

*Severean. The Harbinger is distracted. You have your window. Kill the boy. Bring us his body.
Make it count.*

-Harlon Seever, Inheritor

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Classed (II)

A lance of force tore Wei from his feet, and pain only arrived when the back of his head cracked against the wall on the opposite end of the room. As spots cleared from Wei's vision, he saw Roggi rushing for him, only to be seized by a shivering threads congealing around him. The Oathbearer jolted to an awkward halt as their expression grew strange, twitching and befuddled. Slowly, he was lifted from the ground like a feather cupped by the wind.

Source: [39/45] Lumens

"Wei!" he cried out. That was all he managed. A second thereafter, he lurched hard through one of the still intact portals, cast into the Path of Sloth. The massive bulk of the Roggi splashed into the pathway, and a second later, not even his shadow remained.

It was then that Wei's foe revealed itself. They cut themselves free from the ruptured portal of Lust, essence gushing free from it like a prolapsed wound. The enemy was well over two-meters tall, and wore an armor filigreed by trails of sprawling cold, the patterns coming together in a mind-assailing tapestry.

[Portrait of Salubrious Madness] resisted by Aspect of (Will)

[Unknown] - Knight of Lust: Lv. 25

>Threat level extreme. They have Aspect superiority in all metrics but Will.

As they strode free from the blinding light of the ruined portal, the next thing Wei noticed about them was that their face resembled that of a multicolored serpent. The scales were a myriad of different shade, each glittering like gems encrusted around two heterochromatic eyes. Their left iris was a watery purple while their right was blazing red, and they flicked two tongues along upper and bottom rows of serrated teeth.

From their back sprouted four vast wings, their edges like rose petals growing from desiccated, skinless humanoid bodies hugging each other. Aromas of delectable flavor and the stench of rot flooded the room. In their hand was a long, thin rapier, twice as tall as they were—a weapon formed from a blade of silver and a blooming-rose hilt.

Wei looked down at what was sticking out from his chest and saw a replica of that thin silvery blade lodged in his chest. Exposed to his Source, the metal groaned and dissolved into nothingness, Source Corruption freeing him before he needed to do anything himself. The

young master fell, his knees greeting the ground in a resounding impact that echoed through the room.

What followed thereafter was a choked silence.

Roggi was gone. Cast across a path. The Knight of Lust took in the others in the room as they let out a slow breath. She pointed her blade at Wei as they spoke. "The boy stays. The rest of you may go. You are paltry helpings. You will do little for my appetite. Go. I spare you. I spare you like I spare the dwarf. Remember my magnanimity."

Every word was spoken with a feminine, honeyed hiss, and Agnesia's head whipped fast to look at Wei. Rafael, however, had his gaze locked on the Knight of Lust. For a beat, the lich hovered uncertainly, and then his attention drifted over to the scattered bones of Irene, the Crossroads Guide. Finally, he stared at one of the paths, and Wei realized what Rafael was about to do.

"Wait," Wei gasped.

But Rafael's reply killed any chance at dialogue. "I'm sorry. I—I must reach the city. I *must*." Then, he said nothing more and surged forth into the portal with Wei's Trespasser's Compendium, staff, and pallative banner in tow.

"Coward," the young master spat.

"Survivor," the Knight of Lust countered. "Something you will unfortunately never be, my poor child."

Her words broke Agnesia's trance as the girl snarled. A blazing tide rushed free from her person, crashing down against the Knight of Lust. But dragon-knight made no attempt to dodge; instead, they simply wrapped themselves in the embrace of their floral, rotten wings, and simply endured. The withered bodies burned for a moment, but then they freed their flesh-fused arms with sickening snaps as they sang, drowning the room in a melody of ecstasy.

[Ballad of Desired Pain] activated>Reduces damage sustained by the user and begins a melody that inflicts Bewitch on all nearby entities with an Aspect of (Mind). Bewitch renders affected targets docile to the user of this skill.

Burning petals rushed out from the Knight of Lust swept over Agnesia. A shift of mystical power rushed out from the knight and the flames suddenly ceased, a river choked by a dam. The room dimmed and Agnesia stood frozen, a distant look in her gaze, her mother clinging to her, still shivering.

Burning flesh sloughed free from the Knight's wings, but the scabs peeled away into newly budding roses in the following instant.

Agnesia struggled, trying to spark her flame, but the Knight of Lust strode forth merely shot her a pitying look. "Oh, daughter of the Primordial Flame, I have sampled your power. You have

potential. You are young. The Desolation lurks within you yet. I will be merciful once more, in the name of our shared blood. You will grow. You will learn. And you will understand that if you ever strike at me again with your fire, I will show you what it truly means to burn.”

"I—I..." Agnesia managed, forcing words out with considerable effort.

The serpent-headed Knight of Lust simply let out a hissing laugh. And flicked a hand. A splash of ciphers spiraled with her gesture, and Agnesia was plucked from the room and cast into the Path of Wrath, and causing Ellena to collapse. The feverish woman crashed down upon the ground without a sound, and the Knight stepped past her, ignoring her quivering form.

"Agnesia," she moaned pitifully, reaching for where her daughter had gone.

At this point, Wei finally noticed that his own focus was affected. Affected, but not fully compromised. Gathering himself, he pushed through the mind-bending affects of the Knight's skill and came forward.

Even without a spear, he found himself able to channel his **Form of the Manticore**, though his 50% Speed boost failed to activate. A step into his approach, the Knight of Lust regarded him with flaring wings, the volume of the **Ballad of Desired Pain** growing to deafening heights.

And breaking like glass against Wei's mustered Will. Rushing threads of essence broke against his being as he approached, and the Knight of Lust tilted her long head, regarding him with curiosity.

Enemy threat extreme. It is recommended that you evade them.

Wei ignored the voice of his System. There was nowhere to run, and he was no coward like Rafael. Spiting the impossible and the divine was what it meant to be a cultivator. There was no moment where he had been valorous than the present.

But that didn't mean he was suicidal. Aside from the Knight of Lust, only he and Ellena were still in the sanctuary. Such was the thing he intended to remedy soon. The Knight likely expected him to rush her immediately. Such was why she held her arms wide open and taunted him with her whipping tongues. Halfway across the room, however, the young master suddenly twisted sharply left and made for Roggi's discarded armor.

Damaged hulk of metal though it was, he could still find a use for it, if only as a distraction. Mustering all his strength, he expended four Lumens and advanced his Aspect of Strength twice.

Source Amplification

[35/45] Lumens

>Strength: [+2]

He did not waste time lifting Roggi's armor. Instead, he slammed into it with his shield and sent it bouncing across the chamber. Chips of glass dotted Wei's face with flecks of pain. A small shockwave rippled around him as he kicked the armor again and launched it at the Knight—still unmoving, welcoming his approach.

Following close behind the armor, using it as cover to mask his approach, Wei counted the seconds before he prepared to deviate from his path and snatch Ellena. After that, they needed to dive through a portal—any portal—and flee up the Paths, into the Moogrades. Escape from sanctuary to sanctuary if possible. Or until Mepheleon intervened.

If the Harbinger was going to intervene at all.

His plan died a quick death.

Roggi's armor was split clean in half. The Knight's blade, thin as it was, glided clean through the thickness of the Oathbearer's massive plates like they were even there. The hulking mess of metal parted, and as Wei glimpsed his standing between the straying bifurcation, they vanished.

Something hit Wei. A second shockwave filled the room, this one far more substantial than the first. The steps to the spring shattered. The sanctuary's glass-like surface burst in a rain of shrapnel.

It was more luck than reflex that saved Wei's life. A sudden jerk in his stance allowed him to take the Knight's slash on his shield. But it still felt like trying to stand strong against the force of a tsunami.

Speed Advanced — 15

[4/5] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

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

Wei was ripped from his feet once more, but this time he shot straight up and found himself embedded in the ceiling. Groaning, he shook himself to clear his ringing head only to feel lines of searing pain run across every inch of exposed skin he had.

Then he saw the Knight of Lust flap her wings, the ground beneath her explode in a cloud of devastation, and her blink into him.

The shield saved him for the second time in just as many seconds. Hovering in mid-air, the Knight of Lust's wings rained petals and fetid flesh. Casually pressing Wei deeper into the crumbling architecture of the sanctuary, the dragonness brought her face in close. "Ah." She sniffed. "So. You are the boy. Yes. I can see why you survived. I can see. So determined. But it won't be enough. Such a pity."

The young master lashed a leg out against the Knight's chest, but the kick did little more than ring uselessly off her armor. As he considered drawing upon his **Source Amplification** to boost his Strength again, the Knight clawed a single clawed hand around the edge of his shield and *yanked*.

It was like a giant had wrenched him down from the sky. The bones constituting Wei's shoulder, collar, and upper arm came apart. He let out a ragged cry as he crashed elbow first next to Ellena, bleeding profusely from her many cuts. He bounced off the ground—only for the Knight of Lust to land on his chest, breaking his sternum as well. A ragged gasp escaped Wei—all that spared him from death was a flash of light and the angling of his head.

Still, the blade went straight through both his and slid lower, keeping him in place. Knight's weapon promptly shuddered, and the blade duplicated itself, leaving one length of silver buried deep while another ran extended from her hilt.

Coughing, the young master felt the blade breaking apart from Source Corruption again, only to cry out as he felt the Knight bring their armored foot down through his left knee, striking the ground below.

He released his form of the manticore and began focusing on **Lesser Hollow Mind** so he could heal.

Before he could do anything else, cold claws closed around his neck as the Knight picked from from his crater. Meeting her gaze, he saw their eyes flash as her essence speared against his mind—but got no deeper. The Knight tried harder, wings embracing him as the rotted dead and trailing petals caressed his flesh and spirit, the song bombarding his sense.

But where she savaged his body with ease, his Will held like a mountain before the raging sea, and the hate insane him grew greater.

“How,” Severean hissed. “How are you still *sane*?”

Wei spat Source into one of her eyes, and for the first time the dragonness screamed. He brought his shield up to crack their skull, but he struck her first, reflexes and speed superior to his by a magnitude.

Once more, he impacted his crater—made it wider. The Knight placed a heel on his chest afterward and kept him held, and slowly began to laugh as she stared with her remaining, crimson eye. “Oh. So that's why they want you intact. What a *System* you must have.” She paused, observing him. “Perhaps you might even fetch me a higher price if I decide to bid at the Crossroads—”

It was as far as the dragoness got, for behind her, Ellena rose. The deposed queen's eyes were pitch-black, veins were coursing, skin was pale, and claws were sharp. A shriek sang out from her as she leaped upon the Knight and broke thin-needle like fangs against armor and scales. The Knight turned, seized Ellena with a single hand, and began to squeeze. A crack sounded

thereafter, and though Ellena tried to siphon the Knight's blood, her powers were paltry compared to the threat she faced.

The haggard woman sagged in the Knight's grip, going limp as blood poured from her mouth, her ears, her nostrils. Wei saw them then. Her green eyes. Green like his. Green like his mother's. His mother.

A sudden calmness settled over Wei as all that had happened to him over the course of this miserable day passed through him like a chaotic maelstrom. One memory in particular came back to him. One option he might still have left. Reaching into his bag with his right and only usable arm, he prayed to whatever fates were watching that his Potion of Regeneration was unbroken, and felt the coldness of its container. Fractured. Leaking. But still whole.

Release her," Wei growled. The Knight sagged, turning to face him. Only for him to bury his fist down her throat and shatter the potion entirely with his closing fist. The Knight choked—bit down around his arm, then flinched away as his Source Corruption ate away rows of teeth. Wrenching him free from their jaws, the Knight kicked Wei again, and he skidded right next to the humming presence of a portal.

The world spun. Wei tried to stand but clutched at a gash running down his chest instead. It was hard to breath. It was hard to think.

Source: [4/45] Lumens

But though it was hard for him to focus, he saw the Knight stumbling, clawing at her own throat while her wings twitched and spasmed. As she turned, he saw a tumorous bulge fused around her throat as she choked. Behind, Ellena stumbled toward Wei, shuffling over though unsteady of gait herself.

Her skin was still snow-white, and the darkness lingered in her eyes. For a moment, she just stood over Wei as the Knight choked, a look of effort coming over them.

The young master sighed. "Please don't eat me now."

The deposed queen shook and then leaned down, picking him up. The Taint must have infused her with preternatural strength, considering how easy it was for her to lift him. As she did, however, she bumped into his almost severed left leg and Wei bit back a cry.

"Sorry," Ellena managed, guiding them through a portal.

Constitution Advanced — 9

[5/5] Aspect Advancements to Core Ascension

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

[Gate] 1 System Ascension Available!

Wei fought back the pain and chuckled. "No. It's good. That was good."