

“Lady Sam’lia,” I said, giving the goddess a bow.

“No need to be too formal,” she said, then gestured to the chair beside her. “Please, sit.”

I walked forward and lowered myself into the chair. There was a knot of anxiety building in my gut that prevented me from appreciating how disgustingly comfortable it was. I wasn’t sure what I’d been expecting Sam’lia to look like; maybe a disembodied presence, a giant floating brain, or an incomprehensible cosmic void. A relaxed soccer mom hadn’t made the list of things I was prepared to see.

It was nice that she appeared like someone that I could have a ‘normal’ conversation with, but on the other hand, it made the situation more real. I didn’t think that I would have had much of a problem with the discussion growing contentious if the entity with whom I was speaking was monstrous. As it was, the woman before me looked kind and non-threatening. Her appearance touched on an ingrained social instinct that made me *want* us to get along. Not that I hadn’t wanted us to be amicable before, but now if we didn’t, I’d feel kind of bad for letting this nice-looking lady down. Maybe she’d planned for that, or maybe I was overthinking it.

“How are you doing?” she asked, breaking me out of my mental spiral.

I started to respond with a stock reply but paused to think it over. I saw no reason to be anything less than honest with Sam’lia. She’d already seen everything I’d ever done in my life twice. Once when I was layer walking and the Eye peered into me and another time when Xim hit me with Judgment.

“I think there are several answers to the question,” I said.

“I’d be disappointed if there weren’t,” she replied with a smile.

She reached down and picked up a crystal decanter from a side table between us which I hadn’t noticed before. It was filled with a golden liquid and she poured a measure of into one of two crystal tumblers. She held it up, inquiring.

“Honestly,” I said, “I’ve been trying to avoid the harder stuff as much as possible in this life.”

Her smile grew mischievous, and she leaned in a little.

“It’s apple juice,” she half-whispered, as though it were a secret.

“*Apple* juice? As in, Earth apples?”

“As best as I could make them from your memories.” She took the liberty of filling the second glass nearly to the brim, then picked it up and handed it to me. I took it gingerly so as not to spill and took a tentative sip. It was chill, but not *too* chill, as though it had been left to rest outside on a crisp autumn day. It was also damn good. I savored it, then took a deeper swallow.

“That’s the second-best apple juice I’ve ever had,” I said.

“Second?” said Sam’lia. “What was the first?”

“My nan had an orchard. Nothing quite like homemade, no offense.”

She waved a hand.

“None taken. If I were *second* best at everything I tried for the first time I think I’d be doing pretty well. Besides, sentiment and nostalgia aren’t something you can grow in apples.”

“Can’t you, though? Here in the Third Layer?”

She pointed at me with the hand that held her glass.

“Now *that’s* a question with many answers,” she said. “You first. How *are* you?”

I sat back in the chair, feeling the knot inside me starting to loosen a little.

“I’m stressed,” I said. “Among other things.”

“How so?”

I gave her a careful look, trying to decide if she was trying to play the part of concerned relative, close friend, or therapist.

“I’ve been in Arzia a little over a year now and I’m starting to get a rhythm, but I still feel... alien. Maybe ‘isolated’ is a better word for it.”

“Is it so different from Earth?” she asked.

I shrugged.

“Depends on how you look at it. There are people and social structures that I understand. The cultures are different, but they make sense. It’s not as though I landed on a planet full of unrelatable squid people, but it’s still enough to take some time and effort fitting in.”

“Is that what you want?” she asked. “To fit in?”

“Sure,” I said. “I’m not going to pretend like I’m some special edge case who’s unaffected by feeling like an outcast. I don’t need to fit the world like a glove, but I’d like my glove to have the right number of fingers if that makes sense. I have no problem pushing back against things I think are wrong or being disliked by people who support abhorrent ideologies, but when it comes to regular, everyday people, I like to know I can have a conversation. That I can relate and that they don’t think of me as some outsider to be avoided or afraid of.”

“And you don’t think that you can do that.”

“Not really,” I said. “When I first came here, the thing that created this sense of separation was my lack of knowledge about the world. That was something I could fix. I couldn’t pretend like I was a lifelong resident, but I could read up and talk to people enough to sound like a competent foreigner. But now, the thing that separates me is that I’m constantly migrating away from many of the things that make a person a person.

“Compared to the majority of people on this planet, I’m superhumanly strong, agile, quick, and—at the risk of sounding immodest—attractive. I can get thrown through entire buildings without breaking a bone and I don’t even bruise or bleed anymore. I lost two teeth a week ago and they grew back in an hour.

“I see things others can’t: threads of mana, specters, people’s souls. Not to mention the amount of violence I’ve participated in this last year is more than any ten average people will *witness* in their entire lives.”

“Your allies share this experience with you, don’t they?” she said.

“That’s true. For most of it. Sure, I’ve got this ever-growing chasm between myself and ‘mundane’ people, but I can relate to Delters. However, the problem with relating with other Delters is two-fold. First, a lot of Delters are... guarded. Secretive. Each has their own power set and growth so it can be difficult to find someone that truly shares the experience of how you’re changing. Second, my party members each have their own culture and families which I don’t share. There are multiple layers of separation I have to cut through to connect with people. Plus, even back on Earth, I was considered to have kind of a big personality. Not everyone’s cup of tea.”

Sam’lia nodded and studied her glass.

“That’s understandable,” she said. “But you *have* been adopted, Arlo. You may feel isolated, but do you think part of that is your own doing?”

“Oh, yeah. Of course, it is. I’ve always had this problem. Arzia just amplifies it. As far as the adoption, I apologize that I haven’t come here sooner. Still, if we’re talking about strange... this place is as far from Earth as anywhere I’ve been so far.”

“No need to apologize to me,” she said. “I’m not here to tell you what to do or how to do it, especially if you have no wish for me to do so. If I were to give a word of advice, however, you might consider embracing the culture that you have been made a part of, rather than expecting it to embrace *you*.”

Sam’lia’s words cut through me, but the idea wasn’t a surprise. I’d always kept a degree of separation between my true emotions and the world at large, which I believed was a reasonable thing to do up to a certain point. I had taken it too far in the past, and maybe it was something I was still doing. I really couldn’t complain about failing to connect with people if I wasn’t making much of an effort.

“Thank you for sharing all of that with me,” she said, and it sounded genuine. “I won’t pry any further. As for *your* question about my world, could one grow nostalgia apples? Perhaps, but I wouldn’t say that the nostalgia grows within the apple, more like it’s being implanted there.”

“How does this place stay stable?” I asked. “If people can just think of something and make it real, I don’t understand how it can function.”

“That portrayal is somewhat simple, but I’ll offer you a simple answer,” she said. “It is because I will it to be so.”

“Ah, you’ve got your hand on the dream rudder.”

“In some places more than others,” she said with a wink. “Now, what can I do for you?”

The shift caught me by surprise.

“Oh,” I said, organizing my thoughts. “I just had some questions.”

“Feel free to ask,” she said. “No promises that you will like my answers, however.”

“Seems like the standard divine wisdom agreement,” I said, which earned me another playful smile. “First, these gifts from The Eye. From... you? I’m not sure how the whole seven-organged thing works, but is there something you expect from me? Some sort of...”

“Payment?” she said, raising an eyebrow.

“Not to sound too transactional, but yeah.”

She looked into the fire for a moment, the blue flame reflected in her crimson eyes.

“No,” she said. “See and Reveal responsibly.” She toasted her glass to me.

The ease of her response filled me with relief, although I had expected a bit more.

“That was surprisingly straightforward,” I said.

“Did you anticipate a long list of ‘thou shalls’ and ‘thou shalt nots’?”

“I did. That, or a blood sacrifice.”

She pointed at me again.

“Feel free to do that, just don’t sacrifice anyone I know. Not a requirement, though.”

“I- er,” I tried to interpret her expression, but it was impenetrable. I decided to leave that issue behind and forget that it existed.

“Okay,” I began, “if you don’t expect me to do anything in return for the gifts, do you expect me to do anything *at all*? Any holy missions you plan to send me on or people to smite in your name? Do you want me to do anything like... avoid eating pork on the weekend or try not to take up smoking?”

She sat her glass down and turned to me, resting her elbow on the arm of her chair and placing her chin upon it. It reminded me of Xim. Then again, maybe Xim reminded me of Sam’lia.

“That all depends,” she said.

“What does it depend on?”

“It depends on what you want.”

“What *I* want?”

“What do *you* want?”

“From yourself, or in general?”

“Both.”

“I want-” I struggled to find the right words. “I want to be the best version of myself. To have a place to call home full of friends and family. To have the power to protect them.”

“How do I help you with that?”

“You could tell me what Orexis is up to?”

She frowned.

“Orexis,” she said softly. “My perception of the First Layer is limited. I know only what my worshippers tell me, and little of that deals with the avatars.”

“What about the avatars, generally? What’s their whole deal?”

Her smile returned, though it was a little bitter.

“The avatars are *wrong*,” she said, and the room trembled with her words. “I do not know from what foul womb their brood spawns, but their existence is a plague upon this world.”

“That’s a pretty strong condemnation,” I said, and she turned to me, eyes glowing.

“I am legion, Arlo. My sisters and I span more worlds than I know and those to whom I have spoken do not find these entities in their realms. Some perversion creates them and their existence is anathema to life. All I know for certain is that when Delves begin to rise in the First Layer, the avatars rise to meet them. Now that they are here, they will only grow stronger.”

“Wow.” I shifted in my seat, suddenly warm. The fire in the hearth had kicked up.

“There’s a lot of threads to unravel in what you just said.”

“Yes, and I doubt that it eases your mind any.” Her eyes cooled, and she sat back, looking worn down. “I wish that I could tell you more that was helpful. For now, my best advice is to stay out of their way.”

I swallowed, then took another sip of the apple juice to clear a bad taste from my mouth.

“Staying out of their way might be hard to do,” I said. “I’m already on the radar for a few. What if I decide *not* to do that?”

“And take up Xim’s holy quest for vengeance?” She smiled again and I could swear I saw a fang peek out.

“I’m not sure vengeance is the thing I’m seeking, but as an example, sure.”

“If you wish to confront one, grow stronger. Grow until your power might wash away a nation and then grow stronger still.”

“Any advice on how to do that?”

“Don’t wait for the path you’re on to embrace *you*.”

“Embrace the path I’m already on.” I paused for a beat. “The System phases.”

Her eyes returned to the fire and the flames danced for her. She ran a hand through her hair, and it flowed like liquid around her fingers.

“Yes. Although the System is not your only road to strength,” she said. “You have your allies, your revelations, even the gifts given to you by the avatars themselves.”

I thought for a moment, then pulled out the Traveler’s Amulet and studied its dark gem.

“If avatars like Fortune are so dangerous, I thought you might ask me to get rid of this thing.”

She tilted her head from side to side, considering.

“Fortune’s gifts to you have been a great boon. I hesitate to say you should abandon them. Would you cast off that ring of his, as well?”

I looked down at my right hand where the Ring of Healing sat with its simple golden band and three ruby gems. I had gotten it as a ‘bonus item’ when I was resurrected, to compensate me for the loss of all my worldly possessions. Since learning more about Delving and mana-woven items I’d realized that the ring’s effect was much more powerful than its description let on when I chose it. It doubled every source of health regen I had and was practically the centerpiece of my build.

“This doesn’t give him some weird power over me,” I said, “does it?”

She glanced down at the ring.

“Only the gratitude that it earns him,” she said. “From what I’ve heard about Fortune he is a curiosity, even among the avatars. He’s not the type to lay out traps. He’ll convince you to build them yourself.”

“Then laugh as you fall into it,” I said.

“Maybe.” She sighed. “Of all the avatars that could be keeping an eye on you, he is, perhaps, the best.”

“Where does Orexis rank on that list? From best to worst?”

“Very bad.”

“That’s... really great.”

I turned my attention back to the amulet.

“I haven’t been able to unlock the next effect on this thing,” I said, holding it up and letting the chain dangle. “Xim thought you might have some insights.”

She studied the amulet, then held out a hand.

“May I?” she asked. I set it down into her palm and she ran a thumb across the flecked metal. She smirked. “‘Make Soul-Sight your own’,” she said, then chuckled. She passed the jewelry back to me. “Fortune has given you an impossible task.”

“How so? I initially thought that receiving the revelation—being able to use Soul-Sight without the amulet—would be enough. It hasn’t been.”

“That is because the power flows *through* you, but it is no more ‘your own’ than the air you breathe or the river you drink from. Your body is an organized pile of borrowed things. With every inhale and swallow you add to it, with every exhale and drop of sweat you return what was lent.”

“Huh. If that’s how Fortune sees it, then is that the big joke? I *can’t* unlock the next effect because I can only ever ‘borrow’ Soul-Sight?”

“That sounds too crude for Fortune from what I’ve heard about the creature,” she said. “I think he wanted to make sure that you came and talked to me.”

I tilted my head in confusion.

“Why would he want that?”

“Why did he encourage you toward Soul-Sight in the first place? He must have known that it would draw my attention and that my Eye would get a kick out of inspiring your growth.”

“You think I’m fun?”

She furrowed her brow.

“Naturally,” she said. “A man from another universe saves the life of one of my daughters and then begins peering into her soul. A man with the divine stink of avatar



wound around his veins, adopted into one of my tribes. A man who by all measures shouldn't be having anything to do with half the things you're doing. You're interesting."

"Thanks?"

"You're welcome," she said, picking up her glass and taking another sip.

I hefted the amulet, trying to decide if I wanted to ask anything more about it, but tucked it back into my pocket.

"I assume Fortune isn't the only avatar handing out trinkets," I said, and Sam'lia nodded. "Is that why you showed me Orexis's eyes in the flames of Judgment that covered Gharifon?"

"What you saw was influenced by your perception of the avatars." She ran a thumb over one of her bone rings. "Eyes are important to you, Arlo, even when looking past your gifts. That vision of endless pits gave you insight into Gharifon—either his nature or his past. The flames were a conduit for the vision but not its source. As for what I saw, Gharifon is a man of faith. That faith clouded what I could make out of his deeds, but the taste of them... He has been in contact with something *like* Orexis if not Orexis himself."

I mulled that over, wondering how much of my encounter with Tavio was chance. I started to move back to the System phase rollout, wanting to dig more deeply into what Sam'lia knew but I was taken by a different idea.

"Can you teach me more about magic?"

Sam'lia's smile returned, genuine and gleeful.

"I try not to meddle much," she said. "But if you're willing to take a risk, then I'm willing to give you a hint."