

I named it the Claimed Hells because that was simply what it was: the various realms of hell I claimed. The title of “Diaspora” or “Junction” came afterward with the migrants my newly established state brought in.

You see, dear reader, approximately ninety or so years ago, the many worlds of the Fathoms all had a place they called “hell” or whatever equivalent in their tongue. I was lucky enough to find myself on a world with not one hell, but nine. Nine different planes of damnation, festering with nightmares woven from the fabric of sin to feast on the living.

Or so the Preceptors claimed. The clergy was, for all intents and purposes, ruled by fear and driven by tyranny; poor desperate fools that fed their demonic predators more than they repelled them. It was only when I was condemned to damnation and cast down into the First Circle that I learned the truth.

Most know the story by now: by wit, fate, and will I survived, went ever deeper, avoided the worst of my hunters. And then I found it. That start at the center of the plane. That awakened star that was connected to countless worlds by way overlapping dungeons or other such portals. That star which housed a System. That star from which I rebirthed myself, and began this glorious enterprise you benefit from today.

All the worries, beliefs, condemnations, wrongdoings... that pours from the lands of the living into these hells, and gives shapes to what people claim to be demons. Honestly, my creations are more like pathogens in a way. They use the living to incubate and mutate, after all.

For those of you that are interested or capable, I invite you to my quaint little realm. Tread the path I took before—I even improved the Towers to make the journey far easier for you. Ascend past the outermost layer and greet the First Circle, where the torus world of Preceptor’s Descent awaits you. Your reward will be enlightenment, power, proper company, and every pleasure you seek to indulge.

For in my Claimed Hells, the only sin condemned is being too weak or humble to take what you desire.

-Mepheleon, The Harbinger

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The Offered Path

Severe damage sustained.

It is recommended that you use Source Refinement too—

Wei coughed as he tried to push himself off from where he lay caked into the wall. His flesh—or the monochromatic essence that replaced it—was splayed wide against the surface he once knew to be the ground. The geometries of this place bewildered his mind, but there was little strength left in him to consider that.

Ahead, the portal his father escaped through rippled with a brilliant gleam, its surface comparable to an emerald lake, before collapsing out of existence, leaving only a flat surface of obsidian in its wake.

Pain-addled but still ruled by the throes of hate, Wei peeled struggled to rise, but found his strength wanting. The rage inside him grew ever colder. His father was gone. His father had escaped. His world was dead; dead with his mother.

This would not stand. Wei was not done.

Mepheleon began speaking the same instant Wei closed his eyes. Nothing mattered. There was nothing but focus. There was nothing but restoring himself so he could continue his pursuit. His father would not go unpunished for this; his father and whoever he served. Though Wei's memories turned like a raging maelstrom inside his being, he pushed it all away, silenced all thoughts as he expanded his across existence once more.

The colors of reality sang out to him, their currents flowing over his, touching but not blending. Nearby, he felt a colossal presence dwarf him, its searing brightness all-dominating. Where Wei was but a droplet, the unknown entity burned like a raging star. What's more, he felt its many layers—nine in total. Nine essences churning within its being, circulating out in an interplay of shades from that radiant source.

External System detected: Category Da'at

Restoring Source...

>Source: [0.87/15] Liters

Wei only faintly felt the reshaping of his body take place. Bones were reforged from what seemed to be nothingness. His flesh bubbled out from ruptured wounds and opened flaps of meat. His insides pooled together as his breaths came easier, and his focus even more.

Body Advancement: Lv. 9

>Celerity at Lv. 9: 0.07/SECOND [REACTION]; 200 METERS/SECOND [VELOCITY]

>Fortitude at Lv. 9: 100 CENTIMETERS OF IRON [Durability Comparative]

Spirit Advancement: Lv. 9

>Sympathy at Lv. 9: 0.95 LITERS/SECOND [SOURCE DISTILLED FROM EXISTENCE]

>Source at Lv.9: 25 Liters

Spirit Core at Lv. 4

Source: [25/25]

With his Spirit-forged body finally mended, Wei's eyes snapped open, and he found himself denser but also lighter at the same time. Stepping forward from the surface he was placed, he took in the deformation he imprinted upon the silver and clenched his jaw.

Worthless. How could he subdue his father if he remained so weak. The Spirit that resided in him—the *System*... It was nourishing him with strength, boosting his cultivation at a pace unfathomable. But even this, this wouldn't be enough. He needed more power, and time to prepare as well, and possess neither quality in abundance.

"It was a good attempt," Mepheleon sighed. ***"You even got to him in time. Color me surprised. But a System doesn't make one all-powerful."*** The Harbinger paused, and then snorted. ***"At least, not immediately. It is like a garden—it must be refined. Cultured. Improved."***

Wei strode across the bridge once more, walking back across the length to the place where he was struck by his father's palm. The metal beneath him was warped before the dormant gateway. Glaring at the outline of the passage now occupied by nothing but stone, Wei placed his hand against the obsidian, tried to reach out and seize the portal within.

"Ah-ah-ah," Mepheleon chided. ***"What are you doing?"***

"The gateway," Wei replied, all sense of decorum lost. "Open it."

"Oh. Demands. And in such a hurry to go looking for death once again."

The string of patience within Wei began to strain. He felt the anger inside him fray, clawing at his insides. A fury filled his muscles, burned to be let loose. But to offend a being so powerful would only result in his suicide—even if they were treating him like a cricket in a cage.

"Hmmmmm. No."

The string was on the verge of snapping. "Why? *Why?*" The words were barely pronounced as they left him. Wei sounded more like a raving dog to himself than a person.

"Because that will damage the equilibrium of essence of my Tower; because you seem to be made out of Source Corruption and I don't want to get another part of my System unmade, no matter how small; because I'm increasingly fascinated by you, and would be bored if your story ended as a one-note suicide if I just teleported you to your father immediately."

So the *bastard* could. Wei's fingers curled into fists as red seeped into his vision, his self-control slipping.

“And ultimately, because I want to see what else you’ll pull off during this little quest for revenge. So. I’m not going to open the gate for you. But there is another way you can ascend.”

The storm building inside Wei calmed slightly at that. A second more and he would have...

Would have done *what*? Screamed at the unseen, omnipresent, seemingly omnipotent being? Threatened to strike his tower? Broke down as his will finally gave against all the grief and trauma he was repressing?

Done what? With what power?

Swallowing a lump in his throat, Wei let a shuddering breath and stepped away from the inactive gate. “Speak. Speak. What is this ‘other way.’ How do I reach it?”

A silence followed from Mepheleon, but the surrounding environment clamored with noise. Only now did Wei realize how many eyes were upon him, people pointing and staring at him from the curving city built around this tunnel, demons drifting through the air, leaving phantasmal trails.

Out of place and in the spotlight. A familiar pressure fell upon Wei's shoulders; he was used to being gazed upon by many, being the Young Master of an esteemed sect. But the expressions and stares he remembered were ones of envy or pride rather than judgement, fear, and scorn.

“You know, I was kind of hoping for a bit of an outburst,” Mepheleon said.

The rage returned, but Wei leashed it. “You find joy in my impotence. Is that it?”

“What? No. I just like it when people finally get mad enough to insult me and demand that I smite them. Shit’s hilarious. Anyway. You should get going before someone out there pacts with a Demon of Law and tries to bind you to a contract of servitude for property damage.”

Wei blinked at that.

“That’s not a joke. You don’t wanna run into one of my Lawyers. Honestly, even I think I made them a bit too powerful, sometimes. Anyway. Follow Schrödinger. He’ll show you where you need to go. Dreary matters and looming conquests await my full attention... Try not to die, Young Master. And... welcome to the Diaspora. I hope you’ll settle in nicely here. Mostly because you really don’t have anywhere else to go anymore.”

Mepheleon's final words felt like a knife being twisted, but before Wei could call after them, a burst of flames flared beside him, causing him to take on a defensive posture. Yet, as fire hissed away to become ash and steam, Wei found himself staring down at a particular ugly demonic child.

Or was it a child at all.

Its skin was like wrinkled leather painted a particularly dark hue of green. Red eyes, sharp fangs, triangular claws, and pointed ears made it seem a predator, but with the smallness of its stature—barely reaching the top of his hip—Wei wondered what it was supposed to prey on in these forsaken lands. More curious was the clothing it wore. It had a silken jacket with a bright, burgundy vest sporting nine gold buttons, each imprinted with a different symbol. A round, feathered cap adorned what looked to be a hairless head, but their ensemble was left incomplete without shoes. Instead, three talon-like digits scraped against the metal, making Wei wince with the noise.

For a moment, the strange creature blinked as they looked around, only stopped when they found Wei after lifting their head. It swept him up and down with its eyes again and shook its head. "You the Young Master?"

Its voice was as if a pit of gravel, further refined by smoke. Master He spent every waking moment smoke a pipe and still didn't sound half as bad as this creature did.

"I... yes," Wei replied, uncertain how to respond. Things around him were changing too fast—he could barely keep pace. "What... are you Sho-Ding-Ger?"

The creature made a face of disgust. "Schrödinger."

And then there was the pronunciation of its name. It was a solid mess of syllables. No separation whatsoever—it sounded horrible to say. Still, Wei made the attempt. "*Sho-dinger?*"

The impish being inhaled, as if about to protest, then sighed. "Ah. What the hell: close enough." Immediately after, Schrödinger started walking away from him, marching back the other way across the bridge. Wei stared at the creature for a second before he sighed and followed it. One problem at a time.

"Where are we going?" Wei asked. "How am I to use the Tower?"

"We are going all the way down, kid," Schrödinger said, speaking without even looking at Wei. "*'Immigrations,'* some of the Classed call it. Most who live here just know it as the filtering."

"Filtering?"

Schrödinger reached the end of the path, but his stride didn't slow. Instead, he took off his hat

and hit a specific pattern imprinted on the wall—*ground* facing them. As the headwear struck the sigil, it flared as something constituting a right angle shifted ninety degrees. Gravity changed for Schrödinger as he rolled down the bridge and picked up his hat. Wei hesitated before copying the creature's actions, striking the pattern with a foot and then transition his kick into a stride.

“Wonderful. You got basic pattern-recognition down.” Schrödinger grunted. “You won't believe how many of the assholes who live here don't have that.”

As he spoke, Wei took in their surroundings. With geometry reoriented, he found himself standing at something that resembled a town center. Over a dozen paths led out from cluttered buildings created from scrap, wood, bone, and whatever else. Merchants of all statures, culture, races, and even species watched Wei.

All at once, he found him struck by how disparate their features were; more than skin tone, some had even stranger features, like moss growing from their head like hair. More than a few others were impossibly thin and tall beings that looked analogous to humanity, but had reflective, porcelain bright eyes with pointed ears. Then there were hulking creatures made from shifting stone, with flickering flames hissing from their chests and “faces.” And those weren't even the strangest specimens. His eyes widened as he found a chirping insect twice his height tilting its head at him. It resembled something between a spider and a praying mantis, and Wei's guts made several flips as its many limbs flickered, gliding it across the ground.

Red skinned demons guarded the people, their forms like chimeras of bulls and men. Clad in bronze armor and bearing hammers shaped from flame, Wei looked into the boundless inferno in their eyes and prepared himself for a fight. But battle never came. The demons didn't even face him as he left their line of sight, so indifferent were they to his presence.

Disbelief ate at as he kept looking behind, waiting for an ambush to come. “Why are they not attacking?”

“What the people?” Schrödinger said, barely offering those around them a second glance. He snorted. “They're ‘Sinless.’ As long as they stay that way and done do anything too nasty, the demons are pact-bound to protect them.”

Protect? *Demons*? All Wei's life, he knew the beasts of the underworld to be creatures of destruction and calamity, awakened of Spirit but lacking both virtue and anything a human might regard as a mind.

Schrödinger continued, leading them down a turning path. A long archway came into sight before them, and there is a signpost that showed what looked to be a cage placed upon a spider greeted Wei. As Schrödinger pointed upward, Wei found his gaze trailing up to see exactly what was depicted: a dozen or so enormous spiders with what seemed to be carriages bolted on their backs.

Stunned by the sight, Wei stopped in place while a breath of essence left Schrödinger, undulating through the air in a vibrant shade of red. The Spiritual emanation coiled into one of the spiders, and the demon came alive, snapping free from where it clung as it turned and landed with nary a thud.

Its body was as if stitched together by flowing silk connecting carapaces made from bone. Twelve shimmering eyes dotted its skull, while six human-like hands lined the underside of its torso, clasped together as if in perpetual prayer.

“There we go.” Schrödinger laugh sounded like the grunts of a pig; might be caused by the flatness of his nose. As the spider skittered over to them, it lowered itself flat, and doors to the carriage on its back opened. Wei stared into the wooden box. It looked large enough to seat four of him and no more, but part of him found the thought of being carried by a demon as if a bride in a palanquin repugnant.

Schrödinger didn't wait. The small creature clambered up the side of the spider without a hint of fear and waved for Wei to follow. “It's either this or walking, and I don't know about you, but I don't want to spend the next few hours stumbling through alleys and hovels, dodging lawyers with the only obvious cultivator in town.”

Damnation. Wei swallowed his discomfort—it was just another thing he needed to suppress in himself today. Plating a tentative step on the spider, he shot a glare at the creature. “If you attack me, I'll make a corpse of you and seek your brood after.”

A laugh assaulted his ears. “Yeah, threaten the mindless demon. That'll do it. Come on, kid.” Walking up the stair-like ridges lining the demons back, he entered the carriage, and above him a sigil flared—the sign of two right angles forming a square.

“What is this?” he asked.

“To make sure our gravity-vectors are pointed inverse to the ceiling and our asses stay seated no matter what the Elseweaver does. And before you ask, yeah, that's what the spider's called. This type, anyway. You can build a whole lotta different nightmares with a bit of Wrath and Deception.”

Settling into his seat, Wei glanced around uneasily as the windows to his side darkened. His senses were drowning from sheer overload. There was more essence flowing around him than ever in his life, even with his barely developed awareness.

“*Would you like to be pleased,*” twin airy voices whispered out to him. Wei's eyes widened as he only sensed the being's presence a moment thereafter. As the darkness in the glass parted, he saw a woman and a man greeting him from afar. Their skin glistened like shade, only the thinning fabric of translucent spared their modesty, but revealed enough *detail* to allure his gaze.

Wei's jaw opened briefly before he tore his gaze away. *Sirens*.

Schrödinger grumbled and leaned off, swatting the glass. "Piss off. Frigging succubi *malfunctioning* again."

"Succubi?"

"Succubi, siren, slattern, hole-lo-mancer, *sex-smiths*, holes... call 'em whatever you want, just know that the Circle of Pleasure keeps all the Sins you give to them after. But guessing from how you knew to look away, you might already have a guess about what these things are?" Schrödinger chuckled.

Once again, like so many times before this day, Wei found himself dry of words?

"You a virgin, kid?"

Wei coughed at the bluntness of Schrödinger's statement. It wasn't something a strange would ever ask him—nor was it something he'd ever admit either. His face pulled back in outrage, but that only made the creature across from him laugh harder, its filthy padded feet pointed at him, kicking up and down.

"See that's a yes, then," Schrödinger said. A dark glint entered his eyes. "You're going to want to hold onto that for as long as you can. Or get rid of it. Demons of Lust will smell the reek of a big score—the possibility of a big Sin—to be won off you. How old are you, anyway?"

15 as of a few weeks ago.

Something ached inside his chest. Fifteen. Nascent Spirit awakened. His future was nothing but promise, his life was—*why?* Why did his father do this? Why?

"Shit," Schrödinger said, not sounding so amused anymore. "Not that old at all, then."

Wei just glared, wordlessly.

Something beneath them moved, but Wei couldn't tell how fast. If the spider was in motion, it was carrying them far smoother than anything else he experienced since—in his entire life.

"Alright," Schrödinger breathed. "Let's get a few things in order: you got to learn the ground rules to this place; what you got to watch out for, words and general concepts you have to understand. After that, we need to get you something else to wear, 'cause those robes are about to fall off your body."

Wei tried not to think about the tattered rags hanging from him.

“Thankfully,” Schrödinger continued, grinning slightly, “I know someone who might be able to hook you up with something useful. A little treat on behalf of the Harbinger. Trust me, you’re gonna need it if you’re planning on climbing the Tower, claiming a Class, and entering the city through via the Blood Games.”

He sighed as he read Wei’s blank expression. “Empty Throne, son, you have no idea what the hell is going at all, do you?”

Wei hardened his gaze and did all he could to shield his growing anxiety. “I know what I must do. That is enough.”

The creature in front of him scoffed. “Bravado. Pride’s not your friend in these parts, Young Master. *Pride* is a currency. Pride is something you perform to earn Sins and spend in trade. I’m going to give it to you as flatly as possible: everything you knew before doesn’t matter anymore. The past is gone. Your world’s gone. Everyone you know and love—well, there’s still dear old dad—” He flinched as Wei’s stare turned murderous. “--is gone. Empty everything you got inside your head. Take in all I got to say to you, and what’s happening right now. You just stumbled out from a very, very small pond into a very, very large and hungry ocean. And out here, little fishies that don’t know the score usually don’t make it very long.”

Silence settled between them, and Wei clung to the numbing coldness building inside, willed it to spread through him to dull the ache.

Host has sustained severe mental trauma.

It is recommended that you advance your Mind and Spirit related attributes and develop a Mastery that will allow you to alleviate your psychological damage.

But Wei didn’t respond. Wei held himself together, channeling his attention forward by focus. Only forward. Only the future remained; only finding and *breaking* the man that was his father mattered. Only his vow. It didn’t matter how many years it would take. It didn’t matter if he fell in this life; he would hunt the man across the next.

The past was lost. The past was lost. The past was lost.

Wei let everything sink into the recesses of his mind, buried the last memories he had of his home, his mother, his life.

“Start talking, then,” Wei said, voice stripped of all emotion. “I am listening.”