

*What? No, I did not steal the idea of Blood Games from this Hunger Games thing you're talking about. It was more inspired by the Most Dangerous Game? Well, okay, partly from the book. I also got bits from The Running Man and Predator. Yes, the Arnold films. Both of them. Because I didn't read The Running Man book. Why? I already watched the one with Arnold in it, why would I read the novelization?*

*Battle Royale? What's Battle Royale? Japanese students killing each other? Interesting, but why? ...How in the blazes does that help the government? What? Listen, I have been lenient with your questionable tastes in media, but I will not have my Blood Games be slandered this way. I am not "engineering gladiatorial games" for fun. These are not hapless victims I am processing through my Filter, but Sinners. Killers. The like. The innocent and noble can live in their anchor cities for all I care, or earn proper deaths fighting the expansion of my state.*

*Understand that the nine trials that compose my Blood Games that little to do with wanton slaughter and degenerate brutality. The entertainment that comes with this is a byproduct of tension, struggle, tragedy, and triumph. But above this, there is a greater purpose: What I seek to harvest from these crops of Sinners, however, are citizens worth keeping. Individuals that I can bestow Classes upon and integrate into my Claimed Hells.*

*The first **Trial is of the Abyss**. It is about dealing with rudimentary despair and terror. How well one can master themselves. The **Trial of Need** follows, offering survivors a bounty of resources and boons during a short and desperate period. The **Trial of Charity** follows thereafter, in which their boons are revealed to be partially compromised, and they will need to make decisions on how to proceed.*

*These beginning three trials are conducted as a party to ensure that even those deficient in martial might can prove themselves in other respects. What follows is individual, personalized tests in the **Trials of Retribution, Temptation, and Despair**.*

*Finally, the remaining Sinners who were once allies will be reunited to face one another. These trials will test their brief bonds, but more important how they might face and accept other Classed or citizens should they be accepted to my First Circle. Here, they face the **Trials of Cruelty, Deception, and finally, Treachery**.*

*And through these trials, all their actions will be beheld by the rest of my citizens. It will allow them to see your character and face you on your highest virtues and most depraved sins. Understand that this Diaspora is not a tyranny. No, I am not so weak and cowardly to desire absolute rule. What exists here is an enterprise where those who have proven themselves can be accepted into these Claimed Hells after they demonstrate **dominance** over their vices. To be masters of themselves first and foremost. That is why my Claimed Hells stand, expanse, and consume. That is why we will be here today, tomorrow, and endless eons from now.*

*What is discovered here isn't degradation or a fall to depravity, but a celebration of those who can mantle the wrongs inside them.*

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The Bandits

Everything existed in a maze of cages within the Filter. Wei's cell surged forth like a barge below his feet, carried by force unseen across open patches of obsidian. Around him, other such cells were in constant motion as well. The interiors were considerably more packed, filled to the brim with people of all shapes and likes.

In some, he saw what looked to be hulking gray skinned humanoids pounding against the cages, roaring their displeasure. In another, he watched a swarm of mantis-spider insect hybrids dressed in robes held together by rune pinned tassels, holding their arms out as if in supplication to the Tower passing above them. Humans remained the most numerous race among the multitudes, but even then, Wei found himself taken aback by the sheer variance in appearance, skin color, and morphology.

Above, winged bat-like creatures forged from fractured brimstone and bearing burning tridents watched them. It took Wei a moment to notice they were headless and leaking hellish smog from their decapitation. A second thereafter, his System finished its scans and provided him with additional context.

**Dullahan Gargoyle (Lv. 9)**

**Has capacity to wield, teleport themselves, and turn themselves into smoke and fire.**

And such were Mepheleon's wardens in this place, Wei surmised. These Gargoyles held wedge like formations in the sky as they simply watched. There looked to be one hundred to a grouping, and after the tenth group Wei counted, he gave up on the endeavor.

It was growing increasingly apparent that the Harbinger was a being of unmatched power. Or so Wei could only assume. His sect was among the strongest on his world, and even they would struggle to gather thousands upon thousands of Awakened for the mere purpose of watching prisoners.

Beyond the legions of Gargoyles, Wei watched as bridges of silver, gold, pearl, platinum, and stone formed themselves from the Tower, spilling down toward the shifting grid of prisons like a waterfall. As these extensions crashed into place, a prison would be rooted still, and across the way, against the structure of the Tower, a pool of essence would fill blank frames of obsidian to create active gateways.

Gateways like the one Wei's father fled through.

His grip on his spear tightened as his first vow burned cold in his mind.

A sudden jolting crash drew Wei out from his ruminations. The jarring stop came as he found his cell slotted right across from another. As the bars came down, Wei found himself faced by a hundred or so ragged, bearded men. They were pale of skin, dark of hair, stout of stature, and shared black, sunken eyes earned from deficient sleep. The armor that adorned their bodies was characterized by disunity and incoherence. Some had little more than pants, exposing bare torsos to the elements. Others wore helmets, greaves, and chest plates of visibly different designs. The weapons they bore were no more standardized, but if there was one thing they shared, it was the gaze: the studying gaze a wolf directs at a lamb before they embark upon their case.

A look they were all offering Wei right now.

He supposed he made quite the sight. A lone stranger carried by their own personal cell. His spear and armor were better than whatever they had as well. The goblin was not lying about Mepheleon's favor.

If Wei were to judge these men by the standards of his home, he would assume them to be bandits and ready himself for the inevitable culling. As he was in the Claimed Hells, though, he couldn't be sure if they were merely displaced refugees left shaken by their experiences, as many lesser beings might be.

For that was the ultimate difference between them and he: above the weapons, the armor, and their general hideousness, they were *Pathless* mortals. Unawakened of Spirit; unrefined of technique. He could read the weakness in their stances and postures, winced at their paltry condition as he watched someone of them breath using their mouths.

There was no danger here for him. Not from them. The situation was quite the opposite, in fact.

With the brimstone barriers separating the two cells vanishing into the ground, Wei offered them a momentary glance of courtesy before he strode forth. Just a hundred meters or so ahead, he saw a bridge shaped from what looked like mercury pouring down on the cell behind the assumed bandits'. The bars separating them from the next prison over were also coming down.

The path was clear: Wei knew where he was being directed.

Several among the rough-looking men shuffled with unease as he approached with indifference. They were still taking him in, but their expressions now seemed as if wolves taking in a guard hound rather than pure prey. Some wore their hesitation naked on their face; they would not be the problem.

The problem would be the man who just stepped in his way. Fools were never patient, especially when courting death.

Wei angled his head up to face the man standing before him. The rough-looking character was well over two-meters tall, blue of eyes, encased in heavy plating, and brandished a wicked looking maul. Their beard was long and filth-coated, and there was a reek of alcohol that stung that the young master's nose.

Alcohol. Wei didn't bother hiding his sneer. He hated the substance. He hated the taste, the scent, and how it debased a person. Most of all, he hated talking to drunks—something he gained after hearing his mother dressing down his fourth cousin night after night, asking him just how much of the sect's money he was losing.

For a beat, the two just stared at each other, and Wei flattened his lips in exasperation.

"Nice spear," the oversized fool snorted. "Nice armor too. Might be a big too much for a boy. What's say you take it off? We can *protect* you."

Wei squinted at the idiot. "I can smell the weakness wafting from you. You cannot even protect your own sobriety. Waste your veiled words on someone else."

The playfulness in the man cracked. He leaned down, did his best to loom. "I wasn't fucking asking. Drop the spear, drop the back, drop those scales."

Oh, joy. He was definitely a bandit, then. That made things simple.

"Enough of this," Wei added, already tired of this conversation. He had a trail to pass and a father to hunt. These Pathless were a waste of time. "Look at me. I spent my day surviving demons. You are starved. You reek of drink." Wei heard movement behind him. Two others approaching to flank him. Part of him considered just killing them, but he preferred to slick his spear on worthwhile blood rather than these mongrels. "And none of you are of any interest to me. I only seek the Tower. Stand aside. Let me pass, and there will be no quarrel between us. Waste my time with more idle words or threats, and I will spare you from ever quarreling again hereafter."

The large man's eyes widened with surprise. Then, a guffaw broke out from him. He jabbed a finger against Wei's chest and looked toward his fellows, seeking shared amusement and support. They joined in like a den of swine, disparate snorts filling the air. "This—this little shit thinks he can—"

A flicker of movement blinked across the burly bandit's face. His words and laughter died as he pulled his arm back. The stump of his arm. Everything from his elbow lay on the ground—severed clean before he could even notice.

Wei examined his spear and nodded with self-satisfaction as the bandit began screaming. His cut was fast: no blood marred the polish of his weapon. A martial feat worth celebrating. It would

have been upsetting to stain his steel with blood from a man so worthless. The man stumbled back, gripping his dismembered limb as he blubbered with mountain horror. A memory returned to Wei, then, of an excursion he had with his parents.

He was a boy of maybe five, and they were journeying through the valley of nine fruits—a personal excursion between Wei, his mother, and his father. They dressed in commoner's garb and enjoyed the quaintness of life for three days before some virtueless dog tried to impose their will. It was a moment not too unlike the present.

The bandits “asked” his mother and father to surrender all they had and more. When their request with met with belittling amusement, steel was drawn, and a mistake was made. There were twenty bandits that day. His parents only needed to kill two to shatter the resolve of the rest of the group. They were but stray children, after all. Starving hounds feasting on easy prey.

A final third died when Wei's mother handed her son a blade, and spoke to him a fundamental truth of the world: *“Mercy is bestowed from a place of power, and power must be claimed. Take this blade. Feel its weight. Take his life. Watch them break. Spare the rest.”*

A cold fear gripped him then. An uncertainty, even as his mother compelled him forward. But young though Wei was, and loudly though his victim wept and begged, he was a young master of a sect, and they were a transgressing bandit. There was an order to the realm, and there was a nature to men.

It took him three swings to kill the other boy that day. Three swings delivered to the cries and pleas of the other bandits. Three swings to make his parents proud. It took only one more blow for Wei to cement the lesson for all those who thought themselves his masters.

His left palm shot forth—the same strike his father delivered upon him earlier. The dismembered's bandit's chest piece folded inward, but deeper still did the strike travel. A wetness sounded from within the armor. The bearded man's eyes went wide, and blood began to seep from his orifices, well from every gap in his armor. He managed three steps before falling dead.

**Might advancement: 45%**

**Mastery Demonstrated**

**>Unarmed Combat: 94%**

Wei remained unstained.

Sweeping the other bandits with a glare of annoyance, he judged their faces one more time and finally found himself pleased. The two planning to fall upon him with sword and hammer drawn were frozen with fear. The others looked away, averted their gaze as they pretended nothing

was happening. He was the wolf. But they weren't even lambs. They were worms. And now they understood.

Distantly, Wei heard an echoing laughter sound, carried by the flowing winds. Mepeheleon. They were watching, taking everything in as if it was a play. The young master hid his sneer. The Harbinger must've placed Wei cell against the bandit's for a reason: they enjoyed using people like fighting crickets.

So be it. If this was the benefactor Wei had, then he would use them as much as he could. As soon as he stepped over the body of the dead bandit, he thought no more of them.

Ahead, another open cell waited, this one with a bridge planted at its epicenter. But its inhabitants had not yet embarked on their journey toward the Tower. Instead, they had their attentions fixed on Wei as well. They numbered considerably fewer than the bandits in the adjacent cell and were separated into their own groups as well.

Four heavily armored three meter tall and four meter wide figures lingered near where the bridge connected to their prison. Their armor was intricate and symmetrical compared to the bandits, and their helmets were full and masked their features. More interesting were the gems placed over their eyes sockets, and the aesthetics of a metallic beard dominating the lower part of their faceplate.

Between the towering warriors came a soft melodic notes, and Wei found himself glimpsing three smaller, thinner figures shrouded in golden bark and radiant greenery. Their eyes were larger than a human's and their ears were particularly edged. They studied Wei intently, and he read what looked to be a trace of animosity from them.

Nearby, a contingent of twelve humans clad in gleaming mail held in a loose formation, checking their arms and equipment once more. The head of the group—a broad shouldered man with a pale beard regarded Wei with a nod, before turning back to speak to his men.

On the other side of the cell, a final two dark hooded figures stood apart from rest. One stood around Wei's height, and supported the other, who seemed to be shaking.

From everyone present, Wei felt a flow of essence. Awakened in some way—all of them. Good. More promising than the bandits behind, anyhow.

#### **Average Level of all entities present at: Lv. 5**

Through it all, the young master didn't break stride, noting the details and characters nearby, before stepping upon the right-angled Cipher glowing at the base of the bridge. As gravity inverted, he found himself standing alone across from the portal. A shadow flashed into place. The form of his father was there and not.

*Bleed him break him bleed him break him bleedhimbreakhim.*

Wei shook off his sudden lapse in focus and found himself but steps away from the portal. Behind, he sensed movement, the others following in his stead, spurred on by his decisiveness.

***“Well, well. Aren’t you in a hurry.”***

The quivering essence of softness blue coated the gateway. Wei could feel existence narrowing within it like a funnel. “Harbinger,” he greeted. “Did it please you to see that man die?”

***“Well. I found it a little funny. I would have liked it more if you bantered longer, though. You went talking to killing awfully fast.”***

Wei sneered. “Words are a waste. He declared his intent. I stated mine; action was all that remained. And his worth came second to mine.”

***“Oh? Like how your world crumbled because of mine? Is superior power the way of things to you?”***

A fury clawed up from Wei’s throat, but he kept himself in check. He couldn’t tell if Mepheleon was attempting to provoke him, or was simply curious. “The destruction of my realm was without reason. Without virtue. But power is supremacy. Power dictates order, and the one who rules bears the mandate of ethicality after.”

***“Hm. Very poetic. You know you can just tell me to go fuck myself, right?”***

Confusion and disgust filled Wei. “Why would I tell you to...to have sexual congress with yourself?” The insult didn’t make any sense; Wei also didn’t know why he would wish even the slightest possibility of pleasure on someone he didn’t like.

**It is like meant in a way that is analogous to telling another to commit suicide.**

*Oh.*

Peals of laughter sang out from Mepheleon. ***“Oh, you delightful little fish out of water, you. We’re going to have some grand times together. Just you wait. Just you wait.”***

From prodding at Wei’s wounds to playing the friend. The Harbinger’s erratic nature was *gnawing*. “I only want one thing from you, esteemed *Ascended Elder*.”

***“Yes, yes, your father on a pike,”*** Mepheleon sighed. ***“Get in there and begin the trials then. You’ll have a wait a bit for the rest to trickle in, but consider yourself... pre-welcomed to the first trial of my Blood Games: Step forth into the Abyss.”***