

For whatever reason, you find yourself hunted on a hostile and unknown world. Your foes are numerous—they outnumber you a thousand to one; they are well-equipped, well-funded, fueled by the engines of their empires while you live like a mongrel animal, nursing yourself on whatever scraps you might find on the periphery of their realm.

In such dire circumstances, one cannot be blamed for turning to a higher power for salvation. Perhaps you did nothing to deserve this; perhaps it was your fault, but in your heart still burns an urge to set things right and steal back the advantage. Perhaps you are just caught in the crossfire, and require emergency aid to preserve your own life.

Just a pity that the myriad gods festering from whatever system they sprang from cannot cross the phlogiston so easily. Only a scant divinities reign across countless realms—and what right System would allow such a foreign infestation to take root.

But all is not yet lost. Instead of seeking salvation from a place higher, it would be wise to cast your gaze—and efforts—toward a concept lower. A concept that will unite all living beings.

Death is that checkpoint of mortal finality, and there, across the divide of all Systems, across the separation of worlds and universes, will the totality of existence be bridged. With just a small ritual along with a corpse or some other effigy potent with the essence of death, and you too can summon one of our representatives to aid you: a Merchant of the Crossroads.

Worry not about your dire straits of your purse—we trade in currencies vast and narrow, and accept offerings more niche than gold, silver, or even memories. Whatever the threat you face, whatever resource you need, we Merchants will always be ready to aid and abide.

And in the end, worry not about what is owed, for across the stretch of eternity, whatever debts incurred will always and inevitably be squared. So call on us. Give yourself a fighting chance. Demand all that you require and more.

You deserve victory. You deserve life. You deserve everything.

Just let us help you.

Crossroads: Your ends, our means.

-Merchants of the Crossroads

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Summoning

The second thing Wei noticed after the identical goblins were all the skeletons on display. When he saw the mannequins and armor outside, he expected to see a store stocked full of various goods. Blades on the wall, armors on a stand, fashioned utensils for customers to get a feel of

the goods. Instead, display cases filled with strangely dressed skeletons lined the walls and occupied most of the remaining space as well. The golden plaques attached to the base of each display case were illuminated by softly glowing gems hanging from the rooftop. As Wei squinted at the text, his system began translating on his behalf—and when the information was updated to something he could understand, he found himself unable to pronounce half the words anyway.

An uncanny sound drew his focus away from the skeletons, and Wei found himself doing a double-take as he saw both Schrödingers melding into each other as they started a strange embrace. The goblins were merging into one, limbs aligning, heads merging, and hats melting together. When the fusion was completed, Schrödinger's eyes rolled to the back of his skull, and Wei sensed a confusing essence churning within the goblin. It was like two cups of water splashing back and forth into each other.

Then they began coming apart as fast as they were joined. Arms snapped free first. Then legs. The heads parted last, with both goblins taking several steps before they finally parted. As one of the two Schrödingers groaned and shook himself, he reached over and pulled a duplicated hat off the other's head as well.

This went beyond a **Spirit-Splitting** technique. What the goblins performed was something else entirely.

"Alright," one of the Schrödingers said—Wei could no longer tell which he came in with. "So. You're gonna need a few things. An Ascender's Pack for one. You're gonna be climbing a Tower, after all. But also, artifacts. Armor and a weapon. Both provided for by Mepheleon, no charge on your behalf."

Just hearing the Harbinger's name filled Wei's mouth with a mixed taste. "He aids in the destruction of my world... and now he aids me. There is no sense to this."

"Don't look a gift-bastard in the mouth," the Schrödingers said. "You're not going to like what you find there."

Stepping out from behind his counter, both goblins made for a display case in the leftmost corner of the room while one motioned for Wei to follow. The strangeness of this realm was only growing by a second; Wei expected to be in a market of some kind—perhaps even something like an auction hall hidden within a Spiritual threshold. Instead, he felt like he was visiting a special mausoleum.

Studying the skeletons some more, he found them to be polished specimens, draped articles of finery. The clothes that adorned their bones were foreign in cultural style, but Wei wasn't blind to luxury or fashion. He knew how expensive silk was, and with more than a few clad within plates of armor decorated by artistic traces of shimmering enamel, these must've been individuals of great import before their deaths.

“Are we going to commune with ancestor spirits?” Wei asked, taking a guess as to what was about to happen.

Both Schrödingers laughed. “Sure. Yeah. Not exactly an incorrect way of seeing things. I wouldn’t call them ancestor spirits, though. Or even all the way dead for that matter. Makes them feeling all important and forget who they actually are: bottom of the barrel merchants working off a shit contract they signed while they were still alive.”

The casual scorn the goblins held toward the dead left him feeling even more confused. If they were not revered, then why were their bones cleaned? Why place them in cases? Unless this is an example to be shown to enemies? A threat?

“You wanna do the splits?” One of the Schrödingers asked the other.

A nod was the response. “Yeah. Why not. Just remember to hold him quick. We don’t need another runner.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know how it goes.”

Wei narrowed his eyes. “What are you two—”

And then, before him, one of the goblins began to divide again. They shook and shivered, spiritual essence combusting within and *dividing* somehow. Wei’s mind went empty. The first thing anything a cultivator learn was how essence didn’t just materialize, but had to be refined from the world, and stabilized within an awakened Spirit. What transpired within Schrödinger went against all that was taught to him.

As a new goblin with the exact same set of features, wearing the same clothes, filled with the same essence snapped free from the other that was birthing it, he managed two unsteady steps before bumping into the edge of the display case.

“*Fug*—my head, what’s—what’s happening...” Slowly, the next Schrödinger looked up, and saw the skeleton looming over him. His expression flattened into one of despair and realization. “Oh. Oh, shi—”

The other two goblins were upon him immediately. The Schrödinger that birthed him opened his throat from behind with a swipe of the claw. Blood swelled out from the newest Schrödinger’s throat immediately, as Wei found himself frozen, lost on how to respond. As the newest Schrödinger choked on his weltering gore, the third kicked his legs out and held him down.

The fresh-born goblin struggled only briefly before turning to Wei and giving him an exhausted shrug.

“Alright, get this shit right the first time,” one of the Schrödingers said, holding the dying one’s head steady. “I don’t want to do another split because you placed the omega ciphers in the wrong place.”

“Oh, eat shit, that was one time.”

“It was one time that got us tortured by an Abyssal for a full year.”

“That wasn’t even really us—”

“It’s all us, motherfucker! The trauma and nightmares carries over!”

As both goblins descended into bickering, Wei approached slowly, and watched as they opened the dying one’s vest. Ugly, mottled green skin was exposed to the light, and newborn Schrödinger gasped pitifully as he watched himself bleed in the reflection of the display case. The goblin standing over him reached into their Spirit and manifested a searing dagger made of fluid brightness. Wei could feel the goblin’s essence imbuing the blade as they lowered themselves and began to cut.

“What are you doing?”

“Summoning cipher,” both Schrödingers’ answered. The dying almost mouth the words.

He wanted to ask for questions, and thought of directing it to his System when Schrödingers made their first incisions. They started from the outside, cutting lines and whorls until something of a partial circle was created, then they moved in, and began to chip away, making faint traces and connecting small lines upon the flesh. Subtly, Wei felt the essence around him shifting, making him feel as if a ship upon the waves.

With each progressive cut, the waters of existence grew more turbulent, and he felt something surfacing like a swell of fish, displacing even more of the essence.

“He’s dying,” one of the Schrödingers growled. “Get it done. Get it done now, or we’ll have to—”

“I’m getting it right! Like you asked! You wanna do the cutting? There! Finished!”

Both of stood up and shuffled back, and Wei caught a glimpse of the pattern marring the dying goblin’s chest for the first time. The sheer complexity and detail that was imprinted on his ruined flesh was staggering—Wei had never been particularly adept at the arts, but he knew calligraphy from just how much his mother practiced.

This exceeded anything she did by far. There was little beauty in the symbols, but everything was interconnected in some way. There were five markings in total, but thousands upon thousands of smaller ones raining down from them, swirling about an exposed wound where the

Schrödinger's heart pulsed its last. It reminded him of script on a scroll in a certain sense, but ordered in another fashion. More than that, the way the cuts shone felt *tangible* to his Spirit, and the swelling only began to build as the essence within the goblin began to change.

A final exhale left the Schrödingers. Their limbs went still, their eyes went empty, and thin rivers of blood unfurled from their heart and sought the skeleton in the displace case. A luminous glow infused the crimson, its color a searing white. Opening the glass case of the display before the blood could be halted, the other two goblins bounded next to Wei and adjusted their clothes.

"What is happening?" Wei asked.

"We're getting you your shit," one of the Schrödingers grunted.

"Special delivery from the Crossroads."

Whatever other questions vanished from his mind as the dead goblin's blood fused into the shape of a newly beating heart within the rib cage of the skeleton. With each pulse of the newly made organ, so too did essence circulate as well. The skeleton affected had a coat draped upon their shoulders, leather slacks covering their legs, no shirt, and an amber-hued eyepiece embedded over their right eye. The amber soon became a welcoming brown as pinpricks of fire lit behind the skeleton's sockets.

For a moment, it remained unmoving, as if still dead. Then, one of its arms shot up, its hand turned upward, and with a snap of its digits, a burst of mist detonated out from its body and enshrouded the room. The world peeled apart like a sodden page of paper. Wei lifted his arm in anticipation of an attack, but he felt but a faint coldness passing over his Spirit as the disturbance settled.

Peeking at the skeleton, he found it hovering in the air before him, a ghostly head of hair and beard forming on its skull like building foam. It was then that Wei also noticed he was no longer in the shop. Thick fogs embraced him, and they roared and shifted as if carried by a river. As they lifted slightly, Wei found himself standing upon an intersected path made from gold and studded with gems. Forward and back, left and right, the road went on into the mist, extending without sign of end.

Merchant of the Crossroads: Lv. [Unknown]

Hovering above the living, the skeleton looked down, and its once empty sockets now quivered with reflective pools laced with crystalline brightness. A low, long-suffering sigh came from the entity as Wei prepared himself.

"Of course it's *you*," the skeleton spoke, its voice high, sophisticated, and reeking with scorn. "I knew the critical component of that cipher was somehow... *bland*."

Both goblins aimed their middle fingers at the skeleton. They did it so confidently and promptly that Wei assumed it could only be a gesture of fealty. Wei didn't understand the meaning of the hand-sign, but mimicked them. It was best to conduct himself with the proper rituals of honor here—he needed every advantage he could get.

As he aimed his middle fingers at the skeleton, Wei offered an amiable nod to the entity, unsure of its nature of making. There were ghosts back on his world, but they were incoherent horrors rather than rational, talking beings.

“Wei,” one of the Schrödinger hissed. “Put your hands down. Put them down!”

The skeleton tilted its head specifically at the Young Master, then gave a soft laugh. “Do you know the expression behind the gesture?”

Wei paused. Suddenly, he wasn't quite so sure if it was a gesture of honor. Slowly, he looked at the goblins. “They are not offering their respects, were they.”

The skeleton hummed. “Quite the contrary, in fact. But your intent is conveyed, cultivator. A word of advice, though: do not invoke symbols you lack the understanding of. A cultural faux pas is one thing, annihilating your own Soul because of a mistake in your ciphering is another.”

The Young Master nodded slowly, aimed a quick glare at the goblins, and lowered his hands.