

Cirius and the Demonic Shaman

A week before Autumn

Saturday

Night

At day, on the streets of this auspicious kingdom stroll fine people around finer houses. At night, that farce is broken, and the rancorous figures of drunkard and crooks prowl around the luridly lit streets. On this particular night, there was a drizzle. The raindrops trickle down the many corpulent bodies of husbands kicked out of taverns. The droplets titillate their skin, leaving many tittering on the ground, visualising the touches of mistresses they are unlikely to ever have.

As the drizzles continue enveloping the drunks in their fantasies, a singular figure strode through the deplorable streets. On any other day, this man would face the ordeals of being grabbed on the ankle by one of these men, but fortunately, today, they are doubly drunk, so that little misfortune was dodged. The figure strode in robes of red, which glisters with linings of gold woven into the fabric. A pair of dignified clothes befitting his dignified face, stern and convicted.

He is the priest of the town, with secrets, of course, as priests usually do. If he is seen out at this ungodly hour, where sybarites do their deeds, one can only imagine the rumours! So, he continued on furtively, thinking about how stupid he was for wearing such extravagant attires. Right beside an oaken house, the priest turned into the narrow alley. As the light from the inns and taverns slowly fade away behind, he relished in the surrounding sense of security, found only in the dark. He breathed, and continued in his journey... only to immediately collide into an obstacle.

Suddenly, he was jolted backwards. Perplexed, he steadies himself, and confronts the obstruction in his path. A boy, barely up to his chest in height.

“Pardon me, boy,” he swiftly blurted out, as he crosses over the young body nimbly.

“No bother...” came the unconcerned reply of the boy, also passing briskly.

A mere instance later, they processed the situation, and stopped still in their tracks. The priest spun around frantically, and stared at him with befuddlement. The boy peered across his shoulder intensely. They shared a moment of eye contact; the inundating aura of unease was about to force one of them to talk. The priest, though, was the first to move away. The boy did as well, and disappeared into the town.

“The less I know, the better,” They both concluded from that second of unfaltering eye contact.

This bizarre encounter, with the priest, the boy, and even the oaken house, is only a speck among the pool of strangeness that is the kingdom of Midgard. And the sane mind can’t even begin to comprehend the strangeness that the whole continent may hold. Of course, if we try hard enough, we can spin anything into coherency, into riveting tales to tell. This is a story written by Nature and Fate, then delivered in bastardized form by a person of stagnant lifestyle. Nature and Fate alone are good storytellers, but to dwell on their stories too much, to try to find meanings, is a road to insanity. The best one can do, is fixate on the moment, or better yet, to enjoy it...

For now, the crux of the tale lies with a boy, around twelve years of age. A boy who goes by the name ‘Cirius’- however way you pronounce it, he isn’t particularly fussy about, but when asked will always resort to his default answer of “Cee-rius”-. The boy, who lives by that street of dirty hedonists and suspicious holy man. The boy, who lives in that small, cozy, oaken house.

Six days before Autumn

Sunday

Morning

As the morning sun chases away the foreboding darkness of the alleyways and the streets, the kingdom rises anew.

Cirius' slumber is thoughtlessly interrupted by the rays of the sun, that so sneakily seep through the tiny gaps of the curtain, landing directly upon his face. Writhing on his bed with unrest, he tries to escape their reach, by way of hiding beneath the blanket and pressing his face deep within the pillow. Alas, having lost all the pleasures of sleep, he gets up to sit at the bedside. The boy's tousled, golden hair takes in the sun's glare to cover the room with a scintillating glow.

He remained in that nebulous state of sleep-wake for a while, before his eyes sprung into life, eager and exuberant. He scurried away from the bed, out the bedroom door. Cirius dwells alone in this small cabin, which he seldom questions how. Throughout his life, he has never been bothered here, no landlords, no mention of "rents", a word he's heard too often throughout the neighbourhood, like from Mr. Anders:

"The lout's come for the damn rent! Honestly, it's the only thing he does efficiently!"

Not necessarily the same words every time, of course... sometimes he uses 'git', or 'prat', or words even more unutterable. Cirius didn't much mind it, since it was only once a month. What was a more routine, and frankly peculiar occurrence in this home, however, was that every morning, two pouchfuls of bread and potatoes would appear on the table.

Indeed, many youngsters would love such a place for themselves; a space to cavort to their hearts content. But Cirius has long dreaded his occupancy of this simple, four-walled haven. He finds very little comfort in the "wooden" aspects of the house; he dreaded the night a wandering drunkard would toss a lighter to his door, alighting the house, table, door, floors and himself in flames.

"A match, I tell you, a match is all it takes to set this place asunder, and roast to black dust my livelihood and my body!" He would constantly whinge. After mere days of his stay here, he soon found out about the countless irritations of a completely wooden house: not a day went by without the slightest prick from a splinter, be it from the door, or the floor. He reasoned that he has suffered so many splinters, that his body heals his wounds instantaneously, a feat he has noticed time-and-time again, yet does not question.

He was also not pleased with the ceaseless supply of food he would receive.

Oh, it was an arcane mystery to be sure, and he still finds himself scrambling his brain for the food's enigmatic origin, but the pouches themselves have been deemed a hindrance. Having come to abhor the taste of bread, He would scarcely eat another piece willingly. The potatoes, on the other hand, he didn't fancy from the start; they were tossed into the streets every morning, to be gobbled up a plump, hairy hog that has made it a daily routine to scurry by the boy's house.

Cirius sunk his face into the brimming well outside, guzzling a few mouthfuls of water, before rinsing his face off. He went back in, took hold of that pouch of potatoes and flung its contents insouciantly out the window. With his routine completed, he strode out the house and into the kingdom, exultant for the new day.

At the east side of the kingdom lies a small pond of gleaming water; water clear enough to capture every detail of the resplendent skies. But this is not the only thing that makes the entirety of the east of the kingdom to be so balmy a place. What completes it, is the single towering tree, that pierces the clouds. The people pertinently dubbed it ‘Yggdrasil, the sacred tree of life’ ... or as Cirius affably calls ‘*Big bloody tree by the pond*’.

There Yggdrasil stands, flaunting its great height boldly to the beholder. But what is it about gargantuan trees that invite so much reverence? One could like them for their extreme height, or the expediently large shade they provide, or it could just be simple sublimity.

This pond and the tree are frequented by many creatures that possess a soul sentimental enough to be captivated by its allure. There are the swans, who glide across the surface with its lissom movements; the glorious beetles often land upon the tree barks from flight, like a combatant resting in its barracks, and finally, Cirius, who sits underwhelmingly under the tree and does nothing.

There he sat, staring dully at the soft sways of the lake, in solitude and silence, at least until from the depths of his stomach let out a disheartening growl of famine. Cirius wasn’t worried, he knew the solution would arrive soon enough. And lo, it came indeed, not even a minute later. Peered out from behind the great tree, was the innocent face of a young girl, beaming with such astounding gregariousness, that even a warmongering barbarian would be pacified by.

“The same place, the same time of day, doesn’t it ever get tedious?” The girl stepped out to face the boy.
“You’ve asked that question every day, doesn’t *that* get tedious?”

She sat down beside him, and fumbled inside her pouch. A neatly wrapped good was handed over to Cirius, who received it with exceeding eagerness; he could smell it right away, the luscious aromas of fresh fruits, and the scent of delicately baked pastries.

“Thank you, as always, Urd!”

The girl smiled buoyantly, and let him mercilessly feast on the pastries like a feral beast.

At the sight of the girl, the swan, which hitherto had been deterred away from the lakeside by Cirius, came swimming lithely toward the tree. The swan’s head tilted toward the ground, docilely inviting the girl forward. Her hands moved daintily across its body, stroking the neck, the wings, and the plush beak, imbuing the feathers with the comforting touch of tenderness.

“Are there peaches in these pies?” came a slightly begrudged voice from behind.

“There are many who would be more than content with mysterious bags of food every morning,” came Urd’s indignant reply.

“I don’t think many would like stale bread and potatoes for every meal,” said Cirius, as he meticulously picks away at the peach patches in the pie.

“Well, the poor would!”

“And who are these ‘*Poor*’?”

“No, Cirius, the *poor*! *Poverty-stricken*! *Needy*! The *not-so-affluent*!”

“Huh, well perhaps you could give me their address later, so I might give them my pouches of potatoes instead of tossing them out to the streets every day,”.

Cirius stood up rambunctiously, and gambols around, stretching his limbs; Urd sighs and grunts in mental fatigue, and attempts to keep up. The two errant children left the lake, and readies themselves for an embarkment on whatever escapade that is to come.

“Where to, today?” came Urd, with a slight hint of reluctance.

“Wherever fate dares to bring us!” Cirius looks zealous enough to leap up toward the sky and soar.

“Could you maybe be less ambiguous?”

Urd’s pleas were ignored, as the exuberant boy grabbed hold of her hands, as tenaciously as his will to explore, and made a dash for the kingdom’s streets. As the two scuttles away into the distance, the swan, and the beetle, too, took flight into the skies.

The streets had taken a hectic turn once the sun had started glaring. The merchants had set up their rigid routines of loud announcements, flashy displays of their products, and ceaseless haggling of goods. The pair, with great difficulty, were trying to trudge through the crowds of animated bodies.

As Cirius pushes their way through a man’s towering back, a stentorian voice roars across the vicinity, shuddering every beholder to their core. A voice that holds such firmness and command, that the psyche is put under immediate distress and trepidation at the hearing of it. The myriad of heads turned to witness its owner.

Stomping spiritedly away, were a squadron of soldiers, clad in ostentatious armours of gold- though none of them ever wore them to battle-, followed suit by a figure of monstrous size, evidently the origin of that loud and mighty bawl, clad in an equally ostentatious set of black armour – which is worn by this particular person omnipresently-.

“That’s mister Odin, the Allfather!” Urd whispered.

“He looks absolutely wicked,” replied the awe-struck Cirius.

“He very well isn’t, he is a very nice man!”

“Oh, I’m sure he is, he looks like one, indeed!”

Urd was confused, but decides to brush it off when she realised who she was talking to.

Before the dins from this brigade of marching soldiers could fade away, it was renewed by another set of crescendoing footsteps. The same formation of soldiers with gay, glinting, golden armours; however, this time followed by a stout man, messy from head to toe, yet strangely radiant with a sense of undeniable dignity; an incredulous and bizarre hammer was spun around pridefully by the strip, as he walks off with giant strides.

“Ooh, I know him! The God of thunder!”

“His steps are thunderous enough without the hammer,” she giggled at herself.

“What I wouldn’t give to just hold that great beast of a weapon,” Cirius stares at the swift motions of the spinning hammer with admiringly, but mere seconds later sighed in consternation “Though I probably can’t wield it,”.

“Mjolnir... the hammer’s definition of “worthiness” is an enigma, Cirius. Don’t discount yourself from that selection just yet,”. Urd spoke cheerfully, as she clenched onto his hand, and shot him with the purest smile a face could form.

While the rest of the street continued their routine, the pair had sat down by the side, intent to finish witnessing every resplendent Gods or Goddesses that passes by. That morning was filled with infinite gasps of stupefaction, at the sight of every deity, and their glorious accessories and equipment. Throughout the span of a few hours, they had panted in reverence of Tyr’s great sword, the Tyrfing; they lauded silently of Gondul’s and Brynhildr’s elegance; they looked on, aghast at the grandeur of a warrior that is Vidar.

The last of the footsteps had died away, and the pair was prepared to depart from there, until Cirius' gaze was compelled one last time to the road that had withstood so many magnificent entities and their feet. A lanky man, in refined attire, not of a valourous warrior, but more of a dandified baron.

The man's languid posture, spoke at length of his exhaust with his own situation. His face, on the other hand, shewed the unparalleled sagacity of a polymath. The divine air present in all deities alike swirl vehemently around him, concealing foibles, and revealing only the splendid.

Urd, watching more intently at the God than Cirius, reluctantly uttered the name of this disparate God.

"That's the God of mischief... Loki,".

Cirius remained quiet, engrossed duly on the eccentric antithesis of divinity who presently walks in front of him. Urd tugged at his arm, signaling him of her wish to be away from thence swiftly. Cirius acquiesced, and with a heavy heart, went along their way.

Once more, the pair took to the streets, avoiding bodies, and blockades as best they could. Scarcely had any time past, before they finally came to the end of the bustling kingdom, and into the erratic terrain of the forest; the more they proceeded, the more the towering trees besiege them, banishing light and the equanimity it brings.

Urd's poor, weary feet tried sedulously to match Cirius' speedy trot, but the jagged rocks, and protruding roots were far too onerous an obstacle for the young girl. She pleaded aloud to the boisterous boy in front, forced away from his grasp, and collapsed down like a wilting flower.

She replenished her energy through a thousand giant breaths of air, until she grew sensible enough to notice the rough dirt she had been sitting on, and moved her fatigued body onto a clean and seemingly freshly cut tree stump.

"This all seems so aimless, doesn't it?" Urd managed to spout through her short pants.

"How do you mean?"

"I thought you were searching for a thrilling adventure, but what we've been doing seems more like a rigorous sport! I mean, it feels like every morning, you boast confidently about an escapade, but then all we do is prance aimlessly around this kingdom we're both familiar with by now!"

Cirius pondered Urd's critical comments for a while.

"Well, one can argue that it is precisely *because* it is aimless, that it *is* an adventure. If there were to be a destination, then it would be a journey!".

"Well, if you want to contend, the word 'adventure' is defined as an encounter of risks and hazards, or a..."

The world was denied Urd's great insight into semantics, as a tumultuous thud thundered through the trees, and jolted the children up from their seats. The girl hid behind her companion, and noticed his slight quiver. He knew the source of this uproar was not far away, in fact, he knew precisely what had caused it.

It was the falling of a tree. Not the breakdown of an aged, or weakened tree, nor any normal tree that a lumberjack could fall. The sound it made was far too cacophonous for it to be so; no, this tree was one of extraordinary girth, that no puny weapon by man could think of penetrating.

He had witnessed the pivoting of the monstrous trunk, when he looked to his right. Now, however, he shook in affright at the arcane phenomenon, or much worse, being that caused the falling of such elephantine a tree.

"At least we n-now have the h-hazard aspect of an adventure, wouldn't you say?"

Urd chimed in with her questionable method of lightening the mood, but he was encouraged by it anyway. Composing himself, Cirius reapplied his grasp on her hand, and said quietly. "Be ready to bolt away,".

It would be advisable for any sane children, to bolt away immediately from danger, which is obviously the opposite direction of the clamorous falling of the tree. However, the part of Cirius, particularly the very silly and curious one decided to scout out the definite origin of the tree's tumble. Urd, whose shrewd nature was temporarily lost from the shock of the sound, did not see the problem of waiting in such unsound a place.

Thus, the two youths, led solely by the boy's brave folly, stood there pitifully, vulnerable to quite possibly everything that was ahead. In the forest that regularly resonates the many ambient sounds of nature, now silenced by that tumultuous falling of the trunk.

Then, hammering away at the quiet atmosphere, was a roar of laughter, that announces throughout the woods, abject jubilation. A laughter that surpasses the intensity of merriments like the applause of a play, or the reunion of families. No, no, no, nothing that trivial, this was a laughter of pure, uninterrupted self-satisfaction.

Consequently, the strange guffaw had cleansed away both children's increasing dismay, and Cirius had now felt safe to advance to the tree trunk; Urd, like many times before, had to acquiesce his rash decisions. The two snuck covertly towards the front, hiding themselves behind a boulder, and finally saw, and understood the great commotion's beginning, and end.

The figure of a God, erected himself mightily beside his new fallen foe, the big tree trunk. The God took great delight in basking his pulsating, brawny body in the scarce sunshine of the forest. His arms were raised toward the sky, hands gripped with crushing tenacity onto a colossal sword. The sword, so utterly absurd in size that it dwarfed even the giant hands of muscle that clutched it, like a monolith attached and smoothened immaculately onto a hilt. The eminent God of the Asas, Frey, celebrated his skills in wielding that great sword, with that great laugh of triumph.

"HAVE YOU WITNESS SUCH GLORY BEFORE, MY DEAR SON, FJOLNIR? EVEN SUCH A THICK TREE, FALLEN WITH EASE BY THE SWORD OF FREYR!"

A safe distance away, a boy kicked at the coarse dirt, looking vexed, and on the verge of tears

"Father, please, can I leave?" The boy pleaded, undoubtedly having 'witnessed the glory' more times in his young life than the average person.

"JUST A MOMENT, LET ME DO IT ONCE MORE!"

"Father, please, I'm *hungry*!"

"I'M *STRONG*!"

The boy's face sunk down into his palm, poignantly waiting for his father to finish, in an approximate time of two hours. Cirius and Urd, sympathizing for the voiceless child, like themselves, decided to step out from the boulder.

Any child, so plagued by their family's endless shenanigans, will always have their faces light up at any meeting with people that isn't in their kin; he had lacked the courage to slip away alone, but upon seeing the faces of the duo, the boy beamed and leapt from his sulking posture. He rushes to meet them, and Cirius notices how significantly shorter he was.

The boy approaches, eager to shout his excitement, but was simmered by Cirius' wild gesticulation. The boy instinctively cupped his hands on his mouth, and it was like so, with his hands clasped tightly onto his mouth, that Cirius and Urd led him to the salvation from his swanking father.

On the same morning Cirius and Urd had embarked on their escapade, the grand church located in the middle of the astir city, rang its solemn bells monotonously.

The church was the oldest, and therefore the most esteemed in the kingdom, and in the time of religious uncertainty, was adorned and furnished opulently. Pearl, silken drapes hung alluringly on the walls; the many chandeliers coruscate the interior with lively brilliance; it was a halcyon that invited the pious with fervour, and consoled the sinners with grace.

As the Allfather and his cavalcade of Gods, Goddesses, and Valkyries came tramping into the kingdom after the fall of Valhalla, the kingdom also suffered the inevitable fall in their religious spirits. Many pined for the days when they thought Thor was as profound as he was mighty, or when Loki's mischief was directed solely on the deities. Now that they find out one's just a glutton, and the other's just a prick, the idea of worshiping them seemed to dwindle.

Abaddon, a tad bit somnolent from his late-night wanderings, spouted forth mundanely, the writings on the gospel to any willing souls who still attended the church. As he read out, word for word, he wondered how the audience finds the pertinacity to return for future sermons. It'd only been one week since he came here, but in the two sermon's he's held, he saw the same unchanging characters, with equally unchanging behaviour.

Finally, until all the obligatory phrases were stated, all mundane hymns were sung, and all feckless prayers given, the sermon was adjourned.

Abaddon watches, as the languid bodies of the devout waddle out, taken in by the bright land outside, away from the sombre walls of the church. Everyone had left, except for a woman, Miss Molly, the organist of the church, who had just begun making her way out after tidying her station.
 "Perfect!" Abaddon celebrated in his mind.

He stares at her young face, naïve and innocent, and recalls the day he appointed her the position as the organist for the church. Then, with the dark, duplicitous disposition of a demon in disguise, he steps forth, and said with a voice of ultimate altruism:
 "Molly, may I have a word with you, please?"

The startled woman stopped stiff in her tracks, and before she had the time to wipe away her flustered expression, she was ushered into the priest's room; not having the will to refuse, she strode in obliviously, and braced herself for whatever interrogation was about to ensue.

"Now, Molly, I feel I must inform you that certain rumours have been circulating around recently..."

"Rumours about what, father Lars?"

"Well, rumours about you, Molly,"

"Me?! Well, what do these rumours speak of?" The woman turned uncomfortably in her seat.

The priest went quiet for a moment, feigning a look of utter concern, before saying:

"Molly... the rumours tell of your... well... your lechery."

"Why, that is utter nonsense! Whither did you hear such rubbish?" She darted up indignantly, ire stirring like a waking lion.

"Now, Molly, please calm yourself, and understand that I do not trust one word of these slanderous gossip; and I find you hitherto to be none but virtuous and honest,".

At that moment, all vexation in the woman was flushed away, in spirit was she soothed by the priest's kind appraisals, she couldn't help but blush.

"Why, thank you, for believing in me so,".

Abaddon, too, found great solace and joy, but not in the same way as the woman. As he witnesses the woman's diffidence, he knew that the gateway to an endless flood of malice has thus been unlocked. The ignorant fly had landed itself helplessly into the web of a spider; the spider, in turn, praises his own adroitness in having construct the web that trapped the fly.

"You are an important member of this church, Molly, thus I must ascertain these matters, in order to not blemish our name. I must hear the answers from your mouth, Molly... Do you indulge in the vices?"

"N-no, I do not," She replied, mustering up all her energy to produce a serious reply.

"Have you remained pious and chaste in all your life?"

"Yes!"

The inundating satisfaction escapes the confines of the heart, and into the face. A wide, malignant grin was formed on the Demon's pale face.

"Excellent!"

Molly stared into the gaping mouth of the Demon, her body, paralyzed. The minute bodies of monsters, writhing indefatigably inside the boundless black of the mouth. The strident screeches of those monsters reverberated out the sickly throat, and pierces her delicate ears, and drives sanity slowly out the mind. The beings wriggled in unison, as they crawl out the Demon's swelling mouth.

One emerges completely, and took to the air, fluttering its crooked wings like a mangled hummingbird. It hanged in the air, swaying to-and-fro, dangling its six scrawny limbs, grotesquely twisted, and stiff. Molly, in all her turbulent thought, and endlessly blinking eye, had finally grasp the floating beast in its entirety. A locust. She looked into the empty, pallid eyes of the insect, and any desire to scream, flail, thrash disperses, leaving her a broken human, at her seat.

Quickly, the one became a dozen, and the dozen became a swarm. The locusts made their way onto the woman's head, forced open her pink lips, and sunk into the unyielding darkness of the mouth, all while she twitched maniacally in place.

Molly's life was fleeting away. All she could do, was sit and bear, in clear spirits, each anguishing nimble of each locust; they have perforated the lungs, and stolen away her breath; they have strangled her throat, until all voice was nil; they have severed the veins, and shackled her in place. Indeed, minute by minute, possession of that once lively body is transferred to the sickly insects inside her. But until then, her mind was hers, and hers alone. While her green eyes still shine with the sliver of animation, she did all that was in her power to do. She set loose, the irrepressible sobs of both anger and despondence.

The Demon had fixed up his disguise; any traces of an ignoble fiend vanished behind the omnibenevolent vizard of a priest.

"One last sermon, shall we, Miss Molly?" came his ardent voice, before clearing his throat.

"What do you think goes in the state of mind of any individual, when they witness this minute insect in front of them? Irritation? Revolt? Fear? Indifference? Or perhaps some queer quirks have coaxed a few into feeling a sense of adoration, or intrigue?"

The Demon's forefinger stretched out firmly towards Molly, as a single locust hop sluggishly up his arm, and hugs onto the finger with its six stalky limbs.

“Do you ever wonder the psyche of this flimsy, little locust, Molly? What sordid pleasures it indulges in, when it destroys the very livelihood and hope of farmers. What voyeuristic euphoria, when it sees the woeful plights of the starving. What masochistic satisfaction, when it hears the cursing and scorning of it, from the people?”

“Despite the massive disparity in built between humans and locusts, they still etch themselves as an insuppressible thorn in the human’s side. These minuscule insects curate plagues of famine, and beget thousands of inanition for those who should be, by nature’s law, superior. We Demons value these creatures, out of pure understanding and commiseration, because we too, cherish the idea of toppling the hierarchy of nature. In a sense, every Demon is like every locust, biting away at the crops that sustain you mortals... the only difference, really, is that we deal with things grander than crops and mortals,”

Abaddon glimpses at Molly’s quivering body, making sure she was still alive. He would feel awfully silly if she had already passed on halfway in his speech.

“You ought to feel flattered, my lovely, little Molly! Soon, you shall partake in the grander things I speak of,”

With a wave of his hand, the millions of locusts that had lodged themselves comfortably inside Molly writhed erratically, and Molly was shunted out from her seat. The locusts proceed to jostle about in such pandemonium, that Molly too, was forced into motion.

Her lifeless body stomped in ungainly steps, out the church, and down the road. Midway through the busy market, her arm shot up vigorously into the air, waving at the butcher in the shop she had always frequented. The butcher returned the greeting with a simper.

“I reckon dat Molly bird’s lookin’ a bit paler than usual, inn’t she?” The butcher whispered to his partner.

“Perhaps she’s under the weather?”

“Oi, look! Ain’t she goin’ inta dat forest there?”

“Oh well, someone ought to warn her to best be careful, dat forest there’s dangerous! ‘Specially if she’s under the weather!”

The two nods in agreement, before going back to chopping their beef.

Before long, the two butchers’ attention was engrossed again to the streets, where the velvet, opulent gown of the priest swung attractingly to-and-fro, as he briskly half-dashed toward the same direction Molly had gone.

“Isn’t dat there the vicar of the ol’ church?”

“So it is,”

“I reckon dat vicar lookin’ a bit busier than usual, inn’t he?”

“Perhaps he’s late for somethin’?”

“Oi, look! Ain’t he goin’ inta the forest as well?”

“Oh, well, someone ought to warn him to best be careful, dat forest there’s dangerous!”

The two nods in agreement, before going back to chopping their pork.

*

Sunday

Afternoon

In the densest parts of the forest, where light can't reach; a Demon named Azazel waited patiently for the arrival of a certain locust-manipulating comrade. Azazel's face glowed with a small tinge of indigo, and his coarse pores basked in the dimness of the tree-ridden area. His hands were clasped together nonchalantly behind his back; his head tilted pensively toward the towering leaves, and his eyes resolutely shut, like a scholar pondering in solitude. Now, in honesty, he was half-asleep, but he carried an aura of dignity nonetheless.

Upon hearing the rustling in his surroundings, the languorous Demon gathered his senses, and peered scrupulous at every corner of himself. Lo, a languid body of a wench drags itself over the dirt, arms outreached and grasping at the air for dear life. Azazel, now quivering with a shred of disgust and disquietude, snorted out a relatively loud 'ugh', before dithering on whether to approach the grotesque piece of conscious, wriggling meat.

A trail of water willed into existence, and solidified into an icy cane by Azazel's command. Meticulously, he poked at the face of the girl, as if each poke can summon an explanation for this atrocity. Just when he readies the cane for a slide into the mouth, the scurrying figure of Abaddon emerged from the bushes, giving out hefty pants.

Azazel tossed the cane away instantly, and appeared now, the sophisticated duke he is.

"You're late!"

"So I am," Abaddon replied impenitently, ignoring the oppressive air Azazel did his best to muster.

"If you don't go spouting that bloody speech every time you bring someone, maybe this ordeal would be over by now!"

"The speech is the most splendid part, my fellow Duke!"

"But it's all dross! The only Demon revolting enough to love these gross pests are you. Now, recall those damn insects at once!"

With a swerve of an arm, and an inscrutable command by voice, the countless locusts scamper out the small gaping mouth, each rubbing against the other vigorously, producing a sickly buzz that go with their march. Abaddon flips his gaze from the bluish Demon, and backs away indignantly, chastening his lack of fervour for locusts silently. While Azazel surveyed Molly's body closer than before.

"I do wish you wouldn't damage them so hideously," Azazel whinged.

"If you wanted clean work then why am I here?"

Azazel tugged at the Molly's dainty hands, gauging what's left of the poor victim's spry. Before giving his disdainful reply.

"Because all the competent workers are occupied with more significant tasks,"

Abaddon could only chortle awkwardly at his remark.

While Molly's languorous body lie seconds away from rotting into dust. Azazel fumbled briskly around his waistcoat, before retrieving a small bottle of dazzling blue elixir. After pouring the whole content into the girl's now perpetually gaping mouth; he stood up and bellowed an incomprehensible set of phrases toward the faraway darkness.

What returned his abstruse commands were the ominous course of bays and howls, not wrathful enough to petrify, but soft enough to chill the bones. From the multitude of shadows, emerge the brutish bodies of beastly hounds, blackened from the muzzles to the most outreach strand of furs at the end of their tails. The myriad pair of eyes glitter the iniquitous colour of crimson, as hateful as the wraiths of a fresh murder. They bore the faces of a servile vassal, unflinching subservient every behest of their masters.

Azazel turned to Abaddon, and then the limp victim, and then the hounds.

“Right, we’ll ride back now. Get on... and hold the virgin!”

“Hold her? For how long?!” Abaddon was truculent.

“For the full journey, of course!” Azazel scoffed in reply.

“But it’s nearly half a day’s trip! It’ll get awfully sore!”

“*Sore?* It’s your *job*, now stop whinging!”

“My job was to secure a virgin. I’ve done that part! Now, it’s *your* job to bring it back!”

“Correction, your mission, in Prince Belial’s words, were to: ‘secure a virgin and bring it back for the sacrifice’. Which obviously includes *you* in the part of *bringing it back*.”

“For Hell’s sake, do you recite every thing the Prince says before bed?!”

Before the altercation could escalate, the two were distracted by the girl; the hues of life reinstated themselves onto Molly’s face, and her jaw that had hitherto been forced unclosed snapped back into their rightful place, producing a confoundingly cringey crack, like the pop of a firecracker. Her body, now overflowing with an excess of reactions that was forestalled by the locusts, shove the body with countless actions. She bolted up, swatted her hands, twisted her heads, and many other disorientating gestures.

“There you are, now she can ride back herself!” Abaddon snorted indignantly.

“I guess the conundrum’s solved then!” Azazel snorted too, very indignantly.

With the recovered vigour, her instinct forced her to scream, and so she did, and failed. Though she willfully set forth with a mouth wider than before to release the stifled agonies she endured during her locust-controlled time. What came out of her mouth, were merely dins of nothingness. Which prompted her to try again, letting loose her passionately disconcerted mind, yet unable to transfer these thoughts into tangible sounds. So, she sat there, bopping her head forward and back, and clenching her fists until the point of heavy vibration. She gave one last shout, but still, nothing came out.

Abaddon studied her curiously.

“My word, this is *some* religious ritual they have!”

Azazel had just noticed the silent commotion of Molly, and was mite befuddled by the turn of events. He examined her head to toe.

“Well, this is quite surprising indeed, I thought she’d be at least a bit too torpid to scream!”.

“You mean she’s screaming? Goodness, I’ve never seen anyone so unskilled at screaming before.”.

“Your locusts must have made her mute,”

“Ah, you mean they broke the lynx in her neck?”

“It’s larynx, you cretin!”

Despite the insult, Abaddon smirked triumphantly at the bluish Demon, he erected himself in an exalted manner, and exclaimed:

“Hah, cretin, eh? Well, see how those pestiferous insects have thus saved our mission,”

“What are you talking about?” Azazel barked.

“Hell forbid they hadn’t broken her larynx, and she shouts her head off, dooming our covert operation!”

“As if anyone else would be in this dense forest to hear her. You hardly have the right to crow about your pests’ flimsy accomplishment!”.

“DEMONS!” a voice boomed across the forests, stunning the two on their feet.

*

During the time the locust-controlled Molly meandered into the forest with her wonky gait. Cirius, Urd and the newly acquainted boy had just escaped the reverberant clutches of his father. As distant tried its best to stifle the clamour of that mighty God's voice, the trio stopped, content with the remaining burble of more gloating remarks in the background.

"By golly, thanks for your sudden emergence! My ears would have fallen off if you'd arrive any later!". The boy exclaims exultantly.

"No bother." Cirius said humbly.

"See, my father's an awfully garrulous person, once he starts gibbering, he won't stop until his mouth sores! Which takes an awfully long time, because he claims even his mouth goes through tough routines!"

"I'm glad we could help," Urd chimed in.

"He'd been swinging his sword for the all the duration of the day now, from the crack of dawn... I'd say seven in the morning... until now, and I always have to tag along, because as he claims, his overflowing talents would ooze off him and onto me, which is obviously rubbish, I know that much..."

"Chip off the old block, aren't you?" Urd mumbled.

"Sorry, what?"

"Oh nothing," she gave out a short sigh.

As the boy was about to indulge himself in another tangent, Cirius – apparently unfazed by the gratuitous information spouted by him- asked a question that probably should have been asked much earlier.

"What's your name?"

Promptly after he finished his question, was he lightly slapped by Urd on the chest, who shot a reproachful look at him, as if declaring with her gaze alone: "We ought not to associate with him anymore than we have to,"

"Aha, where are my manners, I do apologise... my name is Fjolnir, son of Freyr and Geror, heir of the divine sword, future ruler of peace, fertility, and rain!"

Now, before you attribute this flatulent introduction to Fjolnir's verbosity, one must understand that this is but a customary way of introducing oneself to others, as it is tradition of all deities to be as laconic about their identity as a scholar with their citations. In many instances, this has become a cumbrous burden for some- Odin groans whenever he has to state his titles, mainly:

'The son of Bor and Bestla; the supreme ruler of Asgard; Allfather of Aesir; master of Sleipnir, Hugin, Munin, Gari, and Freki; Master of the Valkyries; wielder of Gungnir; ruler of war, poetry, and magic'.

Numerous times he would mistake the names of "Gari" into "Fari", and "Freki" into "Greki". The fortunate thing is, introductions are most often a one-off situation, unless the opposing person lacks certain efficiency in their memory.

Fjolnir ended his introduction with a courteous bow. The trio had stopped in their tracks now.

"Urd, daughter of Mimir and Sinmara, heir of divine knowledge, and future Norn of the past." She finished with a dainty curtsy.

"Cirius... just Cirius!"

"My, how auspicious I am, to be able to meet such lovely people! Y'know, it's not often I get to meet people, especially people my age! Father always takes me to his banquets, where there's nothing but droll adult talks. Heaven forbid, I reckon people get stripped of their humour once they've achieved adulthood,". He spouted as he marched hastily forward, trying to catch up to his two new acquaintances.

As the boy's rigmarole became an indefatigable droning behind their backs, the boy and the girl- mostly cajoled by the boy- continued on their adventure, which has been met with too many tedious obstacles by now. Cirius shuddered restlessly, grated from head to toe from the lack of thrill. Urd didn't much mind the equanimity, in fact, she had committed into a few cavorts and skips, with her hands clasped relaxed behind her back.

“These woods hold only two plentiful things... trees and boredom!”. Cirius grouched moodily.
“Forests tend to be so, Cirius.” Urd gave a half-hearted consolation.

The girl’s carefree attitude soon dissipated once she caught a glance at her partner’s complexion; his unsmiling, yet fixated face. The boy’s eyes twitched spasmodically; his invigorated stroll allayed into lethargic steps. The boy looked to be in the most serious of his lifetime. Indeed, his current demeanor vanquished any traces of a cherubic young wean, and shewed a strange consternation only capable in adults.

“You alright?” Urd whispered anxiously.

“I hear something,”

“I’d wager it’s that blathering oath behind us...”

“No, something different... noises completely batty, it sounds... wrong?”

“Well, I hear nothing of the sorts,”

“This always happens whenever I feel dull, I sense these... things that are... how did you call those strange creatures in those books again, Urd?

“Eldritch?”

“Yes, *that*... I think this adventure’s just getting started!”

He concluded before going into a dash, in the direction Urd can only assume to be the impalpable noises’ origin. Having heard her partner’s eloquent yet incomprehensible declaration, Urd’s instincts jostled her into a corresponding dash, trailing behind the boisterous, blond, boy.

“Hang on, where are you lot going in such a bustle? Don’t leave me behind!”

The poor boy noticed the two’s diminishing shadows only after he finished another bluster, nonetheless, he did his best to keep up.

With his heated senses, Cirius swerves like a lissome falcon over each arching branch and protruding root. But even falcons can have moments of slapdash missteps, and he came tumbling toward the ground after crashing into something we never would’ve foresaw; a Goddess, tall and mincing. Her basket of berries flung chaotically upward from the crash, and promptly slamming into the boy, burying him with a basketful of berries. The Goddess gave a demure yelp, as scrambled around the berried boy with frantic gesticulations. Urd would not arrive at the scene until the Goddess’ gestures were at its most berserk.

“Oh, I am terribly sorry, are you alright? I mean you were the one who came scorching toward me with your reckless speed, but I am terribly sorry nonetheless!” She sputtered like a repentant confessor.

Cirius rubbed away the dizziness, and spat out a mouthful of berries. He had planned an immediate apology, but seeing as the other had already gave one, stayed silently staring shamefully at the ground, because he didn’t want to inject too much sense of remorse into the already sorrowful atmosphere. But his scheme backfired anyway, because Urd was already substituting him in giving a verbal apology, which stirred his guilt up enough to begin *his* own onslaught of apologies. Thus, the passing seconds came with a suffocating sense of self-abasement in the air. Before it died down into a cathartic friendliness between all parties. The Goddess, now in the process of picking up the berries with the other two, felt courageous enough to lit the fuse for a conversation.

“You two kids up to your usual antics again?”

“When are we not?” Urd replied with spiteful sarcasm.

The Goddess gave a soft giggle.

“I’d never thought I’d see this side of you, Urd!” She said, intentionally slowing her pace.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, Cirius has always been rowdy, for the few years I’ve known him,” She flashed a buoyant smile to the boy, and continued, “but you, I’ve known you since your birth, and I could not have pictured you in any sort of hustle!”.

“What was she like during her childhood, Miss Hel?”

Urd clicked her tongue volubly.

“Like a young lamb!” She said with a laugh. “Barely even cried at her birth really! And when she did cry later on, it was only meek sobs!”

“You’re kidding!”

“No, no, it’s true! As sheepish as a stillborn calf, she was!”

“Alright! If you two would stop *analysing* my growth now!” Urd finally exploded.

Sensing her overflowing ire, Hel briskly changes the topic, still with a half-suppressed smile.

“D’ye know, you two ought not wander around here, these woods here are hazardous!”

“We keep hearing that... but the only *hazard* we’ve met have been the unceasing blustering of Freyr,”. Urd jeered.

“Oh, these woods are far darker than you suspect, my innocent, little friends... but never mind that, what business have you here anyway?”

“I heard a sound...”

“...care to elaborate?”

“He claims he heard an ‘eldritch’ sound,”.

“Ooh, how thrilling! What sort of sound, Cirius, my dear?”

Both their attentions fixed unto him, curious for his queer insight into the unknown. The boy muttered unfathomably, gazing at the scattered purpleness of berries beneath him.

“Cirius?” Urd asked worriedly.

“It’s here...”.

The otherworldly utterance that engrossed the ears of the boy with a similar otherworldly origin. The strange attracts the strange. And in the congregation of strangeness, nothing, ironically, is weird anymore.

Cirius seized all the instructions given by his invigorated instincts; he scuttled into a nearby bush, and stares determinedly at the trudging body, writhing through the patches of dirt and bush. The quivering body of a young girl, moving with the motions of a broken puppet. Molly’s wretched saunter laid bare for the three to see with lucidity, as she came into the small space of shining sunlight.

“That’s the big escalation of the escapade, eh?” Urd muttered spitefully. “Fat excitement, this is... a walking woman!”.

Cirius’ face dropped at the encounter. He’d like to bellow out grievances at his senses for this tactless hoodwink, but did not know where to direct his complaints. Although the same could not be said for Hel, who had now fully engrossed in the affairs of the two children, not having been accustomed to much drama in life, it took very little to amuse her.

“Where’d you reckon she’s heading off to?” she emanated with childish daze.

“Probably to the chap not far from here...” Cirius pointed with a disappointed sigh.

“Heavens! How long has *he* been there?” exclaimed Urd.

“Since we dashed into miss Hel, in fact,”.

They continue to watch the ambling woman with intent gazes; the children, utterly forgetting their previous aversion. Something about the inconsistent steps of her gait, sometimes thrusting widely forward, sometimes pathetically reserved. Most queer of all, she collapsed behind a tree, yards away from the postured man. Once they thought it all to be over, one anomaly only begets another, and in the distance came the maneuverings of a red blur. Which soon revealed to be the heaving body of a man through the unruly woods. The red gown caught the attention of Hel.

“I do say, that attire seems awfully familiar... like the attires of our town vicar!”

“The town vicar? Well, who’s that he’s off to meet then?” asked Urd

“Not sure, fairly pallid friend he has, though! I don’t think he looks like anyone, suppose he’s from the kingdoms yonder,” Hel guessed.

“Perhaps they have a meeting, and he’s running late?”

“How do you explain the swooned woman then?”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“Oh, I know! This is a secret matrimony between the two, and the woman had just fainted from excitement?”

“Aha, and the priest was requested to validate the marriage!”

They reflected pensively at their deductions, nodded and hummed agreement.

They were making so much sense to themselves of this singular situation, yet it held so little relevance to any of their lives. Indeed, they would continue to pile on new made-up knowledge, until Urd noticed the repugnance of their actions.

“Hold on, aren’t we just prying now?”

“It’s not prying! They’re the ones who wish to be gossiped, going about making secret engagements in the woods and such!” protested Cirius.

Hel looked a tad disappointed as she realised the incumbent duty as an adult to lead children back to the path of decency. She would have liked to observe the conclusions of the bizarre rendezvous, but decided ultimately to put up a righteous front.

“Urd’s right, we shouldn’t pry into this... obvious eloping of lovers. Let’s do the sensible thing and leave before the parents arrive,”. She unintentionally assumed.

“Look! The groom’s poking the bride with a stick of some sort!”

This news made the hopeless Goddess rush back into the bush, ready to pry some more.

“Dear, lord! That’s not how you treat your wife-to-be, is it? How nasty!”

“Oh look, the vicar has just arrived!”

At that instant, the surroundings rustled with the most quaking movements, and a head emerged from the emerald shrubs. Fjolnir, shooting out tidal waves of sweat and spit, gave ginormous intakes of breath as he strove to speak through the agony.

“You lot... abandoned me... like the bloody rat... leaves her young to die!”. He reprimanded.

“Ever the dramatizer, eh, Fjolnir?” Hel chimed in with a snicker.

“Ooh, Miss Hel... didn’t see you there...” he balanced his hands on his hips for dear support, “Perhaps you could...help me lecture them...on the right conduct of camaraderie!”.

Hel was keeping a watchful eye on the indefatigably panting boy, tad afraid he might collapse as the sliver of strength he has left wears out. Cirius and Urd peered attentively at the outlandish displays of the vicar, the pale man, and the fainted woman. It was growing ever more comical and deranged by the second, the two men discoursed, presumably very heatedly, given the quick paces of their mouths and fervid finger-pointing. Then, perhaps the most befuddling of the scenarios, a pack of dark hounds sprouted out as if from thin air, and their menace could be felt even from their bush. Urd’s expression, consumed with trepidation, gulped down her overflowing anxiety, too unstable to utter anything.

“Wicked!” bawled Cirius, “The man’s a druid!”

“What was that, Cirius, dear?” Hel inquired while mopping at the sweaty brows of the panting boy with a purple handkerchief.

“The pale man, he just summoned some black dogs!”.

Hel squinted disconcertingly, as she leaned out the bush to clarify the nonsense she's just heard. Immediately after, she grimaced with the most profane face of disgust. Hurriedly, she pulled back into the bushes, embracing the three children with her slender arms, and whispered laconically into their ears.

"You three, listen carefully... you said Freyr's in the forest as well?"

"Well, he ought to be near, if we didn't run off too far..." Fjolnir, now reading the room, answered timorously.

"Good, you three, run along now, out of this forest immediately, got it?"

The three nodded obediently. Hel loosened her arms around them, and the three waddled along the dirt, duly confused.

"*Fly*, children!" came Hel's harsh command.

And the three burst into action, leaping away for dear life, with Fjolnir frantically groaning behind; they headed toward the opposite of all the commotion that had caused nothing but entertainment. Promptly had the three's shadow faded away, came the bellows of the hitherto gentle Goddess, stentorian and robust.

"DEMONS!"

She too, leaped out from the bushes, valorously warriorlike; a swirling display of violet lights gather at her hand, and it manifested itself into a sturdy, silver staff.

"FREYR! OVER HERE!"

"Seems like we're always running in this adventure of yours" Urd chided condescendingly.

*

Though they may not look like it, the Demons- feeling personally challenged by the powerful yell- were very much panicking on the inside. Azazel's lips lay frozen, unable to sputter any syllable of command, while Abaddon, as if had his feet nailed to the ground, could only watch the approaching figure of the belligerent Goddess. This trancelike state subsists in the both of them for a good half a dozen seconds, and Azazel was only fully conscious of their peril when the bays and barks of his hounds grew more virulent.

Fueled by the adrenaline and bursting into action, he slapped his partner heavily on the back, which only a produced Abaddon's hateful scowl.

"We've been compromised!" Azazel blurted in fits of panic and hurry.

"How surprising!" Abaddon played with his nails, appearing apathetic, yet secretly the most satisfied being there.

"Alright, remain calm, don't panic! It's only one of them!" Azazel's panic only seemed to ascend.

Across the fields of emerald, bulbous hedges and bushes; Hel swung around her staff flashily, marching down the path intrepidly to face the two Demons, whom after all that yelling are still chattering with each other. Clutched within the dainty hands of the Goddess, the staff glowed with a coruscating hue of white and purple; as its glow strengthens, Hel struck it toward the ground, spreading dusts of yellow dirt, all while canting:

"Offspring of the Allmother, hark my wish, raise your rested bodies, and vanquish these fiends..."

And out of the coarse patches of dirt, submerged many wretched paws, blighted wings, and rotting tails. The foul bodies of the animals damned, either by gruesome assail of predators, or pathetic plunges from precarious branches. Nonetheless, the animals, cajoled by the mystical staff, crawl up the earth and roam once more, with livid spirits. By Hel's legs emerged a drove of hares, decaying yet lively; three foxes jumped up a boulder, two with dangling jaws and another with an exposed chest of wriggling maggots. Finally, the largest of the odious congregation, a pair of reindeer skulls peer out from the trees, crackling sickly beats from a drum of bones; the pure, hard husks of white gallop out lithely, and stopping by the sides of their summoner.

The staff was raised once more, ceremoniously, and the reanimated beasts launch themselves fearlessly at the two disconcerted figures. What ensued was a clash between the gritting fangs of the ferocious hounds and the congregation of carcasses. The three foxes surround the biggest of the pack, so that there was an endless stream of snarky snarls and belligerent bays from the two sides of contenders. While the hares, in a sort of karmic irony, went toe to toe with the rest of the pack. Seemingly lost their cowardice from a visit to the afterlife, they settled on the hounds with vicious jumps and bites, all while assuming the silence demeanor that hares tend to have.

Azazel conjured up rods of ice, and trusts it incessantly upon his foes, one freakish and pale skeleton of a reindeer; he got angrier and angrier the more his rods get wedged into the sockets of the bones, thus he settled, after a few more trusts, to batter the reindeer with the rods instead. So, there they were, the reindeer charging its antlers into the Demon, and the fiend whacking at it to no avail. As he was slowly ramming into a tree, the Demon wagered his odds, and decided, dejectedly to ask for his partners aid, albeit still as bitterly as his pride would allow.

“Abaddon, these beasts must have been enchanted, help get it off me!”

“Tough luck, I’ve got my hands full here!”

The vicar stood idly by while his immense plague of locust pin down the other reindeer, stunning it to the ground.

“No, you haven’t! You’re just standing there!”

He couldn’t help but smirk.

“Have to keep my attention on that Goddess, I can sense her attack already!”

Rightful prediction it was, as Hel quickly lashes out at the insect-loving villain, swinging her staff with intent to kill- Or, as much as she could muster, at least-. Each smite has him cautiously staggering to-and-fro, and in order to emerge unwounded, he has had to draw up his daggers to parry the upcoming swings. He commanded his locusts onto her, but every attempt the locusts made was intercepted by the almost instant counter by a descent of woodpeckers, kingfishers and robins, who perch themselves readily upon nearby branches.

The fight came down to one of persistence; although Hel did have to endure a few bites from the swarm, she had cornered their master with her blows, and the swings were accelerating into scorching blows of rigid metal. His vision was a blur, left only with ungainly instincts to meet the staff with his dagger. Enraged, he tore away his red gown, and set abandoned his disguise; now oozing a cloud of gray smog, the Demon’s body morphs grotesquely in the darkness. Hel shielded her mouth and nose cautiously, and squinted through the dense smog of black.

Piercing out from that smog, were horrid noises of buzzing, all too recognizable to the by-standers, as the fluttering of those same locusts. The gusts produced by those giant wings blew away the smog, and now a sickly behemoth stands against the Goddess. Three pairs of furry, stalky legs raise to the sky in wretched movements; prying from the cleared air, was a convulsing head of black pincers; it greets with eyes of gruesome sea green, ridden with as much odium as a creature can hold; the monster hovers in the air, ceaseless twitching, either from sordid urges or pleasure. Hel steeled her stance and staff, stifling her shivering soul.

Yet, the now metamorphosed Abaddon paid her no caution, instead, he glided across the field to his partner and seizes the reindeer with those ghastly limbs of his. Effortlessly, he clutches onto the undead, as he climbs higher into the air, heedless of any resistant squirms and trembling grunts. Azazel took the chance to escape. Like how calamities often unearth inertia, Hel fell victim to the monster’s odious allure, and for a mere moment, she merely watched on as the chaos unfolds. But, desperately, her courage slaps herself awake, and pump her full of shame for succumbing to that hypnotization.

She races after the fleeing Azazel, only to be halted in her tracks by the swift descent of Abaddon's buzzing body. Chagrined, she tries to fight against the gargantuan thorax with her swings; this time, though, Abaddon shrugs off the blows, with little worry; overcome by pride, he even let out a muffled, irksome laughter through his narrow pincers.

As Azazel's figure quickly fleets away into the distance, she closed her eyes, gathered every scruple of her hope, and let out a silent prayer...

"HAHAHA, MEET YOUR FOE, FOUL AND FOOLISH FIENDS! COME STRAIGHT TO THEIR DOOM, EH?"

A voice boomed with vigour and hints of glee.

From the shadows of the forest, thickly crowded with trees, the burly God leaps out with the power of a colliding star, ferally, unrestrained, and duly motivated. Freyr, massive sword still sticking as close as comrades to him, crashes feet first into the field, springing up dirt and dust in explosive radius!

Abaddon stopped buzzing, Azazel stopped in his tracks, and Hel proudly grinned. Freyr scowled at the pale Azazel, making him paler; his lips and legs quiver, as he stares deep into the eyes of a God, absolutely barren of patience, fear, and vulnerability.

"Monster...", he muttered to himself.

The monotonous buzzing resumed, and Abaddon took flight directly toward the new fighter. His wings extend like a gliding eagle, and he whizzes through the air in astonishing speed.

"Freyr, behind you!"

He scarcely needed that warning; the titanic sword had already parted with the ground; Freyr spun around in rapid viciousness, like a tornado of bulging, unforgiving sharpness; his toes, having a mind of their own, gallantly guides the unit in heavy cycles of slashing and smiting.

The two seemed only a hair breadth's distance away, about to collide into devastating anarchy. But the insect soon pulled away, sensing the unadulterated fury in his attacks. Very right he was in doing so, because the outcome of persisting would be a gory onslaught of mincing slices, sure to rend the thorax into nothingness. Seeing his opponent's retreat, the God gives a final twirl, and slams the sword violently onto the ground. Even then, Abaddon's heart jumps a beat at the thunderous slam.

"The bastard puts everything into each strike, No conservation whatsoever! How, on earth is this a good tactic?" The Demon thought to himself.

Meanwhile, Azazel and Hel had promptly moved on from the preceding uproar. Hel sends the birds, drooping with blood and flesh, soaring toward the Demon. But, now, unabated by any antlers, Azazel thrived and reveled at the battle. Spears of ice launch one after the other, piercing through the birds, sending them flying back to whence they came. The Goddess ducks behind a tree, to not expose herself to the same fate as the birds. Then, she happened to notice the field where the hounds and the undead animals were engaged in brutish warfare. Abruptly, something bothersome started itching at her brain, a vital detail she'd missed up until now. Coherency escaped her, she couldn't think through Freyr's clamorous shouting, Abaddon's incessant buzzing, and the dozens of icicles shooting at her. She nuzzled her hands tightly to her ears- which Freyr later scolded as 'quite a silly move' to be doing in battle-, and concentrated.

"Crashed into Cirius... Urd... Fjolnir... then starting fighting Demons... no, wait..."

She thought hard once more.

"Cirius, Urd... Priest? Fjolnir... Demons...no!"

The hustle of combat had destroyed that minute detail deemed frivolous, but she was determined. “Cirius! Urd! Priest! Fjolnir! And... a woman!”

Just like that, thoughts blast off in quick succession, like fireworks in the mind. She rushes for the field, fending off the hounds with expert swings of her staff. Hel searches high and low, though primarily low; pushing away the bushes and hedges for any traces of the enigmatic lady. After peeling away another nearby bush, she found her. Molly had her arms locked bashfully around her legs, she was shivering and tearing.

Threateningly, Hel pointed her staff at her, and called out to her in stern sympathy: “Are you an accomplice, or a victim?”

Molly, made mute, could only frantically gesticulate. She pounded her chest, gave submissive waves, and pointed repeatedly at the Demons, all with a pair of spry hands. Upon seeing the poignant state of the woman, Hel lowered her staff. Only to raise it once more, alarmed by the baying of the hounds that started surrounding the area.

The hounds leapt in unison at them. Hel dove in, embracing the woman in her arms, suffering the mauls of a dozen sharp claws and fangs. Clenching her teeth through the pain, she heaved with all her strength, and pulled the woman out from the cramped bushes. Regaining her steps, she fought off the hounds with doubled fury, cursing them silently under her breath with each swing. One particularly cunning hound decided to drag Molly by the shirt away from the shades of the trees, but its plan was promptly failed by the shrieking snarls of the foxes, still pent up with unduly rage from battle.

Hel searched the woman scrupulously, still a bit suspicious at her. Without finding anything, she finally felt content to trust her. She breathed out a sigh of gladness and relief. Although the battle rages on, she felt a sense of accomplishment. At least, she was able to rescue the one casualty in the ordeal.

Truthfully, Hel seeps into pits of abject anxiety whenever she’s forced into confrontation. Now, seeing the mere expression of gratitude from that pitiful lady rejuvenates her courage. Thus, she set about her new mission-bringing this lady back safely. With sturdy arms, she brought Molly close to her side, supporting her shivering body with her confident one. She reassured her new friend with a brilliant smile, which seemed to successfully implant Molly with the strength needed to walk on.

“Freyr!” She calls out to the God.

But he was utterly engrossed with his earthshattering moves- which continuously failed to affect a flying enemy, yet does not seem to bother him one bit-

“FACE ME, INQUITOUS, INSOLENT INSECT!”

“FREYR!” The Goddess bawled.

“WHAT??!”

“I found a mortal here, and-”

“A MORTAL? TAKE THEM AWAY, LEST THEY ENCUMBER MY BRAWL!”.

“Well, yes, I was just about to, but not for the reason you just said, thank you very much!”

“Damned!” Azazel whispered quietly. With that, he conceded. The objective was lost, and he had neither the leisure nor sanity to dwell here with that savage God. His hounds huddle up obsequiously at his legs, which only caused him more annoyance at their incompetence. Azazel glared once more at his partner, and roared out in his Demonic tongue:

“Abaddon! The failure of this operation rests on YOU! Or, at least, that’s what I plan to report to Lord Belial. Find a way, in that cretinous cesspool that is your brain to remain in disguise, and right this wrong! Procure

another virgin sacrifice, or choose to return to Sheol in shame, facing whatever punishment Lord Belial may bestow!”

Abaddon looked ready to burst. The glassy, giant eyes of the monster winced to expressed his wild scorn and apoplexy at his partner. But Azazel was well on his way, riding at the back of his loyal hounds, they slowly dissipate out the darkness of the woods.

“That absolutely git!” came Abaddon’s muzzled reply.

Freyr took advantage of his foe’s mere second of distraction, bringing his sword down with fiery intent to crush and sever; the strike collides, making the earth tremble once more at the God’s grand might. The monster laid in two disheveled parts, the lower legs still squirming intensely, while the thorax hardened into an inanimate husk. The God gives a triumphant guffaw, and erected himself superciliously by his fallen enemy.

The thrill of victory always infuses the body with euphoria; Freyr, overcame by that high, simply stood in place... and pulsed. After a few more minutes of solitary gloating, he promptly left, leaving the carcass behind without so much as a glance.

“NOW, TIME FOR BREAKFAST TO BOLSTER THE BODY AFTER A BRILLIANT BRAWL!”

Thus, the forest reclaimed its former land, consigning it back to the beasts and pests. The reanimated corpses of the foxes and hare sunk back into the depths of the dirt, where they could rot and rest in peace. The air of calmness saw fit to blow its breeze once more, into the area; so that the trees, too, settle with time, cleansed of worry that they might fall under the sword of a loud, brutal warrior.

Places like these, however, are precisely where Demons thrive. The body of the monster stirs around the earth, wriggling in spasms, much like a parted worm. As the motions get more erratic, so too, does the pulsing noises from within its belly crescendo into orchestras of repulsive buzzing.

Abaddon pries open the monster’s thorax, viciously stabbing out an exit with his dagger. Once confronted with the fresh air of the forest, he sucks in all the clean air he could, and composed himself. He was drenched in milky liquids of yellow; his naked body stuck with patches of black hair. With a few more heaves, he successfully pulls himself out of that gross, black suit.

While basking in the sorrowful aura of the woods, with the approaching Autumn wind being especially cruel to his skin, he let loosed all his ire in fervent words:

“Damn. Everything.”.

With a few swipes, he dusted the coats of yellow off his chest. He stood for a while to recompose himself, all the while, tired sighs slip out in endless waves.

“At least that fool didn’t bother to check!”. He muttered to himself, and made his way back to the city, simultaneously planning his next move.

*

Sunday

Evening

The three youths gasp as they finally jog out the shades of the forest. Upon meeting the familiar sights of the blue sky and paved walkways, the three gave a willful tumble onto the ground, with Fjolnir making the most exhausted scene.

“No one... ought to... ever... suffer... such torture!” He blathered, barely finding the balance between breathing and speaking.

“Another brilliant escapade, isn’t it?”, Urd shot Cirius a look of playful menace.

“Absolutely! I’d do it again without question!”, he was smiling through the pants.

As the three gather their breaths on the sod, the passerby would continue to look through the corner of their eyes in fascination and concern. Urd was the first to notice how strange they must seem; she got up, courtly, and proceeded to pat off any bits of filth from her clothes and dress.

“I don’t know about you two, but I am absolutely through with any more running, jogging, skipping, trotting, or any of the likes!”

“Hear! Hear!” Fjolnir pumped his fist up at the sky.

Cirius got up too, with satisfied defeat.

“Fine,”.

Seeing the two towering before him, Fjolnir decided to stand too, despite his body’s indignation. Even after expunging all that energy, he still holds a mite grudge against his new “friends”, and he was determined to express them right then and there.

“Listen... you two... I haven’t forgotten! You left me... behind there!”

The guilty party turned towards him with blank expressions.

“I tell you... if I wasn’t so hellishly tired... I’d be more cross now!”

“We’re sorry...” Urd added first, scrunching up her eyebrows with at an effort to placate.

“Won’t happen again,” Cirius spouted pithily.

Fjolnir stood awkwardly. He was, in a sense, faced with a social paradox. On one hand, there is due gratitude to be given to them for saving him from his father’s tedious sessions of tree slicing. But then they went off and pull a stunt like leaving him behind, and essentially dragging him on an enduring, strenuous marathon. Slightly taken aback by how swift this conflict is resolved, he can only mutter this reply:

“Oh... well, apology accepted!”

Thus, the three stood dumbly over the corpse of the conversation, seconds felt like mental aeons; Urd was biting onto her lips in visceral agony; Fjolnir’s fingers fidgeted over his jacket. Just then, Cirius’ stomach let out a monstrous growl; Urd seized viciously at the opportunity!

“Oh, I suppose it is time for dinner, isn’t it?” She almost shrieked.

“Yes, I reckon mother must be waiting for me as well!” Fjolnir, too, spat out excitedly.

“Well, then, we won’t keep you... Fjolnir, was it?” Urd was already tugging at Cirius’ arm, as she made for the village.

“Yes, yes! I shan’t be late... mother gets awfully paranoid! Well, bye, Urd and... Cyrus!” That was a lie, his mother, incidentally, was away on a trip. He quietly shuffled back.

The two parties left without so much as a glance behind. One thing’s to be sure, they both had had enough of the other for the day. Of course, no one holds any contempt or annoyance at anyone there; but, often times, there are just limits on how much we’d like to interact with acquaintances.

“That exchange is going to linger for decades to come...” Urd remarked, sieving her face with her hands.

“Wish we could’ve tagged along with him for lunch, really,”

“You can’t be serious?”

“Well then, who *can* I be?” He smirked.

“...”

“...”

“I’m not hearing laughter,”.

“It isn’t *worth* laughter,”.

Faced with the tough audience, he could only giggle at himself. But Urd wasn’t willing to let her gaze of disdain subside yet.

“Still, I’d wager any lunch he offers would be better than those horrible breads!”

“Then don’t eat those breads! I’ll request a few silver from papa, and we’ll parole the streets for cheap delicacies!”.

“Oh, I couldn’t!”

“Come, now, he adores you!”

And despite her declaration, Urd would skip mirthfully the entire journey towards her home.

Just up on the street, at the edge of the invisible line that separated the Gods’ and the mortals’ lodges, there lies a rustic house of white, mason walls and majestic roofs of curvy, red tiles. The chimney churns out neat, nebulous gases of gray; a good sign of a delectable delicacy ready to be cooked or smoked in the flames. Inside the house, Mimir mediates alone, holding softy onto a mug of mocha-coloured tea. The gales that slip through the minute crack shakes his mattered beard, white with wisdom, as if titillating his attention. It seems, however, that nothing could trample over the God’s present tranquility. Mimir sat on, unfalteringly; his aged, but convicted eyes closes out everything but the most enlightening thoughts.

And who better to dismantle all this tough exterior, but the intrusive, yet ever so pleasing voices of children. The duo barely made their way into the gravel footpath, when Mimir’s white beard perked up in anticipation upon hearing that exuberant chatter. Imbued with a new sense of life, he quickly readies himself for their arrival, which surely cannot be endured by this languorous, philosophical side of him. He patted his dry lips thoroughly with the tongue, letting it bloom once more into a healthy red. With a few deliberate stretches, his limbs cry out with crackling euphoria. His breath instinctively let out a sigh. He was ready.

The door unfolds, and the voices of cheer and innocence seeps into the gloomy, pensive room, along with the golden sunlight. Suddenly, one minuscule part of the parent shouted out its doubt to the rest of his self:

“Oh, I am simply *too* tired for this...”.

“Father! I’m home!”

“Welcome back!”

The two waddled their way into the room; Urd, jumping into her father’s firm embrace, giggles from the warmth. Cirius meanders around furtively, unsure of what to thread or touch. The host, though, quickly took delight in this welcomed surprise.

“Ah, Cirius! You’re looking well!”

“Yes, sir, good evening!”

“Oh, no need to be so formal. Come, take a seat, anywhere at all!”

The boy shuffles around from chair to chair, even glancing at the sofa for a split second. Soon, as if sensing how long he was engaged in inactive decision, he bashfully got up onto the nearest chair he could find.

“Father, is it fine if we have a few silvers for lunch?”

“Silvers? nonsense! I have a perfectly good meal here!”

“Oh, what about poor ol’ Ciriuss? Surely, we’ve only got portions for the two of us! Oh, do pity him, papa, he’s had nothing but bread for days, and he simply craves something new!”

She had become a connoisseur at toying with the mental strings of her father; the deviously devilish daughter pleaded to the cornered Mimir. Defeated, he let out a doleful sigh, as he reached for the pouch resting by the table, just next to the steaming plates of beef and corn- now turned to tomorrow’s breakfast-. Urd’s hands extends eagerly in front of him, as two blinging, silver coins are pressed sluggishly into the palm.

“Just so you know, young lady, if I’d had the clairvoyance to make more helpings of lunch, you could kiss your chances farewell!”

“Oh, thank you, father!”

Urd cavorted, her spirit, running wild with ecstasy.

“Now, hold on just a minute! Surely, you don’t plan on going out like that!”

Mimir caught her by the shoulder, as she was just about to leap away. Urd spun around, surveying at her gown, stained with patches of dirt, and concluded with a nod.

“Up you go, to change straight away,”.

And she made her way for the stairs, without a hint of expostulation, still giddy from the success of her persuasion.

Mimir turned his attention to Ciriuss. He was sitting as steadily as he could, trying, with his limited experience, to be as opulent as the Gods and Goddesses he’d observed before. Seeing this, Mimir couldn’t help but smile; his beard scrunches upwards.

“Care for a small refreshment, Ciriuss? Just to prod the appetite!”

He nods frantically, lead mostly by hunger. A jar was pushed toward him, filled to the point of overflowing, batches of biscuits, brown with lushness. The boy fished meticulously onto the one he found most delectable.

“Thank you, sir!”

“So, how goes your day, dear boy?”

Invigorated, Ciriuss’ finally relaxed; he inches his chair closer to the table, as he spews out the details of the zealous adventure. All the while, the bits of biscuit trickle down his mouth.

“Terrific day, sir!”

The bits of biscuit come spewing out like the firing of a dozen cannons.

“First, we saw the soldiers marching, mighty trees falling.... Oh, and a druid!”

Mimir shot the boy a quizzical look.

“A druid, you say? Goodness, are you sure?”

“Honest! I saw him with my own eyes!”

“Ho, ho, either a lone druid simply decided to migrate a thousand miles, or *you*, my little friend, has had quite the topsy-turvy daydream!”. Mimir laughed.

“Really, sir, ask Urd. We saw it summon up a pack of hounds!”

At that moment, Mimir’s spirit twists into revolt, leaving his face a field of paleness and concern.

“There’s only one type of creature I know of, that can call out hounds... and they’re no druid, my boy, they’re Demons! Now, how on earth did you two wound yourselves up to those sorts of danger?”

“We were just walking in the forest, sir,”.

“Bah, the forest! Hasn’t anyone told you that forest there’s dangerous?”

“Believe me, more than enough,” he mumbled back.

“Was anyone else with you, adults, I mean?”

“Well, yes, sir. Miss Hel and Mr. Freyr,”.

“Thank heavens for that!”. He sighs, finally loosening up from all the anxiety.

Cirius was just about to reach for the second piece from the jar, when the table made a momentary jolt. A book, thicker than mountains, was dropped heedlessly in front of him. Puzzled, he quickly climbed up from the chair, up the towering text block, and was faced with the tedious colours, and insipid formality of the cover. In gold letters stained with tinges of grey, were the words: *The complete compendium of Demons*

“Seeing as you’re so alarmingly uninformed about Demons, my boy, perhaps you’d like to gloss over these pages? You might even find the one you two met in the forest!”

Cirius had to lift up the pages with both hands. In it, row after row of lucid images allured the curious mind. He poured over the many countenances of Demons; some hideous, some dreadfully nightmarish, and some ever so charismatic. The endless diversity created a perpetual supply of wonder as he read, and soon, he couldn’t stop viewing. So thoroughly riveted was the boy, that the interest seemed to radiate off him and onto others around him as well. Despite having memorized a good portion of the book, Mimir found his head drawn closer toward the book. While not every piece of writing could dazzle him -some appeared too cursive for him to discern-, but every so often, a name jumps out at him with the trepidation they evoke. “Baal... Balam... *Belial*,” he whispers.

“I recall seeing a very pale face,” he exclaimed to his reading partner, never taking his sight off the pictures.

“Hah, you could hardly find a Demon that isn’t!”

After a minute or so, the abject concentration forced the boy to pull away out of strain. He slid back down onto his seat, rubbing away the accumulated stress from his eyes.

“I can’t find him, sir!”

“Hehe, well, not to worry, I’m sure Hel and Freyr would have deduced their identity in due time!”

Just then, a breeze blown by fate besieges the room; it blows up the pages of that book, just enough, before dying away into placidity. But that page, was just the precise one significant enough to reinvigorate the boy. Upon seeing the picture, Cirius crawled rambunctiously back atop the book. He tried to make sense of it, tilting his head every degree there was; yet, there was not a shred of doubt to be impugned.

“I-Is this... me?”

Mimir peered nonchalantly over the boy’s shoulder. The two stared, one with wild amazement, the other with quiet composure. Etched into that yellowed page, the cherubic countenance of the blond, blue-eyed boy. A splitting image, painted by faultless perceptions and immaculate hands, so that no reader shall ever mistake it for the million other equally blond and equally blue-eyed persons. Yes, Cirius had no shred of doubt left, he was, indeed, looking at a picture of himself... and at the name “Cirius” written immediately under the picture.

“You mean you don’t know? Oh dear...”

“Know what?” His emotions swell in mixtures.

“Well, where do we begin...”

“Am I a Demon?!”

“Oh, no, goodness, no!”

“Am I a God?”

“Erm, well... uhh...”

“Am I a druid? Oh, I do wish I’m a druid! I’ll call out animals to do my bidding!”

“Cirius, look here...”

“If I’m a druid, how come I’m in a book about Demons?”

“Listen, boy!”

“Am I a Demon-druid hybrid? How wicked is that?!”

Mimir looked on the verge of fainting from the boy's barrage of questions. Only with a few heavy puffs did he tried to compose himself. With his hand tenaciously clutched onto the corner of the table, he pulled himself back onto the steady, oaken surface.

"To put it simply, Cirius... You are a Nephalem,"

"A Nephalem?"

"A Nephalem."

"A Nephalem!" He instantly took a liking to his new title.

"Indeed... the bests of both worlds..."

"What worlds, sir?"

"You see, Cirius... the history between Gods and Demons are quite chaotic to say the least, not enough for a dozen dramas to conclude. Perversity is not a trait berefted from the realm of the divine, and secret affairs between Gods and Demons are not uncommon. Some even crave the sordid pleasures of a rebel..."

The lost airs of the pensive thinker seemed to returned to Mimir, and he even began taking satisfaction in lecturing the eager wean.

"Trouble only arises when an offspring is conceived," Mimir continued.

"*Aha*, a Nephalem!"

"Ho, ho, not quite so, Cirius! The offspring of a God and a Demon works in bizarre ways. Either the child takes fully after the God, or they take fully after the Demon... yet, in that minuscule gap, nestled oh so furtively between the two--"

"A Nephalem!"

"Yes! But herein lies the problem, my dear Cirius... you are, by all means, an absurdity!" An overflowing ardour took hold of him, and he kept on delivering.

"The odds of ever conceiving a Nephalem, are so absurd, so stupid, so pointless, that you just seemed to be an affront against nature! Yet, here you are, hah! Space and time, in their boundless grandeur, just loves your sorts of absurdities, don't they? Through unstoppably aging aeons and lightyears of stretching space, the world has been graced by only four of them! And now, one of them sits here, a creature that topples universal laws, eating biscuits and conversing with an old coot such as myself. Utterly absurd!"

Mimir was on the brink of screaming at the end; as soon as he finished, he sat back down on his seat, slightly shameful of his display. The stupefied boy just goggled silently, which made Mimir all the more discomfited, thinking he might have upset or broken the boy.

"Are you alright there, Cirius?"

"Yes..."

"Good,"

There was more silence, which now started eating away at Mimir's insides; he shuffled to-and-fro in his seat, eyeing the boy the entire time.

"But what's so special about Nephalems?" Cirius questioned, making Mimir all too happy to oblige.

"Aha, a splendid question!" He shot right back up, pumped of swagger. Coughing, his heart thumped giddily at the opportunity to teach. "In truth, Cirius, the most unique quality of a Nephalem, is ironically something given to every domain, kingdom, phylum, family genus and species in the world... *adaptation*, ha, ha!"

The lecturer, seemingly gone senile, sneaked out streams of unruly laughter to himself, while chanting that mantra: "Absurd!"

“Adaptation, Ciriuss! The bread and butter of the Nephalem, ho, ho! You drown them, and by next week, they’d emerge with the most efficient set of gills. You throw them in the furnace, they come crashing out with skins of metal. Stabbing, piercing, ramming, squashing, crushing, starving... none, *ever*, disturbs the Nephalem for too long. The pressures of the sea, the vacuum of space, perhaps... no, not perhaps... definitely even a blackhole! He conquered them, all with that petrifying gaze of indifference. For him... for them... infinity is finite and death has died... they are imprints upon existence itself, never to be erased!”

The last phrase escapes his mouth in breaths of fatigue; his attention, cast out beyond the temporal world, he was staring at nothing, nothing came into view. Only the voice of that curious boy could pull him back from that impalpable realm of pondering.

“Wicked!”

The colours return to his cadaverous face, almost matching his beard now. That momentarily fervour for blathering left just as abruptly as it arrived. Sanity returned into Mimir, and into the room, so that everything was just the same as before; the only difference, is that by now, the jar of biscuits was half as full as it was. Clearing his throat, Mimir musters up a terse, concluding question, eager to put this conversation behind.

“Do you maybe understand yourself a bit more now, boy?”

“Oh, absolutely, Mr. Mimir!”

“Good...”

“I’m invincible!”

“Well, technically, you’re more like-”

“I can go wrestle with the animals!”

“Wait, Ciriuss, no-”

“I can leap off a mountain!”

“Now, Ciriuss, I don’t think you quite know how the process-”

“I think I’ll try stabbing myself for the fun of it!”

“Heavens! Don’t do *that*!”

There was no stopping the boy now. He stood up proudly, his mouth dripping with an endless cascade of crumbs. Visions of the stunts he was now prepared to pull flared up in his eyes. Urd came down just in time. She peers across the room, full of inquiries.

“Ah, Urd, just in time! Have I got news for you!”

She made her way to door and opened it. In came the ruffling gusts of the windy weather.

“Whatever they are, you can relay them outside,”.

Ciriuss marched toward her, donning on a new coat of swagger and zest.

“Now, Ciriuss, I think there’s been some misunderstanding on your part. You shouldn’t go doing anything wild-”

“It’s fine, father, we’re just going out eating!” She shouts back with assurance, which did nothing to comfort him.

“Please, Ciriuss, I think we need to clear out something. A Nephalem doesn’t-”

“Don’t worry, sir, I think I’ve just started understanding myself completely!”

Mimir scrambles with the zealous boy all the way to the door, gesticulating and pleading. Eventually, the two children, ambling away from his reach, ventured back outside. And how quickly their figures mould back into the picturesque hues of the town; into furtive shades and shadows. The lone elder stood, aghast, at his threshold.

“Good Lord, what have I done?”

The market was still blaring out the same clamours as the morning; the sellers shout out their products with confidence, along with a set of random adjectives they feel fit with what they were holding.

“Stunning corn, affordable and good!”

“Fresh and original table cloths!”

“Mighty onions, get your mighty onions here!”

The pair slithers through the throngs of people, hand in hand, lest they get consumed by those hustling feet. They stopped occasionally in front of promising looking stores, only for sessions of dissonance and disapproval to arise, forcing them to leave. Thus, with that childish intransigence amongst them, they never stopped wandering. The day turned orange, and the warmth of the setting sun wicked the last shred of enthusiasm out of the peckish pair.

The stores were dimming one after the other, throughout the street, the shopkeepers yawn with relief at the passing of their laborious routine; some sulk solemnly about how unfruitful their day has been; some cry with joy as they made their ways into the taverns. Urd, ceding to her hunger, finally settled on a bakery a few yards away; one that has its lamp still burning bright as day. Sluggishly, she drags her companion toward it with fatigued steps.

A paunchy, yet affectionate baker stood behind the window frame, proudly looking over the counters full of robust bread, his creation. The sight of the children approaching drew his spirit back to his business; he seemed ready to cavort when the pair reached his store.

“*Bonjour*, wee lad, wee lass! What you like today, huh?”

“*Une tarte aux myrtilles, s’il vous plait*.”

The baker snickers amiably, delighted at the reminders of home.

“*Oui, oui! Et vous?*” His attention was fully fixed on the boy.

“...le... pie?”

“*Quel genre?*”

Cirius was in shambles, he stares a signal for help at Urd, who was silently indulging in his predicament. Eventually, before the pause could tumble into social discomfort, Urd finally decided to butt in.

“*Il aura la même chose*,”

“Ah, *merci!*”

With a bow, the baker retrieved back into the window, leaving the two children waiting. No longer than two minutes later, the flavoursome steams of the pies begin wafting out into the clear evening, and the two froze with anticipation. The baker uncovered in front of them, with a somewhat haughty expression, two slices of luscious blueberry pies, blooming with the fresh juices of black and blue.

After paying the silver coin for them- worth every speck-, the two dived back into the streets, however, this time, it was soundless and quite barren. Searching for a place did not took long, the vacuity of the night had opened up places previously unreachable.

They perched upon the mortars of an unfinished building, quietly relishing on their meals. The lamps flare up in united luminosity, and the sun fell fully into the mountains. For what felt like ages, the two had not exchange any words. They were simply enjoying the other’s presence. And rightfully so, because in times like these, to speak is to commit the most insulting affront against all of tranquility.

Cirius bites into the blueberries; the juices romp kittenishly through every inch of the mouth, quenching the thirst from that buffet of biscuits. Between chews, he would glance at Urd, whose pie was barely touched. Instead, her gaze was affixed on the starry blackness above; on the clouds, stained grey by night, yet still so sublime. Her gaze was only broken, once her body, livid with that unsated voracity, forces her to eat the pie.

The crickets’ chirp blare out into the night, so that everyone knew that all was well, and no disturbances were chancing upon this day. As the last of Cirius’ pie tumbles down his throat vigorously, the boy let out a big

breath of the nighttime air, signifying his relish over the berry pastry. He turned towards Urd, who was lavishly indulging in every crust with care.

As the clouds drift swiftly by, the moon's shine reclaimed its glory in the realms below. Now, the pure, pellucid light of the moon embraces her face. Those aquamarine irises, her indigo hair, and her cornflower blue dress blend spotlessly into the night's beauty. Seeing her countenance, so fully grasped by blithe and peace, Cirius entered into a series of reflections.

He reflected on the past few months, past few weeks, and even the past hours; finally, he uncovered something grave, an utterly shameful realization, enough to make him prostrate with furious scruple. Still rebuking himself deep down, he turned towards Urd with great haste.

"You know, Urd, we hardly do anything you like!"

"Wut?" She murmured, with muffling mouthfuls of *myrtilles*.

"I said, we hardly do anything you like!"

She swallowed, before snarking:

"*Hardly?*"

"... Alright, we *never* do anything you like,"

"An astute and correct observation, Cirius,"

"So, perhaps tomorrow, we might change that..."

"Really?!" Her eyes dazzle.

"Yes,"

"Are you sure you could endure it?" She squinted at him with a coy smirk.

"Why not?" He almost laughed.

"Because it's going to be... uneventful... very uneventful,"

"How uneventful?"

"Like... library uneventful!"

"*No...*"

"Like... feeding swans by the pond uneventful!"

"You *wouldn't!*"

"Oh, Cirius, it's going to be a blast!" She cheered as she pulls him into a joyous embrace.

The two hopped down the sturdy masonry, with fresh faces of excitement and dread. Before they part, Urd halted decidedly in her tracks, forcing Cirius to stagger back by her firm hand.

"Well... thanks for today's adventure!"

"No bother..." he found it increasingly hard to reply.

The dimness of the night roused the otherwise meek heart of the girl; resolute, she pulls the boy in, and plants a playful peck on his warm cheeks. And, as if a ritual, she gave his shoulder a small slap, sending him on his way.

"Right, get some rest, you'll need it for tomorrow!"

They both crack into a short giggle, though one was distinguishably more nervous than the other. Urd saw him off with a wave, until he disappeared into the distance.

*

Cirius fumbled around his bed; with every toss and turn reminding him of the ghastly fact that he was still awake. What could prove to be such an obstacle toward his slumber, though? Well, nothing, except for the mere fact that it was the weekend.

From the tavern beside his cottage, came blasting intervals of banging and laughter. Every moment of peace destroyed by the sounds of the drunkards, who would not let shame shy them away from displays of the loudest, most vexing kind. Cirius was caught in a vicious cycle. In the scarce moments of silence, his head would sink into the comforts of the mattress; then the unruly clamours would yank him awake, which also pulls awake his rage; now, enraged and conscious, he goes on to curse and swear; only for more sounds to come rushing in, causing a new set of rage to be aroused. Such is the everlasting plight of those who live near drunkards.

Tonight, however, he would not have it. Already consumed with the dread of tomorrow's ordeal, his restraint collapsed. He threw aside his blanket, and marched outside, as a being controlled by pure, visceral annoyance. No time to contemplate his own moves, would he shout at them? Or would he make a formal complaint to the master? It was not until he reached the front of the tavern, did he truly realised what he was doing.

Basked in the lanterns from the inside, he could only squint through his vision. Through the windows, showed a topsy-turvy world. He was surprised to see just how few people were inside, two tables filled at most. The bodies around him squirm and jolt like starved animals competing for food. Their faces, outlandish, as if gripped by invisible claws that force them into the wonkiest expressions; a smile came out ten folds happier, and a scowl became twenty folds angrier. There seems to be an everlasting onslaught of laughter, which Heavens knows what caused them.

All that animus had fled away, and Cirius stood there shivering at the winds, ready to hopelessly crawl back to his dreadful condition. Just then, he heard steady of footsteps from behind. A figure looms over him, shielding him partially from the chill. Their eyes lock against each other, and that all too lucid memories of the morning flashed across Cirius' mind. In that illustrious parade of Gods and Goddesses, the one God that refused to be like the others, who strolls while the others march, who yawns while the others glare. In front of him, was Loki.

"Oh, it's you... the half-breed,".

Cirius stood solemnly, stammering in place. Yet, the God of mischief seemed to pay no heed.

"Word from my daughter was that you had quite a day! What are you doing out at this time?"

He wasn't sure if it was the phantasms of a tired mind, but as he gazed more and more at Loki, Cirius could swear that a smirk was plastered on his face. The hair, dark and lanky, flies against the gales like a flag strapped to a pole. He bore the nature of a trustworthy evil, and when stood against him, one is perpetually reminded of the dangers and rancour of Gods.

Though Cirius was still too stupefied to speak, he turned towards the tavern, hoping to answer Loki that way. Catching the boy's intention, he nodded, and released Cirius of his oppressive shadow.

"Hmm, yes, the taverns can be quite indecorous, can't they? People return a lower form of themselves, or in Thor's case, a *base* form of themselves!"

"I-I'd just like them to be quieter, sir."

"And I'd like a kingdom to rule over. Tough life, half-breed!"

"Excuse me, sir! I am not a 'half-breed'!"

"Oh?" Loki delighted in his sudden bravado.

"Yes, sir, I am... a Nephalem!" Cirius spouted confidently, even though he almost forgot what it was called.

"Hmph, they've got names for everything these days,"

Neither had noticed they were now carefreely leaning against the railings outside the tavern; both were straining their necks to match each other's eyes.

"But how do you know what I am, sir?"

"Oh, everyone knows a tad about you, quite the celebrity, really,"

“Ooh?!”

“No... taboo, is more of the right word for it!”

“Aww...”

“Mm, yes, imagine presenting a murderer’s son to the victim’s family! Perfectly blameless, of course, but you simply... disturb them,”.

“Do they hate me?”

“I believe some of them do... blindly, might I add,”.

Cirius’ head tilt sullenly downward, pressed by a disquieting weight. The girth of oppression laid its first strangle hold on the boy’s untainted and inexperienced heart. The sensation was new to him. A guilt formed without any ill deeds, and a growing indignation at people he hasn’t even met before.

“Not me, though!” Loki added.

The boy’s perked up like an encouraged pup.

“I just don’t care,”.

Before sinking back down, ready to collapse from despondence.

The God of mischief eyed his new, young acquaintance furtively. A drooping head of woe, so unbefitting in a child- or in anyone-. Yet, perhaps compelled, the God ran his hand roughly through Cirius’ thick wad of hair, and with that gesture, seemingly rubbed away all his dread.

“Of course, there are some who can’t help but see you as the child you really are, filled with innocence and curiosity... and with this conversation, I can see why,”

Cirius smiled, so bright that it might as well be day again. But he had no way of acting out on his jubilation, because he was already being shoved back to the road.

“Now back to bed with you, sleep like a child’s suppose to!”. Loki shooed.

“...Thank you, and good night, Mr. Loki, sir!” Cirius shouted back, as he slipped back into the darkness of his cottage, and shut the door.

He stood for a few more minutes at the front of the tavern, ruminating, until the drunkards sounded their strident dins once more. Mechanically, Loki kicked open the sturdy, wooden door, and strolled into the building. The attenders faces twisted from into bile, sensing a heretic among them. Indeed, his elaborate, purple tunic; those dashingly fresh boots did not belong in a place like that. Faced with those animalistic glares, and the battle stances some have taken, Loki could only confront them with a grin.

“Ladies and gentlemen- if you may be called such-, may I remind you that it is common courtesy to keep your voices down at night?”

“Ye wot, mate?”

“Tis an alehouse, not a library! And certainly not one of ye fancy playhouse!”

“Too bad, yer divine highness, plug yer ears if ye dinnae like it!”

While the room continues their constant chortles, Loki reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small, violet box of metal. He held it up to the whole audience, who, by now was all duly attracted.

“I remembered that I did not come in to remind you of courtesy, I came in to enforce it... this is my personal creation, the ‘Sordid Silencer’! If anyone makes a noise it deems to be excessively loud, it’ll launch a small serpent at the speaker, the serpent will inject a venom that stuns and burns the tongue for twenty hours,” He carefully places the box in the midst of the room, and continued, “Keep in mind, that should any of you touch this box, it’ll simply release a bigger serpent, this one with venom strong enough to rot the flesh,”.

“Hah! You’d think we believe something- AAARGH!”

The man was on the floor, scrambling at the boards within seconds. His tongue hanged limply outwards, as he lied panting in anguish; he was in piles of sweat in a minute, red veins congregate on his body, ready to burst in united agony. Witnessing the writhing man, the rest of them gasped out loud, before remembering their condition, and each plastered their palms to their mouths.

“Now, ladies, gentlemen, have a splendid night!” Loki whispered, before leaving.

The people did not stay long after that; they were rushing towards the exit, but halted before the box with fearful tears. One very shrewd gentleman decided to cover the box with his blazer, but all that did was release the deadlier serpent. It slithered around in a frenzy, and of course, they yelled at its approach, which just released even more serpents. Ironically, at that moment, the tavern was louder than it ever could have been in the entirety of its history. Soon, however, it was as silent as a bat; and it would remain silent eternally, from that day onwards... Loki did not go back for that box.

Cirius fumbled around in his bed some more, from right to left. Until, he landed on that golden spot that just seems to enchant slumber into you. Promptly, he fell asleep peacefully. He dreamt of exploring a valley, with companions he knows in dreams but not in real-life. Once his snoring began, the day could at last conclude, with that mysterious boy tossing into the cottage, the two pouches of potatoes and bread.

*

Five days before Autumn

Monday

Midnight

Though the kingdom may have seeped into darkness and somnolence, the illustrious palace still dazzled with a beautiful brightness, almost like a beacon, never to darken when the mighty deities still thrive and roar with zeal. The throne room shone the brightest of them all, oversaw by platoons of diligent chandeliers in the ceiling. The light was beginning to annoy Hel's fatigued eyes.

She sat, legs crossing right over left, then left over right, then not at all. Although she herself would not admit it even if prodded for a century; she was, unquestionably... cross. The source of all the suppressed irritation suddenly waltzed into sight. Odin's boots left a reverberating stomp with each of his step; his attire expressed a conflicting aura of sublimity and savagery. Odin had a special nature about him, he appears infinitely imposing to strangers, petrifying to enemies, but ultimately buoyant to anyone who got to know him. Yet, in the tired Goddess' eyes, at the moment, he appeared as nothing but a tardy, bothersome, old coot.

"Lord Odin, how nice of you to finally arrive!"

"Oh, I do apologise, Hel. I was occupied with some stately matters,"

"So, you were... I simply cannot understand why this meeting couldn't wait until tomorrow!"

"No, no, Hel! If there is an issue concerning Demons, it takes priority! Heaven forbid we have those fiends running clandestinely amuck in our kingdom,"

"Indeed, my lord!"

"Yes, yes, I'll do better, alright? Now, about your encounter..."

"Abaddon and Azazel, my lord. The former, suspected espionage; we caught them escaping with a citizen. Eir is tending to her, now. I believe she could provide some clarities,"

"Hmm, it'd be a miracle if she's still sound after that ordeal. Right, what do *you* make of it, Hel and... where's Freyr?"

"*Occupied*, as well... It's Sunday, my lord!" she replied, almost with sympathy.

"Oh, him and his bloody banquet! Why are all Gods of War such gluttons?!"

"I suspect he won't take long. The trays were close to empty when I left!"

"Well, what do you make of it, Hel?" The Allfather sighed.

"Sparse, my lord. Truthfully, many things elude me. Why risk losing their duke for a kidnapping?"

"Why, indeed..." His voice trailed off, and he let his mind run down the path of rumination.

As the two went on, a graceful presence stepped timorously into the room. Eir, the Goddess of healing, had finished her duties with Molly- whose voice had been restored, but still locked in a state of internal screaming-. Eir sported a white dress of silk, embroidered with brooches of unblemished copal. Her hair, silver as the steels of weapons, was braided into neat and stunning laces. She stood demurely by the door, as if locked in place. She was dignifiedly statuesque, awaiting for any sign of acknowledgement. Hel noticed first.

"Ah, Miss Eir! Please, come in." She exclaimed as she mustered a beam with her knackered face.

With a bow, she approached the pair, expression and posture unwavering.

"The woman is fine. The only damage sustained was a shattered larynx, I have mended the injury. She appears able to speak, but is in a state of deep trauma..."

"Thank you, Eir. And I know we're being unreasonable, troubling you so late..." She shot a derisive gaze at Odin, who was still occupied by his own racing mind.

"Not, at all, Miss Hel," Eir's face finally formed a semblance of a smile.

Suddenly, as if bursting with new life, Odin interjected quite curtly.

“How would you describe the woman, Eir?” His voice was sonorous.

“Young... perhaps around twenty... not much I can make out of her, yet, my lord, given her current state of raving.”

“What about her appearance, is she the attractive sort?”

Hel squinted at the question.

“...Far be it for me to judge beauty, my lord.” Eir promptly replied.

“Yes, I suppose. But imagine you were an eldritch Demon of archaic origin; would she be the sort of woman you would find... appealing?”

“I... I’m not...”

“Do you know whether she’s a virgin?”

“For Heaven’s sake, Odin! I ought to smack you in Frigg’s behalf!”

“I believe we’re close to the truth, Hel!”

“What truth?!” She demanded.

As unforeseeable as a pouncing dragonfly, from down the corridor, he arrived. The halls echo off his elephantine steps; the chandeliers suffered endless tremors caused by his gait. The door flings open with a deafening slam, enough to quiver the entire palace. Collective grunts of annoyance sounded throughout the bedchambers.

“I’VE ARRIVED, ALMIGHTY ALLFATHER!” Freyr sang into the bright room.

The titanic stature of Freyr was swaying in ways no being his size should be able to sway without toppling over. At one point, his body was bent well over ninety degrees downward before he swinging back up effortlessly. The magical properties of alcohol are truly a mystery. Odin had already started bombarding him with question, while the gargantuan God gibbered on drunkenly about his own topic of interest. Hel whispered to the discomfited Goddess beside her:

“You best leave before you can, Eir!”

She replied with a soft giggle, before looking at the scene in front of her, and was taking the advice into deep consideration. A raucous thud later, and Freyr was lying on the floor, much resembling one of the many trees he had masterfully sliced.

“Eir, could you fix him something to cure his damned intoxication!” Odin’s veins were stretching to his forehead.

“Right away, my lord!” She turned to Hel with a hopeless smile, and scurried out the room.

Just under an hour later, Freyr was sighing comfortably on the velvet cushions of a sofa; a luxurious linen blanket resting on his lap, though it was barely big enough to cover it. Around his neck, a white towel soaked in warm water. On the small table adjacent to him, was a half-finished cup of steaming coffee, and of course, the empty flask of a potion designed to erase drunkenness.

Odin could finally recommence his investigation. Hel was making a show of yawning very audibly and apparently now; constantly reminding the Allfather that he had every opportunity to postpone the discussion.

“Ask away, lord Odin. I’ve nothing to hide!”. His voice came out sonorous and mellow, for once not shrouded by intensity.

“Your bout with Abaddon, explain!”

“Aye, that was a good one! He turned into a massive bug monster, and still couldn’t withstand the might of my sword!”

“So, you won!?”

“Aye, of course!”

“And you’ve captured him?”

“Ah, that I didn’t, I sliced him in two,”

“Oh, so you’ve killed him,”

“Ayyyeee?”

“You sound unsure,”

“...”

“What?”

“Oh no, no, no...”

“WHAT?”

He did indeed have something to hide, the only problem was that he didn’t even know it. Despondently, he met the Allfather’s glare.

“I... don’t think... I finished the job...”

“YOU WHAT?!” Odin bawled.

“Oh, Freyr...” Hel muttered lugubriously.

“You failure!”

“Now, hold on-”

“You ungainly, supercilious failure!”

The denigrations just keep piling onto the brawny God. Positively mortified, and having all his bravado flee him at once, Freyr recoiled into the seat. His face was buried leagues deep into his massive hands.

“You’re usually so careful when it comes to battles, what happened?” Hel asked sympathetically through Odin’s still ensuing ire and insults.

“I’d just finished my tree cutting regimen, so I was knackered... and peckish!”

“Tree cutting?! What sort of idiotic regimen is that?!” From beneath Odin’s grey hair, the veins were migrating more openly onto his forehead.

“Nothing else is up to the standards of my sword skills anymore!”

“I knew the days were getting hotter, so it was *your* doing!”

“RIGHT, we’re getting off topic!” She wedged herself between the two towering bodies.

At this point, Freyr sat as a husk of his former self. He was gently rocking back and forth, with his arms locking his legs tightly onto his chest. The Allfather marches away, and Hel reasoned she could just barely witness tangible fumes of red oozing off him. Then, in the most mind-boggling manner, Odin breathed. It took half a minute for him to draw in his limit of air; something that flummoxes Hel so much she still remembers it vividly. The exhale took a full minute.

“I hope you’re prepared to face what you’ve unleashed upon Midgard...” He turned toward the two, with an expression as gloomy as the night. He continued:

“Now, not only do we have an imminent summoning to deal with, there’s also a Demon running loose in the kingdom!”

“Goodness, A summoning? Are you sure?! And who?” Hel tensed.

“Only fate knows for certain, and she’s a cruel one... what’s done is done, whatever awaits, we face it valorously,”

“I’m sorry,”

Freyr’s shame was rampaging within him, it drained his will to do anything. It was the tiny courage and dignity left in him that forced the apology out.

“Freyr,” came the stentorian reply.

His loyalty resurfaced, and he confronted Odin.

“Do better,”

It was remarkable, every previous trace of wrath, of disappointment, of contempt were extinguished. All that hectoring phrases were forgotten; that countenance of forgiveness and understanding burnt into his brain. Freyr was certain that he could swear to everything in the universe, that no such mistake would ever be committed by him again.

“I’ll inform the others in the morning. Patrol the streets, hunt for Abaddon. We’ll start investigation on the summoning; Mimir ought to be of some help,”.

Hel and Freyr listened punctiliously. The Goddess more awake now, and the God resolutely attentive.

“Heed my advice, you two! Keep constant vigilance. The chicanery and the slyness of Demons knows no bounds! Heaven knows what cunning disguise he’s taken now, blending himself into every throng of people, every building, like he’s always meant to be there. They are actors and prevaricators of the most sinister kind!”

*

Abaddon reached the church. Miraculously, no one caught sight of this nude figure scampering through the night. Unlocking the door with the spare keys he kept under the flower pot, he promptly put on his nightgown, and went to bed. Of course, issues such as his need for a new identity came to mind. But being cut in half took quite the toll on his energy; he decided he would leave the conundrums for tomorrow. Perhaps he’ll try being a shoemaker, the notion uttered itself so curtly, as he drifted into sleep.

*

Over the plains, where the grass dance with the nighttime breeze. The kingdom of Sheol was bustling with energy. The city was only starting to get acquainted with the vigour of a young day. Street lamps scintillate their glorious beams upon the gravel pavement; the road reverberates with the grinding of carts and stamping of hooves. And, oh, the citizens! They blare their shouts and conversations under the fully rosed moon, as if rejecting its authority.

In this city of Demons, the citizens wander and romp at night; oblivious to the fact that outside their walls, the world was hushed and numbed.

Azazel arrived on the castle grounds, still leisurely saddled on his hounds. The pack lowered their bodies for his descent, and only after seeing their master disappear into the building, were they finally content to scatter. He made his way through the halls, yawning and blinking unceasingly. Many had greeted him, only to be met with grunts of either affirmation or contempt.

While winding the corner, Azazel collided into one of the maids, much to her horrific panic, and to his apathy. The tray of tea and cakes rattled violently on her anxious hands, before being steadied by his own. The flabbergasted maid looked on with a gaping mouth, as Azazel picked up the cup of tea, dumped in five cubes of sugar, swirled it with the spoon, and went on his way.

With a phenomenal pour, he emptied the brimming cup into his mouth, and left it on the carpet. Now in front of the door to the throne room, he breathed in the air of determination, and gave it two sturdy knocks.

“Enter!” The muffled voice sounded through the gaps.

Azazel entered, and immediately his person was now devoted to the figure in the room. Belial, so many auras exude off this being, it is suffocating. A hint of tenderness, yet sometimes unmistakable menace; a sign of benevolence was quickly replaceable by malice. It is easier to revere him from the start.

He carried complexion of utter whiteness, and a posture with dignity that hasn't been challenged in his life. His hickory horns curve toward the ceiling; their crooked texture was the only thing out of place within Belial's being.

Azazel struts, almost like a serpent would, toward Belial.

"My liege..."

"Something happened with Abaddon, didn't it? Something bad?"

"Miserable, my liege... how do you know?"

"You look as if you could take a week's nap! Obviously, you wouldn't report to me if all's well. Now, what happened?" He ushered Azazel to a velvet wingback chair.

Azazel was giving off chagrined shuffles in his seat. The prince patiently waited.

"Well, my liege... see... Abaddon, due to *his own* slapdash manner, something entirely outside of my powers to handle, of course... which the same applies for this unfortunate event, which is that it's unrelated to me, or anything I've done... uh..."

"Azazel, please! Clarity!"

"Yes, yes... sorry, my liege! Umm... we possibly... compromised our mission..."

"Possibly?"

"We were... *definitely* compromised our mission, my liege..."

"Elaborate," Belial imposed himself over the nervous speaker, with an empty expression still that's still deciding on the proper reaction.

"Hel and Freyr discovered us in the woods, the sacrifice he procured was reclaimed by them..."

Azazel didn't dare tilt his head upwards, he didn't know if a scowling, frowning, or reproachful face would confront him. He had hoped for that minuscule chance of a miracle, that Belial would joyfully exclaim it was all part of his plan- though in his defence, it *did* happen... more than once-. The ensuing silence destroyed that hope.

The prince just stood still, and breathed. The primary method of coping with anger for many leaders: "passive apoplexy", where you instill the anticipation of outburst with your overly loud breaths, but never actually do it. Belial breathed, each exhale expelling essences of irritation and hatred. Azazel couldn't help but count the moments each sigh ended and another began.

Then, just like that, it stopped. The oppressive air lifted, and the prince was looking as ebullient as ever. Through the affable smirk, he spoke to the penitent duke:

"So, you emerged out of this affair emptyhanded, with the summoning a week away, and left Abaddon to be captured or likely killed by the Gods, then try to deflect blame onto a comrade in peril... *ruthless*, Azazel!". Belial almost laughed, as he trod across the room to his throne.

"You're not bothered, my liege?"

"Oh, I suppose I will be later on... but for now, I'll leave Abaddon a chance to prove himself. And, to be candid, dear Azazel, I'm more bothered about your blatant apathy of your fellow gentiles!"

"There's very little to regard, my liege..." He whispered.

"Hmm, lucky he's not dead. It'll be quite a lost,"

"What makes you so sure, my liege?"

"He disclosed to me once, that in the event of his demise; he'd make it known to me through a crimson-coloured locust, set to seek my presence to the ends of the earth. *So far* in the day, no locusts!".

"Typical," Azazel spat.

“I find it quite thoughtful of him... saves us the trouble of ascertaining. Heh, you ought to come up with one!”

“I’d always envisioned my death would be beside you, my liege,”

“Really?! That’s a bit disturbing to picture...”

Conversing with Belial was like enjoying a dance performance; there was never any stagnation. Each part with something wholly new to engross you, so you never feel like leaving. The list of errands and chores in Azazel’s mind crumble away as he spoke with Belial. Unwillingly, he gave into the mesmerizing flow of an arcane yet delightful conversation.

“Have you done the revision on the summoning?” Belial inquired.

“Thoroughly, my liege,”

“Glad to hear... the time certainly draws close. The chamber’s embellished, the ceremony’s prepared. All but the sacrifice... we’ll just have to trust that Abaddon doesn’t disappoint,”.

“The sacrifice’s always the most arduous, isn’t it?”.

“Hmph, it’s been a headache ever since that mortal village was destroyed. Used to be we could snatch ten sacrifices in a weekend. Now, we’d have to risk ourselves in espionage among the Gods just to get a virgin. Damn those Djinn’s!”.

“Actually, my liege, I’ve been wondering for a while now,”.

“Yes, Azazel?”.

“Why the predilection for *chaste* sacrifices among the ancient Demons?”.

The query left Belial shuffling. He twirls his tongue trying to find a suitable approach to the answer.

“Ah... that’s quite the provocative question,”.

“I see, how crude of me,”.

“No, no, no! It’s a great question that demands an answer... see, Azazel, the ancient Demons thrived in a time where outlooks were vastly different. Their dispositions and preferences are...”

“Traditional?” Azazel chimed in.

“Exactly! The perception for what is considered a ‘*pure*’ maiden was naturally also traditional. A *pure* maiden is... chaste, god-fearing... submissive,”.

“I understand...”

“But do you know what the most interesting part of this whole ‘*virgin*’ problem is? There’s absolutely NO difference at all! Virgin blood and non-virgin blood, not an iota of disparity! Yet, they KNOW! They *always* do... try to hoodwink your way through with a random maiden off the streets, and you may very well just turn the ancient Demons against you.”

“I see... but why the emphasis on maidens?”

“Heh, who knows? Perhaps they’re a bit on the kinky side after a long slumber!” He said with an awkward laugh.

The topics flux like torrents. As one died out, another took its place. This was hardly something new for Azazel and Belial; the other nobles were just happy Belial’s ramblings were contained by one person. The night grew darker, yet neither saw a desirable cessation to their chat. To them, these chats are not mere banter, it was a transcendental culture; it’s custom to end with glory! But today, Azazel couldn’t, for the life of him, discern the signs of that said glory.

“Anyhow, enough about people’s lustful quirks, back to the summoning!”

“Of course, my liege,”

“An unprecedented one, this time! I’m sure you’re aware?”

“Absolutely, my liege, it’s quite exciting! This is the first foreign summoning we’ll have!”

“Yes...foreign...”

Belial's voice trailed off, as he leans deeper into the cushion of the throne.

"Shimush, the ancient Demon of Oyo..." The tone was terse; a smile spreads, freakishly over the fiend's face

The smile elapsed into a sordid snigger. His fingertips tapping irrepressibly at the golden armrest. His red eyes flash with ardent wildness. The thoughts that currently swirl in his head, the flagitious fantasies depravities, they shone through his face; that is now nothing but twisted sickness.

"Do you know what's funny, Azazel?"

The duke senses an upcoming speech, so he ecstatically made himself comfortable in his seat. He shook his head to the question.

"It's the irony, really. The princess of pride sits on her throne in Hell, but the most prideful beings will forever be the Gods up here. Only, they've hidden their pride under a name more soothing and consoling. They call it dignity or honour. That's why they will never see Shimush coming. To them, this war consists solely of Sheol and Aesir; to include any other party, to seek aid might as well be defeat. To procure Shimush for the summoning, I've had to grovel, Azazel... before thousands of derisive smirks, I groveled, flattered and ingratiated with an unperturbed soul. This is something they cannot fathom, to have your essence willingly sunk into pools of degradation, to face ridicule with apathy? Madness!"

Belial paused.

"They've studied us enough, Azazel. They can list our soldiers, our armories, our cities, our origins. In regards to Sheol, they're like immaculate hunters, able to identify and capture the weakness without folly. But, introduce the local hunter to some foreign beast, and see them scrambling their brains. The best part about it? The hunter will reject any aid presented to them, and they just might lose their heads in a reckless pursuit of the beast..."

Azazel's eyes gleam with augustness, and the conversation ended there.

*

The sea was crashing its tempestuous waves upon the oaken hull of a boat. The small crew of the quivering cog was busy steadying themselves against the onslaught of waves. The most effervescent among them was a lady, her violet shawl drenched by the countless splashes that came before. The lady's dreadlocks, soaked and ruffling from the wind and water, would not stop running down her face; her hand constantly upon them to keep them at bay.

She shouted directions at the crew, whom had conceded themselves to anarchy, trying to boom sense back into them. The boat was having its own earthquake, the sails stretched as far as they could go, the unmanned helm churned in rampant, rapid rhythms.

"Lady Bayani! This storm, it came without signs!" A panicking crewmember scrambled up to the lady.

Bayani gaped at the brooding darkness of the sky, biting her lips at the discharges of whiteness hidden within the black clouds. Then came a rumbling, the signs of entropic destruction loomed behind those dreaded nimbuses. She could sense the lightnings raring to race toward their boat, eager to puncture the deck, and let the sea swallow them whole.

“Where’s the bloody expert when you need him? Mosun, call Shango out now!” She demanded.

“Y-yes, ma’am!” He scurries away.

Rain was falling now, and she continued staring at the restless sky, even though it only deepened her worry. Once the cabin doors flung open, however, she regained focus, and jumped toward the opening. An extravagant figure meandered languidly up the steps, yawning and blinking. Shango strutted out, looking apathetic toward anything but rest. He stood shirtless, in the face of chilling gales and icy droplets. Atop his head, was an iron helmet of spikes, it curved, pointing the tip invitingly upwards.

“Shango!” Bayani bawled before his somnolent face.

“What?!” The tired God returned.

Bayani yanked his body out impatiently, clasping his head and forcing his gaze to the stirring sky. Even then, it took a few good seconds before Shango truly realised the situation.

“Oh,”.

“What’s happening?” She loosened her grip on his head.

“Nothing to worry about, sis. Standard procedure for all Gods and Goddesses of Thunder! Happens when there’s two in an area. Think of it as declaring customs.” He reassured her.

Shango steps out of the cabin, into the centre of the ship. Suddenly, Bayani witnessed from his helmet’s prongs. Sparks of bluish white, ever so mite, ever so swift. As Shango’s stance steadied, the sparks flew wilder, and a hiss loudens into a crackle and into a boom!

Then... whiteness all around. The erratic, branching beams of light and electric crashed down from the heavens upon the single tip of the helmet. Shango tensed up every inch of his being, his chest seemed ready to burst. The crewmembers shielded their weak eyes from the light; the boat quivered one intensely last time; Bayani goggled.

Just like that, the storm dissipated. The waves calmed, and the wind settled. Shango breathed in a gargantuan breath of air, and went back inside the cabin. Bayani sighed, and resumed her duties of commanding the ship.

“Back to stations, crew.” Bayani signaled to the cowering crewmembers.

“Yes, ma’am!” came their mellow reply in unison.

In the horizon, the mountains’ image rose, wrapped in hues of orange. Dawn was here. The boat and traumatized crew sailed forth toward the land, just barely before them.

“Few hours more,” Bayani wagered to herself.

The turbulent weather left her quite uncomfortable. From her shawl, dress, and hair were ceaseless cascades of water, and worse of all, the water had seeped into her shoes. But all these were forgotten when the sun rose fully, and she basked in all the golden allure. Pushing back her hair, she stood atop high platform on the deck, smiling sweetly as the morning light engulfed her chestnut skin in warmth.

*

Monday

Dawn

Myriads of pairs of feet shuffled by the deck in zeal. A shipmate lowered the anchor, a few more tending to the sails. The brawnier ones of the crew were lugging around hefty barrels and sacks down to the sandy shores. While all the grunting and panting of labour droned on in the background, the two deities stood absorbedly on the dock of Helsinki's harbour.

Helsinki has seen better days; bustling days and noisy days. As a prominent gateway into the Nordic Kingdom, it was a town of no common tongue, yet pervaded with goodwill. In its golden ages, it saw itself anchored by sharp and extravagant ships from the far East, sturdy and imposing vessels from the Africans. And every blue moon came rare surprises of the Mayans, who sailed their flamboyant colours with pride. When cultures coalesce in the coast of this town, they become united by an undying loyalty to the sea, vast enough to supersede a lifetime's worth of hate and hostility.

But then came the upturning of Nature, when laurel wreaths of supremacies, given to every God as birthright, was plucked away by fiendish hands that emerged from darkness. Suddenly, saintly palaces found themselves intruded upon by feet stained with farcinorous blood. Of course, the ugly truth was that the fiends were always there, only obscured by the ostentatious walls erected by the Gods. And behind these walls they reside oblivious to the exponential malice already brewing over the years.

With the light of Valhalla snuffed, Helsinki, too, lost its allure. Though the Scandinavian sea continued washing with a fervour that is its wont, the harbour was no longer entertaining those vivacious vessels from each ends of the Earth. For the vessels that *do* grace the harbour every so often, they sail into a place chocked with wistful air, eternally reminding itself of what *was*, and what could *be*...

Bayani studied her map meticulously, but couldn't for the life of her decipher where they were facing from the harbour. This was on top of squinting through the glares of the sun, which made the already minute words on the map ever so much more indecipherable.

Shango was beside her, eyes shut, mouth gaping minutely, and head tilted upward in a silent entrancement. He lets the air of this new land glide through every part of his body; once it did, the ritual could begin. Shango listened, to every part of the land, embracing each noise. And finally, it appeared: the melody of the land, orchestrated from the very voices of nature themselves, euphoniousness in its purest form. Shango could envision it, mellifluous minims manifesting from unthinkable places. The trees almost sound like flutes, the wind was the lyrics, and the crawling of creatures were the drums. Unconsciously, he began to jive, keeping to the rhythms with brisk and small twirls and twists.

Bayani found the solution to her annoying map problem, and that was by shielding herself behind Shango's boogieing shadow. After a bit, she scrolled the piece up, satisfied, tucking it in her pouch. She calls out to her brother with a tap on the shoulder.

"Shango."

He replied with a head bop to the right.

"Shango!"

A head bop to the left.

"SHANGO!"

His moves were only getting wilder.

"For Olorun's sake, this lout..." She whispers, ceding her face into her palms.

Shaking with fury, she positions herself in front of the body swaying in disconnected ecstasy, channeling all her annoyance into a fist, and punched it straight at his naked abs.

“Auuurgh...”

There were two sets of moaning here. One from being hit in the gut; the other from punching, with all your strength, on the stony muscles of a God. The two spent the next minute wallowing in agony, much to the bemusement of the onlooking crewmembers. Shango clutched onto his throbbing abdomen, and Bayani massaged her knuckles tenderly.

“What. The bloody hell. Were you doing?” She blurted out.

He replied with a series of coughs, followed by wheezes, and then coughing again.

Once they composed themselves, Shango was finally able to give her the answer.

“The music in these lands is absolutely superb, you know?”

She looked at him quizzically.

“*That’s* what you were waggling to?”

“*Dancing*, sis.”

“Yes... surely, you’d like to abstain from this queer habit of yours here. We’ve learnt to tolerate it back home, but remember that you *are* in foreign grounds. It doesn’t stand to benefit us by befuddling them right off the boat!”

“Relax, sis! I’m sure they have equally bizarre characters in their midst. Oh, the tales they tell of the Norse, I can barely wait to meet them!”

Bayani shook her head, and went back to studying the map, having lost all her comprehension after the punch.

“Ma’am?” Came a diffident voice, which once again drew the Goddess away from her task.

“Y-yes, Mosun?”

“Everything’s unloaded from the ship, ma’am, one of us ought to go book some carriages from the townsfolk.”

“Right, of course... you’ll be bound for... Beyla, which is to the... West of here, right?” Bayani traces the map with her finger.

“That’s right, ma’am.”

“How many carriages do you reckon you’ll need?”

“I think five should be good. That’s including a ride for me and the crew.”

“Good... and remember, it’s a quarter discount on the cocoa ONLY IF they get two barrels of palm oil!”

Suddenly, a wrinkled-faced gentleman approached the group, interjecting himself into the conversation. His expression carried a tint of nostalgia for a glorious past that his grey hair and matted beard could attest for.

“Yorubaland, am I right?”

The two were taken aback by the stranger, but Shango was quick to welcome him with a firm handshake.

“Indeed you are, my good man, how could you tell?”

“From the ship, of course! Iroko wood, brilliant craftsmanship, too.” Said the gentleman as he brushes his hand across the vessel’s hull gently, before continuing: “So, what brings ye to the Nordics, then?”

“Dreadful business, I’m afraid... life, death, and Demons.”

“Demons, eh? Best take it up with the Gods, then.”

“Speaking of that, sir, could you possibly point us to where Midgard is?” Bayani chimed in, eager to finally solve the problem she’s been mulling over with the map.

“Midgard? Well, that’s about forty miles North-West from here. Ye cross the river behind two streets down then it’s just one road that takes ye there. Best take a carriage, I reckon, I can get ye one, in fact.”

“No, no, we prefer to walk.”

“Shango!” Bayani hissed, as she gave her brother an elbow to the chest.

“What? Oh, right! Could you please get us five carriages for our crew? They’re bound for Beyla to trade.”

“NO, call *six*! One for us, too!”

“Oh, come along, Bayani, let’s walk!”

“No.”

“Where’s your adventurous spirit? Let’s see what these lands have to offer!”

“NO!”

“Come on, Bayani!” The obdurate God locks his hands firmly on his sister’s shoulders in pleading fashion.

“I swear to the Heavens, Shango, I am NOT walking forty miles.”

“Fine... you take a carriage, then... I’ll walk.” He finally released his hold, and started gathering his pouches from the ground, slinging them one by one over his back.

“Don’t be absurd.”

“I am. And when you get there, you just go ahead and brief the Asgardians on what needs to be briefed. I’ll probably arrive by tomorrow evening.”

“Me? Meet them alone? Stop being ridiculous. Oi, where do you think you’re going?” She stammered out as her brother began walking.

“I see what you’re doing, this is a trick, isn’t it?”

“You’re not getting me!”

“I’m taking a carriage!”

“I’m serious!”

*

The crack of dawn, is like a chick shedding the shell of its egg. Once having met the wondrous gift of sensation, it cannot help but chirp with loudening perplexity. At dawn, the sky wavers between blue, and grey and orange, unsure which coat to don. The weather too, has not yet decided to be vicious or generous. And when the world dithers, we get the ever so rare occasion of peace, in forms of soothing melodies sung by Nature to all her denizens.

Even if the humans are often too drowsy to appreciate, the melodies find their audience in the flowers, that bloom their hue and fragrance to the tune; the insects who join in a duet of their own; the Heavens, who shine a spotlight to encapsulate her performance.

Abaddon abhors the dawn, but even he could not fully explain why. Perhaps he sees in such shows of goodwill spewed out by those above an undertone of mockery for his kind. Perhaps an internalized loyalty to Demonhood forces him to shun the coming of morning as is the wont of his species. Perhaps he just hate the sight of brightness. But, with each passing moment, as the sun inches higher over the mountains, more contempt for this kingdom surges in his heart.

After marching his way barefoot through jagged thickets and sodden dirt, the Demon finally made it out of the forest. Arriving at Midgard’s outskirts, fields of crops and pastures stretch far across the lands. Abaddon’s head was still in a wretch, surviving off the little blood left circling his being, each step was a dizzying mess of blurred vision and shuffling innards. Naked, tired, and ridden with scabs and scratches, the soft sunbeams of the rising sun only served to sour his mood to the vertex of a tipping point. The only saving grace Abaddon in the present moment, was from the absence of humans and their irritatingly inquisitive nature.

Although, humans would prove to be the least of his worries... because strutting along the borders of one Mr. Clausen's sheep farm, was a Shepherd dog on his lonesome morning stroll. And as the two met each other's gazes, a blood curdling reflex rose up from the pit of the hound's guts, escalating into a churlish baying, and eventual barking.

Even when Abaddon had re-assumed his guise as the priest not long before emerging from the wood, the recognition was instantaneous. Somehow, the beasts always know. It is not just through senses, not the stench of murder nor the touch by sinful hands. It is the ineffable feeling of sickness imparted by a wretched soul masking themselves behind innocence. Such affronts to Nature can fool the disconnected humans, but not the other beasts. Stoic with a duty to protect, the dog's barks got fiercer, the closer Abaddon came towards the farmlands, but unable to surpass a barrier of self-preservation, it could not bring itself to act, and so merely continued barking.

"Heh. It's strange how soothing it is to hear the cries of this mutt compared to the sounds of mortals. At least with the beasts, they do not disguise their distress in flowery words of pleading and begging, they simply *yelp*. Simple and true. The beasts are aware of that inalterable law that lesser beings are always subdued. And though they may betray an instinct of fear, there is never denial. The mortals *fool* themselves into thinking they stand superior, and in hubris will condemn their subduers as evil, monstrous, heartless... refusing the very notion of that universal law itself."

A hideous sound echoed throughout the empty pasture, a hideous sound that bewails an unjust world, gifting to it a solemn dawn bereft of any jubilant melody. The barking was no more, and what once was a dubious day with undecided tones, suddenly emerged with an atmosphere of gloom. Losing the courageous hound's protection, Midgard was once again prowling with a malevolent intruder. Abaddon continued on his trail back to the church. His head was no longer dizzy, as he came away from the farmlands with a quenched appetite, and a spirit more resolved than ever.

*

The journey between Helsinki and Midgard is littered with sceneries starving for attention. The Gods avoid it for its evocation of woe and wistfulness. The traders barely bat an eye, committed to the riches earned in their destinations. And as is the case anywhere, the locals simply grow bored of them. What value is a golden passage to havens, if no one is to walk it? What use are perfect angles to grand canyons, if no one is to see it? Then again, the reverse can be true, too. If a scene is flocked by thousands of gawkers, competing to appreciate, then beauty itself gets lost among the crowd. That's why a good scene is not solely curated by wonders of shapes and shades, but also a sentimental mind to mingle them into emotions to be digested.

As he wandered into a forest glade, Shango stopped, and basked in the pollen-filled air, letting the multiple mixtures of musky aroma tickle the nostrils with delight. Among the most delightful scent of which was traced to a patch of flowers nestled between two raspberry bushes. The Yoruba God bent down for a look, and found himself dizzied by hues and patterns hitherto unseen in flowers. Waddling his burly body to-and-fro, each new species was given meticulous examinations of sight and smell.

"Isn't this brilliant, Bayani?"

Shango uttered loud enough to be heard across the field by her sister, who was still catching her breath after trailing behind for the last few minutes. Stubborn to her last breath, she had spent the entire duration of their journey pleading for Shango to see reason and get a carriage. Alas, stubbornness was an inherited trait for the siblings, and so Bayani was here, two miles out of Helsinki, and thirty-eight miles left for Midgard.

“You...bloody...weh...” She did not have the energy to even finishing cursing out her brother.

Teasingly turning a blind eye to Bayani’s stertorous figure, Shango went on with his inspection of the flower patch. Suddenly, noticing that the patch continued on deeper within, he maneuvered himself through the bushes like a giddy child in search of treasures. And once on the other side, a slight laugh was produced, as he stood in the midst of a stretching land of flowers. The whole spectrum of colour spilt forth upon hills, upwards and downwards. In golden dresses of sunlight they bloomed ever more ravishing for the eyes, one standing prouder than the next, vying to be beauty incarnate. His legs caved in from reverence, and the Yoruba God laid his body down and gave himself to the flowers, where brushing petals titillate his bare shoulders playfully. Then, meeting the vastness of the sky above, a warm reassurance surfaces from within Shango. In that no matter how far home may lie, all lands are concatenated by this singular blue bridge, and so a little piece of home always follows.

Bayani followed suit, barging out from the bushes with an annoyed expression, only for it to melt away in witness of the scintillating landscape before her. A whispered gasp escaped the Goddess’ lips, as she sat down beside her brother and stared with enlarged pupils. Very briskly, awe had superseded the last shred of fatigue within her, and the prospects of their journey ahead was starting to excite.

“Remember when we used to dream about visiting Babel, Valhalla, and Olympus?” Shango asked.

“Naïve dreams of children who barely knew the world.” Bayani reflected.

“And now that we’ve grown, two of them’s gone, and one’s isolated themselves from outsiders. Funny how it turns out sometimes.”

“They all seemed so... immortal.”

“To the eyes of children, everything grand must be immortal. But now, I’ve learnt that truly immortal things in life... are puny.”

“Like what?”

“Like... this field of flowers! Thriving in the summer, destroyed in winter, yet rises again every spring. Immortal!”

“... You sound like Uncle Osanyin.”

“HAH, you’re *right*! Reading too many of his poems!”

Letting one last view sink into her memories, Bayani promptly stood up, and dusted off the blades of grass stuck to her dress.

“Right, then, shall we continue?”

“Aww, give it another minute!”

“Don’t forget why we’re here, Shango! Valhalla may be gone, but I wouldn’t have it on my conscience to let Midgard fall too.”

Shango turned solemn, feeling a sense of shame for his insouciance thus far.

“You’re right... let’s go.”

*

Monday

Morning

The Library of Midgard rested in the kingdom's centre, radiating an omnipresent air of sophistication. It was a place for the cultured, edified, which by total coincidence, of course, was also the wealthy. Over the vast premises of the library, nobody strode or stood without stylishness. Black top-hats and blazers for men, bodices and dresses of assorted colours for women; dictions trailed off smoothly and eloquently, gestures were timid, gaits were composed, and pots of tea sat brewing. Taking these sights all in from the windows beside his seat, Cirius, still in yesterday's clothes, gave a loud yawn.

On his right, none other than Urd, absorbed with whatever raving literature was before her. He could see the monstrous speed of her eyes, zooming from corner to corner; not a minute went by without her brisk turning of pages.

Cirius tried to do what she did, he focused hard on the expansive text in front of him, only for them to eventually blur into nebulous heaps of grayness. The words just form whatever he fancied, gliding dragons, shining swords... and then he would be snapped out of the trance by Urd's page turn.

"How do you do it, Urd?" His head sliding onto the desk in exhaustion.

"Pardon?" She rose up from the book.

"Read! How do you sit through walls of these mite characters, and somehow not be pulling your hair off from boredom?"

Urd thought deeply about it. After a moment, she pushes the book toward his face.

"Did you know, Cirius? Gods seldom read. Sure, they might look up something in the compendiums and grimoires every so often. But ask them for a tale of trials, rapture or misery, and they might just stare at you like a wordless statue. But, mortals? They are an infinite supply of stories... I guess, when your life is endless, very little actually seems noteworthy. But when you know the end lurks unavoidably somewhere, every moment is gone through fervently, and often, you even envision something more than there is..."

Urd was staring at the covers of each book she'd read and continued.

"In their stories, love seems more sublime, evil seems more wretched, reality just seems more... beautiful? One can't help but engage in this alluring universe they've crafted. Floating through the stories, some gripping, some odious, some are transcendental, but all equally beautiful in their own right."

She turned to Cirius, fully expecting him to have dozed off, instead, he had his eyes glued to her. Very bluntly, he said:

"You talk like your dad."

Urd smiled at the remark, and was about to go back to reading, when suddenly, a raspy voice crept up from behind, shunting the children up their seats in shock.

"Adroitly put thy soliloquy be!"

A scruffy man flashes his thick, blue robes to-and-fro, swiftly sitting down at the empty seat beside the two. The man's unending mass of brown beard perks up, hiding beneath it, a most elated smile. With an enormous heave, the man shoved the prodigious pile of books he was lugging under his armpit onto the desk; the poor table's legs wobbles with the added weight.

“Thou leave me o’erjoyed, daughter of Mimir!
I did not think thee the artistic kind.
Such words of wisdom drawn from thy young mouth.
Forsooth, the pantheon lacketh culture much,
Only thoughts of Daemons besiege their minds,
They run rampant and resonantly ‘round,
Till all the jubilation of life are blight’d.
Still, I delight to see, youths of today
Accept ardently, art’s splendorous hands.”

The man broke out in hysterics, as if possessed by the spirit of an exalted victor of war. The two shifted anxiously on their chairs, the stranger’s outlandish vernacular befuddled Urd, and completely bypass the boy’s head. Urd commented only after a brief pause, in case the man would prattle on more.

“W-why, thank you, Mr. Bragi... sir?”

“Aha, thou hath heard of mine name, forsooth?
Thy sagacity doth surpass thy frame,
Or Mimir hath enlightened thee greatly.”

“Yes, father has mentioned you once or twice, Mr. Bragi... I fancy a few of your poems, as well... uh, ‘*Leman*, *Leman*’ in particular...I liked the... imageries” Urd scrambled for any semblance information she could muster from her bleak memory of this person named Bragi.

Bragi, the God of poetry and music, sought to branch out his expertise into other areas of art. He had set his mind on the medium of literature. For weeks now, he toiled in the library for his research, indulging ceaselessly in the stories written by the mortals. Consequently, these weeks of solitary work, with a newfound passion he could find no one to share with, the opinions bottled up slowly. Now, it poured out in waves upon the two youngsters. Urd should not have kept the conversation going... because Bragi, like seemingly all artists out there, suffered the same, lousy set of social skills...

“Ha, it be providence that thee shalt say that!
Because if thou recall in mine previous work,
‘Leman’, stanza three includeth...”

While Bragi’s voice trails off into flatulent tangents. Urd leaned toward Cirius, and whispered:
“Why do we always attract verbose lunatics into our group? First with Fjolnir, and now him!”

He looked at her quizzically.
“But you’re one to talk a lot as well?” He contested.
“Yes, but do we really need two of us?” She retorted.
“... Good point.”

The two slouched hopelessly into their seats. Meanwhile, Bragi had started gesticulating; his remarks turned from discussion of his poem, into self-satisfying gasconades. Soon, he was pacing as he talked. Then, he had his back turned, consumed with the ecstasy of boasting. Noticing this, Cirius tugged at his partner’s wrist, still whispering.

“Hey, I reckon we can slip out of here while he’s not looking,”
“But where will we go?”
“Who cares, as long as it’s not here!”
“We were supposed to spend the day in the library, you promised!”

“Would you really rather stay?”

Urd shot a glance at the blustering figure in front of her.

“No...”

“As consolation, we can do whatever’s next on your list,”

“That would be a quiet, *non-rushing* stroll around town!”

“Fine, then, let’s go!”

The two slid back their chairs back charily, walking on their tender toes toward the exit, and once faced with the open air, briskly dashed away into the undulating streets of the kingdom. The library was left to suffer the God’s lengthy discourse about poetry.

Soon, Cirius and Urd reached their new destination. Great cobbled paths stretch far out before them, stationed across each side, carts of vegetables and carts of meat and cheese manned by diligent peasants. Boisterous was the atmosphere, sweating was the people. As they entered the crowd of haggling housewives by the counters, and clinging coins on tables, any prior guilt for their discourtesy melted away. Instead, its place was taken over by the many mild intrigue one is surely to have while browsing the fanciful items of a market’s stalls: scintillating jewelry, carefully knitted clothes, and most notably, porcelain figurines of people in extravagant dresses.

Of course, neither of them had the ability to actually purchase anything. Indeed, one must wonder why one engage in the activity of “going to the market” if one cannot buy anything in the first place. The lack of money didn’t stop their imaginative minds from picturing a life surrounded by these goods, though, so, the two were quite content with going about this feckless activity.

*

As the children scuttled on their way, they meandered away from Church street, where the eponymous building stood grey and tall, isolating itself away from the world with firmly shut doors and windows. Inside, Abaddon was just waking up from his nap, from both a fatiguing day prior, and a long, surreptitious walk back home. Pulling himself up reluctantly, his bedraggled person sat at the edge of the bed doing nothing for a good few minutes. It is likely he would have gone on longer, had the knock not emerge from the church door. Abaddon ignored the first set of knocks, hoping whomever would come again later... only after the fifth set of knocks, does he truly confront the obstinate morning visitors, though still with sleepy acquiescence.

“Morning, father Lars!” came the visitor’s sonorous voice at the door.

Abaddon stood, galvanised at the sight of two brawny soldiers in front of him. Clad in a blue tunic, and a set of tough, black leather, a woman held onto her spear, solemn and dignified. Beside her was a man in similar attire, the greeting came from him. Abaddon wasted no second in delving into the Demon’s skillful art of trickery. Feigning the most amiable smile known to all, he set his tongue loose on the ruse. The identity of the one called Abaddon was gone, and rose in its place, was Father Lars.

“Good morning, sir, ma’am! How may I serve you on this delightful Monday morning?”

“Yes, father. It seems there has been an incident, just yesterday. As per Lady Hel’s account, one of our town priests has been revealed to be a Demon in disguise, particularly, the Duke of Sodom, Abaddon.”

“My word, how utterly ignoble! Using the sacred position of a priest as a vizard! I sure hope you capture this... indecorous Demon soon!”

“Well, therein lies the reason of our coming here, father. Lord Odin has requested the marshalling of all the town’s priests, so as to enhance the efforts of our search.”

“What?” Father Lars gulped.

“Please, allow us to take you into our custody, only temporarily.”

“Preposterous! Are you insinuating *I* am a filthy Demon?”

“No, of course, not, father.”

“This is REPUGNANT, and DISCRIMITORY! So, you wish to detain all priests, just because one proves to be a disguised Demon? You seek to eradicate us all, don’t you?!”

“They’d just like to gather all the priests for questioning, and possible testing. And I assure you, father, if there *was* a Demon among the midst of priests, you will surely be well-protected. The great Valkyries themselves were tasked to oversee the event. Please, trust us.”

“Trust you? There has been less attendance in the churches by the day, ever since you GODS arrived at our kingdom. If I didn’t know any better, I’ll wager this is just a plot to expunge us from your systems, using the churchmen as scapegoats!”

“Father Lars, please! The Demon was witnessed by Lady Hel herself!”

“Oh, then, pray, tell, how can Lady Hel say for certain it was a priest anyway?!”

The soldiers looked disconcertingly at each other.

“Just come with us, Lars...” The woman finally spat out spitefully.

The Demon’s art of trickery proved inadequate for this situation. It was time for Abaddon to resort to another, equally as exalted skill in the Demon’s great repertoire. The art of cunning...

Abaddon slammed the door on the soldiers.

“Halt!” The soldiers’ voice boomed.

As the flurries of knocks on the wooden door start deteriorating into passionate blows and kicks. Abaddon scurried around like a sentient tempest in his little church abode. Swarms of locusts scattered across the room, some were commanded to fly away with valuables, some were tasked to eat away the evidence.

After a dozen heated blows, the door flung open with a belligerent slam. The soldiers stormed in, spears at the ready, to an empty room. No books on the bookshelves, no clothes in the wardrobe, and not a trace of paper on the writing desk. The curtains were swaying from the breeze outside, and the window laid ajar.

“Report this to the nearest Lord or Lady, tell them Abaddon is loose in the streets of the kingdom. I’ll investigate the boundaries...”

The woman received the order with a quiet nod, and stormed out the way she came, leaving her partner alone in the disquieting room.

*

Monday

Afternoon

Behind a spotless counter, a bartender was wiping meticulously at the glasses. At such times of the day, he would usually have the equanimity and quietude of an empty room to himself. Obviously, people flock to pubs once their incumbent jobs are done, and their responsibilities of the day dissipate. For a long time in this kingdom, this was the routine. However, one day, that all seemed to change. The arrivals became... unpredictable, and the customers too, became diverse.

“Bah, enough patrolling fer noo! Time fer a bit of craic!”

The batwing doors flung wide open, making way for the strappingly strutting customer. A woman, tanned and bulky, always with an audible breathing, marched right toward the counter. As gently as she could, she leaned the mighty halberd against the wooden frames of a table, yet it couldn't take it, and the weapon came crashing towards the ground with a heavy clank. The woman shrugged it off and sat down.

“Come on, tapster, geesa a pint of mead!”

“Brynhildr, please! We mustn't”

A diffident voice chimed in from outside. Not a second later, another woman barged in, pale and thin- well, thinner than the woman who came before, anyway-. She clung onto her spear with anxious hands, her body fidgeting at the oppressive aura of Brynhildr. Her mouth gapes and closes, no doubt dithering endlessly on what to say.

“Live a little, Geira! Even the best soldiers need a wee rest anaw, dinnae they?”

“You say it's a *wee* rest, but each time you come out inebriated and delirious,” She whispers.

“I tell ye, Geira, deary, we've searched a dozen buildings, questioned a dozen more folks, there's nae signs of the fiend amongst them!” She downed a pint as she finished.

“There's more than a dozen citizens in this kingdom...”

“Then tis oot of our power, isnae it?”

Geira conceded to Brynhildr's irrefutable rationality, and flowed down to the seat beside her like a flower wilted from failure. Briskly, a drink was slid towards her; she glanced at the bartender, cleaning the insides of a wine glass, eyes solemnly closed. The golden drink sat ravishingly in front of her, ever so inviting. Without her knowing, Geira had clasped onto the chilling glass, and a fraction of a second later, the drink coursed down her throat, blooming all sorts of little mania and thrill.

Brynhildr watched with a wicked grin; pulling her in, shoulder to shoulder, she bellowed upwards:

“Tae hell with this Demons nonsense!” She laughed.

Geira could only reply with an awkward smile.

“I only hope those statements are not said in sobriety...”.

Someone new entered the pub, who was getting more cramp with these titanic deities' bodies. The God squatted through the entrance, a colossal sword of red hanging off his naked shoulders. The floorboards squeak with his weight, driving the bartender batty inside. A pair of crimson wings extends brazenly upwards at the sides of his helmet, grazing the ceiling as it wobbles.

“Sir Tyr!” Geira darted up, panic-stricken, and knocking over her chair. Arms at her side, staring blankly ahead.

“Just Tyr is fine, Geiravor. And away with the formalities.” He assured the neurotic Valkyrie with a pat.

With a sinewy hand, the bulky God of War pulled a table toward him and sat on it, which made the bartender gape, because he was pretty sure the tables were bolted to the floor. Tyr adjusted himself on the pivoting table, trying to find a cozy spot, once he did, he raised his hand to get the bartender, still shaking with disturbance.

Nonetheless, the drink slid toward Tyr slowly, almost miserably.

“Dooin’ a fair bit o’ patrolling yerself, I suspect?” Brynhild raised her glass up to him.

“Of course, the sooner we capture that blasted fiend, the better. Cheers!” He accepted the toast.

“But what would Abaddon be doing here? A duke as an espionage? Doesn’t seem prudent!” Geira chimed in.

“Aye, that’s why Lord Odin says it were more than just spying... he’s here tae gather...”

“Gather what?”

“Mortals... They’re plotting a summoning, that’s why he’s disguised himself as a priest. They crave the pious and God-fearing. According to Lord Odin, that narrows down the selection to Rosier or... Asmodeus. They sent the duke because of his loyalty. They want someone who’d sooner give their life rather than become a counterspy.”

Geira gulped, and Brynhildr was giving his cup a swirl. Tyr took a sip, and continued:

“Still, this kingdom is fairly large, what are the odds that Abaddon will reside precisely in our assigned area?”

Unruly steps raps against the taproom floorboards. A huffing figure bursts through the entrance, intent to break down the batwing door in her frenzy. The perspiring soldier leant herself on the frame, clutching onto her spear for dear support. All eyes were on her, but she’s long given up on looking presentable.

“Lena, ye look done in, luv! Come join the ol’ posse for a pint!”

“Lord... Tyr... Lady... Brynhildr... Lady Geiravor... Abaddon’s been spotted!”

The God of War shot up like a firing trebuchet. His expression soured at an alarming rate, from wide-eyed astonishment to acrimonious scowl, and eventually to visible veins of fury across the body.

“Where?” He demanded fiercely.

“Church of Swiftly, but he’s... escaped.”

The entire room quaked. The Bartender witnessed in helplessness as his precious bottles on display topple down, and the chairs upturned by a wrathful stomp of the God’s fearsome leg. Though the malefic aura of the God seemed to be contagious. Even Geira was emerging anew in the current exigency, for once, she raised her voice.

“You mean he’s roaming freely in the streets, right now? Heavens, the people! We must order an evacuation!”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort!” roared Tyr.

“What?!”

“The fiends can craft disguises in seconds, we’ll be handing him his freedom if we choose to evacuate when he’s slip in among them. We do the opposite, confine everyone to the area, we’ll wait for him to cause a scene if we have to. At least, he’ll leave a semblance of a trace. Lena, order the troops, begin blockading the district, probe the locals.”

“Probe?! By the Allfather! You can’t possibly mean that!”

“Stand down, Valkyrie!”

Geira has never felt such surges of consternation, indignations and borderline disgust. Every sense of her being, as if unknotted from the forbearance of that timorous persona, simply wished to scream at Tyr for his ruthless inhumanity. She could almost imagine the insults now, a burning throat, grinding teeth, trembling lips. They all vanished, when she was heedlessly pulled back by Brynhildr's forceful grip on her wrists. Geira turned towards her senior, enraged at her attempt to silence her.

Until she saw, a countenance so very grim and dour. The senior Valkyrie shook her head in warning. She never could have pictured a face like this on Brynhildr, who never misses a chance for jollifications. At some point, Geira wondered how powerful the Demons truly were, when a mere mention could overturn completely the personalities of the Gods. From couth to brutish, bashful to acerbic, jolly to doleful.

"No mortal has to get hurt or die if I can help it. Now, get back to your posts, you two, search for any suspicious individuals, rushing, evading and the likes." Tyr seemed to have composed himself.

The deities shuffle out the pub one after the other, the largest of them last. With the little courtesy left in the fuming God of War, Tyr attempts to realign the tables and chair back into their previous states, nothing much to be done about the unbolted table, anyway. Before leaving into the blazing afternoon just beyond the door, he turned back to the sulking bartender, no more glasses to wipe.

"You best retire the pub for today, tavernkeeper. No telling how far the reaches of the Demon may be,"

*

Cirius and Urd went about marking their presence around town, leaving no attraction unexplored. Every few steps, there seemed to be something that appears wholly riveting to the giddy pair. Every sight that seemed out of place prompted a stop; any smell, rank or delicious, halted their tracks. Some things were even monumental enough to cause a detour. Such is the case now, when the streets were ready to bustle with the entertainment of the day: recitals of poems, singing of songs, and most importantly, playing of music.

Upon hearing some melodies, Urd quickly began to pursue its origins, pulling Cirius insistently away from his admiration of a working blacksmith.

Squeezing their way through the throng, they find themselves before an outlandish spectacle. A band of troubadours, flailing their flashy clothes as they play out their soulful pieces. The one in red tunic beat on the drums, with hands impaired from some past tragedy; the one in blue, blind with a set of pupilless eyes, churned away at his hurdy-gurdy; the one in green had dwarfism, and was fluting out his heart for the performance.

Yet, understandably, everyone was engrossed solely to the one in the middle: A young man in orange. His steady foot, outreached for all to see, seized at a bow with his toes. Masterfully, the bow sliding it across the body of a vielle, firmly leant against his calves. Despite this utter violation of tradition, the tune still fills the air with dazzle. The armless musician, imbues into his violative playing, tales of his own tragic loss of limbs and lovers, so that each second it is the beauty of accomplishments that shine through.

Urd sat at the front, charmed and hypnotized, hugging her own legs to contain her awe. To her right, the boy hummed to himself quietly, keeping as hard as he can to the music.

Soon, the notes fade away, and the piece comes to an end. Most of the crowd, sated with this brisk interlude, went back to their monotonous day a bit more refreshed. The enamored Urd was willing to stay besotted on the ground for eternity, had Cirius not tried relentlessly to lift her up.

“That was... extraordinary!” She sighed.

“Yes, really enjoyable.”

“Enjoyable? It was divine!” She boomed.

“Careful, Urd, don’t swoon.”

After a great, gleeful cavort, the girl finally settled down. Her gaze gleaming with a newfound anticipation. The world, at that moment, became a haven of unexplored amusements. How many more shows were she missing every hour of her life? She wouldn’t wait to find out.

“Right, fate only knows what extravagance is raring to confront us! Onwards! To the West” She commanded, as her dainty finger shot boldly frontward.

Hardly a few yards later, they would enjoy another commotion. Really, it seems to be particularly easy, in this part of the kingdom, for abrupt congregations to occur. It isn’t difficult to gauge why; the overlaboured tend to find any excuse to deviate from their strenuous routines. Encircling a very dandified figure, the crowd brace themselves of the ensuing antics: quite predictable, really, a singular person without instruments either means a story or a poem.

Erected at the centre of all those empty expressions, heedless of judgements or possible embarrassments, was none other than the Aesir’s illustrious God of all things art, Bragi. Duly recovered from his discombobulating morning at the library, now he lets loose that inimitable expression of his onto the laypeople of the streets, unaware that this audience will be even less tolerant than the two youths during morning.

“Hear ye, hear ye! This display shalt bear thee
Marks of mirth and love for eternity.
If thou just cleanse thyself of uncouthness,
Hark these glad words from mine novel poem:
‘Leman, Leman, Leman’, fresh from mine mind,
Where fervour floweth from flurry to floods.”

Without further ado, he began his recital, locked into his stance, as if gripped by a tenacious hand from beyond the sky. Every word rolls off the tongue in passionate pithiness; every rhyme ran through rhythmically. All extremely powerful stuff, when spoken to someone who can decipher what he’s saying.

To the gathered mass, however, it might as well be the buzzing of a bumptious mosquito, taunting her victim for their slow reflexes. Barely passing the first stanza, someone had begun to boo. After the boo came laughter, and after that... came the grand finale to every public entertainment: heckling.

“Speak properly!”

“Posh prick!”

“Doth *thee* need directions back to *thine* palace, lordship?”

“Can you translate the poem to Nordic, please?”

“Then tranzlate to *Français*, *s’il te plait*!”

Bragi wasn’t going to stand for this. Without thinking, he spat out his entire mental dictionary of insults at the group of philistines, which only made them laugh more. Soon, the scene of elegant poetry exacerbated into hateful hysteria. Oh, the words that were used... Urd could only wince. Turning back to her partner, containing all of her unrest, she promptly commanded:

“Ehem, onwards to the East!”

And the pair left the scene, which was on the verge of turning violent, with Bragi's pelting of a tomato at the audience.

On their aimless journey across the eastern part of town, the two continued salvaging merriment out of the most trivial of things.

At one point, under the noses of a distracted shepherd, they buried their hands into a sheep's soothing white wool, undoubtedly intriguing themselves with the expected softness of the texture. Next, they intruded upon the calves as well, ruffling and caressing every fluffy entity they came across, until a chorus of miffed bleating alerted their master, and the two scuttled off.

At another point, they arrived at a gray and dingy barrack, surrounded by soldiers, snoozing and snoring. Those who passed by gave the young Goddess an amiable nod, and the boy an acrimonious sneer. They strode up to the shade of a tree, and immediately submitted their attention to the two gentlemen beside them, playing chess.

The men had set aside their stuffy helmets, sturdy shields, sharp spears, and positioned their burly bodies over a puny chessboard. The man on the right crossed his arms in anticipation; the man on the left moves his hand meticulously over the white pieces. Rook captures pawn? No... trade knights? No... Aha, the queen, yes!

Decidedly, he slides the queen majestically across the board, knocking over a bishop standing in her spot. With a staggering amount of pomp, he snorted loudly, and let go of the queen. The majestic queen piece, oozing regality and reverence... was promptly pushed aside by the opponent's knight, whom escaped the confident man's calculation.

Urd produced an audible snigger, and the man who just lost his queen darkened his malicious scowl. So, it was time again, for them to leave...

Perfect timing too, as the game was fated to end right then anyway, with Brynhildr's cacophonous entrance:

"Roight, ye lot! Skelp yerselves awake, we've got work tae dae!"

Though a thousand sighs must have rung through the walls of the barracks, soon, the troops were marching out in militant formations, ready to hunt down the foul fiend within the kingdom.

Having exhausted all tiny surprises left for the day, Cirius and Urd collapsed down at last. In their most favoured place of all, under the coverage of the towering Yggdrasil, and by the glistening pond fancied by graceful fowls of all kind. Being well into the afternoon, the swans had occupied the waters for their rejuvenating swim.

She rested herself on the tree's robust barks. This was the only tree that could make its coarse frame radiate with such comfort. If some wonders how, well, best not to question it, lest it loses its magic.

As Urd unwinds from all the exercise, Cirius fished around his pockets; he recalled stuffing it with a piece of bread in the morning, he wasn't quite fond of the bread, though he would like to witness the abomination it has turned into from the day's running, jostling and jumping.

He fished some more, and retrieved with a wicked smirk, a fistful of crumbs, white and dusty. Suddenly, seeing a swan floating by before him, a brain wave spawned. Cirius chuckled, and the bits scattered like fire sparks from an anvil.

“Hey! You shouldn’t do that!” Urd jolted up.

“Do what?”

“You shouldn’t feed bread to swans, or even any bird, for that matter!”

“Why not?”

“It’s unideal for their diet, potentially pernicious, too!” She scolded.

“Well, she looks quite content, gobbling it up over there!” He retorted.

“I’d suppose you’d also be quite content if you were stuffed full of sweets every day, but let’s see you laugh when all your teeth have rotted.”

She fished around her own pocket, and took out a neatly wrapped pouch.

“Here, grains and wheat! What swans ought to eat!” She was delighted with herself for the verse.

Mimicking Cirius’ method, she scattered the contents toward the ravishing white bird, swimming with ecstasy toward the feast before it.

The pair sank back down to the lush grass of the field, concealed from threats of livid men and raving poets. Yggdrasil’s shadow shielded the glares of the sun, so those below could absorb the calmness of the air in leisure. The wind blew just right, strong enough for the hair to enjoy a steady wave, but weak enough not to disturb the face. In spots such as these, the most wasteful thing one could do, is to not concede the body’s control to nature.

The youngsters were not about to be wasteful. Within a few moments, they let themselves drift into a short dream. A dream they wish they could share, by parking their hands together as they napped...

*

Back in town, the situation was far less tranquil. Every corner crawled with surly inquisitors, blithe to unrest of the harmless citizens they were oppressively grilling. A barricade of stern-faced soldiers closed off the roads, much to the dismay of people, many whose houses lay just yards behind the soldiers’ stance.

It didn’t take long for them to realise a small opening existed between the wall of infantry; slowly but surely, people were being released, one by one. As soon as this news was known, the throngs shunted and shoved their way through each other, as barbarously as wrestling predators.

Sheepishly, Geira tried to order the squirming bodies into a line, but she was drowned out by their overpowering shrieks. She continued trying nonetheless, until even her commanding voice was discouraged into an imploring one.

“Uh, don’t push! We’ll be more efficient with a sequence... please?”

“OI! YE BUNCH OF NYAFFS!” Brynhildr stepped out.

Just like that, the people clambered neatly into a line, albeit a wonky one, without any other protest. Geira watched them do so, mouth gaping in a trance, rudely awakened by the ebullient slap of her partner’s hand on her shoulder. Sighing, she turned back to the opening, where she dreaded to inspect the procedure that was occurring.

The young Valkyrie winced at each moan of pain emanating from the line. At the front of the line, the people were quivering, their naked arm outreached to prove their innocence, by having them pricked by the edge of an indecorous dagger. The men tensed through the stab, mustering up the pretense of courage, as streams of crimson flow down the shivering limbs. Many women did not even bother fighting the tear, and was content

with sobbing out the pain. And the children... Geira looked away. Underneath them all, the dirt accepted the copious droplets of blood, merging the red and brown into a sickly cedar.

She glanced back at the line, spanning half a dozen buildings wide, the faces of the people, progressively souring with worry and affright. If the Demon wasn't in their midst, then the dirt will likely welcome a hundred more crimson droplets. She prayed, prayed it will happen with the next one. All they need, is one irregularity: one arm that the dagger won't penetrate; one arm that spilt yellow blood; one arm that heals the cut instantly.

But it didn't arrive, Geira kept staring, as every pair of feet ambles out the barricade, clutching their wet wounds in restraint. A despondent whisper escaped her mouth:

"May Fate punish us for this one day..."

*

Monday

Evening

Meanwhile, hidden in the alleys of the draconianly guarded town, Abaddon tries, strenuously, to evade the sights of the paroling soldiers: sucking in his gut to agonizing flatness when hiding behind a house's pipes; sometimes crawling like a desperate pup on the ground to stay low. Though try as he might, he could not find the opportunity to penetrate the ranks of the soldiers, who all but occupied the open areas. It was only a matter of time before the patrol expands into the narrow corners.

In the dimness of the alley, he stood grinding his teeth, twitching in vexation. Momentary thoughts of madness flashed before his mind; he could always risk it all, revert back to that monstrous, insectile form of his, and wreak tumult upon the puny guards... perhaps get cornered by the Valkyries, and he'd be faced with the choice of destroying himself or be taken.

Quite unknowingly, perhaps provoked by the inundating irritation, he began chewing on his thumb, sinking his canines hard into its sides, until he tasted the warm bitterness that released, that he finally stopped.

He stood, back against the wall, waiting for any sensible solution that would utter itself.
"Need a new disguise... need a mortal, man, woman, anyone!"

"Uh, father Lars?"

Abaddon jumped, and without even turning back, he kissed, with remarkable passion, both of his palms, sending it soaring into the sky in triumph.

"Oh, sweet hand of fate, how benevolent you are!"

He turned to face this splendorous gift he was presented. He almost laughed at it.
"Mr. Bjornson, how very nice to see you!"

Before the drooling Demon, was a lanky gentleman, sporting the most conventional clothes one can imagine: brown tunics, black trousers, and a great leather belt. This came as a surprise for Abaddon, because he'd only ever saw him once, splendidly attired for his own wedding, which he officiated. Oh, but of course, Abaddon wasn't picky, he could've showed up in a set of mud-stained clothes, and the Demon would still be celebrating.

"Fancy seeing you too, father! You've been well?"

"Positively chuffed, as of now, in fact." His smirk widened.

"Well, that's good to hear... so, some furore in town, eh?"

"I believe so, yes... how's the wife?"

"Oh, all's well... she's been acting up a tad, perhaps the stress of newly-weds, eh? She'll calm down soon enough, once she gets the hang of things, being her first marriage and all!"

"You don't say... on your way back, I presume?"

"Nah... might pop down the ol' Rover for a bit. The lads might all be there..."

"The Rover?"

"Uh, it's the local tavern, father."

"I see... doing a bit of indulgence, eh!"

"Oh, never, father Lars! I'm always awfully careful about drinking, ask my mates, they'll testify! Plus, with all the Demon nonsense going about, work's been cut short. Not common we get breaks like these, d'ye know? This is a time for craic!"

In the instance of silence, Mr. Bjornson could swear he hears an incessant tapping around him, as he was about to investigate his surroundings, his attention was quickly pulled back to the gregarious priest.

“Mr. Bjornson, I do hope you’d be more cautious. Matters concerning Demons are not to be brushed off!”
“Hah, that’s absurd, father! Honestly, the kingdom’s ridden with protection. Just a few moments ago, I got word that Tyr himself is overseeing the search for this Abaddon fiend. Awfully stupid of him to come here in the first place!”

Father Lars burst out in guffaws.

“Indeed... do you, perchance, know how he managed to stay undetected for so long?”

“Oh... if I recall, something about churches? I think he hid himself in a church?”

“He disguised himself as a pastor, Mr. Bjornson.”

“Oh...”

The hitherto beaming expression twisted into blankness.

“Quite heinous, if you ask me, what with my position and all... I hope this knowledge does not create a sense of... prejudice against priests?”

“Uh, n-no, of course not, father.”

“Good.”

The man had had enough.

“Well, s-suppose I ought to be leaving now.”

“Oh, Mr. Bjornson, one more question.”

“Y-yes?”

“Your wife... Anna, was it? She’s rather young, isn’t she? A mere nineteen years of age, if I remember?”

“Yes...”

“She’s also quite devout, isn’t she? I believe you two met at my humble little church.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And, I doubt your piety will soon diminish like many others in the kingdom. I have utmost faith in you two.”

“T-thank you, father.”

“Of course, if decisions for a child are to be made in the near future, there is the matter of baptism. Be sure to notify me a week in advance before the birth, so that I may better arrange things... Anna... isn’t expecting, is she?”

“Oh no, no, no. Not yet, at least...”

“Thank you, Mr. Bjornson. I sincerely mean it.”

The tapping stopped, and the buzzing started. In the already dark alleyway, Bjornson’s gaze was carpeted by a wave of inextricable blackness; every part of his being was feeling something, the stripping of skin, the squirming inside the throat, and the eyes, forced to watch from torn eyelids. In an assault of such magnitude, even if the brain lay untouched, it refuses to work. Bjornson wasted away in utter blankness, as the swarming creatures pith his person, and gave the remains to their master.

When the shadows retreated, having lost its claim of the alleyways, Abaddon’s new face bathed in the evening’s glow. A Grecian nose, azure irises, sturdy lips, magnified in its charm by the rays and the Demon’s intense jubilation. Mr. Bjornson would reintroduce himself to the world with a novel resplendence. Gently, Abaddon caresses his new countenance, forming judgements from his tactile exploration. He didn’t quite like the lumps on the forehead, but otherwise, things were satisfactory.

He turns back to the grisly disarray on the ground, with a look of pity- or contempt, as the line is often so blurry-. A carcass drenched in filthy, fetid pools of gore; skinless, sodden and red, left to moulder further with each passing minute. With a wave, the swarm of locusts gathered one last time along the sides of the late Mr. Bjornson. Ceremoniously, the feast began; a thousand minuscule, yet voracious mouths tearing away bits of sumptuous Bjornson meat.

The master gave a whistle, and one of them, cozily nestled between the thighs perked up, subserviently, it glided to his extended finger. Abaddon whispered to it, delicate phrases of buzzing and hissing, all while its thin antennae brushes titillatingly against his chin. The little locust heard the behest, and away it went.

While the feast continued below, the solitary locust hovered above the belly. It locked itself in place before... diving down in a fearful speed, penetrating the flesh, and the innards gush out in a splat. Bjornson's belly twisted and turn, as if reanimated, until the locust submerged, dripping droplets of red. Unperturbed, the locust flew low above the ground, deliberately staining the gravel below with the trail of blood. It flew away into the distant darkness, opposite of the observing Demon.

Abaddon was about to leave his subjects to finish off the body, it'd would take a while, he suspects, what with how puny their adorable mouths were. Before officially stepping out of the alley, he found himself taking another step back into the ordeal, remembering something.

Taking out a vial from his breast pocket, holding it tightly by its neck... he sunk his hand deep into the same wound the locust burst through. With more splashes and tinkles, he yanked back, and the vial was full, at the expense of a blood-soaked hand. He eyed at the glass case, satisfied.

Finally, after cleaning off all the stains, which took longer than he'd like to admit, at which point the thrill of triumph had dissipated substantially. Finally, he ambled out of the narrowness, into the liberal streets of unhindered air.

Now to immerse himself fully into the role, to act as if Mr. Bjornson persists in reality. Under his vizard, Abaddon could almost feel himself coalescing with the persona of the dime a dozen married man. A man who walks roughly and determinedly; a man who accepts the wave of familiars with a nod; a man who surely returns home with a whistle, greeting with a kiss his modest wife. Yes, that's what they all do, don't they? Married men, they return home, one might say that is the crux of their being.

Abaddon stopped... "Where does Mr. Bjornson live, exactly?"

*

As abruptly as he had drifted into slumber, so too, would Cirius face an abrupt awakening. The sort of awakening where one feels the world's gone mad; where every query is faced with empirical ambivalence: What time is it? Where am I? Is this real? Berefted of the usual reminders of a familiar room and the memory of going to bed, this type of awakening causes a period of very chaotic feelings and behaviour, one suddenly finds everything to be a bother.

The boy perched up, hair disarranged into abject scruffiness, and eyes unwilling to expand. He made an effort to get up, but was anchored by heavy, fur-lined coat, sprawled across his own chest, and even onto Urd's beside him. He examines it closely, and couldn't, for the life of him, discern why Urd possessed such a large attire.

"You two are silly children... silly, irrational, little weans."

The imperious look of the trickster shot at the pair from behind. Sitting, cross-legged against the gargantuan trunk of Yggdrasil, Loki let his pencil trail across a leatherbound book, while hissing at the boy, a thoroughly justified scolding. Instinctively, he tried to stuff the book into one of the pockets among plenty in his convenient coat, before realising it was still being curled up as a makeshift blanket. The more he thought about it, the more he grumbled.

“We’re *not*... silly...” Cirius rebutted truculently, still rubbing the languorous eyes awake.

“Well, I scarcely see any of the non-silly children so eager to suffer the wrath of the Autumn weather.”

“Stop... chatting rubbish.”

Cirius rubbed his eyes indefatigably, trying to drain out what’s left of the weariness within him.

Suddenly, with a sneeze and snuffle, Urd had got up! And now she too, would go through the same bothersome process of awakening as the boy, only exacerbated by the fits of sneezes that overcame her. The Trickster sneered.

“Honestly, the most prudent action, from a parental standpoint, would be to let you continue freezing yourselves half to death, that’d way you’d learn not to do such *silly* things in the future. Alas, we shall be delayed in instilling these common senses into you juveniles, because my daughter simply insists on pampering you two.”

The pair groaned, Cirius, out of frustration from Loki’s strident lecture; Urd, out of the irritation of a stuffy nose and aching body... also, she wasn’t that pleased with Loki being there in the first place. Nonetheless, the shivering girl snatched the remainder of the coat off the indifferent boy’s lap, and wrapped herself in the hirsute haven.

So, under the sacred tree of Yggdrasil, a tired boy, a sick girl, and a grumpy adult toil in the queer, uncomfortable atmosphere, until a cheerful saviour came to alleviate them all from the plight. A cheerful saviour, ironically, deemed the Goddess of Death. Hel waddled onto the sod, both hands grasping onto two ceramic mugs, and stopped before the grim God of mischief.

“I’m back, father!”

She places the beverage into his palm, before being riveted by the shaking tall ball of fur.

“Urd, heavens! You look a mess!”

The girl’s face collapsed onto the warm, benign hand of the Goddess, adding in a few whimpers to sell her own infirmity. Perhaps growing a bit greedy, Urd clung with feigned desperation onto Hel’s brimming mug, oozing with the floral, savoury aroma of herbal tea. With a giggle, Hel dangled the drink before the girl in invitation, who quickly consumed it with energetic sips.

“Don’t cosset them, Hel!”

“Look at her, father! Those pleading pupils, where do you find the will to reject?”

Urd was about to take another mouthful, before the drink was pulled away.

“Ooh, best not to drink too much, lest you start seeing things at night!”

The Goddess tousled Urd’s tangled hair, and she gave an obedient nod, before retreating back into the depths of the coat like a tortoise.

“See? They’re *nice* kids!”

The two youngsters huddled around the benevolent Goddess, who has all but fallen for the display of helplessness. Furtively, they confronted the trickster's contemptuous expression with a smirk. Loki felt the rage-filled throbbing of a vein.

And so, the errant duo's concluded another thrilling day, and proceeded home, along with their congenial escorts. Along the way, the green-faced and groaning girl and the bedraggled boy glued themselves upon Hel like flyers upon a lamppost; a few paces forward, the God of mischief could only swallow his vexation.

"Oh, don't you fret too much, Urd. You'll stop getting these wretched illnesses in due time. Once you stop aging, that is!" Hel consoled her with a pat.

"When does a God stop aging, Miss Hel?" The boy inquired.

"Well, generally, once you've reached twenty years, that's when the body's progress halts. But one is by no means restricted to this convention. Some of them choose to age well past that stage, with a little bit of enchantment, of course. I believe Uncle Thor aged himself up to thirty-two, odd number, to each their own, I suppose."

"Urd, your father must have aged himself well into his eighties! Ow!"

Cirius' comment was met with a light slap to the nose, leaving him rubbing it indignantly.

"Mimir... yes... I suppose he has... a noble reason behind it, doesn't he?"

The Goddess hugs the girl closer, with a warm sense of sympathy which silences the boy, and even placates the nettled trickster in front. They walked the remaining distance in solemnness.

With the sky deepening into a shade of indigo, the firelit house envelope the group with a lavishing shine. The bearded God received his shaking daughter with an embrace, and she was all too ready to nestle up in her bed, away from the harshness of outside, before a loud, belligerent cough from Loki interrupted them. Begrudgingly, Urd unwrapped herself from the coat's boundless comfort, and handed it to the Trickster with a bow. The rest of the group promptly left, with an effusive father ushering them with grace.

"Well, shall we do you, next, Cirius?"

"Actually, Miss Hel, it's only a short walk, I think I'll fare!"

"Are you sure?"

The trickster was annoyed at her insistence.

"I'm sure, Miss Hel."

"Hmm, alright then, but scream real loud if you get into trouble, we'll be around..."

"Thank you!"

With a wave, Cirius was gone. The two Gods stood pensively beside the lighted window.

"Obviously he'll never face trouble, with you eternally coddling him like so, Hel!"

"He *is* just a child, father!" She snapped.

"And soon, an adult, where every youthful adventure will be replaced by barbarous bloodshed, perpetual peril, and suffocating solitude. With the way you're raising him, he'll toil in innocence forever!"

"Is that so unreasonable?"

"In this region? It is foolish beyond belief."

"Why this sudden obsession over raising the youth, father? I seem to recall having a very tolerant and liberating upbringing with mother and yourself."

“You were not born in a time of crises, Hel. This war with the Demons... whatever the outcome, Asgard will emerge changed or broken. In that time, what Gods and Goddesses need will be thrice as much as now, from strength, to shrewdness, to courage. So, we aid a child when it has shown us the signs of these qualities. We aid them when they dare confront, not when they still cower in bed. And when a problem seems too big to overcome, we aid them, so as to show that courage never truly goes wasted. That is how we should raise them, for the benefit of themselves.”

“...How *very* thoughtful of you, father.”

*

As the mystical stars begin to take their places upon the evening ethers, so too, did the various vendors saw fit to close up their shacks and stalls. Along the gravel streets dragged listless cartwheels, and equally lifeless animals and people. Now, upon the barren marketplace, the most lucid thing of all, was the singular, meandering figure of Mr. Bjornson.

“Should’ve asked him, idiot! Amateur’s mistake! The bloody address!” The mumbling man paced.

With each step, the man’s manner grew more heated. Chagrined breaths continued to pour out of Mr. Bjornson, and his trembling fists begs for an outlet for its fury. Then, he stopped; his head was thrown up forcefully, and the nostrils flared, sucking in a massive breath, enough to leave him staggering in dizziness.

“When the play goes awry, it is on the actor to remedy it. Sometimes, this involves being bold, shameless, and reckless!” The words rang in his head.

How nostalgic those words are, uttered dulcetly by a spectacled Demoness. The images drifted in a stream, Abaddon could see lucidly, his venerated teacher, a grand stage, the royal academy... and Sheol, in all its glory. The pining heart often gives way to such unruly emotions, before any tear could be shed, Abaddon had recollected himself. He glanced around, every building seemed more abhorrent than ever before, abhorrent is good, it fueled his will to leave this horrid place, and back to where he belonged.

Fueled by the madness, he hatched a plan in seconds, and was all too ready to act. His sight darted from area to area, until eventually, he found it. What else, but the sole buildings that could thrive under the night, the resplendent pubs! Harbinger of debauchery and intoxication. But this wasn’t just any pub, it was *the* pub! Its name boldly encrusted in bronze letters upon the wall: The Rover’s Tavern.

Distinctly, the voice of the now late Mr. Bjornson came back to the Demon: “...*might pop down the ol’ Rover for a bit. The lads might all be there...*”.

With a fervid smile, like that of a showman minutes before performance, he marched toward the entrance. The cacophony of drumming tables, spirited hurrahs, and strident singing seeped through the thin gaps; when one wave of noise died down, another rose to take its place.

“Bold, shameless, and reckless, right, Madam Carnivale?”

Abaddon slashed his leg with a dagger, digging the blade deep into the calve, puncturing it whole.

The amber-coloured blood came cascading out the chasm of flesh. Simultaneously, his hand wiggled furiously in his pockets, he retrieved the vial of blood, and emptied half of it onto the gushing wound. Slowly, as the disparate colours emerge into a sickly black and crimson, his hitherto indifferent expression finally animates into chaos.

From behind the door, the merriments were superseded by shrieks of terror and agony. The Demon, held by strings of a cosmic, discarnate puppeteer, begin thrashing about, colliding into the windows, unleashing blows of insanity onto the oaken door, which seemed ready to cave in. Inside, the visitors waited, agog, having put their drinks aside, already frightened by how drunk they were.

The door flung open with a mighty slam, and Mr. Bjornson tumbled into the room, still screeching for dear life.

“MY LEG, OH, MY LEG!”

“Erik!? What on earth’s ‘appened?!”

“Dear Lord, look at the wound!”

“How didja hurt yourself that bad?”

The men huddled around his writhing body, each grasping at parts they thought would help in supporting him. Abaddon could witness their expressions, shriveled up in shared pain of the pierced leg, and the dialogue could go on.

“BLOODY FENCE! A moment of clumsiness and there I was... tripped over and onto the bloody edges of a broken fence!”

“Oh dear!”

“Really, you ought to be more wary!”

“Indeed, Bjornson!”

Abaddon was at the centre of it all. While he lay on the table panting and groaning, wincing and sweating, his insides were dancing with glee at the perfection of it all, reveling at the spontaneity of everything. Tossed onto the widest stage of all, with subjects and props unpremeditated, that respond to every rotation, and every syllable. The show persists:

“Gentlemen... please, I need your aid in returning home immediately!”

“Home? Erik, you need a medic!”

“No, I have the necessary supplies at home!”

“Don’t be daft, Bjornson! What supplies can fix a cut like that?”

“Please, gentlemen, I simply must see Anna first!”

The men dithered, sharing puzzled faces, perhaps a bit unsure of the state of their own marriages.

“Right, if you insist, Erik...”

“Mon then...”

Two burly men stepped up, positioning themselves beside him. Locking their palm to his waist, they hoisted him up, and out they went into the night.

“I thank you, gentlemen!”

“Why so formal, Erik? We’ve known each other for years!”

“Right, just call us by our names!”

Abaddon would alternate between a series of moans, breathing, and sighs, all in his attempt to avoid talking to them further. After the little interruption, the tavern promptly returned back to its routine of carousing and shouting.

Patiently, the two men supported their limping friend across narrow passageways and over steps of stones. Although, one of them faintly recall Bjornson’s limping switching from the left leg to the right... the taverns truly serve very potent drinks, don’t they? He resolved to visit them less from that day on.

The other helper ruminated upon how unjudging the kingdom's people were, it is a virtue, really. Had Erik chanced upon his accident at any other kingdom, village, or town, he would undoubtedly be bombarded by scrutinizing people, insisting on bringing him to the nearby medic, instead of just letting a deeply wounded man visit his wife.

While Abaddon was still in a celebratory mood, despite the many 'ooh' and 'ahh' escaping from him. In the midst of a relatively heated moan, his transport had stopped abruptly, leaving him hanging loosely on the two gentlemen's shoulder.

"Uh... Erik... we're here!"

"Oh... I hadn't even noticed, what with the immense pain in my leg... please, just lean me over the window, there!"

They did exactly that.

"Should I call Anna out here?"

"No, no! I'm sure she's resting... I'll confront her myself, if you please."

"Oh, alright..."

"Now, don't let my clumsiness strip you of a delightful evening. I'll be fine on my own."

"As you wish..."

The two ambled away, turning their heads after a few paces, only to be reassured by a wave. After their figures vanished into a corner, the Demon cavorted up like a rabbit in heat, mouth bending into a scary crescent, and flaunting white rows of clenched teeth to a nonexistent audience. He cavorted and cavorted, each jump performed with precise clicking of heels.

"I... nonplus myself. This isn't the mere mastery of craft, no, no, no. To say it's *mastery* is an insult to the clearly supreme gradation of my abilities. Mastery is achieved through labour, a gift, however, is almost like an instinct! Yes! Nature itself holds adulation for me; it foresaw, maybe aeons ago, that greatness is to be achieved on this very day, and so blessed me with everything necessary to perform it. Acting, improvising, disguising, there are mere subsets of trickery. And today, I have transcended trickery! Nature set these tribulations in my path, and I exceeded them all, hoodwinked the very reality in which we stand."

He goes for the door, and turned the handle with an enraptured hand.

It was locked.

*

Four days before Autumn

Tuesday

Midnight

Once more, the sombre night hushes the rest of the world, but invites the kingdom of Sheol up into a bustle. Still, no one truly knows when such affinities for the night started for the Demons, after all, they behave no differently during the day than night. Even Abaddon only needed to acclimate his routine accordingly when he first infiltrated Midgard. Perhaps, they simply delight in breaking conventions of the world. The darker the night, the louder they act, as if challenging the peace Heaven bestows upon the earth in these hours.

Though, underneath the castle, in the basement's dripping ceilings, mossy walls, and fissured floors, the same enthusiasm and raucousness was absent. Azazel, with a pair of modest hands, wrenched open the rusted cell door, and strode into the dull and gloomy dungeon.

He approached the kingly figure ahead, blanketed in the shadows of a statue. The statue, heedless to the overbearing lightlessness of the place, shone its black effigy plainly to the beholder. The features of a malefic head accentuated itself in the darkness, and haunts the watcher violently: Three eyes lined up upon the middle of a crooked mask, staring blankly ahead; at its sides, the horns of a bull arch sturdily toward the air. And its mouth, boldly unconcealed, was lipless, clenching a set of immaculate teeth.

Azazel traced the statue further down its body, only to be disappointed by its lack of splendour there. All the sense of disquietude and threat seemed to be concentrated on the scrupulously chiseled head, because the effigy's body glowed every sign of weakness in the world. Its chest emerged emaciated, as if the ribs would burst out with a graze. Its belly bent inwards like an empty mortar. And its limbs? Stalky and loose, rested on its equally thin legs. Azazel swallowed all these upbraiding comments, as he stopped behind the illustrious prince.

Belial spoke first:

*"Verily woeful did she sob,
Her pure heart crossed to right the wrong.
His death, from Hell's hands she would rob,
So, to the flames she did set off."*

A poem's verse recited with an air of obeisance by the Prince. It caught Azazel by surprise, they were lines unheard of from any literature he knew, and he fancied himself quite the expert in literatures. Masking his embarrassment with further admiration for the prince's wisdom, he approached with pleading curiosity:

"My liege?"

"That was how Chimalma first felt, when she saw the being we see before us."

"Chimalma? The Aztec Goddess of life and death?"

"Precisely, Azazel! Perhaps now you see just how unfathomable the life of Shimush was. A comic intertwining of Fates from one end of the Earth to the other. The tale of Shimush, not the Ancient Demon, but the Yoruba Shaman." The prince turned to his audience with a coy smile, and continued, "You've never heard of that poem, have you? That's because it is from Ppillimtec, the Aztec God of poetry,".

Azazel confessed with a shake of his head, and clasped his hands comfortably behind his back, awaiting for Belial's retelling of the story, which he wagered would be better than the original anyway...

"By one of the many obscene ways the Fates decide to do comedy, Shimush, a divinely sculpted prodigy of a man, was cursed to be born among a lowly tribe in Yoruba. His talent for the mystic arts made him a healer for his people. All those in plight crowded him for illnesses, wounds, exorcisms and the like, and in every instance,

without failure or fatigue, Shimush cured them. But of course, with the parlous combination of talent and curiosity, a small, backwater tribal life could no longer sate him.”

“Questions of origin, the great beyond, and the potential of his own talents fascinated him. After a long thought, he decided to leave his tribe, rebuffing the protests of his people. He travelled out into the mountains, and all seemed well, until... he was besieged by a pack of voracious beasts. The fearsome snarls and fangs of the pack drove him off the precipice, and he perished... yet, the cosmos would not let their comedy finish so soon.

“The Aztec Goddess of life and death, Chimalma, who was there on a visitation, came upon his corpse down the mountains. As she read Shimush’s life from his fleeting soul, she wept at the injustice, a man at the height of benevolence and talent, stripped of his life in so gruesome and insulting of a way. And so, as you’ve heard... *‘His death, from Hell’s hands she would rob.’* Chimalma made haste to Oyo’s underworld.”

“The Goddess negotiated with the land’s God of Death, Ogbunabali. She would insist Shimush’s character to be a noble one, but... the God of Death argued that a blight long existed within him. Ogbunabali finally proposed a gamble with the Goddess: He would liberate Shimush’s soul, only if he could resist every temptation the God would create; Chimalma, confident in the mortal’s virtues, accepted the gambit.”

“The Shaman’s body would be freed.
And he but need to grace her hand.
Withstanding only his own greed,
For the Demon would promise more.

At the first step, it promised wealth.
The next trudge, it uttered: power.
Then, it was everlasting health.
But, just as he stood before her...

On this fatal word he dithered:
‘Knowledge’, the Shaman stopped and turned.
The face of Chimalma withered,
At the man sealing his own fate.”

Azazel’s grave eyes glanced at the statue once more. Belial continued.

“Of course, the promise was all a ruse. Ogbunabali merely wished to prove a point, Shimush, once the image of kindness and giving, morphed into one of pure avarice. Chimalma, however, could not accept it, and tried, forcefully, to extract him from hell, only for her hand to be burnt and charred. She left the underworld, despondent and flabbergasted at man’s nature... Shimush would let his regret overtake him, and throughout the ages become just as profane of a being as the Demons that tortured him. Now, he does not even think, he follows the behest of all except himself, forever believing himself incapable of rightness...”

Belial drew in a large breath, signaling Azazel’s moment to speak his thoughts.

“But, my liege... what are the merits of a being who cannot think for himself?”

“Oh, all the merits, Azazel... if Shimush, with all his might and power, cannot understand rightness. Then we but simply need to inform him of what is it. What is right... is for the world to know balance, that the Gods do not claim the lands as their own, thinking themselves no equal. What is right, is for Odin and his pantheon to know that they are not as strong as they think.”

“Although... Shimush, for all his malevolence and skill, is, unfortunately, formerly human. Any base instincts and predilections harboured in his past age seemed to be carried to the current. Perhaps, seeing the fleeting face of Chimalma in his final moments etched a deep yearning for a *pure* maiden... Hmph, these ancient Demons, they don’t covet contracts, bindings, or souls... they crave simple things. Yet, it’s often the simplest things that are hardest to get, no?”

“With all that said, only one question remains, Azazel... Where Is Abaddon And That Virgin He Was Supposed To Bring In?”

It was a rare experience, Azazel thought to himself. Prince Belial has an inimitable way of expressing fury, that is, he doesn’t. More accurately, when the prince is annoyed, neither his manner nor guise changes. He would very much beam at those he overhears insulting him; he would stroll along with nonchalance after witnessing his favourite robe being torn to shreds.

No, all the prince’s pent-up aggressions manifested through speech only, and even then, it would take a familiar to notice the whims of this quirk. When Belial is mithered, each word escapes his mouth duly and concisely enunciated, as if carrying slivers of toxicity and bile. To the untrained ear, things seemed ordinary to a fault. Perhaps it is this near unreadable nature that leaves him with so few conversing companions; the others were either afraid or expected the worse.

Among the vast social circles of the kingdom, Azazel was dubbed most experienced in dealing with the prince’s strange method of coping with anger. He delighted in the award. Suffice to say, he knew exactly the right course of action to take in the present situation: keep quiet.

“Autumn Arrives, Azazel. Which Means, Soon, Midgard Will Be Commencing the Mabon Festival... An Opportune Time to Stage An Attack, Wouldn’t You Say? While They Feast And Romp, Distracted By The Merriment? To Miss The Chance Because Abaddon Failed In His Mission Would Be Quite A... Pity.”

Azazel suddenly realised just how warm the basement of the castle was. He felt the tickles on his temple by the emerging droplets of sweat, and was about to retrieve the handkerchief in his blazer pockets, before a rush of wind interrupted. The metal door slammed wide open, and the two Demons inside jolted.

“Ah, there you are, sire!” A bawl came from the entrance.

The pitter-patter of steps was brisk and resounding. The skin-tight, maroon dress pressed stock-still against the swaying body of the walker. The complexion of paleness with a tinge of violet blended with the basement’s darkness to create a luminous beauty in her face. Azazel stared at his fellow royalty, only disturbed by what others would ogle, then again, he was always quite vehement on dress regulations, which this Duchess was breaking a handful of.

With her every movement, the Demoness struck a pontifical pose to please an onlooking artist that wasn’t there. She walked the manner of a cat, with the pride of a peacock, and the restlessness of a hummingbird. And the strangest thing of all, was that despite the stuffiness of the surroundings, Azazel swore he could witness the gentle swaying of the Demoness’ hair.

The Duchess halted before the two, meeting their sweat-ridden faces with her own fresh, unblemished one. With another intent gaze at the prince, a menacing grin spread out freakishly across her face, consuming all traces of her plump and purple lips; she took a bow.

“Oh, you’re here too!” The Demoness’ finger pointed at Azazel bluntly.

“Good evening, Mastema. You’re looking awfully ravishing, today.”

“Why, thank you, sire! It’s for a special occasion, of course,” She leered playfully at Azazel. “Going to a banquet, courtesy of Samael.”

“Oh, yes, I believe I did hear of that, do send him my regards! Now, to what do we owe the pleasure of your detour to this shabby basement?”

As Mastema breathed, whiffs of pink escaped from her delicate nostrils, shrouding her in a nebulous haze of fragrant, flowery mist, which quickly dissipates as she spoke.

“Right to the chase, then! See, sire, word around was that you’ve been scrambling nonstop for a virgin woman, ain’t you? For the sacrifice and what not? That’s why Abaddon’s been sent on his little trips, ain’t it? Quite a bother, really, him not being here, I could really use his locusts recently...”

“Get to the point, Mastema!” Azazel spat.

“Alright, Azazel, darling, don’t get your knickers in a twist! I was just getting to it! So, since Abaddon couldn’t hack it, I’ve gone and done his job for him!”

“You have?!”

“Right so! So, go ahead and call him back now, will you? I’ve got some cupboards that need moving, and those mite critters are just the right workers!”

Belial’s suppressed ecstasy was easily deciphered; at the corner of his usual lips, there was intervals of the most intense twitching Azazel had ever witnessed in the prince. With his hands still sturdily locked on his back, Belial invigoratingly urged the Demoness on.

“Why, you’ve shown commendable initiative, Mastema. Now, if you could present us with this virgin woman you’ve so dutifully, and I expect, expertly purloined from the Gods, or wherever it was.”

“As you wish, sire! *Oh*, Alukah~” Her musical voice echoed across the basement, as she slapped her hands in a brisk, haughty clap.

A series of grunts returned her melodic calling. Sluggishly, from behind frame of the door, a creature edged itself into view. It was hunched over, timorous to every reaction of the present audience; the hoofs on its two furry legs graze the cobble floors cautiously, unwilling for even a thump to escape them. Mastema watched adoringly, as the living disfigurement tramped its crooked gait over to her. When its journey was over, and it now stood under the judging eyes of the three looming royalties, the creature dropped its head servilely, before extending its scrawny arms forward in reverence.

“Here you are, sire!”

Belial and Azazel peered at the hands of the dark creature, scrutinizing ever so deeply at what lay before them. They both squinted... and squinted some more.

A baby smiled back at them.

“What is this, Mastema?” Belial questioned uncomfortably.

“Tis’ a baby, sire.”

“...”

“For the sacrifice?”

“You’re Despicable, Mastema! Are You Actually Suggesting What I Think You’re Suggesting?”

“Pardon?”

“How Dare You!”

“I thought you wanted a virgin for that sacrifice! I’ve delivered!”

“What You’ve *Delivered*... Is An Insult To The Fine Sport Of Virgin Hunting, Mastema!”

“What on earth are you talking about?!”

“The art of kidnapping a mortal, much more a virgin, is an exalted sport that tests the essence of our proud species! It requires one’s adroit utilization of deceit, equivocation and guile! A Demon abducts a virgin by blending in with mortals; by knowing and abusing customs and cultures; by procuring, through sleigh of tongue, the necessary knowledge for plans! A successful abduction of a virgin is something to boast about, a gripping tale to tell for ages to come! Any imbecile can steal a helpless infant from their families, but wary, loud and struggling adults under threat of violence every day? That’s what demands skills!”

Mastema went quiet, face as dark as thunder clouds. Her brows were squished into unspeakable proportions, and her eyes flashed the epitome of contempt and fatigue.

“With all due respect, sire... that is absolutely asinine!”

“I’d Never Expect You To Be Such A Philistine, Mastema! Now You Disgrace This Honour Even Further?”

“Oh, very well, your fastidious highness, if you don’t want the baby, I’ll just hand her back to her family. They’ll be right chuffed, I assume... heh, honestly, you men and your sports, absolutely impossible.”

“It’s nothing to do with gender! A rational being is no higher than baseness without integrity, Mastema!”

“You know... I’ll wager you secretly want to take the easy route, sire, what with all this dramatic yelling like I’m accusing you or some sorts. It’s as if you’re embarrassed you haven’t thought of it sooner. Heh!”

“Watch your mouth in front of Lord Belial, Mastema!”

“Oh, I’m chaffing, Azazel darling!”

The Demoness beamed, watching the two’s discomfited manner.

“Shouldn’t you be making your way to Samael’s banquet now?” Belial sighed.

Mastema jumped, still smirking in delight, and with a flamboyant turn, her heels clicked away into the distance, out the door. Before departing, she simpered at the two inside, and shouted with a wave and a wink.

“I’ll leave Alukah and the baby with you! You do as you please, sire!”

She was gone. And the dark creature stood shivering in place, head still ceremoniously tilted to the ground. The baby girl sat oblivious to everything, with her thumb stuck swirling deep inside her mouth. The silence was unbearable for the both of them, and Azazel was the first to cave.

“Shall I dispose of the infant, my liege?”

“No... keep her aside... just... in case.”

*

The Demon had had an arduous night. Particularly, it is very difficult not to appear dodgy when one is seizing and shaking violently at a locked door, even if that door led to one’s own house. Still, with a command, his nimble locusts had set to work, unlocking it from the inside. He strolled in gleefully, and collapsed onto the bed, beside an already dreaming Anna.

He reflected on the hectic day deeply. Playing the role of Mr. Bjornson brought back some ironic amusement... he’d first come to Midgard with the persona of the average working men: bulky, burly, and ever informal. After

a few days of hard labour, though, he quickly realise he couldn't take any more. Who would've thought the working-class would engage in so much work? All the nights of being invited to the taverns, the mindless banter between *lads*, drinking just to tolerate the next day's work... at one point, he'd forgotten why he was there to begin with.

He promptly casted aside the role of the workman, and decided to try his hand at clergy. One night, after pleading for entry into the parish under pretense of a confession, he worked his magic on the pastor, learning his name and chatting about so and so. In the pastor's final minute, he couldn't help but wonder with awe at why this confessor was so well-versed in scripture, especially the parts of the Fallen Angels.

But now the worst was over, lying exuberantly in Mr. Bjornson's bed and kicking back his leg, Abaddon luxuriated. Mrs. Anna Bjornson laid next to her, still snoring. At this moment in time, her person embodied messiness. Withstanding the trials of tossing, turning sleeps has left the hair maddeningly disheveled; the mouth reeked with drool; the crumbly debris and mucus congregated under the shut eyes, waiting for consciousness to split them apart. But even with all these natural tolls on the body, Anna dazzled ravishingly for the Demon. Oh, he could kiss her right now, but he was almost afraid to touch her. So precious and fragile of a specimen, like a glass statue before the looming presence of Hercules.

It was clear in his head, the final act. He could picture it already: the following morning, a surprise for the overworked wife: he'd get up early to buy boxes of fine chocolate, roses and wine. Then, announce the trip to the extravagant capital of Rome. At night, take her enraptured person out of this kingdom, fly back to Sheol, and be hailed with praise and applause as the Demon who brought down the Aesir- or at least, greatly aided in the summoning of the Demon who would bring down the Aesir-.

Quietly, he laid tittering at this vision, and a minute later, all the wicked imagination transpired into dreams.

*

The two gods were far from home. In any other year, Bayani's nights would be luxuriously spent swinging on a hammock under the generous warmth of an African moon; this year, duty led her callously into the cold, capricious weather in the land of the North. Although, Shango didn't seem to mind it much, fully content with traversing the place with a puny garb tossed indifferently around his shoulder.

Shango's insouciance carried along even when it started raining, and he stretched himself wide, letting his naked parts face the full brunt of the drizzle. At that point, Bayani was quite fed up, scanning the area, she briskly ducked under the nearest shelter: a shallow cave, barely enough for two. And so, begin their sojourn for the sodden night. After some studious deductions, she had concluded the distance left of the journey. Promptly setting aside all the work, Bayani collapsed onto the motley mat of hers.

The rest felt so well-earned, after suffering the strenuous day they had, navigating through a foreign terrain that never stops surprising. Indeed, Bayani might say the fauna of these lands prove most troublingly confusing, after witnessing Shango being mauled and masticated on by what she later would learn to be a 'bear'. Surely, if these creatures hold such ferocity, they ought to have the decency to look the part, like the snake with their sickly scales and slithers, or the lions and their intimidating scowl, and piercing eyes of yellow. But an endearingly large and downy creature with a bulbous head and ever-present look of innocence? No one fears that!

A good amount of time was spent prying the God's arm out of the jaws of the beguiling beast. Shango had suggested giving its snout a rough punch, only to be heatedly chided by Bayani for even thinking it up. Though

the two of them left unscathed, they had learnt a very valuable lesson: the more enticing something looked in this place, the more they avoid it.

Bayani laid beside a fire inept at warming, squirming beneath her wool blanket, fighting herself to find comfort among the bristly surface and chilling wind. But perhaps the most vexing obstacle that lie between her and a good rest, was the unyielding clap of thunder that kept erupting in deafening concords. In intervals of a few seconds, crackle after crackle, boom after boom. All in tune with the God of Thunder's beat on his drums.

CRACKLE

CRACKLE

"Shango, I swear on my life, if you don't stop--"

CRACKLE

The commotion went on for the next five minutes, with each show of lightning flaring the insides of the cave blindingly white, Bayani could only shield herself inside her blanket, cursing at her daffy brother bitterly. Once it stopped, the traumatized Goddess lay twitching, too overcome with emotions and inner tirades to sleep.

"What the hell were you doing!?" She bawled to the God, drenched from head to toe.

"Oh, sis, I thought you already fell asleep!" came Shango's genuine reply.

Her teeth gritted. If she was any livelier, and if the weather hadn't been this harsh, she was ready to pounce on him.

"I've just taken the liberty to apprise our conditions to their God of Thunder,".

"What?!" Bayani started up vigorously.

"Yes, what did you think I was doing with the lightning?"

"Up to your usual stupid, eccentric hobbies, I assumed! Heaven knows you've got enough for a tribe of outcasts!"

Shango chortled heartily, and she couldn't help but sneer.

"How do you communicate through lightning, anyway?"

"There's a certain universal language for it, as ancient as the earth, it's an enigma how it came to be, though. It was instilled in me naturally on the day I inherited the position. We twist the lightning into symbols, eventually forming laconic sentences."

"How very intriguing," She retorted drolly, as she slowly slips back down onto her mat, relieved at the finally quiet atmosphere. "Are you sleeping any time soon?" Bayani let out a yawn.

"No... I'll keep watch, don't want any more of those grizzly beasts attacking us, do we? I mean... how could something so fierce, look so... friend-shaped?"

"Hmm, it *was* rather cute, wasn't it? Anyway... just wake me up in a few hours, we'll alternate on keeping guard..."

Shango gave her a nod.

Bayani shifted some more in her spot, and suddenly, like machinery, it all clicked. It wasn't long before her heavy eyelid locked all vision away, leaving her thoughts drifting freely through an undeliberate mind. Although still shivering from the slight wind that burrows into the minute gaps, her weariness superseded her aversion to the little cold. As the night went on, finally, her breath steadied, then began in a snore.

Against all odds, the Goddess had fallen into a sound slumber. Only once he'd ascertain this, did Shango had the confidence to move. Fumbling in his own sack, he unraveled his own blanket, and spread it across her sister. Seeing her shiver subside, he retreated back to his position. Throughout the duration of the night, he sat cross-legged, intently staring out the mouth of the cave, keeping an alert eye for any prowling animals outside in the dark.

The stoic God meditated, while the sedulous Goddess dreamt.

The hours passed, and the sky livened into deep blue twilight. At some point, the once torrential rain retreated into a shower, and afterwards into nothing. Then, the glory of the lighted forest was returned when dawn came, and banished all the trepidations of sightlessness. Shango opened his eyes to the vivid mixtures of the forest: a few bushes, trees, and sod try to hide the patches of green left in them. While the rest boldly burst forth with their dying coats of orange.

All the drenched dirt and flooded foliage wafts their pungent scents to all entities nearby, greeting them with the gentle reminder of the time. There are some in the world who delights in the signs of morning, some, like the elk or wolves, who reply nature's greeting with invigorated spirits, ready to romp, hunt, and feast. And then there are the others who dread it with odium, much like Bayani, who at the first shine of the sun immediately shielded herself under her blanket.

Shango set forth into the majesty of the woods, and was gone for a good while, leaving his snoozing sister huddled up in the corner of the cave. When the sun became unbearably bright, that's when Bayani at last rose up from the depths of her woolen wonderland. She faced the morning with abject confusion, first, wondering about the time- fully expecting to be woken up at the midnight; second, wondering about the whereabouts of her thoughtless partner, who'd left her to be toyed with by the large, furry beast.

Her nostrils suddenly flared up, embraced by the delectable, yet sharp smell of tomatoes and peppers. Her eyes traced the flow of steam towards a rumbling clay pot, sitting atop a roaring fire. Still, in half stupor, she peered curiously into the pot's mouth, and was faced with the full brunt of the smoky delicacy inside.

"Ah, sis, you're awake!" Shango's jolly voice rang across the plain.

"Jollof rice?" Her attention was entirely latched onto the stirring pot.

"Right you are! Served with this queer, and surprisingly big fish I caught by the river!"

The God dangled the scaly body of a salmon before her, threateningly massive, extending down to her waist. It gave its last wriggle, and stilled quietly forever.

"Shango! You shouldn't have!"

"It's no worries, sis!"

"No, I mean you shouldn't have! *We're* the intruders of the forest, more so, this kingdom! It isn't right for us to impose on them without even meeting with their rulers first!"

"Oh, it's only a fish, sis. I doubt the Norse Gods are so stingy as to start demanding reparations for my catching it!"

"It's not a matter of stinginess... it's proper decorum on our part!"

"Dear old sister, ever the stickler, eh?"

Bayani shook her head in rebuke, but did not protest as Shango set about gutting the salmon.

"Right, we'll apologise to them later..."

“I’ll bet, sis, you’re just as eager to learn what this fish tastes like!” He shot her a coy look.

“Preposterous!”

“Oh my! It’s bright *orange* inside! This land... I tell ya, full of surprises!”

Shango handed her a bowl of the rice, deliciously blended red and brown with the vegetables, with the pinkish orange of the salmon standing out in appetizing glints. Bayani took each bite, trying to stifle the joy from the goodness of the guilty meal. Perhaps to distract herself, the Goddess produced that same map, and poured over the contents again. The journey forward was to the north, clearing the forest would land them right on the entrance of Midgard’s eastern gate, where the true mission was only to begin...

Closing her eyes brought forth the rancorous image of that hellish, three-eyed Demon. All too lucid were the memories of his destruction: a village splinters away in flames; out run the people in boiling blood; piled onto the terrain, charred corpses of unsalvageable strangers. With a vigorous blink, she banished those horrors, and finished the last of her bowl.

After some tidying, they travelled onwards. Shango, recalling the morning’s rising sun, confidently announced where north resided, much to the suspicion and worry of Bayani.

*

Tuesday

Morning

With summer fast languishing into its last days, the ounces of health are slowly stripped from the trees, bushes, and people. And here was a clear example of Autumn's destructive capabilities: a nerve-striking sneeze, from the young Goddess. The little, yet torturous inconveniences posed by a cold were starting to vex Urd.

What's funny... is that the plaguy of these minor illnesses such as coughs, flus, fevers, or toothaches, they take more tolls on the mind than the body. When one's nostrils are stuffed perpetually with blockades, one pines for the simple ability to smell, and the fresh airs that one disregards on a daily basis. The patient's minds are filled with all sorts of hypotheticals, it is a nightmare! It is hard to think of anything other than the present, when the dryness of your throat, constant thirst, and stuffy noses serve as an excruciating reminder of your pathetic condition. Perhaps it is only in suffering do people truly acknowledge what the present is like...

'Because people primarily prefer one or the other, don't they? Past or future. Some like to dwell in past memories, chase nostalgia in reunions with old faces and places, cherishing a lucky life dealt by fate. Some have tragic pasts, and would rather live for the future, the passion of aspirations and prospects fuel their being. Even though some might claim to prefer living in the moment, under looming tribulations, they might also be the first to panic and plan, or lament the hardships of adulthood. Who truly lives in the present, really?'

These thoughts streamed through Urd, as she sat slouching on her desk, staring out the window. All seemed quite tedious, until the vivid image of the blond boy illuminated itself in her mind.

"Well, I suppose living in the present just comes as naturally as instinct for some..."

For Urd, she wasn't sure where she stands on the spectrum. Mimir planned on delegating her to the Past; soon, she shall receive all of history's knowledge... so, wouldn't it be best to develop a liking for the past? Then again, what *is* the past? Is it some centuries passed? Half a second ago? Both? Then, when is the present, if it even exists? If the future was built by the past, then does anything other than the past matter? Does the number two exist?

"Ouch!" The headache crept up without warning, knocking her out of the never-ending philosophical pit. Yet, even after regaining a steady breathing, these giant queries loomed invisibly above her, so, she tried a different approach: an approach she could see a certain erratic, adventurous boy take to confront such large questions.

"Oh, who cares! They'll stop bothering you in due time!" She slouched back down on her seat.

And so, an existential crisis was smoothly and effortlessly resolved in the young girl, and the complexities of time and existence would never ever bother her again...

However, the present was still the present, and she ought to find a way to combat the overbearing boredom. Mimir had forbade her from going out, and consecutive attempts at sneaking out was met with failure; it is a trial to try to trick the God of Knowledge. So, bound to her room, she could only do so much for entertainment. Her hand flicked tepidly through the various spines of books on the shelf, dithering on the choice, and then losing the mood to read altogether.

They've all been read cover to cover, all the pages worn from repeated turning. She sighed, ruing yesterday's hasty departure from the library. It was a pity, really, a title had caught her eye greatly: *The Divine Comedy*.

Interestingly enough, Urd was not the only God intrigued by this specific tale written by a mortal. The word 'Divine' caused a big stir among many groups of deities. To this day, it remains the book most widely read by Gods and Goddess that was written by a mortal... of course, when the Roman Gods actually read the book, and saw that the author had advocated for the Triune God, instead of them, they promptly exiled him out of the kingdom and burnt his copies.

Knowing this history only made Urd want to read it more. Invigorated by the new goal, she found the house-bound day more tolerable. She made a game out of observing the strangers that pass by the window, and got surprisingly enthralled by it.

"Maybe he'll pass by... wonder what he's doing now?"

At the oaken abode, Cirius was just waking up, with the day well advancing into noon, having missed the neighbour's cocks' cacophony of crows during the morning, the calling of cumbrous hardships to come for the peasants. By the time the boy's rose for his uncommitted schedule, the sky had dimmed into greyness, and began to drizzle.

So, now he too was bound to a day indoors, because for all his impulsiveness and need for thrill, he was not so silly enough as to enjoy the exposure of rain. For the next few hours, he romped about the cramped house, practically begging for anything to intrigue him. It is times like these, when the mind is in such monumental levels of monotony, when one becomes a time lord.

Minutes slow down, and every second is confronted with acute awareness. There is a tendency to create one's own metronome with the clenching of teeth, clicking of tongue, popping of lips, and so on. Cirius bit down on the lump of dry bread; the tastelessness forces a repulsed mouth to slow the chewing. Now, reality was barely slugging along for the young boy; everything was stilled, grossly unperturbed and faultless... he hated it.

He wished for an explosion, a rumble, a whisper, anything! Yet, fate was content to weave the day into one of placidity. The duo of placidity and solitude can be a very trying thing to face, when the two appears in confluence, we are no longer confronting the real world, because there leaves nothing to be confronted. Instead, we face the expansive and quite rigid realm of our minds: a phase of "self-reflection", as if put through a machine for evaluation, assertion and amendments to make sure all is well.

In Cirius' case, the inspection was long overdue. Suddenly, conversations of the previous days ring soundly within him: Mimir's fervent exclamation of the *absurdity* of the Nephalem, Loki's reprimand of their *childish* nature, and Hel's lecture on *aging* bodies. The fatal question finally dawned on him: How long will he be able to live? Cirius has never been apt with calculations, but fortunately, nor is he bothered much by specifics. So, he found satisfaction with the evaluation machine's curt conclusion: a long time.

Cirius would live for a long time, that much is assured. That means... there will inevitably be many times of placidity, will it not? Cirius cringed at the possibility. There was so much more boredom to face in life... but also so much more thrill to be had.

"Equally balanced, then!" He shrugged.

And, so, the worry for the future was put aside, and eventually forgotten.

However, the present was still the present, and the surfeit of pent-up vigour were clawing at his insides. Cirius was still clenching onto the half-eaten bread, until the irritation reached its acme, and he jolted up the seat in madness. A groan echoed throughout the room, and the bread was tossed upward like a fired cannonball. Although the rain was shallow and steady, to Cirius it felt like a tempest was ready to upturn the entire house.

Then, he was back, wilting onto the chair with sluggish movements. Cirius laid his head down defeatedly beside his plate, submitting himself to the torture of placidity. What's weird, though, was that he didn't quite remember boredom being so unbearable. After all, yesterday, he was doing just fine down at the library....

Fatefully, the countenance of the young Goddess flashed before him. A pair of blinging blue-eyes entrancingly engrossed with the pages of a book. Then, the girl would peer at him, expounding with all these fanciful words about the beauty of books.

Furtively, Cirius' sight was set on the bookshelf in the corner, where collections were ordered wonkily along the platform. Urd had taken the liberty of placing those books there, after having used up all her own shelves at home. The flimsy idea planted itself inside his mind: if Urd can enjoy reading...

"No, no, rubbish! I'm looking to erase boredom, not cause it!"

Urd's indignant response float about his mind, he'd had this exchange with her before. He, naturally dismissed any attempts of her coaxing him to read, while, she, remains diligent in trying.

"You've never finished one, Cirius!"

"Who could blame me? Word after word after word, it's a nightmare!"

"Frankly, Cirius, how can you grouse about boredom when you actively ignore doing certain things? If boredom denotes the lack of excitement or activity, then doing anything must always alleviate boredom more than doing nothing!"

"..."

Cirius stammered to the empty room, snapping out from the imagined, yet freakishly lucid scenario. He meandered to the shelf, fiddled with the rows of books, giving the covers half-hearted peers. On the rack closest to him, perched three equally thick books, all stalely decorated in tepid greens and blues. The illustrations were what caught Cirius' attention.

On the left, a picture of a horse; in the middle, a singular apple tree towering over a child; on the right, a man stabbing a sword through a creature's bloodied face...

The man's name was Horace, and the book quickly divulged into his eventful history, full of sinister tragedies unmatched by all people in plight. Yet, the man beat down consistently by calamities persevere through them in the name of pluck. All very interesting stuff, if Cirius would just make his way through the first page.

Every few lines, an obstacle was presented. Words utterly lengthy and bombastic, gatekeepers of plenty stories for the novice reader. They galled Cirius to the core. Having moved onto the bed, he lay fumbling the book to-and-fro, trying his hardest to decipher them, before conceding, and skipping it altogether. As he advanced through the pages, the hardships of reading only heightened. Trudging along labyrinths of narratives, he would follow one, only to be driven to confusion.

Descriptions of houses, of roads, of grass and ocean, intended to incite an exalted imagination that is undoubtedly evocative... if one has the patience to meticulously consider each word when evoking a mental image. In some cases, all those carefully picked adjectives and imageries can do, is produce a trite, generic picture, as the reader hastens through.

Then Cirius came to the paragraph of clothes. Oh, the clothes are the worst of all! ‘colour of amaranth?!’, ‘bright celadon?’, ‘shining vermilion?’.

“There’s NO such colours! Where’s red or blue or pink?!” He screamed acrimoniously.

His head tilt up from the book in exhaustion; reading has proven itself to be the most knacker task Cirius has faced. Urd had made it look like a right doddle. Her pages turn so swiftly and frequently, that one shudders to comprehend what chaotic cluster of occurrences are in her mind.

“What *happened* to that girl?”.

Cirius had starting reading on a whim, urged on by an enigmatic impulse to stride unwalked lands. Before long, he started thinking on how he might share his experience with Urd; all his complaints, nitpicks and cynicism. He was now reading for just that purpose, tittering to himself as he thought of a remark.

He suffered through more and more of the little vexations in literature: Why are they so many characters? No one talks like that! Why’s it going into such detail about boats and ships? All the while, he was getting more cross by the minute.

However, the final straw for Cirius wasn’t all the longwinded narrative, elaborate descriptions, or nonsense colours... it was the French. One never misses it; it could well be the first thing that catches the eye when flipping the page. They make sure they stand out as bumpiously as possible.

‘*obscurcir et aliéner le lecteur*’

“What’s that mean?! Why’s it suddenly come up?!”

In ire, the book was tossed aside by the boy. He’d had enough for today. The book was just mocking him now, So, he felt the need to mock the author back; he sat, cross-armed and pouting, and muttering very bitter things about whoever Olaf Ingolf was.

“Any writer who forces in French words in their book is a lousy one! Lousy, showy tossers!”

Indeed.

*

Anna was just arising out of her burlywood coloured sheets, sporting the thin, glaucous coloured nightgown from the day before. She scrubbed out the fatigue in her eyes, and gaze at her exquisitely embellished bedroom: the turquoise-coloured carpeting laid out from the door to every edge of the room, which is to say, the four corners in which the room consists of; the birch wardrobe painted the colour of incarnadine and assembled by a dozen roofing nails pounded into its frames by a carpenter with an iron mallet. Presently, the sunlight seeps through the drapes with the colour of drake’s-neck. This room, perfect for a *vis-à-vis* or *tête-à-tête*, is walked on by Anna’s two legs, one left and one right, taking successive steps...

For Anna Bjornson, the littlest aberrations in her life have become a phobia. Waking hours must keep to a schedule, and any deviation is an invitation for chaos. Such is the nature of an unfulfilling marriage. Such life is not the best thing in the world, but nor is it the worst. As she got older, she learnt to make do, a vital skill, indeed, for people like her: not born into affluence, and having neither the splendour of knights nor artists. Instead of risking the possible catastrophes of an unstable life, she could sacrifice a tad amount of freedom for security, binding herself to the conventions: work, marriage, children, and death.

When one has ceded themselves to monotony, the most fearsome thing people like her can face, is to have things change. Today, that change happened right beside her as she woke... her husband, somehow, was not in bed!

Anna tramped through the house like a whirlwind, bawling for the missing man with growing affright. "Erik! Erik! Where are you?!"

Her hands clasped, and her legs froze in place. At present, half her mind was, unconsciously, devoted to prayers, while the other was still gripped by anguish and anxiety. The visions came in concords, each ghastlier than the one before. A mugger? A kidnap? An accident? A Demon?

The fear quickly moved from mere well-being of the husband to ones of money, work, food, rent... rent? But, upon her realisation, Anna crumbled in shame at her own indecorous priorities.

When has her husband ceased being flesh and mind, and transformed into a prop for resources? Still in disquieting trembles, she made for the window, staring out at the activity of her neighbours. There, as if in an assembly, strolled the throng of husbands. Eva's Gustaf, Monica's Harold... and of course Eva's secret lover, Sven, and finally Helen's husband, Ivar. They walked, while combing their beards with burly hands, whistling tunes of merriment as they started for their shops, mills, or farms. The labour would churn out coins in gold; the coins would be bartered for milk and meat; the meat would go to the wife, and become meals; the meals sustain the big men's muscles; the big man's muscle would labour...

Oh, the cycle was clear to her now, it isn't a path one willingly chose to walk, rather, the gust sweeps you along. To shatter it requires pertinacity, that one must apply themselves. Now, however, this awareness shifted in her the panic of change to the angry defiance of the cycle, how draconian and oppressive it was.

Anna recalled once, when the gusts meant nothing to her. She would gambol with friends and sweethearts, indifferent to pragmatic redes of the adults. Then, the horrors of reality shunts those blithe deep in some obscure part of the heart. The gusts did their deed, and suddenly, she was working, and going to church, and marrying Erik. Oh, poor Erik! He was picked like one would pluck an apple from the tree, all from only its perceptible allure, and none from its taste. This adequate house, his stable job, his overall non-offensive traits, had she really loved him? Pensively, she pictured the face and figure of the presumed late Erik Bjornson, and found not a sliver of warmth. This marriage, it was a farce, one built solely on reason, not love.

No, no more! She shall reclaim the throne to herself and her life. An inferno blazed virulently inside her dainty frame, imbuing every move and thought with fiery intent. Her next actions were quite obvious, she shall leave, yes, leave now, lest the vice of rationality cajoles her back to the cycle. Burning with animation, she marched back into the bedroom to gather all her belongings. Also, seeing as Erik was as good as dead, she might as well take all the money with her. All the drawers were yanked out, and the wardrobe flung open. The items tumble out in an avalanche; the coins splashing onto the floor in jingles; her clothes piled messily atop each other.

Working as briskly as she could, she stashed the money and clothes into her luggage, and proceeded to search around for whatever was pertinent.

“By estimation, the money should... No! No estimations! I will face what I face! No more premeditations, come what may! So what, if I’m destined to suffer later on? Death comes perforce as a suffering anyway!”

While standing at the door, Anna fought the urge to glance back at her house.

“Farewell mine abode! Farewell, Erik, wherever you are!”

She left, facing courageously only what came in front.

...

“Oh, Anna~” Abaddon chanted as he entered the door, mysteriously unlocked.

Flashing his immaculate set of white teeth, he brought the boundless jubilation he had into the house with him. Under his armpits clipped a velvet box, oozing a faint scent of lusciousness. Chocolates, from the most resplendent of bakeries in the kingdom. Abaddon’s left hand clutched onto a bouquet, glamorous assortment of roses that came in all its natural hues.

“Anna~ I’m home, and I’ve got some fantastic surprises!” He chanted again, not a sliver less gleeful.

Until he actually came into the house, and saw the aftermath of Anna’s passionate ransacking.

“...”

He looked around some more.

“WERE WE ROBBED?!”

Almost mirroring the spirit of the escaped spouse, Abaddon scurried all over the house, bawling her dulcet name, only to be returned with echoes. Eventually, his methods devolved from mere calling to persuasion, and then to threats. After the futile efforts, and accepting that the Anna was indeed absent, Abaddon resigned himself to the kitchen table. He would sit and wait, with a face of implacable sternness, and his hands glued tightly to his chin. Anna’s bound to return, where else would she go?

The minutes turned to hours, and his listless body did not waver. Outside, the sun paints the street golden with its glare, and sadistically delights in the people’s pants and sweats. The Demon, however, sat listlessly in the shadows of the kitchen. He was growing more confident with waiting, after all, each hour passed was more possibility for her return, or so he thought.

Conjectures were plentiful within the Demon. Anna must have gone to the markets for all their everyday wares. Perhaps she’d left the door unlocked, resulting in a swift burglary... yes, that must be it. Never mind, these things happen. Once she comes back, she’ll be stricken with regret and guilt. And therein lies a ripe chance to lead her away from this kingdom, when she’s too overwhelmed with emotions for judgement.

With the thought of how he’ll salvage the situation, Abaddon quickly smirks at his own ingenuity. Suddenly, the mulling was interrupted by a cheery voice by the gaping door. The bubbly face of a man was peering at the

pensive Mr. Bjornson, who'd been his decade long neighbour. The man's expression concealed a sense of guilty pleasure.

"A bit of domestic with the missus, eh?"

"PARDON?!"

Mr. Bjornson's reply came belligerently, taking the neighbour aback; all traces of mirth quickly dissipated, and he stutters out a conciliatory explanation.

"W-well, sorry for assuming, i-it's just I saw Anna at the kingdom's gates, s-she was leaving with a right big luggage... is s-she off somewhere specific?"

"WHAT?!"

The neighbour goggled with horror, as the nigh imperturbable neighbour he'd come to know as Erik Bjornson stormed with steps of thunder toward him and seized him by the collar, lifting his body up to the air.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN?!" Mr. Bjornson demanded.

"Dear Lord! Erik, what are you doing?!"

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU SAW ANNA LEAVING?!"

"T-that's what I-I saw! S-she just went out the gates and left!"

"WHY WOULD SHE DO THAT?!"

"I-I don't know! That's why I-I c-came to ask!"

At the end of his sentence, the neighbour met with a brutal collision with the sidewalk; visions blurred from the tumult; strident ringing drills into his ears. Gingerly, he heaved himself up with a few staggers, only to be faced with a bigger wave of entropy. Mr. Bjornson was feral, possessed with lunacy, his house cry with poignant crashes and clashes, shrieks and shouts.

The neighbour could barely catch the scene through the gap: Erik Bjornson kicking at everything, from the shelves to the tables that dare be near him. At one point, the chair came bursting out the window, and shattered on the streets. The mixture of his cries, full of ire and anguish, reverberated around the streets, and the crowd began to draw in.

As the chaos escalates, the neighbour tremors in trepidation. Another large crash, and he ducked down from his place near the window, dodging the blunt blur that scorched past him. He looked back to see... a clock.

"THREE HOURS!"

The neighbour wasn't about to question the madman, but he wasn't about to leave either. Curiosity, is a sublime and possibly fatal phenomenon. So, the crowd watches on, either silently sympathizing or castigating, while the maniacal Mr. Bjornson strived to leave nothing in his own home untouched by his trashing fists.

*

Tuesday

Afternoon

Over the roads, the rows of roofs dripped with the remnants of rain. Droplets drop off onto the soaked pavements, puddles and passerby. The air brimmed refreshingly after the light shower of the morning, beckoning the many merchants to park their stalls outside once more. Soon, the hubbub rose up, the touting began, and the kingdom was alive.

Two soldiers marched zealously amidst the throng, standing out among a sea of laymen with their matching bright blue tunics... and their steel helmets, long spears and shields. Of the two soldiers, the man beamed, while the woman soured.

“What’s the matter, Lena? You seem... disturbed.”

“Traumatised, is more of a right word for it, Henrik. Yesterday’s ordeal with father Lars... Tyr was livid, like injected of pure animus. Felt like he was digging into my soul with that scowl!” She shuddered at the recollection.

“Right? I’ve seen that once before, that’s why I sent you instead!”

Lena gasped at the betrayal, before giving her partner’s shoulder a good series of wallops; he only laughed it off. The pair resumed their duties in silence.

Patrolling is a droll job, if one takes it extremely seriously, they will begin to notice that normalcy can be rather absurd at times: quarrels exacerbate into brawls without a moment’s notice, and before they could react it was over, either with swift blows or intervention. Lena watched on, as a scrawny boy swiped away a handful of carrots from the inattentive vendor. These things are better left unimpeded, she thought.

On the other hand, take the job of patrolling in leisure, and you never actually need to do your job, because anything that’s worthy of butting in would always show itself quite apparently anyway. Case in point, a scream from further down the road, followed by dins of disorder. The two soldiers pressed forward with haste, lugging their weapons close.

They arrived at the scene, now holding its own congregation, to see the source of all that tumult. As the onlookers crowd in a semicircle, Henrik and Lena tried their best to jolt through the bodies. The uproar was worsening by the second, with the snapping of wood, violent shrieks, and rumbling of walls. Emerging from the crowd, the soldiers were met with a single, erratic man in the midst of smashing an upturned table with one of its disassembled legs.

“You there!” Henrik was fast approaching.

Hearing the name, Abaddon froze in surprise, and meeting the soldier’s face, his stupefaction deepened. The familiar faces sauntered over blithely, and the Demon started backwards in dismay. Panting from his batty pummeling of furniture, Abaddon struggled to compose himself, and allowed the two soldiers to loom over his shrunk frame.

“What’s all this about then?” Lena was stentorian in her inquiry.

“Nothing!” Abaddon hissed back instantly.

“So, you’ve half destroyed yourself over nothing, eh?” She leaned in disdain.

“Why, is that a crime?! What I do with myself and my housewares are none of anyone’s concern, is it?”

“Look, Mr...” Henrik took over the questioning.

“Bjornson.”

“Mr. Bjornson, we mean no disrespect or ill-will here, nor do we mean to villainize you. Obviously, you seem to be facing some hardships here, we just wish to let you know we’re here to help!”

“I’ve no need for your help!”

“Would you at least share your troubles? There must be something we can do!”

Just then, a bashful voice chimed in from the side, much to the surprise of the three. It was the neighbour, who’s been witnessing the entirety of the tantrum, and left a shaken man.

“Listen to the man, Erik, for God’s sake!”

The soldier, realising that the heated Mr. Bjornson wasn’t about to cooperate, turned to the trembling neighbour for their inquisitions. Abaddon perked his ears up, surreptitiously trying to eavesdrop on their conversation, all the while avoiding the glare of the brawny lady brandishing her spear.

“He’s not usually like this! His wife... she’d just left without a word!”

“Oh, dear.”

“Might’ve been a row! I saw her storming out the kingdom!”

“I see.”

“Erik’s been frequenting the alehouses, lately, you think that could be the issue?”

“Possibly.”

As the neighbour continue orating on his own possible theories on the matter, Henrik returned to Mr. Bjornson.

“My condolences, Mr. Bjornson, I know this can be rather overwhelming. We’ll get this all sorted out, I’ll personally inquire about your wife at the gates, I’m sure we’ll be able to find her!”

“You will?”

“We’ll certainly try.”

“Thank you.”

Abaddon was about to walk back into the darkness of the house, before he was stopped yet again.

“Hold on, Mr. Bjornson! I request that you come with us, please!”

“Why?! What for?!” The tone was beginning to worsen again.

Leaning in close, Henrik uttered in a whisper.

“Frankly, Mr. Bjornson, outbursts such as these are not the product of a... fully sound mind. We believe that you may have some... untreated tribulations in your life, something... unnatural. We’d like to bring you to aid, or if you’d prefer, bring aid to you.”

“WHAT ARE YOU IMPLYING?!”

Lena twitched at the bellow; she was now squinting twice as much at Mr. Bjornson.

“There was a man just a few weeks prior, much the same as you, caused quite the ruckus out in the streets, getting livid at the most trivial things. Things exacerbated, and he was brought in, needing to be restrained by the soldiers. After a session with the Goddess of healing, Lady Eir, it was revealed that it had been a curse of Demonic origin. A curse that implants the sense of hatred and rage into the victim...”

“*Soneillon’s* attachment of turpitude...” Abaddon recalled silently.

“So, better safe than sorry. We’ll get you to Lady Eir, and if it happens that it isn’t a curse, then we’ll gladly guide you towards other aid. Lady Freyja’s an expert in marital affairs...as well as sensual ones...”

Abaddon was stagnant. Yesterday, he was all too willing to swagger onward, boldly welcoming anything this kingdom might throw at him. Perhaps because an underlying safety was always there. Before the flimsy body of mortals, the Demon can still swank playfully, much like a king is not exposed to much trouble around his own subjects. Things are quite different when a few paces ahead, two tightly clad warriors wielded their weapons so heedlessly, ready to stab at the moment of animosity.

“I... don’t want to go...”

“Sorry?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me...”

“Most probably, Mr. Bjornson, but better safe than sorry! Please, just come with us, it’ll only take a jiffy!”

“...”

“Mr. Bjornson?”

The Demon shifts his legs furtively, inching away from the door, and into the unadjoined crowd. The soldiers could only watch, wide-eyed and curious. As sudden as thunder, the uncanny familiarity seized the pair. The same defiance; the same equivocation; the same hostility, it had come up unexpectedly in Father Lars, and it was coming up now. In a monstrous speed did their faces twist into dourness, as the realisation drill into the mind. The world shuts away, and it felt like existence depended on the three. Lena swallowed, and Henrik’s teeth chattered.

“Mr. Bjornson, I must insist you come with us...” He had to make sure.

Abaddon bolted at the end of the sentence, as did Lena. Their feet lift up in synch, and soon, the two were in a frantic race, kicking dusts and breathing hard, shoving bodies and leaping off stalls. In the vigour of it all, Lena threw aside the cumbersome metal shield; soon, her helmet followed. Fully engrossed in the manic madman before her, Lena couldn’t notice the furtive little insects gliding closely alongside her. So, there the fiend lay, always an arm’s length away, which to Lena should have been nothing but pervious and vulnerable. This only heightened her annoyance when each thrust from her spear only resulted in a dodge.

The chase persisted far into the hectic marketplaces. That was when the encumberments piled up upon Lena. The fiend had no qualms with pushing over anyone in his way. First it was a man, then a woman; things went especially malicious, when he rammed aside a little girl, then kicked a kitten out of the way, then shoved over an elderly not even in his direct path. Lena, however, found herself dithering every so often, sidestepping the many pedestrians and animals. With each lingering hesitation, the distance between the two widened ever so slightly.

Lena’s breath was wearing thin, try as she might, she couldn’t seem to close the final gap between them. Probably shouldn’t have wasted the efforts in thrusting, she regretted. Abaddon, meanwhile, was making each stride with increasing gladness, sensing his chaser’s depleted zeal. However, Lena decided on a last gamble... heaving her spear up once more, fists clutched, eyes unblinking... she hurled. The intensity staggered her footing, and she could only stop for balance, praying that the fate would guide her weapon benevolently.

For a swift instance, the Demon heard the footsteps behind fade away. Overcame with glee, and determined to see his tired predator. A grin hanged readily on his face, he turned... and had his cheeks pierced by the sharp edge of a spear soaring across air.

Henrik had not been far behind the chase, but during the midst of winding corners and lithe turns, he eventually lost sight of the two sprinting figures. Left to himself, chagrining and cursing, he decided finally to entrust the chase up to his partner, while he moved on to equally pressing matters: alerting the kingdom.

The search didn't take long, soon, he found his goal. The enchanted, ivory horn, held in place by a leather strap upon a black wall. These horns were stationed all over the kingdom, their utterance rarely heard, yet always trepidatious. Henrik, not forgetting its sanctity, held it up ceremoniously, and blew. The rotund ululation reverberated over the kingdom, mystically drilling itself into everyone as a heedless intruder. The horn's sound speaks of Henrik's message through nothing but theme; it revealed urgency, while slow and rotund; it made known its location with its volume.

Henrik blew the arching instrument for the entire minute, and across every road, building and plains, every soul stilled for a unanimous second, then stirred in a frenzy.

*

Tyr dashed out his chambers and into the barracks. The troops moved without command, bearing their arms, and marching in formation. He was at the front as soon as he retrieved his weapon.

Brynhildr and Geira sat up from their stools, stern and solemn. The former finished her drink with a swig; the latter already out the doors, leaving her coppers by the counter.

Freyr rested his sword around his ginormous shoulders, and ran for his life out the forest. He leapt over bushes, branches and yelping deer, all with a mighty roar.

Loki sat, his fingers plugged into his ears. After enduring through the lengthy din emitted by the distant horn, he went back to writing as if nothing happened.

*

Urd sulked in front of her bowl of bland porridge, twirling the spoon around the white mush. It is uncertain whether the horn failed to reach her feverish senses, or she was just too knackered to care.

Fjolnir shivered in his seat, thinking he'd suddenly been afflicted by a wild disorder. "Ringing in ears? Oh no, oh no! I've *read* about this... tinnitus! Dear lord, I've tinnitus!"

Cirius jumped up from his bed, tossing his book aside. He clambered up to the window, trying and failing to trace the sound. Seeing as the rain has stopped, he quickly took this as a calling to adventure. When the horn died down, he was already far away from the house.

*

The gathered crowd watched on in stunned silence; ducking behind counters, lampposts, and animals in uneasiness, as the menacing soldier hurled a spear as long as herself heedlessly into the jaws of Mr. Bjornson. Lena was panting now, and in this momentary stillness, her sweat finally saw fit to release themselves. Her gaze never left the little spectacle in front. The perforated corpse of the Demon, limp upon the gravel, elapsing into spasms before collapsing again.

Despite the endless looks of horror, a prideful face of relief hanged on Lena. Something about the erected spear, jutting out into the sky and twitching, makes it almost celebratory, like flags on a pole. Of course, circumstances

would be drastically more mortifying if the man she'd just impaled hadn't been a Demon at all, but she wasn't thinking about that. She'd celebrate her victory now, and then roll up in guilt later if it'd been true.

When her heart began settling, she dragged herself across to the nasty little scene, stopping at each of the body's minute jerks. The closer she approached, the more she dithered; bravery waned, and movements lagged. Then, she stepped just a bit too close...

The strident buzzing broke loose. The fetid smell arose. She could only stare with inertia at the rapid unfolding of calamity. As brightness blurred into an obscene grey, expanding and darkening. The rubbing entities sprawled out from untraceable smog, bawling their chirps that ushers in deafness. To combat this gruesome assault of the senses meant shutting them all out. Lena covered her ears, swallowed her lips, and stopped her breath. And without her knowledge, she'd retreated back from the corpse, which is all but hidden within the impenetrable blackness.

The wings were the first to take shape, they flap in horrendous flurry, fanning out the smog and the uncertainties it brought; it revels at the onlooker's languishing expressions, as anxiety morphs into hysteria, when beholding the creature's true form. It wriggled its limbs, squished its jaws, and hovered, all with such sordid blitheness. One is stripped of rationality before it. Reality bends to accommodate, in full, its horror and turpitude, when it compels your attention to its empty eyes.

The insect's mouth was the most erratic of its features, moving with enthusiasm, then shaking with violence. It shakes at the irritation of the spear protruding from beside it. With one powerful jerk, it came loose, and dropped down onto the ground with a smack. Lena forced herself out of the trance, equipped with a new wave of adrenaline, she started for the spear... and was swatted away by the monster's twisted leg, which slashes across the sky, unforeseeably swift.

Her body clenched up in agony, before tumbling across the streets and crashing into the building... and the agony doubled. She gasped and at inexplicable sensation coursing through her, the instance of feeling nothing, then wave of... everything. Yet, in the exigency of battle, instincts know to refuel the body with pain, and she was quite steadily on the ground not a moment later, internally grunting with the spirit of a thousand elderly.

Her hand clasped furtively on two broken scraps of wood that she'd fished out from the debris; torn to sharpness by the splinters, and so satisfying to the irate fists, Lena lunged forth at the hovering creature, determined to push past those lissom limbs. The monster assailed in indefatigable barrages, to Lena, the rains of fatal blows always stabbing an inch from her face. When she got the chance, she latched herself onto one of them, and tried to clamber onto its thorax, only to be thrown off.

The solidier, inuring to the blows, jammed her tawdry weapons into it with every dodge. The monster replied by picking up its pace. Soon, the two's battle devolved into a wrestle, then to a conflict where one consistently tries to shake off the other.

Just then, a particularly vicious shunt from the behemoth sent Lena staggering behind it. The soldier flew out of the monster's sight, and she intended to exploit it. Yet, in the business of movements, from the rushing desire to run, jump and kick, a mistake was made. The crucial misstep threw her off, and her heels caved in to the side. The solidier plunged down like a landslide, desperately wishing away the pain. Lena stoically pleaded for her body to move, but the rush of aches persuade her to stop.

"And there lay the burning spirit within the damaged soldier, the homogenous tragedy among so many fallen fighters. Fervent souls forced to surcease, from their vessel's limit. How utterly poignant..." The monster murmured out in its incomprehensible tongue.

It could sense the desperation from her moans, and it delighted in it. It didn't even need to turn around. How many more blows could she take, in this state, helpless to each one, and at the mercy of its whim? Slowly, the monster started to whirl around, with each advancing turn showing the rapture of triumph. It soaked in the sight of the defeated figure, still buzzing in sordid delight.

With one last whirl, the monster unleashed the gathered energy and rushed towards her, ready to land the final blow on the fallen soldier... before having its jaws pierced by the sharp edge of a spear soaring through the air.

"That throw's a real belter, Geira! Fair play tae ye!" The Valkyrie shouted behind her as she approached with a clap.

Lena didn't have time to wrap her head around it. One second, she was cursing at her foot. Then, she was singing out prayers and reminiscing on blissful memories. Now, she was heaved up forcefully by a robust pair of hands, and carried across the road on the vast shoulders of a gentle giant.

"And fair play ta ye anaw, Lena! It's awrite noo, go on and take a wee rest."

Buzzing out its agony with the whimpers of an insect, the monster grounded itself. It writhed disorderedly in its attempt to claw out the imbedded weapon with its crooked feet; the wound's agitation heightens and heightens, begging for its limbs to quicken the process, which only furthered carelessness and caused more pain. The hate-ridden eyes settled on the dignified figures, complacent and relaxed at its peril. From within the dark, erring husk of the monstrous insect, Abaddon, ardent with abhorrence, cursed at them.

Their green apparels outshone its brooding, mossy lustre. The battlefield gleamed with a newfound optimism: the shrieks allayed away and rose up again in cheers, the hitherto expressions choking with fear dissipated into relief, and those betting on the previous match were either paying or collecting their dues. All very irksome turn of events for the Demon. But perhaps what bothered him the most was the two Valkyries in front; both alike in arms, yet utterly disparate in auras.

The bigger of the two beamed, hands nonchalantly tapping away at her hips. The other glowered with detestation, readily clutching the hilt of her broadsword and hugging her shield.

"What'd ye make o' it, Geira? That's a muckle one, isnae it? But I tell ye, that is a real barry throw ye did, not joking with ye. Square in the heid, real impressive, that one."

"In the jaw..."

"Eh?"

"I got it in the jaw, I was aiming for the head..."

"Oh... still, maybe ye ought tae switch tae spears, eh? With talent like that! But noo am left without a weapon!"

"Yes, I *am* sorry about that. I'll try to pry it out for you."

Not leaving the insect with a moment of rest, Geira and Brynhildr set to work. Abaddon watched on quietly, as the warrioresses plant their foot down the giant locust's eye, and started pulling with all their separate might. The spear wouldn't budge, and the monster sunk back down sulkily.

"My, it's in deep, isnae it? Roight mighty arm ye got there, Geira!" She laughed.

"Right, let's pull our strength, then. One..."

Brynhildr pulled.

“No, on three!”

“Aye, I hear ye!”

“One... two...GO!”

Geira pulled.

“Eh, I thought ye meant after three?”

“Fine, then! After three! One... two... three... GO!”

The spear severed the jaw with a heavy heave, bringing with it gushes of squalid, yellow sick, along with a great cry that pierces eardrums. The heated insect takes wing once more to the air, more erratic than before. It shook off the two Valkyries like an intrusive germ, hissing at them with a broken jaw which slurs the voice. Brynhildr went about cleaning the spear with her handkerchief.

“Perhaps we should have cut it open first...”

“Wa’as that?”

“I said we should have cut it open first, and apprehended the Duke!” She was shouting over the buzzing.

“Nae, this is more interesting!”

At the peak of its impatience and wrath, the monster surged with virulent vigour. As it steadied in the air, it dove down toward the two in astonishing rapidity. It charged, thoughtless of consequences, apathetic to even its master’s wishes inside its belly, it charged, with intent to squash both itself and its target. In the face of the imminent collision, Brynhildr was still wiping away the last muck off the tip of her spear and Abaddon was hysterically pounding on the walls of the monster’s innards, commanding it to stop whatever it had commenced.

Geira sallied forth, digging her toes and bracing her shield... the impact was clamorous. The vibration seized across the young warrioress’ frame; the ringing arose without an end; the tiny rubles over the streets were thrown and upturned, for the dozenth or so time this day.

The monster quickly reverted back to its old tactics, extending out its limbs in a pummeling of frenzy. Only this time, the Valkyries couldn’t enjoy the leniency given to its last foe. Each hit came in feral fury, seeking to maim and tear. Still, the Valkyries pushed back, furtively driving the fray from the behemoth’s unruliness to coordination. Unbeknownst to it, the monster was coerced into a spiral; it turned to meet the young warrior, only to be kicked from behind by the larger. It focused on the larger, standing tall, and was hacked away from beneath by the other. Every turn of the body was met with a pierce from the spear; every waver met a brutish wallop; even a successful hit meant getting its leg stuck in one of their mighty grips, and for the other to unleash her attack unabated. The two worked immaculately, as seamless as a river stream, while the monster collapsed further with each strike.

Abaddon may be faring worse inside the beast. Not only was it getting increasingly rowdy, with his head being knocked from wall to wall every few seconds; the disguise has started to melt off from the dankness of the entrails; worst of all, his rear was starting to get sore from the prolonged sitting. He supposed it was time to flee, he’d forgiven himself for failing the mission, and Lord Belial isn’t one to be too severe with punishments. Yes, he’d done all he can, these missions depend on luck more than skill, really, now that he thought about it. With a poignant sigh, he gave the command for it to soar away from the kingdom, and back to the homeland. The locust began gaining ground, sluggishly climbing its assaulted body up to the sky...

And was pulled back down by the feisty hand of Geira, launching off the palm of her partner with a mighty jump. The young Valkyrie made her way for the wings, a well-aimed stab threw the beast into an unruly whirl, and it came twirling down upon the gravel with a thud.

“...Well, bollocks!” Abaddon went blank.

The carcass’ landing kicked up mountains of nebulous dust. It collapsed on the surface with a splatter of rankness and filth. As the monster lay, with each twitch sucking away the remnants of its life, it felt its master’s desperate movements inside. Abaddon burst out from the damp belly in groans, much like the weary man exits his carriage after a dozen hour’s travel. The monster glimpsed at the Demon’s drenched back, and twitched no more.

The Valkyries observed nonchalantly, making sure to meet the perturbed face of the fiend with their own. Abaddon’s feet started for a tur-

And was impaled...the bathos was much captured by the crowd, who’ve quieted increasingly throughout the spectacle, and now was in its last wisp of murmurs.

*

Tuesday

Evening

‘In hindsight’, ‘Retrospectively’, ‘If I’d had known’... perhaps the most irritating aspect of life is having to utter these phrases at one point. Truly, with every proceeding knowledge we attain, the more we realise how much of an imbecile we were. How much we squander over doddles and trivialities, or how we get clouded by petty little sentiments. Abaddon could very well have circumvented this fate, quite easily, numerous times.

Now, having been tied up tightly around the torso, he’s suddenly become an expert at analysing and critiquing situations long before the present. He’d could’ve just grabbed Molly by the ankle and took off to the skies; he could’ve asked Mr. Bjornson for his address before purloining his identity; he could’ve abandoned his need for bombastic displays, and maybe Anna wouldn’t mysteriously wander off. And then, these critiques in hindsight start to branch off from himself. If only Prince Belial had used the store of virgins sparingly. Perhaps had Azazel chosen a more discreet location for their rendezvous. Every plan is a success in hindsight, and every mistake or failure is as horrendous as the apocalypse... perhaps Abaddon wasn’t as skillful as he thought he was...

The Demon noticed the redundancy of struggling, and gave in to the unrest of the rope, tied by the Valkyrie’s impenetrable knot. He sulked in the dour mood of a post-battle scene, where thrill and vigour go out the window, and tedium resumes. The sellers went back to touting, buyers to haggling, and beggars to begging. Abaddon’s tired gaze settled on the people, picking out the diverse faces of presumed housewives. All the listless bodies strolling in dull little kirtles; the faces under the coifs hides the countless shades of languor, as the unchanging vegetables pile atop the reused and repaired baskets; on the same routine that leaves the people content, yet stultified beyond degree.

“Anna would have been as placid as them now, if only she hadn’t incurred the grip of madness!” Abaddon finally found a reason for his consecutive failures...

“This whole kingdom’s prone to madness! These louts, they seize at any chance to be capricious, to be spontaneous and unthinkably bizarre! They are hammered down by stagnation to the point where the only source of thrill left lies in drink and radical, inexplicable actions! Actions that are unleashed when need for excitement is repressed too much! It happened to Anna, and it’ll happen to all of them! ALL OF THEM! My reason and skills never stood a chance with this kingdom of inscrutable maniacs in the making!”

With the doubts of his ability cleared, Abaddon was ready to meet his fate with the Gods, a little less disturbed than before. Just in time, as well, since over in the foreseeable distance, the titanic figures were already looming.

Freyr was the most invigorated, his freckled face flashed a foolhardy grin as he came bolting forth with his giant sword readily held tight. Tyr was the fiercest among them, a bearded glory approaching with resolved, robust steps. Eir was barely able to be seen, shrouded by the massive muscles before her, a sizable pouch hung around her torso, prepared to treat anything in anyone. Hel was close to the healer’s side, with a duly embarrassed face. Finally, Henrik brought up the tail of the imposing cavalcade, rushing to keep up while panicking.

Over by the Demon’s side, things were less climatic... Lena was leaned against the remains of a cabbage stall, trying to cope with the pain through practical methods of breathing, body clenching... and whispering to herself “Kill me...”. The Valkyries were having a bit of fun on their own, particularly, miming the movements of Tyr with flexes and grunts, which seemed more ogre-like than God-like.

“Making quite the spectacle, ye lot!” Brynhildr laughed.

The marching giants faced her with silence.

“...”

“I told him it was excessive...” Hel uttered to Eir, making it loud enough for the brooding God in front to hear.

“It doesn’t hurt to be stringent when it comes to the fiends!” Tyr replied to both with his stentorian voice.

After that, their conversations devolved into dull discussions, and any interest Abaddon had left on them- and on life in general- quickly disappeared. The only path left to take was clear: to die in ultimate honour and patriotism. For a final time, the locusts spew out the tiny pockets of space in animated clusters; their chirps sound out more melancholic than he’d ever heard. They congregated on his neck, and set upon nibbling the skin out of the way. The sting was masked by the Demon’s pride, and his inner humming of an anthem; the memories of home flood his mind, and he was reliving decades each second. All the languages he’s grilled sedulously within, they all melt away, leaving the mother tongue alone to seize the mind. Similarly, all knowledge: academic and experiential, dissipate to let the instincts of a patriot rule. Abaddon decided to take one last breath...but just then, he stopped it all! The bugs stopped nibbling, he finished the anthem, and the self-sacrificial routine ended.

His shaken mind shooed away all those woeful thoughts, as he took more whiffs of the air. He sniffed, he blinked, he sniffed, he squinted, a familiar smell greets the nose, stronger by the minute. His sight darted to the Gods, still solemnly speaking at length. The odour danced around his nostrils, giving cheeky hints of its origin, which Abaddon couldn’t, for the life of him, remember.

A smell of marsh, mud and moss, rank enough to revolt at, yet strangely relieving for the Demon. The strength of the smell rises and rises, until even the Gods caught its presence, and tensed up in place. Their head sprung into action, surveying everything... Abaddon had already saw it, though. Over in the distance, a large shadow dashes across the buildings. It wasn’t long before the screaming began, the peasants fled in a furore of flailing and falling. The crashing ensued, bringing in an endless commotion of broken glass and splintering walls.

To the Demon, it was a whiff of ecstasy! His giggle grew into a guffaw as he witnessed the unfolding chaos, knowing in his giddy heart what was behind it. In the overwhelming excitement, Abaddon remembered what it was that makes a true fiend. He turned to the Gods and Goddesses, with faces twisted with anxiety, and bellowed in his infinite arrogance:

“The day is *far* from over, Asgardians!” He laughed.

They could sense the evil edging closer. The stomps came in inscrutable intervals; every few seconds, the tremors became fiercer. Imaginations ran wild within them, all pictured the pinnacle of monsters in the loud, foreboding scene. But Tyr’s voice soon boomed through the trepidation.

“Freyr! Secure the fiend! Take him back to the dungeon!”

The God did as he was told, gripping Abaddon by the tight rope with ease. As he was readying to dash, Freyr, the God boundlessly tall and brawny... was dwarfed by the shadow that crashed upon the gravel street. The dust was kicked up thick, blinding and choking. As the Gods fanned away the fog of dirt, the terror revealed itself...

“Local to the bogs of the Greek holm of Naxos, it is inexplicable on what conditions its humongous size is owed to. Though tried as the scholars might, these creatures stand indecipherable by the shrewdest minds, leaving some to conclude... that they are simply not a product of *our* Nature...” Abaddon recalled the words of his old lecturer from school.

There, looming before the intrepid Gods and Goddesses... a frog, in all its slimy features; glassy yellow eyes, and slanted pupils of black; skin, luridly green and brown and black.

“They have named it... Megrog. Quite straightforward, really, ‘Mégas’ and ‘Frog’... clever.” Abaddon finished his thought.

A blob travelled up its corpulent neck, and out bursts a deafening ribbit. The frog stood on fours, staring, with a face only capable of patience, at the group of deities. It eyed with particular interest at the puny frame of Freyr beneath him.

“AWAY, AWFUL AMPHIBIAN, AAAARGH!”

Freyr dealt with it the same way he dealt with all problems, he started swinging. In that sliver of time, where Abaddon was freed from the mighty hands of the God, the frog surged into action; the wide mouth gaped to bear the entrance into a boundless void, and out bursts its bulbous tongue, snatching away the fiend’s falling figure.

Freyr brought down his colossal sword, and as if severing the very fabric of space, sliced through the air with spectacular strength... and missed the Demon by a hair’s length. As Abaddon recedes into the dark and dank, his smile reached peak wideness, and he was quite sure he broke a tendon.

*

There is an unexplainable delight in noticing ironies in one’s life, no matter how silly or trivial they are. For instance, the Demon of locusts can relish the present irony of being saved by a giant frog, the natural predators of what he champions.

There are few experiences that rival the one such as being inside a giant frog, for Abaddon, it was doubly so. The moistures around the walls of the mouth are ceaseless, so that one constantly feels like they’re slipping. Abaddon glanced down into the throat, a slope into gloominess and death... his grip on the walls hardened. The saliva glide down each surface like dew from a tree, and bounce in a frenzy with each of the frog’s jolt. It was at this point, where he noticed that the last traces of Mr. Bjornson had vanished from his being. The skin on his fingers decayed away, and out emerged a set of claws. The eyeballs tumble out the loose sockets, and the immovable pupils of redness shone out once more. Wads of hair scatter, and the antennas regrew. His lips dried, rotted, and crumbled, leaving the wonky fangs more horrifying than before.

“Good evening, my Lord duke!”

Abaddon jumped from surprise, his ardent curse echoing throughout the space. The stranger clambered out from the blackness, dexterously clinging from surface to surface, hanging tight off the uvula, and landing himself before the tied-up Demon. As Abaddon studied the figure, he soon noticed the figure’s astounding shortness and slenderness. Through some laborious attempts, he finally freed Abaddon from his restraints, and the latter set about surveying this stranger’s face.

“You... you’re the messenger boy... T-Ta-Tu-Tolman!”

“Yes, your grace! And I’m obliged to ask whether you have accomplished your mission?”

“... I am... making progress.”

“Then, sir, his highness, Lord Belial has informed me to bring you this epistle.”

Abaddon reached for the letter, only for the messenger to pull it away.

“Apologies, your grace, but Lord Belial has specifically asked me to read it for you.”

Abaddon’s face turned dour, as he gestured for the messenger to continue. The sprightly boy proceeded to unravel the paper from his pocket, and in the lightless realm of the Megrog’s mouth, read it aloud in a tone none could find more official or stern:

To Abaddon,
Duke of Sodom,

If this letter does not reach you, then I pray you are in good spirits. If this letter *does* reach you, then I pray for the opposite! I believe you are conscientious enough for there not to be any need for me to expound further my disappointment... yet, as of present I feel such intense contempt that only the outlet of fervent castigation can calm me! Abaddon, you feckless oath! I have long prophesied that your *unduly* arrogance, if let *unaddressed*, will be the *undoing* of this kingdom!

But this is not the motive behind this letter... while you have been flaunting your incompetence for the past week or so, I still deeply venerate your past accomplishments. As such, I am gifting you a chance at prove yourself...

In two days, it will be the eve of Autumn, Midgard will be consumed with their festivities of welcoming the season. The kingdom, the streets, the people, will doubtlessly be filled with activity, that is when we plan to launch our assault. So, two paths lie before you, Abaddon: One, you can bring an adequate virgin woman back to Sheol within the next two days... Two, desert the mission and come back a failure.

Regarding the last choice... listen well, Abaddon, I am currently at the zenith of impatience, if I am roused any more than this, I will soon slip into irrationality. And if that were to happen, this messenger here, Tolman, may suddenly find himself granted Dukedom, and appointed the new Duke of Sodom! While the previous Duke may very well find himself the new messenger!

With high expectations,
Belial,
Son of Baal, Prince of Sheol

The messenger rolled up the letter, and beamed innocently at the petrified Duke.

“...”

“...”

“Would you like me to read it again, my Lord duke?”

*

Freyr had tranced himself into an endless loop of fervid spirals, whirling the giant sword into cyclones of sharpness and violence. Each successful cut of the behemoth sent it into a fit of hysteria; it bellowed out its ominous croaks, and hop to-and-fro, away from the twisting God. The Valkyries sprung into action as well, fearlessly closing the gap between the Frog and them, yet to no avail; Brynhildr’s thrust slides off the side, and Geira’s attempt at mounting the titan was foiled by spry shakes off the slippery skin. Tyr tried to finish things with a swift and fatal blow: he leaps above the buildings, bringing down the sword at the beast’s head as he dove back down. But every time, the dreadful frog just seems to slip past the strikes.

After everyone's got their turns at the beast, its expression darkens into a baleful anger, and the Gods retreated a few steps. Without a moment's hesitation, the Megrog lunges at Freyr and crushed its fearsome palm onto him with the force of an earthquaking landslide. The God was pinned down on his knees, left only with a wavering will to resist. Any instance of dithering, any unfocused strain of muscle, and he would soon suffer the full extent of the fatal blow. So, Freyr dug in his shin, gritted his teeth, and matched the force of this gigantic monster... then it raised its other palm...

At that moment, the only sound that rang in Freyr's ears was his own roar. As the Megrog's feet inches in for the kill, it happened again... the spear saw its third chance to soar with freedom and valour; the spear thrown by none other than Geira. This time, plunging itself deep into the glassy pupil, letting loose not only the brawny God from its palm, but also the deafening shrieks from this overgrown amphibian. The Frog staggers back in its agony, and Freyr collapsed from his exhaustion.

"Twice on the mark, Geira deary! Pure dead brilliant! Aye, I tell ye, ye've got a gift!"
"Oh, stop it, Brynhildr!" the Valkyrie chides, and hides her blushing cheeks.

*

While the battle rages on, the insides of the mighty Megrog were turning more turbulent through time. Each jump brought in a surge of quakes, and the two Demons were restless in the sodden, slimy footing; Abaddon was looking especially discomforted. When came another powerful jostle, Abaddon was thrown upwards and almost cast into the depths of the throat, saved only by the grace of the Messenger boy's quick grip on his wrist.

"Umm, sir, I must warn you to steady yourself extra carefully. If you fall in, there is but one other exit..."
Abaddon shuddered at the thought, but soon composed himself.
"And, your grace, I feel I must confess my alarm at the current situation. The Megrog tires from this prolonged bout with the Gods... he will not hold. Might I make a suggestion, your grace?"
"What is it?!"
"We could retreat... back to Sheol."
"..."
"..."
"Cheeky tyke... at least make an effort to be less obvious!"

The shouts outside were growing more belligerent, and the jostles more erratic. In the face of ordeals and imminent disaster; the mind races, and reason churns out possible cures left and right. Ideas of fanciful proportions enter into Abaddon, and it was up to him to pick and choose as he likes.

"Right, boy, can you command this beast?"
"Yes, your grace."
"Tell it to stop attacking the Gods, instead, use its tongue to snatch in as many bystanders as possible!"

The reluctant messenger did as he was told, letting the inscrutable language of the animal echo around the chambers of its mouth.

*

"Mum, look! It's the Gods! I can see Mr. Tyr, Mr. Freyr and Miss Brynhildr there! They're fighting that massive frog! I'll get a closer look!"
"Oskar, NO, get back here! You naughty, little monster!"

“Relax, mum, the Gods are here! What could go wrong?”

“I mean it, Oskar! You came back here this inst-”

“Mum?”

The potatoes in the basket scatter out into the gravel, and Oskar stopped in his tracks. The woman vanished from beside her errant son, snatched away from the boy, in both body and life, by the strand of the baleful behemoth’s tongue. He was left to cherish the final sight of her blue eyes, sinking into the lightless insides of the frog, eyes that were bearing the same sense of reproach and reprimand that was in her last words.

“M-mum?”

*

“Oi, Mr. Laurent! Y’aright?”

“Oh, *Oui Oui, Monsieur* Ludwig! It iz alright for you az well?”

“Aye, I’m fine!”

The two men gawked at the commotion in front: Tyr had just landed another blow with his sword, unleashing the choir of anguished croaks within the Megrog.

“Lookit that... batty, innit? The frog, I mean...”

“Yez, it is cauzing me much worry!”

“Don’t you French eat frogs? Perhaps you can try giving it a nibble, scare it off, heh!”

“Zat iz ridiculous!” Laurent almost bolted up in repulse, before continuing: “It iz much too big for me!” He finished with a laugh.

Then the two men devolved into hearty giggles, before being interrupted by a raspy voice at their side:

“Ah, yer people are disgustin’! Go home ta ye slug eatin’ country, French bastard!”. The haggard man bawled.

“Alright, back off, Andersson!”

“Don’t get yer knickers knotted, Ludwig! I don’t think that Frenchie can barely understand me, can ye, mate?!”

Laurent avoided the gaze of the perspiring man before him, swallowing the revolt from his rank breath. The odious man inches closer, and closer... but was suddenly pulled away into the distance. The two goggled at the scene before them: Andersson and his corpulent stature, snatched away in a second by a swift enigma. Before he could break out from his stupor, Andersson had been consumed by the frog, and descending into a situation the two men could only pray was friendly.

“*Mon Dieu...*”

*

“Damn!” the young Valkyrie cursed at herself.

Geira had dove for them desperately, but was bested twice by the creature’s liteness. The brisk glimpses of their faces, warping from blankness to fear, etched themselves into her, fueling consternation of all kind. Blood boils with frustration, and one grips their weapon balefully rather than valorously; precision is forgone for ungainly might. Geira hardens her will for a fervour guided assault, intent to destroy both parties. She rushes in, and was pulled abruptly back by Tyr’s hold on her shoulder. The God’s stolid countenance was all the Valkyrie needed for an explanation, and she banished her overflowing emotions.

“Aye, nae-borra, Geira. We’ll just give da bastard a clean and muckle slice, and the civilians come oot just like dat, albeit a bit mingin!”

“WONDERFULLY WORDED, WOMAN!”

The crowd jumped at the familiar voice booming out at them. They traced it behind the frog, which too was expressing the same astonishment with its boundlessly wide eyes and endlessly gaping mouth. Freyr, in his glistening armour of silver, and locks of ginger hair drenched in sweat, was erecting with the pride of a champion Olympian. No one had seen him surreptitiously- and truthfully a bit pitifully- crawling behind the Megrog.

His fury spiked with each step, until the need to reclaim dignity overpowered the need to recoil in pain and fatigue. Freyr had already begun spinning; the sword swirled and sliced in torrential turns, more deadly by the second. He spared no moment for the Megrog to meditate, barely after its realisation... the strike connected... and the giant frog’s back was split open. The streets were treated to a last poignant squeal, and the sprouting blood showered the area with redness.

*

“NOOOO!” The messenger boy was in hysterics.

Abaddon could tell the gist of what happened outside, a despondent sound the beast uttered with its last breath.

“Even the mountainous Megrog, felled by the hands of the Gods, yet another entity suffering the divine’s callous crushing, such a pity, really...”. Abaddon pondered deeply as he finished dabbing the last scrap of skin on his new face.

It was indeed a pitiful scene: The locusts squirmed more irrepressibly than before, individually cringing at being inside a predator; the skinless man withered away, twitching against the insect’s ferocious bites; the woman’s scream seeped out in scruples through her throat stuffed with the writhing critters, choked and coughed out in spurts; the sobbing messenger boy, whispering his farewell to an amphibian friend.

“Right, boy, is the frog still lucid?”

“He lingers on the thin thread between life and ultimate cessation...” came the lugubrious response.

“Command it to use its tongue to pelt us far away from here, all of us!”

“Have you no mercy, my Lord Duke? You ask such a barbarous entreaty for the dying!”

“Unless you wish for his death to be in vain, you will let him die serving his kingdom!”

Defeated, the boy broke out in tears, as he gave out the order. Abaddon was almost impressed with the tenacity of this frog. Without hesitation, the supple tongue coiled around the four bodies inside, fastening them solidly into one. The surface rustled as the Megrog stood back up, quivering in anguish; its face tilt upwards with a sense of sanctity... and it spat them out!

The four spun around the sky, hanging only by the tongue of the terminal frog. It spun them around, garnering steady momentum, before launching them into the distance. The four bodies scatter out into the kingdom, stunning the sky-watchers of the evening.

Once the thought struck the Gods, they were galvanized into action. Tyr bellowed the command, and began his hectic pursuit, with the Valkyries tailing behind. Freyr huffed out rapid breaths, and knelt down in exhaustion, surrendering his person to the healer nearby. Hel ushered the crowd along, answering the pleas and awes with a patient smile.

And Henrik sat beside his wounded partner, doing whatever he can to cheer up his partner. Some attempts were fine, and got as jubilant of a smile as a maimed woman can muster. And some attempts were...

“What do you do when you’ve dropped something down the Baltic sea?”

“Ah, piss off!”

“Heh, no, you... Scan-the-navy-a.”

“...”

“You Scandinavia, Lena...”

“...”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you decide on a pun about Scandinavia?”

“What do you mean why? Clearly, we’re in Scandinavia, Lena!”

“I obviously know! But, it’s such a queer thing to allude to... you could have made a pun about my broken leg, or the monstrous bug I’d just fought... but you chose ‘Scandinavia’. It’s as if you were just made aware, the previous moment in which you made your little quip, that we *are* in fact in Scandinavia, a thought process that for us Scandinavians should be so unamusingly obvious so as to be pointless!”

“You mean you don’t find it funny?”

“It’s more confounding than funny, I’d say... you really are an odd one, Henrik...”

“Well, I suppose someone else would appreciate the joke, the non-Scandinavians!”

“You mean the non-Scandinavians who might not currently be aware that they *are* in Scandinavia, and somehow need a reminder, and so would find the sudden realisation put forth by your pun to be *amusing*?”

“Look, Lena, just drop it, alright?! How’s the leg?”

She gave her knees a quick rub, delighting in the diminishing pains.

“Less bothersome now, thanks to that tirade!”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it... how about another joke? Why did the Viking boy steal an apple from the market?”

“...”

“He couldn’t *a-fford* it!”

“YOU GIT! IT’S THE SAME THING AGAIN! WHY WOULD YOU-”

*

Tuesday

Night

Living in the Kingdom of Midgard meant getting yourself inured to the absurd, that includes not batting an eye to the strange, and worrying constantly about the normal. There is a remark among the locals for the migrants and foreigners: ‘You’ve only ever assimilated here once you can be surprised at the fact that you’ve made it to bed without hearing someone yell the whole day.’.

“You’re exaggerating! I refuse to believe the illustrious kingdom of the Aesir can be so loud and barbarous!” The unknowing Roman visitor scoffed at the bartender.

“Better believe it, mate! Man’s speaking the truth.” Came the eager reply from one of the regulars.

“Hah! I believe you are doing to me what they say *‘taking the piss’*! I might have just arrived, but things have only been splendidly peaceful!”

“COME! COWARDLY CACODEMONS! SHUDDER AT SUPERIORITY’S SHINE!”

The Roman jolted from his seat, much to the satisfaction of the regulars. Perhaps he’ll start listening to the locals more after all.

While the matter with the Megrog has all but passed, the Gods involved were not about to even entertain the suggestion of rest. Distinctly, they each knew the repulse they’d feel at having the fiends roam the sun set kingdom, so, refusing to descend from the previous battle’s high, they sally forth their search with the same energy. But there can only be so much intensity involved in head-turning and speed-walking, leaving them with quite an excess of vigour. Freyr placed it all into his churlish bellow, easily the peak in menace, though frankly questionable in inconspicuousness.

Tyr’s hunt for the Demons proved equally unfruitful and increasingly irksome; the Valkyries’ faces were practically red with sweat and languor; Henrik lost count of the times he’d yawned, yet walked on with legs on the brink of snapping. However, let us not forget that chaos and tumult does not exist only in the burden of war and frays. Chaos takes forms in both the minute and monumental...

Some distance away from the hotblooded fight and battle cries, a certain young Goddess’ home, cozy and well-lit, was facing their own set of entropies: the kitchen was out of wheat.

Mimir, with all the consternation of the world, eyed his empty sack of wheat as if eyeing the frame of incalculable cosmic horrors. His mind in denial, he gave the sack a hearty shake; his face grew more lugubrious, as the few bits of gold grain tumble out and disappear onto the table.

“Bother! We’re out of wheat!” He tossed the sack aside.

“Oh, horror! How *will* I go on without another bowl of porridge? *Unfairly* deprived of tastelessness and grainy muck!” Urd began pantomiming on her seat.

“Don’t get smart, young lady!”

“I thought you could see the future, father, how come you’ve missed this?”

“Ha hah, that’s not how seeing the future works, my dear!”

“Oh, *do* elaborate!”

Mimir looked up from the hearth at his gleamy-eyed daughter. The fire whispers out the small destruction of the logs, and with that same solemnity in polymaths which Urd adores so much, he began:

“Suppose you’ve chosen not to go out yesterday... you wouldn’t be here sniffing out your nose, and I’d never would have made you my expertly prepared porridge... and the wheat wouldn’t have run out. Suppose you’ve a hankering for buns yesterday... I’d have notice the diminishing wheat supply and went to the market. Suppose

you've disobeyed me and sneaked out despite being sick... well you most likely wouldn't be here to ask the question. Now, Urd... suppose you were born amongst the Mayans, the Greeks, the Shinto pantheon? Suppose you had chosen to go with your sisters? Suppose your mother and I never met? Most importantly... suppose you were a mortal? You might say that is an impossibility, because you are already here, but to know time, Urd, is to observe both possibility and impossibility. And when you're faced with them all, the quantity of wheat left in your kitchen gets the least of your attention."

"But is there no constancy in the sentient? Are all lives a subject to manipulation by numerals and laws? To emerge and be buried in eventuality?" Here, Urd felt her throat burn, shattering the sentences that came out, but she finished it nonetheless. "Father... do you see a future where you could..."

Before she could finish, Mimir pulls the girl into a warm embrace. His body felt light and sublime, at that moment, he felt his soul imbued with a handful of miracles, and he let out his soothing voice for his daughter.

"Urd... I said that the quantity of wheat gets the least of your attention... but that doesn't mean you can't choose to pay attention to them. The blessing of this power, is that those small moments will delight you far more than you can imagine. Moments such as now. Remember that, Urd."

He wiped away the tears from her cheek, before continuing:

"Besides, you won't be facing it alone. You will have your sisters, so that you may share the pain... and the pleasure. Most of all, you'll have the best person to help guide you to appreciate those precious moments of the present."

"Who?"

Mimir shot her a playful smile, before turning to the open window, where the resonant footsteps were briskly approaching. She recognized them instantly, pitter-patters full of restless alacrity, belonging to the boy who never seems to think ahead, and will never wish to see the future.

"Hullo! Urd, are you feeling better?"

"Cirius?! What are *you* doing here, it must be freezing outside!"

"It *is*! I was on my way home, but you were close by!"

"Well, what have you been *doing*?!"

"Oh... popped by the West side of the kingdom, saw a bunch of stalls, and a great big stage! It was wicked! There was a table that stretched all across the farmlands."

"Ah, I suppose they're preparations for the Mabon festival. Happens every Autumn eve!" Mimir chimed in.

"Oh, that's ever so soon. We simply must go!"

"Not before you've squashed this cold of yours, young lady!"

"Speaking of cold..." The boy started to chatter.

"Oh, for goodness sake, come in, Cirius!"

"Heavens, where *are* my decency?"

Mimir rushed to the door. And for that blissful moment, all he thought about was what he ought to make for dinner, now that he'd had a guest.

"Do come on in, my boy! We'll get you nice and warmed up with a spot of tea."

“Tea? I had a sip of that stuff from Miss Hel yesterday... don’t see the appeal.” He bowed his gratitude, before nestling himself before the fireplace.

“Ho ho, no one declares passionate amore to tea, my boy! It’s simply something to get your mouth wet that’s not water nor liquor!”

Mimir shuts the door, and went about boiling the pot.

*

Thus, with all the hubbub of the day depleted, the sky discolours itself, and the night comes for its daily sojourn. Nighttime is a very special phenomenon, its effect upon the world isn’t merely physical, like the shifting of weather and colours or the rise of nocturnal beasts, but also very much metaphysical. Nighttime stirs the hearts of men without their knowledge, it makes them form a set of rigid boundaries that only exists in the night. It’s all well and good if you visit a good friend’s door for tea in the morning, but do so at night... and you might find yourself shunned for a while thereafter. At night, a knock on the door better be urgent, and the event better be catastrophic; a shout better be from bloody murder; rendezvous for whatever secrets or plots better be quiet.

When you know you are about to violate the unspoken regulations of the night, it makes your feelings all the more guilty and shameful, such as how Bayani was feeling at the moment...

Shango and Bayani’s journey to Midgard was as thrilling as all journeys on foot can be. A cycle of aching limbs and thirsty throats. The journey took longer than expected, partly due to their different builds: when Bayani groaned for rest, Shango was raring to move on; When Shango was tired, Bayani had just settled into a comfortable pace. Of course, another reason was because when one of them was resting, the other would spend the entire time berating them and making a show of how much strength they still had by cavorting and stretching.

So, after much more stoppages than needed, the two Gods arrived at the towering gates of the kingdom, where they could only admire as much as the wispy lights from the lamps would show.

“Oh, I do hope we aren’t being a bother... perhaps we should have camped the night out.”

“You needn’t worry so, sis. I told Thor we would arrive by today! Now let me just crackle out a few notices!”

Shango proceeded to fish out his lightning-summoning drums, before being seized by the shoulders.

“No need, I think someone’s coming!”

They fixed their eyes on the ball of light, some distance away. The ball, blindingly bright with a blend of white and gold, approaches solemnly. The Gods stood there watching, their souls transfixed solely on the source of scintillation. They saw it get larger and larger, they could almost make out the bearer behind it, a shadow of a man, exalted and mesmerizing. The shadow stepped forward once more... before turning, and wandered off to the side, diagonally out of sight.

Bayani’s face dropped, turning to her brother, she grumbled out:

“Ugh, fine, get out your bloody drums!”

“Are you two the guests from the Oyo empire?”

They jumped, and turned, and stammered.

The dulcet tones came from amidst a singular trio, each section distinctly eye-catching. Gawk at the weirdness, or gawk at the contrast, indeed, one simply must gawk...

The magnificent figure, more gut than man, nestled himself between the other two. His blue eyes gleamed out from the scruffy mass of red hair, it makes you anticipate his actions, seemingly bound to be inscrutable and thunderous. Next, beside all that ruggedness stood a lady more hair than woman. Her golden locks travel ceaselessly downwards, insatiably blanketing all, hiding her hands, shoes, and the third little person who completes the crew. Emerging from the boundlessly blonde space was the mite frame of a girl, whose sheer being completes the essence of the bizarre family.

“Hiya! Long and arduous journey, I suspect?” said the hair-haunted Goddess.

The travelers were at a loss of words, one couldn’t stop staring, and the other couldn’t stop hyperventilating. Bayani cleansed herself with a cough, and took her brother out the stupor with a surreptitious pinch on the back.

“YES! Ahem, yes... you must be Lord Thor, and Lady Sif! We’ve heard tremendous tales!”

“Oh, no need to be so *formal*... unless it’s a formal affair, in which case, you be as formal as you like!”

The tress ridden Goddess seized Bayani’s hand, clasping it with way more strength than she could’ve imagined. As Sif’s inched closer to the pair, her frame finally protruded from the mass of golden locks. That’s when Bayani noticed she was pregnant. While the two women exchanged pleasantries, Shango was left to confront the burly God of Thunder alone. The night was not doing Thor’s expression any favours, the foreboding redness, basked in a layer of darkness, it was enough to make ten soldiers shudder...

Shango extended his hand. And was pulled into a hug. At that instant, every tension just seemed to scatter, as Thor’s guffaw echo out into the sky. Stifled smiles surfaced; clenched muscles loosened, and all those official terms and titles were trivialized.

“I’d never guess you were so tactile!” Shango muttered through the crushing hold.

“Nae a lo’ o’ chances ta meet a fellow God of Thunder, d’ye ken?”

“Indeed... I *ken*... fascinating!”

“What a beautiful name! Bayani! Don’t you think so too, Thrud?”

“Yes...very beautiful!” The girl beamed.

Bayani bit her lips, and fought back the urge to cry tears of joy. At that moment, she thought about whether making friends was ever this easy. All the pleasantries continued in the walk toward the palace, back and forth conversations about weathers, hometowns, jobs, and laughing at things you normally don’t find funny. Such, is the droll life of the adult. The young Thrud can only look on with befuddlement, innocent to the fact that very soon she will behave like so.

Soon, the palace became less and less distant to the two visitors. Shapes unfolded out from the dark, fine edges of the castle turning and twisting in immaculate angles, surfaces only fit for divine feet. And all the grandness was masked in shadows, drawing the gaze to the scattered lights around the windows, flickering in spontaneity. Eventually, passing the garden, the guards, and the gate, the crew had finally arrived. Standing below the massive majesty, Shango was silent, with a grin that encompasses so much hanging off his face; Bayani gave out constant sighs, with a heart racing like there’s no tomorrow.

While the two were still being overwhelmed, Thor leaned to his family and whispered:

“Well, dat’s me, luvs! I’ll leave da rest tae ye.”

“You’re leaving, daddy?” Thrud poked her head out of her mother’s mass of hair.
“Aye, pet. Yer mum’s da one’s oo’s good at these foreign business, nae... she calls it *diplomacy*.”
Sif gave out a hearty giggle.
“Leave it to me, love.”

The rugged God leaned down for a kiss, and waltz away out of sight, leaving behind a set of earthquaking steps. As soon as she was done waving, Sif gathered herself, and advanced to the two visitors before her. A voluble clap from the Goddess woke the two from their trance, and seeing Sif’s sober smile, they realised, that the night was just beginning...

“And over here is the dining hall! Large enough to fit the entire pantheon, though in recent times the opportunity to dine together has been scarce. Now, if you’re really astute in architecture, you’d have already observed that all the frames, tables and chairs of this castle are furnished with wood from native trees! This is, in fact, a deliberate choice by the Allfather, as he reasons: ‘If we can’t even take pride in our lands, what does it say about our kingdom?’... sorry, what? You’re saying that door’s made of African wood? Oh, that! Yes, it was there when we got here, and it was a bother to change... well, the Allfather *also* reasons: ‘If we can’t even accommodate the diverse cultures of the world, what does it say about our kingdom?’.”

They went from room to room, and the intriguing details and backgrounds never stopped coming. Bayani and Shango didn’t dare intervene her much, but just nodded along. After some time, Thrud, bored by the tour, decided to leave quietly in the middle of her mother’s professions. Not forgetting her manners, she waved goodbye to the visitors and scuttled off, much to the envy of Shango and Bayani.

Following the nature of all house tours, the hosts overestimate the remarkability of their property, and the guests underestimate the slowness of time. They wandered through the garden, with Sif naming the flowers; they entered the library, and was dismissed by Bragi who was working on a new poem; they descended into the cellars, where the Goddesses’ narrations echoed deep and sonorous. Bayani kept track of the time by watching the same few clocks they passed by around the castle. It was approaching nearly an hour...

“At last, perhaps the most exalted of areas in this castle... the ballroom! It is where the height of intellectual exchange takes place, in our salons we regularly organise. Men and women, brightest in their fields, have discourses on science, morality and history!”

She shunts open the magnificent pearl doors, and the two guests braced themselves.

“PASS A PISSING PINT, VALKYRIE!”
“Oh, get it yourself, Freyr!”

In the illustrious ballroom, piled three bodies atop one another, none other than Geira, Brynhildr, and Freyr. Geira clasped onto a glass, dripping with the remnants of mead, tapped from the nearby keg Brynhildr had nicked off the kitchen. After hours of unfruitful patrolling, they had practically crawled their fatigued bodies back, and searched for the first place to have a proper rest. Now, all three lied panting on the cushions of the ballroom’s sofa: Geira sprawled upon the middle, Brynhildr’s head buried on the former’s lap, and Freyr with half his body hanging down the side. They were drenched in sweat and dragging muck from their boots onto the floor. And when one shouted, the rest followed, soon no one can distinguish whether it was a drunk conversation, or a genuine row.

Furtively, Brynhildr pried the glass out of Geira’s hand, ready for another round from the keg, but to her horror, found nothing more than a droplet.

“Pish! We’re oot a’ mead!”

“YOU’RE JOKING! I HAVEN’T EVEN GOTTEN A SIP!”

“Well, someone’s got to go fill it up!”

“It’s nae gon tae be me, I’d just made meself comfortable!”

And the shouting began once more, until Brynhildr hatched a brilliant idea.

“Aye, I know! Ye lads want tae have a wee contest? Who smells da most minging of us? I’ll start! ‘Ere, give me oxter a wee whiff!”

That was when Sif shut the door, slammed it, actually. She turned to the two wide-eyed guests with a petrified grin, hiding the consternation and ire behind the gritted teeth. Just like that, the tour had come to an end, and whereas in a normal house tour, where people come out feeling indifferent, in this one, everyone came out mortified. The trio sat themselves down in the grand hall, not sure of what to say.

“So, you’d like an audience with the Allfather, I presume?” Sif was the first to break the silence.

“YES!” Bayani spouted almost too eagerly. Clearing her throat, she went on. “Yes, Lady Sif, and it is a matter of considerable magnitude.”

“I see... I suppose we can only pray he returns speedily.”

It was back to silence.

“... ”

“... ”

“... ”

“This has been a disaster, hasn’t it...” Sif started again.

“Not at all, Lady Sif!” Bayani replied.

“Oh, it’s fine, I admit it! It’s been a while since we’ve had guests, in lieu of *that* incident. So, when I was informed of your visit, I was frantic! Rehearsed a tour, made up all that dross, all in an attempt to save what little face Asgard still has. Over all these turbulent years, and this is what we have to show for now, narrow halls, and cramped walls! Nothing here compares to Valhalla! Miserable, indeed...”

Sif was on her feet, animated and half-angry. Bayani caught a glimpse of her glassy eyes, lamenting the loss of dearness. They both had a lingering idea of what it was, and began sharing the grief. Shango recalled vividly the first and last moments of the tragedy:

The Yoruba God of Knowledge and Divination, Orunmila, had screamed in his chambers at the crack of dawn. As if bodied by the wraith of madness, he lunged at the people and bellowed the imminence of a calamity. The news aroused everyone, and for a few nights, none slept with any semblance of peace. The disquietude worsened when we received word that our brethren in the Lobi tribe experienced something similar. Their divinator, Wathil, began his onslaught of feral acts at the same fateful time. Soon, the Egyptians confessed... then the Babylonians... the Olympians. All their prophets and prophetess rose on the same day, at the same instance, in hysteria.

We dwelled in the foreboding enigma for some time, with Orunmila needing to be restrained and kept watch on for hours. Then, it was over... after weeks of endless screaming and raving, he quieted down and said, with a stern voice: “An omen, is now history, and the world lives with one more tragedy.”

“The Asgardian empire is fell, crushed under the gut of Leviathan. The pantheon lives on in pitiful remnants among the mortals. The Demons claims their first victory, in our aeon long conflict.”

Shango looks up at the Goddess, who’s reliving that distant tragedy. He wasn’t sensitive enough to do anything but offer silent sympathy. He was, however, sensible enough to nudge Bayani on the shoulder. Bayani returned the nudge with a glare, and he glare back. From the ensuing exchanges of expressions, the siblings entered a heated mental debate.

“Say something, sis!”

“Why do *I* have to?”

“It just *has* to be you!”

“Why?!”

“Because you replied!”

“What?”

“Up until this point, the conversation has been a *dialogue*, and the partakers in it have been *you* and Lady Sif. *You* were the one who consoled her first, *you* were the one who placed yourself into this position. Now, going by principle, *you* must be the one who replies. For me to suddenly enter here would be dissonance, it would cease to be a *di*-alogue! The sociality of it all would crumble!”

“*That* is just pure rubbish!”

Before the siblings can finish their discussion on the intricate etiquettes of social exchanges, Sif had turned back to face them.

“Oh, what am I doing being all sentimental, especially to you guests?” She laughed at herself.

The Goddess, reclaiming her dignity, advanced to the siblings and clasped their hands in hers. Any traces of woe banished, replaced by a coat of fervid joy.

“The fact is, I’m honoured to serve you two, Bayani and Shango! Whether you’ve come here for occasions of mirth or misfortune, know that you’ll have a home and a friend!”

Affected by the contagious jubilance, the two returned with a smile. At that moment, Shango shot his sister a furtive expression from the side. Upon seeing it, the words rang clearly in her mind. Shango was saying:

“Finish. The. Dialogue.”

So, she breathed, and got the words ready.

“So will you, Lady Sif. The Oyo empire will always welcome you!” Bayani declared, putting her heart behind it.

Amidst the scene of deepening camaraderie and pleasantry, Odin had finally decided to show up. As he marched into the hall, the clocks struck midnight. With the moon risen to its height, men ambling away from taverns, and burglars getting up for work, a long day had officially settled.

Among the rows of houses in town, one can almost hear the relieved voices of people crawling into their beds. In one particular home, an old man kissed her daughter goodnight, and laid out a spare mattress for a certain blond boy. In the palace itself, many Gods and Goddesses were turning in for the night. Though for Geira, Brynhildr and Freyr, there was still some debauchery to be done.

For Shango and Bayani, however, rest will have to wait...

Three days before Autumn

Wednesday

Midnight

They'd been running and cowering all night, still drenched in sticky sludges of saliva from the mouth of the Megrog. The two Demons remained alert, dodging the watchful guards, Gods and Goddesses out for fury. The element of the night only seemed to stir their hearts into thrills, and with each passing second of not getting caught, the more ecstatic and confident they were getting. Now, midnight comes, and the Gods have all but given up, leaving the Demons open to do all their malicious fancies.

After some more creeping and scampering, Abaddon and Tolman eventually arrived at the farmlands. Just to be a little extra evil, they cut across the fields of crops, trampling over innocent patches of cabbages. Once shielded by the cover of buildings, the two could finally breath, and calm down from the hustling.

"What'd you reckon we do now, sir?" Tolman murmured out through the wheezing.
"What else CAN we do? We lie low until daybreak, and plot in the meantime!"

Abaddon was rustling with a set of rusty locks on a barn door; he was tugging at its chains with all his might, yet it doesn't seem to give in. With each failure, frustration grew, and grunts followed. Tolman watched anxiously on the side while the duke struggled, but after a minute of waiting, he finally intervened. With an intense jerk, the messenger snapped the chains apart, sending bits of metal flying. Abaddon sneered as he pushed apart the barn doors, and entered with a pride definitely uninjured.

Inside, they idled away the hours, mostly sitting, sighing and coughing, with no company other than each other... and half a dozen cows. Tolman, seeing the duke huddled up in a pensive stupor, decided to leave him alone. He spent most of the time studying the sleeping bovines: squatting down to their lying bodies and poking them in various places. Talks between them was few and far between, with topics eventually fizzled out by the likes of "Hmm" and "Uh-huh," and "Mmh.". But as time passed, as the two get inured into the atmosphere of the shabby room, the talks seem to flourish.

"May I ask you something, my grace?" Tolman began, still playing with the tail of one of the cows.
"If you must."

"Why go through all the trouble? Here, you are, the great duke of Sodom, furtively hiding in some decrepit barn of some mortal humans. I mean, surely, you've missed Sheol? Why not just return?"

"You really *are* craving for my position, aren't you?"

"Oh, sir... surely the prince is in jest about that! You might get a thorough rebuking, but stripping away your dukedom for failing one mission?!"

"Yes, I suppose you're right... *or* you're deliberately coaxing me into thinking so!"

"I'm serious, lord duke!" Tolman's indignant voice raised.

Abaddon shuffled around the bundles of hay, adjusting his seat so he his elbow had something to lean on. Once he found the sweet spot, he continued.

"But as to your question... why do I go so far indeed... how old are you, Tolman?"

"Twenty."

"Then you are not able to appreciate what it meant... do you understand the emotions of the kingdom, when Leviathan crashed onto Asgardian land, Tolman? How the event shook the world, and how one man transformed the quality of being a 'Demon'?"

“I’ve read about it in the schoolbooks, sir. I mean, as far as historical implications go... the general discussions say-”

“No, no, no, no! See, this is precisely the case. You see the event in theories, when it was very much about a transcendental moment! When Leviathan crashed, we, as Demons, were not thinking about futures or pasts, of causes and effects. The kingdom was simply... reverential, at that moment. We revelled at being Demons, with Belial at the front of it all, as Asgard was destroyed. Now, here we are... the pantheon shredded down to size a handful small. And through the sacrifices we’ve made, futures we’ve blighted, *our* generation only has one thing in mind: to see it done, to finish this war one way or the other, either from the death of our legacy, or from the death of the Gods. And we very much prefer the latter... that, is why we go so far, Tolman.”

*

Once Odin had made himself comfortable on the cushions, and all the mandatory mentions of names and titles done, the two Yoruba Gods finally stated their business. The room became solemn and still, disturbed only by the frequent flickers of candles. The Asgardians were on the left, and the Yoruba Gods on the right. Sif observed the two parties at the side, heart beating with trepidation.

Bayani started to explain, sparring no details as she lists off one harrowing warning after another for the Allfather. Forewarnings of a looming bedlam, championed by archaic evils, done through unspeakable powers.

“Are you familiar with the ancient Demons, Lord Odin?”

“They walked the earth aeons ago. Many were cleansed by Heaven, and now only few remain, bounded to Hell.”

“Not *all* of them...”

‘Like many backstories to tragedies, it started with a set of ghastly events, curated by ghastly people. Things tumble out of control, and soon we are witnessing the making of history... and sooner after *that*, we are drawing parallels of the making of history to history. These types of people, with these types of ideas, with these types of actions... This, is why history is so boring. Is it even worth the trouble to know the specificities anymore? Then again, the likes of science, mathematics and philosophy also boil down to the specifics, don’t they? So, is anything worth knowing in the first place?’

Such were the thoughts going through Sif’s head, as she stood by and listened to the Yoruba God’s long explanations.

“Shimush haunts the Yoruba every century...”

“However, for the past month, we’ve noticed some irregularities...”

“As we interrogated the fiends of Ajogun, we discovered a contract had been made! And I believe you understand how worrying Demonic contracts may be...”

“After some investigation, we traced down the parties involved in the pact. It was made between Iku of Ajogun and... Belial of Sheol.”

Odin stirred in his seat, still sombre in expression. When he talked, a sonorous voice fills the room, making it even more oppressive with solemnness.

“So, you believe Sheol may use the ancient Demon against us?” The grandiose figure stood up, and seem to allure all eyes on himself.

“Well, I suppose that solves the mystery of who they plan to summon... tell me, Lady Bayani, what does it take to wake this ancient Demon?”

“Typically, any virgin woman... but the Ajogun are vile, and resort to using infants and children.”

Sif's hands tightened on her belly as she swallowed her disgust.

“And now we have the story behind Abaddon's infiltration...” Odin then turned to the two guests. “I appreciate you coming all this way just to relay the news. We'll see to it that you're exaltedly received in your stay here, be it for days or weeks.”

The Yoruba Gods shrugged at each other. And after another set of rapid mental altercations, Bayani finally clarified:

“Actually, Lord Odin, we were sent to help subjugate Shimush...”

Before Bayani could finish, she was interrupted by a clamorous stomp of the foot. Every shred of gregariousness and goodwill dissipated within the room. The two Yoruba Gods tensed up for that instance, seized by the intense aura of hostility, currently emanating from beneath the horned helmet of the Allfather. Just an instant of negativity, not enough to traumatise, not enough to sully impressions, but just enough to inform on the delicate boundaries between parties. Bayani searched the room for Sif, only to find her distantly avoiding her gaze.

“*Help*, you say? I can assure you that our forces will be quite sufficient in subjugating this threat ourselves...”

Bayani hesitated to speak.

“W-we're... under Olorun's orders... n-not to return until Shimush is dealt with...”

“Then stay as long as you like. But you shan't interfere with *our* war.”

“Lord Odin, please! With all due respect—”

“We Fight Our Own Battles, Lady Bayani...”

“You'll Need It!”

Shango stated stern and succinct, stunning both the Allfather and his sister.

“What did you say?”

“I said you'll need it, Lord Odin... Asgard's never had history of alliances, you might not have ever needed any against the likes of Belial or Belphegor. But you **WILL** need it with Shimush, lest you wish to experience another destruction of a kingdom.”

Everyone convulsed at the final sentence. Bayani's sockets couldn't stretch wider; Sif felt her lips bleed a little from her bite. And Odin... merely sat back down the chair, no sign of outrage or offence. When he did say something, he had already lost all the zest from before.

“Is he... truly that powerful?”

The pair's nods were poignant, then came a series of winces, sighs and clicking of the tongue from the Allfather. The Yoruba Gods could tell they were never getting a verbal affirmation. So, Shango extended his hand out, to seal the outcome.

“Please, Lord Odin, we want the best for Asgard as well.”

Odin acquiesced. As they locked hands, Shango could feel how burly his hands were, all the scars and callouses accumulated on this aged hand. And despite the reluctance and turmoil of the spirit, the experienced pair of hands always know how to behave. They shook hands, with firmness even a tempest cannot break.

*

The barn returned to being quiet for a while, mostly because Tolman had learnt to shut up in order to avoid any further lecture. Abaddon, too, retreated into the solitude of his mind, to think over plans and lament over mistakes. Before long, what started as a genuine attempt at logical analysis became another source for rambling and complaining.

“Suppose you just go up to a woman and ask them whether they’re a virgin, that wouldn’t work! You’d be left without answers as she bolts off in affright. Damn these mortals and their dogmas and stigmas! In fact, damn this whole world for its convoluted social normativity! Everyone’s so sensitive, now! They shrivel up in discomfort at any slight taboos, ‘*Never mind it’s sheathed, just get that sword away from my baby!*’. Alright, Lamia, no need to yell!”

In the midst of Abaddon’s mental moaning, he was interrupted by a set of muffled noises from outside. The two Demons froze and listened. Their twitching ears took in the unfolding scene: boots tramping on gravels, jingles from loose bracelets or necklaces. And two voices, livid and deferent. One echoes raucously through the gaps of the walls, the other whimpers in response. Tolman glued his head to the barn doors, desperate for more details. As the messenger boy pried into the conversation outside, giddy and smiling, he signalled for the duke to join. A request which was scornfully dismissed by Abaddon with a few waves. Incidentally, a locust had just crawled out from the barn through a little hole, and was now basking in the moonlight, beneath two giant figures.

The Demons were listening in on a conflict, and like any conflict since antiquity, it was between a man... and a woman.

“I demand to know, Cecilia! Why were you at the confessionals?!”

“And what makes you so insistent that I was?”

“Sarah told me all about it! Now state what you were doing, and what you were saying to the vicar!”

“I fail to see why that is any of your business!”

“*Not* my business?! Cecilia, if the memory escapes you, I will duly remind it that we are to be married in a week!”

“So what, Felix?”

“So, any of your business is just as well as mine! Any glory you have, any sins you’ve committed! Have you any idea what scandals can do to me, Cecilia? I’m in a precarious position as is! Tell me what you confessed, and let me sort it out this instant!”

“The deed is passed ages ago, Felix, I promise it will have no bearing on you or me anymore!”

“Then all the more reason to tell me! One’s history never stops mattering in politics, Cecilia!”

“*Politics, politics, politics!* Is that all you talk about? I have things I hold *sacred* too!”

“And I’m telling you that what is ‘*sacred*’, goes away in marriage! We exist in tandem, now, Cecilia. TELL ME! What did you confess?!”

“I will NOT tell you, Felix! Perhaps in time, but certainly not *now*, seeing as how you are, it will only bring devastation!”

“Dear Lord... then you are hiding a grave sin, indeed! Don’t tell me... you’ve been unfaithful!”

“HOW DARE YOU! Do my YEARS of devotion to the church and faith do nothing to prove my character?! I’ve saved myself for you, done everything a devout ought to... and you impugn me?!”

The locusts’ antenna perked up. Felix and Cecilia’s argument was momentarily interrupted by an audibly triumphant holler from inside the barn. The two stopped, but soon brushed it off as a particularly loud yawn from the cows.

“If you were such a devout, you wouldn’t resort to concealing your sins!”

“Oh, Felix, don’t press this matter further!”

“Right. Then, you force my hand, Cecilia... tell me what you confessed... or the wedding’s off!”

“Felix... you can’t be serious!” Her voice came out in whispers.

The man glance briskly around, and settled on the conveniently unlocked barn behind him.

“I’ll let you think it over... while I wait in here...”

The truth was, he was the one who needed the privacy most. While he put on a guise of confidence for the bluff, ultimately, he could not stifle his own misery when he looked back at her squirming over the ultimatum. With a body and soul shivering from a mixture of tormenting emotions, he turned his back to Cecilia. In that instance, Felix reflected on a lot of things, some big... some small... things that reaffirm love... things that justify anger. He reflected on what was said from each side... what he did right... and what he did wrong.

The reasons for our own aggression, are often lost to us, because it is imbedded within a multitude of events, rather than a singular one. An unlucky splash of mud by a galloping horse; boastings from an annoying co-worker; dread over a grim and unpredictable future. The sensible person after a quarrel, can always look back and scorn at their idiocy. Truly, it is idiocy, that lets five minutes of spat undo a lifetime of love; that lets stories mispronounced in heat fracture bonds built with dedication.

As Felix opened the barn doors, he was already thinking of ways to reconnect with her, to find a compromise and bury this God-awful day once and for all. With his back against the harrowed woman, he stepped into the dark building. Right beside him, in that lightless realm, flashed two pairs of eyes, cutting across the dark, undeniably evil...

The barn doors slid back into closure with a slam, which jolted the woman waiting outside. Concerned, Cecilia made a step forward.

“Felix? Are you-”

“DON’T COME IN, CECILIA!!”

And she retreated, her concerned morphed into confusion.

“My... what’s gotten him so wound up? He didn’t need to yell...”.

A minute passes, Cecilia settled on an answer for the ultimatum, and waited patiently for a lost lover to return. She saw the doors slid back open, and the face she’d come to know and love emerged with a benevolent smile. She stared back with her own resolute expression, and firmly spoke out her decision.

“Felix... I resent the predicament you put me in. If we, as future partners need to resort to threats and coercion, then perhaps this union was not what I hoped it was... call the wedding off if you will, I WON’T divulge further on my confession.”

She expected a retort with equal disdain, and was even bracing herself for a heartbreak, only to be met by an embrace. There was a sense of familiarity with his voice, it carried a tone she'd lost touch with some decade ago, before all the restlessness of life took place.

"Oh, Cecilia..."

"Felix?"

"I've thought it through now."

"Thought through what?"

"Whatever confession you made, whatever things you've done, none of it matters! Because I *love* you, Cecilia! I don't know what you've decided to conceal, but Heaven can smite me, and I'll still side by you. I know the times we've spent together aren't a ruse, Cecilia, they are blissful and sincere... so if you've chosen to hide away a little blemish... then I won't object."

"Felix... is this honestly how you feel?"

"Of course, my love!"

"My *love*? You've never called me that before..."

"Well, let me start doing so, then... because love is simply spectacular, isn't it? Devotions to one, sometimes two, or to however many you want! Oh, love, love, love! Where we subject ourselves to inexhaustible loops of reciprocity! I'll love *you*, and *you* in turn love *me*! To prove my love, let me do *this*, let me do *that*! Let me write you a poem, bring you flowers, give you my chastity, and kiss you good morning and good night!"

Felix lifted the dazzled Cecilia up by her waist and twirled a few playful twirls.

"Woah, Felix, what's gotten into you?! What are you saying?!" She said, with heightening zeal as she was spun around.

"Oh, nothing, Cecilia... let's not dwell here further, and forget about all this dreadful business of confessions and sin.". He quickly put her down, still grinning from ear to ear.

"Wait!"

She tugged firmly at his hands. They locked eyes, as they did, Cecilia found her partner to be more charming than ever. For once, in the many years they've been together, she was embarrassed to talk.

"What you said about still being by my side... do you mean that?" Her voice came out meek.

"I swear on my being, Cecilia! Now, let's go!"

"Well, then... perhaps you deserve to know... about the confession".

"A hundred threats and insults couldn't get this girl to talk, but now she'd just fork up her secret for vague, emotional promises... these mortals really are the strangest creatures on earth!" Abaddon thought.

The duke really should be preparing to take off to Sheol, but he decided to hear her out, because he knew his curiosity will never be sated otherwise. While Cecilia wasn't looking, Abaddon motioned for Tolman to stand by, and to pounce at his signal. Cecilia turned her head lugubriously downwards, with a set of quivering lips, she shared her story:

"I *have* to be honest, Felix... at the beginning of our courtship, I had doubts that a healthy union would ever blossom between us. Of course, as time went by, as we fully accommodated and accepted each other, I casted those doubts aside. Over the years, our connection stabilised, our love grew complacent. We fought, we bickered, and we returned to normal. But things changed last week, when you proposed... I felt our connection

regrew. Even now, as you pervade your love onto me, reigniting that potent ardour at the hay days of every courtship, I can only rue the idiocy of my youthful self that persuaded me toward sin...”

“What sin, Cecilia?!” Abaddon was getting immersed in the plot.

“It was Sven Berg... the brutish ruffian of my village. In the caprice of youth, I was enchanted by his roughness and renegade attitude. So, when he came onto me, I didn’t hold back... unbeknownst to me, he would age into a product of his upbringing. He beguiled me into his room, and there we shared a night of erring pleasure. Asmodeus herself implanted the spirit of lust within me, and I indulged the monster...”

Abaddon’s mouth gaped.

“No...”

“It was not until a week later, when I noticed the signs of pregnancy, that I began to reflect on what I’ve done. I pleaded to Sven, to take my hand in marriage and raise the child... but he, in his typical wayward style, only scoffed. So... unwilling to face the fury of my family, and in my irredeemable cowardice, I did the unthinkable... I bribed the local doctor, and terminated the child...”

Abaddon’s face sunk into his palms.

“No, no, no, no, no...”

“I’m sorry I never told you sooner... The guilt only recently resurfaced, when you proposed to me. That was when I decided to confess at the church...”

Cecilia quieted down, and waited for a response. Felix was leaning against the barn, with his head hidden utterly by the hands. Seeing this only made Cecilia more dejected.

“For God’s sake, SAY something, Felix!” She marched up to the hunched figure.

“No, no, no...”

“Please! Tell me! Do you forgive me?!” She was on her knees.

“*You mean... you’re not a virgin?*”

“... What?”

The barn doors slammed open, and out jumped a pale and savage monstrosity. Its movements so swift, that Cecilia barely had muster up a look affright.

Soon, the sinful scene settled just as the dusk did. No more disturbances were found anywhere near the barn or the farm. The owls continue hooting, and the cows snored away. And stowed away in a discreet corner of the barn, two corpses of a couple that are finally resting together after a heated quarrel. No one knows how their spirits are doing in the afterlife, but for now, at least, they look nigh inseparable.

*

Wednesday

Morning

The joy of a holiday comes more from the anticipation, and less from the day itself. The singing of yuletide carols obviously must come before the Yule, so must the decorations of horror come before All Hallows' day. The journey of days, weeks or months, the awaiting of the moment it comes, that, is the true essence of all holidays.

Now, as the people of Midgard labour away at the farmlands, with sweat and smiles hanging from their faces, the spirit of celebration had already seized every one of them. Each worker counted the days until the Mabon festival, as they prepared the place for celebration. A man hammered in a nail, knowing each hammer brought him closer to the feast. Another worker unloaded a stack of planks, delighting in the fact that soon the wonderful performances would take place on these very planks.

Throughout the land, the sounds of knocking, bashing, sawing reverberated. The workers gathered upon the grand wooden stage that spans across the open field. Its size eludes a single glance; climbing onto the platform, one is mesmerised by the distance to the other end; if one walks deeper, they might just find themselves lost in the sea of sturdy oak.

"Wicked! How did they build this thing so fast?!" Cirius exclaimed, as he tries to balance on the edge of the stage, swinging his arms to-and-fro as he did.

"They didn't. It's always been here! Since it's only ever used once a year, they come repair any damages when the Mabon festival happens." Urd was lying on her back a few yards away.

"What do they do with a stage this big, anyhow?"

"They pile it with food, of course! All the best harvests from all the farmers, all the new recipes from the bakers and chefs. And then there's dances and shows and songs and a BONFIRE! To put it simply, Cirius, it's everything that's a splendid fun!"

"A *bonfire*? On this wooden stage?"

"That's the *magic* of it, Cirius!" The young girl's eyes gleamed as she said so.

Cirius had never seen this much ebullience from Urd before. Incidentally, any emotion Urd feels always seems to be quite contagious, at least to him. With all the promising pictures painted for the festival, the boy resolved that he would not miss it, come what may, be it sickness, strained limbs, or being stabbed! For the time being, though, there was only so much thrill to be had on an empty stage, and as their excitement depleted, the children promptly scurried off, in search for other things to fill their day. But no matter where the pair wandered, they could never seem to escape the influences of the Mabon festival...

With any holiday, there comes distinct classes of enjoyers. Some enjoy holidays simply for the sake of the festivity, they could smile through plight and pain, because they know they deserve to be happy for a few times a year. But, some enjoy holidays for the opportunities, submissive to trends and seasonal goods that soak in pools of riches. If one were to ask which class of enjoyers Midgard is most predominated by...

"Miss Fransson's pumpkin pies! Freshly baked, only two coppers a piece!"

"Get your own scarfs, beautiful Autumn design! Two silvers only!"

"PLUMMMMMSSSSSS!!!"

"*Miss Falk's* pumpkin pies! Better and cheaper than Miss Fransson's!!"

"*Shut it*, Jamie, ye slag!"

"PLUMS!!! And an assortment of PLUM related PRODUCTS, like PLUM PUDDINGS!!!"

"Who ye calling slag?!"

"Need any boots, lad? Pristine leather, this one, for you... just three silvers!"

Cirius and Urd strolled through the lane of stalls, giving each's wares a quick skim. In the midst of the overbearing vendors and dime a dozen products, everything seemed to blend into blandness. Suddenly, in the corner of the Urd's eyes, she spotted something worth her attention: a stall secluded from the rest, extra extravagant in decoration and atmosphere. What Urd was more interested in, though, was the woman manning the booth, the woman, whose name was boldly plastered in red upon the signs: Freyja, the Goddess of Fertility and Love.

She prances around the space, zealous in both movements and speech. One moment, she leaned out of the right, beckoning at walkers; a second later, she retreated to the back to tidy up the rows of vials and flasks; another moment, she spotted a couple, and was yelling out from the left. Loud and intrusive, but all in good humour, much like a certain member of the pantheon.

The two children approached the booth with Freyja still in the midst of shouting, once there, Urd could finally read clearly, the contents on the stall's sign.

Freyja, the Goddess of Fertility and Love.

-Potions: protective, contraceptive and abortive

-Consultant for virility and fertility needs

-No longer sell love potions (legally)

Urd looked up at the beaming Goddess shifting around with her flasks of blue, yellow and red liquid... It made so much sense, yet, why is she is so surprised?

As Freyja pranced some more, the layers of necklaces and bracelets jingle out in harmony; with each vigorous step, her ginger hair gets more tangled. There was a sense of beauty in the chaotic scene of Freyja's stall. Her comely countenance, coupled with honest smiles could banish the cynicism that so often comes with dealing in markets. Here was a trader unconcerned with the dogmas of the craft, heedless of prices and returns. Freyja was there solely out of passion for her goods, which she quite literally embodies...

"You there, the burly man in the black tunic! You've got the air of a dashing miscreant about you. A fellow libertine, aren't you? I know it, indeed! A connoisseur on the pleasures of the flesh, women are a doddle to you, aren't they? Ho, ho, but are you *as* confident in your capabilities in spotting and avoiding the clap? Well, have I got just the protective potion for you... oh, I see, that's your wife."

Freyja scurried to the other side.

"Ah, the lady, clad in the alluring white dress! You've got an air of a voluptuous rebel! A fellow libertine, aren't you? Heh, I see you~, can't escape a Goddess' intuition! But have you ever let fears of accidents stifle your liberated being? The covert touch of syphilis, and dare I say it... *pregnancy*? Well, worry no more, miss! These concoctions are sure to do away with all those fears... oh, you've just got married... I suppose that does explain the white."

She'd been faced with many glares and scoffs throughout the morning, but no amount of scorn seemed to disturb her at all. Because she knew, every prudish disgust the mortals sent her way was nothing but a farce! Come the time when their beastly natures resurface, they'll come crawling and knocking at night for her to open up shop. Just then, a cloaked figure pushed her way through a crowd, and inch furtively toward the counter. "Here comes one now..." Freyja thought with a giggle. As the figure arrived, she pulled down the hood some more, just to find more comfort in the masking dark.

“Hullo, Mrs.-” Freyja began.

The cloaked figure went mad with gestures, first waving with both hands, then shushing with a finger. The reaction made Freyja all the jauntier. Humming playfully, the Goddess twirled two red bottles between her fingers.

“The usual, then?”

Four silver coins were slammed onto the counter.

“Sorry, miss. It’s six silvers, now. Three for each.”

The figure stepped back in indignation.

“A rise in cost of materials, is all! Just a part of life... *Jen*.”

Up went the figure’s urgent hands again. Soon, another two silver coins was shoved before the Goddess’ face.

“Pleasure. My regards to your partners... all of them.” She finished with a laugh.

The figure clicked her tongue, before hastening away.

Before the Goddess could spare a moment to relish in her cunning sales tactics, the booth was dominated by the high-pitched chitter-chatter of kids. A pair of familiar voices calling her name. Stricken with pure horror, she ducked down and waited for them to pass by, but before she knew it, they had found her, and their voices had only grown louder. Her shop was now held hostage. Bashfully, Freyja rose up from beneath the desk, and was faced with the jubilant faces of Cirius and Urd.

“Lady Freyja! Lady Freyja! Are you getting ready for the festival too?” Urd’s was on her tiptoes.

“Lady Freyja, what are you selling?” Cirius was hopping up and down the counter.

“Hullo children... look, Auntie Freyja’s very busy right now, I’ll play with you later, alright?”

“But we don’t have anywhere else to go!” The girl cried out in misery.

“Lady Freyja, can I have a sip of the potions?” The boy pleaded in poignance.

“What are you selling, by the way? Is it something we can use?”

“NO!!!” Freyja instantly bawled out in a panic.

“Children... please, go play somewhere else, won’t you?”

“Like I said, Lady Freyja, we haven’t got anywhere else to be! All the *fun* things cost money!”

“RIGHT! HERE! Take a silver, go buy some sweets at the other side of town!”

“Only one? What about Cirius?”

“FINE! Here’s another, just run along! The longer you STAY, the dodgier I LOOK!”

Urd snatched up the two coins with a haughty little thanks. The pair were on their way, one of them giving out an audible chortle. And so, Freyja lost the two silvers just as easily as she had earned it.

Along the way, Urd held the coins to her eye, and stared with a prideful grin.

“Y’know, you’re very adept at tricking money out of people.” Cirius commented, half concerned, half impressed.

*

Just as the children left the festival grounds, another group had just arrived. None other than the faraway visitors and their lovely, long-haired guide.

After yesterday's gruelling discussions of threats and combats, it seemed absurd to think that there would be such a calming day ahead. Yet, all trepidations were cleansed from the air and mind, when Shango and Bayani woke up to the warm sun, soft gales and blooming flowers.

'Some parts of the world just demand the land to be jolly, don't they?', Bayani thought as she gawked out the window. 'Egypt's too dry, Anglia's too wet, but here, it's just right! Oh, how the sun play favourites!'. When she leaned further out the sill, she caught her brother basking on the balcony to the right. Once he met her gaze, he sang aloud in ecstasy:

"Listen to the kingdom's music! Furiously fast, yet soft and harmonic!"

"Just don't bring it up with the Asgardians, please!" She yelled back.

Then came breakfast in the hall, where the long table for titans were left for the two lonesome Gods. While savouring the experience of foreign cuisines, the two's dining was interrupted by the familiar face of Sif. The Goddess dragged her locks eagerly across the floor, still silky smooth after a shower, and bid them a good morning.

"Sir Shango, Lady Bayani, did you sleep well?"

"Yesh, wonderful, indeed!" Bayani swallowed the ham hurriedly.

"Excellent! Now, I'm compelled to ask... are there any further engagements for the both of you?"

"Not that we can think of." Shango spouted, with some jam hanging off his lips.

"Great! How about I show you around town then? It doesn't hurt to get acquainted with the area if we're to work together. What do you say?"

The pair glanced at each other. If yesterday's house tour was any reference at all, they knew what this offer implied. They considered the point she made... and the guts it took to refuse; there was nothing to do but accept.

And here they are now, strutting through the streets, accompanied by the narrations of street name origins, building background, infrastructure development, from the tour guide. Sif led the group jubilantly, she was enjoying boasting about the kingdom again after so long. Whenever she turned back to check on the two, they would face her with feigned smiles, which only made her livelier and more verbose.

However, Sif's gleeful spirit quickly sank, when she saw what lay ahead of them: Freyja's stall and all the gaudy decorations surrounding it. An audible yelp escaped her, as Freyja's voice became distinct from the crowd.

"Is something wrong, Lady Sif?"

"Right! I haven't shown you the town hall, have I? How silly of me, that's the other way!"

With some more clever convincing, the group was successfully directed away from the festival area, away from Freyja and her promiscuous products. Sif remained quite assertive for a while, pushing the two guests forward, while simultaneously listing out facts about the town hall. It was only after they arrived at the clustered kingdom centre, that Sif finally calmed down, and resumed leading at the front. As if the whole issue was brushed aside, she picked up where she left off, describing the separate ministrative roles of mortals and Gods.

Despite the insipid explanations, though, Bayani and Shango found themselves admiring in awe more than before. The town was narrower, and every space was imbued with its own spectacles: a galloping horse with its rider shooing away bystanders; a boy hoop rolling along the pavement, with other boys and girls chasing after; a brilliantly dressed man pantomiming to music at the side.

The rows of houses vie to stand out, and the twists and turns of the street that either expand your journey, or lead you back to where you were. From every corner came inscrutable surprises; men who twirl their walking sticks instead of using it for walking, or women holding umbrellas when there's not a drop of rain or ray of sun.

The surprises just kept piling on, as not after a few minutes of entering town, do they meet Thor, gallivanting around the road, lugging the mighty hammer on his shoulder. Upon seeing the group, his red face lit up effervescently, and he leapt directly toward them, crushing the pavement as he landed.

“Awrite there, luv? Awrite there, ye Yoruba folks?” Thor took the lady’s hand in his.

“Hello, dear! Everything’s fine...” Sif, in turn, caressed his burly hand.

“Whit’ve ye bin daein, then?”

“Oh, gave them a tour, showed them around some festival stalls...”

“A wee *tour*, that’s it? Nae banter whatsoever! Nae wonder they look bored! Might as well sit yerselves doon in kirk and dae hee haw!”

“Excuse *you*, dear?! Shango and Bayani enjoyed the *wee* tour, didn’t you?” Sif turned to face them with a prideful smirk.

Bayani nodded instantly, mustering all her energy into her smile. At this point, Shango had lost track of the conversation, and was observing things on his own. His attention was ferociously pulled back, when Thor’s gigantic palm patted his shoulder.

“Aye, ye lassies might be content with yer tours. But this wee man and massehl won’t be! Us Gods of Thunder need more tae please! Booze and scrán at minimum! Dinnae ye agree, lad?”

Suddenly, all eyes were on Shango. And this was particularly disturbing for him, because he had no idea what Thor had just said.

“... Yes...”

“Ye see?” Thor guffawed triumphantly, before pulling Shango away from the tour group.

“Where are you going?!” Sif shouted indignantly as the two waddled away, shoulder to shoulder.

“Am showin’ our friend whit bein in Asgard means! Boozers and bouts till he boak!”

“THOR! Aren’t you on patrol duty?!” The two were getting farther, and Sif shouted louder.

“Nae-borra, just got off!”

And away they went, into the hurly burly of a thriving town. The ladies were left standing in stunned silence.

“My... the audacity of the man! Think I can’t be a *fun* escort, eh?”

Her eyes flared with fiery vigour, and she seized Bayani by the wrist.

“BAYANI!”

“Y-yes?”

“Let’s go have a bit of craic!... As they say.”

Both Yoruba guests were very much confused with their respective situations. But they had to admit, it sure was far more interesting than before. So, for the most part, they went with the flow.

With some insistent ushering and tugging, Bayani was led through writhing crowds by the invigorated Goddess. The stops were abrupt, and began again just as abruptly. A moment of relief was only granted, once Sif announced their arrival.

“Here we are!”

After clearing away the dizziness, Bayani finally had a chance to marvel at what was before her. A spotless window, gazing over it, there was equally spotless furniture and people. An estate that exudes sophistication, or at least, the illusion of it. A very special place, known as the coffeehouse. Neither formal nor informal, they fulfilled a niche people never knew they needed. Delicately, the diverse and delicious aromas waft through the

air, forcing out desirous drools in every beholder. The whiff of cakes, coffee, cocoa, tea, and all the other fantasies the posh dare to dream up.

“It’s a new trend, see, ever since that new craze around coffee came about! I think they’ll take off... Thor says they’ won’t... well, what does he know!”

Sif continued narrating while Bayani took it all in.

“Frigg says I’m not supposed to have too much right now. But a cup a day’s fine, apparently! So, I ask her about tea, right, and she says tea’s fine! That doesn’t make much sense, does it? I mean, coffee and tea, they’re virtually cut from the same cloth! Both dark... and so on. How can one be bad for the baby, and the other’s harmless? At any rate, have you ever tried coffee, Bayani?”

“Yes... it does get around in Africa.”

“Oh good, then perhaps you might get a taste of home. Shall we?” Sif was already at the door.

Bayani beamed, more honestly than before, and accepted her invitation.

Just as the mind unknowingly adapts to the environment, inside the coffeehouses, everyone and everything suddenly becomes lavishing. The philosophers unravel worldly strings of logics; authors think up ways to translate boundless beauty into words. One table could be engaged in politics, then turn around to discuss science. In another corner, a man alternates between playing chess and painting. In such a place, all the imperfection and hideousness of the outside world is temporarily shut away. A beggar boy can pound on the glass for a penny, and be utterly ignored by a band of engrossed philosophers explaining the importance of equal distribution of wealth.

After placing their orders, Sif scanned the room for an empty seat, but couldn’t find any. Desperate, she considered using her very convenient title of ‘Goddess’ on a random patron, but quickly brushed it aside as she remembered Bayani was here. She could only search harder. But this time, she found a saviour in a dim little corner of the room... Hel, one hand scoffing down a lingonberry pie, the other hand turning the page of a newspaper. Sif called out to her, and the young Goddess’ face lit up before responding with a wave.

The pair took their seats with Hel, and with all the greetings and discussions of serendipity done; drinks and pastries served, they immersed themselves into atmosphere. The atmosphere of coffeehouses, which has the power to transcend conversations. They would flow rapidly or slowly, but almost always unstoppable.

Soon, the three started talking, with changing topics, some casual, some contentious, and some insightful...

“Wait a minute, Hel. I distinctly remember seeing your name on the duty board today, you’re supposed to be patrolling!”

“I was, but I got Olav to take my place.”

“Olav? Why, he’s got the day off!”

“That’s why he has the time, Sif!”

“Oh, the poor sap... you know, he fancies you.”

“How do you think I got him to do it?”

“(Sigh) You really are a product of your father, Hel.”

“Well, enough about me. Hiya! I don’t believe we’ve formally met, miss. You’re one of the guests from Oyo, aren’t you? I’m Hel!”

“It’s a pleasure, Lady Hel. I’m Bayani.”

“So, what brings you to this corner of the world, Bayani?”

“It’s a long story...”

“Well, we’ve got time, don’t we?”

“Heh, I suppose we do.”

*

In the same coffeehouse, just a few tables away from the chattering Goddesses, sat Abaddon and Tolman. Both had struggled through the night with scarce sleep, and now was listlessly waiting for a late breakfast to be served. Tolman occupied himself by swirling the teaspoon in his cup of coffee; Abaddon’s focus, however, never strayed from his ultimate goal, and for now, he stares blankly at the wall, eavesdropping on people’s conversations.

“As you know, the Mabon festival’s prime time for business...”

“Ain’t there a Demon prowling around? Are you sure the festival’s still safe?”

“God almighty, have you heard what happened to Bjornson? Terrible stuff!”

“Aye, terrible stuff, indeed, wife’s missing, house’s robbed... tough days ahead for the bastard.”

“...Y’know he’s dead, right?”

“So, the holiday’s coming...we should go on that trip we’ve been talking about. We deserve it, right?”

Abaddon scoffed at the tepid topics they were talking about. ‘If these are the everyday conversations people were having, how is eavesdropping considered such a stigma? In the mortal’s world infested with tepid chats, repetitive routines and age-old stories, eavesdropping is only for the masochists! To pleasure themselves with boredom!’

Once he decided to stop intruding into the affairs of others, and pull his attention back to the table, he noticed that the food had already arrived. In front of him, Tolman chewed listlessly on his sandwich, going for a sip of coffee after swallowing...

‘Then again, even the most extravagant beings have tepid days. So, who am I to judge?’ Abaddon concluded, before he started eating his own sandwich.

So, the Demons sat in silence, enjoying the most pleasant reward Fate gives to hardworking people: a period of placidity. The heated air of the coffeehouse warms the two Demons’ chilled bodies, and the coffees themselves warm their insides. It is in these moments, where the mind has nowhere significant to wander, that the atmospheric abilities of the coffeehouse work best.

Precipitately, Tolman turned to the duke:

“Would you rather eat turds that taste like strawberries, or strawberries that taste like turds?”

“...”

“...”

Truly, it is only in the majestic coffeehouses, that such intellectual inquiries can blossom.

“...And that’s why we’re here now.”

“Good Heavens! I mean... Good Heavens! Ancient Demons?! Contracts?! It’s all so mad!”

“Indeed, it makes you think, doesn’t it, Hel? We’ve dealt in this dyadic conflict between Sheol and Asgard for so long, that we’ve come to forget the outside world. The threats... and alliances it holds.”

“Not *THAT*, Sif! Why haven’t we heard anything from Odin?! Of this Shimush fiend, presumably strong enough to destroy us! How is the kingdom so calm?!”

“...”

“To be candid, Lady Sif, I also find this quite puzzling. Why Lord Odin has chose to not inform the pantheon, or even the kingdom.”

“Well, I suspect he has his reasons.”

“Reasons?! To leave the kingdom ignorant of imminent disasters?! What sort of leadership is *THAT*?”

“...”

“...”

“Look at it this way, Hel. A society would be quite miserable, if all it does is plan contingencies for disasters, wouldn’t it? Always on their toes with anxiety for the worse. A community of sceptics and cynics, perhaps too ready to reduce life to nothing.”

“Well, what if disaster *DOES* come? Surely, then, the cynical society would do better, having made the preparations to conquer them?”

“I don’t know about that, Hel... When you constantly dwell on chaos, and come to expect more chaos, fighters just become fatalists. But if you’ve known true peace and all its sublimity, then fighters will want to exceed limits to preserve or restore peace! Just like the mothers who surpass biology to save their child.”

“But isn’t there always a happy medium, Lady Sif? A society that learns to indulge every once in a while, but pedantic when called for. That way, we get the benefits of pessimism and passion!”

“...”

“Well said, Bayani! After all, truths are often so ugly, and we have to accept them at some point! That’s when the pessimists thrive!”

“Hmph, it’s always the young who hold pessimism in such high regards.”

“We have just learnt to embrace it!”

“That’s why your generation is so bleak, Hel... it’s a fine line between pessimism and paranoia!”

“And an even finer one between optimism and delusion!”

“Bayani...”

“Yes, Hel?”

“This brother of yours, Shango. What is he like?”

“Flaky, ever so flaky!”

“Oh, surely there’s something good you can say about him?”

“Well...”

“Yes?”

“...”

“...”

“Shango... always seems to be certain of what he wants and needs to do. When you work and travel with him, it feels like he’s constantly one move ahead, which obviously isn’t bad if you’re partners, since he’s dependable... but, being his sibling, it also means you’re never out of his shadow. In the eyes of my parents, we should be one in the same... but we just aren’t... and can never be.”

“Parents are hard to please...”

“They expect so much, yet understand so little.”

“Here, here! Believe me, I know quite a bit about parental expectations. Being the only... normal offspring my father has.”

“You have siblings, Hel? Oh, do tell! What are they like?”

“They’re animals.”

“Heh, I’m sure they’re fine people!”

“No, they’re *literally* animals... as in, I’m the only biped among them.”

“... What?”

“Alright, girls, let’s set aside the lamentations of daughters already!”

“Fine, Sif... Oh, while we’re on the topic of parents. How are the weans? The current and the future ones, I mean.”

“Oh yes, I’ve been meaning to ask, Miss Sif! When is it due?”

“About ten weeks!”

“Ah, congratulations, Miss Sif!”

“Have you gone to see Frigg yet?”

“Yes, just last week!”

“So... is it a boy or a lassie?”

“*Boys!* Twin boys... can you imagine?”

“Twins?! Oh my.”

“Twice the joy, innit?”

“And we’ve already got the perfect names!”

“Oh, do tell!”

“Modi... and Magni!”

*

Wednesday

Afternoon

Money, can really only be appreciate by the youth. Not entirely dependent on it, not obligated to save it. Its power has not yet claimed them as it has claimed the adults. In the youth's hands, money invigorates the imagination like lashes to racehorses. A spectrum of possibilities, suggestions after suggestions come barging into their minds. Such is the very case for Urd, as she held up two silver coins to the sky, using them to eclipse the sun.

She sat atop a low cobble wall with an inflexible grin. Occasionally, she glanced down at Cirius, who was drawing circles around ants with sticks.

"So, any ideas?" Urd began.

"For what?"

"Why, for spending these silvers, of course!"

"Oh, right... I reckon we can a good load of pies with that! Maybe even cakes!"

"Pastries?! Is that all you think about?"

"Well, what are silvers good for, then?"

"There *must* be something *else*..." She hummed pensively, repeatedly clashing the coins together.

The two thought in silence for a while, until Cirius spoke:

"You think we can get a pet with that money?"

"A pet?"

"Every adventurer has a pet! They tag along and keep you company on lonesome journeys, you can talk to them about troubles, and when they die, they give you a burst of energy to defeat your opponents!"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"That settles it, I vote we get pet!"

"And what variety of *zoic* companion do you suggest we get with our two silvers?"

"... A hound!"

"Fat chance."

"... A hawk!"

"In your dreams, perhaps."

"... A newt!"

"You'd be lucky."

"Well, you suggest one, then!"

"You know what animal I estimate we'll be able to buy? A goldfish, and that's not including the bowl! So, I don't think our companion will be doing much 'tagging along' in your adventures."

"How you talk, Urd!"

With that, the young Goddess hopped down from the cobble wall, and patted down the back of her dress. She matched Cirius' pout with the same grin, before making her way out onto the open street. The bustles of the city were quick to seize the two's ears, inviting them into the den of shouting and touting. With their mind full of impulses, and hands full of coins, they were only too happy to oblige.

"Well, the day will be over before we can spend these two silvers, if we keep shilly-shallying over here. I say we just amble along until something catches the eye."

"Fine. But if we catch someone selling any animals at the right price, we're getting it!"

"Naturally." She finished with a laugh, and broke out into a playful pace.

They proceeded to be a very importunate presence upon the market for the rest of the afternoon.

The afternoon comes with it a very particular spirit: the spirit of stability. The afternoon, when workers settle into their cycles, having ran dry all their complaints. The afternoon, when even the laziest idler must have risen up from their scruffy beds. The afternoon, when preparations for lunch pump out layers of steam from the rows of chimneys. When people go from yawning out of fatigue to out of boredom. When the sky's most blue but nobody notices.

The afternoon takes a toll on everybody, whether you're Goddesses debating the merits of pessimism, youngsters searching the market for pets, Demons on the hunt for virgin women, or, more relevantly, Gods downing pints of ale while watching people wrestle.

The pub had just barely opened for business before it was crammed with rowdy people more savage than badgers. Truthfully, premonitions were already flaring up within the bartender, when the line of workmen and workwomen barged in one after another, led by Thor and the African God linking shoulder to shoulder. Before long, the crowd surrounded itself into circular wall of people, animated and loud. Having piled the tables and chair to one side, they created a field in the middle, just fit for the room of gladiators.

Things were rather calm at first, when each of them was on only their first drink. But then came the second... then third... then the drinks were on fire... and then half the room was shirtless... finally, fists and feet flew in flurries. Nothing prepares you for it, the crowd cheered, they shouted, stroke their fist to the air, cried and cheered.

Two brawlers at a time, having at it until one's fallen, the victor must stand firm for new challengers.

Thor briskly explained the rules to Shango, the booming voice deafening him slightly. Shango watched it all unfold in the middle. The burly men, dank with sweat and spilt ale, shuffling about like encaged rats. A punch connects, startles, and shrugged off. Through gritted teeth and pulsing veins, the men's bout continued onto the ground, with one twisting the other's arm in gruesome ways.

At that moment, Shango reflected on the contrasting scenes he'd been shown in this kingdom, and wondered which one truly represented it. He didn't think for long, though, because soon, Thor asked whether he wanted to join.

"D'ye want in, pal?"

"YES."

Perhaps it was the five pints of ale talking, or the lack of excitement for so long, but Shango could feel his reservations sucked out by this humble pub. Shango had always been very adaptable. So, if the culture here was to deliver a good wallop to strangers, then by Heaven's name let him respect it.

"Le' see if ya cannae beat mah record, Shango! Twenty-seven in a row!"

Once in the middle, his hands ball up steady and eager and he took a stance. An earnest smile spread across the God's face, as he drove his fists into the man charging forward.

Thor watched Shango attentively... and eventually caught onto something extraordinary. The young God's movements were lithe and virulent, falling foe after foe in effortless flow. But, more enchantingly, every twist of the limbs, every impact the hands left, brought out sparks of white and blue. Fissures of lightning slice the air in tandem with Shango's moves, as if leaking out from his very body. And Thor could only imagine the true extent of thunder stirring within the Yoruba God, the clamour and the power when unleashed.

Too absorbed in his new friend, Thor didn't even notice the two familiar faces that has just approached him. And a hefty smack on the belly shocked him out from the observation. Thor peered down, and was confronted by none other than the Valkyries. Brynhildr and Geiravor, one as jolly as ever, and one as disapproving as ever.

It was, at first, only a trip for a quick drink, but after Brynhildr saw the commotion, it turned to a fifteen-minute break, and once they saw that Thor was there, it became an indefinite stay.

"He's nae bad, inn' he?"

"So ye've heard aboot them, then?"

"Aye, fae Lady Frigg this mornin', she says tae behave ourselves. Heaven knows what she'll dae tae ye."

"Ah, that old gadgie can do what she likes!"

"Lord Thor! That's very impertinent!"

"Nae-borra, Geira! She isnae here, is she?"

"It's not a matter of being present, Brynhildr!"

"Aye, aw'right, Geiravor! I'll apologise to her when I get back! So, let's all have a pint, and enjoy ourselves!"

"TWENTY-FIVE! HE'S ON TRACK FOR BESTING THE RECORD!"

Their attention was rivetted back to the centre. Shango's sturdy stature bathed in the sweat of others and himself, even after the waves of bouts, he stood spryer than before. In front of him, a man downs his third bottle, putting himself in the spirit of warriors and numbing any incoming pain. Brimming with confidence, the man lashes, and was knocked to the ground by a scorching right hook.

"TWENTY-SIX BLOKES! WHO WILL BE NEXT?!!"

That's when Thor stepped out to the tiny battlefield. Once the two Gods of thunder locked eyes, they couldn't help but laugh.

"Sorry, pal. But Ah've got a reputation tae keep!"

The room was wild with bellows, beer and bets. Men stamped their feet, women clapped in sync. Words of encouragement were coming from everyone, even Geira, after a couple of glasses, though it wasn't quite sure who she was cheering for. And the combatants who have previously been slogged senseless were up and ready to offer advice.

"Bend your knees, BEND YOUR KNEES!"

"Can't go wrong with the ol' one-two!"

"Turn those hips! Keep active!"

"Ye gotta be like an eagle, son! Don't be the turtle, be the eagle!"

"What the bloody hell ye talking about, Marty? Eagles don't box!"

It was ready to happen any second, nobody said so, but they could feel it. After all, there was only so long two fighters could stare at each other before it becomes weird. Thor inched closer, each step making Shango shrink in size, yet heightening in pressure. The sparks that flew around the Yoruba God was sharper, quicker, and ever so sporadic.

This, was a battle between lots of things: pantheons, prides, but most importantly, ages. One side ooze young energy in excess; the other exudes wisdom in experience. And, after finalising the first move a dozen times in his head. Thor roared, and his fist dart into action... before the pub door slammed open, and in came a voice that overpowered his own.

“ORDER!!!”.

The whole room was struck with momentary numbness, as the giant figure barged through the door, and left it swinging for the duration of the confrontation. Tyr, was now looming over the stricken people of the pub. He stands sturdily, as if immovable by any force. Even the gargantuan sword, subservient to his grip, hangs stilly at his sides. Scarcely had his voice stopped echoing, the giant God’s breath began haunting the shivering bodies. A very churlish inhale, then a pugnacious exhale. Soon, the people started following the rhythm, and the whole room was breathing in sync.

“Y’aright, Tyr! D’ye want a pint?” Thor was the first to break the silence.

“Brother!” Came Tyr’s curt reply, and he advanced to the centre.

“Aye?”

“Where’s your sensibility?!”

“What?! I dinnae do anything!”

“That’s precisely the point! We’ve got two Demons loose in the area, and you’re mucking about carousing!”

“Am off duty! ‘Sides, Am not completely muckin’ bout, I’m entertaining guests!”

“I don’t appreciate the levity you prescribe onto the situation, brother! Now I suggest... who’s this?”

Tyr just noticed the stranger beside him. With his hands humbly clasped behind his back, Shango had hitherto kept to the side with quiet deference. This is, of course, the objectively correct behaviour when watching others argue, along with mental prayer that they don’t involve you. Upon meeting gazes, the Yoruba God flashed a rakish smile, further astonishing the titan. Tyr turned to Thor, wishing for answers that wouldn’t bring more questions.

“Why, he’s one of da guests!”

“What guests?”

“Guests from Yorubaland!”

“You mean... fellow Gods?”

“Aye!”

“...”

His sternness shifted into confusion, then into embarrassment. Tyr hooked his brother on the shoulder, pulling him yards away into the corner. Though it was hard for him, he whispered:

“When did they arrive?”

“Just yesterday!”

“Why wasn’t I told?!”

“Well, ye dinnae ask!”

“W... He didn’t hear all that about the Demons, did he?”

“I dinnae ken, but ye were awfully loud back there.”

“Dear Heavens! What would he think?!”

“I wouldnae worry about it, Tyr.”

“I’ve just split all our shameful secrets!”

“A’body makes mistakes...” Thor gave him a few hearty pats.

“... So, you’re tasked with escorting them, then?”

“...Aye?”

“You said there were two of them?”

“Da lady’s with Sif.”

“Alright... now... y-you’ll explain this to him, right?”

“Explain what?”

“M-my outburst! B-banter, yes, all just banter! The Norse isn’t... violent... or anything like that!”

“... Nae, why would he think so?”

While the two big, burly men whispered away around the walls, the room was cleared with some of the previous menace. The tables and chairs were rearranged to their places, much to the relief of the bartender. Shango scanned the pub, amazed at how swiftly barbarism and normalcy interchange. Fervent cheers became mindless chats; sleeves that were rolled up ready for a punch, turned into convenient handkerchiefs to mop up sweat and wine. Suddenly, among the twenty-six men he’d boxed and kicked, almost half came to introduce themselves and their line of work. Realising how dry his throat has been, Shango went with the company to the counter. The golden drinks crowded the table, and the men downed their mugs in unison.

“Right, you continue entertaining the guest, then.”

“Awrite, cheers, brother!”

The two giants left the corner, and marched toward Shango, who stood up to receive them. Without warning, his hand was swept up into a handshake.

“Esteemed guest from Yoruba. May I know your name?”

“It’s Shango...”

“Lord Shango of Yoruba. It is with my deepest effervescence that I bid you welcome to our glorious kingdom. And with equal deepness in remorse that I apologise for my interruption of your jollification here.”

“Nae-borra!” He picked this phrase up from Thor, and was surprised to see just how useful it can be.

Tyr ended the handshake with a chortle, gratified in himself for restoring the pristine image of the Norse.

“Hah, on behalf of Aesir, have a wonderful day!”

“Thank you!” he returned with a smile.

After bidding his new friend farewell, he made his way to the bar counter. Bending over it, he fished below the space under the table, and retrieved two red-faced Valkyries, now dangling by their collars.

“You two. On the other hand, have no business here, whatsoever!”

“Heh, you’re only *at* the pub when you’ve *got* no business, silly Lord Tyr!” Geira was hiccupping in the midst of her retort.

“Aw, come on, Tyr. Geesa another pint first!”

And with that, the giant God walked through the swinging doors, with lots of giggles and strange noises coming from his handful of Valkyries. It was a while after the encounter, that Thor remembered the unsettled brawl between them. But for the time being, Shango seemed content with going about the normal flow of a pub, so Thor let things be. Perhaps for the better as well, he thought, because secretly, some parts of him might not be ready to accept the results.

*

Just a mile away from the subsiding hurly-burly of the pub, a pair of Demons prowled around the outskirts of town. Abaddon was getting more and more desperate, still very unsure of the answer to the “virgin” problem domineering his present life.

The two had decided to split up for their collective quest, though the decision came with a lot of hesitation on Abaddon’s part. Even now, he was preparing for the regret that’s bound to surface from leaving a youth to his own caprice.

The anxiety was beginning to show on his gait and posture, stiff shuffles while slouching like hook. His brows knitted into one, and bits of his fake lips were bitten off one by one. Overall, it was a grievous face that accompanied his aimless amble and fruitless search. Ironically, the women who passed by him only quickened their pace. All the stirring dejection in his person eventually made him relapse into his unhinged monologues again:

“We don’t place enough ignominy on virginity! At the current rate, no one can tell who’s what, and that’s a recipe for madness! What we ought to do is blatant separation. Let the virgins mingle among themselves, lace them with markings, force them into uniforms! Let virginity hang as a branding on the person, a branding that catches the eye from a mile away, so they can be no mistakes! Just... any sign at all, imbedded within these mortals, that screams out their inexperience, that screams out their *availability*!”

While this erring fantasy tumbles into absurdity in the Demon’s mind, his senses shut off, leaving a body wandering for nothing. Until Abaddon approached a familiar sight, pulling him out of delusion and into remembrance. The sights of a church, not the one he’s lived in previous, but a church nonetheless, with features just similar enough to invigorate memory. From the period of his judicious disguise as the vicar, to expertly executed plans with Mabel or Bjornson. The reflections only made his current state all the more miserable, seeing how far he’s fallen.

Just then, Abaddon’s lamentations were interrupted by the chipper voice of Tolman, scurrying over with a face of complete contrast to his own. The young Demon pranced around the duke, with blathers so cheerful they blend into annoyance. Utterly defeated, Abaddon stood still, just waiting for all of it to end.

“Your grace, guess what?”

“Urgh...”

“Guess!”

“Urghhh...”

“I’ve got some great intelligence! One that’ll surely lead us to great success!”

“... Go on.” He mustered up the last of his energy just to listen.

“So, we’re supposed to acquire virgins, right? So, I thought, here, where are virgins bound to congregate? And that’s when it came to me, it’s the churches!”

“Ah, don’t bring up the churches, Tolman! They’re absolutely cursed! Have you forgotten about the whole *Cecilia* debacle yesterday? I’ve had it with them, all these *pious* women around here! They’re the most erratic of the bunch!”

“But, sir, you don’t understand. This church right here, apparently, it’s a pilgrimage church! And a group of pilgrims’ set to arrive tomorrow morning!”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“*Pilgrims*, my lord duke!”

“So what?”

“So, there’ll surely be some nuns among them!”

“Nuns?”

“Yes, nuns... you know... churchwomen?”

“NUNS!!!”

“Yes, your grace!”

“Nuns! Of course, how could I forget?! Surely, THEY’LL be virgins! They have to be... right, Tolman?”

“Surely!”

“Yes, surely!”

How the dominant feelings of despondence dissipate in light of that news. That omnipresent frown on the duke’s face twisted into a full-cheeked smile, clenched teeth and all. Everything connects so easily, when one is brimming with euphoria; plans formulate themselves, past pains fade into obscurity, and energy seems undepletable, truly an underrated emotion. With a clap, Abaddon finished deciding all the steps that need to be taken, and the image of triumph shine so brightly before him.

“Tomorrow morning!”

“Yes, sir?”

“Tomorrow morning, Tolman. We return tomorrow morning!”

As he announced this certainty, Abaddon approached the walls of the church, wishing to breathe the air that diffuse this sacred ground. The great elation left equally great residue, residue that dispersed into a dozen different emotions: gratitude, relief, appreciation... and lust.

Eyeing the fine textures of the cobble, Abaddon leaned closer, closer than mothers to their sleeping child; closer than lovers in a warm embrace. A few deep sighs came from the duke’s mouth, and a very uncomfortable glance came from the messenger boy. He decided to leave his master alone for a while, and went into the bakery just opposite the church. But, even after coming out with two handfuls of pastries, the duke’s fixation only seemed to deepen. So, Tolman contented himself to stand by and wait... a good few yards away.

As he bit into a cinnamon roll, Tolman noticed the sky began to pale, and the sun retreating. Just then, the sanguine tone of the duke rang clearly in his ears: “We return tomorrow morning!”. Of course, he didn’t the means, nor the details, but he trusted the duke nonetheless, it felt so confident that he had to. He started envisioning it: images of home, no longer obligations, and sisters, no longer nuisances. Quietly, he wished for it come sooner, and ended that wish with another bite of the roll.

It was a making of a peaceful day, with such peaceful mornings and afternoon. No turbulence, no tension, nor threats of any titanic toad tearing through town. A peaceful day whereby everyone has a fair share of jubilation, in vehement debates, haggling for pets, gruesome brawls, or uneventful idleness. Under the precarious state of warring kingdoms, this is, perhaps, the best you can salvage. Equanimity, in manageable bits.

So long as enemies don’t meet, catastrophes won’t concatenate. A peaceful day may be ushered into completion, so as long as the path of Gods do not cross the path of Demons.

But by the force of chaos’ wicked humour, the evening came... and they did.

*

Wednesday

Evening

There are many things remarkable about the God called Tyr. To be sure, there are many things remarkable about all Gods and Goddesses, for that is the nature of their kind. It is not in many of their intentions to be ostentatious, but as if sentient, their remarkability likes to make themselves seen and known. Be it from beauty, to might, to voluptuousness, to girth; in the divine, these are qualities born to be perfected and embodied...

There are many things remarkable about the God called Tyr, but two things, in particular, stand out amongst them. One was his keen nose, that lets no whiff escape its detection. And now, this keen nose of his is in the most ridiculous of agitations, signifying the presence of troubles! He smells the rank stench of troubles, that exists minutely, in drunk breaths, rising adrenaline, and salty tears.

Still seething from slight embarrassment after the confrontation at the pub, Tyr committed himself back to his duty of patrolling. He tilts his head up to the sky, and saw a dimming day; such times, more than ever, the kingdom needs dependable soldiers. Because, now, as the last shred of the afternoon slips away, vendors drop their acts of congeniality, and the typical worker's feigned resolve for their work comes crumbling down.

In one corner of the street, a clerk turned away a group of tardy customers, and began a heated spat. By a coffeehouse, two men shoved at each other over who to take out the rubbish. On the other street, another customer argued about how arriving three minutes late warranted being turned away. By a narrow alley, a husband and wife's domestic crept out into public for all the town to gawk.

Tyr gave a sigh, and gathered up his dignity. His magnificence tramped through town, with voluble steps stunning everyone into high alert. Soon, whichever street he was in, quiet deference followed. The presence of this God of War, ironically resolved conflict before they happened. He stared at the arguers, and they separated; he stared at two brawlers, and they shook hands and reconciled; he stared at the toddler throwing tantrums, and the toddler picked himself up, apologised to his mother, and promised to exhibit well-behaved manners from then on.

His keen nose traces the trouble, and his fierce eyes fix them.

Yet, while Tyr was dutifully keeping order of the town, the uncertainty had begun pestering his mind. As he scanned the faces of people around him, the reality became ever so repulsive. The whereabouts of the Demonic pair, deceitfully hidden in his very proximity. How the fiendish foes stowed away in one of these faces, like vermin upon seafaring ships. It was enough to irritate; it was enough to madden. Knowing a blemish, but not able to correct it, the sensitive mind can't take this as anything other than mockery. Each minute that passes without the Demon's capture, came illusory scoffing at his competence and dignity. And the world grows more wanton by some degrees.

As the sun sinks lower into the mountains, the casted shadows throughout town grew fainter. Again, with that skilled sense of smell, Tyr picked up the breaths of relief from hard workers, scent of candles in lanterns, and smoke from houses readying dinner. Signs of rising serenity, which his present mood so vehemently scorns.

But suddenly, came a scent that overwhelmed all the others; its arrival effectively shunting Tyr into zeal. The God gave his nose a quick rub, and took it in once more. There were no more doubts. This smell, was the product of an outlandish mixture: alien, native and wicked. And Tyr traced this wild scent... to a pair of pedestrians just coming into view. As he witnessed the two meandering men, everything seemed to fit beautifully into place.

The walkers, undoubtedly local, yet one hesitates around the roads. Both smell of dirt, hay and cow, yet one wears a statesman's uniform, and the other a miller's. From there, it only spiralled into malignant mystery: the faint whiffs of blood from the miller's hand... dead skin, plastered into their countenance... and the fetid fluids of yesterday's amphibious monstrosity, oozing from the men's bodies.

He found them, at last.

The catharsis rushed across Tyr, when rage was finally given a reason to amass. In his eyes, it was as if whatever disguise the Demons conjured had already melted away. There was no more room for façades, equivocation or escape. In the God's eyes, the war has been waged.

Slowly, Tyr stooped down toward the ground, and clenched a sharp piece of rock in his hands. The Demons approached closer, and for the first time in the day, Tyr stood as calm as millponds, with a mind of clarity. The Demons are now yards away, but he did not stir. The Demons are directly in front, he let them pass... and they did...

The world froze as they crossed the grounds of that furious God, and he flung into action. Tyr clenched the sharp rock, and forced out the all the destructive power in his arm. The rock was launched out with a clamorous resonance, fast beyond belief.

The piece of rock soared toward the Demons, as if sentient with ferocity. It cut across the air, intent on slicing through the statesman's neck, before it was stopped, by the swift hands of his partner. Deflected, the rock scurried off into the distance, but not before drawing blood from the miller's protective hand, and streams of yellow blood started to flow.

That was all Tyr needed. His nose flared up in violence, capturing the odious odours of Demons in full, morphing all turbid emotions of fury, contempt and brutality into a singular will to slaughter. The hitherto resting weapon at his back was drawn, and swung at full force toward the Demons. Rapid, powerful, and contemptuous, was the titanic sword he wielded. The slab of iron, more monster than metal, now unhinged, set upon its targets, implacable until they lay in pieces.

The blade caught the miller in its path, and after a moment's delay, the structures of a man came crumbling down before his partner, and before the God.

There are many things remarkable about the God called Tyr, but two things, in particular, stand out amongst them. One was his keen nose. The other, was his will...

It was not so much about the strength of his will, nor anything he could yield from it. Rather, the remarkable thing, was how this will dances delicately on the thin barrier between determination... and obsession. Sometimes, the essence of both sides gets muddled in the actions of the God of War. When in battle, many may find it hard to deduce whether he embodied the soldier, or the madman.

*

Tolman's world was thrown into a turbulent whirl, with a tumbling neck cleaved right through. His final images before the rupture, was that of his exalted duke, still dignified and unscathed. As the blade tore through that final strand of flesh that held his head in place, the image fled. Officially pithed from the earthly plane, the Demon boy's fate was left to the impalpable, which one can only pray is merciful.

The pain that was over in a flash for the victim, though, would compound into a grievous mass, felt infinitely in a timeless void by the onlooking duke. Abaddon watched, first, with a mind utterly blank, utterly uncomprehending; before the event was felt in torrential floods, and every detail of the scene was insufferably understood. The boy's body split off in two pieces onto the ground, eventually to be dirtied. As the legs fell, Abaddon saw the loss of innocence; with the torso, he saw the loss of potential; then came the head, and he saw the loss of a Demon's dignity, along with a God's malice. The workings of heartless predators, that train to claim lives within a blink of an eye, reigning a tyranny upon Nature.

Vision curtailed to redness, all else of the world was shut away, but himself, the corpse, and the murderer. From deep within his belly, came the buzzes of the stirring pets. Whispers of the locusts, begging not to be stifled, begging to vent their amalgamated animus.

Then... with a single, wilful thought, the horde was unleashed. Bursting from the vessel, was wave upon wave of writhing blackness, reverberant and alive. Conjured from the depths of the earth and beyond, the insects expand into the air, swallowed the sky, before beginning their tirade on the streets. The sea of swarms jostled against the people, the walls, everything material was at their control. Singing around the neighbourhood, was millions of deafening chirps, some in ecstasy of being liberated, some still bitterly in grief, some clueless and indifferent.

The locusts continue to pour out from the body, each individual was eager to show their servitude. Unbeknownst to them, however, the one commanding their collective... was no longer their master, not the king of locusts, nor even a duke, but simply, a Demon in its purest form: hateful and vengeful. Demons, who will cross all boundaries to spite those who wrong them.

Total annihilation of the body, that, is the price Abaddon has to pay for summoning this horde from the underworld. In the present moment, surrendering his life comes as such a doddle. Abaddon would toss it all away for revenge. It is a very poetic situation to be in, in a way. To face such a tempestuous whirlwind of bitterness, that even age-long and firmly bred instincts of self-preservation consent to its destruction, for any semblance of retribution that could be dealt. The satisfaction would be short-lived yet so irrationally welcomed.

So, having ceded his life, Abaddon knelt down, letting the horde do as it pleases. His face was still hidden in the swarm, as he embraced the torso of the messenger boy, which was beginning to chill. Suddenly, after some realisation, the duke frantically searched around his surroundings, and found the severed head a few yards away. Pulling the ghastly organ toward him, he stayed there, hunched over the corpse.

The first wave of horrors was passed, all reactivity drained; now, all that are left were dry and miserable quiescence. Yet, it is in that quiet period of mourning, that the mind wanders more madly than before. Delusions and illusions, which before, was the mind's job to abjure, are welcomed in with open arms, hoping their falsified versions of reality bring less pain. Now, one such phantasm has arisen, out of Abaddon's tired mind.

Tolman, back together, as bright and colourful as a boy could be. Abaddon stared upwards, meeting the phantom's face, so weirdly bright in the darkness. So calm was the temperament, and so resolved was the expression, telling him to cast away the guilt, to get over the grief, and most importantly... to find some better ways to hurt.

Finally, reclaiming rationality in an instant, Abaddon stopped his self-sacrificial ritual, and languidly stood back up. The swarm was still gigantic, spanning across the neighbourhood, wreaking havoc as a living flood. His

body was still hidden within the pests, and so, relaxing his person, Abaddon let the swarm carried him off into any covert corner they could find. Once again, escaping the clutches of the Gods, the Demonic duke retreats into the dark alleys of the kingdom, but not before giving two final commands to the locust horde. The first, to devour the corpse of his fallen partner, and let him vanish under the hand of Demons, rather than rot in the land of rancorous Gods. The second, to destroy as much as they please, and as much as they can.

*

Tyr, upon seeing what the stroke of his sword had unleashed, pulled back from the scene of the slaughter. Then, rebuking that momentary weakness, he steadied his sword, and readied himself for another strike... but was too late.

Tyr cut through the wave of locusts, and nothing happened. The sword slipped passed the black mass, like slicing through water, pure futility. Expanding and expanding, it grew immune to might and speed, when one dies, two rise in its place. Then, came another swing by the vehement God, killing one column, only to regenerate a thicker wall. Angered, he went for another, and another, and another... and the horde squirms, impenetrable.

How the brawny stands useless against the puny in numbers. After some good few dozen strikes, he finally saw fit to change his strategy. Now, glancing at the ground below, he intends to split the earth apart, plunging the horde into a pit, spreading it asunder. But, just as the swarm enlarged in size, what grew equally much, was its enmity. Discontent with taking hits, it launches its first assault. Swiftly bursting out from the bulbous blackness, were slithering knots aiming for the God.

Barely able to see, Tyr darts away on instinct, yet still had his cheeks caught by it, drawing a streak of blood. As the black tentacle retracted before his face, the God saw the ghastly sight of the knotted locusts, a thousand gaping mandibles, coupled with thousand more belligerent eyes.

From there, the tides of battle were turned, the hitherto combative Tyr found himself cowering to-and-fro from the onslaught of the horde. The tentacles rained down upon him, forcing brute strength to be stored away, and flexibility to work tirelessly, as he dodged the blows with countless twists and bends. But even with this uncomfortable change in the fray, there was Tyr, flawlessly evading, and cutting off any strand that flew his way. One strike came dramatically close, and just when it seemed a hit was inevitable, up came his great sword, shattering the cable of locusts upon collision with the layer of metal.

The writhing horde spares not a moment of relief for its foe, and it keeps whipping its threads of conjoined thoraxes, determined to dance with the God for eternity. Fortunately, even in such large numbers, the simple functions of the locusts' minds cannot accumulate into wisdom. Once Tyr had been inured to the patterns of the horde's strikes, he was poised to start thinking and observing. Minute details mattered so much more in situations like these, and Tyr found something increasingly strange.

The horde was big enough to reach the rooftops of the nearby houses, thick enough to blanket the sun away. Yet, with the ceaselessly stirring pests that make up that blanket, there was always some transparency. Across all the areas of the massive horde, some light never fails to sneak by little spaces between the bugs. All except the base, where the locusts stir in complete, impenetrable darkness.

Dodging another strike, Tyr gripped his weapon, and dashed toward that darkness. Clutching both hands, he swung at it... and to his pleasant surprise, the sword bounced off, solid meeting solid. That was when he knew, for certain, the truth behind that darkness.

It was the core. A barrier that shields the master from harm, as he commands the subservient swarm. A barrier with thickness reinforced by inhibition and cowardice. Arriving at this conclusion, Tyr couldn't help but scoff. Having found the chance to return the flow of battle, his resolve redoubled. Dodging what will be likely be the final whip from the horde, Tyr stilled his body and his sword... then, just like before, sprang into action.

One simple plan hatched itself into the mind. No need for tactics, or wits. No more jumping or turning. The plan... was to just swing really hard. And he did. An energetically unrestrained, trajectory unobstructed, immeasurably powerful, scenically magnificent, and descriptively gratuitous... swing.

The blade collides with the sturdy dark barrier, fighting for dominance, and prevailed. The innards exposed, a pair of lifeless eyes stared back from within, wincing at the sudden intrusion of sunlight. Tyr smelt the luscious scent of victory, as he readies another energetically unrestrained, trajectory unobstructed etc etc... swing, this time, intended to draw the fatal blood of the duke.

But, as sudden as catastrophe, the horde came alive, more vicious than ever after their master's exposure. The whips seized the God by the ankle, pulling him away from the core. Mad with aggression, the horde dragged Tyr across the gravel, slamming him down once or twice, before flinging him into the cobblestone wall. The screeches became louder, echoing across the now barren streets.

Still squinting with pain, Tyr never took his gaze away from the visage of the duke. The opening he had created with the swing, was reforming, though slowly. Most perturbing of all, the eyes, so empty previously, were revitalising little by little. The God regained his ground, and proceeded to forget all the aches in his person. Once more, the horde began its lashes, and Tyr was thrown back into the rhythm of dodges. This time, however, they were quicker than before, and small scratches were accumulating on his body.

Then, the horrors struck Tyr all at once, when he saw the horde's next move. While the whips were still coming, a rotund ball had detached itself from the core. With the aid of a million pairs of legs, it crawled sluggishly away, leaving a trail of a few stray pests. It made its way to a nearby building, before the sphere of locusts scattered, some hopping, some flying, but all directly back onto the vicious swarm.

Tyr dropped his weapon in an instant, and desperately gave chase, to no avail. As he took each step toward the duke, the horde would bind his body tighter; twice he broke loose from sheer power, but the whips would only come back thicker. When just yards away from the Demon, Tyr was completely frozen in place by the binds, with an excruciating hold on his throat.

Yet, even then, the animosity exuding from Tyr, was not wavering one bit. Conversely, just in front of the alley, the eyes of the Demon stared back at the God, with equal disdain. In that second long interaction, the abhorrence exuding between the two, was enough to overpower a kingdom's worth of goodwill.

Abaddon was the first to quit this hate-ridden exchange, but not before contributing a final piece of message: a smirk, in all its smug, mocking glory. With that, he merged into the shadows, back into the kingdom's pool of people and places. And all the God could do, was roar out his wrath, as he sees his foe vanish from before him.

The horde, now released from the burdens of command and protection, tapped into the essence of pure mayhem... and thrashed. Tyr, unfortunately, was there to face the full brunt of it.

Still under the tenacious grip of the countless tentacles, Tyr was swept along the horde's unhinged journey of destruction. In its attempt to collapse a building, it rammed its victim, in bondage, against the walls of a shop.

With each slam, the splinters dug deeper into the God's skin, and the only thing to do, was to bear through the pain with gritted teeth. With each slam, also came the unshakeable attack upon the psyche: the feeling of powerlessness.

Unshakeable insecurities that only crept in when you're at a loss, and never when you're triumphing; a cruel entity that kicks you down after you've fallen some six flights of steps. They whisper importunately to convince you of your own ineptitude, planting dodgy ideas in your mind, ideas of giving up or changing life. Of course, eventually, many of us learn to cope with their nagging presence. Some embrace it, and learn from it; some ignore it; some completely demolish it, and elevate themselves perhaps a little too much.

In Tyr's case, he does with these insecurities what he's done with all other feelings: convert it to hot rage for battle.

Once more, the hands ram the God against the precarious wall. But, this time, an arm breaks free from its clutches, and with an outstretched palm, fight against the horde's force, and halts the impact. Then, a fearsome bellow, as he tore apart the link of locusts on his chest.

But, before he could free himself, the horde had done it for him. Giving a twirl, it flung the mighty God across the street, back onto the cobble wall. The rush of energy seemed to quickly dissipate upon his crash. His languid body slumps down toward the ground; with disordered vision and ringing ears, his conscious breathing was the only thing keeping him from stupor. Tasting his own blood from his battered head, another wave of rage settled in, and Tyr stood back up, despite reason's screaming objection. Out of habit, he reaches for his great sword, when he found it wasn't there, he decided that fists will do just as well. So, he pulled out a stance, and waited for its approach.

After recollecting itself, the horde began advancing, ready to struck a final, fatal blow to its foe. Squirming its way with the million pairs of feet, the insects' buzzing became more devious, and their eyes more malefic. Strangely, to the beaten and blurry-eyed Tyr, it seemed the entire mass of the horde, was getting a shade darker too. In fact, it was not just the horde, but the ground, and buildings, and mountains too were darkening in hue...

Tyr tilts his head upwards, and saw the sky, masked in clouds of greyness. A twitch of the nostrils, and his nose swiftly came to the conclusion. Those amassing rainclouds were hiding something, heavenly beasts that like to grace the world in clamour and eruption: thunder and lightning. Though he didn't notice at first, at just some distance away, were the two beings curating the movements of those very beasts.

With a hefty clap, Shango summoned a drum between his palms, a djembe, immaculately painted and collaged with platinum at the base. Meanwhile, Thor brandished the fabled Mjolnir, with a few playful tosses and spins. Positioning his drum in place, Shango stepped back, and Thor came in front. Merging their powers over the storm, the two Gods of Thunder ready their strike upon the horde, which was inching closer to Tyr. Solemnly, Thor raised Mjolnir toward the sky, and it hangs there still, like a floating mountain.

"Roight, we'll make 'em piss 'emselves!"

And he brings it down, squarely on the head of Shango's drum! The rumble quivered throughout the land, and the beat reverberated in every direction, soon, echoed into the heart of the stirring nimbuses, and became a stern command.

A bolt of light pierces down, bright and instant! Right through the middle of the locust horde. Across its entire body, the lightning severs the massive chains of insects. At last, the baleful mass of destruction comes undone, burst apart into bits, endlessly splitting as it crumbles to the ground.

Only when sound fully caught up, did the thinking mind comprehend every tumult and anarchy that unfolded. The roar of thunder, along with the pathetic screeches of the locusts... Tyr relished in both of them, as he slumped back down onto the dirt, smiling at victory and at the chance to finally rest.

*

Wednesday

Dusk

Just as usual, always safely romping about at the other side of the kingdom, were the two children, Urd and Cirijs. Cirijs and Urd; never a part of the havoc, unknowingly evading all the ugliness of life, just as the soft-hearted Fates curate it. Innocently ignorant, the children had glided past another day of turmoil, and now were resting their weary feet on a bench by the road.

The sun was fast setting, and, as if desperate to stay, unleashes all its fervour at once, engulfing the sky and land in its warm orange rays. So strong is the sun's will, that this ardent hue soon bursts forth onto everything, natural or otherwise; onto grass, and leaves, ceilings and tiles, people and their very knickers, positively transporting us into a world of orange.

When one has the chance, give this orange world a look when it comes. It is like a blaze without the flickers, without the dangers; it does nothing but cajoles all the minds who grasp beauty. No pensive, artistic thoughts or philosophies needed, not even words are requisite. One just needs to gawk, and nothing else, plain and simple, nothing convoluted.

And that spirit, was very much embodied within the two children, as they sat, dawdling away on the bench.

Their evening had been eventful. Determined on their quest on a finding a pet for their adventures, the two scurried their way into every store, stall or tent that sold any semblance of a creature, plying the vendors with questions until they were eventually chased away. Still, a pet worth their measly budget was not easy to find; it was always either too impractical, or too "silly". After exiting some dozen stores, a companion was still not to be found, while the list of rejected pets only expanded.

Goldfish:	Inability to 'tag along' on adventures.
Stick insect:	Would get lost in the forest.
Cockroach:	No.
Spider:	See above.
Common toad:	Looks smug, like it's too good for us.
Slug	Just plain boring

It was after some hours of hunting, did they finally come away with a suitable critter, purchased with their whole fund of two silvers...

Cirijs, still chuffed to bits, had their new pet held before his chest, as he gently caresses its back. Beside the boy, a good two feet away, sat Urd, with a look incredulity.

"See, Urd? It took a while, but we managed to find a pet, din' we?" Cirijs flashed her a cocky smile.

"Truly, I of little faith, stand corrected." Came Urd's dry reply.

As if eager for its introduction, the critter in Cirius' hand started to resonantly sound out its cries: a series of light squeaks, coming from a brown-furred mouse. It squirmed in the boy's hand, sniffing every inch of the mysterious contraption that's locking its body in place.

"Cirius, are you sure you ought to be handling that mouse?"

"What d'ye mean?"

"I mean, mice aren't exactly known for their cleanliness. What if it's got germs, or bites?"

"Don't be cruel, Urd! Slandering our new friend already? Why, I expected better from you!"

Urd shook her head with a sigh, and decided to leave Cirius to his fancies. Instead, compelled by the serene and gentle air of the ending evening, Urd gazes up at the dimming sky, admiring the specks of stars, that just began illuminating into place. She felt a strange sense of warmth, as if a sliver of a star's heat found its way here, from unspeakable distances away. Or, really, the warmth could be from the people, as near as this neighbourhood, lighting the candles in their lamps in unison, as the kingdom settles into its daily quiescence. Whatever caused this warmth, Urd was enjoying it. For now, home, seemed a most dreadful destination for eventuality to bring her.

But sentimentality is not the only thing aroused by the approaching night. With the night, the sly and shiftily also find their comfortable places. In the glassy-eyed owls, who see just as well in the dark, night is sordid series of ruthless hunts. Or with the cunning foxes, where the day is spent cowering from the large, and night is spent terrorizing the small. And of course, sometimes, the humans, who make the most unspeakable uses of the night out of all animals. Essentially, the night... is when the dodgy starts prowling. And naturally, among this community of nocturnal opportunists, we see the God of trickery walking within it...

Loki turned out from the street corner, and crossed the path of the two dawdling children. With a face ever insouciant, he meets the curious glances of Cirius and Urd, and approaches them.

"You two again..."

"Hullo, Mr. Loki, sir!" Cirius greeted gleefully.

"And what have you got in your hands, boy?"

Eagerly, Cirius held his new companion up to Loki. The mouse's head poked out between the thumb and forefinger, still frantically sniffing every molecule before it. Failing to dazzle or even impress, the mouse only got a few disgusted grunts from the God.

"Just when I thought you children couldn't get sillier, now you're playing with rodents!"

"I'll have you know. I have little to do with the mouse, Lord Loki! It's only Cirius who has that weird fascination with it!" Urd protested.

"Don't call me 'lord'."

"And I'LL have both of you know, he isn't just any ol' mouse! He's a mighty special one, he's even got a degree! Fancy that! A mouse who's gone through school! I didn't know there was school for animals!"

"What on earth are you *talking* about, Cirius?"

"It's true, the vendor said so! He says this mouse has got a *pet degree*! AND, he's a foreign breed, imported from the East!"

"I'm sure he means *pedigree*, Cirius."

"Well, whatever he means, it sounds fancy, doesn't it? This mouse of ours is no pushover!"

"*Yours*, the mouse is *yours*."

"Hah, you better have remembered the vendor's face, boy!" Loki chimed in.

“What do you mean?”

“A *foreign* breed, he said? Load of rubbish!”

“How do you know?”

“Solid colour, naked ears, a dead giveaway! That’s a *mus musculus*!”

“What’s that?”

“A house mouse... in other words, it’s as *foreign* as you and me! Absolutely common or garden.”

“...”

“...”

“WE’VE BEEN BAMBOOZLED!” Urd bawled.

A satisfied grin spread across the God’s face.

“Well, never you mind, Urd. I’m sure he’s still plenty special!”

“UGH, GET RID OF IT, CIRIUS! WHO KNOWS WHAT FILTH IT’S BEEN IN?!”

“He hasn’t done anything wrong!” Cirius clutched the rodent closer.

“Behold, the future of Asgard...” Loki muttered as the two kids’ voices became louder, and their argument wilder.

The boisterous voices of the two echoed throughout the neighbourhood, which had just begun enjoying the quietude. That blissful period for many, where it is too late for any unfinished chores to be done. Paperwork may pile on as they please, dust may gather as they do, once the sun’s fully set, whatever doesn’t kill you might as well be left for tomorrow.

That exultant time of day, when the families have ushered their young ones onto bed, brew themselves a pot of tea for two, and spend the small window of time regaining what little individuality they have. To hear some more boisterous voices of children, then, is the last thing such a neighbourhood wants.

Collectively, the heads start poking out the houses’ windows, each as bilious as a neutered hound. These angry people whisper their grumbles, just quiet enough so that you don’t hear, but loud enough so that you know they want you to hear. The whispers cursed those wayward weans, insult their manners, tone and future, and their derelict parents; if left to foster, there was no telling how scornful these whispers would devolve.

Yet, those whispers, as harsh and spiteful as they were, did not, and could not reach those children’s ears anyway. Shielded by the two’s naivety, they were reduced to gibberish, one insignificant sound in a world of wonder that holds many more. Even now, as Cirius chased Urd around with the mouse, trying to get her to at least pet it once, the girl had no reservation in letting out a blaring shriek, that rang across the neighbourhood.

The whispers, however, were not lost to the adult in the company of the chastised children. And it is always up to the adult, even if they are faultless, to appease other adults, simply by the virtue of their adulthood. With a sigh, Loki grabbed the two children by their heads, stopping their chase from escalating, yet, this still wasn’t enough to stop the blustering mouths.

“I don’t want to touch it, Cirius!”

“Oh, don’t be mean! Look at his eyes, he’s just pleading to be friends!”

“Alright, you two...”

“He can bloody well plead on for life, because I’m not doing it!”

“Well, aren’t you haughty? Hmph, maybe he doesn’t want YOU touching him, ever thought about that?”

“Listen...”

“Excuse you, he’d be lucky to have me touch him!”

“Well, now he doesn’t want it! You’re too haughty to be friends with anyway!”

“LISTEN!!!”

At last, the children snapped out of their argument, and gave their attention to Loki.

“You didn’t need to yell, Mr. Loki. Honestly, we’re right in front of you...”

“Right, also, it’s late, you ought to have some *decency*, Lord Loki.”

Swallowing his annoyance, he breathed in a big breath of patience, and held it for a few seconds.

“Shouldn’t you two be heading home, now?” Loki finally said.

“I suppose...” Urd replied.

“Well, go along, then.”

“Wait, we haven’t decided where we should go tomorrow!” Cirius spoke alarmedly.

“WHY do you need to do that NOW?”

“Just trying to be efficient...”

“You two shouldn’t be gallivanting around in the first place, if you value your lives that is! Haven’t you heard? There’s a Demon loose in the kingdom!”

“Ah, what’s there to worry about? Me and Urd saw TWO Demons in the forest just the other day. And look, we’re totally fine!”

“Hmph, you two have been coddled into oblivion by my daughter’s lenient ways. To escape from catastrophe, yet instead of caution, you’ve developed arrogance.”

“We’re NOT arrogant!” Cirius protested.

“If you think yourselves subject to the Demon’s clemency, then you’re not only arrogant, but ignorant!”

“We’re NOT ignorant.” Urd hissed.

By now, the cantankerous crowd had retreated back into their houses, and the neighbourhood was lonelier than before. Cirius placed his new furry companion in his right trouser pockets, and stretched his limbs, ready for the journey back. As Urd turned towards the direction homewards, she noticed just how dark the night truly was. A foreboding land of inscrutability looming constantly around. She began to shudder.

“Come along, Urd, don’t you want to go back?” Cirius grabbed her by the wrist.

“Wait. Aren’t you coming with us, Lord Loki?” Urd turned to the God of trickery.

“Why? Do you not know your way home?”

“Well, I do...”

“What’s the problem, then?”

“Just... doesn’t seem proper for us to walk back alone. What if hoodlums are around?”

“What’s not proper? You only met me here by chance, didn’t you? So, I’d say regardless of my being here, you two would have had to walk back alone anyway! You can hardly blame me for your own imprudence in staying out so late.”

“Aha! Who told you we weren’t *already* going home when you met us? And it was only by this fortuitous meeting that we were beguiled into staying out late! Over and above, *you* were the one who instigated our argument by revealing the nature of the mouse, ultimately-”

“ALRIGHT, you tykes! If you really insist on having a guardian, then HAVE one!”

Losing that last shred of patience, Loki finally relented. Wanting his interaction with these two nightmarish children done with, he hatched a plan for their escort back home.

The God stamped his foot onto the ground three times, and hissed out an incantation, ominous and serpentine. Suddenly, the dirt tremored frantically beneath them, and something emerged, with movements as lithe and a dancer. Cirius and Urd covered behind one another, as the entity from the dirt rose up just as tall as their frames, and piercing out the dust, a pair of glowing, violet eyes. Its body slithers in place, shaking off the coat of dirt on its smooth, purple scales, all while keeping its gaze perpetually on the children. Every so often, a red, forked tongue protrudes quick and restless.

“Unfortunately, children. I have some prior engagements in this very area, so it would be quite a bother for me to leave. But, fret not... Jormungandr, here, can do just as well as me.” Loki gave the snake’s hood a good rub.

The two stared blankly at the serpent.

“It’ll bite any *hoodlums* you happen to meet. And not to mention...”

Loki hissed at the snake, and again, it started to tremor its body. But as it did, its long body began to radiate a shade of purple, casting light bright enough to cover the entire street in its hue.

“What do you say, children?”

“...”

“...”

The two were still staring blankly.

“You are repugnant, Mr. Loki.” Urd uttered with contempt.

“Wicked...” Cirius muttered under his breath.

And so, the two children, along with two new beastly friends, started on their way back to their respective homes. Cirius marched excitedly beside Jormungandr, whose head stood erected dignifiedly, as its body glides by. Perhaps too enthralled by the majestic serpent, Cirius did not notice that at some point, the mouse in his pocket had crawled out his trousers, and was gone forever. This tragic news only occurred to him before bed.

Urd separated herself from the bizarre company, and walked a few feet behind. She had demanded pretty early on that they would stop at her house first. They didn’t end up encountering any hoodlums on their short journey. But, nonetheless, from this day forth, Urd swore that no matter how congenial and appealing the nightly atmosphere may seem to be, she will never be coaxed by it, and stay out late ever again.

Midgard holds many prowlers of the night. Though contrary to Urd's concerns, hoodlums are actually few and far between. No, the kind that haunts the dark and clandestine streets in this kingdom are less threatening in disposition, but arguably, more virulent in guile. These are your clients and their mercenaries, customers and their black marketeers, adulterers and their harlots. Their presence in the night is delicately planned, rather than from impulse. In some ways, that makes them worse than any acrimonious hoodlum that can prowl the streets. An old-timer from the neighbourhood shared his thoughts to the pub:

"At least when ye meet a mugger at night, they're honest! Ye give whatever ye have, and they leave ye alone. Or sometimes, ye meet a ruffian, they give ye a punch or too, and when you ask what for, they say 'ye just rub them the wrong way'. I'm not saying they're good, I'm not excusing their behaviour. But here, at least they're *honest!*"

"But with these types, ye never know what's behind them. I had a mate last time, call him Garry, we worked together for years, practically joined at the hip. It's a special connection, right, at least I thought. I told him all my problems, and he told me his. Then, one day, I was out a tad late with another mate, then I spotted him. Garry, out in the dead of night. And where, ye say?"

"A brothel. A brothel! Mates for five years, never heard about it, never suspected it! Here was a man I see every day, at church every week, went to his wedding, was his best man. And there he was... at a brothel. He didn't see me, but I saw his face. I'm not saying I can read his mind. But that night there, I just knew, that was a face of a natural born *liar!* Could never see him the same way again, from that day on. I never told him I saw, never told his wife too."

"But ye know what I learnt from that? I learnt how *clever* dishonesty is hidden. If I was to never see his face that night, I would have believed nothing was ever going on forever! Right now, when I see all ye faces, I just cannot stop thinking to myself, what are ye hiding? Am I going to spot yer face out there, in the dead of night, one day?"

Loki recalled the words of the old man who shared this story, the lugubrious expression of his face, as he glared at the people in the pub, each with more distrust and cynicism than the last. The God of trickery snickered to himself, as he further remembered what he thought silently at the time.

"There's only dishonesty when they would reject your honesty anyway. So, either let those dishonest interactions persist in the dark, so that you may enjoy the appearance of integrity. Or, embrace the capricious hearts of humans, and suddenly, honesty and dishonesty melts into nothing, in a world of entropy."

Crossing his legs as he sat on the bench, Loki bathed in the soft gales around him, while he waited for his client to arrive. His very own line of 'dishonest interactions', this time, it happened to be trade of 'Dark Magic Products'. The standard polymorph potion: just a hundred gold to turn whomever you want into a frog; a hundred and fifty if you want the reversal potion. The slogan of his advertisement:

It's not murder if they're just arcanelly turned to an amphibious creature.

(May break other laws unrelated to manslaughter)

This is merely one such occasion under the grey and black skies which hides countless other dark dealings. Throughout the years, Loki had seen and heard it all: Jan Smiths and John Whites, Jane Johnsons, and every so

often, Aliza Lizardbrother Jr IV. This time, it was rather simple: Ola Nordmann, the ultimate unassuming name, fit for unimaginable faces.

The kingdom may audibly harbour their distaste for the God of trickery. Secretly, however, whenever those wicked urges of mortals become all too unbearable, there is only one God who would entertain them. And seeing as dishonesty is going nowhere, Loki was poised to keep his job for a long time to come.

*

Mr. Frans Moller is a man of business. That is, when a man of business meets a conundrum in life, their instinctual method of resolving it is based on trade. A leaky roof requires a roofer; broken furniture requires a carpenter, that much is natural for most people. But, the man of business will take it one step further, by introducing this commercial method of solving problems into their social life...

It has come to Mr. Moller's attention, that the quarrels between him and his wife have become more frequent, and more bellicose. He didn't know when exactly the sparks between them had vanish, all that mattered was, now, their union has become an unbearable irksomeness.

Divorce, of course, was always an option, but sometimes, these options are simply too much for the man of business. A civil discourse, taking into account the opinions of all sides? Madness! And what of the settlement? The mortgages? And the dreaded welfare for the weans?

"If they want to encourage the civil method of settling things, they shouldn't have crammed it full of rigmaroles to begin with!" Mr. Moller reasoned.

And thus, here he is, the man of business has found a way to economize on his divorce. No courts nor judges needed, simply a pithy report for the constable: a wife and mother gone missing, presumed dead.

Such a tragedy would be all the more receivable, now that we have a Demon prowling around the kingdom. For just the price of a polymorph potion, Frans Moller, or rather, Ola Nordmann, could erase an unhappy marriage, swiftly, and conveniently.

"Tell me this is not the height of bargaining. I dare you to tell me you are a sensible businessman, if you will not choose expediency over convolution. I am only doing what the average men of business is too cowardly to do."

Mr. Moller turns into the alleyway, for a shortcut to the meeting place with his treacherous marketeer. He had assumed he would be alone in that narrow and dingy alley. But lo, slouching by a short set of stairs, was a man with a pale face. He looked defeated, as if all his pleasantness was drained at once by a single, calamitous moment. Slowly, the Mr. Moller and the stranger met eyes, making the former avert it awkwardly. He resolved to continue forward. As he was just about to cross this sad stranger by the steps, his leg was seized, stunning him with a yelp.

Mr. Moller stood in a frantic silence, awaiting the fearsome fate this stranger had in store for him. What is it he wants? Is he a bum in a drunken stupor, or a mugger? Please, let it not be a mugger! But, instead of any mugging, the stranger merely asked in a soft, ominous voice:

"What's your name?"

That was when Mr. Moller noticed how elegant this stranger's features were. Bright eyes which dispel distrust; lips red with health; all on an unblemished face. If he was a bum, it would be the world's most charming bum. Haply, it may have been this comely face which compelled Mr. Moller to give an honest answer.

"... Frans Moller."

"What are you doing out so late?"

That sensitive question snapped Mr. Moller out from his admiration, and he suddenly remembered his task at hand. Forcefully, he tried to wedge his legs out from this stranger's grip, raising his voice as he did.

"Look, my man, I haven't got any change for you. So, let me be!" He lied. He always brought change out so he could pay things in exact.

Seeing his captive struggle so aggressively, the stranger, too, didn't feel the need to continue peacefully... with a violent pull, he forced Mr. Moller down with a tumble. Before he could even yell, he was choked by the neck. Moller fought against the arm strangling him, but it simply relentless, heedless to any of his own strength. With vision half seeping into unconsciousness, he stared wondrously, how quickly the charm was gone, morph into deep, fear inducing evil.

The locusts began their march upwards to the victim's head, hopping in a line, up the knees, to the crotch, then his torso. Once at the neck, they cavort into the mouth, one after another. Soon, they stretch out the victim's mouth in full, until his cheeks were bloated with the sickly mass of writhing insects, precariously wobbling, ready to burst.

Abaddon squatted before the unconscious body, mesmerised by his subjects' work. Playfully, he stretched out his forefinger, tickling the veins on Mr. Moller's mouth. Finally, pressing it down, it burst! The locusts spatter out in a frenzy of buzzes in all direction. And what was Mr. Moller's bottom half of a face, was torn out in an instant, leaving only a jagged gap of blood and spit. Another corpse, left unrecognizable in this kingdom's furtive sites. As the Demon revelled in his sordid murder, his mind was cleansed of all the tragedies that had befallen him. The death of his young friend, too, seemed a small and distant bother, in the rancorous glory of this gory scene.

But he wasn't finish. Just as the transgression of homicide was over, the Demon turned to transgress in theft, in particular, a thievery of the identity.

Spending the next few moments in quiet concentration, Abaddon and his locusts peeled off the remainder of Mr. Moller's countenance, slowly merging it bit by bit with his own. Plastering the final piece, Abaddon stepped out of the alley to bathe in the moonlight. Yet a new identity, this time, however, crafted solely by the hands of a Demon. Abaddon turned his head up at the sky, defiantly scoffing at divinity, while gasconading his own creation.

*

In such horrendous days, filled with errant happenings, and the approaching decay of Autumn, the weather is goaded into coldness. Loki was still waiting on the bench, amidst an unrelenting wind, which howls like the screams of the dying. The God wrapped his sides together, taking refuge from the chills in the long and smooth furs of his jacket. Once warmed by it, he scanned his surroundings, searching for any semblance of a person. There was none.

He is peculiarly late, this Ola Nordmann, or whatever fanciful name this suspicious person calls himself. Usually, when black markets are concerned, people would like to do it as quickly as possible. Loki had seen it time and time again. How they hustle the sale, those cloaked and hooded heads. How they hand in their sacks of gold, without a need for change. How they scurry off into some obscure paths immediately afterwards. Sometimes, not even anonymity nor the darkness of night is enough to mask the unrest that comes from the spirit of malice.

As the God of trickery sees it, tardiness in such situations only ever betokened one thing: hesitation. The burden of all conscious sinners, and the final barrier of the rational mind against irrationality.

“Cold feet, eh?” Loki thought out loud. “Well, I wonder which way you’ll go... Mr. Ola Nordmann. Will you snap into sensibility, or delude yourself further? Then again, hesitation is only another form of delusion, isn’t it? Come forth, or stay away. To you, it is a choice ultimately incumbent to the will. But cosmically, it is already as decided as the movement of our sun. If time and space wish to write it so, you will come forth, if they do not, you will stay away. So... which path has the Fates set for you?”

Just then, a figure emerged, strutting down the lane to the bench’s right. Walking past the many lamps, Loki caught a glimpse of the figure’s illuminated countenance, and simpered. Because what the God of trickery saw and judged, was a likeness and a hint. The figure, was one capable of deception, of the most extreme kind.

“He has chosen, and been determined, to come forth...”

Just as the figure came closer, Loki stood up in preparation to receive his client, and start this unlawful transaction. Eventually, he stepped out to meet the figure directly. The figure, on the other hand, had just noticed the God, and strangely enough, his face convulsed into quick twitches.

They were standing before each other, gingerly silent and staring. Now that they both were aware of one another, Loki realised just how unreasonably uncomfortable it was being near this man. A comely countenance that cannot compensate for the suffocating sense of dread beneath him. Loki knew, he had to keep on guard.

“You are Ola Nordmann?” Loki issued his question pithily.

“...”

“Well?”

“No.” The figure’s response was stern. “I’m Frans Moller.”

“Oh... well, good day, then.”

“Cheers.” He said it with a hint of disdain, as he walked off.

As Moller’s back was to Loki, slowly inching away. The discomfort surging throughout the God only deepened. Yet, with only such ambivalent signs surrounding him, Loki was lost on what he should actually do, and returned to the bench, waiting for Ola Nordmann.

For the rest of the hour, Loki waited. The transaction was left unfulfilled, but, rather than grumbling about the lost financial opportunity, what weighed more heavily on the God’s mind, was the uncanny man named Frans Moller, the enigma of what he’s done, and what he will do.

*

Wednesday

Night

The castle of Midgard gleams with an inextinguishable light, a beacon extolling the undying virtue of the Norse. Even now, in the darkest time of day, within each window of the castle, shines a realm of bright vivacity. From a distance away, the radiance is beauty; one appreciates, in rumination, the endless toils of a kingdom that keeps on bustling; a time when light is not in the sole occupancy of the sun, but mastered by humans, too, in our ability to conjure and control flame...

From up close, however, this castle is only annoying. Intrusively blinding from every corner, a nightmare for weary eyes, who have to squint through their passage, as they advance into increasing brightness. Such was the ordeal that Bayani had to go through, while she made her return in the dead of night. Marching up to the open gates, the radiance bursts forth unrelenting, forcing the Goddess' arm forward as a shield.

"You get used to it, Bayani." Hel was beside her, similarly walking with her own arm-shield.

"I don't seem to remember it being this bright when I arrived..."

"That means something major's going on in the great hall!" Sif chimed with the answer.

"A conference of sorts?" Bayani asked.

"Possibly."

"You reckon it would be about that big commotion in town earlier? The one we somehow completely missed?" Hel enquired.

"Most likely."

"If so, do you think Shango would be there?" Bayani questioned.

"I suppose."

"If it *is* about that, we don't need to be present, do we?" Hel catechized.

"*Alright*, girls, I'm sure whatever queries you might have would be answered if we just go and see for ourselves!" Sif finally lost it, and let out as big of an outburst as she's capable.

The oldest of trio marched forward with a mithered gait, trying to shake off the giggling ladies behind her. A part of her, however, also really wanted to know what was going on, in the great hall of the glorious castle. Eagerly, the three made their way inside the gates. Peering around, they hoped to bemuse themselves on any interesting turn of events. But what unfolded before them only caused more questions than solved them.

The band of servants, clad in robes of white, scampered to-and-fro, each evidently dealing with more than they could handle. One had his hands full, dragging along a giant sack behind, while in his mouth, clenched a of butcher's knife. As he passed by the three Goddesses, his head tilted down in an obsequious nod. The unbothered face of the servant still weighed heavily on their faces. Scarcely had the first servant left the room, that another soon entered; this one had a row of baskets dangling about her arm, each with their own set of ever so slightly different purple flowers. Soon, this one scampered out the room as well. Throughout the proceeding moments, the servants came and went, with great hustle, and with greater strangeness.

While Hel and Bayani were still mesmerized, Sif took to examine where they were all going. Watching them undulate around the corners, she soon determined their final destination: the throne room. And so, there she went.

"Twenty pounds of turkey leg, ma'am." The servant with the sack spoke servilely.

"Thank you, Bardrick" Replied a tall Goddess.

"..." Bowing, the servant presented the butcher's knife to her on both hands.

"Oh... thank you for this, too." The Goddess received it with a smile.

With another acknowledging bow, he ambered off, gone to fulfil some other request. A new servant came to take his place, the girl with the baskets, dwarfed by the massive Goddess before her.

“H-here you are, Lady Frigg... I w-wasn’t sure which ones sweet peas were... so I just picked every kind of purple flowers there was...”. The servant was out of breath.

“I appreciate the hard work, Ingrid, but I only needed one, not a basketful...” Frigg said, picking out a sweet pea from the basket second to the right.

“Haaaaaa.”

“I’m sorry for not clarifying...”

“N-no bother, ma’am.”

“Get some rest, dear.”

With a tired bow, she was off too, still panting as she left.

Sif stood by the door, quietly watching them on their peculiar exchanges. In one instance, it was salmon scales, the next, it was strawberry seeds. All the most inscrutable items hand delivered by the line of dedicated servants. It did not take long for Sif herself to be noticed by Frigg among the hectic line.

“Ah, Sif. You’re back rather late!” The tall Goddess beamed a gregarious smile.

“What’s going on here, Frigg?”

“See for yourself.”

Frigg moved across the room, lissomly swaying over the piles of strange goods the servants had brought. Inviting Sif over, she gestured towards the grand sofa, which presently, was uttering a long series of groans. Lying on it, a wounded warrior, covered head to toe in bandages. Though inertly lying like a new-born pup, Tyr’s eyes still flared with zeal, which were really the only active part of him left. The fiery gaze acted fiercely on Sif’s current diffidence, and she inched away from the sofa, leaving the fallen but fervent fighter alone.

“Hiya, luv!”

Just across the sofa, the Goddess could finally breathe a soothing breath, at the sight of her ever-exultant husband. Haply due to the presence of her mother, Thor’s back was unwaveringly upright, and his hands squarely on his knees, as behaving as a schoolboy on the first day of class. Right beside him, just as welcomed of a person, was none other than Shango, who couldn’t help but mimic Thor’s current couth conduct, too, was stiffened in a posture of pure straightness.

“Thor... Shango... how was your day?”

“Eventful.” Came Shango glibly.

“Was it at least to your liking?”

“... Absolutely.” The God’s face lit up.

Suddenly, a clamour erupted among the hustling servants, the throne room rumbled with their laborious steps, and echoed with their strained grunts.

“Heave, *lads*, HEAVE!!!”

“Lift, *men*, LIFT!!!”

“Hoist, *mates*, HOIST!!!”

The group of burly servants bawled away, as they sluggishly make their way toward the centre of the room. Supported by their half a dozen pairs of hands, was a titanic sphere of metal, glisteningly black. Upon closer

inspection, Sif deduced it to be a giant cauldron, fit to brew soup and stew for a thousand at once. After much more strident grunts, the group at last set down the cauldron, letting out a final collective grunt of triumph.

“Oop, sorry boys, but could you set it down on top of these firewood here?” Frigg, who hadn’t noticed their arrival earlier, pointed to the pile of hardwood in front of her.

“Ugghhh.”

The group again broke out in grunts, audibly more cross than before. But still set to work without a moment’s hesitation.

“Wouldn’t it be faster for us to do it?” Shango whispered to Thor.

“Aye, but there hasnae been much work around recently. So, this oughta be good hing to break off the idleness! Besides... I cannae be arsed.”

Once the cauldron was neatly in the correct place, Frigg dismissed the group, and they promptly left, but not without their voluble grunts, which only died away as they moved further over time.

Frigg sat before the immense cauldron, amidst the scattered items. And the rest of the Gods and Goddesses await whatever ceremony was about to commence. For a while thereafter, all was quiet, and it seemed no more hustle was about.

Until, a lone servant shuffles in timorously, lugging a metal pale in each hand. All the way from the door to the cauldron, she was suffocated with the sense of unease, caused by the solemn audience watching her every move. Quickening her pace, the servant eventually reached the cauldron, and emptied out the pales of water. Wanting nothing more than to rid herself from this daunting atmosphere, she speedily shuffled back from whence she came.

“Alright, everything’s set, then!” Frigg exclaimed enthusiastically.

As the Goddess snapped her fingers, a minute flicker of sparks appeared between them, as it usually happens. Drawing her hand closer to the kindling, she gave another powerful snap, igniting a small flare, which she started to blow on. And soon, a roaring flame burnt beneath the giant cauldron, singeing its bottom bright red.

“What is it you’re doing, Frigg?”

“Brewing a potion, for that giant, bandaged puppy over there!”

“Do you intend to use these as ingredients?” Sif poked at the pile of animal guts of unknown origin.

“Yes, what of it?”

“They don’t seem very... savoury.”

“Tsk, ts. Sown in dishonour, raised in glory! What is good must sometimes come from the bad!”

“I’m not sure that translates to edibles, Frigg!”

“Well, you just wait and see!”

Picking up a comically large spoon, Frigg dipped it into the boiling cauldron of water. Gingerly, she shook the handful of salt into the opening, whilst giving the water a rhythmic stir. Sif, too, merely stood back and observed, saying nothing more. For a while, it seemed the room was truly settling into placidity, exhausted of pleasantries, and the people were content with the overall state of things...

But, like a world tied ineluctably into the cycle of peace and disturbances, just when the room returned to being quiet, it was broken again, by the arrival of two buoyant Goddesses. Hel and Bayani, who had only just saw fit to join the formal congregation within the throne room.

“Hiya, Sif! Hiya Frigg! Y’aright Thor! Ooh, Tyr, seen better days? And... you must be... Shango!”

With that fatal instigation, Hel unleashed the voracious beast upon the room, the beast that is: fraternization. How the room then burst into liveliness; the onset of ‘hi’s and ‘hello’s from each person, tumbling into an intricate web of conversation pieces. The horrors of giving names, having it misheard, and repeating it, then being forgotten a minute later; titbits of knowledge about individual days and wellbeing, and the dreaded expatiation of one’s occupation.

The worst was even yet to come... because as this interaction died down, the room, was again graced by newcomers: Freyr, and Freyja, who had just finished tending to the latter’s stall in town, made their return, fully bethinking the castle to have retired. Now, with their appearance in the throne room, the tiresome process starts anew...

“Ah, Freyr, Freyja! I don’t believe you’ve met...”

“Ooh, guests from Yorubaland? How charmed...”

“So, what is it you...”

And how comic it is, that when these newcomers were just getting acquainted, that came another pair of arrivals in the throne room. The force of conversation hangs on obstinately, holding everyone together like a vortex, allowing no escapes. This time, a couple waltzes in, along with them came a familiar set of speech patterns, rhythmically iambic, and utterly gratuitous. Ceremoniously, Bragi, and his jewellery clad wife, Idun, joined the garrulous crowd within the room.

“Tis the second day I share mine lyrics
Yet, still inundated with mockery.
Verily empty of class art these swains
Who slight and spit in the scene of poets!
Let them forever wallow in rankness,
Since they dash such scorn at their uplifter!”

Barging into the boisterous band of bodies, Bragi made his bitterness known.

“You’ll get them next time, love.” Consoled a wife all too used to her partner’s outbursts, before meeting and embracing the others with a sociable grin.

“Ah, how *are* you, Idun?”

“Good, good~ I see we have some guests.”

“Oh, yes, this is...”

“Ooh, guests from Yorubaland? How charmed...”

“So, what is it you...”

Such, is the dreadful nature of all conversations among new acquaintances.

*

Truthfully, dealing with a God or Goddess, is a very troublesome thing to do, if one is not aware of an underlying custom. For mortal humans, this affair is less significant, since they only deal with Gods in small doses. But, for the Valkyries, soldiers, and servants, if unprepared, a conversation with deities is akin to mental

warfare, riddled with conflicts and confusion. And this is chiefly because, most Gods and Goddesses have a tendency to unconsciously try to stir a conversation towards their dominance.

Separated into a few neat circles, the Gods and Goddesses chat... all while trying to make the subject all about themselves. Sif, Frigg, and Idun. Bragi, Vidar, and Heimdall. Freyr, Freyja and Thor. The entire room filled with their chatters and banters; a witty retort followed by an even wittier retort to it; remarks that can be both compliments and insults. All while feigned smiles hanged across their countenances, and every so often they let out strained guffaws.

“I don’t about you two, but I’ve simply had the most pleasant day!”

“Oh, really, *do* tell! Because *my* day hasn’t been bad either!”

“Wait until you’ve heard of *everything* I’ve done today!”

And other such riveting exchanges came about.

The distinct circles of Gods and Goddesses would continue to bluster until their words meld into dross, and only their obnoxious tones remain to the functioning ear. But then, an outstanding presence appeared before the room, and one cough was all it took to forbear all their blathering mouths. In came Odin, stoically stone-faced, fresh and flamboyantly dressed. Stunning the room with a myriad of reactions: there was awe, and wonder, reverence and intimidation, the Gods and Goddesses await his every proceeding action with solemn silence.

As Odin took his rightful place at the throne, the circles dismissed, and all the Gods swiftly shuffled about, mustering to their individual favourite places. The Allfather spoke to his wife across the room, and his voice came out rotund; meant for one, yet oh so audible to all.

“Is everyone here, Frigg?”

“Mostly, dear. Balder’s obviously not here, and... Loki, too.” Frigg was still tending to the cauldron, stirring away chipperly.

“What a shock...” Odin muttered to himself, before turning up to announce to the whole room.

“Now, I presume you’ve all heard of the latest incident concerning the Demon Abaddon. Are any of you unaware of it?”

To this, half the room raised their hands, among them, were the clueless and curious faces of Bragi; Freyr and Freyja, Vidar and Heimdall.

“Are you talking about the incident with the toad?” Idun suddenly asked

“No, this is a new one, happened today.” Frigg answered.

“Oh, then I don’t know anything about it.” Idun’s hand raised to join the others.

“And I’d like to say that I wasn’t here these past few days, so I didn’t even know we had issues with Abaddon.” Heimdall stammered out.

“Same...” Vidar chimed in quietly.

“How could none of you had caught wind of the commotion in town?” Hel leaned forward, full of wonder.

“I was near the festival grounds. I think I heard something from one of the folks, but it’s so awfully loud there, I guess the news just got drowned out!” Freyja quickly rationalised.

“WASN’T NEAR TOWN, TODAY! SPENT THE MORNING IN BED, THE AFTERNOON IN THE WOODS, AND THE EVENING AT FREYJA’S STALL!” Freyr gave his story.

“So, what happened in town?”

“It was mad! Abaddon’s massive horde of locusts wreaked havoc, duking it out with Tyr! He got away, but Tyr managed to kill one of them!”

“*Bloody* hell!”

“Kill *one* of them? You mean there’s *two* Demons?”

“Who’s the other one?”

“Aha! An enigma is thus banished!

Wherefore an absence of audience today,
At mine great poem’s recital in town!”

Odin’s face dropped hopelessly, as he slowly lost control of the audience. Those in the dark plied those in the know with question after question, getting more heated with every new detail unravelled.

“ORDER!”

The audience quieted again.

“Unfortunately, this assembly is not to apprise you on today’s incident, but rather, to discuss the aftermath. Those of you who are not in the know, you may be excused...”

Without saying anything, the lot shrugged, and left the throne room. Hel was secretly gladdened by this, as it was beginning to become quite cramped and stuffy. Instantly as Idun left the sofa, she gladly scooted along it, like an emperor seizing a new land.

“Now... first, I’d like to hear all of your thoughts on the matter.”

“Our thoughts?”

“Yes, Hel. Your thoughts...”

“You mean to tell us... you don’t know what the next move shall be?”

“That is... along the lines of what I mean to expatiate.”

“Well, I’ll be...”

“Who would have thought that Abaddon was such a treacherous foe, whom the likes of Tyr cannot conquer.”

Odin shot the God of War a glance, leaving him to interpret it however way he wants. Just like that, Tyr’s heart started up fiery. Either a genuine remorse or a pride masked as remorse, the deep desire to amend himself goaded him into a frenzy. Lying there, he writhed indefatigably, but with his mouth still sealed beneath the bandages, his fervid words could only come out in muffles.

“Oop, just a moment, dear!” Frigg noticed the God of War’s little conundrum, and rushed to unseal his mouth.

“Hark, Lord Odin! I know it was my misjudgement that led to this dismal position, but I propose a way to neutralize that fiend once and for all!”

“And what will that be, Tyr?”

“A curfew for the denizens! By restricting the flow of people, we impede Abaddon’s hunt. Also, we close down the entrances of the kingdom, encumbering his escape if he does capture his victim!”

“...”

“These, accompanied with austere patrolling, we can corner the fiend in no time!”

“I sometimes wonder, Tyr, whether your capacity to contemplate means and ends is quite... sound?” Odin sounded disappointed.

“What do you mean?!”

“To tax the people with burdens arising from the rulers’ incompetence. That, is the action of tyrants! If my memory serves, you’ve yet to be reprimanded for imposing that ‘mass probing’ the other day... heed my word, Tyr, unduly hatred eventually manifests your own destruction. If you lack this basic principle as a God of War, perhaps that rank is best allocated elsewhere.”

Tyr lied back down on the cushion, mustering up an indifferent complexion, yet deep down, was suffering from the bruises to his spirit. Every word from the Allfather rang resonantly around his mind, absorbed and picked apart. Some were taken in bitterly; some were countered indignantly. At that moment, Frigg had finally finished brewing her potion. Scooping up a bowl of that scarlet elixir, she eagerly brought it to the pensive patient, who hadn’t the mood to take even a sip. But after some insistent offerings, he begrudgingly caved, and let Frigg feed him the bowl.

“Please, the rest of you, share your shrewd solutions to our predicament! Hel, you’re always quite opinionated.” He gestured to the young Goddess, who only shook her head blithely.

“Sif?” She was in the midst of braiding her hair when she was called, and only replied with a shrug.

Odin’s head retreated into his palms, sighing and shutting away the audience, whom now look on in silence.

.....

“What’s going on?” Bayani leaned towards Hel and whispered.

“He’s both thinking and waiting for us to think up something... if he doesn’t say anything for ten minutes, we’re rightfully allowed to leave.”

“Really? He said so?”

“No, it’s just implicitly known.”

“Well, what if he does say something?”

“Then the discussion goes on, so...” Hel simpered and crossed her fingers on both hands.

With the Allfather all but turned statuesque in his seat, the audience focused on the clock on the west-side wall, watching the hands tick by the numerals. Circling once... circling twice... and eventually eight times.

Eight minutes elapsed in quietude, but in all the Gods’ hearts, stirred a loud excitement at the imminent freedom. But, just as the clock ticked passed its ninth minute, the throne room was intruded by a final arrival, who violently shattered the peace.

“Well, well, what riveting conversation have I stumbled upon!”

Enter Loki, and all his insouciant aura and smugness. Welcoming his presence, was the myriad groans and curses of the devastated Gods and Goddesses, which only seemed to be relished by the unrepentant God of Mischief.

“Loki, my son!” Odin reawakens like a ravenous bear after a winter long hibernation. “Please, tell me you’re aware of the ‘incident’ in town!”

“More than aware of it, in fact.”

“Brilliant! So, you’ll divulge on what our next step should be?”

“You want *my* input?”

“Direly so!”

“It’s going to be... contentious.”

“Oh, you’re inputs rarely aren’t! For Heaven’s sake, tell us what we should do to catch this damned fiend!”

“Alright... here it is...”

Everyone adjusted their seats, Odin leaning especially far forward.

“Nothing.”

“...”

“We do nothing.”

“HAH, mah wee stepbrother does it again! This ought tae be good.” Thor clapped.

“I see... And why, pray, should we do nothing, Loki?” Odin had an anticipatory smile.

“This week alone, we’ve had three chances to subdue Abaddon, and he’s eluded us on all those chances. He’s currently in a state where he’s confident, but not over confident. And that sort of enemy is the hardest to overcome. On the other hand, we, the Aesir, are anxious over continual losses, downtrodden and insecure. Suddenly, one fiend becomes a bigger problem than it really is... that anxiety provokes us into a state of urgency, where it seems something NEEDS to be done! Big scale solutions: shutting down the kingdom, curfews, stringent patrolling.”

“The way I see it, we can exhaust ourselves coming up and implementing these fatuous changes, and not even guarantee Abaddon’s capture... OR, we do nothing. Instead, concentrate our forces on a possible future: The Yoruba Demon.”

Shango and Bayani’s eyes unconsciously widened at the mention.

“How do you know about that? I haven’t declared it yet!” Odin interrogated.

“Oh, Odin, my ears reach further in the castle than anyone can imagine.”

Here, the room receded back into quietude, and Odin was back to his pensive, motionless form. The rest of the Gods had either been convinced, or had detached themselves from the discussion. All except for the bandaged and bellicose brute. Tyr, unsatisfied by Loki’s radical reed, hissed his doubts.

“So, you’re suggesting we let the fiend run off with one of our people, and kill her for their sordid affairs?”

“That’s not it at all, my dear Tyr.”

“*Don’t* call me that.”

“I’m simply saying that we are at an impasse with Abaddon! If we do something, we commit too much, and waste more than we have to. Rather, we let things be, and proceed as we’ve done until now. If he wins this small battle, we face the consequences; if he slips up trying to, then we’ve captured him! Ultimately, these would be the two salient outcomes regardless of what happened anyway.”

“Hmm...” Was all Odin could utter, at the God of Mischief’s reasoning.

At this point, the rest of the Gods had devolved into complete indifference, and were whispering amongst themselves about various amusing topics.

“I am bloody famished!”

“I think there’s some cakes left in the dining hall.”

“A cake? what’s the occasion?”

“One of the maid’s birthday... Ingrid? you know her!”

“I tell you, Thor. I don’t think my brother’s right in the head.”

“Not right in the heid?”

“... Yes, not right in the ‘heid’, if you will.”

“What’s wrang with ‘em?”

“He always claims he hears music when there’s no music!”

“You just don’t get it, sis!”

Odin was hesitating. A part of him was discomforted by the absurd proposition of inertia under crisis; the other half, was trusting the perspicacity of a valued member of the pantheon. Unable to come to a final decision, the Allfather put it to the rest of the audience.

“What say you folks? Who thinks doing nothing is our best course of action?”

“Tell me you understand, Thor! Don’t you ever just hear sounds?”

“Sounds of what?”

“Sounds of Nature! Its melodies and hymns!”

“Now that ye say it... I do!”

“You do?!”

“AYE, I DO!” Thor guffawed at the sudden realisation.

“One in favour... All opposed?”

“...”

“None, the motion passes. We do... nothing.”

With an interminably long sigh, Odin stood up. Walking languidly towards Loki, he gave his shoulders two hearty pats, before ambling out of the room, fed up with being among that band of derelict deities. Loki, seeing as nothing more could be done, promptly left too.

On the sofa, the God of War swiftly recovered, not long after consuming the potion. The first thing that brawny body did with its returned faculties, was to storm out the room, enraged and determined to strengthen itself more. As for the rest of the Gods, their conversation continued in whispers, many of them oblivious to the fact that the discussion was adjourned. And so, they talked on and on, until weariness took its toll, and they retired one after another, leaving the throne room a barren and lightless realm.

Was this council ever needed? Was it unduly long? Perhaps it was, or perhaps it wasn’t. But it comes to a close anyway, just like all councils should. And just as it comes to an end, the new day begins. The moon, now centred in the sky, observes the land with its pale complexion. Its white light cleansing the earth, readying for it to be sullied again, by the chaos of day.

*

Two days before Autumn

Thursday

Midnight

At the other side of the land, in the kingdom of Sheol, a council of its own was being held. Though, it wasn't held in the majesty of a throne room nor within the grandness of a palace. Instead, this council of Demons took place in a scruffy and stuffy dungeon, layers beneath the earth.

The dungeon lay largely barren, except for a singular statue, occupying the centre of the space. Ominous and oppressive, the effigy of the Ancient Demon deters the sense of peace and joy, which was truly absent in most of the spirits of those present in the council. That, coupled with the nigh suffocating sultriness of the dungeon, made for a very irritating gathering.

Belial, the prince of Sheol, stood solemnly beside the statue, heedless to the copious beads of sweat on his forehead. A few paces away was Azazel, always showering the prince with his loyal presence. The duke said nothing, but merely admired his highness' tenacity to withstand discomfort. Thus, Azazel, too, decided to put himself through the trial of fighting the stuffiness of the dungeon.

Although, another few paces away was Mastema, who had no such honouring sentiments. The duchess did not plan to suffer through the ordeal, and has used all her power in making the council as luxurious for her as possible. Gathered around her was a team of henchmen, five in total, each with their own distinctively strange faces and statures.

The biggest of the henchmen was prostrated on the floor, offering his sinewy back for the Demoness to sit. His face was buried deep within the hard floor, and he laid sturdily without moving an inch. Another henchman knelt down behind Mastema, this one offering his back for her to lean on, his eyes were closed as he knelt stock-still as a support. The next two henchmen each stood at the sides of the duchess, both were equipped with a hand fan, and they fanned with all the might in their hands. So, there, atop her henchmen armchair, Mastema sat cross-armed, delighting in the cool breezes from her henchmen-fans.

The final henchman is a familiar face. It is none other than Alukah, the dark little creature with so much to love. He arguably has the easiest job out of the team; stationed a good distance away from his teammates, he was tasked with cradling the infant girl in his arms and nothing else. Throughout the council, when the baby girl would whimper, it was almost always followed by a series of pacifying grunts by Alukah.

The dungeon was quiet, barring the occasional whimpers and grunts. Azazel did begin to wonder why the prince called them here just to remain silent, but his own subservience did not allow him to question the prince. Mastema, on the other hand, was quite consumed in her own world of luxury, and was content to just wait. And so, with no one to initiate a discussion, the taciturn council, without an agenda and without activity, continued on. Until, Belial, presumably fed up with the inertia (and heat), broke the silence first by demanding an answer.

"Any News On Abaddon?" He enunciated clearly.

Caught off guard by the sudden question, Azazel stammered out a reply.

"N-no, sire! The messenger boy hasn't returned either..."

A deep sigh escaped the prince's nose.

"I'm telling you, your majesty, just use the baby, saves us *all* the trouble!" Mastema chimed in.

Belial glanced back at Mastema, annoyed. Truthfully, he'd considered this option over the days, but no matter how he spun the idea to make it more palatable, he could not shake off the disgrace that came with it. But really, it came down to the fact that he didn't want to deal with the smugness Mastema would have if he gave in to her suggestion. So, very bitterly, he thought up a way to counter her incessant argument once and for all. Turning to his Azazel, and trusting in his sagacity, Belial asked:

"Azazel, do you happen to know how much blood there is in an adult mortal?"

"Umm... I'd say... one to two gallons?"

"How do you know, that?!" Mastema rightfully questions.

"And, what would you say is the mean amount of blood in a baby?"

"Uhh... it can't be more than... ten ounces, I assume."

Here, Belial retorted to the duchess

"See? Not only is using babies as sacrifices dishonourable, it is also inefficient! Hah!"

"Alright... why not just use, like... ten babies?"

"..."

"..."

"Be quiet, Mastema."

With that, the prince returned to staring at the statue of Shimush in silence. And secretly, Azazel prayed that Abaddon would accomplish his mission soon, so that Belial could be dissolved from this touchy predicament he was in.

*

A church should never be asleep. The place of worship must mirror the devotion of the pious worshipper: undying and omnipresent. Therefore, the clergy of the prestigious Church of Saint Helena abide by one fervent regulation, implemented by the eponymous saint herself. That is, the Church of Saint Helena shall never shut its doors.

"Let the house of the good Lord be open to all that needs His warmth. Be it the average workers, troubled delinquents, doubtful sceptics, homeless paupers, flagitious sinners. The Lord ne'er demands a requisite for His worship." Preached the munificent saint, some centuries ago.

It was also this noble practice that earned the church its veneration from across the land, that spawned a sustaining stream of pilgrimages throughout the ages. The faithful travel across kingdoms, even continents, just to grace those eternally opened doors, revering the sight of Saint Helena's corpse, which even after countless epochs, still emits the same accepting aura.

Though on this particular day, those open doors just might prove to lead to the church's own demise. As, at the crack of dawn, an ungodly pair of feet, was set to adulterate the godly surfaces of the church. Guilefully, the fiend's eyes scanned the room, eventually, his gaze settled on a man at the front row. He sported the black robes of a vicar; with his aged face full of wisdom, he seemed always ready for a conversation.

The priest sat staring at the Saint's corpse, laden in the midst of the room, meditating on things trivial and profound. But, noticing the figure at the entrance, he laid to rest all his fanciful ruminations to fulfil his duty. A gregarious countenance was mustered up, and he stood up to receive this strange visitor.

"So late, my son? What troubles your spirit so?"

The Demon immediately latched on to the scene, and played it out.

"Oh, father, I besiege you to hear my woes, and give me my due rede!" Frans Moller knelt to the ground, his expression twists into despondence in a matter of seconds.

"Certainly, my son! Clear your heart of it!" The priest extends his benevolent hands.

"Well, may we move to a more... private area, father? It is a rather delicate issue."

The priest looks around the empty church.

"Is this not good enough?"

"Umm... I'd still prefer a more... enclosed area. Perhaps I could shut the doors?"

"Oh no, no, no. That simply isn't possible..."

Abaddon's face darkened, as the priest started scrambling his mind.

"Why not we try the confessional?"

"Brilliant, father."

The priest picked his aged body up laboriously, and started marching towards the great wooden boxes at the side of the wall. His pace was too slow for the Demon's liking.

"Let me start right now, father... I've sinned greatly."

"Go on, my son."

"It is the sin of antiquity, simple yet carnal. And though the intelligent world, at large, morally agree on its baseness, they also do not truly condemn it. The doers of this sin have been hated, as much as revered; rejected, as well as proselytized; debased, along with elevated."

"But can that not be said for all other sins, which always has its share of base supporters in society?" The priest was surprised and impressed by this man's eloquence.

"This is different, father. What you speak of are the vocal minorities, and nothing more. But *this* sin transcends that! It has the power to convince a town, a country, and an *empire* of its righteousness, if wielded by the correct person. This sin, committed onto the enemy, is unequivocally good. The sinner who does this sin for the kingdom, in turn, would be celebrated as a hero."

"Well, I haven't the faintest idea what sin you're talking about. But what I do know, is that if such a powerful form of evil exists in the world, humanity would have been devastated by now. Thus, it *must* be conquerable by the word and will of God."

Just before the priest reached the doors of the confessionals, it was gracefully opened by the visitor. With a grateful nod, he took his seat in the shabby box.

"Oh... father... I'm talking about *murder*."

His face paled, and his eyes widened to the horrendous character revealed before him. Not a stammer could escape him, before the fatally quick pair of brutish hands seized his neck, and stopping the world in its tracks. The priests gags incessantly in the Demon's hands, visions blurs into obscurity, yet the ears were still clear to hear his fiendish voice.

"The rightness and wrongness of murder, father, is determined by the sinner! Given enough influence, the murderer can violate the lands with the heated support of his people. The sin of murder is malleable like that. Even right now, the rightness or wrongness of murder isn't absolute. Me, the intruder killing the blameless priest of this kingdom! Because if a single murder can exchange us victory, then I am confident, father, that our people's voices will cheer louder than any protest in this kingdom."

Abaddon's grip on that fragile neck tightened, and tightened... before turning with an echoing snap, shunting out the last iota of consciousness in that instance of time. The priest's body slouched down, forever loose and limb. Abaddon took his place in the box, before the fresh corpse, and slowly closed the doors, shutting his vitriolic deeds thereafter away from the world of light.

*

Thursday

Morning

Nature is a very conceited fellow. From its own womb, it birthed a species willing to ingratiate its every aspect. Ever since the evolution of the artistic mind, Nature has had no shortage of creatures to stroke its ego with compliments. The things uttered about Nature by these artists will make one think it flawless and welcoming.

Among the most adulatory ones are the poets and writers, who bestow unction to the land with every coming season. Springtime is the blooming, dazzling flowers; Summer is the glorious, golden rays; Autumn comes in red with slow decay; Winter finishes with whiteness, barren and dour. It is astonishing that some millennia passed, new descriptions can still be invented for these four cyclical stages. Similarly, lo, every mountain be mighty, ocean be obstreperous, and greenery be green.

Nature wears its vizard well, they will beguile you with a serene scenes of sunsets, temporarily banishing rationality, which knows the dark underbelly of the natural world. In truth, there is no serenity in landslides, earthquakes, and thunderstorms. There is no grace in the gory bloodshed of beasts. Across its vastness, Nature will always be occupied by turbulence more so than peace.

Artists will only ever appreciate nature when seated behind myriad layers of defences. Throw these artists into the woods naked and toolless and see how long their appreciation lasts. Maybe, it is because of this fear of Nature masked as veneration, that we see the rise of kingdoms and empires. Mortals pluck themselves away from Nature's gruesome game, and only then saw fit to praise its beauty.

Then again, there are some who truly belong in the wild. People who love the simplicity... the rawness. They welcome the brutal challenges, and would rather die in the fangs of a beast than wallow away in complacency. For these people, the state of nature is a craving, and once the craving starts, they are unstoppable by reason.

The past few days have been too samey, and he didn't like it at all. Back again at the pond beside Yggdrasil, Cirius sat beneath the shade. Watching the smooth, unperturbed surface of water, a sharp itch shoots up his entire body, deeply insufferable. Irritably, he turned towards East, where the sun was blockaded by the thick mass of trees. The forest stood just there at the distance, enticingly enigmatic. Staring at the heart of darkness, the forest worked its enchantment on him. Suddenly, the craving was all too much to leave unsated. The boy cavorts into the air, and declare aloud:

"That's it! I'm headin to the forest!"

The young Goddess, who was caressing the neck of a swan while feeding it oats, was jolted by his sudden shout. Then, taking in what Cirius said, she readies herself for whatever upheaval of a conversation she was about to be thrown into, in this otherwise peaceful morning. More than used to the boy's shenanigans, she replied calmly, but with a hint of exasperation.

"You can't, Cirius."

"Whyyyy not?!" The rebuttal came almost instantaneously.

"Because Miss Hel and Father says we're not to. That forest there's dangerous."

"Ah, *rubbish!*"

"No, not rubbish."

"Think about it, Urd! Have you heard about all the disasters happening in town this past week?"

"I have, what of it?"

“Miss Gertrude next door said first there was this giant bug monster; then a giant toad, then another giant bug monster!”

“I just told you I’ve heard of it, what’s your point?”

“Well, *Urd*... it seems to me... every dangerous thing has appeared most often in town! In fact, there seems to be a two-thirds chance we’ll meet a giant bug monster in town! And mind you, I’d rather face a wee wolf or snake in the forest than a giant bug monster!”

“That’s *not* how odds work and you know it.”

“Math doesn’t lie, *Urd*! That settles it, I’m heading to the forest, you’ll come along too if you’re sensible, lest there be a giant bug monster just around the corner!”

With a haughty look of confidence, the boy began strutting to the direction of the open land, pumping his arms and legs out as he did. Each step came with it more exuberance, exuberance that shuts away all the negativity expressed by the Goddess behind him.

“Hold on, don’t be daft, *Cirius*... you’re not really going...HEY! I said ‘hold on’!”

Sensing the very genuine manner of brave foolishness in the boy, *Urd* darted up from beneath the tree, gathering up all her things inside a pouch, she started running. Hopelessly chasing after her intrepid friend, her voice of reason never subsiding one bit along the way.

Unbeknownst to the young girl, though, was that her pouch had been caught by a particularly sharp edge of a root earlier. And now, the loose bag of oats inside were leaking out from the little gap, trailing the ground below. The swan by the pond leapt out from the water, and cheerfully feasted on the long line of oats, unintentionally dogging the two youngsters on their new adventure.

*

Deeply tucked away beneath the castle of *Midgard*, segregated from its many bright and glamorous rooms, is a dingy and scruffy laboratory. What was once a dungeon for the most perilous malefactors of the kingdom, was now converted to a workplace for the God of Mischief.

Home to all the heinous experiments the God can imagine, the cobble walls that used to hide the savage noises of the prisoner, now hide something perhaps even more ghastly. Cages placed in lines across the floor, the metal bars rattle with the quivers of abominable creatures indecipherable to the eye. Atop one table were a wide range of strange flasks, connected to even stranger contraptions; glowing liquid of red and green and purple bubbled in some of them.

The coup de grace to this overall, very unpleasant place, however, lies in the towering shelves up against the wall. Specimen after specimens, each neatly organized in their little cells, in their little rows. Some are only accessible by the ladder sitting at the side, though, not many people would even venture near the collection of containers, and the grotesque things they hold. Tongues of toads, suction cups of squids, scales of the spines of rabbits and hares, and other disturbingly diverse body parts.

Peculiarly, however, amidst the cells of grotesque specimens, one container was empty. And it just so happened, that that was the container *Loki* was currently climbing up to. The God of Mischief, scampered up the ladder, and peering at the empty container, his face dropped.

“Damn it!” He cursed loudly.

“What’s wrong?” His daughter returned from below.

“We’ve run out of Robin’s eyes.”
“But we *need* Robin’s eyes!”
“That’s why I’m cursing, Hel!”
“Oh, *alright*, don’t be testy.”
“I’ll have to go hunt for them.”
“In the forest?”
“Yes, Hel, where else?”
“Right now?”
“Yes, of course! They’ll all migrate soon enough!”
“Do you want me to come along?”
“No, no. You finish the formula. It won’t take long...”

Fishing inside a chest, Loki took out a bow, constructed elegantly with acacia and sinew, its string, strong and steady, seemed ready to fire off arrows at the speed of sound. Loki took a careful look at the bow... and tossed it aside, taking out a crossbow instead. With the crossbow and a quiver of arrows, he walked up the stairs of the laboratory, quickly waving to his daughter before opening the steel door.

“Well, I’m off.”
“Be safe!”
“Oh, I’ll be plenty safe, it’s the Robins that won’t.”

Shutting the door, Loki made his way to the stables outside, not for the horses, but rather, for the giant, twenty-foot tall wolf overseeing the horses. Fenrir, seeing the arrival of his father, jumped up excitedly, with a tail wagging in frenzy. Obsequiously, his enormous face nestled against his father’s entire figure, giving it a few good sniffs. Content with the scent picked up from his father, he sat, panting and awaiting his instructions. The canine behaves how it behaves, and does not pointlessly question the scientific possibilities of the universe.

“Good Morning, boy. Now, SADDLE!”

Instantly, Fenrir crouched flat on the ground, extending all four of his paws outwards, like a web spread across a surface. Dexterously, Loki clambered up to the head of the hound, adjusting his seat above Fenrir’s brows, he tugged at the right ear for support. Once comfortable, he patted Fenrir’s head twice, signalling his attention.

“Alright, boy. ONWARDS, TO THE FOREST!” Loki commanded.

And forward the hound dashed, leaping over the castle grounds ten yards at a time, eventually clearing the castle walls with one magnificent jump. Thus, started Loki’s rocky journey towards the forest, riding on his son-wolf.

*

Just as the God and the giant hound rode away from the kingdom’s vicinity; a pair of horse gallops through the border, pulling behind it a sizeable, sheltered carriage, quivering slightly from the uneven pathway. Soon, the carriage was steadied, as the horses made their way into the paved streets of Midgard. The coachman sat atop his seat with a bilious face, yawning frequently while directing the horses around the excessive amounts of corners in the kingdom.

Finally, the coachman sighed a weary breath, when the last stretch of the journey came to an end, parked before the Church of St. Helena. Settling down the horses, he was in a rush to be rid of his customers, and was impatiently beckoning for their descent.

The first customer stepped down to the last step, before eagerly jumping with both feet onto the ground. His long and dark gown seemingly a blotch upon the brightness of day, yet, the jubilation in his demeanour, matched the beauty of morning just perfectly. He is Reverend Alexandre, a vicar on a fervent spiritual quest, but would not mind partaking in a few luxuries along the way.

Following this man down the carriage, were three nuns. As they fully descended the carriage, they stood in a straight line, adjacent to one another, just behind the priest. Two of them had solemn expressions upon their faces, their pairs of hands placed modestly on their stomach. Their names are Cleopa and Daria, respectively, though you'll soon find, also interchangeably. But, standing on the most rightward, was a nun who was curiously glancing to-and-fro; quietly, she soaked in the sceneries of this foreign country. Her name, is Mary.

Excitedly, Reverend Alexandre spreads his arms widely outwards, embracing the air of Midgard with his entire body. Then, he exclaimed to the three nuns behind him:

"Ah, I must say how splendid it all is! To alight on such dazzling a morning, to such dazzling a place! What d'ye say, sisters?"

"Indeed."

"Indeed."

"Not bad..."

"The Church of St. Helena! To finally meet our fellow brothers under Christendom. Separated by odds, but unified by words of God. To see their auspicious land thrive the same as ours, oh, the people we'll *meet* and cultures we'll *experience* and the foods we'll *eat*! The excitement is almost uncontainable, wouldn't you say, sisters?"

"Indeed."

"Indeed."

"What about spiritual quest?"

At the back of the carriage, the coachman was busy lugging off baggage after baggage of his client's belongings. And just when the carriage was all but empty, and the last bag unloaded, he felt a sharp tap on his shoulders which made him jump. He turned to meet the figure in black robes, the kind that's grown to be quite an eyesore to him. A priest stood, sternly staring at the coachman, and dangling from his gripped hand, was a fatly filled sack. Mistaking this stranger for his client, the coachman's voice instinctively turned truculent.

"What'd'ye want, vicar?"

"Leave the horses and carriage."

"...Wuh?"

"LEAVE THE HORSES AND CARRIAGE."

The strange vicar pushed the paunchy sack at his chest, the force sent the coachman stumbling back a few paces. Sensing the enmity from this stranger, the coachman, too, began channelling his rage. He wasn't one to be pushed around lightly, here's an intrepid man who stands up for himself! After all, what is a man without his dignity? What is a human, for that matter? Glaring at the vicar, he readies for a rowdy punch-up... but not before opening the sack to see its contents, because curiosity comes before manhood.

Gold. Heaps upon heaps of gold, as deep as the bag goes. The coins were glimmered, their shine bounces off each other to create a grand magnificence of yellow. Exposed to the air, their malodorously metallic smells escape from within the sack, it pervades its surrounding, instantly relishable for all the greedy and misers around. With shaking hands, the aghast coachman picked up one of the coins, grasping it, bending it, and

feeling its weight. Saying nothing more, he tilts his head up subserviently, and smiled a saucy smile. Then, he started to giggle, flashing his brown and crooked teeth to the world.

“Hehe, leave them horses and carriage, ye say? Hehe, Can do! Anything for ye, my good father! Hehe, God bless ye!”

Retreating step by step, his unctuous eyes never left the priest, and his beholden bows never ceased. Little by little, he inches away from sight. And just like that, the coachman eventually vanished, left to his own device with a sack of money. What matters, great or trivial, would that sack of gold be funding for? Scientific enlightenment? Artistic creation? Political revolution? Indulgent debauchery? We, perhaps, may never know, how the sack of gold may sate the fantasies of a greedy, grumpy, old man.

In any case, Abaddon, having taken care of the coachman, proceeds towards Reverend Alexandre, and his trio of nuns. Giving his face a few vigorous stretches, he masterfully musters up the graceful complexion of a welcoming churchman. For the first time since arriving here, his heart pounds for dear life, now that this turbulent mission nears its end, with triumph almost close enough to taste.

“Good morning, Reverend and sisters! I presume you are the pilgrims from afar?”

“Why, yes, my good fellow man! And I must say, such alacrity in bidding us welcome is praiseworthy, indeed!” He clasped the good fellow man’s hand in his.

“Your words please me, Reverend. And am I right to assume this is your first trip into the kingdom of Midgard?”

“Right again, my great, wise friend! We have travelled across the continent, from Olympus, to finally behold your beautiful land!” He shook the hand of the great, wise friend.

“Well, Reverend, I am delighted to tell you that there is a very unique tradition our church has for pilgrims such as yourselves. If you wish to partake in it, I promise it to be a singularly eye-opening experience!”

“A tradition? Well, as they say, when in Rome! Very well, my greatly good and wise fellow man friend. Let us commence on this ceremony right away!”

“Excellent...”

For Reverend Alexandre and the three nuns, the next few moments were spent being tied up. Not wanting to appear intolerant, the reverend and the sisters stayed still and quiet, watching as the priest binds each of their arms to their waists with a naval rope. Abaddon was no longer taking any chances; behind the Reverend’s and each of the nuns’ ropes, were fifteen different knots to guarantee security. As the minutes pass, their faces of wonder and awe disintegrates into overwhelming dubiety. The quartet’s collective worry only deepened, when the priest moved on to tying their legs together.

Suddenly, the dodginess was just too much to handle, and Mary snapped:

“Umm, if I may, father... what sort of tradition sees pilgrims being tied up and stuffed back into the wagon they came in?”

She blurted out her inquisition just as the priest was in the midst of loading Daria into the carriage. Keeping up his blithe expression, Abaddon answered her question, but not before hoisting Cleopa up by his shoulders, and taking her to the carriage.

“You see, sister. This tradition is one of re-enactment. Through the re-enactment of our Lord and Saviour’s plights, we enrich our connection and devotion to Him. This ‘tying up’ part perfectly mimics the restraints put upon our Lord and Saviour, does it not?”

It is uncertain whether any of the sisters bought it. But, what was more significant, was that the Reverend *did*.

“Ah, I see your point, how symbolic! If man feels such distress over only a scruple of our Saviour’s suffering, then truly, it is testament to His righteousness, and the eternal faith it requires for our redemption! What do you say, sisters?” Reverend Alexandre preaches.

“Indeed.”

“Indeed.”

Cleopa and Daria both affirmed from inside the carriage.

“... But what about the wagon? What does the wagon have to do with anything?” Mary demands again.

“Uhh... it’s a modern spin on our Saviour’s road to cavalry! The ol’ *Via Dolorosa*... yes.” A single sweat trickles down Abaddon’s forehead.

Reverend Alexandre and Mary looked at each other.

“Oh... I guess I can see... some resemblance... Don’t you, sisters?”

“Indeed?”

“Indeed?”

The answers came from the carriage again. Mary, however, leant in close to the Reverend, and whispered:

“I think he’s chatting bollocks, Father...”

With the last of them finally loaded in, Abaddon clambered up the coachman’s seat and with a sturdy whip, sent the horses galloping forth. The quartet squirmed helplessly on the floor of the carriage, with someone’s foot always pressed against either a head or another foot. The rocky road did not do any service to the poor victims now squirming away at the back.

Abaddon’s grip on the horses’ reins were shivering, with each progressing yard, his heart jumped. The crowds died away little by little, as they leave the populate, until they reached the desolate parts of the kingdom, where not even the strays roam. And along the way, his grisly grin twists into a sordid snigger, then into a ghastly guffaw.

“My friend, may I ask where we’re going?” Reverend Alexandre desperately shouted from the carriage, clueless still to their peril.

“Piece it together yourself, vicar! Where was Christ going to, on that fateful Good Friday?” the Demon laughed.

“...”

“...”

“...”

“HE’S KILLING US!”

Then, started a long session of inconsolable screaming in the carriage. Reverend Alexandre, Cleopa, Daria, and Mary shrieked, begged and prayed for their dear life, while in the clutches of this dastardly fiend.

“HELLLLLLPPPPPP!!!”

“Lord Jesus, I confess my sins and ask for your forgiveness...”

“... Your footsteps daily by the power of the Holy Spirit...”

“Gabriel! Rafael! Anyone! Come smite this miscreant! Clap your thunder and lightning, please, Lord!”

But nothing happened, and the Demon rode onwards, enduring the clamour in the carriage with a chipper whistle of a demonic nursery rhyme. Once at the outskirts of the kingdom, Abaddon focuses on the next destination, the emerald den ahead, housing all the sprawling trees and the cover of darkness they bring. The place that started all this ordeal for him, and just as fittingly will end it for him.

He was riding the horses... to the forest. And Just beyond there, were the borders of Midgard lie, clearing it would truly be the triumph. Once through, the demonic Duke would truly have escaped from Midgard, stealing from them, three precious virgins for the sacrifice that would give rise to Asgard’s demise.

And so, everything converges in the forest. A pair of weans, a hungry swan; a God of Mischief, a gigantic hound; a horse-riding Demon, and three screaming nuns. Once more, the absurdities are drawn to one another, to satisfy the twisted curiosities and thrill-seeking foible of the Fates. Slowly, they unravel this entanglement of absurdities, and anticipately relish the prodigious mess it will create upon the dormant soil...

*

Wonder is something orchestrated by the mind, and not by the quality of the object. If one fosters a temperament of chronic apathy in themselves, then the world simply cannot force out any semblance of awe from you. Sunsets are reduced to mere glares of light; seas are a blue monotony; and earth is a platform and nothing else. Perhaps it isn't such a bad thing... after all, to reject the possibility of being dazzled by beauty, also means preventing the possibility of being disgusted by hideousness.

And the hideousness of the world can be truly, truly ugly. Clamorous, they provoke uproar, and in the moment, they deceive us into thinking hideousness has dominion, and beauty cannot flourish or is meaningless. If tricked by those illusions of hideousness, the world seems infinitely irredeemable. In any case, the opposite can be true as well. If one overindulges in beauty, then the world appears immaculate and needless of any improvement. Massacres, famine, poverty and strife, are all trifles when compared to the grandness, the allure of the universe.

How then, do we deal with this delicate balance of beauty and hideousness? Take the middle-ground? Easier said than done. No one *can* take the middle-ground precisely because they don't *know* where the middle-ground is. What is the median of appreciating the world's beauty and revolting at its hideousness? It is a mindless question which garners a mindless answer. As such, most people settle for their stances on one space of the spectrum: some people are slightly cynical about art, some are annoyingly cynical; some people appreciate art, some people call themselves 'an idiosyncratic bohemian and avant-gardist alla prima pentimento'.

Rather, why not get rid of beauty and hideousness to begin with? Both beauty and hideousness are to be judged, and the judgemental brain is oh so finicky. It worries about structure, emotions and all those other rigmaroles that make you only human. If one wishes to be awed, then simply... be willing. Empty all the conceptions of awe and wonder conceived through intelligent means, and simply concentrate on being sentient. In that state, the world will deliver awe and wonder in its own terms.

Once in that state, your eyes will shine with an enchanting gleam of animation, that signify a being truly alive. Eyes such as the ones in the boy named Cirius, which now dance fervidly around the landscape of the woods, taking in the boundless wonders that exist in the terrain of towering trees. From the bark, to the branch, to the twig, to the moss, everything was worth marvelling for the boy.

They were travelling in a single file, led by the excitable boy, then the hesitant girl and a waddling swan. Urd, who'd followed Cirius closely behind from town to forest, tugged tightly onto the boy shirt collar as a means of protest when her verbal pleas failed. Evidently, though, she may not really be that hellbent on convincing Cirius to return anyway, because the boy had no trouble persisting on even with her hands fastened on his collar. Not only that, her nagging had also stopped at some point; when he turned to look back, he caught a blank and stolid expression on her face. And so, Cirius wagered that secretly, Urd wanted to explore the forest too.

The swan's reason for tagging along was less complex. It'd eaten the trail of oats all the way into the forest, when the sack of oats leaking from Urd's pockets ran out, it whooped, hoping for more. And when the pair of children realised it was following them, they heartily embraced it into the party and proceeded on their way, which the swan could only guess was towards a storeroom of oats to continue feeding it.

The crackle of dried leaves reverberated all the way, as the trio traversed the crooked earth of the forest. Every so often, something so wondrous will come into view, that flings Cirius' soul into such a mania that he has to stop in his tracks. Unfortunately, these stops come sporadic and unannounced, so every time it happens, a mini mishap occurs to the trio. As Cirius halts, Urd would clash against the back of his head, and the swan would clash against Urd's back.

“Aha!” The boy shouts before bending his face down to a tree stump.

On it, was a battle between an army of ants and a praying mantis. A titan, against puny mites in waves; a scenario all too frequent in the boundless conflicts of the world. One can surely see why, though, because the puny always love to take down the large, and the large always love to bully the puny.

As the ants gradually amass upon the mantis’ body, it seemed less of a battle, and more of a domination. Suffering the brunt of a hundred bites at once, the mantis convulses, raising its claws up in rage, yet unable to strike it upon any target. Its demise was slow and agonizing, as the swam of redness overtakes its once sturdy, green body, ebbing it into nothing.

“Wicked!” Cirius exclaims.

Urd was watching intently too, and suddenly a quirky little remark propped up.

“No man-tis is an island.” She looked pleased with herself.

The swan nibbled on a few wandering ants, straying away from the rest.

With the mantis reduced to a corpse to be feasted on, the trio moved on, stopping again and again at every slightly interesting thing. On their way, they saw a toad eating a moth, a robin perched on blueberry bush, a toad eating a butterfly, a squirrel in a tree hole, and a toad eating a cricket. Turns out, forests have a lot of toads. At one point, Cirius was dead sure he’d seen a bear, much to the dismay of Urd, but it turned out to be an uncannily shaped boulder, which Cirius was just as amused by. He christened it ‘Bear Boulder’ and tried to carve his name on it, only to give up after etching in a ‘C’ and an ‘I’.

After settling in to the pace of the ‘adventure’, the last shred of Urd’s reluctance faded away. The perils of the forest, as forewarned by all the adults, seemed just an illusion. And chipperly, she went along with the boy’s flow, being entranced by every little thing the forest spawned their way. Though, Cirius, sensing this change in her, was quick to turn smug, while that aura of superiority still lasts, he prepares to utter a line all youngsters cherish the chance to say:

“*See*, Urd-”

“Shut up!”

“I *TOLD* you so!”

“No you didn’t.”

“There’s nothing to *worry* about in the forest!”

“HEEEELLPPPP!!! WE’RE BEING KIDNAPPED!!!”

The loud cry pierces through the area, galvanising the two children. Confusingly turning to-and-fro, they searched for the source for that desperate yell. Before they could locate it, however, another sound was apparently closing in: the steady beating of hooves, and it came from just beyond the trees. Hurriedly, the children dodge behind a bush, gingerly eyeing around for the horses and its ominous rider.

Before long, the stallions came into view with their master in his seat, a look of fiendish satisfaction spread across his pale face. The rough terrain of the forest demanded the rider to slow their paces, so now, the horses were trotting just yards before Cirius and Urd, which they could easily tailed by foot. As the horses drove past

them, the carriage it dragged behind, once more, let out a cry of despair. This time, the bellow rang through the children soundly, jolting them from head to toe.

“HEEEELLLLLPPPPP!!!”

It was only then, that reality caught up with the pair. And anxiety over their own cluelessness began to disturb. Cirius and Urd looked at each other viciously, hoping each will advice the other on what to do. But, as their panicky deliberation yielded nothing, and the carriage advancing further and further away, it was Cirius, who first pounced out of cover, leaving Urd observing distraughtly from the bush. So, the boy ran, acting on nothing except a will that felt that it needed to act.

He raced towards the back of the moving carriage, and timing it correctly, jumped onto the narrow footing of the body. Staring into the carriage from the back window, he was stared back by four bizarre faces, with looks in equal parts of surprise, puzzlement, and elation. After noticing their tied-up bodies, Cirius wasted no time and climbed through the small window, landing himself on the cushioned seats inside. The priest tried to stifle his excitement, resulting in a series of agitated snorts and pants.

Once inside, he was crowded by every one of the kidnapped, each yearning to be the first to be freed. Assaulting Cirius’ ears were the dissonant whispers of instruction from the priest and the nuns; their shoving bodies, too, make each breath a near impossibility. Having enough of that, Cirius gathered all his strength, and pushed apart the squirming victims, and momentarily subduing them for now.

Gaining control of the carriage, he pointed at one of the nuns assertively, gesturing that she would be the first to be untied. Thrilled, Mary turned and presented her back to the boy. But, one look at the mass of knots on the rope was enough to exasperate Cirius. Instantly realising that untying them all was an impracticality (and a bother), he covered his chin with his hand, and begin thinking up a new plan.

Just then, the wheels of the carriage rode passed a path of protruding rocks, shaking the entire cart. In the midst of that little turbulence, Mary lost her seating and banged against the doors, rattling the doors at the side. And at that exact moment, entered a flash of brilliance in the boy.

“Simple is best!” Cirius thought to himself.

Advancing towards the carriage door, he gave it a hearty beating, but the door wouldn’t budge, then he turned to impatient slamming, before realising that it was just latched by a bolt. Sliding it open, the door quickly gets caught by the travelling wind and swung out powerfully against the travelling carriage. Cirius’ face lit up in triumph, and he turned back to face the abductees, each as lost as the next.

The boy stooped down to Mary, excitedly pointing back at the open door, and as she glanced out of it, she got a terribly foreboding notion about what the boy is suggesting. Before she could put up any resistance, though, she was pushed towards the opening by Cirius. Every inch closer to the door invited double the unease, and soon, her head was turning rapidly in rejection, and a mantra of ‘No No No No!’ escaped her mouth. The speed of the trotting horses has never appear so fatally fast; the land seemed to blast by like a grindstone spinning at its zenith of speed. Not even given the chance to imagine the damage it could do, Mary was shoved out of the door and sent tumbling on the ground, while the rest of the abductees watch on in horror.

“Hmm, awfully quiet back there...” On his rider’s seat, Abaddon squinted with suspicion at the surprising silence from behind

“AIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!!!” Were Mary’s last cry before tasting the earthy taste of dust and dirt.

“Ah, there we go!” Abaddon rested easy.

Mary’s trapped body continued rolling backwards on the earth, with each revolution bringing in a new wave of disarray. When her body was finally brought to a stop, she was in an oblivion so deep, the last decade of her life came as a blank. Urd, who had hitherto been running after the carriage, was quick to check up on this fallen baggage.

“Are you alright, ma’am?” The girl poked Mary on her shoulder.

“Becoming a nun? Oh, I don’t know, dad...”

Not long after, Urd would witness three other similar exits from the carriage. Another nun came tumbling towards her, stopping at a distance just shy from the last one. But, as the carriage travelled further, the tumbling abductees also stopped further away. When the last member was shoved off, he tumbled to a distance ten yards ahead of Urd. Once Mary had regained all her lucidity, she scanned her surroundings vigorously before noticing the girl beside her. Perhaps overcome by the gladness of being rescued, a wide grin spread across her face, and she bantered away.

“Eh, are you with the boy? Angels sent by God? No, can’t be, that cheeky rascal’s no angel! You ought to tell him to be less barbaric, even if he *is* saving us folks!”

Urd giggled; it was always a delight seeing people other than herself suffer from the idiosyncrasies of Cirius. Speaking of which, there he was now, poking his head out of the carriage and waving. However, it was only after seeing him jump off that sinister carriage, away from that sinister rider, could Urd finally breath away all her stirring anxiety.

*

Abaddon went on riding, clueless of the situation of his captives. When suddenly, he noticed an inexplicable change in the horses; they began trotting faster, with their gaits light and relaxed, as if relieved of some heavy loads. For the first time since entering the forest, Abaddon felt the sheer vigour of the horses, found only at their natural pace.

And it was also then, that the Demon knew for certain, the surest signs of a fated blessing. Everything was coming into place to aid his return to Sheol: the gullibility of the priest and nuns, the greed of the coachman, and now, even the spirit of the horses. At this point, so consumed with confidence was this Demon, that no fault or further setbacks could be fathomed. He didn’t even suspect anymore about the ongoing silence in the carriage, taking it as merely the vicar and nuns having strained their voices.

Brimming with swagger, Abaddon set aside the harness for the horse, because what was the use of effort for the blessed individual? Adjusting his position to find that comfortable spot, he laid back on his seat, arms on the armrest, and legs crossed one over the other. In that jubilant mood of his, he saw fit to strike up a conversation with his reticent abductees.

“It’s mighty curious, isn’t it, vicar?” The Demon sounds deceptively sagacious.

“You, the men and women of divinity, shall be so effectively... whisked away by my malevolent kind, well, malevolent in your sense, at least. All you churchmen ought to have pondered this question, haven’t you? Why is it that evil, again, in your eyes, always seem so limitless and insurmountable?”

“When really, vicar, it’s not so much the adroitness of evil... rather, it’s the complacency of the good! So very often, evil wants to stop at nothing, it seeks corruption, and destruction, and degradation. Its ambitions are fanciful. Benevolence, on the other hand, wants to turn the other cheek; it seeks charity, and humility, and faith. It is meek in nature.”

“The thing about mortals, vicar, is that they are concerned only with the present moment. Like the animals they are, they are swayed by sensation and emotion. Lust pleases the eyes; money pleases the mind; power pleases the ego. This is why hearts of justice appear so much less frequently than the heart of wickedness.”

“But perhaps many mortals already realise the perniciousness of those desires, and it might be why you do what you do. You condemn the chase for those sensation and emotions as evil. They signify the baseness of animals, which mortals ought to rise above of. Thus, there comes sins of lechery or avarice or wrath.”

“But if that is so, vicar, then what I am doing to you can *never* be evil! My actions are not clouded in lust, nor greed, nor any other sensation. They are done out of the ultimate virtue, of *love*, vicar!”

Abaddon was nigh out of breath when he finished his oration, but the speech he’d poured his fervour into garnered the same sound of silence as before from the carriage. ‘Not even a disagreeable hum, after all that?’. More disappointed than alarmed, the Demon finally turned back to peer through the carriage window, trying to ascertain just what inspired that state of dormancy within...

“WHAT THE ABSOLUTE BLOODY-”

*

Urd couldn’t take her eyes off the trotting horses. Though the group, having concealed themselves deep behind bushes and thickets, there was no shaking the feeling of trepidation that oozes from that rider. His abductees, too, were not shy about showering their captor with the most hideous descriptions. And in the eyes of victims, the malice of the evil-doer can be heightened beyond belief. As Mary prattled on about the nastiness of that kidnapper, the more Urd shuddered at the thought.

The children, the nuns, the priest and a swan huddled together, keenly observing the movements of the horses behind their covers. As the coach slowly glides away, each of the priest and nuns prayed that their absence would go unnoticed long enough just for it to vanish out of sight. They all swallowed in nervousness, one after another, half of them were faithfully hopeful, while the other half were beginning to waver.

Alas, their hearts sank collectively, when eventually, the horses came to an abrupt stop. The rider steps down from his seat, with a face dark and baleful, as if on the brink of explosion. He scans the area for his lost valuables, undoubtedly failing to find any trace of them. Suddenly, a strident and livid scream pierces the ears of the group; the rider was thrashing, with a posture and complexion that grew more crooked by the second. The scream continues, and by now, the human disguise is utterly ripped apart.

From beneath the once fleshy skin of the rider, burst out the chunks of squirming grey. The grey, then manifests its minutes features and form its individuals. And the individuals... take flight. The buzzes start whirring, the brightness starts dimming, and the air starts diluting. The locusts scatter forth in legions, undulating around every tree and rock in their wayward path. Thousands of pairs of eyes, each assigned a single duty, to seek out what their master lost.

There was no calming Urd's breath, as a swarm inches closer and closer towards them. No words, no images, no reason could be conjured by the girl; when fear dominates all faculties, one can only stare in a stupor. The deaconesses and the priest, too, were in tears, each slumped down to the earth, either in a desperate resort to avoid detection, or to accept the coming of ultimate demise. Most concerning above all, however, must be the boy, who, for the first time in his life, could not find any amusement whatsoever in his present 'adventure'.

Each moment passed excruciatingly, as the swarm of locusts whirl by their surroundings again and again, always missing their spot by a hair. And just for a second, they thought they had chanced upon a miracle. Until, the swarm crept up from behind... and the locusts made contact. Like a rabid hound, the swarm twists and turn in a frenzy, with their buzzes booming louder than before. In a dizzying scene for the group, the swarm began circling the air above them, in what could only be a dreadful signal for the worse threat to come. Not long after, it was there.

Peering down onto them with a contemptuous gaze, the Demon had come, to reclaim his goods. To the priest and nuns, it was impossible to believe this entity before them had once given a gregarious greeting back at the church. It was no longer a countenance recognizable by fellow humans. And once the mind is stripped of that experience of humanity, whatever entity that stands before them is only a monster, inscrutable and terrifyingly malevolent.

In the face of that malevolence, the mind goes through a lot of things, but the most visceral above all, must be the contemplation of *death*. Particularly, one comes to realise the true ineffability of that grim state. When death looms so close and near, whatever preconceived notions, whatever institutionalised teachings, they all crumble in insufficiency. Not Heaven, nor Hell, nor Valhalla, nor Nirvana nor any other plane, could be conjured as a concrete scenario, when death looms before you. And so, there was no more praying from the priest and the nuns. Instead, there was only thoughtless silence, as they were about to be returned to their doom.

Abaddon continued imposing upon the group, paying special attention to the two curious children in his captives' wake. There were so many questions he would never get an answer to. The 'why' did these children do what they did? The 'how' did these children do what they did? The longer he looked at them, the more confusing the situation was. His mission had nearly come to another failure, at the hands of a young and meek Goddess, and a... boy, merely a boy.

Merely a boy, yet, for whatever reason, there was no shaking a sense of strange familiarity from him. A presence which the spirit is both compelled by, but wants nothing to do with. It perturbed the Demon slightly. Thus, he sought the quickest solution there was, and went for it. Abaddon stepped forth, and now was looking down directly at the boy. Through the countless cacophony of the locusts' buzz, he spoke soft but sternly:

"Right, look here, boy. I will be taking back these people. I will leave soon after. You will not follow. We will both be out of each other's hair. And there will be no more disturbances... Understand?"

Though the Demon was perturbed by the boy, the same goes the other way around. Though he tries to hide it, there was a rampantly stirring fear in every facet of Cirius' body. No adult he'd ever met in his life has appeared quiet so forebodingly nefarious as this one. At that moment, the desire and will to fight injustice was wavering with his own growing insecurities, when before such unconquerable wickedness. But, nonetheless, try, he must.

Mustering up a bold and defiant expression, Cirius stood strong in his confrontation with the Demon.

"What will you do with them?" Cirius interrogated.

"Why, that's not any of your business, is it?"

"You seem dodgy."

Abaddon gritted his teeth underneath his lips, irritation was building. And very unsubtly, he reached into his jacket to pull out a cooking knife he'd nicked from the Church of St. Helena. Threateningly, he held it inches before the throat of the boy, hoping this could persuade him to see the light of reason.

"Look here, I have just as much distaste for harming children as any other soul, but I don't see myself as above it. Just be a good one and step aside, will you?"

But that knife was perhaps more effective without having been brought out than if it was...

As soon as the glint of the sharp edge appeared before Cirius, a great flash of remembrance lit up! The words of a wise and old man rang enthusiastically within him. Well, the old man's words were rather confusing and long-winded, but still, the words came with a powerful reminder of what he was: the invulnerable, invincible, and immortal... Nephalem.

'Stabbing, piercing, ramming, squashing, crushing, starving... none, ever, disturbs the Nephalem for too long'. Cirius recalled the reverential face of Mimir lecturing to him.

Suddenly, fear was gone and cockiness surged. This knife-wielding Demon before him was as harmless as a newborn kitten. Triumphant, he glued his fists to his hips, erecting himself as a defensive wall for the people behind. A smile spread across him, as he begins swaggering before Abaddon, much to the panic and perplexity of the onlooking Urd, who thought he'd lost his mind from fear. When Cirius' swagger turns into taunts, the young Goddess' inner panic also turned into inner hysteria.

"Come on then, do it!"

"What?"

"DO it!"

"Do what?"

"Stab me with the knife!"

"...What?!"

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU ON ABOUT, CIRIUS?!"

"Do your worst- Let him do his worst, Urd!"

"CIRIUS, NO!"

"Just step aside, boy."

"I'm not going to!"

"Then I'll *stab* you!"

"DO it!"

"I WILL!"

"DO IT ALREADY!"

"I'M TELLING YOU I WILL!"

"I'M WAITING!"

"..."

"WHAT? YOU YELLOW?!"

And so, Abaddon plunged the knife into Cirius' torso... and immediately, the boy went trashing and screaming on the ground, as his chest leak out geysers of blood upon the earth. In those last moments before Cirius' mind was overtaken by madness from pain, he went over what he found strange in this situation. Interestingly, though, what he found strange wasn't the fact that he had been lied to, about being invincible. Rather, what he found strange, was that his vision was suddenly engulfed by an expanse of flickering redness, and his body was suddenly feeling very hot...

*

Rewinding the day just a tad, and shifting the location just a few dozen yards away from the wayward scene of kidnappings and stabbings, we find the God of Mischief. Loki laid low, prowling behind thickets with his crossbow, feeling very impatient. It was approaching an hour since his commence on his hunt for Robins; so far, he's had seven ant bites, three mosquito bites, and zero Robins.

No matter how many times he spied around the branches of trees, no sign of that iconic red breast was anywhere to be found. In fact, now that he thought about it, he couldn't find any trace of birds at all. No pheasants, no magpies, not even a tit! It is an uncanny thing, indeed, for a forest to be so barren with its residents, it always betokened something dismal; likewise, what could deter you from your own home except for some great disturbances?

Loki was starting to feel suspicious. What fearsome ferment could have unfolded in these woods to leave it traceless of fauna, and is he in unfathomable danger? While the God's mind was clouded with all these concerns, from above him, a waxy string of liquid dangled precariously. Suddenly, the string broke, and the sticky, mushy droplet of liquid landed on his bare neck, shocking him into standing up.

He turned around immediately, but could only see the enormous, furry belly of Fenrir. Looking up to meet the hound's face, he finally noticed that Fenrir had been sitting behind him, drooling away with his muzzle directly above. The titanic hound's tongue stuck out like a flab of pink, loose meat; his sharp canines brandished for all to see while he sat panting incessantly.

Suddenly, it dawned on Loki why there was no birds to be found, and the reason really was simpler than he thought. No animal would dare to approach this area, with this towering predator's head poking out the crown of trees! Realising this, he began yelling out towards the sky, ordering this gigantic son of his to lie down flat on the ground. Once Fenrir had heard those orders, he obeyed and did so, though not without a fair share of indignant baying. As Fenrir spread his limbs out and let himself slip onto the earth, a cloud of dust was stirred up around Loki, making him curse out as he coughs. With a satisfied grin, Fenrir set about observing the line of ants travelling by his big snout.

It took no longer than a few minutes before the forest regained its liveliness. As soon as that great deterrent was lowered, the birds glided by once more, perching every so often on the branches. And lo, here comes a Robin, small and nimble, descending from its flight upon a nearby boulder. Sporting that iconic tinge of orange, its stout, little head jerked to-and-fro, as if endlessly curious about all walks of life.

Gingerly, Loki held out his crossbow in wait, like the hunting feline awaiting the moment to pounce. His eyes gleamed with sharpness, and a hint of obsession. With his hands stilled, and the target in clear sight, he readies the trigger...

"HEEEELLLLLPPPPP!!!". It was the cry we know to belong to a particularly disturbed nun. The scream echoes throughout the forest, galvanising all its inhabitants into alarm.

At that moment, Loki fired his shot, but the astounded Robin took flight so quickly, the arrow caught nothing, as it whizzed over the boulder. The God of Mischief shook with ire, before letting out a cry of his own, unleashing some nasty words into the air. Although Loki had not paid any attention to the piercing scream of a woman, Fenrir was more conscientious. Nudging Loki at the shoulders, Fenrir barked out inquisitively at his father.

“Rrrff Grrdfg Hfffgh.”

“What IS it Fenrir?!” Loki said, still fuming.

“Grrhg Rffgf.”

“Yes, I heard that scream!”

“Hgfhg Grfhf?”

“What do I think that distressed, womanly call for help was? Why, I can’t *fathom* a guess!”

“Rrrff!”

“Right, you’re right. Let’s all calm down...”

Loki took a deep breath.

“Hgghhg Rghhg Grrhg?”

“Do I plan to investigate? Hmmm, no!”

“Rgfff!”

“Frankly, I don’t see the point. I came here for a specific task, to hunt Robins. I’m not morally obligated to do anything else!”

“Rrffhg Grfghg!”

“Oh, you beg to disagree?”

“Rhghg Grhghg.”

“*Categorical imperative?*”

“Rffgh Hgffhf Ghhgh Rffhg.”

“I, as the bystander, if exhibit negligence in confronting oppression, has myself become an oppressor?”

“Rffgh.”

“...”

“...”

“Should never have sent you to that animal school...”

Defeated on the grounds of moral philosophy by his judicious son-wolf, Loki relented to investigate the source of that cry for help. Knowing Fenrir has the better senses between them, Loki gestured for him to lead the way. Enthusiastically, Fenrir got on his paws with a great hop which rumbled the ground. The canine’s ears twitched in his immense focus, and his snout too became restless in his repeated sniffing of the surroundings. Loki watched on blithely from behind, as Fenrir set about this busy work, which at the moment, the canine had no idea how truly significant it was.

But, little by little, as the surroundings are taken in by his acute senses, so too, does the morbid reality start to sink in. Such noises, so oppressive and odious; such scent, malodorous and malevolent. These ghastly sensations were washed across the forest, and, to Fenrir’s alarm, were growing in presence. The wolf quickened his pace, and started a continuous snarl, anticipating to meet a foe at any minute. Loki noticed the signs immediately, and he trailed behind Fenrir, closer than before.

Until, the giant wolf halted, and his snarling became barking. Fiercely, Fenrir stood staring down the unfolding terror, though he couldn’t make heads or tails of it, he did his best barking threats and intimidation. Once Loki caught up and saw the terror for himself, the scene appeared all too clear, and their enemy, all too evident. Before them, was the legion of locusts, amalgamated into a single mass, thick enough to blanket sunlight. With strident buzzes and restless bodies, the mass formed an apparent circle, shielding around something.

With his face ever ridden with calmness, Loki prepared his actions thoughtfully. It was clear he needed a way to penetrate this great wall of insects. Power is by no means in scarcity, he thought, as he peered at his titanic son-

wolf. But, of course, recalling the miserable state Tyr was in yesterday, it is evident brute force will lead them nowhere. No, what he needs... is a lasting power. Here, Loki took a look at the earth, and finds scattered twigs, as one usually does in forests. And suddenly, he's got it!

Still calm and blithe, he went about kicking the scattered twigs into a single pile, frequently bending down to gather as many leaves as he could in his hands. Once all was set, he knelt before the pile of twigs, fished out a shining red wand, and lit a flame.

It burned small, then after some swaying, burned larger, and larger, and larger. Until, a roaring campfire swayed vigorously before them. The flame burned quietly and brightly, defying the spectre of bellowing darkness in front of it. And with this fire steadily lit, Loki prepares to unleash the 'lasting power' to tear through the locust barrier.

Fenrir crouched, and sucked in a gigantic breath, fit to strain his stature. As he breathed, he channelled all his strength and aggression inside his belly. With the last iota of air sucked in, he held still for a few seconds, which felt agonizingly slow... And he blew! A genuine, unstifled huff and puff from a wolf; Fenrir unleashed the great beam of fearsome flurry across the ground, and through the roaring blaze!

Next, was a scene of redness and hotness. The beam of flurry catches the flame, before spreading out like a net. The great blaze rushes at the locust wall, merciless in its swift and vicious conquer over it. The fire spreads across the chain, singing and singing until it breaks with the crumbling fall of torched insects. Loki stared with a satisfied grin at the fiery pandemonium that they created.

Finally, the last layer of the shield came down, and the insides of the barrier stood for all to see. And after taking it all in, it was then that Loki realised, that whatever was inside the barrier, was not any less chaotic than what was happening outside. He sighed, as he watched the boy with a knife in his chest rolling over the ground, beside three nuns and a goose, and underneath a disturbed looking Demon.

It seems the day is far from over for the God of Mischief...

*

Successfully unearthing their foe from its protective barrier, Fenrir pounced with a vicious speed at the fiend, his fangs widen in a bloodthirsty attempt to rend Abaddon's head clean off. And, Abaddon, frozen from the sudden chaos, could only stand stiffly as the wolf closes in.

Yet, just inches before those canines meet the Demon's pallid face, the locusts sprung back into action. Those that remained from the barrier escaped the clutches of the blaze by severing the links between their burning comrades, until the last, lingering embers died within the crispy, charred corpses. And a fire that seemed all-consuming was squashed by the instincts of insects.

Still consumed with the frenzy from the fire, the violent swarm rushes at Fenrir, seizing his snout with a thousand tiny grapples and bites. The assault sends the wolf into a frenzy of his own; he thrashes his enormous body about the forest, ramming into trees to scatter the pests before slashing to-and-fro with his paws. And in that moment, while that swirling storm of locusts and the titanic wolf were duking one another, whatever cleverness and guile once attributable to them melt away. It truly, only was a warfare between beasts.

By this point, Abaddon had well awakened from the shock induced daze, but perhaps only being aware was not enough. In such tumultuous states of confusion, the mind knows that it has to do something, but it may be clueless on what to do. Abaddon jerked around erratically, acting on ideas that just kept coming and going.

Before finally, he settled on one idea: grab one of the nuns, and fly off immediately. A desperate, pathetic last resort that takes more convincing on one's pride than on one's bravery.

The Demon reached down and grabbed Mary by her arm, with an irate grip that forces out her pained grunt. With all his strength, Abaddon tried to drag her off, but it seems he chose the worst nun to do so with. Unrelentingly, Mary would claw at her fellow sister, locking her left arm in Cleopa's. Cleopa, afraid of being dragged off herself, would in turn, lock her arm to Daria's, who locked *her* arm to the Reverend's. Before Abaddon knew it, he had to drag four people off at once in his last-ditch effort. Eventually, with a feisty and hefty yank, Abaddon pried Mary off the others, but, by then, it was too late...

As Abaddon prepares to take off in his monstrous locust form, Loki was already alertly behind. The God of Mischief's gaze fixed intensely on the Demon, as he raised his crossbow stolidly towards him. With an unwavering finger, Loki pressed onto the trigger, and fired a scorching shot at the Demon. The arrow pierced the elbows, and Abaddon instantly unhanded his hostage as he reeled from the agony.

Then, hardly another second more, another shot was fired. This time, straight at the neck of the writhing and wailing fiend. Soaring across the air, the arrow penetrates its target with fearsome ease, and felled the Demon face-first onto the earth.

The stillness of the fiend's fallen body pervaded the air with a momentary serenity. Though, it seems the group was stuck in that uncertain mood after a crisis, where we're unsure whether it's really over. Gingerly, the priest stepped forth and leaned his face towards the body, trying to trigger some sort of reaction from the fallen figure. When no response happened, he sprinted back to the nuns, beaming with felicity. Steadily, they each tried to swallow this elating truth, at first with a few relieved breaths and nervous laughter. But, as the reality really settled in, the group bursts out in whoops, hugs and cavorts. Two among them, however, was not in the same celebratory spirits.

The boy's cries were unceasing throughout the ordeal, sounding as obstreperous as ocean waves; one moment his yelping loudens, only to die down, then louden again. Urd would use those short intervals where his yelping was especially soft to communicate to Cirius, though frankly, it doesn't look like she could say much before being drowned out by the crescendoing screams.

"Ahhhhhhhhh"

"Cirius! Stay with-"

"AAAHHHHHHHHH!!!"

"*Listen!*"

"Ahhhhhhhhh"

"You've got to-"

"AAAHHHHHHHHH!!!"

The girl gripped frantically onto the boy's shoulders, half out of panic, half out of genuine annoyance. Hoping to somehow snap him into cognizance, Urd began shaking him forward and back. This, of course, only exacerbated the pain and made Cirius bawl harder. With these fruitless efforts, Urd gave in; in the end, she decided she would just out-scream the boy to get through to him. So, leaning towards his face, she bellowed out her instructions on how to stay calm after being stabbed. And it was then, that Loki thought to finally step in and put a stop to this miserable display from the kids.

"It seems the Fates really like cursing me with the presence of you silly children..." He murmured in the midst of the children's screaming match.

Noticing Loki behind, Urd immediately turned and bombarded him with all her anxious questions.

“Mr. Loki, Mr. Loki! Cirius’ been stabbed!”

“Indeed he has, which really goes to show how silly you two are.”

“What do we do?!”

“Well, for a start, you can learn not to go to dangerous places unsupervised.”

“Bother that now! What do we do about Cirius?!”

“A better question is what to do with you *lot*! You, the vicar *and* the nuns!”

“Please, Mr. Loki! He’ll die!”

“No, he *won’t*.”

“What about Abaddon?! He’s going to get up! And he’s going to turn into a great big bug and kill us!”

“No, he *isn’t*.”

Urd was astounded by Loki’s coolness. So poised and composed was his demeanour, it blasts away distress and makes you forget about any threats or danger. It was the type of coolness that could very well be mistaken for apathy, and to a stranger it very well has. But, fortunately, Urd is not a stranger to the God of Mischief, and she can truthfully say that this God’s constant coolness comes from an indefatigable sense of self-assurance. And in a peculiar way, that confidence is contagious.

Slowly but surely, the conviction about their triumph over this nightmarish day grew stronger within the young Goddess, and hope was reinvigorated from the depths of a heart which shortly before has sunken into despair. And very coincidentally, this renewed spark of hope and courage arose just immediately before they were tested, for a dreadful turn of events was just about to unfold, at the site of the collapsed Demon...

Over the jubilant band of nuns and vicar, the body of Abaddon laid motionless, with each passing second it remained still, cheerier were the voices of the nuns and vicar, and it truly felt that this joy would last for eternity... until, the body twitches...

At first, it goes unnoticed. But then, the body twitches twice... then three times, here Loki started to look up. Then, the body jiggles... then trembles... then convulses.

A sudden din of snaps and crackles quieted the crowd of onlookers. Whatever relief and celebration the group enjoyed was spoiled by this new unravelling terror, and with its arrival, it spewed the expressions of consternation back onto all their faces.

This terror marks itself boldly and balefully, as Abaddon’s body erupts into a violent fit, the air around him began swirling, swirling up a stormy squall which chills the skin and stings the eyes. But, while the others shielded themselves from this gust, Loki squinted through it, never taking his gaze off that fiendish body. In doing so, he bore sole witness to Abaddon’s ‘final’ metamorphosis, revealing, in all its disturbing glory, the true face of the Monarch Locust.

*

Just moments before Abaddon’s metamorphosis happened, a good dozen yards away from the group, the warfare of beasts persists just as turbid as it started, with Fenrir was still consumed in his heated fray with the locust swarm.

Hitherto, the battle had been stuck in a tedious stalemate: the giant wolf had no means of extinguishing those evasive, flying pests; and those pests had no means of hurting the wolf with his thick layer of fur. As such, both just devolved into annoying the other, instead of dealing any damage.

That was until, inexplicably, the swarm of locusts ceased all its manoeuvres, and stayed hovering in place. Taken aback, Fenrir cocked his right and left, still on his guard. Charily, he swiped his paw through the mass of hovering locusts. This dishevelled their formation, but otherwise, did nothing to disturb the collective. The swarm remained hovering, transfixed on nothing, as if in a stupor.

The reasons behind this mysterious turn of behaviours would quickly become clear to Fenrir, as his canine senses began picking up the rapid changes to the forest. The sound of a worsening whirlwind; the growing stench of musk; the creeping chill of the air. These little changes would ferment up an intense trepidation in the giant wolf. Baring out his fangs, Fenrir bayed at what enigmatic villainy was crawling out.

Suddenly, the static swarm kick into motion; in unison, each individual turned in their position before flying off in varying speeds back towards the heart of the forest. Fenrir, though, was no longer paying attention to the swarm, because his ears had picked up something far more pressing and far more significant. The voice of Loki rang resonantly, calling for his return. And even from that distance away, he could tell, his father's voice was one rife with direness. Sparing no other thought, the giant wolf dashed off, stirring up clouds of dust behind with his thunderous sprint. In no time, Fenrir was at Loki's side, making his arrival known with a hearty bark.

"FENRIR! COME!" Loki, missing the sound of the bark from the hurly-burly, was still yelling out for his son-wolf.

Then, Fenrir made another, more audible bark, which finally grabbed his father's notice. When he did, he began gesturing wildly, presumably he was also shouting something, but it was hard to make out; with the whirlwind's roaring and Cirius' screaming and the nuns' wailing, even the giant wolf's acute ears proved inadequate to receive it all. But no matter, Fenrir thought to himself, he'll just read the lips of his father... something he'd also learnt in animal school.

"Fenrir... take these... ride back... castle!". Loki pointed to the band of nuns to his left, then to the two children, then back at the nuns.

Fenrir, delighted with how well he deciphered the code, nodded enthusiastically. Then, he saw his father waved his hand up and down vigorously, signalling for him to lie down. And after he did so, Loki ambled toward the wounded Cirius, and hoisted him up on one of his shoulders; with his other hand he pushed Urd along, meeting some discontent on her part.

Finally, after some tricky shifting and shuffling, the two weans were guided atop the back of the giant wolf. Cirius was laid down on his back, hopefully able to stay secure throughout the journey with Urd's aid. Then, he yelled out for the nuns and priest to join on, to which they waddled forth with their trembling legs, grasping at Fenrir's thick hide for support.

As he left the priest and nuns to settle in clumsily, Loki eyed the boy with increasing curiosity. By this point, Cirius' screams were beginning to wane somewhat, reduced to groans, though still very audible. But Loki was not observing about that, instead, he was looking at the knife jutting out from his abdomen. He wasn't sure what possessed him to do it, it was just one of those things that gnawed away at you. Gingerly, he placed his hands on the knife's handle... and yanked it out cleanly.

Oh, how the screams were reignited with a burning, fiery force. Louder than before, and longer than before. Immediately, there came the furious protest from all those aboard, but, smiling blithely, Loki slapped at the sides of Fenrir, commanding him to take off.

As the giant wolf rose up, Urd was astonished to see just how high up from the ground they were. And when he started sprinting, they all realised how unprepared their spirits were for the journey. Each lengthy stride quaked their seats like a rowboat upon a raging sea, and it felt like one wrong jerk was all it took to send you plummeting down twenty-feet to a face-cleaving earth. Soon, all were joining the boy in screaming for their lives.

“AIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!!” Came the voice of Mary, as the party disappeared into the distance, away from the depths of the forest.

Now, all that remained here, was simple and straightforward. A God, and a Demon; a combination that has seen infinite variances in this tumultuous world. What force is it, and for what reason does it always compel these two types of beings to decimate on another? Perhaps, not even they can answer anymore.

The swarm of locusts float sluggishly towards the whirlwind, and allow themselves to be taken in its flow. As if sucked into a vortex, the insects spiralled around the area, making their way down to the centre, where the fallen Abaddon laid. More and more passionate were their buzzing, as they neared their ghastly paradise that resides in the body of their master. It was dark, it was dry and it was crooked. The corpse continues to convulse, absorbing in the spiralling swarm into every inch of its recess.

Until, the corpse starts to crack... then splinter... and finally, it burst! From that husk broken from an inundating maleficence, rose the unsightly, true figure of Abaddon. Amidst waves of scattering locusts, and whirling dust, stood a figure of half man, and half insect. Once the dust fades and locusts dissolved, the wretched complexion of this Demon came into full view for the God of Mischief.

With an exterior that glows luridly yellow, what encases the fiend, was a jagged shell lined across the torso, the arms and the legs. His dark face jutted forward like a hunchback, while the mandibles twitched ceaselessly, trying to find anything to tear or slice. Suddenly, two pairs of thin, transparent wings spread upwards to the sky; they span the length of the figure himself, and flaps with a speed that shocks the air with intervals of electricity.

Every part of this Demon bellowed out an unsound alarm to those who bear him witness. An oppressive aura that shatters the pluck of young soldiers, and confounds the experience of veteran fighters. He moved so slowly, yet seems able to disappear within a blink.

Tauntingly, Abaddon raises his arms to his sides, flashing the sharp claws that replaced his meaty fingers. In reply to this, Loki revealed a weapon of his own. Fishing into the depths of his blazer, he slid out a sword, a rapier to be exact, that somehow defies logic by fitting inside his blazer.

After a few intimidating swings, Loki held the rapier upright in front of his face, with the shining edge reflecting his steady pair of brown eyes, which gazed decisively at the Demon. As he did so, he could hear the incessant buzzing of Abaddon changing pitch, becoming ever more grating.

*

Abaddon swooped towards Loki in a speed unfathomable; claws outreached in a deadly attempt to gouge. The God's brown irises flickered erratically before he slashes his blade lithely in front, catching the Demon's assaulting claw and forcing him to halt mid-air in his flight. Though, the parry only allowed him a mere instance of a reprieve, for just as soon as the sword and the claws finished clashing, the Demon's flurry of attacks began.

Abaddon's claws slice at the God, again and again, unstoppable until his foe is dived. It pushed Loki back one step at a time. Suddenly, backed against a tree, Loki was overwhelmed, and Abaddon's attack finally broke through. With a satisfying clank, he wrenched the rapier aside, leaving the God's body wide open. Seizing at the chance, his left arm rushes in for a fatal strike, with those sharp claws fully extended. But... he was denied again, by an absurd turn of events which struck the Demon's gut with wrathful confusion.

Abaddon's attack was blocked by a glimmering white plate of metal, seemingly manifested from thin air. Very mystically, the white glow of the plate died away, revealing beneath it the clean, curvy shapes of a shield. On the shield's face bore the insignia of a mighty lion, mouth agape with its fangs, mocking the locust King. Baffled, the Demon glared around for an explanation, but there really was no need for it, because almost immediately, the answer would present itself clear as day. The shield started glowing, the same bright white as before. Defying reality, the shape of the shield began twisting.

Still consumed by astonishment, the next few moments would flash by too quickly for the Demon. Loki, on the other hand, was fully prepared. The shield took on its new shape, its bottom thinning into a shaft, and its top amassed into a foreboding sphere. The God's hands gripped tightly onto the shaft, and before the white glow could fade away, he swung! The weapon bashed across Abaddon's face, splintering his features, and oozing out his sickly yellow blood. And just as Loki landed that bludgeon, the white sparkles scattered from his new weapon, revealing, in all its painful glory, a mace.

Laevateinn, the weapon that could never settle on a form. It scoffs at the average sword, and spear, and bow for letting themselves be so effortlessly tamed. A weapon should never conform to structure and rigidity, for they mark the essence of battle itself. And battle, it reasons, is always in the property of chaos. With its adulating embrace of chaos, what other wielder can he lend itself to, other than the God of Mischief?

The Demon was sent flying with all his faculties in disarray; green became purple, blue became black, today became tomorrow, and yesterday was ten years ago. Seizing the chance, Loki gave a voiceless command to the shape-shifting weapon, and it transformed once more in his hand. The shaft extends, arching both ways into a pair of horns for a sturdy bow, with an arrow already in place, and it was fired straight at the Demon in a daze. Yet, Loki, betraying all his experience, had let a hint of emotion be imbued within that shot from his impatience and rashness. That hint was all it took for Abaddon to be reanimated. Sensing the hostility from that soaring arrow, his eyes were aglow with instincts, and his lightning quick claws snaps the arrow in its flight.

Moments later, Abaddon was back on his feet, buzzing as hatefully as before while he glares into the eyes of the God, a glare which Loki returned served alongside a contemptuous smirk. Laevateinn shifts back into a rapier, pointed to the sky, waiting for the next blood-filled contact.

“To have hidden this hideous form behind human faces... is the sort of trickery I can praise.” Loki said loud enough for his opponent to hear.

There was no reply.

“Obviously, some parts of your skills still need to be brushed up. Otherwise, you’d be home by now, eh, *Frans Moller?*”

There was a stir.

“I... have deceived the whole of your kingdom... and it was only chance which foiled my plans...” Abaddon’s voice came out harshly.

“So sayeth the defeated gambler!”

“Defeated... I am defeated when my body crumbles... and my mind vanishes... before that... you see in front of you... the ultimate enemy... of your kind...”

The Demon launched himself forward, whizzing through the air with his two pairs of wings. The flying fiend clashes with the God once more, exchanging blows, claws with metal. In that short instance of repeated parries, blood was drawn from both sides, which only fuelled their furies for more blows. But, while the scratches on the Demon recovered just as soon as it was inflicted, the God’s body only grew bloodier. Sensing the danger, Loki looked desperately for the opportunity to disengage, yet Abaddon was relentless. Eventually, though, as is his very nature, Loki thought up a wild gamble to force a rest from this savage skirmish.

After another parry, Loki, staring cavalierly at his foe, let go of his rapier. And to his expectation, just for a mere second, the Demon’s attention was engrossed on that falling sword. In that split second, he made a massive leap backwards as he consciously transfers a command to Laevatein. Still being watched intently by the fiend, the rapier flashes white, and shrinks down in size. Abaddon’s eyes would widen in panic, when the rough texture of lead would emerge into view, coupled with the pungent smell of gunpowder... and lavenders.

?

The explosion was deafening, sending Abaddon back to seeing blue, black, and purple. The smoke stifled his vision, choked him, stung him, and by necessity he flew up higher just to compose himself. By the time he could see, a weapon was already returned to Loki’s hand, this time, a golden staff, glowing violet at its vertex.

In a daring and provocative manner, the God stamped the foot of the staff on the earth, which began radiating the same shade of violet. On observing more closely, Abaddon could see a strange runic marking floating just above the stamped area. Just like that, what was a brawl of physical strength and finesse with weaponry was upturned into a brawl with magic. Abaddon didn’t like it one bit. Gingerly, he descent down to the surface, suddenly becoming highly aware of each passing moment.

Magic: incomprehensible, unpredictable, some might call it the coward’s way of fighting, of course, those who would dabble in it could not care less how you label them, because at the end of the day, the insults mean

nothing coming from a person in the midst of polymorphing into a toad. Abaddon scrutinised the rune, pondering what it could do, and how it could do it. A curse? An enchantment? Or maybe... a dud? This, he realised, was how the God of trickery used the essence of enigma as a fearsome force of battle.

Abaddon stood motionless, a safe distance away from Loki. And when the God stepped forth, holding the golden staff forward, Abaddon shuddered, instinctively retreating a step. The two began pacing, with one's movements inciting the other. After a while, it was unclear who was following whose movements, but quite abruptly, Loki halted. His grip on the staff tightened before he once more stamped it roughly on the dirt below him, lighting the ground a violet luminescence. That was when Abaddon looked down, and flew back startled at where he was. Directly underneath him was the first runic mark, swirling with ineffable arcane energy.

Taking his attention off the God, though, was a gruesome mistake. Magic is used precisely to exploit such instances of confusion...

In that hitherto silent field, a loud snap of the fingers reverberated, and Abaddon would see materialize before him the belligerent countenance of the God of Mischief. Clearing a distance of ten yards in an iota of time, Loki's body was now an arm's length away, but more worrying for Abaddon was that the golden staff now stood mere inches away from his torso. Surrounding the God were a torrent of purple particles, emanating from the bulbous crystal at the head of the staff, which at this point was flashing white like the colour of pure nothingness. Overwhelmed by this sudden turn of events, the Demon was stunned into a momentary yet fatal inertia.

Awaking from this inertia, Abaddon twists his body sideways to dodge whatever was incoming. But that short delay costed him dearly, as the destructive beam of violet light shot out from Loki's staff, piercing through the fiend's sides, eradicating his armoured chest, and blowing clean off one of his limbs. His screeches of pain rang out like an orchestra with broken instruments, but the screams did nothing to abate the destructive ray of light, which continued its path across the whole forest, merciless to everything in its trajectory.

Even the edges that escaped the beam's trajectory did not go completely unscathed. All the foliage that was pierced through by the beam was caught up in its firepower, and promptly began burning. A little flare on the shrubbery would flicker and flutter into a flashing blaze. The dying leaves of Autumn sported another coat of searing, orange redness. Carried by the gentle breeze, the flames would percolate to a nearby bush... to a young sapling... and up the leaves of grand old tree.

Over the course of the fight, the forest would burn hotter and brighter, as if a sliver of the sun itself dropped down to the earth. But while the animals are prudent enough to flee, the skirmishing God and Demon was obdurate to leave only after seeing each other's demise.

Along with the limb, Loki's assault had also taken off some of Abaddon's sanity. Though still screaming in agony, he wasted no time in attempting a retaliation, fuelled by spite and murderous intent. His healthy limb raised high; his claw bore down on Loki's exposed face. Just then, another snap of the fingers, and Abaddon was left slashing at thin air, while the God was sent back to his place ten yards away. Instead of frustration, however, he merely cackled at having cracked the code. Energized, he brushed off his bleeding body and leapt into the air, rushing at his enemy. This time, attentively gazing at Loki's fingers.

The smooth, sliding gesture of middle finger off the thumb; as soon as Abaddon saw it, he turns his body fiercely behind, arms outstretch with his claws in a deadly twister. And tragically, Loki was there to catch the receiving end. The claws slash across his face, digging into his left eye, reducing half his world into blackness.

The blow sent the God tumbling backwards, clutching at his bloodied eye with a set of groans that tries to hide the pain. Satisfied, the Demon cackled in the air, sordidly amusing himself at his foe's suffering. Yet, unnervingly, Abaddon couldn't shake the feeling that this small counterattack gave him more elation that it really ought to.

The battle rages on. After Loki had planted two more of those magic runes throughout the field, the fight quickly boiled down into a dizzying mess of back and forth. Abaddon strained his wings trying to keep up with Loki's transportations, and Loki, in turn, was getting disorientated from the flashing into new scenes every few seconds.

Each clash between them became increasingly vital, as their tired spirits were leaving more careless mistakes in their defence. At one instance, Loki seized the chance to pierce the Demon's thighs. At another instance, Abaddon returned with a slash across the torso of the God. The clashes devolved into a repetition of exchanges, one of them would attack, then suffered the other's blow in return. In one of these deadly exchanges, Loki raised his left palm, in an effort to shield his face from the Demon's claws bearing down on him. The jab cut through his fingers, and Loki gritting his teeth in agony, pounced at the chance to strike back. Turning Laevatein into a cleaver, he sliced through the arm in front, sending Abaddon staggering back in a wail.

Loki examined his wounded hand, then poignantly at the ground where the severed bits of his fingers lay. With a sole, lonely little thumb, his hand tremored in pain. Yet, even after this, Loki merely winced once, before emerging more determined than ever, in a stoical acceptance of his hand's hereafter uselessness. No longer able to transport away in a blink, he clutched tenaciously on the cleaver and decided to face the Demon head on. Abaddon, too, accessed the loss of his limb. The extra pair that came with this form went away just like that. His being scrunched up in agitation, which he used to fuel his battle instincts. Glaring at the God, Abaddon hissed a strident and sinister hiss.

Yet, the languor felt by both sides was growing palpable. Movements were sluggish, senses were blunting, the two found even standing to be an onerous chore now, but willingly, they advance towards each other to reengage in their clashes. Loki settled on his cleaver because anything else was too effortful; Abaddon stopped flying because it was taking too much of a toll. All the speed, all the tactical distance were forgone for an old-fashioned close combat.

Though the pace of their battle had slowed, the clashes had grown in gore and fury. Under their bloodied bodies, pale with fatigue, an unrelenting force of courage swirled. Not the courage of determined soldiers giving a last stand, nor the courage that rises in acts of nobleness; it is the kind that is petty and foolish. It is the courage to do whatever it takes to satisfy the ego, and the more parts of the ego that are at stake, the more the spectrum of savagery is explored to protect it.

Around them, the fire burned freely, from the tiny flare in the bush it spread to any foliage in its vicinity. As it burned around the forest, it eventually enclosed the two fighters in an oval pen of flames. The air within it thinned from the rising smoke, which the effects of are starting to be felt. Choking from the quickly dissipating air, Loki was struck with a coughing fit, with Abaddon soon following with his own fit of gagging.

This coughing fit, though, was the last straw that caused Loki's collapse. The final strain that plunged his body into despair beyond recovery, he was forced down upon the ground, palms pressed against the dirt moistened by sweat and blood. Even if just for a slight moment, being brought down to the earth awakened Loki from the trance of a battle, and he could finally remember the world outside.

Did Fenrir make it out with the weans? Has Hel started to worry? His mind races with one thought to another of these kinds, and the more concerned he was about the world outside, the less things such as ‘enemy’ or ‘victory’ mattered to him. The forest and the burning flames engulfing it melts into an amorphous blur. Detached from his present surroundings, it was as if Loki’s very soul was absconding the battlefield. All the pain, all the damage, all rage reduced to nothing. And just as well... since the few moments would be all the more merciful.

The Demon’s claws dug into Loki’s exposed back. Again and again as Abaddon prolonged his finishing blows. His claws stab relentlessly into the lifeless body, leaving it like a punctured sponge, while the Demon’s screeches rise into a raucous proclamation of triumph. As a final mockery from the victor, Abaddon kicks the corpse flat on his splintered stomach, delighting as he saw Loki’s pupils formally vanish into the back of his head.

The overwhelming taste of victory sent Abaddon tumbling backways and collapsing on his back. With an exhausted mind seconds away from fainting, he caught one last glimpse at the sky, gathered with grey clouds above the burning trees. Seeing that, he could not suppress a smile at the delicious dessert served by the cosmos.

A droplet tinkles down from the Heavens, tantalising his lips with what’s to come. Abaddon closed his eyes, letting unconsciousness take over his person, and Fate to curate his safety. With that, he slept through the heavy rainfall. A heavy, housekeeping rainfall that meticulously tends to its tasks: extinguishing the flames from the forest, cleansing off the signs of murder, and washing the dirtied body of the murderer.

During his sleep, the Demon dreamt of his homeland just as he always dreamt of these last few months. Only, instead of returning in disgrace at a failed mission, he entered the kingdom gates with his head held high, and the God of Mischief’s head held even higher. Fanfare and praises of his exquisite triumph came from all sides, and even though the prince may not have said anything, his look of quiet pride was enough to be relished. And as the ages pass, and he, long perished, is still immortalised as an icon of the Demon’s supremacy over the Gods...

?

“You see... deceit, does not inherently involve any lying. It’s not about secrets, or disguises. The purest form of trickery is about showing realities. Realities that people yearn for so deeply, that they will reject truth even if fed to them...”

A clear, blue sky. Under it, a still and scenic forest. Within it, two erect, untouched figures. The God of mischief stood before the statuesque Demon, a broadsword held in his hand, with the blade just adjacent to the Demon’s exposed neck.

“Trickery is not your skills in lying your way through life. It is understanding the feebleness of the mind, and mastering this understanding. Illusions are nothing without proper execution, you know. The slightest bit of displacement ruins it; the slightest bit of doubt breaks it. But get it just right... and they enter an eternal sleep, refusing to wake up.”

Turning his sword to the flat side of the blade, Loki gave Abaddon’s cheeks a derisive slap, he did not stir.

“Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem you have any more chances to hone those skills of trickery...”

Solemnly, the sword was pulled back... and swung clean through the Demon’s neck. The head tumbles onto the earth, leaving a trail of putrid, amber blood.

One would imagine that breezing through the land on the back of a giant wolf is something anyone would devote the moment to enjoying fully. But, for the band atop Fenrir, the day had been all too topsy-turvy for the novelty to be enjoyed. In fact, once they got used to the rocky ride and stopped shrieking from fear, there was very little to say at all. With a collective look of haggardness and dishevelled faces, the priest and the nuns sat still and silently, half of them rethinking their lives, half of them not thinking at all.

This leaves the young Goddess in front, tending to her bleeding friend by herself. Urd kept a vigilant eye on Cirius; each time Fenrir leapt particularly widely across the field, she would adjust him back into a balanced position if he'd been disturbed. Every so often, she would give his face a slap or two (she wasn't yet aware that the need to stay awake only applied to head injuries, but she also wasn't that sorry about it).

At one point in the journey, Cirius finally snapped out of his fit of screaming, and regained some sense of lucidity. He started turning his head to-and-fro, assessing the situation, as he turned to the rest of the group, his eyes met Urd's right behind him.

"Cirius! How do you feel?"

Her voice came out gentle, overwhelmed by relief and gladness, which so often pacify our hearts. As they continue exchanging these emotional glances, Cirius saw fit to speak out too. And the first thing he said to her, when out of that state of endless bawl, was:

"The old man lied to me!"

"What?"

"*Your* old man. Lied to me!"

"I'm sure he did nothing of the sort!"

"Oh, he did so! Told me I was invincible!"

"I'm sure there was either a miscommunication, or a misunderstanding... knowing you, the latter seems very much the likely case."

"I didn't misunderstand nothing! He talked all passionately about how *I* was the strongest being in the world, and how nothing could ever hurt me! And what a fat load of truth that was!"

"Look here, father is a very wise man-"

"He's a fibber is what he is!"

"OI! Don't go calling my father a fibber! Take it back!"

Just like that, all the gladness and relief for his friend vanished. In their place, rose annoyance and agitation. Indignantly, Urd jumped to defend her father from this slander. Approximately fifty seconds since the boy regained consciousness, the two children started bickering. And as they got more heated in their bickering, their voices, too, were picking up intensity.

"NO! He's a lousy fibber!"

"YOU'RE the fibber!"

"AHHHHHHHH, I'VE JUST BEEN STABBED, AND I'M BLEEDING, AND I'M DYING, AND IT'S ALL YOUR DAD'S FAULT!"

"OH, THAT IS JUVENILE!"

So, the journey atop the back of the giant wolf would progress from screaming, to silence, and back to screaming. And by courtesy of Cirius' and Urd's screaming, what would be a tedious half hour long ride

breezed by in a flash for the two bickering kids. Though, unfortunately, the opposite was true for the adults at the back, who had to play audience to their whiny little voices.

Fenrir' slowed from a dash to a jog as he neared the vicinity of the castle grounds. His paw, as if light as feathers, tapped softly upon the luscious grass of the garden, so softly, in fact, that had you not been looking up, the presence of this twenty feet tall wolf would go completely unnoticed. Such is the case for Hel and Eir, who were currently engrossed in the patch of crocus they were sitting in front of them.

The Autumn crocuses, with a soothing shade of silver and pink, beguiles them to ruminate the interminable shifting of time and season, life and death, growth and decay. And as it always does with matters that concern itself with eternity or infinity, they melt into nonentity, futile for the finite mind to grasp. Hel and Eir, while admiring the crocuses, were transported to a timeless space, where the sole existence was the allure of those blooming flowers... and each other.

“HELP, HELP! I’VE BEEN BAMBOOZLED BY AN OLD MAN INTO BEING STABBED AND NOW HIS DAUGHTER IS HITTING ME!!!”

“SHUT UP!”

And the two Goddesses were pulled back into cruel, cruel reality. Scurrying up from their seats, Hel and Eir rushed towards the direction of the children’s bellow. Turning around the corner, they appeared just in time before Fenrir was jogging passed, saving themselves from being trampled under his paw.

Surprised by the emergence of the pair, Fenrir dug his legs into the grass for an abrupt stop, and by force of habit, sat his back legs upon the ground. The sudden incline caused by the wolf’s sitting posture sent the riders atop tumbling down the back of Fenrir. As the priest and nuns rolled down, they stacked on one other at the tail, it was precariously wobbly, though it seems they would just barley hang on. But then came the two children, still at each other’s throats, they bore down like a cannon ball upon the human domino, scattering them throughout the garden with each getting a mouthful of grass.

“What on earth is going on here?!” Hel turned to look at Eir, who could only reply with a shrug.

Hearing Hel’s voice, Cirius looked up immediately, and with as pitiful as a tone he could muster, pleaded out:

“Miss Hel! Help! I’ve been stabbed!”

“By his own foolishness, and *not* by any misinformation on my father’s part!” Urd was quick to interject.

Hel, more confused than before, bent down toward the two children. Gently, she spun Cirius around belly up from the grass. A horrified gasp escaped both Hel, and Eir behind, when they saw the blood-soaked tunic of the boy. Utterly drenched from the chest down, the bloodied shirt stained the grass with its ghastly colour of crimson, and disturbed the nose with its rank smell of iron.

“Dear Lord!” Hel uttered with an unfiltered shock.

Eir did not waste any more time there. The instincts of the Goddess of Healing kicked in powerfully, and she was already on the run to the castle’s infirmary, with an immaculate knowledge on what she needs and where to get them.

“WHAT have you two been doing?!” Demanded Hel furiously.

“We were... in the forest.” Urd confessed, this was faced with a disappointed groan.

“I’ve *told* you two before! That-”

“*Forest there’s dangerous! We know!*” Cirius and Urd sang out in unison.

Hel glared at their obnoxious little faces, but she couldn’t suppress the amused smile spreading across her face.

“Who stabbed you?” Suddenly, the Goddess was serious again.

“...”

“...”

“Go on!”

“...”

“Abaddon.” Urd muttered.

“WHAT?!”

“She said ABADDON, miss Hel.” Cirius repeated.

“Abaddon tried to capture you?!” Hel’s fury leaked out in her throbbing hands

“Not exactly...”

“He tried to capture the vicar and the nuns over there... but we stopped him!”

“*Stopped* him? You mean you two confronted Abaddon?!”

“We certainly did!”

“That’s a silly thing to do. A silly, silly thing!”

“But Miss Hel, we *did* save them...”

“Ends don’t justify means, Cirius! You two could’ve gotten yourselves killed!”

“...”

“Well, honestly, Miss Hel... I never would have tried to stop him... if a certain old man didn’t tell me I was invincible, and could never get hurt.”

“THERE HE IS AGAIN! Blaming my father for his own stupidity! Miss Hel, listen to this-”

Eir was rushing back to the garden, the supplies she’d gathered wobbled in her arms with her scamper. Amidst them, there were rolls of bandages, a ball of wool cloths, and some beakers with liquid of assorted colours. As she came out of the castle, a slight panic overcame her: she couldn’t recall where Hel and the kids were. Fortunately, there was not really a need to remember, because their loud racket led her to them all too easily. Turning a few corners around the walls of hedge, she was back beside the raucous crew.

Cirius and Urd gibbered away vehemently, while Hel sat watching with a quizzical expression. Approaching her, Eir coughed to indicate her presence, the suddenness of it jolted Hel in her seat. After turning up and giving Eir a quick beam, she set about placating the two livid children in front. Shoving herself between Cirius and Urd, the Goddess barricaded them from each other’s bitter spats, all the while her soothing voice chanted out a mantra of ‘*Alright*’ and ‘*Get along*’.

Before long, the Goddess of Healing knelt before the boy; with all the supplies organized neatly on the grass, she was ready to treat that ghastly stab wound on Cirius. Like the expert she is, Eir’s face was absent with any shred of anxiety that young patients so cleverly pick up on. Composedly, she encouraged Cirius with unfaltering hopefulness:

“Alright, darling, you are going to be fine, but this will sting just a bit, okay?”

Obsequiously, Cirius nodded.

Gingerly, Eir lifted up the boy's bloodied shirt, expecting to see the messy gash so iniquitously inflicted on such innocent a child...

Nothing.

Eir squinted and examined closer.

Still nothing.

Her eyebrows pressed together, and she rubbed her eyes to see again. There was definitely nothing! The boy's body was stained red with real blood, there was no denying that, yet, his belly was untouched, no gash, no cut, no scar, not even the slightest puncture of skin. All that's left was an imprint; while the entire torso was covered in blood, there was a thin patch left out of the equation. A patch conveniently the thickness and length of blade, if it was pulled out from the flesh.

Befuddled, Eir looked into the pure eyes of the boy, who was still waiting patiently to be 'treated'.

"Are you sure you were stabbed, darling?"

"I... suppose? I dunno, I was a bit hazy at the time... Urd, are you sure that I was stabbed?" He yelled out for clarity from the girl.

"*What* do you *mean*?" The girl yelled back.

"Hel, there's no wound..." Eir beckoned.

Everyone crowded curiously around the boy. And each, including the boy, was trying to comprehend this bizarre turn of events. Cirius ran his fingers across his belly, rubbing the spot where he definitely remembered he was *most probably* stabbed in.

"Huh, fancy that!" Cirius mumbled.

"I... don't understand..." Urd murmured.

Suddenly, the realisation flashed across Eir's mind, and she pulled Hel closer to her, whispering:

"Come to think of it, Hel, isn't he..."

Cirius was pursing his lips, consumed in his own thoughts. For a while he said nothing, but, after that period of sedulous deliberation passed, he turned to face Urd beside him, and with a face bright with enlightenment stated:

"Huh, I guess I really am invincible..."

Urd stayed silent, having exhausted all her energy to even call up any anger.

*

Thursday

Evening

Of the trinity of meals that take place in the daily lives of everyone, dinner is perhaps the most sublime of them all. Sublime not in the sense that it is the most delicious, but in that unequivocal human element in it. In too many cases, breakfast comes with the grim connotation of the day: tiresome work to be done, irksome people to be met. Lunch, at midday, comes at a time when folks are still manacled by the obligations of their job, and therefore is often rushed through with efficiency in mind.

Dinner, however, is free from such oppressions. Once unchained from the bind of suffocating bureaucracy, the human spirit is able to gambol as it pleases. Maybe this is why meals for dinner are so much more diverse than their counterparts. Breakfast and lunch must carry the predictability that underlies the fabric of a structured, habituated routine.

In a row of households across town, there will be the same plates of sausages and eggs and oats served for the morning. As the workmen bite into them with a tongue numb to the taste, the same types of sandwiches are packed into their bags by their wives: ham, cheese, and sometimes a daring slice of tomato. And off goes the workmen to their stations. The blacksmiths to anvils they've memorized every corner of; the butcher to the cyclical squeals of tortured pigs; the secretaries to the many monotonous, mustached men of politics, religion and royalty. The wives, too, go back to the litany of chores; sweeping floors that's been swept three days before, and most tragically of all, rearing children that will grow up to do the same as their fathers or mothers.

Yet, at the end of the day, despite life's attempts to stifle the individual, humanity prevails in the preparation for dinner. The household comes together, combining the remnants of their passion into making a vibrant cuisine. Firewood gathered by husband fused with the skills of the wife, according to the whim of the child who enthusiastically yells out what they wish to eat. It could be pork stew for one, meatballs for another, a meatloaf or blood puddings. When all is said and done, they can always rely on dinner to provide some serenity. Sat at the dinner table, the father finally talks with genuineness, asking his children how their days went, while the mother listens curiously.

Dinner is eclectic by nature. And that is why dinner cannot be given a face; no one meal can represent the true essence of dinner, just as no one painting can surmise the totality of art...

One by one, the servants emerged from the kitchen of the palace of Midgard. Marching in a straight line, each of them held a tray up close to their cheeks. The leading servant stood before the dining hall door, composing himself with a drawn-out breath, and entered. The door slid open, and the bombardment of boisterous voices erupted from within.

Around the gigantic table, the full brunt of the Asgardian pantheon's mannerism was manifest. Freyr, engaged in an argument with Tyr, was shouting twice as loud as normal. It didn't help that Freyja was parroting whatever her brother said in an equal loudness. On the other side, Bragi was reciting a poem to Vidar, but being drowned out by the sounds of the other's argument, found himself needing to repeat his lines more forcefully each time, all the while the softspoken Vidar was trying to suggest doing it later. In one corner, Thor was showing Shango and Bayani how he could balance his hammer on one finger, but kept dropping it onto the floor creating a thunderous thud. Just beside the gigantic table, pacing up and down the dining hall, Hel was yelling out instructions to a soldier, her face florid with anxiety and irritation.

Well... of course... not every dinner can be a time of sublime artistry and bonding.

Timidly, the lead servant enters the dining hall, setting down his tray of steaming pot roast beside the flailing figure of Freyr. The other servants soon followed, arranging the table full of delicacies from one end to the next.

After doing so, the lead servant quickly shuffles back to the door from whence he came, eager to escape the unfolding chaos that is dinnertime with the Gods.

Soon after the trays made their ways onto the table, the hubbub among the Gods died down, only for it to be reignited with the sounds of gobbling and guzzling. Yet, while the rest of them had set aside whatever they were doing, a troubled Hel still roamed about the room, reluctant to sit down. Watching her roam up and down was a soldier.

During the afternoon, after clearing the issues surrounding the two wayward children and the band of nuns and priest, Hel, in a fit of urgency, had mobilized an entire battalion of soldiers and sent them marching to the forest. In all honesty, she wasn't sure what these soldiers were meant to accomplish, since by the time of their arrival, any bout between Loki and Abaddon was sure to have been concluded. So, now, as the battalion dwelled aimlessly in the forest, an officer was sent back to request their next step. The officer now stood in the dining hall, still and disciplined, though sweating with diffidence. His voice stammered out the battalion's situation for the troubled Goddess.

"Madam, we've found the horses and a cart by the forest's tracks just as you've said. Around it, there was a clearing lined with many bodies of locusts, but neither Lord Loki nor a fiend was to be found!" He reported.

Hel stayed silent, and continued pacing.

"May I pass on the request to be recalled?"

"*Recalled?! You haven't done anything!*" Hel finally snapped back.

"Please, Madam, we've scoured throughout the forest... there isn't any trace of them."

"Well, have you checked the bushes?!"

"... Yes..."

"*Every bush?!?*"

"... No..."

"Well, check *every* bush, then!"

"Please, Madam, because of the short notice of this operation, there's insufficient supplies for-"

"Well, then SEND for supplies!"

"Will this be an overnight operation, then? If so, we may need to mobilize more troops to send for tents and-"

"OH, DAMN IT ALL!"

Just before the officer was about to suffer the wrath of the young Goddess, in came the rescue of the ever-dignified Queen of Aesir. Frigg waltzes between the Hel and the soldier, shielding him from her outburst. She pulled the young Goddess into the embrace of her frothy, blue dress, all the while comforting her with her conciliatory voice, soothing enough to placate stampeding bulls.

"There, there, deary honey darling." A staple phrase of hers.

Feeling the warmth of Frigg's embrace, Hel finally broke down. All the worry and anxiety of her father's fate, released in tears. In that short time covered in that safe, loving darkness of Frigg's dress, Hel let it all out. A quick sob and a quiet wail or two, known only to the fabrics of the blue dress and to the Queen herself who would never tell. And as she let Hel vent out her feelings in her embrace, Frigg turned to the squirming officer behind her.

"Go ahead and recall the troops." She whispered.

With a deferent nod, the soldier was off, still mesmerized by the majesty of the Queen.

Gently, Hel's head was lifted up. Soon, the young Goddess found herself focusing intently on Frigg's bright, cheerful expression, listening to every word she uttered.

"Don't you ruin your pretty, little face worrying about your father, darling. See, I've known him for a very long time, and... call it a Goddess' intuition, but I can tell that he is not the type to perish pathetically like this. Someone like your father... is destined for glorious, magnificent ends!"

Without her knowing, Hel realised she had been slowly guided to the dining table, gracefully ushered onto her seat by the Frigg. Turning directly beside her, she was confronted with yet another beaming expression, this time on the bearded face of a jolly Uncle. Thor had gathered up a mountainous plate of pork and pudding, placing the steaming dish before Hel, the God of Thunder gave his opinion as well.

"And yer daa's nothin if nae a survivor! Nae one's gaun tae tell me he got done in by a bastard like Abaddon, awayego! Always gits away dun he? Like a... like a..."

"Like a worm!" Tyr yells from across the table.

"I was gaun tae say like a slithery snake, but aye, that works!"

Hearing their exchanges, Hel couldn't help but giggle. She couldn't help but admire the omnipresent sense of nonchalance that always took hold of the Aesir. When seeing it, whatever previous concerns thought to be overwhelming get reduced to frivolity. After all, what is the point of her worrying when people centuries older, and wiser than her are not worrying? 'Is this just a form of wisdom?' She often questioned. In any case, it would be something she needs to learn down the line. But for now, her stomach was starting to growl. Glancing one last time at Frigg, who replied with a reassuring smile, Hel finally felt at ease to tuck into her dinner.

And what timing it was, that as soon as she took her first bite, the doors to the dining hall swung open, and barging in was none other than Loki, with a perspiring face that was occupied by a smirk. In each of his hands, he was holding onto a brown sack, one was small, and was grasped by the handles, the other was just as big as he, and dragged across the floor. Walking with swagger, Loki eventually heaved both sacks onto the dining table. Playfully, he met the gazes of all who sat staring at him. His voice rang out across the hall:

"Guess what."

The pantheon erupted in frenzied questions. Ironically though, Hel was now the least reactive of them all. With all her worries duly erased by her father's abrupt appearance, she was content to just enjoy her meal with this newfound peace of mind.

Raising his palm towards the entire room, Loki called for the Gods' frenzy to be quelled. Quickly, the room rose in hushes from some of the Gods, before dissipating into complete quietude. Then, Loki set about in a methodical way, loosening the stings on the brown sacks. They were knotted quite complexly, and so the room watched on with intensifying curiosity; some leaning out their seats, some set aside their plates and utensils, even Hel was keeping one constant eye on the affair while in the midst of slicing her meatloaf.

Undoing the last knot, Loki lifted the smaller of the two sacks, letting it sit in the air for just a tad too long for an anticipating crowd's liking. Then... he flipped it over, and out tumbles the head of a Demon, dreadful in all its features, with a pale, unmoving expression, wincing in eternal suffering.

The room went mad.

The frenzy erupted back, with twofold emotion.

"Bloody 'ell!" Thor was amazed

"For Goodness' sake, Loki, decapitated heads OFF the table!" Frigg was scolding

"Hmm." Freyr was bemused.

"Impossible..." Tyr was denying.

The demand for answers came from all sides, from passion that ranged from disgust to admiration. Loki raised his palm in the same fashion as before, trying to quell the clamorous crowd, but this time, they could not be calmed. Loki, however, wasn't bothered, with the self-satisfied smirk still spread across his face, raising both hands, he declared amidst the yelling Gods, uncaring as to whether he's heard:

"It is with great honour, that I pronounce the vanquishment of Abaddon, the King of locusts!"

The dining hall began vibrating slightly, the vibration could be traced to the God of Thunder, who was clapping mightily, producing an applause so befitting his epithet.

*

After getting all his stately affairs in order, Odin entered the castle, looking forward to the serenity of dinner. But on reaching the door to the dining hall, his eyebrows would scrunch upon hearing the racket going on inside. Internally sighing, he prepared himself for whatever bothersome business that was about to be consigned to him. Pushing open the doors, the clamour inside was amplified to his face, forcing out a wince of annoyance.

"ORDER!"

Odin's command overpowered the room's collective voices, finally abating the excited souls inside. The pantheon quieted instantly, in deference to the Allfather's presence. He began advancing to his seat at the end of the hall, completely passing Loki and the head of Abaddon without notice. With an indifferent tone, he asked:

"To what do we owe this joviality, folks?"

Frigg, who had arisen to welcome her husband, took the opportunity to bring him the excellent news.

"Abaddon has just been *vanquished*... by Loki." She said, pulling out his chair for him.

The realisation set in a second later than it should, as Odin, expecting a rather unremarkable answer, was already in the midst of giving out a reflexive reply. But, once in full awareness, the Allfather's eyes widened as big as it was capable, and from him escaped rare noises of surprise and thrill.

"Ahh... oh... OHH!"

As briskly as he had sat down, he sprang back up, bursting out in rapturous laughter. The room was shining bright like crystals for Odin. Things that only occur once in a blue moon, Odin's awe was in abundance, thrill

was overflowing, and pride was felt abjectly. Meeting the glance of the God of Mischief at the opposite side, Odin's firm finger went up and pointed playfully, trying to express the very nuance mindset of 'being both surprised and not surprised'. Walking with wide, giddy steps, Odin made his way towards Loki, his finger never leaving his target.

"Loki, my boy! You really are the dark horse of the Aesir, aren't you?" Odin clasped Loki's hand in his, and continued. "How comically poetic, indeed! After all your rigmarole about *doing nothing* yesterday, here you are with the head of our ultimate foe!"

"See, Odin... one often needs to challenge the Fates. Don't play into their hands, threaten to not perform, and they will bring the show to you, on *your* terms!" Loki decided to conceal the fact that he did not set out to look for Abaddon.

"You are truly wiser than I, Loki!"

Odin gripped the Demon's head on his left hand, like a trophy he held it up for all to see.

"Vidar!" Odin turned to his right and said with firm delight.

"Y-yes, father?"

"Call the servants! Tell them to bring out our finest keg of wine! And the chefs to cook up a banquet fit for a victory!"

Vidar nodded, and was all too ready to comply, having had enough of the excitement for one day in the dining hall. As he left the room, Odin gave his stepson a final, hearty pat on the back before taking leave of him, still clutching onto the severed head.

"Ga on then, brother! Tell us yer tale about the battle!" Thor gestured for Loki to come sit beside him.

With that, the Gods of the room resumed their merriments, talking and cheering among themselves, excited for the long night of indulgence to be had. Though among the exultant faces, the two visitors from Yorubaland were shrouded in an air of ambivalence, as they exchanged looks of incredulity with each other.

Shango and Bayani were lost on what to do; they thought about offering felicitation, but were afraid it might appear disingenuous. Their fears were heightened when they noticed they could not match the intensity of thrill the people around them exuded.

Quietly observing the Norse Gods, the firm solidarity in their collective happiness, Bayani felt that she ought to be feeling more emotions, alas, one cannot force oneself to feel. Like a sporting victory by a neighbouring nation, one can understand the significance, one may even celebrate with them... yet deep down, there is an indelible apathy, reserved for all things disconnected from the self. There is only so much you can feel, for some stranger's victories in life.

"Isn't it marvelous, Bayani?!"

Just then, the dulcet voice of Sif took Bayani out of her rumination. Face to face with her round, radiant face, the contagious smile infected Bayani, and she replied:

"It sure is, Sif."

Then again, when victory means so much to a dear friend, even the self-centered heart cannot help but be strung along by the shared happiness.

Suddenly, Odin, who swaggered back to his seat, had just noticed the presence of Shango and Bayani beside him. At first greeting them with warm delight, he then twitched, remembering something important, and shuffled in his seat. Finally, composing himself, Odin began addressing the pair, with his hands linked together on the table, and a tone mild but courtly. On his countenance never vanished that look of sheer pride.

“Ah... it seems, we no longer require your *succour* in dealing with the Demonic Shaman, Lord Shango, Lord Bayani. As you can see... we’ve dealt with it *ourselves*.”

The Allfather tried his best to hide any sense of condescension as he spoke to the Yoruba Gods, although, unbeknownst to him, his attempt was very poor. The effect of this poor attempt was already quite influential for one of the guests. Swirling up within Bayani was an overbearing feeling of doubt, that made itself known through a small wrinkle in her eye as she met his cavalier gaze. Shango, on the other hand, remained unruffled, and was still able to feign a smile as he nodded along to Odin’s convictions.

“Of course, we are happy to accommodate you for however long we need. In fact, it is with great pleasure that I welcome you to stay for our Mabon festival... which is...” Odin leaned towards his wife furtively.

“Tomorrow evening.” She whispered.

“Tomorrow evening!” He quickly rejoined and continued. “And I must say, these festivals are truly a testament... to the prosperity and *self-reliance* of the Asgard.”

Finishing his statement with a garish enunciation of the last word, Odin was ready to leave the conversation at rest, turning his attention now to the giant steak resting on his plate. With one swift movement, he sliced a quarter of the steak off, eventually stuffing it all into his voracious maw. The two Yoruba Gods was left deep in thought, amidst the tireless cheers of celebration from the rest of the pantheon.

The evening progressed into the cusp towards nighttime, but the joviality from the banquet was scarcely going away. On the contrary, as the evening went away, the celebration only seemed to become increasingly fervent. A band was brought in for music, a small stage set up for singing, and of course Bragi’s recitals, where poems of Asgard’s latest triumphs have been freshly composed.

Shango and Bayani, after convincing the others of their unbearable fatigue, had retired to their chamber upstairs. But even there, the fervour of the banquet followed them; not a minute could pass by without a chorus of muffled laughter and cheering penetrating through the floor.

With a head still swirling with uncertainty, Bayani sought a last refuge from the racket on the balcony, where the caressing breeze of the dying evening blew at its finest. Embracing that breeze, she breathed, and turned back towards the room, glancing at her brother, who now sat still on the bed. His face carried a solemn expression.

A sizeable moment of silence proceeded. Both of them knew what needed to be talked about, but as is the nature of siblings, both waited for the other to begin first, not because of shyness, but merely because they were lazy. Eventually, though, the more impatient of the two must yield, and Bayani, sighing, brought out the question.

“Do you really think it’s over?”

Shango replied after a brief pause.

“What does your gut say?”

Bayani shrugged, prompting Shango to continue:

“Orunmila once told me... there are no causes and effects in history. Instead, the universe constructs a sculpture of a disaster, then implants it whenever it wishes in time and wherever it wishes in space. Anything that comes before that disaster is just filler...”

“How very typical of him. Fatalistic to a fault. You really ought to stay away from him.” Bayani sounded bitter.

“Hmph... even if you don’t think that’s true, the *melodies* still tell me that Asgard is in for a troublesome period.”

“Oh, not the melodies again.”

“Nature has no reason to lie, Bayani!”

“Fine, what does your *melodies* say, then?”

“...”

“Well?”

“...There are traces of disharmony strewn among the phrases, soft and elusive... like some unearthly malignance looms far in the distance.”

Bayani tried her best to hide the shudder that went down her body.

“Do you really think Shimush can be summoned without any sacrifices?”

“I think... that Shimush is as good as summoned already. Now, it’s only a matter of how the Demons of Sheol will use him.”

Just then, another chorus of cheers erupted from downstairs, followed by a slight quake from the collective clapping of the Gods.

*

Thursday

Night

The nocturnal kingdom of Sheol fosters an amusingly paradoxical ethos. The Demons make every effort to shun the light, yet simultaneously embrace it twofold. Slumbering through the mornings, and rising at night, the begrudging workmen's first task of the day is to light up the lengthy lines of lampposts laid across the city streets. Hour by hour, as the oil runs low, they are replenished again by the same workmen, with the same process. It is a thankless and needless task, for the fiend's eyes naturally see through darkness anyway.

The Demonic kingdom cannot totally abandon its usage of light, because of one simple rule: artistry itself is bound to the lighted world. The puissance of hue, gradience, and shade, the very essence of colour was spawned to dazzle beings of the light, its *faithfulness* is to the light. And without colour, culture amounts to nothing, spirit amounts to nothing. Colours from our eyes and lips, used for flirts and flaunters; our rosy cheeks to invite gaiety; our very complexion which tells us our health, stripped of these, what is there but a husk bereft of life? And what of the crafts? Deprived of colours, murals are as pretty as the walls they're painted on; architectures are just fastidiously organized shapes; fashion, is tragically reduced to a dull, extra layer of cloth applied onto living corpses.

And so, the kingdom of Sheol must embrace light, while keeping up an obdurate front of scorning it. The workmen are paid to relight those streetlamps, and in the castle, the servants are ordered to change those torches and candles. This rigmarole of a system, it may mean burdening the wax and oil industry to its utmost limit, it may mean absurd sums into fruitless labour, but by the Devils, Sheol will not be known as a kingdom without culture!

That's why... in the middle of a nighttime breakfast enjoyed by all the royalties of Sheol, a well-suited imp was floating above the dining hall, relighting all the candles on the chandelier that hangs from the ceiling. Below him, sounded the jaunty chatters of a dozen Demons, with flamboyant dresses designed to impress. Among them, Mastema was especially chatty, and particularly flashy.

"By the bye, you really can't trust a devil these days! D'you know who I met the other day back in Tartarus? Ronove! He's a teacher now, fancy that!"

"What does he teach?" Asked Duke Samael beside her.

"Latin! Can you the believe the man? Never once set foot in Olympus, let alone the *Eternal City*, and the man teaches *Latin*. Oh, the poor saps being duped by that blagger!"

"To be fair, Mastema, I don't think you need to have been to a place to teach their language..." Duchess Gemory interjected.

"How else would you speak the language, then?!"

And away this small circle went into their frequent squabbles over the most trivial topics.

At the head of the table sat the prince Belial, picking up a spoonful of stew and letting it drop back into the bowl. He sat, pensively staring out through the window at the other side of the room, the garden was barely visible, illuminated only by a small glow on a dying lantern dangling on a post's hanging arm. Desperately, the light tries to persist, warding off the darkness' domination over the serene little domain.

Still fixating on that flickering lantern, Belial was determined to witness the snuffing of that light before he set about eating his breakfast. Until suddenly, an audible series of rattles from behind him drew his attention away. The noise moved erratically from right to left, but one thing Belial was certain of was that it came from below. Ducking under the table, he searched the ground for the mysterious source of the rattling, and it made no attempt to hide. The critter rushes into the prince's field of view, hopping wonkily to-and-fro. Once its glassy eyes met those of the prince's, it took the opportunity to hop onto his lowered shoulders, and atop the dining table.

Even out in the open, no one paid the little insect any heed, though eventually, they were forced to, when a loud thud rang out across the hall, and the long table tremored by a fierce jerk from one side. Belial's illustrious chair slammed backwards from his forceful rising. His fingers dug into the edge of the table, with his dark nails in a ruthless struggle against the oak, until the wood loses out and began splintering, and snapping.

In front of him, the Demons' expressions morphed from curiosity to worry, just as their prince's own expression, eyes widened in a goggle, became increasingly disturbed. A gasp would escape from Countess Andromalius right beside the prince, before being passed along to Duke Dantalion, and the reactive message travelled down the table, until all saw and understood clearly the source of that devastation. A crimson-coloured locust perched atop a wine glass, though speechless, pellucidly announced to the dining hall the death of a fellow Demon, a kinsman, and a dear friend.

When Belial at last broke away from the trance-like state brought about by that little crimson messenger, he looked around the room at all the pained faces of his people, before being riveted back to the window across from him.

The light from the garden's hanging lantern, had died.

Clenching his teeth and his fists, he promptly marched down to the door, with a gaze set unalterably at a distant scheme only he himself knew. Once away from the shindy of the dining hall, his footsteps echoed in the empty hallway, each step firmer than the last.

As all tragedy is capable of doing, it halted life in the moment. Every faculty of every person is forced to suffer in a room defined by grief and sorrow. Few were sobbing, few were wailing, few were silent, but most... were sighing.

From every corner of the dining hall came whispers of that deceased Demon's name and his many epithets, evoked with pity, and evoked with pride. Across every mind flashed the memories of a recent encounter, while they marveled at how much more charming he was. So much more lovable, and so much more flawless, at least to Mastema's aching soul. As Abaddon's countenance appeared vividly in her hallucinating eye, tears flowed alongside him; betraying her usual openness and honesty, she couldn't help but retreat to a cover of darkness within her palms, bitterly chastising her moment of weakness.

On the other side, however, displayed a very different reaction, on the apathetic face hanging on Azazel. He was focusing on the crimson locust, at its twitching body, and all that it signified. Yet, strangely, he found himself occupied less by the demise of a former partner, and more by the sudden departure of Belial. He had caught a glimpse of his expression when left. Perhaps it is a bit callous, perhaps even cruel. But, to Azazel, that upset look on the prince was worth twice the dismay than the news of Abaddon's death. The heart cannot stop itself from feeling as it does.

Quietly, while the dining hall was still clouded in turbulence from the tragic news, Azazel got up and slipped away. He moved along briskly, unwilling to lose sight of the prince once out in the hallway. And as he left the room, scouring frantically for his highness, he caught him descending the winding staircase, marching resolutely towards his ineffable goal. A goal which though still unbeknownst to him, Azazel was all too willing to share out of sheer loyalty.

*

Azazel tailed Belial in a discrete manner, not wishing to interrupt the solemn stream of thoughts he's sure is fermenting within the prince's mind. Always following a good distance away, the prince's footsteps acted as a comforting beacon for Azazel, they led him into halls and through chambers. But, eventually, the footsteps would fade, as Belial entered the dungeon doors, and the thick, wooden frame swung shut behind him. The duke stood atop the mossy stairwell, staring into the sombre space beneath.

Azazel stopped and dithered on the first step. Strangely, it was only now... that the weight of Abaddon's death was setting into him. Away from the dozens of mourners in the dining hall and now even away from the presence of the prince, unrest seized over him in that instance of loneliness. The permanence of death is, for some, a slow and agonizing infliction.

Yet, he swiftly shook off those disturbances when he noticed a faint sound seeping through the dungeon door. Leaning towards the walls, his pointed ears twitched trying to capture the noise. It was the quiet weeping of an infant, loudening by the second. A nervous cry, not emitted for fear of a baleful predator, but for a general confusion over one's own safety. Still approaching that ominous door, he wavered at every movement he made.

Until... there came the ungodly scream piercing out from the dungeon, horrendously scarring itself into Azazel's memory! A scream that violates every justice and goodness in the world! A scream of an innocent life who knows not any other utterance! With the desire for answers far winning over the anxiety, the duke rushes for the door handle and barges.

A fierce beam of light blinds him from across the room, causing him to squint and wince as he navigated the dungeon. In the middle stood the glorious source of that blinding light. The august effigy of that Demonic Shaman, whose features have been burnt into his mind upon his first viewing. The light came from the Shaman's mask, out of the three eyes lined from top to bottom. Even now, in an irritating discomfort, Azazel could not help but be in awe.

Gradually, the blinding whiteness dimmed into maroon, then deep red, before settling on a warm ocean blue. As his sight adjusted, Azazel noticed the prince facing firmly ahead. Betraying not a smile nor a frown, a terrifying calmness was carried on his countenance, he looked unperturbable by any calamity that could come his way. His stained hands were dripping with sickly fresh blood, contributing to the pool expanding underneath them. Just beside Bealial was the creature, Mastema's subservient servant, Alukah. The hideous fiend squatted on the floor, whimpering and squirming, although out of disgust or fear Azazel could not discern.

Just as the light dimmed further from blue to violet, a rumble besieged the dungeon, a great rumble that quaked the very foundation of earth beyond the room. From this violent tremor, the torches on the wall flicker in their unstable flames, shifting the room back and forth from dark to light. Having lost his footing, Azazel was on the ground, Belial gave him a glance, but then briskly turned his attention back to the Demonic statue, which in the intervals of darkness was beginning to change, more and more into madness and terror.

Darkness.

Light.

Darkness. It animates.
Light. They caught glimpses.
Darkness. It breaks through the shell.
Light. They shudder from his breath.
Darkness. He stomps onto the platform.
Light. They reel from his stature.

Suddenly, the rumbling stopped. Amongst the dissipating dust, Azazel and Belial were faced with the unsightly product of their summoning. Now standing erect on the pedestal, Shimush, moves at last. Announcing this arrival with a blare, a violet beam shot up into the ceiling, and another set of rumbling began! The cobble support crumbles from the beam's penetration into the land above, carving a perfectly circular tunnel as it did so. Having carved the tunnel, the light, along with the second rumble, also faded. The debris gathered in a neat circumference around the animated stature. And a chilling current poured down into the dungeon.

Ritualistically, the Shaman held out a singular finger before him, pointed upwards as if in an arrogant accusation against the Heavens. In reply, the sky focuses its moonlight down through the carved tunnel, shrouding this dark, wicked being in a warm and pearl-like dazzle, which only magnified the hideousness of his repulsive features. A pair of long horns arched upwards, glowing a foreboding red, as if channeling an arcane energy. Shimush's skin, shaded in the greyness of ash, soaks in the sordid while deflecting the pure. His scrawny body, half naked, draped by a once lush regalia now torn and stained. Sets of crooked fingers and toes with nails sharpened like daggers. This exchange between the Demon and the Heavens ended with a hiss, escaping from the lipless mouth of the Shaman, mocking everything the celestial stands for.

Azazel could hardly breath. Stupefied at the grandeur of an ancient Demon. There in the flesh, as if fished out of a fable, without curtailing a sliver of malice and absurdity. When one confronts the mythical, they concede every shred of awe their puny minds can give to it; not out of veneration as one does with regal kings and queens, nor is it out of worship when meeting the divine. The mythic... evokes an awe rooted primarily in fear. Gazing up at phantom-like form of Shimush, and with his entire emotional faculty in shambles, Azazel could only chuckle. Alukah, too, had long ago scampered away and was hiding under the bed of one of the dungeon cells.

The prince, however, showed not a hint of amusement. Enveloped by the menacing aura of Shimush, Belial remained stern as he stepped forth towards the Ancient Demon, his giant shadow shrouding over the prince. Though a massive gap in stature and power loomed between these two Demons, the demeanor displayed by the prince would have one believe they were in fact equal. Belial stood firm before Shimush, betraying no anxiety nor fear. But the Shaman did not acknowledge him, he remained staring above, his enmity with the sky unfading.

Until Belial bellowed out to the titan, with a tone unlike anything Azazel had heard before.
“Hark!”

The Shaman's head tilted down, as quick as a scuttling insect. The three eyes on his mask peered at the prince, Shimush waited for the puny figure below to continue; his breath, visible in the chilly night, escaped through his clenched teeth. Eye to eye, Belial began reciting the words he'd memorized months ago, each phrase getting more hateful as he went on:

“Though body tenacious,
Thy mind fugacious.
I speak to thee as the Enlightened one,
Who seeeth the future and knoweth best,

There art felicities if this deed be done.
So, heed my word, and fulfill my hest!
O' Shaman..."

Now, the Ancient Demon was fully transfixed on the prince. His breath was getting agitated, as streams of dark liquid oozed out of his clenched teeth. In a deadly fervour, Shimush's fingers gripped onto the edge of the pedestal, shattering it with his strength. Having gained the Shaman's unabated attention, Belial enunciated his last command with alarming clarity, and malice:

"Destroy the Aesir."

Shimush let out a screech, the filthy liquid drooling from his mouth spewed out onto the prince's face. The command was received, and the servile Ancient Demon promptly set to work. From his position on the pedestal, Shimush shuffled about, getting on his knees, then on his soles in a squat. Once more, eyeing into the sky through the tunnel on the ceiling, an arcane aura reignited in the dungeon. Suddenly, for just a brief moment, his horns flashed a piercing light across the room, momentarily blinding the onlookers.

Blinking back his vision, Azazel bore witness to the Shaman's new form! From beneath the grey skin, the Demon's veins lit up with the shine of redness, a million strands pulsating in unison, all culminating in the centre, where there stood a scarlet-coloured heart. With each pulsation, the Shaman grew. Once an emaciated figure of ribs and bone expanded into a sinewy savage with a taste of sadism. He began drooling again, this time, instead of some dark and dirty fluids, it was purely saliva, from a monster voracious for violence and bloodshed.

Out of instinct, Azazel retreated a few steps, his chuckle devolving into nervous laughter. Witnessing this embodiment of malice before him, his mind was racing. There are mysteries he'd like answered, there are scenarios he'd like to test. But there was one thought he was growing ever more convinced of, and that is the destruction of the Asgardians is an imminent eventuality. That is the terror the Demonic Shaman inspires. What defence is there for a being that in such a short time already induces irreparable tumult into both its surroundings and in the psyche of the witnesses? This soul-wrenching monstrosity transforming before him was no creature at all, it is a natural disaster, not to be repelled by worldly forces.

Eventually, the Shaman's transformation ceased, and his body settled back into the same dull greyness of before. As if adjusting to his new physique, his muscles twitched frantically in place. Facing the opening of the tunnel, the Shaman sighed, his breath shooting straight upwards before dispersing. Within that sigh, Azazel swore he heard a mumbled calling of the word '*Aesir*'. Then, in an earth-shattering movement, Shimush leapt! From his squatting position, his bulky legs shoved off against the pedestal, sending fissures running along the dungeon floor. In an instant, he disappeared into the tunnel above, which echoed with his clamorous steps. The night outside grew just a tad quieter, and just a bit darker, perhaps in a reaction of dismay at this preternatural, diabolical beast being unleashed into the lands.

With the tremendous steps still echoing in the dungeon, Azazel's nervous laughter turned into a genuine one, delighting in the demise of their civil enemies. Hoping to share in the celebrations with his prince, he turned towards him with a cheerful beam, which was returned by the same stern look that has hung on Belial's face since the start of this ordeal. Turning back, Azazel supposed that celebrations would have to wait...

*

One day before Autumn

Friday

Morning

When does one get the privilege to declare boldly to the world, ‘it is a good day!’? In any normal period, where goodness must be defined by someone’s subjective experience, it is an obligation to always say: ‘it is a good day *for me!*’. That much is obvious, a relatively good day does not allay our ability to empathize with someone in misery. So that even after a jubilating day, if faced with a stranger who’s currently lamenting the cruelties of life from death to destitution, we may swallow all our cheerfulness to commiserate with our fellow human. Under such conditions, there is no point in which a day can be boldly declared to be good or bad.

Because in us is the instinctual recognition of karmic balance: just as there is something worth being cheerful over in this place, so too at the other side of the world lies a grieving mother, a dying soldier or a starving infant. With this recognition comes the acceptance that one day the tables will turn, and while we’re stricken with some unforeseen tragedy and mourning, we would not want someone declaring so confidently that ‘the day is good!’.

Yet, there are times when this recognition is temporarily muddled, a day unanimously asserted to be ‘good’. When certain bliss is shared en masse, and the community as a whole is enveloped by the jubilating atmosphere of victories, celebrations or festivities, there is suddenly less chance for the sorrower to find a warm shoulder to lean on. A day judged to be good by the people does not have room for miseries, as if it is an impossibility to be upset when there is simply so much joviality around. And so, the frowning faces amidst the sea of cheering and beaming is conveniently ignored.

Such is the current state of Midgard, as it advances ever so closely to its famous Mabon festival. Lining the streets were stalls after stalls of incandescent vendors, preying on the happy mood of people, who in their ebullience would perhaps be more willing to part with their money. From apple pies to handmade toys, Midgard sang with the voices of contented spirits. Even this early in the morning, the blissful countenances of so many civilians have already silently announced the ethos of the day. As it happens, a truant worker sipping on his second bottle of lager would bellow out by the roadside bar: ‘What a fine and dandy day!’. A statement spouted as irrefutable fact, and which met no disagreement from anyone.

This is Midgard at its most vulnerable. On any other day, it would be more resilient, on any other day, if a man runs down the street screaming as if he’d seen Armageddon, he would inspire more concern and curiosity. But as it stands today, he is merely a madman under delusions. Today of all days, nothing could convince its denizens that a calamity is looming so very near and one ought to flee instead of indulging in the festival...

The grand stage was already set, in the midst of a vast, wooden platform was erected a glorious cornucopia. A giant wicker basket, weaved over a month by a dozen weavers, arches proudly toward the sky. And in a poetic

contrast to the prickly willow strands of the basket, a silky, velvet ribbon spirals around the horn. The bountiful harvest sprawls out from the basket, as if frozen in the middle of a cascade: paunchy pumpkins were at the base, supporting the lean and lanky corn, who carry on their back a bushel of hearty apples, who lastly cradles a hundred little bunches of grapes. The produce sprawls out into the welcoming sea of flowers, each brimming with unique shade, vying to stand out.

The spectacle demanded the awe of every onlooker. Here, was not only the beautiful diversity of Nature, but also human ingenuity in organizing it together. The luscious blend of fragrances invigorates body and soul, and the whole town roared with profound zest. Sellers wanted passionately to sell, and buyers wanted passionately to buy; even the dances, the minstrels and troubadours settled into a trance, and felt as if they could perform for eternity. Just for today, the cornucopia is divinity embodied, it asserts its invisible power over the merrymakers, standing at the centre of it all.

And directly beneath the grand stage, was none other than Freyja's stall. If the cornucopia was the leading actor of the festival, Freyja's stall was the leading actress. Or, depending on one's perspective, the leading antagonist. The stall's decorations catch the eye, though not with artistic splendour, but with showiness. Constructed out of mahogany wood, a set of curtains hung on its side, alternating between purple and pink. But what really tested one's capacity for distaste is the bold name plastered on its storefront, illuminated by dangling lanterns on its left and right:

The Goddess of Love's Potions and Charms.

This was a spot procured through her influences, and it enjoyed the never-ending traffic of customers. Each new poor soul who only wanted to catch a glimpse of the cornucopia above was forced to pass through this booth of shiny gemstones and glistening potions bottles. Widows and widowers, young couples, and lonely people in general, this stall was poised to prey on every one of them. Among the most fashionable products were the 'attraction charms', 'potion of endless vigour', and 'unattraction charm', because sometimes magical enchantments were easier than being honest.

Yet, strangely, despite so brazenly advertising it, the Goddess of Love was nowhere to be found in the stall, and maintenance was delegated to a few servants Freyja had pulled from the palace. Unfortunately, even though they were willing to help, Freyja's cavalier approach to briefing meant they hadn't exactly been informed on every nuance that goes into enchantments. So, inevitably, when a customer was vehemently asking for the side effects of a potion, the only solution for them was to deny any. So far, they might have inadvertently caused twenty cases of impotence and eight cases of uncontrollable mania.

Two streets away, Freyja was tending to a little boy named Fjolnir, whose face was burning red from indignation as he protested to his auntie.

"You want me to do what?!"

"Give out these flyers, Fjolnir."

Without a second thought, a stack of flyers was shoved onto his hands. On them was an illustrated map of the entire festival grounds, detailing each stall and activities present. Upon closer inspection, Fjolnir couldn't help but notice that the label for Freyja's stall was highlighted in blue and printed bigger than the others. He glanced up at his aunt with a soured expression.

"Whyyyyy?" Fjolnir half asked, and half pleaded.

"Because I promised your mum to not let you idle while she's away."

"But, aunt Freyja~, haven't I already worked hard this week?"

Freyja raised an eyebrow, and let Fjolnir continue:

“I helped you with the decorations yesterday, and the day before I had lessons with Mr. Kierkegaard, and before *that* I was training with dad! At least let me off for today, in the spirit of festival!”

The Goddess pursed her lips thinking, then sighed with a smile after deciding to grant mercy. She took back half the stack of flyers from the boy.

“Fine, you can pass out these flyers and I’ll let you off.”
But he still wasn’t satisfied and tried to bargain some more.

“Oh, come on, auntie! Can’t you just let me off right now?”
“Well, I can always ask your dad to take you on patrol with him...” Freyja said slyly.

Upon hearing that, Fjolnir shot upright in a flash,. With a resolute face hiding panic inside, he announced in a rotund voice:

“I’ll pass these along right away, Aunt Freyja!”
“Good!” She tousled the boy’s hair playfully and continued, “After your done, come to my stall and I’ll give you some pocket money for treats and games. Now aren’t I just the sweetest aunt you have?”

“You’re the *only* aunt I have...” Fjolnir murmured quietly, and turned around, still feeling a bit defeated.

“Now, hustle!” Freyja commanded after giving Fjolnir a gentle push towards the jostling throng of people.

“... AND DON’T THROW THE STACKS INTO THE BINS, I’LL KNOW!” She gave a final shout towards the boy ambling away.

Freyja kept waving to her grumbling nephew until he disappeared into the crowd. Then, compelled by the moment of relaxing solitude, she breathed and basked in the booming spryness of the whole city. Vicariously experiencing the ebullience of the countless people beside her. ‘It is a day of hustle indeed,’ she laughed as she thought to herself. After stretching her arms widely out into the air, she decided that it was time for her to rejoin the hustle, and made her way back to her stall.

Yet, squarely in these children’s disposition to go against the natural flow of things, just as the town was hustling enthusiastically for a day of celebration, who else but Cirius and Urd was lazing at their usual spot, quietly watching the festival boom with activity. As if a realm with no concept of change, the pond under Yggdrasil persisted like any other day. The beetles still park periodically around the bark; the swans still glide upon the water cavalierly. The eternal tree is heedless to the shifting of human emotion, it gleams green under plague and war, and it will gleam green under fanfare and victory.

Cirius lied on the grass, hands tucked behind his head as a pillow. After breaking away his gaze from the sky which he’s been transfixed on for a while, he turned towards his left, where Urd was tossing another handful of grain towards a small gathering of swans and cygnets.

“What’d you reckon we do now?” The boy started.
“I don’t know, what *you* think?”
“I dunno, what’d *you* reckon?”
“I can hardly *reckon* something I have no opinion on.”

“What? You told me you were eager for the Mabon festival a few days ago!”

“I’m eager for singing, dancing and bonfire. That happens in the evening, until then, I’m game for anything.”

Cirius sighed, sitting up in order to think more deeply about what to do, while Urd continued:

“To be honest, I’m surprised you’re not dragging me along to the festival. What happened to your enthusiasm for *adventures*?”

“Wounds of battle changes a man, Urd.”

“You mean when you were stabbed, and then magically recovered without even a scar?”

“I think I have *adventure fatigue*!”

“Well, I hope this fatigue lasts as long as possible, for both our sakes.”

“Yes indeed... it’ll be DAYS before I’m up for an adventure again!”

“So you’re fine with doing absolutely nothing right now?”

“I’m at peace...”

Cirius stretched himself wide before laying back down. This time though, Urd joined in, and together they stared aimlessly at the clear, blue sky, which heralds joy without any need for cheers or festivities, but just through a serene stillness that augurs nothing and tells nothing...

“I could go for some strudels, though.” Urd said on a whim.

“WELL THEN LET’S GET ON TO THE FESTIVAL!” The boy sprang up with a powerful cavort.

And then the children went, the boy charging ahead, jittering with insuppressible excitement, and the girl once again following behind, hopelessly smiling at her friend. The festival’s allure, it seems, is just too mighty to resist. Even these two wayward children were picked up by the flow, and coaxed into joining the hustle, the cheer, and the fanfare.

*

On the other side of the kingdom held a very different kind of atmosphere. Large fields were barren of any decoration or fanfare, and among the few people who were around only a mood of reticence was paraded. This was the barracks, which today saw the comings and goings of many irritated soldiers unfortunate enough to be on duty. Peacekeeping is already a thankless task on a normal day, but on such festivities it becomes borderline unbearable.

As the distant cheers loudly rang out intermittently from the festival grounds, the patrolling guards are reminded of their misfortune, and a chorus of sighs and seethes always follows suit. The scent of grilled meat and fresh fruit wafts into area, titillating the soldier’s stomachs. No senses were safe from the harassment of the festival spirit. In attempts to bury this deep indignation within them, the soldiers turn a wide range of distractions. Some turn to cards, some turn to reading, but Brynhildr preferred to beat up a training dummy until it snaps off its stakes.

“Where dae ‘e bloody git off, sendin’ us patrolling todae?!!’ She roared as she drove her knuckles viciously into the straw man’s head.

Geiravor sat on a nearby bench, staring at the rising plume of smoke a mile away, her hands wistfully on her chin.

“It *is* only for half a day... we’ll have plenty of time for the festival in the evening.” Brynhildr replied to placate her raging partner. Perhaps because she did not fully believe it herself, but it was not very convincing.

“We would’ve had plentier time if it hadnae been fer this daftie duty!”

“Well...” Geira thought hard on a silver lining, one quickly sprang to mind. “Well, count ourselves lucky that Abaddon has been disposed of. Otherwise, we surely wouldn’t even get half day!” Having said that, she promptly perked up, even if she was not able to convince Brynhildr, she certainly convinced herself to feel better.

With a belligerent cry, Brynhildr landed a finishing blow to the pitiful dummy’s body, splintering the wooden post and leaving it bending crookedly to the side. Just then, a great shadow loomed over her, and as she turned, she was confronted by the giant frame of Freyr.

“LOOK ALIVE, VALKYRIES! HERE’S YOUR FINAL POST FOR TODAY!” He handed them a piece of paper while smiling heartily.

Freyr was clad in newly polished armour with an eye-catching shine of azure; on the shoulder plates of each side was a bulging head of a unicorn, with eyes adorned with lapis gemstones. On his head wore an equally ostentatious helmet, every edge coated a mesmerizing blue, except for the two wings adjacent, which gleamed with a tint of pearl white. Completing this absurd caricature was none other than the Sword of Freyr, hanging tightly on his back, strapped together by two straps of leather, with a winding pattern of laurels etched onto the face.

“Aye, aren’t ye brilliantly dressed, literally!” Brynhildr squinted from the reflective glare of the armour as she took the paper.

“YES, I’M HEADING TO THE FESTIVAL RIGHT NOW! THIS ARMOUR WILL BE MY GRANDEST DISPLAY YET! IT IS A COMMISSIONED PIECE FROM THE FINEST BLACKSMITHS OF MIDGARD!”

“My, it must be quite the spending!” Geira peered over Brynhildr’s shoulder for their patrol details.

“YES, WORTH ITS WEIGHT IN PLATINUM, IN FACT!”

“Church lane... that’s rather close to the festival.” Geira remarked.

“YES, YOU SHANT NEED TO REPORT BACK HERE, FEEL FREE TO HEAD THERE RIGHT AFTER!”

“That’s very thoughtful of you!”

“Cheers, pal!”

All three were just about to depart from the barracks, when their attention was drawn to the sky, which suddenly darkened at an alarming rate. They halted in their tracks, and began scanning the land, all the while instincts stirred with unease. After scrutinizing the sky, Geira found herself befuddled by the strange phenomenon above.

As if a fissure had split through it, one part of the sky remained brightly blue, while darkness only took hold of the other side, gradually advancing from north to south. Before making sense of it all, an unruly wind started swirling in the air, it blew, again, from north to south. The creeping suspicion could no longer be ignored... something is approaching. Geira’s hair stood up. Her breath wavered in frightful anticipation of the unknown.

Faintly, sounds of popping and crackling emanated in front of them, just as the ground beneath was slowly shrouded in traces of white. What should be the dry Autumn earth suddenly became frosted. The thin blanket of ice crackled and popped, as if screaming in confusion at being summoned so early in the year. And what started

as a breeze quickly descended into a howling whirlwind. A frostbiting coldness came like an unexpected siege upon the barracks, devastating the underdressed soldiers. Embracing themselves, they scurried one after another into the buildings for warmth.

Soon, all but three remained outside, who stood braving against the chilling gale. They could be so thoroughly unperturbed by the cold, because the sight of what was on the horizon was enough to ignite the body, and have it boil a flurry of burning, hot courage. Freyr's hand clutches readily on his sword; Geiravor adjusts her shield to her front; Brynhildr stamps her spear into the ground, shattering the icy layer.

It was small, yet all too noticeable. A lone shadow, walking with a gait that is calm and in part apathetic. A figure brawny beyond belief approaches the kingdom, tailing it was a thousand possibilities, each more incomprehensible than the last. But one certainty conceived by the opinions of the three Asgardians, is that this figure spells undoubtable trouble. Freyr, with his acute vision, peered into the countenance of this approaching stranger... and was stared back by three pairs of malignant eyes, an appalling notion he only fully banished once he realised that the eyes were fake, and painted onto a mask.

"A fiend... I've never seen one like him..." He whispered to the Valkyries, who both grimaced.

Silently to himself, Freyr divulged more on what he thought of this enigmatic Demon making his way to them.

"Strong, and sinisterly suave. Always a deadly sign..."

*

The two guests from Yoruba were enthralled, indefatigably turning to-and-fro to admire every little novelty. As one usually finds when visiting foreign places, what is routine to the point of tedium can be sensationally amusing. And if one is lucky enough to chance upon festivities in a foreign land, there is that constant state of oblivion, where nothing can be made sure whether it was expected or unexpected, resulting in infinite wonder.

Bayani was handed a marigold and winked at by a passing florist; she did not know if it was a sales tactic, or if she was being flirted at. An apple landed on Shango's hand after being tossed by a street juggler, he did not know if he could keep it or even give it to the boy who stared at him with a hungry expression.

Strolling through the endless wave of people at the festival, as another stranger's hair was thoughtlessly shoved into her face, Hel finally decided that she had had enough. Unfortunately for her, escorts are not often owed the privilege to stop escorting just because they've 'had enough'. Hel looked behind her at the two captivated guests and sighed, wishing she could share a sliver of the amusement they held. Nonetheless, she would devise a way to get a momentary breather for herself, while still being a dutiful escort.

"Well, Shango, Bayani! Would you like to grab a bite?"

Unbeknownst to her, the pair had stopped a few yards earlier to watch some folk dancing, so her voice was drowned out. With the little endurance left in her body, Hel squirmed and shouted through the throng of people, until she got their attention at last. Moments later, when the three emerged from the main street and into the food market, Bayani apologized in between laughter while Hel panted exasperatedly, her hands on her knees.

"Shall we?" The out of breath Goddess asked once she steadied herself.

"It really is extraordinary, Hel!" Bayani said while browsing the pastry stall.

“What is?”

“Your festivals! Just so many splendid things happening at once!”

“It’s a bit loud don’t you think?”

“Loud? Well, loud is good, right? It means people aren’t holding back, they’re letting out all their excitement and cheer! I’d much rather have a *loud* festival than a *quiet* one, at least you can be sure it’s a happy one!”

“I suppose so...” Hel hadn’t thought of it like that before. “In any case, what are festivals like in Yorubaland?”

“Hmm...” Bayani was pensive. “They’re very... pious.”

“Pious?”

“Hah, that’s one way to put it!” Shango suddenly interjected through a mouthful of baked apples. “Many of the festivals are in veneration of a God in the pantheon. For instance, one for our chief God Olorun, of course, there’s also one for our sea Goddess Olokun has one, and... well...”

“Our mighty God of thunder, Shango, has one.” Bayani finished for her brother, who responded with a shudder.

“Oh, wow! That must be quite gratifying. What about you, Bayani?”

“Regrettably not.” Came a nonchalant reply.

“Must be nice to have devoted followers...” She reflected and lamented the state of her own kingdom.

“There’s beauty in being secular too, Hel. I for one think Midgard is remarkable, devoted followers or no!”

As Bayani finished her remark, she also finished picking what to get from the pastry selection. Raising a slice of blueberry pudding playfully towards the air in a symbolic toast, the Goddess smiled and took a bite.

“Here, have a flyer. Here, have a flyer. Here, have a flyer.” A voice suddenly came into their vicinity.

The repetitive phrase travelled up and down the whole street. Recognizing the voice, Hel searched around amusingly, and quickly spotted the familiar frame of Fjolnir, worming his way through booths, benches and bodies, insisting a sheet of paper into anyone who had hands to spare. Enthusiastically, the Goddess called out to him with a wave, though once he’d noticed, he was evidently not in the same cheerful mood. Fjolnir tucked the stack of flyers into her stomach and tramped towards the trio with a serious expression.

“Ah, hello, Miss Hel and her friends. Here, take a flyer each of you.”

“*Goody!* I wonder who put you up to this?” Hel asked with a smirk, staring intently at the brightly worded letters at the centre of the map.

“I’ve had an epiphany Miss Hel.”

“Oh?”

“There is no labourer who gets more disdain and apathy from the common person than the flyer boy. They put up polite fronts of smiles and apologies, but secretly shun us and loath us. In the face of such adversaries, the flyer boy too must adopt ruthlessness. The key is not to ask, Miss Hel! Push it onto them, so that any attempt not to accept it takes too much resistance to muster under regular conditions. Observe!”

Fjolnir turns to a random passer-by.

“Here, have a flyer.”

“No thank-”

The flyer was shoved violently into the man’s stomach, sending him reeling back, instinctively grasping at the crumpled paper. Appalled, the man walked on, frequently looking back at the small boy with a face filled with slight terror.

“See?”

Hel thought hard on whether or not to lecture Fjolnir on manners, but remembering her father's words, she ultimately decided that it was better for Fjolnir to take his own lessons to heart. And it seems the two Yoruba guests somewhat agree.

"Kid's got grit." Bayani whispered to her brother.

"Few in the Aesir don't." Shango clarified.

"I think it's cute." She giggled.

Scarcely had Fjolnir finish bragging about his newfound life lessons, the group would be intruded by another set of familiar faces, whom had already made their presence known ten yards down the street. With a mouth stuffed up with various types of nosh from various types of vendors, Cirius bawled out for their attention, having noticed Hel among the group. And in his usual fashion not to wait for a response, he bolted to join in.

"Hullo, Cirius..." Hel replied, delighted in the serendipity, "and you too, Urd!" The young girl clasped the Goddess' hand, pleased to find some refuge from her partner's boisterous shenanigans.

"Ah, it's you two... Cyrus and Wyrd." Fjolnir, immersed in his own self-enlightenment, greeted the pair with a mature tone.

"Oh, you're that boy, haven't seen you in a bit! How are ye?" Cirius reached for a handshake, which was accepted reluctantly.

"Have we met?" Came Urd's cold reply, annoyed at the misnaming.

While the two boys caught up with each other, Urd turned towards the Yoruba Gods, at first silently exchanging glances with abject curiosity before mustering up a simple 'hi'. It was her first time seeing diplomatic guests, so she wasn't sure whether to be reservedly dignified, or warmly welcoming. Inwardly panicking, she felt as if the entirety of Midgard's reputation rested on this very interaction. Luckily, in rushes Hel to take that responsibility off her little shoulders.

"Urd, this is Bayani and Shango, they're from Yorubaland!"

"Hello there, little ones!" Bayani knelt down to meet her face to face.

Bayani's affable expression immediately melted away the girl's worries. She relaxed, and even gave a playful curtsy, at the very least, intuition told her that Bayani was not one to be judgemental. There was no harm, then, to speak from the heart.

"You have very pretty eyes!" Urd remarked with a giggle.

The sudden compliment stunned Bayani, who retreated into her hands for cover, trying to conceal both her extremely large grin and her embarrassed blush at being complimented by a child. Having lost her voice, she stood back up to compose herself, in the meantime getting her brother to take her place.

"Why, aren't you sweet! And who might you be, young Goddess?" Shango crouched down.

"Did I say something wrong?" Urd looked concernedly at Bayani, who avoided her gaze like the plague.

"Don't mind my sister... she's very bad with *adorable* kids." He whispered.

In a great turn of irony, now Urd was the one blushing and hiding.

While the Yoruba Gods believed they were learning about Midgard significantly from the people, the children are the ones who reveal most about the kingdom's true ethos. After all, it is only wise to look towards the youth

for the surest signs of the future. And rulers ought to mourn for their land when the children seldom laugh and play, for with the loss of innocence comes conflict and unrest to stay.

From Sif's young daughter Thrud, who is shy, but still committed to playfulness; to Cirius, honest and errant to the bone; to Fjolnir, eloquently verbose with no filter; and to Urd, gentle enough but mercilessly sarcastic at times. Flowing among these children is the spectacular range of character, displayed in each of their own, unique whimsy.

'This, is the essence of Midgard, isn't it?' Bayani came to the realisation. 'Character. There's characters everywhere, but it takes a special culture to have everyone boldly display theirs. The humans do it, and the Gods do it. And if one side starts getting too brazen with their personalities, the other side drags them back down to the earth. When there's such transparency in both sides, no wonder the chasm between the divine and the mortal is largely absent. Of course there's always some bitterness or disdain, or sometimes authority inevitably wins over, but there is something remarkable about the sheer possibility that at the end of the day, a random workman can confidently invite the God of Thunder down to the pub for a pint, and the he will accept with a hearty guffaw.

And it seems this tendency is fostered healthily in the children. In these naïve souls is the virtue in having character, and unreservedly showing these characters without fear of judgement. So, no matter how precarious Midgard is currently, with its conflict against the Demons, or even just the general bickering among the people and among the Gods. There are some optimistic reasons to rest assured, Bayani mused: 'Because any kingdom able to instil the youth with a robust confidence towards themselves, whatever highlight the kingdom have will shine brighter, whatever strength possessed amplified, and the future can be fatefully secured.'

Yet, until then, a child is still a child. And the duty to nurture lies in every responsible adult around them. Duties to teach, to correct and most importantly... to protect.

'Yes... to protect.' This was the vow Bayani made right in the present. To do justice to this kingdom which has welcomed and embraced her so lovingly, 'To protect' was the only natural, sacred promise there was to make. Bayani stared at the northern sky, confronted by the bizarre divide of light and darkness. A horrible sensation churned in her stomach, before her spirits plunged into absolute distraught.

The dark sky came suddenly, looming ominously before the gates of the kingdom. The immersion of the hustling crowd towards the festival was broken momentarily, and each individual drew their attention to the arcane arrival of the celestial realm over a blazing morning ether. Confused murmurs getting louder by the instance.

"What's that over there?!" Cirius pointed excitedly at the distant phenomenon.

"Curious... is it about to rain?" Fjolnir joined in watching.

"Well there's no rainclouds. How strange." Hel started wondering too.

"Shango!" Bayani cried.

"I see it." The God of Thunder raised stoically to his feet.

Rushing desperately towards Hel, she whispered in restrained anxiety the necessity of their quick departure, which rather surprised Hel. Sensing the graveness of her tone, which briskly infected her as well, Hel turned to the children.

"Sorry, kids, something's just came up, we've got to rush! Better you run along now, see the rest of the festival!"

"Oh... alright, Miss Hel." Cirius said disappointedly.

“I’ve seen plenty of the festival from these bloody flyers.” Fjolnir was still bitter. Urd stayed silent.

As the two boys waved goodbye to them, they were fast to take off to some new wonders the festival presented in front. But, Urd moved sluggishly, dithering at every step, before looking back one last time with a dire question.

“Is Midgard in danger?”

“Of course not! Just... diplomatic affairs, darling!” Hel stammered, though the girl was not convinced.

“It’s true! There’s nothing to worry about, little Goddess. Have a thrilling time here for us, alright?” Bayani bent down to face her once more, this time without a shred of the previous embarrassment but an encouraging smile, dispelling all worry in the girl. “Oh, one more thing... Urd, is it?”

She nodded.

“I think you have very pretty eyes too!”

A huge blush burnt across the girl’s face, Urd turned and hurried away to hide her glowing, red complexion. As she left, the trio expressed their farewells, but she could not hear anything, fully focused on escaping. Only after seeing Urd rejoin the other two boys in front, did the group feel ready to leave. And now, with their spirits reinforced by a newfound courage, the adults trotted onward, to the direction of the menacing, black sky.

“Well, back to the grind, I suppose.” Fjolnir grumbled.

“Wazzit you’ve got there, mate?”

“Oh, just these flyers I’m meant to pass out. Heaven forbid a kid has too much leisure, ‘idle hands be the Devil’s work’ after all!” He grumbled more bitterly.

“Do you want us to help?”

The boy’s face lit up with surprise, uncertain whether at Cirius’ generosity or gullibility. Either way, Fjolnir was not going to pass up the opportunity to lessen his workload. Scrambling as if the offer would be retracted soon, Fjolnir shoved the stack onto Cirius’ hands, splitting it once more and taking back half, before bombarding him with an effusive series of thanks and praises. In the boy’s mind, this small deed would upturn every previous evaluations he’s had on Cirius, and he wondered why he’d never engaged much with such a charming fellow.

“Would you?! Thank you so utterly much! Are you sure, though? Yes? My, what a kind pal you are, Cyrus. Thank you again! Oh, and see you and Wyrd around the festival!”

Fjolnir’s voice trailed off, eventually mixing into a blur with the crowd, as he speedily went back to his work eager to be done even earlier than before. Standing still, Cirius waved goodbye with a giddy smile, before Urd caught up, shooting him doubtful glances.

“What’s going on?” She pointed to the stack of flyers resting on his chest.

“We’re handing out flyers!”

“...Why?!”

“He seemed a bit annoyed about it... and we’ve got nothing to do, do we?”

“Are you going to make a habit of shouldering jobs for everyone?”

“Not *everyone*... he’s a friend isn’t he?”

“Not much of a *friend* if he can’t be bothered to get your name right.” She said spitefully, crossing her arms.

“Well... he’s bound to get it right eventually if I keep helping him than if I don’t, right?”

Urd sighed, defeatedly taking her share of the flyers from his hands. Meeting the boy's gaze with kind eyes, she smiled and shook her head.

"Salt of the earth..." She whispered.

"What'd you say?"

"Nothing."

And so, the two children went back to strolling around the festival, in such wondrous spirits that often they would forget the flyers entirely. Only in the few moments when they do remember their task, did they go about handing the papers out, though even this was treated with blithe. Very swiftly, flyer by flyer, the stack would reduce away from their hands, owing to the weaknesses of the passerby, who could not find it in themselves to reject their ebullient expressions.

*

Friday

Late morning

A battle never gets easier. Warriors who claim it does are not warriors at all, but bloodthirsty beasts using the guise of battle to satiate their lust for brutality. While the body can season itself to mastery of the art of combat, reason installs a limit to the levels of bravery coursing through the fighters' mind, lest bravery in excess converts into foolishness.

Thus, the everyday soldier is afraid, no matter how skillful they are, or how confident they are. Because if battle has a single defining nature, it is that predictions and preconceptions ought to go out the window in the face of unadulterated chaos. With a foe capable enough, weaponry means nothing; with a foe strong enough, *three against one* means nothing.

Freyr bit his own tongue in order to abate his own nervousness from seizing over his body. When that didn't work and his body began trembling, he convinced himself he was trembling from the chilling gales. The God's hands clenched on the handle of his gargantuan sword, now held in front resting against the ground. Beyond the gates and barren fields, the fiend was closing in ever so slightly, its malefic intent almost tangible now to the three deities.

"Brynhildr, launch your spear... see what we're up against." Freyr's voice came out surprisingly soft.

The Valkyrie took a deep breath. Not taking her eyes off the marching Demon even for an instance, she readies her spear. Heaving the iron shaft above her tightening elbows, Brynhildr bounded ahead as lithe as an Olympian, and hurled with a mighty grunt that carried her every valour! The spear soared forth, sending a sharp, sonic shout that stings the ear as it leaps for its target in an incalculable speed. The spear appeared merciless towards anything in its path, so unfathomably fast no animal nor human could be prepared to escape its fatal skewer. Yet, it was halted, just as abruptly as it had launched forth. Seized effortlessly in a flash by the hands of the Demonic Shaman, who walked on heedless at this deadly attempt at his life.

"Tsk" The frustrated Valkyrie clicked her tongue.

Uncertain whether out of honour or derision, Shimush would send the spear back to its owner. Twirling the weapon dexterously around, the spear was chucked back so disturbingly sudden that it escaped all their notice. And just as it had soared towards the lone Demon, it soared back towards the barracks, piercing through the air with a shrill.

It headed for Brynhildr, announcing its return to the Valkyrie through a fraction of a light's glint off the reflective blade. Only saved by her mighty instincts for danger, Brynhildr caught the scorching spear with both hands, the pointy tip inches away from her panting mouth. The gust created had scarcely settled while her hands trembled from part inertia and part nervousness which was quickly banished.

The other two warriors stared wide-eyed in bewilderment, dreading the thought of a world where things went utterly different. Of course, Brynhildr won't let them dwell on it; mustering up her usual bravado, she spun the spear back to its front, in a battle-ready stance and bellowed out:

"Hah, nae bother at all! Better yet, we learnt that itta be wise not ta give him yer weapon, hahah!" She laughed away the last of her anxiety.

"BRYNHILDR!!!"

In that short instant where all three pairs of eyes unfocused on the Ancient Demon, it appeared right before them. A distance of more than a hundred yards, cleared in a blink by him. His dark and rugged stature, though merely little bigger than Freyr, was just that much more baleful, like an unconquerable terror looming beyond the reaches of materiality. With a presence that emanates coldness, a massive breath let out by the monster clouds the area in nebulous mist which only the glow of his three crimson pupils clearly penetrated through.

Freyr, hissing out a heavy grunt, had already swung his sword into the Demon's side. The slab of iron lusts after a clean cleave through its target, yet was stopped abruptly by Shimush's right palm, halting the blade like a sturdy wall. From there, they committed to a bout of strength, the blade and the palm pressing against each other in a bout to break through.

From the other side, Brynhildr snapped into action, thirsting for vengeance at being frightened by this fiend, the Valkyrie thrust the spear into the neck of Shimush, trying to skewer as her throw earlier should have done. But, again, it was met by the impenetrable hands of the Ancient Demon, gripping onto the shaft. From there, they engaged in a tug of war, Brynhildr to reclaim her weapon, and Shimush to purloin it.

Though Geiravor's mind followed this erratic development, her body strained to act; scrambling to do too many things at once: simultaneously wishing to slash, while wishing to stab, while wishing to put up her shield. Faltering from the perceived imperfection of every idea, she stood still while her comrades occupied both the Demon's hands...

Faltering, is the foremost foible for any soldier, especially for those reluctant to be on the battlefield to begin with. There truly is no level of competence where hesitation completely disappears. When we try to calculate our plans for the future, the favourite thing the Fates loves to do... is to ruin that plan. And in matters of life and death, the only plan one ought to have, is to let the mind vanish and act forcibly in the moment... a skill Geiravor will need to master soon.

By the time Geiravor resolved to strike and rushed at the Ancient Demon from behind, he had broken through the struggle with the two Gods. In a grotesque twist of sorcery, Shimush gaped his jaw open widely; emerging from within the pits of that dark and noxious maw of his were two gigantic cobras, flashing their black and white hoods in bloodthirsty voracity. The serpents lunge upon the two struggling Gods, sending them reeling away from their venomous fangs.

Reactively, Freyr pulled his sword from the palm of Shimush, and with another great swing severed the head of the assaulting snake, and its body promptly slumped down onto the earth like an unfastened rope. Brynhildr, however, had to give up her spear to avoid her cobra's lunge. With it inches away from her face, the Valkyrie jumped back immediately, and snatched the serpent with her supple hands; A slight laugh escaped her, out of pity for the poor beast, before she crushed it with both hands, granting it a swift demise.

Brynhildr's spear, once more switched hands, would be turned instantly against her comrade. As with a supremely agile manoeuvre from the Demon, the spear was impelled towards his back, to repel the advances of Geiravor. Surprised at the sudden strike, the young Valkyrie raised her shield in a hurry. A fearsome clamour erupted from the clash of metals. Geiravor was shunted back with her vision in a momentary blur, but when she came to, a disconcerting dread overcame her as she observed the streaming cracks the blow left on her shield. Doubts intensified in the Valkyrie: if one mere exchange could leave her in such shambles, just how onerous is the path to victory? Again, she falters, spending some seconds stagnant and speechless during this fierce battle, which was very much still in its infancy.

The other two warriors, though, would not let this exchange conclude in their disfavour. Without delay, Freyr and Brynhildr drew out a heated skirmish with the Ancient Demon. Freyr delivered a constant barrage of

slashes, and Brynhildr, unsheathing her dagger, flanked him at every opportunity. Forced into this rapid pace of blows, parries and dodges, Shimush, for the first time, seemed vulnerable. The two warriors were synchronous in battle, what they expected of each other was perfectly understood by themselves, and perfectly incomprehensible by their opponent.

At one point, after evading the spear's jab, Brynhildr went for one of the three eyes upon the Demon's mask, which twitched obstreperously with her dagger's verging. In desperation, Shimush unhanding the spear and struck his fist up into the Valkyrie, who smirked and lithely kicked herself away. With his back unguarded, the God of War at last unleashed his full fury onto his sword, and slashed viciously at the Ancient Demon's back, leaving a gigantic gash, and provoking a horrendous screech from the wounded fiend! Despite how bleak the outcome looked for the Gods at the start, the Asgardians would draw first blood in this fray. Though 'first blood' was in the complete figurative sense, because as they quickly observe, there was not a single drop of blood in that gash created by Freyr's attack.

"Ooh, didnae like dat did he?" Brynhildr laughed triumphantly, reclaiming her spear from the ground.

"STAY FOCUSED, VALKYRIES!"

"Geira!" Brynhildr called.

Geiravor snapped awake from her trance, right away, she hugged both her sword and shield close to her. Scuttling to rejoined the other two's side while Shimush was reeling from his wound. Her shaky breathing was swiftly noticed by her partner.

"Steady breaths, Geira dear..." The senior whispered. "Don't think, react! Lessons go out the window in a real fight!"

The young Valkyrie nodded before closing her eyes, using this short reprieve to truly enter the realm of battle.

"QUICK, WHILE HE'S WOUNDED!"

Freyr charged towards the writhing fiend, his booming command beckoned for the Valkyries to follow suit. The sight of Shimush pitifully down on his knees was a sight to be relished by the mighty God. With an image of victory so tangible, someone like him could not have resisted the urge to rush. A mind so consumed with the turbulence of fray, was dismissing the small, nagging intuitions that suggested wrongness.

Brynhildr sprang into an especially rapid sprint, and with her nimble strides she soon overtook Freyr, her spear clutched to her side ready to impart a deadly skewer onto Shimush's chest. Freyr saw and adapted according, adjusting his sword in hopes of landing a finishing blow after the Valkyrie's attack. And as the distance between her and the Ancient Demon closed, she leapt off from the ground, shunting all her weight into her spear for an absolute puncture!

Just then, Shimush, hitherto writhing, dropped his façade. All three eyes on the mask locked onto Brynhildr, still midair from her leap, twitching with excitement to bestow a sadistic blow. A crooked grin occupied that dark and brooding jaw beneath the mask, and rumbling within was a howling cackle that mocks his target. Brynhildr winced at the realisation: the monster was never in pain, the monster never felt anything at all, except maybe sick pleasure at the chance to hoodwink.

And now, there was a fist charging at the Valkyrie, with nothing held back by the Ancient Demon, it approached Brynhildr's frame, dreadfully fast and dreadfully sturdy. The only thing left for her to do, was to steel her entire body and bear through it. She didn't know where she'll end up, she didn't even know how

painful it would be, but one thing she *did* promised to herself, was that she'll get back up... and she'll repay this punch with vengeance!

The punch sent Brynhildr flying across the field, crashing into the barrack walls thirty yards away. Shimush, after doing away with his act, picked himself off the ground just in time to engage with Freyr's incoming attack. With his fists filled with fervour from a fresh blow, it itches for more. Each of the God's strikes was met with a powerful parry from the Demon's punches and hooks, shrugging off the blade's sharpness. Eventually, even Freyr was rebuffed by the overwhelming punches of the Ancient Demon, left stunned in both body and spirit.

As a fist bore down on Freyr's staggered, unmoving figure, the young Valkyrie would intercept. Although its lifespan was fleeting as it was, Geiravor braced her shield. And to her prediction, it would repel its last impact; once Shimush's powerful punch landed, it shattered into multiple pieces. The Ancient Demon delighted in watching the shards of metal spill down one by one, yet, unbeknownst to the fiend, what lay behind the shield would prove to be much more of a menacing obstacle than the shield itself. Shimush's hateful aura was mirrored back by the singular Valkyrie standing before him, carrying an expression so radically deviant in nature from before. As if reincarnated in the midst of battle, Geiravor brandished her sword in front of her, with calmness and contempt that would scare all her acquaintances. A warrior in the most hazardous state there was, a state fueled by fiery wrath, heightening senses and burning away everything in the world except for the detested countenance of an enemy.

Letting out a bitter hiss aimed at the arrogant fiend, Geiravor rushed at him, hacking at his limbs at every conceivable opportunity. She moved extraordinarily fast, like a fearsome beast, evading Shimush's every attempt to fight her off. With each passing moment, Shimush was slashed at from different angles. One second she was below him, another second she was above, and with every missed capture, the Valkyrie's sword would find its way into flesh. Even if the Ancient Demon had a strong immunity against pain, the Valkyrie still seemed to be causing a hell of a nuisance.

Making a playground of the Ancient Demon, Geiravor would hack and slash her way through Shimush's body. Though, just as he did with Freyr's mighty swing, Shimush endured every strike with insouciance, and not a droplet of blood was drawn. Each successful hit by the Valkyrie only brought out more fury from the fiend, and doubled the vigour he puts into attempting to crush her in his palm. In turn, the fury would fuel Geiravor in her efforts, and assiduously, she persisted her attacks into ever more dire places: dicing his shoulders, hacking his neck, slicing his nape, and eventually, the golden opportunity arrived for her to go for that hideous mask...

She stabs the sword, aiming for one of his bulbous eyes, but this plan was quickly foiled by a wild thrash from the Ancient Demon. Once again, the fiend moved at an incomprehensible speed, one purely produced unintentionally from a sense of danger. Losing her balance, Geiravor jammed her sword into the mask, hanging on for dear life while the fiend rampaged about! Then, a piercing shrill reverberated across the field, screamed from the bottom of a rotten and shriveled throat. Resonant and raw, it both thrilled and petrified the warriors; this terrible din betokened an entity so detached from their own it ought to be alien, an alien foe who was at last making its pain and suffering known in deafening vocals.

Despite her tenacity, Geiravor was shaken off by the frenetic thrashing of Shimush. As she tumbled onto the dirt, the sword clanked down beside her. An astonished look lit up on Geiravor's face when she sought to reclaim her weapon, because dripping from the sharp tip of the blade, was a trickling stream of thick, crimson blood.

"Interesting." A devilish smile spread across the Valkyrie's face, as she eyed the writhing Demon before her, unmistakable in her assumption that he was writhing out of pain.

As suddenly as he had devolved into a frenzy, Shimush regained composure. In his own dramatic way, he let his posture slump down, all while his back was turned towards the Gods, goading their approach, to which Freyr

comfortably complied with another swing aimed directly at the head of the Ancient Demon. To no one's surprise, not even his own, the gigantic blade was parried by a spinning hook, swiftly leading Shimush into a punch meant to blow the bulky God away. Although this time, Freyr was more prepared than before, clutching down on the brass knuckles within his armoured gloves, he shot his own fist at the Demon. From there, it was a bout of speed... which Freyr would lose narrowly, before being blown backwards ten yards, flat on his back.

Shimush went for the young Valkyrie next. Geiravor, feeling the aftereffects of her brutal movements from before, was left stranded in place. Her disobeying body knelt unmoving, while the Ancient Demon winded up another deadly strike, balling his fingers behind him as he marched...

Truly, all battles are cycles. A battle between two is confined to a cycle of a limited moves by the two individuals. A battle of more is confined to a cycle of different sequences of assault and defence, along with limited moves. So, it is not a very surprising thing for veterans of battle to feel frequent senses of déjà vu, even if they are evil, archaic beings from the underworld.

In a flash, Shimush seized the spear thrown at him from in front. His three eyes glare into the distance, distinguishing the familiar silhouette of a strapping Valkyrie. The thrown spear would garner the attention of Geiravor as well, who turned back excitedly, but unlike the Ancient Demon, what Geiravor saw was something more noteworthy than the reemergence of Brynhildr, rather, the young Valkyrie saw, understood, and celebrated what was held in her partner's firm hands: an ivory horn.

Puffing out her chest, Brynhildr blew into the mouth of the instrument, blaring out a prolonged, penetrating tune that soared into the heavens above before being redistributed throughout the kingdom. A divine call fit for the Gods, the impalpable tune drills its way into each deities' ear, imploring them to harken the urgent cry for aid from a great malevolence that knows no bounds. The Ancient Demon, now wreaking havoc at the north side of the kingdom...

*

As the distance between the Yoruba Gods and the festival increased, so too did the city quieted around them. The shindy of a bunch of buoyant, boisterous people reduce into a faraway murmur. And in this sudden transition into silence, an anxious mind was poised to go wild with unsound speculation. Gazing at the immaculate split of a sky into dark and light, recollections crept its way into Bayani's thoughts, and fueled by the weight of this horrible reality, the recollections would become obscenely more vivid than ever before:

There were flames, convulsing from a constant barrage of gusts, blazes like the red fangs from a spawn of Hell, ravenously tearing up the terrain in fits of lunacy. And from that black, charred earth, marred by pools of flowing gore, a corpse rises. She looked around the haggard faces of her kin, and the fatigued figures of the soldiers, each betraying a hint of despair, evidently having lost count of the times that monstrous fiend has reanimated itself up from the ashes. Again and again, it stands gleaming with fresh life, blooming with malignant mockery at the Gods' accumulated languor.

Her hands ached from even clenching her weapon, and an exhausted heart prayed for the Heavens to just deliver her through this day with one less scar on her body. Yet, there was not even the luxury of prayer, as any attempt was soon interrupted by a stentorian calling from the supreme God of War, Ogun, who singularly holds together the hopes of the fighters. He would bellow out a set of complex instructions, strategies and maneuvers that all seemed to blend into drivel by now in the Goddess' mind.

“Bayani... Bayani!... BAYANI!”

She was taken out from the dreadful memories, realising that Hel and Shango were already some ten yards ahead of her.

“Keep up, Bayani!” Shango shouted, admittedly with a nervous tone of his own.

This was a weird source of reassurance for her. At the very least, she was not the only one haunted by those awful days, and there was solace in misery shared by company. Yet, haunted or not, here was her brother courageously rushing forth to that formidable evil, if this was not a source of inspiration, then she would have scolded herself for being far too weak-willed. With that, Bayani dashed forward to rejoin the other two, and as she did, she came in on an intense exchange had by Hel and Shango.

“Are you absolutely sure this is the Demonic Shaman?” Hel stammered out in between catching her breath.

“I’ve seen that blackness in the sky far too many times to be mistaken!”

“This doesn’t make sense! The timing! What was Abaddon here for, then? What about-”

Suddenly, the ululation of the great horn, conditioned to ignite alacrity in every Asgardian, drilled into Hel’s ear, ringing resonantly with an interest of reverberations. The extended note blares out a short but distinct tale telling of the bedlam brewing in the North. Doubts faded away, and Hel at last understood the urgency, taking on a demeanor reserved for the gravest of situations, such as all conscientious soldiers respond to the abrupt call of duty. For individuals like her, though, such a demeanor comes as a very unwelcomed and tiring thing, endured solely for the sake of love.

“This way, it’s quicker!”

Approaching a corner into a gloomy alleyway, Hel turned in swiftly and beckoned for the other, now taking charge of the group running at the front. They bolted through a dingy path of dripping pipes and scattered bins, fuming with stench born out of perfect blends of filth and muck. Its denizens of critters and pests react to this intrusion into their homes by scurrying away into their covert burrows. It was a sadly not so outlandish site for any bustling kingdom, one might say it is a product of all the bustle. It is a site conveniently skipped across every itinerary made for diplomats and guests, and which Shango and Bayani are now given a full detour into.

Still, these alleys prove to be a veritably confounding labyrinth, with each turn around the corner revealing a dozen new exits, either extending into deeper alleys or out into brand new streets. Fortunately, the Yoruba Gods were blessed with a confident guide, Hel, who only seemed to become faster in these alleys, which she clearly had a history with. Indeed, these passages, messy and dodgy though they are, has played frequent hosts to her and her father’s *mischiefs*, because as it’s so often the case, their line of business demands a quality only preserved in the seedy underbelly of Midgard, that houses the raw, the unfiltered, and most of all... the sordid.

The pungent air of the alleys was nothing for the young Goddess, but for the Yoruba Gods, it was harassment. Soon after Hel had led them back out into the open streets where a fresh late morning breeze hit their faces, the two was left coughing and swatting away the remnants of the alley’s mucky scent. To this, Hel only flashed an apologetic half-smile before gesturing them to persist forward, stoically facing straight on. The Yoruba Gods were taken aback by the change in Hel’s personality, slightly wondrous at how little they thought they knew about their new friend.

*

Many glamourize the position of a ruler by fixating on grand castles, statues of gold and lavish, week-long banquets. Indeed, the privilege of rulers do seem unduly glamorous at times. Odin, though, would vehemently argue that material privileges such as those are no comparison to a vital sacrifice made by a ruler. And that is the privilege to peace of mind, which he confesses is at a gross scarcity in his own life.

When one has to support the structures of an entire society, how many dubieties must be plaguing the mind of the ruler. The discontent of the people, either public or private, the animosities of enemies, the festering of inequity. Unless they choose to ignore these enduringly nagging issues, which makes them no better than tyrants, the ruler must banish all notions of having peace of mind. At least, until certain days when these nagging issues don't nag as loudly. When they are superseded by a resounding ebullience and goodwill throughout the kingdom, under the comforting, cleansing atmosphere of *festivities*.

From the balcony of the royal bedchamber, the view of Midgard contained all the signs of a peaceable day. With people dressed at their best, it was more colourful than usual! With spirits irrepressibly excited, it was more boisterous than ever! And with goods grilled, baked and boiled with passion, a delicious mixture of scents wafts throughout the kingdom in provocative invitation!

Affected by the neighbouring amenities, from Odin's lips escaped a cheerful humming, of a tune harkening back to his youth. He hummed it loud enough to penetrate the pitter-patter of the running water in his shower. And in a dignifiedly childish fashion, the Allfather went about his washing while harmonized with his song, scrubbing back and forth with the pace, faster as it quickened, stopping as each phrase ended. This harmonization would persist through the Allfather's grooming, his dressing and his stretching, synching every movement to that youthful tune. When it approaches its climax, so too did Odin's morning routine. With the final note chanted out, he sat firmly onto his velvet armchair and poured himself a cup of tea, which Frigg brewed not long before.

The steaming cup imparted warmth, all the more comfortable at the dawn of autumn. So, resting with this set of sublime variables, Odin unraveled today's newspaper (also brought in by Frigg), and read the first headline, highlighted in unmistakable, eye-catching bold:

DEMON ABADDON DEAD
MISCHIEF MAKER MURDERS MONSTER

A sweet, satisfied smile spread across his face, and his splendid morning just turned perfect...

But then, abruptly, there came a quick series of knocks at the door. Rapping with impatience, it hinted at the agitation of the knocker, a hint which was sadly lost on the sanguine Allfather, who only saw fit to allow them in once he'd sipped in a celebratory mouthful of tea.

"Come in!"

The God of Thunder entered with quiet and reserved steps, in complete contrast to his attire: a glistening armour of gold, sporting a dashing black cape trailing behind.

"Ah, Thor, looking debonair, aren't we?!"

"Ye best come outside, father... somethin *funny* is afoot."

Still stuck in a state of optimism, Thor's use of the word 'funny' was taken quite literally, and so he followed with that insouciant smirk hanging on his mouth as Thor led the way. Eventually, he was brought out to the garden, where all gladness gradually faded once confronted by an unobstructed sight of the heavenly nightmare. That was the blanket of blackness scattered upon the Northern sky. Though sluggish, the blanket moves towards them, consuming a lively world of boundless hue, and excreting a realm cloudless, shadeless and shapeless. Every flower swayed, either from the chilling squall that came abnormally, or it was from their meek nature which persuades them into shunning the dark.

“Hunner to one odds that’s a work of a fiend!” Thor glanced at Odin before continuing. “Could it be... dat Shaman we was talking about?”

“Impossible.” Odin assured immediately. “They’ve obviously just called up someone else from Hell, a last, desperate attempt at vengeance.”

The Allfather suddenly went quiet, pensive with calculations while Thor stood by wordlessly, knowing better than to interrupt. Soon, Odin started again:

“A Demon who brings forth a dark sky, a cold wind, and can be summoned under short notice. Krampus isn’t in season, Barbatos requires week-long rituals, which leaves us with...”

Odin pointed playfully at Thor, aiming to test how well-versed he was in the ‘Compendium of Demons’, only to be disappointed by an indifferent shrug by the God of Thunder.

“Dantalion is our likely suspect... Arch-duke of Hell, second layer, thirty-six legions... Shapeshifter with advanced hypnosis, elemental magic and rudimentary necromancy.” Odin recalled.

“Hmm, tricky bugger, but not unmanageable.” Thor rubbed his beard.

“That’s the barracks, isn’t it?” Odin pointed at the land below the creeping sky’s edge. “Who’s manning the station today?”

“Ought tae be... few of da Valkyries... and Freyr!”

“Well, child’s play, then.”

“Right!” Thor agreed, and crossed his arms.

The two stood in silence for a while. Thor was particularly conflicted. For one, he could not shake off a foreboding sense of peril while watching the advancing black sky, yet, having just donned on his resplendent attire for the festival, he also did not want to be called into battle. Shooting constant side-glances at the Allfather, he was building up the courage to dismiss himself... before Odin spoke first.

“But, you know, Thor...”

Hearing those words, he was struck with dismay, as the premonition of what’s coming next became unavoidably clear.

“...it won’t hurt for you to join in assist, should wrap it up quicker. Won’t want them running late, you agree?”

“Aye... awright...” Thor sighed away his mild discontent.

Reaching out his hand, the God of Thunder’s body trembled, as he was enveloped by myriad sparks of blue and white, disappearing and reappearing in erratic sequence. Then, a bolt of lightning shot up into the heavens, and before a blink of an eye, a sturdy hammer scorches down into his grasp, blowing up a gust that scatters the clouds and the grass. Mjolnir shone divinely in the clenched hands of Thor. All this occurred without noise, and only when everything unfolded did sound scramble to catch up, as the crackling boom of lightning blasted across the air, and the earthshattering thud of the hammer reverberated across the earth.

After bidding his goodbye, Thor braced himself for battle with a gigantic puff of air. After a ceremonious stance, he leapt! In a single, powerful leap, the God of Thunder vanished into the distance, clearing the castle walls, sprawling churches, and towering buildings.

Left alone, Odin stayed in the garden for a while more, eyeing the haunted ether looming over his kingdom. He shook his head in pitying admonishment of the Demon's efforts. 'Lost the battle, but won't stop the harassment... just what one expects from the beings who embody the sin of pride.', he thought to himself.

Yet, just as he was getting ready to reenter the palace... the horn sounded. Its timbre blared out from the distant barracks, shocking Odin into an abrupt halt. An urgent call for aid echoed right after he had sent one, what should be a serendipitous turn of events only soured the spirits of the Allfather.

He turned to meet that dreadful sky once again, cursing at the world's limitless supply of wretchedness with a dour hateful frown. And soon after, he marched back into the castle, unfortunately not making his way back to a splendid morning of tea, good news, and peace of mind.

*

Friday

Afternoon

The short distraction created by Brynhildr was enough to let Geiravor recover to her feet. Defying her aching body, she picked herself up, arms and sword outreached in front, sending an intrepid message of her tenacity to the Ancient Demon, who scoffed at it by being utterly unmoved. Brandishing the spear that has been rallied back and forth constantly, he looms over her, endeavoring to break that exterior of courage in the Valkyrie. At that moment, she wondered whether it was an illusion that Shimush's horrible frame, was seemingly larger than before.

The fiend hoisted the spear up once more, and manifest was an overflowing intent to kill, more palpable than any other instance since the start of this fray. One lunge, one lunge separated the Valkyrie from a grotesque demise, with a broken body, even the strongest will to live cannot persevere. Then, Geiravor's vision became strangely clear, too clear, as if the approach of mortality brought with it epiphanies of the world, which the implication is either so horrific that death is a blessing, or so brilliant that to leave after knowing is pitiful. Geiravor belonged to the latter, she scrambled to survive. Eventually resorting, of course, to the omnipresent option... of prayer.

And, by the same force that has repelled every attempt at intrusion by the Demon, Shimush would meet with another obstruction, raised by the many valiant souls protecting this land. Not a moment too early or too late, three new warriors arrived in strategically flashy fashion, to foil the Demon's claim on a life, and lifting the Valkyrie from the clutches of death.

The gates into the barracks flung open with a bang that barely shatters it. In charged Hel, a pair of fiery eyes glaring at the scene before her. An enchanting sparkle of violet light gathered around her, eventually blinking into existence a long and silvery staff. It floated before her in the air, subserviently following the Goddess' every move, before being snatched into her hands. With the staff, Hel gave the earth three commanding stamps, making sure the vibrations reached the quietest recesses of the underground. After that, came a stentorian shout from her, the shout echoed across the field, provoking the Demon's attention and ire with new uncertainties, while consoling the Valkyrie with a familiar voice. Then, in a mysterious language of hisses and slurring, Hel bawled out an order, pronounced loudly and cogently for it to penetrate the underground, and summoning a family member with a fervent call of its name:

“JORMUNGANDR!!!”

The giant serpent shot up from beneath Geiravor and Shimush, upturning the scene into disorder. Now basking in the turbulent, warm air of the surface, its purple scales expanded its already girthy body. An animated tunnel of venom and blood, Jormungandr absurdly outsized itself from when he escorted the two children the night before. Hailing itself as the lord of its kind, it sought to reinstate the visceral fear of snakes into the world!

Arching its magnificent physique over the Demon, it rapidly slithered its way across him, coiling parts of its nigh limitless body around the fiend's arms, locking the limbs from use. Then, coiling around the spear, it snapped the shaft off, ridding the weapon off him thereafter. Finally, it strangled its neck, blocking all access to air. With Jormungandr's ethereal link to the earth, it acted as an unbreakable latch as it pulled the Demon downwards. Held in a mighty constriction, Shimush was frozen in place, knelt upon the ground seemingly in silent compliance. As a last show of dominance, the serpent gaped his mouth before the face of the fiend, barring his malevolence, one monstrosity to another.

But Hel's onslaught was not finished. Seeing the struggle in the Demon, she pounced at the opportunity to pile on layers after layers of tormenting restrictions. Such is the unforgiving character one must embody in battle. All traces of the vivacious young Goddess found themselves suppressed. With a facing heart consumed with all combinations of worry, Hel bitterly discerned it too much for herself to handle, and so resigned herself to the cold but fearless persona within: the persona who embodied the gigantic responsibility she always felt was unfairly assigned to her: the destructive and inevitable Goddess of Death. Raising her staff once more, she uttered a foreboding incantation:

"Mortem revocare".

Soon, the staff started to glow, enveloping her in a shimmer of violet, masking her whole frame except for a pair of eyes, and the deep purple irises that no longer views the world as it did.

The ground rumbled, trying to hold itself together while the wrestles and thrashings of a passionate mob from beneath slowly tore it apart. A long fissure cracks open under the Demon, and a haunting ensemble of cries seep out from the cracks, amalgamating into absurdity. It was a bark, a grunt, a neigh, a roar, all blended into a droning cacophony wholly birthed from a realm spectral in nature. Eventually, the ground gave in. And from a slim splinter bursts open a crater, in the wild eruption unleashes the horde of beasts! With skin dripping with decay, and smell fetid with disease, the party of corpses rampage throughout the area, enacting the dramatic last moments of their animalistic lives. All flowing with adrenalin, either in conflict or in flight. All were suffering in perpetual pain, either from a fatal wound or aging infections. And most crucially, all were seething in pure fury, at being recalled from Death.

The wolves bite at everything in sight, first at the weeds, then at rocks, then at the squirming corpses of the goats. The hawks, eagles and ravens scattered across the sky, soaring in dizzying circles, trying to readapt to the feeling of flying. The horses, of course, did the only thing they know, and ran. The grizzly bears stood and growled, arms outreached above them, unknown whether cursing at or pleading to the Heavens. Yet, despite the horde's savage outburst, one voice would penetrate through the anarchic mind of each individual beast, uniting them in deferential silence. 'Hark!' The Goddess of Death demanded from her subjects, before ingraining her will onto them.

Like abject servants, the beasts immediately turned from wherever they were, and collectively rushed to the same point. Each individual in the horde intuited their role, while simultaneously filled with an indelible aggression towards the Demonic Shaman. Piling one after another upon the restricted fiend, the wolves sink their canines into his legs, the raptors claw and peck at his shoulders, and the ferocious bears each find a body part to maul, while the biggest of the bunch crushes his torso from the back. As Shimush went through this brutish assault by the animals, so thoroughly pinned down was he that not even a fidget could be mustered, leaving only his exposed head, with the mask still hanging tightly and a set of teeth gritting with contempt.

Furtively, while the rest of the beasts carried out their assaillment, one horse would gallop away from the Ancient Demon to carry out its own unique duty. The stallion breathed through an exposed lung, which palpitated steadily as it ran across the field, making its way to the Valkyrie, who was watching everything with a mystified expression. The stallion bent his head down, greeting her with a neigh as polite as he could make it. Geiravor, though, had not fully processed the rapid disorder unfolding before her, unsure whether everything was a strange, drawn-out nightmare, she responded bemusedly to the approaching stallion.

"Hello horsey..."

Echoing the feelings of the Goddess, the stallion grunted hopelessly, and decided to be more forceful. With a dexterous maneuver, he flipped the Valkyrie wonkily onto his back, much to her yelping dismay. But this seemed at last to have gotten the message across to her. Steadily, Geiravor adjusted her seat on the zestful horse that was raring to go. And once she did, she was carried away in wide, scorching strides, just as casualties are, to the safety of the backlines.

Meeting her there was her grinning partner, and a stranger, who she instinctively knew held the possibility of friendship, who was playing a mellifluous tune on her flute. Although she did not connect it to Bayani's song at the time, as Geiravor got closer, she felt her pain and fatigue gradually fade away, superseded by an intense zeal, enough for the world to seem conquerable. With that, she hopped off the stallion, clenching her fists in eager anticipation to be back fighting, and made a solemn vow to vanquish the Demonic Shaman.

“While I’ve got him trapped, do what you have to do!”

As she steadies the shaking staff in front of her, trembling from the wavering wills of the beasts, The Goddess of Death shouted to the Yoruba Gods behind her. She was replied with silence, which she took as a solemn understanding. If the change in Hel had been radical in the face of the Ancient Demon, the changes in Shango and Bayani would be otherworldly. Since arriving, both have assumed unshifting, expressionless faces, trained to not betray even a sliver of dismay. Their movements, too, had never been calmer than now, and any lack of assurance or confidence was impossible to tell. Shango's eyes, which hitherto had always inspired playfulness, was now obscured inside the vizor of a spiked helmet, jutting out the jaw of a lion on the forehead.

Coming to a stand, Shango produced a clap, and a set of three double-headed bata drums manifested between his palms. The hourglass-shaped drums, laced with bells at the side, and carved in vibrant Oma wood, was brought down by its weight onto the ground, the bells gave a synchronized shingle in the fall. Ceremoniously, Shango strapped it onto his broad shoulders, eventually, his hand was hovering above the batter heads, ready to join in on a symphony that's already taken form... soon, he started a rhythm, slow and steady. A simple overture controlled by nimble fingers tapping sequentially at the three drums, echoing away in the tiny moment of quietude given to the battlefield.

The piece progressed, descending into a fervid combination of beats. As Shango channeled more strength, so did the drumming grew faster and more reverberant. From the rapid fluxes of grooves spawn a language, spoken in stentorian tones. With the mighty voices of the drums, their instructions pierce into the Heavens, mustering masses of thunderclouds to attention. It darkened the already dark sky, though also punctuating it with bright flashes of the artillery hiding behind the nimbuses, they rumbled, ready to be unleashed at a moment's behest.

Halfway through, the lone beating of the drums would be joined by a dulcet whistle from a flute. Played by none other than Bayani, a few steps behind her brother. In her hands was an Oja flute, made of pine and etched with symbols that flaunt its intricate and glorious history. Its long tube produces a sonorous sound, making any melody played from it more lugubrious than they really are. The Goddess pours her very soul into the mouth of the flute, as her fingers slide lithely across the keyholes in keeping pace to a rapid theme, filled with wild movements and repetitions. Yet, strangely, the two instruments did not harmonize, it was two separate music, racing on their own distinct courses, telling distinct tales. While Shango's drumming was meant for the Heavens, Bayani's fluting... was meant for her Shango.

The flute's melodies carry a potent enchantment, played passionately, the opus ignites the vitality of an audience, who momentarily forget boundaries, inveigled to go beyond limits in an ode to the blessed music

they've just heard. Just as Bayani's piece begin to flow gracefully through its phases, its invigorating effect was soon apparent. Shango's beating surges in volume, the drums struck with doubling strength each passing instance. The Goddess kept a watchful eye on the swinging palms of her brother, which were getting wilder and wilder. She knew the piece's climax was approaching soon, and also knew how violently Shango's ritual was supposed to end. Wincing in dreadful expectation, she retreated a few more steps back before the final note... and blew her entire breath into the flute for an extended crescendo!

It was then that Shango, too, played one last clap upon both sides of the biggest drum, creating a beat mimicking the ferocious roar of thunder itself. Then, the separate, stirring lightning bolts from the gathering clouds above, pierce down in a celestial coalescence directly onto him! For just a single iota of time, the world was shrouded in light blindingly bright, and not long after, shrouded in an extended noise deafeningly loud. Bayani, so used to such routines at this point in her lifetime, first shielded her eyes from the flash, before naturally covering her ears for the boom. When she eventually looked up after the commotion, Shango had vanished from his place, leaving only the set of drums, placed upon the wide remains of dead grass and charred dirt.

The Goddess of Death could not spend a minute in relaxation. From the moment the horde of beasts lunged themselves upon the Demonic Shaman, she was drawn into an arduous bout of will. She found herself in a perpetual repetition of commands, demanding the animals to maintain their hold to their limits. Within that cocoon of creatures, came Shimush's unrelenting attempts to break free. With his absurd strength, he writhed and swatted and crushed, slowly undoing each individual seizing over him. Every passing second of the beasts' hold is excruciating, with the ache and the fatigue felt by the Goddess in tandem. This was what it took to immobilize the Ancient Demon. Only the bodies of the undead, with nothing more to lose, could push their muscles to the thin brink before complete crumble. Sadly, this strain is simply too much to bear for the still living.

While the Goddess was determined to lock down the fiend, even for a little longer, Jormungandr's tenacity was bleeding out rapidly. Struggling in agony against Shimush's fierce pulling and tugging, eventually... the serpent caved. From the Demon came another powerful swipe, and Jormungandr unraveled, its long body tumbled onto the earth before sinking back under, defeatedly calling it a day. With his arms freed, the binding of the horse would begin to collapse, as he rips apart the beasts one after another. The Goddess grit her teeth, trying to salvage the small remnants of control over the corpses, but many would be mangled beyond balance by the fiend's merciless blows. Once Shimush had clawed his torso out from the horde, the last bastion would also crumble. The fiend brought his fists down onto the ground, in a rage-filled hammer that shatters the foothold of the animals, leaving each scattered into bits of decaying flesh, delivering them a second mortality, before they are laid to a true rest, body and soul...

Emerging from the small victory, the Ancient Demon gave a taunting shrill, and flaunted his untouched figure in a derision of the Gods' ineptitude. Though not even he would be given a long respite before he was fetched back into the unstoppable flow of the fray. He readied himself once again, after sensing the approaching challenger, one that currently moves faster than the world can show, but with a hostile energy all too tangible to be dismissed.

Shimush put up his guard, sharpening his perception to the utmost. The three eyes on his mask twitched grotesquely, before shooting into three different corners, meant to capture this rapid foe from every direction. In his intense focus, surroundings fade into the background, isolating this new enemy, whose actions are only visible in a minuscule window of time. He could see the blinks of brightness, they appear and disappear always in erratic places. So swiftly does this blink travel, one can never tell whether it went from left to right, or right to left. But, Shimush was without worry, his pointed ears perked up from his sides, because as fast as this foe

was, it would be betrayed by sound. The Ancient Demon listened keenly, and caught the faint rustle... of electricity. The rustle softened as the blink retreated, and loudens with its approach. Until suddenly, the faint rustle turned into a screech! And Shimush knew immediately that an attack was coming, from his left.

The challenger revealed his figure. Like a descended angel, he shimmered with a body of flickering whiteness, while concealed underneath the pureness was a valorous soldier who stopped at nothing to cleanse the world of sin. A pair of dark pupils penetrate through the cloak of light, staring deep into Shimush, first warning him of his fearlessness then scorning the Shaman's prowess, his history, and his appearance. A warrior lit aflame with jagged volts, Shango balled up his right fist, throwing his entire being into a fearsome punch. Seemingly skipping spaces with its speed, it was thrown directly towards the rectangular frame of Shimush's mask.

Intuition had told the Shaman to put his every effort into tracking Shango's strike, and if his ears had been any less acute, the damage would have already been dealt then and there. At this instance, though, Shimush was just prepared enough to react. As perception slowed to a nigh unmoving pace, the fiend's two arms raised up sluggishly, ready to shield his mask from this perilous blow. The palpable power behind the punch was sure to devastate both limbs, but with his abilities, it would be a trivial sacrifice anyway.

Suddenly, Shimush found his arms stuck in place, with a mighty force keeping them frozen, mightier than the combined hold of the beast horde! An eye darted to his behind, and was confronted by the countenance of Freyr, flashing his teeth in a wicked smile. He had emerged from the parts of the world left ignored and forgotten, in the fiend's abject focus on Shango. The God locks Shimush in a crushing embrace, keeping him on a platter ready to be served to the Yoruba God of Thunder, fully intending to claim vengeance through Shango's punch. Then... the punch connected, and was followed by wavs of discharge rippling away from the impact. The land vibrated, sending bystanders reeling, first from the shockwaves, then from the preternatural cry of agony emitted by the Demonic Shaman.

*

"A mask is worn for many reasons, of which to disguise is the least pertinent of them, is it not? Usually, a mask is worn not to hide our true face from the world, but rather, from ourselves. A burglar hides their face because there is the intuited understanding that their actions are wrong, and in being caught, shame and punishment swiftly follows. Yet, they mask themselves, convincing the mind to persist with their crime under the comfort of a dark, anonymous haven. The mask is deception itself! It crafts identities to fool our spirits so predisposed to honesty. We can be fibbers, robbers, killers or adulterers under a mask. The longer one commits to a life of sin and disgrace, the more precious a mask becomes, until to rip it off means to gut the very soul! Now, Shango, with the aeons of thoughtless atrocities he has accumulated under that same headpiece, how fragile do you think Shimush views his own mask, and what horrors do you think are hiding beneath?"

The first thing Shango did after delivering his blow was to sling Freyr's arm upon his shoulders, dragging his hefty build along in a speedy retreat. Confused by this, the God would bombard Shango with a string of heated suggestions to press on the attack, but was merely responded with a stoical silence which solemnly pleads for his trust. Reluctantly, he relented to be carried back, but his truculent state of mind could not fully accept it. Later, though, as Freyr witnessed the Ancient Demon's transformation, he began to reach some understanding as to why his suggestion would be unwise.

The punch sent Shimush into a dizzying stumble backwards, swaying like a puppet with tangled strings. His hands desperately claw at his mask, which was fractured deeply at the site of impact, dripping with murky streams of wetness. One eye soaked in the totality of damage, and the slit pupils twitched furiously within a bloodied sclera. Slowly, the splinters would begin to expand, exacerbated by the fiend's violent efforts to soothe his wound. The mask dangled on the brink of crumbling, and from the gaps between the cracks, a darkness

emitted itself, a darkness that once housed dangerous enigmas within. When the gloom had all faded, the mask fell apart. In pieces they slide off the Demon's head, reducing to dust before they could grace the dirt.

Then, the Shaman stopped its stumbling and thrashing. Instead, he stood with his exposed head held high, arms hanging limply at his side, overcome by an eerie calmness. There came a sudden remembrance of an era he was not haunted by suffering, a reminiscence of emotions in a full spectrum, something he knew he once possessed. Bliss returned, hope returned, compassion returned... then guilt, then disgust, then despair, but in a sordid way, even those were welcomed with relish as opposed to an eternity of apathy. While wallowing in the maddening torrent of emotions, Shimush's teeth, which throughout the battle was constantly clenched out of fury, at last unclosed itself. But when it did, so too did the unspeakable horrors within seized at the chance to escape. At once, all came charging out from the small gaping maw of the Demon, gathering into a sphere, expanding its stirring body as black as the void.

A sphere of palpable demonic energy, lurid and translucent. From within, pressed against its wall were visages of a thousand hideous creatures, shifting perpetually in dominance for space. The sorrowful faces of imps, trolls, nymphs and humans peer out longingly into the lands, coveting the air and the slightest shine of colour. Soon, their sorrow would give way into ecstasy, as the ball of darkness ballooned wider, teetering on the edge of exploding, and their squirming took on a maddening ferocity. Freyr watched on, shaking with trepidation, until a whisper came from beside him. Sternly, it said to him:

“Steel your mind.”

And the ball of darkness burst! Out scatters the multitude of shadows in a frenzy, rushing towards every direction, hollering out cries of maniacal laughter coupled with agonizing pain. Phantoms, and devils, and goblins and sprites, that made up the legions of souls that laid dormant in the pits of Shimush's gut. Lives, innocent or otherwise, claimed by his hands, left to be consumed by madness through aeons of conscious stillness. Now, they run amok only in spirits, long having been pithed of their corporeal forms. Hundreds of dozens sprint out into the plain, each trying to relive as much of the mortal world's beauty as they can. They ran through barracks, ran through campsites, and ran through the Gods. And in that instance when the ephemeral bodies pass through, one is possessed by the wraith's memories. Few held normal lives, few held peaceful ones, but the unfortunate similitude among this mob, was that of a life of sins... sins which without an indecorous immunity to guilt, is enough to overwhelm the soul with lasting unease.

One after another, the Gods were left winded by the streams of renewing disgust and compunction, as the wave of phantoms run heedlessly through their beings. Again and again, sets of horrid scenes of alien places flash across the mind, so vividly that one forgets their true selves and willingly live out the memories of others. Brynhildr fell to her knees, choking from the assault. Geiravor's hand clasped urgently on her mouth, fighting the sick building up inside. Bayani closed her eyes and poured herself into her flute, though there were frequent lapses in cadence. Hel stood strong, but her expression was plagued by wincing and tears at every moment. Freyr was panting, drenched in sweat and felt weaker with each possession; suddenly remembering the advice, he peered at Shango, shocked at how unmoved he was. Though unbeknownst to him, under the vizor, Shango's lips were bleeding, as he mercilessly bit down in resistance against the phantoms.

While the bedlam he unleashed upon the Gods was in effect, Shimush erected himself, like having been cleansed of curses that have haunted him omnipresently. The skin above his mouth was unusually light, made brighter by the overworld as he basked in the sublime air of liberation. Cherishing the reemergence of a tenuous humanity, he decided at once to spend these fleeting moments of clarity... in defiance. Ritualistically, Shimush raised an arm upwards, extended a finger and pointed at the sky; then another arm rose to his front, forefinger aimed downwards at the earth, in treacherous abjuration of the Underworld. In reply, the terrain would split

apart a tiny chasm beneath the Shaman, spewing out scorching droplets of magma, covering his legs in melting layers of revulsion. Against this abuse, Shimush bore it with a gentle smirk, before both eyes whitened out, forced to relinquish control over his being once more.

The forces beneath were eager to reclaim their servant. From the chasm emerged strings of arcane energy, corruptive and miasmic, they swirl from the toe to the head of the Shaman, clouding him in fumes of ebony. Through the eldritch devilry of the realm under, Shimush was casted a twisted enchantment. His body acted on itself, patching out the gash on his face by expunging the features themselves out of existence, as if sewn together with invisible stitches. The bleeding eye was swallowed by the void into nothingness, leaving his face crooked beyond recognition. The other two eyes stared blankly into oblivion, as they were pulled closer toward each other, already having conceded themselves to the wills of a new host.

Then, the arcane tentacles would plant themselves on his deformed countenance, beginning the process of Shimush's full descent back into the vile ranks of Demonhood. All the tendrils gathered on the face at once like a veil, shaping themselves into a sharp and sleek structure... of a mask. Conjured up with callous creativity from the creatures of Hell, a black, glossy apparel found itself attached insultingly onto the head of the Ancient Demon. The new mask had an asymmetric shape, intended solely for his new set of misshapen eyes; and inspired by his old design, at its edges were decorated by boundless feathers from a flock of dead ravens; above the mouth, a short beak protruded outwards, unevenly aligned against the wonky eyes. After this new costume had been dressed upon the Demonic Shaman, the fumes of darkness promptly dissipated, and the remaining strings of energy retreated back down into the tiny chasm, that was in the midst of closing. But before the earth sealed itself, if one kept a peeled ear, they could just catch a faint, but unmistakable chorus of laughter that echoed from the passage. The rulers beneath were laughing at their jester.

The Demonic Shaman reawakened with destructive wildness, discomfited by his new apparel, he helplessly clawed at it, trying to pry it away in vain. With a gut brimming with implacable hatred, the Demon spat out his enormous breath, which reacted to the open air by combusting into jets of blue flames! The flames shot across the field, scorching the grass, igniting the barracks, and finally scattered to the trees. The battlefield was now burning. And as Bayani watched on in horror as each second the fire spreads further and larger, the nightmarish memories triggered themselves. Her breathing quickened with anxiety, distraught that the nightmare would soon be shared by the people of Midgard.

'No, no, no, no...' came her desperate whispers when at the roof above, scintillating blazes crept into view, and the structures crackled with burning splinters. Suddenly, the support snapped, sending piles of wood hurtling down onto Bayani, before she was swiftly pulled to safety outside the building, by Geiravor. On the field, Hel turned towards the barracks, clicking her tongue at the foreboding eventuality of the fire's spread into town. As Shango and Freyr approached, she aired out her worries:

"The fire's spreading quick, I'll race back to call the guards...". Hurriedly, she prepared to leave.

But Shango grabbed her arm before she could go, lifting up his vizor to meet the Goddess' befuddled eyes. Underneath the helmet was an expression more akin to the Shango she'd come to know in these few but lengthy days. He was nonchalant, merely putting up a finger in the air, reading the shifting states of climate before giving an equally nonchalant answer.

"No need. It's going to rain soon."

"How do you know?!"

"The wind never lies."

"...". She was doubtful.

"Plus, after so many rumbling thunders, there's not a chance *he* hasn't gotten the message." Shango smirked.

A thunderclap roared above the clouds, bombastically announcing the appearance of its mighty master. Descending from the sky was a rapid shadow, diving at a fatal pace like a divine cannonball. The shadow aimed itself at the fiend, who was still blowing out fiery breaths of inferno. The Demonic Shaman only stopped at the last second, jumping back in avoidance when the crashing bullet was yards from his head. The bullet shattered the earth, creating a powerful pulse vibrating across the land, putting up veils of dust that defers sight for an audience, like the curtains of a drama. Then, with a trite implementation of pathetic fallacy, a shower of rain would begin, washing away the dust in reveal of his mythical hammer. The shower swiftly turned into a downpour, bringing into light a charming introduction for a character. The Asgardian God of Thunder, clad in glimmering gold armour, clutching onto his weapon with an iron grip. Eyeing the Demonic Shaman from the crater he created, he bawled out in a cavalier tone, slightly amused:

“Ye dinnae look like Dantalion tae me, hah!”

*

Friday

Mid Afternoon

There comes a point in a battle when both sides start to feel annoyed at any stoppages that come their way. Having been hardened by rapid exchanges of pain and blood-loss, every warrior flourishes to their acme, with a yearning for victory that is unbearable. Patience and tactics go out the window, and a fight boils down to the bare basics of striking first, and laughing last.

The Shaman charges forth at Thor, his enhanced form propels him incalculably faster than before. The God of Thunder, though, welcomed this advance with a taunting guffaw, eager to see the Demon's prowess, and even more eager to adapt himself to the it. Raising his hammer, seemingly defying laws, he swung the rotund weapon as agilely as handling a penknife. Then came a series of reverberant collision, flashing intervals of blackness and whiteness, as the two beings flicker in and out of sight. Exchanging blows at such blistering velocity, they muddle themselves into a blur for bystanders. They watched the skirmish, helplessly losing every movement to the speed, squashing any possibility to participate. Of course, all except for one, who threw himself into the absurd shindy without an ounce of hesitation.

Seeing Shango's furtive approach from behind the Demon, Thor laughed, having never had a companion who could match his pace. Then, he laughed even harder, when Shimush leaned effortlessly away from Shango's ambush. Speed, was something Thor could never get bored of seeing.

Undeterred by his failed ambush, Shango immediately kicked off from the ground, gaining some height with a wild somersault. When his body upturned itself in the air, and his feet dangled above him, he took in the view of both the Shaman and Thor, the former in the midst of brushing off Mjolnir's impact on his ribs. As voice and sound was abandoned at their astonishing rapidity, the moment Shango and Thor locked eyes, he would transfer his message by mouthing out words, while pointing to his face, using his hand as a screen. The gesture conveyed tersely to the Asgardian God:

"Go for the mask."

And in response, Thor mouthed back gleefully with a nod:

"Aye!"

Winding up Mjolnir, he hurled it at the Ancient Demon, sending it on an unwavering trajectory towards his face, ignited with embers, it was imbued with enough power to perforate a mountain. Instincts screamed, telling the Shaman to commit everything into stopping this divine weapon. His sinewy back tightened as he pushed out his palms, letting them clash with a brutal gust of wind. The hammer was relentless, breaking away the Demon's hardened skin with an inexhaustible supply of force that strangely reapplied itself. Quickly, Shimush understood that he was not merely struggling against the God's mighty throw, but was actively fighting the hammer's will itself, flowing with a tangible determination that rivaled its wielder. From the corner of his eye, he spotted the

real intentions of the Gods, with balled up fists of pulsating light, there were incoming attacks from both left and right.

Yet, if a prolonged bout was of any good for the Demonic Shaman, it was the maturation of his skills, as he slowly retuned himself into a dormant body. Coupled with the horrific alteration in form, his repertoire has only gotten increasingly absurd.

In a reflexive response to his danger, from Shimush would sprout a new pair of arms, piercing out from the sides of his torso and dripping with boiling bile. They twitched with veins of fresh vitality, instantly straining themselves to fend off the pincer attack. Both arms flail furiously outwards, repelling away the two fists, sending the Gods staggering back in disruption. With the two threats halted with ease, soon, even Mjolnir would give in, soaring loyally back into Thor's hand, awaiting its next task. As it did, the handful of broken skin repaired itself shortly, while Shimush flauntingly stretched out his fingers himself and all to see. Then, he decided it was time to retaliate. Demonstrating another mutation in powers, the Shaman's mouth gaped wide, freakishly wide, before shooting out a concentrated beam of purple. It shoots across the field, piercing and scorching the dirt it imprinted on. The battlefield burned once more, with violet flames heedless to the pouring rain.

Then, his neck started twisting. At first gradual, then moderate, then spinning like a top, the Demon's head twists around in circles, letting out chilling snaps of bones that break and reform themselves. All while the piercing beam gets blasted in circles across the area.

The Gods behind scurried, Hel ducks behind Freyr, who sought to brace the beam immaculately with his armour; it eventually does slice across him, leaving a scorched, black cut across the once bright, azure chest plate, much to his loud dismay. Bayani and the Valkyries would barricade themselves with the loose walls of the barrack, repeatedly shifting themselves closer into a huddle as the fire rips the wooden walls part by part. Trying to stop this perilous destruction, Thor and Shango charged at the rampaging Demon. The beam proved nothing against their speed, though they would find that the closer they got, the more invincible the Shaman appeared, as all approach is deterred by the terror of a spinning head of flames.

Thor resorted to his hammer once again. Forced into awkward movements in avoidance of the beam, he hurled Mjolnir high into the sky, letting it fly wild with freedom, knowing it'll carry out his will. Soaring with playful twirls in the open air, it channeled the energies of the firmament to break the boundaries of Nature, gaining mass by the second, gaining haste in each passing moment, until it dips back down, in a blistering dive towards the Shaman. That was when the beam of fire ceased, taking its place was a boundless stream of smoke, spewed out from the same mouth twisting in a frenzy. An immense cloud of smog soon spreads across the battlefield, concealing the Demon in a murky cloak of darkness, while severing the Gods' sight, blinding them from friend and foe alike. The last sound before their world was shrouded in darkness and silence, was the thunderous impact of Mjolnir crashing into the earth, followed by falling bits of dirt splattering around.

The black veil would not last very long, as with a single command, a whirlwind would be summoned by Thor to blow away every trace of the smog. Yet, a short instant spent under that cover was all Shimush needed, to petrify the Gods with the extent of his unyielding horror. Revealing themselves in the midst the darkness, was the Ancient Demon's pair of crimson, unblinking eyes... followed by another pair... and then another pair, all a perfect mirror of each other, down to the soullessness of the very pupils. Once the gusts had banished away the smog, sight restored and revealed the dreadful reality: the Demonic Shaman, thrice as many, thrice the menace, thrice the malevolence. The Gods stared in despair, as each moved with a will of its own, yet stirring with the same mannerisms, of incalculable cunning. The Gods wavered, overtaken by plaguing questions that stun their alacrity. And Shimush would seize at this momentary confusion to spread out, in a unified jolt, they rushed

towards different directions. The Gods were only dragged back fully into the fray, when Shango's voice rang out clamorously:

“HIS POWER DIVIDES! HE PLANS TO COME FOR ALL OF US!”

One Shaman charges towards midfield. While Freyr raised his sword in cocksure invitation, Hel grimaced. The thrill was on a sharp depletion for the Goddess, but nonetheless, she buckled her feet and reignited the staff, which glowed a warm and deep lavender, stamping it on the ground, countless patches of dirt would begin to ruffle, with the uncontainable emotions of being raised from oblivion.

Another Shaman made a gigantic leap, crashing into the barrack through the roof. Bayani and the Valkyries waited in suspense by the entrance, equipped with new tools from the stashes of weapons inside. Geiravor held up her tower shield, testing its durability with a hearty bang from her newly-polished halberd. Brynhildr went for a more vicious choice of selection, brandishing two maces on her shoulders, imagining the countless ways to go about bashing the fiend. As if forgotten the ferocity of the Ancient Demon, the Valkyries brimmed with courage, undoubtedly drawn from the scintillating music played by Bayani, a busy yet harmonic tune, to rally warriors in the hurly-burly of war, blocking away fear itself.

The final, and primary body of Shimush, stayed behind to face the Gods of Thunder. His pride would not have it anyway else. In duplication, he divides his own power, casting himself into three gambits. Knowing and exploiting all too well, the anguishing effects of witnessing an ally's loss... and death. Morale is a slippery slope, where after one loss is assured, all other parts begin to fall.

It is the point in a battle when both sides start to *despise* any stoppages that come their way. Because when it comes down to it, a battle only boils down to one simple essence: the combined strength of each party. With the forces now scattered evenly, it was time for a measurement, through the timeless, uncomplicated means... of a punch-up.

Although that would be the case, if the measurements were not already plainly clear, in favour of Shimush. As ardent as valour can burn, it cannot defy truth. Freyr, Hel, and the Valkyries, who could not overcome the Ancient Demon in its base form, is no contest against him handled by the collective depravity of Hell. Yet, the tragic nature of valour demands them to try anyway, until their being is broken, and a dying breath is emitted.

*

Though reduced in pace, the bout between the Gods of Thunder and the Ancient Demon did not diminish in ferocity. Fists and hammer were still thrown and bashed around in a frenetic chaos. A chagrining realization came upon Thor that even with subtracted power, the Shaman still stood his ground as formidably as before. Yet, some instances of vulnerability did shine through. When at last, with a precise and committed throw, Mjolnir would shatter the Demon's defences, stunning him long enough for Shango to draw blood with a fierce blow to the head. It was instances like these, when the tides of battle reveal themselves so justly in their favour, that kept Thor's hope from wanning, and his smile from vanishing. And furtively, he glimpsed behind to the band of warriors whom he always believed to be stronger than him. This faith was renewed, after witnessing all their fearless faces, every single one defying the notion that defeat was an ineluctable assurance. An optimistic sentiment that was not shared by Shango.

“Thor, stay vigilant! We must finish this one fast to assist the others!”

The Asgardian chortled at his friend's lack of confidence in his comrades, as he recalled Mjolnir from its slam into Shimush's gut.

"Dinnae worry about it, Shango. T'was a daft move ta duplicate emselves!"

The Shaman did not take kindly to being belittled. In a fit of rage-filled tremble, his arms morphed grotesquely out of shape, forming sets of lithe, languid looking tendrils, squirming to-and-fro in hysteria. On the thousands of suction protruding from their skin, tiny maws of dagger-like teeth opened and shut, ravenously waiting to be fed. Shooting forth abruptly, the tentacles undulated wildly towards the Gods in, banishing all attempts to trace the patterns. They gave chase to the Gods of Thunder, but was eluded by their swiftness, provoking only scoffs from their effortless avoidance. Until, the tendrils bifurcated: four became eight, then twice more, and eight became thirty-two. Spread out like a web laid onto the land, overwhelming from every direction. Thor and Shango leant back to back, with the tendrils looming above, below and in front.

Then, their thoughts synchronized, and a mutual acknowledgement of smirks appeared on both. A mighty clap of the palms, was followed by an earthquaking pound upon the ground. The jagged bolt plummeted down from the rain clouds onto the tentacles, ripping them into piles of skin like a heavenly hand tearing apart the spawns of the netherworld, before a surging heat disintegrates them into dust. Emerging from the fading flare, a facetious face continued his taunting:

"See? A doddle!". Thor rested his hammer on his shoulders.

Turning back once more towards the others, he expected to see the same triumphant performances from his fellow Asgardians. Unfortunately, with one glance at the scenes, his finally smile faded for the first time since arriving in this battlefield...

*

Seeing the Shaman set his belligerence upon them, Freyr sucked in his gut, and hoisted his giant blade to his front. Tucking his legs and feet, he would shuffle in circles, twirling his body in circles. Eventually, offering himself entirely to the intensifying momentum, the God was spinning like a tempest, hurtling towards Shimush with a relentless cyclone of slashes and dices. This violent display, though, did not deter the Demon from his path, who only seemed to quicken his dash. As their distance closed, an imminent clash seemed inevitable. And with both emanating such obstinate auras, the connection was bound to cause a mess of blood and limb. But that was when the Shaman suddenly halted in place against his own will, by chains of stiff, straight, bones crawling out aplenty from below.

Rallying along with Freyr's perilous tornado, was a legion of soldiers, called up to the present from the past. The bleeding, gutted and disheveled men threw themselves upon the Demon, as if achieving instant enlightenment of who they were fighting for and against. Exposed to the turbulence of the God's vicious spinning, the fragile hold of the last of their flesh would give way, picked up and hurled away across the land, leaving behind merely skeletal figures tied by ineffable strings of sorcery, and powered solely through wistful memories of life. The dead soldiers wielded weapons dusty and rusty, which they clutch on for dear life, being their only companion through unceremonious burials of blood-stained dirt and forgotten time.

They were frail, but united, making up for their weakness through strength in numbers. In their charge towards Shimush, some would crumble before reaching, some barely held on from even the Demon's minute twitches. But soon, one after another piled upon him, piercing their weapons from every imaginable angle. Stabbed through the legs and feet by the dozens, Shimush was pinned to the ground. He was restrained for a single,

crucial second, as the violent cyclone went for the head... before Freyr himself came to an abrupt halt. All the energy he'd put into his spin shunted back into him, vibrating across his joints.

His sword would not budge to all attempt to pry and retrieve, it rested unmoving ere the Shaman's head. A shiver seized over the God, once he'd discovered the set of gaping, yellow teeth, crunching down on the sides of the blade, unrelenting. Then, his stomach wrenched with pain from a swift and powerful blow, sent from a kick of Shimush's leg, which broke effortlessly through the manacle of rusted weapons and bones.

Reeling from the shocking strike, Freyr's brawny body slumped down, though, he clutched onto his sword with a strength that takes the severance of his limb to overcome. The thought he feared most at present, was the Shaman wielding his own pride against him, and against his allies. His fears would give way to insulting relief, when Shimush, with pitiful indifference, spat out the blade and let it fell onto the dirt with a thud. Now dwarfing the slumped down Freyr in stature, the Demon raised his arm, channeling his sordid satisfaction into a fist, which started to swirl with rings of dark enchantment. The imminent strike was enough to obliterate a God, especially with a wounded ego. Desperately, the skeletons around the Shaman struggled and thrash, trying to prevent his forceful attack, but in vain.

Freyr laid frozen, contemplating if he'd really done all he could before meeting this demise... in battle, in life and in love. Countless countenances flashed across his mind, some rousing him more than others: the smiles of his wife, whom he'd just started missing the presence of these few days; his pouting son, who he has never doubted was destined for greatness with or without him; and his dear sister, who has left him with novel's worth of secrets so spicy it's frankly impressive he took them to his grave...

Time slowed to a crawl, and Freyr could take in everything around him with lucid perception. The Demon's fist was a yard away, coming directly for his head. Trailing it was a stream of darkness, consuming small increments of the world into the void, where within flashed the mysterious effigy of a woman, with a solemn look peering out from a pair of blank pupils. Then came a man from the sides, shining in pureness overshadowing the woman's gloom, a new look of calmness and hope was given by him, much to the woman's mild annoyance. The phantasms faded away the next instant, as the black enchantment concentrated into one point, once the fist was inches away.

No part of Freyr's body could move according to his will, yet strangely, he could feel movements generated on his chest. Sudden and forceful, it propelled him back, back from the fatal descent of the Demon's fist. A barricade of bones and skulls shot up from beneath, and a myriad of bony fingers pressed against the God, shoving him into safety, taking in the brunt of the explosive punch that vaporizes them in a touch. The skeletal hands would persist in pushing and dragging his bulky body, until he had escaped the full stretch of Shimush's arm, now quavering right before his very nose.

Freyr was in disbelief, the world which seemed to have mercilessly orchestrated his death the previous moment had just graciously returned him his life, like a wicked drama to entertain wicked beings from the unknown. Plagued by doubts of illusions, he turned to-and-fro, trying to find anything as a grip on actuality. Until he settled on the Shaman himself, whose expression twists radically from content to apoplexy at Freyr's evasion. Feeling the sheer hatefulness from the dissatisfied Demon, Freyr knew instantly that all that transpired in that single second, was just another touch of mischief from the Fates... on a very chaotic reality.

*

The Valkyries would fair just as awkwardly on their side. Gathered on the crumbling porch of the barracks, they stood in alert for any signs of the Demonic Shaman, who nestled himself inside the building, with ominous intentions surely hatched under cover. Unwilling to lower her shield by any length, Geiravor stepped slowly

over the door frame that peered into an incalculable site of enigma. Hidden behind limestone walls, the fiend stirred in the deep quarters of the building, at intervals echoing his steps out into the entrance, slow yet untraceable. Geiravor was streaming with cold sweat from the uncertainty, under an air of suspense pervaded only by erratic echoes, Bayani's melodies which had become low and faint, and Brynhildr's periodic banging of her two maces together.

Then, the echoes from within would stop, with a silence lasting longer than any interval before. Catching on, Geiravor prepared herself for an incoming danger, squinting over the top of her shield with a vigilant gaze.

As predicted, soon, a metallic shine flashed from the within! Something gushes past Geiravor's side with a forceful whirlwind, something long and sharp, surging directly for the Yoruba Goddess, whose eyes widened with shock of the sudden attack. A sword was on a trajectory for her chest, with horrific notions to gauge out the heart, and would soon succeed, if not bashed away by Brynhildr. Her mace snaps the blade in half, and Bayani's panicked breath escapes through her flute, held on by trembling hands. But her panic would quickly scatter, as Brynhildr raised her biceps in confident reassurance, showing off her sinewy body brimming with enhanced haste, ironically infused by Bayani herself.

Dreadfully comprehending everything from this singular turn of events, Geiravor plants her tower shield firmly onto the floor, digging its edges into the stone slates with a shove, and bracing forcefully at the handle with both hands. Urgently, she yellowed for her comrades:

"Behind me!"

But scarcely had she finished her utterance, would a second onslaught of flying fatalities come soaring their way. The Goddesses ducked behind the unmoving Valkyrie, escaping a rushing spear by a hair's breadth. Then, there came an axe, lodged cleanly into the wooden face of the shield. Then, a dagger... then a broadsword... then a claymore. All the weapons pierce through the air, merciless towards obstructions in their path; they perforate the Valkyrie's shield, plunging their sharp tips out the opposite side, some between Geiravor's fingers.

Like the unrelenting fangs of beasts, the blades clamp down on the shield, until the wooden frame started splintering. Desperately, Geiravor shunted her weight onto it, praying it would withstand the coming volleys, which was intensifying in viciousness. Some hope would surface, though, because she knew by the type of weapons hurled at them, that Shimush was working through the last of the barrack's supplies. Finally, a long sword would lodge deep into the frame, piercing perfectly between the seams, stopping mere inches away from the Valkyrie's nose, leaving her panting in grim imagination of a world with a much crueler destiny. But this small scare was soon overshadowed by relief, as this was seemingly the last shot of the volleys. Carefully, she lowered her shield... and was filled with instant scorn for her brief feeling of relief. Calmness, was the single most detrimental state for the threat now looming before her.

The Shaman was standing over the door frame, patiently awaiting this moment of weakness. As the shield lowered, and the gazes of the two opponents met, his mouth twitched, and drooling out from his gritted teeth was a diabolical thirst for blood. A belligerent hiss seeped out from the fiend, drawn directly from the gut's bile, which was also exerting unabated strength into the long, spiked maul he clenched in his hands. Detecting the smallest sign of fear from the Valkyrie, Shimush seized at the chance to strike, bringing down the maul meant to smash into erasure her very existence.

Shimush acted fast, but the peril of her partner persuaded Brynhildr to act faster. With a frantic tug, Geiravor was pulled back forcefully along with Bayani, together they leapt back onto the yard, barely out of the Demon's reach. In the process, the shield was left to soak in the total brunt of the attack. Already on the verge of breaking, the smash not only shatter the shield, but exploded it! In the great clash of metal and metal, all the weapons

previously lodged into the shield's frame would burst out in a scatter, sent on one last, explosive volley across every direction.

Some would fly back into the barracks, some spun around in the air before landing in a clanking tumble, and some would find their original target, grazing Geiravor's on her shoulders, knees and torso. Nevertheless, she gracefully accepted these wounds as a better alternative than being bashed into a bloodied pulp of flesh by a gigantic maul.

*

The trepidation seized upon Thor like a stab into his heart. Seeing his allies toyed with by a cunning and savagery that far exceeds their courage. The Asgardians, constricted in cycles of defending and dodging without rest, with every passing exchange bringing the merciless claw of mortality into an eventuality. At this realisation, came a feeling for centuries kept dormant in some unreachable depths of Thor's mental fortress. Fear, fear of losing those dear, having their gruesome ends scared into him once more, just before his eyes. And before he knew, impulse superseded, and he turned away from the Ancient Demon, prompting a quick and vehement protest from Shango.

The Shaman seized at the opportunity, when focus came undone, and what was a refined warrior reduced to a slovenly squire, confounded at every step. Out came the thrashing tendrils anew, multiplied a hundred fold, swarming the two Gods as relentlessly as before. Each growth blending together in a mass, they descended like a gargantuan carpet upon the field. Having learnt from the prior attempt, the tendrils charged for Shango's hand immediately, binding his palms from laying down a thunderous punishment, before encircling around his being. Then, they charged towards Thor, whom with a distracted mind was ensnared by the sea of wriggling blackness.

Thusly trapped, Thor would channel his furious will into Mjolnir, which he clutched with an iron grip. The hammer showed signs of acknowledgement, twitching with minute sparks, but the tendrils would soon sever this connection, after sinking their fangs into the Gods' necks, overwhelming fury with a resounding sense of pain. A thousand razor sharp maws in sum, perforating even their hardened skins ravenously feasting on divine blood. Desperately gazing at one another, the two Gods of Thunder scrambled for a plan to escape his clutches. though, when the menacing figure of Shimush crouched down before them, imparting the totality of Hell's perversion through his sick, drooling lips, the path towards freedom or even victory became shrouded behind leagues of fiery, insurmountable chasms.

The dread gave way to a second, heightened wave of agony, coming from the tightening tendrils that was crushing ribs and choking throats. Yet, the Gods still mustered unbetraying faces of stoic, having lost the physical capacities for battle, they carried it on in the mental, never conceding to Shimush's voyeuristic satisfaction. Instead, gathering every unperturbed thought, they pouted them into sending a dire message into the atmosphere. It took an acute concentration constantly corrupted by the pain, but Thor would persist on the glimmer of hope that was manifesting in the sky, shown through the gaps of the tentacles. The darkness brought about by the fiend, was overtaken by a gradually invading whiteness. Just as the Asgardian had taken the whitening ether as a token of hope, Shango saw it as a execrable sign of his slipping away into fatal unconsciousness.

Such conflicted opinions of salvation and doom... if reality were determined through thoughts alone, then the Gods' fate would rest on the flip of a coin. And so, beyond the stars, an impalpable watcher tossed up a disc, letting it spin in a frenzy, awaiting its solemn descent onto their palm. Once it landed, they took a long, hard look at the face... before clenching the disc into his fists, and producing a snap of the fingers that shakes the foundation of the world. Suddenly, all doubts between the Gods of Thunder were erased, transformed into assurance, as the sky above Midgard turned a definitely pale and purifying pearl. Harbinger of the final, and most illustrious addition into this long and absurd bout between divine and demonic.

He rode on a creature which legends have spun into existence, traversing terrains in ways such glorious violation of the laws of space. At the speed it goes, it leaves its image lingering in the trails behind. So littered was this image, as if everywhere at once, it conquered the battlefield, flaunting its inimitable features of magnificence haughtily. The creature and its rider bursts forth in front of the struggling pair of Freyr and Hel.

They interposed between the Shaman and the disheveled Valkyries. And at last, they charged out from behind the Gods of Thunder. All while a great weapon was raised up, trailing with flames at the pointed tip, that severs the dark tendrils before the slightest contact. Collectively, the Shamans recoiled in shock at this emerging entity that escaped from their every senses, and who greeted his pinnacle of malevolence... only with a disdainful neigh.

In thinly unfolding time, the creature and the rider came into lucid view for Shimush. With gorgeous, flowing mane and glowing, golden pupils, a white stallion thrusts out from the cloak of light. It soared with silky, smooth movements in the air, propelled by eight, sinewy legs galloping mightily in rhythmic revolutions. The majestic mount: Sleipnir, birthed from the lunatic womb of chaos, subservient to only excellence. Charging with unyielding fury, it carried his master, who brandishing his cherished spear, Gungnir, was incandescently covetous for an earthshattering collision with the Ancient Demon.

The impact was deafening. A clash from that double-pronged spear sent splattering across the horizon, an impressive range of colours, burning with exuberant brightness. The perceivable world itself was dominated by the intermingling flashes of light, reshaping reality before time and space could reclaim their hold. In this blink of time, two of the Shamans' bodies were severed, as a fading mirage of Gungnir slices across them. Before reducing into black dusts, the two copies mustered disdainful scowls, that pierced straight through the Allfather's helmet, and into his heavy soul.

When the flashing colours died away, and everything unraveled as it was supposed to, time seemed to skip forward into a world of new truths, new beginnings and new destinies. Odin's mirages had vanished, along with two of Shimush's likeness. Freyr held out his sword confoundedly, the warrior's spirit within was unwilling to accept such an abrupt end of his brutal bout. The Valkyries took the moment of reprieve to steady their blurry eyes and ringing ears. Every one of them sought answers, and would soon find them looming before the Gods of Thunder, in a phenomenal unfolding of events.

The Ancient Demon's mask crushed upon impact, as Odin's frame quivers on horseback, having plunged Gungnir into the depths of his nightmarish countenance. Bleeding down the blade were streams of crimson red, more than he'd ever spilled in this prolonged battle hitherto. Yet, his behaviour did not show it as so. Shimush was still, and silent, and in his mangled expression which only Odin could see, a feeble eye gleamed of relief... and gratitude, before darkening into a barren husk. Witnessing this, even Odin was lulled into loosening his grip, but he immediately redoubled his strength on his weapon, after sensing a tinge of defiance seeping back into the corpse.

It moved in a way nothing with will can move. The Shaman's hands crawled up towards Gungnir's handle, and wrapped his fingers in a slight tugging. In an offended manner, the Allfather recalled his spear frantically, snatching it out of the fiend's adulterating hands. Then, maneuvering it around himself, he swung Gungnir into Shimush, battering him away like a fly. The fiend's body flew across the plains, before slouching down onto the earth, limp. Though, this time, Odin was not to be fooled, and kept both his hands, on the reins of Sleipnir and the grip of Gungnir, hardened and ready.

Yet, alas, the duty of a sovereign compelled his attention behind him. The whispers behind him called for his formal address, and as he turned to meet his subjects, the whispers turned into cheers. Solemnly, Odin descended from his eight-legged steed.

Across the entire battlefield, faces lit up at his arrival. With a swift banishment of accumulated worries, a once wanning valour surges again. Odin gestured them to come forth, and as they did, the atmosphere thickened with reverence. His indelible dignity often inspires the same in his audience, and in these brief moments, the shame

of defeats or the aching of wounds were forgotten. The Ancient Demon was left faded into the background beyond, under a gush of confidence that every devilish plot hatched would prove no match against the Aesir.

“Is everyone alright?” Odin asked the group, but to no concise response.

It was almost uncanny how effortlessly the Asgardians dissolved into their own lively conversations. Repressed thoughts over the course of battle and near-death blows came flooding out of the Gods. Eventually, the overlapping voices drowned out each other, and Odin exasperatedly accepted this as a sign of their wellbeing. He sighed, as he spotted the Yoruba Gods at the corner of his eye. He wavered on whether to approach them for a slight instance, before he came to his senses and swallowed the shame. The first thing Odin noticed, was the utter contrast between the Asgardians’ ebullition, and the Yoruba Gods’s dolorous spirits. Bayani’s face was buried leagues into her palms, unresponsive to any encouragement from her brother, who looked on the verge of collapsing himself. The sight weighed crushingly heavy on the Allfather’s heart. He extends out an inviting hand, before starting:

“Yoruba friend. I am deeply embarrassed at this oversight... but rest assured...”.

“It’s not over.” Bayani interrupted as he emerged from her palms.

Odin stopped, and scanning the two’s dour expressions seemed to validate the sneaking suspicions from earlier. He turned towards the corpse of the Shaman, lying on dirt that was wet from rain, he hoped with every fiber of being that it would remain bereft of life, and continue lying as still as a log. And as he stood staring, Shango’s words echoed from behind:

“With great evil, there is always... a last stand.”

Odin caught it, the exact moment, a twitch began in the Shaman’s body, prompting a nervous laughter to escape his lips. A twitch became a spasm, before devolving into violent convulsion, and the body of the fiend shot up to his feet, in a clean motion as if hauled up by strings. Shimush’s unmasked countenance flashed upon the alarmed Gods, blank with lifelessness yet still horrendous in its very sight. Conversations ceased among the Asgardians, and all eyes were drawn upon the standing corpse, no longer the fearsome frame he once was in their battle, now shrunk into an emaciated husk.

From the Shaman’s gut was a bulging stretch of skin, that held within a squirming mystery that was seeking to be free. It swam to-and-fro, circling the waist of the fiend, before committing to and path upwards, traversing through the chest and throat. Eventually, the mysterious globule puffed out the Demon’s cheeks, and revealed itself through his gaping mouth to be... a singular, black eyeball, peering out into a realm of light with a sharp, red pupil. It reacted to the realm with a freakish screech that ripples across the Gods’ skins and bones, before enveloping Shimush’s body in a mutation of stretching, and expanding.

The Ancient Demon does away with the manacled rules of life: changing beyond blackness, into discolouration, twisting beyond form, into shapelessness. Any remnants of reason and humanity were shredded up by the all-consuming mutation, birthing into the battlefield an asymmetric monstrosity.

A dozen limbs grows out from his gargantuan torso, pulsing with a thousand intersecting veins that protrude like honeycombs from a lurid skin. Grotesquely, his tongue wormed its way into the open air, thickened and turgid with redness, a bleeding slug of erratic energy. It jammed open his jaw forcefully, unhinging bones and letting it hang in a permanent gape. Then came a second wave of unearthly screech, which hissed louder than the first. It echoed across the kingdom, immortalized in the nightmares of the denizens, before the throat clamps in on itself from overexerted force, and the beast only producing eerie silence thereafter.

Finally, in a desperate attempt to reclaim comfort, a layer of flesh gathers upon the face to form a pathetic mask. In turn, another eye was swallowed up into the folds of flesh, leaving a sole remaining socket directly on the forehead, where the bulbous, black eyeball that surfaced from the pit of his stomach would take its place. It fixed itself there, like a king claiming his throne, it sits as the final barrier between the Ancient Demon, and absolute blindness. The sentient eyeball glowed with an uncannily alluring luminance, beckoning the brave into a ghastly realm of terror and doom.

There, the Demonic Shaman stands, towering over the pantheon. No more body to call his own, no more voice to cry suffering, no more his own eye, to let out tears. Here, was a being of fleeting identity, cursed to return to an annum's slumber with the only companion of an aeon's worth of regret...

"Bloody 'ell!" Thor murmured.

The Gods rejoined themselves, finding solace from the monstrous sight in the warmth of congregations. The Asgardians were quiet in shock: Brynhildr with a hanging grin, formed from fearful humour; Geiravor panting with a heart racing quicker and quicker; Freyr looking solemnly at the ground in denial; Hel looking up at the transforming Demon, in morbid fascination.

"So that is the true face of the Demonic Shaman... a great evil, indeed." Odin said to the Yoruba Gods, before marching towards the others.

Sensing the distress among his subjects, the Allfather acted briskly to rally and revitalize them. With a mighty clap of his palms, he summoned the attentions of both the Asgardians and his divine companion, Sleipnir, who promptly rushed towards his side with subservient zeal. Odin set down a large sack that was strapped to the side of the stalwart steed. And slipping away the giant brown cloth, he unveils an illustrious, pearl chest, adorned with shining insignias flaunting each handsome profile in the pantheon. The Asgardians' faces lit up in recognition of that rare sight, and among them burst forth chatters of excitement and suspense, which the Allfather would not prolong.

"A great evil... deserves to be slain by great weapons!"

Unclosing the chest emitted a cloak of brightness that enveloped the field, a barrier of light penetrable only to those it deems worthy. Odin's hand reached decorously into the depths of the trunk, evidently more spacious than its size puts on, as he fished out a sceptre undoubtedly bigger and longer than the confines of the chest. With the flare of solemnity fitting for a coronation, the sceptre transferred hands onto the Goddess of Death, who welcomed it a coquettish expression reserved for friends of old.

"Laevateinn, we meet again!" came Hel's playful whisper. As it graced her skin, the shapeshifting weapon started transforming wildly, as if returning the excitement it was received with. The sceptre shifts its colour from a dull greyness into a fashionable violet, and twists its head into the shape of skull with bewitching green eyes, much to the delight of its new wielder.

"Freyr!" Odin commanded to the lumbering figure. Then, unsheathing a black broadsword shimmering in a layer of mystique, he handed it over by the hilt, awkwardly avoiding contact with any surface of the blade. Fortunately, it was received with the same delicacy by Freyr, with lips jittering feverishly.

"Dainsleif... terrorizer of Demons." He uttered in an unexpectedly reserved tone, before raising the sword above his head, in a ceremony only he himself knows the rituals and reasons for.

“Geiravor!”

“Yes, mi’lord!” The young Valkyrie erected herself nervously.

“Svalinn, my immortal shield!” He exclaimed proudly, as he pushed it onto her. The shield towered over Geiravor’s entire body, and she was tipping her toes over the top just to meet his gaze, which was one of reassurance, imparting his full confidence in the Valkyrie. She sighed, and accepted the heavy responsibility as the pantheon’s vanguard.

“Brynhildr, that leaves you... take your pick.” Odin laid out diverse sets of sabres, rapiers and cutlasses, which all hovered above the earth, each brimming with its own rich enchantments.

“Aye, mi’lord, surely ye’d know me taste by noo! It can awnly be...”. Brynhildr traced her finger over the floating arsenal, haughtily rejecting the slew of legendary tools in search of her one and only. And at last, she found it, gripping onto a silvery longsword, its blade engraved with runes that tell of its ancient and exalted tale.

“Skofnung!” Brynhildr smiled freakishly, as she pulled the longsword towards her, and in turn the rest of the arsenal rushed back into the chest, as if offended at being rebuffed, snapping shut Odin’s pearl chest and resealing the barrier of brightness.

A weapon is a companion, that one unfortunately can only meet under premises of bloodshed and slaughter. Yet, the bonds that are created are unquestionably raw, formed under the cruel weight of hardships and pain, until eventually, they need to part with the coming of peace. A sweet reunion with such companions, are only available in the worst times of a kingdom. And it is under such bittersweet atmosphere that memories come flooding back, instantly rekindling a connection between warrior and weapon, brewing up the same war cry of before within the gut, awaiting to be unleashed!

Gradually, over the process of this reequipment, Bayani found it prudent to start a reprisal of her melodies. Her dainty hands on her flute, she blew out the notes with a heart determined to see this ordeal over. With this, the effects of rejuvenation was becoming pronounced among the Asgardians. Bruises and aches from the battle prior banished away, supplying a vigour that even a full night’s feasting and slumber cannot match. Each of the Gods studied the tool in their possession, ridden with a powerful belief of invincibility that would just as easily consume them, had not the stentorian voice of Odin grounded their minds.

“Hark, Aesir! This day is one of joy and festivity, these few short hours have plagued it with dread and odium, yet... we will not let them define today’s legacy!” The Allfather turned resolutely towards the Yoruba Gods, and continued: “Shango, Bayani, I believe you have witnessed the worst and the best of our kingdom. For the former, I apologize in shame, but for the latter, I hold my head up high, eager to show you more.”

Shango removed his headset, as he stepped towards the Asgardians, with an authentic air of formality infused with his characteristic jovialness. His expression beamed like never before, a perfect contrast to the permanent scowl etched onto the headset, that the others have grown accustomed to over the hours. A set of wavy, black hair flowed in tandem with the wind, basking in the freedom they’re so desperately deprived of. Shango spoke soft but sonorously:

“Likewise for us, Lord Odin... there is much to be shameful in bringing the worst of the Yoruba to your kingdom.” Suddenly, Bayani joined in, contributing to the sentiment.

“And just as we would like to see more of Asgard’s best. We wish to show you what Yoruba has to offer!”

The siblings took turns to present their piece. Words in continuous flow from brother to sister, one delivers an exposition, the other to conclude. A perfect synchrony of speeches, so that to ignore one means to turn the entire declaration into gibberish.

“...accept our hands, not in disgrace, but in allegiance.” Shango raises his arm.

“And together conquer darkness, or die trying.” Bayani raises hers.

A binding contract between pantheons delivered in empathic tones. They lock hands, materializing a union which immediately after would be put through a wringer of violent claws, tentacles and jaws. A union that now stands against an evil incalculable, as it writhes its abomination of a figure, plunging the Gods into a world of darkness by casting its gargantuan shadow. And in the midst of its uncontrollable flailing, it bursts into a charge! Speeding forth in a grotesque crawl towards the kingdom, leaving a trail of dark flames singing the plain into an ashy greyness of land.

“CA’ CANNY, YE LOT, HERE IT COMES!” Brynhildr warned.

The Goddess of Death, though, went into a cackle, evidently waiting for this exact moment to come. Clenching onto the arcane sceptre, it was raised to its acme, where it took in the gales that traversed from horizons, channeling the eternal energy that has seen creations and destructions of worlds... before being brought down mightily onto the earth, unleashing gushes of waves rumbling into the depths below!

This gesture was responded to in kind, as the first of many reinvigorated entities crash out from beneath, clawing their way out into the open space. Poking out in front of the Gods, were pillars of blueish flesh, erected upon a platform of wrinkles, splitting the ground in a chasm before emerging fully to reveal... a colossal hand. The familiarity of it instantly struck the Asgardians with uneasiness: the tinge of blue skin, the chilling coldness it imparts, the white markings of ancient symbols littered over the limb. Yes, it could only be them, the awful foes of old. This colossal hand that now holds back the charging Demon, belong to the extinct race of the Frost Giants. And the pale countenance of this ancient adversary was just beginning to peek out of the earth, flashing eyes of deep azure, stirring with unwashed belligerence.

*

Friday

Even later Afternoon

There are few days in a year where an entire country of people is entitled to be self-absorbed in their own enjoyment. How rewarding it is to detach oneself from the constant cycles of stuffy courtesies and ingratiating, only for a measly two dozen hours, where one can reclaim the sense of liberty that was a given right at childhood. Indeed, it is fortunate, then, that the Asgardians have met with their tumultuous battle today of all days. With the kingdom still deeply infatuated by merriment, who could decipher the rumbles of thunder and the tremoring earth as anything but the weather acting up a tad?

As the sun sets away down the mountains, casting up curtains of constellations, so too did the last grounds for any suspicions disappear, when the black portion of sky brought by Shimush melted into one with the coming evening's dimness. While among the city, candles and lamps flare up in celebration of the day's youthfulness. The cheering and the music blared on louder than before; the fervour of vendors, the insistence of swindlers, and the thirst of drunks all showed no signs of waning. Though this was very much not the case for our wayward trio of children, who struggled to keep up with the festival's undying spirit, and now slouched languidly on a bench, utterly tired.

Urd yawned, pushing her limbs out like a star in a stretch, Fjolnir took a sip of his lemonade, then gagged at its weird taste, and Ciriús sat still, and stared deeply into the horizon. Having finally exhausted their supplies of flyers and claimed their price from Freyja, the three sat overseeing the fair before them, basking in the lively atmosphere waiting to be experienced after a moment's rest.

"It's awfully kind of Lady Freyja to give all three of us pocket money for helping!" The girl remarked delightedly as she weighed her own purse.

"She'd be criminal not to, considering the work we've put in! Did you saw the crowd gathered at her place? "In fact, I'd argue we're due even more than what she paid us!" Fjolnir began.

"Well, *I'm* happy with what I got." Urd defended.

"I mean, it's just a typical pattern of iniquity done upon children, isn't it? First, they deem you unworthy of..." Fjolnir trails off in his tirade about injustices.

Paying no heed to the ravings of the opinionated boy, Urd peered over to Ciriús, whom she thought was being unusually quiet. With a mesmerized face, Ciriús was still allured by something yonder, and though she tried to find the source of his fixation, she could find nothing unordinary.

"Are you alright?" She gave his elbows a nudge.

"D'ye feel that?" Ciriús said abruptly.

"Feel what?"

He pointed dubiously to the North plains, where just beyond the kingdom's walls and sentry towers, the land was shrouded in thick mist, with clusters of black clouds stirring above.

"Something strange."

"Well, can't be anything good if it makes *you* feel strange. In any case, I'm not game enough to find out, not this time, Ciriús."

"Hmm..."

"I'm getting a drink." Jumping up from her seat, the girl dusted off her dress and asked: "Fancy anything?"

"... Rose syrup... extra rosy."

Urd rolled her eyes, smiling as she made her way to the market, squeezing her way pass throngs of people to rejoin the hubbub of the seemingly immortal festival. Yet, as soon as she did, Ciriús returned to the enigmatic plains of the North, searching for any slight sign that satisfies the strangeness he feels. With Fjolnir's voice murmuring relentlessly in the background, Ciriús stared and stared. Colours often blended together, to which he

then shook away the blur and refocused. And every now and then, a sudden shrill from the festival would break his attention, which he almost instantly reapplied to the horizon.

For a few agonizing minutes, things looked pathetically unchanging... until... there it was! It occurred merely for a modicum of time, quick enough to elude many scrupulous eyes, but not his. Piercing out from the mist, a humongous hand that towers over trees, covered in spectral lights of blue and green! Its palm and fingers arched like claws, brought down with vengeful fury, and disappearing back into the mist, where its unfathomable origin lay. All this was caught clearly by the unblinking boy, who felt he had seen all he could wish to know from just that instant alone.

“Wicked!”.

*

The jostle between the Frost Giant and Shimush quivered the land, with the demon writhing in ever increasing frustration at being forestalled. But, though its body was restrained in place, it would unleash its near limitless supply of limbs, and down came one of its corpulent hands, intent on crushing the Gods. An attack readily replied with mighty slashes of swords from left and right, cleaving right through it with blades shimmering with ancient mystique.

“LIKE CUTTING BUTTER WITH A BURNING KNIFE!” Freyr yelled triumphantly.

“Aye, Freyr, d’ye test ‘em oot on somethin’ bigger?” Brynhildr mimicked the sentiment.

“ABSOLUTELY!”

And away the two warriors dashed, leading the Gods’ first onslaught with their swords drawn ostentatiously upwards, charging towards the bulbous mountain of blackness that is the Ancient Demon. They gathered speed with each leaping stride, and soon was clearing a dozen yards one step at a time. In the thrill of the wind dragging across their faces, and the tangible power emanating from their divine weapons, their battle cries echoed away into the distance. Coming upon the Shaman’s feet with an unstoppable momentum, the two ran up the demon’s body, climbing along the jagged terrain of deformities dexterously. All the while their blades were sank cleanly into its flesh at every opportunity, feeling the effortless piercing of skin, they laughed with delight. Soon, Freyr and Brynhild were at swift work, slicing up streaming seams of gashes extending throughout the gargantuan torso, breaking down the fiend part by part.

Left behind by the two eager warriors was the rest of pantheon and the Yoruba Gods, loitering behind the safety of the Frost Giant’s massiveness. But they wouldn’t idle long, as the Gods of Thunder began preparing a decisive attack of their own. After some brief murmuring between Thor and Shango, the two stood arm in arm, linked together on the handle of Mjolnir. Their movements started slow and gentle, as they swayed to-and-fro, in an attempt to test their harmony. They did this astonishing ritual in complete silence, while a testament to their strong bond as kindred spirits, was much a sight of bemusement for those around them.

“Are they dancing?” Geiravor whispered to Bayani, who could only reply with a shrug.

But soon, the pair’s swaying turned wild, devolving into a vigorous spin. Their hands still clutched onto the divine hammer, unrelenting. They spun... and spun... until a rotund voice boomed out of Thor’s mouth: “HEAVE! HO!” And with a mighty fling followed by a sharp gush of air, Shango was sent soaring into the sky as if fired off a mortar! Riding on the scorching bullet that is Mjolnir, tingling with sparks of jagged white and blue.

As Shango soars into the vertex of his trajectory, in one perfect moment of stillness, from the perspective on his onlookers, he eclipses the rising moon. The Yoruba God’s sinewy body glistens, with the moonlight defining

his hazel features in handsome detail. And in the preceding seconds of a speedy descent, was transformed into an majestic comet, baring down upon the Ancient Demon, wrapped in a cleansing barrier of pulsing electricity... soon crashing onto the back of the monster, with a rumbling blow that ripples across its frame! Upon Shango's destructive impact, the Shaman's bulbous form lit up, imparting a flashes of brightness, escaping through the many seams sliced onto it by Freyr and Brynhildr. And with the synergy of damage dealt by all parties, it was just enough to tear the body apart... with a great, big explosion!

With the body splintering into pieces like a decaying tree bark, Shango brandished his friend's weapon with a respectful pride. Then, noticing a flying piece of the fiend's flesh, the Yoruba God locked his vision onto the Ancient Demon's very essence: the glassy, crimson and eye, directing an omnipresent leer of derision. It gave Shango a blink, causing a flicker of disgust in the God. He felt the weight of his history with this singular, rancorous entity, which for centuries have sullied slumber and disturbed peace. As the two tumble down from their height, the squall from the explosion briskly widened the gap between them, and Shango clenched his fist in fury, as the Demonic eye flew off into the distance.

Following the explosion, the rest of the Shimush's flesh drop down, scattered like rain upon the battlefield. Yet, the keen senses of the Gods quickly caught the live malice that was present in each wriggling droplet of black tar. Their suspicions were confirmed by Bayani's urgent forewarning, and Geiravor sprang into action! Lugging the hefty shield off the ground, and with a laborious grunt, she heaved it above her. The lion's crest on the front of Svalinn pointed reverently towards the Heavens, a beam was shot forth, initiating a golden glow of light that expands across the air. A giant, protective screen was cast over the Gods, just before the first waves of exploded flesh made their descent. And as the filthy tar came in contact with the golden barrier, they evaporated, forestalled by a barricade placed before a holy land.

Yet, the barrier could not expunge all of them; as the remaining waves fall, the tar soon found their way to stain the earth. Hundreds upon hundreds of sickly grime shower upon the land, trees shriveled, flowers wilted, grass dried and critters faint from the sheer malevolence infused into each droplet. And in place of the once lush greenery, arose a sea of figures from pools of darkness, demented and diabolical, swarmed with a diversity of turpitude plucked fresh from the underworld. Now stirring before the kingdom of Midgard, was a legion of Demons, flaunting sin as fashion, rising slowly from the tainted ground, dripping with remnants of fiery flakes from their home of inferno and degradation.

Among the fiends, some were pathetically small, some menacingly big, and some terrifyingly deformed. All the same, breathing with lively perversion, drooling for blood and guts. In the centre of it all, their lord stands taller than the rest, with a distinguishing, piercing luminance of crimson that overpowers his subjects. The Demonic Shaman, back on his two feet, thinner than he once was, but exuding twice the menace. Mouthing out an order in ineffable speech, the legion animates into fits of derisive cackling, grating screeches and sibilant hisses, before rushing towards the Gods. Collectively, their perilous instruments swayed above their heads, sets of sharp claws, pitchforks, and rusted blades. Their sounds merge into one hideous buzz that in history has augured the doom of many kingdoms and souls. But, rather than alarm, the unanimous expression across the Asgardian pantheon, in the face of this sea of evil, was one of excitement.

"A GOOD OLD FASHIONED LEGION!"

"It *has* been a long time since we had one, hasn't it?"

Suddenly, Geiravor felt a sharp grip pressed onto her shoulder, causing a jolt, and turning to see Brynhildr, whom she swore had been further away moments ago. The senior Valkyrie was acting pushier than usual, which Geira could only assume was from the surge of adrenaline.

“Roight, Geira, yer with me!”

“With you on what?” She asked dubiously.

“Just hold on ta yer shield rightly, awrite?”

Without warning, the young Valkyrie was being nudged to the forefront of the Gods, first to greet the army of frenzied Demons, much to her confused stammering. Out of reflex, she clutched onto Svalinn, now getting quite used to the weight, handled it effortlessly.

“W-wait, B-Brynhildr, I...”

“And when I say run, deary, ye pick yer pretty wee feet up and RUN!”

“W-wait, I say!”

“Awrite... one... two...”

“No!”

“RUN!!!”

Throwing the poor Valkyrie’s protests to the wind, Brynhildr started running, propelling her partner forward with both hands squeezed comfortable into her shoulders. She handled Geiravor like a parent handles a pram, albeit with a few more degrees of enthusiasm and chaos. And being pushed with all her senior’s force from behind, Geiravor was forced to go along with the momentum, elapsing into a rapid sprint directly into the legion. The rush of dragging air across the shield left her awing at her own speed. Through the thin slants of looking holes etched onto Svalinn, she could see the power she was dealing to the endless sea of bodies, as one fiend after another was bashed away with ease. The cries of the Demons around them was a sweet symphony of their triumph, coaxing the two Valkyries into a faster and faster dash!

With a newfound assurance, Geiravor peered back at Brynhildr, who was all too ready to shoot her an ecstatic beam. While her left hand still glued to the young Valkyrie’s shoulder, her right hand was busy snuffing out the lives of each hideous fiend. Skofnung was glowing through a thick layer of yellow blood, as it cleaves through the crowd, unstoppable to any and all types of obstacles, the blade eternalizes the fear it bestows upon the corrupted creatures of Hell.

But just as Geiravor settled into a comfortable pace, she was suddenly halted in her tracks, pushed back by a ungiving wall. Peering out the slits of the shield, her eyes met with bloodshot leer of an orcish Demon, twice the size of his comrades, grunting through flared up nostrils. As is the wont of most Demonic legions, here stood one of many veritable Goliaths sprinkled in amongst the foddors and space-fillers. Hardened with scars which centuries did not efface, these brutish titans only crave for a chance to clash with Gods, sating an instinctual pride who knows when was bred into them. Slowly, the giant’s fingers crept up to the edge of Svalinn, and the Valkyrie, sensing the dangers that could follow, doubled her might upon the shield, yanking it away from his odious paws before a tug of war ensued.

The two Valkyries stood back to back, bracing themselves for the mob that encircled them, with the path of fiendish corpses they carved closing up quickly. Yet, in this confrontation where the odds seemed perilous stacked against them, Brynhildr’s excitement only doubled. Clenching the divine sword to her chest, and through a magical connection to a palpitating heart, miraculous feats were summoned. The blade took on a fiery coat of red and orange, before a pillar of flames spread up to its tip.

The flames sparked distraught in the Demonic crowd, who should all be so used to the sight of fire. Sensing its strange aura, they knew the sword’s embers were unlike any fire they’ve experienced. It was a flame only hostile to their kind. So, provoking their selfish instincts of survival, each fiend retreated in quiet cowardice. All except the Goliath, who stepped out contemptuously from the rest of the shivering legionnaires. His barefooted

march echoed beneath, while his hefty club of spikes dragged across the dirt, grinding grains into fine dust. Brynhildr would welcome this challenger by stepping out herself.

For a scruple of time, the two foe's standoff froze everything around them... the world morphed into a small confine that existed solely for this bout, that could end in a single, meticulously executed move... the fighters inch toward one another, slogging themselves carefully into their striking distances... and it was over! But not from an attack by any of the two fighters.

In the middle of swinging her sword, the Goliath had already vanished before the Valkyrie's eyes. All that was left, was a splatter of guts, squished like a rotten fruit upon the earth, followed by blinding flashes of light. In the giant's place stood the Yoruba God, knelt down with the pulsating hammer of Thor. His landing sent shockwaves rippling across the mob of Demons in a chain, twisting their figures into erratic spasms.

Shango got up proudly, hoisting Mjolnir up on his shoulder, having taken quite a liking to this new companion. Greeting Brynhildr in a cheerful tone, he was quickly unnerved at her blank expression, oozing hints of peeved disappointment. Just then, the bits of blood and bile that exploded out from the Goliath came raining back, drizzling down both their heads, making their silence all the more uncomfortable.

"Well, Mr. Shango, ye certainly know hoo ta make an entrance, dinnae ye?". She finally uttered with a long, continuous laugh, still assuming that piercing expression of blankness, prompting Shango's own half-hearted chuckle in response. The two would never forget this encounter, even long past the conclusion of this battle, and even nestled a thousand miles away from each other in their respective abodes.

*

As the Valkyries delved deep into the legion, laying waste to its members, so too does the echo of shrieks and screeches get fainter with distance. But while they've certainly left an impact on more Demons to count; the legion, like a tidal wave, washes unconquerably forward, with many more cohorts, and many more centuria to overcome. Odin squints his eye, surveying the approaching concord of hellish origin, scanning over tens of dozens of hideous faces, which together blends into a picture even less pretty. And eventually lands his sight on the only frozen entity amidst the squirming masses. Disquietingly still, stood the Shaman, his emaciated frame lulling one to jeer at his weakness, a naivety he would too eagerly exploit. Odin discerned immediately, that the legion was a deception, and there resided their true foe, behind the bulk of marching fodder designed to exasperate body and mind.

"Hel." The Allfather began.

"Yes?" A hint of grumbling seeped through her voice, already anticipating the worst.

"Call them down."

The Goddess of Death returned the order with a heavy sigh, feeling like a day's worth of unloaded tension suddenly went surging back into herself. Slowly, she lifted Laevateinn up, waving it in circles. From its golden tip, a crystalline beam extended into the clouds, acting as a line of communication between the earthly and heavenly. Stuffy speeches and florid formalities, these were the last things Hel wanted to muster up after this long and arduous day, but these were just what was needed, to address parties that demand gentle decorum even from Gods. These were not beasts called to thrash about with leftover instincts, not skeletal remnants of old forgotten battles. As Hel finished up her ritual, the field lit up with towers of light, pierced down from above. Each beacon betokened a legend, ancient or modern, called to roam the mortal realm they once shaped.

One by one, they revealed themselves by stepping out from their pillars. Bright beings, pure beings, blessed with enchantments that match their accolades. Some had sharp features, some were stout and round, some had

pointy ears and blonde hair, some were short and brown. They came in eclectic kinds: elves, dwarves, knights, kings and queens. Here, was a congregation of heroes, each through grit and tribulation have etched themselves into the world's eternally expanding epics. Some have lived to see their conquests bear fruit, some have died alone in grimy pits. Yet, the heroes alight with no gripes or bitterness, but with smiles, equipped with the same sense of virtue and courage that they embodied in their prime. Happy to grace an old home, happier to serve justice once more.

But even among this congregation of greatness, one stands with taller spirit than the rest. A hero, whose golden mane flowed with ecstasy at being reunited with the northern wind. His arms outstretched before him, letting them soak in the terrestrial air. A mind once tortured through journeys across these very lands, now gaze upon it with peace and purpose, and with this tranquility he spoke his first words in greeting:

“A staunch plain reeketh of the soil,
A dust fill'd air set to be snuff'd,
Where monsters walk, there be men toil,
One life starteth, another snuff'd.”

The hero stood with his back towards Hel, who came away from the summoning ritual swaying light-headedly. She planted her staff firmly on the ground for support, catching her breath. Upon seeing the figure in front, she smirked, and couldn't suppress a laugh at the remembrance of a conversation with her father centuries ago.

“Who? Never heard of him?” Loki answered absentmindedly, peering into the looking hole of his device.

“Really?! All the mortal kingdoms are echoing his tale!” Hel said, surprised.

“Well, the Gods *aren't*. And no one's a hero unless we crown them as such... them's the rules.”

“In any case, *I* think he's a hero, one worthy to enter Valhalla!”

“I doubt it, Hel... and what kind of name is that, anyway? It doesn't even sound Nordic!”

The Gods never did acknowledge the hero before her, but that only made it all the more amusing. He now stands at the very pinnacles of the mortal realm's legends, a symbol for bygone and future eras to come for the humans, eras that was, and always will be disconnected from the gaudy, eternal lives of the 'divine'. In a strange way, the Goddess of Death found it funny to have her kind be proven wrong, but have her be proven right. With a sense of pride, she called out to the hero:

“Welcome back... Beowulf.”

Thor and Freyr looked around them, and flashed their teeth in a grin of great delight. It was a rare enough occasion to reunite with one familiar friend, but to be blessed with so many! Imagine the chaos of a conversation, a thousand different heroes all speaking the tongue of their own ages, coming up to them for a session of reminiscence... but that was an ordeal for later. Because peering at Odin, Thor realised from his father's resolute face how quickly the heroes would be put to labour.

“Right, Freyr, take charge of the heroes. Let them run wild, form platoons, *anything*! But, take care of this legion. Once you're able, make your way to the back of the cohorts... and join us.”

The brawny God in blue received his mission with a hefty nod that shook his helmet over his eyes, before promptly marching off towards the zestful crowd behind them. “HEAR YE, YE BRAVE SOULS!” came his booming voice, louder than ever before.

“Thor.”

The stalwart son gave his full attention.

“Get to the Valkyries and Shango, tell them to push through the army, focus all efforts on the Ancient Demon... *he will fall before the day is done.*” Odin enunciated the last phrase with particular intensity.

“Aye, mi’ Lord.”

Having full faith in his pantheon to carry out their duties well, Odin sat himself back on Sleipnir, that hitherto had been panting out robust breaths, its eight legs stamping in restless repetition, raring with irrepressible zeal. As he gripped onto the reins, the Allfather turned to his subjects, taking in their gentle countenances while they were still offered what little respite. A nostalgic feeling evoked itself within the almighty Lord, and a set of old words slipped out from him:

“March through blood, glare through tears, rise above pain. No mercy to be had, when cleansing a stain.”

Odin shot his son a playfully devilish smirk. In response, Thor blushed, then chuckled, marveling at how the silly epigram was not forgotten and buried. Then, with a mighty whip of the rein, the divine steed and his rider vanished in a blink of an eye, leaving behind a jet of wind which whistled far across the mountains.

*

“AIIIIEEEEEE!!!”

There went the Valkyries’ fear inducing war cry again, echoing all the way to the backlines where the heroes were marshalling into place by Freyr’s direction. Gathered in a small enclave was a troop of warriors that stood taller than the others. The forest giants of Myrkvior, gentle in nature, they move about in a manner as if afraid to harm the air’s harmony. Even if sets of emerald hair and beard obscure their features, one feels an utmost faith in their tenderness when standing before their menacing heights. Twice the size of Thor, who was currently huddled on their mighty arms gleefully.

“Awrite, lads, HEAVE...STEADY...”

Two giants lifted the God of Thunder upon their shoulders, each with a palm firmly nested on his boots. Atop their sturdy shoulders, Thor took in the full view of the legion, catching glimpses of a periodically erupting splash of flesh and blood, always followed by a comically maniacal laughter only Asgardians were capable of instilling. “More ta da right, lads.”, came Thor’s commands, and the giants start making minute adjustments by turning to-and-fro, resembling the jitters of a compass’ arrow. “Too *much* right!”, and the giants shuffled back slightly. “Perfect, noo inta positions!”, he curled up his limbs, forming himself into a giant cannonball. And being reeled back in suspenseful fashion by the giants, like an Olympian awaiting the momentous run up in a shot put. “And FIRE!”, came a stentorian roar that ignited a flare within the two titans, and a surging energy was poured into a magnificent push, pelting the burly God resting upon them instantaneously out of sight!

While soaring through the air and given a bird’s eye view of the battlefield, the sheer size of the legion was felt more threateningly than before. Yet, what offered solace was a literal silver lining, a winding pathway of decaying corpses carved out from the Demon’s army. The surest sign that their overwhelming numbers are still incomparable to the brilliance of their vanguards. Tracing this line upwards, Thor would find Shango and the Valkyries, engaged in a bout with a particularly ferocious looking Demon.

They were standing face to face with yet another behemoth amidst its cowering inferiors, Brynhildr quivers with excitement, a spirit mimicked by Skofnung, whose embers flicker on faster and faster, in front of the

facinorous fiend. But, as if recalling a similar experience just minutes before, Brynhildr turned back with a scowl, with a surly arm held up as a warning, which was received with clarity by one of them in particular.

“Away with ye folks, *this* one’s mine!”

“Yes, Brynhildr, we shan’t interfere...” Geiravor tried to pacify.

“...” Shango said nothing, but raised up both hands in acknowledgement.

Sensing a bloodlust, the Valkyrie centered her animosity back on the Demon, who bore the head of a bull, bellowing in low tones of savagery. A rusted mace swaying in both hands, it looked on the verge of pouncing. Yet, it was against such brutish opponents that Brynhildr thrives in overcoming, a fight where no remorse is owed for any side: a beast too foolish to reflect, and a warrior too clever to regret. Any action in such a bout comes from the clearest wishes of the mind, thus ameliorating strikes to their utmost potential in speed and might. It was always this prospect that made Brynhildr flutter ecstatically so in the face of vicious foes.

She inches her way forward, doubling her strength on Skofnung. Then came time, when another minuscule step provoked the fiend into assault! Without a single delay, her eyes were wise to it, and implored her arms to swing the divine blade...Everything went dark, with her ears ringing with unceasing alarms. And for a measly second, the Valkyrie was convinced her skills have failed her, and she was consigned to the plane beyond, until she started chocking, and her gut welled up his disgust after seeing the figure unveiling before her. Thor made his crashing descent, having dived squarely for his allies, hoping to help extend this trail of corpses made behind them, littered around the presence of their lord as a triumphant taunt.

“Y’Awrite, lads!”

His friendly demeanor shined through the cloud of dust his impact created. Stepping down from the incapacitated Demon with a hole punctured through his torso, he waved to Shango and Geiravor, who came into view first. But, rather than receiving a warm welcome, a dismayed wince hanged on both their faces. And no one’s expression was darker than the Valkyrie before him.

“YE BLOODY C-”.

The obscene word echoed throughout the battlefield, amusing the Gods, confusing the fiends, and appalling the heroes. But, Bayani was paying no mind to all these commotions. When the worst of the turmoil was over, at the nearest signs of a fully quelled disaster, her body untensed and her legs gave way. She sunk to the grassy fields with a heavy sigh, indulging in the sweet wave of relief that washed over her knees and feet. Of course, the battle was hardly finish, and the shameful thought of reclining in leisure while her friends were coming to blows did made itself known. But all her faculties were convincing Bayani, that at least her part in the battle was over and done with. Besides, the last of her qualms about her own idleness vanished when Hel marched up towards her, and just as readily adopted the same sentiments by taking up the spot next to her.

“Splendid day, innit?” Hel said, making a louder show of her own laxity with a wide and audible stretch.

“Never a dull moment in these lands, eh?” Bayani uttered with a wistful look at the faraway mountains.

“Believe me, it’s not always like this... this is just one of those ‘weeks where decades happen’ times our history is so fond of.”

“Well then, I’m glad to be part of that history.”

“...” Hel replied with a smile, and for once felt an inkling of proudness for her roots:

“After this is over, you *will* stay for a while longer, won’t you?”

“Why of course!”

“I’ll show you all the *dull* moments Midgard has to offer, until you’re bored enough to go home!”

“I wouldn’t miss them for the world.”

But before the two could seal their promise, a reverberant explosion pulled their attention back to the raging battlefield before them. Alongside that, came a shattering reminder of the very real peril still beset upon Midgard itself, a peril that needs to be quashed for their pleasant visions of the future to materialize.

*

Friday

Early Evening

The mythical horse traversed with the same magnificent speed it came upon the fray with, making mockeries of Nature's rules. The scenes beheld by the rider fades into blurs as his mount penetrates through the army of horned heads, smashing into amorphous bits those who dare stand in its way. Odin readies his spear, tucked tenaciously to his sides, awaiting an impact bound to happen in time, for the target stuck out amongst the legionnaires like a sore thumb. Even traversing at this speed, the Shaman was perceived through palpable malice.

Soon, Odin caught a glimpse of the fiend, flaunting his new features with a sense of bravado, indubitably induced by thoughtless insanity. Though, as that sneering face was closing in from their speedy approach, it became too easily discernible, that the expression worn upon the Ancient Demon was not a foolish bravado that has ruined many a soldiers, but a parlous confidence garnered from a wisdom used for wickedness. Until now, whenever the reins of Sleipnir were in his hand, Odin had enjoyed a world of unchallenged authority. Today, when Shimush planted his singular, remaining eye squarely on him, that authority was upturned, and a paroxysm of unease flared up for the first time since aeons ago. An unease born from an onsetting uncertainty that the fight can be won.

The same ambush that had rendered the Shaman powerless just previously, was now being slipped past so effortlessly. The tip of Gungnir was left grazing at mere air, and even Sleipnir, who expected a gory impact, stirred in astonishment at the Demon's fast reactions. In a sickening twist of fates, while Odin stared out the vizor of his helmet, Shimush's grotesque mug was closing in on him instead. His jaw gaped open in unnatural proportions, before unleashing an ordour as fetid as burning sewage. But the smell was only an omen of what's to come, for beneath the throat of oblivion, Odin felt a lingering danger he did not want manifest at point-blank.

In great alacrity, he balled up his fist and delivered a blow upwards, forcing away the trajectory of Shimush's hideous mouth. The Allfather would doubly appreciate his judgement and reflexes, as from the Shaman's face poured out a jet of green vapour, and having fused with the natural air... instantly exploded into a giant ball of sizzling liquid. When the droplets drool down onto Odin, he felt them eating into his helmeted head and armoured torso, before drying up, not without leaving their scarring marks.

The proceeding exchange of attacks commenced vicious and blistering. Whipping on Sleipnir's reins, Odin sallied forth with his spear, plunging, slashing and twisting. Yet, still could not reach the Ancient Demon, who dodged the blade that seemingly came from every direction. If not, the strikes were parried by his hands, hardened to a point that it withstood the metal's force with ease. Irritated, the Asgardian invoked one of the many enchantments laden within Gungnir, summoning a shimmer upon its sharp end before it shot out towards Shimush, and like a needle through soft fabric, perfectly punctures through his hands, shoulder and back, stretching out across the lands indefinitely.

The momentary stagger that followed in the Demon was exploited mercilessly. Hacking and stabbing a dozen times in a blink of an eye, Odin was on the verge of severing head from neck. But Demons only delight too much in dashing away such hopes of an easy victory. With Gungnir digging into the sides of the Shaman's pale neck, the malodorous stench wafts once more out from that mysterious maw. Odin's nostrils tingled in repulse, deciphering all the wretched intentions of his foe. Watching that singular, crimson eye plastered on the fiend's forehead, the imposed gambit was received lucidly: will the God's spear cleave through the neck first, or will the Demon's breath shrivel his head into nothingness first?

Odin thought hard in that minuscule span of time. A braver God would have taken the gamble, but so would a more foolish one... clicking his tongue, he yanked Sleipnir's reins to the side. This dislodged the blade from the Shaman's neck, and threw the Allfather off the galloping steed, while managing to avoid the expanding cloud of

toxicity. Having lost its master, Sleipnir dashed around in frenzied circles. The horrid eye that settled on it made it reluctant to approach, yet bounded by fierce loyalty, it could not flee. In this desperate predicament, it looked to the Allfather, which mouthed a single response: 'Fly!'. Though Sleipnir heard the command, it dithered with a neigh. 'FLY!', this time, the word came out stentorian, and finally drilled the urgency into the steed. Its eight limbs kicking into action, it disappeared in a blink away from the God and Demon.

With the bout shifted onto the ground, while on his two feet a full view of the fiend's malice emerged for Odin. Standing a head taller, the Shaman's lanky figure, which masks beneath it an incongruous power, is a sickening disguise. It lowers the guard of warriors, whose heroism often repels them from harming the weak. Yet, once driven into an exchange, they find that emaciated enemy to be freakishly indestructible, and heroism crumbles along with their fleeting life. Speaking of which, the wound that took all Odin had to inflict just minutes ago, was already sealing itself up by the seemingly sentient wrangles of flesh. A momentary dread came over the Allfather, 'it would be one of *those* battles.', he sighed as visages of some historic encounters flashed across his mind.

Deep breaths and calmness overtakes, when the soul re-treads old grounds. The last one-on-one stand off he'd has was innumerable years ago, when he still wore a youthful complexion and spirit. When threats were paradoxically larger, yet less menacing. When he wielded regular spears against giants, orcs and ogres. In some ways, the present moment betokens a poetic return to those roots, only ameliorated in several aspects. Now, he wields a spear of divine legends, against beings of otherworldly evil.

In any case, the degree of weapons and skills of opponents are frivolities anyways, what stays universal across a life's worth of confrontations are the rules and laws of battles. Offense, as the art of violation; defense, as the art of obstruction. And if one can remember their mastery of these two arts, there is no rustiness to be had in any bout, no matter the length of absence. With a mind like Odin's, which thrives under conditions of chaos, everything came gushing back in no time at all. And precipitately, he felt as if he was transported back into the old eras, when he was the finest warrior Asgard has begotten and groomed into being! Twirling Gungnir ostentatiously into place, Odin sprinted fearlessly for the fiend, and soon was consumed by the heat of combat, where blows follow harder blows, an endless exchange that cajoles one to discount pain, blood and death.

A stab, a twist, and a strike. A thrust, a shuffle, and a thrash. A smash, a tussle, and a slash. Each escalating exchange reverberates throughout the lands, sending vibrations which does not cease. The land shakes and shakes until, on the verge of splintering the continent, swallowing mountains and lakes! Then it did, at last, came apart with after an awesome clash of might, which sends its world-breaking power rippling into the ether, that soon was swallowed too. And darkness presumed... but the fight takes on an amorphous form, blended together with the influence of Heaven and Hell, who competes through their vessels, throwing pangs of light and dark that overtake one another in inscrutable speed, in a plane where the churn of time was disqualified. Then, presumably out of boredom, the battle stopped. Either a second or a century elapsed, there is no more minds to conceive. It was at such a point, that an ethereal architect popped their head out from spaces even further beyond. Sensing the great damage, they rub their palms together, and fixed it with a snap.

The vessels awake, racing to break out of their daze induced by the hypnotic experience of the ineffable. Having his awareness returned so abruptly, Odin surveyed his body furiously. He found wounds and swellings he knew not when or how was incurred. Gungnir was still in his hands, though hanging off its tip was a few skewered fingers, cadaverous and warm. His surroundings felt brighter than it had been, and warmer too. It took until a lock of his, sweat-stained, silver hair dropping over his eyes did he realised... that his helmet was gone! Though it did not take long for him to find it again.

The Shaman was shivering in a pitiful state. A dozen open gashes scattered over his torso, so deep a sliver of sunshine were starting to seep through. Unlike before, they were no longer patching themselves up. Their circulation was cut off from the crimson eye which supplies all, after a horned helmet was lodged squarely into the Demon's throat. And though his expression betrayed nothing of this conundrum, the Allfather caught onto it instantly. He made a gamble, and hurled Gungnir straight at the fiend. The spear accelerated beyond the grasp of sight, cleaving through Shimush's left arm. And before the shock could register, Odin had followed up with a tackle, the God's burly hands creeping up to the Demon's head, facing an anxious attempt at restriction by his remaining hand. They were inching closer to the crimson eye, which was pulsating with more bloodshot veins than ever.

The Shaman's knees dug into Odin's sides viciously, desperate to pry him off. But the Allfather would not cave, flexing his core to absorb those powerful kicks. Soon, even Shimush realised the futility, and instead, pulled the last scraps of his energy into a final defensive maneuver. Without the luscious elixir of Demonic blood coursing through his body, every movement pounded the muscles with excruciating sharpness. And what he was about to do would beset unimaginable agony, pain that would have been portioned through lifetimes condensed into this singular moment. Pain such as this was not borne with the body, but with the mind, and if one's psyche cannot endure it, they would surely elapse into an unawakenable stupor, silenced forevermore. But for the Ancient Demon, who treats pain as an imperishable constant of his world, it was a flimsy price to pay indeed.

Sprouting from the sides of his torso, were a damp and pallid pair of arms, teeming with the spryness that all newborn lives exhibit. Yet, soon was forced into line, operating at the wills of its host, who direct them fervidly and furiously at the target: not the God clawing his way to the crimson eye, but his helmet that was pierced through the throat. And with one mighty tug, a geyser was unleashed upon the God and Demon, pouring murky yellow mist from the top of Shimush's neck to the bottom.

A mere second later, Odin felt a gush of force shunting him away. After a great tumble that sent him into a light daze, the Allfather discovered himself outside the vicinity of the yellow cloud, covered head to toe in hardened spots of amber, reeking of hellish miasma. He leered into the cloud, recalling Gungnir into his hands with a commanding gesture. Once at the vertex of vulnerability just instances before, an unabated trepidation now looms once more over the presence of the Ancient Shaman. Odin's mind was in a busy business of banishing every pessimism that intrudes, but his cold sweats and jittering fingers already made him well aware of the disaster that was approaching.

Every proceeding second ridden with inscrutability, as the yellow fumes obstructs all guesses into the Demonic Shaman's whim. Whatever that emerges from the barrier could be fast and belligerent, or slow and methodical from the fumes. The flickering shadows within only serve to confound the observers more, keeping them in a maddening suspense. Until... something did emerge. Jagged and deformed, it shot out from the smokes and tumbled with a metallic clank, rolling ominously to a stop at the foot of the Asgardian. It was his helmet, or at least the remnants of it: having its wings plucked and horns shattered. Left to impart not a warning, but a statement. Moments after casting this message, Shimush made his appearance, as if sensing the anger in the God. Stepping out from the dissipating clouds, once again wearing a new look; he stood pulsating with a body unblemished from head to toe. The crimson eye squinting, a look layered behind uncountable sets of derision.

How briskly their kind reprises their bravado as soon as the taste of duress is quelled. Tactics that serve to annoy the opponents more, after losing a victory so closely achieved. But Odin was no longer in the capacity to feel rage anymore, nor was he so barren to feel despair. Coursing through this God's veins were strictly the sensations of the present, devoid of concepts called 'consequences'. And so, clenching Gungnir, he readies himself...

Unknown whether out of impatience, or fear of another skirmish that came too close to defeat for comfort, but the Shaman who emerged from the smoke was vacant of any coyness that hitherto was his staple. The air around the fiend thickened as he channeled grit into a devastating strike, and a fist barreled down upon Odin. Feeling the weight and speed behind this punch, the Allfather could do nothing, except brace for it with shut eyes. Suddenly, he was floating freely off the ground, carried by a gust of wind that undulating like a raging river stream mid-air! Yet, strangely, he felt no pain; opening his eyes, he was greeted instead by the gregarious face of Freyr, followed by a fervently fierce bellow from his divine steed, Sleipnir.

While Freyr's one hand clutched onto Odin's steadily, his other hand handled Sleipnir's reins with a sense of awkwardness, unsure when to yank, twist, or reel a beast as eccentric as it. But ironically, the awkwardness extended both ways, since Sleipnir was barely heeding any command the reins were giving, rather, was acting in accordance to how it instinctively believe its true master would tell it to act. All the same, seeing this unlikely pairing put a jolly smile on Odin's face. Ah, The sublimity of family had never shined so gracefully bright until now for Odin. The sight and sound of people you'd be bored to experience in any other day suddenly soothes a sensory faculty sore by skirmishes of war.

"M'LORD, ARE YOU ALRIGHT?!" Shouted Freyr in his usual bombastic fashion, which Odin now felt endeared by. But the Allfather hesitated on an answer, first allowing himself a moment to reassess his foe. Turning to peer at Shimush, whose frame was shrinking away into the distance as they coursed through the field in scorching speed. It was not until the Demon fully vanished, that Odin gave Sleipnir an approving caress, along with a gentle order:

"Halt." The stallion grunted out a relieving puff of breath, having never stopped soaring since their separation, it was craving for this singular word.

When the two Gods descended, the land was still spinning, but the Allfather was quick to reapply his senses back to the ongoing battle. Placing a hefty grip on Freyr's shoulders, Odin started sharing every detail he gathered from his prolonged bout with the Shaman. Lauding with bitterness at every strength he possesses, and exposing contemptuously every weakness uncovered. Freyr nodded along to them all, whether he fully understood or otherwise.

"Go for the neck, but don't make it obvious! Listen, Freyr, periodical: gut, neck, arms, then gut, knees, neck. D'you understand? Watch the eye, not the body! It's a read, you see. Short blink is a left hook, a twitch is a right hook. But for blinks longer than three milliseconds..."

Enthralled in their discussion of tactics, the pair became blind to their surroundings, failing to notice the throng legionnaires now encroaching around them. Unbeknownst to them, Sleipnir had brought them back into the centre of tumult. Ignited by the roars of heroes and screeches of ghoulish creatures, the stalwart horse's neighs of warning were drowned out. Furtively, using the cover of clamour, an imp lunges at Odin, trident drawn savagely overhead! Until it was shocked and shriveled into dust by a bolt of lightning, shot from across ten yards away. The sound of sizzling electricity above at last captured the two Asgardians' attention, and they turned to be met with a hearty reunion of bemused laughter and cheerful banter, by none other than the inimitable quartet of two Thunder Gods and two Valkyries.

"Good evening!" Shango brandished his sparking, silver gauntlets proudly.

"Oh, hullo... Father, Freyr, fancy seein' ye here!" Thor welcomed the surprise.

"M'Lord, ye look battered!" Brynhildr was taken aback by Odin's wounds.

"Was it because you didn't have your shield?! Oh no, what have I done?!" Geiravor's neuroticism kicked in fully.

They began crowding now, plying the Allfather with a barrage of questions. And with the perfect mixture of strong personalities within the bunch, the concept of speaking in turns was lost on them. Thor spoke over Geiravor, only for Brynhildr to speak over Thor, until all voices was overshadowed by the might of Freyr. From there, the pantheon devolved into chaos. And just like that... all the good-humour of reuniting with familiar faces was flushed out of Odin.

“ORDER!” he boomed.

“...” Silent obeisance pervaded every Asgardians’ demeanor.

Odin looked towards Shango, deciding to address him first.

“*Thank you* for the assistance earlier.”

“What do you make of Shimush, Lord Odin?”

“He is a strong foe, indeed, but...”

“But?”

“ But not invincible.”

“Though anyone would be fooled into believing so.”

“I suppose you have some additional strategies to advise?” Odin’s voice carried a slight pleading tone.

“Unfortunately no, you folks have had the right approach from the start... by hitting him really hard.” Shango continued. “The real trial Shimush imposes, is how he keeps rising up, relentlessly with a new form. Breathing fire in one, shapeshifting in another, selected among a collection of hundreds, unceasing until the last droplet of his blood is spilled.”

“How much blood does he have then?” Odin asked dubiously.

“Lucky for us, it seems he must not have had a big breakfast... because it looks like he’s on his last legs already.”

Before the Gods, the Ancient Demon emerged from amidst the squirming fiends, leaving behind a path of flattened figures. Cadaverous in countenance, sinewy in shape, a bloodshot pupil leered detestably at the congregation. The Shaman stood with his arms spread to the side, gasconading his truest and strongest form. Lengthy chains of conjoined symbols wrapped around his frame, glowing a resonant purple. On his expansive back opened up a gash that travelled down towards the tailbone, a gash lined with crooked fangs guarding the entrance into a darkness. A gateway between Hell and Earth, emanating the sounds of tortured sinners, and every so often the screeches of something worse.

Both parties knew unequivocally, that the decisive moment of the battle had arrived. The Demon at its apex form, against the Gods at their abject numbers. Brynhildr and Geiravor steadied themselves, alighting Skofnung and bracing Svalinn. Freyr hulked his new sword off his shoulders, letting it fall to the ground with a quaking thud. A storm brewed overhead, with rumbling thunders stowed away behind darkened nimbuses, ready to unleash themselves at the slightest sign of aggression. Gingerly, the Allfather leaned over to his Yoruba ally, speaking softly with a touch of sympathy.

“How many times have you had the displeasure of facing this monstrosity?”

“Too many.” Shango mustered a lugubrious smile.

“Well then... we leave ourselves to your command.” Odin said this audibly for all the rest of the Asgardians to acknowledge with stoic silence.

Shango blinked with confusion at the trust placed on him by the Asgardian Lord, and felt rather shy. Soon, though, he shook away the diffidence, and made a solemn promise to himself to honour that trust hereafter.

“Right.”

Friday

Early Evening

On many a lonely days, we may draw some comfort in the thought of humanity's vastness and richness. It guarantees that no matter how eccentric one is, there is a likeminded individual to match or surpass us in idiosyncrasies. Though the older one gets, the more apparent it becomes that humanity's eclecticism is a curse rather than blessing. Because with every spectrum of characters at hand, there is bound to be conflict between two personalities which simply cannot coexist. The selfless hero cannot accommodate for the greedy tyrant, and as a matter of fact, the selfless hero will not even accommodate other heroes whom are less than selfless.

More often than not, two strangers can converse a seemingly civil and pleasant dialogue, yet come away with total antipathy towards each other. Are mortals inclined to make more enemies than friends in a lifetime? Perhaps not, but it is assured that mortals inclined to make more acquaintances than friends in a lifetime. Character conflicts will always be the more dominant presence than character harmonies. Despite this, humans persist in offering themselves up to be acquainted with. Two strangers, across time and across space, always seeking a confluence of souls: a drinker and their bartender, two pipe smokers on the curb, a beggar and a lollygagger. Deep within, there is a craving for those rare instances of harmony, where one, with ease, earns a precious companion. The type of companion who makes one wonder how they could have lived thus far without.

In the sidelines, having been freed from the messy duty of battle, two young Goddesses found an enrapturing harmony in their own pairing. Sat atop a slope far away from the skirmishing soldiers, Hel and Bayani talked. Emboldened by the cacophony around them, they talked effortlessly it was impossible to believe they had only met the day prior. There were no subjects too out of place, no opinions too contentious, and no secrets too sacred.

"I worry about Midgard sometimes." Hel confessed.

"In what way?"

"In every way... like what would we have done about the Shaman if you weren't here?"

"But we *are* here."

"But imagine you weren't!"

"There's no use thinking about imaginary scenarios, Hel. What's *really* bothering you about Midgard?"

"... Pride."

"Every kingdom has pride."

"Not like ours."

"And every kingdom has someone who thinks that." Bayani giggled.

"Fair enough..."

"I don't like lingonberry jam." Bayani revealed.

"WHAT?!"

"Tried it the day before, didn't like it."

"Elaborate, what didn't you like about it?"

"It's only a more bitter form of cranberry jam, what's the point?"

"Darling, it's called 'kick'!"

"Not convinced."

"FREYR! Restrain him harder!" Odin spat out amidst his tussle with the Ancient Demon.

"I'M TRYING, MI'LO-" The burly God of war stammers out before being sent tumbling away in one mighty elbow.

Suddenly, the Allfather recoiled in agony, as blinding flashes and a deafened ear besieged him, set off by a chain of explosions that rang across the battlefield. Through one of the dust clouds that now covered the grounds, Brynhildr unearthed herself, stained head to toe in rupturing soot, marked by scorch marks, fur and guts. She could not take a restful breath, before she was again beset by a beast with deadly fangs, that was only prevented from feasting on the Valkyrie's face by a tenacious shoving of its snout. Hellhounds, with pupils red with belligerence and with blood boiling with explosive chemistry. One by one, they climbed out of the Shaman's back, still gaping open a gateway to the nether planes. Bringing their hellishly bred savagery onto the earth, each shook with excitement to the point of bursting.

Locked in a struggle with the hellhound, a sharp unease crawled up Brynhildr's spine, as the beast before her started glowing through its translucent hide. Its dripping saliva reeked of burning flesh, with a trace of gunpowder. Just then, a swift and hardy kick sent the hound flying into the air, where it combusted into fiery showers of fur. Shango extended a hand to the Valkyrie, heaving her up onto her feet. Then, turning with a ushering gesture, he shouted for his partner:

"Huddle up, Thor, let's discuss strategies!"

"Aye, but the bloody dogs winnae stahp comin'!" The God of Thunder replied, whilst delivering a heavy blow to an encroaching hound.

A drawn out howl signified the approach of a fresh and ferocious pack, and Shango shot his surroundings a look of consternation before holding up his gauntlets. But then, a soothing warmth overtook him, and the world was enveloped in golden, heavenly hues, seemingly impenetrable by evil. He traced the barrier of light to none other than Geiravor, who held the illuminating shield before her.

"Thank you, Geiravor!" Shango said politely, before becoming stern: "Now, strategy."

Freyr was pinned against the ground, with Shaman inching ever closer to his throat. The fearsome mug was lit up in detestable detail by the flames of his divine sword, the only thing holding the Demon's forceful claws at bay. Then, with a hefty grunt that penetrated through the thick clouds of smog, Odin emerged from behind, locking himself upon Shimush's back with an iron grip. The Allfather's armour was shredded into pitiful tatters, but he stood heedless to the otherworldly heat gushing out from the gaping gash, heedless of the gnaws from the hellhounds trapped on the other side. And as the beasts glowed red with imminent explosion, Odin anticipated and relished the moment the Shaman would be caught in its crosshair.

But amidst the vicious bays of the hounds, a distant rumbling was seeping through the gateway. Traced by the keen ears of the Allfather, it forewarned of something large and something fast, emitting echoes that ears cannot fathom, or dare to imagine. Its shape lay unperceivable through the ephemeral portal, but its approach was deeply augured, by a loudening roar of smothering rubbles. After a single instance of silence, out it burst! A gargantuan pillar of scales, undulating into the sky leaving splashes of fiery specks floating with the upsurging wind! And Odin, forcibly pushed against its massive snout, was taken along in its journey of upheaval among the clouds.

"There's ups and downs, y'feel? He got all the attention, but also all the expectations. I wouldn't want to trade my position for his..."

"Still, doesn't the favouritism bother you?"

“It’s not as if I wasn’t loved! We got the same gifts, fed the same food. At least our parents weren’t that tactless. But, it’s weird sometimes... you get the sense that with me, they were more ‘negotiable’, while with Shango, it was always ‘non-negotiable’, I don’t know if that’s a good thing or bad thing.”

“Funny... it’s the opposite with me. I’m the non-negotiable one, and my siblings... well, they’re not up to negotiate anyway.”

“Face it, Hel, you’re an only child with two pets!” Bayani rested her chin on her hand indignantly.

“I wouldn’t say that! Fafnir’s actually quite eloquent sometimes... it’s only Jormungandr... say, that looks quite like him doesn’t it?”

Staring face to face with the giant beast, Odin saw in it a physical mirror of Loki’s own serpentine spawn. Yet, in personality, the present beast sported an animalistic savagery utterly absent from the serpent he knew. One was raised to be a sibling, the other raised to be a husk of monstrosity that must match the vices of beings below. Now, as the arid breath of the beast assaults Odin’s senses, scalding heat and noxious odour conjured an illusory hold over the God. He envisioned himself enveloped by the full might of the depths, hiding powers that may upturn the overworld as it pleases. And in affright he recoiled, pushing off against the snout into a swift tumble downwards, leaving the roaring beast dancing alone among the ether.

But then, in his plummet back into the atmosphere, Odin’s racing heart was once more stilled by calmness, after he was served the bird’s eye view of his kingdom. The flickering brightness in the centre of Midgard that were telltale signs of merrymaking, and a distant humming of caroused people that spelled jollity. What is a lord if they do not live vicariously through their subjects? The thought dispelled all traces of fear and unrest in the Allfather, awakened a resolve that has since receded in the wake of his skirmish with the Shaman. Yet, as if sensing this reawakened resolve, the gargantuan serpent curved downwards too. Setting his pupils upon the God’s tiny frame, it gaped open a mouth cavernously laden with fangs.

“SVALINN!” Odin commanded as he reached down to the earth.

*

Shango struck his gauntlets together, producing a metallic reverberance within their golden bubble. As fist rubbed mightily against fist, a fine streak of static pierced into existence, dark and foreboding. Then, with another hearty clap, the static was condensed into a radiant sphere, floating above the palm of the Yoruba God. Like the boundless expanse of the cosmos concentrated into a singular ball of energy, it compelled the silent attention of the audience.

“Monamona iku. The lightning of Death. It is the epitome of my arts, a bolt that can stun even Olorun. Struck by this, Shimush WILL be paralyzed. Traditionally, in our every battles against him, this has always been our last touch.” Shango uttered in reverence, eyes glued to the spinning piece of majesty resting on his hand.

“Da looks pure barry...” Thor was entranced.

“Roight then, just lob at it ‘em, and everything’s braw?” Brynhildr stretched herself within the safety of the barrier.

“Yes, but the trouble’s always getting it to connect. You see, launching the monamona iku takes a ginormous physical toll that my gauntlets can only stand once or twice... usually, I would fare fine with the aid of my kin, but here... let’s just say I’m out of my element.”

“Nae worries, tell us what ta dae, and we’ll dae it!” The Asgardian beat his chest with pride.

Shango laughed at the enthusiasm, before the glint of Svalinn caught his gaze. Scanning the shimmering slab of enchantment up and down, a plan surfaced in his mind. Approaching Geiravor, he could see on the face of the young Valkyrie a quietness instilled by overwhelming nerves. To put her at ease, Shango beamed at her, and spoke in a tone that treated the chaos around them as trifles.

“How good are you in maneuvering the shield, Miss Geiravor?”

“I-I’ve never done it before, sir!” Geira stammered out, taken aback by the sudden question.

“And yet you’ve saved us from countless casualties already, haven’t you?”

Geiravor glowed scarlet, unaccustomed to what those outside the soldiery call ‘positive affirmations’. Shango turned towards the others, face bright with excitement:

“I’m thinking of a divergence tactic... engage Shimush in close quarters, find a blind spot for a clear shot with the monamona iku!”

“Aye, sounds like a belter plan!”

Thor chimed up loudly, eager to support a friend unconditionally. But Brynhildr mustered up a doubtful glance:

“Ye think the bastard’ll give in fer a clear shot?”

“He’ll be wary of me, I’m sure... but he won’t expect the shot to come from Geiravor!”

“I-I’m shooting the lightning?”

“Not directly, you’ll use your shield! I’ll launch it at you at just the right time, and you deflect it back to Shimush.”

“A-a-are you sure it’ll deflect. W-what if it just... penetrates?”

“Monamona iku only penetrates flesh, it’s part of why it’s so potent, faced with metal, it’ll only bounce!”

“W-what about you saying that the manomano takes a big toll on the body?”

“It does... but you *do* have Odin’s shield... I reckon that will do most of the heavy lifting.”

A slight hesitation still festered within Geiravor, but she could find no reason to object further, admitting that the odds were well stacked in her favour. Just then, she felt a sudden tug on her arms, Svalinn was starting to quiver, dragging the Valkyrie unwillingly to-and-fro. And despite her attempts to restrain it, the straps came undone, and the shield jetted away in a frenzy, pulling out with it the golden dome that enveloped them. The shield eventually slid upwards into the sky, disappearing into a speck, leaving behind befuddled faces throughout. Though the threat of hounds were no more, the stench of flaming corpses assaulted swiftly, shunting the group unmistakably back into the realm of battle.

“Oh, dear.” Shango remarked.

*

Odin bore full witness to the serpent’s esophagus, an endless tunnel of charred flesh, punctuated every so often by seeps of dripping magma. As the serpent undulates down onto his falling figure, the dragging of air turned torturously hot. Odin felt the peeling of his lips, his hair on the verge of singing, and his body numbing under the heat. Holding faith, the Allfather fought hard to sustain some sensation singularly in his right hand, still reaching out for trusted arsenal. But the closer the serpent came, the more unbearable it became for him to maintain the senses. Soon, eyes closed, and breathing ceased, Odin poured the remainder of his will into his right palm...

And the exact moment he felt a tingle of tactility, a wrathful force flooded out Odin’s systems. As the gargantuan fangs clamp down hard, grazing the metallic shell of Svalinn, the serpent found itself repelled violently. Through its scales, it could sense the surrounding air thicken with impenetrability. Though furiously defiant, it made another attempt, aligning its body well before hurtling towards the Asgardian with full speed

and strength. Odin decided to retaliate, flaunting every confidence in his own invulnerability, he smirked and affixed himself behind Svalinn, awaiting the moment of the serpent's impact. Once more, the serpent clamps down on the God, enervating every muscle in its lengthy frame to do so on. Yet, instead of a satisfying exertion of force, the serpent found itself frozen, an involuntary inertia spread throughout his being and chained it down. In that moment of stillness, its eyes glared at the God, hidden behind his shield, which was wrapped in a cloak of brightness hitherto unseen.

Standing in between the edges of its jaw, Odin perked up from the cover. He returned the serpent's gaze with playful villainy, before winding up Svalinn in a frenzied spin, and bashing it over the serpent! And through means its beastly brain cannot grasp, the serpent was slammed away by a force twice as hard as it'd exerted, a force seemingly spawned out of the womb of nothing, as if it was the energy's will themselves to double over and work against it. The mind-quivering slam left a dent in its scales, and sent a mighty ripple pulsing through its veins, vibrating steadily throughout its enormous length. A blinding cast of light overtook its sights, as it writhed in dazed senses and unquenched hunger.

Strength comes half from physics and half from psychics. Freyr's head was the clearest it has been the whole week, holding nothing but the path to victory. Thoughts on anything trivial shrank away, isolating the visages of the Shaman, pinning him down against the earth. Having the weight of their prowess pitted against each other, Freyr gritted his teeth in stifled devastation at being overpowered. Yet, what was a warrior who ceded to better evils? Pride is a powerful fuel, and in the God's imagination, a careful process of conviction had begun. Slowly, Freyr was convincing himself to be Shimush's equal. The delusion, misguided or not, vivified a surge of power that helped Freyr stand back up.

And then the rippling force that traversed down the serpent's body. With the writhing monstrosity still attached to his back through the gates, the ripple from Svalinn found its way into the Shaman. Though dissipated at that point, the small force wreaked as big of a chaos as it could, upturning the Demon's faculties over mind and matter. But, that small disturbance was all Freyr needed! With a final shove, he broke free from Shimush's hold, acted with fast feet in retrieving the divine sword, and gathered enough distance for a tempestuous blitz.

Dainsleif, the terrorizer of Demons, earns its moniker not from any holy blessing imbued by the Heavens, but rather from the wretched infamy it stokes within the infernos. It is the blade every condemned fiend witness before they are stripped of their immortality. Wielded exclusively by the executioners of Hell, Dainsleif is the sole weapon able to utterly halt the regenerative tendencies of Demons. And now, clutched in the hands of a bloodthirsty Asgardian God, even the Ancient Shaman must shudder in cold sweat.

Freyr ridded his mind of correct tactics and stances, pouring it all into a signature spin, with a body feeling lighter and lighter each revolution. Together with his blue armour, a swift and shimmering cyclone stood before the fiend, making the air itself grew sharp and capable of slicing. Sensing the sword's perilous properties for his kind, Shimush produced a hiss, directed to the giant serpent attached to his back, it was hostile, carrying an order for it to heed his command. Still shaking off the daze from Odin's slam, the serpent relented and began to undulate back around its masters. Gradually, it coiled its gargantuan body around the Shaman, encasing him in a dense layer of scaly protection. Buried inside, the fiend bided his time until the God's fury blew over.

Peering into the whistling cyclone unlocks a sight of wonder. It is a world of incompleteness, a if the thread of existence is constantly getting snapped away. And standing before it, one will be harrowed to feel that Dainsleif brings this breakage of logic from its own world into yours. Before contact could occur between Freyr and the serpent, the first slash had already landed. Deeply into the side of the beast, a gash split apart from thin air, utterly untouched. Half an instant later, another one ripped out below the first, and then another... a dozen

different wounds wrenched into reality from untraceable sources. In harmony they unleashed a flood of amber blood that charred the earth on spillage.

Wave after wave of arcane slashes, traversing from the base of the serpent to the tip. All while the whirring tempest of Freyr's cyclone approached closer and closer, auguring the bedlam to come on an actual connection of blade with flesh. A pair of bloodthirsty pupils pierced out through the seams of the twister, spelling an absence of mercy. With a final turn, and with the momentum gathered at its acme, Freyr charges out headfirst from the roaring turbulence, veins pulsing hungrily for an outlet. Fortunately, their target stood larger than life right in front, eclipsing the small inkling of sunlight shining out between the mountains. The God of War heaved! Liberating a life's worth of pent up rage and hostility, swung the blade squarely into the serpent.

The force of a million slashes at once, conquered over physical space. The beast splintered apart, in finely thin, and fatally clean fashion, brutally cleaved into dust to be carried by the wind like frivolous particles. And as the bits floated upwards away, pouring downwards was a shower of rank blood. Revealed beneath all the layers of shredded torso, was the Ancient Demon, spared the same fate as its beast, but not completely unscathed. Shimush stared coldly at his left hand, at the missing fingers consumed by the storm, slightly amused at the lack of obedience his body currently displays.

Freyr, instead, wasted no time in pouncing on the distracted foe, drawing Dainsleif above head, he attacked through the blinding shreds of serpentine corpses. He did not see how, but he was immediately halted in his charge, seized by the throat by a strangling hand that held him inches over the earth. The Shaman forced the God to watch as he paid him no heed, and resumed his attention on his missing fingers.

In the commotion, the thought had escaped his mind, but Odin suddenly remembered he was in a midst of a long plummet, with the earth closing in ever faster. But, with nerves steeled by absolute confidence in Svalinn, the Allfather turned, and committed to a dive downwards, securing the shield tightly before him. And when he reached the ground, instead of an echoing boom, what followed upon his fall was a mere mild upturning of dust, from a crater inches deep. Odin expelled a breath that had been racing up his throat during the fall, but even then, a graceful calmness was obvious.

When clutching onto a divine tool as potent as Svalinn, one can only feel reassurance, as any bit of unsteadiness, conflict or doubt was ate away by the shield. The shield plays with the flow of the universe as a child plays with a toy. Now, having soaked up instances upon instances of what could have been fatal energy, it quivered on the brink of explosion. Its wielder, unwilling to engage it further, loosen his grip, and sent the shield soaring with a mighty hurl! Svalinn jetted away in a trajectory handled by its own rogue mind. And it chose to barrel down the hectic battlefield of Demonic pawns and heroes, swerving to-and-fro in avoidance of the endless stream of combatants.

Ignoring the fodder, Svalinn made its way to the puppeteer, slamming itself squarely into the Shaman from behind, lodging tightly onto the gaping mouth across his back, and as a final touch secured itself with a set of golden chains conjured from the ephemeral. The curious creatures from the underworld were left pounding on the metallic face in vain, as the gateway thereafter was shut from further invasion. A bellicose hiss vocalized the Demon's annoyance, and an extra pair of arms emerged from behind, trying desperately to pry the shield out.

Seeing this unease, Freyr jumped back into action. Through nigh suffocation, he swung his blade right for Shimush's neck, only to find the Shaman's head shrink deep down into the shoulders. A vacuum stared back at the God, littered by short dominations of a blinking red pupil in the darkness. Freyr was not afforded even the

privilege to be unnerved, as a fist from the headless body sent him tumbling a dozen yards away, leaving him lying dazed on the dirt, with a dent on his new freshly dyed chest plate.

Asgardians are not one to let up, though. Offering no rest for the Shaman, Odin returned steadfastly into the skirmish, Gungnir tucked out front like a javelin. With a jab, he punctures through his hardy flesh on his stomach, exposing the singular eye that hid itself within for a mere second. Unknown whether out of threat or pride, Shimush's figure bloomed open a set of sinewy arms like petals surrounding his frame. Together they smother the Allfather in pools of gripping fingers, seizing his spear and entangling his armour. Before a shout from behind signaled his freedom, as a precise slash from the glowing Dainsleif eviscerated the thicket of limbs.

This time, both Freyr and Odin were at it. Trading blows with the Demon front and back, forcing his retreat to a dozen yards away. Panting, Odin stepped forward, aligning himself with his nephew.

"Still fine?" Odin queried.

"OF COURSE, MI'LORD!" Freyr roared across the field, a statement to the Shaman that he was not enervated one bit.

*

Geirvaor glanced down at the shield in her hands. A round piece of silver, barely bigger than her waist, and visibly scratched by what she could only deduce were claw marks of some hellish spawn. It bore the insignia of a lion, whose snout has grown deformed through years of wear. The shield was generously lent by one of the heroes called down as reinforcement. Geiravor could recall clearly her kind smile, along with a confident thumbs-up. While the Valkyrie appreciated the gesture very much so, but now holding the shield in her hands, and knowing full well her duty to come. 'It certainly felt lighter... and smaller... and less *divine* than Svalinn,' she thought to herself.

"Are you sure it'll work with this?" Geiravor asked tentatively.

"It should. We'll just need more *grit* from your end." Shango reassured with a pat on her shoulders.

"How *much* more grit?" She replied unconvinced.

"You'll do fine!" He answered, and turned to the others before more doubt could be verbalized. "Right, we're all set on the maneuvers, right?"

"AYE!" came in unison from both Brynhildr and Thor.

"Heaven help me..." Geiravor hugged the third rate shield to her chest.

"It was THE darkest experience of Asgardian history. Yet, being there, the distraught wouldn't hit you at all! No weeping, nor tears, nor shrieks of anger. Instead, what gripped every one of us was a disbelief that barricaded senses and reason, it felt impossible... no, it WAS impossible for Valhalla to be destroyed. We learnt two very costly lessons that day. That the age of deities were over, and that the insanity of Demons knows no bounds."

"It's not just Asgard, Hel. It RIPPLED throughout the lands, from Babylon to Bharat. A single moment, immortalized in divine history... it feels wrong to romanticize it, but we sometimes we can't help but squeeze out pitiful moral lessons out of the rubbles of destruction, can we?"

"I guess we look for any opportunity to rationalize, even for the most unthinkable, unforeseeable events. For me, though, I'd like to treat it as a nightmare that's passed. 'But all the same, shame is shame', that's one of Odin's sayings. I don't think anyone in the pantheon would ever sleep soundly at night until Sheol is utterly eradicated.

Heh, y’know, Njorun, our Goddess of slumber and dreams perished that day in the attack. Sometimes, I think that’s why none of us can sleep well.”

“In such paroxysms, it is easy to direct our emotions toward vengeance... even when the best course of action, is to rebuild, and simply wait for the Demons’ gamble to catch up!”

“Exactly!”

*

Friday

Mid Evening

Shango's gauntlets buzzed in the thrill of hand-to-hand combat, tickled by the sensation only pure, enchanted metal could feel as fist clashed against fist. The Asgardians, more fiery than before, had cleaned out the area of obstacles, now surrounded their singular foe finally committed to an all out exchange. Orchestrating an assail from all sides, the Gods flowed across the field in a single mind, shifting into positions that catered each of their sizes and arsenals. Yet, with each slash, stab and pummel by the Gods, they were returned with equal intensity by the Ancient Demon.

The battle elevated to a comic performance of divine and fiendish prancing. Moving at vicious speeds, a blinding barrier of mirages was veiled upon them, disturbed often by a fighter who tumbled out after facing a rather intense blow, only to jump back in with doubled zeal. The Gods lingered on in the battle by stringently commanding the scraps of willpower they have left. As minute old wounds dry up swiftly in the turbulence, and new wounds ooze out every second, all of them knew to hold their sights steadfastly on the fiend, for any lack of focus would plunge them into irrecoverable stupor. One by one, they strike with the synergy of chess pieces trying to corner a lone queen.

With the pressure of fleeting time and energy, Shango's psyche was edging towards the precipice of agitation. He applied his full effort in searching for an opening in Shimush, lamenting the knowledge that anything less than perfect precision would result in failure. Pupils cavort to-and-fro in a frenzy, scanning the expressions on his allies for the signals of confident preparedness. Odin returned a look that told everything it needed... Brynhildr nodded... and Thor's voice was muffled under the palm of the Demon... and so another tussle commenced to free the God of Thunder from his clutches.

Again! This time, Thor stood alert, though, noticeably disheveled... Odin gave the same look... Freyr huffed out a grunt of agreement... and Brynhildr was just pounced upon by Shimush out of a moment's distraction, initiating another furious jostle that lasted a tiring minute. One, final time. Shango thought while panting. Odin with the slightly wavered, unwavering look... Tho's eyes widened... Freyr's grunt dropped an octave... and Brynhildr gritted her teeth so hard they seem about to snap.

"Right, NOW!"

Shango leapt forth, casting common sense to the wind as all experienced warriors learn to do. He entrusts his safety to the hands of the Asgardians. And as his gauntlets emit with sparks that ran across its surface like hunting lions, Shango drew the Shaman into a head-on confrontation of fists. But in his approach, a multi-armed horror appeared before him, enshrouding the singular, malefic eye out of view. Each finger brandished a nail fatally sharp, enclosing upon the Yoruba God at all fronts. Shango swallowed a creeping nervousness, and closed his eyes, praying to the Heavens that his faith in his allies were validated.

And lo, the entanglement of limbs cleared away in an instant. Disintegrating into finely thin chunks, as the whirlwind of logic rending slashes by Dainsleif took over. In the chaos of trinkling flesh, a punch connected from Shango, then two, then a dozen! The impacts reverberated the earth, leaving spreads of darkened dents on Shimush's torso, the first onslaught that has visibly shaken the hitherto nigh invulnerable fiend.

And with a wounded body and pride, Shimush attempted to return in kind. Out came his tongue of serpents, leaking venomous drool when they curled above the Yoruba God's head, ready to constrict. But just like before, the assault was foiled, as the lively knots of snake were lit ablaze by the slashes from Skofnung, which Brynhildr wielded with delight. Its immortal flames race up the sodden tubes of flesh-beasts, forcing Shimush's swift act in severing his own tongue to quell the spread to himself. Forestalled at every measure, the Gods goaded the Shaman into accepting the one on one confrontation with Shango.

Now, standing toe to toe, their bodies recognized immediately the habits of the other. And the martial exchange grew fearsome in the matter of seconds. A frenzy of jabs, followed by a frenzy of blocks. The two bartered blows to their blind spots. With his speed enhanced from the heat of battle, Shango just managed to scrap together an upper hand. Throwing a decisive punch to the Demon's gut, he sent Shimush into a stagger, while holding back the suffering from his own dislocated fingers. At this shortest moment of imbalance, out came the manomano iku, exuding a dimness that swallowed vision. A small, potent pellet, pirouetting in the palm of his gauntlet.

With all his might he launched it! Overcoming an unnatural resistance from an atmosphere unwilling to accept such a fearsome force. He sent it barrelling down at the Shaman, whose pupils expanded with alacrity at the familiar sight. Pulling himself together at last, he made a grotesque maneuver of twisting his back inside out, and bending himself to a quarter his size, narrowly dodged the lightning ball's path. But as if he did not just barely escaped his defeat, as if fatalities were routine, Shimush twisted himself back to his menacing frame to continue his barrage of assaults with redoubled ferocity.

Geiravor stood at a safe distance away, watching her friends get outmaneuvered at every opportunity. As someone conditioned to despise idleness, her mind raced restlessly with ire. And in her usual fashion, she directed the anger foremost at herself. For being too young to be experienced, yet too trained to be reckless. Mulling over these galling insecurities, she tried to calm her nerves through the militant breathing exercises instilled since young. With an inhale, followed by a prolonged pause... then an exhale...

Inhale... pause... but then her exercise was cut short by a sudden siege of instincts! A paradoxical sight appeared before her, where brightness and blackness blend in perfect harmony. Geiravor knew her mission had commenced, yet she did not anticipate the weight of her responsibilities. Manomano iku crashed into the shield, sinking the plate forcibly into her abdomen, where it threatened to puncture right through. The young Valkyrie panted aghast at the gyrating ball of lightning, whose outburst of hostile energy was syphoning her mind of precious memories bit by bit.

Having tussled with the likes of countless titans, the limits of organic strength was intuitively clear to her. And the forces wielded by this singular ball of darkness, is not mustered by anything living nor earthly. Though she dwarfed the manomano iku a dozen times over, in her imagination, she felt shrunken to a size where the disparity between it and her was large enough to conjure lunacy. It only takes an instance of rationality in a warrior to slip into sluggishness, and her mission promptly faded from consideration. All faculties, instead, became preoccupied by the objective to merely survive.

Her right leg jolted, repeatedly shoving the shield to change its angle. And after thorough exertion, gargling on beads of sweat that trickled into the mouth, she finally sent the ball sprawling upwards, where it perforated a straight and clean tunnel within the clouds. Having been left with a psychic trauma, the Valkyrie sought to recover by dropping to her knees, ceding herself to the motions of an erratic fit of panting.

"Nice effort Geiravor! But make sure to AIM it next time!" Shango yelled, as he tried to break out of a rabid grapple.

The comment miffed Geiravor slightly. Frankly, she'd rather deal with aggressive, rather than passive-aggressive. But as soon as she snapped out of it, she stood up more alert than ever, patiently awaiting the next attempt.

But more so than traumatize the Valkyrie, that shot of manomano iku planted a ruinous seed of doubt in the Yoruba God. A steady faith in the Asgardians was tried by a shivering relatisation. Hitherto, he had not noticed just how much his kin back home cushioned the feeling of anxiety when facing one such as Shimush. Thrusted into the daunting position of leader, his duty before the Ancient Demon was no longer just to listen and act... but to outsmart. A new universe's worth of knowledge about warfare, combat and tactics suddenly unveiled itself, and Shango found himself thoroughly lost. Stuck in a quandary of finite trump cards, and an unprepared wing to deliver it, panic overtook him.

How fatal the sin of distrust is, when it befouls the humble spirit into embracing egoism. Embroiled in the bedlam of a final stand, and irked by wounds one must remember to forget, the Asgardians vanished from Shango's perspective. And delusion laid the burden of vanquishing Shimush alone on his back. Before he knew it, manomano iku was called out from his gauntlets, which was starting to show signs of a splinter at the fingertips. He watched as Shimush pranced back-and-forth, staving off some invisible foes. Following his steps meticulously, Shango awaited for that small break up in gait, the shortest occurrence of a dodder... and he struck!

Lunging forth with a violent thrust, he shot his second monamona iku, and the rush of air cleared also cleared away the cloudiness of isolation, which led to his realization of what he'd done. Because between his path to the Demon, stood Thor, who the destructive ball now barreled at full speed towards! The outrageous blunder was only salvaged by Thor's keen surveyance of his peripheral. Spotting the threat, he twirled Mjolnir up to his shoulders, and split into the stance of a batsman in a game of bat-and-ball. Matching the manomano iku might for might, the Asgardian slammed the hammer into the lightning ball, and instead of smothering it, stimulated its potency and sent the shot towards the vicinity of Geiravor, in one swift motion that betrayed not an ounce of struggle.

"Oi, Shango, ye trying ta take me heed aff?"

Thor laughed away the Yoruba God's misjudgment. A compassion which served to deepen the compunction in his new friend. Enough for Shango to apply a firm slap across his own cheeks as punishment. And thereafter, he vowed that his fate would be irreversibly linked to those of the Asgardian, in victory and in demise.

*

"What makes someone a Goddess, and what makes someone a Valkyrie?" Bayani queried.

"Lineage." Hel answered curtly.

"So, blood and royalty?"

"Exactly... in the olden times of Asgard, there was a lot more talks of purity in Godhood. A pantheon member had to possess fully divine parentage. So, when a demi-God or demi-Goddess was born, they became trapped in a dilemma of being too above the humans, yet too beneath the Gods. The compromise, then, was the 'Valkyries', where the 'unpure' demi-Goddesses was inscribed as an elite battalion, fighting for Asgard's cause."

"And what of the demi-Gods?"

"Left to do what they do best... journeying on voyages and adventures to be written in epics!"

"How *typical*!" Bayani stared in disbelief.

"Heh, I'm half kidding! Let's not look at it in such bad faith... Mimir actually told me quite an interesting interpretation of why there are no male Valkyries..."

"Oh, *do* tell."

"Hmm... okay, so, imagine that in the olden eras, when demi-Gods are mostly born from affairs between Gods and humans. Many demi-Gods were most likely to be raised among the humans, right. Well, the humans weren't always fair when it came to sexes, that much we know. Mortal men are raised to pursue greatness, while mortal women were raised to support that pursuit. Of course, things *have* improve slightly at least..."

“Ahh, I see your point now!”

“Yes, the Valkyries, then, was a way of alleviating the demi-Goddesses potentially doomed to the roles of homemakers and housewives.”

“So, what does the Valkyries stand for, today?”

“So, after the fall, there was no more room for purity or impurity. If you have divine blood under the Asgardian empire, you are kin. And the Valkyries have just become the highest level of ranking within the Asgardian military, which ALL pantheon members are required to rise up from.”

“All? Even you?”

“Well... not *us*... who’ve been here before the fall, but the new generation. You’ve seen Thrud, Thor’s daughter? She’ll have to go into Valkyrie training eventually. Oh, and the Norn sisters, too, you’ve met Urd! They’ll be going in a few years.”

“How long does it take to rise up the ranks then?”

“Ooh, decades if you’re lucky... Gondul’s been stuck as a lieutenant for twelve years! Although... there are sometimes... *outliers*. Someone seemingly born to conquer the ranks of a Valkyrie.”

Hel shot a glance at the raging battlefield before them, and Bayani did not even have to trace the pupils to sense who she was looking at. Prodigies always have a way of standing out, after all. Together, they focused on the lone figure, apparently bracing herself for a fast-approaching danger that unveiled itself only in flickers of visibility for the pair.

“Is it her?” Bayani asked.

“It is, indeed... our very own Geirvaor the gifted.”

What isolates the gifted from the average? Many try, in vain, to give a satisfying solution to this question. Ask the gifted themselves, and they will blather out ambivalent strings of nonsense hoping you’d leave them alone. Fated performance? Inborn talent? Unmeasurable potential? No soul knows what defines the gifted... yet, intuitively, we are sure of it when we witness one. Because in truth, the gifted cannot be surmised by a singular quality. They are intelligent, sedulous, brave, generous, or ruthless only when the times call for them to be. Very ironically, the essence of being gifted, is simply to be more generalist than the general, owing to the paradoxical situation that the average is often less than average in many things.

Incidentally, Geiravor has always loathed the word ‘expert’, disdained it especially when the label is attached to herself by others. For her, the word was reserved for the select few who enshrined themselves as idols in her mind since youth. Thor, and only Thor can be an expert in hammers, and Odin, only Odin, can be the connoisseur of spears. What is she, the lowly Valkyrie, next to these titans? But like many in her position, she is blind to her own extraordinary ability, an ability that is always unknowingly impressing itself to those who have made the effort to befriend her. Perhaps not fittingly described with the label of ‘expert’, but is deserving of an epithet even greater.

Geiravor, of the Valkyries, is a genius, in every sense of the word. A genius, to whom no skill is beyond the grasp of mastery. A genius foreign to the concept of foreignness. Time and time again, she has proven it so by conquering every new weapon, art and technique sent her way. And now, she was on the brink of mastering manomano iku. Unable to overpower its strength, she went for a compromise, having deciphered the angle at which manomano iku was best manipulated. A forty-five-degree slant to the right, with pressure applied an inch below the centre. Procedures intuitively devised from just one deadly encounter.

And when came the second impact, equanimity reigned supreme. Rather than let it barge in like before, Geiravor took charge, stepping forth to welcome its embrace. The booming clatter sounded half angelic and half demented. Manomano iku consigned the Valkyrie a choice: to convert its might for justice, or let it run savagely wild. Hearing this ethereal soliloquy from the destructive sphere of energy, Geiravor knew that the decision rested solely on willpower, and not on strength. She exerted every fibre of her being, and then some... straining veins to a frenzy to be felt weeks to come...

Sensing the winds of triumph, the rest of Asgardians equipped themselves with diligence in excess. Their tactics suddenly grew bold and fierce, ensnaring Shimush into a specific recess of the battlefield. Here, the air was thick with unease, as it lay exposed to the whims of an otherworldly force. Throwing thoughts of pride and glory to the wind, the Asgardians pulled their might to restrain the Shaman, taking every moment of his immobility as victory. When nearing finality, every battle enters a paradoxical stage, where desperation more often prevails over sheer power. And this disorderly attempt at restraining the Demon worked to perfection.

Just in time for the young Valkyrie to gather the last bit of determination required. With a roar, she repelled manomano iku, and sent it blasting off from the shield's surface, echoing a space-bending ululation as it did. Time trickled to a turtle's pace, as the Gods and the Demon struggled with abated breaths. Manomano iku loose on its unalterable path, its visage voracious like a pouncing predator. In a rare moment of poetry, the Shaman appeared helpless. And like prey, it squirmed for an escape, oblivious to mortal notions of cowardice... and lo, at this stage of battle, desperation prevails...

It happened in an instant, too quickly to register a sound. Shimush abandoned its sinewy body to the lightning, preserving the head that housed his vital, singular eye. The lightning of Death seized the body in a crippling hold, torching the veins into a deep shade of violet, that would have eviscerated its functions in totality thereafter. The collision emitted a spark that carpeted the area in flashes of whiteness, spanning a mile in length, blinding the bystanders. While the detached head crawled on the earth, using its sets of insectile prolegs, morphed out of some remnant flesh and bones.

For the next five seconds, time trickled to a standstill, thoughts raced at incredible speed. The Gods blinked away the dazedness in their eyes, readied their weapons for hunting. And the loose head shuffled its tiny legs in preparation for flight. Each knew their objectives well: the Gods to obliterate the demonic head, and the Shaman to escape certain death. To defeat, and to survive, two objectives pitted against each other in excess within Nature. Yet, it is a conflict never tiring to witness. Both parties act as if they were granted total agency, which to those wise to the ways of the universe, can only be a delusion. But one glance at the grit and determination blooming on their faces was enough to convince otherwise. When two sides believe in agency, a war becomes a battle of will instead of might.

