnesia, however, bit her lip and made for the steaming spring at the center of the room, not even bothering to remove the bloodstained articles of clothing from herself or her mother. Ellena made a noise as she stirred more. Wei saw several deep gashes running along her leather vest. Giving her the armor was a wise choice indeed.

As Agnesia splashed into the water, her body flared with silvery fire as she released a sudden cry of shock. Wei jolted to attention, making a fist in his right hand pulling—

Only to remember that his spear was lost as well. He shot a look at the unmoving skeleton within the displace case fifty meters away from the edge of the pool. This one had a large sunflower like hat and wore a fine dress made from colorful feathers.

Agnesia’s sudden cry receded as the waters glowed around her, rising over their own volition and washing away the cuts on her face like they were but smears. As the princess touched herself, she blinked, and color returned to her face. More, as her vitality rose, so did her essence return, and around her did the air simmer once more.

“It’s fine,’ Agnesia called out, her mother bathed in the same glow. “It just... it’s invigorating.”

The tension broke in Wei as he continued studying the lich. He had his own means of healing. Perhaps this would be a good time for him to see if he could interact with the case somehow. Summon a merchant. But what would he trade with?

As the young master considered one lich, another drifted down and took up his line of sight.

“Can we talk about—” Rafael began.

Only to be immediately be cut off by Mepheleon. ***“It is not easy to face one’s past. Well. Not easy for most of us.”*** Wei frowned and somehow, despite being little more than bone and magic, Rafael replicated the action. ***“But face it we must. For if you cannot endure the echoes of those you have hurt, then what lay ahead will tear you apart from the inside.”***

Thankfully, you will not need to face it as you are: broken and unbalanced. You will have time to recover. Discuss.

Roggi was still unmoving. Wei checked his Source and shook himself. He was recovering. Albeit at half the pace of normal mediation. Frankly, he preferred doing things with **Lesser Hollow Mind**. The Claimed Hells was a place of many *surprises*, and though Mepheleon proved themselves to be a more reasonable master than most, Wei was reluctant trust in another's goodwill when he could ensure his own safety.

Source: [13/45] Lumens

"Get in the pool. Mend yourself. I will stand watch." Wei spoke. But Roggi was like a stone. They didn't appear to have heard. Their eyes were like beads of dull red, its shade easy to separate from his many seeping wounds. Finally, they nodded.

"Aye," Roggi said, frowning at their missing arm. The entire limb had been ripped free at the shoulder. Wei was curious why they hadn't been in a hurry to tie off the wound somehow, and his curiosity only grew when he realized the dismembered limb had become a scabbed stump.

Wei was **Sourceforged**, but it seemed the Oathbearer possessed immense healing abilities of his own. Or, the young master eyed his banner, maybe the artifact was more potent than he thought. Considering how freely Agnesia's armpit bled, he thought it more likely to be the former.

Deviating from the girl's example, the Oathbearer shed his armor before entering the waters. Circuits of light and steam lit along the back of his plating. Blasts of heated air erupted out from Roggi's shoulders like wings, and with a hiss, the protective shell encasing them unfurled, letting them step out from within.

The young master took a few steps back, trying to catch a glimpse of Roggi's true form. The Oathbearer's unarmed form was only three-fourths as large as it was in the armor, but they still towered over Wei regardless. However, the dimensions of Roggi's body were just strange to behold. A barrel-wide torso was supported by unnaturally short legs. A translucent body glove also coated the Oathbearer's form, wrapping him in a sort of protective gel. It was all rather strange to Wei, and as his gaze continued going down, he felt his widen as he found a very essential organ missing.

Roggi followed Wei's stare downward and chuckled humorlessly. "What? Did I lose something else."

The young master gestured toward his privates awkwardly. "I... perhaps?"

The Oathbearer's head whipped back up as a look of pure horror curled across his face.

Deep pity welled inside Wei. It was an ugly thing, for one to lose the fruits that seeded—

Roggi broke and gave a soft snort. Then drove a set of massive, hairy knuckles into Wei's shoulder. "I'm not a bloody human like you, Wei. Can't lose what you don't have."

Shaking his head, he stomped over toward the spring, rolling his shoulders as he tried to loosen his tension. A dull moan came from Ellena as her head rose. Her daughter was cradling her face, keeping her from laying against the hardness of the steps. Both of them seemed entirely healed now, and the waters of the spring were also cleaning their attire as well, scrubbing away stains and splotches as if animated by a higher will.

Wei stared upward. Mepheleon. How eccentric could one higher being get?

Alright," Roggi grunted. "Make some room."

Agnesia nodded without looking. "The temperature is perfect. Hot without being scalding." Finally, she turned. This proved to be a mistake. Her face went blank for a moment as Roggi's squat, hairy form lumbered toward her. Her eyes traveled the same path Wei's did, starting from his head and settling just below his waist. She cupped her mouth with both hands as a response.

Stirring completely, Ellena lifted her head, turned, and froze. Roggi was stepping into the spring now, his immense bulk displacing the water. As the spring began to lick at his wounds—the Oathbearer flinching as he cursed at the fluid tendrils, demanding he stop being tickled—the older woman stood in the water and stumbled back, face turning beet red.

"Master Roggi... you... your... this is most improp—you're a eunuch."

Again, Roggi froze and looked at her. "What? No." He reached down with an exaggerated motion, groping for something. Then went still again. His head shot up, his face horrified. "Oh, no! Gods! Gods why!"

Both mother and daughter had their hands over their mouths and brows climbing high up their foreheads.

"No!" Roggi roared dramatically. "Mepheleon, you bastard! Why did you have to take that too. Why—" Rivers of water coiled into the stump of his wound and he jolted, giggling unwillingly. "Hey. Stop."

Wei just blinked. How fast did the Oathbearer go from near despondent to deceitful gadfly. He wondered if that was a gift possessed by all Oathbearers, or something specific to Roggi.

"Specific to him, I'd say," Mepheleon whispered directly to Wei. ***"The surviving forgekin born of his Hearth... They're more streamlined. And traditional. It is fortunate that you saved this one. I doubt you would have worked so well with the others."***

“Fortune? Or scheme?” Wei muttered. He remembered Roggi tumbling over into the dark. That could have been pure happenstance. Or it could have been engineered.

“Fortune. I do not control everything. Nor do I desire to control everything. That is only something fools desire. Regardless, things worked out nicely. You kept him alive. And he even saved you once. I wasn’t sure if you could survive the Keeper landing on you. Even with your System.”

Wei scoffed. “What was that abomination? It began with such strength and speed... Was it all sacrificed for the echoes?”

Mepheleon laughed. ***“It’s the nature of its existence. Its speed is tied to the guilt present in those it faces. And the Oathbearer? The princess? The queen? They all have so much guilt. Not you though. And not you either, Rafael.”***

The lich was hovering nearby, uncharacteristically silent, though bobbing angrily, mouth opening and closing.

“What’s wrong?” Wei asked.

“Nothing,” Mepheleon answered. ***“I just muted him. I grew tired of hearing all the sex positions he wished to teach my mother.”***

“Ah,” Wei said, understanding. That made his mind go blank. How disquieting the things a man could come to casually expect in the span of a day.

“Whatever the case, I wished to congratulate you on your continued survival. And reward you with a piece of information. Your father just left the Black Tower. He is heading deeper into my circles.”

Wei’s focus broke. Complex considerations splashed into his consciousness like a returning flood. Secondhand embarrassment ignited in him as he considered Roggi’s impropriety, as he noticed how soaked Agnesia and her mother were, as he struggled to process their ordeal.

“Now? Where is going? Can you keep him—”

“Don’t worry, boy. He’s not going anywhere. Not that there’s anywhere to go. He is returning to his owner, after all, to report the failure of his task.”

“Failure?” Wei asked.

“Yes. Again, the destruction of your world was an... inconvenience. Something that had to happen toward greater ends.”

“Greater—” Wei paused. An epiphany suddenly hit him. The Everblossom branch. The essence flowing along its length from the core of the crumbling realm into Wei’s being. “The System.”

“Quite so. And real estate, actually. Someone wants to move a planetary casino where your planet formerly was. It’s at quite a stable point in the Fathoms.”

Wei’s jaw just dropped. “A casino.”

“Yes. I actually have a 25% stake in the venture. It will be called AllPleasures, and when they finish making the world, it will be able to house approximately twenty trillion visitors in its hollow innards and the higher realms layered over its surface.”

A conservative estimate, Wei’s System provided.

The young master’s jaw fell even lower.

“Regardless. My congratulations also comes with a warning: You are being watched.”

“By... you?” Wei said.

“No. By people other than me. Let’s just say that your performance and... what you might possess has several interested parties... aroused.”

Discomfort filled Wei. “Aroused?”

“The ‘want to recruit you and train you as an attack dog’ kind of aroused. Although...” Mepheleon hummed and went no further. ***“Regardless, you must prepare yourself for the Trial of Temptation. Look upon the dormant gates. You see them?”***

“Yes,” Wei replied.

“Good. Each you walk beyond will offer its own treasures. And risks. Each will have you traverse another spot of the Moongraves dotting these primordial hells, send you on a path through the heart of one of the Archdevils. It is only by crossing over the other side may you begin your arrival at Preceptor’s Descent: the First Ring of Hell. During this journey, you must navigate your way ahead, and know that the Archdevils seeks to consume you.”

“The Archdevil. That is the creature I saw earlier. The beast impaled upon your Tower.”

‘Beasts. And yes. Without their sweet, sweet ichor, this place simply cannot quite run with the same efficiency. Passing through a selected gate will grant your companions a Class. A Class they all sorely need, as seen from their recent performance. Each subsequent path traveled offer even more boons. Artifacts. Class improvements.

Potential benefactors. Which is the thing I want to speak with you about. There are a lot of people who wish to be your direct benefactor, Wei. Many for the skill you've demonstrated. Some because want to deny another Circle their advantage. And the Lodge because they want to get after your father."

"The Lodge?" Wei asked.

"The Trespassers Lodge," Mepheleon answered cheerful. **"A club for specters, unfortunates, scoundrels, and soldiers marooned across the threshold, trapped in the Fathoms. For now at least. The Circles will be sending aid. Or hunters. Knights to cull potential recruits for their rivals along the Moongraves."**

Wei worked to process that. "And... you allow this?"

"Of course. Why, this barely counts as political subterfuge at all. Ah. You'll see once you arrive in the Circles."

"I'm not sure if I want to, now."

"Oh, stop, boy. You're a cultivator. Scheming, betraying, and clawing for dominance is practically how your lot say hello to each other."

The young master narrowed his eyes and folded his arms at that. "Yes. But there is an *etiquette* to these things. Only bandits ambush and murder people."

"Sure," Mepheleon said, sounding unconvinced. **"Whatever the case. You will have a day for recuperation. The gates will remain dormant, and you may consult the guide in the display case for details. But be not surprised if you are specifically targeted, Wei. Many among the Circles wish to claim you. Knights. Dukes. Princes. And many more might see you dead before you are ever claimed."**

The young master stifled a sneer. "Many court death."

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"Hm. We'll see. Oh, how close are you to pass through your first Gate and achieving System Ascension."

[3/5] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

[9/10] Core Ascensions to [Gate] 1 System Ascension

“Close enough,” Wei said coolly. Schrödinger’s suggestion about keeping the deeper nature of his System hidden still lingered.

“Well, I hope you are. You should cross as soon as you can. It may mean the difference between being forced to sell your own agency or having enough power to decide your own fate. Oh, and one more thing: It strikes me that it would be awfully odd for your companions to gain Classes while you remain divorced from hell’s blessings. Very unfair. And it might create even more people to suspect you of possessing a little something no one wants a mere boy to keep. This won’t do... This won’t do at all. Say. Where’s your spear?”

“You know where my spear is?” Wei said, speaking through clenched teeth. “To the point, Harbinger. Or I shall contemplate how I might... have relations with your mother.”

Rafael nodded and threw his head back in silent laughter.

“Sadly, the effect is not the same with you. You’re just too repressed, Wei. But, yes, I’ll stop teasing you. If you’re going to be spending any time in my realms, you need a means of communicating with others in the Circles and the wider communities.”

“You are insufficient? Do you not know all and see all?”

“No. Not even close.” The casualness of Mepheleon’s admission sent a chill into Wei. The dread came in two parts; it took an act of supreme humility for someone so powerful to admit their limitations; and there were still limitations left for Mepheleon. ***“Whatever the case, you need a replacement weapon. And armor. Maybe a dog. Would you like a dog? Ah. I’ll let you choose. Consult the guide for what Eidolon you want to bind with.”***

“Eidolon?” Wei asked.

But then only silence came, and Rafael was finally audible again. “Oh. Oh, good. The bastard is gone.” The lich made a spitting noise. “Good riddance.”

Wei frowned. “I’m beginning to hate these conversations.”