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### The Wager

In times of prosperity, such as these, it is not uncommon for gods to fill the time through other means. High upon the hills of Olympus, Caerus, the god of luck, was negotiating the terms for a wager with Momus the satirist.

“I have endowed them with wit and wisdom.” Momus said. “Any idiot could see through the forgeries built in your name.”

“Only an idiot would resist the splendours that could be achieved in my name.” Caerus cracked a sly smile. Twirling his white goatee between long, uncut fingernails.

“You are a fools fool. Blind to man’s wisdom to look past your illusions.”

“And you are my fool. Blind to their willingness to indulge my illusions.”

They locked eyes in a silent stalemate.

“Then a wager it is.” Caerus broke the silence.

“I have not yet agreed to anything.” Momus replied.

“Since I am feeling lucky, I am gracious enough to let you choose the pawn.”

Momus rubbed his bald spot, thinking over the proposition. His work had only gotten harder given the current state of affairs. It is good to be good, but better to be lucky and Momus could use luck on his side.

“I get to choose?”

“You get to choose.”

“Then you have a wager.”

Lucius awoke from restless slumber to find he was not in the same place where he went to sleep.

Smooth linen caressed his calloused skin used to sleeping on hard floors. Cool air blew through his long beard bleached by years in the sun. In his previous life as a sailor, he was used to waking up each morning in a new land. Born on the deck of a trireme, he was nursed on salt water and suffered from terminal land-sickness.

He stumbled out of the dark room into a long hallway stretching to the horizon. The makers of this grand palace had captured the sun and put it into orbs hanging from the roof. Doors lined both sides of the hallway *ad infinitum*, each bearing a number. One of the doors was a large, metallic double door with a crowd standing outside it.

Boisterous young men merrily drank from large wine jugs. Lucius joined in their revelry, taking swigs from the drinks offered to him. Lucius asked, “where am I?” but the men ignored his words. Not caring who Lucius was they pushed him into a tiny room that began to shake as the doors closed. The room stood still but Lucius felt himself moving. The doors opened after an eternity and he emptied his stomach onto the ground before falling over into a pool of his own sick.

Endless crowds walked over his crumpled body. Lucius' garbled speech was only met with laughter, cheering and the occasional look that carried the threat of violence with it. He spoke and screamed but nobody cared to listen.

His tongue had been taken from him.

A gargantuan Moorish man, who walked like a mountain with legs, appeared before Lucius.

"Brother. Brother. Where am I?" Lucius asked.

"Anywhere but here, man." He replied.

The man helped Lucius to his feet and walked him through echoing halls. The splendor surpassed the finest temples that populated Lucius' imagination. Marble columns held up cavernous rooms where onlookers walked in between effigies of generals and statesmen. Lucius felt the blessings of a pantheon of statues looking down on him from the perch of a great fountain. He thought that the patron of this temple built these tributes to thank the gods for great fortune.

He was wrong. They built this palace to atone for their transgressions.

Lucius' people had left this forsaken place. Giving up any hope their stories may last, they vacated only to be replaced by doubles. Refractions not reflections, who defiled hallowed ground with wanton excess.

Dancing nymphs bared skin to insatiable audiences. Selling love and lust, endowed to them by *Eros* in exchange for items to fill pockets. They showered the nymphs in small coins resembling *denarius*.

Lucius picked up one of the coins. Bright green and soft to the touch, it was not made from silver or any material known to him. Confronted with the golden visage of an emperor on the coin, Lucius tucked the coin into his tunic.

Standing outside in the warm wind, Lucius thought he died in his sleep and awoke in Elysium.

All the great wonders of the earth now stood before him.

The Roman Colosseum's shadow hung over grand canals resonating with the love ballads of Venetian ferrymen. Water danced on a lake, rising to irrigate the stars. The Great Pyramids of Giza illuminated the night surrounded by obsidian obelisks scraping the heavens.

The architects of this land had captured all the colours of the rainbow in tubes of lightning. They hung from every surface and lit the night as if it were day. Tongues of neon fire cracked through the aether and struck Lucius blind. The scripts, in a language he had never known, started to form in his mind's eye.

*Flamingo. Stardust. Casino Royale. Bellagio.*

"Help me" Lucius reached out to those walking by him.

"Get away from me, you fucking bum."

One of the kinder responses.

Lost and alone, Lucius stumbled blindly through the street, trying to feel his way home. Bare feet scraping on pavement, stripping skin to a callus. An endless river of onlookers kept him in their periphery. Acknowledging the basest level of human presence while refusing to

make eye contact and accept his humanity. The crowded street corridor's cacophony trepanned his ears and baked his brains.

His legs finally collapsed after an hour of walking.

Through clouded eyes he could see the outlines of legs walking over him. Arms wrapped around Lucius and dragged him into the alcove of a side street. His saviour, a scraggly older man with a wiry beard, resembled the scholars teaching in the Lycaeum. People walking by dropped coins in a tin cup the man was holding. Lucius repaid the favour by dropping the bright green *denarii* into the cup.

"High roller." The man said. "You can't sleep on the walkway brother. PD's been cracking down lately, cleaning up. They'll take any excuse to fuck us up."

Lucius did not understand what the wise man said, but reveled in his warm touch.

"How do I get home?" Lucius asked.

"I don't know what the hell you are saying, but it'd do you some good if you spoke English. People aren't getting any nicer to foreigners. Must be in the air now." The man twiddled his fingers in the air as he said this. "Doesn't matter what you speak though. We're both in the shit."

Lucius was sure that if he closed his eyes here, he would enter a sleep from which he would not wake.

Willingly, he closed his eyes to escape this nightmare.

The gods, however, were not through with him yet. Warmth surrounded his body and he awoke to see a boy standing before him.

The boy radiated a light which swallowed up the neon tongues of fire surrounding him. He wore a gold crown adorned with precious diadems and lapis lazuli, curved sceptre in one hand, palm fronds and hibiscus in the other.

The boy grabbed his hand and Lucius could feel life filling his body. They walked towards the end of the strip and as they walked, crowds thinned, lights dimmed, and sounds muted. They arrived at the edge of the city, sand between their toes.

“Why have you brought me here?” Lucius asked.

“Different forces caused our paths to cross. Different yet the same. Playing dice with the lives of mortals.”

“This is torture. Seeing what they have done to my people.”

“It is an honour. To witness the grandeur.”

“There is no honour in walking through a living necropolis.”

“Yet, even after all this time our people still live through tales told and untold. At least you will die knowing they achieved immortality.”

“Nothing of them remains. Only cheap facsimile and even that cannot last forever.”

Lucius could see over the boy’s shoulder that the city they came from no longer stood. All that remained was dust and echoes.

“Your illusion crumbled at the slightest doubt.”

“He traded coin for brotherhood. The illusion still stands though the city does not.”

“Seeing as how there is no clear winner...”

“Another wager?”

“Double or nothing.”