

System-hosts are rare, but not an oddity in the Fathoms. Plenty of Trespassers cross over with one already attached to them. That's the reason why most of us spent so long looking for [CENSORSHIP GEAS], because we know there's an intact Antediluvian Vault there — one that might even contain a System-Forge created by the Firstborn during their Wars of Creation.

But beyond all your common hosts, there are ten that stand above all the others. Ten entities capable of reigning over realities and worlds. Ten Sovereign Systems that unfathomable power, that fuel uncountable legions, that define the very fabric of existence, that shape the balance of power in the Fathoms.

If you've been here for a while, you probably already know their names, probably already have accepted a Class from one of them because of self-preservation, loyalty, or enslavement.

And of these Ten Sovereigns, one stands out in particular for their leniency and neutrality.

Let's start this entry off with Mepheleon the Harbinger, and talk about how a "clerk" who used to process "janitorial expenses" for MI5 back in the Second World War took over every single circle of hell....

-The Trespassers' Compendium

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Want and Need

The spiraling ciphers that pulled the disc-shaped elevator upward winked out all at once, their purpose served. But even though the platform had arrived, those it carried remained at an impasse.

And worst of all, no one offered Wei an immediate answer, so consumed by glaring at each other they couldn't even show him basic courtesy. The young master scoffed. Spending a moment to take in his new surroundings, Wei's suspicions immediately began to climb as the environment resembled what could best be described as a massive treasure hoard.

Rolling hills made from gold coins, gleaming baubles, sparkling diamonds, and overflowing chests surrounded the platform from all sides. These concentrations of treasure formed mounds, and at their summit were weapons laden with spiritual essence and armor layered in glowing symbols — bearing **Aspect Property Enchantments** according to the System.

Gazing upward, Wei found outcroppings of rock funneling down into another tunnel leading higher. Its circumference was far smaller than the cavern itself, perhaps only encapsulating a tenth of the space below. Seeing as they were "climbing" a Tower, it wasn't hard to guess Mepheleon's possible plans.

As things stood, someone touching any piece from these dubiously placed treasures might trigger something in the room. Perhaps a weighted array or mechanism would cause the entire chamber to ascend and force the Sinners to sprint toward the middle of the cavern so they wouldn't be crushed. A typical test of greed, in other words.

It was one possibility. But so far, Mepheleon didn't seem like the time to settle with the easily expected.

Mind Advanced — 7

[2/5] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

The sudden flare of monochrome from Wei made a few of Angelous' soldiers stiffen. The old warrior himself was still trying to out-glare the white-haired girl. Seeing how more than a few seconds had passed, and still no one bothered to explain a *politely* asked question, Wei's displeasure rose with his suspicion.

"I won't let you touch her," the girl—*Agnesia*? Just hearing it said boggled Wei's mind. What was her mother thinking when giving her a name like that? How did the sounds even go together? And how many characters made up her name? It sounded like one large clump of noises when spoken.

"We so rarely get to decide the way of the world, girl," Angelous said, his voice low. The wings spreading from his back had a spectral quality to them, and seemed more fibrous than feathered. A faint essence was building from the man, but the girl's presence felt greater, *hotter*.

Turning to study the suffering woman held down by her daughter, Wei found himself locking eyes with her. However weak she was a second ago, her withering was worse now. Her paleness was such that he could compare her to a sheet, as all hints of tone faded from her skin. He saw a subtle darkness drifting through the veins spreading beneath her skin, and her breath came in soft gasps. She mouthed something at him, and pleaded with her eyes.

Her eyes, which oscillated between red and green. Red, like blood. Green, like... like...

A flash of a severed head came back to Wei. He remembered *her* eyes. He had her eyes. His eyes were green too, but she was gone. Everything was gone.

The woman reached out to Wei, and drew his attention back. He bit his lip and steeled himself as tension built. Giving the others a final look of frustration, he scoffed and stepped past Angelous. "Enough of this," he muttered under his breath. No explanations, no *courtesy*, no sense to even glance at their surroundings.

The only ones who did were a few stray bandits, and those fools were still petrified. Held in place as they flicked their heads between the incredible bounty laid out around them, and the sickly woman whimpering on the ground. Or perhaps this was Angelous doing. There was a

feeling of warmth trying to wriggle its way into Wei's mind, after all. Hard to tell if that was Mephelone or the old man's aura.

"Cultivator," Angelous warned, redirecting his cold stare at Wei. "Do not—"

The young master ignored him. He could spend the rest of his life glaring at the girl, but Wei had no urge to treat him as any kind of equal. Once more, they were trapped on the cusp of indecision. It was becoming a habit with these commoners — something Wei wouldn't abide.

Ignoring how one of the swordsmen was watching him, how two pikemen were facing him, Wei spoke to Agnesia, recalling the burning silver scales he saw earlier. "What is wrong with her? What is a vamp—"

"Congratulations!" Mepheleon's booming voice flooded the cavern, interrupting Wei.

"You dog-hearted bastard!" Wei snarled, directing his gaze upward on reflex as if he was cursing the heavens. In a way, he supposed it wasn't so different. Whatever the case, he could feel in his bones that this was planned. That whore-born mule must've noticed Wei's ire when no one answered his question and waited specifically until now to interrupt him. Unfortunately for them, Wei wouldn't be dissuaded so easily.

"You!" he pointed to the nearest bandit he could find: a skinny, rat-faced man wearing a leather helmet too small for their head and absolutely nothing for a shirt. And then there were his nipples... they were the ugliest nipples Wei had ever seen.

"Me?" The man said dumbly, Mepheleon still talking in the background.

The latent stupidity hidden in his voice made Wei disqualify him immediately. He needed someone more— "Oathbearer Rog-Gee" Wei called, making sure to use the other man's full title — like one is supposed to *customarily* do.

"Aye!" Roggi said, shouting over Mepheleon. Wei ignored the Harbinger. He was going to ignore the bastard until he got his answers from the girl and forget everything he accidentally heard from them out of spite as well. Whatever he needed to know, he would hear from someone else.

"Listen to the Harbinger's words. Summarize them to me when I ask later."

The Oathbearer slammed his hammer against his chestplate and chuckled. Wei assumed that signified an agreement. The other Oathbearers mocked him for turning into an errand boy as he griped playfully against them. Between the armored titans, the Faebloods continued to watch Wei with apprehension.

Returning his attention to Agnesia and her mother, he asked his question again. “What is wrong with her?” And in the background, Mepheleon was growing louder. *Bastard! Bastard!* “—and what is a vampire?”

It took a moment for the girl to understand his words, but when she did, her eyes widened as she swallowed, as if uncertain whether to trust him. A few strides away, Angelous was watching as well, his wings still glowing, his gaze bound to the suffering woman as if his eyelids were connected to her body by chains.

“She has been *cursed*,” Agnesia finally said. The golden fire in her eyes dimmed slightly as she bit her lip. “A Scion of the Ancestor *embraced* her, infused her blood with the **Sanguine Taint**. Now two Systems war over her being, and she suffers because of it.”

Wei nodded slowly, understanding only a portion of what was said. The basic gist was clear, though. The woman was cursed, and there were effectively two malevolent entities fighting inside her. A dark fate. Master Mou Ze was a wandering exorcist in his youth. More than once, his drunken tales left a younger Wei with nightmares — something neither of his parents appreciated.

If what the girl said was true, then she and her mother were the victims of an unkind fate at the hands of a higher power.

Flashes of a burning world lingered in the back of Wei’s mind as he processed the information. Through it all, Mepheleon never stopped rambling.

As things stood, the soldiers did not trust Agnesia or her mother. Indeed, they regarded the woman as something worse than a leper; infectious, dangerous, a beast sheathed in human skin.

By the coldest calculus, the simplest thing to do would be to kill her and resolve the potential of her danger. Yet, Wei found himself twice as reluctant about the idea.

The loss of his mother and the devastation of his world remained an ever-constant ache inside him. And something about the girl — something about the green in her mother’s eyes pried at his empathy.

Despite how much he tried to resist, he was wounded, and they were slipping between the cleft of the injury lining his heart. Agnesia was pleading with her stare now, her skin still faintly silver and bright, but a fear shining through the fierceness shown just prior. Wei let out a small sigh. What worth was power if it could not be exercised for virtue — or whatever the cultivator perceived to be virtue?

More than his want, however, was the matter Agnesia herself. The white-haired summoned fire earlier, scoured scores of demons with scorching tides of bright.

If judged by sensed essence alone, hers was greater than Angelus', and siding with her right now might also provide him with another indebted soul. Through Roggi, he could call upon the aid of the Oathbearers. If he ensured the protection of the girl's mother, then her flames would be his to direct.

There was also the fact that, for reasons both petty and martial, Wei didn't much like Angelous. He didn't like the way the man acted, he didn't like the way the man spoke to him like some idiot child or needed to be prompted into action when they fought the Ashpanther's earlier. Their meeting had been brief but cordial, but there was something severely lacking about this man.

The way he led his men made Wei think he was a commander of some kind. His slowness in considering tactics and the way his eyes were still locked on the shaking woman on the ground reminded Wei of cultists and zealots.

No good ever came with cultists or zealots.

The choice Wei made, in the end, was a simple one. "I will watch over her," Wei said, speaking loudly. He faced Angelus, his men, and all the surviving bandits. Most of the brigands looked away, but the soldiers were open with their disbelief, and a dark cloud of anger was washing over the old man's face.

"I take this woman under my charge and protection." Wei pointed his spear at Agnesia's mother, and the girl pushed the weapon slightly aside. He ignored her. And he allowed it. At any other time, he would have responded poorly to someone touching his weapon without his approval, but filial piety was a noble trait for one to have.

It was also a trait Wei would never experience as a son again. A misfortune he did not wish to share.

"I will make sure that she is not a danger to you or your men," Wei said, speaking directly to Angelus now. "And I will make sure that you are not a danger to her. Whatever she does, it falls on my honor. She is now my responsibility, as are the people who will act against her. This matter is settled."

A suppressed sneer struggled beneath Angelous' face. "You are an arrogant fool, boy."

Wei took a step closer to the man. Pikes were leveled at his head. Swordsmen stepped near. Archers had their bows drawn taut. At least his men were trained. Trained. But Pathless mortals in the end. He saw how they fought the demons. The less he said about that, the better. "Focus on the trials, old man. The woman will not be the death of you. Be concerned with other things."

"Aye," Roggi's voice rumbled. The bandits stumbled away from the four Oathbearers. Steam hissed free from their armor and their hammers and shields shone with glowing runes. "Can't tell if the boy made a fool decision or a noble one, but a debt is a debt."

"And that's all it takes," Angelous said, voice filling with disgust and disbelief.

“Aye,” Roggi said, the question entirely easy to answer. “He gave his vow. He’ll watch her.”

The old man scoffed. With a sudden flap, Angeluos’ glowing wings vanished as a gust of ethereal wind washed over everyone present. “I will ask the Adjudicators to offer your souls’ clemency when you pay for this folly. She is no victim. She is a monster. And the only mercy that should await her is the flame.”

“There is no should,” Wei said. “There is only ‘can’ and ‘will.’ The heavens are blind. Call to your ascended. I do not think they will hear you. You were trapped in hell, after all. Why would they leave a loyal servant in such a place? They must not know. Or.” Wei shrugged. “They might not care.” The old man’s cold anger turned almost murderous. Wei didn’t meet his energy. “Save your anger. The trial continues.”

Mepheleon suddenly stopped speaking mid-sentence. ***“Oh, Young Master Wei. You’re finally done resolving in-group diplomatic matters, I see. Very nice. Don’t worry, I save the dwarf from giving you a recounting of the movie ‘Predator.’”***

“Dwarf?” Wei said, confused.

“That’s not a word for the outsiders,” Roggi grumbled.

Wei looked the giant up and down. If he was a dwarf, then what were humans?

“I decided to give everyone a little bit more time to catch their breath, thanks to you. I really wanted to see you stretch those diplomatic muscles. Still kind of blunt, but I suppose I like it. I always wondered what would happen when a Templar met a cultivator. I suppose one with an absolute faith in heaven was always bound to clash with one who absolutely believed they need to surpass the heavens.”

Whatever the case, the Harbinger cleared their throat. ***“Anyway. Congratulations, Sinners. You survived the first trial. How did you like it?”***

Silence followed.

The bandits were looking at the ground, salivating at the gold, but too scared to move or catch the Harbinger’s attention.

“Are we going to fight a single kind of demon in every trial?” Wei asked, plainly curious.

“Oh, no. The first trial is the simplest. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure the horrors you face will be nice and varied.”

“You’re going to get us killed,” Angelous hissed under his breath.

Wei snorted. “Fight better, then.”

“Anyone else have any questions? Or is the single response going to be from the universe’s most patricidal young master?”

From over one of the hills of tumbling gold, Wei heard another voice cry out, this one hysterical and sharp. “Mepheleon! You rat-fuck! Your demons ate my sister! Ate her in front of me, they did! I’m going I’m going to climb this tower, and I’m going to bury my fate-damned axe in your head.”

Mepheleon hummed at the threat, sounding contemplative. ***“The passion is admirable. I like it. I like it a lot. Well, I’m hearing a lot of different responses, but it seems a lot of you chaps are in a dour, dour mood. I might have just the cure. Look around and feast your eyes: welcome to the Trial of Need. And I do mean need.”***

Mepheleon’s chuckles echoed through the chamber. ***“I can see some of you looking at that gold like it’s water, and you haven’t drunk in days.”***

Suddenly, some bandits shifted awkwardly, looking away from the treasure. They found interest in their own feet or fingernails, coughing loudly and violently as if that would dissuade the harbinger from looking upon them.

“I don’t blame you,” Mepheleon continued. ***“For you see, a lack of capital is its own kind of drought. Insufficient material resources can sometimes hurt more than not having the power to command your own fate. Well, you never know what you’ve lost until it’s not there anymore.”***

An ache deepened inside Wei, and for a moment, red crept along the corner of his eyes. He forced himself back to calmness, but he couldn’t help but notice Agnesia staring at him from the corner of his vision. He couldn’t tell if the Harbinger spoke those words to taunt him, or if it was simply another trick of circumstance.

“You’re all going to have a minute. A minute for you to complete this Trial of Need. The rules are very simple: whatever you touch, whatever you can carry, whatever you get your hands on, that’s yours. No curse, no catch. When the time is up, and you are touching it in some way, it’ll be yours to keep for good.”

“And to convince you that this isn’t a trick, by the end of the coming minute, those here who think they’re going to be smart and outwit my trial by choosing the way of poverty... well, you can. But odds are, you’re going to die a very, very horrible death when my Greed Demons arrive. And Greed is all about what you have, see, and so the have-nots don’t apply.”

Mepheleon's voice grew more menacing. ***“So fill those fists with gold, clench your teeth around chests of treasure. Put on armor and helmets and strap blades to your back. Flee! And grow rich! But understand you do this to preserve your own life and know that this is a Trial of Need. Need. What do you need, Sinner? What will help you reach the top of***

my Tower? Knowing how to control your greed will save you, but simply being a hoarder? That will not do at all. Anyway! Happy looting, sinners! And good luck! We'll be watching."

With that, Mepheleon's voice went silent, but two large digits materialized in the air and slowly began to change with each passing heartbeat. 59... 58...

Most Sinners got the point immediately, and the bandits broke off in every direction as if dogs set free at a feast. But though he expected them to unravel into chaos, Angelous' transparent wings flared again, and the old man spoke his commands. A spontaneous structure developed among the bandits and soldiers, and they swept out, heading for the chests.

Wei himself wasted no more time, speaking fast to Roggi and Agnesia. "I will go claim the treasure for us. I have the speed, you—"

"Don't worry, lad," Roggi said, flicking his hammer at the other Oathbearers and the Faeblooded. "We'll be fine. You just handle them."

Wei shot Agnesia and her mother a quick glance and frowned. The Oathbearers and Agnesia were both constrained for this trial. Constrained and certain to be at a disadvantage, if not for his involvement. Had Mepheleon planned this ploy to ensure that he was their savior? The way things were lining up, Wei suspected it to be the case.

Snapping free from the thought, he gave Roggi his thanks and sprinted for the nearest incline of treasure as he followed his senses. He ignored the plainly material treasures and followed his senses — heeded Mepheleon's words.

Need. He had a backpack filled with essences. What he required now was more artifacts to amplify the potency of his Aspects. Following his senses, he rushed up the hill to find a crackling staff waiting at its summit. He blinked past groups of bandits as if they were standing still, passing them while they wasted time trying to uproot chests of treasure half buried in the mound. The air was pregnant with static, and this close, Wei could see an illusory string tagging the instrument with a certain value.

Staff of Falling Thunder - 5,500 Sins

How nice of Mepheleon to provide a monetary value to his objects. Would have been nicer if he mentioned that beforehand.

As Wei reached out to claim the staff, however, his senses jolted as he felt something *squeeze* across existence.

Awareness Advanced > 12

[3/5] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

A looming figure made from muscle and shadow materialized before Wei without any pretext for their arrival. They were two heads taller than him — just a bit shorter than the Oathbearers — and they resembled a merging of wolf and man dressed in an iron harness.

Both of them pulled at the same time, and neither managed to wrench the staff free from the other's hand.

53...

Only then did the wolfman notice Wei, and after an instant of surprise, they bared their fangs at him and growled. "Mine—"

The creature's attempt at intimidation died as Wei whipped his foot into its groin, and felt the familiar popping of two testicles.

So. Definitely a wolf-*man*, then. The young master smirked as the creature collapsed with a pitched shriek. Years of practicing "low" techniques on the Outer Sect Disciples finally proved its worth; Wei took the staff as the wolfman rolled and whimpered behind him, seeking the next closest artifact.