

“So. He’s ‘Yu’s’ boy. Does he have any idea who his father truly is? What he does?”

“God, no. The poor boy’s just chasing shadows. He spent his entire life thinking there was a certain way to his world, but that’s all gone now. I made sure he received a Trespassers’ Compendium from Crossroads. If he ever bothers to read the bloody thing, he might catch a hint.”

“Do you think he will?”

“Ha! No. Not unless he thinks it will help him get stronger. Boy’s a damned cultivator—power and dominance are a borderline religion to his like. Just a pity he understands so little of it. Ah, but he’ll learn if he survives. He has a System in him, after all. A Keter-Designation, in fact. A Concept-Breaker; A System-Killer.”

“Keter. So that’s why you’re helping him. But that makes him a threat, if he passes his third Gate—”

“He’ll get a glimpse of just how big and ugly this entire game is. Besides. He barely understands what he is now—what he is capable of. He needs... mentorship, I think.”

“Michael...”

“No, trust me! This will be grand! The boy’s got the devil in him when it comes to violence. Bit arrogant though. And I’m not all too sure about his mental state—but that’s probably more of a benefit than a deficit considering where he is. If ‘fortune’ were to continue favoring him, perhaps he might just go far enough to intercede in the coming situation of his own accord. Resolve this situation, and keep me looking as if an unaffiliated party.”

“You think you can make him go after the Returners?”

“Make him? They own his father, Sarah. I don’t need to ‘make’ Young Master Wei do anything. When he discovers the truth behind his world’s destruction, a new grudge light up inside him. And you know how cultivators are with their vows. You lived as one, right?”

“Old history. So, then, why haven’t you told him already.”

“Because the boy deserves to acclimate to the Claimed Hells first. And also, I want to see how he performs.”

“Always a mix of business and pleasure with you.”

“Sarah. Business is my pleasure.”

-Sarah Moonscar and Mepheleon

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Source: [25/25] Liters

Sympathy Breakthrough: Lv.9

>Refine 0.95 Liters of Source/Second

Mastery Demonstrated

>Meditation: 40%

Celerity and Might Advancements at Current Conceptual Threshold. Pass through your First [Gate] to evolve your aspects and ascend your current Threshold of (Awakened) to (Eidolon)

Sourcery Manifested

>Sourceshaper: The user can infuse 1 of their Aspects into another being or object.

Should the targeted entity be Awakened or higher, the user's Aspect can be added to or subtracted from the sum of the target's corresponding Aspect. Should the user's Aspect reduce the target's Aspect to nil, the target will take Conceptual Damage to their Aspect.

A final exhale ferried all the exhaustion and pain out from Wei's body. Opening his eyes, he found the right side of his vision restored. Blinking, he tested it for any diminishment and found him pleased, like it had never been lost in the first place. Flashes of his mistake passed through him: the Ashpanther ambushing him using the other's shadow was a surprise, but that was no excuse.

His masters would have seen him punished for such hubris. Now that they were gone, he alone must bring judgement upon himself—he needed to find an adequate penalty to refine this failing into a lesson.

The other aches and pains had vanished from his body as well. Cuts, cracked ribs, lacerations were all restored, leaving only a strange tingling sensation. Wei let out a dissatisfied breath. If his System hadn't reforged him and bound his Body and Spirit together, he would have long fallen.

On some level, he wished these wounds would scar. Mistakes had to be mastered. He would find another way to surpass his current missteps. For now, he had other matters to address.

Namely, the enormous titan kneeling directly across from him.

"I am Oathbearer Roggi," the giant said. Their ruby-eyed helmet was placed on the ground beside them, and Wei took in Roggi's face for the first time. Tangled knots of wild, red hair wrapped along the Oathbearer's jowls and formed an even unrulier beard. His eyes glowed blood-red upon a canvas of pale skin. Calcified stripes lined Roggi's forehead, and his cheeks were round and full—almost like a well-fed toddler's.

Wei looked at the man's helmet again and stifled a laugh. The beard on that looked almost entirely like the one adorning Roggi's face. It seemed these Oathbearers were quite proud of their grooming. "I am Young Master Wei An Wei. Of the Drowned Sky Sect."

He did not mention its destruction; he did not mention the murder of his mother, the betrayal of his father, the ruin of his world. No. So long as he remained, the sect remained, and every scale would be balanced once more.

Do you hear me, Tower? Wei seethed mentally. He would cultivate this structure with essence until it finally developed a Spirit of its own. And when it awoke and learned the worth of fear, he would take back the life he gave it.

"I owe you my life, Young Master Wei," Roggi said. Without his helmet, his voice was softer and rougher. "Don't want to think about what might've happened to me if the dark would've had its taste."

"Death or incubation," Wei said, shrugging. "I have walked these lands. Of the two fates, I would assume the latter for you. You seem quite formidable."

Roggi snorted a laugh. "Yeh. And that didn't stop me from toppling over the edge."

Wei agreed. "I said formidable, not well-balanced."

This time, a laugh wheezed free from Roggi's lungs as he reached over to clap Wei on the shoulders. The young master's shade scale rang from the force of the greeting, and he gritted his teeth as a bruise began to form along his left arm. "I do not recall giving you permission to touch me."

The Oathbearer froze awkwardly and slowly retracted their arm. "Right. Yeah. Sorry, little—uh, young master. I just want you to know that what you've done for me has earned you my favor for life. Should we survive this, should you need anything, you need but call."

This, Wei understood. A blood vow sworn between warriors. Extracting his backpack, Wei produced his purification flask and frowned.

"What are you doing?" Roggi asked, confused. Another Oathbearer stomped up behind him, but Wei ignored them.

“For the vow to be done properly,” Wei said, popping the lid off his flask, “we must share drink from the same cup. And the custom was meant to be liquor. Just a pity I only have water.”

The mention of alcohol lit a gleam in Roggi’s eyes. The Oathbearer extended an open hand and hefted his hammer. “Let Roggi solve that problem for you.”

Wei paused as his mind spun. Paranoia urged him to reconsider handing his drink to a stranger; curiosity demanded he see what might happen. Slowly, he placed his purification flask in Roggi’s hand, and the Oathbearer promptly struck it. A burst of stinging steam washed over Wei, and he felt a shift of burning essence pulse with it.

With that done, Roggi returned what was offered, and Wei found himself startled by the smell. *Alcohol*. And a strong drink at that. “How did you do that?” Wei asked, fascinated by the feat.

Roggi grinned and held up his hammer. A symbol of an anvil beneath a tree ignited atop the head of the weapon. “This hammer’s been marked by the Creator’s Rune, lad. If it’s broken something, it can recreate it.”

“What an awesome power,” Wei said, genuinely impressed. Before, he was too deep in his battle trance to truly appreciate the alchemical properties of these Oathbearers. “May I see?”

“Of course,” Roggi said, grin growing even broader. As he handed Wei the hammer, the young master prepared himself to bear its weight. But even so, as soon as Roggi released his grip, the hammer slammed straight down against the platform, and Wei choked back a gasp as he nearly fell over with it.

This Artifact possesses an Aspect Enhancement: Entities who have not had their Spirits tagged as “worthy” by a corresponding System will not be able to contend with the Might restrictions of the hammer. Your current Might aspect is insufficient to alter this enchantment. You will need to reconfigure the essence governing the structure of his hammer through ciphers or reach [Gate] 1 - Might Lv. 15 to destroy the enchantment with Sourceshaper, or [Gate] - 2 [Might] Lv. 29 to dominate it.

Sourceshaper. It allows me to... grant parts of my cultivation to another?

Think of it more like a link. What is yours can be added to the base of another’s Aspects, or placed atop it to weigh their potential down.

Wei was too awed by the new technique he possessed for true anger, but still shot Roggi a glare. It only deepened when he found the Oathbearer taking a long swig from the flask. Placing the drink next to Wei when he finished, Roggi wiped the wetness from his beard and casually plucked the hammer off the ground. “Ah. But you have to be Classed for it.”

Annoyed, Wei lifted the drink and took a far more conservative sip. In truth, there was far more

ceremony involved in making one a sworn brother, but this was merely an oath of allegiance, and this was scarcely the time for ritual. “You could have told me about that beforehand.”

“Ah. But some things are better learned than told.”

The annoyance remained, but Roggi’s words made Wei think of one of his old masters—Master Jie Si the Toad. Never a straight word from that man either; only winding lessons and strange proverbs.

“Good. You’re well and healed again.” Wei turned at the sound of Ser Angelous’ voice and took in the others on the platform.

The platform was packed dense with surviving Sinners. Ser Angelous’ had clearly directed the group to maintain their formations and assigned his archers to keep an eye on the path ahead. All traces of the first chamber had vanished, and now they were accelerating up an obsidian shaft. Translucent ciphers descended from far above like willow leaves and tethered themselves to their counterparts spiraling around the disc-shaped platform. Wei could feel the essence of strength flowing out from them as they drew the group upward.

Much higher, he could see a scintillating opening looming over him, and felt as if a frog climbing up a well, preparing to greet a golden dawn.

The Trial of the Abyss was over. Now for whatever ridiculous test came next.

So be it: Wei was a cultivator. His like was molded from tests, trials, and tribulations.

“Some of the men thought you were dead for sure, seeing how much... *ichor* was gushing out from your eye. But here you are. Healed and whole, *cultivator*.” Angelous spoke the last word with unease. “I can’t confess to expecting one your like to among our number, but considering all the martial feats you performed just now, I not one to complain.”

Wei studied Angelous for a moment, and the older man met his gaze without flinching. “So. You know of us *Pathseekers*.”

“Call you Ascender Cultists where I’m from. The Adjudicators don’t much like your lot. The School of the Quelled Tides raid our shores every decade or so, enslaving and butchering smallfolk on one end, while the *Sanguinites* come at us from the other.”

At the mention of the word Sanguinite, Wei saw the white-haired girl shudder reactively while holding her shaking, shrouded companion in her arm. She caught his stare, but he didn’t look away. He read fear from her gaze. Fear and apprehension.

“Do you... know of the Quelled Tide?” Angelous asked.

“Wherever the heavens loom above, there will be cultivators below seeking to surpass its boundaries. Mine, as said, was the Drowned Sky Sect. What another sect, cult, school, or empire does is their own matter, in their own realm. Do not stain me with their sins.”

Angelous gave an acquiescent nod. “Right, then. Expected as much, seeing as you didn’t try to butcher us on sight. And how you risk yourself to save the big one here.”

It was a thoughtless action—but a most beneficial one. “Preserving his life was within my power. Letting him die would be a cold choice, and reflect poorly upon my virtue.”

A horn-like laugh sounded from another Oathbearer as they hammered a fist down against Roggi’s shoulder. Runes flashed across his pauldron and Wei shifted back as a shimmer of force flared. “You hear that, Roggi? He saved yeh because he would’ve been embarrassed by yeh!”

The helmeted Oathbearer mocking Roggi had sapphires instead of rubies slotted over their sockets, and their metallic beard was tied in looping rings. Roggin scoffed his companion as two more stomped forth and joined in on the laughter.

Behind them, the Faeblood’s peeked at Wei. For the first time, he had a good chance to look at them. There were taller than he by far. Perhaps sixty centimeters—they were well over two meters, anyhow, though paltry beings next to their stout protectors.

The living wood that shrouded their bodies was flowed with essence, and branches slipped up and down their arms. All three looked almost entirely alike to one another, with their sharp faces, large eyes of glowing white, and golden locks of hair that spilled down their bodies like waterfalls. All three also shared an apprehensive look at him, bordering on fear.

Faintly, he could still hear the song they sang chiming in the depths of his mind. He wasn’t sure if the noise was memory, or something more.

“Salutations,” Wei said, breaking the awkwardness. He laid palm over fist and offered the strange beings a salute. “I am Young Master Wei An Wei. Your song resounds in my head still; your act of protection will be a feat to remember for some time.”

The first among the triplets looked to the others, and branches coiled free from their person, burrowing into the wooden dresses protecting the other two. It remembered Wei of children holding hands. Even so close, he wasn’t sure if they were male or female, and the pitch of their voices left him even more lost.

Finally, the Faeblood at the front spoke, the Oathbearers watching them carefully. “Why is your soul *hatching*? Why is your soulblood the poison of the Beyond? Why is there order to the hymn of your being?”

Their questions filled Wei with a sudden coldness, but Roggi just shook his head and sighed. “Hey. Knock it off. Kin don’t like it when you gaze too deep.”

“But Roggi,” the Faeblood on the left stepped forth, gripping the hand of the first. “There is *wrongness* in him. Black and white are becoming each other inside him, his colors are lost. Lost. *Source-blooded. Source-blooded.*”

“Agh, by the Pale Anvil. Listen, lads, no one has the *Corruption* flowing through them. No one ‘cept the *Unmade*.” Roggi turned back to Wei and offered him a wide grin. “You an Unmade, Wei?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Wei answered.

Am I an Unmade?

No. You remain a being of Conceptual Linearity at your current level.

What does that even mean?

You presently exist at a single point in time, occupy one point in space at all times, and are incapable of reducing this Fathom of existence to pure Source. To become equivalent to an Unmade, you will need to pass the threshold of your eight [Gate] and reach Lv. 85 for all equivalent Aspects.

“You were bleeding monochrome,” Ser Angelous said, suspicion entering his voice. “And it drifted out of existence more than it spilled...”

“If he was Source Corrupted, why do any of us still exist? Why does this world still exist?” Roggi clearly thought the question was ridiculous. “Things don’t remain stable around the Unmade. And Systems don’t take kindly to their intrusions either.”

A dozen questions sprang up inside Wei. *What was an Unmade? What worlds were they all from? Why were they here?*

All these inquires and more went unanswered as a piercing shriek sent Wei to his feet. Thoughts were emptied from his mind like a cup as he shot to his feet. Making a fist, he pulled his spear to him—barely avoided hitting an archer as it sailed into his grasp.

In seconds, he found the source of the noise.

Not six meters from him, the shrouded figure thrashed and howled beneath the weight of the white-haired girl. The young woman’s features took on a desperate quality as she whispered pleas and prayers to her struggling companion. The loose formation of bandits standing behind them back away, some of them scraping against the sliding walls.

A quick series of calls by Ser Angelous saw his greatswords surrounding the girl and her companion, while the archers began to nock their arrows.

“Stay back,” the girl said. Her eyes flashed, and the temperature spiked. For a second, Wei glimpsed a flicker of silvery scales overlap with their girl’s skin. Her essence was building as well, and Angelous’ soldiers held their positions, waiting for orders despite the sudden chaos.

Beneath the girl, the hooded figure snarled and screeched. Then, Wei noticed the sharpened nails slicing through their gloves. It was like they had daggers instead of fingers for their hands.

The Oathbearers surrounded their Trine, and Roggi’s helmet was back on before Wei noticed. The young master himself trailed Angelous as they took in the sight of the girl holding down her struggling partner.

“It’s okay, mother,” the girl said. “Be strong. Be strong. This will pass. You are stronger than this. It will pass. We are almost there. We are almost there.”

There was a begging quality to her words, and Wei found his focus utterly captured by the unfolding scene.

As Angelous stepped forward, the girl’s attention shifted from her companion to him, and the fire in her eyes returned. “*Back.*”

A stinging sizzle filled the air. Bandits cried out, wincing. Soldier’s flinched. Wei felt a sudden bout of dryness assail his eyes, but no more besides that.

Holding his hands up, Angelous stopped a few steps away from the girl. Her arms were pressing down hard, and noises coming from the one beneath her were inhuman. The sound of snapping bone and tearing sinew became constant, and Wei sensed *something* wrong with the woman’s essence.

Her Unawakened Spirit has been contaminated by an invasive System. Uncertain designation.

Another test by Mepheleon? Or something they missed.

Feverish chanting sounded from below the girl, and Wei watched as Angelous groaned. Something tugged at him internally, but was too weak to affect him.

[Leech Blood] has been resisted by Fortitude.

The soldiers next to him were not so robust. Trickle of red were pulled out from their orifices and pores. They stumbled, unready for the sudden lethargy, but a pale glow spilled forth from Angelous and two spectral wings unfurled from behind him.

Bathed in his light, the shrouded figure wailed—this time in pain.

The girl's eyes went wide as it happened, throwing herself over her companion. "Stop!" Flames flowed free from her body, forming a blazing corona around her. What Wei saw earlier was no illusion—her skin glittered with veins of brilliant silver, and her eyes were like raging stars.

For a moment, Angelous and the girl's essences clashed, and the space between them shivered.

The blades of Angelous soldiers were aglow as well—purest white like the wings behind their commander.

The older warrior's features took on a scornful quality as he examined the girl. "What *Fel* creature have brought with you. Reveal them."

"She is no creature," the girl spat, face contorting with fear and rage. "She is my mother, and she is sick, and I will see her healed. Now put away your wings, *Paladin*."

"Let die your flames, *dragon*," Angelous replied.

For a second, neither bent, neither folded, but then a weak gasp sounded, and the figure on the ground pulled at their hood. "*Ag-Agnesia*."

The girl looked away from Angelous and saw what was happening. "Mother, no—"

But with a rough swipe of her claws, the once masked figure slip their cloak open, and Wei found himself staring at someone who resembled an older version of the girl, if shriveled and waxen. Her face was strong and regal, and locks of gold still clung to her face, slick with sweat. Yet, her incisors were longer than any Wei remembered seeing on a human, and her irises were like pools of blood.

And then there was that *bite* along her neck. Eight marks in total.

Was the woman poisoned? And why couldn't Wei sense any of the girl's fire in her? Was the mother unawakened?

Once more, he found himself the only one confused as curses of horror and terrified expressions consumed the surrounding men.

Through it all, Angelous' wings only glowed brighter, masking his face in a shroud of contempt. "*Vampire.*"

Gestures came forth from every bandit and soldier around. A hiss of steam followed as Wei heard Roggi arrive next to him. The Oathbearer's helmet was on, and his hammer was gripped tight in his fist.

A sudden tension had thickened over the group as light spilled over them from above as well, their platform above to arrive at the next challenge.

Wei let out a soft breath. "Can someone here tell me what a vampire is?"