

Alright. A simple lesson today: there are three kinds of trespassers you'll find across the Fathoms. The first is the most common — some poor bastard who died, or was at a place where the veil was weak enough to be breached. They're usually pulled from [INFORMATION REMOVED] by a god or something of that nature to bless with power and purpose.

Trespassers under this category are usually the Classed. Real chosen one type stuff. Except not really. Except it's more like being drafted with benefits. I can't complain; it should have been the end of me when I stepped on that mine in Đắk Tô, but getting recruited to fight an actual evil empire has done wonders for my sanity after the shitshow I lived through. No concerns for "civilian casualties" when most of my foes are undead.

Anyway, the next group are those with a System. If you have a System, then you won a lottery, my friend. It's the difference between god giving you superpowers—such as if you're Classed—and imposing your own relative rules on existence. Having a System is like... being a king most of the time. Depending on your System Category, you'll be able to ascend and grow more powerful in a variety of ways no Classed ever can. And what's more, if you're the right kind of System, you can also grant other people Classes.

Which is the reason why they're called Classes in the first place: Classifications. As in Classifications under a governing System. Hell, Classes don't even get more powerful on their own; the leveling you experience is usually just a carrots to incentivize you to operate under your System's rules. That's why a lot of you Chosen Ones come in capable of killing giants in a week or two when the rest of the bastards who spent most their life fighting and dying on the frontlines can't even match you—it's by design.

That "Experience" you've been gaining? That's flowing up to the System. And they're giving you back little boons that make it easier for you to help them expand beyond their thresholds.

Sorry if this ruins the fantasy for you; guess there are bosses and workers even in wonderland.

Anyway, getting to the third type of Trespasser: the unfortunate. Just some poor bastard who slipped through the crack and became Alice or Robinson Crusoe. For you guys... well, try to get the attention of a divinity or something. They'll Class you. They'll use you. We're valuable in ways that most the locals can't be. Even I don't fully understand it—something about how our Spirits are missing or... malleable. Whatever it is, you'll be able to take on any Class. Just be aware that once you're Classed, that System can choke you as much as it can elevate you.

Understanding your lot in this new life is the key to prolonged survival. But even those of you who don't have a System running inside you have cards to play, for across the countless worlds in these parts, there are also just as many Systems, and you can use them against each other the same way they can use you...

-The Trespasser's Compendium

6
Explanations

“So, the first thing you need to know is that you aren’t in Kansas anymore,” Schrödinger said. He caught Wei’s confused expression and just shook his head. “I-it’s a place—it doesn’t matter. The point is you’re in the Claimed Hells, and should understand the state of this place.” Tapping a claw against their carriage window, a mess of sigils ignited along the glass, and to Wei’s surprise, Schrödinger pulled the symbols out, tapping them as if they were notes on an instrument.

As the burning icons solidified, Wei observed they were arranged in rows and columns of neat little buttons contained within a framed window of some kind.

Schrödinger continued. “This here? This is called the ‘*Chat*’ function. It’s part of the System—which also makes it part of the Harbinger, which means that perverted piece of shit knows all, and sees all.”

Incomprehension filled Wei; the impish creature spoke one set of words, but behaved separate from the meaning he implied. “You proclaim your Ascended Elder to have omniscience and insult him in the same breath?”

The hideous little monster grinned. “Sure I do. They’re a piece of shit, and they know it; I’d compare them to a snake, but at least you know what to expect from a snake; the Harbinger will help you then turn on you between the seconds. Sometimes because their interest changed, sometimes because they just like the look of horror on your face. They’re a heartless, degenerate fuck, and don’t you ever forget it.”

Wei stared on at Schrödinger for a few minutes of stunned silence. The cultivator expected to hear the sound of crashing thunder at any moment, or sense that shift in the heavens which proceeds a falling bolt of divine retribution. But nothing came. Schrödinger remained unharmed.

The imp scoffed. “But they’re also not a tyrant. Not that they need to be, anyway. Everything you see around here like the Tower, the city, the demons—especially the fucking demons—belong to him. Are a *part* of him.” Schrödinger gestured at the window. “This is part of him. The Chat passes through him first, and those with Classes have Chat’s bound to their Spirits, so though they might be able to call and speak to almost anyone connected to Mepheleon, there’s a catch: they’re speaking through Mepheleon.”

Ideas began to form in Wei’s mind. His focus narrowed to how this detail could be turned to his advantage. “My father. Does he have such a ‘Chat’ inside him.”

“Nah. He’s different. Special guest.” Schrödinger paused momentarily. “Mepheleon is a pretty major player. But he’s by no means the biggest, and definitely not the only sovereign in town. These Claimed Hells? They’re more like a... League of Nations of some kind. A Switzerland.”

He noted Wei's incomprehension and sighed. "It's a neutral empire where other empires can do business and perform acts of diplomacy where they might be fighting anywhere else. That's also why they call it a Diaspora. Because most of the known Fathoms have roads leading here."

"Fathoms?" Wei said.

"Jesus H. Christ, son, you really were from a know-nothing backwater, huh."

Something in Wei grew colder. He leaned down and put his face through the fiery window hovering in front of the imp. "My education was centered around *other matters*. Perhaps I can give you a direct demonstration on what I do know so you can better *gauge* how you speak to me?"

Rather than flinching in fear or biting back with a challenge, Schrödinger just shrugged. "Hey, listen, I'm trying to piss in your cereal. God knows you've had a bad enough day already. It's just what it is. You can kill me. Hell, you *will* probably kill me at some point. But that just results in a delay and another instance of me getting assigned to you, so let's skip the politely veiled threats, yeah?"

Wei blinked at that. "Another instance of you? You have mastered the Spirit-Splitting Technique?"

"I—yeah, sure, think of it like that. The point is, there are a lot of powers playing around here, but the good news is you don't need to worry about any of them yet. Frankly, you shouldn't even think of your old man before you get through the Filter and climb the Tower, earn a Class, and gain access to the First Circle."

"The First Circle. It is a higher realm, isn't it? Was it the grand loop I saw looming beyond the atmosphere?"

"Yup. The first loop-world out of nine. Mepheleon prefers thinking of it as a 'Descension' rather than a higher realm, though. They do love the aesthetics of hell. A little too much, in fact. Makes me wonder if they were in some kind of cult before coming over—anyway, that's the first step to your patricidal adventure. Nothing else matters or will matter until you climb that Tower. Unless you decide to stay here, of course."

"No." Wei's response was immediate and adamant. No force would turn him from his task. The face of his father was seared into his mind; the man was all that existed on the horizon. Claiming answers from him after breaking him in Body, Mind, and Spirit was the only purpose behind Wei's existence. "Tell me of this Tower. I will play your master's game."

Schrödinger didn't respond immediately, instead, he tapped a series of icons using the Chat. Each button flashed as he struck them, and a moment thereafter, the windows to their carriage turned transparent. As Wei looked outside, his eyes widened. They were soaring fast over

buildings. A curved bend of sprawling shacks blurred past Wei's vision as they journeyed downward toward the base of the tower. Perhaps over twice as fast as he was moving without using his **Source Amplification**.

Closer to three times, his System informed him helpfully. Wei paused as he remembered he had some kind of System bound to his Spirit.

Can you do this? The 'Chat' Technique?

Our Communications function is currently inactive, at factory settings, and unnecessary as you are the only entity connected to your System. However, you may activate it on command should you deem it to be necessary. Due to our System's categorization and your attunement to Source, you will not be able to imbue attributes or portions of your Source upon most other entities.

Why not?

Because the Source will see them unmade.

Once again, Wei thought of the Specter he bled upon. How the demon apart more from the monochrome seeping out of him than his blows. He thought of the Incubator that dissolved outright when he was pushed into its currents.

What am I.

We are System designation Keter. We are the unshaped that comes before. We are judgment—

What does that mean? Why are you bound to me? How? What is the nature of our power? It's limits. Wei paused. And how do I reach its summit with utmost haste?

System designation Keter is a System designed to govern, dominate, or destroy other Systems. Our primary directive is to ensure the stability of the existential order until reassigned by the Firstborn. We were assigned to you due to a compromise lining our stasis vault allowing your Spirit to enter our thresholds and trigger our activations. Due to you meeting all the necessary requirements as host, our joining became imminent both for your preservation and development of our capabilities.

System designation Keter is theoretically infinite in attributional development, and only possesses limits when it comes to the functions of "true creation," "temporal engineering," "reality shaping," and "Source distillation." However, our Will supersedes as we are a wellspring of the highest waters, and so all that exists may fall under your Dominion should you have attributional superiority and devote the necessary Source for infusion.

A scowl broke across Wei's face. For every question he asked, more mysteries followed. The thing that dwelled inside him was even more confusing than the imp that sat across from him.

"Talking to your System?" Schrödinger asked.

Wei's scowl only deepened. "Am I that easy to read?"

"Nah, there just ain't that much you could have been doing. Another note of advice: tell no one. You got no idea how powerful that thing inside you is."

"You know about the Systems?" Wei asked.

Schrödinger chuckled. "A bit thanks to all those years of hands-on experience, but most days, I still feel blind as a bat."

It took Wei a moment to decipher what the imp was saying. "You have a System too."

"Yeah. And before you ask, no, I won't tell you my designation or what my directive is."

A voice chimed within Wei. **He is System-designation Qlippoth. His directive is to spread his husks further across all known worlds to become a universal observer across all known worlds by way of death.**

Death?

"You shouldn't tell anyone about your, System either," Schrödinger continued. "Bad enough that Mepheleon already knows, but I think they got plans for you, Young Master."

"They plan to manipulate me?" Wei asked.

"They *use* everyone. You're not special. Now, they might just help you get at your father, but don't be surprised if your journey there ends with a lot more collateral damage and detours than you expect."

"But he is not without honor?" Wei probed further.

"Honor? Fuck no. He doesn't even have an ounce of that. But he does love stories—and you, my unfortunate friend, are a walking, talking protagonist in a fresh tale of bloody revenge. Hunting your own old man, no less. Talk about tension."

The heavens are blind. Until they aren't. Until a higher power finds you amusing. Wei focused on his breath and waited for the screaming inside his mind to pass. So be it; if they found

amusement in his task, then he would twist that to his advantage for all it was worth. Both sides could pull on a chain, after all.

“So, some lay of the land shit about most folks you’ll be running into around here,” Schrödinger said, gesturing out the window. “The ring we’re on? It’s called the Outer Wheel. It’s where most the legions of hell are grown and cultured by Mepheleon. It’s also what he uses to anchor his Towers when invading new worlds.”

“How large is this wheel?” Wei asked, trying to grasp of the scope of this new world.

“Wide?” Schrödinger snorted. “Kid, this place used to be a great disk used to cage a sun. A sun that had a System trapped inside it. Your entire world doesn’t even amount to a single percent of space here.”

Wei’s mind went empty at that. An expanse so wide was beyond his conceptualization. He knew things by lengths of rivers, widths of ponds, the size of mountains. To imagine all that dwarfed was hard. Near unfathomable. “How did Mepheleon even claim this place.”

“Became. He *became* this place. And you can blame the Firstborn for that. Assholes didn’t quite finish their cross-planetary prison properly, and so the ugly thoughts of people started leaking in, and demons started leaking out. Story has it that Mepheleon found his way in on one of those worlds. Well, more like he was exiled for debauchery and sin while being a practicing priest of some kind, but somehow, the fuck climbed the towers and got all the way to the Nine Circle. What happened after that is pretty murky, but pretty soon after, hordes of demons started acting more like a legion, and the hells weren’t so unclaimed.”

And suddenly, irrelevant details from the past returned to Wei. He remembered his mother complaining about demons, proclaiming how they seemed to be growing more organized or least careful in their approach. According to her, they used to spill forth from their breaches, slaughtering and destroying with wanton abandon until they were finally culled, or rift that spawned them was sealed. Now, they were cautious. Careful. And developed not only of Spiritual refinement, but also tactics and strategy.

His cousins and uncles always chuckled at that. They claimed his mother was too paranoid for her own good—attributed the flaw to her surviving an assassination from her great-grandmother. Wei winced at that; right. *Great-grandmother*. Her name was struck from the sect’s records for a reason.

“What is this, then?” Wei said, tilting his head at the ramshackle city outside. “There are so many here. Is this one of your master’s cities.”

Schrödinger’s irises narrowed. “I guess you can think that way about this place. It’s more like these are the people Mepheleon *didn’t* want, and got sorted out of the filter. Now, they live here in these anchor-cities, trying to put the broken pieces of their lives back together.”

The heart pounding in Wei's chest felt like it was slowly calcifying into stone. "So. They are like me, then. Survivors of desolation."

"Sure. If we're looking at it that way. Most people get kept here are, uh, what's the word? Helpless? Useless? No threat? Innocent. That's the one. There's not enough Sin in them to harvest for demons, and there's not enough worth in them to invite them to a party."

A cold thing, but not uncommon, even on—

Wei stopped himself from thinking of his world. "Why does the Harbinger not just see himself rid of them?" The question was both heavy and ugly, but there was something here. There were naked incongruities in Mepheleon's character already; how were they at once a lord of demons without remorse for worlds ravaged, a benefactor, and a merciful emperor at the same time.

"Because he's cultivating them for the future," Schrödinger said. "Because they can still breed, or still transgress. There's always tomorrow. And there's always the children—and all the ways they can fall to violence or vice. This place isn't so much a mercy as it is a farm. Cruelty doesn't keep the essence here flowing."

The world outside grew slower as their mount trotted to a stop, waiting beside a gathering of spider-demons. Leaning over, Wei narrowed his eyes and discovered what caused the delay. The path ahead of them was turning; entire sections of the city were being shifted clockwise, and a vast plot of land meant for agriculture and farming spun past. What trailed after was a wide open road flanked by elevated stacks of wedged shaped buildings.

The concept of waiting for a world to reshape itself was strange, but not altogether foreign to Wei. Legend had it that the ascended who departed the mortal world were capable of cultivating entire realms within their Spirits. Wei fantasized about achieving such power before; nurturing an entire world within himself. Now, he had an example to match the concept.

"Is there enough produce?" Wei asked, trying to judge how much was being grown here. "To feed all the people."

"Easily," Schrödinger said. "Especially since Mepheleon can shape more any time. Not like they doesn't have the space or power."

The words settled in Wei's mind, and he struggled to digest them. "I don't understand them."

"Yeah. And the Harbinger prefers it that way. Listen, we're going to be at the Filter real soon, but before that, we need to get you something other to wear than those tattered rags."

A spark of rage flared and died in the Young Master as he looked down at the ruined, gray silk robes that barely clung to his body. He had just earned the right to these colors with his

advancement in cultivation; he remembered putting them on for the first time and showing his mother, her incessant prodding about his physique mixed with subtle smiles as she commented on his increasing height.

“Perhaps we need to feed you less; you’re going to make your father look short. Are you trying to get your poor mother to sprain her neck looking up at you? Is that your intent, boy.”

His father. His father. *His father.*

The warmth of the past died; the subject of his revenge remained.

Their ride lasted a few minutes more as Schrödinger went over the generalities of the Filter. “There are two tracks at the start: sinner and the innocent. As I said before, the innocent infest this joint, and since you’re not planning to stay here and become a farmer, then you’re going to be filtered in with the other bastards.”

“So my company is to be dregs of humanity,” Wei replied.

“Dregs? Yeah, mostly. But not just humanity. You’re from a pretty insulated world so... ah, we don’t have time for a lesson on all the potential races you might encounter, but you’ve seen a few back there. Beastfolk, Faeborn, dwarves, the animated, undead, kelpi, hive-kin... all kinds of bastards out there.”

“And what are you?” Wei asked.

“Me?” Schrödinger said, looking at his hands and sneering. “Well. The other little nightmares that look like me are called goblins. Nasty fucking creatures; loves war, loves bloodshed, loves stealing shit, constantly splitting into more of themselves.”

“But not you,” Wei asked.

“Not me,” Schrödinger replied. “Let’s just say I used to be taller and a bit more like you. Then I died, and came back with a bit of a height issue.” He shook his head, sounding more resigned than anything. “Anyway, most of the so-called ‘dregs’ aren’t going to make past the second wave of testing. The ones that fail are taken away to have their Sins extracted.”

“The people in the Incubators,” Wei realized.

“Right-oh,” Schrödinger said. “And those who succeed? Those with the *attributes* or that *special something* that can climb Mepheleon’s Tower and reach the First Circle? He gifts them with a Class, claims them as part of his System, and allows them to stay with all the privileges that entails.”

“And I will be one among them,” Wei surmised.

Schrödinger nodded. A moment thereafter, his expression softened. “Such is the hope. Listen, kid, you’ve been dealt a raw deal. An ugly, painful deal. Seen it happen time and time again. But most in your position can’t... they don’t have a System is what I’m trying to say. You have *power*. Not much of it yet, from the looks of it, but you’ll be growing at a rate not even Mepheleon can control. Or even wants to control, for whatever reason. Frankly, I don’t know why he didn’t just try taking the System from you, but you’re still your own man, and that’s more than most can hope for.”

“Indeed,” Wei said, his tone flat. “Heavens be merciful for small blessings.”

The goblin chuckled. “Yeah, something like that.”

A signpost trailed past Wei’s view, and he saw the same sign showing a spider carrying a carriage on its back. Slowly, the Elseweaver came to a stop beneath another archway, and Schrödinger dismissed the Chat with a flick of his claw. Standing on the seat, he leaned over to pry at the door handle.

Wei reached out and opened it first.

“Thanks.”

Wei nodded.

Following the goblin down the back of the spider, Wei watched the demon crawl up the wall and return to a dormant state along with a dozen others. He still had no idea what it cost—if anything—to ride them, but assumed that was tied to Mepheleon’s will as well. As they followed a cobblestone path, Wei found himself standing before a closed door flanked by two transparent windows. Standing for all to see were mannequins dressed in damaged plates of armor and holding misshapen weapons.

The sign above was written in blocky letters unknown to Wei.

Language detected: Vulnond

Translating...

And then Wei blinked, and found him literate once more, the words displayed in his native tongue.

“*Salvaged Luck*,” Wei said.

“Yeah, it don’t look like much, but I’ll have something for you in there. Some of the sinners that die come from High Spirit worlds as well. Some of them even have some interesting artifacts.”

“Does this city not have a proper smithy or market?” Wei asked.

Schrödinger barked a loud laugh as he pushed open the door. “Why? The demons take care of all the security, and steel doesn’t cut it when your foe can warp the currents of reality. Besides, Mepheleon decreed it illegal for the innocent to bear arms. That’s the privilege of the Classed or other System-favored—which you can count yourself among, Young Master.”

As Wei stepped into the room, all other details came second to the fact that there was another goblin sitting at a counter, staring right at him. They were dressed the same way as Schrödinger—looked the same as well.

“So,” Schrödinger said, a hint of a snigger in his voice. “Busy day.”

When the other goblin spoke, Wei found discovered the two sounded exactly the same as well. “Fuck yourself, asshole.”

“How? We don’t have cocks anymore.”

And then they both laughed.

Behind, Wei just stared, wondering how much stranger hell could actually get.