

Some say money can't buy you happiness.

Well, they clearly haven't fought a Demon of Greed before.

If you don't have the material wealth when they call on you to bid, they will be extracting capital from your flesh instead.

*And let me tell you, I have never seen a happy exsanguination. Remember, Trespasser, your blood has market value. Your skin has market value. If you don't have resources to blunt their **Economancy**, you're going to be paying with other materials very shortly.*

-Harrington Giles, Trespasser

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Gold Rush

When Wei woke this morning and found his sect under siege, horror was his primary emotion. Then, when he found his mother's corpse and discovered his father's betrayal, his horror calcified into ineffable agony and visceral hatred. Arriving in the Claimed Hells added a cocktail of confusion, desperation, euphoria, and bloodlust to the mix, but now, as he found himself dodging the repeated attacks of a screaming, teleporting wolfman that was clutching their groin while in pursuit, Wei finally felt himself cross over to point of tired acceptance.

Of course this place had teleporting wolfmen. Of course. Why wouldn't there be.

When he first arrived, he thought he was the one going mad. Now, it was clear that this place was entirely insane, and he was being punished for actually being sane.

"You split my sack open!" The wolfman screamed. Space folded inward every time they teleported, creating two implosions between where they were and where they were going to be. "I'm going to get you, bastard! Bastard! I'm going to rip off your balls!"

42... 41...

Wei ignored them for now, more focused on his procurement of wealth. It helped that his Aspect of Awareness made it easy to predict when the wolfman was coming. A *clench* of pressure always preceded their arrival, the flow of essence interrupted at a specific point in space. But though they could transpose themselves across space, they lacked Wei's raw speed, and always found themselves too far ahead or behind to reach the young master.

As Wei bounded down a golden-covered mound, his footsteps flinging coins in all directions, some pieces striking bandits below. As men cried out, Wei pulled out the rope he had stored in his pack and tied it around the staff he just claimed. He did this while he blurred toward the next hill over, eyeing a particular puissant shield he could sense from all these meters away. While he

fastened the rope tight around his arm and infused the tether with his **Aspect of Constitution** via **Aspectshaper**, he ensured that the artifact he just claimed would stay connected to him at all times.

His speed cleaved a path of displacement through the landscape of treasures, and he aimed the jet of valuables behind him, managing a lucky strike on the wolfman as they appeared. The mutant cried out once more, and blinked away immediately. They didn't appear immediately thereafter, but Wei felt a shudder of pressure coming up the incline where the treasure was waiting.

They were either planning a theft or an ambush. This offense, Wei would not abide. He took a proactive approach to the problem instead. Leaping, he shot upwards by five meters, saw the Wolfman emerge just in time. His spear streaked across the air out through the air sank deep into the upper right pec of the mutant. They wailed. Black blood trailed as Wei yanked his spear back, retrieving his weapon before he risked losing it to the wolfman's following teleportation. As he landed atop the summit, he focused he senses to make sure the wolf was gone.

A frown adorned his face. He hadn't expected them to be so durable. The blood only coated his spear by two inches. They were made of stern stuff.

He spent no time in celebration. Rather, his entire focus was on accruing as much capital as he could. The artifact that waited on this mound was bronze-rimmed shield with ciphers around the edges and a mirror-polished core. He could see his own reflection in the center, saw the black scales that plated his body, his bloodshot green eyes, his wild, sweat-matted hair. He looked near feral himself.

How fast did the Hells remake a man.

Shield of Inner Holding - 4,850 Sins

There was no halt to Wei's motions. He scooped the shield up, cradled it under his arm as he started running. There would be no easy way to tie this with his rope. He couldn't quite secure it like the staff would, but could aid him further in battle. As he shot towards the next hill, he found himself staggered by simply how wide the entire cavern was. As far as he could see, tumbling hills rose and fell in sprawling masses of treasure and gleaming baubles. He probably couldn't even cover a tenth of this place at a dead sprint given the time he had left. But he didn't need to. He just needed a few more artifacts. Things for Agnesia and her mother. Mainly her mother.

37... 36...

He needed to plot a route outward and back. Be efficient. His mind accelerated faster than it ever had before. On the next hill, just twelve meters to his left, was a banner bearing a symbol resembling an eye with a cloud at the center of its iris. A light mist adorned the space around the artifact, and Wei thought of going for it first. No. This would be the last thing he claimed. He would go further, claim more treasures beyond and then capture this on the road back. There

was a risk of losing it. But still, if he didn't do this, then he would be wasting time jumping from junction to junction, wasting his final bit of time in a run backward without claiming anything.

What he needed was a *higher* perspective and ease of travel. And he knew just how he was going to do that.

He leapt off the slope he was running on and readied his spear. He rapidly jabbed at every bandit he saw, sacrificing the blows. Monochrome echoes pulsed as imprints upon existence, and it was as if he never made any attacks at all. The men he hit flinched, but were not wounded. He had no time to explain. He required **Velocity Charges** for his **Form of the Manticore**. Thirteen stabs became thirteen charges, and he launched himself up into the air when he was done. But rather than falling, he spent the first of his charges and aimed his trajectory with the tip of his spear. Speed exploded out from him — sending him zooming forward as if he was thrusting himself forward along with his spear. The ground beneath him rolled in waves, and soon, he gained a vantage point over the entire cavern.

Velocity Charges: [12/13]

What claimed his attention first were a massive swarm of those insect-like creatures—the life forms larger than human and resembling something between a mantis and a spider. They were scooping up fistfuls of treasure with their many limbs, picking item after item as they attached them to their exoskeleton. Wei shook off the odd sight and focused himself. The staff and the shield might be useful, but he wanted more weapons and armor. Something that could potentially aid the girl and keep the ill-woman safe. She lacked the skill to defend herself and her essence was weak. Every defensive measure placed upon her person further enhanced her possibility of survival.

The sheer intensity of Wei's concentration slowed the pace of time. His reflexes and awareness working in tandem like never before, and he took in the world using a sense beyond sense, following trickles of essence, guiding himself along currents of unseen power. The strongest pull turned him rightward, and he found his bounty immediately. Along between two promontories, made from layers of silver and copper, he saw four stands with pieces of armor attached to them, and a great sword sheathed between them. Even from afar, he could see pieces missing from each stand, but together, they made up a full set. A black leather helmet could be found on one, while another had a leather vest that radiated dimly with motes of brightness, and beside that were massive gauntlets that looked to be forged from stone, and chainmail pants that shone pale silver. The sword was an enormous weapon, and a cipher burned bright on its pommel, projecting moving traces of arcane symbols.

Wei accelerated down like a falling meteorite. When he struck, he dug a furrow into the ground, casting pieces of metal, broken glass, and gobbets to his sides like shrapnel. The pace his mind worked at left him in awe. Never before had he thought so quickly, so clearly, the efficiency he felt was unnatural. Human perfection.

Beyond, the system said, **you will be far beyond the limitations of any material being. You will stride beyond the means of any law to constrain, System, nature, or otherwise.**

Wei ignored the pleasure that statement brought to him.

As he reached the stands, however, he realized it would be difficult to carry any of them. No matter. He thrust out with his spear, leaving a hole large enough within each, avoiding the armor and punching the wood. Then, he threaded his rope through and tied knots behind the exist wounds. In seconds, he had a train of stands linked behind him, and was tying what little he could still use of the rope around the pommel of the sword. He only briefly peeked at their values, and knew them to offer a haul over 30, 000 Sins. Whatever kind of currency Sins were. As he pulled, he found his bindings secure and marveled at how hsi Aspects of **Mind, Speed,** and **Awareness** made his dexterity inhuman. That, and the infusion of his **Constitution** into the rope prevented it from snapping from strain. He barely even felt it creak.

18... 17...

Source Amplification

>[Speed +1]

Source: [33/35] Lumens

Immediately, Wei burned two Lumens to increase his advancement of **Speed**. As he prepared to go for the banner, he once again felt that familiar clench of *teleportation* two meters ahead. The wolfman was—

Then another clench followed. A meter behind. Another! Barely to his left. Wei ducked a slashing claw and spent a Velocity charge to get away. The wolves exploded into a series of blinking attacks, clawing wildly as he dashed upward and downward, a chain of artifacts jolting behind him.

Velocity Charges: [8/13]

The blast waves displaced from his body threw off more than one of the wolves attacks, but they were constantly teleporting, never staying in one place as they tried to overwhelm him. Fighting one was easy thanks to his awareness. Three was a nightmare. A howling projection of an ethereal wolf's open jaws materialized in the air behind him, and Wei barely accelerated himself between his closing fangs before two wolfmen blinked into his path.

He brought his new shield to bear and felt staggeringly strong blows ring against his metal. The ciphers along its edges flared bright, and he felt the shield's weight grow.

14...13...

He didn't have time to fight these fools. He needed to get back to Agnesia and her mother. Aiming his Velocity charge downward, he tried to break contact with a sudden change in

movement vectors, his **Constitution** straining against nausea and counter-forces, but found the wolves materializing on ground in wait for their next assault.

Or they would have if they didn't all suddenly lift their legs and start yowling. Wei's eyebrow rose as he saw smoke coming out from their hind paws. The silver coins they stood on burned white hot, and when Wei slammed down, spray coins into the body of the wolfmen, their cries turned to deafening shrieks as the pieces of metal ignited their flesh upon impact.

Three clenches followed at once, and the wolves vanished from his sight and senses.

Wei briefly blinked and then looked at up at the time.

10...

Damnation. He spent another charge and was airborne again—two more and he was swooping flow to claim the banner, bouncing across points in thin air as if he was a dragonfly dipping across a pond. Soft, relaxing mist embraced him as he closed in on his final treasure, and he upon approach, he saw Angelous climbing the last part of the incline, coming into claim what belonged to the young master.

Velocity Charges: [3/13]

Wei spent five charges of **Velocity** at once and blasted across the air. He snatched the banner so fast that Angelous likely never got a good glance at him as he flew past. Still, he heard the mans cry outrage and laughed. Then realized he wasn't slowing down as he sailed over where the Oathbearers and Agnesia awaited.

Velocity Charges: [0/13]

He used a **Velocity** charge to slow his current progress, another to angle him down, and a final to slow himself some more. It was like slamming into a wall each time, but he managed to control himself enough that he splashed down upon trails of coins, surfing them so fast sparks flew high. As he came in, the armor stands grounded the path behind him as well, the noise of their friction horrible to his ears. Still, he was here, bearing gifts of triumph.

8... 7... 6...

As Wei prepared to bring his bounty back to the girl and her mother, he expected to be regarded with esteem and pride. But as the winds stop whistling around him and his acceleration died, it was he who was stunned by the sight first as he came to a halt right next to his erstwhile companions. An enormous steam-powered mechanism of some kind was draining in all the surrounding treasures through a series of tubes. At the center of the machine was a transparent dome that held the trine, and below, along the base of the machine, each of the Oathbearers worked complex various valves, gears, and runes. The armored titans were adorned with chains of gold, jewel hanging from their arms and wrists, and rugs and velvet curtains worn like caps.

Wei had expected them to be helpless, to barely fend for themselves. Instead, they outdid him several times over, absolutely rendering a barren patch of land once coated by treasure. They had taken the opportunity to aid Agnesia and her mother too, with the girl holding her mother atop a small hill of diamonds and rubies. The older woman was seated upon a treasure chest, overflowing with all manner of additional gems. As Wei stalled next to them, his armor stands completely worn out at their base, he stared at them, and ignored Roggi's waving.

3... 2...

He quickly cast two stands of armor over to the mother—armor for her body and legs—the greatsword to the girl, and kept the rest for himself.

1...

Fireworks detonated across the sky, and as Wei held his bounty close to his person, he heard Roggi laugh. "So. How was shopping?"

"Do not speak to me, you bitch-born-son-of-a-bastard-whore." Wei stated, monotone. "Why didn't you tell me you had such a machine? What need was there for me to run?"

"Thought you could use the exercise."

A dry offense rose in Wei. Roggi was mocking him. Did the man's oath mean nothing? Did he not know what it meant to give face to someone his better? A hand placed against his arm returned his attention to Agnesia. The girl's eyes were still shimmering, but less intense than when she was about to burn the world.

"Thank you," she said, leaning the greatsword against herself. It was almost as tall as she was. And she was slightly taller than—no, her shoes were helping. Boots. Such was the problem. Wei gruffly folded his arms and nodded, regarding the girl's mother as the woman moaned. Her fangs were somehow gone now, and her veins were no longer black. The sickness seemed to have gone dormant. Again.

A screen of ichor ignited the air high above them without warning and dropped, sweeping past their forms. Crimson lattices flowed thereafter, connecting each of them to their spoils. Wei felt tethers from between him, his staff, the shield, the banner, and the helmet. Agnesia and her mother had their gold, armor, and greatsword. The Oathbearers and Faeborn, meanwhile, turned into a tangled web of crimson.

In their surroundings, Wei would see links forming around other Sinners as well. A few unfortunates only had a handful of coins.

As the final links between treasure and owner were forged, the rest of the mounds suddenly began to fall upward. Wei saw a cipher flare over them, complex sigils connected to a directional arrow pointing upwards. Every bit of treasure that was unclaimed began to fall as if gravity was inverted. Wei heard a cry, saw a bandit reach out for a trickle of gold getting away from him, but

as he reached, a flash of red marked the man with a cross, and suddenly he was falling upward alongside the treasure, subject to the same vector of gravity that was funneling the rest of the wealth away.

No one else moved after him. Everyone stood in place, trying to understand what was happening.

"And time!" Mepheleon said. They let out a soft breath. ***"Well, wasn't that a fun little mad dash before the main event? I hope you all found something you deem acceptable, or at least you liked. Some things are aesthetically pleasing, but if you went just for the decor, I afraid you might not be having a very good time in a moment."***

Waterfalls of silver, gold, copper, platinum, and bronze along with apparel, artwork, weapons, and more tumbled and crashed against the outcroppings of the cavern above. Glass broke, metal dented, and coins rang out as they skipped against jutting obsidian. But none of them stayed still. Rather, all of them were compelled to flow towards the funnel, the funnel that Wei suspected earlier. So that was what it was for, extraction, perhaps recycling for the next group.

As the wealth vanished, however, Wei found himself studying the naked ground around him. The floor beneath him seemed to be separated into panels each running 25 meters across and long, their edges marked by faint ciphers. He, Agnesia, and her mother stood on one. The Oathbearers and their Trine occupied another. Angelous and his men were spread across countless more.

Another detail he noticed was how many other groups there were besides theirs. Wei counted a dozen more groups present. A dozen more. A lot of the bandits were gone. Vanished. But there were those insect people, a pack of twelve wolfmen maybe fifty meters away, all glaring at him; and countless more silhouettes afar.

A new number formed over each person. Wei looked up at saw he was marked with **[28,550 Sins]**, while Agnesia had **[56,000]**, and her mother at **[40,225]**.

The Oathbearers numbers were well over a meter long as they patted their machine. Wei still had no idea where that came from, but found himself more wary of his new number.

"With the Trial of Need concluded, thus beings the Trial of Charity. I have given you wealth. Now, you will need to show me you know how to use this wealth. Or at least know how to take it. For what comes next is a cruel foe, a mighty foe, an insidious foe. The Circle of Greed produces many demons, but the most common among them, the most often faced... is the Almost Invisible Hand of the Market. I hope your number is above 1000 Sins, because if not...]

The Harbinger chuckled.

Wei blinked. "The Almost Invisible Hand of the—"

Then, a massive shape slammed down on the ground, and Wei felt artifact shudder. A shockwave swept across the room, and Wei felt a pressure that briefly made his vision darken. As his senses cleared, as wind swept over his face, he found himself pressed beneath what looked to be a large, looming hand, its present near translucent, near invisible, and his currency of Sins burning bright.

Some among Angelous cohort weren't so lucky. Turning, he saw what became of them, and winced at the bloody smears on the ground.

Almost Invisible Hand of the Market: Lv. 15

High threat entity detected.

Oh, good. More *nonsense*.