

“Dear Strider. I see you sighing and moaning. What is the matter? Are you displeased with the crop of citizens that are participating in this year's Blood Games?”

“I see desperate wretches. I see fools come to bargain. I see the blind wandering in the dark. Wastrels all. Wastrels, with only a few worth taking on as Servants. That cultivator though... the boy. There is potential there. Something of worth. The Circles of Wrath and Pride already have their eyes upon him. I, Pale Strider of the Circle of Envy, will not abide by their pleasure.”

“Ah. So. You have desires to recruit our promising Young Master Wei. Tell me, are you all genuinely impressed with his skills and abilities, or is the nature of his parentage the main reason behind your... fascination.”

“Two things can be true at once.”

“A fact thusly stated. But be warned, Strider. Your benefactors send you to secure an asset of unbridled will and independence. And though he is just a boy, there is a killer stirring in him. A killer that wishes to break things. Just as the master of your masters had a hand in the breaking of his world.”

“...”

“Oh, come now, Strider? Did you think yourselves so quiet? Did you think yourselves so cunning? Behaviors and desires betray one so easily. And with the destruction of a Low-Concept realm like the Evernest, there are only so many possibilities for one's motives. Did you find it, then? The System hiding at its core? Do you know what designation it bears?”

“No. But I suspect I will soon.”

“A prediction I share. But do be careful about how you find out. These Blood Games are ever capricious. And at times, even a Knight of the Claimed Hells might meet a most untimely end...”

-Mepheleon the Harbinger and Pale Strider, Knight of Envy

Wei zipped over the disorganized echoes like a kingfisher seeking prey. He ignored the midline of his foes and sought the back. There, the Keeper of Paths awaited him. And the demon was not alone. He needed to occupy and resolve the matter of the outer sect disciple and the wolfmen before they stole initiative for themselves. The healing mists provided by his banner would only delay their response for so long — Roggi and Agnesia were unbalanced enough that skirmishers ambushing them could be fatal.

A funnel of trailing ash clung to Wei like the tail of a comet as he aimed speartip at the outer sect disciple's throat. He was but three meters away when a shift of essence and wind caught his attention. A sudden rush of force was coming just below. He burned another two Velocity Charges.

Velocity Charges: [9/13]

Awareness Advanced > 14

Snapping to his right in a burst of force, Wei glimpsed lashing tendrils of blood rising beside him. They were as if brambled branches lined with fangs and slit-like mouths. Small tongues licked at the world, and he glanced down, he saw the bald Faeblood holding one of the burned children in his hands, using them as a catalyst for whatever fell sorcery they were conducting. What the young master assumed to be brambles were actually veins and arteries twisting out from the child.

Momentum shifting sharply along a right angle, the outer sect disciple failed to respond to the sudden changes. All he perceived of Wei was an approaching blur. He threw up his arms in an attempt to block. But by then, Wei was coming in from the side, hounded by slashing tendrils of blood. The weakling only realized where Wei was when a spear punched clean through their gut.

The air left the outer sect disciple's lungs. They couldn't manage a scream, but their eyes conveyed impossible pain. Wei's velocity carried as he impaled his forgotten "nemesis," lifting the other boy off his feet—

And waited.

A clench followed. The three wolfmen blinked at once. The Keeper was shifting, turning to capture Wei's reflection in the flatness of its blade. Above, another bolt of concussive magic thundered.

"Combat is about enforcing order upon yourself, and inflicting chaos upon your foes." An intrusive memory snaked into the young master's mind. A lesson from his father that never faded. Even now.

A lesson he would use to see the man dead.

Signatures of essence materialized near Wei. He booted the outer sect disciple into a space pre-occupied by a teleporting wolfman. A sickening sound of meshing flesh and grinding bone sounded. A synchronous howl of agony came from wolf and boy alike. But Wei was already moving. Two problems resolved.

Speed Advanced > 14

Mind Advanced > 9

A static crackle licked the nape of Wei's neck. His Advancement of Speed arrived just in time. Paired with his Proximal Acceleration, he barely dove under the stormwolf's whip. He flung his spear out in the direction of their materialization. His weapon launched out. The storm-infused wolfman caught in a single claw—spearing roots of blood shot over and around him, the Faeblood still hunting Wei.

Then, Rafael's lighting struck once more, and the veins and arteries burst apart into puffing mist.

Wei's bracelet flared. He yanked his spear back with a clenched fist while launching himself forward. The stormwolf was tugged off-balance—yanked back hard to prevent Wei from recovering his weapon; failed to anticipate the young master expending three Velocity Charges at once.

Velocity Charges: [6/13]

A bronze shield met the supple flesh of the stormwolf's neck as force exploded behind Wei, the blast back flinging the only other active wolf aside. Meat and bone folded along Wei's shield as leaping bolts of electricity surged into him. The young master spasmed with discomfort—his ironclad focus ensuring his concentration, keeping his **Form of the Manticore** active. The stormwolf's neck furrowed inward—then folded back well beyond ninety degrees.

Wei tore his spear back from the wolfman's slackening grip. He expended another Velocity Charge and buried his spear through the back of the last wolfman's skull before they could rise.

In his wake, the outer sect disciple and a wolfman wailed on the ground, their bodies merged in a nest of caked flesh and limbs; the boy's face was somewhere inside the wolf, and his legs kicked with the desperation of one seeking air. Jutting lumps protruded from the stormwolf's neck as he flew back. A last spark of electricity traveled through him as he released his whip, his head utterly dismembered if not for skin and fur. Wei flicked blood and left the last wolf beneath him.

The skirmishers were dead. The backline was pierced. Time to discover the Keeper's mettle.

Through all the fighting, the Keeper had not responded—had not drawn its blade and entered the fray. Considering the amount of essence flowing from its greatsword into its body, and then flowing out its gate-like eyes before composing these echoes, Wei suspected it likely couldn't maintain the summons and fight at the same time.

He tested his hypothesis by driving his spear into one of the Keeper's eyes.

Velocity Charges: [5/13]

He launched himself like a ballista bolt upon the Keeper's looming body. Its legs kicked and staggered, but the speed it exhibited before was absent. The essence-treated alloy greeted a gateway of pulsating blue. Wei's mind was empty of thought. He was but focus. He was but concentration. The push and pull of combat and pulled him deep into a meditative trance.

Refining Source

>>>Source Refined: [35/35] Lumens

Source Core Ascended > Lv. 9

>[1/5] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

>>[9/10] Core Ascensions to [Gate] 1 System Ascension

>>>Source: [45/45] Lumens

Reviewing encounter...

Masteries Demonstrated

>Meditation — 100%

>Unarmed Combat (II) — 4%

>Spearmanship (II) — 3%

>Thrown Weapons — 100%

Mastery/Aspect Junction Node Detected

>Lesser Hollow Mind — Allows the host to filter out all sensory they deem unnecessary, such as colors, sounds, and thoughts. While in this state, the user enters a lesser meditative trance that allows them to refine Lumens at half the efficiency of full meditation. Core Ascensions can be initiated in this state. Requires concentration.

>Lesser Manifestation — The host can create a projection of themselves while in deep meditation. Their projection can take on any shape they can imagine and possesses a 25% of their baseline Aspect value. This projection can travel and interact with the world as long as the host remains in their trance, but all damage sustained by the projection will in turn be inflicted on the host. Should the projection be destroyed, the host will lose 25% of their Lumens. Requires meditation.

>Lesser Cast Possession — The host can infuse their consciousness and System into the weapon they are casting and manipulate its travel vector in the process. Momentum, acceleration, and other factors cannot be altered by this Mastery. Requires concentration.

>Mark of Emnity — The host can mark a target that they have accumulated 10 Emnity Charges on. Should they cast something that can reach the target thereafter, the projectile will seek the target autonomously.

>Vector Chain — The host can trace "Vector Chains" for their weapon using their mind. The number of chains is determined by their Aspect of Mind [4] and if the throw object possess the acceleration necessary to complete the journey.

Select [3] Mastery Nodes

Time seemed to almost halt. Wei felt his spear splash into the Keeper's eye as his System flooded his consciousness with details. The sensation was uncanny, and a small part of Wei almost broke focus. But as it was hard to fight the weight of momentum in battle, so too was it difficult to rise from a state of flow.

He considered his options quickly. The first two were going to be absolute necessary in different ways. The first would allow him to recover faster. The second—though risky to use in direct combat in its present form—would allow him some ability to scout without fatal risk to himself. It was the mastery relating to Thrown Weapons that he needed to think on.

Lesser Cast Possession seemed more suitable for a user of a longbow, or another weapon with greater range. Perhaps it could provide his thrown weapon with such benefit, but channeling his consciousness into a weapon seemed far too dangerous. Mark of Enmity could be useful—but its limitations make it a slight convenience than a substantial boon. The Vector Chain Mastery, however, offered him the most benefit now.

If he could use it to hit multiple targets—or perhaps mimic the properties of his bracelet—that would be more than beneficial.

In the end, the choices were clear.

Selected Nodes

- >Lesser Hollow Mind**
- >Lesser Manifestation**
- >Vector Chain**

Mastery Node Capacity [5/5]

>Mastery Nodes at Capacity. Meditate to replace active and inactive Nodes. Complete System Ascension to unlock more Mastery Nodes

An eruption of brilliant blue sprayed free from the Keeper's ruptured eye. Wei selected his newest active nodes without hesitation.

- >Lesser Hollow Mind**
- >Vector Chain**

Core Ascension completed, Wei felt a blast wave of psionic power crash and part around his mind.

Psionic Overflow resisted by Aspect of (Will).

He was as if a jutting stone enduring a flood of rushing memories. Faint screams wailed around him. Echoes of people and places flickered in his mind's eye. The quivering form of a red-eyed Faeblood with ebony hair flashed before Wei before splashing apart in a shower of glass and essence.

The signature of an echo went missing. Wei had a guess as too—

A very *real* blow hammered into him before he could complete his thought. Masked by the sudden blast of thought-blinding essence, what felt like a giant's club hammered into Wei's midsection. His Shadescale Armor rang and endured. For a second.

Then, its plates folded inward, sinking into his body as he was swatted like a rag doll off the Keeper.

Source: [39/45] Lumens

The world blurred around Wei as he spun, lost in a hurricane of motion. Sharp pain spread through his abdomen, danced down his spine. A kaleidoscope of moments greeted the young master. He saw the stormwolf blinking over him—clawing at him, as though his neck had never been snapped. With another turn, he saw tentacles of red chasing Rafael across the sky, the skull screaming something about his holes are only for consensual touch. Then, Wei smashed through a skeletal horseman, their rusted armor and shattering bones cutting his face apart before he finally broke through a decayed wall.

Source: [18/45] Lumens

Wei was still sliding across the ground—barely had the chance to groan—before three stormwolves blinked into existence around him, tore into him with fang, claws, and whip. An electric arc was the first thing to hit him. The whip sliced through his cheek and chipped three of his teeth in half. But that pain paled before the sensation of a storm going off inside his mouth.

The world went white. Wei thought he was unconsciousness for a second. Until he felt rows of teeth sink into the back of his skull—and a feeble foot bounce off his armored groin. Another hit to his privates followed. Outrage filled the young master. Was someone stomping on him? Biting down on the whip, he tried spending the remainder of his Velocity Charges, but found them lost to him alongside of his concentration.

Growling, he swept his spear out wide. The wolves teleported. The whip suddenly vanished inside his mouth. His vision cleared. Only a single signature cleared, and Wei glared as he found the outer sect disciple descending upon his pelvis, intended to make a eunuch of the young master with both feet.

Source: [9/45] Lumens

Constitution Advanced > 8

[2/5] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

Wei's spear shot up and burrowed up the outer sect disciple's privates instead. The other boy gave an ear-piercing shriek—that turned to a gurgle when Wei headbutted their jaw into their upper skull. Once more, the young master was thankful for his training. That would have gone worse if he dropped his spear. The shield was still with him too. Which was the only reason why he managed to ward off the stormwolf's next attack.

His Shield of Inner Holding consumed the force behind the attack. Immediately, he felt a sudden increase in weight—not enough for it to be effortful, just enough to be noticeable.

Shield of Inner Holding at [140 Kilograms]

Two other wolves blinked around Wei. A jolt of voltage danced down Wei's arm just as a concussive bolt impacted something. Suddenly, the stormwolf vanished. Wei grinned. Rafael must've hit one of the Keeper's gates. Noting the positions of the outer sect disciple and the two remaining wolves, Wei marked **Vector Chains** through all three of them as he pulled the shield off his arm and cast it free.

Vector Chain: [¾]

The outer sect disciple's skull burst apart like a grape. The shield slipped through the viscera and then jerked right unnaturally—then left again. Wei ducked as his shield slipped over his head. Three splashes of hot blood showered Wei. He reached out and caught his shield before it could completely pass through the partially bifurcated skull of the wolf. He kicked the outer sect disciple off his spear. He struck the ground at the same time the wolves did.

Another bolt of lightning came cascading down from the sky. Shards of bone rained down as Rafael passed above, proclaiming that the: "Glory of the freed *republica* will be eternal." Staggering from his wounds, Wei gathered his focus and triggered **Lesser Hollow Mind**.

At once, the world grew *simpler*. The sounds of combat grew muted. Colors faded to black and white, with only emanations of essence outlined with the faintest shades. Slowly, Wei felt his more complex thoughts recede as he regarded the world with mechanical efficiency.

He had been flung through a collapsed wall that was once part of Roggi's fortifications. Stumbling out the other side, he saw Agnesia on her knees, clutching a bloodied left armpit. A flung lance sailed over her and struck her mother on the hip, but the greaves Wei gifted her sparked and deflected the blow with a pulse of force. That didn't stop Ellenor from flinching and toppling over her daughter all the same.

The ground around mother and daughter was almost entirely glass. There were maybe three skeletal horsemen left—all of them grievously damaged, missing much of their bodies. Still, they clawed on toward Agnesia and her mother, holding their own sharpened ribs as shivs.

More worryingly was Roggi, who was currently sailing through the air. His armor was shattered—hissing green from several places and unnaturally corroded. His helmet was missing. As was one of his arms. Chasing him was the Undead Oathbearer, now two Hammers of Creation in each hand. Specters gnawed and burrowed into the once brilliant symbols upon each instrument, and Wei noted a coiling mass of worms sprouting free from the Undead Oathbearer's missing head and helmet.

The other Faeblood and the burned children were missing. At least that was something.

Source: [11/45] Lumens

Stifling a groan of pain, Wei watched as Roggi landed next to him, crashing prone on his back with a broken nose and a swollen eye.

For a moment, young master and Oathbearer just stared at each other. The Undead Oathbearer strode forth, ground shaking to his encroachment.

Then, Roggi chuckled. "He's... as good as I remember..."

Wei just nodded, stepped forth to meet the new threat.

He loosed his spear first, targeting exposed bone jutting out from the Undead Oathbearer's sundered left sabaton. Wei developed a frown when worms and ghosts erupted out from the Oathbearer's armor, catching his spear before it could land.

His frown only deepened when, with a flash of festering essence, the worm-infested Oathbearer swung both hammers down and shattered the spear—turning it from Everblossom and metal to fragments of rotten bone and putrid ash.

If Wei had been in his normal state of mind, he would have been very, very upset at the Oathbearer for their transgression. But with **Hollow Mind** active, such complex thoughts were beyond him, and he used the opportunity to drive his shield through the Oathbearer's other knee instead.

Ghosts and worms came out for him again, but the undead giant was too slow to swing its hammers again. With a burst of speed and over 200 kilograms of weight, Wei felt the creature's leg fracture, felt them topple, hammer his shield into them thrice more for mass, and then one last time to completely cave the leg in.

The giant attempted a sloppy swing at Wei while it felt. He felt a strand of his hair shattered into hissing Source. Then, he was atop the Oathbearer, bringing his shield down on their shoulders and chest.

Shield of Inner Holding at [680 Kilograms]

The worms tried biting at him, but recoiled from where his Source leaked. Then, as he was about to bury his shield through his incapacitated foe, they suddenly vanished beneath him, leaving only a corrupted hammer after a burst of blue.

He didn't have time to consider that, however, as the Keeper itself ran over Wei. A series of crunches sounded as hundreds of legs stomped down on him. Things inside the young master broke. The demon pushed off from him—jumped into the air.

Wei sighed. He could only imagine how much this would hurt.

Then, somehow, Roggi slammed shoulder-first into the massive Keeper. The demon tipped in midair and came down at an angle. Demonic metal screeched along the obsidian ground just beside Wei. Slowly, it began to roll. And so did he, wishing not to be split in half by its bulk.

Staggering to his feet, he leaped atop the Keeper and pounded it with his shield, feeding its mass each time. With each blow, the weight clinging to his arm went from heavy, to near-unbearable. He managed two more hits before he found himself unable to lift his arm. Whereupon he dropped with his shield against the flat of its blade, and promptly detonated all the force his artifact was storing.

A cone of pressure burst out from the shield. A series of snaps sounded as legs under the Keeper of Paths splintered. A stream of blue continued to flow from one last portal, connected to some echo or another.

Shield of Inner Holding at [1.5 Tons]

Strength Advanced > 11

[3/5] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

Source: [4/45] Lumens

Wei limped, tripped, and fell against the last gate. Pushing himself to a kneeling position, he drove his shield against it. Once. Twice. Thrice. Another eruption of blue followed. Then the last of the color faded. A final groan escaped the Keeper as it unnaturally righted itself, fling Wei off its body as the sword sheathed at its center pulsed once, turned clear, and revealed a chamber bathed in soft amber glow.

Laying on his back, Wei tried to stand but coughed a spray of bright monochrome instead. The ash above faded out of existence. His breath stilled as the space beyond this point was revealed. A chain down and connected to this plot of land he and the others were on. But then he saw other such places—little spherical masses hovering in the air. Each pearl bright. Each covered in ash. Each attached to the Black Tower itself by massive brass chains.

But all that paled before the sight of a *nightmare* made manifested. Impaled by the Tower, with brass chains riven through its burning flesh, was a creature composed of gold and glory. Twelve sets of wings sprouted from its back, each pure and beautiful. The most beautiful Wei had ever seen. And then there were the eyes and hands—so many eyes and hands. Strands of glistening sinew and multicolored threads formed its body, and though Wei hurt so bad, part of him yearned so desperately to worship the creature. To give it his adulation.

Another part in him—his own will; his own *pride*—simply sneered at such a notion.

Archdevil of Pride: Lv. [250]

Rafael hovered over Wei, blocking the exposed atmosphere from the young master's eyes. The lich seemed to have come out of this almost unscathed, though a hairline fracture lined the point between its right socket and cheekbones.

"My friend," Rafael said, triumph choking his voice. "We have attained glorious victory against Mepheleon's bastards. I must salute you. You fought magnificently. Magnificent."

Wei coughed. "Yes. *Glorious*."

Turning his head, he saw Agnesia clutching her bleeding armpit, looking pale. She had her mother over her shoulder, and dragged the greatsword behind her with considerable effort. Her expression twisted as she saw the state of Wei, and grew worse as Roggi stomped into view. Blood pouring from his mouth, staring at his ruined hammer.

"I suspect," the young master said, swallowing his own pain as he rose. "That we need more practice. And less glory."

Gripping his fist, he tried to recall his spear. Nothing answered. The cipher's carved into his arm bracelet flickered as well. Turning, he tried to find his spear, but sighed. How was one to sort ash from ashes? Looking down, his mood worsened as he found his pack torn and savaged in several places. Thankfully, his *Trespasser's Compendium* had become lodged in the only hole large enough for other items to escape.

As he tried to push it back in, Rafael descended and stared at the book. "Is that..." The lich faced Wei again. "Are you... Where are you from?"

Wei didn't answer immediately. He needed to get his banner back. Salvage what they could. A

sudden tremor shook the ground beneath him, and he doubled his place. He got the feeling that Mepehelon didn't want them to linger.

"Through the... that path," he said, speaking to Roggi and Agnesia. The girl shot him a worried look as her mother groaned. Roggi wouldn't stop looking at his hammer.

"Wei. Wei!" Rafael called after him incessantly.

"Later," the young master said. "When we're inside."

"Fine! Yes! But you have no idea how—I've been alone for so long! I knew there were others that crossed over. But I never—" The lich shot ahead of Wei and pried the banner free using several mystical hands. "I mean, I should have expected more of us here. It is called the Diaspora, after all. Claimed Hells."

As the lich carried the banner inside, its effect winked out and the healing mists ceased to provide any benefit. Wei snorted at that. Maybe it could help Agnesia, Ellena, and Roggi once they got to...

Where they were going.

For now, Wei just wanted to get off this rock, and find someplace to collapse.