

Before Orexis could voice his displeasure, I asked a question that was burning a hole through my mind.

“So, if you’re in here, as a soul fragment,” I said, gesturing at the specter, “does that mean that the *real* Orexis, outside, doesn’t know that Fortune just kidnapped his sister?”

“Tell me where he has taken her,” Orexis demanded. His shadowy form trembled as the words whispered their way across our ears.

Varrin spat on the ground.

“I see no reason to answer the questions of a ghost,” he said.

It would have sounded pretty badass, if he wasn’t speaking to a spot several feet to the left of where Orexis really was. Varrin was following my gaze, but there was nothing for him to lock onto.

“No, no, no...” Orexis muttered, looking away from us and running a translucent hand along the side of his snout. “Do you even know where Anesis would be? Or has Fortune betrayed you, as well?” He turned back, studying each of us in turn. “Yes. I see. The avatar of mystery has tricked us all.”

“Avatar of... mystery?” I said. I was expecting this conversation to be a lot more hot-blooded than it was, but Orexis’ rage seemed directed at Fortune, rather than at us.

“I guess the concept of fortune can be mysterious,” Xim said.

“It’s not what I was expecting.”

“You are all fools,” snarled Orexis. “No one *knows* what he is the avatar of. He calls himself Fortune, but what is he really? Fate? Luck? He defies each concept with his actions, eternally contradictory in his motives.”

“Sounds like chaos,” I said.

“That makes sense,” said Xim.

As the three of us conversed, Nuralie disappeared. The room was lit only by the lingering orange glow of the hundreds of obliterated corpses. The mounds of dismembered flesh were also large enough to hide behind in places.

“He is too organized for chaos,” said Orexis. “His plans interlock in layers. There is reason to them, but they are impossible to foresee.”

“A foe I would call cunning,” offered Shog. Orexis’ eye-holes narrowed at the c’thon, then swept the room.

“It is of no matter,” the specter said. “I wish to hunt all my betrayors, whether in the worlds above or below.” He floated closer to the center of the chamber, glaring down at us. “And I see many betrayors before me.”

“I never *agreed* to work for you,” I said. “Sort of impossible for me to betray you.”

“I need not your consent to deliver unto you my decrees. You have defied me, and I now wish to consume you. To understand *why* you have done so.” He floated down toward us, arms spread like six-armed Jesus descending from the heavens. “Especially you, daughter.”

Orexis reached out toward Etja with all three of his right arms, clutching his heart with the largest of his left.

Etja’s eyes went wide as she listened to Orexis’ words, her body as stiff as when she was made of clay.

“I brought you into this world,” said Orexis.

“Hey, hold on,” I said. “You’re not about to say ‘and by gawd, I can take you back out!’ are you?”

Orexis slowly turned his head toward me.

“I will savor you last,” he said.

“Dude.” I pointed at Orexis, who’d drawn within fifteen feet of us. “You gotta work on your villain speech. It’s a bowl full of *Oops! All Tropes!* right now.”

“And because of your betrayal,” Orexis said, ignoring me, “I will allow the void sphere to collapse this space, and wreak havoc on the outside world. Perhaps the prisoners will find their ways to your family homes as well. Those was the terms of our agreement, and such shall be the payment for your treachery.”

“No, you said that you would take the void sphere back out of the dimensional anchor if we helped you release Anesis,” I said, still pointing at Orexis. “The contract didn’t specify what would happen if we *didn’t*.”

“Silence!” Orexis hissed, his ephemeral voice echoing through the spherical chamber. “Your pedantry knows no bounds! There was no *contract!*”

“Ah, so you admit that we weren’t legally bound to help you.”

Orexis rushed me, his form trembling in rage. The fingers of his smaller hands began to glow as his pair of large, upper hands reached toward my throat.

I gulped, but kept pointing at the specter.

A *twang* sounded from just behind me, and I felt the wind of an arrow as it tore past my right ear. Nuralie had been behind me this entire time. The projectile shot along my arm’s trajectory, the missile close enough that the fletching brushed my armor. It sailed directly at Orexis’ center mass.

Orexis did a goddamn barrel roll.

The specter spun to the side, evading the arrow and closing the distance between us. I tried to bring up *Gracovus*, but Orexis was too fast. His oversized hands grabbed me by the throat and lifted me into the air as one of his smaller fingers blazed orange.

“My sister’s favorite spell,” he whispered, then a beam of disintegrating energy erupted from the digit. The same beam that Orexis Prime had used to melt stone. The same beam that Etja had used to cull dozens of Praying Heads.

It struck me in the chest and bore a hole through my armor in a second. I felt the ice-cold chill of flesh being seared away by intense heat. The sensation overwhelmed me and I wrestled with Orexis’ limbs in panic, rather than doing something more useful like, say, casting *Oblivion Orb* on his wrist.

But, while I was stupefied by the white-hot bolt boring into my ribcage, the rest of my party knew *exactly* where Orexis was.

A greatsword flashed by my face, blade wreathed in gray mana that shone in my soul-sight. The force lifting me disappeared, as Orexis’ intangible arms were severed from the rest of him at the forearm. Then, a crimson beam crashed down onto the specter, engulfing his form in holy fire.

I staggered backward, but managed to keep my feet under me. I brought *Gracovus* into targe mode, not believing for a second that Varrin and Xim’s one-two combo would be enough. I glanced at my health.

HP: 367 -> 305

Even after being interrupted, it was a hit that would have one-shot either Etja or Nuralie, and taken both Xim and Varrin below half. But, it wasn't the godly hit I half-expected. It looked like the soul-fragment's labors within the crucible of the Divine-crushing Delve had softened it up for us.

I snapped my attention back to the fight, ignoring the scorching pain beginning to assert itself in my chest, and focusing on the flames before me.

An arrow zipped into the column of fire, but the specter burst away from within before it connected. He was still ignited, the divine inferno sticking to him like napalm, and hope swelled as my allies were able to track his movement. An invisible man is hard to see, but an invisible, *burning* man really stands out.

As flames danced through the air, consuming their unseen fuel, Nuralie loosed another arrow, but the specter continued to dodge. For the first time, I saw the results of Nuralie's miss. The arrow impacted the ground beyond Orexis and between the dismembered bodies, shattering into motes of light.

'May only be used once' really meant *once*. Nuralie had already fired three shots of her seventeen.

I pulled out the pair of my own divine arrows from my inventory and used *Thrown Weapon* on one. I knew it was unlikely to hit, but the more shit Orexis had to dodge, the better the chances that someone else's arrow would connect. I gripped the second arrow, waiting for Orexis' flight to calm, while the first arrow shot toward him at less than half the speed of one fired by Nuralie. A pulse of mana flooded the air around the specter.

Orexis used the same tactic he'd used against the matriarch's volcanic attack, and cast a wave of dispelling mana to douse the flames on his person. My thrown arrow made its approach, and the specter's lower set of limbs caught it.

I cast *Shortcut*, appearing behind Orexis in the air, intending to thrust forward with the second arrow while he was distracted with the first. When I appeared, one of his larger hands was *already* reaching around behind him, completely reformed as though Varrin had never cut it away. The specter's shoulder twisted like rubber as the limb moved into an impossible angle, the hand seizing my wrist before I could make contact with the arrow.

In hindsight, the fact that an incorporeal soul monster that was spawned from a god-like being had insane flexibility and range of motion shouldn't have been surprising.

The limb heaved me over Orexis' shoulder, and I lost my grip on the arrow, which sent it tumbling to the ground. Good news: dropping the damn thing didn't count as using it. Bad news: I was once again facing down a full throttling.

This time, I *did* cast *Oblivion Orb* on Orexis' wrist. Normally, this would have been really effective at getting an enemy made of meat and bone to let me go. Sadly, all it did was put a hole in the soul-stuff the specter's wrist was made of. The grip held firm, since there was no tendon or muscle that enabled the hand's movement. The specter's body had no biological logic to it, other than the limits of form that he'd chosen to take. I wasn't even convinced he had to stick to the form he was in. For all I knew, he could transform into a walrus. A *violent* walrus.

A violent walrus *with six arms*.

Before a fresh glowing finger could start uncovering the secrets of my heart, however, a wave of blue mana pulsed around us, making Orexis' spell fizzle.

It was identical to the spell Orexis had cast to douse Xim's flames. Orexis turned to look down at Etja, whose fingers glowed in mirror to his own, though with fewer colors. I used the distraction to land another *Oblivion Orb*, severing his wrist. I tried to twist free, but the second hand held me firm as the one I'd *just* amputated immediately reformed. I tried to cast another *Shortcut* to escape, but Orexis immediately hit me with a debuff that kept me from casting the spell.

Silent Commandment: You cannot cast spells for the next thirty seconds. All beneficial spells affecting you have been dispelled.

Orexis began to squeeze, and he quickly rotated so that he held me directly between himself and my allies. I felt a gentle thunk in my back, and assumed another arrow had gone to waste. Orexis slid his glowing hands past my waist, pointing them at my allies. My vision began to darken as the blood flow to my brain was restricted.

Body of Theseus has negated the debuff Unconscious.

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[Grotto! Can you broadcast what I'm seeing to the rest of the party? Give them a better target?]

[*I cannot perceive what you see with your soul-sight, lest you've forgotten.*]

My mind ran all the way back to my conversation with Grotto inside the baths after the Creation Delve. He got impressions of what I was seeing, but the soul-sight didn't make it to the live feed.

[Fuck.]

[*Yes, this is a very unpleasant experience for me as well.*]

Why couldn't Grotto see it? What was it about the ability that didn't translate across our connection? Was it because soul-sight was divine in origin? Was it because the ability had come from the damn *Traveler's Amulet* initially? Goddammit, I'd made the ability my own like the amulet told me to do. I didn't need the amulet, I had the Eye's blessing! Why couldn't Grotto see it, still?

Body of Theseus has failed to negate the debuff Unconscious!

In the moments before darkness engulfed me, I had a brief thought.

If only I could *show* Grotto what I see... If only I could *show* all of them...

Then, there were feathers.

I didn't know how long I was out, but I came back to consciousness in a storm of downy tentacles.

Shog'tuatha raged in the air before me, his feelers ripping through Orexis' specter, but the soul-fragment was unphased. A pair of Shog's tentacles were wrapped around my waist, the c'thon jerking my body enough for Orexis' grip on my neck to loosen, and Shog had worked a feeler between the specter's palm and my throat. Not a great way to break someone's chokehold, but it worked. Sort of. My neck hurt like shit.

HP: 305 -> 258

Orexis grappled several of Shog's feelers in his upper and lower hands, but the c'thon had yet more, which he used to whip the space in front of me. Shog'tuatha may not have been able to see Orexis, but his attacks didn't require much finesse, and my summon began weaving claw strikes and kicks into the mix.

Where Shog struck, his blows dispersed Orexis' form like smoke, but the specter's essence quickly reformed. I had no idea if the attack was even dealing damage, but either way, Orexis was tired of the c'thon's antics.

The specter raised a finger, the color of rotted eggplant, and drove a wave of mana into the c'thon.

Shog ignored the spell, continuing to strike at his invisible foe, and I watched in horror as the c'thon's exposed flesh began to blacken. His feathers fell from his body in droves, exposing necrotizing flesh beneath.

"It is especially effective against summons," Orexis commented, as Shog's body continued to decay before my eyes. "I know not why."

Violet blood began seeping from Shog's large, black eyes, and the c'thon took a breather from his melee. He reached up with his long, taloned hands and wiped the blood from his face, body trembling.

Then, he bellowed, but his voice was not the one I'd come to know.

"I WILL EAT YOU!" Shog roared in a demonic screech.

His tentacles flew open, revealing the mouth that lay behind his 'beard'. It was a vicious beak, with six sharp edges that snapped open, revealing rows and rows of dripping, dark blue teeth. His tongue was spiked and covered in sharp bristles. It shot out into the air like a harpoon and, to the surprise of both myself *and* Orexis, it connected.

Then, a pulse of dark light ran down Shog's tongue, transferring into Orexis' shade-like body. Shog'tuatha jerked back and the tongue retracted, pulling the specter to his horrible mouth, where the beak's razor edges bit down and *chewed*.

Whatever Shog was doing, it was working. Chunks of Orexis' soul broke away, and I could see the visceral impact his gnashing teeth had on Orexis' body—fleshy resistance giving way beneath the relentless pressure of Shog's piercing teeth. It was one of the most fascinating things I'd ever witnessed; an extra-dimensional mana-fiend gorging itself on the magical essence of a divine soul fragment, and I was literally seeing it from arm's length, still held in Orexis' grasp.

The damage done by Orexis' spell began to reverse. Bloodflow stymied, dark veins cleared, rotting flesh began to regrow. I even saw a few fresh tufts of feathers sprout from Shog's bare chicken skin.

But, Orexis was smiling.

It was a ghastly thing, the avatar of Yearning's non-mouth. It was little more than a spiraling pit to whatever hell his atomized victims fell into, but it stretched broad across his snout like a feral dog.

"I am reminded of my place, sometimes," said Orexis, reaching up and stroking one of Shog's tentacles as the c'thon took another bite. "To all the beasts that prowl the land, using tooth and claw to sate their hunger, **I am your god.**"

Orexis' mouth opened wide, the pit to endless nothing on full display. A single word echoed through reality, and the revolting *desire* of Orexis' soul pressed down upon me.

"Consume."

And Shog went from the eater, to the eaten.

Shog'tuatha's flesh first began to crumble, then shatter, into thousands of pieces that were sucked into Orexis' endless maw. It began with Shog's tentacles, and the dark c'thonic bone beneath was quickly revealed. Then, the phenomenon moved toward the c'thon's center.

This was going to kill him.

I hit my mental emergency release button, and dismissed the summon. A portal opened, sucking Shog into it and away from Orexis. It snapped closed in an instant, leaving the specter vacuuming up the last few c'thon flakes drifting through the air.

Orexis turned to me and wiped the side of his mouth with the back of a hand. It was a superfluous gesture, but his empty eyes stared into me as he did so. I was surprised he wasn't licking his fucking fingers.

The pressure on my neck redoubled, Shog's limb no longer present to prevent my strangulation.

I glanced down toward my allies, eyes feeling like they were about to pop out of my skull. My party members manuevered from place to place, trying to get a good angle on the unseen force attacking me, but it was no use.

Nuralie had her bow drawn, but Orexis kept my body between himself and her attack. Varrin circled, looking like he was prepared to leap up and strike at Orexis, but he had no way to plan his trajectory. Etja's hands glowed, but she couldn't, or wouldn't, risk an indiscriminate death ray. Grotto hovered at a safe distance, but his tentacles writhed in the shared anguish of my impending demise, our *Shared Fate* ability displaying its hazards.

Xim, however, was praying.

HP: 258 -> 228

The sight of Xim praying made something click in my mind.

***Body of Theseus* has negated the debuff Unconscious.**

I was the only one who could see Orexis, because of my soul-sight.

HP: 228 -> 198

I no longer needed the *Traveler's Amulet* to use the ability, because I had learned to see souls through the Eye's blessing.

***Body of Theseus* has negated the debuff Unconscious.**

Seeing was the Eye's first blessing.

HP: 198 -> 168

Showing was the Eye's second.