

I reeled from Fortune's words, but their meaning wasn't lost on me. Still, I needed to be sure.

"Sorry, I've been getting to know a lot of gods lately," I said. "Where did we meet again?"

Fortune's smile receded an inch, and Xim turned her head slowly in my direction, eyes wide. It was the first time I'd seen her look genuinely worried about something. Then, Fortune's laughter filled the room again.

"Arlo!" he said, the sound coming from his right mouth as his front one laughed. "I'm glad you've got some zest to you. Where did we *meet*?"

"Nowhere!" shouted the left mouth.

"Right here!" shouted the right.

"What counts as a meeting?" asked the front. "On Earth and in heaven and now here in the land of..." Fortune paused, and his left pair of eyes fixed on Varrin. "What have you all named it?"

Varrin watched the god, standing tall. He spoke with a respectful tone, but his grip on the hilt of his greatsword was tight enough for his gauntlet to creak.

"Forgive me, divine one, but do you mean the name of the world?"

"The world, the continent, the country, anything will do."

"The known world is called Arzia. The entrance to this Delve is in the Hiward Kingdom."

"A *kingdom*," said the left mouth while the right one frowned. "I enjoy kingdoms. The power imbalance is delightful."

"Boring," said the right.

"We have met three times," said the front mouth, "But only in Hiward have we met in the flesh."

"Then you're the one who brought me here," I said.

"To Arzia," said the right.

"To this *kingdom*," said the left.

"You brought yourself to this Delve," said the front.

“I see,” I replied, running a hand over my beard.

For whatever reason, this creature didn't bother me the way it obviously bothered my other party members. Xim's smile was gone, her face pale. Nuralie was back on all fours, eyes flitting around the room. I thought she was looking for a place to hide away, but the chamber was well-lit and barren. Varrin stood stock still, save for his flexing grip. Even Shog had floated down to settle on the ground, as though he feared looking at Fortune at eye level. Grotto was tucked close to my shoulder.

Etja didn't seem to mind Fortune's presence, though. She stared up at him curiously, leaning from one side to the other to see his three faces.

Maybe it was the fact that I'd already died once. Or that my life had been under constant threat ever since being resurrected. Also, this guy was the one who brought me back. Why would I be afraid of him?

Or there was the possibility that I was genetically engineered to view him favorably.

“Am I a clone?” I asked. “Or the original?”

That shook Xim from her shock.

“A... clone?” she said.

[That is exactly what I wanted to ask.]

“You are not a clone,” said Fortune. “Nor have I modified your mind in any way.”

“I swear upon my name it is true,” said the left.

“No fun if we cheat,” said the right.

“*Sometimes* it's fun,” the left retorted.

“You are also not an android, cyborg, homunculus, collective hallucination, a brain in a simulation, or any other manner of Arlo facsimile,” Fortune's front continued. “Your body is temporally consistent with the person that existed on Earth. A single continuity through space and time, not a copy. I did add a few improvements, though. Purely functional. My own modified Creation process.”

“Then you have the ability to physically pull someone across dimensions,” I said, considering the power that would take. Honestly, I had no frame of reference for it, but if this Fortune was a similar brand of god to Orexis, did that mean Orexis also had abilities at that level?

“I do!” shouted the left.

“Not really,” said the right.

“Humans on Earth can fly, but not with their arms,” said the front. “I have my ways.”

{Hey!} Cage’s voice crashed into my head, feeling like he’d cranked his psychic volume to eleven. {I don’t like this! Why do you know Fortune? Why does *he* know *you*? Is your entire party some sort of deceptive god-delivery vessel?}

“What, like a Trojan god-horse?” I said.

Fortune’s eyes all shot down and to the right, each with a different expression, none of them pleasant. Narrowed in suspicion, scrunched in disgust, with the front looking down imperiously.

{Yeah! And why can’t I see inside that room anymore? What’s hap-}

Fortune waved a meaty hand through the air and Cage’s presence disappeared.

“What a rude creature,” said the left.

“It is,” said the right.

“’98 won’t butt in again. Where were we?”

“M’lord,” said Varrin, “we’ve awakened you over a matter of great import. This Delve is unstable, and another deity threatens to destroy it.”

“Yes, I know,” said Fortune. “Yearning is as tireless as he is single-minded.”

“You know Orexis?” I asked. “You already know he’s inside? Were you conscious while frozen?”

Would being frozen for millennia while remaining aware drive a god insane? It was at that moment I began to get confused over Fortune’s timeline. If he’s been locked in here with all these other god avatars, when did he summon me?

“Yes. Yes. No,” said Fortune.

“How long have you been in here?” I asked.

“I have no idea. Long enough for a new civilization to arise.”

“Then... how did you bring me to this dimension? If you’ve been trapped for this long, did you have some type of god-level Rube Goldberg machine?”

“Ah, my boy,” Fortune said, his front growing somber. “I brought you here before I was ever imprisoned.”

“But, if that was thousands of years...”

“The life you knew on Earth passed by long ago,” Fortune said, reaching out to pat my shoulder with a hand that was the size of my chest, and Grotto floated away as the thick palm landed. The gesture shook my whole body, but I kept my balance.

I thought I’d made peace with the idea that Earth was behind me, but Fortune’s words showed me the truth. I’d been running my life at a sprint, never giving myself time to pause and think. I’d filled my days with non-stop training, fighting, and outfitting my Pocket Closet. I made lists in my head before I drifted to sleep, about new things I could make or study. It was a habit I had in my old world, and I’d imported it straight to this one.

Now that it was revealed that everyone I’d known and loved were not only unreachable, but long dead and buried, a fresh sprout of grief began to emerge. It broke through the emotional soil I’d scorched and salted, reminding me of the life that once grew there.

There was no home to go back to.

I had so many questions, but they died before reaching my lips. I felt myself begin to fold inward, to cut myself off from reality in a fit of self-pity. The brooding, disgruntled Arlo of the past breezed into the shattered remains of the glass house I’d built around my emotions, whispering about how he told me so.

‘This is what happens,’ shitty Arlo says. ‘This is our life. We’re raised in a family that’s ripped away. We build a new life and it’s destroyed by betrayal. We build a better one *and we fucking die*.

‘What will happen to *this* one? Why should we get invested at all? Why should we bother?’

But, we didn’t have to do anything. I wasn’t that guy when I arrived in Arzia, and I didn’t think I ever really *was* that guy. He was a fiction I created to hate myself with more efficiency, and I’d retired that caricature of my past. Learned to give myself grace for how I used to be. At least, I thought I had. So as the storm clouds rolled in, and the Big Sad tried to invite me to cuddle up with it in front of a cozy fire, I took a deep breath and

turned down the invitation. I wasn't going to give up trying to make a better life for myself.

Besides, there wasn't any time for my gloomy bullshit.

"We need to deal with Orexis," I said. "I'd love to stand here and play twenty questions, but there's too much at stake to get hung up over how and why you brought me here."

Fortune frowned, letting go of my shoulder and standing upright. He looked me up and down, then crossed his arms.

"I know how much time we have," said Fortune's front.

"Plenty," said the left.

"Less than two minutes," said the right.

"**The reason *why* I brought you here is simple,**" his three mouths said in unison. Reality shook under their combined speech, reminding me of the sensation from Orexis' words when he created Etja. "**You exist to set me free.**"

"Good job," said the left.

"Congratulations," said the right.

"Your reward is that you are alive when you should have died," said the front. "As for those that aided you..." His three sets of eyes looked over the rest of my party. "I allow you to do battle with the Specter of Orexis."

All six eyes settled on me, and I took an involuntary step back. For the first time, I began to see the soul of Fortune, and I got the impression that he was *showing* it to me. *Allowing* me to see it, and reminding me that without his permission, I couldn't, even with my soul-sight ability.

An ability *he* gave me in the first place with the *Traveler's Amulet*.

Fortune's soul did not dominate the room. It didn't crash down on me like an all-consuming force as Orexis' did. It was tight, controlled, and held firm to his body like custom-made armor. Still, all the details of the world around me disappeared, robbing me of any perception outside of Fortune's soul.

It held no metallic color like a Delver's, but was made up of thousands of faces with myriad hues, each wearing a different expression ranging from horror to glee. Fortune's soul was less like seeing the soul of an individual, as much as it was like seeing

thousands of souls at once, all wrapped around a single entity and compressed on top of one another. It was not malicious, but neither was it benevolent.

Like Orexis, there was a deep *desire* within it. A desire that would serve only Fortune, and grant blessings and curses to all in his wake.

I was brought here to prison break *this*? Cage had told us Fortune wasn't as *bad* as the other avatars in here but still gave the divinity a fifty percent chance of raining hell down upon the world. After seeing Fortune's soul, I thought Cage might have been conservative with his estimate. Sure, he wasn't giving off sadist vibes, but most *psychopaths* weren't malicious. They just did what they wanted and fuck everyone else. *This* was my fucking quest?

I'd never really thought of myself as a summoned *hero*, but I didn't think I was a goddamned summoned *villain*.

"Fighting Orexis," Nuralie began to say, then paused for much longer than her normal beat. "Fighting Orexis doesn't sound like a reward."

Fortune turned a face to the Loson, and his soul disappeared from my sight. The world rushed back to me all at once, and I gasped as Fortune began to belly-laugh again.

"If you prevail, it will be!" Fortune said.

"And if we don't?" Nuralie asked.

"That question answers itself," said the right mouth, Fortune nodding with the words.

"Then why did we release you?" I said. "You're supposed to be a fallback, to stop him."

"This Delve exists at my pleasure," all three voices declared. **"I am no mechanism to be deployed."**

The room's mana-weaves flared and flickered. Several more of the sigils sparked and died before the room went back to its normal, steady glow.

"Do not worry," Fortune's front said in a calming tone after his verbal assault on the fabric of the universe. "I will ensure that Anesis does not accelerate the Delve's collapse."

"But that stain," said the right, "that *suggestion* of Orexis is beneath me."

"He'll be good practice for you," said the left.

“It is time,” said the front. “Now, we shall go to Orexis, and I shall teach his sister that she’d have been happier if her brother had let her rot in here.”

Fortune strode forward, causing me and Shog to hurry out of his path, and approached the room’s portal. He waved a mighty hand, and the portal collapsed into nothing, revealing an arched doorway to the inner cage.

“It really did just take us to the other side of the wall,” I muttered.

Fortune bent down to walk through the arch and leapt off the platform at the top of the mile-high inner cage without sparing the rest of us a glance.

We ran outside the room to the top of the ladder, looking down to see Fortune plummeting away.

“How the fuck do we follow him?” I asked. The answer we got was a wave of force that tore us from the platform and sent us careening toward the bottom.