

Fortune continued to walk, footfalls trodding neatly between the bodies. Though the overall shape of the central cage was a sphere, the ground here was level. Looking at the distant edge, I could see that the floor we walked on abutted the sloping wall, built flat. I had no hint as to our destination from studying the terrain.

The world was filled only with the sound of our steps, and the occasional sparking of a rune and rumbling shudder of the Delve, until Xim grabbed me by the elbow and pulled me over to Nuralie.

“Nuralie!” Xim said, the sound of her excitement cutting sharply across the silence.

The Loson blinked at her.

“Yes?” Nuralie said.

“I was thinking, and you mentioned that you have spiritual sedatives.”

Pause. “I do.”

“Our tribe has an Irgriana tree in the Third Layer,” said Xim. “We use its sap to brew a type of liquor, but we don’t call it *liquor*, we call it a *spirit*. Not just because we prefer that word, but because the liquor has spiritual properties. Lots of things in the Third Layer do.”

“...Ok.”

“For tribe members, the spirit induces a mild hallucinogenic state. Since hallucinations in the Third Layer can manifest in physical form, it’s great for festivals and celebrations. Everyone sees what they can create with their mind.”

“Right,” I said. “Sounds fun... what if someone manifests a demon?”

“The rest of the tribe steps in if things get out of hand,” said Xim. “Hallucination Demons are no big deal. Pushovers.”

“What if they spawn something worse? Like a... clown... demon?” I asked.

“Hush,” said Xim, before turning back to Nuralie. “For people from the First Layer, the spirit doesn’t induce hallucinations, it sends them into a coma. The reason for this is that the brew has a positive interaction with the souls of Third Layer denizens, but it has a *negative* interaction with the souls of those from the First.” Xim stopped walking and took Nuralie by the shoulders, bringing the three of us to a halt. “It’s poisonous!”

“This is,” Pause. “Very fascinating. Why are you telling me?”

Kim whipped her head toward me.

“Arlo,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Do you still have those poison essences we farmed from *The Toxic Grotto* inside your inventory?”

“I do,” I said, trailing off on the vowel sound as I caught up with what she was getting at. “You said a poison essence can be used to make *any* type of poison.”

“Yes!” Xim said with a broad grin. “Nuralie, are you familiar with any spiritual poisons?”

“Of course,” Nuralie said, her eyes widening. “My sedatives are poisonous in large doses. Most alchemy products are.”

“Could you convert a poison essence into one?”

“Any crafter can convert essences,” she said. “Your skill limits what you can do with it. I could make one, but it would only be so strong.”

“Strong enough for an itty-bitty divine soul fragment?” I said. “Like Orexis?”

Nuralie looked thoughtful, then shrugged.

“I do not know if it would be,” she said. “We don’t know how powerful he is as a specter.”

“What’s the limiting factor?” I asked. “Is it based on skill level, or something else?”

“There are many,” said Nuralie. Pause. “Time is our first problem. My Intelligence evolution makes me craft faster, so I can do something quick and crude. The product won’t suffer too much. My Alchemy skill affects the potency of everything I make. I have an evolution to make poison more effective if a target is already poisoned.”

“So, you’re fast,” I said, “make stronger stuff, and maybe we can hit him with more than one poison to boost the effect. Sounds good to me.”

Nuralie shook her head.

“All spiritual substances require a spiritual tribute,” she said. “The stronger the soul, the stronger the product. Compared to Orexis, I do not think I am a good match. The

sedatives are already a gamble.” Pause. “Anything else I make would be a gamble as well. If none of them work, we waste time and ignore other strategies.”

As Nuralie spoke, my eyes wandered to Fortune. The avatar, along with the rest of our party, had stopped. Most of them gave us questioning looks, but not Fortune. He had a smile on all three of his faces. Like all his smiles, it was the kind that made me think he knew something I didn't. It was an expression I was learning to dislike.

His body was also hugged by the thousands of crawling faces that made up his divine soul. Something I knew he was showing me on purpose.

“Does it have to be *your* soul?” I asked, and Nuralie followed my gaze back to Fortune.

“I have to be involved,” she said. “But I do not have to pay the tribute.”

Our conversation was interrupted by a blast of air, causing me to throw my hand up over my face on reflex. When I dropped it, Fortune was no longer a hundred feet ahead of us. He was three feet away, towering over us.

“What secret words are we exchanging?” Fortune's front asked.

“We think we have a way to take on the Specter of Orexis,” I said.

“Oh?” Fortune said with mock surprise. “Tell me.”

We gave him the short version, then I hit him with the request.

“We'd like to use *your* soul to make the poison.”

The smile faded from Fortune's three faces, and he studied the ground for a moment. He didn't look angry, but he looked *serious*. It felt more real than anything else he'd shown us.

“Do you know how significant a request that is?” he asked, eyes flicking back up to my own. There was no hint of his jovial tone anymore.

“If I'm being honest,” I said. “No. You could explain it to me, and I probably *still* wouldn't know how significant it is. I'm- *We're* just a group of people trying to survive. *You*, and this whole situation,” I threw my arms out, gesturing at the rumbling, flickering Delve, “is so far outside our weight class I don't have words for it.”

I reached up and pulled my hood back, running my only-slightly-covered-in-guts hand through my hair. It had gotten a bit shaggier than I liked.

"I don't know what your limits are," I said. "I barely have a concept of how powerful you are, with the way you executed every creature in an entire monster war in less than a minute. But, I suspect that giving us the bit of soul we need to craft an anti-Orexis poison would be a drop in the cosmic ocean for you."

Fortune nodded, then sat his massive body down on the ground with a thud. He crossed his legs, which were short enough compared to the rest of him to look a bit cartoonish. Then, he leaned in.

"I am tempted to lie to you, Arlo," he said. "To tell you that my omnipotence is rivaled only by my omniscience. But, I believe it would serve us both better if I were more honest."

He sat back, placing his hands on his knees and taking a moment to study the Delve, his six eyes glinting in the azure glow.

"This Delve places an incredible burden on divine spawn. Because of the weaves all around us, struggling so hard to suppress the creatures into oblivion, their lives are like soap bubbles. My barest breath can pop them." He frowned. "Causing a blood vessel in the brain to fail, a claw to land one inch to the right, a minor imperfection in a dimensional tunnel... it's child's play when the environment is perfectly in tune with what I want, like it is here." His head nodded back and forth, as though his side faces were agreeing. "Anesis will not be like that," he continued. "Giving you a bit of soul, even the barest piece, increases my chance of failure."

His eyes fixed on Nuralie, and he held out a thick hand toward her, finger extended. The Loson flinched but stood her ground as Fortune lightly tapped her head.

"I just needed you to know that," Fortune said. He climbed back to his feet, and his smile returned. "I have a position for high priest open, by the way! I'm always looking for promising candidates. And not just you, Arlo!" He clapped me on the back, making me stumble forward. "All of you seem like fine adventurers! Now then, you have three and a half minutes left to make your poison. Good luck!"

I was addled for a moment, until Nuralie's presence grew tenfold in my mind.

Her soul erupted, the platinum swelling and becoming wrapped in a dozen swirling, smiling faces. The Loson looked panicked, taking heaving breaths as she struggled to stay upright. I stepped over and took Nuralie by the shoulders to steady her.

"Looks like Fortune gave you a present," I said.

“It hurts,” she said, voice ragged, body trembling. “Everything on the inside is trying to get out, while everything on the outside is crushing it back inside.”

I watched her with concern, keeping an eye on her health bar, but she wasn't taking any damage. The only insight the HUD gave me was a listed status effect.

Blessed: 9999

Probably a higher value than Nuralie was meant to have at her level. I mentally welcomed her to the club, while considering how I could help her. Before I could decide on anything, Nuralie pushed away from me. She dropped to her knees on the ground, opened her inventory, and started pulling out a few tools. Mortar and pestle, a couple of jars full of murky liquid, some paper packets full of powder, a mixing bowl, and a large copper spoon with a thin handle and tiny tip that looked like it was made for stirring the comically large cocktails.

She hurriedly dumped the contents of the jars into the mixing bowl, and the packets into the mortar. Her jaw was set firm and her entire body was tensed as she struggled to work through whatever chaos Fortune's soul was having on her. Tears slid down the side of her face.

She stopped for a second, then held out a hand to me.

“The flower I gave you,” she said.

I processed her sudden request, then threw open my inventory to pull out the water-producing flower she'd gifted me the first time we met. I placed it in her hand and she began mashing it up in the powder with the pestle.

“How many essences do you have?” she asked.

“As many as you need,” I said.

She nodded, shutting her eyes tight and tapping her clawed fingertips against her palms.

“One for simple, two for complex, four for expert, eight for supreme...”

“Sixteen for divine?” I suggested, following the math. I'd already begun pulling poison essences from my inventory and placing them on the ground beside her. The green,

egg-sized crystals let off an acrid vapor, which quickly began wafting all around us. Fortunately, none of us got a debuff from it. Must have needed a few hundred thousand to get a good toxic cloud going.

Nuralie scraped the mashed and mixed flower into the large bowl, then grabbed one of the essences. She held it over the bowl, chanted something under her breath, and the essence liquified. It dripped and splattered into the bowl, leaving Nuralie's gloves slick with deadly moisture. She immediately grabbed the next essence and repeated the process. She chanted so fast I could barely tell she was speaking words.

Once finished, Nuralie began stirring the bowl's contents with the long spoon. She went at it like a pro chef during rush, tilting the bowl and swirling the spoon so fast that the liquid whirlpooled.

"Heat," she muttered, then pointed the spoon at Xim, slinging a bit of the poison broth onto the hem of the cleric's robes. "Divine fire!"

Xim knelt next to Nuralie and held out her hands, sending a gentle flame of Sam'lia's crimson fire into the bowl.

"It's not a hatchling!" Nuralie snapped. "Hit it harder!"

Xim smiled gleefully and goutts of flame rushed from her palms, the fire arcing up out of the other side of the bowl, swirling into the air. Nuralie kept stirring.

First of all, I had no idea Xim could do that. I'd thought her divine fire was limited to her big smite attack.

Second, Nuralie's health began ticking down one point at a time, which was concerning, considering her diminutive health pool. I could see steam coming off of the Loson's face and scales. After a few feverish seconds of stirring and inferno, Nuralie nodded curtly.

"Stop," she said, and Xim pulled back. Then, Nuralie held her hands out over the steaming, bubbling concoction. Her brow furrowed as she pressed her palms forward, looking like she was struggling with an invisible force. The laughing faces all along her body began to slide down her arms, then spiraled around her hands. They moved faster and faster until they were a multi-colored blur.

The gifted piece of Fortune's soul streamed from Nuralie's palms into the liquid, the smiling faces reforming on the poison's surface, then dissolving into it. I watched in fascination as the liquid itself began to glow within my soul-sight.

Finally, the last bit of Fortune left Nuralie's body, and she collapsed backward, holding herself off the ground with her elbows. She looked like she'd just run a marathon.

Nuralie took three deep breaths, before pushing herself back up to sitting and pulling out a quiver of arrows. She grabbed the entire bundle by their hafts in one hand, yanked them out, and then shoved the heads into the still-boiling poison. She held up her free hand and began chanting again.

Mana streamed from her palm and wrapped itself around the arrows, then shot down into the brew. As I watched, the level of the liquid began to drop. When it dropped enough that the arrowheads could be seen again, I saw that the poison was being sucked *into* the metal. The arrowheads took on a sinister green sheen that rippled with a rainbow hue.

I leaned in closer to get a better look and could make out a tiny, laughing face crawling across the surface of each arrow.

Nuralie placed the bundle of arrows on the ground beside her, keeping one for inspection. She held it up in both hands, running her eyes over it. She flipped it up and squinted at the tip. Satisfied, she let out a breath and held the arrow out to Xim, then picked up another to hand to me. As we did our own inspection, Nuralie began packing up her supplies.

Divine Madrin Arrow of Soul Toxicity

Imbued with a spiritual poison crafted from the soul of a cosmic avatar, anything struck by this weapon will be afflicted by the debuff *Soul Toxicity*.

***Soul Toxicity*: A target afflicted by this debuff suffers damage over time to their spiritual essence. Unlike normal Toxicity, which naturally decays, Soul Toxicity persists until it is cleansed.**

This is a spiritual weapon that is capable of affecting incorporeal entities. Spiritual weapons ignore physical armor.

This is a divine weapon that deals bonus damage to entities scorned by the patron deity. Divine weapons ignore deific damage reduction.

Based on the crafter's skill, this item has been granted 1 Divinity Bonus.

Chosen Divinity Bonus: *Fated Target*.

***Fated Target*: This weapon gains a bonus to damage and debuffs when striking a target chosen by the crafter, but cannot harm any other entity.**

Chosen Target: Orexis, Avatar of Yearning.

This is a fleeting item and may only be used once.

"Well, goddamn," I said as I read the description. "Talk about having a bullet with a name on it..."

"It's amazing," said Xim. "I was worried that with Fortune involved, it would end up with some weird Luck-related skill."

"One of the Divinity Bonuses I could have chosen was called *Divine Misfortune*," said Nuralie. Pause. "I didn't like it."

I once again wondered about the speed at which some people managed to read the System notifications. Did it just upload it to their brain? Was I the only one using my eyeballs to look at them?

"Not a fan of relying on Luck?" I asked.

"No," said Nuralie as we began walking again. Pause. "You saw what happened to Ashe."

I grimaced and wondered if Nuralie had learned the wrong lesson from that encounter. The lucky tanker triplet had been the only person to affect Orexis when we first encountered him inside the entrance to *The Calvani Caverns*.

'Affect' meaning that she singed his clothes.

Ashe also managed to dodge a single one of Orexis' strikes, whereas the higher-level golds and platinums were getting slapped into craters. Really, Luck seemed to work well against Orexis. However, it had also caused Orexis to single Ashe out and it doomed Cole and Ember's sister to her atomized fate.

Some part of me wondered if Fortune being arrayed against Orexis and his sister, Anesis, was somehow related to the God of Yearning's apparent vulnerability to Luck. Regardless, no one in our party was built into the stat, so Nuralie likely made the right call.

Now that we had the "Fuck Orexis In Particular" arrows, we just needed to figure out how the Loson was going to *hit* his specter with them.

After all, Nuralie couldn't see him.