

By my authority as Harbinger of the Claimed Hells, on behalf of—oh, I'm bored of this—listen, you poor, unfortunate savages: I am Mepheleon. To those of you that understand, I am a System-host reaching over into your worlds.

To those of you that don't have the needed context, a separate example to put things into context: I have just flayed the entire pantheon you worship, and intend to sell your so-called Stormking to the Fae so they can do their usual assortment of degenerate deeds.

Now: typically asked questions.

"Why are you doing this, Mepheleon?"

Because the Crossroads requested it of me, and I find your arrogance and cruelty to be most amusing for a people so weak. Also, I need to get a certain boy some clothes. I can't have him running around in taters. Soon, he'll lose the shirt, and with that long, black hair, I won't be able to resist making Conan the Cimmerian references that almost no one gets.

Ahem. Next.

"No. Please. Stop. Agh! I'll do anything!"

Indeed, you will do anything I desire, which, right now, is butchering most of your chieftains and making the rest of you climb my tower.

"What's going to happen to us."

Well, after your gods fed to the Fae, they will strike an accord with the Crossroads, and the mass graves you've been making with all that slavery and genocide will turn into a useful assembly line of diligent workers. The rest of you? Well, that's a good question.

How long do you think you can stay sane while morphed into the body of a dog? Because at least half of you will be living on Fae territory. The rest of you are likely going to be getting recruited as Merchants, and though it sounds better, it's really not.

Anyway, if any of you are suicidally depressed, now is your time to shine.

-Mepheleon the Harbinger

“So. He is the Harbinger’s newest fascination.” The skeleton clucked somehow, despite not having a tongue. “Cultivators do bring excitement where they go, I suppose. This one does seem a bit *young*...” They turned their eyes back on Wei. He stood stalwart and awkward at the same time. Slowly, he made to place his palm and fist together in apology, but they waved him off. “No need for that, dear boy. I am the Lich-Merchant Yengen Tuller. My services have been purchase already, and nothing more needs to be offered on your part.”

Distantly, Wei heard the crack of a whip and the neigh of horses. He couldn’t tell if they were coming from the north, south, west, or east.

“You are from *Feng Ke*, yes? Or should I say were?”

Tuller’s question caught him by surprise—the destruction of his world came second to the lich’s knowledge.

“Yes,” Wei said. “How did you know?”

“Your accent and language. If I were to guess further, you would be from the *Ya Yun* continent. Probably from the eastern coast.”

A faint note of hope rose in Wei. “Have you known others from my world?”

“Ones that survived, you imply?” Tuller sighed. “That is not a knowledge I possess, and even if I did, it is not something that can be offered without recompense. And I was not paid for intelligence.”

Another equine shriek sounded, preceding the hammering of hooves. From ahead came an ethereal light, and there, Wei saw a hearse pulled by two spectral horses, their eyes and hooves ablaze. Each gallop rang against the road like steel against steel, and as they drew close, they drifted to an unnatural halt, the eyes of the beasts never even looking at Wei.

Chained to them was an enormous, wheeled coffin decorated with whorls of gold. The wood of the container was a texture Wei had never seen, and as the lich descended, he pulled his right index finger off and slotted into the coffin’s lock.

“Skeleton-key,” one of the Schrödinger chuckled.

With a gesture, Tuller opened the case, and Wei found taking in the offerings.

There was a backpack flanked by two cases, one above, and one below. The one above was long—like something meant to hold an instrument or weapon. That which was below was more a square, and Wei guessed it held his new outfit.

Something inside him turned with unease as he considered all that was being offered to him. He was no merchant himself, but he attended auctions with his father, watched people destroy themselves and their families bidding for baubles and prizes they couldn't afford. Nothing came free in this life; everything had to be gifted, traded, or seized. "How much did this cost?"

"A small favor and nothing more," Tuller said. "Now, beginning with the pack." The lich redirected Wei's attention with a gesture. The backpack was far smaller than Wei expected, capable of being slung across his chest, and would impede him little in combat. Tuller undid the strings holding its top closed with a telekinetic gesture—incurring a raised eyebrow from Wei—before pulling out thirteen different items.

The first two looked like writhing centipedes of some kind, though their limbs looked the texture of a person's gums. "Omni-pede pair. One goes under your tongue, the other in your ear. It will let you speak and hear other languages with perfect fluency. But I suppose you don't need that."

"Why are they bugs?" Wei asked.

"Because the Hive-Queens originally created them as a means of insemination before they realized peace was more profitable. Next!" Two potions were placed atop the backpack next to the bugs. "Potion of Regeneration; Point of Clarity. Pour the first over your wounds to close them. Take a sip from the second if you are being assailed by psionics or need an edge for your focus. Do not drink the first if your wounds are not internal, and especially not if you are without wounds for such is how you gain a fast-acting tumor."

Then came a large flask of water with another complex symbol on its lid. "Water flask with purification cipher. Be it gutter water, rainwater, urine, or whatever else that's fluid, if there is drinkable content present, it will be purified, and it will keep you alive."

A sack followed. "Ascender ration pellets. Approximately twenty thousand calories per pellet. Do not over-indulge, or your digestive track will fail."

A blank parchment placed before Wei. "Self filling map with enchanted quill. It will expand and adapt as you visit new places, and detail the locations you have been." After it came a bundle of rope, a box, what looked like a foldable wrench with several heads. "Eldsilk rope. 50 feet. Tinderbox to start a fire. Multitool, if you plan to do something more technical."

The final item from the backpack was a metal-bound tome with the words "*Trespassers' Compendium*" imprinted upon its cover. Wei felt a faint trace of essence within the book as well, and frowned. "What is this?"

"*Trespassers' Compendium*. It does not read like a normal book, but rather is more like a dictionary you can speak to. Ask it an inquiry, and if it has anything related to what you mentioned, it will produce the pages you need. Additionally, you may also add to its contents by writing on its empty pages. Doing so might just you the appreciation of a certain group of

people.” Tuller was eyeing the goblins when he said that. “It will also grant you access to the Trespassers’ Lodge, should you survive the Tower.”

Wei looked between the lich and the goblins as he detected some hidden subtext he was missing.

Trespasser: A lifeform not native to our local universe (DESIGNATION: FATHOMS); mostly a human subspecies. Immune to Source Corruption and does not possess a natural Spirit of their own.

No natural... That was the second impossibility Wei faced today. It sounded absurd, but with what he just saw, he wondered how much else his masters were wrong about, or just didn’t know.

“Now, with the basic essentials out of the way,” Tuller said, a hint of a smile sounding in his voice, “let’s show the boy his toys.”

Wei pressed his lips together at that. The lich made to open the long case first, but the Young Master found himself annoyed that he didn’t get to choose a weapon. A warrior knew themselves—

The case opened. Wei’s thought popped like a bubble.

Before him lay a spear with its shaft carved from the purple and white wood of nascent Everblossom and a tip that shone like a bright mirror. Wei saw his own face in the reflection, and looked away. The shadow of his father lurked wherever he went.

“Everblossom spear with essence-sharpened titanium tip. Three meters in length. Nine hundred grams in weight.” Then, Tuller gestured down at the haft of the spear, where Wei silver stud slotted onto the bottom of the spear and a thin band beside it. Both the stud and band had matching ciphers. “Essence-tether for easy retrieval. Allows you to wield the weapon even if disarmed.”

Wei gestured his intent to test it, and Tuller waved him ahead. Plucking the spear from where it sat, Wei spun the weapon in his hands and listened to whistle through the air. The craftsmanship was incredible; perfect balance. Good length. Sliding the bracelet onto his wrist, he suddenly felt the weight of the spear disperse through his arm.

“Who is the master that made this?” Wei asked. “They deserve my personal compliments.”

“No, master. Just thralls guided by a group of crafters. It was assembled by a group of animated constructs and replicated from the original of its like. As for who made that... why, they are long dead. Suicide, in fact, after the Crossroads casually started mass-producing his work across the realms. A pity. We would have liked to recruit him.”

For the hundredth time, Wei was dry of words. Shaking his head, he leaned back and launched his spear into the dirt beside the crossroads. The weapon sank a meter deep before it stopped.

“Make a fist,” Tuller said.

Wei did so, and felt his bracelet flash, and a translucent chain connected his grip to the spear. His fingers could feel the haft, and with a pull, he tore the weapon free from the ground back into his grasp.

“Well,” Yullen said, sounding pleased. “It seems you already know how to use that. Better than most thrice your age, even.”

Wei faced his reflection this time. “Not better than the one I need to find. Not yet.”

The lich hummed in casual agreement. “Now. The final article—something to replace your ruined robes.” The last case opened, and Wei thought he was glancing upon rows of black fangs for a moment. Then his eyes adjusted, and he saw the armor for what it was.

“Shadescale. Ciphered as well.” The lich levitated the armor before Wei, and he angled his head at it. He couldn’t find any sleeves or openings. Then, the lich placed the armor against him, and it unfurled wide, expanding to cover him from neck to toe. “Folds around the wearer upon contact. Can be taken off by delivering three rapid and consecutive taps on the scales at the base of the neck. I recommend you get changed as soon as possible.”

Wei looked at the lich and the goblins. “I... will go behind the horses.”

The others just nodded and shrugged. At least people shared a sense of modesty here.

As Wei placed a barrier between himself and his benefactors, he tried undoing his robes as gently as he could, but the last strands came apart the moment he lifted his arms. Testing the spear earlier must’ve torn the remaining threads. Shedding his ruined robes, Wei gathered the gray that represented his sect and Spirit into his hands, and breathed in.

Ash. Brimstone. The scent of hell was all that remained.

His world was lost. His past was gone.

Gone.

He forced his fingers open and left his robes fall. For a few heartbeats after, he just stared, bleeding himself of all sentimentality before he pressed the armor against himself. It opened at once, clamping down on him as if an open maw. The cold iron of the plating vanished as padding took its place. Lifting his legs, he let the greaves fold across him as well. The pieces of

scale clicked and drew taut as it adjusted to his size. Wei then tested the disrobing—was surprised when the armor solidified against his chest and fell, requiring that he put it on again.

When he was done, he traced the rows of armor, sensed an intermingling between it and his stats.

Artifact Synchronized

Shadescale: Host's Fortitude attribute is improved by 10%; the armor also seals around the host's wounds.

As he returned to the others, he watched the Schrödingers eye him once more.

"Well, you don't look like you lost a fight to a blender anymore," one of them said.

"Where'd you leave the rags?" the other added.

"Behind," Wei said.

"Huh," the first answered. "I was kinda expecting to see you come back with it hanging around your shoulders like a cloak or something."

The thought had crossed Wei's mind, if only briefly. "The past is gone."

And they spoke no more of it.

"This armor-artifact has two functions to speak of," Tuller said, pointing to Wei. "As you are an Awakened—you have an Awakened Spirit, yes?"

Wei nodded.

"Good. It will bolster whatever attribute you have for durability by ten percent. Additionally, if you are wounded, the armor will tighten over your wounds, forming a suture and staunching the bleeding."

"What of damage to the armor?" Wei asked.

"Find a crafter," Tuller said casually. "Or better yet: buy new armor."

A merchant was a merchant, even as a corpse.

"And thus concludes what has been held in stock," Tuller finished. "I do hope you survive, boy. Perhaps next time you can do your own shopping—I promise it is a different experience altogether."

Wei considered the lich's words and released a breath. "All this for a small favor. And nothing more."

Tuller understood. "A small favor from a System-host is the effort of lifetimes for that of mortal men. Everything is relative. Understand that this was nothing to Mepheleon, and that he could have us give you much, much more for the benefits he provided to the Crossroads."

The essence shifting through the lich began to thin. It bobbed briefly in the air before catching itself. "Ah. The time of our business is coming to a close. Schrödinger. Never a pleasure."

"Back at you, asshole."

"Young Master Wei," Tuller said. "On behalf of Crossroads, I hope that my service has been satisfactory, that purchases are to your liking, and that you experience every fortune on the road ahead. Interesting times will be upon you soon, thanks to the Harbinger's favor."

That earned the lich a snort from Wei. "Interesting times are upon me now."

Tuller paused and sighed. "Indeed. Regardless, I do hope to see you again. Seek out the wretch should you require my summoning cipher."

And with that, the lich held out a hand and snapped its fingers once more. All at once, all the mist that detonated outward was drawn back in, and the peeled portions of existence mended, restoring the store to its rightful place.

Wei blinked, and found himself facing a dormant skeleton back in case. Its eyes were hollow, and the heart that beat was no more. If not for the fact that there was a backpack on the counter, armor cover his body, and a spear in his hand, Wei would have questioned his sanity.

Of course, there was also the dead Schrödinger still laying on the ground, blood pooling beneath Wei's feet. The other two looked at the corpse of the goblin faced each other.

One made a fist and grinned. "Play you for his body the old way: *Roshambo*."

The other sneered with delight. "Best two out of three."