

The thing about demons is that they're surprising but predictable at the same time. They're strange monsters in a lot of ways. I can say that they're definitely "intelligent," but also not truly conscious—trust me, I know: I'm a Psionic Class. I reached in before; there are no thoughts for you to control, so don't waste your time.

*Now. With that said, they do inherit the averaged attributes of the Sinners they were incubated from. That gives the various types of demons a bit of variance, but their **Classification**—and more importantly, governing Sins—limits their behaviors substantially.*

If you're fighting a Knight of Wrath, expect it to be vicious, constantly attacking, and have no care for its own survival. Dangerous and impossible to dissuade, and depending on who they were harvested from, potentially quite skilled as well. But they're also easy to lure into traps, because even if they know a trap is there, they're going to walk through it.

Again, they're "intelligent" but not "conscious." The best Wei I can describe is that they can express limited creativity and executive decision-making so long as it falls under the parameters of their design. The same thing with a Siren. It literally cannot choose to stop seducing you, which is a problem because if you're not a Psionic like me, then I hope your Mind aspects are high.

*Or, instead of hoping, maybe you can dull your senses or cast a **Sleep** spell on yourself. Again: they're a demon of lust. Unlike the higher leveled Succubus, they can't harm you without your consent. I don't know why they work that Wei, but that's how the Harbinger shaped them.*

All demons have something like this. Some threshold that hasn't been planned into them. Something beyond their ability to consider or compute. Find it. Exploit it. And maybe survive.

-The Trespasser's Compendium

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The Warrior Kind

Wei slipped back through the threshold of light just as Ashpanthers swelled forth like an ebony tide. They slammed hard against the Hymn's barriers, dark masses sprawling across its threshold and curving against the dome. The Faebloods' voices jolted with strain, as if unprepared for the sudden force. Despite this, Wei could sense the essence passing through the protections to be stable, if slowly waning.

Growing **Might** flooded his muscles, while the Source in his veins surged with impossible **Celerity**. However powerful he was a moment before, he was even greater now, and his System hummed inside him, building with each triumph.

The System is internalizing experiential data to further attune your aspects to the foundational pillars of existence.

Whatever the explanation, Wei found himself grinning euphorically. All the howling noise dwelling in the back of his mind were silenced by his spiking power. This was more than his cultivation offered him by far. Then, he had to shape the essences permeating the world, fill the brittle cup that was his **Nascent Spirit** carefully for fear of suffering deviations or destruction.

Not so with his System. Here, he nourished himself on feats of martial skill and moments of triumph. With every victory, his Spirit was honed, refined, reshaped, *ascended*.

And he needed more. His senses thinned as the noise of the world was tuned out. All that mattered was he, the demons, and the threshold that guarded him. There were still around three hundred and eighty left on the other side. Three hundred eighty should be more than enough for a few more advancements.

He sought the first Gate, he sought a coming breakthrough, and he had no urge to wait any longer.

Pacing left to right, he studied the Ashpanthers as they followed him, clawed at him. How fitting. They were as fixated on him as he was on them—hunters trying to claim the other as prey. As he watched them react to his movements, though, a new thought formed in his mind. He could exploit their movement patterns with his speed. Create his own—

A shadow passed beside him. Wei's spear swiped out on instinct. A resonance passed from him into the weapon, and he felt his **Celerity** split from his System and flood the spear with ripple of essence. The tip was an inch away from a human soldier's throat when Wei halted his cut.

The other man was taller than Wei—fully grown and clad in gleaming mail. He had his pike pointed high, and his brown eyes were wide with fear. A sneer drifted over the young master's face as he found the other pikemen stumbling around him. Close behind, the one they called Ser Angelous was approaching, and following him were bandits organized in six ragged battle lines.

Wei drew his spear back and turned his attention to the demons. Only for Ser Angelous to call and distract him once more. The young master closed his eyes for a beat and directed a question to his System. *Will my aspects and masteries be advanced if I decide to kill these fools?*

Yes.

Hm. Tempting.

“You could have just said what you were planning to do,” Ser Angelous spat. When Wei opened his eyes again, the man was right next to him, glaring at the demons. Turning, Wei fixed the

bandits with a pointed stare, and they suddenly found the floor, walls, and ceiling to be quite interesting.

“You should not need me to teach you such an obvious strategy,” Wei said, patience short.

Ser Angelous looked at him with a flat expression, “Dawn guard me from the young and arrogant. Listen, boy, I know what you’re trying to do, and I think I know *what* you are.”

“What.” Wei’s voice was thin, sensing a potential insult, seeing as the man was referring to him as a thing. But Angelous ignored the young master’s building ire and continued.

“But together we can do this.” He gestured to the forces he was marshalling. It was clear that he was a commander of some kind. A leader of warriors. Whatever warriors Pathless amounted to, anyway. His six pikemen took their positions around the threshold, mimicking Wei as they stepped through and back, stabbing and provoking. Archers were kept in reserve, tendrils of radiance coiling around their bows. The bandits, meanwhile, were marshalled in curving lines as well, directed by Angelous’ four greatswordsmen. “We’ll harry them, and you go out for the kill. You harry them from behind, and we’ll gut them from the rear, and make sure you have a way back. We give them problems instead of waiting for them to become one for us.”

The Hymn was reaching a building crescendo. “Song’s coming to a close,” the ruby-eyed titan roared. He and his like haven’t moved. Neither had the shrouded figures, with one trying to keep the other standing. Those two were the greatest oddities in their group. All the rest were capable of some level of combat, but one of the veiled figures seemed so enfeebled, Wei thought they were on death’s door.

Another one of Mepheleon’s games, he supposed.

With the arrayed pikemen, Wei found the demons’ attentions scattered, and along the right, he saw an open space forming near the walls.

The abyss above was past the top of the frescoes now—almost a fourth of the way down. Time was short. The decisions were simple.

“Very well,” Wei said, speaking without looking at Angelous. “Make use of yourself however you can, Pathless. I will make for us a path.”

He didn’t wait for the old man’s acknowledgement before he launched himself other the pikemen, running along the leftmost wall in a burst of force. His movements felt crisper than ever, and his body was alive, attuned to velocity in a way he simply couldn’t describe. Rather than being more, it felt like he was growing *closer* or sinking *deeper* into an idea—a concept.

Scattered in focus and density, pushed himself off the wall with spear directed outward, hammering into a pack of Ashpanther’s like an explosive technique. Bodies were cast aside by

the force of his approach as he felt his spear tear forth at twice the speed he was capable. He felt the essence within it disperse at once as it punched through bronze and flesh—a feat he was incapable just moments ago.

An Ashpanther found itself impaled along the length of its spear, and it writhed to get at him, lashing with trident and tail, its resilience far beyond that of a common man's. It pawed at the ground and pushed itself further along the length of Wei's weapon, doing all it could to strike him. As it struggled, another five demons flooded the open pocket Wei made, noticing his sudden breakthrough.

But their charge was short lived. Wei slammed his heel into the Ashpanther he skewered and felt the Source within him resonate once more. A ripple of monochrome flowed around his strike and the full potential of his **Might** was channeled through a simple push kick. The Ashpanther plunged away from him and struck its kindred with a series of sickening cracks.

Bodies folded at grotesque angles. Festering ichor of unnatural crimson splattered free from rupturing flesh. Metal dented and warped.

And through it all, Wei couldn't help but laugh. He let his spear seek; he let his violence flow. He became an avalanche to counter an avalanche, flanking the masses of demons from the side while the most of them remained blind to his coming, still desperate to get at those behind the Hymn of Protection.

His spear spent and restored its charges of **Celerity** on alternating thrusts. That took some getting used to as the slow blows glanced from bronze while the faster staked deep and through. As he drove his way into the bulk of the demons, they finally turned to address him as a threat. But though they were many, he refused to let them bring their numbers to bear. Spear thrusts carried over into kicks, and shockwaves of force detonated through the air, striking the barrier of sound and scattering the demonic scourge.

By the time he was at the center of their group, a good hundred of them were scattered across the section of the room, laying on panels of painted glass stunned or crippled. Wei laughed. Never before had he expected this of himself—and so soon.

A facing a demon or two? Yes. A trifling matter even an outer sect disciple should be capable of. But this? Breaking their hordes like a countering tide all his own—

Recommend an immediate retreat.

He ignored his System. He understood caution, but the surrounding demons were scattered or dying upon his spear. What few of them dared to leap down from the darkness above, Wei avoided and killed as well. Driving his spear deep through the ribcage of a final Ashpanther, he hoisted it high and relished his burgeon strength, growing with each kill.

Above him, the demon twitched as he twisted his weapon. Pikemen stepped out and drove their arms into the downed monsters he left in his wake. A few of the braver bandits darted forth and brought clubs and daggers to bear. All at once, the center of the demonic horde was collapsing, their responses divided between Wei and the soldiers, and the Ashpanthers flowing into replaced those lost were simply not arriving fast enough.

The young master was a whirlwind of ruin in motion. Nothing could stop him. Nothing—

An stinger shot out from the shadow cast by the demon he was holding up. The attack came without pre-warning, and it was only thanks to his shadescale that Wei went *ungutted*. He felt his armor-enhanced **Fortitude** deflect the blow, but still, it felt like a giant had swung a club into his ribs. A series of pops and spiking pain drove the breath from Wei's lungs. The greater issue was how the stinger was coiling around his leg now, tearing him from his feet and swinging him into a wall.

Another Ashpanther squirmed out from the shadows cast over Wei, and unprepared for its ambush, he failed to bring his **Might** to bear, and bounced headfirst off the wall. A splash of stars and spots formed in Wei's vision. The world tumbled and spun as he stabbed and clawed, fighting to regain his bearings.

The Ashpanther lurched, and Wei felt his entire body go with it. He kept an arm close to his head to protect from another impact, while his right hand maintained a death grip on his spear. Dropping it might just mean his death.

A sudden weightness took him as he found himself released from the demon's grip. Before he could discover why he was freed, Wei crashed backward across panels of cracking glass. He caught himself halfway and kipped up into a backward roll—

Only to have three more demons slam into him. Jaws wrapped around his limbs. The back of his head greeted a wall. Stars burst across his eyes once more, and a trident bit deep into Wei's left eye before he could recover.

It was only the slowing effect of his **Evasion** Mastery that kept him from death. His only free arm shot up just in time to halt the trident from going deeper into his skull. An agonizing grinding of bronze gliding against the bones lining his inner eye made Wei nauseous.

But what was worse was the darkness in his missing eye. Because in the darkness was fire. A dying world crumbling apart; the head of a severed woman facing him; the face of a man he had to kill.

Warning, you are experiencing severe psychological—

Wei would hear no more of this.

Willpower Lv. [Error]

Source: [11.25/25]

The weakness left as fast as it came. Wei snarled as Source combusted within his body, a corona of monochromatic essence infusing his sinews and physical aspects, doubling them. **Source Amplified**, Wei tore the trident from his now missing eye and hammered a palm against the wall behind him. Force blossomed over his body; web-like fractures spread across the wall. He thundered forward, fists, elbows, and knees shredding ripping through his current foes. More shapes lashed out from behind them. Blows rang from his scaled armor like peals from an instrument, but Wei's **Fortitude** was bolstered, and his thoughts were vacant.

All that existed was him and the fight.

He stabbed and sliced with his spear, honed practice dissolving into vicious savagery. Whatever skill remained in him was muscle memory, and with his depth of vision lost—his missing eye flickering between a whirlpool of colors and shapes between moments of darkness—he relied more on volume and speed to kill.

Faintly, some part of him was aware that the Hymn had ended. He didn't know the state of the others—nor did he particularly care in that moment.

A blow sent his head snapping back, but Wei caught himself before he could fall—headbutted a Nightpanther before it could bite down on him. His **Unarmed Combat** mastery triggered. Its head disintegrated against his. Ichor and hellish drenched him everywhere but his wounds. The Source leaking from him unraveled demonic blood from existence.

He caught a flurry of movement in the corner of his working eye and pivoted hard. The glass beneath his feet shuddered and cracked. He caught a trident seeking his throat and pulled it aside—drove a fist into the throat of a demon. Flesh ruptured and bones parted. The monster collapsed against his grip and he cast it aside. As it fell, he found himself noticing the platform beneath his feet, and the wall before his face. Ciphers spun around him while the disc below him began to rumble.

Wei struggled to remember when he got to this point when a sudden flash of warmth licked the nape of his neck. Spinning on his heel, his battle trance broke entirely as he found himself beholding a rushing tide of blinding fire enveloping the demons, erupting free from one of the shrouded figures. They directed the flames as if the blaze was alive, shaping the inferno to consume all in its path.

The conflagration lasted but three seconds, and though it swept across the entire room, only the demons were torched. The rest of the Sinners remained untouched.

Wei's skull pounded as he took in the others. They were crossing the second section of the room in a dead sprint, heading for the platform. Loose gangs of bandits rushed over first, sprinting and tripping over the downed demons in desperate escape. Their more disciplined companions remained behind them, moving in a box-like formation to Ser Angelous' commands. His soldiers held an inner perimeter, and next to him soon the two shrouded figures. Wei's eyes widened in brief surprise as he corrected himself.

One shrouded figure. The weaker one. They were being carried by a strongly built girl with smoldering rags having from her body, revealing a curiass of gleaming silver encasing a brown leather tunic. How those clothes remained unburned was a mystery to Wei, but from the golden embers aglow in her eyes and the searing essence radiating from her body, there was little doubt she was the bringer of flame.

Her near-white hair was braided into knots, and her face was strong of structure and sharp of chin. No mere commoner, then.

Toward the very back of the group came the titans, and though they lumbered slow, their small shields projected fields of repulsion that swept the demons clambering down the walls, and whatever their hammers struck was alchemized into gold with a blast of hissing steam. Three of their number fought while one reinforced the ground they walked, each swing reshaping broken glass to unmoving stone.

In their midst trailed the Faebloods. The flowers they grew while singing were now wilted, and branches feel from their wood-embraced bodies with every step. Theirs was an uncanny grace to their movements, but also a fragility to their forms. Something almost compelled Wei to take a step toward them.

Might Advancement: 100%

Might Lv. 10 [Current Threshold Reached]: 8 Tons [Max Force Output]

Celerity Advancement: 100%

Celerity Lv. 10 [Current Threshold Reached]: 0.08/SECOND [MAX REACTION SPEED]; 190 Meters/Second [Max Velocity]

Fortitude Advancement: 150%

Fortitude Lv. 9: 85 Centimeters of Iron [Comparative Estimate]

Masteries Demonstrated

>Spearmanship (II): 4%

>Evasion (II): 3%

>Unarmed Combat (II): 3%

Source Core Ascended

>Source Core Lv. 6

Sourcery Manifested

>Sourceshaper

Wei felt a hardness settle over his body with the advancement of his **Fortitude**. His **Might** and **Celerity** aspects swam within his body, made him feel stronger than he ever was, but it felt as if they were pressing against a ceiling. Or a *bottleneck*. And then there was that feeling of increased awareness—like he could feel every liter of blood within him. He suspected that it had something to do with his new **Sourceshaper** Sourcery, but decided to regard the details later after finishing this trial.

Casting his spear out, he missed a demon that descended upon a bandit, shredding the man apart in seconds, before pulling him down into the darkness.

Frustration boiled within Wei. *Damnably missing eye.*

The Ashpanthers were dropping faster, and the abyss above was well past the halfway point of the frescoes. The Sinners who didn't move with the group were picked off and taken, impatience betraying steps away from escape. Alone, they were just commoners; no match for a fiend of hell. And of the forty or so bandits that marched to Angelous' commands, some were cut down by stinger and trident regardless.

Wei slew what few demons were near him as he kept the path to the final section of the room clear. Pulling his spear back, the first of the survivors filtered past him and got on the softly humming platform. Haggard faces regarded him with horrified looks as one of the pikemen clapped on the shoulder.

"Thought you was fucked for sure."

Then, Angelous shouted something, and their formations changed again. Greatswords held an angled perimeter just before the disc, and archers loosed volleys of arrows, guarding the Faeblood as they finally departed from the Oathbearers' protection.

The titans were the last to arrive, but they were so heavily armored that the demons managed little more than scratch their intricate plate before a falling hammer or a bashing shield swatted them away. With the final swing of a hammer, the last panel of glass was replaced, and the Oathbearers crossed their makeshift structure.

The ruby-eyed one among them—Oathbearer Roggi—remained at the very back as his companions went first. All the while, a flood of Ashpanthers filled the room behind them, falling free from the abyss like a downpour. Despite this, none of the demons dared trespass on near the platform, and fled when the ciphers approached.

"Roggi! Hurry!" one of the other Oathbearers shouted.

The last of the Sinners gave a rough growl as he flung a dozen or so demons off him, taking two steps back before finally turning.

But then, a shadow slammed down on him from above—followed by another; and another. Oathbearer Roggi pitched, unbalanced mid-stride, and as the demons clawed at him, striking sparks off armor, he toppled from his bridge and slammed elbow first on a panel of glass.

“Roggi!” A Faeblood cried.

Webs expanded along the glass, and as the Oathbearer struggled, the ground between them shuddered and cracked.

It wasn't going to hold.

For a second, Wei lifted his spear and aimed it at the demons assaulting the Oathbearer—and reminded missing. But suddenly, his thoughts inverted on themselves, and he found himself shoving his spear into the hands of one of the other Oathbearers.

“Don't let go; be ready to pull.” That was all he said before rushing forth, hoping to reach Roggi in time and avoid what he was planning. But hope was a brittle thing, much like broken glass, and as an Ashpanther brought its stringer down against the Oathbearer, the ground beneath them shattered, and they plummeted.

Source Amplification activated.

Source: [6.03/25]

Wei's speed doubled once more, and a cone of force washed out from his backdraft, launching men from their feet. Roggi's hammer was the last thing he saw of the Oathbearer, and Wei wrapped his fingers around the head of the weapon while he still could. Roggi's immense weight tore Wei from his feet, and he was dragged against broken glass, drawn across with the Oathbearer.

Below, a roiling maw of darkness loom—a second abyss just as dark and animated as the one above. Tendrils gripped at Roggi, rose to burrow into Wei.

Then, he made a fist with his right hand, and the ciphers connecting his spear and bracelet flared. Force pulled at his arms, and Wei felt his shoulders strain. The darkness below was drawn taut, and Wei spat Source-stained blood to sever their hold on Roggi. The large Oathbearer was wailing in raw horror—a terrible noise; they really didn't have the throat for it—and only a second later did the other Oathbearer remember to tug.

But tug he did, and as the abyss below slackened, Wei found himself straining his fingers to kept hold of Roggi, both of them drawn back from the precipice in lurching increments.

“D-don’t let go,” Roggi hissed.

“Don’t fall over next time,” Wei muttered through gritted teeth. As they were reeled out from the panel of broken glass, a disorganized series of cheers broke out while the other Oathbearers—and the former veiled girl—pulled.

The abyss above was no more than two meters away, but the darkness avoided the platform entirely, granted it a path upward through the blackness.

As Wei and Roggi were drawn back over the final section of the room, he released the Oathbearer and stumbled away. Jubilant faces and annoying lips moved at him, but Wei sought only his spear.

The recklessness of his last action only registered thereafter, but now he was just too tired to care. Stumbling onto the disc, Wei fell to his knees and tuned the world out. He could feel people touching his head and shoulders—had half a mind to handle the disrespect, but decided manners could wait until he was finished with his mediation, and restored his eye.

“Very heroic of you, Wei.” Mepheleon whispered, interrupting Wei’s concentration anyway. Below, he felt the platform lurch and rise. **“Well done. I was expecting almost all of them to fail. At least! But your hyper-violence really saved the day. Anyway, the next trial’s going to be a breeze. Have a breather on me.”**

A bad feeling festered in Wei. He redoubled his focus and mediated faster.