

There comes a point that one must choose how to thrive in their life. Under most Systems, the choice is to dedicate yourself to a proper master in exchange for power or protection. Sometimes, this is the state. Other moments, this becomes a sufficiently powerful Classed.

In the Claimed Hells, however, I expect you to take. I expect you to be an agent for your own interests. To chart the course of your own life and use every sin and demon to your advantage.

Great and terrible things can happen here. But the separating factor is how well you understand who you are, what you can do...

And how willing you are to discover what rules can be broken, and what promise can be seized.

Such was what I learned when I first broke the Archdevils and took from them their essence. Such is what you will learn in the Hearted Realms.

-Mepheleon the Harbinger

41

Bird's Eye View

Searing droplets fell from the sky, hissing as they struck a surface of rusted, corrugated steel. As Wei and the rest of his group emerged, he felt the first raindrops dissolve before they ever touched him. The others offered only quick glances to the rain before shifting their attention to their surroundings. With everyone Classed and Constitutions improved, a bit of hot water inflicted only the slightest discomfort.

Further, Wei's **Fortification Aspect** allowed him to ignore a certain amount of damage upright. It was as if his Source helped him ignore reality's effects on him to a certain extent.

At the start of this day, a mundane blade could pierce his flesh, and he was scarcely faster than an arrow in flight when drawing on his cultivation. Now, his fists could shatter stone, and what once were mortal wounds became setbacks that took but a moment to overcome.

The portal behind them vanished, its essence vanishing as the wound across space closed as if suddenly sutured. They were in a pit of some kind, with hills made from bone and discarded weapons forming slopes of detritus to higher ground. Above, a thin veil of translucence drifted over head as festering clouds spewed a light drizzle. Crimson veins sprawled down in the near atmosphere—Sin-Incubators stretching across the Moongrave.

Off to the right, Wei saw the faint outline of the Black Tower looming like a distant object in space. A massive brass chain ran between it and the Moongrave they were on, keeping them

connected to the superstructure. Faintly, a crushing presence loomed somewhere afar, the essence of an unseen Archdevil plunging down like a waterfall.

"All these places are oh so charming," Roggi said, sarcasm thick. "I can only imagine what a Moongrave of Greed might look like. Maybe it'll be like a joined sea made out of coins and jewels that you have to swim across, but beneath that there are gold-devouring serpents that come out and bite yer legs off."

The Oathbearer was jesting, but the young master frowned. He could actually see Mapheleon engineering such creatures to bring ruin to a poor sinner's day. Scouting his surroundings, Wei watched for any movement as his **Aspect of Omniscience** kept him alert of everything within 70 meters. For now, it was all quiet. Just them and no one else.

It pleased Wei that his peek beyond the portal had proven true. There were no demons laying in wait, prepared to ambush any unfortunates that passed through the portal. But there also didn't seem to be *anything* waiting for them here at all.

"Well," Agnesia said, wiggling her nose in disappointment. "I was kind of hoping that there would be demons."

"I wasn't," her mother sighed.

Rafael cleared his throat. "Perhaps I can prepare a working that will—"

"No," Wei interrupted. He looked upward and directed his **Intent** high into the air as well. "I will get a bird's eye view of our surroundings. We will make our plans after that."

Rafael lowered a skeletal hand and looked up as well. "Are... you capable of flying now? Why are you projecting your essence that way?"

Wei ignored the lich and waited for his System to calculate the Conceptual Integrity he needed to break. The longer the distance, the most complex the structure, the more things in the way, the harder or more Wei needed to strike his marked target. However, there was an additional factor that could also drastically increase the integrity as well.

Estimating Distance: 5 Kilometers

Obstructions: 0

Conflicting Laws of Reality or Adversarial Systems: 1

Threshold Established

Calculating Targeted Conceptual Structure...

Conceptual Structure Calculated

Concept-Integrity of [Distance]: 1050000/1050000 Integrity Points

The atmosphere was thick with an oppressive essence, and Wei's senses told him the effects were even more severe beyond the boundary of this Moongrave. If he had to guess, it would be the raw, undiluted power leaking from an Archdevil. He had caught a glimpse of one such titan before entering the first sanctuary. Considering their level and how Wei was venturing closer to the Hearted Realm as he ascended the Tower, they like faced primordial energies like no other.

So much energy that Wei wondered how Mepheleon managed to keep it separated from the atmosphere. Whatever the case, the Harbinger also clearly didn't want someone flying from Moongrave to Moongrave or even trying to bypass the Tower altogether. With that noted, Wei pulled his Intent back by a full kilometer or so. Unlike his **Omniscience**, his **Intent** could stretch as far as he could see, but it was also more a trickle of his being forming a structure around a part of existence rather than a projection of his senses.

Estimating Distance: 4 Kilometers

Obstructions: 0

Conflicting Laws of Reality or Adversarial Systems: 1

Threshold Established

Calculating Targeted Conceptual Structure...

Conceptual Structure Calculated

Concept-Integrity of [Distance]: 400/400 Integrity Points

Feeling the worst of the crushing essence diminish, Wei struck his new target of conceptual distance time and again. Light and shadow flashed above him like a pillar, and a question from Ellena almost made him stop punching.

"Do you think the flaring of your... power will attract demons to us?" Ellena said, trying to keep her question respectful.

Wei frowned as he thought of that. "Well. It seems we will be finding where the threats await one way or another."

Roggi snorted a laugh and just shook his head.

The young master mentally repressed any feeling of shame; he intended to fight demons. The outcome would be the same regardless.

With a final blow, he shattered distance and suddenly blinked far up into the sky, finding himself just below a roof of clouds. The true shape of the Moongrave unveiled itself before him. It was a large sphere, and this close to the atmosphere, he could see several other planetary bodies

beyond the thickness of crisscrossing crimson arteries as well. Even from afar, he could detect emanations of different essences congealing within them, and the young master's suspicions that the space between the Moongraves was uncrossable beyond portals, specific bridges, or without Mepheleon's aid grew stronger.

Directing the fullness of his attention to the moon grave below, however, he found this strange little realm, a patchwork of trenches running between dilapidated fortresses, crumbled battlements, collapsed structures, and scenes of ruination in general.

He saw figures moving in the trenches, some of them stumbling atop parapets, even a few wandering in from distant wastelands. The Sin-Incubators implanted themselves along the far poles of this moon grave. Serried columns of surging red injected demon after demon into existence. And as gravity finally began to pull Wei down, he saw more and more humanoid forms emerge from the distant thickets.

But ultimately, his focus was captured by a few structures even more uncanny than the tendrils from which demons were bred.

Four massive floating pylons, each at least a kilometer long, hovered in the air, projecting burning symbols into the sky, while the surrounding air thrummed with a constant outpouring of essence. Below, it projected a portal in place, and the large forms of demons stood in formation to protect the installation.

Wei tried to invoke his **Aspect of Enlightenment** as he examined the nearest pylon, but found his System's knowledge lacking. However, as his eyes fell upon the symbol above the obsidian structure, he felt a trickle of information enter his mind as a scrawl of text expanded across his vision.

Skill Shard Rift: Enter the rift and defeat the Blazing Manticore (Lv.10) to obtain a Skill Shard of your choosing. Can be attempted as a group or solo. Each Sinner can obtain a max of 1 Skill Shard. Experiencing death within the rift will result in your return to the Moongrave without any Skill Shards obtained. The rift will be sealed after your attempt, regardless of success.

Wei blinked as he internalized the information. It felt like knowledge injected directly into his mind.

You have encountered an Information Cipher, his System said. The pattern conveys a condensation of detail.

Well. That was useful. Turning his attention to the next hovering pylon beyond the nearest one.

Artifact Rift: Enter the rift and survive endless waves of demons. Get to the end of the temple and claim as many artifacts and Sins as you can within 02:00 minutes. Experiencing death within the rift will result in your return to the Moongrave with all the

items you have already obtained. The rift will be sealed after your attempt, regardless of success.

A defensive wall set of walls and a moat surrounded the underside of this pylon. What looked to be demons pulling massive cannons atop the walls made Wei wary about getting too close. He would likely be fine, but the others...

This rift was definitely not one to attempt first. As he fell a few meters more, he looked behind him and noted the last two pylons.

Essence Rift: Enter the defeat 50 demons. Succeeding in the challenge will immediately grant you an additional Class Level. Experiencing death within the rift will result in your return to the Moongrave without any essence obtained. The rift will be sealed after your attempt, regardless of success.

Specialization Rift: Enter the rift and began your Class Specialization assessment. This rift must be attempted solo, and you will be given Specialization options based on your analyzed performance. It is recommended that you attempt this rift after you reach Class Level 5. Experiencing death within the rift will culminate the assessment and trigger Specialization selection. You cannot fail this rift. The rift will be sealed after your attempt, regardless of success.

There. That was the rift he was looking for. Just two kilometers away from his current position and behind ten trench lines. There was also the matter of needing to get his Class to Level 5. Not a difficult prospect. A great many demons were wandering in small bands along the trenches and across the wastes. Wei intended to break their Constitutions and leave them as easy feed for his group. Not their other Aspects though; the threat of danger would ensure his companions don't get complacent.

Also, true to Ellena's words, it seemed that a few bands of demons noticed his essence and were slowly approaching the pit where the others were. He counted maybe fifteen or more. Fine. That would save Wei some travel time.

Channeling his **Intent** downward, Wei shattered distance once more and crashed down among his comrades. He impacted the ground with a resounding impact, and the metal surface beneath him dented.

Ellena flinched back while Roggi looked up and down. "That's the most interpretative kind of falling I've ever seen. What's that called? Making the world forget where you are?"

"More like beating it until it complies," Wei deadpanned. "I have good news and better news. Which do you all wish to hear first."

"Better news," Agnesia grunted.

"A good deal of demons are coming over to greet us."

The former queen's eyes widened. "How is that better news?"

"Because it's not every day that the prey delivers themselves to the hunters."

"And the good news?" Rafael asked, sounding dubious.

"I know where we go to get our Specializations." Wei gestured toward the upper right beyond their pit. "In a short walk and with a few levels, we will be claiming a new power once more. So..." The first of the demons entered the edge of his **Omniscience**. They were a ragged figure clad in dented armor and bearing a broken sword. Yet, from the jagged edge sprouted fiery and animated tendrils that lashed at the world around them.

Collector of Scars Lv. 3

A second thereafter, two more followed. And then another group. And then another.

The **Intent** leaked out of Wei. "...I'm going to greet them first. You follow my father afterward. Keep your Chats open. Finish the ones I break. We keep our momentum. We claim all we can from this place, and then..."

And then he wanted to stay. He wanted to greet the Knight of Lust again and settle their first bout. There was unfinished business there. He wanted to gauge his growth in power. And he wanted to feel a victory—if only against someone a shadow before his father.

"...and then we move on," Wei finished, unsure if he was lying.