

Alright, this is a follow-up to the other guy who wrote that thing about Mepheleon's Blood Games. I agree on most, but I want to emphasize something: Mepheleon's demons are your primary concern. He's not using his best demons against you. Hell, he's not even using trash against you. You're fighting nothing. Bottom of the bottom.

*The Harbinger can spawn things that eat stars and crush worlds. Things that I can't even describe. The **Trial of the Abyss** is about decisiveness in the face of overwhelming odds. It's scaled to your group's capabilities, and if you can ignore the fear of the descending darkness and constant stream of demons, you'll make it. **The Trial of Need** is more about making the right friends than being fast. You're going to have a time to bond after the **Abyss**. **Trial of Charity** is about using those friends and building up enough wealth by taking it from other teams so that you can survive the hand.*

*With each trial, your group is going to be reduced. Until it might just be you, and three others. For the trials that follow, well, there are too many variables to go over; they're different for everyone, but do your best to understand who you're working with by the time the **Trial of Despair** arrives, and you get to the Moongraves. Here, you're going to be petitioning a Knight of Hell for patronage for when the trial gets impossible—but understand that the choice you make is solely your own, and that your new patron might demand you do a little something something to your "allies" if they decided to throw their lot with a rival Knight...*

But that's mostly politics and for later. The different Circles of the Claimed Hells are their own can of worms, and if you manage to survive the Trial of Charity, chances are you'll be making it to the end.

-The Trespassers' Compendium

18

The Almost Invisible Hand of the Market (II)

The first thing Wei learned about the wolfmen was that they couldn't occupy a point in space already occupied by an existing material structure. This was demonstrated when two of the wolves teleported into the recently constructed fortifications.

They cried out upon arrival, bifurcated by alloyed walls. Their bodies split from neck to pelvis as they flopped, gore spilling from their wounds. Still, they pawed at the ground with the single arm and leg they still retained, tracing semicircles of viscera.

This led to Wei's second discovery as the rest of the wolves arrived. He learned they needed a line of sight, or at least to know where they were teleporting.

They arrived a disorganized, disoriented, and immediately discombobulated mess as Wei triggered a cast from his Staff of Falling Thunder. The mystical manifested cloud blended into the vapors of the banner perfectly, and when lightning came, it struck true to its word, impacting the wolfman nearest to Wei like a falling hammer. The affected wolf was clad in spikes and

leather armor. Quite frightful to behold aesthetically; absolutely worthless against concussive effects. Force plunged down through the wolfman, and it was smeared across the ground to a chorus of snapping bones and squelching flesh.

Foreclosure - 01:27... 01:26

Three wolfmen were already downed. Nine were scattered around in inner perimeter of the Oathbearer's half-finished fortress, seeking blood, violence, and for one in particular, Wei's testicles.

A pack of three were already blinking toward the Oathbearers, claws raking sparks from rune-enhanced armor. Roggi and the others adopted a defensive posture as they swung and reshaped the land with each swing; comparatively, the wolves skirmished, blinking and attacking from different angles.

Wei's bigger concern was with the six that arrived next to him, Agnesia, and her mother. Seizing the initiative, he cast another bolt from his staff and aimed it at the center of the wolves. Arcane lightning impacted the ground like an artillery shell. Five of the wolfmen were flung from their feet outright; the remainder stumbled forward, dazed and unbalanced, unprepared for the young master's coming.

Casts: [2/4]

Picking the nearest target, Wei charged into a pack of three wolves. The first of them responded, but not nearly fast enough to handle the rainstorm of spear thrusts.

Three punctures hollowed the wolfman's skull, and a final stab parted its spine, severing its ability to fight. Wei struck like he was dipping a brush into a pot of ink, and though the palliative mists healed all in their vicinity, the restorative effect was not a resurrective one. As Wei's first victim sagged down against him, its massive form thrice his size, a second wolf behind it let out a roar of ferocity, stepping out to get an angle on Wei with its wicked, curved blade.

But the young master shifted his position as well, avoiding the awkward cut using the first wolf as a shield. As the body of the second wolf aligned with the spear protruding from the first, Wei hammered his palm into the haft of the weapon. His spear exploded from the first wolf's corpse into the throat of the second. There was no cry as they fell. Just a wet choking noise augmented by a trace of arterial spray.

Recovered from being stunned, the third wolf leaped high in the air in an attempt to pounce—and a flash of sudden fire in Wei's peripheral vision told him that Agnesia was inflicting her flames on other wolves as well. Wei responded by triggering his bracelet, pulling his spear back from where it sailed, and directed it haft-first into the third wolf's ribs. A crack sounded—quickly followed by another as Wei drove an ascending elbow into the creature's stomach. Bones shattered. Organs burst. It was vomiting blood when Wei gripped it by the back of its neck, slammed its throat-first against his knee, and folded its neck at an angle using the edge of his shield.

Strength Advanced — 10

[5/5] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

Source Core Ascension Available > Lv. 7

[7/10] Core Ascensions to [Gate] 1 System Ascension

Though a mangled ruin, the third wolf still managed a teleport, blinking away from Wei, only to liquefy its upper body by rematerializing in the ground. Before the young master could marvel at his feat, he heard something snapping through the air, felt a pulse of essence rapidly approaching him

He rolled back as a stinging pain flicked across his cheek—and delivered a sudden jolt of electricity into his head. Wei bit back a snarl as he stumbled back, shifting to face his new foe—

Only to throw himself aside as he felt another clench arriving where he stood. A towering wolf manifested where the young master was standing. Its fur was a dark, ocean blue and lightning danced across his body in crackles of static, flared out from its glowing eyes. A mesh of sprawling copper wires coated its body, and in its hand was a crackling leather whip with a tendril of metal threaded along the length.

The storm-channeling wolf gave Wei a vicious grin. "You owe my idiot brother two balls."

Wei scoffed. "Your idiot brother owes me for the free instruction I showed him."

The wolf threw back its head and gave out a howling laugh. A veritable storm erupted out from its body and the air built with building pressure. This one was more threat than the others. Wei could feel the essence bleeding off of it.

Estimates have the target on par with you.

The wolf cracked its whip down and a second of the ground split open with a flash of lightning. It licked its fangs. "Show me your worth, then, little boy—"

That was as far as it got when a massive sword cleaved it in half from approximately four full meters away. Wei blinked as the wolfman came apart in four pieces. Two hands fell free from their arms. Their upper body and the lower body were also summarily divorced. His attention shifted to Agnesia bouncing on one leg as the swing sent her off balance. A few steps away from their treasure were two piles of ashes—likely once wolfmen.

Wei stared at the gurgling storm-wolf, and then frowned at Agnesia. "I was going to fight him."

Her jaw dropped slightly. "You were going to—are you serious?"

He was. "I have very few pleasures in life left."

Foreclosure - 01:21... 01:20

"Wei!" Roggi's bellow came from atop the battlements. Looking up, he found the Oathbearers standing upon the defensive walls they were putting up, with two wolves additionally fused into the infrastructure. A final survivor from the pack was kicking weakly in Roggi's hand. Its skull was partially caved in, and its snout was gushing blood. "This one said they wanted your *fruits*. What'd you do to 'im to make him want that? You go wolf-courting earlier?"

The rest of the Oathbearers laughed, and Wei shook his head in disgust. Accusations of depravity now. Did these Oathbearers have no decency.

"I'm surrounded by madmen," Agnesia muttered.

"Yes," Wei said, nodding. "I empathize completely."

Her expression flattened into an inscrutable look when she heard her mother coughing. Turning, she ran to attend the older woman left laying upon a small hill of treasure, leaving Wei to take in the butchered wolves around them. Pathetic. He had hoped they would have given him a better fight; further honed his skill. But he supposed he couldn't complain. They still had an actual challenge to deal with, after all.

But just then, his **Aspect of Awareness** detected something, made him notice that the wounds of these creatures were slowly closing. He shot his banner a frown briefly as another noise called to him. The first two wolves he killed with his spear were shifting on the ground, their wheezing breaths building in strength. Those that were dismembered by their teleportation were unmoving, and the ones that were burned had nothing to regenerate from, but five or so of the pack regenerated at a considerable pace.

The storm-wolf coughed as it looked at Wei and smiled once more. "Girl's not going to be able to save you next time. We'll be back with you in a second." It wriggled some more, trying to reach its severed hands with the stumps.

"Are you immortal?" Wei asked, curious.

The wolf laughed. "Immortal? We're more than immortal. We're Scions of the Unmoving Moon. We have the blood of gods in our veins. You have transgressed against divinity, boy. But you got strength. Come closer. Let me show you the secret to our bodies. It'll just be a little bite."

Wei shrugged at that. Such was what it meant to cultivate. "Apologies. Think I must reject this offer. My hair takes long enough to groom. I wouldn't want any more. Agnesia!" He called out. The girl turned. "Burn them."

He recalled their weakness to silver, but he didn't want to spend the time killing them with coins and utensils when he had a perfectly good pyromancer to work with. A blossom of silvery fire expanded around the girl, and the storm-wolf suddenly went quiet.

“Wait,” it said—

But Wei was already moving, seeking greater elevation and departure from the mist to figure out what they needed to do against the hand looming over them.

As he broke free from the mist, flashes of brightness cut off pleading cries for mercy. A stench of cooking flesh followed thereafter, as well as a sudden increase in Wei’s total Sins.

Wei - [28,550 Sins] + [45,300 Sins] = [73,850 Sins]

New thin and transparent links connected to him, trailing far into the distance. He owned some of the wolves’ treasures now by right of conquest. Good to confirm that killing another granted you their goods.

As Wei landed with his spear in one hand, shield in the other, and the staff attached to him by a rope. Roggi greeted him by holding up the last surviving wolf like a doll. Large as the wolfmen were, the Oathbearers still dwarfed them by far. The surviving wolfman’s turned their intact eye on Wei and glared with all the hate they could still muster. “My... my balls...you broke...”

Oh. That one. Wei scoffed. “Can you turn this one to silver?”

“Nay,” Roggi said, sounding grave. “The hammer’s not for flesh, lad. That’s not the creator’s way.”

“Tear their head off, then?”

Instead, Roggi closed his fingers around the wolf’s head. The skull squirted free in jets of red between the giant’s closing digits.

Farewell, nameless nuisance. You will not be remembered.

Foreclosure - 01:03... 01:02

“How’d you get a bloody pack of lycans after you,” Roggi asked.

“Lycans?” Wei said.

“The ones we just killed.”

“Ah. A dispute over treasure,” Wei stated simply.

The Oathbearer grunted. “That’ll do it.”

“ONE MINUTE TO FORECLOSURE!” An unseen voice boomed. Beneath the total Sins possessed by the hand was also a second line of text.

Foreclosure Limit: 25,000 Sins

As Wei studied the Oathbearers' total Sins and did some math. Over six hundred thousand Sins between all of them total, including Agnesia and her mother. They would all likely survive the next falling of the hand, but still wasn't enough to challenge its monopoly. And even if they had enough Sins for one person to surpass the creature, that meant the others might be at risk of foreclosure as well, if the amount were to keep growing.

The solution came as Roggi pointed forward beyond the stretch of their hastily constructed fortress. Some fifty meters away, fighting desperately on hills of overturned treasure chests were fourteen men imbued with pale and radiant armor. Their blades were aglow with ethereal flame, and their movements and strikes were beyond that of a commoner, channeled into them by Angelous at the very back.

They were also losing.

Losing as they were flung back and overwhelmed by five mantis-like beings—the same kind Wei saw at the square back in the anchor-city.

“Rusted hive-kin,” one of the other Oathbearer's growled. The strange beings' antennas pulsed with wavelengths of opal-hued energy, and Wei could faintly hear whispering tickling at his mind. Thoughts that were resisted by his **Aspect of Will**. Beside him, he heard Roggi and the other Oathbearers let out a shared growl.

Psionic overflow detected.

That wasn't the only battle raging before them. Across the reach of the entire cavern, Wei saw five additional mobs fighting among themselves, warring as disparate pockets beneath the hand. Wei didn't know how many among them didn't have **25,000 Sins** or more; something to discover when the hand next fell.

Studying the hive-kin, Wei watched as they created opalescent constructs which they used to hammer against the man. One man splattered against a falling tide of mind-shaped-force while a greatsword bearing soldier cleaved a scar of light around the pulsing essence shrouding the hive-kin.

The insects were each almost four meters tall, possessing two enormous scythe-like forelimbs each the size of a full-grown man, six humanoid along their ebony-plated thorax, and twelve skittering legs.

The pulses from their minds splattered another one of Angelous' men apart, and the old soldier sagged, the wings he projected from his back flickering, running dry of essence.

“They're not going to be able to hold,” Roggi said. “And after they fall, we're next.”

“No,” Wei said, activating his **Form of the Resonant**. It was like Mepheleon wanted all this to happen... “They’re next. Distribute your Sins among the others and stay about the foreclosure pricing if need be. I will claim us enough wealth to challenge the hand’s monopoly.”

Another of the Oathbearers punched Roggi in the back of the arm, metal clanging together in a cacophonous union. “Do you hear that, Roggi? He’s giving us orders.”

“Hive-kin don’t make for easy prey, Wei.” Roggi’s voice was low and as earnest as the young master ever heard. “Best that we weather their coming together.”

Foreclosure - 00:47... 00:46

In most circumstances, he might have agreed with the Oathbearer, but though the hive-kin were powerful, he had the means to damage the structure of thought itself—and they wouldn’t be prepared for his arrival.

“Glory belongs to the one who seizes it,” Wei remarked simply. “Maintain the perimeter. I will discover how much Angelous believes his life to be worth.”

It was forty-one seconds to foreclosure when Wei reached Angelous and his surviving forces. So pressed by the Swarmkin, all twelve of them who still lived formed a desperate line, the archers firing shot after shot to no avail. The bandits were little more than a wall to endure on behalf of the others, and the greatswords and pikes did all they could to cleave through the hive-kin’s mystical protections.

Psionic, Wei’s System corrected. **The source of their power is their Aspects of Mind.**

Psionic, Wei thought internally. A stormcloud hovered above him, and he spent a one of penultimate casts at the five hive-kin, impacting their barriers and sending them reeling back. The blast wave also cast six of Angelous men backward, as with the brief reprieve, he called out to the old man.

“Ser Angelous,” Wei said, narrowing his eyes at the regrouping hive-kin. Only a tiny crack lined their shimmering barriers. That had been to cake a wolfman against the ground. Roggi was right, fighting them without something like **Form of the Resonant** would have been folly.

The old man’s manifested wings blinked out as he turned, and Wei could see the exhaustion writ upon his face. Angelous turned, expecting an attack, discovering only Wei. Still, his face darkened as he took in the young master just ten meters away from him. “Help us, you damnable heathen!”

The brightness from him waned, and strain consumed his posture, his features. He was shaking, barely able to stand. Everything from him flowed out to his men, but even then, there were not enough. He was not enough. The trial seemed to test everyone in different ways. For Wei, it was the strangeness of this place. For Angelous, perhaps, it was making the right choices and accepting the right offers.

"I might," Wei said, watching the hive-kin. "I might just save you from this regrettable fate. But I have a question for you."

One of the hive-kin shaped their mental blast into the form of a curving sickle. It sliced through the air and split an archer's head in half. Then it suddenly arched upwards, traveled ten meters towards Wei, seeking to cleave his head from his neck. He turned slightly, side-stepped the cut and slammed his shield into hit. A peal of resonance rang out from his body. His blow shattered the psionic projection, and the hive-kin recoiled, the colors projected from its mind shattering like a shell.

Noticing the impact, Angelos' eyes went wide, and he looked at Wei. "Help us, please. I will promise anything. *Anything!*"

"I don't want a promise," Wei said simply. The hive-kin all suddenly focused on him. Yes. This was what he wanted. A proper brawl. Something new to break.

"What do you want, then?" Angelos said, desperation consuming him.

"A donation. You seem quite wealthy in Sins, Ser Angelous. The fortunate should be charitable."