

There are some fights you gotta finish. There are some people you have to kill.

Because if you don't, if you fuck up and let them live, well, tomorrow just might not be your day, and the nuisance that spilled from your hands might just become an avalanche that swallows any possibility of a future your sorry ass might have...

-John Bishop, Trespasser

49

Miscalculation (II)

A moment of silence passed between Wei and the fallen Knight. As they shifted her body, bits of rubble crumbled from her armor. Her floral-edged, corpse-formed wings were little more than mangled stumps, but still they twitched, jagged splinters of broken bone jutting out at all angles. Slowly, the Knight reached out with a clawed hand and took the Potion of Regeneration.

Wei's **Relativity** allowed him a preview of her every action, and his **Omniscience** ensured he was aware of her every movement. The filigree decorating her armor was absolutely ruined, the coldness that seeped from the metal altogether absent in the aftermath of Wei's onslaught. Her multicolored scales were utterly blackened from the sheer amount of lightning he channeled into her. Of her two eyes, only the right remained: an orb of blazing red; her left, once a gem of watery purple, was missing altogether.

Wei's **Aspect of Omniscience** peered inside to her body as well. He realized she had bitten off one of her two tongues as she was blasted across the landscape. Blood welled between the Knight's teeth as she slowly opened her elongated maw. But she didn't drink immediately. Instead, she gave a wet chuckle as she shook her head. "You are a fool, boy," she said. "That System has gotten you far, and its teat has fattened you on unearned glory. You are unworthy of your Specialization, audacious though you might be. You are no warrior. You are just a child. I can see it in your eyes."

"Perhaps you will see better after drinking the potion," Wei said flatly. "Missing an eye tends to affect perception."

She spat, but still poured his offered potion down her throat.

At once, the pit of gore that was her left eye began to fill, and her wings snapped back in place as they mended as well. The Knight's broken body was coming back together. Shrugging the last bits of rubble off her body, she rose from the debris and her silver rapier directly at Wei. "But so be it. Even if you are a fool, you are a commendable one. I will remember this deed. By the Harbinger's mercy, I will even name my next slave after you." A budding mass of sinews extended from her missing tongue. "A shame too. I would keep you if I could. The Circle of Lust always needs new *pets*."

A forewarning of the Knight's coming attack materialized before Wei's eyes. An echo of the Knight acted before her actual self did. Essence flared from her blade as the blossom that was its hilt shed a few petals. Across the dilation of time, the young master beheld her next actions a half-second before they arrived. She would step forward, 7 petals would flick around Wei as the blade in her hand went for his throat. As her main sword sank into the young master's adam apple, each petal would transform into a replica of her weapon, and strings of telekinetic essence would reach out from her, allowing the Knight to skewer Wei from several directions at once.

A half-second later, Knight of Lust performed that exact sequence of actions. She shot forth, her **Speed** still superior to his. But Wei's parry began before her stab even began. Silver metal greeted a shaft composed of lightning. Electricity danced down the Knight's blade and charred the hilt of roses. Only 3 petals made it out of the supposed seven, with one drifting above Wei, and two materializing at his sides.

The Knight drew back as three blades materialized around Wei, but then he triggered his **Heart of Calamity** and his parry rose into a cutting riposte. A blade of wind swept out around him and shattered each of her essence-formed blades. The Knight's telekinetic tendrils gripped around nothing before they dissolved.

A raging gale battered down by the two duelists. Lightning flashed above, and the earth tremored below. Rain fell, but where the Knight was drenched, Wei remained dry as bone. A lull followed the initial surge of violence. The Knight just watched Wei, both her eyes fully regenerated. The young master pointed his Broken Crescent at her, the reach of his strike succeeding far beyond the tip of his spear.

"Tricks will not be enough," the young master said. "Show me skill. That is all that will save you."

Trickles of golden essence flowed from the points where her blades were destroyed and the Knight herself. Wei felt his arrogance refill with his feat of dominance. The Knight's glare only intensified as she grasped her blade in both hands and shifted her stance. Her restored wings flared wide, and he felt essences of force and flora wash out from them as they flapped.

She ran her tongues along her serried fangs. "Fine, then. If such is your desire, then I will see you satisfied."

Without hesitating, Wei placed his **Minor Icon of Dominance** on the knight, but did nothing more to augment himself. This was a unique opportunity for Wei. With the **Source Catalyst**, he could break the Knight's Aspects in but a heartbeat, but his many trials had also revealed another thing to him: His System would not grow without proper adversity, and furthermore, neither would his skills.

He intended to use this Knight for every bit she was worth, and extract every experience, every struggle, every skill she was capable of providing before her ultimate breaking.

A fresh-smelling aroma washed out from her wings, and Wei felt fragrances he could only describe as divine. Pinkish essence flooded the air, and his **Aspect of Enlightenment** detected something trying to influence him. The scaled face of the knight widened into what seemed like a predatory smile.

Resisting [Pheromone of Submission] with Aspect of Fortitude...

No. Wei wanted a fight, but he was not going to oblige the Knight's every annoying trick. The young master extended his intent into the surrounding vapors and felt a concept calcify.

Concept-Integrity of [Pheromone of Submission]: [6/6]

Wei pressed his spear tip against the Source-captured concept and pushed. The skill shattered utterly, causing the pheromone's effects to vanish along with its scent, and also the Knight's smile. A second thereafter, she tried again—only for Wei to break it with a casual backhand this time. "I told you. Skill. Not tricks."

With the breaking of the Knight's skill, Wei realized that the integrity he targeted for skills or constructs was likely related to how much essence composed them. That was why he had a chance of affecting one of the Dancer's Lances, with them being 60 essence constructs in totality. Comparatively, the skill projected by the Knight was a constant trickle, making it far easier to break, but also more annoying to resolve. He would need to target the Skill Shard itself to stem the flow.

Enlightenment Advanced > 15

[6/10] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

As the Knight reared her wings back a third time, the last of Wei's patience gave.

This time he struck, and his **Relativity** awarded him once more. As he moved, he saw her dilation-echo react. Her blade whipped down at an angle, trying to swat his spear aside. At the same time, her wings flared as the beginnings of a garden exploded out from beneath her feet. The scene played out exactly as portrayed an instant thereafter, but the assistance of foresight was still beyond value for the young master.

He had a full moment to examine the knight's technique and the expansion of her essence-formed garden. His counter came nigh instantly as well. Roses erupted beneath his feet, only to be crushed by a falling tide of water. Tendrils of telekinetic force shot free from the plants as if they were conduits used by the Knight. But the young master did not break them with his system. Rather, he observed them using submissions and moved between each tendril.

More petals flaked out from the Knight's four wings, and they materialized as new blades hovering by her side. Undaunted, Wei approached her, his Broken Crescent striking her silver

rapier. A ripple of force blasted out between them. But their blows were more than material. Each slash and block resonated with the world around them, their essence shaping an aspect of reality into weapons as well.

20 meter waves slashed out from Wei, crashing down upon the Knight's approaching blades. Bolts of lightning swatted at her as she created even more copies of her rapier. The two warriors, like rival composers, directed primordial forces with the movements of their bodies and the strokes of their weapons.

The Knight was faster than Wei, but his **Relativity** evened out her reflex advantage. Wei's strikes flowed like water, each move drifting seamlessly into the next. The Knight blocked defensively and counter-attacked like a lashing viper, but his foresight denied her any openings. He saw her ripostes coming before they ever arrived, and her effort and essence became little more than waste in the end.

She cut low and high. A ledge of stone deflected the first cut. A whirlwind yanked her off the ground as Wei twirled his spear, knocking her high slash off course. Her wings flapped hard against the hammering gale, and telekinetic tendrils extended from her drowning garden. Tethers of power held her in place, and she directed herself as a marionette, her **Strength** superior still to Wei's **Authority**.

Through it all, she never stopped spawning more blades, trying to overwhelm the forces directed by his cataclysm. As Wei controlled the pace of the fight, his **Minor Icon of Dominance** only made his Aspects grow. Slowly, her **Speed** advantage vanished, and their **Strength** drew closer as well. Frustrated hisses and growing impatience slipped out from the knight. Her slipping control was expressed in her every action, desperate to overcome the boy she had so easily mutilated just a few hours ago.

On Wei's end, however, something sublime was happening. His **Aspect of Enlightenment** was building and growing. Every cut, every movement, every action committed with his sword was observed in perfect detail by his **Omniscience** and further analyzed by his mind. In just a few short seconds of dueling, he gained more epiphanies about using a sword than he had in all his years. This act was like he could greet the world with eyes of perfect clarity, all the clutter blocking his thoughts banished, allowing only focus to prevail.

Mastery Unlocked — Rapier

"Fall," the Knight screamed. A blade speared out from behind Wei. A column of rocks rose, impaled in the young master's place. "Die!" The Knight exploded forth, her wings a blur, shockwaves washing out from behind her. Her blade accelerated towards Wei's neck, and then three petals broke free, materializing as blades beside her.

One attack became four. With 30 meters between them, Wei swept his Broken Crescent. It was just one attack, but when your one attack was expressed in the form of a falling tsunami, one was all you needed.

Swallowed by a rolling tide once more, the Knight almost let out a rageful shout of pure frustration as her tendrils barely kept her from being pulled away. More essence flooded out of her. A forest of telekinetic roots erupted beneath Wei, reaching out to grasp him. Still, he only dodged, straining his **Relativity** and **Omniscience** to the max as he focused on improving his System's Aspects.

Relativity Advanced > 27

Omniscience Advanced > 24

[8/10] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

Despite his best efforts, he couldn't dodge everything. Thin slices glanced off his **Aegis of Arrogance**. He felt his Eidolon's inherent willpower sustain the damage, consuming Arrogance. Having his primary defensive skill and his **Heart of Calamity** drawn from the same resource seemed a risk to Wei. Furthermore, his **Fortitude** was among his more lacking Aspects as well. And so, the young master dismissed his **Aegis of Arrogance**. He was almost certain to be cut, but what was a little pain when the reward was a growing toughness.

He managed thirty seconds of evasion before a tendril passed through his thigh. Stifling a hiss of pain, another thread glanced off his new armor. During this process, he only struck at the Knight half-heartedly. He noticed that they were smiling again within the sphere of his **Omniscience**. The poor fool, she thought she was winning.

A few more telekinetic strikes bit into him. Worse than merely being vectors of the force applied against his body, he felt them grow as if vines, spreading through his wounds before being unmade by his Source. However, as the fight drew on and more tendrils sank into his flesh, a resistance began to build. His **Aspect of Fortification** rose, and the Knight's telekinesis began to skip off Wei's skin more than they pierced him.

Fortification Advanced > 19

[10/10] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

Now, Wei noticed the Knight of Lust's smile begin to fade. A look of concentration came over her as she channeled even more essence into her garden. He had to break that annoying pheromone attack twice before she stopped trying. If nothing else, she had quite the pool of sin to command.

The duel between them continued a few minutes more, but though felt his Aspects grow, their developments slowed as he settled into a stable routine. He managed one final advancement in **Relativity** before he decided the Knight was reaching the end of her use as a sparring partner.

Fortification Advanced > 28

[11/10] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

Diving under a lashing blade, Wei suddenly extended his **Intent** next to the Knight and shattered the distance between them. The knight reacted with surprise, their attacks striking nothing. Wei didn't hit them with the Eidolon directly thereafter. Rather, he punched her in the ribs as the full force of a typhoon channeled through his knuckles. The tendrils holding the knight snapped. One of her wings was ripped clean from her back. The impact sent them skipping across the metal surface of the Moongrave, sparks flying. They tumbled through 2 trench lines before finally coming to a rest sixty meters away from the artifact pylon they'd tried sniping Wei from earlier.

With the Knight's focus broken, the garden beneath Wei withered and died. The telekinetic tendrils faded shortly thereafter. Soaring after the Knight, the young master found himself... disappointed. The Knight's was skilled at first, but after a few minutes of dueling, that ceased to be true. She clearly fought with her blade as a supplement to her many Lust-related skills rather than it being the other way around. There was a lack of resolve in how she approached things—an unwillingness to commit.

Wei hovered above the Knight as he watched them her their silver sword upon the ground, struggling to rise. He was pondered about indulging in a Core Ascension as she collapsed again, but delayed that till later. The temptation of peeking at one of his new sourcies was great, but he would see her removed as a threat first.

"You feckless wretch," the Knight snarled as she finally rose to her feet. Then Wei felt it, the concentration of essence thundering within her very being. Pink veins spread from her heart, across her body, down her remaining wings. Her essence was on the verge of some kind of blossoming.

The young master smiled. Good. He was disappointed. Now, he was just hopeful. "Finally. Give me a true struggle. Give me something worth breaking."

"I will give you pain and suffering. I have allowed you to humiliate me enough. You are just a boy—an ape! I will show you where your place stands before your betters. I will show you what a daughter of Ignium is fully capable of."

"Ignium?" Wei said, fascinated. "You share a god with Agnesia?"

"Ignium? A god?" the Knight laughed. "Ignium is beyond a mere god. Ignium is destruction absolute. The progenitor of ruin. The father of forces, the father of dragons!"

As the Knight continued to rave, Wei found himself studying her essence more. Perhaps Agnesia could achieve the same power down the line, though he wondered what was about to happen with the Knight. Her total essence hadn't changed, but it was like all the remainder of her power had begun boiling within her at once.

Her essence built to a crescendo as rose petals layered over her form. As the knight began her metamorphosis, the petals detonated with a telekinetic explosion. A tide of plant-infused corpses swept down towards Wei, only to be countered by a wall of water directed by a stab from his Broken Crescent. Both tides crashed and broke apart, and as bodies fell alongside heavy droplets, Wei beheld a massive four-winged behemoth looming above him as even more roses began to rain down from the sky.

"Witness power. Witness the will of nature untamed. Witness me, Severean Dreameater, Daughter of the Garden Consuming."