PRINCE BOOK

This book is a work of fiction. It not only contains names, characters, places, and events that are either entirely fictional, or which have been used in a fictitious manner, but takes place in a world adjacent to yours, where—among other things—many of your favorite celebrities are ambulatory animals, skeletons, mythical creatures, or have at least met a few in their time. Any resemblance to events in real life, locales, or persons living and dead are coincidental, and all gods and deities mentioned in this book are assuredly either real or not real, depending on how many pipe bombs you would like to leave in my mailbox.

Topics covered in this book are meant to be regarded with some suspension of disbelief, and the characters depicted within who are eccentrics, liars, cheats, murderers, and otherwise do not accurately represent the views of the author, no matter how much he admires them.

No offense is intended. Remember Hanlon's razor, "Never attribute to malice what could just as easily be attributed to ignorance."

With that said, I hope you enjoy this story as much as I do.

And if not, then please tell all your friends how awful it is and warn them not to read it.

I'm sure to get more readers that way.

CHAPTER 1: Black And White And Red All Over

One day in the middle of November, a letter was received by the people of Kaliningrad.

It was a rather uneventful day, with business going about as usual within the slums of the town—snow unrelentingly showered upon the stone-paved alleyways and laid heavy upon the ground like a thick white blanket. Grandmothers with gnarled fingers and warty skin stood hunched in the doorways of their houses, lined up along the sides of the streets, bundled in thick maroon cloth and watching their bright-faced children laughing and forming snowballs. The kids laughed and bent down, packing the snow into tight clumps and tossing them at whoever they could find.

None were spared from their onslaught.

The bulky costermonger with a cart full of strawberries and crabapples, who had steadfastly stood outside in the cold with nothing but his apron the previous night just to prove to his drinking buddies that Russians could withstand anything, his right hand scarred from many years spent daring people to games of five-finger filet.

Cranky old Mrs. Samoylov, the wife of a notary whose long and crinkled hands were nigh-constantly curled into an accusatory point as she furrowed her brow and insisted that her husband would be hearing about the neighborhood children's misdeeds. Mr. Samoylov, for what little time he spent with his wife, didn't seem to care much about her quibbles if the look on his face as she ranted and raved to him was any indication.

A local policeman, always on guard and standing stock-straight along the paved asphalt buried under white, who shuddered as another snowflake ran down the back of his uniform. He brushed the snow from his ruddy mustache, not letting it distract him from his duty of keeping the children safe.

The hearty local butcher, who supposedly had lost an eye in World War II, though many had their suspicions of the reason being otherwise.

The landlord with the pencil mustache who was terrified of balloons and refused to have them in his building.

The beautiful young woman from across the street, who everyone agreed only seemed to do the single act of brushing her hair in her front door's window all day.

The tailor. The official. The chief. The fisher, the storyteller, the author, the father, the son, the mother, the people. All people of the slums in the city of Kaliningrad, in the gloomy morning of the city, made what happiness they could with what little they had.

Then the clocks struck four.

Every resident suddenly received a letter, delivered by a postman only they could see and stamped with a green wax seal. Opened, haphazardly glued onto the paper within, was a menagerie of letters and symbols that made little sense upon first glance. Look closely, however, and a message would become clear.

“we are post men
we are send to collect fore post master general
letters is very trouble
do not squirm, little stamps
papa is here to take you home
return to sender”

Those who gazed upon the message saw their own eyes become little more than cut-outs, the glue keeping them onto their faces fading.

The words began to appear along the walls, along the floor, along the sky and along their minds.

The children started to cough up P’s and Q’s, one choking on an L.

Mrs. Samoylov started to speak, but she found her throat folded to nothing.

The policeman raised his baton, and with a touch, he was lost, his eyes glazing over and his grip loosening.

The dogs barked for the scent of their old master, the master they had before the world had come.

And the smell of newspaper pulp filled the air.

And the sound of folding paper invaded everyone’s ears.

And the message came.

The Dead Letter Gendarmerie were here to dispose of the mail.

Snowballs still littered the streets, degraded from their original and tightly-packed status to little more than lumps among the rest of the snow…but there was nothing. The locale was utterly deserted. The stores were empty. The homes were empty. All were empty, and scattered across the roads, deep gashes were visible that one had to avoid stepping on. The cold rush of the biting Russian wind swirled through the alleys like a ghostly mourn, moving little more than the air and a few scraps of residual paper.

And yet, despite this desolation, one man still remained outside. He let out a heavy and frustrated sigh, digging into his coat’s pocket and retrieving a small silver locket. Opening it, within was a photograph of a smiling young woman in a headscarf, as well as a watch. The time read five in the afternoon, much later than he would have liked this to have been over and done with. His stomach growled, and he put a hand to its ample surface as he looked around, murmuring to himself in Russian.

“(...Where…has everybody gone? Is five in afternoon. There should be many out and about, is past rush hour, so everyone would be at shops getting ingredients.)”

He trudged along the path, snow crunching under his leather shoes as he turned a corner, quirking a thick eyebrow and craning his neck. The butcher’s shop appeared entirely abandoned, the door left wide open and creaking in the wind. Snow began to track inside…but, he could see that the meat remained inside. He gave a sigh of relief.

"(Well…I am at least glad butcher's stock is still there. Wild animals must have not gotten to it yet. Was there some kind of disaster in town while I was busy with work? I assume someone would tell me if there was…or, I would see bodies.)"

Another growl from his stomach reminded him of the primary reason why he wanted to get to the butcher's in the first place: he wanted a fresh raw steak to cook for dinner. Ducking his way into the establishment and kicking a bit of the snow that had tracked itself inside, he turned to the meat itself. Hung sloppily on hooks were hocks of skinned lamb, and stacked behind that, packed in ice, were all manner of beef, pork, and chicken slabs. No owner, no customers, no one. The place was well and truly deserted, just as it seemed like the rest of the town was…he was used to it being relatively empty. Kaliningrad had never been the most populated of cities, after all: Russia kept a stranglehold on the territory after the Soviet Union collapsed, and as a result, most Germans were evicted, and many German buildings were closed down in favor of more Russian architecture. As such, it essentially became Volgograd lite—in his opinion, it was little more than another miserable town that elbowed out another country's culture to establish its own. He took off his coat and hung it on the inside of the door, entering the abandoned establishment.

Regardless of such thoughts, the fact that he wasn't even seeing people fearfully peeking out of their windows was something that struck him as odd. With his reputation, business owners would go out of their way to greet him, and children would often run up to him and ask him all manner of gruesome questions…but whether he would answer them or not would be a personal choice. He brushed a bit of the ice off of a particularly good-looking slab of meat, peering at it with a discerning look and turning it over in his coarse hands with a delicate touch.

…Then, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed something peculiar.

A litany of words started to creep along the green-and-white-tiled floor stained with dried blood from the meat, snaking along like a collection of worms, slithering in flat helix shapes across the pattern. He whipped around as fast as he could, pressing himself up against the back of the space behind the counter and holding the steak he had close, as if he would use it for protection.

"W-What…what is this? Words? English words?"

The mass of swirling phrases, when it wasn't illegible due to many layering on top of one another, consisted almost entirely of postal words and phrases: "STAMP", "DEAD LETTER", "PACKAGE", "WRONG ADDRESS", "INSUFFICIENT POSTAGE"...and most commonly, "RETURN TO SENDER", all in the same black Courier New text, as if being frantically sputtered out of a neurotic typewriter word-vomiting. He tried to back up further, but his head hit one of the racks of meat hung up, causing him to spout a "chert voz'mi!" and knocking the meat to the floor with a resounding thud.

Advancing still on him, he was forced to throw the steak he held in his hands at the mass in the vain hope that it would do something to prevent their approach. When the brick of beef hit the floor, however, the word-snakes effortlessly parted around the frozen meat, creating a split

stream like a river running over a rock. Gritting his teeth, he opened his hand and held it up in front of him, closing his eyes as he began to think…

…But his thoughts were unseemingly interrupted by the sound of heavy footprints and the invading scent of a printing press, the stink of ink and pulp invading his nose and squirming into his brain. Opening one eye, he saw that the words had stopped. Not only that, but they had begun to tremble. He whipped his head to the side, and saw a massive figure in silhouette lumber past the butcher-shop doors. Swallowing coldly and surrounded by words, there was no choice but to watch what would enter.

Its entrance was preceded by a low and rustling voice that crunched and crackled as though it ran through a speaker before reaching the air.

"PACK-CK-CKAGE DELIVERYYYY…"

The monstrous source of such a message stepped through, revealing its hulking size. It was humanoid in shape, but it was not made of flesh nor stone—instead, it was composed head-to-toe with paper, envelopes and packages, stamps and tape, its head of bowl-cut hair being nothing more than a shutter of envelopes. There was no muscle mass, and yet its arms were brawny and its chest was broad, addresses and sentimental messages plastered carelessly across its body. Even the simple red postman's uniform it wore, with a brown leather satchel over its shoulder, seemed as though it would rip with any sudden movement. Its eyes, if it had any, were hidden by the convex lip of an envelope, kept shut by a red wax seal that stuck slightly above its stoic and unmoving mouth. The monogram upon it was unable to be discerned.

His breath hitched in his throat as he looked up at the creature. It had to be over ten feet tall, and if he had to bend down to enter the butcher shop in the first place, this…*thing*, it nearly took up the whole room.

"...W-What…are you…?"

It stared down at him, and though there was no pupil, he could feel the wax seal staring down at him, scrutinizing him, seeing through to his very soul. And after what felt like an eternity of ogling, the humanoid thing stepped forward, the words around its feet scattering so as to not get trampled. The beast opened its satchel and dug within, seemingly looking for something.

It was here that he noticed that the satchel was dripping red, but if he hadn't noticed then, he would have certainly done so once the paper creature retrieved Mrs. Samoylov's severed head, holding it out to him. Her face was frozen in a terrified and horrific gape with her wide eyes and tongue covered by stamps, and blood dripped slowly from the severed trachea down to the floor like a leaky faucet. He covered his mouth and his blood ran cold, looking up at the beast as it produced a ballpoint pen and handed the two to him.

"WILL YOU S-S-S-SIIIIGN FOR THISSSS?"

He wrenched his eyes shut.

"...I SAID…W-WILL-WILL-WILL YOU SIGN FOR THIIIIS…?"

He clenched his fists.

After an expectant silence, after dropping the head onto the floor with an unceremonious splatter, the creature made a note on itself with the pen along its arm, making a memo.

"...PACKAGE FAILED TO TO TO DELIVER. MUST OBTAIN SUBSTITUTE PAAA PA PACKAGE."

Instead, it put an arm out and placed the heels of its feet together, opening its tightly-pursed mouth up wide, wider, wider and wider to show all the nibs that made up its teeth. Pointed and metal, gleaming red with…letter openers. That's what they were, they were letter openers. Then he knew why they were red. Unhinging its jaw and cocking its head back, letting out a guttural and content sound similar to a thoughtful hum, one of the teeth firing forwards. It didn't disconnect from its jaw, rather extending as though being fed through from the back with the force of a bullet. It just barely grazed the tip of his left ear, jamming itself into the back wall with a shattering splitting noise that showed the very air being cut. A small gust came from the motion, and cracks spiderwebbed from the impact point. He nearly barfed up his heart, but turning to flee, he found another letter-opener tooth, dripping with viscera, stopping his advance. He was now stuck, a barrier on both sides of his head.

The being's head reared back, and with an animalistic and primal screech, it opened its envelope, the inside of the lip reading only three words.

"Return To Sender".

Stuck on both sides, he took a deep breath through his nose and raised both of his hands in front of him, preparing for something as he grit his teeth and braced himself…

…But that impact never came.

In fact, when he opened his eyes again, he saw that the beast's envelope had closed once more, and its attention had turned to the large hock of meat that had fallen on the floor just a few scant minutes earlier. It caught his gaze as well, as—oddly enough for a long-dead chunk of beef—it appeared to be moving. Not just moving. Throbbing. Gyrating, as though something wriggled inside…

All too suddenly, a gash appeared along its top, and the rainbow spewed out.

Heaps of billowing and swirling globs of color, cherry-red and lemon-yellow, lime-green and orange-orange, purples and pinks and magentas and turquoises and lavenders all twisting, writhing, passing through one another and spreading at the ceiling as the pulpy and overbearing scent of ink was overtaken by that of tutti-frutti and expensive perfume…as within the clouds, obscured into little more than a shadow by what could have only been described as the color-fumes, a lithe figure erupted from the meat. They pulled their upper body out, then one foot, then the other, ultimately reaching full standing height with a stretch. As they opened their mouth to speak, an effeminate, lilting Londoner accent emerged.

"Haaaahhh, gads, did it *stink* in there. Honestly, you would think that since the meat's been frozen, anything that would have made a bit of mank stench would have gotten itself iced over as well, but apparently I was mistaken. Rare thing, honestly."

They turned to look at the man being attacked, and gestured with a hand as the smoke dissipated.

Now fully visible, they appeared as a fair-skinned and rather thin young man with downturned ice-blue eyes adorned with fake eyelashes along the bottom, a pointed nose that

aimed towards the floor like a lowered weapon, and a wide grin full of pearly-white teeth that was capped off by purple lipstick on his thin lips. His eyebrows were thin as lines, meticulously shaped no doubt, and two brass studs adorned the outer edge of his right one. His chin, while not pronounced, had a more feminine curve to it, and his ears were partially covered by a shock of tightly-curled frizzy red hair that almost appeared to be numerous shades at once.

As for his dress, it was both a miracle and completely expected that the seizure of colorful clouds had obfuscated his appearance: he was dressed extremely garishly, after all. Most prominently, a long and thickly-padded blue coat covered his arms and hung down to halfway down his thighs, rimmed with white fluff and its unchanging line-covered surface covered in delicately swirling and twirling silver-foil arabesque. No matter his position, the blue pattern within always seemed to remain the same, giving a slightly dizzying effect to any watchers. With this, he wore circular-lens rose-tinted glasses with wire frames, a long scarf patterned in harlequin diamonds of red, black, blue, green, and yellow, a wooly green baja jacket covered in ruddy stepped-fret designs, and a blindingly, overwhelmingly indefatigable pink miniskirt rimmed with corks on strings showing off his red-hair-specked legs. Red high heels covered his feet, and his long nails were painted in red as well. Over his head, curiously enough, hung a gnarled and twisted crown of thorns that gave off a small glow, always producing blood as it dripped onto his head and onto the floor.

However, the description wouldn't be complete without mentioning the first thing most would notice upon seeing him for the first time: The endlessly complex, labyrinthine, Gordian tattoo that covered the left side of his face. It was filled to the brim with all manner of patterns, all manner of colors and packed to the fullest with eastern-inspired horror vacui layers and spirals, almost shifting and turning of its own volition. It invaded his face like some sort of skin condition, and even with every other tacky article of clothing he had on, it was impossible to miss.

The odd man puffed his cheeks out and brushed himself off, checking his nails as he looked up at the postal golem.

"Don't you worry, love, your mother's got this."

The one who was being attacked in the first place, however, was utterly gobsmacked by this strange person's sudden appearance. A million questions ran through his head, but the first one was that he certainly wasn't his mother, or anyone's mother for that case. Still, the colorful man in the coat brushed his thumb against the side of his nose and looked up at the golem with his hands on his hips, cocked slightly to one side.

"Well well well, what have we got here? Some muscly omi who thinks he can get what he wants just by flaunting his status, hm? You lot never change. Big, lumbering galoots who swear up and down that they're just following orders. Well, I've got a message for that postmaster general of yours: Don't mess with royalty, because you mi—"

His smarmy speech was interrupted by a letter-opener tooth heading his way. Effortlessly, he reached a hand into his coat and pulled out an object resembling a wok made of cast iron, though he lifted it like it was nothing. With a resounding sound, the tooth hit the plate head-on and

cracked along a clean and diagonal slice, falling to the ground before melting into the floor. He made a small raspberry.

“Pthbbt. Now really, didn't your parents or your caretaker or whoever’s got the naff clevie your sorry arse somersaulted out from teach you manners? Don’t interrupt a lady, especially when she’s about to kill you.”

As he stepped forward, some of the words that had remained on the ground suddenly launched themselves towards him, coiling around his legs and starting to worm their way beneath his skin, debossing into the pale flesh. He didn't seem worried, however, and instead performed a high-kick to fling all the words away from him, stomping on the rest with his high heels and smashing the tray into the floor as though he were killing ants.

“Gah, rrgh, pesky phraseworms, off! Off, you little monsters! I’ve got enough tattoos as is, I don’t need some tacky ‘Miss You Mama’ schlock grafted along my lallies!”

With each hit or stomp, the phraseworms broke into wordworms, then into letterbugs, then into nothing but sentence fragments. They weakly formed into the word “SOREY”, and two O’s and a C made a sad face beside it, before they melted into ink. Black and red mixed on the tile floor, and he threw the dish away as he clapped his hands past one another and stepped towards the golem.

“That takes care of your little pets, hun, but unfortunately we’ve still got your big self to deal with. Let’s do us both a favor and make this a quick one, eh? I’ve already sent most of your mates back to their senders, and you’re the last straggler I’ve got to take care of here. I could do without you terrorizing what few good omis are left here.”

The postal creature pointed down at him, stepping backwards in fear.

“...Y Y YOU YOU ARE P THE L LOR PRIN THE YOU WH”

“Oh, would you pipe down already? It isn’t like you can say anything I haven’t heard before.”

Screeching, it lunged at him with both arms outstretched. Deftly, however, the feminine man dropped to the floor and did a lunge of his own, rolling on the floor between its legs and popping up just as quickly, twirling on his heel and leaping into the air to grasp onto the beast’s shoulders. It stared down at its hands, confused as to why they were empty for a few short seconds, before feeling the weight on its back and reaching behind itself to try and shake its assailant off. He clung to it, however, no matter how much it spun around trying to reach behind itself, his hands digging into the paper skin.

“Rrgh—do you know how hard it is to do this in high heels, you big ape?! It would be extremely difficult if I hadn’t been wearing them half my life! Now stand still while I finish things up…and stop moving, for Pete’s sake! You’ll only make it hurt worse!”

He snuck a hand back into his coat and produced a sheet of unique triangular stamps, all with the same image on them: a simple and childlike drawing of outer space. Peeling one off with his teeth and licking it, he managed to place one over the wax seal on the golem’s face. Immediately, the creature stopped moving, freezing in place as if it were nothing more than a statue. He slid down its back and let out a huff before skipping around its feet and looking up at its head.

“Right…see? Now how hard was that? Ahem.”

His hands were put together, and he closed his eyes.

“May it be your will, Papa Legba, lead your children in peace and direct their steps in peace, for they are lost with no destination. Open the gate for me, Papa Legba, Atibon Legba. Open the gate for me, Papa, so that I may pass, and when I return, I shall thank the loa.”

He recited it from heart, but without passion—he had clearly done it many, many times before, and by now it was more of a process than an event. Following the prayer, there was half a second of nothing, before a set of tall gates emblazoned with a complex sigil appeared in a wisp of bright green smoke behind the golem. Without any hesitation, the man shoved the golem into the doors. They both creaked open with the sound of crackling fire and a dog barking violently, and the postal-patterned beast fell backwards into nothing, where it belonged. The doors immediately evaporated into green smoke once more, and the man who had summoned them stared at where they once were for a second before sighing and bending down with his hands on his knees.

“Haaaaahhh, bloody hell, that should be the last of them…”

The man stood back up straight and clapped, turning to the other.

“Sorry ‘bout that, love. The Dead Letter Gendarmerie are always a cod sort. Big ol’ hunks of pulp and cheesy headlines they are, and the Phraseworms they bring along aren’t much better. I would hope they didn't scratch…your…handsome…”

As he fully took in who he was talking to, his sentence trailed off, and he tilted his head up to come eye-to-eye with the man.

He was an undoubtedly massive and bulky middle-aged Russian man with ashy skin, a thick beard, a head of black hair swept to one side, and tired eyes under thick eyebrows, looking down at him. An aquiline nose stuck out above a parted chevron mustache, and as evidence of his age, a prominent Frankenstein’s Bride-esque white streak ran diagonally down from his hair, through his eyebrows and mustache, to his beard. A scar crossed through his right eye and finished between his eyebrows, and shaky red spiral-shaped irises focused on the red-haired fellow.

The Russian was dressed quite formally, in a quite form-fitting brown suit (which appeared to have some faint indiscernible stains across its sleeves) worn over a grey undershirt with a red bowtie and with black leather shoes. The breadth of his suit didn't quite contain his portly frame, however, and so a portion of the undershirt was visible poking out.

He looked down at the other with a complicated expression—confused at his appearance, thankful for being saved, still in shock from the surreal nature of the whole event and not just how quickly it started, but how quickly it was over. Meanwhile, the red-head just stared up at him, and his eyes then scanned down the Russian’s whole body, tracing out the outline of his thick body with his eyes before glancing right back up at him and returning eye contact once again. That cheeky smile crept back onto his face as he placed an elbow on the butcher shop’s counter and placed his other hand on his hip.

“...Well, a-la-mo, who’ve we got here? My, I would have worked a bit harder if I knew I’d be saving such a bona omi as yourself. What’s your name, hun?”

Remaining silent, his brow furrowed and he lowered his sweating palms from where they had been practically glued to the wall behind him, letting out a small sigh of relief. Thankfully, he seemed to no longer be in danger, and he brushed himself off.

"Ah…well, um. Thank you for saving me from large newspaper golem, strange colorful person. I do apologize, I am still not entirely fluent in English…what is this 'bonah ohmee' you said I was?"

"Oho, I'm the one who should be apologizing, love. Sometimes I forget not everyone knows Parlyaree[1] like I do. I'm saying you're one handsome fellow, and that's the cut of that…unless perhaps you object, hm?"

He blushed and put his hands up, his intimidating countenance dissolving as he nervously smiled and showed his large teeth.

"E-Er, no, no, I do not object, I was…am, just confused. But, I get ahead of myself. Ahem."

One of his hands, coarse and rough and yet surprisingly delicate-looking, was extended out.

"Rodion Nikolayev. Is very nice to meet you."

The red-head just grinned up at him, dropping his elbow on the counter and taking Rodi's hand in his own, looking it over for a second and rubbing the creases with his thumb before turning it to view his palm.

"Let's see here…an earth hand, with prominent Apollo and Saturn mounds…a straight head line, quite deep and long heart and life lines…and your fate line is long and unbroken. The logical and rational sort who can keep a cool head under pressure, a life with plenty of experience where you value your relationships deeply…and a long, eventful past and future. Aren't you an intriguing one!"

He giggled, and Rodion gently tugged his hand back, slightly uncomfortable with the other not letting go.

"...Uh, what are you doing?"

"Palmistry, also known as chiromancy! Some folk say the lines and mounds of your hand can help you predict your whole future and read your whole past. I once knew a cove of mine who only needed a second, and they could assess another's entire past from nothing but a glance. They were the one that taught me all that sort of nonsense…'course, then they got into hot water when they started noticing criminals and thieves out on the street just by looking at their palms. Last I remember, they were still holed up in their little tent with their gloves sewn to their wrists so that they never reveal their own future…but enough about me."

[1] Polari, the cant of the LGBT crowd in some parts of Great Britain. A glossary will be provided at the end of the book.

A red-nailed finger poked the center of his palm.

"I was simply checking to see if you and I would be compatible, love! Can't say I've looked at my own palms in a while, but from what I remember…you and I must be a perfect match!"

"...When was the last time you checked, then?"

"That's the thing, dear, I don't much remember. Might have been a bit dizzy that night after the show. Quite fun to think about though, isn't it? Besides, it gives me a bit of a chuckle every time I do it. You do know you're speaking to royalty, do you not?"

Rodion's eyes widened.

"R-Royalty? You sound British, so…are you part of royal family, with Elizabeth and Charles and…*chert*, what was his name…William?"

"Close but no cigar, love. I'm no member of a royal family, I make my own with whoever I've got. I haven't got a castle, but every seedy alleyway and backwash nightclub is my home. I haven't got any diplomatic powers, but I sure as hell can flirt my way into a handsome young man with a bulge in his pants' bedroom in ten minutes flat. To keep things simple…"

He turned Rodion's hand around once more so that the back was facing upwards, and gently kissed it.

"The Prince of Fuck All. The Prince to my friends. Charmed to meet you, Rodi."

~

The two of them exited the butcher's shop, walking down the ruined asphalt road. Rodion had put his coat back on and had his hands firmly tucked into his pockets, while The Prince remained as he was and walked backwards, checking his nails as he looked up at Rodi with half-lidded eyes.

"So…you are saying your name is Prince? And that is why you are royalty?"

"Not quite, love. The Prince of Fuck All is the only name I've got. So I figure, why not own it? It makes for an interesting signature, that's for sure."

"But then, why did your parents name you something so vulgar?"

"A tale for another time, love, a tale for another time. I could've had that drink, I could've talked a while, I would've done it right, I would've moved us on, but I didn't, and now it's aaaaall toooo laaaaate~"

As he sung, he twirled a bit and skipped over a rock. Rodion just raised an eyebrow and shrugged. If it was a story for another time, then it was a story for another time.

"Then, who were…what did you call them, the…Dead Letter…Gendarmerie?"

The Prince's twirling stopped, and he immediately got up on his toes to put his hand over Rodion's mouth and shush him, whispering harshly.

"(Shhh! Not so loud! There could still be agents prowling about…I'll tell you once we get somewhere safe. Talking about *them* out here, especially after an attack like that, could spell trouble with a capital F-U, to say the least.)"

He pried his hand away from his mouth.

"Alright, fine, fine, I will not talk about…whatever they were. But what happened to citizens? I saw heads in their bag, but…"

"Sorry to say, love, but I think it's a fair wager to say that a good portion of them are dead. And the chunk that weren't are likely far, far away by now. How many omis and palonies and everything in-between lived here?"

"...You are asking how many people lived here, correct?"

The Prince sighed and rolled his eyes.

"(Gads, I'll be here all day at this rate.) Yes, dear, yes I am. And I mean in this neighborhood in particular, not the rest of the place—I biked here, after all, and I saw folk living their lives freely just a scant few miles out from the borders."

"Hmmm…perhaps, 110 people?"

"Yeah, then likely 20 of them have kicked the bucket by now. And the other 90…well, that's to talk about later."

Rodion furrowed his brow, thinking about the loss of life, and looked up at the snow-filled air. It didn't smell like ink and paper pulp anymore, but those gashes in the road remained…and the town still felt so empty. They turned a corner, and not a single soul was visible down the alleyway. No children. No policemen. Nobody…

"...I must say, you're taking this surprisingly well."

He turned to The Prince.

"Hm?"

"You heard me, love, I said you're taking it quite well. Most laypeople would be on their knees practically catatonic from what went on. I would expect you to be the same way, no? Rather queer, I must say. Almost as if death doesn't quite affect you as it does most, hm?"

Immediately, Rodi went pale and his mouth tightly pursed itself, looking away.

"...W-Well…you see, I was—I am, a doctor of sorts, and—"

"A doctor! That explains matters quite well, doesn't it? You've probably seen plenty of stiffs in your time, sprawled out on the operating table all grey and starchy, hm?"

He let out a sigh of relief and smiled back at The Prince.

"That is indeed true. The life of a doctor is hard one. You help many people, but…you also cannot help many others. It requires much mental strength and fortitude."

"Yes, yes, what a troubling existence you must lead…now, how long before we reach your place? You said you were a doctor, so you must have quite a fantabulosa house, shouldn't you? Or, are we mincing to your office in some local hospital? (I've got a stiff I've been wanting to show you, myself…)"

Rodion stopped walking suddenly, with The Prince bumping into him as a result, and turned to one of the two stone walls that lined the pathway they had been traveling on, facing a prominent crack that snaked up from the ground to the rounded top.

"Ah—sorry about that. But, a little bit of both. My office, workplace, and home are the same place, you see. This is it."

He gestured to the crack in the wall.

The two of them shared a couple seconds of silence, staring at the crevice, before The Prince slapped Rodi on the back and scoffed.

"Pfft, did all the snow freeze your brain over, Rodi, hun? That's a crack in the wall. Don't tell me your version of medical care is pouring some soup over the open wound and pinching it shut with staples."

Rodion looked down at The Prince with an unimpressed expression as he dug into his pocket and pulled out both a small note-card, a vial of a red liquid, and a feather quill, uncorking the vial.

"I will ignore your lack of faith in me, Prince, and instead tell you that my room is *inside* the crack. You are familiar with magic, yes?"

The Prince raised his eyebrows, intrigued.

"Some time ago, I spent few years in St. Petersburg, studying esoteric magic. Perhaps you did not believe I was anything more than common citizen when you met me, but I do know quite a bit, myself. I do not usually share such things with people…"

"...During the '50s, when the Soviet Union was at its height, General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev outlawed the use of magic in Russia under the pretense that it was a Western invention."

"Exactly. You know your history, Prince. I had to study it in secret, and I was something of outlaw because of it…I hid in basement of Yusupov Palace, hiding my identity when going out to buy food by day, and thumbing through books by night. It was not enjoyable experience…but I did learn many things in those four years."

As he spoke, he dipped his quill into the red liquid, wrote on the blank notecard, and handed it to The Prince once he was finished. It read, in block letters, "ДРУГ". Curious, The Prince sniffed it, and picked up a recognizable, coppery scent. Blood. In fact, Rodion in general had the smell of blood on him.

"Love, what is this?"

"Think of it as passport. Without it, you cannot get in and out of my home. It is hermetically sealed using cloaking magic: completely invisible when it comes to using any of your senses…save for this crack here. Usually, it requires fresh blood of lamb to work properly, but I can use stored blood of lamb to write temporary passport. Is very, very old technique…used by Jews during the plagues to conceal their homes in biblical times. Just be sure to dispose of it afterwards—if you lose it, anyone can use it to enter as they wish. Keep it on your person."

"I see, I see…not a problem, though. Let me just tuck it in here…"

The Prince opened his blue-and-silver coat, carelessly chucked the ‘passport’ inside, and closed it once more, holding his hands up.

“Done! I’ll bet as much dinari as you’re willing to accept that nobody will be getting their strillers on it now.”

“...Is it not just in your coat?”

“Special coat, hun. It was a gift to me from my old man before he shuffled off this mortal coil—it acts as its own separate pocket dimension! I’ve got loads and loads of naff junk in there. We could spend the better part of 14 years looking through everything, and we still wouldn’t get halfway through it all.”

Rodion looked at the coat, then at The Prince’s eyes (who batted his eyelashes coyly), before murmuring out an ‘if you say so’ and reaching his hand into the crack. As it approached the crack, space-time itself seemed to flatten around it, his hand going from its usual three-dimensional self to a thinner, two-dimensional form. He reached it out further and further, and the flatness encroached up his arm, across his shoulder, waving across his head. His other hand grabbed The Prince by the collar.

“Come along now. Would not be good if someone saw us.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice, russki. Is this gonna hurt?”

“No, no. Is painless.”

“Ah, then that bellyache I’m feeling is just period cramps, is it?”

~

In less than a second, the two had finished their transition from the outside world to Rodi’s office. If there was one thing you could say about it, it was that you certainly couldn’t call it something other than classy. As they entered, the warm scents of bourbon and copper filled their noses, and a plush red carpet laid beneath their feet atop a delicately-waxed floor. Rodion took off his coat and placed it upon one of the arms of the coat rack, resting his hand on the handle of one of the umbrellas placed in the stand beside it as The Prince looked around.

The place was chock-full of not only medical instruments, walls of biological diagrams and lightly stained surgical tools lined up on cork-board pins like criminals lined up to be picked out by the victim, but a variety of unique alchemical tube-and-beaker combinations. Unidentifiable liquids, present in most laboratories regardless of owner, bubbles and fizzed inside beakers and bain-maries, retorts and distillers, crucibles and alembics, all manner of brass and glass under the sun. Papers were strewn messily across the desks, but on the warm-wallpapered walls, beautiful paintings of the Russian countryside hung.

To the right, a spotless and pristine kitchen was visible. Two simple refrigerators with ice machines flanked a row of cupboards hung over a sink, a dishwasher, and other usual amenities. Another few notable paintings hung on the walls, but notably, there was a window out to the world beside the intricately-carved dining table. Though it was ostensibly in the opposite

direction from where they had entered, it provided a view from the crack in the wall that acted as the front entrance.

Even behind him, the crack that they had walked through was now instead an ornate door with meticulous embellishments patterning its edges.

The sound of something boiling in the background provided a calming audio backdrop akin to white noise as The Prince craned his neck, looking at everything with an impressed look in his eye.

"...Clogs and clamps, I certainly misjudged you, didn't I, Rodi? I thought you were just some Tom, Dick, and Harry omi who lived their usual nine-to-five life and had to have dashing young things like me pull you out of sticky situations…but it seems like you know a great deal on your own. I had a friend back in college who was into alchemy—funny sort, he was. Always muttering about the *magnum opus* or something along those lines."

"Ah yes. The process through which philosopher's stone would be created, able to turn any metal into gold. I have no interest in such things, I am wealthy enough as is…and being a doctor is rather lucrative job. I use it to create medicines and perform experiments."

The Prince lifted a beaker and rubbed his chin contemplatively.

"Ain't that something?"

Quickly, Rodion hurried over and softly lowered the beaker to the desk, smiling at him.

"I-I, er, would advise you not to touch anything here. They are very delicate, and as you can see, I was in middle of things…"

"Oh, boo. Fine, you big party pooper. Then…"

The Prince bounded excitedly over to the kitchen and looked around, judging the carvings of the table and pressing his nose up against the window like an excited child.

"Clearly, you did have *some* idea of what was going on out there in the town, right? I mean, you've got a bally window here that gives you a view of the whole street."

"Yes, well…one street. Not whole town. Not only that, but it is entirely soundproof—even if people were screaming, I would not be able to hear it. If it wasn't soundproofed, I still would not have been able to hear it anyways. The alchemical glassware and processes can be very noisy sometimes."

He leaned to the side and reached for the fridge doors.

"Then, what about in here, hm? What does a big guy like you even eat to keep up that figure of yours?"

Rodion scrambled over and placed his palm on the fridge door, keeping it shut as he smiled once more.

"...W-Why do we not save food until after we have a proper conversation about what has been going on, hm?"

He pouted and puffed his cheeks out, scoffing.

"Hmph! Fine then. I didn't want a buvare anyways."

"Come, I will take you to study. There, we can talk."

Gesturing for The Prince to follow, Rodion stepped aside, exited the kitchen, and walked down the hallway. Though much of his thoughts were taken up by marveling at how Rodi almost seemed to fill the whole width of the hallway on his own, he couldn't help but notice one thing that stuck out from the elegantly-decorated and cozy home.

There was a thick metal door, bolts lining the edges across the jamb, with nothing but a single slit window in front of it. Imposing black Russian text adorned the front, reading "ОПЕРАЦИОННАЯ". There didn't seem to be a handle to open it, funnily enough, and The Prince put his fingertips on the cold metal as he bounced on his heels, trying to peek into the barricaded room.

"My, my, what's in here? Is this where you keep your porn or something, big boy? Unfortunately, I only took three classes in Russian and I was drunk for most of it, so I can't read the signage here—"

Before he could get a good look at what was inside, Rodion turned around and slapped a hand over the slit window, staring down at The Prince with a new expression that he hadn't seen before: cold intimidation. The usual friendly smile he had on when he was explaining away almost seemed like a memory, the way those swirling red eyes stared directly, deeply, at The Prince. With how large he was, he almost seemed to suddenly become encroached in shadow.

"That room is private. You do not go in there."

The Prince, wide-eyed, stared up at him and gently rescinded his hand.

"...O…kay then. Rather unsuspicious in the slightest, no? You're one lucky russki that I've got better things to worry about than what kind of fucked-up kinky stuff you've got hidden away in there."

His look of intimidation dissipated, and he stepped aside, sheepishly scratching the back of his head.

"Er, j-just please do not go in there. Is very strictly for private matters."

"Alright, alright! Alamo, I get it already, secret room. Are you going to tell me interlopers will be shot on sight next or something?"

With his arms crossed, The Prince entered into the study.

In line with the rest of the house, it was quite cozy, and consisted of yet another plush red carpet over a hardwood floor, but the walls were lined from top to bottom with bookshelves. Bookshelves upon bookshelves filled with books upon books upon books, so many that it almost was intimidating. Just a glance showed that the bulk of them were old anatomy textbooks and procedures for various surgeries, and The Prince didn't care to look too much closer than that. In one of the rare spaces among the bookshelves, a dusty old phonograph stood beside a black case slid behind it. In the middle of it all, a single fireplace flickered and burnt with a prominent flame. The mantle was full of a number of pictures, containing people The Prince didn't quite care enough about to view with more scrutiny. In the center of the room, two chairs were stationed: one was quite large and upholstered with a suede finish, the small drawer-table besides it holding a single lamp placed upon a black book with no text on the spine and a porcelain gzhel

teapot, and the other—while appearing similarly comfortable—was obviously less-used than the other. Above the fireplace hung one final painting.

This one, The Prince actually recognized, and he stepped forward to look at it.

It depicted, painted in a raw and emotional manner that almost felt like a primal scream erupting through the canvas to his eyes, a man (at least, a humanoid figure) dressed in purple and white vestal robes, seated. As though being ripped from existence, his whole being seemed to drift upward, and his mouth was frozen wide-open in an eternal scream. Yet, this scream was hidden beneath ghostly drapes and yellow boundaries, trapped within whilst already trapped within.

He stared at it with his hands on his hips.

"...I think I know this one. Francis Bacon, isn't it?"

Rodion stepped in behind him and sat in the larger of the two chairs, letting out a groan as he reclined back and stretched.

"Hrrnngh—aaahhh…Yes, indeed. You have a good eye for art, Prince. *Study after Velasquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X.* I managed to snatch it up at an auction I attended a long while ago…Is very nice, *da?* Powerful. Primal. When I look at it, it makes me feel like I'm staring into face of Satan."

The Prince cocked a hip and looked into the Pope's screaming maw.

"...You know, I read a book once on the chap. He was 'so', y'know. Fell in love with an omi named Peter Lacy, and the man wasn't good for him. He would ruin everything Bacon created. Tearing up paintings, hitting him in a drunken rage, leaving him out on the street to bleed out. Yet, through all that, he still considered Lacy the love of his life…and he painted this, inspired by those conflicted feelings. His lover after him, Georgie Dyer, offed himself with a pack of barbiturates. They say almost every criminal in the East End was there crying with him at the funeral."

He listened to The Prince tell his recollection of events with a somber look directed at the painting, and once he was finished, his gaze returned to the other man.

"You are quite knowledgeable…I was not aware of such a history."

"When you love to learn, every bit of knowledge is a midnight snack, right? Enough about me, though—mind turning it around, hun?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know what they say, two's company and three's a crowd. I'd rather not have any prying eyes honing in on this conversation. You don't need to put it away, though: Frankie only painted the bloke with one aunt nell, so I doubt he can hear too well."

Somewhat confused at the request, Rodion nonetheless reached towards the painting and flipped it around, showing the back of the canvas instead. The Prince sighed and looked about himself one last time.

"...And you're sure this place is entirely invisible to everything and everyone that hasn't got oney those nifty little passcards, correct?"

"Yes, yes, I assure you. If it was not so, I would have been dead long ago, bahaha!"

He laughed good-naturedly despite the dark subject matter, and The Prince stretched as well with a large grin, leaning on the arm of the chair Rodi reclined in.

"Then I haven't got medzer thing to worry about! That's a relief! Now you and me can get down to business, hm? What do you say, big boy?"

The Prince bit his lip and cupped Rodi's chin, smirking.

"Why not show your savior a bit of a good time~?"

Though his face lit up red with a mix of embarrassment and other feelings he was all too aware of, Rodion gently pushed him away with two fingers on his sternum, clearing his throat.

"Ahem. T-Though I am…willing to consider your offer, Prince, I still have the many questions you must answer for me. That is why we returned here, so we could speak in private. You said you needed someplace like this yourself, correct? Then you must tell me. Where did those large postman creatures come from?"

He pouted, puffing his cheeks out like a child, before kneeling down on the floor and resting his elbows on the arm of the chair. Frankly, it was something of a laughable pose—he almost looked like a child waiting for grandpa to tell him his favorite story—but it was meant to be more seductive than anything else.

"Oh, fine then. Spoilsport. I'll tell you where the Dead Letter Gendarmerie came from."

Gesturing with a hand, he held up all five fingers with his palm out.

"This world is sort of like one big lill, y'know? It all comes out from the palm, all the worlds 'n whatnot."

He put his pointer finger on his thumb.

"Things like alternate dimensions, mystical realms, all that, they all are strillers off the hand, right?"

"Yes, I do know that much. I do not have much experience with these 'mystical realms' as you call them, but I am aware of their existence."

"Brilliant. Well, where those ugly buggers are from, it's more like…an ugly wart, right on the back of your hand."

His face turned grave.

"They're agents of an interdimensional cult known as Man Unkind. Stupid name, I know, but they're no joke, love. They've been on my arse since I was nothing but a little feely, but lucky for me, the lot of them generally aren't very smart. Their base of operations is this filthy pocket dimension called the Broken Tracks of Meinung."

"The…Broken Tracks?"

"Yes, keep up now love, I know it's a lot to handle for your little squishy brain, but you asked."

Rodion's face twisted into a bit of a sour expression, but he let the other continue.

"Essentially, the Broken Tracks are quite literally the wrong side of the tracks of existence—" He held up both index fingers. "It runs both parallel to our existence, but depends on it to exist. Something like how most governments work, nobody knows or cares about how the bally thing

conducts itself, but it needs us to govern. Only thing is, Man Unkind's wanting the exact opposite of that."

"Exact opposite? How so, what are their aims?"

"Well, something like anarchy, but hooked up to every steroid you could think of. Their whole goal is to…the best way to put it, I believe, would be to drive the world crazy."

He furrowed his brow, struggling to understand.

"...What sort of foolish plan is that? World is not conscious being. It has no mind, no concept of sanity—there is no way to do so."

"You say that, Rodi, but there's laws, aren't there? The universe has got rules to put in place. Evolution. Laws of physics and thermodynamics. Gravity, magnetism, not just that but how our DNA is laid out. Why we're usually born with ten fingers and ten toes, why the Earth revolves around the Sun, why the sky's blue. There are answers to these things because nature's got its own way of operating. The goal isn't really to drive it 'crazy'—really, I think they say that rather since they like the ring of it—but to induce a complete and total breakdown of the laws of reality. And it just so happens that the main way they aim to do that, is to collect magical artifacts."

He shifted in his seat, scratching his beard as he leaned forward and The Prince tried not to focus on how his suit bunched up tightly above the swell of his gut for the sake of keeping composed.

"...You are meaning to say, they want to collect many magical and enchanted items to induce, as you say, 'complete and total breakdown of laws of reality', *da?* How would one cause other? And why would they come here, of all places?"

The Prince stood up and sat on the arm of the chair, placing his hands palm-down on his thighs as he checked his nails (still immaculately painted red).

"Don't ask me, love. Not only are they terrorists, they're also complete lunatics, the lot of them. You saw how the Gendarmerie went about things, they thought they were collecting returned packages rather than killing people, and to them, their 'boss' is the postmaster general rather than the head of the cult. If you were to ask me, I would say they're aiming to cause some sort of massive singularity by hoarding tons of magic in one place. Not only that, but you know damn well how powerful some things can be, don't you? I will say I misjudged you and that you aren't just some Tom, Dick, and Harry who just thinks magic belongs in fairy tales and in cheap and schlocky children's stories, but you still haven't exactly convinced me that you're 'so', Rodi."

Offended, he sputtered. "Wh—What do you insinuate by that, Prince?! 'So', 'so' what? 'So' informed, 'so' versed in magical matters? How many people do you meet that have studied so thoroughly subjects like *zagovory*, witchcraft, conjuration of fire and summoning rituals, hm? You are very egotistical, Prince. Even your name is so full of assumption."

The Prince climbed over and rested a knee on each armrest, staring at him.

"Oh? Pardon me for assuming a brute like you would know such *special* things. Pfft. Please, any omi out west could buy a kiddie book teaching them how to shape water in under five

minutes. The only reason you had to study so hard is because you happened to be born in poor magic-despondent *Rossiya*…unlike me, who was born and raised in jolly old England!"

Rodi sat up more, frowning.

"I do not care if you are English or if you are Australian, Prince, I will not take such slander sitting down. I am quite well-versed in my abilities, and if you require demonstration, I would be more than willing to show you!"

The other leaned in more, grinning as he rested his chin on Rodion's ample chest.

"Then tell me, what would you show me if I took you up on that offer, big boy?"

Closer.

"Something I have studied long and hard for, I can assure you! Many long hours spent pondering over it!"

Closer.

"Why not cut the boasting and get straight to the point then, you beast, come on then! Whip it out, show me, right here, right now!"

"Fine! I would be more than happy t—I feel something pressing into my stomach."

"Kiss me, you handsome Russian devil!"

The Prince pounced on him, knocking the chair over backwards…and the pleasant crackling of the fire in the fireplace soon became drowned out with more visceral sounds of pleasure.

~

Though Rodion had initially protested, he had to admit that there was a certain air to The Prince and how he conducted himself. That gentle sashay of his hips, the teasing lilt of his feminine accent, how he hated keeping his hands to himself and always wanted them to be roaming something, somewhere…and somehow, that tattoo of his. Even as it swirled and almost distracted him a couple of times, Rodi had to admit that he was surprised to see it cover his entire upper body, neck, and arms down to the elbows when his partner stripped down.

And needless to say, the man was a freak…which was quite fortuitous for the both of them. Partway through, while thrust waist-deep into the thralls of pleasure, the red-haired man suggested they try something. It was a common practice among adherents to both Hinduism and Buddhism, among the esoteric traditions of *tantra*. A form of sex that focused on the prolonging of pleasure, the transferral of sexual energies from one, to the other, to the first again, to exercise and exorcise the pent-up feelings of arousal. Though early Vedic texts refer to the practice, many chose more…unsavory partners by modern standards, to say the least, and the first mention of the practice of sexual yoga between two consenting adult partners was within the Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra, a Buddhist text written by the monk Asanga around the fifth century.

He stated, *"Supreme self-control is achieved in the reversal of sexual intercourse in the blissful Buddha-poise and the untrammelled vision of one's spouse."* This 'reversal of sexual intercourse' mentioned is generally interpreted to be about the conservation of semen during

sexual activity…and for The Prince, that meant plenty of teasing, plenty of gentle touch, and lots of delayed gratification.

As their movements became one and their positions turned and twisted, swirling pink energies started to flow from them, their bodies bathed in a faint aura with the after-images of lotus flowers twirling in the air above them. The placidness of a lake, and the intensity of the waves, in one incredible night. Of course, neither of them could see such a thing, considering their views were focused on much more important matters at the moment, but it was quite the sight nonetheless.

Both of them were unsure how much time had passed whilst they were writhing about on the warm hardwood floor, but soon enough, the two of them were sprawled out on the floor of the study coated in sweat, panting. The Prince clung tight to the larger man's rugged body, covered in chest and arm hair as well as a litany of shallow scars that nonetheless were quite visible against his ashy skin, his thin and bony red-hair-flecked left arm sinking deep into supple flesh as he nestled his head into the crook of his armpit. He let out a sigh of contentment and gently nuzzled into him, bringing his hand up to pet the thick mat of chest hair his lover had.

"You know, I always was a fan of bigger guys. Omi-palones like me are always too angular, too bony. They're the sort you always want to jerk around, y'know? Show them who's boss. And by Maude's bones, did you certainly show me who's boss, Rodi…Whoof. If I hadn't been doing this a long time, I wouldn't be able to sit right for a week."

"It was quite nice, yes…I have not had fun like that in long while. Perhaps years…"

He planted a gentle kiss on the larger man's chest and cupped one of his cheeks.

"Well, you could have fooled me. You worked your way around my bony palliasse like you'd been doing it every day and every night with guys more antsy than me."

Rodi smiled and laughed, blushing at the compliment. He had to admit, the man was adorable when he was grinning like that. Just at a glance, the six-and-a-half-foot-tall, five-hundred-pound man with the deep shadows under his eyes and the disquieting gravelly voice looked like he belonged more in a horror film than in real life. But he had to admit, he was rather fetching. And he had to admit, he was getting attached.

And that was something he really didn't want.

"You are very talented when it comes to pleasing others, Prince."

"Ohoohoo, well, like I said, I've got plenty of experience. I was a dilly boy for a good while back in Eine, 10 bucks for a blow, 25 to take home, 50 for special treatment."

"What was the special treatment then, hm?"

"I wouldn't steal from them after I shagged them."

That made him sit up and stare The Prince down, and with an impish smile, he opened the hand that had been petting the other's chest hair, revealing a small silver locket. Rodion immediately moved to reach for it, but he quickly snatched it away and leaped off the ground, the soft pattering of his bare feet on the hardwood floor accompanying his smug tittering as he twirled the chain-connected pocket watch on a finger. Rodion moved to stand up, a bit of a struggle with his size, but he glared daggers into The Prince's ice-blue eyes as he did so.

“Give that back. *Now.”*

Unintimidated, he held up the keepsake and rubbed his chin.

“And what if I decide I don’t want to, hm? A bougie silver pocket watch like this must go for over five hundred dinari in the shots…and triple that easily on the black market.”

“You are not going to be selling that, is, hrrngh—! Very dear to me!”

The Prince quirked an eyebrow.

“Very dear? It’s nothing but a shiny pocket watch, love, what could you have in it that’s so importa—”

As he talked, his hand idly clicked the top of the watch, accidentally opening it up to reveal the image of the young woman in the head scarf. He stopped mid-sentence to study her features, dodging a lunge from Rodion effortlessly in the meantime.

“...Now who’s this dona?”

“It is my sister. Now give the locket back!”

“She doesn’t look a bleedin’ thing like you, hun, don’t lie to me.”

“Separate marriages. If you could just—”

“Family drama, hm? Now that’s a real pickle. Always had family drama myself. Fifteen sisters, fifteen brothers, one pair of parents. It was a wonder they didn't tear each other apart like a pack of wild wolves.”

Rodi stopped, wheezing, and took a moment to collect his thoughts before clearing his throat.

“...Ahem. Look. Prince. That locket is very dear to me, it was…”

His expression turned downcast.

“It was the last thing Maria gave to me before she passed. It’s the only thing I have left of her. Please, if you could just hand it back to me…I am wealthy, I will be able to give you whatever money you wish, an equivalent amount, maybe more…just please, give it back to me.”

“Hmmmm.”

He hummed and rolled his eyes, looking around the room as if scanning it for valuables.

“...What would you say if your mother thought about it for a bit, got back to you about it next week after a quick trip to the pawn shop, and then I’d have an answer for y—”

The next thing he knew, he was stumbling back into the bookshelves with a bloody broken nose, knocking a few of the tomes off their perches. Stunned, he looked up at Rodion with his fist extended, breathing heavily with a grave look on his face.

“...Did you just punch me in the nose, hun?”

“What else do you think could have happened, Prince?”

Rodion spat on the ground and raised his other fist, glaring down at him.

“I told you to give it back, and yet you do not listen. I ask you politely, and yet you still do not listen. Is obvious you have trouble hearing, *da?* And as they say in America, ‘actions speak louder than words’, yes? There is reason I am not as affected by death apart from being doctor.”

The Prince swallowed and put his hands up.

“A-And…what would that reason be, exactly?”

“I do not wish to tell you. But I would advise you hand back locket, or else more things of yours will be broken than just your pointed nose.”

“Now, now…surely, you wouldn’t want to duke it out here, while the both of us are still in our birthday suits, would you? And after such good trade! Wouldn’t you want to savor the moment?”

He cracked his rough knuckles.

“I believe I have savored enough for one night.”

“Genali Otradesha!”

Rearing back, Rodion moved to deliver another punch, but the red-haired man took that small opportunity to snap the fingers of both the hands he was holding up and shout those words, touching the tips of his middle fingers as he turned his palms parallel to one another. In an instant, accompanied with a flash of dark flames, a force-field resembling a curved piece of glass frosted with faint flame patterns sprouted in front of him. His knuckles hit this force-field, and though they went through as though it wasn’t even there, above him, the glass congealed and morphed, turning into a perfect simulacrum of his forearm and fist. Since it all happened so fast, he had no time to react as his punch as reflected, effectively socking himself square in the jaw and causing him to stumble back, shouting obscenities in Russian. The Prince smirked and clenched both his fists shut.

“Dreifest.”

Wisping away into black fire, the magical shield dissipated once more. Then, swinging his right hand in front of him as if to stretch, he stared down at the stretch of tattoo covering the skin. His eyes ran themselves over the complex patterns and collection of colors, searching, before they found what they had been looking for. Using one of his pointed red nails, he quickly traced around the patterns, closing his eyes and letting the bumps on his skin guide his movements. Under his breath, he muttered to himself.

“Those who reside within the recesses of my mind, those who rant and rave and scream and cry, I request your services. Those of complex, those of anima, those of ego, id, and superego. Those of archetypes and those of stereotypes. Come, Zoso. Come, Boleskine. Emerge and serve your master. Abrahadabra.”

Holding his arm out in front of him, two miniature humanoid figures emerged from the tattoo, crawling out as if the swirling colors were a swampy marsh. One was a clownish figure, its blank and mannequin-esque face done up in mime makeup and its limbs layered with many colorful rings, a white inner tube around its waist. It carried a staff in one hand, and branded on its back was the word “ZOSO”. The other was a more tribal figure, its circular head having nothing but three holes for a ‘face’, its body resembling more an armless cylindrical shoe brush (complete with bristles) than anything useful for grasping, and its thick legs being white with thin black stripes around their circumference. This one, assumedly, was Boleskine.

All this happened within the couple moments Rodion had to recover from the impact of his own punch, and by the time he was able to open his eyes again, he saw these two strange little

creatures standing in each of The Prince's palms. He looked between the two and grinned at Rodion.

"Hold him down, won't you, dears?"

The two ten-inch-tall beings nodded and hopped down from his hands, skittering along the ground towards Rodi. Boleskine started off running, but quickly turned to its side and started rolling along the ground due to its cylindrical shape, Zoso hopping on top and log-running along its compatriot.

"What—?! What are these?!"

"Servitors, love. Thoughtforms, psychological complexes given form through chaos magic. They come quite in handy, especially if you're a nutter like me. I've got more of them than I know what to do with!"

Zoso hopped off of the other and kicked it towards Rodion, wedging itself right underneath his foot as he moved to step back. Thus, he was on the fast-track to falling backwards to the floor, giving his head a nasty knock on the opposite wall in the process as he made contact with the ground.

"BLYAD!"

His hands reflexively went to hold the point of impact for his head, and Zoso took that opportunity to thrust out its hand, its coiled arm unspooling into a colorful rainbow wire that fired off to his wrists, wrapping both around his neck. It took a bit to notice, but once Rodi felt that his wrists were bound, he grit his teeth as he tried to break free of them. He'd broken out of ropes before, why should these be any different? But not only did they not even budge, he could feel the rest of the length constricting around his neck, making it hard to breathe. He stopped struggling, and let out a wheeze as he looked to his left. Zoso sat on his shoulder with its arms coiled around its captor, happily kicking its feet as if it were proud of a job well done. He looked to his right, and Boleskine was doing a little jig beside him on the floor. Rather frustrated and feeling a bit silly that he was outmaneuvered by two manikins, but in too much throbbing pain to really care too much, he looked up at The Prince. He had already put his panties and skirt back on, and was in the process of putting his shirt back on as though nothing was wrong.

"I wouldn't advise trying to break out of those, Rodi. Rope's quite a bit weaker than the power of the mind, you know?"

Rodi frowned, equal parts angry and saddened.

"...You…I thought we were going to get along. I honestly did. First friend I would have made in while that was not afraid of me…Pah. What an idiot I am."

"Oh, don't beat yourself up too badly, love. For what it's worth, you are one bona-vardering omi. And you were a real good shag. Almost makes me feel a bit bad shushing you like this, but hey, what can you do? That's just how life is sometimes, dear."

He walked over to the phonograph and pulled out the oblong case tucked behind it, turning it over in his hands.

"My, is this a violin case? You didn't tell me you played violin, Rodi!"

"I never quite got the chance to show you." He spoke with his teeth grit and his brow furrowed, and The Prince raised his eyebrows a bit.

"...Were you planning on it?"

"I was. If the evening was to turn out that way. I still never got to make myself dinner. I was planning on sharing it with you."

He put his hand to his cheek, smiling.

"Well, how sweet of you to want to treat a lady so well! But trust me, love, even if I'm not so happy about it, things are better off this way."

"...What is that supposed to mean, exactly?"

The Prince put the violin case down on the chair and picked his coat up from off of one of the shelves, rolling his eyes.

"Don't worry about it. Folks like you have enough to worry about as is, and it'd be rather rude of me to layer more…on…"

Once he placed both arms through the sleeves of the coat and reached inside its pattern-tracked depths, he trailed off, and that wry lipstick-coated smile of his immediately dissipated as his eyes widened. Trembling, he groped his arm around inside the garment and bit his lower lip. He swallowed hard, and muttered to himself.

"On…on…on…on on, on on on, where is it? Where'd it go? Where did it go. I put it right here."

He pulled out the small slip of paper Rodion had given him.

"Still have this."

He pulled out the scarf he had been wearing.

"Still have this too."

He took the coat off and plunged his arm shoulder-deep into it, beads of cold sweat starting to drip down his face in addition to the blood his levitating crown of thorns had started to generate, blending into his mess of red hair.

"Shit. Shit. Shit, shit shit shit, shit! Not here, I thought—I thought I was *safe* here…"

Rodion just watched him with a confused and annoyed expression on his face. What was the issue? He was in the middle of being robbed and he was buck-naked to top it off, what could this fop have to freak out about? On cue, The Prince snapped at him.

"Don't you look at me like that you git, where'd it go?! Did you take it?! If you did, there wouldn't be an issue, but you've got to tell me if you did!"

"...I have no idea what you are talking about."

"The stone, you blaggard! Where'd you stash the bloody stone?! Don't tell me you shoved it up your arse while we were shagging either, I would have known if you did!"

"I don't know what *stone* you're mentioning, Prince!"

"Shit. Then…"

The Prince's gaze turned to the Francis Bacon painting above the fireplace. Where once, Pope Innocent X's expression had been locked in an eternal scream hidden behind a transparent film of paint…now his face had taken on a more ecstatic expression. Where his hands had once

been grasping onto the armrests of his chair as if he was being executed, now his arms fell limp to his sides.

They had been here. They had felt the vibrations, from when they were…

He clenched his fists and growled at nothing in particular, grunting as he threw punches into the chair Rodion had been sitting in earlier, biting it and screaming into its headrest. The man himself just watched, still utterly baffled. Even the servitors appeared to be confused, watching their master with expressionless faces that nonetheless seemed puzzled. He whipped back to face Rodion.

"You told me this place was safe from all outsiders! That nobody could detect it, inside or out!"

"...I did not say *inside* or out. Nobody outside can see or sense it, yes, but once you are in, you are in. Is this issue?"

He pointed at the painting.

"You didn't dip the damn thing in vinegar before you put it up, did you?!"

"...No? Why would I?"

"Dammit! Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit! I should have known the Libertine Watercolors would have come through here…I thought that, since it was in here, and they were out there, they wouldn't know, but…ugh! Great. Just great. More work for me, I suppose."

The Prince threw his hands up and put his arms back through his sleeves. The servitors faded as well, Rodion apparently having been let free. He put his wrists down and looked down at them. No marks. He supposes they really were just thoughtforms…but, he reached to one of the shelves to grab his discarded shirt and pants, starting to re-dress himself while his 'new friend' appeared to be busy having a breakdown: biting his thumb, pulling his hair, and pacing around as he thought and mulled and cursed to himself. Once he was sufficiently dressed and had recovered enough from the blows to the front and back of his head, he approached The Prince.

"...Uh…may I have my pocket watch back?"

It was unceremoniously thrown at him, hitting him between the eyes before it fell into his open palms.

"Here. Take it. Bloody thing's not important anymore anyways."

"Hmph."

Grunting, he crossed his arms and looked down at The Prince, one of his thick eyebrows quirked.

"You know, I am quite fed up with all this nonsense. What are these 'Libertine Watercolors'? What went missing? And do you expect me to not kick you out after you had sex with me and subsequently tried to rob me?"

Melodramatically, The Prince cocked his head back and let out an annoyed, tired groan, flopping back into the chair and slinking down into it until his chin was resting on his chest. He rubbed his temples with two fingers each.

"Alright…alright, okay. Calm down, girl. Let me put this in a language perhaps your vodka-soaked noodle can understand, alright? I told you about Man Unkind. They've got legions and

legions of bleedin' agents. The Dead Letter Gendarmerie, the Twin Fantasies, Mel's Hole, Carmen Possum…and the Libertine Watercolors are one of those groups of agents. They're wiry, horny little buggers who you can knock down with a strongly-worded letter and an oath of chastity, but damn if they aren't stealthy. Their responsibility within the cult is to go and collect those magical artifacts I mentioned before. And they can travel through any painting not soaked in vinegar by shagging the subjects to do it."

He tiredly gestured back to the painting.

"Including the Pope. You know there was a Pope who was murdered back in the day? John…Some John. Octavian was his real name. Youngest Pope in history…stories say he got tossed out a window by the husband of the woman he was in bed with. Gads, my head…"

"And what about what they took?"

"Oy, not so loud with the yelling and the questioning already, your mother's got a splitter right now…Interred here in Kaliningrad, at Konigsberg Cathedral, is the philosopher Immanuel Kant. 'Course, you know this place used to be Prussian territory, right? Then it got blew to hell and it became a mini-Moscow. Anyways, the cove always was banging on and on about how we don't see things as themselves, we see them how our brain interprets and perceives them, but what he didn't tell anyone was that one of the things that helped him come up with that little nugget of innovation was something he obtained while working as a tutor over in Veselovka. It was a gift from a student he had, supposedly. It was…a rock."

"A rock?"

"Yes, did you not hear me?! A rock! A rock, a bloody rock, keep up already, really…sorry. It was a white rock that made his hands buzz when he held it, and it had odd carvings all over it. He had no clue what it was at first, but some research into Slavic folklore taught him what it was. It was a fragment of the father to all stones, the 'world rock' located on the ethereal island of Buyan: the Alatyr. Atop it sits the 'world tree', and on the canopy of that tree is the heavens. *'From underneath the little stone, from underneath the white Latyr, rivers flowed, swift rivers, all over the earth, all over the universe - To bring healing for the whole world, to bring food for the whole world…'"*

Rodion's eyebrows raised with interest upon hearing the short poem.

"...It's from the Dove Book. Medieval Russian, I took a class on it at Oxford for a semester. Either way, he was unsure of what to do with the thing like most common folk were, so he locked it in a box and kept it under his bed for most of his life. Only trouble is, the rock's got healing powers…at the cost of sucking away the health of whoever else is nearby. He never figured out how to use it properly, so for the latter half of his time here on Earth, he suffered from an unknown illness that ended up killing him. The rock, found under his deathbed, was buried with him since they assumed the thing was important. Hah, can you imagine that? The very thing killing him ended up coming with him to the grave."

"What is your point?"

“Boy, you Russians really are straightforward, huh? The ‘point’, Rodi, is that it’s part of a very powerful stone, and—were you even listening to me? It was part of the *world stone.* Get that? *World. Stone.* The father of all stones.”

He crossed his arms again and his eyebrow-raising changed from interest to somewhat amused annoyance.

“And?”

“And, doesn’t a father always know where his children are? Even a small piece of that stone can be used to locate any other stone in the world if you know what you’re looking for.”

“So, you’re saying they could be using them to steal precious gems?”

“Precious gems, schmecious gems, think outside the bun, Rodi! Think about how many magical artifacts there are, around the world, in mythos and folklore, that are just bleeding rocks! This is bad. Really, really damn bad. I’ve essentially given a bunch of terrorists a compass pointing to every nuclear bomb in existence.”

Letting out a wail of despondence, The Prince buried his face in Rodion’s stomach and used it to scream into, the Russian quickly pushing him away and putting his hands on his hips.

“Hmph. Well, that does seem like a problem.”

“Come on, it looks so soft…but, problem is an understatement, darling. As sexy and talented as your mother here is, I’m only one chap. There isn’t exactly much I can do to stop them…bar going after their leader. But there’s no way I’m doing that, not even for all the money and trade in the world…”

He blinked, staring blankly for a few moments, before he noticed the red stain he left on Rodion’s white undershirt. Then he put a hand to his face and touched the tip of his nose, wincing at the sudden shock of pain that ran through his face.

“Ow—Did your punch make me bleed, Rodi, hun?”

“Do not call me hun or love, please. And yes, it did. Because, as was previously stated, you tried to rob me.”

“You’re still going on about that? The past is the past, Rodi, and time keeps on slippin’, slippin’, slippin’ into the future! You have to focus on the here and now! And the here and now, right now, is that…”

The Prince nervously smiled up at him and scratched his cheek.

“...My nose is still broken and I’m just now remembering that it hurts quite a lot. Would you be a dear and set it for me?”

Rodion just sighed deeply and pinched the bridge of his nose, scrunching his face for a few moments before exhaling and gesturing for the red-haired man to come with him to the lab.

CHAPTER 2: Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here

A few minutes later, The Prince was sitting in the favorite chair of his new friend, gently thumbing the tip of his nose with his cheeks puffed out. Now left to set with shaping apparati inside his nostrils and a bandage over the bridge, it would take a bit to heal. He leaned forward and put his chin in his palms, sighing as he looked over at Rodion. The larger man had started to place the books that had been knocked off his shelf in the scuffle back the way they were, in addition to replacing the case of his violin in its proper location. He blew dust off a couple of the older and more tattered tomes, looking them over again before re-shelving. As is the case with many book collectors, sometimes you really forget what you have in your possession: it all becomes "another book to add to the pile", and you stop actually looking through them. The thought of owning a book becomes more important than reading it. Whether that's a good or bad thing, Rodion couldn't really make a statement, but he knew that he enjoyed books, and that was enough for him.

"You said you knew magic, right? And you're a doctor? Why couldn't you just wave your fingers around a bit, say a spell or two, and have it set on its own?"

He sighed, roughly putting back the book he had in his hands.

"I still am rather upset with you for seducing me, robbing me, and then going back on both, Prince. So I believed letting it set on its own would be more fitting for you. Additionally, I could ask you the same. You undoubtedly know much more magic than I do, yes? Then why do you not heal yourself?"

The Prince pulled his bony knees up to his chest and rested his chin between them, pouting.

"It's the damn tattoo."

"Come again?"

"The tattoo. It's where I get most of my magic. I *can* use it to do fun stuff like transformation, cloaking, all that, but…it's like trying to stick your finger in a running faucet. You can keep most of the water from coming out, but some will still emerge…there's more chaos magic packed into every square inch of my tattoo than most people have in their entire high school. With other people, it isn't like I have to hold back, of course, but…you should know, there's some danger when it comes to using it on yourself."

"There is indeed…possibility of the magic backfiring. You need concentration, a steady hand. At least with surgery, is tangible practice that can be reversed. Magic is much harder to use. I only know conjuration, some healing spells, and…other practices, so I mainly use as assistance to my own skill as a doctor."

The Prince cocked his head up.

"You know, I never did ask. How old are you?"

"Fifty-eight."

His eyes bugged out.

“Fifty-eight?! You’re telling me I shagged a senior citizen?!” Though his shock persisted for a bit, it then dissipated as he laid back into the chair. “Eh. I’ve shagged stranger. You know that omis with an arm or a leg missing are always some of the kinkiest?”

“I didn't know you had such varied tastes.”

“Hey, I like big boys, but if it’s got a basket with a baguette in it, I’m game, hun.”

Rodion’s expression soured a little.

“I told you to quit calling me that.”

“Oh, hush. Honestly, I was more surprised about *you.* Bears like you usually present a bit more…well, camp, y’know?”

“I was raised by nuns. They taught me early on to keep…many feelings of mine, er, hidden from His eyes. But, once I became a full-fledged doctor and started making connections, I quickly found that status and notoriety attracts many, male, female or in-between.”

“Raised by nuns, eh? You know, I was raised by nuns for a short time too. Our Lady of Forgiveness Baptist something-or-other along those lines. They kicked me out when I started using their crucifixes for ‘sinful misdoings’. Not my fault they got the rounded kind~”

“I thought you said you were raised with many sisters and brothers?”

The Prince averted his eyes and gave a tight-lipped grin, as though he was asking a question he already should have known the answer to. He said nothing more on the subject, but instead tilted his head at the black book in Rodion’s hands: It was bound in cowhide, and debossed in the middle, pressed in gold leaf, was one word. *“GOETIA”.* Surrounding that one word, the Latin phrase “Goetia Vel Clavicula Salomonis Regis” embraced and wrapped around it, repeating endlessly like computer code until it filled the entirety of the front cover.

“Now, what’s that you’ve got in your hand there? Can’t say I’ve seen it before.”

Immediately, as if he had been waiting to talk about it all night, Rodion’s face lit up with that cheerful and fatherly smile of his as he stepped over to the red-haired man, showing the book to him.

“Oh, this? This is copy of Ars Goetia, most popular and well-known section of the Lesser Key of Solomon—’goetia’ itself is Latin for summoning, evocation of demons—specifically the version edited by well-known occultist Aleister Crowley! It is favorite of mine.”

Looking closely, The Prince could indeed see that the corners were somewhat worn, and the pages were slightly tattered—it was obviously a well-loved copy. He took the book from Rodion and flipped through it a bit. Inside, instructions for magical rituals were listed meticulously: the scents, the smells, every sensation needed for the perfect summoning, and along with the names of the ShemHamphorash—the 72-fold hidden name of God, with each part corresponding to an angel—were listed the 72 demons of the Goetia. All kings, all princes, all marquises and dukes. He bit the inside of his cheek, trying not to seem impressed.

“My, my. Are you rather into this whole demon-summoning thing?”

Rodion nodded excitedly.

“Yes, I am! You could say is hobby of mine! Not only do I have the Ars Goetia, but I have all other books of the Lesser Key, the Ars Theurgia-Goetia, the Ars Paulina, Ars Almadel, and the Ars Notoria!”

“Lot of arses, aren’t there?”

Ignoring his snide remark, Rodi stumbled back to the bookshelf and picked out dusty and tattered book after dusty and tattered book, kicking up enough dust to make The Prince sneeze as he brought them over, dropping them heavily on the end table.

“The Book of Abramelin, the Pseudomonarchia Daemonum, the Grand Grimoire, the Book of Thoth tarot guide, the Grimorium Verum, Grand Albert, *Livre des Esperitz*…You may call me a collector of sorts, bahaha! They make for interesting reads, especially for at-home usage!”

The Prince whistled and leaned to the side, looking over all the dark books. His tattoo throbbed just by looking at them…though they were nothing but reproductions, edited and with some parts cut from the original texts, all grimoires and bibles of dark magic and demonic summoning have some measure of magic within themselves. It’s not something they put in at the factories, either—just having the names and techniques written inside instills it with some power…but, he snapped out of his thoughts upon really digesting what Rodi had been saying.

“...At-home usage? You’re saying you actually do try to summon demons with these musty old things?”

“Not just try! I do succeed many times, and when they do not immediately leave, we have many conversations and I learn many things about Hell and the afterlife from them!”

His face flushed a bit as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“And…well, other things that sometimes happen. They are sinful beings, after all…Who am I to refuse propositions from such attractive and persuasive creatures?”

“Yes, yes, you fuck demons on your own time, what an exciting life you lead. Frankly I’m surprised you haven’t…made…”

Though his tone started off contemptuous and dismissive, it trailed off as his eyes widened and he came to a realization. The fact that Man Unkind now had that fragment of Alatyr had not left his mind—how could it—but he had been unable to truly think of a solution to his problems. He was only one man, after all. One sexy man, but one man nonetheless. He couldn’t handle this alone. But…that was when it hit him.

He didn't necessarily have to do it alone, did he?

“...How many of these demons are you friends with, hun?”

Rodion’s smile faltered a bit. There was some concern in his eyes as he saw scheming in the other’s.

“And where is this sudden interest coming from?”

“Are you dodging the question?”

He sighed. “Really, not very many. They consider me a conversation partner, but I do not know about ‘friend’ for many of them. More…”

“One-night stand partners you were forced to awkwardly chat with after they woke up still in your bed?”

"No! Get your mind out of gutter for once…it was, um, other way around. Conversation, then bed. But they usually left soon afterwards, those who were willing to stay that long."

The Prince turned the copy of the Ars Goetia he was holding sideways and flipped through it looking for centerfolds like it was a saucy magazine.

"And, have you ever been to Hell?"

"...Okay, tell me, why are you asking this now after showing such disinterest?"

Sighing, he put the book down and gestured with his palms out.

"Well, you remember that whole mank business with Man Unkind getting that fragment of the magical Russian stone, right? I would hope you do. I was thinking, I would need some help getting it back from them and out of their hands. And who better to help out a sinful little thing like myself than the armies of Hell itself? What luck too, Lady Fate must have been keeping her eye on me today, because I just so happen to have run across the perfect person to act as my ambassador! Now don't get me wrong, I've met plenty of demons plenty of times, but with the shushing and all, it isn't quite like I have a good reputation among the lot of them!"

"You said you had never seen summoning book before."

"Exactly, so inside one of these books, there must be some way to open a portal to Hell, right? We go in, we ask Satan or The Devil or Uncle Joe or whoever's running the show down there for help, they say yes, we go to the Broken Tracks, we get the stone back, I hitch a ride out of town, and the whole business is over and done with in under a week. I'll even see if I can get you some medical textbooks or whatever from the cult, as a gift! How's that sound, heartface?"

Summarily ignoring Rodion in favor of rambling on about his scheme, The Prince ended his proposal with an expectant look in his eyes and an open-mouth smile. The Russian just frowned, staring down at him with a heavy silence hanging in the air for a good couple seconds. The Prince closed his mouth and swallowed, changing to a tight-lipped smile.

"...So. Let me get this straight."

"Mm-hmm?"

"You save my life, which I am thankful to you for doing so still. I take you home, we have sex. You try to steal from me. You punch me in the face and tie me up."

"To be fair, love, you broke my nose and punched yourself in the face."

"Whatever. You only do not steal from me because something more important, which you also stole from a *grave*, was taken from you by other thieves. I fix your broken nose against my better judgment. And when you learn I have knowledge about demons, you ask me to accompany you on big adventure at risk of my own life, to serve your own goals?"

He sighed and lowered his head, shaking it sadly.

"Phrasing it like that, you make me sound like some sort of villain…You have to understand, I'm not doing this for personal gain! It's for the sake of the *world*. If you think I'm bad, Man Unkind and its gaggle of wingnuts is a hundred-thousand times worse. You let me go, I steal something with some sentimental value and 500 bucks of value. You let them go, they destroy the world. This is important."

The Prince looked up at Rodion with a genuinely sincere look in his eyes, clasping his hands together as he hopped off the chair and begged.

"Oh, please, please, pleaaaase won't you come with me, Rodion darling? I promise I won't try to steal from you, and I'll keep you safe the whole way through! You've got my word as a queen!"

Shuffling forward on his knees, he wrapped his arms around one of his thick legs and leaned on the man's thigh.

"You're the only hope I haaaave, love…My goodness, your scotches are thicker than oatmeal. Do you do squats with an arse that size?"

"Would you get off me?!"

Rodion shook his leg, throwing The Prince off of it and sending him tumbling along the ground. He clenched his fists and grit his teeth, looking down at him with a seething look before taking a deep breath, closing his eyes, and slowly exhaling. When he opened his eyes again, he only looked somewhat frustrated.

"...Though I…ahem, *appreciate* the offer, Prince, I have to decline. With all due respect, I…I just met you. Sure, we had relations, but I cannot entrust my life to you on this dangerous mission. Just because I am nearing end does not mean I believe I can spend the rest frivolously. I am sorry, but no. It was nice to meet you, but I would like you to get out of my house now please. Goodbye."

He looked up from his new position on the floor, slowly sitting up as he listened to Rodi speak…and for once, he appeared genuinely crestfallen. He sadly sighed and got up, brushing himself off dispassionately.

"...I understand. I know it was a lot to ask of you, especially after what I did. You're right, I'll…I'll be going now. Sorry for the inconvenience."

With his head hung low, he turned to the door out of the study and listlessly pushed it open, trudging away like he had ankle weights on. Rodion's annoyance dissipated a little as he watched the man leave. Some nagging voice in the back of his head said that perhaps he was a little too hard on him…but putting his hand to the pocket where he kept his watch and another to the bruise that had formed on the back of his head kept him grounded. He knew this person, yes, and had been quite intimate with him, but they met only earlier that day. They're essentially strangers. There's no sense putting his life on the line for some flight of fancy like this. If he needed some partner, he could go look for some other wizard or warlock or summoner or whoever else was in the yellow pages. He didn't need this…especially not now, with most of the population of his hometown abducted.

Sighing, he put back the grimoires and manuals he had pulled out to show The Prince. These things were available in plenty of old bookstores, right? He would be able to find other copies. Though, his thoughts remained on the red-haired fop…he was certainly a character, unlike anyone else he'd encountered in the dingy and primarily muted state of Kaliningrad. Colorful, passionate, flirtatious…even the most daring of men and the most fearsome of women he had met during his time as a doctor hadn't matched up to him. It was like he was from a completely

different world…but of course, that couldn't be the case, right? There's all sorts in the world. He did say he was from England, so…perhaps all English were like that. He wouldn't know. He's never been outside of Russia apart from passing through a couple Baltic states. Estonia was always beautiful in the summer…

While he ruminated, he absent-mindedly ran his fingertips along the books on the shelf, and his thinking was cut short when his finger fell into a gap.

"Hm?"

He looked down at his hand. His thick index finger was wedged between Agrippa's "Three Books of Occult Philosophy" and the second book of the Lemegeton.

The Ars Goetia was missing.

Now that was funny, where could he have…

It took less than a second of thinking before he remembered exactly where it had been last, and if that hadn't been motive enough for him to start running towards the lab, the booming and crackling of a thunderstorm emanating from the neighboring room would have been reason enough. Slamming the door open, he scrambled down the hallway and skidded to a stop once he witnessed the scene before him.

Drawn on the ground of the lab, traced out from an upturned vial of goat's blood (there was very clearly a thumb-shaped spot on the edge of the spill where he must have licked it to check), was a complex sigil drawn with pinpoint accuracy: a circle containing a wide pentagram, overlapping with a smaller pentagram to the side, a shape resembling the letter 'A', and a few lines ending in circles. Surrounding the inner circle was a larger copy, the space between filled with Latin text. It was the size of a decently large rug, the sort you would put down in your bathroom if you didn't want to shell out for two smaller rugs. Placed at each corner of the pentagram, outside both circles, were five separate bunsen burners showing varying degrees of use—his substitute for candles. The sigil of blood glowed like cat eyes in the night, black smoke started to seep up from the floor. Flashes of lightning shot across the room from the bunsen burners, the source of the ruckus Rodion heard from the other room. The place had turned into an utter mess—at least, more than it was already—with all manner of alchemical equipment strewn across the floor, chemicals spilling into the hardwood and broken glass everywhere.

And of course, standing opposite the sigil with a pleased-as-punch grin on his face and the Ars Goetia opened in one hand, was The Prince of Fuck All. He hadn't noticed the Russian yet, his attention solely focused on the book and the sigil.

"Boy, am I a good artist or what? Lucky thing I've always got my sticky fingers on my side…now, what was that incantation I saw in here? Opening a portal…aha! Here we are! *Con—*"

"Prince!"

His voice was loud and booming, that gravelly quality that accompanied his baritone dissolving quickly as it became clearer and more striking than the clear night sky. Rodion stood with his legs firmly planted on the ground, both fists at his sides. He was breathing heavily, both from the short run and the sheer anger broiling in his chest.

"What in God's name do you think you're doing, *ty chertov debil?!"*

The Prince, completely untaken back by his anger, just smiled and waved to him as if nothing was wrong.

"Oh, bona to vada, Rodi! Funny thing, meeting you again so soon! I hope you don't mind I borrowed your little book. A man's got to have some way of getting to Hell, y'know, and I don't know how to tie a noose, so this was the most convenient option. Just step back for a second, alright? It'll only take a moment, so apologies for the mess. I promise I'll clean it up afterwards~"

"Only a mo—look at what you've done to my lab, *tupitsa!* Broken! Strewn about! Do you know how long I have been working on some of the things in here?! This is months of work! And you think simple apology will get you out of this?!"

Rodion rolled up his sleeves, burly, hairy, muscular arms emerging as he strutted forward with fury in his eyes and bile in his mouth.

"I will break every single bone in your body, one by one."

The Prince gulped, holding up a finger as he hesitantly stepped back.

"Better option…"

Quickly, he jammed his nose in the book and frantically scanned the text, the words spilling out of his mouth just as they entered his eyes.

"Conjuro potentiae Lucifer, patefacio a porta ad inferos et tua deamones transire sic urantar mundi! Summoning the powers of Lucifer, I reveal the portal to Hell and your demons to pass into the world of flames! Dundula-matrach kathaka-ne nel—Gyack!"

He was interrupted by Rodion's hand around his neck, meaty fingers crushing his trachea as he was lifted up effortlessly, the Russian's other hand clenched into a raised fist.

"You come into *my house,* you *fuck* me, you try to *rob* me, and now you open portal to Hell and ruin my work?! You have no shame! You have no morals! And soon you will have no working limbs! I will break your nose all over again!"

"W-Wait! Can I make one last request?"

Rodion lowered his fist slightly, glowering.

"Make it quick."

The Prince grinned.

"Kathaka-ne nela scathano hecan, fhtagn Gehenna!"

Suddenly, Rodion started to feel a deep vibration underneath his feet. His grip never wavered, but a quick look down revealed that in his anger, he had stepped directly into the sigil. Sparks of lightning shot between the bunsen burners in the manner of a Jacob's ladder, and the droplets of goat blood slowly lifted off the ground as the rumbling only grew more and more severe. He started shouting something and shaking The Prince's limp body by the neck, but his speech was drowned out by the sounds of sparks and thunder. The smoke that emanated from the floor only grew thicker and thicker, and the stench in the room grew foul.

With a great sound resembling a thunderclap, there was all at once a great flash of light.

~

Down.

Down with your body cold and your mind frozen.

Down with your head towards the bottom.

Where exactly was ‘bottom’? Presumably, the opposite of wherever ‘top’ was.

But where was ‘top’?

For that matter, where was ‘left’ and ‘right’?

Nothing but blackness.

Nothing but the endless, empty blackness.

It is said in the Tanakh that God Himself cast Korah and his family down into the abyss for attempting to strike up a rebellion against Moses.

In the beginning, when God said “Fiat lux!” and there was then light, there was then shadow.

Then God created Earth and the Heavens, and all the angels within.

When Eve and Adam bit into the forbidden fruit, they were banished from the Garden of Eden, and when Cain killed Abel, he was condemned to a life of endless wandering in Nod.

Seeing God’s fierceness and temperamental nature, some angels began to question His authority.

One of these was Gehinnom. He did not object to God’s punishment of Cain, but he saw how strictly He commanded both angels and mankind. He feared that, if angels are to be the servants of God, made in His and humanity’s image, then should they not be fallible as well? They are role models, protectors, messengers. Do they not have every right to be petty, to be jealous, to be hateful, to kill, as humans do? And when humanity obtains the free will to follow their own faith, will they be subject to the same standards? Foremostly, he believed that angels should be above all, fallible, because God is fallible. God was petty, God was arrogant, God was temperamental and egotistic and hateful at times. Humanity was made in His image, after all.

A close friend of Gehinnom and fellow rebel angel was the seraph Yophiel. He disagreed with God’s punishment of Eve and Adam for eating the forbidden fruit and gaining knowledge of good and evil. God planned for humanity to live a life of piousness, a life of righteousness and a life of chastity. Gambling and drinking and pre-marital sex, all sins in His eyes. Angels could do no such things, of course…but why? Why should they be restricted from all the wonders that mortal life had to offer, if the mortals were not able to take advantage of them themselves?

Finally, there was Helel, the first and the most beautiful of the angels, and another seraph. He wanted angels to have self-governance and independence from both God and humans, no longer ordained to protect and serve mankind. Angels were created to serve God, and now they were being made to guide man? Man, who had already gone against His will and killed? Man, who were nothing more than God’s little pet project that he wished for all the angels to help him with?

The three seraphim bided their time, convincing other angels to join their cause and letting those angels spread the word discreetly. Yophiel gave birth to three other angels to aid them in

their cause, Hennuk, Atzmaut, and Hofesh, named after their aims: satisfaction, independence, and freedom. Helel summoned the primordial beasts from the dark sea of Tehom, the Behemoth, the Leviathan, and the great bird Ziz. Finally, Gehinnom used all his might to summon those who had been kept locked away deep in both Tehom and the abyssal realm of the dead, Sheol: the Beast of Revelation, the Mother Harlot, and the Shadowed Lamb to act as their secret weapon.

When the time was right, they staged their attack. There was a long and bloody war, and many angels on both sides were killed, but ultimately, there was a clear victor. God had won, and He would make sure that those who rebelled against him would feel His wrath. The archangel Michael cast both the primeval beasts and one-third of all angels, all those who opposed God whether in thought or in action, down to Sheol, the realm of nothingness where the souls of the unvirtuous deceased remained.

Those who fell from Heaven are said to have traveled nine days and nights falling down, down, down, until they reached the bottom. The bottom of nothingness. It's something of a laughable concept, but they had reached it, and when they did, the impact was so strong and the friction was so intense, that it set the entire lower part of the realm ablaze. Having been stripped of their angelic status, these beings then proliferated, forming both Hell and reproducing to create a slew of what were newly christened as 'demons'.

Soon, God found the inhabitants of Hell. Though he was unhappy, he saw use in them, and ordered them to torture and punish the souls of those who were sent to Sheol rather than Heaven, threatening to eradicate them from existence in a repeat of the Holy War that had only recently come to an end.

And so was the land of fire and brimstone founded.

~

When The Prince opened his eyes, the first thing he noticed is that his throat was almost certainly going to be bruised in the morning.

The second thing he noticed was that the sky was red.

And the third was that there was this unpleasant prodding sensation under his ribs, as well as a gruff voice echoing in his ears and pounding along very well with his headache.

"Hey, buddy. C'mon, wake up, I haven't got all day here."

Another somewhat less gruff voice piped up, chipper and smart-alecky.

"Haven't got all day? What sort of talk is that, eh? You sound like a cop from one of those cheesy shows from the '70s."

"Can it, rookie, and peel yer nose off the screen for once. Standard procedure for drifters, speak using terms they can understand. And on that note, I'd suggest keeping all comments, questions, and concerns until we're back at the station."

"U-Understood, sir."

The Prince let out an annoyed groan and slowly raised a hand.

“Huh…what, where in blazes am I…?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, tourist. Like the rest, ya prolly got shit-faced, wandered outta the bar lookin’ for a good time, and blacked out layin’ face-down in yer own vomit. We might not get lots of yer kind ‘round here, but we know the type. Now get up.”

He felt that same prodding sensation from before slipping its way under his back and lifting him up, bringing The Prince to a sitting position. Covering his eyes and groaning, he forced his eyelids open and closed in some manner resembling the blinking he wanted to do, and his memories started to come back. Ah, right. Man Unkind. Alatyr. Portal to Hell. Rodion. Rodion, Rodion, Rodion…it hit him at once, and he turned to one of the two voices.

“—Ah! You wouldn’t have happened to have also seen a…a…”

The Prince trailed off as his eyes wandered up the figure. The speaker with the gruff voice appeared to be a tall and burly humanoid figure with the features of a lynx, deep sapphire fur decorated with various golden swirls and designs, resembling the ornamentation on the outside of an old book. His uniform was simple (if a bit tight) being a modest red button-down polo shirt worn with black pants and black shoes, a utility belt that held numerous vials and books that The Prince didn't quite have the wherewithal to recognize, and atop his head, a squarish red hat with the face of an owl embossed in gold on the front sat between two tall antelope horns. Fiery red eyes stared down at him as the officer bared his teeth, and he kept a firm grip on a blood-stained billy club. At least he was sure it wasn’t his blood—last time he checked, it wasn’t bright purple.

Besides him, dressed in the same uniform, was a wiry and younger-looking being resembling a fox with tusks and a prominent overbite, glassy yellow eyes staring down at him as two of his arms were crossed, and the other two were placed firmly on his hips.

He stammered a bit before continuing.

“Uh, y-you wouldn’t happen to have seen a rather burly fellow come here with me, would you, dears? Around six and a half feet tall, hairy, scar on the forehead?”

The lynx-like demon wordlessly pointed a couple meters away, where Rodion sat in a lump on the floor, still slowly coming to as well as he cursed under his breath and rubbed his eyes. The Prince almost felt a little relieved that he was okay, before remembering that his head would likely be on the chopping block once his memories also returned. He must have been looking for a bit too long, since he was slapped on the shoulder with the rubber billy club in the officer’s grasp.

“Ow! Bloody hell!”

“Now that you know yer friend is alright, get off the road. You’re blockin’ traffic.”

“How can I be blocking traffic if I’ve barely been here five minutes?”

The Prince laid back down and folded his hands behind his back, smirking.

“Perhaps I’d rather lau here for the rest of the night and make small-talk with whoever passes by. You two handsome things’ll be first, if you don’t buzz off!”

The fox demon leaned to the side, eyeing the senior officer expectantly.

“Can we count that as resisting arrest, Mudorio?”

Mudorio just sighed and folded his arms, bending down and picking up The Prince effortlessly by the scruff of his coat, dragging him along the road until he was thrown in Rodion's direction. Apart from a slightly scraped knee, he was alright—the ground was surprisingly spongey, seeing as an experimental press revealed it to be dirt rather than pavement. He sat up, and saw Rodi staring directly at him with a complicated look on his face. He just smiled back.

"Bona to vada, Rodi dear."

Rodion just frowned, looking back at the two officers as they approached the humans. Mudorio pushed the brim of his cap up, his look of annoyance instead having given way to one of confusion.

"Do you two mortals even know where you are?"

Said mortals looked around, and took the opportunity to properly take in where they had ended up. First and foremost, the smell. Rodion was reminded of the time he had been away from his home for a week and had forgotten to put the eggs back in the fridge. The Prince, separately, was reminded of a particularly unpleasant client he had who apparently didn't know you were supposed to wash yourself before paying for sex. It stank of fire and rotten eggs.

Putting that aside, it was very clear that they were in the middle of a walkway, in the middle of a city. All around them, tall buildings made of black stone and with red-tinted windows stood ominously like giants, and it occurred to them that there was music playing. Loud, bombastic music full of crunchy guitars and frenetic trills and runs, feeling as though it was taking your brain stem and strangling it with its presence. It was slightly muffled, supposedly coming from one of the surrounding buildings, and faintly audible beneath that were the sounds of moaning and flesh against one another—also from the same building. Scanning downwards, they saw the inhabitants of this city, and what inhabitants they were—all manner of anthropomorphic animals, distorted humanoids, unidentifiable creatures with some resembling monsters and others resembling aliens, of all shapes and sizes and sexes. Many were naked. Others were smartly dressed. A choice few were somewhere in between. Despite the claim that they were blocking traffic, it appeared that many of the beings simply passed by them without even giving them so much as a distasteful look. The air was hot and humid, and Rodion could feel himself already sweating through his shirt, unaccustomed to any amount of heat.

The Prince sucked on his lower lip before turning back to the officers.

"Hell, I would assume?"

"Correct. Specifically, Dis. Jeez, didja get so drunk you forgot where you were even drinking?"

He slowly stood up, with the still-sullen Rodion accompanying him.

"Figured. Well, for your information, we didn't come here to drink, as much as I could use a stiff chocolate mojito at the moment. You know where I can speak with your leader?"

The fox demon raised all four of his hands, stepping forward after a period of silence and producing a pad and paper. Even the paper appeared to be charred black, which made The Prince wonder what good a black piece of paper would be.

“Whoa, whoa, slow down there, horseradish. We have a couple of questions for you two. First and foremost, we need some ID. Who are you two?”

Rodion cleared his throat, speaking clearly and unintentionedly with experience. He was a doctor, after all—The Prince figured he probably was on-site to a lot of murders and accidents.

“Rodion Nikolayev, from Kaliningrad, Russia.”

The officer cracked his knuckles and a thin claw came out of one of his pointer fingers, writing in red on the pad. The Prince considered his question happily answered.

“Mm-hmm, and what about you, sir?”

“The Prince of Fuck All, love.”

His eyes darted back to The Prince, staring at him.

“...You think it’s funny, joking around like this with an officer of the law? I’ll have you know tha—”

Officer Mudorio put his hand out, stopping his colleague.

“Easy, Phalarthao. You’ll have to excuse him, he started on the job just recently…as you mighta heard, I’m Mudorio. We’re both officers of the law here in Hell, and our beat is the city of Dis.”

Rodion tilted his head, crossing his arms.

“Police officers in Hell? That is curious. I was under apprehension there were no laws. This is realm of debauchery and sin, yes?”

“True, but even crapholes like this gotta keep the peace somehow. Besides, there’s plenty of troublemakers, so it ain’t like we’re just sittin’ around all day with our thumbs up our asses. Now, second question. How’d you enter Hell, and how long ago? We’ve got locations in Turkey over in Denizli, Turkmenistan, Mt. Osore in Japan, Nicaragua, and one entrance in America that offers tours. You two get lost tryin’ to sneak into Dis at the end of your tour?”

“Aha, well…actually, funny you say that, love. We actually used a home portal, dunno how long ago.”

Rodion pointed at his compatriot.

“I would like to make correction. *He* used home portal, in my home. I was trying to stop him, and I got taken as well. I do not want any trouble, officers, I just would like to be taken home please. If you need character witnesses, I know some demons who I can contact if need arises.”

Officers Mudorio and Phalarthao stared at the two of them, dumbfounded as they processed what they had been told…before Mudorio turned to his fellow officer and shook his head.

“Gotta say, I didn't think there were many folk stupid enough to open a portal here in their own home anymore. Though that stopped back in the Middle Ages.”

“There was that flare-up in the late 1800s though, wasn’t there?”

“Yeah, yeah. (Smartass.) Either way, as for you two.”

He raised a hand and clenched his fist twice, a pair of handcuffs appearing in it with a flash of fire that he proceeded to twirl around his finger.

“Entering Hell illegally without proper documentation is a Class Orpheus violation of Charter 3. I’m afraid I’m gonna have to take you two down to the station. You’re under arrest.”

The Prince reared back a bit, fearful at what being in prison in *Hell* and being around those deemed too dangerous to be placed among those who torture the damned for fun would entail, but Rodion put out his wrists without a fight.

"R-Rodi?!"

"Do I not at least get right to silence and legal counsel?"

"Don'tcha think that if you did, I would have told you?"

"I have had officers 'forget' when arresting me."

Mudorio belted out a laugh, grinning and showing off his pearly-white fangs as he had the handcuffs slapped onto him. The Prince, seeing the officer distracted, took the opportunity to slowly reach into his coat to look for something he could use to get them both out of this sticky wicket.

"Hahahaha! Nah, boy, we don't forget down here. Only things in the world with better memories than elephants are the big guy upstairs and us demons. Now just come along quietly and—"

"Wait."

Phalarthao spoke up, putting one of his many hands on his colleague's shoulder, stepping towards the two of them. Tilting his snout upwards, he sniffed and snorted, making a circle around Rodion as he smelled him thoroughly. Rodion blushed a little and kept his eyes trained on the officer. After a bit of deliberation, Phalarthao squinted up at him.

"...There's the scent of blood and death on this one. And a bit of magic, for that matter. And the other…"

He proceeded to do the same with The Prince, who quickly yanked his hand out of his coat to appear as innocent as he could, and subsequently swayed his hips a bit watching the demon smell him.

"You know, I don't usually let strange good-looking men sniff me for free. If you smell potpourri, that's my perfume."

Phalarthao gagged.

"Believe me, I smell it…but I also smell lots and lots of magic…magic of all kinds. But especially demonic magic."

"Demonic magic, hm? I don't know where you're getting that from, hun. I don't exactly remember slathering myself in demon splooge…this week. You sure nobody messed with us while we were out?"

Ignoring The Prince's question, Phalarthao stepped back to Mudorio and spoke in secret with him in a language neither man could understand. It sounded somewhat like a mix between Arabic and Hebrew, with a bit of Latin and some vague faux-English words the both of them could pick out like "kriminal", "steshon", "jurisdiktion". While they spoke, The Prince side-stepped over to Rodion and leaned to the side, looking down at the handcuffs. They appeared to be made out of pure silver, and that familiar itch The Prince got in the back of his skull when he saw something he wanted to steal started to buzz. With the two officers here though, perhaps it'd be best to hedge their bets for now…but what if…

“Don’t even think about it, Prince. You have gotten me into enough trouble as is, and if you want me to stay with you through this asinine adventure you have dragged me on, you will behave yourself.”

“Wha—I-You—Did you *really* think I was going to try to steal the handcuffs off of your lills, right under the rozzers’ noses? Hmph! Honestly. Rude. Some people just have such low expectations of others when it comes to common decency, I suppose.”

“You got me arrested in Hell, Prince, I believe my expectations are well warranted.”

“Fine then. Be like that. I’ll be a good little slut and shut my mouth while I get handcuffed, if that’s what daddy wants.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“And what if I want to, *daddy?”*

“Ahem.”

Mudorio cleared his throat, and the two stopped bickering to turn to him. He stepped forward, with Phalarthao folding all four hands behind his back beside him.

“Gentlemen. We as officers of the law have come to a conclusion. You are still under arrest, but warrant further investigation. We’ll be taking you to our headquarters to meet with Chief Constable Andras.”

He raised his other hand and clenched his fist twice, and another set of silver handcuffs appeared in it.

“Until then, we’ve got to keep you two cuffed. Regulations and all.”

The Prince put the back of his hand to his forehead and let out a despaired moan before thrusting out both wrists.

“Ohhhh, how terrible! How awful! What a miscarriage of justice this is, arresting a poor fruit like myself! Have you no *shame*, orderly daughters?! Fine then! Lock me up! Lock me up and throw away the key! Show your people what the law means! Because you may beat me, hurt me, kill me, but you shall never rescind my spirit! And furthermore—”

Partway through his second sentence, the handcuffs were unceremoniously placed on him, and Phalarthao turned to Rodi.

“Have you ever teleported before, Mr. Nikolayev?”

“Not consciously.”

“Then my advice? Hold your breath. I’ve heard from other mortals that the feeling’s sort of like having your head dunked under water and pulled back out again in the blink of an eye.”

“...Will I be getting a warning?”

“Oh, sure, sure. We’ll count down from three. Us demons don’t actually mind you mortal folk much, y’know? Plus, you know another good thing about working in Hell?”

“What’s that?”

Phalarthao then snapped the fingers on all four of his hands, and immediately the four of them were gone.

~

When they all arrived at their destination less than a second after they'd left, The Prince found that not only did his headache feel a little worse, but he also now felt like he had suddenly spaced out for five hours, despite only a moment passing. Rodion blinked harshly and squinted, looking around their new surroundings.

They were in a quite cushy waiting room, the walls papered with a sickeningly dull orange color and the ground covered in a red velvet carpet. A large leather sofa sat to the side underneath a large painting of a dark-wood forest bathed in twilight. Funnily enough, it was the first instance of green they had seen while in Hell that wasn't the color of some lumbering and bulky demon's fur. The wooden frame was intricately carved, and ahead of them, a door of some unknown type of wood—last time Rodion had gone shopping for doors, he didn't remember seeing any with screaming faces imprinted in the knots—stood nestled in the wall with a knocker in the middle. It was slightly air-conditioned, but only slightly.

"Wait here."

Mudorio shot a distrusting look between the two before stepping towards the door and gently knocking on it using the door-knocker.

"Chief Andras, sir? It's Officer Mudorio, with Officer Phalarthao. We have two…*drifters* here, who entered Hell illegally, Class Orpheus, home portal. There's one with the stench of death and another with demonic magic on him. We were hoping you could possibly identify the latter. Are you free?"

A stern and deep voice like the far-off sound of someone dropping a heavy book on the floor after severely miscalculating just how heavy it really was responded.

"You may enter. Bring the two criminals with you."

The door unlocked, and Mudorio opened it, gesturing with a jerk of the head for the others to enter. Phalarthao prodded the 'criminals' in the smalls of their backs, having them enter one by one. The Prince first, then Rodion.

Inside, a large purple shag carpet redundantly thrown over the velvet flooring welcomed them, as well as a large desk with various appliances and tools drawn out meticulously across its top. Pens, paperwork, a desk lap, a mug reading "#1 POLICE CHIEF", a button connected to a desk speaker, and of course, the ubiquitous placard that every high-ranking official seemed to have to avoid the annoyance of asking for their name. His read "Chief Const. Andras". Behind him, a large window gave a view of what countryside Hell seemed to have—primarily, a grove of gnarled and twisted trees that appeared to be bearing fruit remarkably shaped like human heads…or human heads that looked worryingly unlike fruit. Hanging on the wall was a long and intimidating longsword that befit its owner.

Speaking of, Chief of Constabulary Andras sat at his desk, his hands clasped as he leaned forwards to look at the entrants. He was humanoid, for the most part—though his skin was worryingly sunburnt, to the point of appearing orange. Or perhaps he was just that color naturally. Either way, his head appeared to be that of a yellow-and-blue-feathered owl, with intense sapphire eyes, stubby dog-like ears with a single silver ring piercing in the right lobe, and

a stern brass-colored beak. Out from his back sprouted two wings deceptively similar to those of angels'. He was dressed in a dark red uniform resembling those of his officers, but worn with a white undershirt and a black tie.

Remaining in position, his eyes swiveled between the two mortals.

"...I assume these are the two who you have brought me to see, yes?"

Phalarthao saluted, removing his hat.

"That's right, sir! These two, calling themselves Rodion and…'The Prince of Fuck All'."

"Privet."

"Hello, Andras darling. Might I say, your feathers are looking especially downy today—is that a new conditioner I see?"

Andras closed his eyes, thinking for a few moments before standing up, palms down on the desk.

"Thank you. Officer Mudorio, Officer Phalarthao, you are dismissed. Return to your beat."

The two of them saluted without a word and exited the room, closing the door behind them. Andras folded his hands behind his back and looked down at the two of them. He was well-built, and was a good foot taller than even Rodion, which expectedly made him quite imposing to poor little five-foot-seven The Prince. He looked to Rodion.

"Are you the one they said had the stench of death on you?"

"Yes, sir. I work as a doctor on Earth."

"Curious. You are quite calm for someone who has been taken to the underworld. Why is that?"

"I have a hobby of summoning demons for companionship, sir. I do not seek anything from them but conversation and intimacy."

"Oh? And why have you not tried to summon me then, I wonder?"

Rodion swallowed.

"Goetic texts describe you as an incredibly dangerous and fearsome demon who could kill the summoner if negotiations are handled incorrectly. I usually keep to demons of lesser rank who do not pose as great a threat to my life or my work."

Andras huffed slightly, seemingly amused.

"Funny. You say that as if even the weakest demon could not kill a human with a snap of their fingers."

"Some are at least willing to not do so right away…sir."

"Interesting. I've heard rumors about you. The one they call 'The Butcher of Kaliningrad'. Do you know why they call you that? I'm unaware of the reason."

The Prince raised his eyebrows, leaning in a bit to hear the conversation between the two. Now this was something he was interested in, he doesn't recall Rodi mentioning he was called anything of the sort when they met. The man himself stared up at Andras with a steeled and stoic look on his face, trying his hardest not to show any emotion. He had done this before, that's certain.

“My reputation among townsfolk is rather low. Because of the poor quality of water and food, many become sick and injured, and they do not see me until they are beyond help. They blame me for the deaths of their friends and family, and so they call me The Butcher, as if I see them as nothing more than meat.”

The Prince sucked on the inside of cheek. Bullshit. However, the police chief seemed to buy it, as he straightened his back and hummed.

“...Quite a reply. Thank you for elucidating me. I do sense magic on you, Russian, but nothing from our ilk. Primarily eastern-european, mystic in nature. Conjuration, summoning…and the smell of alchemy. A barbaric hobby, in my opinion, but one us demons are versed in as well. And I am to believe you were taken here against your will by…” He glanced to The Prince, who blew him a kiss. “...this strange person?”

“How did you…?”

“Intuition. Not only that, but I can see out of the hats of every policedemon in this country. By meditating and clearing my mind, their many eyes become my own. Though, that brings me to my second question.”

Keeping his pose rigid, he turned his head to face The Prince. In speaking with Andras, they noticed a curious element of his movements: that is, that he always seemed to be in one pose or another, only moving either his head or his eyes, and when he changed positions, it was robotic. It was meticulous, as if he was more mind than body. Stiffly, he bent down to come face-to-face with him.

“...Between the two of you, I can sense plenty of sin tarnishing your souls. This one certainly wears it on their sleeve, however. What did you say that your name was?”

The Prince wrinkled his nose, looking down the bridge at the owl-man.

“The Prince of Fuck All, love. Capital T-P, lowercase o, capital F-A.”

“And that is your *real* name?”

“It’s the only name I’ve got, hun, and I won’t be coming up with any more as long as you’re here staring at me with them big ol’ ogles of yours. Mind stepping back a few paces?”

Andras stood back up straight, glaring down at him with the same distaste you would give a piece of dog shit you stepped in.

“You dare to speak to me, Chief Constable Andras, that way? You have some fire in you, Englishman. You are remarkably calm, even rebellious, in the face of Hell. Do you not have any questions?”

“Yeah, I’ve got one. Mr. Owl, how many licks does it take to get to the Tootsie Roll center of a Tootsie Pop?”

Rodion snickered a bit, but Mr. Owl himself remained stern.

“I am unfamiliar with your reference, mortal.”

“I’m only 80% mortal, dear, and that’s really quite a shame, I think you of all people would get a kick out of it: so, there are these right awful candies called Tootsie Rolls, and—”

He raised a hand to shut him up.

“I do not need to hear the reasoning, Englishman. I am here to do what was requested of me, which was to assess the source of the demonic magic my officers sensed around you.”

Andras closed his eyes and made a circle around The Prince of Fuck All, furrowing his brow as if he was trying to see through the top of his own head.

“You demonic sorts sure do like circling humans, don’t you?”

“Quiet.”

Stopping once he was behind The Prince, he squatted down on the floor with just as robotic a movement as the others, staring at the coat. Rodion, who had been watching discretely from only a few feet away (and who was frankly starting to feel slightly left out of the whole affair), happened to catch the only time Andras’ stern expression swung in the opposite direction from ‘sterner, yet sterner, sternest’, and instead showed genuine shock. His beak hung open momentarily, blue irises constricted, before he rose once more.

“Englishman.”

“Prince of Fuck All, Mr. Owl.”

“Whatever. Where…did you get this coat of yours?”

Rodion raised an eyebrow. The coat…ah, right, the pocket dimension coat that held all his usual sorts of items. He hadn’t had much chance to ask about it when it was just him and The Prince, especially since…well, his mind was sort of preoccupied with other things at the moment. But, now that he was able to take a closer look, he could make out a vaguely familiar design paved in silver leaf on the back, right above the fluffy white hem-lining. The Prince just pulled on the collar a bit with both hands, huffing.

“Well, if you must know, I got it from a Victoria’s Secret for ten quid. Quite a steal, it was, I had to beat an old lady to death with my purse to get it.”

“Do not lie to me, Englishman.”

“Fine, fine. I nicked it off a hobo.”

Andras reached forward and wrapped his hand around The Prince’s neck, clenching all five fingers around his throat hard enough that Rodion could see veins pressing up against the underside of his skin. He wheezed.

“M-My father, alright, I got it from my bloody father!”

“Good. It appears that force is the only thing that will make you tell the truth.”

He let go and The Prince doubled over coughing. What was it about him that made people want to strangle him? He knew he had something of a pencil-neck, but not so much that it attracted palms and fingers to clasp around it…He glared back at Andras.

“It was the only thing the old bastard left me. Supposedly, he stuffed it full of all kinds of magic so it’d be hard to track. And if you think I’m telling you any more than that, you’re obviously dumber than you look, Mr. Owl. Which, if I may politely add, is quite substantial…”

The owl-man squinted back at him, meeting his glare head-on, but re-clasped his hands back behind his back. It appeared he was done with the violence for now.

"...I can see that. There are many sources and forms of magic attached to this garment. Black, white, and grey magic, curses, witchcraft, fae spells, apotropaic protection magic, yellow shamanism, moon magic…sex magic…"

To Rodion, it almost seemed like he was shaken about something. Even if he was as stoic as ever, there was a slight tremble in his voice, and he hesitated slightly between his words. Andras sniffed.

"However. The chief source of this garment's magical properties, whatever they may be, is that of Paimon, one of the Kings of Hell and the Chief of the Secret Police here. How in Judas' name did you…your father, manage to adhere his magic to this? There is even his sigil here, emblazoned on the back."

Rodi leaned to the side, taking a peek at the sigil that Andras gestured to. Frankly, it sort of resembled a distorted comb in some ways, or perhaps a cast-iron garden-fence gate, but the design was unmistakably a demonic sigil. All at once, it hit Rodion. Why hadn't he noticed it immediately? Then again, it *had* been a while since he had even tried to summon a demon…and Paimon generally always seemed to be a headache. After all, everywhere he went, a parade preceded him, so he always figured it would just be a big mess and headache that he would be left to clean up. Demons usually weren't very good about hygiene, from his experience.

The Prince himself just stuck out his tongue.

"Don't ask me. I never knew the codger. Don't even know his name, nor my mum's. But, you say the reason my clobber here's got a handy-dandy pocket dimension pre-installed is because I've got the blessing of some cove named Paimon? Does he know?"

"...If he does, he has not told me…this is most intriguing. Russian, what was the reason you two opened a portal to this realm on your own in the first place?"

The Prince puffed his cheeks out, annoyed at being snubbed for the one question he was dying to answer, but the aforementioned Russian just took a deep breath.

"Prince explained to me that there was cult called Man Unkind who was looking to drive universe insane, and that they attacked my city to steal piece of world rock called Alatyr from tomb of Immanuel Kant, and while we had relations, piece of world rock was stolen by agents, and Prince stated they could use it as compass to other important rocks. Then I show my grimoires, and Prince says he could ask demons for help using me as ambassador, and opens portal without my permission. I try to stop him, but here we are. Is that good enough explanation, sir?"

Andras listened to the explanation whilst rubbing his chin (or, whatever owls had in place of a chin—his gobble?), mulling things over. Then, when he opened his eyes, he pointed at The Prince.

"You, Englishman. You say you have been fighting Man Unkind?"

"Do you know them, love?"

He sighed.

“Unfortunately, yes. But I do not have the information you need. You will need to speak to the leader of the Order. I believe he should be finishing up the weekly meeting at the Hall in Pandaemonium.”

Rodion tilted his head.

“The Order?”

“W-Wait, Mr. Owl, Pandaemonium? Right, your officers said your headquarters here was in Dis, right?”

“Indeed it is…ah, right. I forget, many mortals generally are not familiar with teleportation.”

Andras raised his hand.

“Please prepare yourselves accordingly.”

“Can we get a countdown, or—”

He snapped his fingers, and they were there.

~

Rodion leaned against one of the walls dry-heaving, while The Prince just roughly massaged the whole upper half of his face with his palms, groaning out.

“Ugh, bloody hell, can’t you demon folk at least give us a warning before you do that? Not all of us are used to such sudden teleportation…even me. Poor Rodi’s liable to yak up his lunch at this rate…”

“(Technically, I did not eat lunch…)

Andras brusquely crossed his arms in response.

“If you are unable to become accustomed to our mode of transportation, then you two are weaker than I had assumed. Now, if you are finished vomiting, take a look around you.”

He gestured to the ceiling, and the two did as requested.

The building where they were now was exceptionally large, or at least the hall they were in was so: constructed in the style of a Victorian gothic cathedral with dark maroon stonework and numerous arches and flying buttresses visible stretching high over their heads, it made the two of them feel quite small in comparison, like ants in a house. Even the patches of stone much too far away to make out clearly were obviously quite intricately detailed. Large flags unfurled out from the ceiling, all with the same design on the front: two equal horizontal stripes, red on top and black on bottom, and a white pentagram in the center. The floors were quite polished, and lining the massive walkway they stood in were numerous seats upholstered in red velvet, large ornate doorways hiding away other parts of the building, and a number of impressive paintings. The one that The Prince noticed stuck out the most, if only for how unfitting it was, was a portrait of what appeared to be Heaven, populated by all manner of angels surrounding the focal point of the image: a great white light surrounded by three rings of color.

At the very end of the hallway, they could see two massive doors that took up the entire width of the passage, which by itself was the width of a football field. On the front, a symbol

resembling a fly's head was painted in a red, dripping liquid. Both could venture a guess as to the origin, but neither would be right.

"This is Aleister Crowley Memorial Hall, named so in honor of Earth's greatest occultist, and one of our close friends. He was accepted into our arms with grace, before being sent off to be tortured like the rest."

Andras started off towards the doors at the end and gestured for The Prince and Rodi to follow, which they reluctantly did. Now that Rodion's stomach had settled, he looked back to the owl-man.

"Pardon me, Andras, sir?"

"Yes, Russian?"

"You say we will be meeting with 'leader of Order'...er, what order? No demon I have talked to has mentioned any order."

"Ah, yes…we usually keep our proceedings within this group rather secret. And not only that, but when it comes to demons outside of our own ranks, there isn't exactly much interest. Does everyone on Earth keep up with all the substrata of their nation's governments?"

"Only if they haven't got a better hobby."

"So then, what is this 'order', exactly?"

"This is the headquarters for The Order of The Fly, chief administrative unit under the instruction of The Devil, who as you likely are already aware is the head executive of all of Hell's operations. We conduct all manner of business here, each primary responsibility being headed by a member. For example, I am the Chief Constable as well as the Head Military Instructor for the legions and armies employed under our rule. Other members have jurisdiction over negotiation, cuisine, public health, the casinos and whorehouses, weapon-smithing…just as you humans have such constructs as 'Congress' or 'Parliament' or the 'National Diet', we have The Order of the Fly to take care of much of the same responsibilities."

The Prince snickered.

"What I wouldn't give for there to be someone in Parliament who did nothing but control prostitution…that'd be a sight to see. He'd get my vote no matter how daft he was."

They came to the two doors, towering so high the two mortals could barely see the tops of the wooden panels. Without warning, a deep voice rumbled through the hall, echoing and ricocheting off the walls. The Prince nearly was startled out of his skin, and clung to a similarly-shaken Rodion girlishly.

"IDENTIFY YOURSELF TO ORCUS."

"Shite!"

Andras sighed and reached into his uniform, producing something resembling a wallet, made of orange leather. He opened it and revealed an ID card showing his sigil, as well as other ancillary information, holding it up to the door.

"...APOLOGIES, THE TEXT IS A BIT TOO SMALL FOR ORCUS. ORCUS' EYES ARE NOT WHAT THEY USED TO BE."

"Yes, yes, I understand, you have been the doorguard for the past 1500 years or so after all. It's Andras."

"AND WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER TWO? ORCUS KNOWS THAT YOU KNOW THAT MASTER DOES NOT APPRECIATE NEW INTRODUCTIONS IMMEDIATELY AFTER MEETINGS."

The Prince curtsied as best he could with his wrists shackled.

"Charmed to meet you, Orcus love. The Prince of Fuck All."

Rodion just raised a hand to wave.

"Rodion Nikolayev. I am…his unwilling compatriot in this little adventure."

"ORCUS IS HAPPY TO MEET YOU TWO. ORCUS DOES NOT SEE TOO MANY MORTALS HERE IN THIS DOOR. ORCUS WILL OPEN THE WAY FOR YOU ALL."

The sound of a heavy metal click signified that the doors were unlocked, Andras putting back his ID and moving to push it open.

"Er, w-wait."

He stopped, turning to look at Rodion. It was his voice that had spoken, and he had a neurotic look in his eyes as he fidgeted with his bowtie.

"I have, um…just had realization. This is Order of Fly, yes? Who…Who is the leader?"

Andras raised his eyebrows incredulously.

"I am surprised at you, Russian. I can understand the ignorance of the Englishman, but as someone who has described that he enjoys studying demonic rituals and practices and who has supposedly even met with a few face-to-face, you do not know?"

"I, uh, have an inkling as to who it might be. B-But I want to know! You know, bahaha, is good to know person's name before introductions, *da?* I, I do not want to seem rude. You see. Right?"

The Prince just furrowed his brow, trying to read the Russian's expression. His pupils darted all about, trying desperately to find anything to focus on rather than Andras' staring, and his bowtie-fidgeting only grew more fervent as he stammered. It may have just been the heat, but he could see Rodi sweating. The owl just grunted.

"It will be obvious. Do not worry about being rude. I assure you, Lord Beelzebub is quite amicable, when he wants to be."

His mouth hung open, his eyes widened…and he turned beet-red.

"B-Beelzebub?"

"Yes, and I believe we've dawdled quite enough."

"Wait, wait, can we not just take more dawdles, for time being? I would really, really rather not talk to him, he is very—can be, um…"

Andras ignored Rodion's pleas and shoved the doors open with a bit of effort, the metal joints creaking as the massive entryway opened up fully.

Rodion covered his face, and The Prince just gaped in amazement.

The room they entered into, while not as massive as the hallway they had just exited from, still impressed with its size: it was clearly built to serve as a meeting room, and steel suits of

armor lined the ornate red wallpaper that overlooked the long, oblong table in the center of the room. A few windows dotted the walls, but from what they could see, all that was outside was fire.

However, it wasn't the setting they had been shocked into silence by.

A knight cloaked in chainmail and red plate armor, bloodshot eyes peering out from the darkness in his helmet, raised his hands.

"Lo! 'Tis a tragedy, I say, an injustice of the highest degree! Our realm, accused of such misgivings?! We have been nothing but courteous and obedient towards their wishes!"

A humanoid young man with curly black hair, one tattered red wing, a floating head, and yellowish-green skin leaned forward and pointed accusingly towards the knight.

"Quiet, you tin crackpot, we've been anything but. I mean, we're demons! We don't bend to anyone's wishes, and we do whatever the hell we want! If they wanted us to give them a fighting chance, maybe they would have sent someone who wasn't such a dunce!"

A pale woman with snakes curling around her body, including one around her neck twisted into the shape of a noose, lowered his hand.

"Simmer, Abezethibou, remember your temper. None of us are happy about this, and we're all under a lot of stress."

Another woman—somehow paler—with her voluptuous figure stuffed into a skimpy black leather outfit leaned on the backs of her fists and sighed with a dreamy grin.

"You have to admit though, he was pretty damn hot…"

One reminiscent of a burly humanoid bull with beige fur, three eyes, and what appeared to be a furnace built into his gut, slammed his fist into the table, the corners of his smile twitching.

"I still say we stop with all this shit-talking about 'fairness' and 'justice' and just raze the whole damn place to the ground! Let them see the true might of Hell when it's staring them in the face and violating their wives and children!"

A hunched bluish-black-skinned figure with large glassy eyes opened his mouth to speak, but was pushed out of the way by a lankier green-skinned humanoid with three horns and a hooked nose, who gestured with a sword.

"I agree! Demons bow to no one, much less I, Master Leonard, Prince of the Sabbath!"

A rather short young man of fair skin covered in ruddy sigils and with a mess of red hair flapped his white-feathered wings annoyedly.

"Keep it down, you two. Doing that would only make Him more angry. We need to resolve this issue more thoroughly, and we can do that in the next meeting."

Seated in seven chairs surrounding the table were a host of colorful demons of varied build and appearance, arguing amongst one another. They shouted over each other, slamming their fists on the table, and at least once, The Prince could see one moving to strangle the other.

Seated at the far end of the table, a good 20 meters away from where The Prince of Fuck All, Rodion, and Andras were standing yet still clearly visible was the leader of this Order of the Fly.

He was a massive creature that resembled a pile of dung more than any living being, thick and corpulent rolls of brown flesh that were torn in places with yellow fatty tissue seeping out

caused his body to assume the shape of a rounded heap. His diseased skin was flecked with all manner of bloody scabs and discolorations in red, green, orange, and brown. Nestled in a thick neck roll, a head with large and wild orange-and-red eyes rolling about and twitching to and fro rested. Two tall, hooked antennae sprouted from his scalp, one looped within a lopsided crown smudged with shit, a sigil drawn on the front. Four translucent red wings—two with skulls at the edge—fluttered erratically behind him, and six thin hairy insect limbs flail about, growing from his misshapen sides like sticks in a mud pie. A lumpy orange-and-red abdomen sac rested heavy behind him. He was quite large, to say the least—taking up the entire space of the back of the room with his width, and easily being more than twice Rodion's height.

The Prince just stared, equal parts confused and utterly mortified at the scene before them, while Rodi kept his face covered with his shackled wrists. Andras closed the door behind them and raised a hand to the leader. There was a slight silence before the abdomen sac wriggled and writhed, a tinny rumbling starting to grow louder and louder until the top ripped itself open with the sound of flesh peeling from flesh: an unending swarm of what had to be millions (if not hundreds of millions) of horseflies filed out from its fleshy container, and the cacophonous sound of buzzing filled the conference room. Collectively, all those within covered their ears and groaned, wrenching their eyes shut and wincing at it. The Prince did the same, whilst Andras just closed his eyes and endured it.

In the intimidating collective of millions of voices, the flies spoke as one for their master.

"Quiet, you squabbling children."

The conference room quieted down, still covering their ears.

"We are Beelzebub. Lord of the Flies, those who none but The Devil above sits. Andras. What is the meaning of this interruption? You understand we have been under much stress as of late. We sense you have brought two with you."

"Indeed, milord. Two illegal entrants into Hell, one with Paimon's energy on him."

Some of those seated murmured between each other at the mention of Paimon's name, but Beelzebub's flies drowned them out.

"We said for you to be quiet, children. Please, bring them to us, Andras."

Andras pushed for the two to walk towards Beelzebub, and they both reluctantly complied. Gawking, The Prince stared at everyone with ice-blue mascara-circled eyes.

"Lord, you are an *ugly lot*, aren't you? Bunch of oddballs, freaks and geeks. I assume one of you is going to bite the head off a chicken for the after show?"

One of those seated, the one resembling a bull, stood up with a bitter grin that just barely failed to hide his anger.

"Great. Last thing we need's some tranny fucking up negotiations. I'm outta here, dad. You have fun sucking whatever that thing's got instead of a cock, I'm leaving."

Though he moved to exit, a cloud of flies short forward and surrounded the bull, stilling him.

"You will not exit until you have been dismissed, Moloch."

Moloch gulped and sat back down, crossing his arms like a spurned child. The two humans were left to approach Beelzebub himself. The Prince craned his neck upwards to look at the head of the beast, whistling.

"Gordon Bennett, you're a big one, aren't you, Bubby?"

The cloud of flies encroached on him, The Prince quickly shutting his mouth to prevent from accidentally swallowing any. Though he was not kept from moving, as he jerked back and wildly swatted at the sudden enveloping.

"Gah! Bloody flies!"

"We ask that you do not swat us. Though we are many, we are one as well. Identify yourself, mortal."

"Do I really have to? The Prince of Fuck All, love. Charmed to meet you, Bubby."

He inhaled through his nose and immediately doubled over dry-heaving from the stench. Shit. He smells like literal shit. Feces. In hindsight, it wasn't surprising: he *was* the Lord of the Flies after all, and there certainly were a lot of flies as anyone with two ears and a working brain could tell you. He plugged his nose, opting to speak through gritted teeth. Hopefully they wouldn't think to enter through his ears, right? The Prince was into some freaky shit, but having flies eat his brain was very low on the list. Right below being fucked with a pair of scissors. That wasn't a fun night.

He was barely able to get a word out, but he did wrench an eye open to look at Rodion. He didn't seem to be having nearly as bad of a reaction as The Prince did…in fact, it seemed like he was almost blushing, covering his face not out of horror towards Beelzebub or to spare himself from the stench, but to prevent others from seeing him.

A fly landed on the tip of Rodion's nose.

"Hm? This smell…we recognize it. You are…"

There was a silence. The main body of Beelzebub, showing more autonomy than was expected from the flabby rotting husk, turned its head to stare down at the Russian with both crazed dipterous eyes. The motion was accompanied by an uneasy creaking of its flesh.

"...Rodi?"

The Prince's head snapped in Rodion's direction hard enough to tear something important.

"Scusi, did Bubz here just call you Rodi?"

The Russian's face was beet red and he stammered out as quiet as a mouse.

"D-Da. Da, yes, we—I were, he was, um…"

"We dated."

The board of demons' reactions varied between confusion, awe, and sheer shock at the fact that their Lord, their master, the massive pile of flesh that smells like crap and belches out flies from his ass, could even be near someone romantically.

The Prince instead stared at Rodi for a few seconds, before proceeding to burst out laughing and fall backwards onto the floor, cackling and snorting to try and catch his breath any way he could. Rodion clenched his fists, finally removing them from his face, and made a pained expression at the Lord of the Flies.

"You…! You make it sound like it was long-time thing! Was only three months!"

"It was quite an enjoyable three months."

He bit his thumb, pained and flustered at once. "I was afraid of this, *trakhni menya*, I was very afraid of this…"

"What was the reason you broke up with us again? Please, remind us."

"...You kept leaving your dirty laundry around, never cleaning up after yourself. Stinking up place. Odd stains on bed and couch."

"We were under the impression you liked that."

"W-Well, maybe I did! But was very expensive replacing and cleaning everything because you did not want to, and it became hassle explaining to family—"

Beelzebub's flies let out an ear-splitting wheeze-cackle as the main body gently ran its tarsal claws through Rodi's hair.

"Just as charming as ever, we see. Your presence soothes us. We have been under a great amount of stress, you see. We were meeting with the princes and dignitaries of the Order to discuss those matters that plague us. Tell us, Rodi, why have you brought this…man, here to us?"

Right on cue, The Prince slowly writhed about on the ground, trying to get to his feet whilst still shackled and doing so with honestly rather impressive adeptness, sighing with a weary grin on his face as he regained his sensibilities.

"Ahahaha, ah, ahhh…that was worth a chuckle and a half, I'll tell you that for free. But, either way, righto. Problems abound, love, and it concerns all of us."

Speaking frankly (or at least, as frankly as he could with his manner of speaking), The Prince recollected the events that had led them there. The rest of the demons on the board listened intently with the exception of Moloch, who spent the speech trying to figure out how to make a church and steeple with his hands. After he was finished, Beelzebub's host body closed its eyes and he hummed in thought.

"Indeed. Man Unkind has been a hot topic of conversation among the various factions of the immortal world. Beneath the realm of the mortals that you reside in, Asiyah, there is Yetzirah, that plane inhabited by us demons, the fae, and all manner of beasts. Beneath that is Beri'ah, the plane of the angels and other such deities. Once further is Atziluth, where all souls and spirits linger. Beyond even that, the realm of the prima materia of existence, Adam Kadmon, where only He resides.

"Mortals have always been aware of our existence, their knowledge and even their own travel is of no concern to us…however, they cannot see such beings as angels, other deities, spirits, or the Lord. Just as fairly, we cannot see spirits for the most part, but we can see the layers below us and one above us—that realm of the angels and gods. Usually, there are barriers put into place to prevent free travel between these realms, reserved only for those select few such as archangels and those of us who are…but there has been a breakdown in these barriers as of late."

The red-haired man stood up, clearing his throat.

"Permission to continue, Beelzebub?"

"Yes, Lucifer, please do so. You are more familiar with our current activities."

Lucifer stepped around the table to approach The Prince and Rodion, looking up at the two of them. He was almost a little underwhelming in terms of his height for someone supposedly referred to as the 'Prince of Darkness', but there was an undeniable sense of ambition and rebellion radiating off of him. The same aura most teenagers give off, in fact, which generally goes away once they've screamed into a pillow and burnt themselves out for the night.

He made the devil's rock-n-roll horns with his right hand, and a silver chalice full of a cloudy liquid fell into his open palm with a puff of red smoke.

"I'm sure you've already wondered this, but the reason we can't call upon Paimon to assess your coat—which, by the way, very nice, still no clue why he would even lend it his power—at the moment is because he's been quite busy directing the Eyes of Kismet, our secret police squadrons, across this world to monitor the actions of Man Unkind. Before now, we've been aware of their existence…but, well, we aren't a police force. We have other matters to attend to that come first."

The Prince bent down a little, grinning from ear to ear with a cheeky glint in his eye.

"Aren't you a cute little bugger? How old are you now, 16?"

Lucifer grit his teeth and stared up at him with yellow eyes as intense as the sun itself.

"I am over *six thousand years old,* I'll have you know. And it'd do you well not to look down on me for it."

"Well, it's rather hard not to when you only come up to my knees, isn't it?"

Rodion gently nudged the man with his elbow, hesitant to make any wrong move.

"Er, P-Prince, I do not believe you should be teasing Prince of Darkness for his height."

"And what's wrong with my height, hm? Do you have something to say about it, russki? I'm only five-foot-five, that's average!"

The Prince leaned back and to the side, murmuring out the corner of his mouth to Rodi.

"(Average for a munchkin, maybe.)"

At once, Lucifer's shape bubbled and broiled until it became something entirely unrecognizable as the humanoid he once was, seven dark eyes shining brightly and thick deadly claws rearing. His voice boomed and rumbled like thunder, and the two mortals winced back.

"JUST SHUT THE HELL UP AND LISTEN TO ME, YOU MORONS! I HAVE HALF A MIND TO—"

"Lucifer."

Beelzebub's own buzzing voice spoke up from behind him, and he returned to his former shape in the blink of an eye. He inhaled, closed his eyes whilst counting to ten mentally, and opened them once again.

"...Apologies for my rash behavior. Accept this as my apology."

He splashed the contents of the chalice into both of their faces without warning. The Prince cursed loudly and Rodi followed swiftly after, only in Russian. It felt almost like some sort of

severe acid had been slaistered across their skin with how it fizzed and bubbled, but there was no pain at all. Instead, both their faces started to feel numb, and their eyesight started to cloud.

"Cor, bloody 'ell! What'd you throw in our eeks, you chicken?!"

"Da, I could use warning next time!"

"Calm down, mortals. It's only Joseph's Cup. It's filled with a mystical liquid that lets you see anywhere the pourer desires. Really, it's just a knock-off of what Jamshid had, but it was the best we could do for him and Ben on short notice. It should be showing you snapshots of all the world's affairs at the moment…and you should see how Man Unkind has been meddling with things."

Once they were done screaming and had calmed down for the most part, the two harshly blinked and squinted, peering through the aether into other worlds…

CHAPTER 3: Peek Behind The Curtain

The birds sang as they fluttered through the canopy of the glen, white doves and caladrius pigeons soaring freely through the skies. Young unicorn colts drank from the same pools as mermaids and undines, bishop-fish saying their prayers to shellycoats and grindylows seated on lily-pads and rocks that streams passed by elegantly. The trees were tall and with clear bark, and their leaves glistened with the dewdrops of the morning shower. Great colonies of mushrooms grew and twisted around the roots of the trees, happily siphoning away at whatever food source they could sense and occasionally forming great rings among the blue-green grass. In the shadows, hidden from the shining light of the sun, bugbears and lindworms were shrouded. The air, gently misted, felt like breathing not just air, but the ideal of air, the pinnacle of experience itself. Sparkling, living, through your lungs. Life was good on the island of Tir na nOg, the paradise for all beasts and creatures under the sun and moon.

Within a great circle of those aforementioned mushrooms, capped with hoods white as snow, resided one of the most prominent settlements of the loose and unincorporated kingdoms under the Seelie Court collectively referred to as 'Fairyland'—in fact, it was the capital of the whole lot of them, Arcadia Sióga. To enter not just this fairy ring, but *any* fairy ring (provided you aren't being kidnapped and taken there forcefully), one must do three things.

First, you must turn at least one article of clothing you have on your person inside-out: sod grass, which misdirects and confuses unknowledgeable visitors, grows naturally around fairy rings in order to cloak their position.

Second, you must be of pure heart and mind. If you are not of pure heart and mind, though, bringing a gift or eating something given as a gift by the fae generally does the trick. It shows that you are a friend to the fae, or at least that one happened to fancy you enough to shove a dessert or two in your mouth.

Third, unless brought by a fae, you need to provide proof of ID, a passport, and be investigated thoroughly before entering to ensure you aren't a criminal. At least, that's the custom for most settlements of the Seelie Court—most of the Unseelie decide whether to kill you or to not break every bone in their body picking a fight the minute they see you walking up to them, and the same goes for their lands as well. As such, in most parts of the world, fairy rings are treated similarly to national enclaves and are directed to be set up in national parks or historic forests where trespassers are able to be prosecuted via means apart from being turned into a fruit.

The mystical paradise of Tir na nOg lacks these prerequisites, however, mainly because they get so few visitors and is home to such strong beings that matters such as security generally hold little concern to the inhabitants. Additionally, one must pass through the honeyed fields of the mortal paradise Mag Mell that hangs secreted away off the coast of Ireland and must be deemed worthy to enter the immortal paradise far above them. It is a safe haven for all mystical creatures under the care of the fae.

However, with a bit of rule-bending, any sod who happens to have enough bull-headed stubbornness can muscle their way in.

A matted-furred foot stamped out one of the mushrooms encompassing the ring, and two figures entered the grounds with a flash of golden light. Within the blink of an eye, they were shrunk down to little more than the size of a collective thimble, flanked by towering blades of grass and monumental mushroom heads visible in the distance like skyscrapers. Smaller flowers of all shades and colors flanked their patted-down dirt path, and at the end, a cast-iron gate was guarded by two fairies. Their translucent wings fluttered anxiously as the armored soldiers—one male, one female—held up their ostensibly metal-and-wood-made spears like they were shotguns. The tip glowed with swirling magic.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"No trespassers're allowed 'n Arcadia Sióga 'less they've got a grand reason fer comin'. State your names an'…business…'ere…"

She trailed off, raising the grille of her helmet to gaze up at the two who had approached them. They were tall and feral-looking beastmen with fur as dark as the night, eyes glowing red with fury and hatred as they hunched and stared down at the guards. Each of their heads were two conjoined into one by the backs of their scalps, with two mouths, two noses, and four eyes. Foam poured from their mouths, staining the strained white polo and ripped khaki pants they had on. As they spoke, stiffly and in turn, their bodies twitched and jerked.

"We are Sons of Sam."

"Sons of Sam, yes."

"Master left us."

"Master."

"No more master."

"Hungry."

"Cold."

"We are masters."

"New masters."

"We are gods."

"Hateful gods."

"Gods desire sacrifice."

The guards' grips on their spears started to shake as the Sons of Sam leered down at them.

"Gods desire blood."

"Blood."

"Yes, blood."

"The blood of young girls."

"New master promised."

"Promised us blood."

"Fairy blood."

"Sam loves to drink blood."

“Go out and kill commands Master Sam.”

The male guard let out a primal yelp and fired his spear, a magic bullet whizzing through the air. It flew past the left Son of Sam, who lunged and tore his throat out with a splash of glittering red blood on the grass. The other turned to the female guard and pointed, letting out a wheezing cackle.

“Shoot me first.”

“Shoot to kill or else.”

“For Master.”

“Master wants the stone.”

The two mouths flashed a bloodthirsty smile.

“Keep out of our way, or you will die.”

Gulping, the female guard dropped her spear and retreated further into Arcadia Sióga, flapping her wings as fast as she could as she swooped over the gate and through the path. Tears in her eyes, she made a mental list of actions to take next.

Inform her superior.

Inform the superior’s superior.

And get Fionn here as soon as possible.

~

In a way, those of God, of YHVH, and of Allah, are all the same when you get right down to it. True, Judaism came first, then Christianity popped off when someone who had been drinking too much proclaimed himself the son of God and ended up getting strung up for the unpardonable crime of telling people things weren’t so bad after all, and then Islam emerged some few centuries later when someone who had been living in Mecca got his brain fried a little bit too long, claimed he had talked to the *real* God, and the whole thing that happened with that nice boy from Nazareth repeated itself.

The unmitigatable oneness of God and the fact that all other deities are nothing but pipe dreams thought up by other cultures deemed lesser simply because they happened to worship the grass rather than the sky at some point in the past and negotiations never really managed to get off the ground is collective among all three Abrahamic faiths. Christians maintain that Jesus was their messiah, Jews hold steady that the messiah hasn’t come yet, and Muslims take a third stance that they’re both wrong in their own special ways.

Keep in mind, this is a broad and general statement. There are more sects and differing sets of beliefs than there are ants under the sun, and they can get especially angry being compared to some of the others. Fortunately, the universe is generally self-correcting when it comes to these sorts of things, and despite it trying its hardest to please everyone, what usually happens is that nobody thinks it’s trying at all, and after that it watches reruns of I Love Lucy whilst sadly eating the last of the Neapolitan in the fridge while trying to think of where it went wrong.

When things were first starting, before there was even the concept of a ‘thing’ and nobody had even thought about starting one partly because there wasn’t the concept of ‘starting’ and partly because there was nobody to think, He came into existence from nothing. God. He created the Earth and the Heavens, and Adam and Eve were brought in and that whole business went over smoothly.

Simultaneously, Allah commanded Himself to *“be”*, and Him and the world formed. The Heavens and the Earth were created as one by his will alone, and separated forcibly into the two realms present currently after smoldering for a bit.

Not only that, but the Hiranyagarbha, the golden womb of creation that existed before our universe as created by the world’s very soul and the originality of all things, opened and revealed within it the form of the creator god Brahma.

The Purusha, the primordial cosmic being that represents the universe itself on the metaphysical level, was dismembered and formed the four castes of Hinduism, leaving from its body the golden egg from which the dual-spirited entity Viraj emerges.

Hvergelmir, a spring within the foggy lands of Niflheim, formed a rime across the surface from detritus and sparks from both its homeland and the neighboring fiery world of Muspell, which created the primordial ooze that then birthed Ymir, the first mystical being.

Ahura Mazda, Wise Lord of Lords who resided in the Absolute Light, created the world and the first man Gayomart, feuding with the Dark Lord Ahriman who resided in the Absolute Darkness after he refused to cooperate with the creation process.

Where there was Chaos, the utter nothingness and lack of presence given form, the goddess of the night Nyx emerged, and the two produced Erebus, god of darkness, whereupon they continued reproducing to create other gods until the mother goddess Gaia formed the Earth.

Where there was Nu, the swirling waters of chaos, the *benben* erupted as the first item of creation, atop which the creator deity Atum sat after emerging from Nu as well, giving rise to his children Shu and Tefnut via the classy processes of sneezing and masturbation.

Where there was nothing but formless chaos, a great vibration began until the lightest particles settled at the top, the heavenly realm of Takamagahara and its three chief godly residents was formed.

Where there was nothing, the dual god Ometeotl formed themself, the hermaphroditic entity able to reproduce by itself and forming the four cardinal gods in the age of the First Sun.

Where there was nothing, the two original water gods Apsu and Tiamat formed others and those yet others.

Where there was nothing, there was then something.

All religions, both modern-day and ancient, follow this creation myth, and the universe (being the neurotic and self-correcting entity it was) decided that the best way for everyone to get along would be for it to clap its hands and state unequivocally that *all* of them had happened *simultaneously*, and no single one was right or wrong, because they all happened. All creation myths have occurred, both old and new, retroactively creating the universe an immeasurable amount of times. Even the stuff that contradicts the other stuff.

Originally, there were so few religions in the world (or even rituals that would be *considered* a religion) that there wasn't much contest. Vague and implacable deities of hunting and agriculture whose names have been lost to time, lion-men with fire in their eyes and full-figured goddesses of fertility. A favorite soon emerged and increased in popularity, lording their power over all other gods: Sumerian god-king An and his three primary *annunaki* kin, known as Enlil, Ninhursag, and Enki.

Then, as society progressed from stone to bronze, the sun-king Atum emerged, later known as Atum-Ra. He and his pantheon of fellow gods ruled over Ancient Egypt, leaving those of other civilizations scared to approach. The Egyptians reigned supreme as the Sumerian faction shrunk in power, becoming secondary.

Then, the Trimurti emerged: Brahma, god of creation, Vishnu, god of preservation, and Shiva, god of destruction, along with their own collection of deities. They were both three and one, two aspects of the other three, all aspects of one, the same but separate all the same, all dedicated to the functions of the universe. They fancied themselves the proper rulers of the world's mortals, declaring that there would not be enough room in the pantheon for two theologies to survive and coexist. Not only that, but An and the remaining Sumerians would only further complicate matters. Many Egyptians persisted in their worship of not only Atum, but Ptah and Ra as well, and the Indians and others of Hindu faith grew more populous by the day.

Left in this state of confusion, the early gods scrambled for a peaceful resolution. To this end, Atum—being the head deity of the oldest of the three religions—assembled the first Divine Synod (only referred to as thus retroactively—at the time, it was simply called 'The Assembly'), located in the heavenly field of reeds known as Aaru. Together, the three head gods spoke of peace, and agreed to continue convening in their Divine Synod every century in order to resolve disputes over power, territory, worship, sacrificial rites, and other such conflicts. Following all matters being resolved, the three celebrated their peace with a feast, full of music and drink and happiness. This became known as the Symposium, and it became custom for all Divine Synods to end with one once all matters had been resolved in a way that satisfied all parties.

Soon, the Divine Synods grew in size, and as Ahura Mazda and his Amesha Spenta—the personified aspects of him that were good and righteous—joined as well as the early Olmec gods and the early Mycenaean deities entered, it became clear that for all deities to join a single Synod would be chaos. Instead, it was decided that the head deity of each pantheon should act as the representative for their group, save for Hinduism, which was permitted to cycle through Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva every three meetings. However, Atum remained the designated Chairman of the Synod for the time being. Truly, one of the Trimurti should have obtained the position, as it had many more active adherents at the time, but Atum had kept his position on grounds of 'being there first', so they were forced to begrudgingly accept it.

When Ancient Greece and Rome emerged, however, Zeus/Jupiter (he was always more partial to Zeus) took up the position of Chairman, and instituted a new rule: if your pantheon lacked a certain amount of worshippers, you were not considered worthy enough to stand at the Synod. This caused great conflict, but it was reluctantly agreed upon that the Sumerians hadn't

really contributed much since their people had been overtaken by the Akkadians, and later the Babylonians, and had undergone so many changes that they were largely unrecognizable. Up-and-comers such as the Canaanites were allowed a spot, however, so it was largely to prevent clutter from old and defunct religions. The Divine Synod was held at Mt. Olympus, of course.

Zeus' reign only lasted a few thousand years, however, until God Himself emerged.

With the sudden and unrelenting popularity of Judaism, a section branching into Christianity, and yet another morphing into Islam, it was essentially like playing baseball against a team with a player on every base. The other theologies were woefully outmatched, and from then on, He oversaw all Divine Synod meetings. Of course, He was so busy that he couldn't be bothered to constantly show up every century, so he instead sent the scribe Metatron to speak in his place as the representative of the chairman. From then on, until this day, all meetings were held in Shekinah Temple, among the clouds of Heaven.

All gods and deities who had their representative privileges revoked over the years were invited to act as security and caterers to the present members. Frankly, they were unhappy about it, and by then many had already left the occupation and pursued other career choices—figures like Anubis especially had had much success acting as a mortician—but there were a few that opted to continue attending out of goodwill, or at least so as to not provoke the wrath of God upon them.

One of these few was the one known as Apedemak.

Apedemak was a deity worshiped by the Meroitic people inhabiting modern-day Nubia surrounding the Nile River in Egypt and Sudan, considered the guardian of the kingdom of Kush. When the Kushite rulers claimed victory over their enemies, they cited the support and encouragement of Apedemak.

He was a three-headed humanoid with deep brown skin, the faces of a lion, an elaborate headdress perched atop his head and traditional Nubian clothes patterned in winding gold patterns and sewn in all manner of colors. His four arms stood fast, each holding a different weapon: a bow, a shield, a pike, and a shortsword.

It had been quite a long time since anyone had even mentioned Apedemak in polite conversation, that's for certain. Not even when the Egyptians with Atum and Ra and Nephthys and all their nonsense took over. There wasn't a single soul who looked around and said, "Hey, what happened to that fellow?" "Which fellow?" "You know, the one with three lion heads and four arms?" "Oh yeah, whatever happened to that guy?"

Nobody said a word.

And nobody had said a word in over 2,300 years. Frankly he was more than a little hurt, even if he knew it was the fate that would befall all old gods. They didn't pull their power from belief, though it did help—no, they were their own beings with their own feelings and their own biologies. The position of deity, however, is one of reverence and respect: it's like saying you're a teacher, or a doctor, or a scientist. People look up to you. You've got kids who look up at you and say they want to be just like you. Who wants to be just like papa Apedemak? Nobody.

It was just depressing hanging around Mandulis and Sebiumeker and Arensnuphis, they just made him feel sick. He was a war god—it was in his nature to protect, to fight, to serve *some* purpose. Without it, he was just some retired veteran full of old stories nobody wants to hear. So, to give himself something to do more than anything else, Apedemak had volunteered to be both security and doorman for the Divine Synod this century.

He looked to his left, and he looked to his right. Clouds. Clouds and harps and shining light and such clean air and such perfect equilibrium of temperature. It would be almost sickening if it weren't so beautiful, to him. He had never liked this place, but Sudan had gotten rather dangerous to hang around nowadays, even apart from the theological sense, so it wasn't like he could even swing by and see if anyone recognized him without raising some suspicion. All three of his heads yawned as his tail flicked from side to side. Not a soul around him. Guess he was the only one that volunteered. St. Peter, for what little he knew about the guy, was still at the Pearly Gates signing people in as always…he took a moment to wonder what he really could be doing all day. It isn't like Heaven's standards are especially lax. He's only seen maybe ten or twenty mortals wandering around *tops*, surely most of his day would be spent just lounging about? Then he considered that Peter may be the one keeping track of all the deities and figures entering and leaving Heaven, and that shut up his line of reasoning.

The bit of halo that curled around one of his lion ears, resembling a hooked earpiece more than its original ring format, glowed with a white light as a feminine voice came through.

"Apedemak, this is Gabriel. May the Lord be with you."

He put a finger up to the earpiece, mainly because he'd seen modern spy movies and thought it was a neat visual.

"And also with you. What is the situation, Archangel?"

"There's been a breach at the Pearly Gates. I've contacted St. Peter and Uriel, they both said that there was a mysterious figure who walked up to them. Despite His blessing, they could not understand it, though it sounded like Russian, and before they knew what was going on, it had gotten in."

Apedemak looked up to the sunny blue sky. Sure enough, there were winged figures swooping and darting all around, stopping in mid-air to have conversations, Powers passing around spears, Dominions starting to give out orders among their lower-ranked brethren. It certainly seemed like something was going on. He clenched his fist around the handle of the sword, trying to hide the excitement in his voice as he grinned.

"Who should I be looking for, Archangel?"

"Wipe that grin off of your face, pagan. This is unprecedented. A breach into God's kingdom, if left unchecked, could spell disastrous results. I've been trying to contact Metatron and telling him to put the Synod on pause, but he hasn't been picking up. You need to stop the meeting."

He kept his grin un-wiped and snickered.

“Are you joking? All day, I’ve been standing here watching your winged kind fly by. Now that the chance for action is presenting itself, you expect me to turn tail and ask your Heavenly Father for guidance?”

Gabriel paused for a second, though he could hear her taking a deep breath on the other end.

“...Apedemak. You will follow my orders. You volunteered for this position, and if you should abuse it, it is not my wrath you will have to face.”

“Hmph. At this point, anything is better than sitting around with the others. They are despondent, left in the cold because of your God’s refusal to perpetuate their worship.”

“This is neither the time nor place to discuss this. Enter the Synod and get Metatron’s attention, now.”

He was silent for a moment, contemplating.

“...If you do not do so, then you will be incurring the wrath of God himself. Remember Luke 24:17: ‘And that servant who knew his master’s will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating’.”

“I would rather take the beating, Archangel. I’m done taking orders from you and your false god. *Ma'a s-salāma.”*

The archangel started to say something in return, but was cut off by Apedemak taking the ‘communication device’—only made possible through the blessings of God—and throwing it to the cloudy floor, stomping on it and smashing it to bits. They dissipated into glittering gold dust, and he spun his shortsword in his hand with a bloodthirsty grin. Fighting. He hadn’t fought in *ages.* Millennia, even. Finally. Finally, he’ll get his chance to prove that he’s still got it. That the old gods are just as worthy to rule as the current ones. What’s so great about Atum-Ra anyways? What’s he got that Apedemak doesn’t?

Who’s to say he can’t be the next Chairman of the Synod, eh?

“Privates. Prostit menya, sir. Mind helping me find what I’m issue for?”

A slippery-smooth voice, degraded as though it were coming through an old record player, piped up from behind him, accompanied by a tap on the shoulder. It smells like dead flowers and tanned leather. He whirled around.

“What?”

He came face-to-face with a visage of corsage. All manner of flowers in shades from pink to white, framed by grasses and smaller flowers, hung like a visor over a grin that wasn’t situated on his pale skin. Instead, it floated disquietingly in front of it, deranged and angular, the corners stretching much farther than they should. The same flowers clumped at his chest and around his wrists, his bony fingers click-clacking and moving unnaturally. Despite being so thin, it still seemed like he was poured into his black suit and white undershirt.

Apedemak looked him up and down.

“...What?”

“Ah, how grooby I’m being! Your name, kravisy, who’s you?”

He quirked an eyebrow and grit his teeth, opting to ignore the creature’s request for his name in favor of swinging his sword towards its neck. Nimbly, it ducked and swirled around the swing

like paper in the wind, and each frenzied swing and jab that was thrown at it, it dodged with equal ease. It placed its hands on Apedemak's shoulders and leaped over him, crossing its legs around his neck and bending over so it stared directly into his center head's eyes, grinning that incessant grin.

Apedemak growled.

"Who in the world are you?!"

"K'toyah? Ya, Superfluous Man. Obshesto, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat alike didn't care for me. For my mannery, I was rejected, obstructed, deducted, ostracized, demoralized, prisvet bugger, what a mess! You have lovely energy."

He roared and jabbed the pike upwards at the Superfluous Man, landing a direct hit right in the middle of the bouquet that made up his face…however, it didn't do a thing. He just laughed and jumped off of Apedemak, performing backwards somersaults before popping back up with an effeminate gesture. The war god just turned around and glowered at him, sneering. He hadn't seen anything like this creature during his tenure as a god, not even Ammit came close…but that didn't mean he had to be scared.

"If you must know, you *freak,* I am Apedemak. Patron god of Kush, husband of Amesemi and bringer of conquest."

"Apedemak? Bringer of zavoyevanye? Fantastichevsky! I wouldn't have it any other way!"

Digging into his suit for a moment, the Superfluous Man produced a modern German luger pistol, pointing it at him.

"Then it's pistols at dawn! Nashetry!"

The lion god smirked and lowered his bow, loading an arrow shining with light and pulling it back. Now this was more like it. This was the most excitement he's had all day. His blood's boiling…time for something with some real risk.

"You want to duel then, creature? Then a duel it is. On the count of three, we turn around and fire."

The Superfluous Man straightened up and turned around, holding his gun with the barrel upright in typical duel fashion.

"On count of three!"

"That's right."

He lowered his bow.

"Odin!"

He kicked off the ground, lunging towards the being.

"Diva!"

He raised his sword, readying a vertical cleave.

"Tree!"

Before he could lower it, however, the Superfluous Man whipped around and aimed his gun right between Apedemak's eyes, that grin never faltering. He pulled the trigger…but no bullets came out. Instead, a sudden bouquet of flowers—all pink and white—emerged from the barrel in a cartoonish manner. Thrown off by the sudden shock of having the gun pointed at him and the

subsequent further shock of no bullets coming out, Apedemak whiffed his shot. His sword dug itself uselessly into the clouds below. He winced.

"Tch! Damn it all!"

He couldn't look up. All he'd see is that dumb smile of this thing. Whatever it is, it was not a creation of the gods. It was something else entirely. Something with no sense of 'being', no soul, no moral and no intention.

…Suddenly, he felt calmer. In fact, much calmer. The corners of his mouth creeped into a woozy smile, and he faltered on his feet. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing coherent came out in either English or Nobiin. His vision was getting hazy.

Moving his hand up to feel that sharp pin prick he had noticed in his neck felt like lifting lead, but he could feel something. And he could see that it was purple with a yellow center. He let out a barren wheeze. Opium poppy. Something had fired out of that gun after all.

Apedemak slowly lowered to the ground, in too much of a haze to do anything, and the Superfluous Man squatted down next to him. He giggled shrilly.

"Sorry to do that, droog! Rabottle-dottle told me that you wouldn't take well to the old spletnichat. Now I'll make this quick so you can enjoy your opium caif."

He leaned in close.

"Where is the Stone of Jacob?"

~

It is custom that, for all who believe in a certain religion, they will go to the afterlife of their religion, or their soul will follow the typical trappings to be expected by dogma. Christians will go to Heaven, Hell, or Limbo. While there are many schools of thought, for Muslims, the soul will typically be removed from the body by the angel of death before being questioned for their faith and determining their destination afterwards. Hindus will have their atman, their self, reborn into another body through the cycle of Samsara, as do the Buddhists.

However, what about the people who don't swing towards a particular religion? Or the atheists, who sit and staunchly proclaim that there is no such thing as a God, myriad or monotheistic, despite the fact that Xochiquetzal is selling home-made pottery at exorbitant prices because she's got to find *something* to do with her life apart from watching over expectant mothers nowadays?

For those, it's a matter of who's in charge of the Divine Synod. Whoever takes the position of Chairman is accepted as the "default" religion, not in the sense that other religions are lesser (though certainly more than a few deities who have held the position have held that belief about others), but that in the grand pie chart of life, they hold the largest slice.

What about the souls themselves, though? Don't they get a say in things? Are they really left to the mercy of an underworld that likely wouldn't have anything good in store for them just because they chose not to believe in such a thing?

When a ghost is created, it's typically because the mortal spirit is restless. It has unfinished business that it needs to take care of, it's leaving behind a family it cares about too much, its body was killed before its proper time…or, it refused to go to the current underworld of choice quietly. After fending off any psychopomp who comes to collect their soul and guide them down the proper path, they are officially labeled a spirit rather than a soul. That's what a ghost is after all: a soul outside of a body.

These spirits will wander and do as they please. They will possess dolls that are then sold to podcasters trying to entertain their listeners. They will hang around their graves to appear to their loved ones with a content smile. They will become twisted and gnarled, driven mad by their isolation, feeding upon the living in an attempt to reclaim their humanity.

There must be someone who can control them.

However, spirits are a fickle race. A fickle, difficult, hateful race full of bloodthirsty savages now so much less than human, even moreso than they already were before. It would not be an easy job, and it would need to be taken by someone who was a member of a religion no longer widely practiced—as adherents would dwindle, underworlds would become emptier and emptier, so it wasn't exactly like they had much of anything to do back home.

Mictlantecuhtli, Mexica god of the Underworld, offered to take up the position, but was sufficiently talked out of it by his wife Mictecacihuatl due to prior arrangements with reading to a kindergarten class at the library. The Sumerian Ereshkigal vyed for it, but she instead opted to support her husband Nergal in his pursuit of writing his memoir, "Nergal: A Life In Hindsight", detailing how he had made many mistakes and acquired lots of enemies along the way, and he regretted none of it.

There was one who was completely free, however.

Deep in the foggy lands of Niflheim, where the frost giants reigned supreme, a cold mist pervaded the rolling hills of dead grass. Far beyond where anything could live, deep within a pit of the highest magnitude, over a shaky bridge, and through the cloud of dark mist that pervaded the inner sanctum of Niflhel, through the roots of the great world tree Yggdrasil, further below than even the well of Urdr where the three Norns of Fate reside, there is the realm of Hel itself. However, with the pervasive nature of the Christian 'Hell', its inhabitants were forced to refer to the dead land as 'The Foggy Lands of Helheim", the more antiquated term for the country. Every damn place ended in '-heim' here, from Muspelheim to Jotunheim to Niflheim. At least to most people, Niflheim made sense, it was the misty lands, Muspelheim the fiery lands, Jotunheim the human-likes' lands, what was Helheim? The land of Hel?

If there was one person who wasn't broken up about the change in name at all, it was Hel herself.

The giantess (only in name) Lady Hel, with long and wispy ghost-white hair falling to the right side of her pale face like a silk curtain and twirling, curling, pitch-black hair radiating from the left side of her deep ocean-black-blue face, and one blue eye with one black eye, sat in her throne of withered and frozen corpses. She rested one wrinkled leg above the other, the tattered grey robes of her garment shifting with her movements. Her chin rested in the middle of her

bony palm, knobbly fingers drumming long and gnarled black fingernails on her sunken black cheek.

Hel was not happy, to say the least.

Sure, she had volunteered for the position of 'Queen of the Spirits", primarily because she loathed the thought of ending up like other gods of the underworld, performing degrading mortal acts like speaking at places of education or involving themselves with frivolous occupations involving the sliding of meat between cut loaves of bread. She believed there was some cheese and lettuce in there, but didn't care enough to look closer. But she had underestimated how exciting the job would be. Ruling your own legion of vengeful spirits for you to command as you please, unfettered by the demands of other uppity 'gods' who claimed their own dominion over the dead, it sounded like a fun job.

Hel's servant Ganglati, a twisted and deformed gray-skinned humanoid beast with rotted teeth, one bugged-out eyeball, and a ragged blood-soaked Nordic courtsman's uniform, shambled slowly out from the snowy hall of Eljudnir. His voice warbled like a dying chicken.

"Miss Heeeel…Miss Heeeeeeeel…"

Hel sneered a little watching her servant slowly shuffle his feet towards her throne. Ganglati always took three times as long to get to where he wanted to go than most people, so to her chagrin, she always had to get up and walk to him. She stood from her seat and stepped off her high throne, the frozen corpses that made up its bulk slowly crackling and lurching as icy patches of frostbitten skin flaked off. Their bodies twisted and contorted to place palms, heads, and backs in the way of her feet, forming a long and narrow staircase that allowed her to lower herself to the floor. She placed her hands on her hips and stared down at the diminutive servant.

"And what is it this time, Ganglati?"

"Buh, buh, b-big news from the restless spirits…the ones, the gjenganger legion of Arlington in Vinland, they state there iiiiis…there iiiiis, uhhh…"

She stamped her foot on the ground, and a shock of ice rose up around her briefly before dispersing once more into the air.

"There is *what*, lazy walker?"

"The legion, they-they-they say there are disturbances in the laaaand across the river where they cannot paaaass…in the, I think it was, the…theee uh, what was it called?"

"Smit-sonja!"

A shrill voice like nails thrown in a blender called out from across the hall, and out from the snowy corridor shuffled another twisted humanoid like Ganglati, although this one was ostensibly female judging from the matted hair and sagging breasts.

“The soldiers called it S-S-Smitsonja Ganglati, you *dolt!* The grand mausoleum of jewels and bones where the spirits of all an-an-an-animals remain shackled to their bodies!”

She raised a hand, clenched it into a fist one finger at a time, and slowly lowered it onto the top of Ganglati’s wrinkled head, making him wince once it made contact despite the fact it had about as much power behind it as a snail with a boxing glove.

“Owww…Ganglooooot…”

“Don’t you st-st-st-start with me, Ganglati! You always do this, wasting the Mistress’ time with your uhming and awing! I’m sure Milady has en-e-e-enough problems as is!”

Hel pinched her brow and let out a frustrated sigh. This is what she’d been reduced to. Dealing with her two moronic servants, keeping up with the activities of restless spirits that were either too weak to act as soldiers, or lacking in enough smarts to know when they were being ordered around. From behind the throne of bodies, the great shuddering wolf Garmr with his patchwork matted fur and blood-red eyes padded slowly up to his mistress, tilting his muzzle up inquisitively and being met with a distracted brush. Hel has been dealing with this monotony, this absolute *nothingness* for the past…by Odin, it must have been the past thousand years. Even more than that, perhaps. Now at most, she gets a couple visits from Loki, who tells her of his other children—her siblings—the great wolf Fenrir and the great serpent Jormungandr. It was a strange family, but it was *hers.* At least before then, her time was spent watching the souls of the old and sickly wander in her dead lands, as well as feeding the especially treacherous and nasty souls to her dear dragon Nidhoggr. There was also Baldr, but all he did was sit there like the handsome twerp he always was.

A whining roar from down Eljudnir made her brow furrow as her servants bickered. Nidhoggr’s usual meals were the souls of the hateful, the criminal, the sinful…but ever since that false god took control of the Synod and all those who died went to Hell, ever since her people, her *worshippers*, were converted to Christianity…things went downhill from there. Now she’s lucky if there’s even one soul that comes down who happened to have parked in a handicapped spot once or twice under the assumption nobody was using it anyways. She only gnaws weakly at the roots of Yggdrasil nowadays, no matter how much Hel tries to excite her by trying to get her to play.

Ignoring her servants fighting amongst one another and writing off their assertion that the Unknown Soldier Legion felt that something was off (they always did, the bleeding hearts), she strutted down the hall and turned to the right, immediately being blasted with a deluge of snow. The name Eljudnir *did* mean ‘sprayed with snowstorms’ after all, and so the corridor was always under blizzard conditions. Being the ice queen she was, however, she simply parted the snow and walked straight through, coming to a tall and ornate cast-iron door with a bas-relief image of the swirling dragon kept within. Though she could hear the whines from her chamber, as she got closer, those whines turned to huffing, which then evolved into distressed roaring. Occasionally, something would bang harshly against the doors, making the lock rattle.

She furrowed her brow a bit. Hel was not one to be especially sentimental, but Garmr and Nidhoggr were her closest companions here in Helheim…at least, her closest companions that

she could stand, but Nidhoggr had always been there for her, from conception to the present day—by virtue that she was essentially as old as creation itself. She usually was more despondent than anxious, though…

Hel put her ear to the door. There were two female voices shrieking and laughing and speaking in an indeterminate language behind it…but, how? How could outsiders get inside Nidhoggr's chamber, let alone get through the snowy corridor on the way there? Hell, how'd they even get inside her great mansion in the first place?

Raising a finger, she formed the uniquely jagged key out of ice and opened the lock, the key melting away immediately after as she pushed the doors open.

"Nid? Niddy, are you alright? Are there intruders in your—"

"What do you say, sis? Think this big ol' dragon knows where we can find what Poppy sent us for? It doesn't exactly look like it can speak…heehee, really, it doesn't look like it can do much of anything! Real pathetic for one supposedly called the 'Hateful Striker'!"

"It'd better know, or else these roots are gonna get a hell of a lot more red than brown."

Situated in the middle of Nastrond, the realm for the hateful dead to serve as food for the great root-gnawer, was Nidhoggr as always. The great dragon, pale and eyeless from the lack of sunlight and emaciated from the lack of food, with but a single sinewy wing to her name, sat among the twisted and gnarled roots of Yggdrasil whining and softly clawing at the wood with her yellowed claws. She weakly lifted her head to Hel, silently pleading for help with the two other figures that danced outside the roots.

The more higher-pitched and girlish of the two voices came from a figure to the left, appearing as a floating body lacking anything from the waist down—solely a head, torso, and arms—with a multicolored and ornately-decorated head in the asymmetrical shape of a crescent moon tilted to one side. A wild green eye and a similarly wild yellow eye from the other bugged out, thick cartoonish eyelashes framing the circular peepers. Her neck and shoulders, however, were cloaked in Balinese handkerchiefs and ornamental grilles. The figure's orange-splattered body was wrapped in a dress as shining and vibrant as the sunrise, and around her long and lanky arms' wrists were corsages of dry grass. She held a small paper fan and opened it, the cheery grin printed on it acting as her mouth in lieu of one built into her face.

"Boy, what a loser! Loooooser! How shallow are these teeth marks? When was the last time you went to the dentist? Heck, when was the last time you *ate?* Kyahaha, just looking at you is depressing me, ew!"

"Oi."

The lower-pitched feminine voice came from a more humanoid figure with chalk-pale skin, black hair slicked back at the top and flaring out from the bottom, and unnaturally long limbs dressed in something resembling a mix of Rococo nobleman's attire and a CBGB punk. A leather jacket covered in spikes and studs went over a frilly white cravat, and black combat boots and fingerless gloves went with flared breeches. Two long aluminum bats were crossed behind her back, seemingly held on with nothing more than a thumbtack pushed through their bulks at the intersection. A twisted grin with black lipstick ripped like a gash across her face, and her

neck was striped in black and white. Wherever she moved her appendages, small sparks of electricity seemed to crackle, though five or six continuous sparks shone in cardinal directions around her head.

"Cut the chit-chat and let's get to the beating, *ma soeur*, Boss-man said we needed to get this thing as quickly as possible."

Moon-head floated over to the other, twirling in the air and looking at her upside-down with a pleading look.

"Aw, but come ooooon! It isn't every day we get a chance to make fun of a world-eating beast like this! And look at it! Look! Look how sad and stupid it is! That's prime material!"

Nidhoggr lowered its head to the ground pitifully. Hel, standing in the doorway, clenched her fists hard enough to crush an apple in her palms and thrust a hand out. Ice slammed the doors behind her shut and barred them from opening again, and swirling paths of rime snaked towards her hands like loyal snakes. They formed themselves into longswords, cold mist billowing from their lengths. She growled at the two of them.

"By the command of Queen of Spirits and Lady of Helheim, who are you, and what the hell are you doing here?"

The two figures turned to look at Hel, frozen in shock as Nidhoggr perked its ears up. The one in black's smile didn't waver as, after a bit of silence, she jabbed her partner with her elbow.

"Hey Moxy. You wager this is the gal?"

Moxy swirled in the air once more, garments floating slowly after her, and lowered herself to Hel's piercing gaze.

"Hmmmm. Half black, half white. Long white hair. Gloomy disposition. Yep, you're Hel, aren't you?"

She raised an ice-sword to Moxy's chin, prodding it with the tip as she grimaced. Sharp yellow teeth revealed themselves.

"And what if I am, *vordr?* Answer me. What business do you have here with me and Nidhoggr?"

Moxy raised her hands and closed her fan once more before opening it to show a panicked mouth.

"W-Whoa, whoa, easy there, you old bag! Don't go jumping to any conclusions! We were just here to ask a couple questions, that's all! We didn't mean anything bad!"

"You did call her pet dumb and pathetic."

"Stay out of this, Foxy! You aren't making things any easier!"

Hel lowered her sword slightly and shifted her gaze between the two of them. She was more confused than angry now, though she was still a mite irritated that there was apparently a race of *jotunn* that irritated people's pets for fun.

"...Hmph. State your names."

"Now that, we can do! I am the spirit of excitement, the life of death and the creation as well as the perpetuation! The free and rebellious nature that dwells within all given will and ambition!"

Moxy swirled in the air once more, like a leaf in the wind, before performing a complex swirling gesture with her arms and crossing them behind her head, ending in a position beside her partner.

"Moxy Fruvous!"

Foxy cracked her bony knuckles.

"And with every flow, there is an ebb. With every creation, there must be destruction, and with free-spiritedness and rebellion comes delinquency. Deviance and hatred, suffer all the children and let your sinful thoughts guide my way."

Brushing her shoulders off and taking out one of her bats, she instead removed the thumbtack from her back and was left with two bats stuck together in a crossed shape. She didn't seem to mind though, and spun it like a flag in front of herself before slamming it into the ground in front of her and crouching in front of Moxy.

"Foxy Shazam."

"Light and warmth!"

"Darkness and cold."

The two of them slid in opposite directions and struck a pose.

"We are…"

"...the Sisters of Yuga!"

They stood in silence for a few seconds, with Hel watching in confusion, before they snapped out of their poses. Moxy opened her fan to a wide smile and hovered over to the underworld queen.

"Well, what'd you think, huh, huh? We spent an eon rehearsing that and trying to get it juuuust right so we could show it off to everyone who we were messi—er, sent to talk to! Did you like it? Any pointers? Comments, criticisms, or concerns?"

She pushed Moxy away with her index finger and allowed her swords to dissipate, turning away.

"...I have decided you two are not a threat. You are simply stupid. Now leave, or I shall make quick work of you before the Aesir start to chastise me for not providing shelter for two…erratics, such as yourselves."

"Stupid?! Who're you calling stupid, you witch?! Me and Foxy have more brain cells put together than most humans nowadays! Psh. And to think we were gonna help you break Fenrir out…"

Hel raised her brows at that and turned.

"Fenrir?"

"Yeah. Your brother, right? The big wolf chained to a rock?" Foxy sniffed.

"...What business did you have with him?"

"Seeeecret business! Super secret silly business! But maybe it'd be alright to share with you…the main thing is this, we'll help you let Fenny go free, if we get to keep Gleipnir!"

Gleipnir was the binding that held Fenrir to the island Lyngvi where he was imprisoned, as thin and elegant as a silk ribbon but strong enough that no god could break it. Forged by the

dwarves, it has held Fenrir there for as long as Hel could remember…which was essentially ever since she was born all those centuries ago. She missed her brother horribly, and had always held such resentment towards how the Aesir had unfairly tricked him…though, it was foretold that he would only be released during Ragnarok. Could he truly be released before his time…?

…If it were possible. Fenrir surely would be on her side, as well as the ghostly army she has tenuous control over, and those two strange girls and whatever forces they may be allied with…it is none of her concern what they do with Gleipnir, but perhaps they could free Nidhoggr? With those powerful forces on her side, could she possibly threaten the All-Father himself? She could become the leader of all Aesir.

She could bring the Norse back into power.

She could make the mortals worship her.

She could…

Hel was quiet for a moment, Nidhoggr huffing through her nostrils, before she faced the two girls with a sinister grin on her bisected face. The air in the room grew colder.

"Tell me what plan you have, ladies."

~

If there was one thing Vaid Vaprust knew about his job, it was that nothing ever happened, and that was exactly the way he liked things to be.

When he was a kid, he was surrounded by wide-eyed hopefuls who would thumb their cheeks and look up to the sky going 'I want to be a doctor!', 'I want to be the president!', 'I want to go to the moon!'

Frankly, it made him sick to his stomach just thinking of how much *effort* would go into pursuing one of those lines of work. Being a doctor required years and years of medical school, going to the moon needed that young dreamer to stick their nose in books and take rigorous math and physics classes before even getting the chance to train for space travel, and being the *president?* I mean, really. Who wants to be the president nowadays? For Vaid, he knew that he would be setting his sights oh-so-much-lower than his classmates.

"What do you want to be when you grow up, Vaid?"

"Security guard."

And now, fifteen years later, look where he was.

The bipedal wolf in the black-and-white security guard uniform had his feet kicked up on the front desk, his hands folded behind his back and his ears twitching through holes in his downturned cap. His tail softly brushed the floor behind his chair.

He figured, what use would there have been in saying anything else? What, was he gonna be a doctor? All the fur would get everywhere. He's heard the horror stories of people with animal surgeons coughing up furballs years after their operations, the full-body hairnets they're expected to wear. And even then, that'd be with the few patients you did get. Who'd want to be treated by a wolf?

Hell, who'd want a wolf for president? Nobody's elected a non-human president. Nobody had even elected a non-*white* president until a couple decades ago, what chance did a wolf or a lizard or a skeleton[2] or anyone else have? Just because these subtypes of humanity have been around since ancient times doesn't mean everybody's just accepted things. The mortal nature of itching to pull the trigger on anything that looks different from you never changes.

Why can't we all just get along, Vaid thought to himself. Life would be so much easier that way. Not as much effort trying to get people to listen to you, not as many weird stares from people…but with this job? Being the night guard? Nobody even had to look at him. He barely had to speak to anyone. The most that happened was that Eli called him over to clean up an exhibit that had fallen over or something.

The walkie-talkie shackled to his belt crackled to life.

"Hello? Vaid, come in. Over."

Groaning, he pushed the brim of his hat up and took his feet off the desk as if they were made of lead, pulling out the walkie-talkie with a flourish to entertain nobody but himself. He stared up at the taxidermied Fenykovi elephant in the lobby, trying to give himself something to focus on to take away from his partner's obnoxious voice. Really, it wasn't that obnoxious, he just didn't like being talked to this late at night.

"What, Eli? What is it?"

"..."

He groaned. "...Over."

"There's been a disturbance in the geology wing, the security cameras picked up movement in that area and…this might just be the lack of sleep talking, but it looks like there's…a new exhibit there? Did Director Williams tell you he was adding anything new up here? Over."

Vaid yawned purposefully into the walkie-talkie before rubbing his eyes.

"Nope. What sorta new exhibit you see, dude? …Over."

"I can't make it out clearly…but they seem like cabinets. The sort you'd use to keep expensive china in. But, I'm looking through the footage, and…there's a gap in the recording. Like, there's nothing there, then the tape skips a couple minutes around midnight, and then the cabinets are there. There must be twenty of them. Over."

The wolf stood up and cracked his back, grunting as he stepped around the front counter of the rotunda and approached one of the elevators, pressing the 'up' button as he smacked his lips. He should pick something up from the vending machine later. He could go for a drink.

"Alright, alright. Geology wing, right? I'm goin', already. Over an—"

"Wait!"

He winced and pulled the walkie-talkie away from his ear.

---

[2] A subspecies of human that emerged in Germany in the twelfth century due to a genetic condition causing a child to be born without skin, their muscles and organs replaced with a thick capillary-gel. The first skeleton was ran out of his home village due to people accusing him of being the spawn of Satan, was raised by a coven of witches in the Black Forest, and was later executed for spreading docetist religious doctrine. After a hanging failed, he was burnt alive. All Catholic skeletons today have a small picture of St. Vomer above a candle somewhere in their house, which he probably would not like to see if he were alive today.

"Jesus man, give a guy a little warning, why don't you? Over."

"S-Sorry, it's just…I'm not telling you to go and investigate it. I want you to call the police. Or, I don't know, call someone. This is serious."

Vaid stepped into the elevator anyways and pressed the button for the second floor. He sort of boggled at the walkie-talkie, confused by Eli's tone. He hadn't really noticed it before, but…the guy sounded downright panicked. He had that sort of low-key vibrato people pick up when they're trying to keep their composure in his voice. His tail swished a bit faster as he scratched his neck.

"Uh, how so?"

"You know the older guard, Mars? He was supposed to be up on the second floor guarding that very area, and…I haven't seen hide nor tail of him for the past few hours. I thought he had fallen asleep somewhere out of reach of the cameras, but I could…"

The doors opened.

"What, what is it?"

"I could see his hat near one of the cabinets. I don't know what happened to him, but you need to call someone. This isn't normal. We may be dealing with some sort of magical being who's trying to rob the museum, and if it's linked to a disappearance, this could be a big deal. Call someone. Now. Vaid, are you listening? Vaid?"

"Yeah, I hear you. And I hear what you're saying. I just don't really choose to believe it. I mean, guy just up and gets spirited away? That seems kind of fishy, don't you think?"

"Washington D.C. is home to many sorts of creatures, Vaid. Don't get cocky. Leave it to the professionals, my phone's not charged and I can't leave my post in the office, please…V-Vaid, Vaid, are you in the geology wing right now?!"

Vaprust looked up at one of the security cameras and waved with a lax grin before looking around. Yep, it was the geology wing, alright. He ducked through one of the entryways and flicked on his flashlight, shining it on the many rocks and precious crystals kept behind glass. Everything seemed to be in order. He put his hand on a large slab of meteorite the visitors could touch, shuddering a bit from how cold it was, and continued on.

"I am. I wanna get a scope on the situation myself before we go doing anything rash."

"Rash?! Vaid, Mars could be dead right now for all we know! We're just security guards, we—we aren't equipped to handle this sort of thing!"

"Maybe you aren't, Eli. But me? I wanted this job since I was a kid, and if I'm gonna die, I might as well die doing something I love. Heh, I mean, I doubt that'll happen, but who knows? Besides, I really think you're worrying too much. The guy probably just curled up into one of the cabinets for a nap."

"And how often does that happen?"

He shrugged before remembering that he was on a walkie-talkie, opened his mouth to speak, and then shrugged again once he also remembered Eli could see him on the cameras. He made a left, then another left.

"Let me handle this already, alright? It's probably nothing."

"Vaid, you—"

Eli's transmissions faded into garbled static, reduced to white noise. Vaid knocked the underside of his walkie-talkie with his palm gently, then roughly, but to no avail. Nothing was coming through. Damn things always stop working on the off-chance you're actually using them. He slotted it back onto his belt and entered the last room of the geology wing.

It was a large room with a brown floor, and though the lights were shut off and he had to rely on his flashlight for sight, he still always felt a little in awe entering it. There was just this unplaceable energy that permeated through the room. Usually you couldn't sense it due to the throngs of people crowding inside, but when it was empty, it was more obvious than ever. The cold chill of government-funded air-conditioning blew through the room, and it made his fur stand on end.

Four pillars surrounded the literal jewel of the exhibit: The Hope Diamond.

The most expensive jewel in the world as well as one of the largest, it was said to be cursed after its previous owners fell into misfortune: one of these was the ill-fated Louis XVI, beheaded with his wife Marie Antoinette at the height of the French Revolution. Some say the ghosts of all the previous owners who died whilst the gem was in its possession reside within its shimmering blue body.

Vaid shined his flashlight on the case and sighed. Yep, it's still there. Not stolen or anything. At least it wasn't a burglary. He twirled the torch in his hand and whistled a jaunty tune as he kept an eye out. Still no sign of whatever Eli was talking about. Mars probably just headed home early without telling anybody, and the cabinets…Eli was always a neurotic one. When was the last time he got a good night's sleep? Maybe he was just hallucinating.

Creak.

There was a creak behind him.

He immediately whipped around and shone his flashlight where he heard the sound coming from. Nothing. The wolf swallowed harshly. Was it just the weather? Yeah, it was just a cold night. Buildings creak and shift all the time when they expand and contract. Creak.

Creak.

Vaid snapped behind himself, waving his light around like a police searchlight trying to discern the source. Still nothing. He slowly opened his mouth, about to speak.

Thump, batta-batta-batta-batta…

The sound of something heavy hitting the floor and equally heavy but quick footsteps.

Crash.

Something porcelain breaking. He winced hard at the sound and scanned the floor around him as he stumbled, feet failing him as he tripped over his own ankles and caught himself with his hands. When he opened his eyes, he saw a plate shattered into numerous shards in front of him.

It had a portrait of soldiers from a war he didn't recognize holding weapons that looked like rigging equipment, and a United States flag with yellow stripes and only 20 stars.

Vaid's heart beat in his chest as his ears perked up.

Batta-batta-batta-batta.

Batta-batta-batta-batta.

“S-Shit, what…what is this? If there’s anyone here, you’d better speak up!”

He reached to his belt and grasped for his gun, but only took hold of empty space. It was out of its holster. Must have left it back at the rotunda. Damn it, now of all times! The one time he really needs it! Vaid turned onto his back and looked around, watching as tall rectangular figures slowly shuffled towards him. In the light of his flashlight, still flickering on the ground, he could see the shimmering of their bodies and the knots in their skeletons.

Cabinets. They were cabinets.

But they weren’t cabinets.

“...W-Who are you…?”

The cabinet on the left smiled and opened its rotted maw. The sounds of warfare and the roaring waves of the sea formed themselves into words, bombastic and malevolent.

“ONE MORE TO ADD TO THE COLLECTION!”

The doors opened and the hands wrapped their cold, spongey digits around both his ankles.

He screamed, but if screams could leave the Cabinet of Curiosities, you would know.

Once he was inside, everything was screaming.

Eli watched the whole affair take place from the security room with his hands over his mouth, frozen with terror.

Once the cabinets had taken the wolf, they turned to the camera and grinned before turning their attention to the Hope Diamond.

Not wanting to delay any further and deciding that leaving his post was the least of his worries at the moment, the trembling skeleton leapt from his chair and practically kicked the door down, opening a window into the cold DC night and reaching out for a tree branch. He managed to wrap his bony hands around it, but the branch snapped and sent him falling into a meticulously-trimmed bush. He likely had broken a few bones—in fact, he could see very plainly that he did through his body gel—but he limped to the nearest payphone and punched in the only number he thought to call.

Something had happened to Mars, and now it had happened to Vaid.

It wasn’t going to happen to him.

He’s calling an expert.

~

The air tasted like lemon-scented drain cleaner, and it felt like needles raking over his skin. Mars Volta didn't know where he was or how he had been seemingly eaten by a cabinet he had never seen before taking up space in the Smithsonian’s spacious halls.

He didn't know where he had picked up that splitting headache.

He didn't know who was carrying him gruffly by the back of his uniform collar, whose appendage he could only assume to be a hand despite the fact he could feel something like fire licking the space between his shoulder blades.

He didn't know what the meaning behind the odd thoughts that crept into his head now and then telling him that all the radio stations were in fact nothing but the broadcasted dreams of a great dark lord sleeping deep in the Gulf of Mexico and the only way to protect yourself from the sub-atomic particle waves that its eldritch vocal chords produced was to wrap your neck in tinfoil and make a slight incision along his tongue to let the blood drip over it.

But the damn trains didn't help matters at all.

For his own sake he kept his eyes shut, considering he rather disliked what he saw when he did open them, but the things that he heard did not bode well for wherever he was destined to travel. Voices of all pitches babbling and talking over themselves, sometimes in English and sometimes in languages he couldn't quite understand despite his tenure having listened to tourists from all over the world babble meaninglessly about how they got the damn whale hanging from the ceiling in the first place, always with the undercurrent of laughter. Roiling, cackling, riotous laughter. Some form of music seemed to emanate from the very ground itself, but there was no melody, no chorus, no verse, not even really any identifiable instruments being played: more the *idea* of music, put through the wringer and interpreted by particularly tone-deaf aliens.

There was a deep voice saying something far away and up above him, and slightly above and behind him, a somewhat less deep and notably French-accented voice responded with something else. Both were utterly incomprehensible, and if they were English, they weren't words Mars had ever heard. Then there was the sound of something wet peeling off of something sticky, the scent of fresh lavender, and a sudden high-pitched frequency, before they stopped moving once again. It smelled like flowers. The French-accented voice spoke up, this time in English.

Another one, sir. The Cabinets of Curiosities brought him out of the Smithsonian. His name is Mars Volta, he is 33, a Gemini, he dreamt of being an astronaut at a young age but balked seeing the amount of work it would take and instead chose to become a security guard, and he is right-handed. No history of murder, sexual perversion, or erratic behavior.

A remarkable voice responded back. It had no accent, or at least, none that he had ever heard—to Volta's ears, it flip-flopped between English, French, German, occasionally some Indian or African influence, but it was never able to be truly stuck to a single heritage. It was shrill and cloying, yet an underlying air of menace ran through it like blood through the body. Not only that but it seemed to echo against itself, sounding like many copies of the voice layered over one another with a few outliers that were much deeper or much lighter thrown in for good measure.

"oh goody goody molly wolly what have you brought for me today? a funny man it seems mars volta wut an odd name.. . do you know venus?"

Mars kept his eyes shut as tight as they would go. The other voice let out an animalistic whine.

"papa he dun want to play with me this ones BROKEN can yuo buy me a new one? blease? ahah ah ah aha h ah just my little jokey. jus t open your eyes son wake up and smell the turpentine face the day face it and rear its ugly head and tell it NO THANK YOU and go right back to bed forever an ever until you die."

He wrenched them even tighter, trying to somehow convince himself that he was dreaming, or maybe that he was dying and this was all some sort of way that his brain was processing the cycle of death and reincarnation. Or maybe he was already dead. Is this Hell? It feels like it. He felt something knock on his head.

"Wake UP wake UP wake UP SLEEPY HEAD"

Mars swallowed down his heart, which had hiked up his body into his throat, as the knocking turned to slapping. Whatever was hitting him, it felt bony and…not quite furry, but fuzzy. Like TV static wrapped around a bag of chicken bones. The shriller voice let out a childish whine and stomped on the floor, the guard somehow able to feel the action through where his own shoes touched down on the ground.

"fine. thats just fine. he doesnt want to talk you know i cant make him what with the wonderful wonderful wonderful gift of free will HE gifted to all the boy sand girls. Molly hows hows the thing going the thing i asked everyone to do is it going? Is it?"

The operation is running smoothly, sir. The Cabinets have already retrieved the Hope Diamond and will be returning to Meinung soon.

"eeEEE OH Goody Goody finally. All our friends and buddies and workers and little friends and littttttlest friends have been waiting so SO long for his momemt me included me especially yes. Spread out. spread out we have been too spread like peabnut butter on a freeway all here and there and no clue what to do no direction no purpose AS THEY SHOULD BE. as they should. Be. funny. funny how things ch ch ange the more they stay the same, always collecting always doing the same things we do every day of every month every year every eon archon marathon millennia and whats it good for? weeee have numbers and THAT'S whats good but no closer to the goal, the goal, the goal we have been looking toward so high in the sky like god himself shining down on all the ants in paraguay and now its here its coming its COMING ah"

"ah im getting"

"getting"

"getting"

"ch"

The shrill voice stuttered and jerked, trailing off into manic tittering and giggling. Mars felt the hand holding his collar tighten.

Did the Pincushion Midwives help you with your daily exercise, sir?

"NO I HATE DAILY EXERCISSSSE ITS FOOLISH AND HATEFUL AND WHY MUST I RUN N N RUN AWAY RUN AROUND AROUND THE BIG TRACK LIKE THE FUNNY TRAIN

no. no no they didnt no when they came i said no and i locked m myself in here and im been here eer since sire"

The deeper voice sighed through its nose.

…Sir. It's important for you to get out of Nobody's Enemy every now and then. Staying in one place for too long isn't good for your health.

There was a silence.

" b b b but but i like stayingg in one place it makes feel safe"

We've gone over this. You'll be heading out after you tell me what to do with this one.

Mars could feel his feet being lifted off the ground again, and the shrill voice gasped excitedly.

"OH YESSSS O F COURSE THE LITTLE MORzEL hello there little boy. Woood Ya Like To Hear A Storey?"

His whole body was trembling at this point, his bones rattling against one another. The air stung his skin. A train passed. He wanted to go back to the museum. Back home. Back with mom and dad. Gritting his teeth, he shakily shook his head.

"wunce upon a time there wus a mummy and a daddy and they livved hapily ever after in their bee-yootiful little home. they had looootsa fun playing crokay during the day an rolling around in theyre beds all day n all night. then because they loved each other so much they had a wonderful little baby boy with pretty green eyes and curly hair and a luverly smile and he was a VERY NICE young man who al-ways did as he was told like good little boys an he had the most rosiest cheeks in all the neiyborhud.

"and one day daddy came up to him and he said son i want to tell you sumthin very very impordant and the son said what daddy andd the daddy said son i want you to have the family gun and he said REALLY and he said yes really son this is very veryy speshul becaus you are my only son and i want you to have it to cuntinyu my legasy.

His eyes were shut tight enough for him to see colors swirling across the insides of his eyelids, and though he of course couldn't see in front of himself, he could tell the shrill voice was right in front of his face. A train passed.

"annd thennn daddy and mummy and doggy annd lit-tle sister and old man winklefoss stood up against the the wall and one by one he SHOT he SHOT he SHOT them all withhh daddys twelve gauge and thee walll was painted a very ver y luverly red and when he was finished he put it at him and then when he splattered his brainy bits on the wall they were all smiling because it was all happy thoughts left in his head :)

"and the moral of the story is never give yor chillun guns because they will all grow up to be good littel boys and girl s who will not do what mummy and daddy wants them to."

The security guard slowly opened one eye.. He was stared down by a bloodshot crescent-moon, an iridescent marbles that shone and flickered in its sea of brown and yet showed nothing of substance behind their lenses. No hate, no love, no sympathy, no pity. Red and yellow and blue and purple.

And green.

The hand raised him up by the collar a bit. A train passed.

What should I do with him, sir?

The eye looked up from the guard's gaze, almost hurt by the question itself, before whipping around. Volta immediately shut his eyes again after that.

"what? what?? what do yu think i want yu to do with him stupid stupid STUPID. idiot. go put tatoo on him please now i am VERY BUSY taking care of the bee-yootiful little flowers. theyll die without water molly oh molly what am i going to do with you"

As you wish, sir. Please do take care of yourself.

"SHUSH SHUSH SHUSHY SHUSH the flowers are……s leebing…"

Mars felt himself turned around and moved along, but his mind had been so thoroughly scrambled by fear and confusion and that damn train that kept burrowing into his mind like a needle every time it ran through the 'town' that he couldn't even tell where he was going at this point. The only thing that registered was that, as he left the shrill voice's room, he brushed against one of the flowers bordering the exit.

He swore he could feel cold fingers touching his face.

Your name is Mars Volta, correct?

"...Y…Yes…"

Then it won't be much longer. The Loanword Sharks will make sure of that. Then a trip over the Pancreatic Islets…and you'll be with the Modern Primitives. They'll take care of everything.

You won't be Mars anymore.

You will be something so much more.

You will serve us, and you will see that our way of life is preferable to the rigid and structured daily life you once led.

You will see those who enter their work and leave it, day in and day out, repeatedly until the day they leave work for their coffins, and shake your head at the wasted potential.

You will weep for the countless hours lost to occupation that could be put towards study and creation.

You will pity the busy monster, Man Unkind.

CHAPTER 4: Come Away, O Human Child!

Mag Mell.

Discovered in 1932 far off the west coast of Ireland by Clifden fisherman Dermot Fuairmee who had taken off in his boat in order to watch Amelia Earhart's plane arrive in Derry from the sea, but ended up swept out to sea and survived on copies of The Bible and his own urine (which he later described as "not a half grand meal, if you're Protestant"), the oval-shaped micronation is located right around the vertical midpoint between the islands of Azores and Iceland.

It is a decently-sized island of sprawling plains of golden grass, vibrant and marvelously-colored trees, and a magical field across the whole landmass that freezes the conditions of those who enter its grounds. If you enter whilst alive and sated, you will remain alive and sated no matter who should attack you, no matter how little you eat.

Upon arriving on the shores of Mag Mell, he was greeted by its ruler, the great warrior-king-god Manannan mac Lir, who inquired if he had been cast out as a crackpot for continuing to pay his respects to the gods of his ancestors rather than joining the followers of who he called *Dia na nEabhraidheach*, God of the Hebrews. Dermot, after having calmed down from having screamed 'Giants!' for the past five minutes, explained the situation. The warrior-king-god was dejected to hear it was a simple matter of lost direction, but lent Dermot his self-navigating boat *Sguaba Tuinne* so that he could find his way home, after requesting that he tell those who he knew to spread the word to whoever they could.

Once he returned to Ireland, Dermot told everyone he knew. If they didn't accuse him of being a crackpot, they called him a drunk who just stumbled into a foreign embassy and pissed his pants trying to find his way home. It was an oddly specific take-down, but once Amelia Earheart touched down properly, she recounted how she had also seen a mysterious golden island in the ocean uncharted on any maps, and the public turned to Dermot.

The government of Ireland remained mainly silent on the matter throughout World War II, not wanting the Nazis to find out about this safe haven, but as the 1950s rolled in, Ireland's economy was plummetting despite the rest of Europe enjoying the economic bounce-back from war reparations, and they needed a way to revitalize it fast.

As such, the decision to negotiate with Manannan mac Lir, who expressed that despite his confusion at the state of their government and his uncertainty of many of the modern terms and appliances they used, he was proud of his people's descendants and the culture they had created. He suggested the conversion of Mag Mell, its immortal inhabitants having long since grown tired of remaining in the same (admittedly very beautiful and wondrous) location for the past 2,00 years and left the place mostly empty, into a summer resort for those who want some time to enjoy themselves free of earthly worry or obligation. The proposal was considered, reached the floor, took a week of debate among politicians, and had a few riders concerning tax increases and the reallocation of some funds towards local police departments tacked onto it, but it was finally passed with overwhelming support.

Dermot, for what it was worth, received a lifetime subscription pass to the island, and has remained there happily catching giant sparkling fish for the past century or so without a care in the world.

~

The Prince of Fuck All pulled his shoulders in close, trying in vain to squint at the unfolded map and make out the location names through the creases. He had a green cap pulled over his floating crown of thorns on, the blood the relic generated flowing down his face, as well as (to get in what he called the 'Celtic mood') a gaudy bright-red traditional Irish leine tunic with an orange Ionar jacket of stout wool tossed over it, a long green kilt decorated in tartan, and tall flower-patterned mud boots—all worn, of course, under his magical blue coat. He had even made his lipstick half orange and half green for the occasion.

An overfed tourist talking loudly on his cell phone bumped against him, making him curse under his breath as he turned the paper over in his hands again.

"Good lord, why do they always fold these things so damn tight? And when you unfold them, god help you if you need to get it back to its original size, it's like re-folding origami. You know, I had a brief stint making maps for a living. It was a rather droll job, really. I got fired after they caught me adding 'Arsehole Junction' between Edinburgh and Glasgow. But oh look, honey, they have a hot spring! Isn't that just adorable? You can even take a picture with the king, for…*500 euros?* You might as well burn the gelt and snap a picture with the most handsome hobo on your block."

"Focus, Prince. We are looking for entrance to Tir na nOg to talk to fairies about getting stone, not to sightsee."

Rodion pushed along a short way along past him, his large frame making him easy to spot among the crowds of people but no easier to maneuver through the mob. He kept his usual brown suit on, preferring the formal look over style or comfort, but it was clear that the temperate climate of Ireland had gotten to him. He was hot when they arrived from Hell, and now he's stuck being hot for the foreseeable future. The Prince glanced back at him.

"Oh, shush! We're partners now! Off on a wonderful and bona quest to gather up all the precious little bijou stones before the orderly daughters over at Man Unkind nab them first, with my new partner!"

"We are *not* partners, Prince. I am still dragged around because…well, what will I do now? Ride plane back to Russia? Ask you for bike ride back? Ha. Like you would do such thing, no, *only* reason I am still here is because you drag me along like sled in snow going 'Come and see Rodi, it will be heaps of fun!' and I have no choice but to oblige."

"Right, firstly, I have *never* said 'heaps of fun'. Except for that one time in Reno, but I think that was deserved. Secondly, honestly, do you need to be such a spoilsport? We're on this trip whether you like it or not, we might as well enjoy it!"

Rodion frowned and side-stepped awkwardly past a crying child.

“We were told to come here by massive demon sitting on toilet. I believe I am past deciding to enjoy things.”

“I thought you liked demons?”

“I like *some* demons. There are reasons I do not summon some.”

“Like what, hm? Bubz stinking up the joint and being full of insects didn't exactly seem to stop you from getting frisky with the buzzy bugger.”

“Please do not talk to me about this further.”

“Pthbbt. Fine. I suppose we are on something of a time limit here. And I will admit, I think they could have sent a better ‘ambassador’ with us than—”

“Human dudes! Red dude! Russian guy! Over here!”

A low and warbly Californian-accented voice echoed from somewhere to the left, and both The Prince and Rodion winced upon hearing it. Silently sharing a tired look, they shuffled through the crowd until they came to where he had been calling from.

It was a music stand, the sort that’s hastily set up with a tent overhead, CDs shoved into plastic bookshelves and not arranged in any sort of particular setup. Wooden string instruments and vinyl records with pictures on the front of the lush countryside of the Emerald Isle were hung on the wireframe backdrop behind the counter. An older man with hair as orange as the sunset and a mustache-goatee combo as pointed as a morning-star stood bent over with his hairy-knuckled hands clasped together as he looked exasperatedly at the figure currently waving to the other two.

It was a large (quite so in both manners: he was a foot and a half taller than Rodion and likely two-hundred pounds heavier) demonic male figure with a mess of greasy black hair that fell out in waves hanging over his face, cow-like ears with golden studs and piercings framing what little could be seen of his face: an upturned nose with a septum piercing and a mouth full of sharp teeth and two tusks jutting out from his lower jaw, golden braces connecting all the bones together and cheek studs connecting via golden chain to a piercing in the middle of his fiery orange-and-black tongue. Out from his scalp sprouted two red-and-black-striped horns that curved inwards, and he had on a poor overburdened yellowed black shirt full of rips and holes, the unreadable logo for some unrecognizable metal band torturously stretched along his ample chest and the garment itself leaving so little to the imagination that it acted more as a makeshift bra than anything else, the pink sigils winding across his red skin on full display for all to disparagingly boggle at. The silhouettes of large door-knocker nipple rings pressed against the fabric. The pair of blue jeans he had on was ripped in several places and only barely remained in one piece, though it did admittedly go well with the tired and mud-splashed purple-and-white sneakers he had thrown on (and really, anything he had on was better than his original insistence that he was fine the way he is since he was never kicked out for going in nothing but sweatpants and socks).

This was Belial, the demon of hedonism and lawlessness, as well as the ambassador between the demons and the Fae.

He waved the two of them over with a grin, calling out to them. The Prince and Rodion managed to squeeze their way through the crowd to get to him, and the demon giddily gestured around himself.

"Look, dudes! It's a music shack! They got all kinds of, like, CDs and stuff for sale here, check it out!"

Belial picked up one of the CDs on the shelf. The front read in swirling knotted text 'Cana Cludhmor', as printed above a woodcut silhouette of a whale. A chintzy sticker on the front read *'Listen to the original recordings from the inventor of the harp herself!'*.

"I mean, uhhh, I can't really pronounce…any of the names of the songs, but like, dude! Look at them all! I've been trying to work with the stall guy here, but no dice so far."

He turned back around and leaned a bit forward onto the counter.

"So, askin' again…like, you got any Pantera? 'Cause I loooove Pantera. Judas Priest? Any Iron Maiden? Guess I could also, like, take any Metallica albums if you got 'em, just—any heavy metal?"

The man running the stall stared blankly up at him.

"...Fer th' las' time, nah, mate. We dun' sell that 'ere. All I've got's traditional Celtic. I've been yellin' ya this fer th' past fifteen minutes."

"C'moooon. You're holding out, man."

"I'm not holdin' anythin'. Now please get off th' desk, if ye break it, it gets taken out of my salary."

Belial just pouted and took his hands off the counter, sighing as he stretched his arms far above his head.

"Man. That stinks, I was really hoping to pick up something new…"

Rodion, who had been watching the whole scene glowering, let out a sigh.

"Well, I suppose I cannot blame you fully for side-tracking us, Prince. This one just as useless."

"Oh, useless? Just as useless as *me*, you say?"

"Yes! You have been staring at that map for half hour and have learned nothing important!"

"Now that's just simply not true. What about the picture-taking kiosk?"

He grit his teeth, about to growl out something, but just sighed and covered his face. Belial stepped forward and playfully ruffled Rodi's hair like he was a kid, which got him swatted away.

“Aw, c’mon, Russian dude! Don’t be such a grouch! Like, don’t worry. I take this trip all the time. It ain’t that big a deal. Follow me, dudes, I’ll take you to Tir na nOg, no prob. Haha, if you just woulda asked, I would have totally taken you there first…but I thought, y’know, you two dudes might want to check out the attractions and all. It’s a resort and all, I thought you’d like it!”

“Ahem. For your information, Lial honey, we are in…kind of a rush. Man Unkind, Alatyr stone and all. Did the big bloke on the toilet not brief you on what was going on?”

“Bloke on the t…oh! Oh, Belphegor, ya mean? Haha, maaaan, he gave up trying to talk about whatever was goin’ on with me years ago. Somethin’ bout how fried I was all the time, I dunno. I get most of the news from Mol ‘n Mam, my bros. But if ya guys really need to head to th’ Land of the Young, I’ll take you there!”

He happily gestured for the two to follow and hiked up his jeans, fearlessly (or perhaps obliviously) walking through the crowd and not even noticing he was pushing people out of the way. His wide frame thankfully allowed the others to follow behind him unimpeded by the throngs of people, though they still muttered under their breath.

“(You did not tell me that we could just ask him. I was under impression he was only person who could take us here. Because that is what you told me.)”

“(Well, I mean, look at the hunk of flesh, Rodi. Arse as wide as Three-Mile Island and a fashion sense just as disastrous, you think I’m going to trust someone like him with such delicate information?)”

“(He is appointed ambassador, why would he not be trustworthy? He does seem like he has…empty skull, but we are in no position to judge, *da?* We are likely just as suspicious.)”

“(Perhaps you. All I look’s attractive.)”

“(What’re you dudes whispering about? You wanna hit up the corn dog stand before we head out or something?)”

The Prince and Rodi shut their mouths and remained silent for the rest of the trip, even when they made a substantial detour for corn dogs.

~

Quiet, or they’ll hear you.

It’s important that they don’t hear you. You need to be swift, strong, but most of all, silent in your approach, or else they’ll run away.

It’s just like hunting. Just like hunting deer, or catching fish.

The importance is in the approach, the concealment, and the swift retrieval.

Sit in the tree and watch without moving. Move your eyes and not your head if you are able.

Grip your bow in one hand and your arrow in the other. Be prepared to load when it’s time.

Hide yourself among the foliage. That way, they won’t find you.

Do what you’ve done ever since you were six.

Hiding and hunting and fighting for your life.

The crunching of grass, fifty meters to the south.

It's time.

Imbas forosnai.

Close your eyes. Collect your mind and attend to the Force that pervades all. Three figures. One small and lithe. Two large and bulky. Two humans, one demon. All with some degree of magic. Especially the small human.

Teinm laida.

Run your tongue over your teeth. Under your breath, without making a sound, recite the poem of wisdom and clarity. The small one has a magical coat on. The larger human is older. The demon holds great power. A high voice from the small one, deeper voices from the others. The humans' scents are unfamiliar, but the demon's is reminiscent of that which reminds him of some prominent fairy settlements. Smell of fried dough and some manner of meat product.

Lick your thumb and close your eyes.

Dichetul dichennaib.

They arrive seeking Lia Fail.

Put away your arrows and retrieve your sword.

Mac an Luin shall cut these trespassers down where they stand, just as with the others.

~

"I still rather don't see why I had to turn my farting crackers inside-out before coming in just to see some bloody fairies. I mean, this place is bona fantabulosa, lovely scenery, but it just seems a little silly. All Rodi had to do was take his suit off and put it back on the other way round."

The Prince of Fuck All roughly adjusted his kilt, the seams on the inside now visible on the outside. Rodion walked next to him with his suit on inside-out as well, though instead of complaining, he was simply enthralled by the scenery.

The realm of Tir na nOg was an ethereal forest, the misty air infused with an ethereal turquoise glow that seemed to wrap around the towering and interminable mushroom-coated trees that made up the canopy through which sunlight poured in fantastical rays. It was neither too cold nor too warm (which helped to improve Rodion's mood), and the landscape was mostly flat save for a few hills and the occasional cave that Belial steered them away from.

Belial, who had turned one of his socks inside-out, laughed.

"Well, thing is, fae and fairies and all the other forest dudes are, like, pretty solitary. Dunno if either of you have ever met any, but they like to do things on, like, their own terms? So, if we're gonna go talk to Oberon and Titania, we gotta be smart about it. This place is full of stuff called 'stray sod' that makes your sense of direction go all fucky if you step on it, and the only way to avoid it's to turn somethin' you're wearing inside-out."

He sniffed.

“Also dude, try not to call ‘em fairies to their face unless they call themselves that? They’re kinda sensitive about generalizations and stuff…”

Rodion took a deep breath in through his nose, taking in the sweet scent of the air with a smile, before he turned back to their accompaniment.

“I admit, I am not familiar with the actions and standards of the fae…though, I was under impression you had to have pure heart to enter their realm?”

“Oh! Yeah, well, that’s still true, but they make an exception for me and you two dudes, since you’re my buds! Goin’ to see Obie and Tits together on an adventure!”

“(Right, now I see what you meant, Rodi dear. Very annoying, making a farce out of things like this…The fate of the world’s hanging in the balance, after all.)”

Rodi himself just sighed and rolled his eyes, peering around trees and periodically stopping to look at mushrooms. This place was fascinating…but it was empty. Extremely empty, for that matter. True, this is a magical realm, but the way Belial described it as the ‘paradise for all magical creatures’, there’s shockingly few magical creatures here. In fact, there’s none. Unless you count the mushrooms, but he didn't consider anything lacking a brain to be ‘alive’. He sniffed.

“...Should there not be more…creatures, here?”

“...Oh, dude, yeah, you’re right…I totally didn't even notice. Where’s all the unicorns, and the lil’ brownie dudes, the spriggans and knockers, all the caladrius-es and phoenixes?”

“Perhaps they’re all out on vacation. Do fairies have work holidays?”

“Nah man, Samhain passed last month…this is way different…”

Belial crossed his arms uncomfortably, looking around with a concerned expression. The Prince scurried over to his cohort and whispered to him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“(Right. Well. Between you and me, Rodi, I don’t believe I can trust this fellow. Ambassador to the fae and fairy expert my left bollock, he obviously isn’t quite all there.)”

“(Da, that is true, but what other choice do we have?)”

“(I’ll tell you what choice we have! Split off with me!)”

Rodion gaped at him.

“(Wh—What are you, out of your mind, Prince? We cannot abandon him like this to go and perform flight of fancy! Even faulty information can be better than no information, after all…)”

“(And faulty or correct, I’ve got heaps of information. Come now. Look at him. Look, look at him, he’s got a mank stench wafting about him, he probably hasn’t washed himself in a month…no clever-clogs omi, demon or not, is going to be acting like that. Now me, I’ve got plenty of tricks up my sleeves—quite literally—and doing things my way is going to get this whole affair done a whole heap of a lot quicker. You want to go home, don’t you hun? I know I dragged you along into this whole thing against your will, the least I could do is speed up the process.)”

“(...I am admittedly still wanting to go back home…)”

“(Then how’s this for a plan? Open those aunt nells up wide now and listen here.)”

They whispered among one another as they spoke and Belial kept looking about ahead of them, the group passing by rings of red-capped mushrooms, green-capped, morels, shiitakes, until they came to a sunny clearing. Golden light streamed through the breaks in the canopy onto the grass, and in the distance, a ring of puffball mushrooms with caps as white as egg shells encircled a bare patch of grass. The two kept mulling over their plans while Belial (having sufficiently worried enough and instead moving onto whisper-yelling out heavy metal lyrics to entertain himself) led the way towards Arcadia Sióga, the de facto capital under the Seelie Court of fairy settlements.

However, Belial stopped, causing the two to stop short of his large frame. The Prince and a more unsure Rodion looked up, the first prodding him in the back.

"Oi, Lial, what gives, eh? You start feeling a mite peckish after seeing some cloudberries growing on a bush or—"

"Shush."

He put a hand up to silence the two of them, swiveling his shaggy-haired head as if scanning the area. The Prince of Fuck All, however, refused to follow orders: especially from someone with such poor fashion sense as him. He stood up straight and cocked his hips.

"Excuse me? Dear, did you just shush me? Now that's just rude, I'll have you know that I haven't got to follow any of your orders if I'm not feeling it: Your mother's her own boss, and what I say always goes no matter if it happens to make some walnut-brained meese bloke like you uncomfort—"

"Duck!"

Belial harshly grabbed a handful of The Prince's hair and some of Rodion's beard, yanking the both of them down into the grass. Three arrows whizzed above them, ripping through the air and at least one managing to shave a thorn off of The Prince's bloody crown.

"Zaebis, what was that?!"

"Arrows, dudes. I didn't even notice, but we've got company. And it ain't really nice company, I don't think."

"Oh, you think? Perhaps they're just here to chat over a spot of tea? Right, I'm sick of this."

He reached into his coat, digging around a bit with a wry grin on his face before he produced a small bronze sculpture of a man's head, the hair cut short and the eyes being especially piercing, with white sclerae and green irises that peered with a curious intensity. Huffing, he lugged it into both of his arms. Belial kept an eye out for the attacker, shielding the others the best he could with his own body.

"If you're gonna do somethin' with that, red-hair dude, make it quick. I caught a whiff of those arrows that just went by, and they're bad news if they hit us."

"Hahh—no worries! Picked up this bona thing when I saw it lying under a temple staircase. Put it—hrnnk—in a museum for a while, but it started freaking people out, so I, nghh, happily took it back."

"What is strange bronze head going to help us in this situation?"

"It's not just any strange bronze head, love! It's the Meroë Headcounter! Just hold it upright—" He lifted it up as much as he could, elbows quivering under its weight. "Hrnngh, dammit this thing is fucking heavy, and give it a little flick in the temple…Go on! Someone, uh, other than me! Please?"

Rodion did the honors, flicking the temple of the artifact. Immediately, it levitated up from where it was being held, staring out into the forest before it started spinning to and fro, shakily changing directions back and forth like a compass on a swing-set. The Prince snickered.

"Fancy little thing, isn't it? It can see through everything: cloaking magic, hiding behind walls, anything under the sun: all you need to do is give it a flick and point it in the right direction! Now we can tell where the blasted arrows are coming from!"

"Gaugkh!"

Belial fell to the ground, holding his shoulder. An arrow, fletched with shiny gold feathers, was lodged deep into it. Crimson blood as thick as molasses that swirled with a dark mist within slowly seeped from the wound as he groaned.

"Lial!"

"No!"

"Gaahhh…ow. Ow, ow ow, fuck, dude, that…that really hurts…Shit, it's been a real long time since I felt actual pain…thing must have, l-like, a blessing on it…"

Rodion put a hand on his head.

"Do not worry, Belial. We will make sure you are safe."

"Make sure he's safe?! Ha! I'd rather make sure that rock over there is safe before him."

"He saved our lives, Prince!"

The Prince stood up straight, reaching into his coat once more before retrieving a shining obsidian macuahuitl[3] and holding it in front of himself.

"Yes, and we're going to finish saving them. Now, you've got some magic in those dainty strillers of yours, don't you, Rodi? Whip out some incendiary magic and smoke the bugger out."

"You want me to burn down the forest?"

Another arrow flew out of the forest from the direction the Meroe Headcounter was facing, The Prince managing to deflect it with the macuahuitl.

"It's a bleeding magical forest, I'm sure it can take some lousy fire! Now hurry!"

Belial groaned out in weak protest, but Rodion followed the order he was given: raising his hands, he made a small motion with his hands where he waved his fingers in front of one another before cracking his thumbs together like pieces of flint and holding out his palms.

"Pozhar."

A plume of flames emitted from his palms, the air around them warbling and warping from the heat as he ignited the area around them whilst turning in a circle. Like a human flamethrower

[3] A weapon used by the warriors of the Aztec civilization (among other Mexica peoples) resembling a flat paddle-board lined with square obsidian blades. It was described as being so fearsome that some Spanish explorers reportedly fainted from fright upon seeing it for the first time, whereupon they would be made fun of during the entire journey back to Spain. Huitzilopochtli later described his people's use of the weapons as 'bitchin'.

(a hopelessly literal description of the situation), he created a ring of flickering orange flames among the trees. Smoke rose up from the conflagration, and he turned back to The Prince.

"How was that?"

"Good, but you need a flashier name for your spell. More pizzazz, y'know?"

"I do not focus on pizzazz when I am in life-or-death situation, Prince."

"And that's where you and I are different, love."

The Headcounter suddenly tilted backwards, its piercing gaze staring up at the canopy and drawing the humans' attention towards the sky.

"Ha! Can't see anything but smoke, can't step on anything but fire. We've cornered him!"

He raised his macuahuitl up towards where the artifact's ogling orbs pointed towards and physically cocked something that was seemingly invisible on the shaft of the weapon, before shouting up at the trees.

"Try this one on for size, you bastard!"

With a sound like the sudden depressurization of a tupperware container, one of the sharpened squares of obsidian lining the outside of the weapon's bulk fired off as a projectile into the sky. It traveled for quite a long distance, and after it finally left their sight, there was a loud groan and the sound of branches breaking from above. He winked and snapped his fingers, grinning to the others as he stashed the Meroe Headcounter back into his coat.

"Now *that's* how you get things done nice and quickly, The Prince of Fuck All way."

Belial groaned out weakly and murmured out some words of acknowledgement, struggling to stand with the arrow in his shoulder, while Rodion just rolled his eyes and lowered his hands, soft plumes of smoke dissipating from the balls of his wrists.

"Yes, yes, do not forget that you required my help, however."

"I could have set the bleeding place on fire myself, you know, so it'd be good of you to keep that pretty oven of yours shut unless it'll be doing something more useful than spewing naff."

Soon enough, a figure fell from the trees, smacking his face on the grass and bending backwards in a way that almost certainly would have paralyzed a normal human, if not for the fact that this was no normal human.

Looking up from his position on the floor was a lithe and svelte young man with pale skin, stark gleaming-white hair, and a wide pair of stag antlers that branched out from their positions on his scalp. Across his forehead was a leather circlet with a triskelion design squarely placed in the middle, and though his greenish-blue cloak blended in with the surroundings, it had taken on a reddish-orange hue to go with the flames that licked all around them. Brass-and-leather wristbands wrapped around his arms like twin snakes coiling around him, and tattoos consisting of long lines peppered with notch marks—the symbols of the ancient Irish *ogham* writing system—coated his arms and legs. Burlap tunic pants worn under a chainmail top hung loose with a few cuts leading up a few inches from the ankle hems of each pant leg, making them appear tattered, accompanied simple brown leather shoes with brass buckles.

Shining green eyes stared up at his assailants, and he spat up blood as a result of the macuahuitl blade which was currently lodged deep into his side and staining the grass. He

coughed and looked up at The Prince, who crossed his arms and squatted down in front of him with a wide grin. He stuck the weapon into the dirt.

"Well, alamo! Who's this spring chicken, hm? You look rather too put-together to be an agent of Man Unkind. Usually they're the farthest thing from human, or animal, or whatever. More like freaks of nature, I'd say. But I do demand a good reason for why you're here shooting at us like we're little wooden ducks at the carnival. Tell me, do I have a target painted on my back?"

The boy did not respond, instead slowly struggling to his feet and reaching into his cloak. Unsheathing it with a sound like a roaring wave, he drew a long claymore with a hamon effect reminiscent of rushing water hardened into the blade. It glistened with swirling green energy, and he held it to The Prince's neck as he rose to one trembling knee.

"...P…Put out…the fire…*Forruad…"*

The Prince smirked with a sinister glint in his eyes.

"And why should we, hm? Perhaps we'll just let it burn the whole forest down. I had a friend back in college who was rather of an expert in fairy matters, you know. He had a ring of mushrooms growing in his basement, had its own little city and everything. Whenever the fairies did something he didn't like, he burnt away one of the mushrooms, and one by one, every building in the fairy settlement went up in smoke!"

He spat up another bit of blood.

"...It…'Tis my duty, a-as protector not only of the people of Eire, but of all beings of the wood…great and small…to preserve the—" He staggered and fell to both knees once again. "—the, the integrity of Tir na nOg and the h-homes…the homes of…of…"

"How do we know we can trust you then, m'lud? And what, you expect us to simply lay down and die otherwise? We're trying to *save* your cod collection of ramshackle huts and mushroom temples, you—"

"Prince."

Rodion spoke up from behind him, helping Belial walk by ducking his head under his shoulder. He turned around.

"Whaaaat is it, honey?"

"Belial wishes to speak."

"J…Just put out the fire, dude…it ain't gonna be good if ya let it spread and…like…damn, this arrow really hurts, but remember we can't be going around making enemies. T-The fae and us demons are on pretty good terms 'cause, y'know, I give them immortality in exchange for that totally gnarly food…of theirs…but, uh, just don't make things more difficult than they are already…"

"Please do as he says…He is in bad condition. I need to treat him, and is best not to do it in prison cell. Or while we are both dead. Would be, ah, very difficult to operate in those situations."

The Prince of Fuck All ruminated for a second, looking down at the bleeding warrior, before sighing melodramatically and stashing away his weapon.

“Fine. I think having Blondie here live in a pile of ash for a while is fitting retribution for having him almost kill us, but since I happen to like Rodi so much, I’ll stomp the vogue just this once.”

He placed his open palm to the side of his face, then closed his fingers to make the ends meet as he drew his palm away, a glob of fresh-water forming where all his fingers met. The patterns on his tattoo throbbed and shifted among one another like some deep and vast mechanism under his skin.

“Gefra-Vatchuza.”

Quickly swiveling his hand outwards and opening his fingers, a deluge of water with the force of a firehose poured out from from his hand, swiftly dousing all the flames and putting the whole mess out in a single sweep around the area. The white-haired boy ducked under the flow, as did the others, and when the fire was finally gone, The Prince winced as though he’d been shot and clutched at his left shoulder, gritting his teeth and cursing under his breath.

Steam rose up through the trees and mingled with the smoke as he recovered, reaching to the boy. He recoiled back and moved the end of his sword to block the approach.

“N-No!”

“Don’t be such a baby, heartface, I’m just gonna take out this little eensy-weensy foreign object lodged in your side here. Then use a bit of the ol’ arcane majicks to stop the bleeding so you won’t die.”

“...I…I will do it.”

Rodion leaned over and grimaced at the warrior. He’s going to yank a lodged object out of his body himself? That’ll only accelerate the bleeding, it needs to have pressure put on it and then removed carefully through surgery…He turned to Belial, still woozy and murmuring something about chicken fried rice from the arrow in his shoulder. If only he had his supplies from back home…and he doubts anything The Prince had would be of use. Probably some strange insect that’ll heal you if you let it eat an eyeball or something.

He put his hands up.

“Your funeral, cove.”

The boy nodded solemnly and reached to the obsidian blade, using his right hand to twist it slightly (causing another pint of blood to gush out and his stoic facial expression to twitch) before ripping it out with a nauseating sound. The Prince yelped and covered his eyes, peeking through his fingers, while Rodion watched in shock. The red life continued to flow out of him…but he took a deep breath, and steadily, as the wound was left open, the blood flow slowed. First it was a torrent, then a light stream, then no more than a trickle until there was nothing left at all save for a glowing green patch where a deep gash once was. He took a deep breath and stood up straight, re-sheathing his sword into a blue waist-sheath, now visible tucked behind his coat. A small stork-skin bag hung at his side as well, and his coat returned to its greenish-blue state to match the surroundings.

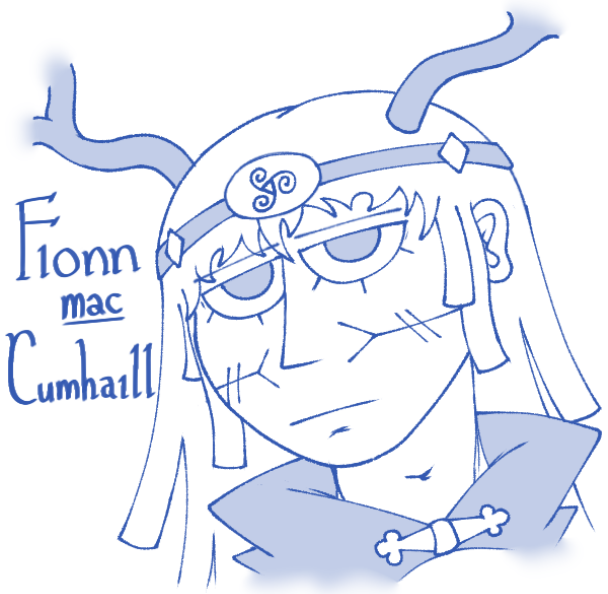
He cleared his throat.

“I apologize for attacking you. I see now that I was hasty in my decision. Arcadia Sioga has been subject to many sieges lately by *sluagh* forces taking on frightening forms and speaking in unfamiliar ways. Would you like me to introduce myself?”

“Frankly, I’d be remiss if you didn't, dear.”

“Yes. Then, I am Fionn mac Cumhaill, son of warrior-king Cumhall mac Trenmhoir and leader of the Fianna. Protector of Eire, I was awoken from my rest in the cave where the great seer Fintan mac Bochra the Wise that accompanied the descendent of Nóe many years ago, remained safe as the deluge of floodwater passed by. With my raging sword forged by the great smith of the mountain Slieve na Glaise named Lon mac Liomtha, Mac an Luin, my stormy shield as originally gifted to the warrior and king of Tir na nOg named Manannan mac Lir, Sgiath Gailbhinn, and the banner that bears the sun that gleams as bright as my own hair, the Dealb-Greine, I shall strike down any and all foes who shall choose to threaten the sanctity and safety of the people of Eire, the people of the Seelie Court, and all worthy who shall require my assistance. So ‘tis an honor to know you three. May I please know your names?”

The Prince whistled.



“Gordon Bennett, we didn't ask for your life story, did we? Shorten it to five paragraphs or less next time…either way, the name’s The Prince of Fuck All, love.”

Rodion raised his hand.

“Rodion Nikolayev, is very nice to meet you. And large red man you shot with arrow is Belial.”

Belial just groaned in response. Fionn, raising his thin eyebrows a bit in what could be argued to be either shock or the face you make biting into a slightly cold hot dog, stepped past The Prince to look up at Belial. He couldn’t have been more than five-and-a-half feet tall, but he stared up at the man without any fear.

“You are the Belial?”

“Hrrkkh, th-that’s my name, dude…don’t wear it out…”

“I see. I am sorry for shooting you with my arrows. Typically, blessing them with holy magic helps to fend off those that oppose the fae. Please, let me take care of that.”

Reaching forward to grab the arrow, Rodion gently put his hand up and smiled nervously at him.

“Er, Cumhaill, you are not medically trained, yes? Taking out arrow or bullet or other projectile like that, especially if was blessed and stuck into demon, will be catastrophic for blood loss…I am doctor, you know, and I am sure he can persist until we arrive at…what was name, Arcadia Sioga? Yes.”

Fionn put his hand down.

"I am sorry. I am unfamiliar with many medical practices."

"(Bloody hell, tell me about it…)" The Prince murmured.

"Now that you have said your name, however, I understand more. Medb and Titania were waiting for you to come."

Belial's eyes opened wide enough for the red pupils to be visible past his shaggy hair.

"M-Medb?! What's she doin' here, man?! She's bad news!"

Rodi tilted his head.

"Medb?"

"Queen Medb, High Queen of the Unseelie Court of the Fae…w-whaddya mean by she's waiting for me with 'Tania, Finn-dude? They *hate* each other…"

"I surmise it is a very important matter. I tried to ask, but I was transformed into a frog for the afternoon. I think there are still flies in my teeth. If you are the Belial they were waiting for, however, then I can allow you entry."

"Too much information, Blondie. But, well, if that's the matter, then what are we standing about with our thumbs up our bums for? Let's go hand off this slab of meat to the queens, eh?"

The Prince turned around, making a start for the ring of mushrooms in front of them, before Fionn whipped around and grabbed him by the collar.

"Wait."

"Jesus! You know, there's easier ways of getting a girl's attention than by man-handling her, what is it?"

"I am unfamiliar with you, Forruad, and your compatriot."

He picked Fionn's fingers off of his collar one by one.

"In the Queen's English, please?"

"The fae have not described a human with red hair, nor one in a *cron* suit from the eastern continent."

"That's rather a shame, considering I had a little sister who wandered off into the woods once. Pa always said she dun' got spirited away by fair folk, an' I was plumb hopin' I'd be able to go an' find her to help his dear ol' soul rest in peace…"

"Tis not my responsibility to find your sister, Forruad."

Rodion stepped forward a bit.

"Now, Cumhaill, think for a minute. I am a doctor. This one, Belial, he was person that brought us here on behalf of forces of Hell in order to either assure safety of important items, protect from attacks, or collect to prevent from falling into hands of…you called them sluagh? They are members of cult, called Man Unkind…Prince will tell you about them, but please, trust us."

"...What about the fire? And Forruad's threats to let it burn?"

He shot a glare at The Prince, who dusted off his outfit and adjusted his hat with his cheeks puffed out as he stayed silent, before sighing.

“He did…not mean it. Is quite the eccentric, says things he does not mean many times. We mean no harm to Tir na nOg or the fae that inhabit.”

Fionn mac Cumhaill stood quietly for a second, staring at Rodi for long enough that it unnerved him a bit. After his brief sojourn into empty thought, though, he turned around and waved a hand.

“I understand now. I have made my decision. Come, I will take you into Arcadia Sioga. The Fianna, my band of fellow warriors, have unfortunately stayed behind, but I have been given lodging by Queen Titania in her castle.”

The three of them followed, The Prince stepping back so he could be next to Rodion.

“(I do have to say, Blondie may be a bit of a meese chap, but he’s got spunk. And he isn’t half bona-vardering, either. Nice work wrangling him enough to let us in though, now we won’t need to bust the bloomin’ doors down like John Rambo.)”

“(I do not think I did any ‘wrangling’, Prince. I just asked him to trust us. Do not cause him to do otherwise—we need all the friends we can get, *da?)”*

“(Yes, I suppose you’re right. I’ll still always be keeping an ogle on him, though. The second he starts to turn on us, slip-slop-slap, he’ll be so pumped full of blades he’ll look like a Gilette commercial.)”

“(First Belial, and now Cumhaill? I have…suspicion you are unwilling to trust anyone, despite you being the most suspicious of all of us.)”

“(Oh please. I’m not the one with some literal skeletons in his closet. And besides, I frankly don’t give two shits what you think of me, Rodi, I am who I am and if that makes you mad, you can go suck a lemon.)”

“(I think is pretty reasonable thing to bring up…)”

Fionn pointed at The Prince.

“Blood is running down from inside your hat, Forruad. Are you injured?”

“No dear, it always does that. Don’t you worry your pretty little head about it.”

CHAPTER 5: Over The Hills And Far Away

The guards at the gates of Arcadia Sioga were wary at first, but upon seeing Fionn and Belial—who they greeted with wide smiles and excited hand-shakes as though they were meeting a celebrity, as well as concern for the arrow sticking out of his shoulder—they happily opened the gates after holding their palms out and producing a small pile of glittering dust within each. Leaning into the piles, they whispered out "Belial and Fionn will be arriving at Overhill, residency of Her Royal Highness of the Woods, with two others" before blowing the pile of dust away as it scattered in the wind.

Arcadia Sioga itself was a beautiful place, legions of huts and quaint homes made from painted mud and dirt or from hollowed-out mushrooms liberally decorated with all manner of garlands and flowerbeds running from window to window, lines with jars holding fireflies illuminating the perpetual dusk that the town remained in despite the surrounding weather. Free fireflies flitted through the sky as more natural lighting, and tall blades of grass painted with elaborate murals of notable fae throughout history towered overhead like protective gods.

If they had come at a different time, the streets would have been full of all manner of woodland creatures, satyrs dancing away whilst playing the pan flute and fiddle, the scent of fresh-baked bread and cloudberry pies cooling on windowsills lingering with sizzling salted meats drawn through sticks and glazed with all manner of flavoring, street vendors hocking magical appliances and talismans, brownie businessmen soaring through the air and water sprites and undines chatting as they bathed in the puddles surrounding the town.

It would have been like one massive and constant festival.

However, as the four of them entered, all the doors and windows were shut and boarded. All the lights were dimmed, and the only fae who stood outside were garbed in thick brass plate armor covered in elaborate forested designs. One with dark skin and an eyepatch took note of the four and approached them, nodding to each.

"Ello, Fionn. Ambassador."

He squinted at Rodion and The Prince.

"...The others. Off t' Overhill then, is it?"

Fionn nodded.

"Yes."

"What in bleedin' Nora even happened here, fairy-boy? From Shakespeare and cartoons, I would have expected this place to be all party all the time, y'know?"

The guard wrinkled his nose.

"...For yer information, 'laddie', there's been non-stop sieges on Arcadia Sioga fer th' whole day, an' we've been up t' 90 'cause of it. Folks 'ave holed themselves up in their homes per th' Queen's orders. T'wouldn't be an issue if th' bleedin' things didn't just keep comin'...An', Ambassador, ye've got an arrow lodged in yer shoulder there."

"Yeah man, I know…"

"We were, uh, going to take it out once we got to castle. Do you know the way, *storozhit?"*

"Name's Beltane, ye scut, an' if ye wanna get to Overhill, walk with caution. We had a nasty gobshite with more arms than a conservative centipede an' fur black as a magpie's arsehole goin' 'round callin' 'imself th' Utility Monster scurry in jus' recently. We moved to strike it down by choppin' off its head, but th' bloody gomeril just kept goin'!"

"I am sorry. It must have snuck in when I was trying to kill these three. Have any assailants reached the castle yet?"

"None so far, we've been holdin' th' fort well since…wait, ye were the one who stuck th' arrow in the Ambassador here?!"

"Yes."

The Prince pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, starting to wander away before Rodi grabbed him by the head and turned him to face Beltane and Fionn. Beltane stammered for a bit, looking between Fionn and the nearly-unconscious Belial, before just sighing.

"...We shoulda given ye a picture, shouldn't we 'ave, ye goon?"

"I am not a goon, but yes, a picture would have helped."

"...Jus' leg it to Overhill already, before I slather ye in ham glaze an' choose t' feed ye to th' beast meself."

Fionn saluted.

"Thank you, Beltane. We'll be on our way. Come, Forruad, Cron, Ambassador."

"Wait, Blondie, am I Forruad then? And for that matter, why the silly nicknames?"

"It helps for recognition. My men all had notable characteristics that helped me recognize them. Conan mac Morna was bald. Diarmuid Ua Duibhne had a heart-shaped birthmark on his forehead. Goll mac Morna had one eye. Conan ma—"

"Bloody hell, forget I even asked if you're going to bore us to tears like this."

"Your red hair is the most notable characteristic of yours, so you are 'Red'. Same with the one from the far east's 'Brown' coat."

"Can you not just, er, call me Rodion…? Seems much easier that way."

"Perhaps for you. Follow me, I will lead you to the castle."

Fionn gestured for them to follow, and the three others did so. Beltane watched them go as he leaned on his spear, sighing and scratching under his helmet. How the Fianna got stuck with such a plain-spoken and literal-minded boy as their leader, he'll never know…though, fate was always a little funny like that. Often the folks you never would have expected to even say a word are the ones that end up leading the charge.

Screams came from a hill in the distance. He turned to face the commotion, watching a writhing mass of black fur lurch over one of the houses' roofs as he lifted his spear once more. Back to work, he supposed.

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The castle of Overhill, the royal residency of Her Royal Highness, Paragon of Benevolence and Grace, Queen Titania and her rather snubbed husband Oberon, was a sturdy stone construct set high atop one of the larger mushrooms in Arcadia Sioga. Usually, an ethereal staircase of glittering fairy dust held up with magic would trail down from the gleaming golden portcullis that granted entry into the castle—though, the majority of residents were able to fly, so it was more for dramatic effect than anything else—but due to the current situation, it had been dissipated. Fionn told the others to wait at the bottom and performed what was essentially a twenty-foot vertical leap onto the edge of the mushroom's cap, before sloppily crawling into a window and calling out something they couldn't quite make out. After a few moments, the glittering staircase formed once more, the portcullis was raised, and The Prince, Rodion, and Belial were granted entry into the palace.

An intriguing blend between function and form, from the outside, Overhill appeared to be the prototypical 'fairy fort'. It was built as you may expect a medieval fortress to be, save for the fact that it was built in the shape of a circle, stretching upwards like the Tower of Babel with concentric floors. If it was visible at normal size, it would have been the size of the top barb of a caltrop among the grass.

On the inside, however, it was a quite different story: delicately-waxed wood floors dotted with expensive-looking rugs hung low under ornate velvet-and-gold furniture, great golden crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceilings of every room and paintings of austere-looking fae royalty lining the walls of the hallways, breaking up the flower-patterned wallpaper.

Flying about the hallways like busy bees were pixies and satyrs and even a few spriggans in all manner of noble wear, chattering among each other in a language none of the group could understand. An elf in shining silver armor with piercing blue eyes sat sipping a cup of tea and talking with a stocky female dwarf with a bushy red beard and thick leather gloves.

Notably, there were a number of sinister characters who were prowling about as well. Pot-bellied fear deargs whipped their tails and whispered to their drunken clurichaun friends as the group passed, ambulatory cat-shith with gleaming green eyes snickered and gossiped to a wiry newtish alp-luachra that gnawed hungrily on a chicken bone. Surprisingly enough, it was easy to tell at a glance whether the fae that murmured about the palace were of the Seelie Court or the Unseelie Court, whether they were mischievous or ill-natured—if you looked at them and you felt sick, they were from the Unseelie Court.

While The Prince and Rodion were paid little attention (though some did eye them suspiciously), the instant they entered the front doors, Belial was mobbed by starstruck sprites and sylphs who alternated between thanking him profusely and expressing their abject shock at the arrow that was stuck in his shoulder, before whisking him away on a gust of magic down the hallway and past the spectators. Regardless of their allegiance, all those who saw him greeted him and thanked him enthusiastically.

Rodion let out a sigh of relief at not having to carry him about any longer, but watched him travel down the hallway until he made a turn down another hall and disappeared.

"Where are they taking him, Cumhaill?"

“The medical wing. They will treat his wounds, and he should be fine by the end of the day today. We are going to see Titania and Medb, however, so we should not keep them waiting.”

The Prince crossed his arms as he walked, confused by the attention Belial was getting, though his spirits were lifted as he surveyed the various fae they passed by. He winked to a chubby satyr in a suit who was talking to a salamander, who blushed and quickly turned away, and playfully growled at a bugbear that growled back aggressively as a show of dominance.

“Now this is more like it! I was always a fairy fangirl, even when I was but a wee lad growing up in Cornwall. Owned loads of books on them. You don’t think I could get an autographed version of Midsummer’s Night with Obie and Tits’ names on them, could I?”

“I do not think so. Fae do not like to use their true names, whether in speech or in text. Are you familiar with the Fair Folk, Conn?”

Rodion, who had been taking in the sights and waving to the fairies who noticed him (the majority of which, especially those of the Seelie Court, slunk away with a sullen expression), turned to Fionn upon being noticed.

“A-Ah, me? *Nyet,* unfortunately not. Due to stringent laws and crack-down on non-human entities in 1950s, the fairies I know such as *vodianoy* or *polevik* went into hiding and retreated from most city centers. I believe Prince would know more about subject, being British.”

“Whoever said I was British? I could have hatched from an egg fully-grown, for all you know. I hear that’s the chic thing to do nowadays for couples that can’t pop one out themselves.”

“Regardless of your experience, they can be a fickle and easily-angered people. There are a few rules that I recommend you follow so that you don’t invoke the wrath of fae royalty.”

Fionn held up a finger.

“The first rule, first and foremost, is that you do not give your real name. Even Beltane, who we met earlier, did not use his true name. Names are very important, and if you use your real name, it will be taken from you. Use a pseudonym instead.”

The Prince of Fuck All muttered something under his breath.

“Second rule, do not say ‘thank you’ or ‘I’m sorry’ to fae. This implies you are in their debt, and they will soon ask a favor of you.”

“...Do you not apologize constantly though, Cumhaill?”

“...Ah. Yes. I’m sorry. I am already in their debt and am in the process of doing them a favor, so there is no issue when it comes to me. The third rule is that you should never accept food or drink from them unless it is judged to be safe. Fae food has certain qualities to it that are undesirable for many mortals.”

“Undesirable how, Blondie? If they’re going to be putting a chip butty in front of me, I’m not going to turn it away out of a sense of impending doom or something.”

“I am unsure. Do not take the risk, though. Fourth, do not lie to them. Fae hate being lied to, as they are incapable of doing so themselves. Fifth, do not accept gifts from them. Sixth, do not carry any cold iron on your person. Seventh…”

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"...Fifty-second, if you have a fire burning in your fireplace, do not put it fully out if you know the fae will be coming, as they like a steady warmth when they visit. Fifty-third, to be a good host, leave out a cup of pure freshwater for them to bathe in. Fifty-fou—"

"Okay we're here thank you for the lesson Blondie."

Fionn promptly shut up, and after listening to him blankly ramble on about the many, *many* rules and regulations that applied when it came to interacting with the fae, both The Prince and Rodi were all-too-willing to ignore every single one of them by the sheer fact that they had forgotten all of them anyways and didn't want to ask him to repeat it. They had arrived at the throne room anyway.

It was a massive chamber, a plush purple carpet lined with yellow tassels sprawling out in front of them and providing a path to the throne. The fairy thrones themselves, one for Oberon and one for Titania, resembled actual chairs less than they did twisting gnarled trees full of dazzling purple, white, and green flowers that framed their seats: carnations and delphiniums on the right, rhododendrons and violets on the left. Fruits of all manner of shape, color, and texture hung from the branches of the great three that the two were conjoined in, weaving upwards in a helix as it covered the ceiling with a great canopy of leaves, small bits of sunshine making spotlights among the floor and glistening off the running waterfall that ran from a wall into a stream through the room before exiting elsewhere. The walls themselves were covered in small openings the size of foxholes for seemingly no purpose apart from slightly wigging The Prince out. The air was lightly misted, slightly brisk, and surely the sounds of birds chirping and wildlife chittering would fill the air if things weren't so dire. It was idyllic in all manners of the word.

What was confusing, however, was that there was nobody in the thrones. The Prince wiped away a bit of the blood that had been streaking down his face for the past few hours from his crown.

"Are we early? Or are they busy taking a royal 'We'?"

"I don't understand."

"What, the joke? Or why they aren't here?"

"Both. Mostly the latter."

"Is this real stream? Wow…I remember hearing Tsar Nicholas II wanted one installed in his palace. I think there was story after October Revolution, where they had inflatable swimming pool instead. No water, but there was couple of old leaves and pool skimmer inside."

"Honestly, I'd go mental having a stream constantly going. I'd always need to piss."

"I mean, depending on where stream exists, could be convenient."

The Prince snorted and giggled at the thought and playfully splashed Rodion, mockingly warning him about getting his suit wet. He was startled for a second, but heartily laughed back and started splashing him as well, causing him to sarcastically complain about his makeup being ruined. They played around in the water like two kids who had gotten a new sprinkler in the

middle of summer, whilst Fionn crossed his arms and eyed the doors they had come through warily.

“I suppose we will wait for them to arrive.”

They didn't have to wait long, however. Only a few minutes passed before the doors swung open, and the sounds of matronly laughter and conversation gradually filled the room as multiple figures emerged.

One of these figures was Belial, still wearing his pants and shoes but going shirtless, not only fully showing off both the sigils covering his deep red skin and his nipple rings, but also revealing his bandaged shoulder, wrapped in gauze that was slightly stained red around the entry wound. Apart from that, he seemed well-natured, having recovered from the injury surprisingly well.

The other, staying quiet for the most part but occasionally chiming in, was an older man with a bushy grey walrus mustache, a short tuft of receding grey hair, a gaunt face with sunken cheeks speckled with freckles, and an outfit consisting of tightly-wound green clothes embroidered in golden fibers and covered in tassels and gemstones, puffy breeches framing white stockings and an crown of elegantly carved, planed, and smoothened wood. Notably, though he appeared human, much of his body appeared to be plant matter: what slivers of wrists that you could see between his sleeves and his gloves were covered with moss, which also snaked over his outfit like a parasite, cloaking much of the fabric and many of the gems in earthy tones. Where his left eye should have been, a white rose grew, and out from the back of his head grew an entire miniature lime tree. The branches wove around his neck, visible beneath his laced collar, and stuck out from the skin under his scalp like horns. From his back, two wings showing the orange, black, and white markings of—what else—the monarch butterfly softly fluttered as he smiled politely and listened to the other two talk.

Lastly, there was a shorter and more rotund figure with a distinctly motherly aura. Her hair was a vibrant auburn color, and though it was clear she was still on the older side, she was beautiful nonetheless. Her manner of dress was similarly elegant, being a green-and-yellow layered dress that hung loosely off of her body, and her round face had freckles just like her compatriot. Instead of being mostly moss and lime, however, large patches of her body were instead composed of wood. Tree bark splotched across her fair skin, knotted in some places and even with branches emerging from others, and polypore mushroom shelves lined themselves along her arms and down her back like she was some sort of feathered dinosaur. With how much of her was made up of bark, you would have expected her to struggle with moving and bending her joints, but she carried herself with surprising ease. The same wings that emerged from her cohort were present on her, as was the wooden crown.

Belial shrugged with a laid-back smile on his face.

“I mean, I can’t really blame the dude, y’know? Like, look at me. I’m pretty scary, right?”

“Scary as an ‘alf-baked haggis.”

“Oh, shush, dear! Ye aren’t half scary, no matter what yoke sticks ye wit’ an arrow! How’s the wound comin’ along, by the by? Healin’ well?”

“Yeah, s’healing. I could have, uh…like, I don’t think I needed the kiss? It was just blessed, it didn't hurt as bad as when Uriel shot me with some of his arrows…like dude, *owch*, it was awful. Friggin’ hole burned for decades…”

Fionn, The Prince, and Rodi (the latter two of which were still in the middle of playing in the creek) recognized the crowns, wings, and general presence of the two new figures and stopped their goofing off. That is, Fionn went from standing tensely to kneeling on the ground tensely with his head down.

“Fall to your knees and bow your heads, Forruad, Cron.”

Rodion opened his mouth, looked to the royalty, and obediently stepped out of the creek before kneeling as best he could and lowering his head, though he did look up at the others and sheepishly grinned. The Prince, on the other hand, watched the two kneeling and just stood there for a second. Then he looked to the king and queen, rolled his eyes, fluffed his outfit, and strutted over with a self-assured smirk on his face as he put out his hands.

“Very nice to meet you two. Charmed.”

The blonde warrior looked up at him, and it felt like his whole body tensed up even tighter. He put the tip of his thumb to his mouth.

“(What are you doing, Forruad? You need to show proper respect, or you may be killed. Or worse. You need to show the fae proper respect.)”

“(Da, I would do as Cumhaill says…)”

“(Hush, I’ve got this.)”

The Prince looked back to the others.

“Might you two be so gracious as to honor me with your names, then?”

The queen stared at The Prince, eye-level with him, with a look that almost felt like it could be measured on the Kelvin scale. However, such a look lasted only a second, and she put her hand out to take his, smiling kindly at him.

“Ooh, ye must be the red-head I heard about on the dust! ‘Tis grand to meet ye, laddie…lassie…er, which…?”

“Any that suits your fancy, love.”

“My, such a gentleman! I am sure Fionn told you about us already, but I am Titania, Queen of the Fae among the Seelie Court. This handsome lad here is my husband, King Oberon. Do say hi, won’t you?”

Oberon was still for a moment before he registered that he was being mentioned, and shook The Prince’s hand awkwardly with a nod.

“Yes, very good tae meet ye.”

Titania put a hand to her cheek and giggled as she turned to Rodi and Fionn.

“I certainly hope Fionn didn't scare your friend over there into thinking th’ Fae are some almighty capricious power. Certainly, ‘tis quite a bit of mischief about, but since so many ‘ave been learning more about mortal life and takin’ up residence in mortal towns, we’ve mellowed out quite a bit. Ye two may rise, if ye so choose.”

Fionn rose to his feet robotically, still gently chewing on the tip of his thumb as Rodion stepped forward to join the group. Titania smiled up at him.

"Might I know your names?"

"The Prince of Fuck All, milady."

"Errrr."

He glanced back to Fionn, who shot him a knowing look.

"...George Psalmanazar[4]."

"Fionn…ye didn't really tell them all this nonsense about 'oh ye may never give yer real name to a fae, lest they take it from ye', did ye? You'll 'ave to excuse him. Poor lad's about seven centuries behind on lots of matters. We don't do that much anymore. Ye know, business transactions are not easy if ye don't know anyone's names. Please, yer real names, lads."

"Ah. Ah, aha, my apologies, I am…Russian, er, as you know. I am not accustomed to…as I am learning, many things. I am Rodion Nikolayev. Very nice to meet you and be in your presence, your majesty."

The Prince puffed out his chest.

"The Prince of Fuck All."

Oberon raised an eyebrow.

"Is that really yer name, bairn?"

"It's the only name I've got, milord, and my mother always did say to make the best with what you have. Though she might have been referring to clothes…It would explain my camp clobber, wouldn't it? Had to learn how to dress myself when I was a wee boy of six, no less!"

Titania laughed happily at The Prince's anecdote of debatable authenticity, while Oberon just furrowed his brow even as he smiled. Belial put his hands on the two royals, bending down a bit and grinning wide.

"You two dudes're really hitting it off with Tania and O-bro, aren'tcha? They're real sweet folk once ya get to know 'em, y'know. Me and them were just chatting about the arrow wound I picked up. Should be healed over in a week, no biggie."

"Ooh, yes, it was a nasty thing too. Did we really not give ye a picture of our close friend here for you to recognize 'im? Not even a physical description?"

Fionn was quiet for a second, opening his mouth and closing it, before he flushed a deep red and looked away.

"...I…thought I could recognize an enemy upon seeing it. I chose to ignore the descriptions out of pride. I am sorry."

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[4] The acquired name of an unknown Frenchman claiming to be the first Formosan native (i.e. person from Taiwan) to visit Europe. To prove his genuinity and test his mettle, he produced a full book detailing the customs and practices of Formosa, most of which were 100% fake due to "George" never having actually been to Taiwan. Incidentally, a man named John Zegrus later appeared in an airport claiming to be from a country called Taured, which he claimed was between Formosa and Lilliput. He was judged as an uninentional interdimensional traveler, and after going through the proper travel agencies, was able to return home alive. He later sent a postcard of him and a friend reading "Good Times From Formosa – Wish You Were Here!".

“Losh, ye’d apologize fer breathin’ funny, laddie. It ‘appened, s’nothin’ can be done aboot it now.”

“Yeah dude, no harm, no foul! I actually—”

Something started vibrating on Belial’s person, and he held up a pudgy finger as he dug around in his pocket and tossed various melted chocolate bars, stray buttons, and a dead rat out onto the floor, whereupon they were swiftly swept up by a small pixie into a magical dustpan that spirited the pile away. He retrieved his phone and held it up to his ear.

“Yello?”

Oberon leaned over to Titania.

“(Jings, what’s ‘e doin’ now, kimmer?)”

“(‘Tis one of those cell phone doohickeys th’ kids are all usin’ today. Think fairy dust, but ye can also play games on it an’ speak via text and everythin’. ‘Tis popular with demons an’ humans especially, I think.)”

“(Don’t seem ‘alf useful. Dust’s more versatile’n convenient, aye?)”

“(It all does the same thing, honey.)”

“(Yeh…but does it sparkle like th’ dust?)”

“(If ye hush yer face, dear, maybe I’ll get ye one next *Nollaig*, ‘ow’s that?)”

“(Well good, but ye coulda kept it secret, could ya no?)”

Belial’s face sunk, and his eyes widened enough that they were actually visible underneath his mess of greasy hair, red irises shrunken as he listened to the caller. He put a hand to the phone and whispered something in a language none of them understood as his eyes darted around anxiously. He nodded once, then twice, and pressed the screen before shoving the phone back into his pocket.

“I-I need to go. Like, right now.”

“So soon, dear? What’s the occasion, somethin’ gone wrong back home?”

He nodded weakly.

“Yeah. Yeah you might say that. Uh. So, um, would love to stay and, like, chat with you dudes and all, Titania, Oberon, but I really gotta head back, so I’ll catch you on the flip-side. Don’t forget why I brought ya here, Prince dude, and like…uh, bye. Bye. Just, good-bye. See ya. Yeah.”

With that awkward conclusion, he vanished in a puff of thick red smoke, leaving the rest of them confused. The Prince raised an eyebrow and looked to Rodi.

“Do demons usually exit so rudely? Did he have a summoning to get to or something?”

“I do not know. If was summoning, though, we would not have time to say goodbye. Is like summoning genie, it just brings them as is.”

Queen Titania shook her head with a sad expression.

“Tis a shame he couldn’t join us. We were just about to prepare a small feast for ye three to discuss matters with us!”

Fionn took his thumb from his mouth.

“A feast? Under such conditions? Titania, I am not able to guard the city. What if there is another attack? Beltane informed us there is still a monster on the loose outside castle grounds. We cannot entertain such a thing, surely.”

“Oh, pish-posh, us fae are more’n sturdy, Fionn. Ye worry too much! Besides, it isn’t like our guests can float to take th’ weight off their feet. Ye’ve been walkin’ fer quite a while, haven’t ye two?”

“Yes.”

“What a blunt answer, Rodi, it wasn’t any harder than a trip to Disney World. The line to get in was half as long as the one for Splash Mountain and twice as enjoyable.”

“I have not been.”

“Never been to—” He scoffed. “I’m taking you sometime, definitely. You ever been inside that massive disco ball? It’s wonderful.”

“Excuse me, I am sorry, who is Disney? Is he one of the Tuatha De?”

“He might as well have been, Blondie. He might as well have been.”

~

Shortly, with the aid of a small legion of gnome butlers that toddled about in their pointy hats and brought in an elaborately-carved wooden table lined with flowers and a set of five root-woven chairs, they were all seated for their meal. The Prince leered down at his bacon and cabbage suspiciously, poking down at it with a golden fork, and Rodion stared at his own plate of cottage pie with a hesitant expression.

Fionn sat with both his legs bouncing at irregular rhythms, eyeing the two humans.

The Prince stuck his fork in a piece of bacon and almost raised it to his mouth, but the blonde hero’s gaze deepened, and he quickly lowered it. Oberon spooned a clump of rumbledethumps into his mouth and turned to him.

“Mmph. Whas’ wrong, laddie? Ye ain’t touched yer scran.”

“Well. Apart from Blondie here staring daggers into my poor feminine heart, I *have* heard rather…interesting stories, about what fae food can do to people.”

Titania giggled through a mouthful of boxty.

“Ye really did spook them, didn't ye, Fionn?”

“Fae food is not only extremely unhealthy, it also forever binds you to the one who granted it to you. I do not want Forruad and Cron to become slaves of the fae.”

“Slaves?! My, ye really are behind the times…But regardless, we assure ye two, these meals are perfectly safe fer humans! Honest—most of the cursed meals’re done by th’ younger fair folk. Yer mate Belial requests a boatload o’ the hexed food every couple years in return fer grantin’ us fae the ability to cheat death, an’ if it’s fine fer him, should be fine for ye, right?”

Rodion and The Prince both pictured Belial in their heads. They simultaneously pushed away their plates, shuddering.

“I believe I’ve lost my appetite.”

“Yes, yes, me too. *Slishkom polnyy*, I had big lunch…”

“Hmm-hmm. Suit yourselves, lads. An’ still nothin’ fer ye, Fionn?”

Fionn conspicuously lacked a plate in front of him.

“I have no desire for food. I only eat what I hunt.”

“Och, ye know we can make ye parasite-infested deer an’ mauchit lake-water at ‘ome, ye dafty scunner.”

“Oberon!”

“...Sorry, kimmer. If th’ lad won’t eat, th’ lad won’t eat. Simple as.”

Titania smiled warmly at her husband changing his tune and brought another spoonful to her lips as she turned to The Prince.

“Either way, lad, Belial didn't quite tell us the whole story. Would ye enlighten us on a few matters? Where are these surreal-lookin’ agents comin’ from? At first, we thought they might be corrupted members of the sluagh na marbh, th’ mass of th’ unrestful souls of th’ dead that come to spirit poor blokes away…but they feel as though they’re somethin’ more.”

“Believe me honey, they’re much more than some crotchety undead.”

The Prince explained their mission in full, going into further detail about the cult of Man Unkind, their agents, his constant lifelong struggle as a fugitive, hiding from them at every turn as they pursued him…though he refused to elaborate on a few particular points. When Oberon questioned about how the crown of thorns that floated above his head (as he had removed his hat out of courtesy as a dinner guest) reminded him quite a lot of that nice young fellow that a couple Roman missionaries had been trying to insist had died for his sins, he skillfully dodged the question by stating that there was no relation apart from the two of them being the son of God. Rodion and the rest laughed it off, and Fionn just sat there confused. When Titania asked shortly after about the implacable scent coming from his tattoo, however, he visibly tensed up and changed the subject. Ultimately, however, his explanation boiled down to the explanation of one important fact.

“My dear old dad, bless his heart or not, handed down this snazzy coat to me. It’s woven through with a smattering of magical sources, a thaumaturgical potpourri if you want to be snooty about it. Lordy knows how he managed to do it, but this coat here is the only thing that the Man Unkind nutters can’t get into. Everything I’ve ever put in it has stayed exactly where I left it, and if I can help it, I never touch ninety-eight percent of the stuff. And the fact they’ve got a powerful little pebble that now guides them to where all the most powerful rocks are isn’t helping matters. So, the plan here is to go around and snatch up all the stones before they do, stuffing them in my coat here, and hopefully getting the piece of Alatyr back so that they won’t just try again. That little boulder’s what’s allowing them to get into all these sacred places, after all. It’s like having GPS coordinates to every major politician’s gated community—all you need to do is blast the bleeding doors down, and you’re in.”

Titania and Oberon listened intently, having finished their meals in the process.

“...’Tis certainly an interesting plan, lad. I will say that.”

Fionn stood up.

“Respectfully, I must object. This plan is not interesting, it is foolish. We are simply trading one interloper wanting to steal our most powerful possessions for another. What evidence do we have that we can trust Forruad and Cron?”

“Evidence? You certainly didn't need evidence when you tried to *kill us*, Blondie. I’m the only solution you coves have got, I’m the one who’s been dealing with these idiots nearly all my life, and I know damn well that—”

Rodi raised his hand, causing The Prince to trail off as he turned to the blonde-haired warrior anxiously nibbling on his thumb.

“...Cumhaill. Is okay if I call you Cumhaill, yes? I apologize for not asking beforehand.”

“Yes. It is alright.”

“Good, good. I do not expect you to believe us. In fact, I did not believe myself until only scant few hours ago. But, put facts together. We came with Belial, trusted ambassador and associate of fae, good friends with fairy king and queen, *da?* Why would we come with powerful demon and ally of fae if we were planning to steal?”

“It is…possible that you simply persuaded Belial with your devilish charm. He is not very bright.”

“If I were only so lucky, bahaha! But, seriously, you see we have agreed to feast and met well-naturedly with king and queen. We have not made attack on palace or attempt to steal anything. We show utmost respect and kindness to best of our ability. Is understandable that you do not trust us. I would not trust us either, frankly. But I ask of Her and His Majesty: what other options do you have?”

Oberon cleared his throat.

“Ahem. Th’ big yin’s got a right fair point, but we’ve been ‘oldin’ off th’ munters well enough as is. Who’s sayin’ we need ‘elp like this? Th’ fae’re a hardy sort, yea? Dun’t quite need all this hustle an’ bustle rollin’ about when we’re doin’ fine as is.”

“But…’tis true we’ve never quite seen anythin’ like this, ‘ave we? True, fairies are tough, but they’re liable to tire out as well. An’ th’ Dagda knows we aren’t perfect…all it would take is one oversight, an’ we’d be up to our feet in creatures. Ye’ve dealt with this…’Man Unkind’ rabble before, right, lad?”

The Prince grinned smugly.

“Only for the last twenty years of my life.”

“An’ we’ve only been doin’ so fer th’ past day. ‘Tis best to listen to the experts on this. Otherwise, we’d be no better than Medb.”

“Och, dun’ even get me *started* on that lizzie wench…”

“Dear!”

“What?! ‘Tis true, is it no’?”

“She is a guest in our house!”

“I don’t keek her ‘round anywhere, do ye?”

Fionn shifted uncomfortably in his seat, reaching into his coat as he eyed the canopy.

"...That is curious. Where is Medb? There are various members of the Unseelie Court here, but what of their leader?"

"You don't fancy she's off taking a leak like I said earlier, do you?"

The boyish warrior opened his mouth in protest, but the ground suddenly started shaking as a deep and animalistic roar cried out from above the canopy, shaking a few leaves and branches loose into the throne room. Promptly, small pixies gathered them all up and took them away into foxholes in the walls, but above them they could see a dark figure blot out the sun shining through the ceiling. A sparkling greenish-purple glow filled the sky instead. The royals looked up with wide eyes and mouths agape.

"Losh…"

A shrill and feminine voice called out something incomprehensible before there was a sound like someone had shot a wind-chime gangland style, followed by the whistling sound of something massive hurtling through the air.

The canopy parted as a bus-sized beastly creature covered in fur as black as the night, its body scrawled in white with nonsensical maxims and axioms and dotted lines. Piercing yellow eyes peered out from an all-too-human face on the end, though their lights had been dulled—probably at least partly because its head was disconnected from its body and bled sketch-outlined blood onto the table. Impressively, it hadn't broken the table, but it had splashed what food remained on the table onto Rodion and Fionn. The Prince managed to escape unscathed, though that was because he fell out of his chair as soon as it made impact. The canopy reformed above them as though nothing was wrong.

After a bit of silence, Titania and Oberon got up from their seats and fluttered above the beast with crossed arms and cross expressions. The Prince cursed loudly and freely as Rodi brushed himself off and helped him up, and Fionn mac Cumhaill blankly stood up. The feminine voice from before cackled from above.

"Did somebody say my name?"

Descending from the canopy and surrounded in an aura of crackling green-and-purple magic was Queen Medb herself. Her figure was angular with a slight hourglass tilt, a thin neck running up to a prominent and sharpened square jaw, her nose pointed and her orange eyes fierce with determination. A mess of frizzy blonde hair held loosely in place with three equally-spaced stone hair ties fell from her scalp, and her dress was rather more sinister than those of her Seelie counterparts: a dark-green cape with a high and pointed collar, lined with silver ornamentation and held on with a ruby brooch carved into the shape of a bull's head, worn over a deep purplish-black garment with a turtleneck collar. Rather than being a dress, the garment stopped short at her waist, the hem floating above a pair of flared black pants decorated with thistle-and-clover designs and black leather heels. Where her heart would be, a white rose sprouted from the flesh, and thorned, gnarled, ashy roots snaked from the rose out into the rest of her torso, running themselves through her sleeves like stitching before stopping at her gloved wrists to act as as makeshift corsages. The wings of the death's-head hawkmoth sprouted from her back, and atop her head, a silver tiara with a single diamond nestled within sat.

The other royals sneered, Oberon preemptively covering half his face with a palm as she lowered herself onto the table.

"Ah. Yes, hello, Medb. So nice t' see ye again."

"Aye, quite."

She held herself quite regally, head held high as she stared down her nose grinning at Oberon and Titania, both of whom she was taller than…even without her being on the table.

"Charmed, the both of you. Pardon my late arrival. As you can see, I ran into this unruly little beast whilst returning from Avalon. It caused quite a bit of fuss, and a great number of your goody-two-shoes fairy guard ended up in pieces. I swiftly took care of the issue, but please, leave your thanks until after these unpleasant matters are resolved. I believe I may take this one as a pet, if it happens to still live after its own decapitation."

"Avalon? What in Gordon Bennett were ye doin' at Avalon? Ye know fair well th' Tuatha De Danann aren't here…"

"It was a matter of personal interest. I'm sure you understand, Lady Titania…though, I'm not quite sure how you get anything done with a body like that. I would be glued to the mirror all day and all night."

Titania scoffed in offense, and Oberon hooked himself between the two.

"Oi! Ye minter, lay off ma Kelly Ann, if ye know whas' good fer yer mingin' self!"

Medb lowered herself off the table without lifting an ankle, and a small army of pixies swarmed out of the holes in the walls, flapping their little wings as they slowly lifted the corpse of the beast off of the table and carried it away. The head remained.

"My, and Oberon! So wonderful to see you. Those sculpted cheekbones of yours haven't aged a day. And that stubble…so rugged, so bold. I've got half a mind to pounce on you here and now, but relations at the dinner table are quite improper in front of guests."

Oberon's face flushed red, and he turned away grumbling with his arms crossed. Medb turned to the others as The Prince finally staggered to his feet.

"Bloody hell, couldn't you give a gal a warning or something?! I nearly barfed my own heart out with how you dropped the damn thing on us! You're lucky I managed to swiftly and purposefully fall backwards out of my chair, otherwise I would be all stained like Rodi here. Just look at his clothes." He brushed a bit of mashed potatoes off of Rodi's chest. "Ruined. He looks awful."

"Do I?"

"Nah, you look grand, hun. Just give me a few minutes, I'll lick it off."

Fionn mac Cumhaill brandished Man an Luin, its blade glistening with a thin sheen of green energy, and stepped in front of the two of them.

"State your business, foul queen of the Unseelie Court."

"Foul? My, now that's rude. But I don't mind the rudeness, especially coming from a young man as attractive as yourself…"

She reached out to lightly poke him on the nose, and Fionn's expression steeled somehow more than it already had as he slapped away her hand.

“I have no interest in women.”

“Weren’t you married to that nice young lass, though? What was her name…Sadhbh?”

“It was a loveless marriage.”

“Didn't you have a child, Oisin?”

“...I don’t wish to speak on the matter. I have no interest in women, and least of all an evil soul such as yourself.”

“Hmph. Fine then. At least lower your sword, you pipsqueak, there’s no reason why I would be wanting to cause harm to our—and I do say *our*, Titania—beloved guests here! I am meeting with them to assemble over a common enemy, after all. I mean no harm. You may steady your sword.”

He didn't waver, and she furrowed her brow in response, her tone turning sinister.

“I would prefer you do it *now,* you child. I have seen much stronger warriors than you, not the least of which was the Champion of Ulster himself. Steady your blade, or I shall be forced to move you out of the way myself.”

Fionn still refused to lower his sword, but Rodion lightly tapped him on the shoulder. At the touch, he shuddered as though an electric jolt went through his entire body and whipped around tersely.

“What?”

“...I was going to say, is okay. She can talk with us.”

“But, she is the Queen of the Unseelie Court, the ruler over all malicious and nefarious fae forces among the wood. Surely, nothing she says can be trusted.”

“Do you not think we can be judges of that? Lower your sword.”

Reluctantly, and after a small mental debate, Fionn sheathed Mac an Luin once again and stepped aside. Medb stepped forward and shot a nasty look at him before smiling at the other two.

“Thank you, Russian, for your courtesy. It has been quite a while since I have seen Russia…not since the *ekzortsizm.* Might I ask, how is the weather?”

“Weather is as always is. Cold. Snowy.”

“Ah, yes, as expected. And you are quite built for that weather, are you not? Quite well-padded, covered in thick, luscious hair…Tell me, do you have any…partners?”

“Partners?”

“Sexual partners.”

“Oh.” He blushed a little. “Oh, well, is…surprising question, er, really I—”

“He’s *taken.”*

The Prince objected before he could answer, wrapping a thin arm around Rodi’s shoulders and pulling him close with a playful smirk.

“This big handsome hunk of meat is mine and mine alone, sister, and if you want him, you’re going to have to pry him from my cold, dead, immaculately-trim-nailed hands. Isn’t that right, Rodi darling~?”

“...What?”

"What?"

"What, I mean, as in, when were we…when was…we are not dating, yes?"

"I thought this was a date."

"A date? Are—do you not remember the rest of today?"

The Prince busted out laughing, patting Rodion on the back as he doubled over.

"Ahahaha, ah, ahh, it was a joke! A joke, dear, really, lighten up! We aren't anything yet but friends! Bona to vada, Madame Medb, you're speaking to The Prince of Fuck All and his partner in crime, Rodion Nikolayev."

Medb raised an eyebrow.

"Charming. Might I say, that makeup really does suit you. Really brings out quite the accents in your features."

"Well, *thank you*, but if you're trying to butter me up, I'm sad to say you're barking up the wrong tree, sister. You might have better luck with…well, I dunno about Blondie, but Rodi here, he'll…I wonder, Rodi, do you only like men?"

"When did I say that…? Er, l-look, let us get back on topic. You said you came from Avalon, *da?"*

Titania and Oberon approached.

"Yes, we're still rather curious about that. Fer what good reason could ye be comin' to visit th' palace of th' Dagda?"

Rodi leaned over to Fionn, whispering to him.

"(Hi. Yes. Excuse me. What is Dagda?)"

"(The Dagda is the king of the Tuatha De Danann—the people of the mother goddess Danu—who are said to have descended from the North Islands onto the mountain ranges of Connacht thousands of years ago. Some call them fallen angels, even their own stories refer to them as more supernatural entities than deities.)"

Medb just let out a haughty laugh and poked a finger under Titania's slight double-chin, grinning and showing off a mouth of sharp teeth.

"As I said, that is a strictly personal matter. But, if you nosy and sanctimonious Seelie fae, you shells of your former selves who have grown soft and weak in these modern times, should desire to know…then I shall tell you. You and our guests."

She lightly prodded Titania's forehead, pushing her away, and clapped her hands in front of her as she closed her eyes. The smell of grass after a rainstorm began to fill the room as a thick and musty purple-and-green smoke formed where she parted her palms. The Prince coughed and waved it away.

"Lord, woman, take it to a designated smoking area, can't you?"

"Quiet, fool. Regardless of what you think of me, I have been listening—it's always a woman's skill to have ears on the back of her head, you know—and I am unfortunately more than aware about the situation with those freakish monsters called Man Unkind. If you are to be our only hope, then you would do well to listen. When the Tuatha De Danann descended upon Eire in dark clouds from the northern islands, they brought with them four great treasures."

Gradually, an image appeared in the fog. It showed a long and sharp-looking spear, its metal tip sparking with silver electricity.

"The first was the weapon later known as the Spear of Lugh, a masterwork in forgery that was wielded by their former king, guaranteeing the absolute victory of any man who held it."

That image shifted, dissolving and fading until it showed a shining sword with a fiery tip and the sigil of a sun embedded in the handle.

"Second was the Sword of Light. It was wielded by our first king, Nuada, and was said to have never missed its mark once it was swung, shining with a divine light."

Once again the image changed, showing a large wooden cauldron overflowing with food in the same manner as a cornucopia.

"Then third was the Dagda's Cauldron. It was always brimming with food, and no mortal man has ever walked away from it unsatisfied."

"(Belial did claim t' be once during a party, but I saw how green in th' gills he was!)"

"(Quiet, quiet kimmer, 'tis important.)"

"Yes. Anyways."

The image changed for the fourth and final time, revealing a large obelisk of stone, surrounded by flaring panels on the surrounding grass. Moss had grown over its exterior, and it was no taller than a human, perhaps even shorter.

"The fourth and final treasure that the Tuath De brought with them was special. It had been imported from across the sea, a long-existing and ancient relic that the occult *fili*—poets—of the northern islands simply imbued with their magic. Now, when one who has the birthright to rule over all of Eire stands atop it, the Lia Fail, the Stone of Kings, shall cry out in joy for its master."

She closed her hands, and the fog dispersed with the smell as her expression twisted into a smug smile.

"And now…it's mine."

Fionn instinctively reached for his sword, but Rodion put his hand up to stop him. Oberon sputtered in shock as he stomped up to Medb and wildly flailed his arms, wings fluttering agitatedly.

"Ach—that's—I-you—are ye *mad*, ye reprobate?! Ye can't go 'roon stealin' from tae Tuath De! Ye'll be given a malky 'fore ye can give a good reason! 'Ow'd ye even get into th' bit?!"

"Calm your handsome self, Oberon. Did you already forget? The *Sionad Dhiaga* is currently ongoing. The Dagda and the Morrigan are meeting with the rest of the other gods, and so the rest of the party-loving fools have wandered off to join them. The only one remaining in Avalon was Dian Cecht, their healer. After I explained that there were mysterious creatures attacking the capital demanding the Lia Fail and promised that I wouldn't take any of the other treasures, he agreed to hand it over."

Fionn drew his sword out a bit more, even with the Russian trying to control him.

"I do not believe you, witch. You must have stolen all four of the sacred treasures, and plan to use them to raze Arcadia Sioga among the chaos. I cannot let you keep such powerful items."

She turned to raise an eyebrow at him, simply shrugging and smiling.

“My, even after I tell the truth, you still choose to ignore me? You know, I was human once too. I know the virtues and disadvantages of lying, and as much as I would like to use these treasures for my own gain…I know not only that the Tuath De would have my head on a pike for stealing from them without their permission, I know that if left unguarded, this important item may very well fall into the wrong hands. Avalon is a fortress of gods, it cannot be breached as easily as this little village can as long as one remains within it, but to have these items all in the same place would spell grave danger.”

The Prince raised his hand, and Medb nodded for him to speak.

“Yes, hello, Prince of Fuck All here, ah…I wonder, can you tell me *why* exactly these cult mooks want the…what did you call it, Leah Fail? The stone. Of course, it is magic, but all it does is scream sometimes.”

“That, I cannot divulge. Perhaps you will find out while it is in your possession.”

Oberon’s eyes bugged out of his head as he turned back to Titania.

“Wh—What?! Ye can’t be—I mean, kimmer, are ye alright with this?! Our sworn enemy, handin’ over one of our rulers’ great treasures tae some young…some young jessie?!”

She had her eyes closed, deep in thought…before she opened them once more, her face stern with determination.

“...Even if I disagree with her initiative, I don’t disagree with her plan. As I said, our hope rests in this odd young bloke an’ his friend. We’re in no position to fight with ‘er.”

“But…But, kimmer…”

Medb smirked.

“Listen to your wife, Oberon. It does a man well to do so. Do not worry…you have my promise that I still will hand down upon them a test, to prove if they’re worthy of keeping the Lia Fail. I won’t be using it myself. Now, if you two would be so kind as to leave me and these three alone…and do not try to have your pixie servants watch me. I will know. Hah! Imagine, you claim to be morally superior, and yet you still keep slaves.”

“Tain’t *slaves*, ye gormless—”

“She’s just trying to rile ye up, honey. Let’s just go. Prince, Rodion, Fionn. Oberon an’ I have utter faith in ye…please do take care of this problem afore it gets any worse. We fae are immortal, but we are not invulnerable.”

The Prince saluted with two fingers as Rodi waved, the two royals fluttering out of the room. The boys hadn’t noticed it before, but the pixies had also removed the table and cleaned up the blood that had seeped from the monster’s corpse. Rodion cleared his throat.

“So…a test, then? To prove we are worthy to this Lia Fail stone?”

Fionn held his chin high.

“Am I being included in this?”

“Depends, Blondie. Do you want to save your dear ol’ Emerald Isle, or do you want to be ground beef?”

“I would not want to be ground beef. Ground beef has no morals. Then I will assume I am being included.”

"Smart choice. Either way, Medby dear, whatever it is, I'll do it. Except shag you. I know you were rather gung ho on that, but I'm telling you now, it isn't going to work out. Rodi might, though."

"Will you stop with that?"

Queen Medb smiled down at the three of them, ignoring The Prince's comment.

"Good. I admire your initiative. First, a question. What do you all know about magic?"

"What don't I know about magic, hun? Conjuring, summoning, spells, sigils, I know it all."

"Such confidence…I wonder, do you really have awareness of such a wide variety of spells? Did Fionn not tell you it is extremely dangerous to lie to Fae?"

The Prince smiled cheekily.

"Who's to say I'm lying?"

"...Hmph. Honestly, with how much magic that tattoo of yours is giving off, it almost makes me sick…it's like an especially rancid scented candle, or perhaps a rotting boar carcass. Where did you even get it?"

"A parlor in downtown Pittsburgh from a guy named Eddie."

"Moving on. Russian."

Rodi stammered a bit at being so suddenly addressed.

"O-Oh, me? Well, er, I admittedly do not…know much. No. Mostly elemental spells, some healing…and demon-summoning. My expertise is more in alchemy."

"Alchemy? Intriguing. I once knew an alchemist, William Butler. He claimed that he had discovered the secret to producing the philosopher's stone—that substance which could transform any metal to gold. I believe he simply mixed spoiled milk with some ammonia and his own urine. The whole experience has left a rather sour taste in my mouth when it comes to the subject."

"Well, much has changed in modern times. Even if alchemy is not officially recognized, there are classes in colleges and scientific branches dedicated to the study. They all agreed philosopher's stone was nothing more than excuse by Zosimos of Panopolis to keep getting research grants."

"Funny. I can't say I've kept up with modern times. And as for you…Fionn mac Cumhaill, leader of the Fianna and Ireland's current greatest hero."

Fionn bit the end of his thumb.

"I take offense to that 'current' in your sentence, witch."

"Do you now? You are nothing compared to the great hero Cu Chulainn, who faced down my nation's entire army without half his power and yet still continued to fight. When his intestines were spilling out upon the grasses of Duldalk, still he had the strength to crawl to a lake and drink. When he found he could no longer stand, he tied himself to the rock of Clochafarmore and fought still. And when he was alive no more, the raven of the Morrigu landing on his shoulder, in death, his cut tendon severed his killer's hand. Until that arm was severed…he kept his hero-light."

The Prince raised an eyebrow. "Hero-light?"

"The *luan laith*, Forruad, is said to be the blessing of the Tuatha De. It is a golden aura that forms in the shape of a bird, showing ultimate valor and bravery in the face of hardship. It means that the gods are on your side. Cu Chulainn, son of the god Lugh, had it. Arthur of the house Pendragon, wielder of Excalibur, had it. Llenlleawg Wyddel, wielder of Caledfwlch, had it. Con—"

"Right, right, and you haven't got it, have you?"

Medb smirked.

"Never. He has never shown that he is worth the Tuatha De's blessing…hence why I call him nothing but a pipsqueak. All he has done of note is burn his thumb on a salmon, slaughter one of my best warriors, and dress up like a baby to fool one of my giants."

"Blimey, you dressed like a baby, Blondie?"

Fionn, his face flush with shame, lowered his head and looked away, anxiously chewing on the edge of his thumb.

"That aside…refresh my memory, child. What do you know of magic?"

"...Only what my aunt Bodhmall taught me. She was a druid, and knew much about the forest and healing magic. I rely on the combat and hunting skills that her partner Liath Luacra taught me as a boy for combat."

He put out his hand, and the tips of his fingers glowed with a pale green glow. It smelled slightly of spearmint. Medb snickered.

"Pitiful. But, I suppose such physical prowess is needed on a team of misfits such as this. I can sense blood on both you and the Russian's hands…but not you, red-hair."

The Prince took off his hat, and the Stoic-Passion Relic floated above his head as he wiped off a bit of the blood that had been streaking down his face.

"You sure it's not this, love?"

"...Er, yes. I meant it in the sense that…you have not killed. How queer."

"Did you finally notice, dear? I swear, you can be as thick as a brick sometimes. But that's why I looooove you~!"

She ignored him again and carried on.

"As for my test…preparations will be finished by tomorrow morning. For now, go and rest. I will have one of my loyal subjects guide you three to separate bedrooms, where I have put proper food for you all to eat and where there are surely beds for you to rest in. Get undressed and sleep well—you have a long day ahead of you tomorrow."

"But, what of the castle?"

"Oh, please. Your priggish king and queen's guard have been doing quite a good job at it, and any fairies who ended up dying should be coming back in a few hours' time. I will personally guard the castle, if that eases your worries."

Fionn sucked on the inside of his cheek.

The doors to the throne room suddenly opened, revealing an odd little creature resembling a stooped reptilian with a simple burlap tunic, a lantern hung round its neck, and a red felt cap

pulled over its eyes. It hurriedly scurried over to the boys with a delicate pitter-patter of its feet, and raised one of its gnarled little hands.

"Hoy, lads. Hodekin, at your service. Follow me to your rooms, as milady requests."

It curled a finger before walking the other direction, and the three men said their goodbyes as they followed the kobold out the doors. Medb remained in the throne room, looking up at the sky. There remained an ethereal light shining through the canopy. There was no day or night in Tir na nOg, after all, for this was a land where all creatures of both the night and day lived relatively peacefully among one another. The Fomoire had once inhabited the darker portions of this land, as well as the caves and forests of Ireland itself, but all but the oldest had long since moved out of the country to pursue employment. She missed them. They were like the old masters of painting, those who you looked up to and idolized despite never meeting.

A few minutes passed, and soon enough, Hodekin came stumbling back into the room with a twisted grin, kneeling in front of Queen Medb.

"Milady! The humans are in their rooms. I have done what was asked of me."

"Very good, Hodekin. You have always served me well…For all my talk of how Fionn could never hope to match the feats and wondrous matters of Cu Chulainn, the other two show great promise. This entire messy conflict is getting on my nerve more and more, the more time passes…so, the quicker it can be over with, the better. It is true I must test them, however, for the Lia Fail indeed has a quality that must be regarded carefully…so, why not give them the same challenge I gave that legendary hero and his two rivals, Conall and that fool Loegaire?"

Taking a deep breath and closing her eyes once more as she swirled her hands around one another, the thick fog from before that showed the four treasure returned once more. Hodekin shuddered a bit watching his mistress' magic in motion, and the petrichor scent never ceased to send a shiver down any self-respecting Unseelie fae's spine…or for any fae's spine, for that matter. She extended and contracted her fingers as if she were sewing the smog itself, kneading and grasping until it grew to be the size of a cabinet.

Out from the cabinet, three shadowy cat-like figures emerged. Their bodies were round and pudgy, but their skin and fur were a deep and shadowy black, their eyes a piercing yellow, and their rows of sharp teeth pure white. Their legs ended in stubby feet with five pointed toes in a radial shape, leaving sizzling star-shaped footprints wherever they went. Their rounded ears perked up, and their wispy tails swished behind them as they bowed to Medb as well and the fog dissipated.

"Hello again, Mistress."

"Greetings, Mistress."

"We live to serve you, Mistress. What do you ask of us?"

"My dear *druden*[5]…I must call upon you once again. I apologize that it has been so long without giving you proper exercise. Do you remember what you did once before? In the competition for the champion's portion?"

The druden all nodded.

"Only the hound of Culann prevailed."

"The others were terrified."

"Such weaklings."

"Yes…I must ask you to do the same once more. Go, and eat the warriors' food. See what they will do…and I will make my judgement in the morning."

With an otherworldly purr among them, the cat-shaped druden wisped along the floor, sprawling out in all directions and crawling into the pixie-holes carved into the walls. Medb watched the last of them go with a self-assured smile and strutted to one of the thrones, sitting in it and putting a leg over the other. Hodekin raised his head.

"What'll you do if they don't act to your liking, Mistress?"

The queen of the Unseelie Court just put a hand to her cheek and looked up to the sky with a knowing grin.

"I haven't quite thought of that."

[5] Druden, singular 'drude', are malevolent spirits commonly kept as rather unruly pets by dark elves, alps, and dwarves of stature. Their main claim to fame is the star-shaped footprints they leave behind, followed by being notoriously picky with food and very easy to spoil if the keeper is a weak-willed sort..

CHAPTER 6: Deus Interruptus

Within the house of the Divine Synod, known as the Galilee Symposium after the land where Jesus Christ gave his sermons on the mount and on the plain, there was growing tension among the deities housed within. They had finished their usual summations, the various religious heads shifting between either passive-aggressively mocking one another or speaking on equal grounds, so why had they not been dismissed? The Synod lasted for three days, after all, and if the first one never comes to an end, there'll be less time for merry-making at the end.

They were just about to leave, when there was an order given by the speaker for God, the current Head of the Synod by proxy, Metatron.

Metatron was the Scribe of God, speaking in His stead as the underboss and dictating all of His holy statements and orders. He was a rather tall and slightly pot-bellied man who appeared to be human, with pink skin, black hair tied back in a long braid, and a pointed mustache with a two-pronged beard. He wore a green tunic tied at the waist, worn over a long-sleeved red shirt and beige pants with up-arrow symbols across their cuffs with golden wristbands and a complex Islamic golden crown atop his head, reading his name in Arabic. Hovering over his head was a three-part halo of light, with three extra sun-dog halos around the main entity, and from his back sprouted uniquely-patterned orange wings that almost seemed to have ball-bearings within their tube-like array of feathers, rolling to and fro.

He had a piece of Gabriel's halo in his ear as well, allowing him to communicate with God's most loyal (and, if you were to ask him, most hard-nosed) watchdog easily during the Synod. He was seated in an elaborate velvet-and-gold throne at the far end of the conference hall, surrounded by a circle of other gods that sat facing one another. Surrounding them, up in the bleachers, were a litany of lesser deities that were brought along as company by the members to observe the proceedings and accompany them during the festivities on the final day. The walls were sheer and pure ivory and marble. He always was saying to the Ophanim, 'Hey, we should paint a mural or something here to represent all religions coming together! Nobody likes these boring white walls!', but the Ophanim just stared at him because they were pretty much dunces in the grand scheme of things. Powerful as they were, they were little more than mechanics and construction workers, not to mention the big heads they were getting nowadays with all the pop-culture exposure…

Nonetheless, he was just about to bang the Holy Gavel to call the first day's meeting to an end, when he received a call from Gabriel.

"Do not end the meeting. There are intruders in Heaven."

He shuddered a bit. Gabby was always scary when she was angry, but this was a different matter. Intruders during the Divine Synod were a usual occurrence, once upon a time. Some old and scorned deity from Africa or some island in Polynesia wouldn't accept that they had been removed from the Synod and would stage an attack on Heaven. It's why they had contracted

security nowadays, all thanks to His divine decision-making. He put a finger to the halo-piece and his eyes darted to the other members for a second before he covered his mouth.

"(Gabriel, what is the meaning of this? Intruders? How? What about security?)"

"Uriel has been trying to take care of the issue, but he already took out one of our security guards, Apedemak of the Nubians. He isn't gone, but he is gravely injured and had to be sent home. I was planning on sending for the Powers to wake Michael, but…"

"(What?! No, you can't do that!)"

Archangel Michael was absurdly powerful, but there was a reason they only stirred him for conflicts that threatened the balance of the world. Actually, there were two. For one thing, he was very unpredictable, and often caused a lot of collateral damage. For another, he was just kind of whiny and sensitive, so it was hard to convince him to do anything without hurting his feelings. Metatron pinched the bridge of his nose.

"We are short on time, Exalted Scribe. What should I do? Has He made a decision?"

"(Don't you think I would tell you if He did?! Look, just—I'm in the middle of something here, let me—)"

"It seeks the Stone of Jacob."

He stopped. The Stone of Jacob was one of Heaven's most treasured possessions. In Biblical times, long after his mortal life as Enoch[6], there was the patriarch Jacob. Tired from escaping his wicked and foolish brother Esau, he slept at Luz with a rock as a pillow. Taking pity on his situation, God granted the stone His divine power, and Jacob could then see the heavenly ladder that the angels used to travel to and from Earth, as well as God Himself standing atop it, who spoke to him and granted him His blessing as well as the ownership of the land. Jacob, after working out the crick in his neck and recovering from the nervous breakdown he believed he'd had, named the place Bethel—the house of God.

After he had left, the stone had been consecrated at Bethel for many years, until warfare in Israel caused God to send the angels to bring it back up to Heaven, where it was kept in the possession of the cherub Sachiel—who also doubled as the governor for the sphere where the Synod was taking place.

"(How…does it know about the Stone of Jacob? Wait, scratch that, what does it look like?)"

"I don't have time to explain, but it is no human or god of this Earth. Please, just tell me what to do, Exalted Scribe. We are at a loss."

"(Okay, okay…do your best to guard the Stone of Jacob. Send Sachiel all the reinforcements you can, but only send for Michael if you are truly out of options. I'll keep an ear out for any of His orders.)"

"Understood. I'll keep you updated as well, Exalted Scribe. May God be with you."

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[6] Noah's great-grandfather as most prominently featured in the Book of Enoch, biblical apocrypha detailing Enoch's interactions with the fallen angels and his ascension to Heaven whilst alive at the ripe old age of 365. Contrary to popular belief, he was not chosen by God to become the seraph Metatron because of his righteousness and studiousness—rather, he got sick of dealing with the people on Earth and pretended he was senile and couldn't find the door until He gave in.

"(And also with you.)"

Metatron lowered his hand and turned to the rest of the congregation. They were all variously bored or annoyed, and now they had been that way for the past few hours. The Jade Emperor summoned for his magistrates to come down from the higher seating and they had all crowded around him as he put on his glasses and dutifully took care of paperwork. The Dadga, portly but intimidating as he was, happily bantered with the old and crotchety Papa Legba, who turned his straw hat upwards as he laughed with green eyes and petted his trusty dog companion. Tenri-O-no-Mikoto pat their stretch of desk as they made meager small-talk with Cao Dai, the Vietnamese deity with a triangle over his left eye who obviously would rather just be quiet. Amaterasu-Omikami shone as brightly as ever, but even her divine light dimmed a bit watching Haneullim and Yuanshi-Tianzun stare each other down.

Seated directly beside Metatron, however, was Shiva, the four-armed three-eyed Hindu god of destruction and rebirth. The ash-caked, blue-throated deva sat with two arms crossed, the other two gently patting his *damaru* drum passively as it rested on the table. His loyal serpent Vasuki, king of the snakes, slept coiled around his neck and nestled itself in his matted hair, and as elegantly as he was dressed in his tiger-skin garment with his crescent-moon hair-pin…he was admittedly getting quite antsy as well. He had business with his son, Ganesha, which he needed to attend to. There was a new temple being built in his honor, and he had asked his father to come and give it his blessing in his mother Lakshmi's absence—she was too busy with other affairs. He thought it rather spoiled of him, asking to give his approval for a temple in his honor when such an important event had been going on, but out of love for his son, he had agreed to it. If these meetings should extend beyond those three days, he could miss such an occasion…

He uncrossed his lower two arms and clasped their fingers together, turning to the Abrahamic messenger with a calm expression. He was not worried—for he had been ascetic for many years now, not having been tempted into frenzy and hedonism out of respect for his worshippers—but he was concerned by how Metatron anxiously rocked in his seat. Seeing such a powerful figure under the Abrahamic God nervous brought him worry.

"Pardon me, Chairman-Proxy Metatron. Are you at liberty to divulge the reasoning of why we are yet still held here?"

The scribe took a deep breath and cupped his palms over his nose as he took a deep breath, inwards, then outwards.

"...There is an intruder."

At the word 'intruder', the other gods stopped their business and conversations, turning to Metatron in silent shock. Those in the bleachers murmured among one another, gasping. He sank slightly in his seat at having so many powerful eyes on him (for he was not really good with crowds in the first place, and his human past made him both fortunately and unfortunately more similar to mortals in his emotions than other angels), but quickly straightened up as he stood.

"Ahem. As I said, I was informed by Archangel Gabriel, who greeted you all as you entered, that there is an intruder in Heaven. Its properties are unknown, but it is not human, nor is it a

god. Somehow, it entered through the Pearly Gates—not through Hell or by Sheol either, otherwise there would be word from Hadraniel or Jeramiel."

Shiva wordlessly looked to the Dagda, who slammed his fist on the table hard enough to ruffle some of the papers upon it as he let out an offended beer-scented huff. His glass of beer spilt over onto the Jade Emperor's papers, who crumpled his face in disgust.

"Oy! Whas' that look for?! If it was one a' me fair folk, don't ya think I woulda heard word from Oberon 'r Titania about it? Me Unseelie are unruly, true, but e'en they're smart enough to know not to cross somethin' as important as this. 'Sides! The rest of me Tuatha De clan, my friends and comrades, are here as well! They would tell me if there was an issue, wouldn't they?"

The Jade Emperor silently handed his soaked papers off to one of his magistrates and folded his glasses up, placing them back into his deep green-and-red imperial regalia. Thin eyes as verdant as his namesake peered at the Dagda. He could feel his long beard growing whiter with every new antic of this Irish buffoon. He always did this, every time they met for the Synod. Every century is a long time to mortals, but for gods, it was nothing. For a busy god such as him, those hundred years went by all too quickly. It was like having a U.N. meeting every week, and every time you come to see your colleagues, your boss also invites the old drunk who you believe should have been fired long ago, but remains only because the consumer-base loves him so much. True, the people of Ireland still believed quite fervently in the fae, and so his influence remained strong, but his true number of worshippers were very few. Even less than some of the South-Asian gods who had been ousted only recently, unhappy with being snubbed despite having hundreds of thousands of adherents.

"...If the honorable Dagda would calm himself, it would make him appear more as a wise man to remember that this building restricts communication with the outside world apart from that which is in this heavenly realm itself. Our chairman is able to speak with his inferiors, but you cannot communicate with your gaggle of drunkards and buffoons no more than I can commune with the Ziwei Emperor in my Heavenly Domain. Or, perhaps the honorable Dagda's brain has become so thoroughly soaked in ale that it has started to become prematurely senile."

The Dagda quickly grabbed him by the collar, growling with yellowed teeth and raising his hand. Slowly, a lone stick formed from the air, but that stick grew and grew, wrapping itself several times over with bark and sticks, until it became the thickness of a tree trunk and rounded itself into a club.

"Who're ye callin' me friends drunkards and buffoons, ye peely-wally—"

"Stop!"

A feminine voice called out, and Amaterasu, the shining goddess of the Shinto faith, pushed the two of them apart. Her golden headdress beamed with divine light, which caused both parties to cover their eyes, and she crossed her arms beneath the sleeves of her kimono.

"Dagda-san, we do not accuse your *yosei* of causing this disturbance. We know that your people have been quite happy with the Synod, and have no reason to disrupt its proceedings. Is that not correct?"

She turned to the section of Tuatha De seated behind the Dagda, high up on the bleachers. Though they were too far away to hear clearly, she could see them waving and raising their fists in agreement. Amaterasu turned back to Metatron.

"Should we not exit and deal with this intruder ourselves? True, it is not many of our places to sully our divine hands with the messy art of combat—" She glanced at the Dagda, who grinned toothily. "—but if the security as ascribed by the *kirisutokyo-no-kami* is unsatisfactory, then it is of the utmost importance that this is dealt with swiftly and efficiently."

Papa Legba puffed out a ring of green smoke from his pipe, grinning a broken-toothed smile as he sat leaning on his cane.

"Don' be so sure about that, missy. My people have a saying: 'The culprit forgets, but the victim remembers'. Think back to th' last time anyone tried to do that."

Amaterasu closed her eyes, thinking back to when someone had tried to leave the Galilee Symposium without Metatron's (and thus, God's) express permission. It was one of the newer gods, Nuit, who had been picking up traction due to an occultist in America in the early 20th century. Her manner of speaking was much too casual for a head deity, her beliefs and wants much too unconventional and ambitious for her rookie nature. She had only been in existence for a short while, and yet the celestial-bodied goddess spoke as if she were on the same level as the rest. Upset at the other deities' lack of cooperation, she pushed past security and stormed out the front doors.

Though she didn't die—no god could—she never appeared again. Curiously though, there was a quite lovely ice statue made in her image at the feast afterwards, and she remembered seeing Itztlacoliuhqui speaking proudly with an angel about his skill with the arts, watching the sculpture melt into the punch with an oddly sorrowful twang of her heartstrings.

Metatron slammed his hands on the table in front of him. He did it slightly louder than he had wanted to, but it certainly served to get everyone's attention.

"The Vodou god is correct. We cannot do anything until He grants us permission to leave. Even now, He watches over this Synod, and though He had taken his leave due to the belief that it was already over…He still watches. He is always watching, listening, waiting. All we must do is wait, and pray."

Cao Dai, the youngest of the admittals (for his religion had only started in the middle of the 21st century) who was youthful-looking with long white hair and had a tattoo of a triangle over his left eye to show his own providence over his people, shook his head.

"Such a foolish system…"

Metatron turned to him.

"What was that, Cao Dai?"

He stood, pointing accusingly at Metatron.

"Your God claims to hold this Synod to reconcile all religions, to show peace among the pantheons of the world, and yet he still has the gall to keep us here like caged animals, following his orders and punishing us when we act 'out of line'."

“You must understand, He is much older than you are. He, in his infinite benevolence and mercy, has invited you all as guests to his realm. To disrespect His wishes would be to spit in the face of His hospitality, would it not?”

The Vietnamese god scowled.

“Even when your fellow *Than* are faced with danger and unprecedented intrusion, you still tell us to remain here and to trust in His indeterminable will? Are we gods, or are we mortals, bound by this force that tells us to simply obey because it is what is willed?”

Metatron opened his mouth, then closed it again. God’s powers had become only more powerful after the Abrahamic Triad of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism all melded into a single conglomeration of faith, absorbing other sects such as the Ba’hai faith and the Druze, but this standard was nothing new. When Zeus had held the Synod in Olympia, he denied premature exits for fear of them bringing armies to ransack the meeting-place. So too did Amun before him. Regardless of their collective power, He had what he had heard humans calling the ‘home field advantage’, for reasons Metatron assumed had something to do with farming and soil quality.

Defeated, he sat back down and shook his head.

“I am sorry, but until I receive word from Him, I cannot let any of you leave.”

The room broke out into chatter once more, the bleachers’ conversations growing more frustrated and anxious by the minute. These contentions mounted, rising further and further in tension, as Metatron took off his hat and ran his fingers through his brown hair. His mind was still racing with questions. How had they gotten in, in the first place? For that matter, how did they even know where Heaven was? The Celestial Spheres were hidden from all beings godly or otherwise by virtue of His holy divinity and ineffability, and to break into heaven would be to not only find where an invisible floating castle was over the sea, but to somehow find a window and pry it open.

Though the walls were blessed with holy sound-proofing architecture, if they weren’t, the gods would have heard a massive explosion, the sound of innumerable flapping wings, and a number of other sounds too strange to explain.

However, they didn't. All they got was watching Metatron get another ‘call’ on the piece of halo stuck in his ear.

“Yes, who is this?”

“S-Sachiel! It’s Sachiel! It’s gone!”

“What’s gone, Sachiel, what have they taken?”

“All…all the riches remain…but the stone…i-it…”

There was the sound of hundreds of laughing flowers on the other end of the call.

“The Stone of Jacob is missing!”

CHAPTER 7: Each Of Us At His Special Art

Rodion sat in his undershirt and pants, laying down on the plush and soft bed that the fae had provided for him. It was draped over with an elegant green velvet blanket that was thick enough to provide warmth in the winter, but also thin enough to not be suffocating in the summer. It was a pain to make, so the fae asked the Elves to weave it with their vast knowledge of the arts and beauty. They refused the task, however, and outsourced it to the dwarves. The dwarves, who hated the elves in the same way people who live in trailer parks hate people who own mansions, refused to make it, so they instead called upon their close allies, the Dark Elves[7]. The Dark Elves weren't exactly fans of the dwarves either, though they were more like the middle-class who just didn't want to get involved in all this socio-political drama, so they just sent someone to buy a blanket from Goodwill and pass it off as an original creation, which continued down the line until it reached the fae once again.

He stared up at the ceiling with his coarse hands folded behind his head, looking at the lovingly hand-painted mural that stretched over the ceiling of the bedroom that detailed the arrival of the Tuatha De to Ireland. He had gotten his fill of food: after asking a servant if the heavy meat dish he had been given was truly safe for humans to eat, he devoured the whole thing in only a few minutes. Seeing his happiness at finally getting a decent meal, they continued to bring him more until he was full. There was still half a ham-hock left on the plate, though it was stacked high with other bones. It was the first real meal he'd had all day, since he had never even gotten to share dinner with The Prince. That seemed like so long ago now, even though it had only been a couple of hours.

The Prince of Fuck All…his mind wandered to that lithe young man in lipstick and a skirt, who spoke in slang he had never heard before and flirted and lied as easy as he spoke. He was capricious, petty, and surprisingly cruel if the mood struck him, but it was hard to get a full read on his personality. The people he knew in Russia were simple. If they were happy, they stated it, and would only show a smile if you were lucky. If they were sad, you would know, and if they were angry, you would be unconscious by the time you found out. The people he knew as a doctor were bombastic, yes, and he met some true characters during his tenure, but they were anything but cunning. The closest that came to him was an older man with a pointed beard who had asked him to remove a bullet that had struck him in the thigh. He provided five different reasons as to how he acquired the wound, and when he had woken up, Rodion had asked if any of them were true.

The old man just smiled wryly at him, with that same grin that he saw in The Prince, and said "Believe what you wish, for what you seek as the truth makes no difference to me. Only the end result is what can be said to be 'truth'. All other subjects are a matter of perception."

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[7] Dark Elves are like regular Elves, but dark. You would think this would cause some strife, but apart from awkwardly tiptoeing around the color of their skin when describing an elf coworker, they got along alright.

He dug into his pocket and pulled out his silver pocket-watch, opening it and gazing upon the woman inside. He sighed sadly. How old was he now? Sometimes he forgot he was almost sixty, and in those moments, he felt untethered by the weight of his past. Much of it, he had spent whittling away his humanity bit by bit in the name of familial love. At first, he said he had done it in the name of dedication and passion, and perhaps at first he believed it. But that reasoning fell away to depravity, corruption, greed and avarice. He had such genius, and he used it for such barbaric means…Hell did not scare him, not anymore. He summoned demons because he knew that he would be meeting them someday, but that was not the only reason.

Some part of him had wished they would strike him down then and there, sensing his sins and choosing to take his soul back with them. Every time, however, his nihilistic hopes were dashed by conversation. Which, he did enjoy the conversation—but there was always that small part of him that stood locked behind bars, grinning at him and provoking him, telling him to insult the demon, to say he is a man of God, so that he may be smited and his long suffering would finally end.

He had been improving when The Prince stumbled into his life, doing good for his community…but that community had been so suddenly whisked away. And he had been so swiftly seduced by this stranger who had saved his life and introduced him to this world of intrigue, of fairies and cults, of gods and creatures he had never heard of before in his life. He thought about the neighborhood kids and hoped, foolishly as he was aware, that they were alright. They always ran away and cried whenever he smiled and waved to them, but perhaps they would see him as more than his appearance and his reputation as the Butcher of Kaliningrad.

…Though…is he still so annoyed, knowing this mission is helping to save the world? Could he say that he didn't enjoy being dragged along by The Prince, hearing his feathery English accent flirt and giggle, seeing his cunning smile and his skill with magical items? …He wasn't sure. But, he wasn't sure about a lot of things about The Prince of Fuck All…least of all, his name. His tattoo still interested Rodion, but it seemed to be little more than a novelty to the fae. Perhaps they had never come across such a thing before?

Rodi sat up in bed and yawned, looking at his coat as it hung on the ornately-carved bedpost. Everything here was so fancy, so elegant, so intricate, that he almost felt like touching it would soil it. That wasn't an unfamiliar feeling to him, though.

When he watched a shadowy figure slink out of the coat, that brought a new feeling out of him. It was in the shape of a cat with piercing yellow eyes, and as it was rather dark in the room, Rodion concentrated his mind and snapped his fingers. In an instant, a small fire appeared in the palm of his hand, and he used it like a candle to see the figure more clearly.

"...Who is there?"

The drude didn't respond with words, instead hissing and pouncing towards the man's plate, going for the slab of ham that remained.

It stopped partway, however, grinding to a halt as it stared at the man. What could be guessed to be its fur shot up all over its body, its yellow eyes widening into dinner plates as it stared at Rodion with abject terror. It could smell him. It could smell the blood on his hands.

He looked at the beast not with annoyance or with hatred, however, but with a look of sympathy.

"Ahh…you must be one of Unseelie Court, *da?* I saw many of your kin in Overhill, they are quite varied. From what *Koroleva* Medb said, you and your kind are looked down on by regular fae, are they not?"

The drude's eyes shrunk a bit, and it nodded hesitantly, its ears still folded back in fear as it trembled.

"I understand. You are fearsome creatures, often hurting people or otherwise causing cruel mischief…but you have emotions and desires like everyone else, no? You are more than hatred. Do they not feed you? Come, you can have rest of my ham. I am not hungry anymore, so you may have it!"

Hesitantly, the drude plodded towards the plate, placing its front paws on the edge of the table before biting into the meat, swallowing it after only a few large bites before hopping up onto the bed beside Rodion. It purred happily, butting its head into his thick arms, and he laughed.

"Bahaha, you are no more dangerous than large kitty cat! I was going to go to sleep, actually. You may sleep curled up on foot of bed if you desire. You deserve nice place to rest."

The drude nodded in the affirmative. And so, after Rodion had stripped to his underwear and gotten under the covers, the shade trotted on top of his massive body and curled atop his stomach like a boulder on top of a hill, the two of them resting peacefully.

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Fionn mac Cumhaill sat on his own bed in his room, having removed his colorful cowl and disrobing to little more than his chainmail top and his tunic pants. However, he kept with him his magical oxter bag and his trusty sword, Mac an Luin. Though there was a sumptuous vegetable platter laid out before him, he had no interest in the meal. He wasn't lying to Medb when he said he would not eat anything he didn't kill himself—not that he would lie in the first place, he was hopelessly literal and honest even when it was to his own detriment—and so he had produced from his oxter bag the carcass of a boar he had caught before his retirement in the mountains, skinning it with his sword and using the fire magic that Bodhmall had taught to him to cook the flesh. He sunk his teeth into the hind leg and tore off a chunk of flesh, rocking happily in place as he savored the taste of the meat and thought over the day's events.

It had started when he had awoken to the sound of the Dord Fiann, the war cry of his men as played on the borabu horn calling for him and the Fianna to come to Ireland's need. It had been said that he and his band of warriors would awaken only in the darkest hour…but when he

awoke in the deep and dank cave under the mountain of Tul Tuinde, he found that his fellow warriors had not woken up. They would not stir, no matter how hard he shook or beat them.

Not only that, but his memories of his life were still vivid: his boyhood wonders, where he burnt his thumb on the fat of the Salmon of Knowledge while it was cooking and thus obtained clairvoyance and knowledge of all things under the sun, fresh in his mind. His legendary defeat of one of Medb's most prolific commanders, Aillen mac Midgna, the fire-breathing Tuatha De-turned-Unseelie-fae who would ransack the castle on the hill at Tara where the Lia Fail once stood before being taken in for protection (as he had been informed later) and where the high kings of Ireland gathered every Samhain. He remembered his escapades with his wife, Sadhbh, and his two hunting hounds who he had loved dearly. The dogs had died long ago, but his son Oisin did live on to tell the tales of his adventures to all who would listen. He even remembered his battle with Bennandonner at the Giant's Causeway, though he wished he could forget it.

He remembered aging. He remembered his joints growing creaky, his body becoming flabbier and weaker, his beard growing and his gait becoming crooked. One of his men, Diarmuid Ua Duibhne, had fallen for a woman who had already been betrothed to Fionn, Grainne, and he grew bitter and greedy. He grew vengeful and jealous. He had the chance to save Diarmuid when he had been mortally wounded later on in their lives with his healing magic, but he remembered those times and let the healing water run through his fingers, killing him.

And then…there was nothing.

There was a void in his memory apart from these notable escapades and a few other scattered details he remembered, but from there, he awoke in the mountain. He didn't remember ever entering the cave within, either with or without his men, and when he awoke, he was youthful and fit once again. When he thought of his wife, he held no love for her, though his care for his comrades was as strong as ever, and the idea that he even had a son made him sick when he thought about how he had been conceived. He was called to Tir na nOg and Arcadia Sioga by the fairy king and queen, but they spirited him there after seeing his confusion at the modern appliances and houses that surrounded the hill he crawled out of.

Why had he changed so much? Why had the Fianna, who also appeared as they had in their prime, not awoken with him? Was this not Ireland's greatest time of need?

He finished his boar, laying the bones out meticulously in front of him before placing them one-by-one, smallest to largest, in his oxter bag to save for later. He often whittled tools and makeshift weapons out of bones, so they always proved useful no matter the source.

And what of Forruad and Cron? They had called themselves The Prince of Fuck All and Rodion Nikolayev, and he wasn't sure about either of them. Cron seemed nice enough, but his sinister aura made Fionn wary, and The Prince's flippant attitude and inscrutability made him not only annoying, but hard to understand. His modern lingo fell roughly on Fionn's ears, and he had to often run his sentences through his head multiple times to guess at the meaning. He didn't trust either of them, to put it bluntly, but he knew that this was his responsibility.

Perhaps they really will oppose this odd group that they call 'Man Unkind', and maybe…just maybe, he will be able to shine just as brightly as the warrior Cu Chulainn before him.

From underneath his bed, however, the second drude slunk out. Its pitch-black body slithered along the floor despite its cat-like appearance, and it stared at Fionn mac Cumhaill.

Fionn, acting quickly, picked up his sword and stood from his bed, staring down at the beast as a green light shone around Mac an Luin. He pointed the tip at it, staring down at it coldly.

"State your name and intentions, vile creature. You face the hero Fionn mac Cumhaill."

The drude hissed at him and pounced towards the vegetable platter. In an instant, he launched off the floor just as quickly and swung Mac an Luin with the sound of a crashing wave, green magic swirling and cresting outwards from the crescent-shaped afterimage of the swing. The shadowy beast let out a pained yowl as it was cleaved in two, its body dissipating into nothing but darkness once again. Fionn stood and sheathed his sword again, looking down at the vegetable platter.

"...The foul thing must have been attracted to my room by this uneaten food. I'll place it in my oxter bag for later."

Retrieving a patch of tanned leather, he stretched it over the porcelain plate and secured it with tree gum before tucking it away into the oxter bag. Still, he kept his hand on his sword and put his thumb to his lips. No other creatures in the room apart from the pixies always flitting through the walls, acting as the humble servant force of Overhill. He sat back on the bed.

"If one came, then more may come as well. I don't believe I will sleep tonight—I could be struck during my rest. I will stay awake."

He sat on the bed, staring intently at the door with his hand on his sword.

Within five minutes, he had promptly fallen asleep sitting with his weapon still drawn.

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The Prince of Fuck All had been feeling a little stuffy in the relatively small room, so he produced a small electric fan from his coat and flicked it on as he took off his hat and wiped the dried blood from his face, all his makeup coming off with it. He had changed out of his clothes fully (keeping his blue coat within arm's reach at all times and keeping it in view), his slim and pale body dressed in little more than red boxer briefs seated on his bed as he looked off towards the mirror in the room. He got up and walked towards it, staring at himself. At first, his brow furrowed slightly, but soon enough he got into it and began posing provocatively, enjoying seeing himself with his hips thrust out, his arms stretched over his head as he yawned.

"Looking damn fine once again."

His compliment rang hollow even in his own ears as his eyes were drawn back to his colorful tattoo, its patterns swirling and fading into one another, turning like watercolor cogs in some vast machine underneath his skin. Staring at it gave him a headache, and he was the one with the damn thing on his body, but it was impossible to ignore.

It covered the left side of his face and the whole of his neck, snaking down until slightly before the bottom of his ribcage and stopping short of his elbows. He placed a finger to his chest,

then all five of those on his right hand onto his sternum. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes, and pushed gently.

His hand began to meld into the tattoo as if it were an open cavity underneath a colorful whirlpool, and twisting technicolor accents of spirals and leaves fluttered out from his chest and face, only floating a few inches into the air before dissipating entirely. The sound of a hideous crackling started to sound from his body, and it smelled strong enough of tutti-frutti to make him sick. He felt sick anyways though, and as he sunk his hand deep enough for half his palm to be enveloped, he grit his teeth and was wincing terribly. More odd little symbols and swirls emanated from his body, and they made it further each time…but he couldn't take it.

"Fuck!"

Yanking his hand out, he spat out the curse and grabbed his chest as though he had heart pains, wheezing heavily as sweat ran down his face. He felt light-headed, and he was in terrible pain, but that was par for the course for this sort of thing. He got as far as halfway down his palm this time. That was a new record, and a win in his book even if he had to stagger over to the bed to prevent from falling onto the floor. He bent over and ducked his head between his legs. Man, was he tired.

He glanced over to the plate of fish he had been given by the fae and wrinkled his nose up at it. It had already started to stink up the place, since he hadn't touched it at all—he still didn't entirely trust fae food, even if he was promised this platter at least would be safe, so he instead had produced a greasy fast-food burger he had stashed into his coat a while back for just such an occasion and had happily eaten it, tossing the wrapper into one of the pixie foxholes like he owned the place. It was thrown back at him, and he debated on whether or not to make this a big deal, but he decided that he was too tired for this shit and instead just threw it back into his coat.

The Prince turned back to his coat, taking it in his hands and running his fingers over it. The fabric, patterned with that same unchanging blue latticework textile that seemed to stay static as the rest of the world moved around it, was as fine and comfortable as ever. The white fluff around the cuffs and collar was as soft as it had always been.

Reaching inside, he produced an old copy of the first book of John Milton's *'Paradise Lost'* and a pair of scissors. Unceremoniously shoving the fish dish off onto the floor (where it promptly flopped onto the ground with a resounding splat) and pulling the table it was on towards him, he placed the book in front of him and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath inwards, holding it, and exhaling once more. His tattoo churned and throbbed as he muttered a sentence in an unknown language under his breath.

"Zogaibe-stisano, jakez zanejez-bayast fanatef-sodhana kispo-zumatez."

With that incantation out of his mouth, his hands became busy as he ripped pages from the spine and tore his scissors through it, snipping and clipping through Milton's carefully-crafted stanzas like he was making confetti. However, this was not a meaningless gesture. He knitted his brow and muttered under his breath in tongues, lost in his own mind, and splayed out what he had cut out. Soon, his painted-nail fingers began to arrange them into a new arrangement. This continued for a short while, until he had formed a small poem.

The Prince opened his eyes and looked upon what he'd made with an expectant and inquisitive look.

"find to rest destin'd cold Each Ocean great resolve
Center Almighty and long hasten'd and were adventurous wander
Hail Angels Ilium on of by neither Heav'n into sufferance
and as Noon Almighty shall temple angels slumber
And receiv'd by malice o're voyce they those have the
such torture
God's dreams began with solemn highth
After what side pursuers execute the to lucid bright
though wearied, attempt me
his Justice Smote a Mate in misery
the One Lords not work
Lords Innumerable suffer
Thunder the rest War Sultan"

His expression dropped as he gulped, staring down the paper scraps.

"Bollocks. That really doesn't sound good, does it? Come on now, chaos, work with me here, can't you give me something better…? Maybe picking Paradise Lost was a bad choice. Too dark, too dreary, sold at the gift shops in Hell with the sticker 'Based On a True Story - Local Author' on it. Maybe next time I'll pick something more…positive."

The Prince idly brushed the paper scraps off of the table, and when he looked back up, he was face-to-face with the drude that had slunk into his room while he had his eyes closed. Letting out a high-pitched scream, he scrambled up onto the bed (making sure to grab his coat in the process) and lifted a leg, staring down at the drude.

"Shite! Jesus! Don't you scare me like that, you bloody—you—you, you, uh…what exactly are you?"

The drude hissed and showed its teeth, skulking over to the fish plate and starting to feed from it. He furrowed his brow.

"Oh, is *that* what this is about? Don't they feed you little buggers in shadowland or wherever you come from? Go on, shoo! Shoo! Don't make me use what I know! Five years' experience as an exterminator and cat-neuterer! I'll…"

He dug into his coat and pulled out a large acoustic guitar with 'THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS' written sloppily on the front in some red liquid, holding it by the neck like he was about to hit a home run.

"I'll knock your little brains out with this guitar here if you don't git! Don't you test me little man, I'll go Paul Simonon on your arse! …Actually, I think this thing has blood on it. Do shadowy little fellas like you like things with blood on them?"

The drude turned distastefully towards The Prince, growling. The Prince attempted to growl back, but it just sounded like he was failing to clear his throat, so he blushed and stopped soon after. In a blur of darkness, the shadow-beast lunged at The Prince, who swung the guitar as hard as he could in front of his face. It made direct contact with the drude and made a discordant twanging sound as the wood splintered into dozens of pieces, The Prince himself stumbling off the bed afterwards. The impact didn't seem to hurt the drude too much, though it did seem temporarily stunned by the hit. It shook its head, dislodging the pieces of wood that were sticking out of it as it turned on the bed. The Prince whipped around to face the creature, but his expression dropped once he saw that the drude was standing directly on top of his magical coat—he had put it on the bed to hold the guitar with both hands, and now it was too far away for him to get without putting himself in danger.

Trying not to seem fazed, he put out his palms and opened his mouth to speak, small sparks of rainbow crackling around his fingers before they fizzled out into nothing. He grit his teeth and grunted, his hands going to his tattoo. It hurt. It burnt, it throbbed, it felt like his insides were seeping with fresh wounds. His nightly self-exploration seemed not to have gelled well with the tattoo. It didn't like being messed with, and now he was paying the price.

“(Fuckin’ stupid god-damn piece of shit tattoo…)”

The Prince cursed under his breath and kept eye contact with the drude, watching it carefully to make sure it wouldn’t try anything with his coat.

He remained that way for the rest of the night, keeping his eyes on the creature and never once changing his point of interest.

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The following morning, when the dawn had broken and the druden that remained had faded away, the three of them were summoned once more to the throne room, where Queen Medb treated them to breakfast and explained the plans that she had made the other night. The Prince, who had gotten zero sleep and as such was horribly tired—having dressed himself in little more than a loose Goonies t-shirt and some sweatpants along with his coat, and his makeup sloppily applied. He had to lean on Rodion when he was standing (not that he minded being so close to the warm and quite soft older man at all) and needed him to keep his head up so he didn't face-plant into the mashed potatoes, while Fionn had eyed the Unseelie fae they passed warily to see if he could spot the druden that had attacked them last night and yet again refused to eat anything Medb gave him.

Queen Medb explained that she was the one who had sent the druden to their bedrooms in the first place, but not to kill or even attack them. It was a test of their character: to see how they reacted to a threat after being assured that they would be safe.

In Fionn mac Cumhaill, though she teased him about falling asleep without even being able to keep guard for more than five minutes, she saw strength and courage. He faced the drude without fear and struck it down hastily, but he also did not question it or stop to think about his

actions. He was hasty in doing what he deemed was the right course of action, where he could have defused things peacefully if he had the social grace. Fionn's expression hardened, but he lowered his head silently in accession.

In Rodion Nikolayev, she saw a great kindness and compassion, for he was willing to sympathize with the drude and not only share his food with it, but to let it sleep with him. His rational and understanding nature was to his advantage, but the drude's hesitance showed a dark spirit lurking within him. A hidden depravity and guilt that the being not only could sense, but was terrified by. Rodi sunk a little into his seat, trying to appear smaller despite his size.

The Prince of Fuck All, however, was where she focused her attention. In spite of his odd appearance and mannerisms, his solution to the sudden attack was the closest to that greatest hero of Eire, Cu Chulainn—he attempted to make it flee, attacked it, and when he saw that his attack was futile, he stood his ground and cowed it into submission. His solution showed not only bravery and ingenuity, not only courage and tactical skill, but also a strong sense of right and wrong despite what he presents himself as. The Prince murmured something about her reading too much into things as he buried his head in his arms, but didn't object.

Ultimately, she deemed that the three were worthy, and as the smell of petrichor and the sights of purplish-black fog filled the throne room, she produced the Lia Fail. It was a mossy stone slightly shorter than The Prince in the vague shape of an obelisk, with some dirt clinging to the bottom. Fionn mac Cumhaill, though his mouth was pulled into the blank line it usually was, was clearly star-struck with seeing one of the ancestral treasures of the Tuatha De in the crag, and his eyes watered a bit as a result. The Russian just put his hands on his hips, looking at the stone and then down to his own suit. He wasn't exactly impressed by it. In fact, he was wishing he had packed more than his usual suit…if he had a chance to pack anything at all. Next place they're going, he's buying some new clothes, especially since he didn't trust The Prince's fashion sense at all.

Speaking of, he stood up grumbling and took off his blue coat, draping it over the Lia Fail. It went slowly down the stone's whole length until it was flat on the ground, whereupon he picked it up and put it back on once again. Rodi crossed his arms.

"Er, actually…Looking at stone, I think I have seen on travel brochures? Did people not notice?"

Queen Medb crossed her arms with a sigh.

"We put in a decoy years ago, back during all that nasty business in the 50's. People thought it was a show of defiance to pour paint on it and scrawl phallic imagery across it, knowing how important it was to us."

"Show of defiance? For what reason?"

"I cannot get into it now. Least of all because I did not involve myself with much of it, but mostly because it is quite a long story…and you three have better places to be. You are collecting powerful stones before this Man Unkind group gets them first, correct?"

The Prince sniffed and put his hands on his hips.

“Indeed we are, missy. We’re selling newspapers for five pence if you want one, too. All proceeds go to gettin’ me poor ol’ daddy out of the factory.”

Medb just ignored his comments, but Fionn spoke up.

“Wait, three? Am I going to be coming with Forruad and Cron as well? What about Arcadia Sioga? Does it not need to be guarded from monsters such as the one from yesterday?”

“Don’ worry yer lil’ head about it, Fionn darlin’.”

The lilting Irish-accented voice came from the entrance to the throne room, and King Oberon and Queen Titania entered, nodding reluctantly to Medb to acknowledge her before they faced the rest.

“Th’ kingdom is right well protected, now that Queen Medb is here.”

“Aye, thas’ right. We’ve ‘ad a palaver over it, an’ as much as it’s a scunner to me, we ‘ave to trust ‘er. Ain’ got much choice now, and but. Prollem’s bigger’n us both.”

“It took me *ages* to whittle Obie down, but ye know what they say, greatest gift God ever gave women is the gift of femininity~!”

Oberon crossed his arms and looked away blushing while The Prince just smirked and said “Kinky.” exhaustedly. Regardless, Queen Medb smiled and put a hand to her chest.

“I promise you, Goody-Two-Shoes Titania and Deserves-Better Oberon, that I will do my utmost to protect this city in Fionn’s stead. I’m sure I can do just as good a job as he did anyways.”

Rodion raised his hand as Fionn sulked in the corner.

“Er, excuse me. What is…where do we go now?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, we were told to come here and to pick up stones and to visit fae first, because fae are closest allies of demons, *da?* That is why we come with Belial. But, we do not know where to start elsewhere. What other stones should we be looking for?”

The Prince raised his eyebrows.

“Right, good point actually, we haven’t got a clue where we’re going after this.”

Queen Medb rubbed her sharp chin for a bit, ruminating on the issue, before she snapped her fingers.

“Ah, yes! I believe I can help you with that. Ever since this whole nasty business with the cult started, I’ve been in contact with many of my subjects to see where the most dangerous areas have been. Do give me a moment. Oh, Honekin?”

The kobold Honekin quickly scuttled into the room through one of the pixie foxholes, spooking Titania and Oberon, who clung to his wife. The Prince hid behind Rodi, and Fionn put his hand out in front of him. Rodion wondered slightly why he was always the one without much of a strong reaction to things, but then he remembered he was on the older side and sadly stopped wondering.

“Crivvens, a rat!”

“I take offense to that, yer Lordship! Rats are much more sophisticated than us kobolds. You know, I heard they have kings nowadays. All we’ve got’s whoever’s allowed to use the only working toilet.”

Queen Medb snickered a little at seeing the nobler fairies’ shock and looked down at him as he bowed.

“Tell us, Honekin, where are my subjects seeing the most of those strange creatures on Earth?”

The Prince whispered to his partner.

“(On Earth?)”

“(I suppose there are no fairies in heaven. At least, no evil ones. Makes sense, I guess.)”

Honekin stood up as straight as he could and saluted before scratching his chin.

“Well, let’s see…I remember gettin’ some comments from the *yosei* over in Japan about some commotion that had gone on over there. I think it was somewhere in…what was it…Tochigi Prefecture! Yeah, heh, that was it.”

“Ooooh, Japan! Oh, Rodi darling, I’ve always wanted to go to Japan! It could be our honeymoon!”

“Honeymoon for what? We aren’t married.”

“You don’t need a ring for a honeymoon, dear…at least, not on your finger~”

“What romantic use would a toe ring have, Forruad?”

“Hush up Blondie, the adults are speaking.”

“And what is this land called ‘Japan’?”

The kobold cleared his throat.

“A-herm. And! I also heard word from one of our snallygaster associates in the D.C. area that there was recently a big dust-up at some museum. Apart from that, nothin’ much of note, lads. Sorry to say.”

The Prince stepped out from behind Rodi and clapped his hands.

“Well, I’d say those leads are as good as we’re going to get! Japan and America! Sushi and burgers! Geishas and bikers! Shibari and leather! I say we swing by America first. If whatever they were looking for’s already been stolen, then maybe we could at least get some leads on what happened, where they went, yadda yadda. You all ready?”

“But—we are in…well, not Ireland, but an entire ocean away from America, *da?* How will we even get there?”

“Is America not close by? Perhaps it is near the Isle of Man. I helped to build that island, you know.”

“Yes, yes, very interesting. But you needn’t worry about transportation! Rodi dear, remember when I said I biked to Kaliningrad?”

“...Yes, I suppose so.”

“Where do you think I biked from?”

Rodion blinked a few times.

“...Gureysk?”

“Try Birmingham, love.”

The Prince reached into his coat and produced a vehicle. It was an old and rusted green bike with spots where the paint had not only chipped off, but the revealed metal had long since rusted and was in danger of degrading entirely. The tires were in better condition, but were still very worn. The only thing that appeared even remotely new on the bicycle were two rainbow tassels attached to the handlebars. He patted the worn seat with a beaming grin.

“This trusty queen of mine has gotten me everywhere I needed to go without fail, every time!”

“...There is only one seat.”

Fionn walked around the side and prodded curiously at the rust, licking the flakes that caked his finger. The Prince gently slapped his hand away.

“Don’t—don’t do that. I know, I know, there’s only one seat and it looks like it could fall apart at any minute, but it’s been going strong for over a century!”

“Over a century?! How old is this bicycle…?”

“Older than you, Rodi, and that should give you an idea of it.”

The royal fairies watched the three of them patter around the bicycle curiously and exchange questions with polite confusion. Really, they could just spirit them to America if they really wanted…but if they wanted to try and bike there, they could do as they pleased. The Prince got onto the seat and scooched all the way forwards, to the point where he wasn’t even sitting on the seat and was instead just standing on the pedals.

“Rodi, you come and sit here, and Blondie, I dunno, you I guess just hold onto Didi’s coattails and pray to whatever god you worship.”

“I worship no gods but the Tuatha De.”

“Ha! Lame. Now come on, hurry, hurry! Time is of the essence, lads!”

Left without much room to object, Rodion awkwardly hoisted himself onto the seat. The bicycle creaked ominously, but surprisingly enough, it remained in one piece. The Prince lightly grinded his backside into Rodion’s front with a sultry grin.

“Now I’ve got some in-flight entertainment to keep me company~”

“‘Time is of the essence’, huh?”

Fionn stood and looked at the setup for the two of them, proceeding to clamber up Rodi’s back until he was sitting on the large man’s shoulders, wrapping his arms around his head.

“I am ready.”

“...Are you sure you, ah, want to sit on my shoulders, Cumhaill…? Is there really no room behind me?”

“This is fine. You may drive your horseless half-chariot, Forruad.”

The Prince just rolled his eyes and snickered.

“Whatever you say, you meshigener kid, you.”

He waved to the royal fairies, and the rest followed suit.

“See you wonderful omis and palones later! Have to say, this joint was much nicer than I was expecting—we might come back here to celebrate some time! I’m sure you fae know how to party, right?”

“Yes, yes, thank you for all your help, Queen, King, Second Queen!”

“Titania, Oberon, do send a messenger if the witch who you have agreed to help protect you decides to go back on her word. I promise you that I, the warrior Fionn mac Cumhaill, will personally strike her down if—”

“I think they get it, Blondie.”

“Sorry.”

The royals waved back.

“Aye, we will, Fionn, we will!”

“Cheers, lads! Kick those waffinger knobheads’ arses!”

“Take care, boys. My, Oberon, who knew you had such a potty mouth? Do you talk that way to your wife in the bedroom, I wonder?”

“Like ye’d wan’ to find out, ye hoor.”

The Prince took a deep breath, reached into his coat, and turned back to the other two.

“So, boys. Do you know the story of this bicycle?”

They both shook their heads as he produced three small patches of gritty paper that resembled stamps in shape and size, patterned with rainbows and hearts.

“As the story goes, on April 19th in the year of our lord 1943, the Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann was experimenting with some substances he had extracted from plants to make some new pharmaceuticals, when he discovered something very interesting. Soon enough, he discovered a certain chemical that, when ingested, would cause you to see wonderful, wonderful things…”

He tore off each square and handed two to the others, Rodi passing the other square up to Fionn.

“...So, to test out this new wonder-drug on himself, he took a quarter of a milligram, got on his bike, and rode out through the streets of Basel, Switzerland, with his colleague. At first, he was terrified and paranoid, plagued by delusions—on your tongues, you two—but soon enough, those feelings gave way to such a splendid and phantasmagorical euphoria.”

Hesitantly doing as they were told, Rodion and Fionn put the squares onto their tongues, and The Prince did the same.

“That’s the story of how LSD was discovered, and every year since then, April 19th is Bicycle Day. All the psychoactive wonder and excitement he felt during that ride became instilled in his bicycle, making it a juju of sorts. Take a tab, think of your destination, and you’re there. It’s never failed me, except for once when I wanted to go to Reno and ended up in Rio. It was a bona fantabulosa time anyways. Strap in.”

Rodi and Fionn’s eyes started to dilate, as did The Prince’s, and he looked straight on.

“Straight on til midnight, boys! *Carnivale!”*

Starting to pedal, the bike moved as swiftly as it would have if it had only one rider as they circled their section of the throne room. The bike slowly began to pick up speed as it traveled in circles, and wherever its tires turned, swirling psychedelic plumes of yellow and red, green and blue, lemon-yellow, orange-orange, tutti-frutti orgasm followed and sprouted, growing and twisting and fading. The Prince whooped and cheered, the three men losing themselves in the colors, until by the time everything had faded…they were gone.

The fae royalty awkwardly stood remaining in the throne room, unsure of what to do with themselves for a few minutes, before Oberon and Titania wandered over to their thrones and sat in them, getting comfortable once again. Titania shifted a little uncomfortably and called to Medb, who had just started to hover up out of the canopy to guard the city once again.

"Medb! Did ye sit in my throne while I was sleepin'?!"

"Me? …No. No, I didn't."

"I can feel the impression yer bony behind left in it!"

"How would you even feel it under your own?"

"Medb!"

Oberon snickered and covered his mouth, turning away.

"Oberon!"

"Ach, dun' 'Oberon!' me, that was a good one, kimmer, ye hafto admit."

CHAPTER 8: Gylfaginning

Hel, Foxy Shazam, and Moxy Fruvous had exited the realm of Helheim, and though the two odd feminine creatures had explained their plan to Hel, she still was reluctant to trust the two of them. Not only that, but she was still technically in exile as per the All-Father Odin's orders: when she, Fenrir, and Jormungandr were born, they were immediately taken in by the Aesir gods to discern what to do with them. She was very young then, but still able to put up a good fight against the warrior Thor, and her siblings proved their strength as well. Fearing their future strength, Odin ordered Jormungandr the serpent to be wrapped around the outer edge of Midgard, and Hel was cast down into the coldest and most deadly realm of Niflheim, where the souls of the old and sick went when they died, and she eventually became its ruler.

She didn't find out what happened to Fenrir until long after he had been imprisoned, and when she had found out what they had done to her dear brother, she was heartbroken.

The Aesir saw no real threat in the pup then, and so allowed him to grow up in Asgard with his keeper, the war-god Tyr. However, once he became an adult and both his strength and wit were worrying Odin, it was decided that there was something to be done. He brought binding after chain after restraint to Fenrir, challenging him to break it under the guise of a test of strength, but every time, Fenrir broke out of them easily.

Ultimately, they turned to the Dwarves to forge a binding which would never break so long as Ragnarok itself wouldn't come. To ensure that the possibility of breaking would never cross the chain's mind, they forged it from six impossible things: the footfall of a cat, the beard of a woman, the roots of a mountain, the sinews of a bear, the breath of a fish, and the spit of a bird. It was an odd assortment of ingredients, but the Dwarves assured Odin that they were the best smiths in all the nine realms. If they couldn't make something brilliant out of such strange materials, then what good were they? It took three weeks of work, but eventually Gleipnir was formed.

It was as thin as a ribbon and just as flexible, but no matter how hard the Aesir pulled and stretched and ripped, it wouldn't break. Bringing the binding to Fenrir as one final test of his strength, they attempted to pull the same trick on him that they had before, but Fenrir had grown wise. As a show of trust, he requested that a god place his hand in his mouth while he is bound, and if in the event he cannot break it, he is not freed, he will bite off their hand. Tyr begrudgingly volunteered, and when Fenrir saw that he could not break it and would not be freed, he bit off Tyr's right hand as revenge. To keep him from thrashing, Odin stabbed a sword through his mouth, and the spit that flowed from his mouth formed rivers in the land. He was bound to a boulder placed on Lyngvi, an island in the middle of Lake Amsvartnir within Asgard, where he will remain until Ragnarok comes.

Though some asked why the gods did not simply kill Fenrir, as he was fated to devour Odin when the end of days came, the gods agreed among themselves that to spill the blood of such an evil beast on their holy land would be disrespectful to the highest degree. Thor would have raised

his hand at the meeting and said that he didn't really care about things like respect or sacrilege, and if Odin hadn't given the order to not slay him, he would have caved that mutt's brains in under they were leaking out of his ears like spoiled porridge, but Loki gently put Thor's hand down and shook his head before he could say anything.

Suffice to say, if the gods saw that she was skulking her way up to Asgard with two eccentric strangers, it would not end well for her. As strong as she was, the Aesir were stronger, and her position could always be filled by someone else. So, after the three of them tip-toed through Niflheim avoiding the frost giants' gaze, clambered over the tall mountains and through the harsh burrows of Svartalfheim—land of the Dark Elves and Dwarves—and even narrowly avoided an encounter with some castle-sized livestock in the fertility gods' home of Vanaheim, they finally managed to sneak into Asgard seemingly undetected.

Moxy helped to carry her partner and Hel over the great stone wall that surrounded Asgard, the guard of the Aesir, as it were. She clearly didn't have much experience in carrying people, as she complained and whined the whole time even when Hel ordered her to stop. Hel was honestly puzzled at that—usually, when she ordered people to shut up, they did it with minimal protest. Foxy stayed silent until they had overcome the massive wall, dropping to the ground with Hel as Moxy wheezed and floated down.

"Haahh…whoof…Man, you two are freakin' heavy! Hea-vy!"

"More to love."

Hel shushed the both of them, speaking in a harsh whisper.

"(Quiet, you fools! If that doddering old fool Odin and his crows catch wind that we're here, the whole thing will be a bust!)"

She stood up straight, craning her thin neck. The dense thicket of trees they were surrounded by didn't help her poor view of the area. Crossing her arms, she furrowed her brow and tried to think back to her childhood when she was brought to Asgard. It was immediately prior to her exile, and she remembered going over Bifrost, the rainbow bridge that allowed passage into the main city of Asgard…Hel snickered mentally, wondering if Heimdall would be getting an earful from his friends for unknowingly allowing the three of them to come in through the backdoor, but to be fair, she was pretty sure he was drunk all the time when she saw him last, and she was four. He didn't exactly give off the impression of someone who was especially watchful. Either way, coming off of Bifrost, they made a left at the main road, around Valaskjalf, ducked through a couple of branch thickets…and to the right, she saw the lake before entering the meeting-place of the Aesir, an open field with seating and a stage set up called Idavollr.

Hel opened her eyes and snickered to herself, Foxy slinging an arm around her frigid and flaking body.

"What's the plan, Stan?"

"Don't touch me. (And be quiet! Stay silent, and follow me.)"

Making a shushing motion and gesturing with a hand, she had the two of them silently follow her through the thicket until they came to another clearing, whereupon she directed them to hide in a bush. They peered through the bush, and ahead of them the pudding-stone main road of

Asgard laid. Curiously, while the road was usually pretty sparse as-is, it was unnaturally quiet. Peering down the walkway, Hel swallowed. Moxy poked her head out of the bush, sticks bundled on her head and berry juice painted on her face.

"Is it just me, or is this place boooo-ring? There's not even anybody here!"

"(Quiet! Get down! Though…I will say that it's odd not a single god, Aesir or Vanir, is here. What could be going on…?)"

A pit grew in her stomach, but she led them along the fringes of the road and made a left, coming upon the great hall Valaskjalf. 'Shelf of the Slain' in English, it was a massive structure with its walls and roof composed almost entirely out of pure sterling silver, consisting of a circular base-building and a monumental tower-like structure resembling a lighthouse emerging from the middle courtyard. To any mortal, it would have seemed meaninglessly extravagant, but there was a purpose to the material: silver is very reflective when it's properly polished, after all, and it symbolically represented Odin's ability to essentially have eyes in the back of his head. His endless search for knowledge was facilitated by his two pet ravens Huginn and Muninn—Thought and Memory—who he sent out over the nine realms, especially Midgard, to gather information to bring to him from dawn until their return at dinnertime. Whenever they were out, a golden triangular banner with the image of a raven would be hung from the high tower's sole window overlooking Asgard, providing a waypoint for them to return.

Ordering with hushed breaths and unable to make out the banner against the sun, Hel convinced Moxy to float up to the top and see if it was flown. She was up there for a few minutes, worrying the two of them (or, at least worrying Foxy, Hel really was just impatiently waiting) before returning and saying that the coast was clear. The banner was up, and so they wouldn't have to worry about being spotted by the ravens.

Sneaking around the left side of the building and making their way through a few brambles easily thanks to Hel's powers of ice, they made a right and dove into a field of cloudberry bushes as they looked on towards the lake.

Amsvartnir was a lake as wide as a football field and five times as deep, its water as dark as the night with no fish or stones in sight within its watery masses. Smack in the middle, just barely visible as a single speck in the body of water, was the island of Lyngvi. It was seemingly the only thing within the lake, but Hel—attuned to the souls of the dead—could sense that if nothing else, there was one thing that the lake was full of.

Corpses. Lots and lots of corpses.

Moxy's head rotated on her neck as she gasped.

"Woooow, is that the big lake we're gonna see? It's so huge! It's so big! It's so big-huge! Can we go, can we go, please oh pleaaase?"

"Of course we're going, you ninny! That's the whole crux of this plan you two came up with!"

"Oh! Yeah! Though to be fair, Foxy came up with most of it."

Foxy looked up, her mouth and hands stained with orange cloudberry juice.

"Food helps me focus."

"Quiet. We need to get across without being spotted…thankfully, it doesn't seem like there are any gods around to see us, so we should be—"

"Hold up. Shush."

"Shush? Did you just shush me? I am Lady Hel, Queen of Helheim! I am not shushed by floozies such as yourself!"

"There's voices."

Hel immediately quieted down and opened her ears, cupping one hand around her non-charred ear to listen for the mentioned voices. Indeed, true to Foxy's word, she could hear conversation…though, not only between two people. It was the steady hum of a group, only a couple dozen meters away. She waded through the bushes and peered out from behind a tree. If she wasn't the Ice Queen already, her blood would have ran cold. Though, that would have also required her to have blood, which she decided against once she found out about periods.

In the gathering-field of Idavollr, around eleven or so gods of both Aesir and Vanir heritage had gathered and sat on the long wooden benches beside their spouses, children, and siblings, making up a crowd of nearly forty people. Small for some, but monumental for those of Asgard: apart from those noble fallen soldiers who were shored up in Valhalla and Sessrumnir, the only residents that weren't animals or corpses were the gods themselves. As such, when almost all of them showed up, you knew something important was going on.

Hel grimaced looking at the procession. Dear Ymir, what were they doing meeting here?! They almost never met at Idavollr anymore, having only done so in the old days following events such as the death of Baldr or the reveal of the great treasures of the Dwarves…not only that, but almost everyone seemed to be there. Squinting, she could even make out the telltale wavy golden hair of her own father, the Trickster, the Lie-Smith, flyting champion five-hundred-years and running, Loki. Though it was partially hidden under his usual red cap, it was easy to tell that it was him since there was a five-foot radial gap around him where nobody sat. Sometimes she wondered why they were all chummy with him even after he's caused so much trouble for them, but her train of thought was always quashed by the reminder from her servants that he is adopted into the Aesir as Thor's brother, and that once one is adopted by a family, they are no longer adopted and are from then on family.

Curiously, however, their manners of dress varied heavily: some were dressed quite modernly, leather jackets and graphic tees thrown onto ripped jeans and combat boots, and others stayed true to their traditional Nordic roots. Some split the difference, with varying levels of extravagance in any direction. Hel had never even seen the manner of dress that people of Midgard had in the modern age, however, so they appeared simply as odd ceremonial garb to her.

Moxy and Foxy flanked her two sides.

"Wow, I've never seen so many buff dudes in one place before! Who are all these people, Hella?"

"Don't call me that. And, these are the head gods of the nine realms of Yggdrasil…my family."

She spat out those last two words with an ice-cold and bitter sneer to her tone, as if the very words were poison to her. Foxy pointed.

"Someone's getting up onstage. Is this a concert? I love concerts."

"If it isn't Bragi up there, it isn't a concert. Besides, I doubt they would assemble everyone for something as inane and frivolous as a musical performance."

"I dunno if that's your Braggy or whatever, but someone's walking up!"

They all quieted and watched as a man took the stage.

He was a rather plump and older man with curly blonde hair and a bit of scruff on his chin, a crown of white orchids atop his head. His eyes shone bright yellow, and though his skin was fair, it seemed to shine with splendor and radiance. He wore a green-and-brown tunic robe currently shrugged off of his shoulders with a golden rope wrapped around his waist to keep it from falling down, worn with flower-patterned green pants and a necklace of woven flowers. Since he went shirtless, despite his doughy appearance and disarming smile, numerous shallow scars were visible on his skin and gave the impression of a man who has seen many battles in his past.

Moxy nudged Hel, whispering.

"(Who's the fat dude?)"

"(Silence, you ignorant fool! Even I know that that is the leader of the Vanir, our gods of fertility, Freyr. Do not underestimate his appearance, for it's said that he will be the one to fight Surtr when Ragnarok comes.)"

"(Ragnarok would be an awesome band name.)"

"(Silence from you as well!)"

Freyr waved to the crowd before putting out his hand. In an instant, vines and roots shot out of the ground and formed in front of him, a ripe mango connected to a thick branch forming the shape of a microphone and mic stand in front of him. He tapped the mango twice, sending a sharp feedback through the crowd, and sheepishly grinned before speaking with a soft and lilting voice similar to the sort of tone an elementary school guidance counselor would have before announcing their summer play.

"Aha, sorry everyone. Still not used to, uh, working out the kinks with this whole 'technology' thing…"

He cleared his throat and stood in front of the mic stand, raising a hand.

"Hello, everyone. Um, sorry for summoning you all on such short notice. Thank you all for coming, I know you've all been busy with your affairs on Midgard. Very nice to see you, thank you, really. I hear things have been good. Bragi, I hear, has started his own black metal band."

Bragi, a musclebound man in terrifying black-and-white makeup with his arms crossed, smiled smugly and nodded among scattered applause.

"Uh, thank you, yes. Hlin, the maiden of Frigg, I hear, has, um, become a lawyer! Very nice. Took lots of…school, I'm sure. Lots of education."

Hlin, with jet-black hair and a piercing gaze, checked her watch and looked up at Freyr with an annoyed point towards it. She was missing a homicide trial to take this meeting. Freyr just weakly laughed.

"(It'll be quick, I promise. Sorry.) Um, as for me, Freyr—hi, sorry, don't think I ever…introduced myself, I'm Freyr, hi, you know me. Right?"

A voice from the crowd shouted.

"I would rather I not if you shall continue to waste our time with this, Freyr!"

There were a few bouts of laughter among the crowd, but for the most part, the response was a resounding groan. Freyr himself sighed in defeat.

"...Thank…Thank you for that, Loki. Yes. Um. Anyways, I've been living in a new-age commune with my wonderful sister Freyja and my beautiful wife Gerdr. She couldn't come here today, um, because this is a meeting among the Aesir and the Vanir, and unfortunately she is a jotunn, and yes. Very sad. I see there was a good turnout. Heimdall remains steadfast in guarding Bifrost, but so as to keep him in the loop, I asked a friend to, um, rig something up with him. Video chat. Call. Video call? Anyways. Everyone say hi to Heimdall, he's sitting, um, right over there. Say hi. Helloooo."

He pointed over to a crusty-looking tablet with a Superman carrying case propped up on one of the tables. Vaguely visible in the screen, though blurry, was the pale skin, tousled blonde hair, and woozy gold-toothed smile of Heimdall. He raised a bottle and said something intelligible before the camera suddenly panned downwards and ultimately went black. It must have fallen over. Freyr coughed awkwardly.

"(Oh dear.) Yes, well. Odin really is the one who should be talking to you all, this is his big issue. Not mine. But, he's still up in his tower trying to figure things out, so he should be down with Thor in a bit. If you've peeked into Midgard or heard from the other gods recently, you, uh. Might know why we called you all here. But, just hang tight! He'll be here in a bit. Until then, um…Bragi, would you like to come up here and play us a song?"

Bragi got up, cracked his knuckles, produced an electric guitar with three necks, and smiled fiercely as he stomped up onto the stage.

Hel swallowed, turning back to the other two as they came out of the bushes and walked to the shore of Amsvartnir, peering off into the distance to set a course for the island. Foxy stood next to her with her hands on her hips, and Moxy twirled blissfully in the air.

"It was a concert! I was right! I was right, I was right, I was riiiight~"

"Shush! We haven't got much time. Thankfully, Odin and Thor aren't here yet, and those fools will be distracted by skaldic recitations of metals as dark as night, so we must act quickly."

Moxy weakly floated to the ground, folding onto the ground like a heap of clothes.

"But, but, how are we gonna get across the lake? It's so faaaar…"

"You can float, so that shouldn't be an issue if you keep up. However, Foxy, you take my hand and keep up with me as I run. Don't slow down if you don't want to freeze to death in a pitch-black lake."

"Got it. Hold hands and run."

"Don't phrase it like that, but yes, you get the gist."

Hel put out her hand and Foxy took it in her larger gloved hand. Taking a deep breath, Hel walked to the edge of the lake and bent down, her long white hair dipping into the water slightly

as she steadily lowered her hand into it. She kept her palm dry but submerged her fingers, taking a deep breath as she murmured something in Old Norse. Gradually, blurry shadows began to rise to the surface. Moxy turned upside-down as she floated over the lake.

"Why don't you just freeze it and run across that way?"

"What an uninformed question. Have you ever tried to freeze a patch of water disconnected to any solid object?"

Moxy blushed. "Not since last week…"

"Then you must know that unless you submerge something cold into the body of water, it won't just freeze so easily. The cold will disperse too quickly. Besides, I can generate ice, but I cannot melt it. It's better to use something that's already here that will sink immediately after use."

An eyeless and rotted face turned in the water to face Moxy, who squeaked with fear and sped off towards Lyngvi as Hel snickered.

"The bodies. For all their pontification, the most bloodthirsty people in the world are among them, and this just so happens to be Thor's favorite place to dump jotunn bodies."

"Gnarly."

A harsh and distorted guitar chord and the sound of Bragi starting to growl from the pits of his lungs heralded the start of the song, and immediately, all conversation was drowned out with the sound of black metal. Hel snapped her fingers and immediately took off running in a full-on sprint, dragging Foxy Shazam along with her. With every footfall, another giant corpse bubbled up from the black depths to act as a stepping stone for the two of them, the frozen waterlogged flesh crunching and squelching under their feet as they ran. It was a long sprint, but Hel and Foxy managed to keep up the pace, with Moxy flying after them. The black metal song banged and crashed on in the background, though it grew slightly fainter as they ran across the lake. After what seemed like five straight minutes of nothing but running, the three girls finally made it to the island of Lyngvi, whereupon the corpses sank to the bottom once more. They caught their breath, Hel bent over on her knees wheezing while Foxy sprawled out on her back on the ground among the grass. The music was thankfully quieter, though it hadn't stopped. That was a good sign—Odin hadn't yet come.

After that small break, they ventured further into the island, passing through thick forests and yet more bushes of flowers and fruit until they finally came to the prison of Fenrir.

The great wolf had deep black fur and piercing red eyes, only one visible as it stared down at the three who approached it. It had to be at least the size of a commercial airplane, perhaps even larger, and each sharp tooth was the size of a full-grown man. Its ears were reared back, its gums bared as Odin's great sword stuck out handle-first from its open mouth and buried itself into the stone Fenrir had been bound to after exiting through the back of his head. He was bound vertically to the rock behind him, his arms tucked close to his chest and his legs doing much the same as they were secured by the fetter.

This fetter, shining with a glistening rainbow light and no thicker than a ribbon, was Gleipnir. The legendary chain forged by the dwarves, said to be impossible to break—at least, until Ragnarok.

The imprisoned wolf stood tall like a skyscraper among the forests, and as the three approached, the corners of his mouth pulled themselves into something like a smile. His tail, though it was bound as well, wagged its tip excitedly. Moxy excitedly twirled in the air, squealing.

"Puppyyyy!"

She buried and rubbed her face into Fenrir's sooty fur while Hel slowly approached the beast, looking up at him and making eye contact. She felt a painful twang of emotion seeing her sibling like this, having only seen him as a puppy so long ago as a child. Never allowed to leave Helheim on her own even long after Odin had officially declared the worship of the Norse gods dead "for the most part", she never got a chance to see Fenrir when he was fully grown. Small crystals budded at the corners of her eyes, which she quickly flicked away as she smiled and gingerly placed a hand on his tail, steadying its wagging.

"...Hello, brother. Do you remember me? It's Hel, your older sister. How long have they imprisoned you here, Fenrir…? For how long have you had this terrible blade thrust into your throat?"

Fenrir whined and attempted to speak, but the muscles of his throat clasped around the blade and caused him to cough and choke.

"Ah—no, never mind. Of course you can't speak, not with that thing blocking the way…but don't worry, brother. You will be free soon. I have journeyed up from the darkest depths of the worlds of Yggdrasil to release you, with the help of these two…people."

Moxy pulled her head out of the fluff.

"I take offense to that!"

"We aren't really people."

"Yes, I see that. Be thankful I didn't call you two freaks like I wanted to."

"Now you're talking."

Hel pinched her brow and sighed.

"(You see what I have to put up with, brother? Honestly.) Either way. Moxy, Foxy, produce whatever you claimed you had that could break this fetter. Hurry now!"

Foxy clapped her hands and grinned.

"Alright. Here's the fun part. Look what we got here."

In a manner that only drove the point that calling them 'people' was more than a stretch further home, Foxy Shazam put both her hands on the sides of her head before abruptly spinning it. Rather than breaking her neck, it spun like a top independently of her neck and body and raised vertically until it popped out of her neck entirely, falling into her hands. Coming out from the bottom of her head was a spiraled shaft that proved the entire thing was able to be screwed on and off at will. Placing her own head in one hand, she reached her other arm into the open cavity within her neck, reaching around until she produced a strange tool.

It resembled a small *djanbiyya* dagger, its black opal blade sleek and sharp as it curved to the side. The golden handle was ornately decorated, rich with swirling and wisping ornamentation, and the blade was carved with ancient Persian runes similar to those found on protective warding talismans. She screwed her head back in with a smooth motion and snickered, tossing the blade in her grasp.

"Boss called this the Hume Gibbetine. Stole it off some cowboy. It's in high demand. He'll probably steal it right back after this. Only need it for a quick second though."

Hel sniffed. She could feel from here that it gave off an oddly cold aura, but otherwise, it appeared unremarkable save for being quite nice to look at.

"And this piddly little thing is going to cut the great fetter?"

"That's the thing. Can't cut anything that can be cut. Look."

Foxy bent down and swiped it across the grass, the blade of the dagger pushing the blades of grass harmlessly out of the way. Standing back up, she slammed the blade into her arm, it not even breaching her clothes. She twirled it in her hand.

"The trade-off is, it can cut anything that can't. A hop, a skip, and a…"

Moving towards Gleipnir, she looped the dagger within the fetter-loop holding down Fenrir's tail and pulled it back towards her, separating it. She cut it in three more places, freeing his legs, arms, and chest, and it only took a few seconds before the entire thing was in pieces. Foxy quickly gathered up the shining pieces, but the wolf remained bound to the rock so long as that sword was still in his mouth.

"I got it!"

That was a simple fix, however, as Moxy raised into the air and swirled around, her dress shrouding her entire body until she emerged in the shape of a giant hand. Gripping its fingers dotted with eyes around the handle, she tugged once, twice, three times, before it finally slid out of the rock and fell to the floor. She transformed back into her usual self, descending to Hel with a proud expression. Hel just boggled at the two of them, her jaw hanging open.

"...What in Odin's name *are* you two?"

"Tough question! I thiiiink, I think I think I think…that you put it best earlier!"

"Freaks."

"Yeah, we're freaks!"

"(Mental note. Tell father about this next time we meet.)"

Fenrir fell to the ground with a resounding *thump,* his paws making contact with terra firma for the first time in centuries. At first he laid prone on the ground, but slowly rose to his full height as he coughed, his bony back arching with each hack until he sat and his blood-red eyes settled on his sister. With the sword out of his throat, he began to speak, and the voice that came out was smooth as honey and twice as sophisticated.

"Thank you for freeing me, dear sister…and you too, small ones. Terribly sorry about the awful noises that came out of me earlier, I had something caught in my throat, as you could see. You have my gratitude, and—"

He was interrupted by Hel, who had stepped forward and wrapped her arms around one of Fenrir's legs, embracing it in a hug with her face buried in his fur. Small snowflakes could be seen falling around her, but Fenrir gently wriggled his leg with an embarrassed smile.

"Come now, sister, it's really only been a few thousand years or so, hasn't it? No need to get so choked up seeing me after all this time. You don't see me crying, do you? Besides, you're freezing my fur."

"Sorry."

She stepped away, sniffling as she regained her composure and Fenrir licked the frozen area. Moxy waved her hands excitedly and swirled around the wolf like an especially annoying fly.

"Ooooh my gosh! Hi puppy! Hi! I'm Moxy Fruvous! That one down there is Foxy Shazam! She's my bestest friend in all the world!"

Foxy raised a hand.

"Yo."

The great wolf bowed his head.

"Very nice to meet you two, Ms. Fruvous, Ms. Shazam. However, sister, I do wonder what the purpose of this whole exercise is? You somehow managed to break Gleipnir, that which even I couldn't break and against which I struggled every day…but it is long before Ragnarok, as you know."

Hel opened her mouth to speak, but there was a sudden roaring on the horizon. Moxy turned to where the sound was coming from, and like a cat, her whole body seemed to fluff up—even the non-biological parts, whichever those were—as she flew down to Hel.

"Bad news! Bad news bears! All those people who were at the concert are coming after us!"

"Shit, then they must have noticed him getting free!"

Kicking off the ground, Hel leapt high into the air and landed firmly on Fenrir's back, Moxy floating to sit behind her and Foxy doing something similar to an Italian plumber's triple-jump to land behind her partner, whose waist she placed her hands on for stability. Hel gripped onto her brother's fur and turned around.

Over the horizon, she could see what Moxy had warned her about: all the Aesir in all their glory atop their mounts and with their families, charging through the air as though it were simply another path in the dirt. The cavalry was led by none other than Freyr himself, riding upon his boar-steed Gullinbursti as forged by the Dwarves long ago. Its golden fur shone in the light of the sun, and it effortlessly sprinted through the air as Freyr pointed to the group and shouted orders to the army behind him. Though small, their power was incomprehensible—especially compared to measly little Hel. She at least couldn't see Odin or Thor among them…though Loki also appeared absent.

She whipped back around and called to her brother.

"Run! Run as far as you can, and don't stop even if you reach the edge of Asgard!"

"That is *right* in my ear, sister, but I shall do as you command! Anything for my freedom!"

With that, the building-sized wolf took off running.

~

A short while earlier, Odin the All-Father sat in his study within the high tower of Hlidskjalf.

Odin was a burly man with the wizened look of a man who seemed to know the very history of the world—and with his ardent thirst for knowledge, perhaps he soon would. Lines like aged tree bark covered his face, and a narrow nose hung like a sword above a mouth hidden beneath a long and white wisping beard which would have fallen to the floor had he not slung it over his shoulder and wrapped it around his beard in the same manner as a scarf. Though long since grayed, small flecks of red could be seen where its original luster laid. A single narrow green eye shone from under a shaggy white eyebrow, and over where his right eye would be, a leather eyepatch inscribed with the symbol for the *Ægishjalmir* was instead slung. Sparse white hair dotted his head, though he was not fully bald just yet, and his hands were coarse and spotted with liver-spots but dextrous nonetheless.

He sat dressed in a simple grey tunic lined with black feather-like designs with black pants tucked into high leather boots, along with a golden amulet around his neck and the golden ring Draupnir on his left ring finger. Small bushels of raven feathers stuck out from the back of his shirt collar and the cuffs of his boots. For the highest of all the Aesir, perhaps his outfit would have been seen as sparse, but he was so well-known for his status as the one to whom all battles were given, the Goth of the Slain, the Smith of Battle, that wearing his armor when he was simply in his study would be a show of weakness.

Odin hunched over his great spruce table overflowing with books and tomes, their pages yellowed and cracking from severe age-related degradation as compared to their owner, and hummed in deep contemplation as he stroked his beard. His two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, sat atop his shoulders. Huginn was a sleek and sharp-beaked thing, while Muninn was pudgier and with more down than usual, and they were still the beloved pets and companions of the Known and Welcome One. They peered over his shoulders curiously as he fiddled with what he had in his old hands.

It was a small rectangular object, its body sleek as if carved from some ornate marble, but its backside was forged from a polished metal and a black onyx rectangle was inset within the front. Beneath that rectangle was a circle inscribed with runes Odin had seen before in paintings and on other unusual relics, and along the edge of the object were divots, their insides decorated with shining strips of what could be brass or gold. One divot was long and slim, the other circular.

A grumble of confusion emerged from his mouth.

“Huginn…remind this old fool, where did you find this peculiar item?”

Huginn spoke smoothly and calmly, though it retained the raspy quality of a raven’s call.

“Where the people of Midgard place their refuse, High One.”

Muninn had a bit more of a casual tone, in contrast.

“It was the dump, right?”

“Yes, I believe it was colloquially the dump.”

“We found it in the dump.”

Odin harrumphed and turned the object around in his hands.

"It appears to be arcane in nature, much like some of the other objects I have had you recover. You recall when we came across that large box with a sliding tray within it, correct? Between us all, we deduced that it must have taken some sort of disc-shaped relic, and thus when we later found one such relic later that month—inscribed with the name of its owner, 'Ace Ventura: Pet Detective'—we were positively ecstatic! You do remember that, don't you, Huginn, Muninn?"

"Yes, High One, I remember it quite fondly."

"Aaaaaalrighty then!"

Muninn struck a pose and clicked his beak proudly.

"No reference-quoting before the All-Father, Muninn!"

"Sorry, sorry. I really liked it. His escapades were so…comedic!"

"Yes, very comedic."

"Extremely so!"

"I hope many skalds told of his escapades as pet detective."

"Me as well!"

Odin experimentally prodded the black rectangle, trying to see if another tray would emerge.

"...Could it be yet another scrying artifact? Muninn, did you see any common folk with items such as this?"

"Many such, High One, but none that appeared as this one did."

"They were black!"

"Some black, some red, some in many colors."

"One was pink and had images of horses on it!"

"The horses frightened us."

"Yes, very frightening!"

"We ran."

"Flew!"

"Yes, we flew away."

Odin grunted in acknowledgement, not wanting the two of them to keep prattling on forever, and pressed the center of the circle experimentally. If this was inscribed with the same runes he had seen on that playback artifact, then…

To his surprise, the black onyx screen suddenly shone with a bright blue light before displaying the image of an odd yellow folder. He and the ravens gasped.

"It lives!"

"Avert your eyes, All-Father. It could prove dangerous."

"What if it has a kill-ravens curse put on it?!"

"You believe everything has a kill-ravens curse put on it."

"And?!"

"It has never happened."

"But it might!"

"I doubt it will."

"Quiet, the two of you. If I managed to get this thing working by placing my thumb in the center, then maybe if I press it again…"

He moved to press the center of the circle again, but before he could see the result of his actions, the door slammed open.

"Father!"

Standing in the doorway and taking it up almost entirely was Odin's son Thor, the god of thunder. He was a massive and burly man built like a brick wall, his bushy red beard flowing out over his aquiline nose and fierce green eyes. His sturdy body was sculpted like a strongman's, a thickly-padded leather set of armor complete with chest-guard and knee-pads covering him thoroughly, and his flowing red hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

Odin would have practically had a heart attack if he weren't a god, fumbling with the object in his hands as Huginn and Muninn fluttered off to their cages. He finally managed to clasp it in both hands, hunched over and looking at his son.

"T-Thor! Really, son, I am the king of the Aesir, the least you could do is knock before you enter my study!"

"Apologies, father, but do you not remember? The meeting you called for the gods is ready. Freyr has been forced to blast that god-awful music of Bragi's simply to pass the time, and—what are you doing up here? Messing around with another one of your discoveries?"

Odin knitted his brows in reminiscence before recalling the meeting he had ordered and rising from his seat.

"Ah. Yes, thank you for reminding me, Thor. I could have done without the sudden entrance…and indeed, as you so eloquently put it, I am messing around with one of my discoveries. Perhaps you could make sense of it? Here."

Without asking, Odin dropped the item in Thor's bulky hand. He held it up with two fingers, thoroughly unimpressed as he looked to him.

"...Father, this is an iPod. It plays music. The people of Midgard haven't used them in years."

"Is that so? Incredible! What music is it able to play? Does it have the *Ynglingatal?"*

"It has…'Songs of Innocence', by U2."

"Ahhh, hymns of a bygone era…"

Thor tossed it into the pile of other assorted appliances that had accumulated in the corner of his father's room, including a DVD player with the aforementioned disc of Ace Ventura propped up next to it, a blender, a reading tablet, a Tamagotchi, and the upper half of an electric credit card reader with someone's signature frozen on it. He had assumed it was the property of 'Omnmng' and let it be. Regardless, Thor marched over to the window and gestured to it with a clenched fist.

"Do you not hear the hideous racket outside? Look! Turn those senile eyes of yours out of this watchtower of safety you've built for yourself!"

Sighing at his hot-headed son, Odin slowly got up and wandered over to the window, looking out of it at the concert below. Bragi was on his knees practically playing the guitar with his teeth,

while the audience looked on. Some vaguely tried to dance despite the lack of a rhythm, and Loki had taken to picking up a branch from the nearby bushes and strumming it like a guitar to mock him. He shook his head.

"...Hmph. Your insults will not move me, Thor. This is an issue for the people of Midgard, not us Aesir, but as many of our kin have taken to staying on Midgard as of late…I feel as though it is important to address these concerns of theirs, if for no other reason than that they will continuously pester me otherwise."

Odin sighed and rubbed his working eye, yawning.

"I suppose I should go and stop the performance, give everybody my two cents, and send them on their way. Really, it was more Frigg's idea…she was the one that told me, 'If you don't say something about this issue, you'll be blamed for your inaction when things get too bad', and I still wonder, why should I? Us gods are strong enough to handle any interloper that should attack us or these nine realms."

"And what of the people of Midgard, father? Would you rather let them be slaughtered by forces they cannot comprehend, simply because those forces do not affect you? Is it not the responsibility of the strong to defend the weak?"

"If the weak do not show respect to the strong, we are obligated to nothing. I have spent my time gathering what information I can of their culture…but I refuse to associate with them. I have come to realize that there is no difference between those who venerated us and those who overwrote our worshippers with their monotheistic nonsense. They are but mortals. Fickle, hateful, paranoid mortals."

Thor lowered his fists and looked on at Odin frustratedly.

"Father…"

"Do you not remember what happened only a scant couple of decades ago, Thor? We were vilified. Those of us who chose to live peacefully on Earth were evicted, persecuted, despised…simply for our power. I believe, if they should show defiance towards those who are stronger than them, then they should not expect our aid. Do not bite the hand that feeds you. Some of the Aesir and Vanir may have taken a liking to mortal life, but I will always remain steadfast in my beliefs. I am surprised you do not share in my thoughts, Thor."

The bulky red-bearded man shifted uncomfortably as he crossed his arms and looked out to the sky.

"...True, the mortals have not treated us kindly. They plaster mockeries of our faces on their movies and television shows, they merchandise us and place us on shoes and drink cups, and yet they are terrified of us. They hail us as heroes right up until we show proof of our strength, then we are shunned out of fear. I do not hate the mortals—"

"Of course, neither do I. I only speak frankly of how I regard them."

"—but I choose to remain here training for Ragnarok and continuing to fend off the jotunn hordes because my duty is to you, father, and not them."

"That's a good boy. I raised you well, Thor. I raised you well compared to your—our—family of hooligans…Which, speaking of, I should probably get down there and—"

As he turned to exit the tower, his eyes happened to gloss over the lake visible a distance away from Hlidskjalf tower. The watchtower itself was impossibly tall, supposedly able to not only see all of Asgard, but all of the nine realms…though that last part was more exaggeration than fact nowadays. His eyesight isn't exactly doing him any favors either, cataracts are much more of a drag when you've only got one eye left, after all. Far off, deep within the black depths of Amsvartnir…he saw the great wolf Fenrir fall from his bindings. Thor saw the same thing, and though the rest of the crowd was distracted by the music and unable to see past the trees, the two of them could see exactly what happened.

Thor's jaw dropped.

"Oh, *shit."*

Odin nodded solemnly.

Oh shit, indeed.

~

Once Odin had grabbed his spear, Gungnir, and Thor had summoned the short-handled Mjolnir to his hand with a mighty call, the two of them practically fell down the stairs of the watchtower out to Idavollr, Thor sprinting down the path and calling out for the music to stop with a mighty call as Odin hobbled behind him. Everyone quieted and turned to him, even Bragi and Loki, and they listened as Odin raised his spear and spoke.

"Aesir! Vanir! People of Asgard! The great fetter, Gleipnir, has broken. Somehow, Fenrir has escaped!"

Immediately, cries went out among the people, and the gods started panicking. Could Ragnarok be happening already? They weren't ready! They had made friends, they had jobs, they couldn't rightly all be killed in their prophesied apocalypse now! Not only that, but there had been no other signs: the three roosters had not crowed to signify its coming, the frost-jotunn Hrym and fire-jotunn Surtr had not been sighted, and Jormungandr had not thrashed! Heimdall, having since righted his camera, blindly groped for his sounding-horn, though he seemed to have misplaced it among all the empty bottles. Thor called for silence to let his father speak.

"However, steady yourselves. The signs of Ragnarok have not come. This is not the end. This…somehow, this is the work of outside involvement. Intruders have come and somehow allowed Fenrir to escape. We cannot let them go! Freyr!"

He pointed Gungnir at Freyr, who had gone as white as a sheet and was trembling, his hand at his side trying to grasp at a sword he had long since given up, and shook violently at the sudden pointing.

"M-Me?!"

"With your golden boar Gullinbursti, lead the charge against Fenrir!"

"But, um, ah, sir—Odin! All-Father, yes, er, wouldn't—wouldn't *you* be more suited to, um, leading the, uh, charge?"

“I grow old and weary, and my death is prophesied at the jaws of Fenrir. I choose not to take such a risk immediately, if even one more event from the *volva’s* tellings is to come true. Lead our people on to re-bind Fenrir somehow, and we shall choose our next course of action! I’m counting on you.”

Thor nodded. “We all are, Freyr.”

Swallowing his apprehensions, Freyr nodded back and whistled for his trusty boar.

~

Hel, Moxy, and Foxy huddled together on top of Fenrir with the cool wind blowing past all of them. Hel’s ice-white hair blowing back behind her as she gripped the sooty fur of her brother in both hands. With every stride, Fenrir crossed the length of a football field, trampling trees and berry bushes, crashing through houses and palaces—though every time he did so, he shouted an “Apologies for that!” behind him. Moxy’s body fluttered behind her as she held onto her partner, and the two of them laughed as though their very lives weren’t in danger were they caught.

She looked back behind the beast and beheld the legion of gods chasing after her, either flying on their own or atop their own litany of steeds and vehicles, at least three or four small boats soaring through the air, Odin atop his eight-legged steed Sleipnir, and of course Freyr leading the charge. Tyr the one-handed war-god pointed a sword at the wolf and let out a fearsome war cry. Hel grimaced and looked back to her brother.

“Shit, they’re gaining on us! Brother, can’t you go any faster?!”

Fenrir looked back up at her.

“I do hope you don’t think me rude for saying this, sister, but with all due respect, I have been chained to a rock for the past 1500 years. You should be glad I’m able to run at all with how my muscles have atrophied.”

“F-Fair point! Just, keep running! Keep running until your legs give out or you reach the end of Asgard!”

Foxy perked up and tilted to the side.

“End of Asgard?”

“Yes, the end of Asgard, you twit! How do you think we got here?! These worlds are of a finite space, they have edges and they have boundaries! Every fruit of Yggdrasil has a skin separating it from both the outside world and its other fruits!”

She grinned, showing off more teeth than would be normal or acceptable.

“I got an idea. Go off the edge.”

Moxy giggled. “Oooooh, I think I know what she’s thinkiiing~! We’re so in sync like that! But yeah, head to the edge and go straight off! We’ll take care of it from here!”

“Purposefully?! Are you mad?!”

“Yup. Also, duck.”

A shining golden blade was flung from the mob, Odin’s trusty dwarf-forged spear Gungnir. It was carved with runes on its tip and said to never miss its mark, and that he would face the

hound Fenrir with it during Ragnarok…however, it was also said that he would have the Einherjar, the valiant army of those who fell bravely in battle, on his side.

Fenrir grit his teeth, wincing for impact, but the spear simply bounced off of his impenetrable hide, falling to the ground. Far behind them, they could hear Odin swearing in old Nordic and lowering Sleipnir to pick it up, and Fenrir looked up at his riders.

“Unless you have a better plan that doesn’t involve me collapsing from exhaustion or falling until I knock my head on the roots of Yggdrasil, I would advise trusting these two.”

Hel opened her mouth to interject, but turned around to see Thor throwing his hammer at them. Mjolnir soared straight towards them, but she managed to duck just in time. The weapon seemed to go straight through Moxy, and Foxy simply ducked her entire head into her body like a turtle, but once it returned back to Thor, she realized that she didn't really have a better option. Plus, their harebrain plans had worked to her advantage once before, so why wouldn’t they again?

…Well, she could come up with a lot of answers to that, but she didn't have time to mull it over while she was being chased by numerous angry gods. She groaned.

“Fine! Whatever! Fenrir, head to the nearest edge and jump off as far as you can!”

“Right!”

Making a harsh left, he sprinted faster and faster. The wind whipped around them, the feeling resembling sitting on top of a bullet train, and behind them Hel could see the army growing closer and closer as they sped up after them. Thor came to the front of the pack, riding in his chariot driven by the two goats Tanngrisnir and Tanngnjostr, with a look of fury on his face as lightning sparked from his eyes and his hands. Mjolnir shone with a shuddering white cloud of electricity, and he bellowed from the center of his chest.

“This time, I will not miss!”

She gulped and whipped back around.

“Go, go, go go go go!”

The cliff was approaching fast, Fenrir striding and striding, pushing through tree after house after lake, and Thor reared back with his hammer, clenching it in his fists, imbuing it with all the godly force he could, and it shot forward with a roaring thunderclap as lightning shot across the sky, Hel clenching her eyes as tight as they could and praying, *praying*, though she didn't know who to, that it wouldn’t hit her and would only…

There was a sudden drop as Fenrir reached the edge and leapt off. Hel felt the hairs on the top of her scalp stand up as the electricity from Mjolnir sparked overhead…but it never hit. It only grazed against the top of her head, burning some hairs off but never once touching the flesh. Moxy reached up to touch it as it passed by, but it passed through her just as it did earlier, and Foxy opened her mouth as a camera flash came out.

Thor shouted in rage as Mjolnir returned to him, the flying army dive-bombing towards Fenrir as he fell down, down, down. The land-mass of Asgard passed by them, dirt and stone giving way to lava, then sky, then blackness, and then…wood. Lots and lots of wood. The bark of Yggdrasil was everywhere, the in-between of the nine realms. Hel and the others had crawled

through these areas briefly to get to Asgard in the first place, but now they had no end goal. Fenrir could actually run vertically down the bark, then horizontally, then in a loop, then seemingly in circles. Hel shouted back to the two other girls.

"Now would be a *really great time* to tell me what you two have in mind!"

"Oh yeah! Foxy, would you do the honors?"

"You know it."

With a wry smile, she took out the black opal blade she had used before to cut Gleipnir, twirling it in her hand.

"Cuts anything that can't be cut. Including the fabric of space-time."

Jamming the blade into the air, part of the blade disappeared as if it truly did just sink into something solid. As they ran, the djanbiyya ripped a hole in space-time with a ripping sound unlike any that the others had ever heard—it was impossibly loud and discordant, even momentarily stunning the cavalry chasing after them, and it elicited such a strong and vehement sense of *wrongness* in their hearts. Something was happening that was going against all laws and rules that they had believed the universe to follow, and even if for some it worked to their advantages and for others it hindered them, something deep in their hearts seized in terror.

The gash that opened crackled with a colorless electricity, opening to a void of…nothing. It was not blackness, it was not white, it was the absence of anything. The air itself peeled back as if it were indeed fabric, and Hel (who had also admittedly been shaken by the development) pointed to the hole.

"In there, Fenrir!"

"Understood!"

Making a sharp U-turn in his course, he dove into the deep hole.

Above them, the gash sealed with a hateful hiss and the crackling of otherworldly electricity.

~

Once they had surmised that they had been outfoxed (or rather, out-wolved) by their enemies, the gods returned to Idavollr, defeated. They gathered on the benches where they had been sitting earlier and sat with their heads in their hands, some weeping, others frozen trying to process what had happened. Freyr was nearly on the verge of tears blaming himself for not paying enough attention, with Bragi comforting him. Odin sat consumed by thought as he fed Sleipnir and dug his spear into the ground, stroking his long beard.

Thor, meanwhile, had stomped off to find Loki—who had shapeshifted into a crow to try and preemptively get away the second he saw Fenrir escaped—and returned grabbing the man by the throat.

He was a wiry and quite punchable young man with a red fabric cap laid askew atop a head of wavy golden hair, wide orange eyes flanking an aquiline nose and a litany of dot-like scars over and below his lips, just above a golden beard that curled outwards. He was wearing very simple clothes—little more than the muddied tunic, pants, and boots of a peasant. In comparison

to his adoptive brother Thor, he was downright puny, but he was in good shape nonetheless. Thor had his hand clasped around Loki's throat, staring down at him with righteous fury in his eyes. The air around him crackled with lightning as he breathed heavily.

"Loki…*Loki…*tell me. You had something to do with this, don't you?! You struck some deal with the Dwarves to make Gleipnir faulty! Atop your accursed wolf-son, we saw your witch of a daughter, Hel! We allowed your conjugal visits because we foolishly pitied you, *you*, who killed Baldr and who would not weep for him, who cut off my wife's hair, who stole from Freyja and who has been nothing but an utter *nuisance* for all of us from the moment you were brought into our family! I knew we should have left you in that cave until Ragnarok! *I ought to kill you where you stand!"*

He put out his hand, and Mjolnir flew into it as he raised it up. Loki choked and put his hands up, forcing a smile.

"Ghack—! Thor, Thor! Temper! We've—gah, talked about this…! No choking family until after dinner-time!"

"You have three seconds before I cave your skull in."

"Y-You wouldn't."

Thor grimaced, and Mjolnir sparked with another thunderclap.

"One…"

"A-Alright, alright, you've convinced me! Goodness. Didn't anyone ever tell you violence doesn't solve all your problems? I-I had nothing to do with this whole affair! Does it make me happy to see my daughter and son having some proper bonding time and causing you lot oodles of stress? Yes, absolutely, but I had no role in it!"

Thor roared.

"Liar! You speak to save your own hide! This was the last straw, Loki. I believe I speak for all the Aesir when I say that we have put up with too much from you, for too long. Two."

"But—But we're family!"

"Family by word only."

"Thor!"

Odin raised his spear as he marched towards the two of them, bringing Sleipnir along with them. His son stopped and looked to him, and then to the crowd of gods who looked on with varied expressions. Some were expectant, excited to see Loki paint the grass beneath him a brilliant reddish-pink, but others were hesitant and ready to look away. Freyr had his hands over his eyes, but peeked through his fingers. The All-Father cleared his throat.

"Ahem. My son and companion, calm yourself. This is…indeed, a very grave issue. Fenrir has come free, and Hel has broke loose, but for the time being, I believe we are safe. For Surtr has not come, the Fimbulwinter has not occurred on Midgard, and there is no crowing of the three roosters. Ragnarok has not come…this is something different. An outside force that has upended what we have expected for millennia."

Thor growled.

“But, for what reason? With Loki, I can understand his feeble mind’s motive: he gets joy out of our suffering. Something is deeply wrong with him.”

“Hrrk—love you too…”

“Loki was not the cause of this. Tricksy as he is, we always become wise to his cunning sooner or later. He remained at the concert mocking Bragi even before Fenrir fell…and really, son, do you think Loki would want to miss the looks on our faces when we found out Fenrir escaped?”

Thor’s gaze turned to the other without moving his head, but turned away as soon as he saw Loki’s knowing grin. He let go of his neck, dropping Loki to the ground as he doubled over and coughed.

“Fine then. But if I see that you had any part of this, I’m turning you into *wallenbergare.”*

Loki wheezed and coughed. “F-Fantastic…I’ve always wanted to die being served up on a silver platter…”

The All-Father furrowed his brow as his expression grew sinister.

“No…judging from the appearances of those two who accompanied them, this is the work of the same group who I gathered this assembly in the first place to talk about. Surreal and nonsensical creatures that go against what we know and what we have seen in the universe…I have seen them taking the people of Midgard, and some who have stolen the precious objects of the *Amerikener.* They have not showed themselves so clearly until recently, and never so boldly. This is a problem beyond our comprehension, Aesir…but thankfully, it appears to remain consolidated to the nine realms. With some confidence, I am sure that we can—”

Suddenly, there was a burst of light in the open field, and with a heavenly choir, a young man appeared.

He was quite dark-skinned, with tightly-curled black hair that clung close to his head and cheery ice-blue eyes did nothing to diminish the effect of his shining and pure-white smile, the corners forced upwards in a customer-service grin. A golden halo shone over his head, and four wings sprouted from his back, complementing his white-robed body. He held a clipboard covered in sketches and writing in a language unintelligible to the Norse gods in one hand, and an ethereal golden pen in the other.

The archangel looked around to the others.

“Hello! Hi, sorry if I’m…interrupting anything. Mind if I speak with you all for a bit?”

The Aesir were stunned, looking between one another in utter confusion—even Loki and Thor had been shocked into silence. Odin was wiser, however, and nodded.

“Speak, Archangel Phanuel.”

Phanuel gasped, stepping forwards and putting out a hand with a genuine grin.

“You remember me! Heyyy, that’s great, I’m glad you still know me from all those years ago at the Divine Synod! How’re things going, Wuotan?”

“I go by Odin now, Archangel.”

“Wonderful.” He turned to the others. “And, just so you guys aren’t out of the loop: Hi! I’m Archangel Phanuel, spokesperson and personal speaker for the Lord Almighty, very nice to meet

you all. But, I'm actually here to talk about a very, very serious thing that He has his eye on currently, so I have to speak to Wuotan for a bit now, if that's alright. We good?"

He gave a thumbs-up, and the gods gave a collective noncommittal shrug. Phaneul grinned.

"Yeaaaah."

The archangel clapped his hands and turned back around to Odin.

"But! But but but. Big thing. Numero uno concern. Have you recently seen any sort of…strange creatures that didn't fit in with your pagan monsters? Inorganic and surreal, based on modern conceptions and pieces of pop culture that don't fit with the old ways?"

"Yes. Two of them ran away with our monster dog and our leader of the underworld."

Phanuel faltered for a bit, but coughed into his fist and returned to his fake smile.

"Aw, shucks, that sounds real tough! Well, look, can you describe them to me? The big man upstairs is really keeping an eye on this whole thing, you know, and he wants to know what he's dealing with."

"Is your heathen God not all-knowing and all-powerful? I don't see why…wait, you are aware of these creatures as well?"

He held his clipboard in front of his chest.

"Oh yes, very aware."

"And you did not think to fix the problem before it caused us such strife and stress, Archangel?!"

Phanuel's smile grew a bit wider.

"Sir, we're trying as hard as we can to address the issue, and being rude will not make things go faster. And just so you know…"

His expression became serious in the blink of an eye.

"This 'problem' is much bigger than any of you know."

CHAPTER 9: Back In The USA

"Do you serve chocolate mojitos here?"

The Prince looked up from his laminated menu at the waitress, a young woman with olive skin and dark-brown hair shrouding two keratinous horns who was holding her notepad disinterestedly.

"...'Scuse me?"

"Chocolate mojitos, dear. You know, a mojito with creme de cacao in it? Do you sell them here?"

The waitress stared at him, and there was a beat of silence that was filled by a hobgoblin and a balding man in a jersey arguing with liquor-soaked breath over which sports team would win the Super Bowl next year. The hobgoblin insisted the Middle Carolina Minutemen would win, and the balding man argued in favor of the North Tacoma Isotopes.

"...No. No, we don't serve it."

"But, it says here you do serve mojitos, don't you? I'm reading this right, right, it says mojito-dash-twelve-ninety-nine."

"Yes, we serve mojitos."

"Then, I dunno, pour some bloomin' chocolate syrup in the thing! It isn't that hard to add chocolate!"

There was a groan from the table, and the waitress rolled her eyes.

"I'll see what they can do."

"Perfect, thank you, love."

She turned to the others.

"And for you two?"

Rodion sat with his thumbs rubbing his temples and his curled fingers covering his eyes, nursing a migraine. He looked up at the waitress.

"...Nothing for me. Actually, water. Ice water."

"Mhmm. And you, sir?"

Fionn just sat rocking in his seat and gnawing on his thumb enough for it to bleed, silent. The Prince laughed and flippantly waved a hand.

"Oh, he's good too. That'll be all for us, thanks."

She nodded and walked away, just in time for The Prince to watch the hobgoblin drunkenly knock out the bald guy with a single punch, spitting on his unconscious body before proudly declaring that the Middle Carolina Minutemen are the best damn football team in the contiguous United States, and then asking the bartender what his favorite team was. He said he was more of a baseball person, and meekly returned to cleaning his glass.

Good ol' Washington D.C. was the place to be.

The Prince of Fuck All, Rodion Nikolayev, and Fionn mac Cumhaill had come down from their psychedelic bicycle ride and arrived smack in the center of the National Mall, and while the

Prince got over the effects quite quickly on account of having done it numerous times before, Rodi and Fionn weren't so lucky. Rodi got questioned by a police officer for puking in the grass, and Fionn was so overwhelmed by the experience that he hadn't said a word since they arrived.

Not wanting to waste any time, however, The Prince happily took their hands and dragged them along to the nearest clothing store to get them some proper blending-in clothes. No sense in seeing what's up in a museum than to act like tourists, right?

The Prince didn't buy any clothes himself, however, instead producing from his coat a Union Jack-patterned baseball cap, a Union Jack-patterned women's blouse, deep green jeans with a metal wallet chain, and a set of open-toed sandals. His mascara, lipstick, and nails were all painted red, white, and blue for the occasion, though whether he was trying to play up his supposed British heritage or blend in with the patriotism of the city was a point of contention.

Rodion, still reeling from the light-show of colors and sounds and sensations he had gone through, let The Prince pick out his clothes. It was clearly a bad choice, as he ended up with a very tacky suede faux-Native American jacket decorated with tassels and various dull shades of red and blue in all manner of totem-pole patterns that barely fit his large frame, the front left open to show a kitschy (read: extremely cheaply made) red tourist shirt reading 'WASHINGTON D.C.: HOME OF THE PRESIDENT!!'. He ended up wearing the audacious getup with a pair of ripped jeans and some simple Nike sneakers…along with a Stetson cowboy hat. Forget fitting in and looking like a tourist, he looked like an alien trying to appear American when their only exposure to the country is a collection of middle-school productions of 'Oklahoma!'. He felt extremely stupid-looking, and frankly didn't trust The Prince when he said that his original clothes were safely tucked away in the coat, but he didn't have the spoons to object at the moment.

Fionn almost got new clothes, but every time The Prince reached to take his armor off, he slapped his hand away. So, with his original chain-mail and cloak he remained. He still didn't say a word, but his eyes darted harshly around as he nibbled on his thumb. It seemed that the hustle and bustle of the big city, people milling about and the commotion of cars all around them, was a bit too much for the boy who had spent the last couple millennia sleeping in a cave.

After finishing up their clothes-shopping, The Prince agreed that everyone was thirsty, and decided to treat them all to drinks at the nearest bar to them. It was a dingy place called 'Mr. Mojo Rising', but despite the groovy 70s rock-inspired name, the inside was essentially what you would expect from a hole-in-the-wall bar. The most interesting things about it was that there was a plaque on the wall denoting where J. Edgar Hoover had once supposedly pissed on the wall in a drunken haze, and there was a television mounted above the bar.

Eventually, their drinks came, and The Prince eyed his mojito suspiciously.

It was a Hershey's bar bobbing sadly in the middle of a perfectly-made mojito. Frankly, he would have complained, but he was dying for a drink, so he stirred it with his nail until it turned a sickly greenish-brown and took a solid sip. Rodion took a sip of water and found that it helped his migraine a bit, so he gulped the rest of it down as he took off his dumbass cowboy hat and ran his hand through his hair, sighing.

“Alright. So. Our lead is museum here in Washington D.C., but what else? There are so many museums here. Museum of Natural History, International Museum of Divine Intervention, Library of Congress, Madame Tussaud’s Mutter Museum, Sexual Liberation Center for the Perverted Arts…”

“You’re keen on museums, aren’t you, Rodi? For a Russian, I wouldn’t have expected you to know so much ‘bout Washy Deesee.”

Rodi stammered for a bit before clearing his throat.

“...I had…friend, long while ago. Very interested in American culture, very ‘keen’, as you said, on museums and such. E-Er, regardless, what do we do now?”

“Simple! We ask around about any high-profile thefts that have happened recently…oooor, we make use of one of the greatest inventions of our bona modern age, and look it up on the internet! You got a phone, Rodi?”

He weakly shook his head. No phone. Briefly, The Prince turned to Fionn and started to open his mouth, but closed it again. Definitely no phone. He sighed to himself. Must he always be the one who’s hip to the javabean nowadays? Digging into his coat, he produced a glittery pink cell phone, turning it on with a small jingle as he sipped his drink. Holding it up, he waved it around as though he were trying to somehow have it make contact with the ‘wi-fi waves’ in the air, but to no avail. He sucked on his cheek.

“Damn, no data.”

“That is odd. We are in crowded space, yes?”

“Well, yes, but do you really think I’m paying for a separate data plan for every phone I use? I have like fifty of these bleedin’ things.”

He shook his sleeve and twelve separate cell phones fell out onto the table.

“Can’t trace you if you throw away your phone every time you use it. On that, you wouldn’t mind if we took a detour to the nearest incinerator after this, would you? Anyway, if I can’t get a signal, I’ll have to get one some other way…and luck-ee for you, I happen to have such a way!”

Reaching into his coat once more, The Prince produced something that almost looked like a miniature satellite mixed with a wi-fi router, plugging one of the many wires that spindled out from its rectangular core into the headphone jack of the phone and dipping a finger in his mouth before running it along the rim of the dish that sprouted from the top. He grinned and fiddled with a few knobs, looking at Rodi and meeting his bewildered expression with smug satisfaction.

“Ha, I know that confused look on your eek all too well by now, darling—you wanna know how it works, right? Well, this here is the—”

“The lightning box.”

“Scusi?”

Fionn had turned to look to the bar, and pointed at the ceiling-mounted television as he healed his bloody thumb.

“The box with the people in it…it speaks of the theft.”

“Ah—Cumhaill is right! There is big news story about it playing on television right now, look!”

The Prince looked at the television before angrily swatting the satellite-box and phone off of the table with a loud crash, the whole thing breaking to pieces as he crossed his arms and pouted.

On the television, there was a skeleton woman with red pupils in her eye sockets wearing a smart three-piece blue suit and a brunette wig. She sat with her bony hands clasped around a stack of papers. The ticker displayed a headline from 'NPBA NEWS', its logo a green pair of glasses with a single eye above them as the anchorwoman spoke.

"Confusion escalates across the nation as a series of mysterious thefts have wracked the nation. Among other historical artifacts, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History was hit the hardest by the odd string of crimes, as the Hope Diamond, one of the most valuable gems in the modern world, has been stolen from its case in the middle of last night."

An image of the Hope Diamond in all its shimmering blue radiance appeared on-screen, followed by a placeholder image of a silhouette with a question mark in its head.

"The reclusive Sant Director Edward Williams of the Museum of Natural History declined to comment in person, instead writing in a letter given to the press that the incident was 'not preferable' and that they 'politely ask the criminals to kindly return the object in its original state'. The incident shares elements with similar robberies that have occurred in the area, all within high-profile government establishments and conducted by beings that have not been identified at this time, but who generally do not resemble any regular citizen."

Another image, this time of another skeleton—neurotic-looking, with sharp teeth and blue pupils—appeared. It appeared to be a candid photo, considering his face was frozen in an expression of terror.

"The incident was reported by night-shift security guard Eli Youngband, who reported it to the Department of Unexplainable Occurrences after notifying the police. Their best selection of idiosyncratic great detectives are on the case as we speak. In other news, President Baudelaire has…"

The Prince stopped listening at that point and stood up, chugging the rest of his 'chocolate mojito' and slamming the glass down on the table with a satisfied sigh.

"Alright then! We've got our target, we've got our crime scene—it's time to investigate! Rodi, Blondie, you ready to mosey on out of here and see what we can do?"

"See what we can do? Prince, Hope Diamond is already stolen. What *are* we able to do?"

He grinned cunningly and rubbed his hands together, chortling.

"Hohoho, I am so, so, *so* happy that you've asked, love…I just happen to be friends with some people in very high places, and some of those places happen to grant me access to some very special government records…Just follow my lead, and everything will be hunky-dory, dears~"

~

The three of them walked to their destination after The Prince proposed another bicycle ride and the two men dry-heaved just thinking of another ride on it. So instead, they made a right

straight out the door, took a leisurely stroll down Pennsylvania Avenue (with The Prince valiantly leading the way as Rodi comforted Fionn from the noise), made another right into the National Mall's territory, and passed by the National Art Museum before they finally arrived at the Museum of Natural History.

Usually, there were massive banners that hung down from the museum's intricately-carved exterior between the Ionian columns that advertised whatever hot new exhibit they had ushered in. A team of construction workers were in the process of taking down the last one, which was bragging about its most recent exhibit: a series of relics purported to be from a so-called 'lost civilization' from even before the times of Sumer. Visible on one of the pot shards illustrated was the old Proctor and Gamble man-in-the-moon logo.[8]

There was also usually a throng of people surrounding the outer steps, but the entire area was cordoned off with police tape and police cruisers parked on the curb between extremely conspicuous black limousines. Conversation was abuzz. A bengal cat police officer talked to a praying-mantis scientist, and golem security guards conversed with skeleton city officials. A legion of identical white men with brown hair wearing black suits and black sunglasses seemed to permeate throughout the whole crowd, occasionally saying something into their earpieces with their mouths covered. Not only that, but a number of odd characters were pushing themselves up against the police blockades, including a few men in deerskin caps, numerous old ladies and their cats, odd men with curled mustaches, and at least two dozen people in trench coats and trilbys wearing booze-soaked ties and five-o'clock shadow.

"Not another one of these…there's been a shit-load of these surreal robberies lately, and at least one person always disappears with them too! Can't these museum people figure out how to keep their most precious possessions safe, already?!"

"We are trying as hard as we can, you bonehead police officers! You try holding something extremely valuable that everyone wants!"

"Heh, don't you talk to me with that, pal. I've got every single Simpsons DVD up to Season 56, I think I *know* what it's like to have something special like that, okay?"

"By jove, I've cracked the case! Watson, prepare my cocaine back at Baker Street, this shall take no more than a few moments if I could—hrnngh! Just…hrrk! Get past these blasted barriers!"

"(Breaker, breaker, code X-19 Flywing eating for two, there is no swamp gas in Roswell. I repeat, no swamp gas in Roswell…)"

The Prince and his friends approached the mob, peering around it with an impressed look as Rodion covered Fionn's ears and sighed.

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[8] During the 1980s, the consumer goods corporation Procter and Gamble were under investigation for supposed connections to the Church of Satan due to allegations concerning their 'Man in the Moon' logo. An FBI investigation revealed that the company was indeed sponsored by high-ranking greed demons, but considering all major corporations had at least some demonic influence at that time, the investigation was dropped. The Man in the Moon would later sue for copyright infringement himself in a landmark Supreme Court case.

“How are we even going to get near museum? Is surrounded by people, there is no entryway. Besides, if we did enter, we would certainly get caught…Who did you say you knew here, again?”

He yawned and cracked his knuckles, rocking on his heels as he turned to Rodion.

“Did I say that? Hoho, silly me. I haven’t got a clue who any of these people are. Except for that one over there, that one’s Tony, we shagged once in community college. But you remember what else I said, don’t you, dear?”

“...Just, er, follow your lead?”

“Exactly. And with that…”

The Prince cracked his knuckles, took a deep breath, and put his hands out in front of him. In a smooth motion, he twirled on his heel and closed his hands so that only his middle and pointer fingers were extended, sailing them through the air like he was ribbon-dancing until he suddenly extended all his fingers to the sky. He whistled like a bird, and then closed his eyes.

“Masfrekav Alejaka Hisliga.”

Something resembling a translucent bubble grew from his fingers, steadily growing from the point of casting until it fully enveloped them…and, in a small flash of light, the three of them were rendered totally invisible. Not one of them could see the others, and nobody else could see them either. Rodion gasped.

“A-Amazing! We are completely invisible…”

“...Astounding…”

“Hrrngkh—w-well, well, look who finally found their voice, Blondie. Now—hrgh, quiet! (They might not be able to see us, but they can still hear us.)”

“(Ah, right…Prince, are you okay? You sound like you’re in pain.)”

“(Doin’ just dandy, love, now c’mon. Follow me.)”

“(...How?)”

There was a small moment of silence.

“(...Good point, love. See, I keep you around for more reasons than just being arm candy! Just head to the front door.)”

Together, the three invisible men skulked towards the entrance of the Natural History Museum. However, due to the fact that walking actually is rather hard when you have no clue where your feet are or where your body is in relation to the world, Rodi and Fionn immediately tripped over some of the police blockades. In an instant, guns were turned on them, but the cops cooled down once they realized it must have just been an especially wily great detective kicking out a little grey pant leg. The Prince, however, cleanly stepped over the blockade and managed to evade the conversations of all manner of people, helping the others up blindly and leading them to the front doors…

…Until they were stopped by one of the men in black suits, who tapped on The Prince’s shoulder.

“Excuse me, do you have a license for that?”

“(...Prince, should we—)”

"(Hush, stay quiet!)"

He placed a hand on The Prince's shoulder and the invisibility effect immediately dissipated, leaving them exposed. Everyone became quiet, and their eyes turned to the three men as the man in the suit raised his palm. Wrapped around his hand and nestled in his palm was something resembling a joy buzzer, though it appeared to be painted like a yellow smiley-face. He put out his other hand.

"Use of magic without a license is outlawed in all 64 federal states of America. I'll need to see some license, sirs, or else we'll have to take you in."

The Prince scoffed and crossed his arms as Rodi waved meekly at the crowd.

"Pah! A license? *Really?* You crank-yanks are so scared of a little razzle-dazzle that you need a license to practice magic here? Back in Eine, I didn't need anything except chutzpah and gumption to do magic! How long has that been a law, huh?"

"First passed in Massachusetts in 1695, codified at the federal level in 1952. Now, I need to see your license, if you have one."

Multiple other white men in black suits crowded around them, staring at the group through their black sunglasses. Even the local cops, who had mainly shown up just to quell the mobs and prevent people from trespassing, stepped back out of fear and respect for the agents of the DUO. The Prince rolled his eyes and dug into his coat.

"Fine, fine. Wouldn't have done this if I knew America's orderly daughters had such strict laws. Don't throw me in the queer ken, milord, I swears I'll be good…Here."

He handed a small scrap of paper to the agent, who adjusted his sunglasses and peered at it.

It was a magic license, alright, but not only was it locally-issued from Ohio, it belonged to a 'Moe Sanall', an older Hispanic man with a balding head of hair and a scruffy mustache. The agent looked back up at The Prince, who smiled appraisingly with a gesture to his face as Rodion covered his face in shame.

A symphony of clicks emerged as the agents that surrounded them pulled out a collection of guns, the group raising their hands. Though they appeared to be revolvers, they looked extremely fake, and every single one of them had a 'BANG!' flag poking out of the barrel. The agent they were talking to threw the ID over his shoulder, producing his own.

"You've got fifteen seconds to state your names and intentions, or else we're taking you in as suspects."

The three of them looked around at the weapons, Fionn especially confused by their appearances. He looked to The Prince.

"Forruad, what are these items? They appear to be miniature banner-holsters, but they all hail from the clan of 'Bangi'. Is it possible we've stumbled into enemy territory?"

"Cool your tuchus, Blondie, they're just practical-joke guns. What could they possibly do to us?"

One of the agents aimed their gun at a nearby tree and fired it. The flag in the barrel immediately shot outwards, and once it lodged itself into the trunk, the entire tree burst into

flames with an explosive gust of air, smoldering the branches and leaves away until it was as if there never was a tree there in the first place. The Prince nervously laughed.

"Ahaha. Aha. Ah. Right. Question answered."

Rodi raised a finger.

"Excuse me, Mr. Agent? *Da,* yes, we are actually here to investigate what happened with Hope Diamond. We know who culprits are."

The agent they had been talking to lowered his own gun.

"You know who did this?"

"Course we do, love! This is the work of Man Unkind! They're a bunch of nutters who want everything to fall into chaos, don't you omis know who they are? You're the Department of Unexplainable Occurrences for Xenu's sake, isn't this sort of thing supposed to be your whole job?!"

He was silent for a moment before waving to the rest of the agents, causing them to lower their guns. Clearing his throat, he stood up a bit straighter.

"...We do have some scattered reports of something called 'Man Unkind'. Due to their description as a cult, we had no interest in intervening due to matters of religious freedom. Had we done the same during that whole People's Temple debacle a few decades back, they wouldn't have their own system of churches in Indiana. We only intervene if they actively cause harm to the populace and disrupt the order of the country."

The Prince was shaking as he held his hands out in front of him.

"Wh—I-You—You wanker, they're *kidnapping people!* And not just to off them either, they *change* the poor bastards! They make them less than human, less than *mortal*, into new things…terrible, terrible things…things that were never meant to be."

"If they're kidnapping people, it is nobody who has been listed, and it doesn't affect the regular number of kidnappings there are in the country. We have limited resources, you know: we can't go after every single disappearance like they're all equal."

He shivered and spat on the agent's glasses, sneering.

"You bloody people make me sick."

Rodion, sensing that tensions were running a little high, gently pushed The Prince out of the way (him melodramatically falling to the ground and crying 'Medic!') and smiled weakly.

"E-Er, hello. Sorry about my friend here, he is little crazy, you know. Haha, cuckoo, cuckoo, right? But he is right about, er, Man Unkind causing this. We can return Hope Diamond and all other stolen things if you give us some time. May we speak with, er, Sant Director Williams?"

Slowly, the agent took his black sunglasses off and wiped off the spit with a white handkerchief. His irises were pure black, his eyes as dull as a doll's as he made eye contact with Rodion. The Prince, having scuttled around on the floor, popped back up with a type-written piece of paper in his hands.

"Aha, right! Silly me. I got so caught up in the theatrics, I totally forgot! We received this letter from the good director just this morning inviting us to a private meeting. I believe this is proof enough to let us in, hm?"

The agent took the paper, looked it over, and placed his glasses back on.

"...Frankly, you should have shown this first, but I can't argue with paperwork. I've tried before, and it is much harder than you would expect. Go inside, but know anything you say and do will be monitored. Not by us, of course, but there are security cameras in the building. And besides…"

He side-eyed the mob of great detectives. An older man with messy hair in a raggedy green coat was currently in a fistfight with another man in a gaudy yellow suit and trilby, and a crowd had gathered around them cheering one or the other on. He sighed through his nose.

"...I feel like you boys will have more idea of what you're doing than most of these fools. Ever since Truman made 'Great Detective' a federal job in '52, every whackjob who thinks they've got a bit of deductive skill believe they qualify for an easy paycheck. Head on inside."

The Prince took the paper back with a snide 'thank you' and gestured for the others to come in as they entered the front rotunda of the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History.

The massive chamber was impressive, as it always was, the taxidermied elephant in the center mid-stride as it appeared to welcome whatever visitors would enter. Despite its enthusiasm, however, the three men were the only ones in the building. Fionn stared up at the great beast, in awe of its size and stature—he believed the creature was a steed of giants, or perhaps even a pet—but he tore himself away to glance at The Prince. He was tilting his head at a standing map in the lobby, trying to work out where the Sant Director's office was.

"Forruad, how did you obtain a letter of invitation from this director? We never met or sent a letter to him, did we?"

"Of course we didn't, Blondie, you were with us the whole time. It was just a little matter of being smart…and having some handy items on-board."

Digging into his coat, he pulled out three blank pieces of paper in the vague shape of a currency bill with a sly grin.

"I nicked them off some poor bloke. I think he was a con man. Either way, they'll appear to others however you want them to—usually I use them to get into clubs and whatnot, but it helps when I need to 'prove' we're special guests! I call 'em Blank Checks."

Fionn frowned.

"So you lied to those in authority in order to grant us entry here?"

"Pthbbt. I lied to the *government*, that means it doesn't count. People lie to the government all the time. Besides, how was I supposed to know America's got a special magic-focused lilly corp up our arses?"

Rodion, having been distracted looking at a whale skeleton hanging from the ceiling, turned back to him.

"Wait, if you had object that could appear as any scrap of paper, why did you not make it look like American magic license?"

"Be-*cause*, I don't know what an American magic license looks like."

"Did you not produce fake license before using papers?"

"No, I didn't."

“I believe you are…demonstrably wrong on that, Prince. I remember you put forward fake license, then everybody pulled out guns.”

“I agree with Cron.”

The Prince threw his hands up in frustration, “God, what’s with all the questions, you two? I got us inside, didn't I? Be thankful I didn't decide to sneak in on my own and kidnap the cove. Now come on, the office is this way…unless you’d like to stand around moralizing like a couple of waffle-irons for a few more hours?”

After a bit of exasperated sighing, Rodion and Fionn followed him further into the museum.

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Fionn put both hands on the wall and peered at a photograph detailing the archaeological exhibit that unearthed what many archaeologists at the time had claimed to be the remains of the biblical Leviathan. It was in a warm sepia tone, and depicted a number of humans, a few skeletons, three wolves and a creature that Fionn couldn’t adequately describe hunched over in a large hole in the ground pointing to something that looked vaguely like bones, though it was hard to be certain with the poor camera quality. The plaque beside the photo read that later on, a statement was issued by Lucifer that the bones were not those of the Leviathan, as the Leviathan was still alive, but simply had gone into hiding after that whole business with Revelations and all. Later, a herpetologist identified the remains as those of an extinct species of sea-faring wyrm, closely related to those colloquially referred to as ‘Nessies’, despite the fact that *Nessiteras rhombopteryx* is the only member of her species native to Loch Ness.

“I was not aware this land of America also had the old clans among their citizenship.”

The Prince stood up at the water fountain.

“Pardonez-moi?”

“In this picture, visible are numerous odd creatures I have only heard mention of in the stories of the Tuatha De and related to the Fae. Skeletal beings, anthropomorphic animals, great sea monsters…”

He came up to Fionn and peered at the picture.

“...Oh, you poor, poor thing, you. You really have been cooped up in a cave so long, you haven’t got a clue what modern life is like, do you?”

“I only know what I remember of Eire during my time, and what I have been learning now, Forruad. Please do not judge me based solely on my lack of knowledge. I would have struck the first creature I saw, but Cron convinced me otherwise.”

Rodi looked up, having stood outside the door that read ‘ST. DIR. WILLIAMS’ on the front on a shining brass plaque.

“Is true, *da*, he was so shaken by whole experience of bicycle ride, he was very out of sorts. I had to persuade him to lower his sword after the skeleton policeman came to ask if I was okay. Though I will say…is very interesting. I have never seen such beings before. They walk and talk

like regular Americans, I see, but they resemble all manner of creatures. I had heard talk of them, but only seen them in grainy photographs in medical textbooks."

The Prince just scoffed and turned on his heel, walking to the door and knocking on it three times as he put his hands on his hips.

"You two really are a riot, you know that? Blondie's at least got an excuse, but you? You're, what, sixty, and you still don't know about the whole thing? Weren't you taught it in school, at least?"

"I have not left Russia in my entire life, Prince, do not mock me. And as I said, I was raised by strict Russian Orthodox nuns. They decried anything and anyone non-human as Western and sinful. Is miracle, frankly, that I am not as hateful as some of my neighbors were."

"Figures. Ha, religious fundamentalists, am I right? Shield the world from your children so they either hate it when they finally get a chance to see it, or embrace it once they realize it ain't so bad."

The plaque on the door opened a bit, a seaweed-green finger with webbing attached to it poking out of the gap. The plaque hung over the rectangular gap like a dog-flap, and a voice on the other end spoke in a squeaky falsetto.

"'Mister Williams is busy working! Go away!'"

He crossed his arms with an amused puff of his cheeks, before reaching out to poke the green finger.

"Right, you can't fool us with that, we know you're in there. The whole museum's been closed since midnight last night, and you're a hermit, it isn't like you're doing interviews and being dogged by reporters, are you?"

As soon as The Prince touched the voice's finger, they quickly retracted it and thought for a second, before speaking in a somewhat low androgynous tone. It was lightly colored with a Welsh lilt, and though it was less prominent than Fionn's Irish accent, it still made him perk up with intrigue.

"...What business do you have with me? Also, don't touch me."

"I'll tell you what business, love, we've got a meeting with you about who's behind the Hope Diamond theft, and we were hoping to get a little bit of info out of you before heading on our way. Mind letting us in?"

"You mean to say I've got a meeting with you all? Funny. I don't recall scheduling one…Do you remember when I sent you the letter?"

"Last night, dear."

"Ooh, 'dear', I like that. Well, you all sound nice, and considering I've been getting sloshed the whole morning and night anyways, I can't turn down such nice guests regardless of if I invited them or not! Or, wait. You aren't with the media, are you?"

"Nyet, no media. We had to push past them to get inside."

"You aren't here to kill me?"

Fionn unsheathed his sword a bit. "No promises."

"Good enough for me! Come in, come in, just…let me…"

The three of them stood there for what had to be a good half a minute as a harmony of locks and chains unlocking and unchaining sounded from outside the door before it finally opened and they laid eyes on the interior.

To call it plain would be a flat-out lie, but it wasn't like it was exceptionally decorated; rather, it was almost like a slice of the wilderness was caught within the building and had walls built around it. The floor was grass—not astroturf, but real grass—and a flowerbed in the corner sat beside a small pool the size of a hot tub. A deer scare gently bonked its pointed head on a rock in the corner beside a man-made (though debatably so) waterfall, and their desk appeared to be carved directly from some massive tree stump.

The Sant Director themself was an odd sort, that much was clear, and they definitely weren't human. Though they wore a plain forest-green suit patterned with wave outlines over a black undershirt with an aquamarine bolo tie, it appeared to cut off into short sleeves and shorts. Their left arm and right leg were of a verdant green color, slightly scaled as though they were amphibious, and their fleshy leg was digitigrade, ending in a foot that was just as webbed as their hand. Where their other limbs would be, there were instead prosthetics carved from wood with what appeared to be 'veins' running through them, through which a sort of greenish-blue magic circulated. Despite their crudeness, they appeared to work pretty well. Growing from the base of their spine was a fin-lined tail, and the collar of their suit came over their head to resemble a cloak's hood, two downturned ears and two jagged black horns poking through shoddily-cut holes in the garment.

A single piercing maroon-irised eye peered out from their shadowed face, the only facial feature able to be made out, but its intense quality was dulled by a teal-tinted single-lens glass worn over their face, held up by a wireframe perched behind their ears.

They were holding what looked like a small juice-box, but upon closer inspection, the label read 'Wine-In-A-Box (For Your Kids' Recitals And Plays!)', and they lifted the straw to their face before waving and escorting them in, spitting out greetings as they re-locked the door.

"A-Ah, hello, hello! Yes, welcome. My, you're a big one—you must be the Russian I heard, yes, very interesting. Nice to meet you sir, madame, er, whichever. Whichever you prefer. Very nice to meet you too, young man, love the antlers, did you get those added on? Hah, kids today, right? You and your body mods. I wanted to get a piercing when I was younger, but my father wouldn't let me. We've never spoken since."

Sant Director Williams turned around and sat at their desk, upon which a small model ship in a bottle was perched. Opening a drawer, they dropped three more wine-boxes

on the table and put out their arms appraisingly.

"Go on then, take one! I promise they're not poisoned. I swear. Mostly. Or, wait, does saying your drinks aren't poisoned not make people want to drink them? Then they are poisoned. That way you won't think they're poisoned. Well. Either way, poison or not, they're there if you want them. I am Sant Director Edward Williams, pleasure to meet all of you."

They put out their hand, and The Prince awkwardly shook it.

"The Prince of Fuck All, love, charmed."

"The Prince of who-what now? Hah! Like I said, you kids and your crazy new names. Did your mother call you that?"

He snatched a wine-box and sipped from it.

"If she did, I would have strangled her."

"Fan-tastic, love the handshake. What about you, russki? Gonna make it two for two?"

Rodion, formerly a bit wary of this so-called 'reclusive director', smiled broadly and happily shook his hand firmly. Perhaps a little too firmly considering the wet squelch he heard when he took Williams' hand in his. He immediately opened it up.

"A-Ah, sorry, sorry! I am Rodion Nikolayev. I am a…let us call, 'friend', of The Prince. Is very nice to meet you, from one scientist to another."

"Ow, ow, ow! Ow. Ow. Ow." They held their hand in pain, but then opened it up once again with a point. "Ha! Gotcha. My body just does that. Didn't hurt at all. I'm like an octopus, you know? One of the party tricks I did for my mates back at Bangor was to stuff my whole body into a Coke can."

"Sounds very painful. Do you not have bones?"

"Oh, I do, I just ignore them. Lush meeting you though, Mr. Nicholas, always nice to meet a fellow academic. Two for two! And what about you, youngfella? Gonna make it three in a row?"

They turned to Fionn mac Cumhaill, putting their hand out cheerfully. Fionn's stern and unchanging expression somehow seemed to have somehow grown even sterner as he kept a hand on his sword and stepped towards the desk. He leaned forward, his emerald-green eyes burrowing directly into Williams' singular eye through their glass. They leaned back, glancing over to the others.

"Uh. Um. Does he usually do this? Too much personal involvement makes Williams uncomfortable. I very much value it, considering I've been doing my correspondence via letter for the past couple decades."

"Right, he's a bit of an odd one, isn't he? Come on, Blondie, leave the poor chap alone."

The Prince reached to pull him back by the cloak, but the cloak itself seemed to shrink from his grasp. He cursed under his breath and tried to grab it again, but every time, the cloak swished out of his reach. Rodion stepped forward weakly, sizing up the risk of grabbing Fionn and pulling him away with the risk of seeing where this went. Fionn himself stopped leaning in, only an inch away from Williams' face as he stared deeply at their face.

Slowly, he reached a hand up, and delicately pulled the glass down. The maroon eye met with both his pupils.

“Ngkkrgh—!!”

Immediately, Fionn dropped to the table and then to his knees, clasping both hands over his head as he fell to the ground. Rodi and The Prince both stepped back, the former turning to them as the Sant Director quickly covered their eye once again with the teal glass.

“What did you do to him, Williams?”

“Nothing that wouldn’t have happened if I had done anything, I can assure you. There is a *reason* I wear this eyeglass, after all.”

The Prince crouched down next to Fionn, helping him sit up as he still covered one eye with a head, panting.

“Cripes, Blondie, you alright? Here, have some wine, it’s great for your nerves.”

“...F…Fuh…”

Fionn pointed at Edward Williams, and his eyes widened with a shock that neither man had seen in him before that moment as he yelled.

“Fomorian!”

CHAPTER 10: The Sermon On The Mount

Belial appeared in Hell with a plume of thick red smoke, the large and slovenly demon looking around in a panic. He was in Aleister Crowley Memorial Hall once again, but he looked about and saw that the place was in chaos. Usually, demons love a bit of chaos, they yearn for it the same way working men yearn for a good vacation, or lizards yearn to have a big flat rock in the sun they can lie on, but they usually prefer it to be on their terms. This was unfettered chaos, and it was their least favorite kind second only to the kind angels brought along with them.

The walls were crumbled around him, bricks and debris thrown across the floor and the paintings that lined the hallway upturned and ripped. The howling sounds of numerous demons screaming filled the air, but what caught his eye the most was what dotted the walls, eating away at their structure like hungry termites.

Black fire.

Suffice to say, it appeared to be fire, but not only was there no heat (and demons knew heat, they lived in Hell after all), but it didn't scorch—all it did was consume, leaving emptiness in its wake. It was like a flesh-eating virus that targeted more than just flesh. He was tempted to reach out and feel it, but as dim as he was, he knew that was an extremely terrible idea.

He had been called here in a panic by the Head Ambassador of the Order of the Fly, Belphegor, ordering him to return from wherever he was and help them as soon as he could before being cut off by something loud and hanging up. Not wanting to waste any time, he had voiped away from Tir na Nog and Arcadia Sioga to return there. What had happened? He felt a pit in his gut that was more than just the munchies for once, before he heard a groan from the end of the hallway.

Turning, he saw a large stone figure—made completely out of the red hellbrick that made up the rest of the building—with the features of a pig hunched over at the far end of the hallway. He gasped.

"O-Orcus!"

Running as fast as he could to the stone pig-demon, he helped Orcus up to his feet and saw that he was missing multiple parts of his body, including his left arm, half of his face, and the lower third of his left leg. Belial supported him with his own body.

"Orcus, dude, what happened to you?! I thought you were, like, supposed to be the gatekeeper and stuff, you're made of *stone*, dude, what happened…? You're even back to your walkin' form…"

"Orcus…was approached by a strange being. He was tall and round, but black as shadow and possibly wearing a suit. He asked Orcus about where The Devil's mansion was, but Orcus refused to tell him. He said Orcus was—hrnghk—! In his way, and attacked Orcus with his black fire…Orcus barely managed to escape with his life, but he tore his way through the rest. Orcus does not know how many have survived, but Orcus shall keep protecting the Order until Orcus dies!"

"N-Nah, you won't die, man, I'm sure of it…but, you hang tight, okay? I'm gonna go and see if I can find pops or my bros, or Belph if I can get to him first…anything happens, you leave, alright? Like, we dunno how strong this dude is. If he's like angel-level, we're in big trouble."

"Orcus will do as commanded…but Orcus asks that you stay safe as well."

"I will, dude, I will."

He gave Orcus a quick hug, gave a peace sign, and hurried further inwards past the ajar doors.

The meeting-room was an utter mess, the great table in the center broken and missing swaths of dark wood. Splinters dotted the floor, and various demons were sprawled about looking like they were the victims of a bad magic trick. There was a sharp call from beside him.

"Belial!"

He whipped around, looking about for a bit.

"Down here, you nitwit!"

Belial looked down and saw one of his brothers, Mammon the rotund golden-furred wolf with as many piercings and pieces of jewelry put on him as a freakshow exhibit mixed with a nouveau riche vanity. His empty eye-sockets were sewn shut, penance for his envy of man as an angel long ago, but they were still twisted in annoyance as he growled. He was missing most of his lower body, though since he was laughably short, it barely made a difference.

"Moron, the hell were you?! I was worrying my head off thinking your dumb ass ended up eaten by the black fire!"

Belial picked him up effortlessly, Mammon letting out a small yelp as he was raised up like a child.

"Mams…aw, man, look at you! Look what they did to you!"

"Believe me, I would love to. Love. To."

"O-Oh yeah, right. Sorry. But, what happened? Some big shadow dude in a suit came and, like, fucked all your business up?"

"You know, I was right next to the door, I could *hear* you talking to that blockhead Orcus. I'm blind, not deaf."

"Why do you think…why'd he do that?"

Mammon groaned.

"If I knew, don't you think I would have told you? The guy barged in during the meeting of the ambassadors—we got some troubling news from Samael's front with the angels, I'll tell you when I grow my legs back—commanded us to tell him where The Devil's mansion was, and when we didn't tell him, he fucked us up and fucked right off! Asshole. Real, real asshole. Fat french piece of shit."

Belial looked around, surveying the damages as he carried Mammon with him and stepped over a few bodies. Though plenty of demons were sprawled out on the floor, either unconscious or just groaning in pain from whatever they were missing, he couldn't see that anyone had fully disappeared. Even Belphegor, the massive purple-skinned hook-nosed toilet-sitter he was, had fallen off his porcelain throne and laid in a fetal position, missing a head. His chest still rose and

fell, so he at least wasn't dead. It took properly blessed/holy weapons to do that. The walls were practically torn down too, a massive hole in the wall leading out into the red-hilled and building-dotted landscape of Sha'are Maveth.

Small pockets of black fire peppered the houses, and though the land of Hell was more than accustomed to fire (in fact, hellfire, blood, sin, and brimstone were essentially the three prime elements of Hell, complete with the shakily-accepted fifth element of 'hatred'), this was unlike anything they'd ever seen before. Musclebound animal-men rushed to carve out whatever section of the building had caught the black fire, suspending it in the air with their demonic powers so it would fizzle out into nothing. Flittering insects helped buxom horned women out of their homes, and those who could no longer move on their own were raised out of their roofs along with their legions of servants and concubines. Hell was a surprisingly community-driven place, but when you started as a group of exiles, you stay a group of exiles.

Mammon coughed, and a thick golden fluid like honey spattered out of his mouth.

"L-Look, I'd love to keep talking, but I'm in a lot of pain right now on account of having my legs fucking eaten, so if you could get on your way, I would really appreciate it, brother…"

"What, me? But-but, Mams, man, I can't, I…you always said it best, it's not like I'm super smart or anything…"

"And I do stand by that. But look, dad and his friend Lucifer are off trying to calm things down. Go help them. You've got shit like heart and compassion, Belial, and that's a pretty damn rare thing among demons. You've seen Moloch."

"Yeah, Moloch is kind of a dick…"

"All that baby-eating caught up to him, eh?" He coughed again and groaned. "Oop. Oh. Ow. Ow. I-I looked out the hole…the bastard should—should be on…Mount Delectable…"

"M-Mams?!"

"I'm not dying, you t-twerp, I'm just going unconscious. Jeez…you really are t-the youngest sibling…"

With that, he slumped in Belial's hold. He furrowed his brow and shook his unconscious brother a little bit, sniffling, before tossing him onto Belphegor's back and looking out to the open horizon. Visible on one of the faraway hills was a small crowd that had formed around the foot of the far-off Mount Delectable, named for being a popular haunt for gluttony demons' food trucks and picnics. At the top, one single black dot.

All demons could fly, if you could call it that. It was more of a gentle floating and swooping, but it at least got them where they needed to go. Even those the size of houses could do it.

Belial, however, could not. So he instead hopped out of the hole in the wall, let himself fall to the ground, climbed out of the crater he had made, and started on his way to Mount Delectable.

~

It was nighttime in Heaven, though that didn't mean much when He was always shining.

As was the tradition for the Divine Synod, the gods would convene for the length of a day, and then rest. Some would sleep properly, like the Dagda who slept in his skivvies, or Papa Legba who rested in his chair with his trusty dog on his lap. And others, like Cao Dai or the Jade Emperor, would stay up and busy themselves with what they could.

Thankfully, the Galilee Symposium came equipped with plenty of bedrooms, as infinite as God's love for His creations, though they were rather sparse and poorly-decorated, just like the real thing. Shiva sat in his room, cross-legged on the single table that grew from the center of the pristine white floor, and idly threw a ball he had brought with him against the wall. It rebounded back to him every time, and whenever he caught it, he threw it back. He felt as though it would be torture, and thought back to how prisoners had prayed for him on Earth. He idly considered sending an avatar to prison, just to see how it stacked up to this, though he couldn't imagine it was much comfier. On one fist, he rested his cheek. He was bored and frustrated, and when Shiva became bored and frustrated, a number of other emotions started to bubble up.

Vasuki, under-king of serpents and Shiva's loyal pet-companion, rose from his curled position on the sparse bed and slithered up to him, curling back around his neck as expected.

"What isss wrong, massster Shiva?"

He hummed and caught the ball the next time it came back, turning to look out the window. It still appeared to be daytime, though that was genuinely just a side-effect of God residing in Heaven—His radiance shone so bright that it made it impossible to be dark. It was handy for keeping productive, but terrible for anyone who actually wanted to sleep. The clouds were full of panicking angels, however, dominions and powers arguing with one another as base angels flew around like scattered ants. Shiva soured his face and lobbed the ball at the window. It bounded off and beaned him square in the third eye, and he cursed in Hindi as he held the eternally-closed eyelid before calming down.

"...I am frustrated, Vasuki. There is clearly trouble, and yet the Abrahamic Father refuses to let us help. I don't see the reason why, and yet I do see it at once."

"What do you sssee, massster?"

He closed his eyes.

"I see…that He does not like us very much."

"Usss, massster? You and Vishnu and Brahma, you mean?"

Shiva stood up and stared out the window, troubled.

"I mean all of us. He insists upon His own strength, and for what reason? Simply because He claims the most worshippers. Simply because His people have pillaged and ruined civilizations in order to spread their good word."

"But you are ssstronger than Him, yesss?"

"It could be said, and it could be not said. His powers are so vaguely defined…He is omnipotent, He is all-loving, He is almighty. I remember hearing a saying in this modern world: 'Could God create a stone so heavy, not even He could lift it?' To create the stone is to display His omnipotence, but to be unable to lift it is to deny it. He sees all, and yet he is blind. He is one and he is three. Are we not three and also one, all manifestations of the great Brahman force that

holds us all? But in this, we are fallible. Do you remember when Brahma, after overseeing the golden age of humanity, let out a great sigh and birthed the Rakshasa demons? They turned on their master and clawed and bit, and he had to call Vishnu for aid. Do you feel that He would ever ordain to have any similar anecdotes?"

Vasuki hissed softly, thinking on the matter.

"...I cannot sssay, massster. I don't believe ssso."

"Precisely. Krishna said that there are two worlds, one where every living creature is fallible and another where all beings are called infallible, for they—we—know all. Just because we know all is not precedence for doing no wrong. Never underestimate the cruelty and ignorance of a man who is given power over others. We make mistakes, we lust after one another, we fight and kill and cry just as humanity does. And yet, this is viewed as the great difference between us and Him. He is infallible and omnipotent, but to what extent is utterly unknown. Such, where does that leave us? Left to flounder like beached fish under the might of the sun."

Vasuki looked out to the window in silence.

"...Who do you sssuppossse ssstole the Ssstone of Jacob, massster?"

"Remind me, what does it do again?"

"From an angel I inquired to, it is said to grant those who lay their head on it the ability to see the invisible."

"I assume it would be taken by someone who wants to see something invisible, then."

"Quite assstute of you, massster. Your wisssdom is bottomlesss, sssurely."

"Enough with the sarcasm, will you? I could use you to churn the great ocean of milk again, since you enjoyed that so much."

The snake hissed in retaliation and slithered away.

"How about thisss, massster?"

In a swirl of white smoke, Vasuki transformed and changed into something more than the simple cobra with a gem in its forehead. A human form emerged from the snake's skin as it shedded and molted, its scales remaining staggered along a sleek masculine form, with long black hair, slit-pupiled eyes, and a pointed goatee. His lower body lacked legs, however, instead keeping the slithering body of the cobra he once was. This was his naga form, as it befitted one of the great serpent kings to have. He bowed to Lord Shiva, lowering his head.

"I shall put my own life on the line in order to survey the actions of the angels. Then, when you have more information, perhaps you could ordain a proper courssse of action. I understand that, being your loyal servant for so long, you must have some reservations, but I promise that I shall put my very life on the line to—"

Shiva had already retired to his bed, reclining with his jaw in his palm, with all of his eyes closed. Vasuki just stared at him, disappointed.

"...Master?"

He opened an eye.

“Hm? Oh yes, you can go. Please do tell me what all those odd little winged beings are up to. Then I will decide on what to do next. For now, I must rest…this meeting was much more of a hassle than I had expected, and I am quite tired.”

Vasuki nodded.

“Then rest, massster. I shall either return to you with great information, or my head shall be returned to you.”

“I should hope it’s the former. My neck already feels a little chilly.”

Saluting, Vasuki slithered out the door.

~

Belial ran and stumbled, wheezing and out of breath as he came to the foot of the crowd. It was muggy—though, it was always muggy, wasn’t it—and the sounds of conversation and murmuring filled the air. Some were just plain confused, others were genuinely interested and were hearing the speaker out, and yet others were just quietly watching. Belial could hear him speaking from far away, but couldn’t quite make out what he was saying. He prodded an orange-furred bear woman with tits the size of beach balls square in the back, leaning back when she turned around to make sure he wouldn’t get smacked in the face.

“Huh?”

“Uh, yeah, hi. What’s goin’ on here?”

“Oh, what, you haven’t heard? This dude busted out of the Memorial Hall, and when we told him that The Devil was out on an errand, he went into a huge frenzy and started burning things down with that creepy fire of his! It seems like he’s done for the most part, but now he’s up on Mount Delectable and started preaching.”

Belial tilted his head.

“Like…preaching-preaching? Is it like hellfire-and-brimstone preaching, or like, ‘the meek shall inherit the earth’ preaching?”

She shrugged.

“Dunno. It pretty much makes the rest of my evening more interesting though, so I’m not complaining.”

He just sighed and side-stepped along the crowd, trying to find an opening. Unfortunately, for a demon of his size and stature, that was sort of a tall order, so before he knew it, he had reached the far edge of the crowd. Suffice to say, he was shocked to find a line of security guards holding the line, all being fish-like humanoid entities dressed in the old style of Australian police, complete with brimmed hat and button-lined jacket. They sat on their horses with too-human eyes and stared off into nothing in particular, yet even when the demons at the front tried to push past them, they didn't budge. Their very skin and being appeared to be painted onto the world rather than existing as a real thing. Thankfully, their numbers were not infinite, and Belial managed to sneak past the front with little problem. It helped that he asked politely and, when he got no answer, assumed that it was a ‘yes’.

However, he only got a couple paces past the front of fish-police before a sharp and metallic voice rang out from beside him.

"Oi!"

He turned. Atop yet another horse (though this one appeared to be showing its rear end to you no matter which way you looked at it in a curious heresy of perspective) was a more humanoid figure, cloaked entirely in black with studded shoulders and a large flat rectangular pane for a head, complete with a slit the size of a mail opening near the top to act as a visor. Eyes that resembled magazine cutouts floated in the visor, and in his hands he held a low-detail musket shotgun. It was hard to tell if the blackness was cloth, metal, or just his body, but what was certain was that he had the same painted quality as the rest of the fish-police.

The end of the shotgun (or at least, what was probably the end—there wasn't a barrel hole painted) was aimed directly at Belial.

"State yer name and intentions, mate."

Belial put his hands up and smiled.

"Uh, hey, look dude…I don't mean any trouble. I just gotta go up and talk to your leader real quick, ask him some questions about stuff."

"Nobody sees the Shadow, mate. Not if ya value yer life. Now git back behind the line."

He puffed his cheeks in a pout as he lowered his hands.

"Alright, man, I didn't wanna have to do this, 'cause like…I really don't like fighting. But if I gotta do it, I gotta do it. You've got some reaaaal nerve, man. Showing up with your entourage and guarding this dude who tore apart all my buds and my family…So, uh, I'll only ask this once, man. Where's dad and uncle Lucy?"

"I dunno who yer wanker pals are, ya corker. Now shove off. You're facing off with summat who stood behind the greatest folk hero of Australia."

Belial huffed exasperatedly and raised his fists.

"Can't say I didn't warn ya, man."

To his credit, he reacted pretty quickly to the shot and *would* have blocked it if it were made of practically any other material, but he had always been unlucky like that. The BB-sized pebble of black fire shot straight through his chest, causing him to clutch it as thick mayonnaise-consistency blood pulsed out of the wound. He hissed through his teeth and stepped forward through the pain, but three more shots through his shins and the center of his head downed him. Losing consciousness, he dropped to the ground.

It took a while for the Ned Kelly Simulacrum to trot his two-assed horse up to the top of Mount Delectable, especially with the mass of Belial sloppily tied to his mount behind him, but he made it eventually. His noble steed galloped to a stop in front of his master, peering up to meet him face-to-face.

This being was of a humanoid shape and of tremendous stature, solidly eight feet tall and portly enough to the point where he could easily fill any dark corner, helped more by the fact that his whole body was nothing but black shadow as opaque as bubbling crude. Rather than liquid, the ill-defined edges of his stocky limbs ending in either three-tendril hands or featureless

pointed feet flared and flickered with black flames. The loose and jagged outline of a suit and tie was visible upon his body, but it appeared to be nothing more than superficial: his body was all the same material, and so the suit came off more as an attempt to seem human than anything else. His round face was featureless save for a single white eye full of concentric circles that persistently zoomed outwards, and an upwards curl at the fringe of his scalp was the only thing that demarcated the mess of curly 'hair' from his face, no other outline visible.

He held in his hand a clipboard as black and featureless as he was, the writing on it entirely indecipherable, and turned to look down at his minion.

"Got another strong'un for ya, Chief."

Another one? Hmph, you would think after detaining two of their strongest members, demons would have a little less fight in them. Cut off the head, and the body will die. Or, it should.

"Yeah, he weren't a right strong one. Went down like swill."

Put him with the others, then. I believe my sermon should start properly soon.

"As ya command, Chief."

Trotting along, he took his prisoner of scuffle towards a large rock in the vague shape of a hamburger bun and dropped the unconscious demon behind it, out of view from the onlookers down below. It was a decent ways below, perhaps the height from the top bleachers of a football stadium down to the field, but there were plenty of demons with good eyesight and better hearing, so it was still in their best interest to keep them hidden.

Belial slumped against the back of the stone, his chin pressing into his chest. The Ned Kelly Simulacrum hopped off of his own horse as well, gesturing to the bound demon.

"G'day, mates. Brought along new company for ya to stare at."

To the bound demon's left were a rolled-up stretch of flypaper with innumerable flies coating the sticky substance—so many it appeared completely black—all buzzing angrily, and a painting the size of a manhole depicting a rocky cliff beneath a sky of angels, with Lucifer himself sitting and stewing as tears welled in his baleful gaze towards the one who had imprisoned him in it.

Reaching into his visor and retrieving a rope interwoven with gold, silver, and copper fibers, he tied Belial's hands together (in front of him, as he couldn't put his hands together behind his back) and bound his feet as well.

"Thank fuck fer this Rope of Samson the Chief got me. You demon buggers are a tough lot, you're like cockroaches. Only uglier and hornier, somehow. Can't ya tell yer mates to put some bleedin' clothes on next time we invade? The tits and cunts I don't mind, but the less wangs I need to see, the better. Especially the spiked ones."

He shuddered a bit, hopped back upon his horse, and rode back to the shadow before saluting.

"Done and done, Chief."

Good. Now things can finally begin properly.

The simulacrum was quiet for a bit as the shadow adjusted his tie (or at least pretended to) and looked over his clipboard, starting to clear his throat. Looking out to the sea of demons below, he looked back to his master.

"...Say, Chief, you sure this is a good idea?"

Of course it is. Demons are attracted to anarchy. They feast on it, it is to them as adrenaline is to the common man. Warfare brings wrath, orgies bring lust, heedless indulgence brings gluttony, possession and coveting brings both greed and envy…Demons are creatures of chaos, and they have been vilified since the dawn of their creation during that Great War in Heaven.

"Yer right on the mark on that one, but are they really as 'chaotic' as ya think? I mean, look. They've got jobs, they've organized themselves into a little society…on my way here, I saw they've got a money-changing station. Ha, can ya believe that? What place with a President would ever embrace our brand of entropy?"

The shadow chuckled, his voice low and smooth with a French flavor as the black flames crackled and smelled of charcoal.

That's why I was asking where their leader is. Demons may be chaotic creatures, but they also aren't very smart. They're like ants, when left to their own devices, they resort to their own id to give them direction, giving in to their basest desires. A queen is needed, and there is one in The Devil. Suppose, however, that a more capable leader should appear and sway the public.

"And…if they don't?"

I will cover that in the sermon. Why do you ask such things? Do you not have faith in our cause? I remind you, you are nothing but the shadow of a folk hero. Such stories about a great hero take form, and given the right circumstances, are granted a mind of their own. And what happens when that thoughtform does not live up to expectations, hm? Desperate for direction, he turns to any leader who will take his pathetic whelp of a 'self' in.

The Ned Kelly Simulacrum would have gulped if he had anything resembling a throat, throat muscles, saliva glands, or spittle to swallow. Trembling violently, he slowly raised his gun to the shadow despite the fact it would obviously have not done any good. The shadow stepped to the thoughtform and placed a hand on the barrel of his shotgun, pushing it down.

You are nothing more than a tool, as all beings are, to be directed and to have your talents put towards the good of the world. If you should die, you will be replaced without issue. You are expendable. Do you understand.

"...Ch…C-Chief, I—"

Enough with the 'chief'. I am the Shadow, *moquerie.* You asked about what would happen to the demons if they chose not to follow us, yes? Perhaps what you need is a physical demonstration.

Gripping the barrel of the gun, black flames spread from his hand onto the weapon, consuming it in fire. As if it would burn him, the simulacrum dropped the gun with a sudden shout, frozen in fear with his hands up as he watched the gun become gradually consumed by the

flames until not an inch of its painted length was visible. The flames grew smaller, then fizzled out entirely. It was gone.

He looked back up to the Shadow, and by the time he saw his chief's three-fingered hand aiming straight for his face, he too was consumed by the black flames.

He screamed, but his head soon disappeared. He tried to swing wildly, but his arms were gone. Soon, his torso lamely dropped to the ground, smoldering until it was nothing more than a speck of flame, which blew out shortly. The Shadow blew on his hand and straightened his tie once more.

It's always harder on the employer than the employee when someone gets fired. I'll have to report this to my supervisor.

Turning down to the crowd, he cleared his throat once more.

~

Vasuki touched his thumb to the gem set within his forehead, closed his eyes, and recited a mantra as he tapped his finger against it in a steady motion.

"Om hreem hreem shmashanvisini swaha[9]*, om hreem hreem shmashanvisini swaha…"*

What began as an intentional act turned into an automatic recitation, and as he repeated the mantra from his heart, his body became translucent, bit by bit, until he was entirely invisible. His Lord Shiva was fast asleep, reclining as the Buddha himself does, and so he gingerly opened the door of their lodgings and peered an eye into the hallway. It was what was practically an endless stretch of white marble, the walls lined with white doors leading to white rooms. His master wasn't joking—this really was like prison. Was this really any way to treat His guests? Standing stationed in front of each door was an angel of the Power division clad in shimmering red-and-gold armor patterned in all manner of angelic ornamentations, and theirs was no exception.

Vasuki gulped silently and lightly pulled the door inwards with as little involvement as he could, making it seem as though it was simply the wind blowing open an already-loose entrance.

[9] This recitation, as recorded in the Rudrayamala Tantra, is supposed to be said in a meditative state 400,000 times within a graveyard or cremation site on the 14th day of the waxing/waning phase of the moon in the lunar month of Kartika, usually around October and November, all while being completely naked—whereupon a Yakshini, a feminine nature spirit, will grant you a robe of invisibility. She eventually stopped answering once she realized that the only people willing to go through all that trouble to turn invisible just wanted to use it to spy in the women's bathroom.

The power fumbled with his blessed spear and whipped around, pointing it directly at the open doorway and narrowly missing Vasuki's throat in the process. The power guarding the door across from theirs (which happened to hold a busied Jade Emperor) craned her neck.

"Bitachonel?"

The one named Bitachonel snapped back at his colleague, the rest of the guards in the hallway either looking along with his fellow guard or averting their eyes out of a sense of respect and/or pity. He sheepishly grinned.

"...Yes, Avtachael?"

"Can you calm down, already? This place is the most guarded place in Heaven save for His Holy Shekhinah and the Empyrean right now, I'm sure whatever weird freaks of nature that have come and messed with things here will be shot down long before they come here. Besides, you know you're guarding Shiva, right? *Shiva.* Heretical Hindu deity as he may be, he's still known as 'The Destroyer' for a good reason. Man can kill you literally with a single glance of his eye."

"A-And, so? God can do that too! What's your point?"

"My point is, stop being so jumpy. It won't matter who annihilates you if you wake up our guests while they're sleeping."

Bitachonel's breath hitched in his throat (not that he needed to breath, but angels liked fitting in—it was a fad, like eating or enjoying music) and he let out a sigh, softly closing the door behind him so as to not rouse the Deva. Vasuki managed to slip out while the two were bickering, silently slithering down the hallway as he tried to find an exit.

It took a short while—the place was simply humongous, even by Vasuki's own standards. He thought the pool of primordial chaos-milk Shiva churned with him was unfathomably large, but after a couple minutes of wandering aimlessly in the white corridors, he was spitefully thinking to himself that this stupid building may hold a close second. Still, he eventually made his way to the front entrance, its two monumental marble doors carved with bas-relief images of the historic war in Heaven. There's not a chance he'll be able to get through these…but, as chance would have it, he happened to notice that the doors were very slightly ajar—their size and stature made them likely impossible to move except for by His Holy Grace's godly strength, and it would seem He was a little sloppy with closing the door behind him as white light streamed through.

Transforming back into his snake form, he stalked up to the gap in the doors and with a bit of pushing, he squeezed himself through. Standing guard at the gates was a tall pink-skinned man with gaunt facial features, long blonde hair, and an angelic robe in the tantalizing shade of 'Cough Medicine Magenta'. The angel sighed wistfully, and if Vasuki hadn't been invisible, there's a good chance he wouldn't have stopped him anyways. Nonetheless, the serpent king transformed back into his naga state—still invisible, of course—and hurried along.

From attending previous meetings of the Divine Synod with his master, Vasuki remembered that the primary control center of the angels was located in the sphere of Makon, one sphere off from Zebul, which is where they were now. It hurt Vasuki's head thinking about how the place was laid out, especially since there was never really a straight answer given by angels on how to traverse it: they always seemed to know where to go like birds migrating for the winter, and the

best answer they could give for a map was to imagine a seven-part venn diagram, make it 3D, make every sphere also encompassing one another, and imagine you're walking on the inside of each of the spheres. More than once in the past, gods had gotten lost on the way to the Galilee Symposium, so after a certain point God just hired Phanuel to direct everyone to the building with his fake smile and his stupid arrow-shaped sign.

He walked amongst the clouds, looking up to the 'sky' relative to where he was. Jutting out from the clouds were immensely radiant and shining golden…he would call them something like spires and something like upside-down minarets, but it was impossible to say for sure what it was. Burning wheels covered in eyes—the Ophanim—hovered around these spires, performing some kind of task. By Brahma, these Abrahamic angels are so gross-looking sometimes…He flicked a forked tongue out in hypocritical disgust and shuffled away in the opposite direction.

Soon, passing through a wall of clouds, he came to what he believed to be the central control center for all angelic activities. It resembled something like a massive and misshapen tower of cubes, angels constantly flying in and out of the thousands, possibly tens of thousands of rectangular holes bore into the sides. Though thin at the bottom, it flared outwards towards the top before tapering once more, making the whole building a vague club shape. Above the front door was a sign in a language Vasuki couldn't understand, though he had seen it on plenty of other angelic buildings on the way there. And of course, the whole thing was made of—what else? White stone lined with golden veins running through it. These angels really love their white and gold, Vasuki thought to himself. Don't they know any other colors exist? Saving his grumbling for a later time, he managed to slither up the side and slot himself into one of the lower wall-holes.

He traveled for surprisingly long, the corridor being entirely black despite its confines being made of a white material, before he finally came to an opening after what he estimated to be way too long crawling up and down, to the sides, all about in the darkness. He peered through the square-shaped hole.

Visible from his vantage point was a large room, the inside resembling the control centers Vasuki had occasionally seen in government buildings: a legion of angels with skin as pale and grey as polished stone, hair in all manner of wild colors (though blue seemed to be in fashion), and a floating *velificatio* ribbon inscribed with lines upon lines of the same angelic lettering he had seen above the door hovered around each of their heads. Their clothes resembled a curious mix of a traditional robe, a judge's outfit, and a business suit. He couldn't help but feel a little confused as to why they tried to incorporate the business suit motif when angels were simply *so* used to wandering about without any underwear on. They all sat in a circle around the central raised platform, scrolls and heavenly portals opened as they talked over one another and held pieces of halo to their ears.

On the raised platform, each seated on marble seats made comfortable with a variety of throw pillows and embroiled in fierce conversation, were the four Archangels. Four wings sprouted from each of their backs, and a shining golden halo as radiant as the dawn hung over their heads.

"—and if He shall give the order, then we shall follow His will to the bitter end, but we must stay steadfast in our faith! For all we know, this whole business could be nothing more than a stunt by The Devil and his demons, and they could be laughing all the way home. I will not act until He grants me His blessing."

Gabriel, an archangel appearing as a sharp-angled woman with fair skin, silver-toned eyes, long platinum-blonde hair held in place by a great white lily hairpin, and a flowing white robe patterned in angelic lettering and lily iconography, sat with her hands clasped together. Her face was stern and unmoving, and the way she furrowed her brows and pursed her lips gave the impression that it was her default expression.[10] She looked to her right.

"Now, now, Gabriel. True, it is best to wait for His word, but this is a threat none of us have dealt with before…perhaps not even Him. Should we really stand idly by as the rest of the many worlds fall into chaos? Remember Daniel 11:32—*'Those who do wickedly against the covenant he shall corrupt with flattery; but the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits'.* And keep in mind, our little group's leader…"

Raphael sat beside her, a soft-faced masculine angel with honey-colored skin, strong green eyes, wavy blonde hair in a parted style, and a somewhat frail frame that he leaned onto the wooden cane he carried with himself. He was dressed in a mint-colored robe, though it was worn over a grey suit and with a grey chaperon cap atop his head. Gabriel sneered and looked to her right.

"..."

Silent as usual with their hands folded in their lap, Uriel sat. An angel of indeterminate gender with light brown hair in a bowl cut, olive-tone skin peppered with freckles, and piercing red eyes, they wore a red and white outfit resembling that which was worn by the old crusaders, the robe sloppily thrown over their shoulders like a cape. A black-onyx key hung on a string around their neck. They were the most quiet and contemplative out of the four. As such, they only ever spoke when it was to say something profound, or when nobody else would—Gabriel mostly turned to them just to see if this was one of those times.

It was not, and Uriel just turned their gaze to her with a placid expression.

A shaky and unsure voice spoke up, the other three immediately turning to the source.

"...Did, um, we really need to come all the way here? To the control center…? It's always so loud here…I want to go home. All this cult stuff will go away soon enough, and the angels will get the Stone of Jacob back, so we don't really need to do anything, right? …Please don't make me do anything…"

The speaker was none other than the head archangel, Michael, who sat on his side with his knees curled to his chest as he hugged a stuffed lamb. His red-undertoned skin, long and straight black hair, and muscly figure made him quite intimidating on paper, but he was an utter wimp. Pale blue eyes quivered, and you could barely see the blue tunic worn over his golden armor

[10] This was true, but nobody mentioned it to her anymore since she always got all huffy about it. Comments about her not being able to take a joke would make her protest that she did too have a sense of humor, and the smile she forced generally provided a good enough warning against anyone watching bringing the topic up again.

behind his thick legs. His wings were even shirking away, covering him like a bird trying to hide from a predator. A sheath at his side held an ornate sword and its hilt.

Despite being the most powerful out of all of them, on the level of even the Seraphim in terms of sheer raw strength, he was notoriously sensitive and naive, empathetic, even childlike at points. He was only brought out during the most dire of situations, preferring to spend most of his time plucking the petals off of flowers and staring wistfully into the clouds. Raphael raised a hand and beamed a calming smile to his technical superior.

"Don't worry, Michael, you won't be made to fight. We will resolve things."

"Oh, please, Raphael, honestly! You baby him so much, it's a wonder he gets *anything* done."

"Gabriel! Not in front of him! This meeting is about Man Unkind and how we as angels should best deal with it, not to meaninglessly degrade our friends and companions."

Gabriel opened her mouth to speak, took a breath in through her nose, and exhaled it.

"...You're right. I apologize, Michael, Raphael. Returning to the subject at hand…I maintain my position. I am loyal to God, and if He does not give the command to act, then we as His servants shall not act."

He rubbed his chin, thinking as he mulled over the issue.

"And I maintain mine. We should act now, in order to quell this issue before our hands are forced. Mortals are foolish beings, and they often don't realize they are in danger until they feel the repercussions for themselves. Even now, as the theft of the Hope Diamond and several other lesser mortal artifacts are sweeping the world, there will be men going about their days who stick their heads in the dirt and refuse to hear it. That is why we sent Phanuel, no? We must gather intelligence on this enemy before striking. As it is, we only know as much as we learned from that 'Superfluous Man' that barged in here…and we only got so much before Uriel struck him down."

He nodded to Uriel, who smiled and put a hand up humbly, and Gabriel sighed. She took her lily hairpin out and turned it over in her hands anxiously.

"What purpose could this group be working towards, to need something as heavily guarded and yet which provides such little power as the Stone of Jacob, in addition to what they already have? The Principalities and Dominions have been combing the mortal world as best they can without interfering, but apart from the theft of the Hope Diamond and an incident in Japan involving a cursed stone, there doesn't seem to be a pattern…"

"Apart from the fact that they are all stones, that is."

She spat derisively.

"Oh yes, how could I have forgotten? Next, you will be telling me all Roman soldiers used shortswords and spears, and that was somehow significant."

"Patience, Gabriel, patience…I only pointed out what I could see. Our purview is the mortal world, and we have no eyes in the realms of the Fae, the households of other gods…we only know what we are able to learn."

"...They must have obtained some way of tracking them."

They turned to Uriel, who spoke softly and as though talking too loud would break their voice like an egg. Raphael rubbed his chin with a smile.

"Now there's an idea. Why didn't they act earlier? Why now of all times, on the first day of the Divine Synod, no less…it must have been a calculated effort, and they surely must have obtained something to make it possible.

Michael hid behind his lamb plush.

"...B-But…there's no proof of that, right?"

Gabriel slammed a fist on the arm of her seat, causing him to yelp and nearly fall out of his own chair.

"Does the Heavenly Father require proof to ask man for belief in Him?! Anything is better than nothing right now. If Phanuel should return with news from the Norse heretic gods, then…we shall see what He has to say on the matter, and review a new course of action."

"Oh, but I hate Phanuel…he's so…fake. I don't like how wide his smile is, and he always scares me with how friendly he is…"

"True, he can be a little intimidating at times, but don't you worry, Michael. He serves the same God as you and I, and remember that where two or three are gathered, so too is He there in the midst of them. Perhaps He, in all His ineffable glory, is watching these very proceedings…"

Gabriel rested a cheek on her fist, rolling her eyes as she silently bet that He was dictating His memoir to Metatron.

Vasuki watched the proceedings from his hiding spot in the wall, looking on at the archangels. This intruder that came into Heaven…what was it? The 'Superfluous Man'? This wasn't an isolated occurrence, and not only that, but there's reason to believe that this group he's affiliated with…Man Unkind, that they are stealing from other gods and mortals alike! He put a finger to his own forehead jewel and swallowed hard, hoping that they wouldn't come to him for his own gem…

It soon occurred to him, however, that his master had with him the divine stone of the Chandrakanta, formed from the congealed essence of the crescent moon as it waxed and waned, dripping its essence onto the Earth. Shiva had taken a liking to it, having an affinity for the moon himself, and Parvati had given it to him as a gift. He was practically like a child for the rest of the month afterwards, showing it off to everyone he could with a big smile on his face. Vasuki got the stone shown to him nineteen times. He was very familiar with it. It held the power to generate water and to grant the user the latent power held within the moon itself, as well as to shine a ray of blinding light towards whoever it was shown to. Only Lord Shiva, with his position as the deva of destruction and rebirth, could handle its brilliance.

He swallowed dryly. Not only was this problem indeed much bigger than he had thought, but they may be targeted! And the forces of God, what were they doing about it? Sitting around with their thumbs up their asses waiting for His holy approval in triplicate! Incensed by fury, he almost wanted to scream at them right then and there, but his loyalty to Shiva came first. He must return and warn his master.

Vasuki started to crawl backwards, only getting a few paces before he felt a harsh bump against his backside and heard a male voice.

"Ow! Man! Stupid tunnels, I keep telling Gabby to widen these things, make them at least two lanes wide…Hey, I can't see a thing but, whoever's stuck here, I have a job to do, so I'm gonna push on the count of three, okay?"

He opened his mouth to protest, but realized his Indian accent and his hissing sibilance would give away his identity, and so instead frantically waved an arm. He had completely forgotten he was invisible, and so was shocked to find that the angel behind him counted once, twice, and then slammed into him as hard as he could.

With a comical 'pop!' sound, Vasuki came tumbling out of the hole in the wall. He practically did a front flip in the air before landing squarely on his face, the jolt to his gem causing his invisibility to turn itself off. He was now nothing more than a naga—a distinctly un-angelic being—trespassing in the main control center of Heaven. Immediately, the dominions around him got up from their seats and shouted amongst one another, a few flying off to parts unknown to tell supervisors unknown of their grievances (likely well-known). The archangels took note of the ruckus and rose from each of their seats, looking down at the snake-man.

Not exchanging a word among any of them, the four dove off the central platform and lined themselves up in a defensive formation, Gabriel retrieving from her robe a long copper horn, Raphael raising his cane like a baseball bat, Uriel opening both hands and generating fire in each of them, and Michael holding his lamb plush out in front of him menacingly.

Gabriel raised the horn to her lips, staring down at the trespasser with fearsome intensity.

"State your name and business before you are struck down by us loyal servants of God, heathen."

Vasuki peeled his face off the ground just in time to see the four archangels, at which he scrambled back and put his hands up.

"Ah, ss-ss-ss, I-I am Vasuki, a serpent god-king of the naga people! I accompany Lord Shiva in my snake form to the Divine Synod every century, he is sssleeping sssoundly in his room as we speak…This was an independent action on my part. Do not hand down punishment on him for my own actionsss! You see, the Divine Synod was interrupted due to the appearance of the 'Superfluous Man', yesss? I was curious, and wanted to investigate what had happened…"

Raphael lowered his cane a bit and turned to Gabby.

"...Well, he is a known figure, and he lacks malicious intent. I feel as though we are not in any danger here."

"He still left the Galilee Symposium, right under the Lord's blessed nose! That is tantamount to heresy and a flagrant disrespect of God's will, and so it is judged that he shall be bathed in the holy radiance of His almighty glory until nothing remains of him."

"It is judged by who, exactly, hm? Remember, Gabriel, God sees all and knows all, but we can never hope to comprehend what He sees and knows exactly. If He did not strike Vasuki down, then He surely must be accounting for this in His plan. Our tension clouded our judgment, and so I ask you, Gabriel, lower your horn."

She stood there with her mouth open, glancing between a concerned Raphael, a trembling Vasuki, and Uriel standing with their hands behind their back, before sighing and dropping her hands to her sides, the horn coming with.

"Fine. But I must remember to tighten up security. The powers, I expect a certain level of incompetence from, but Cassiel the door-guard? He disappoints me."

"Yes, yes, everything disappoints you. Now…"

Raphael walked up to Vasuki and leaned on his cane once more, smiling warmly. Despite his young appearance, of course, these angels were many thousands of years old, and the way he carried himself and spoke his peace made him feel much older than he appeared.

"...You mentioned the 'Superfluous Man', yes? Then you must have been here for much of the latter half of our conversation. You must be worried for your master and his possessions. Do not worry. As you heard, we have an agent who is speaking with the Norse gods as we speak, and we assure you that as long as you remain in Heaven and remain in the company of God, everything will be—"

A sudden beam of light, a small heavenly choir, and the appearance of Phanuel next to all of them interrupted the platitudes.

The archangel still had that plastic customer-service smile of his plastered on, but its effectiveness was a little hindered by the fact that a battleaxe the size of an electric guitar had lodged itself in his shoulder, having made a bypass through the side of his face. Golden, glimmering, honey-viscous blood seeped from the massive wound as it coated the weapon and made a puddle where he stood.

"...So. Bad news about the other gods."

They all stood dumbstruck by the sudden appearance save for Uriel, who leaned to Michael.

"I don't like him much either."

~

Seeing the multitudes of demons at the foot of Mount Delectable, the Shadow stepped forward and looked out over the crowds. He cleared his throat, raised both his hands, and taught them. He said these words:

Blessed are the resentful, for a world of chaos will be theirs for the taking.

Blessed are those who laugh, for their laughter will echo across the earth.

Blessed are the violent, for they shall reshape the very earth.

Blessed are the ordered and docile, for great potential lies within their forms.

Blessed are the stifled, for they shall be stifled no more.

Blessed are the hated, for they shall hand down retribution upon their conspirators.

Blessed are the great and twisting mobs of rebellion and anarchy, who rend the framework of this structured world asunder to create a new Babylon of fire and rain. Think of the forces of God and suffer. Think of the rules of society and weep. Look within yourself and see the limitations that you place upon yourself, your superego that exists

independent of outside influence, and imagine what you could accomplish should those limitations be lifted. Are you strong enough?

Rejoice, for there is no concept of strength and weakness in our new world, and all will be worthy and unworthy all at once. Our emanations shall precede our virtues, and we shall no longer be only salt of the earth.

We shall be the salt and the earth, the farmer and the farm, the air and the water and the fire and all anima and animus, all breath and soul and light, all hatred and darkness and emptiness. We shall be all life and all death, because all life and all death is but the lens through which we view the unending primordial anarchy of the universe. We shall be chaos, the destroyer of all worlds.

Do not presume me to destroy all that you have built. It will be here, it will not be here, and it will be everywhere all at once—there will be no here or there, and there will be no us or them. No laws will pass, no jot nor tittle, and those who shall endeavor to sow law among us will face retribution of the highest order.

This is not a movement of hatred. This is not a movement of separation. This is a movement of utter and complete oneness, the unification of all beings via the decay of all barriers separating us from one another. As demons, are you not vilified and hated for fulfilling your God-given task? Ladies and gentlemen, prisons are built with the stones of Law, and brothels are built with the stones of Religion. All order will lead to chaos. It is an eventuality, the Holy Order of Our Lady Entropy shall permit all access to the annihilation of what you deem reality. All culture is built upon guilt, shame, and fear. Then, if there is the antithesis of culture, it is based upon conviction, pride, and courage.

I say to you, demons of Hell, think of a world of indulgence, a world of temptation and a world of sin, a world of blessedness and a world of holiness, a world where all are together and all are one. Think of who has wronged you, and remember these words:

Progress is a comfortable disease, and a world of made is not a world of born.

Pity your brothers and sisters, for they toil in a land of limits.

Pity your mother and father, for they granted you life in a world of shame.

Pity your flesh, for it binds you to a grotesque world of matter.

Pity the busy monster, man unkind.

The Shadow raised a pointed finger to the sky as his voice bellowed and echoed across the land.

Come, then!

Come join us!

There's a hell of a good universe next door!

Let's go!

From his position behind the rock, Beelzebub could hear cheering.

CHAPTER 11: The Big Mess

"Fomorian?"

Fionn mac Cumhaill slowly staggered to his feet as he unsheathed his sword Mac an Luin, wavering as he stood and clasping its handle with both hands as he wheezed.

"This…Williams…is a Fomorian. They are evil, and they must…they must be destroyed!"

He lunged towards Williams with his sword, swinging it down with a mighty mint-scented arc of druidic magic coating the blade. Though the Fomorian managed to stumble out of the way, the stump-desk was utterly destroyed, cleaved in two. They looked up from where they had landed on the ground and whined.

"Awww, come on. That was my favorite desk! I ordered someone to carve it with my own two hands!"

"Blondie, what in the Queen's name do you think you're doing?!"

"I'm extinguishing what should have been snuffed out long ago, Forruad. Do not interfere, and do not gaze at their eye. This should be over quickly, for in the name of Fionn mac Cumhaill of the Fir Bolg, I shall strike them down."

Williams' eye widened.

"Fionn mac…oh, no. Oh, no, no, no, he only just recently got out of his cave, didn't he?"

The Prince dove towards Fionn's legs and wrapped his lanky arms around the warrior's boots, weakly slamming a fist against his thigh and wincing each time he did so. Damn, why did he need to be so physically weak?! He was like a flimsy old bundle of sticks. A sexy bundle of sticks, but a bundle of sticks nonetheless.

"Nggh—Yeah, how'd you tell? Gah, Blondie, would you calm your tits for just a moment?!"

"I will do no such thing. The Fomorians are evil creatures, born of the deep and existing only to sow chaos and hatred among the forces of good."

Williams got to their feet.

"Oh, come now, where'd you read that? Is there somebody handing out pamphlets outside? You know those people don't go to church. I mean, I don't either. I think it's silly. But they can't be trusted, either way!"

They scrambled behind Rodion, hiding behind his wide frame.

"Large Russian man, protect me from your friend!"

"Can you not do it yourself…?"

"Don't you think I would be doing that if I could, Mr. Niccolini?! I don't do magic, the only thing I use it for is keeping my prosthetics working, and the most exercise I do is CrossFit on the weekends! And I skipped it this weekend! And the one before that. Actually, I should probably cancel my membership, but, regardless!"

Rodion sighed, reluctantly putting his hands up as he stepped forward.

"Look, Cumhaill, they are obviously not dangerous. I am sure that—what were you called?"

"Fomorians."

“I am sure that Fomorians are quite nice, once you get to know them! Aha, and, considering we are trying to talk to them about what went on here, it would be better if you would just. Give them a pass? Just this once?”

Fionn furrowed his brow and drew his sword once more, holding it to the side as he approached Rodion, still trying to shake The Prince off his ankles.

“You know not of what you speak, Cron. It is impossible to speak on even grounds with a Fomorian, nor should anyone attempt such a thing. Now move. I was unaware such scum still existed in the modern day.”

“Um, rude?”

Rodion’s nervous smile soured, and he lowered his hands.

“Cumhaill, I am asking you nicely. Be kind to Williams.”

“I doubt that is even their real name. It is English in origin.”

“In a way, aren’t we all English in origin? In here? You, uh, you can’t see it because I’m behind Mr. Nickelback, but I’m pointing to my heart. Or, I think it’s my heart. Where’s the beating, where is—oh! There it is. Left side. No wait, right. Both? Wow, both, okay, that’s cool.”

Fionn stood up to Rodion and stared up at him.

“Move.”

“Right, Blondie, you know, you’re being a *real* wanker right now, but if you lay a finger on Rodi, I’m going to shove your head so far up your arse you’ll be eating your own shite for the next week!”

“You as well, Forruad. I said *Move.”*

Callously, he flung his leg towards the wall. The Prince was sent flying, hitting the deer scare with his back and landing sprawled out where the waterfall pooled out in the ground. He wasn’t moving. Fionn looked on at his body unmoved. Finally, now that that was taken care of, he could get to Williams.

The instant he turned to face the other two again, he felt a sudden, blunt, and extremely prominent pain go across the side of his head, and he was out cold.

~

“I suppose since you have the legendary—and unsurprisingly out-of-the-loop—hero Fionn mac Cumhaill with you, I should tell you chaps the whole story. The boy was spot-on when it came to my name. My real name’s Iolo Morganwg, and I took on Edward Williams since it felt like the sort of name nobody would really question. Everyone knows an Edward or a Stanley or a Jonathan, I assumed that it was a pretty solid pseudonym, right? There aren’t exactly many folks named Iolo nowadays, right? I dunno. If people are naming their kids ‘The Prince of Fuck All’, maybe I’m just behind the times myself.”

Sant Director Morganwg led the three of them through the empty halls of the Natural History Museum. After Fionn had some time to cool down, Rodion had apologized for punching him (he claimed that it was a ‘heat of moment action’, but when The Prince questioned what kind of heat

he was feeling, he quickly denied it), and the doctor had fixed the two of them up with some gauze and antiseptic for their bruises, the Fomorian had invited them to walk and talk, to see more of the museum.

Fionn still walked holding the side of his face, and The Prince was practically limping, but apart from a few dirty looks, they were quiet for the most part. Rodion looked around at the exhibits, suppressing the urge to spend hours reading every individual plaque in favor of listening to Morganwg's story. He did make a mental note to visit once the heat had died down, though.

"So, what is 'Fomorian', exactly?"

"Ah, right, you're a Russian. Essentially, my race of people—the Fomoire—were the original inhabitants of the island of Ireland and its surrounding waters. Born from the Great Flood, which…right, you remember the whole deal with Noah, yes?"

"I was raised Orthodox, so, yes."

"Yes, well, we managed to survive that by virtue of being able to live under the water, but soon, my people waged war on the old inhabitants of Ireland. Admittedly, they did…well, kill and enslave. We need fresh meat to survive, but my ancestors had practically razed the whole place of animals, so when new folk arrive, what're you gonna do *other* than kill them and put them to work on your farms? Then there came the Fir Bolg."

Fionn looked up, and The Prince snickered.

"Oop, Fido's up. If you beg like a good boy, Blondie, maybe you'll get a bone."

He swiftly kicked The Prince in his shin, who swore loudly, before Rodion annoyedly told them to settle down. Fionn put a finger to his sore cheek, closing his eyes as he slowly healed the bruised skin with his own magic.

"My own tribe, the Ui Thairsig, are descendants of the Fir Bolg."

"Yes, indeed. I'm sure you've been told the stories of the wars between the Tuatha De and the Fomoire then, right? Bedtime stories."

"Horror stories, stories of your kind mating with them illegitimately and muddying their divine bloodline, stories of how you slaughtered the noblest rulers Eire ever had."

Morganwg pushed up his eyeglass and put his hand on a plaque, looking up at the beastly diorama they had come to. It was a terrible and corpulent thing, a humanoid shape more than fifteen feet in height and with a wide stance carrying with him a monstrous club, surrounded by his malformed minions. Massive tusks framed a single hideous eye, as fiery and intense as the sun itself despite being clearly made of glass, with its flabby eyelid being held up by four hooks attached to the back of its head. It had only one arm and one leg, just as Morganwg did, and though its skin was a more ruddy color, it still was slightly scaled and dotted with fins. The figure was mid-swing with its heavy club, and were it alive, spit would be flecking from its mouth as it belted out a battle cry unlike any other. Rodion stared up at the figure with a mix of awe and fear, and The Prince bit his lip with a grin.

"You're half-right. I cannot deny those actions, but I don't claim responsibility for them, and you lived decades after all this took place. You know the stories, yes, but you only know one

point of view. Most prominently, you may know Balor, the one who the Fomorians call our greatest king. According to our oral legends, they say he could scorch all that he saw and kill five thousand with a single glance of his eye."

"Is that what you…?"

"Is that what I? Oh! Oho, no, no. All Fomorians have a single eye that demonstrates some power—mine only causes migraines, and I keep it in check with this prescription eyeglass. It also helps with my near-sightedness! Regardless, ever since that loss at the First Battle of Mag Tuired where the Tuatha De warrior Lugh killed him, the Fomorians as a whole have never approached the Tuatha De or their people, the Fae, ever again. There were still occasionally bad apples, yes, but they usually were swiftly culled by warriors such as you, Fionn mac Cumhaill."

The Prince sniffed.

"So to recap, Blondie…you're miffed that a bunch of fish people *lost* against your gods and ancestors? Sounds like kind of an insecure move, if I'm honest…but then again, that's the general vibe when it comes to these 'evil race' types, right? Demons, jinn, orcs, Southerners, whether they win or lose, they're the enemy."

"It is not as simple as you say, Forruad. I have been told stories by Liath Luachra and Deimne about how the Fomoire will snatch children who stay up too late, how any food that is left on your plate goes to feeding their infernal ranks, how the dust in your room provides ample hiding space for their miniature agents, how—"

"Right, so you got scared because you saw the Boogeyman."

"It is not that simple."

"I think it's pretty damn simple, honey. No shame in saying you were just scared! Scared like a little baby chicken who lashed out in a temper tantrum, yes, but scared."

Rodion tilted his head as Morganwg continued through the exhibits.

"But…you do not do such things, right?"

"No, of course not. Such reasoning, however, is why I chose to take on a fake name and hide myself away. People will despise others for what their ancestors did to the other's ancestors and forget everything else. Perhaps more often, they will despise others because their ancestors hated the others', and that's the way it's always been."

They took a right and stopped short of an unlabeled door between the other exhibits, producing a key from their pockets and opening the entryway for the four of them as their tone grew dark.

"Mr. Nikolayev, Prince. Are you two familiar with a period of history known as 'The Big Mess'?"

"No, I cannot say I am. My education was mainly religious when not self-sustained."

"Course I do."

Rodi looked at him with a bewildered expression, as did the others, and The Prince awkwardly chuckled with a weak grin.

"...Aha…ahaha, uh, but, I would be willing to hear how you explain it. Just to be clear that I've got my facts straight, you know?"

Rolling their singular eye, Iolo led them into a cramped room with a single light hanging from the ceiling, the walls lined with filing cabinets as they led to a single computer. Rodion let the other two enter first so he could squeeze himself in, craning his neck as Iolo opened a cabinet drawer and thumbed through folders of papers and documents.

"During the closing days of World War II, Hitler became increasingly desperate as Nazi forces lost not only the Battle of the Bulge, but the Battle of Remagen and Operation Spring Awakening, and he turned to his occult researchers for answers. Cornered and knowing that the Allies would soon be upon them, he turned to something that went against his very belief system: he prayed to the old gods, those Germanic deities of storm and thunder that they loved so, though their reverence was in idolatry and reappropriation and not in worship."

"The existence of these gods had been known for a long time, but they kept to themselves and did not meddle in mortal affairs unless it was to live among them, the Germanic-Norse gods being among them. Though they despised what he and his Axis powers were doing, it would set an ill precedent if they were to interfere. People already feared their powers, and it was only under shaky relations that they could exist in the same world."

They produced a small grainy photograph, depicting an old man with one eye and a beard so long it wrapped around his neck meeting with a number of people at the White House. He wore a suit that looked odd on his old yet sturdy frame, but he stuck out even more among the group of tired-looking men in suits that surrounded him.

"Meeting with the United States, they expressed their extreme discontent, but President Roosevelt warned them not to do anything drastic. Simply ignore their pleas as they had doubtless done many times before, and the Allies would finish things off within the next month. The gods were not happy."

Iolo put away the photograph and produced another, showing what appeared to have once been a lavish office building—the Reich Chancellery—completely destroyed. The building was nigh-unrecognizable, scorched to a crisp and surrounded by craters.

"That night, they descended upon Berlin and killed every single person they could find with connections to the Nazi Party, destroying their monuments and burning their buildings until there was nothing left. All concentration camps were liberated, their prisoners fed and clothed as best the gods could. Shortly afterwards, the Shinto gods of Japan and the Roman gods of Italy showed themselves to their countries' leaders, and they surrendered instantly out of fear. Soldiers returned to their homes and families, and the governments were left to grapple with what had happened."

Rodion sniffed, his blood running cold in his body as he spoke.

"...But, they did a good thing, yes?"

"To our modern eyes, yes. But…hm, well, imagine you are an ant in a colony, fighting an enemy queen and her colony. All of a sudden, a human comes out and stomps the enemy colony, killing everyone inside. You would be grateful, yes…but think about the fear that would instill in you. There was a force more powerful than you could ever comprehend, and if you should ever get on their bad side, they could instantly destroy you and everything you know. True, the

Germanic gods quashed an unambiguous force of evil…but their judgment, or that of any other gods', could not be infallible. People began to realize just how weak they really were. And they grew *scared.* And from fear, comes hatred."

They shared another photograph, this one depicting a manticore family fleeing from an angry mob. Beneath it, a mystical-looking man in a horned headdress pleading with a business owner pointing to a sign stating they reserved the right to refuse service to anyone. Beneath that one, a picture of a mystical forest—not too dissimilar to Tir na nOg—set ablaze with charred and inscrutable figures visible laid across the ground. The stack of photographs was as thick as a novel, and The Prince put a hand over his mouth as he saw the images.

"The period from 1946 to 1960 saw widespread panic across the globe as people fell into discord. Rates of religious adherence dropped sharply in some places and spiked in others. Fae settlements were destroyed by flash mobs. The occupation of 'monster hunter' hit its stride, some prominent members of Congress wearing the title as a badge of pride as they decorated their studies with the heads of the snallygasters and tarrasques that once lived in houses just like them. Even among mortals, subspecies were singled out and targeted. Among skeletons, many had to flee more progressive states to keep their families safe, and the wolves and sheep and cats who had since long ago walked upright just as men had were demoted to second-class citizens in the eyes of many—no better than their four-legged lessers. This was known later as the Big Mess, and it wasn't until John F. Kennedy became president and became a spearhead for civil change and de-escalation that things calmed down in America, his efforts to quell the civil unrest that had plagued the nation causing him to be so popular among non-'pure' humans and supernatural beings that he even appointed some to secret service positions, preventing numerous assassination attempts."

The last photo in the stack was of John F. Kennedy, the smiling face of America he was always shown to be, shaking hands with a red-scaled dragon secret service agent whose wings were ravaged with bullet holes.

"Gradually, the wound has healed, but tensions are still high for many. That's the end of the story when it comes to America, but countries around the world had their own ways of dealing with it. Some were always accepting of non-humans, such as the United Kingdom and Ireland…but for others, the Big Mess still pervades their everyday life due to government regulations, internment camps, and other practices."

"And…some expelled them entirely, *da?"*

"Yes, unfortunately. This world is a very diverse place, which is both a blessing and a curse. Thankfully, a period of chaos is usually followed by a period of peace, so we should be fine…for now."

They tucked all the photographs back into the filing cabinet and sighed, leaning against it and crossing their arms.

"If people knew I was a Fomorian, they never would have let me have this job in the first place. I would have been chased back into the sea by Irish families before I even got a chance to

say my name. That's why I kept myself hidden…and it's saddening to know that opinions on us haven't changed since 350 CE."

Fionn's blank expression saddened a bit, and he nibbled on his thumb.

"...Sorry. For me, it feels like it was only yesterday that I was hearing stories of the Fomoire's deeds…"

"Right, I was going to ask about that, you look surprisingly young for a guy who's been sleeping in a cave. What's your skin-care routine? I mean, look—look at me, I'm dry as a bone. Why do you think I have a pool in my office?"

The Prince awkwardly let out a forced laugh, having been wringing his hands as Iolo told the story, and shut the filing cabinet himself. Rodion could swear he saw a bit of dampness around his mascara.

"Ha ha ha, my, what a…f-fascinating story…very nice. Um. So, about Man Unkind…"

"Ah, r-right! That was whole reason we came to speak with you, Sant Director Morganwg, we know who is behind these thefts!"

"You do? Well, then spit it out!"

The two of them explained the events that had led up to their arrival, as well as who and what Man Unkind was and their mission. Iolo Morganwg nodded and listened intently, and when all was said and done, they opened their eye as their tail swished in thought. Fionn piped in from the back.

"Excuse me, I have a question. Why do these agents want the Hope Diamond, of all things? What is so special about it? From how it has been explained, it does not seem like anything more special than a gleaming blue rock."

"It's a very *expensive* blue rock, Mr. Cumhaill, and not only that, it's said to carry with it the ghosts of all its previous owners. Louis XIV and his wife had their heads chopped off after it came into their possession, the banker Thomas Hope for whom it is named was eventually forced to sell it after he went utterly bankrupt, sultan Ibrahim Mukah'rab of Najd who cited it as being the reason for his erectile dysfunction and ordered it destroyed…I doubt there's any truth in it, but some have said that it keeps an image of all who touch it within itself, and if one can learn to harness the shades of the dead that reside within without being killed, they may become quite powerful."

"And, er, who is people who are saying this?"

"Oh, what do you doctor types call them...I know you have a name for them…ah, yes. Quacks."

The Prince sighed and put his hand to his forehead.

"Course if the bloomin' thing's haunted, the kooks would want to get a hold of it…I would say to hope they haven't got any psychics in their ranks, but considering I know they've already got plenty of ghosts, I doubt it would do much. Right, come on then, Rodi, Blondie. Time to head off to Japan and hope we aren't too late to snatch up whatever funny pebble's causing trouble over there."

He wheeled around on his heel, Rodion moving to open the door, but Iolo put his hands up.

“Well, wait, hold on! You haven’t told me much of anything about this so-called ‘cult’, no matter what you think you said. Why are they only stealing it now rather than gunning for it months ago? Who’s the leader? You said they have ghosts and whatnot in their rankings, how is—how is that possible? Are they demons of a sort?”

Stopping, The Prince rolled his eyes, dramatically lowered his head with an exasperated sigh, and opened his mouth to explain something that he felt was rather obvious.

A rumble from outside cut him off, followed by the sound of crackling flames.

The Prince swallowed, frozen for a moment, and pushed past Rodion to peer through the keyhole.

“Oh shit.”

“Oh shit?”

“They’re here.”

Standing outside the door with their hands on their hips and occasionally flexing and posing as if they were on the beach, were three hulking masculine figures with broad chests, burly arms, and a tan as deep as molasses and as leathery as an armchair covering their bodies. Their crotches were covered with a thong of fire, and white dripping markings resembling tribal tattoos sprawled across the rest of their body, snaking around their biceps and under their pecs like overly-friendly snakes. Their heads weren’t humanoid, however, their necks instead tapering to a point where a miniature sun burned and shone, prominences flaring out from the corona. With every step, they left scorched-black footprints on the tile floor.

The Prince turned around with a hand over his mouth, looking at the others. Fionn began to unsheathe his sword, but Iolo raised their hands.

“I-I’m sorry, uh, who? Who’s here?”

“(Hush, fish-and-chips. Man Unkind is. Specifically, the Sunshine Supermen.)”

“(Sunshine Supermen? What is…who names these agents, Prince?)”

“(People just as loopy as the folks they name. These are nasty buggers though, they’re spirits of the Earth born from the fury she has towards people using spray products. Think of them as the vengeful ghosts of the ozone layer. They’re seven feet tall, built like a brick shithouse, and—)”

One of the Sunshine Supermen flexed both hands behind its head, pointing with a toe towards the door.

“It will last all day, again and again! No re-application needed!”

A fireball erupted from its foot, firing at them. They just barely managed to shrink back from the door in time, but the impact left a circular scorch-rimmed hole in the door. The Prince peered through it, gulping.

“...And they only speak in lines from sunblock ads. Run.”

The Prince opened the door from the outside, flinging it open as the four of them began sprinting away from the Sunshine Supermen. The beings twitched their pecs and the ‘leader’—the one who had fired the scorching projectile—pointed at the group.

“Guaranteed not to sting your eyes, and lasts long enough to prevent untimely sunburns!”

The three of them charged after the group, and The Prince led the pack with a long-legged stride as his coat billowed behind him. Fionn ran backwards with his sword fully unsheathed, lagging behind the group as Rodion huffed and puffed to keep up and Iolo rambled in a panic.

"Y-You aren't kidding about this cult thing, huh? I thought it was just some big prank! I mean, Man Unkind, kind of a lame name for a cult, don't you think? They should have given it some catchy name like 'The Dead Poets Society', or 'The Breakfast Club', or—I don't know, something that'll make people nostalgic! Then you could get celebrities in on it! It worked for—"

"Scientifically proven to reduce burns by 80%!"

Another fireball emanated from the flexing hulks as the air filled with the sound of sizzling, aiming at the back of Rodion's head. Thankfully, he ducked down just in time, though a few of the hairs on his mustache were burnt. Looking behind him, he closed his eyes for a second and put his hands in front of him, performing a complex motion as the light scent of bourbon complemented the sizzling flames and a ball of water formed in his palms.

"Voda!"

The glob of water shot from his hands, nearly missing Iolo and beaning one of the Sunshine Supermen directly into their chest. It evaporated instantly, and Rodion cursed in Russian under his breath as he kept running, turning to The Prince as he rummaged around in his coat.

"Hff, Prince, water is—hahh, not working!"

"Course it doesn't, Rodi! They're beings of nature, nothing natural will work against them! Just give me a second! (Damn it, I used it this morning…)"

Fionn let out a cry and swung Mac an Luin, green magic swirling around the blade as he leapt into the air and chopped an incoming projectile in half. The two parts of the fireball wisped away into nothing, and he continued running backwards, fending off whatever attacks came towards them. He glanced to Iolo.

"Fomorian! Where are the nearest set of stairs? We cannot run in circles forever!"

"You would be surprised at how long I could. Actually, my doctor said—"

"Tell me!"

"Next right coming up, through the marine section."

"Forruad, did you—"

"Yes, honey, I got it, I'm not deaf. Crafty thinking, though…and I've got an idea! Come on then, off to the stairs!"

They scrambled along past the noticeably empty geology exhibit, around a totem pole that was immediately burnt to cinders (Iolo being audibly upset about it and whining that it took him five days of negotiation and half an hour of mercenary-hiring to get that thing), and through the hall of marine animals. There, the Sunshine Supermen showed a bit of cunning and aimed towards the cables holding the gigantic fake whale suspended above the walkway.

"Stays applied even in water!"

The cables snapped under the intense heat, and The Prince shouted.

"Scatter!"

In an instant, all four parties went in different directions: The Prince hid behind an octopus, Rodion took shelter behind a lake of plastic coelacanths, Fionn dove into an interactive iceberg cave, and Iolo launched themself into one of the pools, forgetting that there was no water in any of them. The whale hit the ground hard, crashing onto the floor and sending a wave of debris and clutter up into the air. The Sunshine Supermen looked around, unable to see among the dust, and the others saw their chance. Discreetly, they all moved in the same direction—that is, away from the enemy—and turned right towards a spiral staircase that led up to the second floor. Stepping aside, The Prince ushered the other three up the stairs, before stepping in front of them. Rodion stopped partway, however, watching from behind the center column as the Sunshine Supermen stood in front of him.

One flexed.

"Summer is here."

Another crunched.

"Protect your skin."

The leader pointed down at him.

"Don't be a paleface."

The Prince just snickered with a hand still in his coat, looking up at the three humanoids.

"You know, you omis are real lucky I'm not into guys with miniature stars for heads. I mean, I know I'm flaming, but leave some for the rest of us, right? Besides, you know what I think you all could do with?."

He whipped out a can of hairspray, 'Lightning Bolt' brand with the label advertising 'Strong as Zeus and just as stiff!', and aimed it at the agents.

"A nice bouffant."

Clenching his fingers down on the top, he sprayed the CFC-filled substance directly into the Sunshine Supermen's 'faces', all of them letting out screams that were less beastly and closer to the wails of drunken frat boys as they fell to their knees holding their faces. He sprayed until the can was almost entirely out, then threw it at the leader. It bonked harmlessly off its shoulder.

"Ta-ta, lovelies~!"

With that, he sprinted back up the stairs and past Rodion, mentally wanting to chastise him for being a Peeping Tom but not having the time. The two of them met with Fionn and Iolo on the second floor where they were catching their breath. Fionn panted as he turned to the rest.

"Forruad, where—hff, where should we go? They seem unstoppable, they could follow us out of the building."

The Prince stuck a hand into his coat once more and stuck out his tongue.

"See, funny thing, that. Some of these bastards are an easy shot, you send them back where they came from with a silly little ditty or humming 'Camptown Races' or spraying them with hair product, but the Sunshine Supermen and others of their ilk are real tossers. They're practically impossible to get rid of."

"T-Then, what do we do, Prince?"

"Simple! We leave. Immediately. Who wants to go to Japan? I do, I do!"

“What?!”

Iolo sputtered as they got to their feet, shaky from exhaustion and adrenaline.

“You’re—you’re just going to leave? Me?! Here?! With these, these *things?* I don’t even know what they are, you called them, what, ghosts? Ozone ghosts? How does that make *any* sense? The ozone is not a living thing, it can’t have ghosts, it isn’t associated with any deities to my knowledge—and you say the cult somehow recruited these things? How? Why?”

One of the Sunshine Supermen slowly skulked up the stairs, visibly in pain from the hairspray attack but raising an arm steadily. It was readying a flex, and its projectile would be a direct hit to Iolo. They had no clue.

“I-I mean, I thought—I thought you folks were nice people, but all you’ve done is come here and make a crackin’ mess of things, and bring these insane creatures here! Would I invite you to dinner? No. Maybe. Maybe if you apologize for all this. *Maybe* if you showed some *decency* and *compassion* for your—”

“Fomorian!”

Fionn’s voice rang out, and Iolo turned just in time to see the great ball of fire that encompassed the entirety of his vision heading straight towards them. It was the size of a beach ball at the very least, and they raised a hand in some attempt to shield themself. It was hot. Extremely hot, and they could feel the sparks of kindling on their wooden prosthetics.

“Oh—”

They tightly closed their eye, anticipating the wash of searing pain that would envelop their body…

…But no such pain enveloped them.

Instead, they saw Fionn standing in front of them, his pure white hair dotted with scorch marks and his coat a bright and fiery orange as the two halves of the projectile faded away into the air. Burn wounds dotted his arms and his face, and blackness was visible beneath his chainmail, but he stood steadfast in the face of the figure with shaky breaths.

Iolo looked up at him, their voice far away from their own ears.

“...F-Fionn?”

“Go…Run. I must trust Forruad’s judgment, and when you leave this hall of memories, tell them of your heroics. Establish yourself as a hero.”

“You…saved me, even though I’m…”

“A spawn of the deep capable of evil like no other creature? Yes. I am aware of the irony. Remember that you owe the warrior Fionn mac Cumhaill your life now and forever. Please hurry and go.”

A tear beaded in Iolo’s eye before they nodded, taking off and running as fast as they could in a random direction. They made a right into the insect sanctuary and disappeared entirely, the three Sunshine Supermen fully making their way up the stairs in synchronized marching as Fionn staggered on his feet. The burns were too severe, and he began to fall backwards.

Yet, he was caught by two familiar and rough hands.

“Cumhaill…It will be okay. You did good, come, let us go.”

He raised his hand weakly before losing consciousness entirely. Rodion hoisted him up in his arms and placed him on his shoulders, carrying the wounded Celt on his back as he hurried to The Prince, who had finally managed to produce his trusty rusty LSD-powered bicycle and was already perched on top of it.

"So, Blondie took a hit for fish-and-chips after learning a little bit of compassion for his fellow monster, did he?"

Rodion climbed on as The Prince handed him his tab.

"Yes…I do not know how badly he was wounded, but it seems like it may take a while. I may need to perform surgery once we get to Japan."

"Ah, Japan…where are we headed again? Akibirito Prefecture?"

"Y-You don't remember?"

"Hahaha, just kidding, love! Juuuust kidding. Now come and ride with me, Rodi, girl, on a magic carpet ride!"

The two of them took their tabs at the same time, and The Prince started pedaling just as the Sunshine Supermen were gaining on them. The sun-headed men sprinted after them, the three raising their hands in the air as they formed a collective fireball above their heads.

"The last sunscreen you'll ever need."

"The last sunscreen you'll ever need."

"The last sunscreen you'll ever need."

The heat in the chamber grew almost unbearable, like ants dancing upon the two men's skin as their vision melted and gave way to colors and shapes and phantasmagoria, the trail of growing technicolor mirages running and pluming from their back tire. The fireball they charged grew larger and larger until it almost filled the entire ceiling of the rotunda, and with a thrust of their hands and the tensing of all of their bronzed muscles, they threw it down upon their enemies.

The Prince cackled.

"See you in hell, candy-boys!"

And when the flames settled, they were gone.

~

Shortly after they left, there was a breaking news bulletin on the television, courtesy of NPBA News. A young Siamese cat woman in a grey suit held a microphone to her mouth as she stood outside the Natural History museum, where an even greater crowd had since gathered around the entrance. A short distance behind her was a mob of people all shouting and asking questions, and she kept a finger on her earpiece.

"This is Jo Jackson reporting live from outside the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, where in an unprecedented move, Sant Director Edward Williams has emerged! I'm on the scene hoping to get an exclusive interview. If you'll excuse me—"

She turned to the mob and proceeded to crack her knuckles, fistfighting and shoving her way through the people and leading the cameraperson behind her, until she had made it to the sant director with only a couple scratches and a few dusted knuckles on her part. They stood calmly, their eye closed as they folded their hands behind their back.

"Whoof…hah, Mr. Williams, what is the reasoning behind this sudden public appearance?"

They leaned forward, opening their eye.

"Well, firstly, I am not a mister nor a missus, and my name isn't Williams. My name is Iolo Morganwg, and I am a Fomorian."

"This is quite surprising for many of our viewers, we—was it hard, getting to your position while being a member of such a vilified race of slaughterers and rapists, no offense?"

"If you should call my people such things, save them for some of the humans you meet." Iolo let that statement stand for a bit, believing it to be profound, before they coughed awkwardly and waved a hand. "Er, no, I sent all my resumes by mail and kept my camera off for all virtual job interviews."

"And, what of the Hope Diamond theft? Any developments?"

"In fact, there have been several developments. Among them are more damage to the museum—though nothing that cannot be fixed with a bit of spit-shining and some government funding—and knowledge of the perpetrators of this crime. If you should see those who identify with the name 'Man Unkind', report them directly to the DUO, those men over there in the suits who I'm waving to, yes. Yes, you! Yes, I'm—I'm talking to you, it's—oh. Oh, I shouldn't? I'm being informed I shouldn't draw attention to them. Kind of hard when there's fifteen of you guys! Anyways. More agents appeared in the museum while I met with three experts on the subject, and they saved my life. Soon after they left, the agents seemed confused and left, so I can only assume there is nothing else here that they want."

Mrs. Jackson raised an eyebrow, glancing at the camera.

"Man Unkind? Are they some sort of terrorist organization?"

"In a way, I guess so."

"It's good the government is getting involved, then. Is there any advice you would like to give to your fellow museum directors and anyone else who may be at risk?"

Iolo rubbed their chin, let out a dramatic sigh as they mulled it over, and took off their eyeglass as they turned to the camera and made direct eye contact with it.

"I would just like to say—"

The lens cracked.

"Oh crap. Oh—oh my god, I am so sorry, I don't—how much was that? Was that a high-end camera? Oh my god. I am really just—that's awful. I'm awful, I'm sorry. How much was it? I'll pay for it out of pocket."

Jo just sighed, pinched the bridge of her snout, and peered into the camera. Her face was fractured into several pieces thanks to the broken glass, but her annoyed expression was clear.

"...This is Jo Jackson for NPBA News, signing off."

Iolo waved behind her and called out just before the feed cut back to the newsroom.

“Hi, mom!”

CHAPTER 12: Weeping And Gnashing Of Teeth

"It is quite an honor to see you here once again, Frenzied One."

Seated cross-legged in his seat at Galilee Symposium, Odin sat flanked by his two closest comrades: his son Thor, God of Thunder, and his blood-brother Loki the Lie-Smith. They sat at the far end of the table, all around which were seated the members of the Divine Synod. Shiva sitting closest to Metatron, the Jade Emperor annoyedly adjusting his glasses, Papa Legba and the Dagda taking turns nodding off (as they had been roused from their sleep for this impromptu meeting), and the others looking intently at the other end of the table. The four archangels stood steadfast around their boss, master, and superior all in one—Metatron.

Metatron currently had his head folded in his arms as he slouched over the table with heavy exhaustion weighing on his shoulders. He peered up at Gabriel.

"Gabriel, be silent."

Odin crossed his arms, Huginn and Muninn perched on each of his shoulders as he squinted down the table at the angelic figures.

"Do not speak as if we are equals, or as if you are lesser, Christians. I may have but one eye in my skull, but my brain remains as hardy as ever. I can feel your animosity towards I and my kind from here, permeating the air like a foul stench. I would be lying if I said I was not pleased to see some old acquaintances still entertaining this facade of order—"

He exchanged knowing glances with Shiva, the Asian deities (Amaterasu-no-Omikami, Shangdi, Yuanshi-Tianzun, Haneullim), and the Dagda.

"—and others, who I pray are informed enough to recognize the sordid self-satisfying affair that this 'Divine Synod' claims itself to be."

Cao Dai nodded with a sour look in his eyes, while Tenri-O-no-Mikoto looked to Papa Legba expecting him to look at least somewhat offended. He simply puffed on his pipe, contemplating. Gabriel opened her mouth to speak again, but Metatron raising a hand shut her up as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Ugh, look…Odin. We know that you don't like us. You make it abundantly clear, and *have* made it abundantly clear. It'll take Phanuel most of the next week to stitch up his physical body thanks to that 'gift' you gave him."

"I take no credit for that."

Thor raised his hand with a satisfied grin.

"It gave me great pleasure feeling how the axe split him like wood. It's just disappointing that he didn't scream at all."

Metatron loudly cleared his throat. "Ahem. Yes, well, anyways, I assume you know why we called you here?"

"Of course we do. This absurd new threat that has led to our Nine Realms being thrown into chaos. Your pitiful angelic lackey informed us that these problems were affecting more than our

own world, including Midgard. And yet, what do I see when I arrive? All of your club members, still sitting right where they are, not doing a single thing to address these issues."

The Dagda stood up, sneering and showing his yellowed teeth as he slammed a fist on the table. His other hand held two coarse fingers up to his ear.

"Oi! 'Tain't like we 'aven't been bloody tryin', ye shitehawk! Ye try gettin' anythin' done wit' the Almighty loomin o'er yer shoulder like a schoolmarm!"

Odin raised his eyebrows and cracked a grin at the angels.

"Ah, so you still face the same problems that I did when I was among your ranks: a chairman who lords his power over others. Some may call Him a jealous god, including himself from what I have heard, but I was always more partial to 'tempestuous'."

Cao Dai stood as well.

"This is not a new issue?"

Loki cackled upon seeing the light-haired young man, lightly nudging his blood-brother.

"They must be letting anyone into organized religions nowadays. This boy can't be any older than twenty-two, and look at him sitting with the big boys at the adults' table! That deserves a toast, wouldn't you say?"

Odin just ignored him, clasping his hands together in front of him.

"You are one of the new ones, yes? Who are you? How long have you been attending this frivolous sham of a meeting?"

"I am Cao Dai. My followers embrace Caodaism, syncretism between Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, as well as a creed of nonviolence, vegetarianism, and moral righteousness. This…is my first Divine Synod."

"Then sit, boy. All gods who run the Synods have become power-hungry fools at some point or another. Before their God, there was Zeus, who instilled the worship requirement for attendees. Before even him and before my own existence, Atum ruled with superiority over the many gods that attended his Synods…and he paid the price dearly. This God who organizes your meetings, He is inscrutable at best and destructive at worst. He keeps you and your people here in the face of danger, and for what reason? So that He could come to the rescue, thus proving His power over all."

He smiled bitterly under his heavy beard.

"If His son developed a martyr complex, then I suppose He must have a hero complex. Only at the last minute, when all else is lost, does He get off His Holy Empyrean Behind to act. With a flick of His finger, he could solve all of these new problems, not to mention the many issues on—"

"Enough!"

Metatron shouted and stood up, a new determination in his eyes as he breathed heavily. His words had incensed the seraph, and if he wasn't fed up before, he certainly was now. Realizing the tone of his voice, however, he stopped and stood up straight, regaining his composure as he folded his hands behind his back.

"...Per His orders, we have sent all but the core member deities back to their original worlds. It is important that we keep the leaders here for the time being in order to speak with them on strategy, though we have also opened communications between them and their pantheon. Heaven is in chaos right now, and we need all the support we can get. We will not acknowledge your past transgressions so long as you do not acknowledge ours."

"Ha! You ask me to ignore murder when the blood is on your hands. I did what I did for the good of mankind, and they hated us for it. Where was your exalted God when such terrible atrocities were committed in Midgard, sleeping as mass prayers and begging from His people to save them fell on deaf ears? Gods do not meddle in others' affairs. If you would do nothing, then I thought that I would. Especially given what that foul dictator and his band of delusional sycophants were planning to do, if left unchecked…something even worse than your Satan would have come into being, and we would be left fighting a foe too powerful for any of us to handle."

He grit his teeth. "Our meeting is to discuss the new threat that has been noticed among the worlds of the gods, a cult known as Man Unkind. This is our first point of discussion, and all others can be saved until after the first is dealt with. Be thankful that He is a merciful and loving God as well as a wrathful one."

"Perhaps only merciful to those who flagrantly spit in His face. But please, go ahead and speak. It is not as if our most dangerous animal has been freed along with his sister, who has anointed herself Queen of the Spirit World, is on the loose and the prophecy of Ragnarok may be forever tainted."

Metatron shook his head and sighed, covering his face with both hands. Glancing to Raphael, he vaguely gestured with a finger outstretched.

"Raphael, you tell him what you and the others worked out. I'm getting another migraine."

"Of course, High Scribe."

Raphael, hobbling over to the table with his cane, formed a stool by extending the floor tiling vertically and gingerly sat himself on it as he looked to Odin.

"We have deduced from both our own reasoning and the help of the Dominions that Man Unkind is a dangerous cult that has been acting under both His and our noses this entire time. There are many worlds, endless copies of Earth, the Nine Realms, Heaven, and of all others. The leader, on whom we have no data, snatches magical relics and artifacts from each of these worlds, to the point where if they take one thing from every world, it will be impossible to ascertain their patterns and movements. It was like they were never even there. Thus, this rash of activity on our Earth is unprecedented. They wouldn't have pulled such an ostentatious move unless they had complete confidence in themselves—and we know the source of that confidence now."

He raised his cane and turned it upwards, putting the curved handle to the ground as the black cap on the ferrule opened. Glittering golden light sparkled out from out of the hole that was revealed, but it lingered for no longer than a moment before forming into a three-dimensional golden sphere, which then shaped itself as though invisible hands were kneading it like clay until

it took on an oblong shape. Slightly debossed swirl patterns were visible through the light, and a small stump came to rest underneath the shape as golden light sloshed and crashed about it in waves.

"Those among you from previous Synods may remember one Rod, creator deity of the Slavs. One of his most precious creations, resting on an altar at the navel of the Earth with the great World Tree rising out of it, is the Father of All Stones: Alatyr. He once watched over it, but after the events of the fifties, he retreated to his domain and has refused to come out since. As such, the Alatyr has become a popular tourist attraction among mortals and gods alike, some of whom have taken to chipping small pieces of it off as souvenirs."

The Jade Emperor sneered and clasped his hands together with a snarl.

"Of course. What man sees, man wishes to have. What man cannot have, man whittles away until everyone can have a little bit. They have done the same to my Great Wall."

The lights zeroed in on a silhouette of a man with a pickaxe, shiftily looking over his shoulder as he knocked a piece of Alatyr off. Then, hurrying with the stone in his jacket, he came upon a stern-looking man in a powdered wig.

"Indeed, it's quite an issue for many gods, we've seen. My point being that one of these tourists, Jakob Beck, brought a piece of Alatyr back with him to Prussia to give to his master, the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant formulated his theories of idealism, that the world is only what we see, and that what we are is ourselves and nothing more. Quite ahead of his time. Some said that piece of the world-rock and the ensuing spiritual insight was what pushed him to develop such a theory…though unfortunately, it would also lead to his demise."

Shiva swallowed, keeping silent as the stern-looking man—Kant—fell over dead. A grave rose in his place, and the light 'zoomed out' to reveal a small mound with the words 'IMMANUEL KANT' in black inscribed on the brick above it.

"The stone was buried with him at Konigsberg Cathedral in Kaliningrad…and news reports broke just a few days ago that his grave had been broken into, and that nothing appeared to have been stolen. However, the stone was missing."

The light swirled and took the shape of the stone once more, before zooming out to reveal other stones surrounding it, which in turn zoomed out further and further until it was nothing more than a cloud of singular points of light, each representing a different stone.

"The Alatyr's property as the Father of All Stones allows it to divulge the location of any gem, stone, or otherwise mineralistic element in this universe to those who touch it, including those which are kept in the realms otherwise invisible to all. However, because it is only a piece, it can only show a few of the most powerful signals…and we have already surmised three of the stones that they desire."

The cloud suddenly clumped together like grime in a swimming pool, and split into three chunks.

"The Lia Fail, the king's stone of Ireland with unknown abilities, is one of them. Another, the Stone of Jacob, our visionary stone blessed with His divine powers, which they have unfortunately already gotten their hands on. They also already have with them the Hope

Diamond, a mortal gem imbued with the souls of those who died with it in their possession. Testing with similar-sized pieces of Alatyr as conducted by our lower-ranked angels showed that they should only be able to locate five at a time."

Odin listened to Raphael's explanation with both eyes closed, occasionally nodding and humming to show that he hadn't fallen asleep. Thor sat with his arms crossed and his brow furrowed hard enough to frighten a bear, taking in the information as best he could, and Loki sat with his head folded into his arms on the table, snoozing away. When all was said and done, Odin opened his eye.

"I appreciate your clarification on this threat, archangel. But I still do not understand why you brought me here. Surely, your God could very easily strike down this 'Man Unkind' with a flick of His wrist, no? Then why does He not do it?"

Gabriel shook her head.

"Perhaps you wouldn't understand His master plan. None of us can claim to know how God operates—only what He bestows upon us in the form of His holy command. We as angels are forever loyal to God so long as we remain in this kingdom of Heaven. We can do nothing if He does not command it, for we are but humble servants and nothing more."

"You are slaves, then, to an uncaring Father. Speak on your purpose for bringing me here."

Her face twisted in anger, causing Michael (who had slunk further and further into the background in some attempt to make himself as unnoticeable as possible) to flinch, but Metatron stopped her once more with a simple raise of his hand. He had gathered himself once more, and sat with his hands folded.

"...It is true, we cannot act in any meaningful manner before I receive command from Him. However, we also lack any information on where their home base is. They are scattered and unwilling to give up any intel as to their headquarters whenever we capture them—what few do not die simply fade from existence. We call upon you because you have been affected most directly by this issue."

He reached up to his head, taking hold of the elaborate golden headdress he had on, and took it off. Metatron placed it on the table in front of him, showing his slicked-back head of black hair as he bowed his head.

"If you would be willing to use the powers that you used against the Axis once more to destroy this threat once and for all, it would be greatly appreciated."

Odin's eyebrow raised, as did Thor's, and even Loki woke up with a string of drool hanging from his mouth. The other gods murmured among themselves in a mix of shock and confusion: to grant such power to another deity, especially for one of the most high-ranking angels to grant to a leader as contentious as Odin, was unthinkable! Amaterasu-no-Omikami shuddered as her divine light dimmed, remembering the shockwaves that it sent around the world when the Nazi Party was completely obliterated by the hand of the Germanic god. They had committed such atrocities, and yet to her knowledge, it was only when they began calling to the gods for help that Odin had taken action and struck them down entirely. Her mind drifted to her own country and

the horrors they had committed in the Pacific theater, how the Japanese had regarded the *kami*[11] and supernatural in the wake of the war.

Shiva kept a close eye on Odin. One of the three oldest members of the Synod's ranks still among them with Vishnu and Brahma, he had seen the squabbling of gods first-hand. He had seen the troubles that occurred during what South Asian countries had called 'The Acknowledgement', as the true power of their gods had been revealed. Religious zealotry increased rapidly despite the Trimurti's staunch policy of non-interference with mortal affairs unless they were to send down an avatar. They were more conservative than some of those of the old religions, who freely mingled and associated with their modern adherents with a casual flair, but Hinduism was still one of the largest religions in the world. Just as how the angels were not allowed on Earth unless it was in the guise of humanity, these gods of the Synod (save for the Dagda, being a special case) promised that they and their pantheons would remain fully separate from mortal affairs, acting as they usually would, for as long as they were members.

He still never fully understood why Odin did not interfere when the war had just started, or even when the statements the camps had emerged: he would still be stigmatized either way for an overreach of power, but he could have saved millions of lives if he had chosen to act sooner. He felt a bit of hypocrisy coming from Odin—who is he to judge the Abrahamic God when he is only marginally better? Shiva remembered his own musings on the nature of their God and shuddered.

Nonetheless, the one-eyed father stroked his beard in deep contemplation, humming as he thought it over.

Thor sneered as he stood, slamming a hand on the table.

"We acted for the good of Midgarders once, and look where it got us! Bragi lives as a musician by changing his name, Freyr and his wife live on a commune away from society, those who have integrated have changed their names and given up their godly ways, we are but impotent mockeries of our former selves! What good would come out of us doing your dirty work, seraph?! At best, we shall be hated once again, judged as the heavy hammer of the law for your holier-than-thou God to smash down upon those He deems unworthy. At worst…"

Odin's creaky voice spoke, interrupting his son.

"Will the Midgarders know?"

"Those on Earth will never know what has happened. In return for your cooperation, we promise to grant you whatever you desire to the best of our ability."

Loki raised a hand.

"Can I have endless supplies of meat and beer every day for the rest of my eternal life?"

"Loki, we already have that at home."

"I know, but I'm *sick* of it. It's always Saehrimnir[12] meat and Heidhrun[13] mead! Can't a guy ask for something different?"

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[11] Functionally the same as 'gods'/'heavenly beings'/'deities' in Japanese mythology, though more accurately described as the powerful tutelary spirits of nature and existence itself. Attempts to clarify the difference is generally met with pointing and laughing from other religions' gods.

"But you're asking for the same thing, you dolt! If you wanted anything in the world, you wouldn't ask for a slightly better plate upon which to put your daily meals, would you?!"

"Ooh, nice thinking! I want a fancy plate!"

Thor groaned and covered his face, peeking through his fingers at his father.

"All-Father…you will not accept this deal, will you? If you do, it will be the death of our honor!"

"And what is the alternative, Thor? To languish in our homes, to point and laugh arrogantly at the Midgarders as they suffer? We are warriors by blood. To live is to fight, and I believe that, somewhere along the way…we were pushed to believe that to deny our nature was the right way to go. We are gods, Thor. We are deities, the masters of our domain, and we will never be as the mortals are. If they should fear us, then they shall fear us. If they shall love us, then they shall love us. But they shall know that we exist. No longer shall we hide like the cowards we have fooled ourselves into believing ourselves as!"

He stood, pointing Gungnir at Metatron with a wide and energized grin on his face. His teeth stood like a row of white tombstones beneath his grey beard, and his voice boomed with an authority only rarely heard by the Aesir nowadays. Even Loki sat stunned.

"Let the people know that they were saved by Odin, Thor, Loki, and all of the Aesir and Vanir as one! If they shall despise us still, then so be it. But if there are those who shall waver, then I ask that their hearts waver no more! We shall re-capture Hel and Fenrir ourselves, and if the rest is to be destroyed, then by Mimir's head, it shall be done!"

The seraph stood up and clapped, a weary but relieved expression painted on his face. Internally, he was desperately thanking God that all he asked for was recognition and glory—nothing more.

"Fantastic, fantastic. I knew we could count on you, Frenzied One. God is on your side."

"Ha! If He is on my side, then tell Him that I need no assistance apart from those who I treasure."

"Er, will do."

Scooting out from behind his chair and placing his Islamic crown back onto his head, Metatron walked around the table with his hands folded behind his back.

"So, as mentioned, the only stone they seek that we don't know the current location of is the Lia Fail. Before calling this meeting, I requested that Uriel ask the Dagda to tell his Tuatha De brethren to ascertain the location and safety of the Lia Fail, and to report any strange occurrences."

"That is why he has had his fingers to his ear this whole time, then?"

The Dagda nodded, dirty hair shaking about as he did so.

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[12] The fantastical boar-like creature that is slaughtered, cooked, and eaten every day by the Aesir and the armies of Valhalla, regenerating during the night. According to Loki, it tastes like chicken.

[13] The mythical giant goat that produces the milk-mead that is served to the Aesir and armies of Valhalla. According to Loki, it also tastes like chicken, which he is much less happy about.

"Indeed. If you remember, halo pieces act as two-way communication conduits: Uriel broke a piece of their halo off and gave two pieces to the Dagda, who then gave one to one of his companions that accompanied him here to the Synod."

"Aye, t'ain't fair to leave me family out of the equation when it comes to having the craic at the after-party! 'Tis the only real reason I attend anyway. I gave th' chip tae me dear ol' mot, the Morrigan. The lot's a real handful, but ha, like I'd be th' one complainin' bout havin' three lovely wives![14] Been on hold fer th' whole meetin', though."

Right on time, a small buzzing was audible on the other side of the halo-piece. The Dagda's face immediately melted into a soft and gushy smile as he scratched the side of his beard and softly swayed in his seat.

"Aaaah, 'ello again, lovey…to whom do I 'ave the honor of speakin' to today, hm? …Badb? Lovely, Badb, dear, mind tellin' me what's been goin' on o'er there? Is the Lia Fail safe? What about the other treasures? Please tell me th' cauldron's safe at least, that bleedin' trencher Belial nearly ran it empty last time he came around!"

The gods all went silent, leaning in towards the Dagda as he listened, nodding.

"Mhm. Mhmm. Yes. Yes, Dian Cecht was supposed to be…hm? No, no I don't…"

Papa Legba tapped him on the shoulder huffing on his pipe, and he cupped his hand over the earpiece as he whispered at him.

"(Do ye mind, ye *seanfhear?* I'm on a call wit' me love here.)"

"(Put it on speakerphone so all of us can hear, dummy.)"

"(...Ah, yeah. Good point.)"

He pulled the halo chunk out of his ear and turned it around a bit, muttering to himself while everyone stared at him. Loki pulled out his own phone and filed through it—partly to pass the time while the Celtic fool figured out angelic biotech, and partly to subtly brag that he knew how to put speakerphone on during a call with a modern cell phone. No one noticed or cared, and Metatron eventually hurried over to help the Dagda out.

An Irish-accented voice with a slight screeching quality, like some sort of bird had learned how to mimic human speech almost perfectly save for the natural differences in mouth shape, rang out from the other end.

"—llo? Hello?"

"Allo Badb dear, yer on speakerphone. I'm 'ere at th' Synod with all me…'mates'."

"What is that supposed to mean, you brute?"

"Oi, stifle yerself, Jadey! 'Pologies love, but do ye think you could repeat all that fer the others?"

"Ah, right, yeah! Of course, mot! What I was saying was…"

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[14] The Morrigan, the Phantom Queen of the Tuatha De associated with fate, battle, victory, and death, is a collective term used to describe the system of three sister goddesses—Badb, Macha, and Nemain—within a single shape-shifting body. They frequently toyed with the hero Cu Chulainn, and the separate personalities had marriages with other Tuatha De, but they all regarded the Dagda as their husband. He is extremely happy having three loving wives with one-third of the mess, but could do without the violent foreplay.

~

"I'm here at Avalon wit' all the rest of us, and three of the four treasures remain secured. The Spear of Lugh remains safely in the possession of his son, Ibic of the Horses, who kept it safely guarded wit' woodland magics. Nuada's Sword of Light remains steeped in the blood of its victims, its light dimmed and its lust for battle weakened, and no need to worry, mot: your cauldron is safe an' sound in the kitchen, where it always is."

The Morrigan, currently in the form of Badb—a tall and sharp young woman with a pointed nose, raven-black hair, and a feathered gown of black feathers that almost took attention entirely away from her shining golden eyes—stood within one of the many halls of Avalon.

This was the home of the Tuatha De, their sanctuary within the fairy-world of Tir na nOg, and its tall brick walls shone with rainbow soap, bubbles breaking off from the coating to meander through the forest air before popping a short distance away. In the old days, Avalon was on the shrouded island of Hy-Brasil, but so many people had turned up there accidentally while looking for the country of Brazil that they had made a collective decision to move the entire castle to Tir na nOg to be closer to their subjects and kin. The moving process had been a big hassle, but they're glad they got it done in the mid-nineteenth century before anyone could really notice the giant cloud of mist carrying the castle over to the phantasmal country.

She kept the piece of halo she was given in her ear as she looked over to the rest of the Tuatha De. Generally, they were thought of as a bunch of muscle-bound bruisers thick with hair and covered in warpaint, though that was only because that was what you got most of the time picking one randomly. Aengus, a young Tuatha De with a shock of red hair who embodied youth and poetry, conversed with the hulking mass of meat that was Goibniu, their metalworker and weapons-smith whose rugged body was covered in shallow burn scars and carbuncles. Badb kept an eye on most of them, and when she came to the display where the Lia Fail was typically displayed, a cluster of Tuatha De were standing around the empty pedestal with anxious looks on their faces.

"Unfortunately, the Lia Fail's nowhere to be seen. Don't look like the place was broken into anyways, an—"

She stopped, feeling a few taps on her shoulder. Whipping around, she was met with two figures: Queen Medb, the tall and sharp-angled blonde queen of the Unseelie Fae, and Dian Cecht: a short and stooped older man with a head in the rough shape of a hexagon, sparse mint-green hair that wrapped around his head via a scruffy beard, almond-shaped eyes with piercing blue irises, and a loose Celtic robe draped over his body. She had on her face a look consisting of two parts steeled determination, one part arrogance and smug superiority, and a pinch of personal pride, while Dian's was nothing but three heaping bowls of exhaustion. He pulled back a knobbly hand and cleared his throat.

"There's been news about this quare fellow and his fight against the cultists that attacked us, Lady Morrigan. Medb will be able to explain it more succinctly than I will be able to."

He gestured to Medb, who approached the Morrigan (despite her height, she still was a head shorter than Badb's form), cleared her throat, and began to relay what had happened thus far.

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The gods and angels all listened intently to Medb's story, recanting how Arcadia Sioga had been attacked by odd surreal creatures, how many fae had died and were in the process of resurrection as they spoke, and Oberon and Titania's reactions. She explained in detail the Unseelie and Seelie fae's shaky alliance, as well as her own acquisition of the Lia Fail through Dian Cecht's permission (though she had to stop momentarily so the Dagda could give him a curse-laden spittle-flying shouting-to over the halo-piece).

Their interest was truly piqued, however, when she began to speak on the traveling party that had entered, explained themselves, and later proven they were worth their salt through her drude test.

"There is one, the hero Fionn mac Cumhaill, more youthful and spry as well as more physically fit, but just as awkward as I remember him."

"There is another, a large doctor named Rodion Nikolayev with the stench of magic and blood on him, but a kind heart and many secrets."

"And the final one…an inscrutable man with the mannerisms and dress of a woman, a bleeding crown of thorns floating above his head. He called himself The Prince of Fuck All, and he is the most mysterious of all of them…yet, it is clear that he has great experience fighting the cult and that out of all of us, he knows the most of their intentions, what they are capable of, and their ranks of agents."

Odin scrunched his nose, sneering.

"A man with the mannerisms and dress of a woman? And such a figure is supposed to be our savior? Even Baldr, with his great beauty, still hunted and sang skaldic poetry with us."

Metatron shushed him, nodding to the Dagda intently as the Celt scratched his beard.

"An' where's th' poof now, Medb?"

"Per directions by my kobold servant Hodekin, they were directed to Washington D.C. in America, as well as Tochigi Prefecture in Japan. I assume they stopped by America first, and so if all has gone as expected, they must be arriving in Japan soon."

The Dagda looked up at Amaterasu-no-Omikami, chief goddess of Shintoism within Japan, who exchanged a confused look with the others before he returned to the halo.

"Are the attacks still goin' on?"

"Funny thing, that. I don't believe there's been any more, not on Arcadia Sioga. However, there is an eerie feeling…it's as though it's the calm before the storm. We're hunkering down as much as we can, but…well, I'll just say that we're lucky that the fae can cheat death by the good graces of demons."

He coughed over her last sentence, beady eyes darting to Metatron with a nervous grin.

"Ahaha, ahaha, ah, Medb, we're in company of angels, might be best not t' say that."

"Ah yes, of course, my apologies. I forgot how uptight angels can be. Apart from that, everything is calm here. What about you, Dagda?"

"Unfortunately, we're stuck here 'til the big Father gives th' go-ahead. Safety precautions an' all. Say hi to Obie an' Titania fer me, won't ye? Now hand the bit back to Badb."

She did as instructed, and the two exchanged some cooing goodbyes in sickly-sweet Gaelic before he took the halo chunk out of his ear. He squeaked the remaining cavity with a pinky finger as Metatron stroked his beard in thought. The Prince of Fuck All…it isn't a name that he'd heard before, at least not in any meaningful capacity, and for that matter, it wasn't much of a name at all. It was closer to a title, but for what—if anything—he was at a loss. He looked back to the archangels.

"Gabriel, talk with the Dominions and contact Raqid and Atid[15] to see who this person is, what he's done so far, and where he is now."

Archangel Gabriel nodded, giving a two-fingered salute.

"Understood. None are safe from the eyes of God, no matter who or where they are—if he was born under the sun, then we shall have a full dossier on him."

Her four white-feathered wings extended out like a bird stretching to the sky before folding inwards and fully enveloping her. Then, in a flash of light, she disappeared. Metaton turned around and pointed an index and pinky finger at Raphael and Uriel with one hand.

"Raphael, resume tending to those who were injured in the initial theft of the Stone of Jacob. Uriel, you stand guard with Sachiel to make sure nothing else is taken. Keep a close eye out for anything that's out of the ordinary, and report it as soon as you see it, alright?"

Both of the archangels saluted, before disappearing in the same manner. Internally, Odin cringed. What was so wrong with using the front door? Was there some rule in their holy book that said 'Thou Shalt Never Exit A Room In An Untheatrical Fashion'? Metatron clapped his hands, showing his small teeth in a smile as he shared an anticipatory look with the gods. Then he stopped and turned around.

"Oh, and Michael, you're free to return to…Michael?"

Michael, still holding his stuffed lamb in one muscly armor-clad arm, had his other hand pressed up against a window at the back of the hall. He was staring outside with a mix of ironbound determination and trembling fear. His mouth was pulled into a shuddering grimace, and his pupils shook with the rest of his body as he focused intently at some point outside. Metatron's smile dropped, and he cautiously stepped towards the archangel to peer out the window.

"What are you looking at, Michael?"

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[15] Two Principalities whose duty it is to dictate all of a person's deeds: Raqib the good, and Atid the bad. In the Islamic world, they are known as *kiraman katibin*, 'honorable scribes'. Originally, they would face every person who died and show them all their good and bad deeds before dictating them to God to determine their fate, but modernization and streamlining prerogatives have allowed them to outsource almost all of their work to lesser angels. God never gave a straight answer, anyways: there are only so many ways Metatron can interpret 'It shall be'.

Slowly, the rest of the deities rose to their feet. They circled around the window as well, some floating slightly in the air. Loki impolitely pushed Haneullim out of the way to get a front-row seat at the foot of the window. Michael tapped on the glass with an index finger.

"...Some…someone's out there…someone who isn't an angel, and…not a god either…"

"What? But we've doubled our defenses since the initial theft! How can there be a—"

He got a proper look at what Michael was looking at and stopped, mouth hanging agape mid-sentence.

Standing outside, alone in a field of wisping clouds, was what appeared to be a human boy. However, his skin was pale as chalk and patterned with blue veins that ran across his body like a railway map, snaking out of the collar of his deep grey shroud and the cuffs of his brown tunic sleeves as though it were the result of an illness. His face, bloated from decay, was only barely visible between thinning strands of frayed brown hair that fell in heaps from beneath a red cloth cap topped with a pink feather. He stood with red breeches and white stockings on, one knee raised and folded against the other like a flamingo, though his balance never once wavered. One bony hand pressed itself against his chest, and the other held aloft a human skull.

He appeared to be just standing there, but even through the thick walls of the Galilee Symposium, they could hear his buzzing from outside—words, phrases, but none able to be made out. Loki cackled, tears in his eyes.

"It's just a young thespian everyone, no worries! Perhaps he got lost on a school field trip! Your adversaries allow tours, surely you do as well? Waltz right up to the young fellow and ask him where his mommy and daddy have gone, that'll clear the whole thing up!"

Thor shut him up with a fist clenching around his scarred lips.

Metatron felt a pit in his soul. The walls of Galilee Symposium were sound-proofed by God's light itself. How in the world was any sound able to come in, in the first place…? He looked to the Archangel.

"Michael. You need to take care of this."

Immediately, tears welled up in his eyes as he turned them down to Metatron.

"M-Me?! Why me?!"

The Dagda raised a thick-bristled eyebrow, raising a stick as it slowly grew and twisted about itself, roots and bark layering on top of one another to form his club.

"Aye, why him? Th' lad may be yoked, but 'e's a mim-moothed jessie! Ye've got a perfectly good fightin' force right 'ere!"

Shiva nodded, flicking one of his wrists. In a flash of white lightning, his great trident Trishul[16] appeared in his hand. Though he kept a calm and impassive expression on his face, his grip on Trishul made the veins pop out of the backs of his hands.

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[16] It is said in the *Shiva Purana* that Shiva was created of his own volition as an incarnation of the ultimate destructive-reincarnative force of Sadasiva, with Trishul already in his hand. He considers it a part of himself as he would any other part of his body. Parvati often gets annoyed with him for bringing it everywhere, but her attempts at a 12-step program have been unsuccessful at best considering there's not a much higher power for him to surrender to.

“It will do me well to exercise my *rudra* qualities after this period of rest. Grant me an audience, and I shall decimate him.”

Metatron whipped around, shouting.

“No! It is forbidden for you all to leave unless He permits it! Remember what happened to the last member of the Divine Synod who endeavored to go against His will!”

They all quieted at that remark. Gods’ memories being quite keen, those who remembered last century’s Synod vividly recalled Nuit’s incensed protests against God, and the slowly-melting ice sculpture that had hopefully only been made in her image at the afterparty. There was a gap of silence, and Metatron cleared his throat.

“...Anyone else wanna test their luck? No? Good. Now, Michael, get out there!”

“A-Again, why me…?” Michael shrunk away, wings partially shrouding him from view. “I have no clue who or what that person is out there, and…a-and, you remember the last time I drew my sword, don’t you? I, I can’t…I couldn’t, I mean…”

The last time Michael had drawn his great flaming sword from its holster was during the High Blasphemy after the killing of Abel by Cain, and when he had done so, he not only inflicted a permanent weeping scar across Satan’s chest, but had entirely demolished half of Heaven, sending all angels with even the slightest inkling of dissension in their souls down into Sheol. It had taken much longer than seven days for them to rebuild the place, even with their functionally infinite stock of angelic construction workers, and there were still areas where you could see the division in the clouds between ‘Old Heaven’ and ‘New Heaven’. He was always a sensitive sort, but the experience had deeply traumatized him and reduced him to a trembling wreck with a phobia of his own power.

“C-Couldn’t you do it? You’re a seraph, you’re…you’re more powerful than me…”

“Michael, I am leagues less powerful than you are. And besides, my hands are tied by His holy doctrine: I am His scribe, not his fighter. You are His fighter. You are His dragon-slayer, His baronet in blue, our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the Devil. Please, will you do this? For the good of God?”

He swallowed, large eyes wet with tears.

“...I…I-I can’t...I…”

Suddenly, Loki let out a mix of a cry of astonishment and a guttural scream as he pressed his pointed nose against the window. All others turned to look out of it.

Outside, Odin stood facing down the Young Man with a Skull, holding Gungnir in both hands. The boy had turned to face him, but remained motionless as Odin wheeled the golden spear over his shoulder and held it in both hands from beneath like a shotgun. The clouds around his feet turned a stormy grey as electricity crackled around the tip.

Notably, he was not being turned to ice, nor struck down with divine light.

They all stood, stunned into silence…before the Dagda sniffed, made a wet noise, spat on the floor, and raised his man-sized club of twisted wood.

“Ye might wanna stand back, then, if we’re doin’ this.”

He tightened his grip on the hunk of organic matter, watching the gods and angels stumble out of the way, and dug his heels into the immaculately-polished floor of the symposium. He stomped his back heel once, reared the immense club back with such effort that it proved even such a strong figure as the Dagda himself could barely wield it at its fullest, and his face went red as his yellowed teeth broadened his grimace. At the last moment, just when the tip of the club brushed against the floor, that grimace turned into a smile as he let out a deep and animalistic howl, slamming his front heel into the floor hard enough to make the whole building shatter as he swung the club.

The walls shook terribly upon impact, the whole symposium creaking with an eerie groan. Yet, nothing happened. The Dagda wheeled his club back around and rested on it with a hand as he blew on his knuckles.

Five seconds passed, before a stretch of the wall the size of a billboard was framed in cracks that spread and wriggled like worms, forming a complete rectangle of damage. Lifting the club once more, he prodded it with the blunt end, and the entire wall fell forwards as if in slow motion before landing on the clouds outside with a decidedly underwhelming 'pomf' sound. He grinned widely, wrinkling the edges of his cheeks.

"Thas' how ye do it, lads."

Metatron covered his face with both hands and groaned, knowing that it will take the Ophanim another decade at least to rebuild that portion of the symposium. Still, the rest of the deities were decently impressed—a few even clapped—and they all filed out of the building in a small mob to approach the Young Man with a Skull.

Shiva twirled Trishul in his grasp as it crackled with pure-white energy.

The Dagda dragged his club behind him like a harrowing plow.

Amaterasu reached within her billowing kimono and retrieved a circular bronze mirror inscribed with the shape of the sun on the back.[17]

The others who weren't so used to combat—the Jade Emperor, Haneullim, the two most recent Asian deities, and Papa Legba—hunkered back and whispered to one another about how one-sided the fight would be. They were *gods*, after all, and some of them were creator deities. No being, mortal or otherwise, could face off against gods themselves and win! Even those who were part god themselves, figures like Hercules, Cu Chulainn, Abe no Seimei, Gilgamesh and Vali, always buckled and fell to their knees when faced with the absolute power a god wielded. Odin would likely fire one shot, the boy would be vaporized, and that would be that.

They all stood by, watching carefully as Odin took a deep breath and stared down the boy.

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[17] This is the Yata-no-Kagami (lit. 'Eight-Hand Mirror'), one of the Three Sacred Treasures of Japan. During an incident in which Amaterasu was so offended by her brother Susanoo taking a crap in her imperial throne (true story), she hid herself in a cave and refused to come out, causing the sun to never rise again. Panicking for a solution, the local party girl Ame-no-Uzume, goddess of entertainment, stripped naked and began to dance. Intrigued by the cheering of the spectator gods, Amaterasu emerged from the cave and caught her reflection in the Yata-no-Kagami, keeping her interest long enough for the other gods to seal the cave with a rock. She keeps it on her person to use as a vanity mirror, loaning it out to the imperial family of Japan when they need to use it..

It was in this silence that they realized that the boy wasn't speaking—it was the skull he held. Said skull spoke in such a grating and grandiose Elizabethan tone, cracking and tearing like leather on a cheese-grater, loud enough to damage the hearing of any unfortunate mortals around to hear it, but what it said was utterly incomprehensible save for sounding vaguely bawdy.

"YOUNG ADMIRABLE FORM NEAR AND BE
HASTE COCK NEGLECTED HATH LESS WHO YOU BE
WAS THEN SIGHT LOVE DRINKS LOVE OF IS LORD
SPOTS YOUR PRIMROSE BEYOND SAID ME MAR
SEASON HAND AND YOU STUCK YOUR QUEEN DISCHARGE
HOR SWEETS SHOWS QUEEN STREAM THE SALVATION"

Odin shouted.

"Silence, fool! Though I hold no reverence for the God of this world, I have no qualms about murdering His enemies!"

The Young Man with a Skull's babbling stopped momentarily, and slowly, unnaturally, the boy turned to Odin. It was a wholly artificial movement, not done with traditional anatomy in mind: it was done as though all movement derived from the center of gravity in the skull. It was then that the boy's face was revealed.

Just as pale as the rest of him with blue veins snaking up his neck, both of his eyes were rolled back into his head, and the corners of his mouth were pulled into a rictus grin. Too many teeth crowded together in his blue-lipped mouth.

"ARE LORD MY PLAYERS RESPECTFUL?"

He fired. An ear-splitting thunderclap reverberated through the area, and an arrow-shaped projectile of grey magical-audial energy from the shockwave flew from the two-pronged point of Gungnir. It made direct contact with the boy, and in an instant, his left arm and much of the surrounding area was reduced to chunks splattered across the clouds. He fell to the ground, dropping the skull, and twitched slightly before moving no more. Odin lowered his spear, looking to the rest of the gods with dull surprise.

"I suppose you've all realized He has let you out of your cages? Funny how it's always the trendsetters who have to take a chance, isn't it?"

Metatron just put a hand to his chest and sighed with relief as the others clapped and cheered him on intermittently. Everyone was happy with that. Things had gone basically exactly how they had wanted them to go, and though how the boy got in was a mystery, it was taken care of! Yet, Archangel Michael still clenched onto his stuffed lamb and hunched his shoulders.

"...I-I don't think that was it."

The seraph looked at him.

"Hm? How so? He's reduced to pulp in the clouds, I don't see what else he could do. See?"

He pointed to the boy's body, and lowered his arm when he realized he was pointing at nothing. Just then, another thunderclap—this one accompanied with shocks of lightning—as Thor's booming voice echoed.

"Father, behind you!"

In a flash, he lunged himself forward and swung with Mjolnir behind Odin. He made direct contact with something that made a sharp meaty sound as it disintegrated, but it was only when the two parted that it was clear what he had hit.

It was the Young Man with a Skull again, with both arms. To the right, another Young Man with a Skull was standing with a frozen sardonic smile on his face as he staggered forward. The skull babbled once more.

"TRUE THEE COLDLY? IS SLEEP WE NIGHT AM NO DINNER"

The red chunks of flesh that had separated from Thor's target, his body still on the ground, twitched. Then they lurched. And then, gurgling and with impressive speed, they clumped themselves together like a sentient meatball as the clump of flesh raised into the air and swiftly reformed the shape of the Young Man with a Skull.

"AND THY LIP I WISH HAVE HIS IN GRAVE"

He giggled and stumbled stiffly towards his copy, as the original body whose brain-chunks he had been formed from sealed up its head wound and rose once again. It joined their three companions, and the three skulls chattered at once as they lunged at the gods: two at Thor and Odin, the third at the rest.

"DISCOVERED SON OYSTER YOU BODIES"

"APPLES FOR STIRRUPS BE FEW NOT"

"WHY TAKE FLOWERS? YOU GUESS AND EXIT"

Odin and Thor alike showed their roots as warrior gods, Odin firing Gungnir at whatever came close and Thor using both Mjolnir and his powers as the god of lightning to hurl thunderbolts at the beings. The third went for the others, and Archangel Michael let out a small cry of helplessness before covering himself with his wings, apologizing profusely, and disappearing. Metatron cursed the archangel internally, and turned just in time to see one of the Young Men barrelling at him. The prongs of Shiva's trident stopped it dead in its tracks, prongs going through his throat and skull before the great destroyer rescinded the weapon. In only a few seconds, one had become two, which became three, and three had now become six.

The Dagda let out a throaty growl and raised his club.

"These bloody kippers…I'll grind 'em all into paste!"

Amaterasu thrust out a hand as she raised her mirror into the air. It shone with a blinding light, which then extended itself like a laser down to another approaching Young Man with a Skull. The beings' chattering had become incessant, and some of them had taken to just cackling maniacally. Even from the cauterized wound that the light caused, two more bodies split from the charred remnants of his intestines. Now there were eight.

"Wait! For every boy you strike down, both it and another rise! They return from the mulch of their predecessors, what do you think will happen if you strike down all of them at once?!"

"I don't think, lass, I act!"

"That is very evident, Dagda-san, but we must exercise caution, or—"

Without stopping to let the Shinto goddess finish her sentence, the Dagda commanded all present to duck, and swung his club once more in a wide circle. Catching each boy along the

way, he managed to crush them all into a thick red-and-white paste that was splattered a few dozen meters away, turning a couple of clouds red as the blood seeped into them. She lowered her mirror.

"...Or…we may be…overrun."

"Ye couldn't 'ave ended yer sentence sooner, could ye've?"

In the distance, a great mass started to form. A mess of writhing and thrashing pale bodies patterned with veins and occasionally speckled with thin brown hair or spherical outcroppings of bone that undulated and grew as the slurry of mashed flesh reformed into body after body, limb after limb. Shiva lowered his trident as he looked on at the roiling mass, feeling a pang of familiarity.

"I have faced a foe like this before. I do not know if we can win."

Metatron, spreading his arms out in front of the non-combat-equipped gods (most of whom were either panicking or, in the case of Yuanshi-Tianzun, impassively malcontent), looked over at the ash-covered deva.

"W-What makes you say that, huh?"

"Long ago, there was an *asura* general named Raktabija. My wife, Parvati, had taken on her fearsome warrior incarnation—Durga—in order to fight the fearsome demon. He had been blessed with the boon that whenever a drop of blood would hit the ground, another copy of himself would be born."

Loki, cowering among the rest of the peaceful gods, raised a hand.

"And how exactly did you do that, three-eyes?"

"I did nothing. Incensed by rage, the blood-knight incarnation Kali emerged, collecting all of Raktabija's blood into a bowl before drinking it in addition to devouring all of his duplicates. Then she went on a rampage, killing everything, and I needed to thrust myself underneath her foot to make her realize her violence was misplaced."

The mass of bodies rumbled and began to advance on the others, the Dagda, Thor, Odin, and Amaterasu held the line firing off at the mass as Shiva stayed close to Metatron. The seraph huffed.

"Fantastic. Is anyone hungry, then?"

"I do not mean to say this foe could be defeated the same way—but there must be a way around this issue. If the force of gods as powerful as we could not slow their onslaught, then what hope does the rest of the world have? There must be a solution."

Metatron silently bit the inside of his cheek. Duh, of course there was a solution, it was just kind of hard to think about what it might be when you're being bombarded with little men. Just then, he spotted a lone angel flying through the sky. He was a dark-skinned man with a thick beard clad in shining red-and-gold armor, and his two wings flapped behind him as he dove to hover above Metatron.

"S-Sir! Exalted Scribe!"

He looked up at the Power—only powers usually wore armor after all—and outstretched a hand.

“Hadraniel! Thank goodness you’re here, where are all the angels?! Tell them there’s been an issue here near the Symposium, get Uriel on it! And, take these gods to safety! Lock them in the vault or something, anything He allows!”

“I will, I will, but—”

“But what?! Get them over here now!”

Hadraniel looked over his shoulder. In the distance, beneath the cacophony of obscene poetry and the sounds of weapons firing, there was a deep buzzing rumble on the horizon.

“They’re all…preoccupied at the moment, sir. A crowd of beings not demonic in nature are swarming out from the entrance to Hell. Uriel and the others are facing them, but there’s just too many of them…”

“Impossible! What about Maalik, he should have—”

“He was taken unawares, sir. He…Raphael sent me to inform you. It isn’t safe for you to be here, in the middle of—oh my goodness what is that.”

“Yes, as you can see, we’re currently facing our *own* little predicament…Hurry and get these gods to safety, and follow whatever orders your superior Camael gives you. I need to see if I can work something out with Him. We won the Great War against demons, who were just as strong as us, we can win against these creatures.”

“Y-Yes sir!”

Hadraniel saluted, scooped up all the deities he was instructed to rescue, and disappeared in a flash of golden light. Metatron sighed, shaking his head and opening his eyes just in time to see the great shadow cresting over them. The wash of Young Men with Skulls was upon them. He nodded to Shiva, the Norse gods, the Dagda, and Amaterasu with a steeled look in his eyes, assured of their cooperation as they fended off the wall as best they could.

He put his fingers together, templing them in front of his chest, and spread out his wings fully as he faced away from the horde of unduly-animated young men. Raising the orange-tinted appendages, the circles that rolled within rose out of their ‘feathers’, circling above him like a model train as one followed tightly after the other before they made a complete ring above him. They all lowered at once, spinning at the same time to create curved orange lines in the air that formed a cylinder around him. These lines grew wider and wider until they enveloped him completely, and by the time they disappeared in a spark of orange, he had gone as well. A mass of chattering jawbones clattered down onto the clouds where he once was.

How could He allow such an invasion? Just what was He planning? He knew full well that God’s inner machinations were, as some would say, ineffable, but neglect on this level was unlike even Him. Deference or not, he couldn’t just stand idly by and watch as his home was ransacked by heathens.

Metatron was taking this all the way to the top.

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Only a few short hills away from Mount Delectable, nestled within twisting and turning labyrinths of constricted hallways, winding walkways that occasionally went upwards, downwards, sideways, in spirals, and occasionally folding in on themselves[18], was a massive office with a ceiling obscured by black clouds that softly rolled through two open windows situated above massive bookshelves of history and culture books, both of mortal and demonic ilk. The hide of something with six glowing eyes and hide like a bear with a snout like a wolf was splayed out across the lacquered wooden floor, and behind a comically small desk that resembled a breadbox than a proper office desk was an absolutely enormous humanoid figure.

It was male in appearance, and though it wore a classy ensemble of a dark maroon suit with a white undershirt, red tie, and black pants, its hulking figure stretched the limits of the suit to its very limits—in fact, the torso portion of the suit had the sleeves ripped to shreds long ago, leaving it as more of an open-chested vest. Its hands were a deep bloody red, thick keratinous black fingernails emerging from skin as rough-hewn as granite, and its face was cloaked entirely in shadow. Nothing could be seen of it save for a set of wide bison horns, a long wavy mullet pulled back in a ponytail, and a single pupilless white eye peering out from the darkness.

This was the Devil, the primary executive figure of Hell when it came to giving orders, organizing everything, and making broad announcements pertaining to the well-being, objectives, and mission statements for all demons under his employ. Which was all of them, save for any who had quit and gone on to greener pasture, living wondrously hedonistic lives among mortals.

He sat with his knees up to his chest, though his feet were spread slightly to make room for the miniscule desk in front of him, and the fibers on his shirt creaked as he hunched his shoulders and neck and meticulously maneuvered his thick fingers over it. He bit his lip and squinted down at what he was doing like a seamstress trying to thread a needle with her arms fully out in front of her.

The Devil was currently trying to pass the time before his servants came by bending a paperclip into the shape of his head. He wasn't Satan, of course not, and anyone who mixed the two of them up would be swiftly fired. Thankfully, the difference was obvious to any demon with even a cursory knowledge of their own history, so he never had to do so, but the threat warded off any jokesters. He was simply the person that the Order of the Fly had elected this cycle to lead their nation of Hell. Satan hadn't left Lake Cocytus in millennia, and most people were more than happy keeping it that way. His days were mostly filled with paperwork, ordering circle leaders around, and filling out paperwork ordering circle leaders around, but these three days were a special occasion. Ever since they had been humiliated during the Great War, demons were under direct orders from God to torture the sinful for all eternity. Due to Him being more occupied with the Divine Synod whenever it rolled about every century, however, he was able to take a short holiday. He wasn't allowed to leave his office, of course not, what if something came in? But he was at least able to relax.

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[18] He'd been meaning to get that fixed, but if Ophanim are bad construction workers, demons are even worse. Who knew a race of beings centered around vice wouldn't have good work ethic?

And now his three days of rest and relaxation were spoiled because of one little uprising.

There was a knock at the door, and a throaty feminine voice came from the other side.

"It's Rheibet. We've secured the interloper."

The Devil's answer rumbled out of his throat like a lava flow.

"Enter."

The door swung open. A somewhat diminutive and stocky black-furred ram woman with spines running along the backs of her arms dressed in the uniform of Andras' Constabulary saluted, her other hand leading back into the hallway out of the Devil's view.

"Would you like to speak to him now, Master?"

"I told you to stop calling me that." He bent the paperclip the wrong way, muttered something in an ancient Semitic language, and placed it gingerly on the desk beneath him. "But yes, please do bring him in."

"I should warn you, M—sire. After he finished his little sermon, it took some of Satanachia's best men to wade through the sea of demons and retrieve him. By the time we got to him, though…well, the only reason we knew it was him is because he was the only human among the lot."

He put his index and middle fingers on the desk in front of him, leaning forward out of interest.

"Yet I saw a shadowy figure speaking to my people…perhaps he is a shapeshifter? Nonetheless, please do bring him in."

Rheibet nodded and stepped in, leading the figure in with her.

The Shadow, for what it was worth, had retained his fearful size and statue—he hadn't shrunk from the towering eight-foot frame he had before, though even that paled in comparison to the Devil in front of him, but everything else about him had completely changed. No longer wholly pitch-black, he now appeared as a young man in his early twenties with skin nearly as pale as chalk, deep dark shadows beneath his glassy and unfocused eyes, and fluffy black hair parted to one side that cascaded down the back of his head before stopping at his shoulders. His suit and tie had been traded in for a plain grey sweater, plainer black sweatpants, and even plainer white socks.

He was led in mainly by Rheibet's hand, stumbling along half-lucidly with sluggish dragging of his feet as he stared off in a random direction. The man barely even seemed to notice the mountainous Devil in front of him, who only attracted his attention after the demon cleared his throat. It sounded more like a boulder suddenly shearing into two than any sound a human could make, but the Shadow (or at least who was once the shadow) lazily craned his thick neck to look up at him. The Devil clasped his hands in front of him, resting his elbows on his knees.

"So. I would like to talk to you, mister…I see they've been calling you 'the Shadow', is that your proper name?"

No answer. The Shadow just stared at him, and the Devil stared right back.

"...Right, I will take that as a yes, now. As you may already know, I am the Devil, chief executive and leader-cum-supervisor of all infernal operations. It was, admittedly, rather rude of

you to just barge in here and start spouting gospel, but you know, you had some interesting points. Do I agree with them? Well, I don't know about that, but I wanted to show that I'm willing to talk things out with you."

The Shadow continued staring at him. The demon huffed through his nose, like a vent in the Earth's crust puffing out superheated air, and raised a hand. He made a few hand shapes, and in a flash of sulfur-scented smoke, a television screen constructed mostly out of bone, muscle, and sinew appeared hanging in the sky beside him. It lowered down to the Shadow's level, flickered through a few grotesque snapshots of Hell, and then showed a few vignettes. In one, buxom red-skinned women the size of a pencil each carried along bricks as they gossipped about the new blood. A tall grey-furred being with a flaming crown atop his head recanted the Shadow's speech on a slowly-rebuilding avenue, rotund animal-folk sitting around him like enraptured children. A swarm of yellow snakes that mixed foul-looking blood-red cement in a vat excitedly hyped up the upcoming new world order like it was an upcoming sports game.

"You see, the demons—for the most part—really enjoyed your speech. You've energized them with thoughts of bringing their ideal world to form, and as such, they've vowed to give you their all in order to fulfill your own desires. I would say it's manipulative, preying on demons' insecurities and fears to pocket more troops, but considering…well, you know, I'm pretty impressed. There's just sort of an issue."

The television flickered to static briefly before showing a snapshot of Heaven. Surrounded by fluffy clouds, like some child had torn out a handful of cotton candy, was a dark hole that flickered with fire and had a pointy cast-iron gate in front of it. Swarming out of the entrance were surreal beings and other such creatures, and numerous angels (including Uriel, fending off an ambulatory jaundiced forearm with hand-held fireballs) were seen locked in combat with them.

"We got this picture from Samael, our double-agent in Heaven, and…these troops are yours, right?"

The Shadow said nothing.

"If your true plan is to instigate an invasion of Heaven, then I have no qualms with it. I do however ask that you do *not* involve us demons in it. Many of those recently created forget our history and our heritage. They forget why we do what we do."

He leaned down slightly, though his face remained almost entirely cloaked in shadow.

"Demons are, on the whole, weaker than angels. That is an immutable fact. The strongest demon facing down the strongest angel will always lose, and the strongest demon facing the weakest angel will never have victory as a certainty. The reason we stay in Hell, the reason we torture the sinful in death, is because this is our sentence, our eternal Sisyphean task. We know what He will do to us if we refuse this singular order. It isn't our place to bite the hand that chooses, for utility's sake, not to beat us. It does not matter how strong your army is, we cannot take that risk. He would *destroy* us."

The Shadow still said nothing. The Devil clasped his hands a bit harder, becoming irritated by his complete silence. He coughed, the sound like a small explosion.

"...Do you understand? It's dangerous for you to be exciting my people like this. Soon enough, they may start listening to you more than they listen to me."

He cleared his throat.

"They aren't very smart, you know."

There was still silence from the pale man, and the Devil sighed. Was he a moron or something after all…? Rheibet turned to look out of one of the windows, feeling somewhat awkward and wanting to avoid the situation entirely, but she soon let go of the Shadow's hand and stumbled over to the nearest pane of glass, pressing her hands against it. Swallowing, Rheibet looked back up at her boss.

"Sir? There's—"

A brick shot through the window and beaned Rheibet square in the face. She fell onto her back and clasped her fingers around her nose, cursing in languages that would have made a mortal's ears bleed. The Shadow remained unperturbed, however, and she turned over to face a concerned-looking Devil. The sounds of a jilted crowd roared outside, audible thanks to the hole in the window.

"What is it, Rheibet?"

"A riot. There's—fuck—a riot outside. They want us to release the Shadow."

"Release him? Do they think I'm holding him hostage or something?"

"You *did* order our soldiers to shove through a crowd and grab him against his will, sir."

The Devil pondered this for a moment, and then placed his palms on the ground, shifting his body. He was moving to get up.

"Well, this I can't have. I don't know what Beelzebub and the others are doing not nipping this in the bud, but I won't have my foolish people fighting a meaningless and bloody war simply because they were swayed by lofty aspirations and clever phrases. I'm going to take care of this here and now."

The Shadow sluggishly turned to look up at him.

He raised a pudgy hand up to the Devil, whose boulder-sized shoulders scraped against the walls of his office as he began to rise as his bones and muscles creaked from the effort.

"Don't presume you can face me, mortal. As far as I am concerned, you are but a man…."

Though imperceptible to the demon lord, there was a slight smile on his face, and his palm flickered with black flames.

CHAPTER 13: Floating World

In a flash of purple haze and lemon dreams, a rusty green bicycle with an English drag queen, a Russian doctor, and an unconscious Irish warrior sped out from nothingness like a bat out of hell, worn tires skidding across the dirt and kicking up a plume of brown dust as they skidded, swerved, and ultimately crashed into the side of a gingko tree with the sound of impacted metal.

The Prince of Fuck All shouted and scrambled to support himself, but the three of them fell roughly to the ground with the bicycle. He muttered curses under his breath as he pulled himself to his feet, brushing the dust off his pants while Rodion groaned in a heap on the floor. He faced the bruised doctor with his hands out, a smile painted on his face.

"Well, we made it, didn't we? Barring a bit of a crash landing."

He grunted in response, and The Prince helped him up with a hand (though with Rodion's size, it soon enough required both arms). He happily brushed off the extant leaves and pebbles that had dug themselves into his face and tangled into his hair, petting his head.

"You alright, love?"

Rodion spat out a pebble.

"I could have done with less painful arrival…especially considering we still have injured cargo with us."

He bent down and picked up Fionn mac Cumhaill once more—the warrior was still badly injured, though his chest still rose and fell with ragged breaths. Reddish-orange burn wounds marked his arms and legs, and the heat from his chainmail had singed a black lattice pattern onto his torso. The edges of his platinum-blonde hair were singed. Blood had started to seep from his wounds. Despite the crash landing, he thankfully didn't seem any worse for wear. Gingerly, he turned the unconscious young man onto his back and hoisted him onto his shoulders. The Prince puffed a cheek.

"You know a bit of the ol' magic, don't you? Why not just waggle your fingers a bit and heal up the poor cove?"

He shook his head. "Most healing magic I know only accelerates body's natural healing processes. If he needs skin graft, is best to get somewhere with proper medical resources. Hopefully there is hospital nearby, or at least someone with supplies…where are we, anyway?"

"Hah, what, you don't remember, Rodi?"

"Well, excuse me, but I have had many things going on today. I had to run for my life from fire-breathing sun people, so forgive me for not remembering. You said you remembered, *da?* Then, where are we?"

The Prince clapped his hands and stuffed his bike back into his jacket before turning on his heel.

"Simple! We're exactly where we wanted to be. Nagatacho Prefecture!"

"...That doesn't sound right."

"I'm positive that's what it was."

Fionn murmured, "To…chi…gi…", coughed up a bit of blood, and then passed out again. Rodion put a hand on his onus' head and frowned at the other as The Prince raised his hands.

"Right! Tochigi Prefecture!"

"You said you remembered where we were going!"

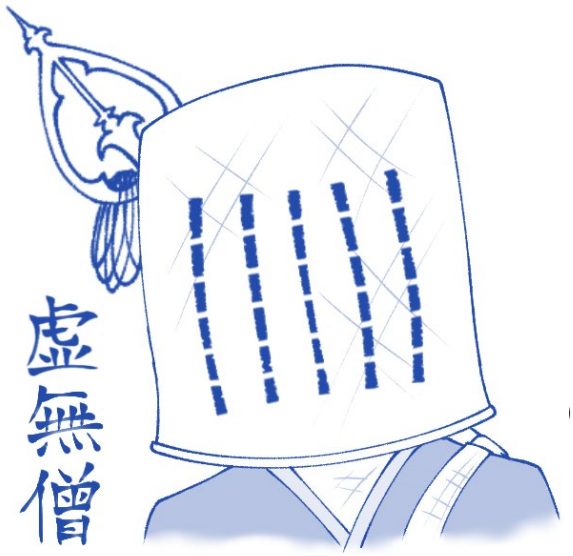
He scoffed, "I did! I was just testing you, dear, don't get your knickers in a twist over it. Medb's bijou kobold underling said there was a commotion over here, so…Where's the commotion? Hmmm. Should be somewhere around here. Some important rock, too."

His friend peered out from beneath his hand in an attempt to look like he was doing something worthwhile. The area they were in was a small forest, the grey-barked trees stripped of their leaves by the cruel winter air and the pale grass and dirt covered by a thin sheet of snow. Snowflakes gently showered around them, and in the distance, mountains loomed like giants. The land was flat, so they could see quite a ways away, but the forest surrounded them save for the lone path that they happened to crash nearby. The Prince shivered a bit, unused to the cold, while Rodion weathered it expertly. Living in a place where it was always cold and always snowing, plus having plenty of winter padding built-in, made him feel right at home among the wintery Japanese wilderness.

While trying to gauge their location from scenery, both of them noticed a curious sound that went against the howl of the wind and the scattered buzz of the wilderness.

It was the deep and wistful sound of a woodwind instrument, splitting the sounds of the wind like an arrow through the skies. Its soothing sound echoed throughout the forest, and when the tone of its song became accompanied by soft crunching footsteps, they both turned in the direction of the sound and watched its originator that marched along the path.

They were a rather diminutive fellow who had every trademark of the wandering *komuso* mendicant monk upon their person, wearing overturned on their head a reed basket with several holes in the front, and upon their body a deep navy-blue kimono with a white *obi* sash, a small *inro* box attached to the side of their belt, and two-toed white socks with rope sandals. Sheathed in a strap around their back was a long metal *shakujou* staff, usually carried by Buddhist priests, with metal rings hanging from the top that jangled as they walked. The bamboo *shakuhachi* flute they played produced a marvelous sound—so marvelous, in fact, that it distracted from how their hands were gnarled and narrow, a dark grey color with curved talons that nonetheless held the instrument with finesse and respect. Black tail feathers were visible jutting out from underneath their kimono.



They went about their travels playing their flute, and only stopped when Rodion hurried over to them and raised a hand.

"E-Er, pardon me. We are from out of country—I am Russian, for example, hello—and, we have gotten lost. Do you know where we are?"

The monk turned to face him, the reed hood obscuring all emotion, before they played a bit of Japan's national anthem, *Kimi Ga Yo.* Unfortunately, both Rodi and The Prince hadn't brushed up on their national anthems in a while, and so they both stared vacantly at the monk. Rodion cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Sorry, I…should have been more specific. You see, we have injured friend here—" He gently shifted Fionn on his shoulder, who laid there like a wet towel. "—See, and we need to know what prefecture we're in."

"We'd also prefer a verbal answer, love. If God gave you a mouth, you either use it for speaking, or—"

They blew on their flute, politely cutting him off, and paced the opposite direction down the path. Sidling slightly off the beaten path with the others following, the monk knocked their fist into a sign that had been buried by the snow, the white curtain falling to the ground with the rest.

It read, beneath some characters, *'IBARAKI'*.

Rodion let out an exasperated groan and pointed an accusatory finger.

"So I was *right!* You lied and said we were in right place, when we aren't anywhere near where we need to be!"

"Oh, give me a break, would you already? We're still in Japan. And besides, I've seen maps of the land of the rising sun, Ibaraki should be ajax Tochigi."

"I can't believe you—you really didn't know? If we hadn't come across this hitchhiker, we might have been lost for days!"

He ignored Rodion, clasping his hands at the monk and smiling sweetly. "Any idea how close we are to Tochigi Prefecture, hun?"

They were silent, then banged their fist on the sign once more. Another layer of snow fell off, revealing another line of characters and text reading *'TOCHIGI -> 35 km'.* Rodion groaned again and covered his face with a palm, eliciting a glib shrug from his companion.

"What's the groan for, hun? 35 kilometers, that's only 20 miles or so. That's from Bristol to Newport, it'll only take a bit to walk there! Only…"

He counted a bit on his fingers. "...Ten hours!"

Rodi didn't answer, shaking his head. Smirking, The Prince produced a handful of LSD tabs.

"You know, we could always take the trusty ol' bike! I love using it, y'know?"

"No, please. No more psychotropic bicycle rides…I'm still not used to them. Can't you just bike there normally?"

"And lug your big behind around for three whole hours? I love you Didi, I do, but not enough to rend my lallies like that. I'd be sore for weeks!"

The Russian huffed and looked back to the monk, who had been standing politely in an open-toed stance.

"You wouldn't happen to know if there's a train station nearby, would you?"

They perked up and nodded, gesturing with a gnarled hand as they blew happily on the flute. He let out a sigh of relief.

"*Slava bogu*, we're saved…Er, and—forgive me for many questions and whatnot, you are very busy I am sure—you wouldn't happen to have a burn salve on you, would you? Is best to address his wounds, but it would be unwise to run snow-water on burns before applying soothing agent."

The monk nodded once more, opening their straw *inro* case and producing a small pointed green plant: aloe vera. Breaking the slice they had in half, they motioned for Rodion to lower Fionn to their level and gently applied the gooey salve to the most exposed wounds. Fionn scrunched his face reflexively, but remained unconscious. Rodion let out a sigh of relief and took a handful of snow from the nearby sign, breathing hotly on it and crunching it in his hands to create a small flow of water onto the red splotches. Fionn grimaced. Still, that little bit of care sufficed for now, and the monk retrieved a small roll of gauze bandages, with which they wrapped Fionn's arms and legs to ensure they wouldn't be exposed to the elements. Rodion smiled, his worries lifted somewhat, and he rose to his feet.

"Is not ideal, but…this will do until we can rest somewhere properly. Come now, Prince, we should…"

He turned as he spoke and trailed off once he faced The Prince of Fuck All, whose stance had suddenly become much tenser. His thin arms folded tight against his chest, and his typical lax cocked-hip pose straightened. Rodion's smile fell a bit.

"...Uh, are…are you alright, Prince?"

"You, uh, you said we were going on a train?"

"Well, yes. You are coming with, *da?"*

The Prince shook his head with a stern and fearful expression.

"I'm not going."

"You aren't?"

"Nope. I'm not a fan of trains, love. Not at all."

Rodion's mouth pulled itself into a thin line, curious about this odd phobia of his, but just as soon as the awkward moment had came, it passed. He trotted up to Rodion and slung an arm over his broad shoulder, nestling his head in the padded crook of his shoulder.

"Don't you worry about me, alright? I'll take the bike, ask around, and meet up with you and Blondie at wherever it is we're headed. Have you got a phone?"

"I, er, do not carry one. Personal preference."

"Ha, you really are behind the times, you know that? Then, if you wanna know where I am, ask around and see if people have seen a *josou* walking around. Or maybe an *okama*, if they're on the older side. Or watch too much anime."

"You are sure you will not come with us?"

"I'm sure, hun. Don't you worry your handsome eek, I'll meet back up with you in no time."

The Prince got up on his tip-toes and planted a kiss on Rodion's cheek, leaving a lipstick mark and making him flush pink, before patting his ample chest and stepping away to bring out his bicycle once more. Rodion bashfully rubbed his cheek, looking at the red smears left on his

palm. His look of confusion faded to a resigned smile, and he looked back to the monk as he picked Fionn back up.

"I can never tell what he's thinking…"

~

It was a short walk, maybe about fifteen minutes' worth or so, before the Russian and the monk came upon a small train station situated a short ways away from a small town. The rail that ran through the countryside was untouched by the falling snow, and so it stuck out like a sore thumb. The straw awning that covered a metal bench and the billboard showing the map and schedule for this line was a bit too low for Rodion's liking, but it would have to do. There wasn't a soul around the station, and it appeared that there was no one to perform upkeep: it was dirty, and the edges of both the bench and the board were lined with assorted grime.

He raised his chin to peer at the town. It'd be another twenty minutes of walking that way…and though he was tempted to at least drop Fionn off there, he couldn't risk it. They had stopped a few times along the way to the station to wring snow over his wounds, even removing his chainmail to assess the black lattice of scorch marks that had resulted from the heat conducting through the metal, and thankfully his condition was stable. Still, Rodion's knowledge of healing magic was shoddy at best—even though he spent three years studying his grandfather's work, his art of mystic healing was something he could never fully get the hang of. It was worth a shot, and he managed to repair a bit of the skin with bourbon-scented wisps of brown magic, but the act of doing so gave him a migraine.

Rodion and the monk sat themselves on the bench, the metal creaking under his weight, and rested their weary feet. Well, Rodi rested his feet at least. The monk, whose name and identity they refused to share, seemed unfettered as they pointed out the time the next train going to Tochigi would arrive. They even played another tune on their shakuhachi to pass the time.

Eventually, the train—modern-looking and well-polished, Rodion had never been to Japan before but he appreciated their utilization of public transport—came into view and stopped in front of the station. They rose to their feet and entered.

The car wasn't packed as Rodion had feared it would be, but it was full of humans and no one else. Young men and women, older stern-looking businessmen, a man with frizzy black hair and a cigarette in his mouth…compared to the wide range of faces and species he'd seen in America, this resembled his home more in terms of makeup. He and the monk stuck out less like sore thumbs and more like weeds in a zen garden—though even if he had come alone and didn't have a man covered in bandages slung over his shoulder, he would have attracted odd looks. Being a six-and-a-half-foot five-hundred-pound Russian in Japan will do that.

He heard sharp Japanese in his right ear and turned to face a man in a uniform staring up at him. His face was twisted into contempt, and Rodion weakly put up a hand.

"E-Er, I am sorry, I am not from here, I do not speak Japanese…"

The man grit his teeth.

“Ticket! You need a ticket! Did you not pay the fare?!”

Rodion held his breath, not wanting to be turned away but knowing there was no way they would accept rubles. The monk raised a curled hand, catching the worker’s attention. Digging into their bag once more, they produced a small slip of paper packed with writing and handed it to the worker. He sneered down at the monk, then glared up at Rodion, and then snatched the ticket from their hands as he grumbled and stomped away. He let out a sigh and smiled down at them.

“...Thank you. I am surprised you had a ticket on you. You do not seem the type to take public transport.”

They extended an index finger to their face, shushing him as they opened their bag to show him. At the top, among other things, was a stash of gingko leaves. They made a small gesture with their free hand, and in a small puff of smoke, it transformed into a stack of identical tickets. He laughed, amused.

“Fair enough, then. If only I had that power, it might have gotten me out of many scraps when I was younger.”

The two of them took an open seat on the side of the train, sitting between an old woman with curled hair holding her purse protectively in her lap as she eyed Rodion, and a balding businessman who argued with someone over his flip-phone.

There they remained for the next three hours, the time to reach Nasushiobara.

Rodion fell asleep where he sat, and the monk leaned against his warm body with their fingers templed in front of them.

~

Rodion and the monk stepped off the train ignoring the relieved murmurs of the other passengers, though he did look over his shoulder with a bit of frustration. Nonetheless, they were at Nasushiobara Station, and it was a far cry from the wilderness they had existed only a few hours ago. Swaths of snow and trees without their leaves were replaced with blacktop hills and telephone poles watching over herds of cards.

The train had been populated by early risers, for the most part—when they exited D.C., it was a little after four in the afternoon, which meant that it was roughly five in the morning in Japan. It would have been full of people either returning from a long day, or getting an early start for their commute to work. Now that it was closer to eight, the level of activity had started to rise. People were milling about here and there, occasionally turning to look at the three of them with either interest or disgust. They were all human as well.

Rodion’s first interest was taken care of as soon as possible: he took Fionn to the closest medical center, Kanma Memorial Clinic, and exasperatedly explained in English how his friend had been in an accident involving open flames and had been badly burnt, and that they had taken some action but that he really needed proper attention, and that he is a doctor but he’s busy so if they could attend to him politely he promises he will reimburse them and apologized for the

inconvenience. He was out of breath by the end of it. The nurses just stared at him, then at Fionn's limp bandaged body, and then to the monk. Wordlessly, they ushered Fionn into the back rooms on a gurney.

That was a great weight taken off of Rodion's shoulders, both physically and mentally. He was a doctor, after all—the well-being of those around him was his utmost concern, even if The Prince didn't seem too bothered by it. In fact, he doubted whether The Prince even knew basic medical practices like the Heimlich maneuver…though, he himself only knew about it by the time he was in his twenties. He remembered performing an emergency tracheotomy on a bystander who was choking as a young child, and his mind wandered slightly before returning to the situation at hand.

He sat on a bench, the monk sitting next to him. Their feet hung over the edge like a child's.

"First priority is to find what we are looking for. The Alatyr, according to Prince, allows them to hone in on locations of various stones, and kobold said that there was ruckus here in Tochigi. Do you know any famous stones here in this prefecture, monk?"

They shuddered as though the very question reminded them of death itself, remained still for a moment, and slouched their back as they nodded.

"You do? Where?"

The monk hopped off of the bench and ran off towards a kiosk where a big-mouthed man wearing a hat was barking advertisements at passers-by before returning with a small pamphlet. Opening it up, it was full of Japanese text—none of which Rodion could read, save for a few blocks in stars of color that he guessed were the result of the graphic designer desperately trying to keep the reader's attention.

However, right in the middle of the paper was a full-color photograph of an oblong grey stone with a rope wrapped around it, jagged paper talismans hanging from the rope. It sat a few meters behind a wooden rope, and a wooden sign with *kana* written vertically jutted out of the pebble-fraught ground of volcanic byproduct.

"This is it, then? It definitely is…a rock. I do not see big deal. But, if that is what is here, then it is best to leave no stone unturned!"

He chuckled to himself and stopped once he saw the monk wasn't laughing. He cleared his throat awkwardly.

"How do we get to it, then?"

The monk got up and pointed to the train station.

"...Ah…right. Of course. More trains. I hope you have more tickets, then."

~

Thankfully, the ride from Nasushiobara Station was substantially shorter than the previous trip. The monk helped to produce tickets for the both of them, and though they still got odd and suspicious looks thrown their way as they sat, Rodion could rest easier knowing Fionn had been left in good hands. He probably would be disoriented being in a place that he didn't recognize

surrounded by people he didn't know, but he took the proper precautions in addressing that. It was at this point that he realized he was still wearing the chintzy faux-native jacket and stretched-out Washington D.C. shirt, and he awkwardly tried to close the jacket over his large frame as he hunched over and became rather self-conscious.

The train ride was uneventful otherwise, and once it had dropped them off in the mountains of Nasu, they were back in the wilderness. Though there were still plenty of buildings and a few people shoveling snow out in front of them, the legions of stripped-bare trees revealed the curvatures of the mountains in the distance. Rodion kept his hands in his pockets and looked around at the scenery, appreciating it. Apart from the occasional sound of a car going past, it was nice and quiet. Snow softly fluttered down from the sky, lightly crunching as he stepped through what had already fallen. A cool breeze sent the light fragrance of the woods and volcanic ash past his nose, and he took a deep breath in, exhaling with a smile.

This place was beautiful, unlike anything he'd ever seen. He tried to keep a low profile back home, and The Prince had hurried them along in D.C. to the point where he couldn't stop to properly appreciate the sights—call it being there for business and not leisure—but he took advantage of any stretch of calmness he could get. He did enjoy being with The Prince (at least, he figured he did), but he would be lying if he said he didn't quite appreciate the hectic chain of events he'd gotten roped into, just because he had the books that could open a portal to Hell. He probably could have gotten away clean after their little rendezvous with his locket and a grimoire, but he opted to stay. It confused him, but he had to admit, he's seen more of the world in the past two days than he had for the rest of his life, and even if his life was in danger more often than not…it was fun learning about what the rest of the world had to offer. Russia was nice, but they it wasn't the most welcoming or exciting place. If you liked snow and historical monuments consisting of big buildings where important people lived before being killed by their subjects, some of whom later became important people who were then killed by their subjects, it was paradise.

He thumbed the silver locket he always kept with him in his pocket, thinking about how Mary would have loved this place. She always did love how the snow would fall on the branches of the bare trees outside her window…it was the only thing she saw most of the time.

Rodion was so lost in thought, his memories mixing with his recent experiences as the soothing symphony of his companion's shakuhachi-playing lulled him into reminiscence, that by the time they came to a set of stone stairs, he nearly tripped over them. The monk tugged on his jacket.

"Hm? What is it?"

They pointed past him, and when he looked up, he was met with a fleet of stone steps in front of a great *torii* shrine gate, also made of stone. Flanking the path to each side were granite lanterns that had been long left unlit. A short ways up, he could see a wooden structure with an awning over it, a box for alms situated at the far end.

Leaning on one of the stone lanterns and partway through taking a bite out of a *yakitori* skewer, The Prince of Fuck All glanced up to his partner and waved as he swallowed. He had, as

Rodion had expected by now, changed his outfit entirely—trading in his American look for a pink flower-patterned kimono, his bare feet visible beneath the garment's hem atop black-lacquered *geta* sandals[19], and *kanzashi* hair ornaments of white cloth flowers that cascaded down the side of his face. He even accentuated the corners of his eyes and his lips with red mascara and lipstick.

"Howdy-doody, Rodi, dear! Trip go well?"

Rodion smiled wide and put out his hands.

"Bahaha, as well as four hours of train rides can go. I would have been completely lost if not for very helpful companion here. I assume everything went well?"

He gestured to the monk, who bowed politely.

"Always good to have another friend to add onto the pile, eh?"

The Prince approached them, sandals clacking against the stone, and took another bite of his yakitori as he reached into his coat—still thrown over his kimono—and retrieved a thick pocket-sized book whose cover read *'Japanese-to-English Dictionary — So Simple, Even A Gibbering Moron Could Do It!'*.

"You tell me. It was a lucky coincidence I happened to have this on me, otherwise I would have been wandering about for just as long as you two. I asked around for notable tourist destinations relating to rocks in the surrounding area, heard about this nifty thing called the 'Sessho-Seki', and here I was at Nasu Yuzen Shrine! I even had time to dip in the hot springs and rustle up some new drag while you were on your way."

"There is a hot spring nearby?"

"Bet your bottom dollar there is! Hell, this whole shrine is dedicated to the gods of the hot springs! The stresses of fighting a cult of deranged psychopaths really just melt away amidst the bubbling water…Maybe I should take you there sometime."

"I do wish I could have come with you."

"If you sucked it up and took another tab, you could have, ya big baby! But you're my big baby, so I respected your decision! I respected your bodily autonomy, yes I did, yes I di—"

Rodion put his hand up, tacitly begging for him to stop the baby-talk.

"You said we are looking for Sessho-Seki, *da?"*

"Right-o, Rodio. Come on, and bring the little bugger with you too, I'll take you over to it."

He gestured for the others to follow, and follow they did. Ascending the sets of steps and passing under numerous other *torii* gates, The Prince spoke as they ducked under trees whose branches encroached onto the shrine path, occasionally brushing snow out of his face while the others followed behind.

"Sessho-Seki, from what I gather, means 'Killing Stone' in English. Back in the 10th century, there was this palone who was a *kyuubi no kitsune*—mystical nine-tailed fox, if you

[19] During the feudal era of Japan, *oiran* (high-ranking courtesans) would go barefoot in their lacquered geta as opposed to wearing the traditional woolen socks, as this was considered more erotic for onlookers of their parade. The Prince did not know this and just picked the black ones because he thought they were stylish, but if he did know, he would have absolutely chosen them for this reason.

haven't brushed up on your yokai[20] knowledge—as well as a master manipulator with oodles of charm to boot. She was various rulers' concubines throughout the years, fiddling about in China and India having trade and making political moves for her own amusement, until she came into the court of Emperor Toba in Japan under the name Tamamo-no-Mae. She was the emperor's favorite courtesan, without compare."

Rodion peered over the edge of the path as the trees faded, giving way to rocky outcroppings littered with stones ranging in size from unimportant pebbles to sizable boulders.

"A courtesan?"

"Something like a personal entertainer mixed with a private escort, love, every emperor had them. Either way, when Toba ended up falling deathly ill, nobody could ascertain the source of the ailment…until the emperor's personal cabal of sorcerers found out that he was marked with a bad omen that only began once he made Tamamo-no-Mae his personal consort. They tried to exorcise her, but through her own cunning, she managed to evade capture until her eventual death a week later."

He whipped around, walking backwards down the wooden planks that now made up their walkway as he finished off his yakitori, nonchalantly using the end of the stick to pick his teeth.

"However, her ghost came here, back to where the mother of all foxes, Inari Okami, birthed her. She now haunts a boulder in the area, and anyone who happens to touch it ends up dropping dead. It used to be a big tourist attraction, but after the Big Mess, folks were so scared of the supernatural that it's a dead zone. Nobody dares go near it now…'least, not spiritually-minded Japanese. Dumb tourists like us are fair game, though."

"We are not dumb tourists, though."

"Dear, I'm a drag queen and you're a six-foot Russian. We couldn't be locals even if we spoke Japanese. Either way, I figure it should be an easy job—waltz up, chin-wag with Tammy, get her to ixnay on the illingkay for the good of humanity, we pocket it, and Bob's your uncle."

The monk shook their head knowingly, though only Rodion seemed to notice.

"She is dead though, *da?* How will we speak to her? In Russia, communing with spirits would get you fifteen-year sentence. Twenty years if you spoke to victims of government. And besides, only way to talk with dead that isn't chintzy store-bought items like EMF readers and ouija boards is to find someone who can see them…Beelzebub called their realm Atziluth, right? Only angels and gods would be able to view them without issue."

"True, those gimcracks might be the only *legal* way to talk with the dead, but if you know me—and I know you do—I've got more than a few tricks up my sleeve~"

"Will said tricks take care of that?"

He pointed over The Prince's shoulder, making him turn and look.

A few meters away, where the path ended and the Sessho-Seki would be, there was instead a small crowd—not of humans, but of something else. They had a humanoid shape, but their

[20] A Japanese word meaning 'mystery', describing beings in the realm of demons, spirits, cryptids, and other such creatures. Not to be confused with 'yurei', which are ghosts, 'bakemono', which are shapeshifting humanoids, 'ayakashi', which are water yokai, and 'kowai', which summarizes what a majority of them are: unsettling.

bodies were little more than black stick figures that were jagged and jittery, as if drawn in a moving vehicle. They shuddered and twitched, and their pencil-thin necks connected to heads that were cloudy brown bottles full of sloshing liquid that rocked from side to side as they pressed their three-fingered hands against the air. A few slammed their heads against the space above the fence, each time being met with a thick clunking sound and little other effect. All the while, they muttered and murmured to themselves.

"needafixneedafixgottahaveonejustonedrinktogetmethroughtheday"

"itsoothesmeitcalmsmeiswearillonlydrinkatpartiesandonnewyears"

"darlingpleasecomebacktomeiputitalldownthesinkigotridofitallofit"

Rodion sniffed. Only a few short days earlier, he wouldn't have known what he was looking at, but now he was almost certain. He looked to The Prince.

"Man Unkind agents?"

"Certainly. They're called the Delirium Tremen. You ever heard of hungry ghosts?"

"The spirits of the gluttonous and vengeful, forced to forever wander unable to satiate their hunger…"

"Exactamundo. These buggers are one of the many egregores that make up the cult's ranks—when alcoholics go through withdrawal and start shaking, they generate these things on a subconscious level from their spiritual vibrations. You stay back, dear: one touch, and you'll be feeling barrel fever for the rest of the night."

"How horrid…"

"Eh, it sounds worse than it is. Within Man Unkind, these guys are like level-one mooks. One member of the Dead Letter Gendarmerie is worth fifteen of these coves. The fact they're here and nobody else is tells me either they weren't too concerned about nabbing this pebble—not likely—or they've been throwing agent after agent at it and nothing's been budging, so they've got a skeleton crew up. Now, where did I put my Molotovs…?"

The Prince dug into his coat, unconcernedly filing around in it. The monk that had been tailing Rodion quietly walked forwards, the red-haired man not even noticing as they politely shuffled past him and opened their inro bag. Rodion opened his mouth to warn the small figure, but stayed quiet seeing how calm they were.

Purposefully and meticulously, they retrieved from their bag an archetypical folding paper fan, raising it in front of them and opening it up with a flick of their thumb. Printed—rather, meticulously painted on the paper in black calligraphy ink was a Japanese kanji character resembling some sort of altar within a shrine alcove. The motion caught the attention of the Delirium Tremen, who sluggishly turned to face the monk. Their bodies jittered, and they hunkered down like animals as their simple hands curled into claws.

"rememberyourtwelvestepprogramrememberthatyouaresick"

"rememberthatgodiswithyoualwaysexceptwhenyouareill"

"thesononthecrosssaidhewasthirstyandtobequenchedistobeholy"

All at once, they pounced, yet the monk was unphased. They raised the fan upwards and to the right, and with a single swoop of its paper width through the air in a diagonal motion, a great

gust of wind barrelled through the mountains, causing pebbles to roll across the wooden path like tumbleweeds and ash to kick up, clouding the air momentarily. Rodion brought his arms up to his face to keep from breathing any in, but he still watched through squinted eyes as the Delirium Tremen were quite literally blown away like paper dolls. They went over the nearest mountain-edge still muttering to themselves, and that was that.

The monk turned around, closed their fan, and bowed deeply.

Rodion, sufficiently impressed, clapped politely with a smile. The Prince stood holding an already-lit molotov cocktail in his hand, arm already cocked back and about to throw it.

"...Oh, great. I never get to use this thing. Back into the coat it goes, then…"

He disappointedly tucked the flaming explosive back into his coat, and the three approached the Sessho-Seki in earnest. Rodion retrieved the pamphlet he was given and compared the images.

As expected, it looked exactly like the image: an oblong stone, rough around the edges and with a rope surrounding itself, decorated with *shide* paper charms. Beside it was the wooden sign with Japanese characters painted on it in white declaring its name—'The Historical Killing Stone'.

Rodi raised a hand, it flaring with a thin veneer of brown bourbon-scented magic, and knocked above the fence. It bonked hollowly against the space, sending small ripples from the impact point.

"Is magical forcefield. There's no way we can get close."

"No need to get close, love. You can yell at someone from across the street and they'll still hear you, after all. I bet Tammy's floating there with her arms crossed giggling to herself, jeering at our stupidity. The joke is on her, however, becaaause…"

The Prince dug into his coat, rummaged about for a second, and then pulled out two laughably tacky pairs of glasses. The lenses consisted of two planchettes, made for use with a ouija board, pointing inwards with the circles in the center being the glass for the eyeglasses. The frames were made of polished wood, and symbols that Rodion remembered drawing in goat's blood in the past were burnt black onto them. He handed one pair to his partner and kept one for himself, twirling them in his hands as Rodi inspected them curiously.

"What are these?"

"Maquette Planchettes! The glass is made from the sand gathered from beachside graveyards, and the wood is shaved off of cemetery trees. I got it for five bucks in a back alley in Malibu. Guy was so sure I was a cop, I mean—do I look like a cop to you? No cop would be caught dead looking as fashionable as I do. Anyways, they let you peek into the spirit world."

"Really? Wow…then, why doesn't everybody have a pair?"

"They're on custom-order, and the only cove who knows how to make them always fudges the glasswork. Real near-sighted, you can only see ghosts that are five feet in front of you and nowhere else. Luckily, this here pebble's more than close enough! You want one too, lil' chicky?"

He held out a spare pair to the monk, who shook their head. The Prince didn't notice on account of not looking at them when he did so, but they were trembling slightly as they looked on at the rock.

"Suit yourself."

The two of them put on their Maquette Planchettes, and the world took on an ethereal bluish-gray hue. All physical objects were hazy and wavered slightly as if they were in the intense heat—for all but the strongest spirits, the physical world was as incorporeal to them as ghosts were to those in the lower planes of existence. Rodion waved his hand in front of his face and saw that he could see little more than an outline of his hand, jittering and shuddering with little detail save for the fact he still had all five fingers. Then he looked up and heard a high-pitched feminine voice, cloying with condescension and superiority.

"My, so it's true. You modern humans don't possess brains after all."

In front of them, her figure appearing and consisting of a sort of golden fog that constantly wisped and twirled and plumed in front of them despite never fully dissipating, was the ghost of the nine-tailed fox courtesan, Tamamo-no-Mae. Her appearance was typical of the era: pure white *oshiroi* makeup with red accents on the lips and the edges of the eyes, a thickly-waxed black hairstyle decorated with nine kanzashi hair ornaments that resembled the rays of a shining sun, staggered upwards through her bundled locks, and a thickly-padded *uchikake* kimono worn over several layers of lesser garments. The uchikake was patterned with images of foxes among short grass-brush, and the image on the front of her stiff *obi* belt-sash showed a silhouette of a fox staring at the viewer.

Despite appearing human for the most part, two fox ears jutted out from the sides of her scalp and a thick bushy tail whipped and thrashed behind her. In one hand, she held a long *kiseru* tobacco holder that slowly gave off more golden fog as if it were smoldering. She grinned, fangs visible poking out from her upper lip as it twitched like whiskers.

"I would have thought that after Hansei, locals wouldn't be stupid enough to march right up to something called 'The Killing Stone' like it's some sort of freakshow for you to gawk at. I was rather liking the peace and quiet that came from people having some common sense for once and fearing that which is so much more powerful than they are. And yet, here you are."

Rodion stared blankly. "...Pardon?"

She giggled, the sound echoing in their ears as it softly bounced between the mountain walls.

"No, now that I look at you all closer, you aren't from here, are you? Some hairy slab of meat that I surmise is a Roshiajin*...though, perhaps I could be wrong judging from your garish clothes. And he is accompanied by none other than an* Igirisujin*."*

The Prince huffed and put his hands on his hips, puffing his cheeks out childishly.

"And how in the Queen's name did you know I was British, hm?!"

She ignored him, her black eyes shifting to the monk.

"Finally, yo round out this little cabal, you have…Oh my. Is that you, Samayou?"

Immediately, a shudder went up the monk's entire body, and they pulled the rim of their reed hood down in an attempt to further hide their face. She lowered herself to their level, but remained a distance away.

"So, you still wander, upholding your self-imposed vow of silence. Tell me, why do you hide your face from these…people? Is it because you fear what they may do to you if they find out who you are? If that is true, I must say, you've done an extremely poor job. Your talons are on display for all to see, and your tail plumage sticks out like a sore thumb. In America, perhaps that may have slid, but you know better here, don't you?"

The Prince lightly stomped his foot on the wood, clearing his throat loudly.

"A-hem, a-hem!"

She snapped at him.

"What is it, Igirisujin?! Do you desire some frivolous novelty such as a picture with me?! If you do, then take it before I decide to strike you down!"

He crossed his arms and scoffed, looking away even as Rodion put his hands up and tried to get him to simmer down.

"And how exactly will you do that, huh? Newsflash sunshine, you're dead as a doornail, and nothing's going to—"

She flicked her tobacco holder, and a fist emerged from the magical force-field to bean The Prince square in the nose. He stumbled backwards and held it as blood seeped out of it.

"God—Bloody fucking hell! It's still healing, you…H-How did you even do that?!"

"You're either even dumber or even more foreign than I thought. Everyone knows powerful enough yokai *can use magic by calling upon their mother* kami*...even those who have passed on. Your bloated friend there already said there was a force-field up, now I ask you, why would you not presume I could punch you in the face as well?"*

He didn't answer, continuing to hold his nose and groan. While he stepped aside and used some minor healing magic to set it right once more, Rodion stepped forward and cleared his throat. He politely waved.

"Hello. I am Rodion Nikolayev, and I am not proficient in Japanese—haha, you see, I am barely proficient in English as is—but he means no offense. He is known as Prince of Fuck All."

"Is that what parents are naming their children in Great Britain now?"

"Do not ask me what it means, I am just as lost as you are. But we come to you, the great Tamamo-no-Mae, with a request."

She raised her eyebrows, anticipating the next sentence to fall out of the Russian's mouth to be the stupidest thing she had ever heard in her thousand-plus years of living.

"We want the Killing Stone."

Tamamo always loved it when she was right. Throwing her head back and cackling, she leaned back in her plume of golden fog and took a drag off her pipe with a sardonic grin on her face. She blew it into the air, where it swirled and spread until dissipating entirely.

"You and many others, apparently. All sorts of absurd yokai I've never seen before have turned up wanting a piece of my rock. At first, they put up a good fight. There were times where,

if I were not one of the Three Monstrous Yokai of Japan, I would have feared that they would break through my barrier. Now, they have sent such weaklings that even a sentimental fool like Samayou could whisk them away. What makes you two different, apart from the fact that you can speak in full sentences? Though even that is giving you too much credit, in my opinion."

Slightly offended but accepting the dig at his grasp of English rather than offending the powerful ghost in front of him, Rodion gestured to The Prince.

"We gather them to fight against forces that have been assailing you. They are Man Unkind, an evil cult who wishes to bring about end of current world to create new one of complete chaos. They recently obtained something that gives them directions to some powerful stones across many worlds, including this one, which is among most powerful, to my understanding. If they obtain all of what they seek, then it is end of world. We collect them so they may not fall into wrong hands, and can be placed in a safe environment. We have already collected Lia Fail from the fae."

"The what?"

He was quiet for a moment, processing her question, and nudged The Prince with his elbow. He whipped around with a finger to his nose, snapping at him.

"What?!"

"The Lia Fail. Show it to her."

"Lia Fail, Lia…ah! Right, yes. That'll show Tammy we mean business, eh?"

Shoving an arm deep into his coat, he retrieved the Lia Fail that they had received courtesy of Queen Medb. He put a hand on its top and leaned against it with a smirk. Samayou looked over it, impressed by the moss-covered rock and putting their hands out as though in front of a fire. Tamamo-no-Mae, on the other hand, just stared at it with boredom.

"...I certainly do sense some magic coming off of it, but how is that supposed to convince me?"

"Well, the fae are nasty buggers, you know? Kidnapping children, eating porridge, whatnot. If we could convince them we were to be sided with, then it should be enough for you, right?"

"And how did you do that?"

"We proved our…what was it, love, our characters, to Medb?"

"I think so."

"Yes, we showed our character."

Tamamo yawned.

"And that is worth my time, how? I know neither of you, and trust you even less. I have been doing perfectly fine guarding my stone for as long as 'Man Unkind' has been after it. Why would I pass it off to you two children who might fall and break their necks on the steps down from the mountain? Besides, even this barrier is only to keep their unsavory forms from getting close to me—if they did try to pick it up, they'd be killed on the spot."

Rodion opened his mouth to protest, but The Prince patted him on the shoulder and tucked Lia Fail back into his coat as he put his hands to the magical force-field like a child pressing against the aquarium glass.

“Look, Tammy. I’ve been dealing with this cult for most of my life, and if there’s one thing I know, it’s to never underestimate what they can do if they pull their shit together for five seconds. Usually, they’re a bunch of nutters. That never changes. But when the top brass can pull them together and find the right mystical tchotchke to give their minions, they can bring down the most powerful of gods. They slowed down on throwing agents at you because their focus is elsewhere: once they take care of that, they’ll send in the big guns.”

“And what will they do? I’m dead already, and…”

“Forget being dead, or even being killed.”

His expression turned grave, catching her off-guard.

“It will be like you never existed. No *kami*, no god, no yokai would be able to bring you back after that…and that’s if you get off easy. You say if they touch the stone, they’ll drop dead on the spot, but that’s not a guarantee for all of them. Most of them were never alive in the first place, and they’ll still not be alive when they’re throwing your stone in a box with the rest of their ill-gotten gains and strapping you to a table, transforming you into—”

She snapped her pipe in half, shouting as she covered her ears.

“Stop! Stop talking, enough!”

He took his hands off the barrier, resting them on the fence in front of him.

“If you want to have faith in your own abilities in the face of creatures and beings that you couldn’t even *begin* to comprehend, be my guest. Don’t come crying to me when the Three Monstrous Yokai become the Two Monstrous Yokai.”

Everyone was quiet, and a soft breeze went through the mountainside. Rodion especially felt a chill down his spine, though it wasn’t the wind that caused it. Whenever The Prince talked about this cult, Man Unkind, he either regarded them as nothing more than a nuisance that he could easily evade at every turn…or one of the most dangerous forces in the world. Rodion remembered a line he had read in a textbook as a young boy decrying those who describe their enemy as both too strong and too weak. He had seen the power of the cult first-hand through their many agents, but he was still unsure of their true scope. He didn't even know who their leader was, which (from his recollection) was the number-one thing most people knew about cults.

His trust in The Prince had always been a little shaky, and his insistence that Man Unkind was unequivocally evil was still something that he did want to believe…but it did scare him seeing how his emotions and opinions wavered on the subject. Rodion believed The Prince because, well, what other option was there? Besides, what force for good would kidnap the population of his entire hometown? They were definitely malicious, though he was unaware of the full extent of their power.

Tamamo-no-Mae kept her ears folded down over her head with her hands as she wrenched an eye open. She lowered them, sighed in annoyed (yet fearful) resignation, and looked down at the three of them.

“...Fine. You have convinced me. I will turn over my home, this stone that kills those who touch it, to you for the time being, for the sake of protection.”

The Prince smiled and turned around to the others with his hands out, beaming. Yet, Tamamo prodded a finger at him.

"However."

She took another drag off her pipe, it having reformed itself from the fog, and blew it into the air. It hung in the air, wisping like paint in water as it slowly took shape. It split into three, one dissipating into nothing as the other two took on fearsome forms: the left one of a man in an antiquated Japanese royal court uniform with a wrathful expression on his face, and the other of a bulky horned figure wielding a studded club mid-swing with little more than a .

"You must prove that you are stronger than me for me to properly trust you with this. Of the three great yokai of Japan, I am but one of them. The others are Sutoku Tenno, the vengeful ghost of a wronged emperor, and Shuten-douji, king of all oni."

Rodion blinked as the uniformed man dissipated, leaving only the horned figure. "Oni?"

"Ogres, you nitwit! Devils! Creatures of the inferno! ...Following Hansei, his underlings dug up the spot at Oinosaka where his head was buried and resurrected him. They enjoyed seeing humanity grovel before them, killing and maiming and making them their slaves as they pleased, but per the request of the Emperor, he and Sutoku Tenno[21] promised to never interfere with their affairs again as long as humans never interfered with theirs. He and I talk often. There is a bar he frequents just past my stone."

The shape of his robust form in the fog, a solidly muscled chest above a pot belly, became covered by something resembling a short jacket. It appeared laughably small on his frame, but nonetheless hung loosely off of him.

"He has with him a fiery haori*—a jacket, for you foreign twits—that he grants to those who have bested him in a feat. Challenge him to a competition, claim the haori as your reward should you win, and come back wearing it. Then I will know at least one of us three acknowledges your true power, and I shall grant you my support as well."*

The Prince crossed his arms, cocking his hips.

"Is that all? Pfft. Piece of cake. I'm sure I've got oodles of anti-yokai drag in my jacket, should be a cinch."

"The fact you believe a simple warding charm will stop Shuten-douji tells me that you will be returning in fifteen pieces. Tell me, would you like Samayou or your friend Rodion there to hold your disembodied head as I mock your overconfidence?"

He opened his mouth and started to strut towards her, but Rodion quickly shoved past him.

"Er, wait, wait, you say he gives this jacket to anyone who bests him in…any competition? I would think king of all ogres would be more discerning."

She just snickered, the sound coming out in sharp yaps like a fox's cry.

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[21] Sutoku Tenno, incensed at the fact that even in death he was unable to keep his grasp on public office and that he was cowed into accepting the deal to leave humanity alone despite the fact that his biggest shrine—Shiramine Shrine—was smack-dab in the middle of Kyoto, has since spent his time sitting atop the shrine gate and glaring at everyone who passes by. Normal mortals cannot see ghosts, of course, but real estate value has dropped immensely in the area regardless. This is because of the large number of dog owners.

"He has nothing better to do. Even before the Second Great World War, he remained in his hideout on Mount Oe, content to while the days away with partying and sharing tall tales. Besides, he's an utter lush. You're lucky to arrive so early in the day: any later, and he would be dancing on the tables with his pants off."

"...He does not sound so frightening."

"He used to rampage through Kyoto kidnapping virgins, eating their organs, and draining them of their blood before throwing the bones and skin to his minions."

"I take back my statement."

The Prince clapped his hands and cracked his neck, walking away from the stone to vault himself over the fences bordering the walkway.

"Well! You heard Tammy. We pop on down to the pub, we meet the nana omi and snag a few bevvies while we're at it, we beat him at his own game, I pop on the schmutter, and we've got a fancy new stone to add to our collection!"

Tamamo-no-Mae's barrier reached out to lightly knock him on the back of the head, causing him to fall face-first into the rocks below with a muffled curse.

"One more thing, Igirisu."

She gestured to Samayou, the monk who had remained stunned into silence for as long as they had been speaking to the ghostly yokai. They froze up in response.

"...If you're going to take them with you, remember you'll have a much higher chance of losing. This one is known for being quite over-sentimental when it comes to humanity. Try not to get yourselves mangled too badly, alright? I would hate to gloat to a pile of mush."

The two of them turned to look at the komuso, The Prince picking pebbles out of his cheeks, but by the time Rodion had turned to her and opened his mouth to ask what she meant, she was gone. He took off the Maquette Planchette glasses and squinted at the sudden wash of color in the world that refilled his view, raising a hand. He looked back at Samayou with an inquiring expression.

"You would not be willing to tell us what she meant by that, would you?"

Samayou raised a talon to their reed hood.

"Ah, right, yes. Vow of silence. I suppose I should have expected that from a monk, right? Well, do not worry. We have had tag-alongs before, I am sure you will prove helpful."

He smiled with a warm radiance that soothed the tense monk, who rocked on their heels and nodded. The Prince called from a few meters away, waving to them.

"Dilly-dally shilly-shally, lads! We can't all sit around thumbing our noses!"

"C-Coming!"

He hurried over to the waist-high fence, looked down at it, and sheepishly grinned at a confused Samayou.

"Er, you wouldn't mind helping me over this, would you…?"

~

In a starchy hospital bed with pure-white sheets that stank of chemical cleaners, in a white-walled room with one window that showed off a scenic view of the parking lot below, with the sound of Japanese teledramas and the steady drip of an IV, Fionn mac Cumhaill slowly stirred from his period of burn-compelled involuntary rest.

"Urgh…"

His eyelids felt like lead as he slowly pried them open with what felt like every muscle in his face, which just so happened to be extremely sore. In fact, his whole body felt sore. That dull soreness then evolved into a sort of throbbing pain that made his mouth contort into a grimace, which in turn caused his face to hurt once more. So focused was he on the state of his own body, that he barely registered the room that he had been situated in. He remembered being in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, blocking a fireball for the sake of a Fomorian, and then…blackness. Perhaps some occasional cold and scattered flashes of pain, but apart from that, it was impossible to recall.

Fionn looked down at his body, and his body would have tensed with shock if it hadn't hurt so much. His clothes had been taken off, even his emerald circlet and circling wristbands, and he had been instead wrapped with thick gauze bandages: some around his arms, many around his midsection, a few he could feel around his legs, and a few patches on his face. The only thing that was left on him was his sheepskin underwear, and frankly he would have preferred that they had taken those too. They never were that comfortable in the first place. The bases of his antlers hurt a bit, and from the crook of his right arm, he could see a clear tube running up from his arm to an odd stand with a bag hanging on it.

He didn't have much time to mourn the loss of his beloved armor and clothing, as well as Mac an Luin—his sword! Oh, what had happened to his sword? Or his shield and banner—such important gifts he was given! Where had they gone? As he soon noticed at the edge of the room his oxter bag, bulging from the contents within. A note on the front read 'BELONGINGS' with a smiley face. At least they were safe.

That was his current state and his belongings taken care of. Now, where was he in the first place? He looked down on his chest and saw that there was a note folded in two, the front signed 'Rodion / Cron' in elegant but stripped-back cursive. He moved to pick it up, but the searing pain that shot through that entire side of his body put a swift end to that motion. He supposed that he couldn't move, due to obvious reasons. Burn wounds all across his body. Duh. He should have figured.

Then his ear twitched, picking up voices in the outside hallway. They spoke a language he had never heard before, nor one he understood, but if he was going to get anywhere, it was time for the next best thing. He cleared his throat and projected his voice as best he could.

"Excuse me."

The voices stopped. Then the door opened, and in shuffled a young woman with black hair dressed in the typical white robes of a nurse. She kept her distance, looking on at Fionn with a mix of wonder and fear. He could see other nurses standing outside the door, peering inside and whispering among one another. The nurse that had entered swallowed.

“Yes?”

“Hello. I do not know where I am. I was brought here by two friends of mine, one from England, and one from Russia. Do you know where I am?”

Her voice wavered slightly.

“Kanma Memorial Clinic.”

“Japan?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. There is a note on my chest. It is signed by a friend of mine. I cannot move due to my injuries. Can you please open it and hold it open for me?”

She looked back at the other nurses, unsure, and whispered among them for a few seconds. The excited hushing stopped, she turned back to him, and pointed meekly at his head.

“Antlers.”

“Yes, I have antlers. What about them?”

“...Can I touch them?”

Fionn stared at her.

“No.”

The nurses all collectively sighed and started to walk away, and he suddenly realized his mistake.

“I mean, yes. You may touch them. Just please open the letter for me.”

They returned, and the nurse that asked the question in the first place hesitated for a moment in place before nodding, steeling herself, and approaching Fionn. She advanced her hand at a snail’s pace, but after fifteen agonizing seconds of waiting, her index finger made contact with the antler. Fionn would have shuddered if the action wouldn’t have caused him horrible pain. He hates being touched by people he doesn’t know. Or people in general. She pulled her hand back and murmured out something he didn't understand in an awestruck tone, before pulling out her phone and hurriedly setting up the camera to take a picture.

“I assume you are medical practitioners, so I thank you for taking care of my injuries, but please do open the note. It is from a friend of mine, and I would like to know what he has to say to me as soon as possible.”

She nearly dropped her phone.

“A-Ah, yes, yes!”

Opening the note, she held it in front of Fionn for him to read. It follows thusly:

‘Sorry to leave you on such short notice
I am doctor, yes, but I did not have proper supplies to treat you, so I took you to hospital
Me and ~~Prince~~ Forruad are going to Tochigi to get next stone
Do not look for us, stay where you are, we will pick you up later
Many thanks, Morganwg sends their blessing

Cron’

Fionn nodded, closing his eyes in thought.

"You can put it with the rest of my things."

The nurse placed the note away in the oxter bag, though the way in which she poked open the opening with a single finger and quickly tucked the slip of paper into it before stumbling backwards made it seem as though she was worried it would suddenly reach out and bite her.

He sucked on the inside of his cheek. He certainly wasn't happy about being left here while the others went about proving themselves. He felt like dead weight, and he hated feeling like dead weight. How was he supposed to get his hero-lights if something as pitiful as *fire* could incapacitate him so thoroughly? Still, he couldn't move. There was no way he could use the magic he learned from Bodhmall, one of his druid mothers, to heal himself…

Thinking of Bodhmall once more gave him an idea. Perhaps he couldn't use his own magic to heal himself, but he still had plenty of items in his oxter bag that could be used in druidic medicinal practices! If he could instruct these well-trained nurses to fulfill the recipe correctly, he could be up and running within an hour!

"Excuse me."

She looked up at him.

"Would you be willing to do a favor for me?"

"Yes?"

"Look into my oxter bag. Pull out three lavender-colored thistle bulbs, five ounces of clovers, a handful of mistletoe, one whole mandrake root, a small stack of henbane petals, and a vial of dog's blood. After this, retrieve a wooden mortar and pestle. Light a fire underneath it. While reciting the Druid's Prayer, place a small amount of items into the mortar in this order: Thistle, henbane, clover, mandrake slice, drop of dog's blood, mistletoe, repeating this pattern until you have gone through the whole process and used up all of the ingredients. Bless it by Dian Cecht and by the keepers of the forest, remove my bandages, and pour it evenly over my wounds. Do you understand?"

The nurse stared at him, cautiously reached into his bag, pulled out Mac an Luin, and passed out on the floor. The others rushed to her aid and crowded around her, stammering in a questioning tone. Fionn sighed through his nose.

"Let me go through it again. Three lavender-colored thistle bulbs…"

CHAPTER 14: Hel And You

Hel, Fenrir, Moxy Fruvous, and Foxy Shazam fell for what felt like an eternity.

Escaping from the Aesir gods, Foxy had cut open a hole in space-time and directed the wolf to jump into it to act as a quick escape route, but their transition was not swift. Falling through the hole into the nothingness, Hel almost instinctively held her breath despite the fact that she didn't need to breathe at all, as her eyes widened to fully take in what she saw during those few endless seconds.

There was a deep and vast nothingness. Not blackness, neither whiteness nor grayness, but the complete absence of all essence, of all existence…and within the nothingness, she could see what had conglomerated together. They were great bubbles, massive circular structures containing vague shapes of deep purples and blacks and splashes of color, impossibly enormous. Her mind struggled to wrap around the size, the farthest bubbles still appearing to be the size of tennis balls upon the horizon. Occasionally visible, stark against the eternal void, were sparks. Sparks of sheer white light that crackled in indistinct lines between these bubbles, shuttering from one to the other, one to the next, like neurons firing off inside of an incomprehensibly enormous brain. There was silence in this world, not even when the sparks would fly, and her skin bristled against the uncomfortable sensation of being within a vacuum.

She was unable to see clearly what structure they traveled across, but in the few short moments she had to appreciate the realm, she and her cohorts and the great wolf she rode upon were consumed by a flash of light before they appeared elsewhere. Hel wrenched her eyes shut at the light, raising a hand to block it, but her eyelids still filled with whiteness before ultimately dissolving away back to the black she expected.

The odd sensation on her skin in the previous realm was replaced with another odd sensation: now she could feel that her body temperature was in flux. Her hands were ice-cold, though that was normal, and her chest burned like fire. Her ankles were lukewarm, her scalp somewhat brisk, and the extreme temperatures among her body caused them all to almost level out. The many became one, and after weathering the first few moments of the new air, she became used to it. The air buzzed slightly whenever she breathed in, scented with lemon, burnt cinders, cinnamon rolls, and a variety of other scents she had never experienced before. Still, she felt out of place. She felt as though she occupied space in a place where there was meant to be something other than herself there, that she was filling an empty spot reserved for something else.

She was afraid to open her eyes, however, due to the *sounds* that invaded her ears. All manner of horrid audio launched themselves against her, laughing and cackling interlaced with screaming and the sounds of meat frying caught ping-ponging between a politician speaking a language unknown to her and a bicycle horn combined with the sounds of squeaking leather. Footsteps could be heard above her, sounds flying around her and past her like gnats who spoke in tongues and recited pop song lyrics, and when she felt the noise could grow no more agitating, the rumbling began.

A rumbling at first unnoticeable, at first not prominent, that slowly grew like a rolling stone until the chugging became impossible to ignore. A great sound bellowed, and she could smell the smoke that belched out of the vehicle and the wind that blew on her as it passed close by.

A train passed, and there was silence for a moment before everything resumed.

Foxy lightly prodded her in the back.

“Hey. We’re home, you can open your eyes now.”

Behind them, Moxy could be heard whooping and cheering, greeting all manner of beings and creatures that Hel couldn’t make heads or tails of. She shook her head.

“I-I am…not opening my eyes, until one of you freaks tells me where the Helheim we are.”

“Oh. Easy. We’re at the Broken Tracks of Meinung. Home base for Man Unkind.”

Moxy’s peppy voice chimed in.

“It was real lucky of us to end up right back at home! Foxy, did youuuu…did you plan to take us back here all along? Hm? Hm? Cause you gotta tell me if you diiid!”

“I didn't.”

“Oh, pooh, you could have at least tried to play along…”

Hel swallowed. She didn't want to admit it, but she was trembling. She who had dominion over all spirits, who had seen the pisacas and yakshas of the world cower before her, she who walked through fields of corpses and who held sole dominion over the great dragon Nidhoggr…was trembling. She had never seen beings like Moxy and Foxy before, never in her whole life, and…what was she to expect from their home? They defied all logic. They went against all beliefs that she had accrued through her years of existence…and yet, she had made her decision. She helped these people so they could help her, and, well…she had to admit that she had taken a liking to them. They were at least much better company than her other two bumbling minions. Still, she grit her teeth.

“...If I open my eyes, do you promise that I will not go mad?”

“Can’t promise that.”

“Yeah, that’s actually when they get you! We could get the Transparent Enucleii to take out your eyes and replace them with better ones though! I once knew a fella here who had that procedure done, he said that the world was so much prettier once he could see it for what it was!”

Rather liking the eyes she had, Hel very slowly opened one eye, which quickly shot open along with the other as she saw what the Broken Tracks truly were.

The ground she stood on was not dirt, and certainly what she breathed was not air. Looking down from Fenrir, he appeared to have his paws sunken into a substance of sponge-like consistency with structures resembling undersea vents occasionally shooting off plumes of green smoke filled with screaming faces. In front of them was an iron railway, floating diagonally in the air and stretching infinitely across the realm and unsupported by anything within. To her left, two unclear figures resembling mannequins dressed in women’s clothing, their heads upside down as if balancing on the platforms of their necks, chattered in German to a hulking figure constructed entirely out of tombstones with marble eyes and a spiked spine lined with iron fencing, its helmet and clothes being nothing more than decaying tatters. Its speech,

incomprehensible to Hel, was like the wind through dead trees. They spoke in front of what could have been a building, but which more resembled a massive human head sunken into the ground down to the bridge of their nose, a spiked crown atop their scalp. Their eyes slowly scanned back and forth, occasionally looking upwards to the pastel green-and-blue-and-plaid-and-dream sky to fire an arrow of the words 'ARCTURUS' at aerial creatures that flew by, their faces those of Ronnie James Dio and their wings made of razor blades.

To her right, a deep incline in the 'ground' was dotted by road linings and swooped into a loop-de-loop before continuing on its side, other beings visible ambulating one way or another across the lop-sided road. There was a clattering of popsicle sticks behind her, and she turned just in time to see a beast the size of a double-decker bus made entirely out of wooden sticks slowly trundling along past her like some oblivious caterpillar, followed by the fedora-wearing head of an elephant walking on a bisected trunk leading the rest of his grinning saddled body along. Hel would have called it 'Boschian' if she knew who Hieronymous Bosch was.

She looked to the sky and saw not only roads and endless twirling streams of water and chocolate and blood through which indiscernible beings called and gutturally belched as they dove in and out of the levitating rivers…but tracks. Tracks and tracks and tracks upon tracks, at least twenty within her field of vision at that given moment, all assumedly connected to a train. Hel boggled at the number of railways before another episode of chugging occurred, and another train went by. It had only been five minutes since the last one, and just like before, everyone stopped their conversation and remained silent as the train passed before continuing onto their manic everyday lives.

In the far distance, massive figures with rounded heads and arrows shooting out of their heads loomed, a cyclops with a placid smile gazed out to the vast expanses of the Broken Tracks, and in a far-off corner that she could see had no color, a seated old man with the body of a birdcage where his torso and head would be sat overlooking the rest of the land. Hel silently hoped that they were nothing more than monumental sculptures, oddly-shaped mountains.

As she took everything in with her jaw hanging open, the cacophony of noise that was the usual hum of the Broken Tracks resumed to occupy the front of her mind.

"...What…"

Moxy Fruvous floated up next to her.

"What's what, Helly?"

"...W-Where…?"

Foxy Shazam rested an elbow on hers.

"Where's where, Helz?"

"Where…is this?"

"Whaddya mean 'where is this', silly? This is the Broken Tracks of Meinung! Home sweet home, mission control, the motherlode of motherlands for all us agents of Man Unkind, Foxy already told you!"

Hel closed her mouth and glared back at the two of them, sputtering. She was at a loss for words—this, *this* was normal for them?

"N-I, you—no. No, you…what…where is this, in…in relation to the world? Surely this…this bedlam could not exist in the nine realms of Yggdrasil, could it?"

"Nope. We're far, far away from the big tree."

"T-Then, is this some sort of hidden place underneath Midgard…?"

"We take offense to that! Folks in the Closed Door would *never* understand us. Never, ever, ever!"

She ran a hand through her hair and just stared down at the fur in front of her as her old-fashioned mind desperately tried to process all the new information. She was banished to Helheim centuries ago, and she had no knowledge of the human world apart from what her father had told her…certainly, she would have struggled there, but this? This was all too much. Though, she blinked a bit.

"...Closed Door?"

"As you folks call it, the world as it is! Everything that isn't the Broken Tracks is the Closed Door, and we work to open it per the direction of our leader~!"

"A *huis clos* is the mark of ignorance. People put limits on each other, they put limits on themselves, they put limits on their gods. Open it, and the truth can be seen. Makes sense to me."

"...That is—"

"Erm…sister?"

Fenrir's trembling voice spoke up from below them. Hel had completely forgotten in all the mess—they had ridden in on Fenrir and he's had to accustom himself to this place as well. His eyes also clenched tightly shut.

"Is it alright to open my eyes? I know it's rather unbecoming of a wolf of my stature to feel such terror, but when faced with such…strange noises…I would much rather not open my eyes."

"...Yes. Yes, it is alright to open your eyes, Fenrir. But just—listen to me, do it slowly, okay? Slowly, so you don't get—"

He opened his eyes and looked around. All the fur on his body bristled up.

"...Oh good lord, I feel queasy…"

Moxy, Foxy, and Hel just barely managed to scramble off the great wolf as Fenrir fainted, collapsing onto his side and plugging one of the screaming vents that erupted from the spongey ground. Hel nearly sank in up to her ankles, but managed to pull herself out—she would just be treading lightly for a while. The three looked at the fallen wolf, Hel crossing his arms as she sighed.

"Hmph…You never were one to follow directions well, Fenrir. I suppose you'll at least be spared this world's insanity for a short while. But, now we have a predicament—my brother, and our primary mode of transportation, is out of commission."

Foxy sniffed.

"I'm not carrying him."

"Oh, no problem! I can get some of my friends to put him in the stables! There he can be niiice and saaafe and cooomfy, heehee~! Come on, come on!"

Moxy giggled and gestured for the other two to follow as she approached the mannequins and the golem. Lowering herself down to them, she spoke in perfect German to the mannequins, who nodded in understanding, and even replicated the eerie whooshing sound of the construction worker's voice to speak to him on his own level. She pointed at the unconscious wolf, and the others nodded in the affirmative as they hurried along (or in the case of the golem, trundled) to the wolf and began to pick him up to carry him off elsewhere as the tombstone creature barked orders in his mysterious tongue. Hel squinted at them as Moxy spun in the air, proud of herself.

"All done! I told them Mr. Puppy-Dog got super tired and needed a soft place to sleep for a while, and they told me *complex-switch-green-eight-vonnegut*, which means they'd do it!"

"...What…were those, exactly?"

Foxy put a hand on her shoulder as she pointed to each party.

"Munich Mannequins. The dreams insomniacs never had. They're unfulfilled, so they dress themselves in the fabric of other people's dreams to give themselves what they never had. Graveyard Architect. One of the construction workers who died in workplace accidents and had their ashes mixed into the cement. Their voices influence people to build meaningless structures."

The queen of the spirits sniffed.

"Then, they are ghosts?"

"Some of them are ghosts! Some of them are egregores, concepts given form! Some of them were once human! It's a big ol' mixed bag we've got here, and these are only the ones that we form ourselves!"

She opened her mouth to speak again, but the words hitched in her mouth as they passed through her brain.

"...Wait, once human?"

"Yup. Probably a third of everyone here was human originally."

Hel looked to Foxy, then to Moxy, pointing at them with a furrowed icy brow.

"...Were…were you two…?"

For once, there was complete silence between the two of them. Moxy's head lowered as her body hung limply in the air, lightly jostled by the otherworldly breeze, and Foxy's plastered-on smile dissolved for the first time during Hel's time with her. A passing train's horn filled the lacuna as she closed her mouth. Wrong question to ask, she supposed.

The head-building fired another word-arrow at the Dio-birds, and it dropped to the ground a few meters behind them. Hel looked down at it and hoped that those weren't some of the ones that were formerly human, though something in her gut told her otherwise.

Thankfully, something else odd rolled up to distract everyone from the awkward situation: a hunk of plastic in the terrifying shape of a clown's face, the speaker within its unmoving mouth's throat, hopped down onto the land from a passing paper airplane on its single sensuous women's leg, ending in a red stiletto heel. It bounded to and fro like a demented pogo-stick, leaping over the fallen bird, as it approached the three of them. Hel immediately tensed up and raised her hands, spikes of ice forming into her palms as weapons.

The clown-speaker-leg-thing stopped, scanned its eyes from side to side, and spoke in a robotic voice resembling that of an animatronic speaking through a blown-out speaker.

"COME AND SEE. COME AND SEE. COME AND SEE."

Hel held out a spike defensively.

"What in Odin's name is that and what is it doing here."

Immediately, Moxy and Foxy snapped out of their funks and almost shoved Hel out of the way as they crowded around the speaker.

"Ooh, oh my gosh, the master is calling!"

"T-The master?"

"Our leader. The head of Man Unkind. Our daimyo. Our burgermeister. Our duce and guru. Our executive and executor."

"Sometimes he walks around outside, and sometimes he stays cooped up in Nobody's Enemy for weeks at a time! But he always keeps in touch with his agents! Even if the Shadow is the one who gives the orders, Dear Leader's really the face of the whole thing, even if we dunno much about him~"

The speaker yammered on.

"COME AND SEE. COME AND SEE. COME AND SEE."

"What does it want from us?!"

Foxy raised a hand.

"I got this."

With the same bored muscle memory that an office worker would press the elevator buttons on his way to work, she pressed her thumb into a button beneath the speaker.

"I'd like a Big Mac, three large fries, a Frosty with apple slices, and the death of modern civilization, please."

She took her thumb off it and the clown's eyes swirled in a circle for a few moments, before a voice, crackly and low-quality (as it was still coming through a drive-thru speaker), came through. It was high and lilting, tittering and with pauses and an odd drifting in accent. There was a slight echo to whatever the voice said, and it occasionally stopped entirely, cutting out and coming back in.

"—essage fo rme us um mhmhm yes yes to talk how how h how to i OH oh o h oh oh okay okay Hello Hello Loyal Agents of Mein you your…your who are you again"

"Moxy Fruvous here, sir! I'm here with my partner, Foxy Shazam!"

"Hey."

" m mox moxy moxie foxy foxy . . . AAAAAOUH RIGHT THATS YOURE YOUR your the ladies Hello Ladies well cum back how whael welcome back what what have you brought with you who is that"

Moxy gestured to Hel, though clearly he wouldn't have been able to see her gesturing.

"This is Helly! She's from the Norse pantheon, we retrieved Gleipnir and freed her brother Fenrir in the process!"

She did not speak, stunned into silence.

"GLAYP NEER i rem ember asking for that……good good very good that means. That mariners that means means that what does it mean ohhh my hands are twitching YES we have…glayp-neer and jaconbson stone…next is there is—there is the the…the uh…mmmm…"

The leader's voice trailed off as he muttered incomprehensible phrases about scrimshaw and intermittently giggled to himself, only interrupted by Foxy.

"Shadow ain't with you?"

" and and the drums shall crave all maner of AH molly? mollee is busy in the burning place drumming drumming drummmming up some support…come to the foot of nobodees enemee. bring her here. i want to see her thank you. bring you and the other one thank you love you hee hee"

The two of them nodded to one another and saluted.

"Yes, master!"

"Yessir."

The voice from the speaker wheezed and degraded into nothing but static. The clown speaker proceeded to, rather than hopping away, sink into the spongy ground until it had disappeared entirely. Moxy clapped her hands and took one of Hel's, yanking on it.

"Wowie zowie, the master's expecting us! Come on then, Helly, we haven't got a moment to taste!"

However, she stood her ground—sinking in a bit—and pulled her hand back.

"D-Don't presume you can simply drag me wherever you want just because some manic street-preacher wants to meet me! Unhand me!"

Moxy let go, and Hel sighed with her brow furrowed enough to rival the most thoroughly wrinkled towels as she crossed her arms. A cloud of pink dots passed by them, and another train rolled by. She thought silently about her plan of action before pointing to Foxy Shazam.

"Foxy, watch over those…things. Make sure they place Fenrir in a safe place and that they don't try anything with him. I want Moxy to come with me as a bodyguard, and once you've made sure he's safe, come and join her, alright?"

Foxy gave an 'okay' sound with a grin.

"Aye-aye, cap'n. Here, hold this."

She tossed the reality-cutting onyx blade to Hel, turned on her heel—her head taking a moment to turn with the rest of her body—and hurried along. She leapt over an ambulatory vaulting horse that whinnied at her, slid down a pile of strawberry ice cream covered in pepper flakes and marbles, and disappeared from view.

Turning back to Moxy, Hel cleared her throat, raised her chin, and thrust out her hand.

"Then you shall take me there to meet him. Do not delay, as I would like to spend as little time here as possible."

"Aw, don't worry! It might be strange at first, but once you get used to it, you'll never want to leave!"

"(Yes, perhaps if only because I would be driven mad.) Lead the way."

Moxy took her hand and led her forwards.

~

Traveling through the Broken Tracks of Meinung was about as cumbersome, confusing, and surreal as looking at it. Hel and Moxy mounted a set of ears the size of a car each with a knife erupting from where they met, which traveled along a helix-shaped road made up of the eraser ends of dozens and dozens of pencils until they arrived to an upside-down set of structures that was possibly a 'town'. Hel held a hand up to her head to avoid making eye contact with any of the creatures they passed by. Wiry creatures with bourbon bottles for heads that trembled and shook, sinister figures that appeared to be nothing more than trench coats and downturned hats who were followed around by ambulatory streetlights, the massive floating head of a middle-aged man with barbed wire wrapped around his mouth…she shuddered as it passed by and whispered conservative economic policies to itself.

She turned to Moxy once they began to approach the massive cyclops she had seen a short while before, bobbing and weaving through fields of wheat stacked on top of one another, floating in a cube shape.

"This place is…maddening. Nothing makes sense. It's like it was designed by a child."

"Well, our child is a leader at heart, y'know!"

"And, he was the one that made this place then? How? Is he a god?"

"Heeheehee, no, silly! He may have the powers of what *you* call a god, but he's just like the rest of us! Just like the rest of us and yet so very, very different. A god is someone who rules—no better than a king or a president! We only call him our leader because he leads us."

Hel grimaced, trying to wrap her head around what Moxy meant, before deciding that she could have an aneurysm later on her own time.

"...I can't say I've seen anything like it. Frankly, I'm surprised that fickle Abrahamic God hasn't wiped this place out of existence."

"Technically, it's out of His jurisdiction, so he doesn't even know we exist! Our agents spread themselves across the many worlds, usually only acting sparsely and leaving no trace of our origins…until nooow, that is~!"

She crossed her arms, ducking down as a fly with the body of a dragon swooped overhead.

"And why is that?"

"Our leader said that one of the Libertine Watercolors picked up something really fancy: a stone that can lead us to the directions of all other stones! That's how we picked up what we have now! Me and Foxy went to the Nine Realms of Yggdrasil to get Gleipnir, and the Superfluous Man popped into Heaven to provide a distraction while others picked up the Stone of Jacob! We can see into plenty of places, but actually going there is a different matter—the worlds of gods are pretty much all the same place overlapping over one another, but you need to know where you're going to get to a specific one!"

Hel furrowed her brow.

"...Uh huh."

“It’s like being in a biiiig big forest, and wanting to visit a specific tree! They’re all in the forest, but unless you know what you’re looking for and where it is, you’re totally lost! The Alatyr Fragment is like a GPS that’ll lead us to the trees to get the sweet, sweet honey within…or at least, that’s how the Shadow explained it! I liked our leader’s explanation more, his had marmalade.”

She didn't respond to that, instead stopping and craning her neck upwards. Indeed, in front of them was the gigantic cyclops that she had seen in the distance when she first arrived. It was monstrous in its size, larger than even Odin’s high tower, larger than how her father had described the buildings that scraped against the sky in Midgard. It lacked hair and its skin was a soft toast color, large ears framing either side of a round head. A single eye stared placidly off into the horizon, not even noticing that they had approached, and thin lips where the edge of its chin would be were frozen in a content smile.

Directly in front of them, a forest shrouded the rest of its body. No limbs or even a torso were visible, just that haunting visage and its curved neck and a single shoulder. For once, the ground was a feasible material: dirt, patted down from plenty of movement along the path. And in front of them, a lone train track.

Moxy stopped, knowing that this was the ‘foot’ of Nobody’s Enemy (Hel didn't quite understand why it was called that, but she knew better by now than to challenge their beliefs), and Hel stood beside her with her hands on her hips.

“...Is he really going to meet us here? I can’t say I expected such a…who I assumed to be a rather reclusive leader, to be meeting with me.”

Moxy bobbed up and down in the air.

“Weeeell! Sometimes he’s reclusive, sometimes he walks around a ton! But he’s really sweet, really really really sweet! And you must be very special, for him to want to meet you! Maybe he wants to talk to you about helping us more! …Which, actually, I wonder, why did you agree to help us out anyways?”

She crossed her arms and sneered, looking away.

“...It was a pragmatic choice on my part. Nothing more. Long ago, I was vilified by our chief god, Odin, simply due to my heritage. I am naught but the daughter of my father, the trickster Loki, and if a daughter cannot have pride in her family, then how can she have pride in herself? …My brother Fenrir was allowed to be raised among the Aesir, yet they still betrayed his trust, and I was cast down into the frost-bitten depths of Helheim, where I ordained myself Queen. All my life, I have dreamt of revenge against them.”

Hel made a cold grin and pointed.

“And believe me, once I return to Eljudnir, I shall look back on the looks on their faces seeing my brother escape from his chains and relish their miseries. I, the Queen of the Spirits, Lady Death herself, have not had so much…so much *fun*, since before I ruled the land of the spirits. All other gods of death took a liking to mortal life or remained among their company, but I remained in exile, the armchair queen who rules without ever leaving her seat…it was misery. It was boredom. Perhaps I may tag along with your little group a while longer…the dead and

wrathful spirits are curious beings, but they aren't engaging company. Not like you and…the other one."

Moxy didn't have a mouth despite her chatty nature, but Hel could see that she was beaming and visibly tearing up hearing her story, before she wrapped her arms around Hel and spun her around. Hel almost reflexively opened her mouth to tell her to get off, but she found that she couldn't muster up the spite to say it.

"Ohhhh, Helly…that's so sweet…that means so much to me, I've been having so much fun with you too! Both me and Foxy!"

"R-Really now?"

"Yeah! She's a little bad with emotions, but I can tell she really cares about you! Of course, I'll still always be her fave, but who knows? Maybe you might be a close second!"

Against her better judgment, Hel blushed slightly blue.

However, a train ran right in front of them, and Moxy let go promptly to hover next to her as she focused her gaze on the train. Hel watched the train as well.

Once it passed, there was a figure on the other end.

It was a tall and gangly figure of androgynous build, a little over seven feet tall, wearing a complex outfit. It appeared to be an ochre suit jacket patterned with orange triangles worn over a blue-and-orange collared shirt, which in turn was worn over a bright magenta undershirt, all topped off with a beige bowtie decorated in orange veins. Bones—Hel couldn't say whether they were real or fake—were adhered to the back of their jacket: two on each of their upper arms and one at the small of their back. For pants, they wore green bell-bottomed jodhpurs with the cuffs patterned with blue hamsa symbols, red circles, purple bones, and yellow spirals, and squiggly pointy-toed purple shoes went with it. Atop their head sat a green brimmed desert hat with a sand-colored neck cover-cloth, an "MU" monogram on the front as an emblem.

However, their clothes were the least among the things Hel noticed about them. They were not human, but they were much less surreal than she had anticipated: their face was canid in nature with a pointed snout, a mouth full of sharp teeth, thin eyes with constricted pupils and deep bags underneath them, and their body covered in what appears to be light brown fur. Yet, their canid appearance was only surface-level. They had no nose, their fur did not appear soft and had no pattern apart from resembling a wooden door, and rather than ears, they had two cone-shaped flaps of flesh that curved downwards like ram's horns. 'Hair' consisting of a mass of writhing black-and-orange-striped snakes wriggled around behind their head, as did a single large one that acted as a tail. Their hands were humanoid, but their fingers were large and angular, exaggerated as though they were little more than a drawing.

Hel couldn't quite focus her eyes on them, however. The edges of their being sparked and crackled, the colors that made up their body bleeding into one another and changing like a lava lamp. The leader stood with their back facing the two of them, leaning on their cane—a large stick with a smiley face on the top.

They opened their mouth, taking the brim of their hat, and began to sing in a creaky and mirthful tone, slightly echoed as though many versions of him were speaking at once.

"saaaay BOYS and GIRLS, dont you wanna haaaave fun? why bother too walk when yood, rather run?"

He spun his cane and turned around.

"WHYYYY bother with boo-oooks when youve"

Tap.

"gott a Gun…"

He spread his arms with a too-wide smile.

"come flyyy with me, riiIIGHT INTO THE SUUUU AAU UH UAU AU UUUUUNNN"

Breaking out into unhinged giggles, which turned into cackles, which turned into an intermittent screaming fit as the corners of his mouth stretched far beyond his eyes and curled at their corners, he crossed his arms around his midsection and stomped one foot on the ground a couple times, before the noise suddenly stopped and he threw his cane away into the bushes. He clapped once, twice, putting his large hands out with a smile.

"Hello Hello every-body every lord and lady and lordladies and Germs, put yuor flajella toogether for ME and YOU and THE DEVIL WATCHING US, greetings young lady."

The odd man twirled once in a circle, stopped, fell forward with the stiffness of a board, and went into a somersault that ended in him launching up to come face-to-face with Hel—or rather, face-to-snout. His twinkling magenta eyes peered directly into her own, and his smile visibly curled a bit wider.

"Soooo. you are the wee lassie Moxey and Foxey dragged cat-the —that the cat dragged back in hello. Welcome To My Twisted Mind, land of all the right wrongs and home of those with all the wrong rights where the trains always run on time and hatred. Furbish my with the title of your pers personage pwetty pweaaase?"

Hel was stunned into silence, staring up at him with a deeply uncomfortable expression, her face pursed into a terse straight line. She glanced to Moxy, and in an instant, he was standing next to the agent with both hands on her shoulders.

"moxy…shes not playing with meee. rude. rude rude very very rude of the ice queen to not let her snow prince in who is she who is she WHATS THE NAME OF OUR DEAR CONTESTANT TODAY JERRY???"

She gestured to Hel.

"This is Hel! She's the Norse queen of Helheim, the underworld, as well as Queen of the Spirits! She's the one that helped us get Gleipnir!"

He put a hand up to his face and yawned wide enough that it seemed like he was going to turn himself inside-out. Hel could swear she saw eyes in the back of his throat.

"yawn a rooney ill belieb it when i see it baby"

In a slick motion, Moxy clapped her hands and produced the shimmering length of Gleipnir. When he laid eyes upon it, the leader fell to the ground like a ragdoll with a small cry of excitement before rising once more like a puppet on a string. Shuddering and shaking like he was full of explosives, he slowly reached out to Gleipnir and took it, sniffing it loudly and putting one end in his mouth before letting out another cackle as his tail thrashed wildly behind him.

"YES YES YOU DID IT YES ITS REAL ITS REAL AHAAA ah ah i need i need to show molleyyy…molly would lov ethos moxy hell you did a fine job. Hell. hell hel hell you know mollys there right now…i hope he brings back some hel nuts……"

He tossed Gleipnir over his shoulder, a bird with an arrow through its head swooping down and plucking it out of the air to take to parts unknown, and rested an elbow on Moxy's head as he faced Hel. He tapped his teeth as his eyes rolled separately in their sockets, but said nothing. Hel was the one that spoke up instead.

"...Ahem. Well. A-As…Moxy introduced me, I am Hel. It is an honor to meet you. To whom do I have the…pleasure…of speaking?"

"ILL TELL YA WHO"

In a flash, he popped up behind Hel and spooked her with a small 'boo!', causing her to whip around with a hand to her chest.

"im the son of rage and love, a lover a joker a hitter a stoker, the antediluvian prophet and the nonhead nonking of chaos. saint christie was my mother and reprebus was my daddy and they unmade love with one another to form a wondrous little bundle of hatred which was MEEEE"

He grabbed the back of her head, jamming her face to his as their eyes came only a few centimeters apart.

"if a charmed life we lead, cave canem and cave societatem, call me the dog-faced man until we thumb our nose at you-know-who for the first and final time"

"...V…Very nice to meet you…Dog-Faced Man…"

The Dog-Faced Man harshly patted her on the back and began to walk away, leading a stiff and thoroughly unsettled Hel back down the path.

"welcome to HELL, scumbag! come come i can i can i will show you many things you can see uh "

Moxy watched them go and raised a hand.

"...Um, leader? Can I come t—"

Cutting her off, he raised a hand without even looking at her. Then his head swiveled independently of his body, and he stared down at her with a condescending look as he harshly whispered—or, at least, what he thought was whispering. He was just speaking more higher-pitched than usual.

"(moxy. let me tell you. a thing. ver ee very mundo importante suelo. The cats out of the bag but it hasnt caught the early bird with the worm yet. go to the pain surgeons go to the modern primitives go to the fbi the cia the epa upa pf chang WHOEVER. give em hell. you hear me? this is an Important. Give Em Hell. you hear me. Give Em Hell. GEH. Geh! Geh geh geh heehee)"

His ‘message’ devolved into sharp biting sounds and was capped by a giggle as he continued to lead Hel away, leaving his loyal agent alone.

Moxy watched the two of them go, and a train rolled behind her. She raised a hand and started to speak, then looked over her shoulder, then around herself. Then, ultimately, she lowered her head and sighed before floating off to parts unknown.

~

Hel’s internal monologue was little more than confusion and fear for as long as she was around The Dog-Faced Man. His entire existence was an utter mystery to her. His mannerisms, his speech patterns, his biology, how he seemed to be wearing something different and looking slightly different every time she looked away and looked back at him (he was dressed in some odd mix of combat gear and a wedding dress now), it was unlike anything she’d ever seen before…though, considering where she was, she couldn’t say that was much of a surprise. Still, for someone who had only ever communicated with those in her own pantheon before today, she felt less like a fish out of water and more like a fish in marmalade. The constant rumbling of trains going by didn't help her thought processes—how did these people get anything done with this incessant racket?

They made more turns than she could properly count, went in a couple circles, and at one point she swore they got turned around somehow without her ever noticing, but The Dog-Faced Man prattled along happily as they went, bobbing his head and occasionally lapsing into manic giggling. He gestured to a flock of flying rainbow fish that passed them by, traveling in a pocket of water in the shape of a six-limbed mammal.

“there oh there the flipper-flish coalesce in such grandrous and wondermost arcs of rainbow tetrakarn and from our hearts their little candy gills sing in such bliss full jubilee, the ground beneath our feet aching with the sense of binacholy and vanderlust as ve are but eine in multus and the many will be one”

The Dog-Faced Man nipped at the water and skewered a rainbow fish in his jaws, cocking his head to the sky and messily gulping the fish whole like some sort of waterfowl as iridescent blood seeped down his neck and stained his Kevlar bridal gown. She was reminded of the last time Nidhoggr got a decent meal: a Heathenist serial killer who ate his victims. He kept the girl fed for at least three days. They went down a flight of stairs suspended by wire behind a door frame that hung sideways in the air, an indistinct red shape wisping past them.

“and that great quill quiet still night of of the red death, god of hatred and torment and friend to all who are thrown aside and are no more than garbage without a a a a name, refused refuse and sandbagged trashcans with tracheotomies and tolstoy tongues, the crimson misfit of death and death again, why so quiet my love? is existence too much for you ? ?”

Hel remained quiet and watched the red shape (which she could swear glared at her and gave a grim smile) go, taking tacit chagrin at being called ‘my love’ and wondering silently to herself about how he knew the names of all these strange things. She would have asked why, but she

somehow knew she wouldn't understand the answer anyways. When she noticed that they had stopped moving, she added to the one-sided conversation with the most burning question on her mind.

"Moxy said that some of your 'agents' here are…*were* once human. Yet, these—if you'll pardon the term—freakish monstrosities, most of them don't resemble humans in the slightest.

His head swiveled to look down at her with a giddy smile.

"Ooooo i TOLD HER not to let her pretty little mouth spit when she shuld swallooooow but thats just the weight of the world i suppose. . . . . yes, yes, yes, but no. some are not human. some are the world. sum are the hateful ghosts of life, some are thee mixed colors and lost phosphenes, some are because they are and GOD DAMN IT does there need to be another reason? we only grow the most BOUNTIFUL crops heer, look, look an dsee the parlor of miracles"

Her loopy cult-leader tour guide marched in a goose-step for a few paces, made an odd devil-horns and middle-fingered salute, and bowed deeply as he pointed to a large structure a few paces ahead of them.

A structure was the best way to explain it without ending up having to cross your eyes, as it was nothing more than the wireframe of a mansion. It had to be just as large, if not larger, than Hel's own castle. In fact, it was closer to the size of Valhalla. Yet, if Valhalla was as gruesome as this, then Odin would be much more feared: where there were supposed to be walls, great stretches of skin have been extended out to their very limits. Vibrant black-shadowed tattoos covered the expanses, but the veins of the flesh still shone like a cobalt interstate across the building. Hel, used to seeing dead bodies and gore all her life, felt her stomach turn a bit.

"Is that all…human skin?"

"ahe hee hoo, only some of it. courtesy of the skin fisher, collector of the shed and wondrous enthusiast of all things cute-aneous. they donate it to upholster the Parlor of Miracles. this ohhh this is where the MAGIC happens "

"Where…the magic happens? And what about that small building next to it?"

Beside the Parlor of Miracles, barely visible as it was hidden behind razor-blade trees, there was a small building resembling something you would see at an old county fair, its entrance cloaked by red curtains and small light bulbs lining the door. A sign hanging above it read 'TEN CENTS'.

He suddenly jumped up in front of her and waved his arms wildly.

"AH AH AH yes the Magick but thats later thats laaaater my dear gumdrop, lets go see the fair. lets not go to the fair would you like to see the worlds trayshur? come come come along now come away from the Humdrum, we will go to a place that is safe from , "

The cult leader trailed off, his smile frozen on his face as his pupils constructed, before suddenly grabbing Hel by the wrist and dragging her off in the opposite direction. She protested and swore loudly, even using her powers to form a knife from ice and stab at his hand, but it didn't seem to do anything. Against her better judgment, she was dragged along. A train chugged along past them.

~

Foxy Shazam stood leaning on the side of a lamppost near the ‘stables’ where the Munich Mannequins and the Graveyard Architect had dragged Fenrir. Much like everything else in the Broken Tracks, it was less of a stable and more like a massive color-puzzle cube that hovered in the air, constantly turning and shifting to show the various creatures and steeds within its keep. It shone with a pale blue glow, and after the lamppost she was leaning on got up and walked away, she brushed off her shoulders and approached it.

Stepping forward, she put both hands up, her smile fading as she concentrated. The stable stopped its undulations, preparing to be manipulated, to be solved in order for her to see the wolf that had been checked in.

She reached into her jacket and pulled out a turkey-and-swiss sub, tossing it from hand to hand before launching it up at the stables like a football. Once it hit the cube, it messily splattered against the wall, and its constituent ingredients unceremoniously fell to the floor. Still, it worked, and a glittering glass staircase faded into view.

Foxy marched along it and entered the odd stable, ducking through a few winding corridors and bypassing at least one dance battle-focused security system before coming to a large and lavishly-decorated room. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, the mahogany floor was covered in a plush red carpet, and candelabras dotted the various ottomans inside. There were no chairs or tables. Only ottomans with candelabras on them. There was, however, a small window on the same wall as the door she entered through that allowed her to look down on the people. In the center, Fenrir laid with his chin resting on his front paws, eyes firmly trained on the carpet.

He only looked up briefly when she entered, though she caught his attention when she pushed one of the candelabras over and sat on a nearby ottoman.

“Hey.”

“...Hello.”

“You feelin’ alright, Fen?”

“Hmph. I cannot say I appreciate the nickname, but…yes, I suppose I’m feeling somewhat better. This room is surprisingly well-air-conditioned, though it doesn’t hold a candle to the breezes of Lake Amsvartnir.”

“That’s because the breath of disgruntled stable workers powers this place. The Un-Stable.”

He groaned.

“I should have known. Nothing makes the slightest bit of sense here. It’s all just nonsense. You know, I tried looking out that window a while ago? It gave me a migraine. Me! The wolf the size of a mountain, destined to devour Odin himself at Ragnarok…my, speaking of, I do wonder how they’re getting along. I’m glad that my dear sister rescued me, but I feel like her plan was…somewhat half-baked.”

“How so?”

“What do you mean ‘how so’, do you not…oh. Right, you aren’t from the Nine Realms. Well, during the apocalypse—that’s that whole ‘Ragnarok’ business—I’m supposed to swallow

Odin. Then his son, the silent god Vidarr, will rip me apart by the jaws as vengeance. From what I've heard from the Aesir who come to chatter amongst themselves near me as though I were some kind of monument, he's been working on one hell of a shoe to stick in my mouth."

"Metal."

"I think it's a bit overkill, really. Any old shoe will do, he doesn't need to collect the cobbler scraps from Midgard to make one *really* sturdy shoe. Either way, I'd be dead at the end of it, and she would be too from the ensuing war. So, what use is bringing about the whole thing? I think she just wanted an excuse to sneak out of Helheim, honestly. She's almost like a moody teenager sometimes."

Foxy pulled a knee to her chest and looked out towards the window.

"...What happens if you don't, though?"

"Pardon?"

"If you don't eat Odin. What then?"

The wolf stared at her like she had asked him why he doesn't just turn himself inside-out to stay dry from the rain, and then raised his snout condescendingly.

"...Now that really is just foolish. You see, it's prophecy. We all know it'll happen, a seer told the whole thing to Odin. It's the future. Anything I do to change it, it'll just end up the same, you know? I think it's called 'determinism' or something along those lines in Midgard."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I *don't*, but I don't need to. It will happen."

"And if it doesn't?"

He growled.

"Then I suppose I'll go off and have a nice picnic in Lapland with Saint Nicholas then, won't I? Really, you ask a lot of questions for someone from someplace like this. Frankly, you and the other one—"

"Moxy Fruvous."

"Yes, whatever, you and her act more normal than most of these other loonies. I can understand a bit of German, mostly Old High German, and those mannequins were just babbling about sulfur and baby laces, nothing that *made sense.* You and her though, you speak in full sentences. You ask questions. You feel emotions, even if your body is inhuman, your mind is still…"

As he spoke, Foxy's smile faded once more, and she turned her head further away until she was facing the opposite direction. Fenrir rose and looked down at her with a thoughtful glint in his eye.

"...You aren't like the rest of those things, aren't you?"

She didn't respond. After he was convinced he wouldn't get a reply, Fenrir lowered his head back down onto his paws.

"Well, regardless. I hope Hel is getting along well. She always had a higher tolerance for nonsense than I did. She rants and raves and curls her nose, I just up and faint. Tyr always hated that—"

“I was human, once.”

One of his ears perked up.

“We both were.”

She crossed her arms, white-gloved hands on her leather-clad shoulders as Foxy’s tone shifted from her usually laid-back and deadpan attitude to one of somber recollection. Fenrir softened his own voice in response.

“What were you two? Sisters? Lovers? Best friends?”

“Don’t remember. Can’t say. But we were human. We were thrown out onto the street. Never were wanted by our folks. I was a delinquent. She was a handful. Went from door to door trying to get some food and some shelter. Never got much of either. Cold nights. Shuddering in alleyways hoping that the blood we coughed up didn't freeze in our throats. But we had each other. We had each other, right? Then it was okay. It would always be okay as long as we had each other. She’d tell jokes to cheer me up. I’d stand up for her. We were two halves of a whole.”

Her voice cracked.

“But it wasn’t okay. We were dying. We needed help. But nobody would give it to us. They all just turned away. Never gave us a second look. ‘Freeloaders’. ‘Bums’. ‘Crazies’. It was the middle of winter. We were trying to sleep through our twelfth night on a stomach filled with nothing but puddle water. I woke up. I shook her. She wasn’t moving. I wasn’t moving. Then…”

Foxy sniffed and turned back to face him. She was smiling, but it was more bitter than anything else.

“...Then he came. And he told us he would help us. They didn't help us because they thought they were better than us. Because other people would help us instead. Because we were lesser. And he wanted to make a world where there was no lesser and there was no greater. Where everyone could get the help they needed, the help they wanted, even if they didn't need it. Where there were no social rules, no difference of status, no gaps in wealth, no stigmas and no hatred. He promised us we would be happier with him, in return for us helping him bring his world to form.”

There was a long gap where the two of them were silent, refusing to face one another. Finally, after a few minutes had passed, Fenrir spoke.

“Then…are you happy?”

She didn't respond, her smile frozen on her face.

Commotion outside broke the tense air. Fenrir’s ears perked up and he turned to face the window. It sounded like some sort of eastern woodwind instrument, piercing and trilling like the mating call of an exotic bird. He groaned.

“Ugh, what’s this racket now? Is your odd little country club hosting some sort of concert too? It was bad enough dealing with Bragi’s noisome melodies…”

Foxy’s grin immediately dissipated as she raised her head, listening intently to the sound.

“That’s…”

She immediately leapt up from her seat, stumbling towards the window and knocking over a couple of ottomans in the process as she stared out of the pane out into the landscape below. The wolf plodded after her, lowering his head to peer a single eye through it as well.

Visible standing on the checkerboard ground below were three figures. Two of them, standing next to one another, were dressed in the style of the Spanish renaissance—breeches, leggings, puffed shoulders, and flat caps with feathers sticking out—but had heads that were little more than crude profiles of the human head carved from stone. Their simple mouths, wedges cut from the stone into permanent gapes, hung open as beady orange eyes gaze off into nothingness. One appeared to be playing a long and curled horn of some kind, while the other held a spear and spoke to—

"Moxy…"

Fenrir's ears flattened.

"Moxy? Isn't she supposed to be with my sister? What's she doing talking with…with…who are those two?"

"The Pipers at the Gates of Dawn."

"That explains the instrument."

Foxy trembled, her hands quivering in front of her as if she were going to lunge for their throats.

"...The Pipers at the Gates of Dawn only blow their horn when there's to be a new showcase."

"What's that mean?"

"It means your sister's in danger."

Moxy gestured with her hands, the Piper she was talking to nodding as she did, before she glanced up and noticed the two of them. She paused, looked around in a panic for someplace to hide, and then zipped away in the opposite direction. Her partner in the stable swallowed dryly and grabbed Fenrir by the ear, dragging him to the door she had entered through with a tense and mechanical stride.

"We're going. Now."

"Argh—would you *let go* of my ear? A simple 'please come along' would have been sufficient. But, why is my sister in danger, exactly? What is a showcase?"

She kicked open the door, letting go of Fenrir as she ran down the steps, hopping over a passing train.

"I'll explain on the way. Just hurry. If we're too late, you might not have a sister anymore."

~

The Dog-Faced Man clapped his hands once, wiggled his fingers, and gestured proudly.

"AND now LADEEZ AND GENTEELMEN, the moment youll have all been waiting for, the proud and glad incredible vault of our discontent, the fruits of our labor days and weekends, this is , uh "

He turned around, and Hel watched with her arms crossed.

The two of them had traveled for a bit longer, and they had since passed into a section of the Broken Tracks that she had seen when they first entered, only an hour or so ago despite it having felt like years. This area much more resembled a human settlement, relatively normal-looking houses lining a relatively normal-looking street. However, even here, it was clear that it was still the product of a broken mind: the doors and walls were all angular, obtuse and acute corners adorning the walls with skewed perspective, and roads that zig-zagged and rolled over the landscape. The shadows were not a result of any extant light source, painted onto the walls and floors. They had even at one point passed a young man in a bowler hat with an apple in front of his face bent down onto the sidewalk, painting a new shadow.

Most prominently, the neighborhood was entirely monochrome, in stark black and white, and Hel and The Dog-Faced Man's appearances changed to fit it. The Dog-Faced Man had even picked up a smart-looking suit that nonetheless looked jagged and oversized on him. She almost felt a bit of visual deprivation looking around at the place after enduring the onslaught of nonsense and color that she had spent the rest of her sojourn here mired in. At least this section was quieter. There were still freaks and agents abound, but not nearly as many.

They tramped along the expressionist walkways for a short while, until The Dog-Faced Man had stopped her and proudly gestured to a building nearby.

She wanted desperately to call it a building, but it was another massive head. It was human in structure but not in material, being constructed of a shiny metal that Hel likened to steel and with eyes whose artificial pupils were constricted to pinpricks. A ridge ran up the middle of its scalp from the bridge of its nose, a similar ridge went from ear to ear, and from where its neck ended, wires connecting to its base sprawled out and secreted themselves between buildings, in alleys, and underneath shadows.

In front of it stood three burly figures, all in pure white: one with the head of a cow, another with the head of a monkey, and the last with a teapot perched atop their neck. They stood beside one another with their arms crossed like protective spirits, not moving even when The Dog-Faced Man made his grand gesture. The leader dropped his arms limp at his sides, trudged over to the three of them, and pulled the cow-headed one by the ear.

"(what was that. what was that do you realize what you just did ning, you made me look like an IDIOT in front of our NEW GUEST do you have any last words before captain marvel zaps you right between teh eyes, moolissa?)"

The figure, Ning, made a sound like a bell being struck, 'bong', as his exalted one hissed and tittered under his breath with a pained grin.

"(you see me?? you see me right here you see me feel me know me AND YET you and nang and nong dont move. you dont move. do you know what i do to p e o p u l l i k e youuuu ?)"

He patted Ning on the back, making a thumbs-up as he stepped aside. Ning let out a sigh of relief, visibly relieved by the change in attitude, as Nang (the monkey) and Nong (the teapot) watched from their own posts.

"You get a PROMOSHUUUN! Extra Time Off And Fifty Percent Off Your Monthly Gift Cards, pat on the back for you broheim. now if you would kindly. Grant our new friend hre the Free Show, just one quick widdol peek for the liddol lady"

"...Ahem."

The Dog-Faced Man practically fell over hearing Hel speak once more, stumbling forwards and facing her upside-down.

"YES MI LA DEE"

"...Yes. What do you mean by 'free show'? I assume this head is some kind of vault, judging from how you referred to it, but a vault for what?"

He turned his body independently of his head and stepped back, raising a hand to the robotic head.

"ahhh, yes, yes…well, lil missy, we got all kinds of swanky jank and swunky junk doon here. cant make an ohmlet without breaking a few skulls and you cant fold the universe like a five-dimensional ori gummy work of heart without sufficient power. we gather we collect we amass, and we will be the ones who use it to bring about the new world and open the door"

The eyes of the head rolled backwards, revealing the constricted pupils to only be part of a sheet that covers two windows. From her vantage point on the ground, however, she couldn't quite meet the two-story visage's gaze. Nang made a small whooping sound and Nong gibbered unintelligibly as the leader beamed at her from a deep bow.

"come and see our life's work, hel"

She shuddered slightly at his words. Hel had remained quiet for much of their journey because, for the most part, she had no idea what to say or to ask. Occasionally, she would inquire about the nature of some of the agents, but her capricious tour guide refused to elaborate beyond vague riddles and allusions. Once, she questioned the origins of the massive golems whose bodies were patterned in stamps and newsprint, the Dead Letter Gendarmerie, and only got 'they are the angry souls of those who opened the sacred tomes of days and worlds since past, imbued with the man of the crossroads' blessing' as an answer. She couldn't make any sense of it, and after a certain point, she had stopped asking and just taken the time to observe the world as it was.

Despite the cult's—and she did indeed consider this place the home of a cult—insistence of bringing about a world of complete chaos and a lack of social hierarchy and the Broken Tracks' own surreal inhabitants and locales, it followed an internal logic. All the beings she saw spoke with each other as equals despite each holding certain jobs, and though they venerated their master, they spoke with him as if they were equals. Some were completely devoid of coherent thought, others were startlingly human in their nature. Hel wondered how much of their original consciousness remained, and what process they underwent in order to become such strange creatures.

The ice queen thought back to her interactions with spirits: all mortal beings had a soul. That was a solid fact, and though she knew little of modern mortal life and was confined to remote interaction via liaisons in her castle due to her exile, she remembered long ago when many still

worshiped the Norse gods. Criminals, thieves, killers, and all other manners of unsavory people would end up in her court to either wander in turmoil or act as food for Nidhoggr. Each only remembered shades of their mortal life, wisping currents of thought and memory that would occasionally cause an event to bubble to the surface of their consciousness, but the knowledge of how they died would always be firm in their mind. The experience of death leaves an imprint on the soul that can never be erased, even if it can be forgotten. It was for this reason that resurrection was so frowned upon in the mortal world: making someone who has died once experience the full knowledge of what it felt like and know that they will feel it again is one of the worst cruelties imaginable. Even she only moved the corpses, she did not breathe life into them once more—she lacked that power.

Were these spirits placed inside artificial bodies? Were they human and were transfigured by some arcane process? Could he have just been lying? He did say that only some of them were humans. Did that mean that some are not and were not ever living in the first place? Or only that some of them were not human? As she looked down upon Ning, Nang, and Nong, she assumed that they were certainly not once living creatures. Especially not that one with the teapot for a head.

She made a staircase of ice and scaled it silently, peering into one of the eye windows. The second she laid eyes on the glittering trove within, she felt a sudden jolt to her whole body that caused her to grip onto the corners of the eye for support. It was comparable to standing in front of a wind tunnel, though it was something beyond her body being thrashed by the sheer magical force that emanated out from inside the head.

Inside of this vault was a collection of magical items and relics so incredibly abundant, representing such a potent stockpile of power—divine and demonic, fae and beastly, magical and cursed—that she instantly understood their comments about wanting to cause the universe to fold in on itself. Managing to wrench an eye open, she saw vast swaths of items: gemstones and helmets, a stretch of golden fleece and a flaming sword, the caduceus and the nehushtan, thunderbolts and a swirling headband, vials of divine blood, a rack of angel's halos…they were scattered among the inside, and though she couldn't make out quite how large the space was, it was impossible to see the bottom through the collection. It astounded her that a collection of magical items this massive wasn't already causing side-effects…though, when she turned around to look around where she was, she figured that they wouldn't have noticed if there *were* any.

Hel lowered herself to the ground and looked to The Dog-Faced Man, who was giddy as a child as he put his hands over his mouth and stifled amused giggling.

"How…how did you amass all that?"

"we have eyes and ears everywhere, little by little, bit by bit we take the things and we take them frome everywhere, not just where you are and where your souls are, not just in the nine realms and in the seven heavens, we send them everywhere everywhere ev e r y w eh er er and nobody ever notices. nobody ever misses them.n obody knows where we are and nobody will know when we lite the fuse"

She felt a cold pit in her stomach.

"...And, how long did it take you to…?"

He cackled, throwing his head back as his bloodshot eyes bulged.

"HOW LONG DO YOU THINK IT TAKES ANTS TO DEMOLISH A BUILDING"

Hel took two steps behind her, putting her hands up as another train rumbled past.

"You're insane. I mean, I knew you were beforehand, but you really are completely…I mean, honestly, what would you have to gain from doing all this? You say you want a world without rules and without borders, without social hierarchy, but if you keep doing all this, you're just going to destroy the whole damned thing! You can't live happily in a destroyed world!"

"maybe you cant. but i can. and i will. and youre going to help me."

She kept stepping backwards, and The Dog-Faced Man responded to each step backwards with two steps forward on his part, until they were walking at the same pace.

"remember when i said not all my agents were human? good times. good gud times those were. some of them are ghosts. some are eger—eg-erge- l living manifestations of thoughts and fears. but many are human. and we make them. o h oh we make them but i always wondered how powerful we could be if we made a god "

"Get away from me, you maniac."

"only the first date and were already doing pet names??? i HATE pet names."

Fed up, Hel raised both her hands and put the heels of her wrists together, firing a deluge of ice at the deranged cult leader. When the blizzard dissipated, the frozen bodies of Ning, Nang, and Nong were stuck to the outer wall of the Steel Trap, but the target himself was nowhere to be seen. She felt a hot breath on the side of her neck as she stood, heart pounding out of her chest.

"dont look now darling theres one too many in this room and i think its you"

A swath of bony tattoo-covered hands three inches across each wrapped themselves around Hel's arms, pulling them behind her back and binding her wrists to one another with some sort of rope that burnt her skin when it touched her. She let out a groan of pain and attempted to kick behind her, but she couldn't come into contact with anything.

Looking behind her, she saw towering beings that were grotesque mockeries of human beings—their emotionless eyes bulged out of too-small sockets, and their bald heads adorned with subcutaneous spikes and horns clung to the contours of their brain. They lacked noses and mouths, their long ears hanging down to the floor with gauges the size of manhole covers making great holes in their earlobes. They were chinless, their heads tapering to a thin and veiny neck that went to a floating body covered in a large and bloody rag of gauze that covered their torso like a starving child in a burlap sack. Eight bony arms, four on each side, grasped at her wrists and forearms curiously. Every square inch of their visible body was covered with dull and saturated tattoo designs, and their skin was stretched taut by piercings and studs that lined them like studs on a tank.

Hel struggled against their grips, but the more she fought, the more the rope around her wrists burnt. Reluctantly, scowling, she was directed away from the Steel Trap with her head down as the beings behind her bubbled and murmured among each other.

Then, there was a voice.

“I’m sorry…”

“Moxy?”

She turned to face the voice, and there was Moxy, hovering beside her with a pained and guilty expression on her face. Her arms hung listlessly at her sides, and her normally exuberant voice was as timid and fearful as a scolded child’s.

“I-I didn't want to do this…I didn't, I really really didn't, please believe me, Helly…but, he asked me to, and…”

The Dog-Faced Man marched over and grabbed one end of her head, picking her up and shaking her like a doll.

“and Everyone Knows Da Rules and what happens when they dont do what i saaaay~ really moxey you are Such a gud agent you led a god a GOD A GODDASS right to our doorstep. you make things so easy for me,,,ill have to buy you some iced cream later :) our new world disorder is made possible by girlies like you. Thenk You.”

He let her go and pat her on the head proudly, but she kept her eyes firmly locked on Hel. Hel herself was in disbelief as she was led away, stumbling over her own feet, and only found it in her to speak just before another train passed by.

“Will this ‘new world disorder’ be worth this, Moxy? Following a deranged lunatic who will likely end up destroying it rather than making it any better? Will you and your partner even live to see it?”

Moxy remained silent, hanging her head.

The Dog-Faced Man called after her before disappearing from view.

“have you ever gotten a tattoo? if not dont worry the modern primitives will make sure you wont feel a thing once its over”

The Modern Primitives muttered between one another as they dragged Hel to the Parlor of Miracles.

CHAPTER 15: Shuten-douji

The Prince of Fuck All, Rodion, and the wandering monk Samayou's journey through the Nasu mountains wasn't an especially long one, but it was a decent challenge, as one would imagine walking pathless through the mountains would be. The Prince forged ahead utterly undaunted by the uneven terrain, however—save for the occasional complaint about a broken nail, he stepped along rocks patterned in rushing ice-cold brooks like a game of hopscotch. Rodi, somewhat annoyed that he didn't seem to notice that his companion was much less athletic and svelte than he was, awkwardly lumbered down cascading rock steps beside waterfalls, pushed snow-covered branches out of the way, and was helped by Samayou over steep cliff sides that The Prince clambered up without issue. Samayou themself had less trouble than even their red-haired acquaintance, knowing the area like the back of their hand.

Said red-haired acquaintance whistled and waved behind him without turning around.

"Not too much longer, boys! I can see we're approaching a clearing!"

Rodion, however, had attempted to pass the time between catching breaths to ask a litany of questions to their silent companion. Knowing now that the monk had taken a vow of silence for one reason or another, he restricted himself to yes-or-no questions. It was admittedly a little silly, he felt, but it was the best way to go about it.

"Mae seemed to recognize you. Are you two friends?"

They shook their head vehemently.

"Figures. You are enemies, then?"

Samayou thought for a moment, pushing through a bush, and then shook their head.

"Not enemies…"

They put up a finger.

"Not enemies…yet?"

They shook their head, held their wrist with their other hand, and rotated a pointed talon backwards.

"...Spinning, backwards, hands…oh! You were enemies in past?"

Samayou put their arms over their head in an 'O' shape. Rodion laughed, a wheeze underlining it, and sidestepped along a rock wall with The Prince.

"Then, how old are you? She was alive in eleventh century, after all."

The monk lowered their head as they sidled along.

"Ah, right—yes or no only…er, are you older than World War 2?"

They nodded.

"Older than one-thousand years?"

They nodded again.

"Two-thousand?"

They started to nod, stopped, and then shook their head. The Prince groaned and looked back at the two of them, still walking backwards with his arms crossed.

“Ugh, are you two done playing Charades yet? I can’t stand hearing such a one-sided conversation…unless of course, it’s me being the one side.”

“You are not curious about who Samayou is?”

“I’m not curious about a lot of things, Didi darling, it’s a survival technique. ‘Curiosity killed the cat’, you know?”

“True, but full saying is, ‘Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back’. The new knowledge gained and quelling of restless mind outweighs potential risk. Besides, they helped us back at stone, remember?”

The Prince rolled his eyes and scoffed.

“Of *course* I remember, love, I was there and I’ve got eyes and ears just like everyone else on this planet. Really though, it isn’t so impressive—Delirium Tremen are just jobbers, after all. Fodder! You could have killed them.”

“You said one touch could cause me to shake for rest of day.”

“Did I? Well, you should know by now, I say a lot of things.”

Rodion huffed through his nose, frowning as he gestured to the monk.

“At least show some gratitude. You could have taken care of it, but you did not, and they did. Even with Sunshine Supermen at Natural History Museum, all you did was slow them down—it was Cumhaill that saved Morganwg.”

The Prince opened his mouth to speak, tripped over a rock in his geta sandals, and nearly tumbled over backwards before turning back around and muttering swears under his breath before raising a finger.

“Well, we’re on a schedule. Given the chance, I could easily dispatch any of them. You remember how I took care of the Dead Letter Gendarmerie way back when, love?”

“That was two days ago, but yes, I do remember. In fact, I remember you more sending them back where they came from rather than killing them…”

He was silent at that, crossing his arms once again as he looked quietly onwards. Samayou gently tugged on Rodion’s jacket, tilting their head quizzically, and he just sighed and a shrug.

“(He is always like this. Arrogant, confrontational, a liar.)”

Samayou nodded knowingly. The two of them were suddenly shushed, and The Prince doubled back a few steps before ushering Rodion and Samayou behind a thick section of underbrush as he himself slid next to a tree and peered around at the clearing they came to.

It was a wide-open space with a waterfall running next to it that ran into a small pond—frozen over from the winter chill—and in the middle of it all was a scuzzy-looking pop-up bar seemingly designed to resemble the architecture of the Heian period. The roof was of a thatched wood pattern, sloping upwards and connected by a metal rod at the top, and the walls were visibly made of little more than paper and wood. The inside and outside were both lit by paper lanterns, revealing a smorgasbord of monstrous silhouettes within its four

walls. A wooden porch connected to steps stood outside, and above the awning that kept the snow off the porch was a red-and-white neon sign reading '水飲み場 の 猩々[22]'.

Standing outside the door was a beastly creature, Rodion's height but built more for muscle than for bulk. It was dressed from its shoulders down in a straw cloak that caught whatever snow fell upon it along with two-toed socks, and its bright cerulean face was twisted into a permanent expression of rage and intimidation, long yellow tusks jutting out past its bloodshot eyes as it stood like a guardian spirit outside of the bar. It had its hands on its hips, looking around the clearing with a fire in its eyes.

Rodion felt Samayou shuddering beside him, and placed a hand on their head to calm them as he whispered to The Prince.

"(Who or what is that?)"

"(I believe it's one of those *namahage* things. Wandering ogres that live in the mountains and only descend on New Year's Day to punish naughty children.)"

"(A-And, er, how do they punish children?)"

The Prince gestured his thumb towards the arm-sized machete holstered at the namahage's side.

"(How do you think, love?)"

Rodion grit his teeth, looking down at Samayou.

"(You wouldn't be able to blow him away like you did with Delirium Tremen, would you?)"

Samayou shook their head sadly, but The Prince gave a cocksure smile and dug into his coat as he gestured with a hand.

"(No need to worry, lads. I've got this more than under control! All we need's a distraction, yeah? Simple is as simple does! Watch, learn, and be amazed~)"

Pulling his coat-buried hand out, it was holding an odd contraption that was in the shape of an 'L', consisting of an angular metal rod, a hollow wooden block, and a wooden sphere. Sticking out from the block was a small crank. He began winding it up, and it played 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' in a laughably tinny manner. He glanced to the other two.

"(And you may want to cover your ears. I got this vibraslap doohickey from a garage sale, and the cove said it put his son's ears out. It was fifteen pounds though, so he must not have wanted it gone that badly.)"

Rodion plugged his ears, and Samayou made two extra holes in the reed hood to plug their ears as well. Once it would crank no longer, The Prince sniffed and threw it over his shoulder like a grenade. It arced high into the air, ticking ominously, before it landed in the snow a few

[22] Translates roughly to "Shoujou's Watering Hole". Shoujou are red-furred ape-like yokai known to hang around the rocky beaches of Japan, spending their days drinking, partying, and generally not having a care in the world. They are quite wise, however, and in modern times, they have made good use of their brewing skills to market their own international sake businesses. They are fully capable of imitating human speech, but are often too drunk to speak clearly, though nobody seems to notice at most executive meetings.

meters to the left with a light *pwoomph* sound. The namahage bouncer turned his head towards the motion, but didn't move. There was a tense moment of silence.

And then the sound started.

It was an ear-splitting rattle, an overexaggerated and screeching mockery of the typical southwestern-tinged sound that its ilk usually made that echoed through the mountains and knocked chunks of snow off of their perches as a flock of black birds were roused from their rest and flew through the white sky in a hazy cloud. The three of them immediately winced as the sound hit their eardrums, but The Prince's grit teeth were covered by a grin as he shouted and gestured with an elbow. His voice was faint beneath the din.

"Now! Now, hurry! Go go go!"

Following his instructions, Rodion and Samayou stumbled out from their hiding places and ran after The Prince. Their shoes and sandals crunched the snow beneath them as they sprinted as fast as their legs would allow, tunnel vision focusing in on the paper-and-wood doors to the bar. The Prince's kimono billowed out as cold wind rushed past them, and he reached out one hand to stretch it towards the doors as he yelled.

*"Almost there! Almost! Come o*n, come on, we're nea—"

Partway through, the noise had stopped. The Prince froze mid-sentence, the others running past him as he turned to look at where he had thrown the vibraslap.

The namahage bouncer was standing over it, staring down at the ground. He raised his foot, and broken splinters of wood and chunks of metal dropped from his soles. Then he turned to look at The Prince, the same horrid expression plastered on his face.

He looked back at the others.

"...You l—"

In an instant, The Prince was tackled to the ground with the namahage holding his machete close to The Prince's neck as he breathed a fog of wood-scented breath onto the red-haired man's face. He glanced up at the two others and shouted, swallowing and feeling the lump in his throat brush against the dull side of the blade.

"Get inside, you dolts!"

Rodion yelped and fiddled with the door for a few moments, Samayou helping him slide it open and hurriedly jumping up to slam it shut behind them.

~

Inside, the bar was the portrait of mirth and merriment as one would expect from a bar said to be frequented by an often-inebriated demon lord. The light was provided by paper lanterns dotted across the wood-board ceiling, and the pleasing odor of cooked meats and alcohol made Rodion's stomach growl. The floor was covered in tatami mats, and the number of occupants made clear why their silhouettes could be seen from outside. The place was completely packed.

To the left, seated on the floor and surrounding low tables piled high with empty bowls, glasses, and bottles, women with gills laughed with a hunched old man that was human save for

his single backwards leg, an odd being that lacked a head but had its face on its bare torso was in a shouting match with two short samurai: one made of pillows, the other of cutlery. To the right, seated at the bar, a humanoid dragon made out of dirty dish rags flirted with an odd being resembling a shrimp mixed with a horse and a tiger. Above it all, hairy birds with long necks perched in the rafters breathing in the animate fumes of a person-shaped cloud of smoke.

The building was filled with the cacophonous sounds of social interaction: laughing, crying, shouting, speaking, all accompanied by the clatter of cutlery against silver and the sound of pouring drinks. When Rodion and Samayou entered, the sounds quieted slightly for a heartbeat as some turned to look at them, but the majority returned to what they were doing without much thought. At least half of them were probably drunk out of their minds right now anyways.

Rodion looked around, in shock at all the amazing creatures he was faced with. He had met plenty of demons—and they were a varied sort, though the majority often took the forms of either humans or various animals—but there was a different air to this cabal of yokai. He supposed it was that exotic flair that came with being a stranger in a place familiar to others, but he soon noticed that Samayou was trembling, tapping the edges of their talons together as they looked over their shoulder. Protectively, he patted the monk on the head and spoke to him under the ruckus.

"Do not worry, Samayou. We will be fine, *da?* Anything happens, I protect you. You helped us, is only fair we do same for you."

They looked up at him and nodded, their trembling abating slightly. Rodion still looked over those who turned to look at them, however—primarily the older-looking sorts, and he remained silent as he walked over to the bar and leaned on the counter. Samayou clambered up onto a stool. A short ways away, cleaning a glass (as was the custom of all bartenders not currently serving drinks, no matter their origin or species), was a burly older man with close-cut black hair and a single bulging eye in the center of his face. Rodion raised a hand.

"Ah, excuse me?"

The cyclops turned to look at him, opened his mouth, looked him up and down, closed his mouth, and turned away once again. He looked to Samayou, who shook his head.

"They will not speak to humans, will they…?"

They nodded sadly.

"Damn. Then, I suppose we'll just have to find Shuten-douji ourselves…"

A few heads nearby perked up upon hearing the name of Shuten-douji, but none dared to raise their voice. However, Rodi did feel a slightly moist tapping on his shoulder, along with a rumbly vocalization that might have been an attempt to get his attention. He turned around and faced the dish-rag dragon, who gestured with a hand and spoke in a relaxed tone. The only words Rodion made out were 'gaijin' and 'Shuten-douji'. He was quiet for a moment, glancing at Samayou, before clearing his throat.

"Ahem…do you know where Shuten-douji is? We were told he frequents this bar."

To emphasize his point, he gestured with two fingers to imitate walking, and pointed with his thumbs to show he needed to go somewhere. The rag-dragon started to speak, but the bartender

tapped him on the shoulder and caught his attention. The two exchanged terse glances and a back-and-forth in Japanese that Rodion didn't understand a word of, before the rag dragon looked back at him with a more serious expression. He pointed behind Rodion at a door with a sign hanging on the front, reading ‘V.I.P.’ in block letters.

“Shuten-douji is in there?”

He nodded and whispered to the bartender, keeping an eye on Rodi as he did so. He felt out of the loop, especially considering his annoyance at getting weird looks and being left out of the loop the whole time he’s been in the country, but he nonetheless smiled and bowed his head a bit.

“Ah, thank you! I hope you have a good day, Mister Dishrag Dragon.”

The yokai just snorted and returned to his drink, a little more troubled than he was before they came up to him, and Rodion led Samayou over to the V.I.P. door. He knocked three times on it, the sound heavy against the thick wooden door, and a small window slid open. Beady yellow eyes stared down at him, and a sneering voice spoke.

“Pasuwado…ningen.”

The last word was spat out like poison.

Rodion blinked at the yellow eyes with his mouth hanging open. Of course they needed a password, how stupid was he? He stood in silence, and the slit eventually closed once more as he sighed. Then he felt a tugging on his jacket and looked down, seeing Samayou point to themself. Understanding what they wanted, he knocked once more before picking Samayou up and holding them up to the slit.

*“Pasuwado…*eh?”

Samayou leaned forward and cupped their talons around the holes in the front of their hood, whispering something into the slit. Rodion couldn’t even hope to hear it over the racket in the bar, but once they were finished, he heard a *click* from the other side of the door as he put the monk down. They shared a quick thumbs-up, and Rodion pushed his way through the door.

~

“Odoro ahou niii~”

The interior of the room, in stark contrast to the rather typical decoration of the bar on the outside, was much more infernal-themed than the rest: spikes adorned the black-painted wooden walls, as did long scrolls depicting great fights between beasts and monsters larger than mountains, and covering the back wall was a veritable barrier of white sake casks wrapped shut with rope, each with a different Japanese character on the front and a tap built into the front.

“Miru ahouuu~”

This place was much less crowded than the common area and lacked the same variety in customers: most of those who were in this room were beastly humanoids with tusks, horns, and skin in a plethora of colors spanning the entire rainbow. Most of their bodies were wrapped in tiger pelts, though some had on ripped jeans, cut-off shorts, solid-color t-shirts, or leather jackets.

Each and every one of them had to be at least seven feet tall, however, and the majority were quite powerfully-built. They were mostly men, but a few women were visible as well. They sat and stood around the room, laughing as they shared stories, arm-wrestling one another, and guzzling down sake from cups the size of manhole covers.

"Onaji ahou naraaa~"

The one who was most striking out of all the occupants, however, was seated at the very back of the room in front of a wide table. He was an oni with a deep red complexion and coarse skin patterned with bumps and splotches, long grey hair pulled back into nine distinct ponytails, and an equally grey spiky beard. Wild yellow eyes peered out from heavy brows and a prominent nose, and while he was clearly on the older side and had let himself go, forming a pot belly that was visible beneath his blue open-chested yukata, he still quite obviously had more than enough muscle to go around. Rodion wouldn't have been able to fit both hands around one of his biceps, and it wasn't just because he was at least ten feet tall.

Beside him, a younger green-skinned oni with the appearance of a narrow-faced and austere young man with long straight hair and the robes of a priest stood. He was missing his left arm, and surveyed the rest of the partygoers with a scrutinizing eye.

"Odorana son, sooon~?"[23]

Despite this stern companion, however, Shuten-douji himself didn't seem to be very high-strung at all: instead, he was chugging sake by the bottle with a mirthful grin that creased all the corners on his face, whooping and cheering on the dancer on the table in front of him, who sang in a delicate falsetto as they hunched over and waved their arms in an odd manner, slowly spinning in place as they gestured.

This dancer was…

"Prince!"

The Prince of Fuck All shot up straight and looked behind him, meeting Rodion's gaze as he hopped down off the low table with his arms outstretched.

"Heyyy, look who it is! Glad you could make it Rodi, did the locals give you too much trouble? You know they aren't a fan of humans 'round these parts. At least, ha, not most of them! I suppose it isn't right to generalize, is it?"

"How did…how did you get in here? Before us? There is only one door, and—"

"Only one door you know of, love."

"B-But, what about the guard? How did you escape?"

The Prince wiggled his hips and kissed the tip of his thumb with a wink.

"Oh, I have my ways~"

Earlier…

[23] The lyrics to the traditional chant performed during the Awa Odori dance at the Obon festival, translating loosely to "The dancers are fools, the watchers are fools, so if everyone's fools, then why not dance along?" The Prince learned this song and dance from a documentary he watched once, and is one of three songs in Japanese he knows, along with 'Hato Popo'—a children's song about pigeons—and the Sailor Moon theme.

"Who are you and what do you think you're doing here, Igirisu?"

The Prince swallowed and put his hands up as best he could with a knife to his throat.

"J-Just an innocent madame out on a lovely stroll, dear!"

"Cut the bullshit."

He frowned.

"Fine. Me and my friends came here to speak with Shuten-douji, but we haven't exactly gotten a warm reception from certain other yokai. Now could you get off me? I like a bit of knife-play sometimes myself, but the throat is off-limits."

The namahage stared right into The Prince's eyes…and then laughed, getting off of him and patting the snow off his would-be victim's kimono as he shakily got to his feet.

"That's really it? Man, you can't expect me to treat you well if you try to sneak your way inside like that…I thought you were some kind of poacher or something, I would have killed you on the spot! Ain't common we get *ningen* up here past Tamamo's stone."

"Humans, you mean?"

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"Then…You aren't going to kill me? I thought namahage were, y'know, boogeymen. They scare kids."

The bodyguard just sighed and scratched his head as he rolled his eyes.

"Not this again…look, it's true we scare kids, but we never lay a finger on them. It's just to promote good behavior. We only work one day outta the year, so this is what I do for the rest of my time: most namahage are pretty gentle folk under the surface, as it turns out. I got a buddy who moved to some country out in West Asia to work with the Red Cross."

"Really now? Huh. Learn something new every day."

"But seriously, you made a real bad first impression. You're lucky Shuten-douji *is* here…but the yokai inside? They aren't really so much a fan of humans, though who can blame them? Humans were never really a fan of them either."

The Prince cocked his head. "How so, hm?"

"Eh, it's a long story. If you were told about it in history class, no point in me saying it. Either way, I doubt they'd react well to a human in their midst, let alone an especially…'effete' one. If you want an easy way in to see Shuten-douji, there's a ceiling vent to control the temperature inside, and if you can crawl into it, you'll be right in his room."

"My my, omi has his own private room?"

"He practically lives here, heh. But yeah, go 'round back, get through the grate, and if you manage to get a word in edgewise, ask the boss to send me your remains and I'll hand em off to your next of kin. You got any family?"

The Prince of Fuck All bit the inside of his cheek and turned on his heel, raising a hand.

"I think I can handle him, love. I've dealt with more than one big hunk of meat in my day, and at the end of it all, men are pretty much all the same. They wanna drink, they wanna fuck, and they wanna la—"

Mid-sentence, he stumbled over a rock embedded in the snow and fell flat on his face. The guard shouted after him.

"Might wanna take the courtesan sandals off, man!"

"Really now? You think that would help. What a swell idea. Next you'll be telling me I should walk with my legs and not my nose. Appreciate the help dear, really."

Currentlier…

"So I fell in through the ceiling, me and the old cove chatted a bit—he's really quite swell, don't you know—and we got to the topic of entertainment, what with them being so dreadfully bored sitting around and drinking all day. There's only so many stories you can share before you start repeating them, after all, and when I said I knew a bit of a song, here we are~"

Rodion sniffed.

"...Are you drunk?"

"I may have had one or five cups of sake. Try it, I prefer a drink as fruity as I am, but you'd be surprised with the taste. Hints of nut. Oh and look, you brought the birdie! Hi, cutie!"

Their conversation was cut short by a rumbling voice from the back of the room, Shuten-douji catching the attention of the group as he spoke.

"Now what th' hell is takin' so long? Who're these people that just barged in?"

The green-skinned oni beside him furrowed his brow.

"Interlopers, no doubt. Another human, and—"

"Another one?!"

He cut off his assistant with a booming voice as he slammed a fist the size of a volleyball down onto the arm of his chair, using his other hand to guzzle down a bottle of sake before carelessly shattering it across the wall behind him as he lazily lifted a finger to The Prince.

"Girlie, get back on the table and keep singin', why don't ya? Don' waste yer time with whatever shitty human came crawlin' here to bring ya back. I promise you'll be well taken-care-of…"

Rodion lowered his voice.

"(Girlie?)"

"(They think I'm a girl, hun. And who am I to ruin their fun?)"

"(Prince, we do not have time for shenanigans like this, you said yourself, we are on borrowed time pertaining to Man Unkind…)"

"(I wouldn't call it 'shenanigans', Rodi, it serves a purpose like everything else on our god-given Earth. Now just shush and roll with it, alright?)"

The Prince pecked Rodion on a face, making him blush in addition to sealing his mouth shut, and twirled around with a flare of his kimono as he bowed deeply and gave a docile smile.

"My humblest apologies, dear Shuten-douji, but these are friends of mine. May I request that they stay for as long as I do? I will only be here for the day."

Shuten-douji's face wrinkled with disgust as he looked down at the red-haired man, resting his chin in the palm of a coarse hand as he drummed his fingers on the edge of a sake dish. His retainer looked to his master.

"Master Shuten-douji…recall the agreements made after Hansei, we are not to interfere with humans' affairs."

Not turning his head to look at his retainer, the oni king placed a finger under the green-skinned oni's chin, lifting it slightly to make him look up at Shuten-douji. His yellow eyes turned to look at him.

"An' if you recall, Ibaraki-douji, the humans *also* agreed to not interfere with *our* affairs. It don't stop dumbass tourists an' urban explorers from getting their stupid asses killed. Ain't that how it's always been since the old days? You don't follow the rules, you stray from the paths, you're fresh meat."

"M-Master…" Ibaraki-douji's face turned a slightly darker shade of green. "But, I recognize that other one, the smaller one in the komuso outfit, they are…"

Shuten-douji smiled a crooked grin at his new guests, showing off a mouth of sharp yellow teeth that complimented his chipped tusks.

"Let them give their own reasons fer why they came here. If I don't think it's satisfactory, then I get to kill 'em and spread their remains around fer the rest of my boys to snack on."

There was a roar of approval from the surrounding oni, who had all been torn from their drinking and partying to settle on the group. Rodion hunched over slightly, rather uncomfortable with so many eyes being on him—as things had been for the whole day so far—but he was pushed to the front as The Prince bowed once more, gestured with milling hands, and stepped out of the way to give Rodion and Samayou precedence.

"The floor is yours, Didi."

"M-Me?! But, Prince, you…you…"

He made a 'go on then' motion with both hands sweeping, and Rodion all at once realized that he didn't have a choice in the matter. He sighed, adjusted his jacket, and stepped forward as he cleared his throat. Rodion placed a hand to his chest.

"I am Rodion Nikolayev, from Russia. Me and The Prince spoke with Tamamo-no-Mae, whose stone we need in order to combat evil cult that threatens to destroy universe with singularity of magical artifacts. She accepted that she would give it to us, but only if we win your flame-patterned haori jacket fairly in competition. And so, Shuten-douji, king of the oni…"

Rodion pointed with a grin.

"I challenge you to a contest! The winner receives the jacket!"

CHAPTER 16: Status Report

Gabriel paced anxiously around the control center of Heaven, watching the diligently-working Dominions that circled the outer wall of the archangels' office with a keen eye. She had been ordered by Metatron to send Raqib and Atid to find a file on this 'Prince of Fuck All', but in the interest of thoroughness, she ordered them to find out about Rodion as well. She would have asked for Fionn mac Cumhaill, but they were already thoroughly familiar with the figure: he had been presumed dead for centuries. She never did buy the whole 'sleeping in a cave' story.

The Principalities were always a bit sluggish with their duties: after all, their responsibility—to ensure that God's doctrine is carried out to the fullest of each nation's potential—was essentially downsized out of existence once He became the chairman of the Divine Synod. After all, most countries with varied religious makeup didn't take too kindly to having someone else's boss looming over them.

They tacitly agreed with all afterlives, even with Hell (scratch that, *especially* with Hell), that there was to be a certain degree of separation between the mortal world and those where the souls of the dead were kept. Angels and gods could see spirits naturally, and demons were able to see them too by grace of God, but mortals were always left out of the loop. Heaven did not admit visitors, and demons lacked the ability to allow humans to see spirits via their own abilities: they needed some cheap cursed knick-knack to do that, and the punishment was severe for anyone who did somehow let something like that float into the markets.

She bit the end of her thumb and grit her teeth. God could easily take care of this threat, couldn't He? Of course He could, what is she thinking? His power is almighty, ineffable, infallible…and they were nothing more than cogs in the great wheel of His infinite mental machinations. Still, she would be lying if she said His inaction didn't frustrate her. It fostered doubt…and doubt was something that she could not abide. Hopefully this Prince character would be the tool that He used to take care of this wretched business once and for all…

On cue, two figures flew through one of the holes in the wall. One accidentally bumped into another on the way, however, and the two of them argued for a short bit before leaping onto one another and tumbling to the floor in a cloud of flying fists and pulled hair. Gabriel marched over to them and cleared her throat.

"Ahem."

The fighting stopped, and the two figures looked up at her. They were exactly the same height, each with the same bronze skin, long brown beard, black wings, and white turban atop their head, above which their halo floated. The one on the left, Raqib, wore a white robe, and Atid on the right wore red. This change of clothes was the only visible difference between the two of them, and even their eyes had the same vibrant yellow glow.

Raqib smiled obsequiously to the archangel and put his palms together.

"S-Sorry for that, Miss Gabriel."

Atid gave the same smile, though a bit more forced at the corners.

"We were rushing to fulfill your order as quick as possible, and this *bonehead—"*

"No need for names. You were the one who bumped into me."

"Was I? Or was it you who weren't looking where you were going, hm? Blinded by virtue?"

"Perhaps it was you who was blinded by sin."

"I swear, one of these days—"

"Enough."

Gabriel's icy tone shut the both of them up, and she glared down at them with an obvious look of distaste in her eyes. She despised this breed of angel, the subtype of Principalities that have made themselves so known to mortals that they appear all too often in movies and TV shows: the shoulder angel and the shoulder devil. She heard stories of demons gloating about how they always tempted people into doing the fun, indulgent, reckless thing, and notably, they never said that theirs was the *right* thing. Really, the devil aspect was just to throw them a bone. Both of them were always angels.

"This is an urgent matter. What do you have on The Prince of…ahem, The Prince, and his companions?"

"Ah yes…"

"About that…"

In conjunction, the two of them snapped their fingers and produced a scroll rolled into an impossible number of layers, holding it up to themselves as the bottom of the scroll fell to the ground, bounced, and rolled along the floor until it exited through a door.

"This person known as the Prince of Fuck All, biologically male, five-foot-six, blue-eyed, is a known swindler, thief, enfant terrible, and rabble-rouser."

"A few short years ago, he was arrested at the Vatican for stealing a relic from the Apostolic Palace, but broke out a few days later. He has a warrant there."

"In the country of Georgia, he caused an incident with local police where he sat atop a pole and waited for five days—seemingly without eating anything—in order to return the Golden Fleece from the constellation Aries. Per order of Ares, he was expelled from the country."

"With the heart of Mexico, he raided Aztec tombs in order to recover an obsidian mirror said to be blessed by Tezcatlipoca himself, and was considered a national terrorist for it."

"In Peru, he stole crystal skulls given as gifts to the Incas."

"In China, he stole alms from shrines to Chi You."

"In Africa, he stole fifty dollars worth of designer clothes."

"In Suriname, he stole—"

"In Indonesia, he stole—"

"In Quebec—"

"In New Zealand—"

"In Dine-Navajo territory—"

"India—"

Gabriel eventually ignored the two principalities as they overlapped and interrupted one another, regaling her with tales of The Prince's sticky-fingered sojourns. She got the gist, either

way: he was a cad who stole precious things, magical or not, simply because he could. There was a twinge in her heart as she sneered, scanning her eyes along the wrap of scroll on the floor. What made him so different from Man Unkind? They both got in the way of divine affairs, both theirs and others, and they both stockpiled these ridiculous items. The only real difference between the two, she felt, was that one claimed to be doing it for good…scratch that, both believe they're doing it for the good of the world. It's just that one's end goal results in the destruction of said world…and she wasn't even quite sure about the prior's goal. She bent down and picked up the scroll, turning it over. There was a curious blank spot on it. She turned to Raqib and Atid.

"Principalities."

"Y-Yes Miss Gabriel?"

"I get the gist. But there are things that I do not understand…"

She gestured to the blank spot, trailed her finger along the rest of the paper, and saw that the rest of the endless scroll was utterly blank. Squinting at the oldest line of text, she read *'Pickpocketed a Soho passerby's wallet.'* in red text—stating it was a bad deed—and sniffed.

"Certainly, this was not his *first* deed. Usually, most newborns' first good/bad deed is to share their toys or say hi to their mother or some other similarly simple developmental occurrence: what of this pickpocketing incident?"

Raqib turned to Atid with a curious look on his face, and Atid put his hands out.

"Well, funny thing about that, Miss Gabriel…"

"There are no records of a 'The Prince of Fuck All' from before age 16."

"We even checked without the 'The', but apparently that *is* part of his name."

"Our records show he simply…appeared in London one day."

"And even then, he was stealing…"

"Though he's clean of murder!"

"Zero blood on his hands."

"Except for unintentional murder."

"Yeah, he's responsible for a couple counts of unintentional manslaughter."

"Though he didn't directly kill anyone!"

Archangel Gabriel crossed her arms and closed her eyes, gnawing slightly on the end of her thumb. He hasn't killed anyone, so that was at least admirable, but she was fully focused on the mystery of his origin. Who was he, exactly? Where was he from, why does he do the things he does? Without more information, it was a moot point. She opened one eye.

"And what about the Russian?"

Raqib looked to Atid, and Atid looked to Raqib. The both of them winced and grimaced as they sucked through their teeth, clapping their hands and producing not a scroll, but something resembling a divine tablet. They each held it with one hand, Atid scrolling with a finger, before handing it off to Gabriel.

"We think it's best if you look at his file yourself."

Frowning, she snatched the tablet from their hands and read it herself. She scrolled with a delicate touch of the index finger, silver eyes running over the paragraphs of text. Red. Red, red, red, all red…at the beginning, there were large chunks of white, the marks of good deeds, but in the middle, it was replaced with large swaths of red text. Only within the past few years of his almost sixty years of life did white text begin to show once more. She read closer, taking in every detail and act…and she felt a pit of nausea form at the bottom of her throat as she read it, brows knitting as her nose wrinkled and she winced, clenching her teeth and gripping the tablet like someone reading a horror story that's gotten much too disturbing for their tastes, and yet they want to continue reading…until ultimately, she swallowed and handed the tablet back to them.

"...I cannot trust them."

The two principalities looked at one another, then back at her.

"But what about what Metatron said?"

"I mean, I wouldn't trust them either."

"No, no, definitely not, especially not that Russian fellow."

"Of course not! But The Prince, didn't the Exalted Scribe say that—"

Gabriel shouted the two of them down.

"The Exalted Scribe only relays God's order, he does not create it!"

They both immediately went silent, shrinking away from her, and she crossed her arms as she looked away.

"He can trust in this cross-dressing kleptomaniac all he wants, but unless I know that the Lord is willing to put His faith in such a figure and his unscrupulous cohort, then I will not budge. The Lord is more than powerful enough to intercept any threat that should come to Heaven, and if I am deemed wrong, then I am no more faithful than the next worm you encounter in the mud!"

One of the Dominions encircling the room stood from her seat, looking back at her superior.

"Miss Gabriel! There's pandemonium at the Gates of Hell in Shehaqim, Maalik and Hadraniel are both fending off a sudden invasion of intruders!"

She whipped around.

"Demons?"

"Not demons, Miss Gabriel. We believe them to be cult agents. We have already dispatched the Powers and all able-bodied Angels to take care of the threat, but they are proving sturdier than expected."

"What?! How?! We have His divine light on our side, how could—"

Her halo made a sound like a harp being plucked in a delicate arpeggio and repeated as it vibrated. She reached up, gently broke a piece off of it, and placed it in her ear.

"Talk to me."

"Gabriel!"

She bit the end of her thumb, starting to pace again while she shooed the two stunned principalities away. At once, they vanished in a puff of smoke.

"Raphael, what's going on? There's an invasion?"

"A sudden influx of cult agents…They're coming from Hell, I think they've obtained some sort of cursed weaponry? Or they're specializing their troops, angels are falling one by one…I'm here with Uriel trying to—"

There was an explosion and a sound like three pigs screeching at the same time.

"—Sorry, trying to control this, but it's not going well. I'm helping those who were injured as best I can, but I can't keep up with the attacks…Has Metatron ordered the Higher Sphere of angels to come and help us?"

"I-I haven't received word…"

Gabriel looked up to the Dominion, covering the halo chunk with a finger.

"Keep sending angels at the entrance to fend them off for as long as possible. We cannot be weakened."

"But Miss Gabriel, our troops dwindle by the second, and—"

"Then keep sending them until we have no one left to send! We can always ask the Lord to make more. The body of an angel is nothing compared to the sanctity of Heaven, they can stand having to expend a bit of energy to regenerate one…"

She returned to the halo.

"Is Maalik still up?"

"Yes, he's—Puriel! Dokiel! Flank the…I don't know, the heads, and evade their attacks until you're sure you have a direct hit! Sorry, yes, he's here."

"Send him to speak with Metatron, inform him of this! I don't care if he's having a playdate with all his pagan heathen friends, or drying little baby Mikey's tears after he scraped his knee, this is extremely urgent! He needs to speak with—"

There was a loud industrial creaking, akin to the sound of metal being rent by some sort of giant, and then there was silence.

"Raphael?"

No response.

"Raphael?!"

Still, no response. Gabriel bit her thumb hard enough to draw sparkling golden blood, stifling the urge to swear as she slotted the broken piece back into her halo. A million thoughts were running through her head, though the one that clamored the loudest was 'How could this happen? How could He allow this? Surely He is incapable of wrongness, and this is only a part of His plan? But then…what *is* His plan? Does He even have a plan in the first place?' She silently chastised herself for doubting His almighty grace, but she had to admit that the inaction was infuriating her. There were no demons in this invasion, though, and that frightened her. Demons, they could take on easily. These *things*, things they had never seen before and which were still mowing through them like grass…Could they…?

No. They would not upset the celestial order.

She would make sure of it.

With a flap of her wings, Gabriel vanished in a flash of white light.

CHAPTER 17: Makura

Shuten-douji's lips parted into a sinister smile, the demon lord leaning back in his chair as he looked down at the doctor.

"A challenge, you say? For my…jacket? Ibaraki-douji, where'd I even put that musty ol' thing?"

Ibaraki-douji held out his hands, and in a sudden wisp of leaves, the perfectly-folded fire-patterned *haori* jacket appeared in his grasp. It was quite obviously made to fit Shuten-douji, the size of a folded blanket, but it at least was proven to exist. Nonetheless, the retainer looked to his lord.

"Master, I wouldn't give these fools the time of day. Especially considering that they have *the crow* on their side. You've had your fun with the woman, just allow the rest to slaughter them. I'm sure the Russian will provide more than enough meat for the party…"

The crowd of oni cheered and whooped, some raising their studded iron *kanabo* clubs into the air as a tacit demonstration of what would be caving their skulls in. The Prince protectively wrapped his arms around one of Rodion's, puffing his cheeks out.

"Hey! Rodi's meat is all mine, and I won't let any of you ragabashes lay a finger on him!"

Rodion blushed and gently shook him off.

"P-Prince, I do not believe that is what they mean."

"Right, and I'm the Queen of England."

Shuten-douji stroked his beard in thought, crossing one leg over the other as he closed his eyes and thought over the situation. His retainer frowned at him, occasionally shooting suspicious glances towards the humans and the monk—no, *especially* Samayou. The Prince stuck his tongue out, still clinging to Rodion, while he himself just responded with a confused tilt of the head towards Samayou. What was it about this unassuming little bird that all of them seemed to recognize…?

"Master Shuten-douji, you really can't be—"

Cutting him off, Shuten-douji slammed a fist down on the arm of his chair.

"I can an' I will, Iba! Lookit us! Lookit what we've been reduced to! Th' damn rules have been so vague, we haven't been able to hunt humans…They tell both us an' them, 'no interfering with the other', but that means humans never go near the wilderness anymore, and we can't enter the towns! It ain't like we *need* humans to hunt…but dammit, ain't that what we oni are all about?! We're bored outta our goddamn minds here!"

The oni surrounding them pretended to cry, making unconvincing wailing sounds and 'wiping' their eyes as they decried the cruelty of humanity, not wandering head-first into oni territory to be consumed. The Prince muttered something about alligators crying for their prey to himself, and Shuten-douji clenched his fists.

"We need *something.* Most o' the others have left Japan, but ya know what they are? Traitors! This is our homeland! The sun rose and fell on over a thousand years of history, and we were there for all of it…and some shit-brained mongrel traitors decide to just up and evacuate?! Not me. This is our origin."

He was quiet for a moment, and then lowered his head as he bellowed.

"And our homeland is fucking boring me to death!"

Ibaraki-douji winced hearing his lord shout, and his gaze ended up stuck to the floor. The crowd had silenced themselves as well, humbling themselves in the presence of their master's rage. Rodion cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Then, no better way to entertain yourself than with a little game, *da?* We win, we get the coat. We lose, you get to eat us. Is simple wager, yes?"

The Prince flinched like something just hit him, and he tugged on Rodi's coat with a weak smile. Even Samayou looked up at him, fiddling their talons nervously.

"Aha, love, you know, we can negotiate on the 'being eaten' part…I've always wanted a flashier death, you know? Some sort of Vollmer-esque stunt that's started up by the both of us being shit-faced and ends with one or both of us with bullets in our heads, I rather wouldn't like being eaten by ogres. Are you sure you aren't going to—"

"Then it is settled!"

Shuten-douji rose with a crackling of his spine, raising a gourd-shaped bottle of sake.

"There will be three challenges. Whoever wins the best out of three shall be the winner! Each challenge's winner shall be able to pick the topic of the next game, and my loyal second-in-command, Ibaraki-douji…"

He placed a finger gently on Ibaraki-douji's head, and the young man's face flushed a dark green.

"...shall act as an impartial referee on the matter."

"Me? Master, really, you shouldn't have, I-I mean, wouldn't I be a biased judge?"

"Ha! You try finding someone who respects me as much as an *okama* in this bar, and then come back to me about being impartial. Besides, you see them, don't you? It's a girly man, some flabby doctor, and a chicken nugget. I'll crush 'em. I trust you, Iba-kun. Don't let me down."

He tousled the boy's hair with the tip of his finger, making him blush a bit more, before he shook it off and nodded, determined to fulfill his lord's wishes to the letter. Shuten-douji himself stepped forward, his horns brushing against the ceiling as he placed his hands on his hips. Extending one forward, he grinned down at the group.

"As ya proposed the challenge, you are free to choose who to go first, and what the game will be. Make it a good one, I'm makin' this easy on you!"

Rodion opened his mouth, but only got a single sound out (something like a 'wuh') before The Prince eagerly cut in with a raised hand.

"Oh pick me, sensei, I'll go first! And I've got the perfect challenge to start off with~"

~

The Prince sat on his knees with his hands neatly folded in his lap at one end of the long table that stood in the middle of the room, his eyes closed in contemplation. Across from him, on the other end of the table, Shuten-douji sat in the same position, albeit with an irritated quirk in his eyebrow. In front of them, one to each contestant, was a small black dish only mildly larger than a compass. Ibaraki-douji, standing between the two of them, held in each hand an oblong bundle wrapped in regal purple cloth, speaking as he placed each of them to the right of their respective dishes.

"In the interest of entertainment, this is the first of three challenges put forward by the party of *Nanimonai-no-hime*[24], Nikolayev Rodion, and…ahem, an as-of-yet nameless karasu-tengu[25], against the lord of all oni, Shuten-douji! Whoever wins this first challenge shall enjoy a victory, and be able to decide the topic of the next challenge! This game's topic…"

Ibaraki-douji raised a metal umpire's fan.

"Ikebana!"

Rodion, sitting with his legs crossed on an uncomfortable pillow a short ways away from the table beside an enraptured Samayou, whispered to the oni seated next to him.

"(...What is ikebana?)"

Ibaraki-douji loudly cleared his throat, glaring at Rodion.

"Ahem. For some of our…non-local spectators…ikebana is the traditional aesthetic art of flower arrangement, often to a certain theme. I have taken the liberty of obtaining a number of flowers from the nearest shop, and have wrapped them in these blankets. Contestants, you may unveil your flowers."

The Prince and Shuten-douji both opened up the purple bundles, The Prince delicately unfolding it by the corners and the demon lord flattening out the cloth.

Inside, ten flowers were laid out. From left to right, they included: a red and yellow poppy, a red rose, a bluebell, a cactus flower, a red camellia, a rhododendron, an edelweiss, a hydrangea, and an iris. Each had a stem of varying length, with a few bulbs sprouting here and there for each.

"You may use as many or as few as you desire, and place them in any arrangement you feel necessary to fulfill the theme given, but a time limit of fifteen minutes shall be put in place for the sake of time."

Shuten-douji scratched his beard and surveyed each of them, picking them up and turning them over in his hands. Rodion craned his neck, looking over at The Prince as his red-haired companion looked over the flowers with a steely gaze.

"E-Er, Prince, you are sure you know how to do this? It appears…very formal."

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[24] Roughly, "The Princess of Nothing At All". The Prince referred to himself as The Princess of Fuck All to get a chance to dance for them as a woman, and nobody has bothered to clarify, least of all The Prince himself.

[25] A yokai known for resembling a crow, feasting on small animals and humans, and being generally rowdy, lecherous, and stupid. They are lesser versions of *daitengu*, more enlightened beings that more resemble red-skinned humans with long noses. Most karasu-tengu who move out of the country become frat bros. Birds of a feather flock together, I suppose.

He smiled over at Rodion, gesturing with an open palm.

"Oh, don't worry, hun! I've taken plenty of classes on ikebana, I know it like the back of my hand! Besides, do you really think I would pick something I was bad at for our first challenge? I'll be fine, you just sit there and look pretty while I do all the heavy lifting~"

"(What 'heavy lifting' do you mean…?)"

Ibaraki-douji raised his fan once more.

"Once the theme has been stated, there shall be no talking from the gallery until both parties have completed their ikebana arrangement! Is that understood?"

Rodion shot up straight and nodded silently. The rest of the oni murmured among themselves, collectively shrugging.

"...Good. Then, without further ado. Contestants! Your topic is…"

He waved the fan down.

"The dreams and aspirations of your future! You have fifteen minutes! Start!"

Despite the ostentatious commencement, all sound in the room cut out as everyone remained silent. There was an occasional cough, but they were all silenced with cutting glares before they could cause too much disruption. Rodion and Samayou watched The Prince intently, as did several oni, though most focused on their lord. They watched as Shuten-douji furrowed his brow in deep concentration, picking up and putting down flowers, weighing his options and thinking his options through. The Prince, on the other hand, picked up the poppy stem, twirled it around in his fingers, and promptly put the end of it in his mouth to chew on as he shuffled the remaining flowers about.

Rodion swallowed and felt his heart pounding, which confused him: why was he so nervous? The Prince knew what he was doing, right? …Right? He looked down at the monk, who was leaning forward with their hands clasped and their index fingers touching in a look of concern. He looked at the other oni who watched The Prince, and their facial expressions didn't give him much more confidence.

The fifteen minutes passed by with no interruption, Shuten-douji carefully placing flower after flower in his dish and gently pressing them against one another, tucking branches and buds under one another in order to create an arrangement that perfectly showed his ideal future and all that it entailed, and The Prince hopefully doing the same as he equally spaced his own flowers. When time was up, Ibaraki-douji raised his fan and shouted.

"Fifteen minutes have passed! The judging will now commence! …The audience may also come and investigate the contestants' ikebana arrangements. The contestants shall not talk. They will let their arrangements speak for themselves. First, we will view Shuten-douji's."

He and a small chunk of the audience, including Rodion and Samayou, got up to take a proper look at what the demon lord had created. He leaned back with his sturdy arms crossed, huffing through his nose as he beamed with arrogant pride.

In his flowerpot, surrounding the rim, the cloud of hydrangeas that he was provided with sat like a mass of fog above the ground, with a red camellia emerging from above them, yet drooping down with an air of defeated dignity. The centerpiece, however, sticking up straight

and with its petals curling up to the heavens, was a single edelweiss rising high above all the others. Each leaf spaced regularly, it stood like Jacob's ladder with an air of authority. Ibaraki-douji nodded looking at it, though his expression remained impartial. Rodion sniffed. It certainly looked nice, but he couldn't say he 'got' it. It's something he wouldn't even notice if it was in the room with him, but the oni behind him seemed sufficiently impressed, judging by their murmuring, so it must have been pretty good.

"Next, Nanimonai-no-hime's."

The throng shuffled over to The Prince's end of the table, and a couple more oni got up to see the result for themselves. They all circled around The Prince as he leaned forward and placed his elbows on the table, resting his chin on the backs of his fists, showing off a grin full of shining white teeth as he looked around at the crowd.

His arrangement was a lavish and tacky display befitting something that you would see placed on the desk of a secretary in the 1920s. The three red flowers—the poppy, the rose, and the camellia—were placed in a radial pattern, each pointing upwards, and sprouting from the center, the bluebell, yellow poppy, and edelweiss filled in the gaps left by the first three. Smack in the middle, the cactus flower stood like a pool in the middle of a patch of mud. With the rest of the flowers, he wove a flower crown, which he handed to Rodi with a blown kiss and a wink. The doctor accepted it hesitantly, but kept his ears open to hear the muttering of the oni behind him. Before he could sense their opinion, however, Ibaraki-douji rose.

"I have reached a verdict!"

The muttering stopped, and The Prince puffed on his fist before rubbing it on his chest. Shuten-douji quirked an eyebrow, grinning as his retainer returned to the center of the table. He raised his metal fan high into the air…

…And pointed it to Shuten-douji.

"Shuten-douji is the victor!"

He pumped his fists in the air, letting out a cheer, and most of the oni in the room shared the sentiment, passing bottles of sake like fire buckets to their master as a reward. He happily guzzled them down. The Prince, however, was much less happy, and leapt to his feet as he slammed the counter.

"What?! How?! How on earth is that gaudy little piece of window-dressing better than mine?!"

Rodion raised his hands, weakly trying to calm The Prince, but he was having none of it as he stomped over to Shuten-douji's arrangement. Bending down at the hip, he cocked his head at it and squinted.

"He only used three flowers, and none of them work together. Purple, white, and red? Do you know *anything* with a purple, white, and red color scheme that wasn't a tampon package? And look at this! It's drooping! Flaccid! Your flower's bloody flaccid, and that's just depressing. Now really, if I were to do it, I would—"

He reached out to grab it, but Ibaraki-douji was quicker on the draw and smacked his hand with the edge of the metal fan. Being that it was a *metal* fan, The Prince immediately doubled

over cursing as he held his hand, quickly being tended to by a concerned Rodion and Samayou. Iba ran a finger along the edge and sneered down at him.

"Silence, you gibbering fool! And do not touch the arrangements once they have been completed."

"Motherfu—"

Rodion interjected, raising a hand with a nervous grin.

"Aha, um, hello, yes. I am unfamiliar with this 'ikebana', and was wondering…what makes this flowerpot better than other flowerpot? They both seem similar to me, and if given a choice, I would go with Prince's."

The Prince snickered with battered pride at Rodion's approval, but the retainer just shook his head in disappointment. However, the demon lord smiled down at him not with pride, but with a look of acknowledgement and a calm smile.

"So, you wanna know the reasoning behind it? I don't mean to toot my own horn, but I think Iba-kun made the right choice here. Let's see..."

Shuten-douji cleared his throat and lowered himself to be nearest to his arrangements, gesturing with a finger.

"In accordance with *hanakotoba*, the language of flowers, I've depicted my ideal future: The edelweiss stands strong, representing power, authority, superiority. Surrounding it like attentive children, the hydrangeas are full of pride. Pride for what? For having me, a powerful and strong figure as their master…yet, you see the camellia here. Though it droops, it does so with purpose, and it symbolizes the graceful end I wish to experience, having lived a long and fulfilling life before ultimately handing my soul over to the *kami*. Ha, I bet you'd think a meathead like me would want to go out in a blaze of glory, eh? But, well, I wanted to be realistic. I arranged it in the traditional *rikka* style of austerity, and followed the example of the school of Ikenobou. Finally, as a final touch, there are only three flowers in the pot."

"But, that makes it unsymmetrical, *da?"*

"Is nature symmetrical, human? The purpose of ikebana isn't to make something that just looks nice, it's supposed to elaborate on the feelings of the arranger and stand proud as a statement all its own!"

The Russian raised his eyebrows. He had always fancied himself a fan of the more sophisticated arts: painting, the violin, elaborate antique furniture and meticulously-woven rugs, but he suddenly felt as though his understanding of what 'sophistication' was had been very narrow. Ibaraki-douji flashed a sly grin at The Prince—who glared back—and gestured his fan to The Prince's own arrangement.

"In contrast, look at this tacky monstrosity, poisoned by Western ideals of 'beauty'. You said you were well-versed in ikebana, what school did you model when making this?"

He pulled himself off the ground using Rodion's stomach as a hoist, staring at Iba with a look of genuine rosy-cheeked frustration. Samayou wrapped their arms around Rodi's leg, slightly frightened as The Prince shouted back at the oni.

“How dare you?! I know more about ikebana than anyone else I know! I was modeling it after the Anjuri school!”

He sniffed.

“Not a real discipline. You don’t know the first thing about the subtle art of decoration, and it shows. Look at this, radial symmetry in a six-pointed star, positioned like a cage surrounding the cactus flower. Do you know what the cactus flower represents, Nanimonai-no-hime?

“O-Of course I do, you pompous boytoy! It’s dedication and loyalty!”

“It’s lust. Lust and sex. You surrounded it with not only power, gratitude, and success, but exuberance, love, and a desire for a graceful death. Not only does it feel like it traps and confines the cactus flower inside, but the patterned layout makes it look utterly unnatural, like it’s forced. It’s like the cactus is just shoving everything else aside to make room for itself as the center of the stage!”

The Prince’s mouth clapped shut and he looked away, wincing.

“I thought it fit rather well…”

Rodi looked over at his companion with concern, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Prince…why did you pick something that you had no expertise in for our first challenge? Now we are already lagging behind, and we have just started. This will set us back…”

He flinched and lightly slapped the Russian’s hand away.

“I-I do have expertise in it! It’s…it’s just stupid flower arrangements, I figured, how hard could it be? I still hold this bloody round was rigged against me…”

Ibaraki gave a shit-eating grin to the red-haired man and twirled his metal fan.

“You know, accepting defeat with humility is a virtue. Perhaps if you allowed your actions to speak louder than your words, your skills could speak more than your ignorance.”

“Iba-kun, enough. The girl bit off more than she could chew, she lost, and that’s that. Ain’t no point rubbin’ it in their face when they could still win it all.”

Shuten-douji rumbled out with his voice, firm and scolding, and Iba stiffened as he lowered himself in a deep bow.

“R-Right…my apologies, master.”

The demon lord put on a pleased smile, huffed steam through his nostrils, and gestured to the group.

“So you lost one round. That ain’t so bad. It’s the next one you really gotta worry about…especially since, because I won, I get to pick the next challenge.”

CHAPTER 18: Fresh Meat

Hel didn't have the energy to kick and scream as she was dragged away by the Modern Primitives. She had been faring pretty well in this new world of nonsense, she told herself: she hadn't broken down crying, or laughing, or both, even once! Not only that, she figured she at least had some guides to help her along when it came to traversing it, but all that sure did go out the window once Moxy wandered off. And then what? She gets given the grand tour by the leader of this whole demented and ill-reasoned operation, and then one of the people she thought was on her side ends up…

Well, no. Hel stopped that train of thought as she remembered: these are cult agents. Their loyalty is to their leader first and foremost, and the whole reason she was running with Moxy and Foxy in the first place was because they struck a deal. They get Gleipnir, and in return, she gets Fenrir released. She gets Fenrir released, and…it partially dawned on her that she didn't have much of a plan past that. She had just been sitting in her world for the past couple of centuries, exiled, and she had only picked up the title of 'Spirit Queen' because she thought it would give her *something* to do. Most of the other gods ended up meddling about in Midgard, but what about her? What about Fenrir, what about Jormungandr? They were just sealed away, serving no purpose apart from holding up some absurd future.

She spat with a sardonic grin on her face as they passed through some of the areas she had been led through by the Dog-Faced Man. At least, she thought they were some of the areas she'd seen before. The whole place changed constantly, so it was impossible to tell where you'd been and where you hadn't been unless you were a local…in a way, she supposed it was pretty similar to how most worlds are. Just a bit more unhinged.

Hel spat out a laugh.

"Ha, where are you taking me, you gibbering masses of printed meat? I don't suppose it's a comfy domicile where you'll offer me some heated milk and roast lamb, is it?"

The Modern Primitives just burbled in response. Idiot, why did she even ask? They can't speak. Still, she saw trees as they dragged her along, and she remembered where they were, and where they were heading.

The Parlor of Miracles. That massive palace with flesh walls, stretched to the point of redness around a wireframe skeleton.

In the time it took for her to realize their location, they were already at the door. Craning her neck behind her in an attempt to get a better look at the gruesome building, she saw that the door was similarly made of skin. Two rolling green eyeballs, twitching and circling as if they were in a deep sleep, were nestled in the door on each side of the division. The Modern Primitive on her left raised one of its bony hands, curled its fingers, and proceeded to jab two fingers into each of the eyes. Blood seeped out of its lids as the building wrenched them shut and let out a low, drawling moan, before the two doors opened up.

Hel was dragged in, and her view from behind the Primitives as they dragged her along only served to further confuse her. As soon as the doors closed once more, she got a view of what the inside of the Palace of Miracles looked like…and she wasn't sure why she thought this place, the crux of their operation, would be any different from the rest of the world.

As soon as the doors closed, they separated and melted away into musty black bird-shaped stains on the ugly yellow wallpaper that fluttered away. It looked like a dentist's office from the Victorian era, the walls patterned in disgusting spiraling floral patterns, and it made Hel sick just looking at it. In the places where it wasn't peeling, posters, photographs, and various other oddities adorned the walls in place of windows. A framed painting of a face held on by hooks, a close-up of a man crying out in pain, a painting almost as tall as Hel was that depicted some sort of dissected hunk of meat hanging on hooks with a man whose face was shrouded in an umbrella emerging, surrounded by a guardrail…though as they passed it, she saw a signature in the bottom that said 'TAKEN 4-03-93'. It stank of clove oil, only overshadowed by the musty odor of mold as it likely seeped through every inch of the place, and when they stopped, she could once again hear a train passing.

Said train passed straight through the walls, following ethereal tracks that materialized out of nothing, served their purpose, and then dissipated once more. In a left turn they passed, she saw a new pair of tracks forming. Still, they appeared to be the only ones in the building…or, that's what Hel would have thought if she hadn't heard the screams.

She was not a woman unaccustomed to hearing screams. In the heyday of adherence to the Norse gods, those who killed their brethren, broke oaths, or fulfilled other such unsavory acts, would be thrown into Nidhoggr's room and be eaten alive. Their screams were music to her ears, the sound of their bones crunching and muscles splitting as they were crunched away into nothing. Even when her two servants would cover their ears, she would happily swirl a glass of mead and down it with the sweet satisfaction of a job well done. Those days were long past, but she looked on them fondly.

These screams weren't the sounds of death, nor were they the sounds of painful suffering. They were *despair*. Mixed in between the screams were pleas for mercy, crying, she picked up the sounds of men and women, children and the elderly, even some sounds that, while inhuman, still reflected the mental suffering they waded through on their hands and knees. Hel shuddered as the Modern Primitives led her up a small flight of stairs, spiraling into an endless and singular point until they suddenly came out into a cramped room.

It was roughly twice the size of a walk-in closet, and had no windows, but the two side walls were partially transparent. Sniffing, Hel smelled barrier magic and sneered—who among them knew how to use magic? In the hands of lunatics like these, she should be glad they only appear to have gotten the hang of barriers, though on closer inspection, they appeared to be generated by gilded bars laid across the floor. In the back corner, gently rocking in a rocking chair, a hunched old woman in a red coat made entirely out of felt sat and embroidered onto the back of a velvet skull. Pins the size of shortswords stuck out from her back like hedgehog spines, and she had a placid smile on her face.

The Modern Primitives threw Hel harshly into the room, her landing on the loose pile of hay in the middle—assumedly a bed—and groaning as she sat up. The floating grotesques burbled an order, and she innately knew it was to stay until she was taken. They hovered out the door, and it shut behind them before dissolving entirely, replaced with a crude smiley-face. Great. At least this hellscape has a sense of humor. She got up, albeit with a bit of tossing and turning due to her hands being bound, and turned around to face the old woman.

"...Hello?"

She said nothing, and Hel felt a twinge of rage. She stepped up to the stooped figure, fists clenched in front of her.

"Don't play coy with me, woman, I know you can hear me! Your boss, your *leader*, he shoved me in here because he wants to turn me into one of his puppets—like you—and I want to make it known that I will *not* be accepting this lightly. He is messing with the Queen of the Spirits, the one with full control over the astral plane, the one who commands an army of the dead! When I'm done with that manic street preacher, I'm going to…to…ugh, I don't even know what I'm going to do, but I know I'll definitely kill him. I'll think of something clever with corpses and coldness."

She was embellishing a few details, but that was the least of her concerns.

"I'm going to get out of here. And I'm going to do it on my own. I've had enough of being cooped up in tight spaces all my life, and now I know more than ever that relying on other people's cooperation is more a liability than anything else. Are you listening to me, woman?!"

The old lady simply rocked back and forth, embroidering onto the skull. Hel sighed and sat down in the hay, grimacing. Great. Now what? She tried to wriggle against her wrist bindings, but the action burnt like hell and left visible imprints on her skin. Even the wrist that was black as the night burnt a lighter color, which she would have found intriguing if it didn't hurt so bad. Getting out of these confines, at least for now, was out of the question. She marched up to the place where the door had once been and scrutinized the smiley face left in its place. Then she got an idea. Feeling like a moron for even thinking about doing it, she opened her mouth, closed it again, and then shakily spoke.

"...Can you…hear me?"

The face said nothing, because it was just a drawing. Hel cursed loudly in Old Norse and kicked the wall. The wall kicked back, hitting her straight in the stomach, and she fell to the floor with a wheezy groan. Rule of thumb. Anything you think would work here doesn't, and anything you think wouldn't work, does. She slowly sat up and tried to swallow down the wave of nausea she was hit with.

Then Hel heard a voice.

"Hey…they got you too, huh?"

She turned around, and seated on his knees near the right wall, peering into her cell, was a human man. He had a somewhat stocky figure, contributed to by the heavy coat and fingerless gloves he wore, and his pale skin was hidden by a mess of shaggy brown hair and a long beard worthy of a prophet. His chest was adorned with all manner of pins with varying degrees of

damage, seemingly all fished out of the garbage. His room was just the same as hers, including the old lady in the back. He leaned forward, intense blue eyes peering out from a heavy brow. Hel was quiet as he spoke, rubbing his chin.

"Jeez, lady, you don't look so good. Lemme guess, you were in an industrial accident…no, frostbite! Frostbite on a hiking expedition with your family, which disfigured half your face. Couldn't get a job, didn't qualify for welfare, soup kitchens were full, and just like that, you're out on the streets. That's when they getcha. They got me when I was out on the street corner, trying to educate the populace. Public education's a travesty nowadays, y'know? Somebody has to tell the kids what the government does to them in their sleep."

Hel furrowed her brow.

"I'm sorry, who are you?"

The man grinned, showing that he was missing about half of his yellowed decaying teeth.

"I like to think of myself as the harbinger of a new era. Something like…a disco messiah? Yeah, disco. I was always a fan of disco, I used to dance in my younger years…now not so much. But the people need a leader, and a leader's what I gave them. The name I gave myself's the Modern Man, but you can call me Moe."

Digging into his pocket, Moe produced a dog-ended and slightly dirty cigarette, flicking it at Hel. It passed through the translucent barrier without issue, landing at her feet. She stared at it suspiciously, not knowing what a cigarette is, and looked back up at him. There were a lot of questions she wanted to ask this man, but one stood out as her tone changed.

"...For your information, I'm not disfigured, and I'm certainly not a tramp like you are. I am Hel, some say Hela, keeper of Nidhoggr, warden of Helheim, daughter of Loki and sister to the wolf and serpent."

He snapped his fingers.

"Of course, you're delusional! Same thing they pegged me for."

"I am *not* delusional. You're the one going around calling yourself a messiah. Do you even know where you are?"

Moe looked up at the ceiling, looked over his shoulder, and returned his gaze to Hel.

"Can't say that I do, but it isn't my philosophy to worry about that sort of thing. People worry too much. They worry about their family, they worry about the economy, they worry about money, they worry about the worth of their life. Me, I just go where the wind takes me. I'm like Cain, forced to wander the Land of Nod for the rest of eternity as punishment for my crime. That crime? Killing the old America."

She scoffed. "You are absolutely delusional, you fool."

"To you, maybe. Everyone else might just be delusional too. Ain't that funny, how life is? Either way, I know there's a lot of other people here with me. You heard them on the way here, right?"

Hel's ears perked up, and she listened closely. She hadn't noticed it beforehand, but now she could tell that the screams were still there—they were just less prominent. Moe pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.

“If you squint hard enough, it’s all cells that way. All cells the other way too. Folks go in, folks go out, some folks stay, but it’s all the same to me. They ain’t ever taken me though. I think they’re too scared—scared of what I have to say, y’know? People are people, and that means they’re all the same.”

“...Listen, I was brought here by two…*servants* of mine, who betrayed me and turned me in to this absurdist cult. Do you know if there’s a way out of here?”

Moe laid down flat on the floor and folded one leg on the other, clasping his hands behind his head.

“Never tried looking. It’s kinda comfy here, y’know? You meet a lot of nice people. There was a kid who came in, blood all over him, said a bad man came in and killed his parents. The state didn't want him, so he wandered the streets, then he came here. Another one was a lady, dressed real old-fashioned like, eighteenth, nineteenth century—said they deemed her hysterical and she was due for a lobotomy. Post-party something or other.”

“And what about yourself, huh? Did they pick you up for being a loon?”

“Pretty much. I was out on the corner one fine day in Bloomsburg P-A, tellin’ kids the gospel truth about the government spying on all the things they masturbate to, how robots fill their internet sites to pump their malleable little skulls full of propaganda till they explode in a cloud of extremist patriotism, how the radio waves from the new-fangled 5G system slowly degrade their critical thinking skills ‘til they need to be told what’s right and wrong by, *who else?* The government. They got their grubby fingers in everything nowadays, and the average Moe doesn’t have anything but his own ass to his name anymore.”

Hel laughed bitterly. “Maybe they saw you as competition.”

“Dunno ‘bout that. You catch a look at half these critters? They ain’t human, not anymore. But even then, I dunno if they were human to begin with. Everyone who comes in, see, they’re forgotten by society. No matter how perfect your world is, folks will always fall through the cracks, folks will always be left behind. They say they don’t have the resources, the funds, how will we ever feed all those starving kids without families? But you know they’re lying. You know it’d just make it so they give only five yachts to their kid on their birthday instead of six, and they can’t have that. Me, I was never able to hold down a job. ‘The Man’, he never had time for any of my radical new ways of thinking, so I went in and outta hospitals and halfway houses. By the time I made a full circle ‘round the city, half the people I knew at the first place were still there, the other half were dead, and a new set had just come in. They don’t give two shits about us, man.”

She sucked on her teeth listening to Moe speak, waxing philosophical as he stared up at the ceiling. Admittedly, she had no experience with what modern-day America was like—she barely even knew what America was like back in the days when the native peoples had full reign—but her father had never mentioned the more unsavory parts. He was more keen to ramble on about whatever new ice cream flavor Ben and Jerry’s had just released. Moe sniffed.

“If you ask me, I think they go after folks like us ‘cause we can’t help ourselves. Therapy’s too expensive, we ain’t got the money to pay for medication or food or shelter ‘cause we can’t

work, and when we come to Uncle Sam asking him for a bit of help, he gives us the finger and shoves us back out onto the street. You hear success stories, yeah, and behind every story about someone getting off the streets, there's a hundred people starving in alleyways, a hundred people stuck in mental hospitals without families who care about them, a hundred people who're left in the shadows of society. Folks who won't be missed. At least, not by the public at large. I think that's who they go for."

Hel wrinkled her face, feeling the nausea from earlier rise in her throat.

"Insidious."

"Yep. But that's just how it goes, eh? You get a news story every month or so about the mental health crisis, people get all scared for a bit, and then they forget about it until the next massacre…"

Moe sat up, stretching.

"Hrrnk—ahh, well, I don't mean to bring ya down, Helen. You wanna talk about baseball? There was a kid they brought in a while back, dunno how long ago, he had a real bad drinkin' problem. We talked about baseball for hours, kid's favorite team was the Baltimore Orioles. Anything ya like if it'll distract ya."

She sputtered, staggering to her feet.

"I—you—th-what?! Are you kidding?! Why would I want to talk about something as menial as a sport when my life is on the line?! I need to find a way out of here, do you read me? Find. A way. Out."

"Good luck with that, Helen."

"And my name isn't Helen, you buffoon! It's Hel! Just Hel!"

He put his hands up.

"Okay, okay, jeez. No need to shout. You'll upset the Pincushion Wives…Oh look, she's sewn a message for you. Y'know, I'm good friends with mine. If nothing else, she's a good conversation partner."

She turned around, and true to his word, the Pincushion Wife had raised her head and turned the velvet skull around to face her. The old woman tilted it forward, showing her the message embroidered on it in golden thread.

"Calm down, dearie. It'll all be over soon."

Hel just frowned at her, shaking her head and starting to pace. There *has* to be a way out of here, there has to be…she just has to find it. This cult was nothing more than a cavalcade of psychos and buffoons given too much power, surely they weren't smart enough to create inescapable cells. No, of course not…there had to be some way for her to escape.

And she would do it on her own.

Just like she's always done.

CHAPTER 19: Hondai

The ikebana arrangements were placed tastefully in the center of the long table as Ibaraki-douji walked to each side of the table, placing a package wrapped in delicately-folded red cloth in front of each contestant. At one end, Shuten-douji sat on his knees in the traditional *seiza* style as he had earlier, and at the other…

"Why did we have to choose the chicken nugget, exactly?"

The Prince and Rodion were seated among the audience, The Prince draped over his large companion like a throw blanket as he rested the side of his head on Rodion's stomach, puffing his cheeks out in a childish pout. Rodion gently pet his hair and occasionally wiped the blood that dripped from his crown of thorns off his pants. He would be smiling, but considering this challenge had an entirely likely chance of getting them both eaten, he wasn't really in the mood.

"Well, I know nothing about the topic, and we can only send you in once."

"You could have at least given it a college try like I did."

"And look how that turned out…"

"Excuse you? Rude. I did my best, isn't that enough?"

Rodion opened his mouth and shut it again without saying a word. He looked on at the other end of the table, where Samayou the crow-monk sat on their knees in a disciplined pose. True, he didn't have much confidence in Samayou's skills, but he had even less in The Prince. Still, he was surprised by the…relatively simple nature of the challenges so far, as well as the demon lord's shocking amount of knowledge when it came to these arts. Rodion supposed that he must have picked up more than a few hobbies other than drinking and partying in the woods since…since, what? Since his 'death', as Tamamo-no-Mae mentioned? Or since Hansei? And what exactly *was* this Hansei that they kept mentioning? He felt the light dampness of blood in The Prince's hair, and when his companion nuzzled a bit closer into his ample frame, he felt a bit more at ease. When he thought about why, however, those feelings quickly dissipated.

Regardless of his thoughts, he was snapped out of his ruminations by Ibaraki-douji's commanding voice.

"As per Shuten-douji's request, he has chosen the next challenge! The visiting team has elected to put forward…" His nose crumpled slightly. "...This completely unremarkable karasu-tengu, as their contestant. Regardless of the sagacity of their decisions, the challenge remains the same! Contestants, unwrap your packages. The challenge shall be…"

As each party unfolded the cloth wrapping, inside was a large pile of what appeared to be exceedingly long flat wooden sticks of an off-beige tone. Unrestricted by the wrapping, they unfolded and scattered out onto the table, and in Samayou's case, more than a few fell off the edge. Even those that stayed firmly on the table still stuck out a good distance to the sides, almost to the point where the audience could reach out and touch them.

"Basket-weaving!"

Shuten-douji let out a small huff of pride as he crossed his arms, looking down at the strands.

“Each contestant has been provided with an ample amount of *madake* bamboo, shaven into pieces that are ideal for use in weaving. You will have as much time as you need, and both the contestants *and the audience—”*

He whipped around to glare at the humans, The Prince petulantly burying his face in Rodion’s middle to avoid looking at him, before continuing.

“...are able to talk as well, to pass the time. Whoever makes the best basket, both aesthetically and practically, shall be declared the winner. You may start…”

Ibaraki-douji brought his fan down, shouting.

“Now!”

Immediately, both Samayou and Shuten-douji picked up strands and started to meticulously flatten out, bend, fold, and weave the strands of bamboo between one another. Samayou’s small frame made it slightly difficult, as there were several maneuvers they wanted to perform that would be best done with two people, but they made it work by placing their saddlebag down on the ends of some of the strands in order to keep them steady as they folded and twisted them. Shuten-douji’s massive and coarse hands made such a task easy, however, and he moved his big fingers with such finesse that it almost made you forget that he was over ten feet tall. Ibaraki-douji stood as a watchdog, scrutinizing their motions and studying their techniques.

After the initial rush of seeing such high-octane basket-weaving, most of the oni in the audience returned to their drinking, only occasionally turning their heads to view the scene as it occurred. Rodion happily accepted a small cup of sake that was handed to him, gently sipping it as he looked around. Well, talking *was* allowed. No better time, he supposed…

“Erm, I do have question. What is Hansei? Tamamo mentioned the word when we met with her, and you, Iba, also have mentioned. You, ah, must forgive me: I am Russian, if you know our history, you know there is little information given about other countries’ histories except for how they relate to war.”

Iba didn't turn around, continuing to scrutinize the basket-weaving and remaining silent. The Prince turned to look at him and sat up from his comfortable position, frowning.

“You know, *I’m* curious too. It’s impolite to keep a lady in the dark.”

The oni servant growled out the corner of his mouth, keeping quiet enough so that his master didn't hear him.

“(Frankly, I doubted you were a woman from the moment you entered. Your chest is pathetically flat.)”

“(Extremely rude of you, but go on?)”

“(...As such, I’m not beholden to tell you *anything*.)”

The Prince twirled around and laid his head on the floor, looking up at him through the hole in his crown of thorns as it bled on the rug. An annoyed-looking oni scrubbed the area with a washcloth while glaring at him.

“(Aw, c’moooon. Please? I’ll make it worth your while~!)”

“(Er, P-Prince, I am sure is not good idea to anger impartial judge…)”

"(Oh, but for what reason? If the omi-oni's a servant worth his salt, he should know his own country's history, right? Unless he *doesn't* know, in which case, oh my, how embarrassing…)"

Ibaraki-douji clenched his fists, but kept his eyes firmly trained on the baskets. The two competitors had made an impressive amount of progress for the small amount of time that had passed, the oni lord having constructed the base of the basket, and Samayou having completed roughly the same amount on theirs. Out of The Prince's eyeline, his eyebrow twitched, and he clasped a wrist around his prosthetic arm. The red-headed queen just stared at him with a smug expression on his face, boring holes into his shoulder blades, until finally the oni stomped and whipped around with a snarl on his face. In that moment, he lived up to the standard of the flesh-eating oni, prone to fly into rages, and his tusks were fully bared. The Prince scrambled up and hugged Rodi for protection, who just looked down at him resignedly.

"You want to know our country's history so badly, when you could not be bothered to educate yourself in the subject in your own time, then fine! It is only right that you know, considering you have—" He pointed to Samayou (unaware of the reference due to being entirely entrenched within the act of basket-weaving) and sneered with a sour look on his face. *"—Them*, on your team."

The Prince happily sat seiza-style once more with a childlike grin on his face.

"Oh goody, story-time~"

Iba gestured with his fan to the rest of the oni onlookers as well, who responded to the exchange with a variety of looks of confusion, apart from a few studying glares directed towards the monk.

"This will be a learning moment for all of you as well, youngsters who perhaps have not been told these stories by your mothers and fathers."

He cleared his throat.

"Hansei—for you foreigners, that's 'Self-Reflection'—is the word for how the Japanese mortals responded to our presence…us, including the kami as well as all other yokai, after the Pacific War. When the Reich Chancellery was obliterated by the Germanic-Nordic gods, shortly afterwards, Amaterasu-Omikami-sama brought all Shinto deities and yokai to the Tokyo Imperial Palace, intending to do the same—and much more. Japan was responsible for numerous horrible things during the war too, of course, and though they had sworn to noninterference long ago, she most of all was sickened and distraught. She believed it was best to wipe the slate clean and start anew."

Ibaraki-douji crossed his arms, eyes closing in remembrance.

"Master, do you recall that day? One of the many out of the summer of 1945?"

The oni lord grunted, nodding. He was too focused on the basket to respond properly, staring down at it with his obsidian-glass yellow-irised eyes in a look of fierce intensity. Iba shook his head, looking back to the humans.

"He would agree with me were he not occupied. However, on the way there, they were stopped by a coalition of forest yokai, a few lesser kami, and a number of others. There was a great skirmish, but ultimately, Amaterasu-Omikami-sama was persuaded into calming down and

speaking with their leader, who convinced her to pursue a less destructive solution. Speaking with government officials, military generals, and the Emperor, she and her allies—us included, though we had no ultimate say in it—convinced Japan to demilitarize and publicly admit fault for all of its wrongdoings, as well as provide reparations and continue to take full culpability for its own actions. Not only that, but a strict policy of non-interventionism was established: all of us had a 'role' that we played, and we were either expected to fulfill that role or leave the country. The kitsune played tricks and shapeshifted, us human-eating oni remained in the forests to feast upon wayward travelers, and the kami remained in Takamagahara, their home. In return, humans would not interfere with our actions, and an informal system comparable to your natural parks were created: some areas were simply yokai territory, and so humans stayed away from them. Good for solitary yokai and kami, not good for those who enjoyed humanity's company and those who preyed on them, such as our kin."

The Prince stroked his chin, intrigued. The oni surrounding him murmured among one another, having never heard the full story before: it was simply tradition for them, and when the older ones confirmed the stories, a few shouts came up from those who were upset that they weren't told sooner.

"Then, is that why there were only humans in the cities?"

"Not wholly. Japan has never been good with tolerance, so during…ah, what is it you would call it? Not *Tsuihou*[26]…"

Rodion put a hand on his cheek, frowning.

"The Big Mess."

"Right. What an uncreative name…regardless, the Big Mess resulted in many deportations. Immigration is very strict, and some species are simply forbidden from moving here long-term…though, even those who just visit are met with suspicion and derision."

The Russian's eyes scrolled upwards as he thought about leaving Fionn all alone in a foreign hospital, surrounded by people he didn't know, but his idle thoughts were interrupted by The Prince's lilting tone, accompanied by a limp point over to the monk.

"And what does this have to do with the chicken nugget, hm?"

Ibaraki-douji let out a long, deep, and fully intentional sigh of annoyance, steam pouring out from between his fangs, before gesturing with his fan to the monk.

"Your 'chicken nugget' there, who you call Samayou, was the leader of that group who opposed Amaterasu-Omikami-sama. The name they have chosen is nothing more than a pseudonym…and the older oni in the room may recognize them as Haneteki-no-Mori: Haneteki of the Woods."

Said older oni went utterly quiet—the younger ones alternating between gasping and confused questions to the older ones—as they focused their eyes on the diminutive and unassuming little monk, bird-like figure continuing to silently weave their basket. However, they seemed to have noticed the topic of conversation, as they had lowered their reed hood somewhat.

[26] Lit. "Expulsion".

Shuten-douji stopped mid-motion, a thread of bamboo halfway through the hole it ran through as his eyes slowly scrolled to the monk. His heavy brow furrowed into a mess of ridges and valleys, and with a twitch of his fingers, the shaving he had in his hand snapped in two. The words seeped out of his mouth like venom.

"...Haneteki-no-Mori, you say…?"

Rodion shuddered a bit from the gravity in his voice. He didn't want to see a ten-foot beast like the oni lord in front of him in a berserker rage…though, he supposed, Samayou—Haneteki? No, he would stick with Samayou, it was easier to say, he supposed Samayou would have seen the same thing long ago. Ibaraki-douji crossed his arms, the hanging sleeves of his imperial garb folding among one another as he glared at Samayou.

"They were excommunicated from most of Japan after that. As penance, they oh-so-nobly took on the role of a komuso—a wandering mendicant—and adopted a vow of silence, revoking their own name and traveling the countryside for the next century or so. They were unwelcome in yokai territory, and they were unwelcome in human settlements."

The Prince of Fuck All squeaked a pinky finger in his ear, boredly letting his eyes wander despite being one of the people wanting to know in the first place, and Rodion raised his hands with a nervous grin.

"Er, but, forgive me, I do not understand…why were they not allowed back in yokai territory? Did you not agree with their wishes?"

"As varied as the ones on Amaterasu-Omikami's side were, they all—we all—still obey her every command, as she is the High Kami. We disagreed with Haneteki-no-Mori, but we could not voice our anger towards Amaterasu-Omikami…she can be quite fearsome when angered, and so it's in our best interest to keep her happy. For many yokai and kami, Haneteki-no-Mori is forever the one who objected to a "New Japan", to wipe the deeds of our past clean and start anew…and the one who defended a people guilty of such horrible crimes."

Ibaraki-douji turned to Rodion and flashed a terrifying grin.

"If it were up to us, all humans in the country would have become nothing but cattle for us to feed on."

He swallowed, a sudden small shock of fear shooting through his body. Behind his retainer, he could see Shuten-douji still frozen in place, having lowered his hands and glaring down at Samayou. His tone was still oozing with vitriol, though it had abated somewhat.

"...Haneteki-no-Mori."

Samayou did not respond. The demon lord clenched the fist still holding a broken strand of bamboo and growled out towards the karasu-tengu once more.

"Samayou."

They looked up from their project, meeting Shuten-douji's hateful gaze as he glared daggers through the holes of their reed hood.

"...It's 'cause of you that we've been reduced to this, y'know. Because of you, we go hungry, we only eat what we forage and what we can steal, because of *you*, we've languished and stagnated. Japan has languished and stagnated. The gods are out of touch with the people, yet

they still expect worship like the pompous asses they are. The yokai lose all fulfillment in their lives and simply continue their jobs until they pack their shit and leave. You have been exiled, reduced to nothing more than a tramp who plays his flute and begs for money from people who don't know or like you, wandering as an outlaw who's only allowed to live so that they can wallow in the hell that they have created. Don't you regret anything you did that day? Don't you regret causing all this trouble?"

Samayou stopped weaving for a moment, thought, and then shook their head solemnly. The oni lord let out a bitter laugh like a train giving off steam and slowly unthreaded the bamboo shaving he had held onto for so long, flicking it to the side as he continued his own project, the hate in his eyes dissipating.

"Ha! Then I'm looking forward to when this competition is over. I can't want to see a pathetic whelp like you begging for their life, as little worth as it has!"

The Prince called out from the side.

"Oi! Don't count out the chicken nugget just yet, big boy! Even if I just met them today, I'm sure I've seen a lot more of who they are than you ever have. Now shush and let the chicken weave!"

Ibaraki-douji whipped around to shout at him, but a hand-raise from his master stopped him in his tracks. The two locked eyes, trading silent questions and statements, before Iba just shook his head and returned to evaluating the competition. He made a promise to be impartial to his master, and he's never failed to uphold one before.

The two wove for a while longer, perhaps ten or fifteen minutes, until ultimately, both gave the sign that they were done. The green-skinned oni raised his metal fan.

"The basket-weaving challenge has officially come to a close! Now is the time to evaluate both parties' creations! They will be judged both in terms of aesthetic and practicality. Shuten-douji's will be examined first."

Rodion and The Prince both got up (The Prince wrapping his arms around his partner as he followed along), peering through the gathering crowd to get a look at Shuten-douji's basket, Ibaraki-douji scrutinizing it from every angle. He showed it off with crossed arms, though his smugness from the previous game was absent. Instead, he had a look of determination on his face, the look of someone for whom victory was not assured, at least not mentally.

It was an artisanal and hand-made affair, made with surprising precision and attention to detail. From the base, it had a shape resembling that of a torus, a squashed cylinder that bulged out to the sides to showcase the latticework that went into it. This torus shape sloped up into a concave shape, flaring outwards like a trumpet towards the ceiling. The opening was roughly half the size of a manhole cover, and above it arced a handle that sprouted from the projecting curves like cattail shoots. The base stood firm, and it was the size of a typical flower pot. Rodion heard some oni behind him murmur about it being in a '*wamono* style', though he had little idea what that meant. The Prince patted Rodion's chest, pointing at it as he whispered.

"(It doesn't look half bad, does it? Pretty fortuni, if I say so myself. Wouldn't have thought a big hunk of meat like that would be so good with his fingers…)"

"(Please do not phrase it like that.)"

"(Aw, why? Are you jealous~?)"

"(Believe me, I could very easily prove how good I am with my fingers if you gave me the chance.)"

The Prince tittered with a blush, and a beet-red Rodion whisper-shouted back at him.

"(I'm a *surgeon!)"*

The crowd had suddenly started to move in the other direction, and The Prince summarily ignored Rodion's blushing protests to drag him over to Samayou's basket, grinning innocently as Ibaraki-douji declared that the monk's basket was next up for evaluation.

"(Come now, let's go and see what the chicken nugget's whipped up! The big lug might have made a pretty little vase, but let's see if he can compete with—)"

He stopped mid-sentence once he saw Samayou's basket, which they stood behind proudly.

"(—Oh, we're definitely getting eaten.)"

Samayou's basket, frankly, looked more like some sort of demented modern art exhibit rather than a functional basket. When The Prince and Rodion both pictured a basket in their minds, they were simple shapes: a cup-like form to hold whatever it contained, and a handle to carry it around. This object, however, lacked both of those things. It had the vague shape of the crucible, yes, in the same way a donut is in the vague shape of a tire, but its weaving job appeared messy and uneven at best. Gaps in the woven sheets of bamboo made it so you could hold it up and peer straight through it, and it entirely lacked a handle, instead possessing a tenuous lip of flaring bamboo strips on each side. It looked flimsy, it looked useless, and it looked plain bad. While Rodion put a hand to his cheek as he looked on at the mass of straw nervously, The Prince swallowed the bit of fear that had bubbled up into his throat and looked over at Ibaraki-douji.

The green oni surveyed the basket, picking it up and turning it over from all angles as the crowd of oni hushed and whispered among one another in tones of hushed confusion. A few snickered under their breath. The Russian shrugged with a sigh and a tired grin, raising a hand to Samayou.

"Well, you tried your best, Samayou…Is all we could have asked for, I suppose."

"Is it too late to ask for more?"

He glared down at a disappointed Prince, but the monk was unfettered and gestured a talon towards Shuten-douji. Against what the two of them had expected, he wore not a look of smugness or arrogance, but of studied determination as he himself scanned the basket. It would seem he was taking this competition a bit more seriously than the last, especially after Samayou's true identity was revealed to him. The thought that even the smallest doubt existed in his mind—the fact that he knew he could lose if he was too careless—eased Rodion's mind slightly.

Finished with the examination, Ibaraki-douji cleared his throat to stop the muttering of the crowd, raising his metal fan as he returned to the center of the table.

"Now, the test of practicality! This *gunbai* fan weighs roughly five kilograms[27], and if the basket cannot hold this weight, it goes without saying that it will be quite bad for whichever contestant's creation is incapable of carrying it! Shuten-douji's shall be tested first!"

The oni lord held his basket by the handle, holding it out to Iba as the green oni slowly placed his fan into it. The crowd held their breath as the handle entered first, then the fan itself…and he unclasped his fingers around it, one after the other, until—

Rip.

As soon as Ibaraki-douji let go of the fan, the sound of splitting bamboo echoed throughout the room, and the gunbai clattered onto the table with a heavy 'thunk' sound, leaving behind it a massive hole in the bottom of the basket. He winced immediately as the crowd let out a groan of disappointment, his fingers curling back, and Shuten-douji grunted under his breath as he grit his teeth. The Prince doubled over in laughter, letting out a high-pitched cackle as he buried his face in Rodion's side, only stopping when he was politely shushed by his partner.

The downcast Iba picked his fan back up without a word, walking over to a reserved Samayou's messily-crafted basket before shakily clearing his throat and placing the metal fan into the bamboo pot. He uncurled his fingers one by one from the handle, then pulled his hand back. For one moment, there was complete silence in the room as all eyes turned to the basket…

And miraculously, it held.

Some sound of mixed relief and excitement caught in The Prince's throat as he watched Samayou lift up the basket, twirl around, and even toss it up into the air before catching it several times, Rodion letting out a sigh. Shuten-douji groaned like a piece of rending metal and covered his face with both hands, Ibaraki-douji's face twisting into disappointment, resentment, and confusion as he retrieved his gunbai fan. He let out a deep sigh, raising it once more.

"...While my master's basket is well-crafted aesthetically, made in the Chinese-originating *karamono* style, it fails to serve its purpose. Haneteki's not only is sturdy enough to hold 11 pounds when faced with a variety of stressors, but is made in the asymmetrical and wholly Japanese *wamono* style. Thus, as much as it pains me…"

He pointed the fan to Samayou.

"The karasu-tengu has made the better basket. They win."

While the oni in the crowd alternated between confusion and shouts of protest, Samayou hopped off of the table and ran to Rodion's open arms. He picked them up and hoisted them up the same way a father would to his son, spinning in a circle as he laughed heartily. The corners of his mouth and eyes creased in that way that they always did, and The Prince found himself blushing just watching the man smile and laugh and congratulate the silent monk on a job well done. He then turned his attention to Ibaraki-douji, a glint in his eye, and pounced on him with roaming hands.

"Oh, Iba-chaaan, you're so wonderful! I thought at first that this game was definitely rigged as shit, but you really are a proper impartial judge! You know, I really like that in a guy, neutrality and an objective eye~"

[27] Around 11 pounds.

"G-Get the hell off of me!"

'Iba-chan' quickly wriggled out of The Prince's grasp, shoving him away into the crowd as he brushed himself off.

"You don't have the right to touch me, Nanimonai-no-hime, only my master does."

He just smiled innocently and crossed his arms into his coat.

"Ain't that the way it always is…Sorry though! Got perhaps a bit too carried away there, appy-polly-loggies, my good droog~"

Shuten-douji, having risen from his seat with a look of defeat on his face, trudged over to Rodion and Samayou and peered down at them with dull yellow eyes. The two of them quit the celebrations as the demon lord loomed over them, Rodion still holding Samayou effortlessly in his arms. He looked up to the oni.

"...Yes?"

"...Y'know what I wanna know? How? How the hell did you manage to not only weave a better basket than me, but one that actually worked?! I've been takin' basket-weaving lessons from Orihime[28] every Friday for the past five months! You friggin' stupid bird, how did you beat me?! Tell me!"

Rodion was about to open his mouth and state that Samayou is not beholden to anything, that they won fair and square, but the little monk tapped on one of his hands twice before twirling a talon claw.

"Ah, this?"

He turned Samayou towards Shuten-douji, holding him up so that the two were basically eye level. Once more, the monk tapped his hand, and Rodion flipped him around. The karasu-tengu gestured to the back of his reed hood, and the demon lord craned his neck downwards to squint at it. His eyesight wasn't as good as it used to be, but having your head cut off and buried in the mountains for decades will do that to you. Yet, once he saw what was on there, he hung his head low and sighed.

On the back of the reed hood's hem, no bigger than a dime, was a meticulously-woven square seal that contained three miniscule and somewhat squashed characters, reading *'Samayou'*. He scratched his gray hair as Rodion put him down.

"No fuckin' wonder, you've probably had to re-weave that damn hood of yours hundreds of times over the years…I guess, well met. But I still hate yer damn guts, and you'll still go down smooth after all this is over!"

The Prince sauntered over with a bottle of sake in his hand and snickered, putting a hand on Rodion's shoulder as the three gazed up at him.

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[28] Lit. "Weaver Girl". The daughter of Tentei, the Sky King (a version of the Jade Emperor), she wove beautiful clothing and fell in love with Hikoboshi the cowherder after expressing her loneliness to her father. The two of them were separated by the Amanogawa river once Tentei became angry that his daughter no longer weaved and that there were cows everywhere, but the two were soon allowed to reunite for a few days every Summer, which became the Tanabata festival. Tentei swears he got rid of all the cows, but the stink of cow pat never came out of his carpets, which he hates awkwardly explaining to guests every time they arrive.

“I wouldn’t be talking game as big as you are if I were you, big red. We’re one-for-one, and that means the next game is for all the marbles. We win, we get the fiery clobber and you go to bed with your tail tucked between your legs.”

Shuten-douji bared his teeth and snorted.

“You lose, and me and my clan get to feast on you and pick our teeth with your ribs.”

Rodion shuddered a bit and murmured something about his ribs being too thick to perform the job adequately, which caught Shuten-douji’s attention as he was joined by his narrow-faced retainer.

“Either way. I lost…”

His eyes flitted to Ibaraki-douji, who looked away in shame.

“...So, you get to pick the next challenge, Russian.”

Rodion sputtered a bit, caught off-guard by the question despite the fact that, by process of elimination, he would be the only one left to participate, and put his hands up.

“Er, m-me? I, uh…aha, gosh, I should have…thought of this beforehand…”

The Prince patted him on the shoulder for a bit of reassurance, and when he looked to the redhead for support, he just gave a cheesy thumbs-up before guzzling down the sake bottle’s contents. He huffed, and looked to Iba.

“Are you able to procure alchemical tools and substances like you did the bamboo and flowers? An alembic, a Hessian crucible, a distillation still, some Erlenmeyer flasks, and some fulminating gold should be sufficient.”

“I doubt I could find any of your nonsensical implements, if they even exist.”

“O-Of course they exist, I am alchemist and doctor by trade! I doubt Shuten would be very happy dissecting body to remove malignant squamous cell carcinoma from acnestis, would you not?”

Shuten-douji crossed his arms with a grin.

“I’m more of a ‘deconstructor’ than a ‘dissector’.”

“Da, yes, that is what I mean. Summoning demons definitely out of question as well…I doubt you could produce a violin large enough for him to play, either…”

The Prince impatiently tapped his foot, turning the sake bottle over and frowning at the single drop that fell from its empty interior.

“Didi, why are you even trying to be fair? If you challenge him to the violin, he’ll fumble with it and then probably smash it, it’d be a cinch!”

“I am trying to be fair because this game is only allowed for us to have fighting chance, and very easily, they could change their mind. Is entertainment to them, even if for us, is our lives.”

The oni lord bellowed out a laugh, startling Samayou and The Prince enough to get them to scramble behind Rodi.

“Glad to see you’ve got at least one brainiac on your team! Now make your pick, Russian, or I just might decide that a meal is more important than entertainment after all…”

He crossed his arms, lowering his head and thinking as he stroked his beard and racked his brain for a suitable challenge…and suddenly, after a few moments, an idea flashed into his head.

In that period of thought, he reminisced about his past, the old days with his associates in Kaliningrad…and while it was by no means ideal, it would be the best shot he had. He just hoped it would at least give him a fighting chance…

"...I have idea, but will require moving table out of center of room."

CHAPTER 20: Communication Breakdown

"Your Holiness, if I may be so impolite as to voice my concerns, the fact that you are simply sitting by and doing nothing in the face of Heaven itself being invaded by forces beyond our understanding is causing me to become somewhat concerned."

Metatron sat in his position on one of the many floating auxiliary thrones occupied by the seraphim, a short distance behind and to the left of the central 'throne' from which all of the chairs radiated. It wasn't really a throne, it was the Empyrean, but it was much easier to just call it His throne than to explain why it was called that. Consisting of three incomprehensibly huge rings of rainbow light that constantly spun in an oscillating motion, they encompassed an unendingly bright and incomparably divine light, the one who is all and the all that is one, He who is who He is, the Endless One, He who is the most gracious, the all-compassionate, the beneficent…

The seraph kept his hat in his lap out of respect, craning his neck as he looked over at all the other seraphim. Despite the fact they were in dire circumstances, the seraphim simply sat where they were, doing the things they usually did: murmuring prayers. Lazy bastards. Metatron looked at the throne, one of the few able to do so without immediately dissolving into fire and ash, and furrowed his brow.

"I certainly don't claim to hold any knowledge of your ineffable plan, but it would be appreciated if you could be a bit swifter on the draw. We're running low on angel bodies—Gabriel's told me we've gone through most of the lowest angels, the archangels are on their last legs, the powers are struggling as hard as they could…Thank goodness we tidied the place up, otherwise all the saved souls would be in a panic as well…But, the fact of the matter is, my Lord…we need you. So, if you could maybe…I don't know, um…let's say, find where Man Unkind is situated, and then wipe them out? Forever? I know you aren't a fan of people going against your plans."

The light remained as strong as ever, and Metatron ran his fingers through his hair. He would never admit it, of course, and he knew that God could, will, and does read his every thought to scan it for sin…but He certainly had a reputation for being a petty and jealous heel sometimes.

He thought back to when Elisha the prophet was trudging through the Idumean desert, and a couple of traveling boys had teased him for being bald. God was really focusing on His prophets back then, and the nerve of these kids had made Him so angry that when Elisha cursed them in His name, he sent a bear to maul all forty-two of them. It really wasn't necessary, especially since He Himself had said that he wasn't the biggest fan of bald people to that old codger Leviticus, but then again, he never really was a fan of anything old Levi said anyways. It was usually accompanied by a stern fist-shaking.

And what about Job? That poor fool, God was speaking with his best seraph when he made a bet to the Lord that Job's faith was so strong, so unflappable, that no amount of suffering or torment could shake him. As a result, He gave the go-ahead to the seraph to kill Job's children

and animals, burn down his house, destroy his accrued wealth, and afflict him with terrible sickness. Metatron wasn't there, but he saw the pictures, and he never could quite get the image of festering boils the size of baseballs out of his head. The Lord made things right in the end, but it was still quite a surprising move.

Then there was that whole business with the Flood…though admittedly, that was more Mastema's fault than anything else—the Nephilim were mucking up the whole Earth, and He wanted what He called 'a great cleansing', and Mastema just happened to take that literally. Noah wasn't too happy about being the only person left after the world ends up drowning in holy rainwater, but God at least promised to never do it again. Metatron would be lying if he said that he wasn't sure that He had at least thought about going back on his word a few times, though, before deciding ultimately that mankind was doing a pretty good job of it themselves.

He looked up at the Empyrean and sighed, smiling tiredly.

"...Please? Could you please do something about this?"

There was no response, of course. The seraph just shook his head and then put it in his hands. Why was he honestly expecting anything other than that as His answer…?

Suddenly, his revolving halo buzzed and made a sound like a wonderful trumpet signaling the end of days, and he broke a piece off to speak into it.

"Gabriel?"

"Yes, yes, it's me, Exalted Scribe, May the Lord be with you."

"And also with you, yes, I'm sitting right next to him. What's the status on The Prince and the other one?"

"We have no records of The Prince before age 16, and the Russian…well, he is guilty of many sinful things. He will be going directly to Hell once he dies, that's for certain. However, he has dealt with this cult his entire life up to this point, and—"

There was the sound of cartoonishly maniacal cackling, the sort you would hear in a haunted house, and she screamed as the tone of metal slicing through the air rang throughout the air.

"You stupid—I'm on the phone! Don't interrupt me, you vile thing!"

Metatron flinched upon hearing what sounded similar to a hand grenade going off with an angelic choir behind its cacophonous blast, blinking a few times before raising the halo a bit more.

"...Gabriel?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Just had to take care of one of these things. Uriel is down, Raphael is still up, but just barely, and troops are falling faster than he can resuscitate them…we need Michael to take care of this, or at least someone to seal up the entrance!"

"Gabriel, we can't, it's impossible to seal up the entrance!"

"Why not?! Get those miserable ophanim to take care of it!"

"It would take *centuries*, you remember how long it took to rebuild Heaven the last time! That's why we can't call on Michael either, at least not right now. Things aren't *that* dire. The Lord is still safe and sound, I am with him. How is your condition?"

-

The Archangel Gabriel kept her piece of halo stuck into one of her ears as she wielded her long and tapered horn with two hands, striking down the beings that launched themselves at her. Scurrying like oversized arachnids, jaundiced hands with groping and gnarled fingers, outstretched in some desperate plea for interlocking digits, skittered about on their many hairy legs and made a direct shot towards the archangel. Spitting on the ground, she swung once, and one of the members of the Five Fingers of Fascism was sent careening over the horizon of clouds. Such a play left her open, however, and another hand-spider lunged onto her, gibbering political maxims in fractured German. Bristled legs flailed and jabbed into her side, piercing through her skin and drawing glittering golden blood with a power she could not place, as she yelled.

"Get *off of me,* you repugnant monstrosity!"

She thrust her elbow into its pinky finger, cracking it backwards at a 90-degree angle and causing it to fall to the ground limply. Whipping her head around and her silver hair following suit, she watched three more of the creatures approach. Taking a deep breath, she silently thanked the Lord that she had diverted the responsibility of 'Judgement Day trumpeter' to Israfel, and blew into her horn. It fired out a condensed projectile of audial energy, a tightly-wound ball of air and divine light, which sailed through the air and exploded with an angelic choir. Gabriel pumped her fist, but kept her smile for later.

The sounds of fighting still continued throughout the sphere of Shehaqim, near the gates of Hell, and with every labored scream that echoed out, the sounds of struggle became overtaken by the racket of chittering, cackling, gibbering, and other such monstrous noises that came out from Man Unkind's seemingly-endless supply of agents. Above her, powers with cleaving armor let out exhausted battle cries as they fended off a gaggle of levitating Polite Businessmen who rose like marionettes as their stretched-back rictus grins unhinged their jaws to spit projectile-vitriol at the angels. The sound of thick red block letters clanging against divinely-forged swords paired horridly with the Enochian shouts of their commanders, who held their shield up to keep away the Sons of Sam, the bipedal werewolves with an unmatched thirst for blood.

Groans and murmurs sounded from those bodies strewn about on the clouds, Raphael crouched beside two angels who had been fused together—a result of the Twin Fantasies, cartoonish canines conjoined at the arms that swayed to the silent waltz that echoed in their minds—with a tired look on his face. His face was covered in scratches and bruises, his suit torn in several places, and even while he raised his cane to fire at the members of the Dead Letter Gendarmerie that marched towards them (he wondered, feeling the magic coming off of them, was Papa Legba involved after all?) it was clear his own energy was running low. Unlike mortal beings who relied on their own willpower to conduct magic, angels relied on God's divine light, which was nigh-endless. Still, they were not perfect—they had stamina, like any other being, which could be depleted with long enough of an onslaught.

If there was any proof of that, it would be Uriel's limp body a short few meters away, being mobbed by hulking humanoids with heads resembling miniature suns, the Sunshine Supermen, who held their form upwards as they spouted sunscreen slogans at them in some sort of ritualistic action.

She panted, putting a hand to her side where the legs had ripped her robe, and watched the golden ichor pool in her palm with a sneer. The very fact that abominations like these were able to draw the blood of God's servants disgusted her. They didn't have the right, and putting that aside, how could they do so in the first place? The only things that can seriously injure angels, to the point of having them feel actual pain, are weapons and ammunition cursed by demons…

She felt her stomach, or at least what she had resembling a stomach, turn as she pondered the possibility. The pondering was cut short by Metatron's insistent tone over the halo.

"Gabriel, are you still there? How is your condition?"

"Yeah, yeah—I-I mean, yes. Yes, I'm still here. I've been managing to fend these things off well enough, but I've been hurt. It drew blood."

"What…? Drawing the blood of an angel? Then—"

"Do you have anyone in Hell who can tell us what's been going on down there?!"

"No, unfortunately. Anyone we send down there just gets laughed out of the country and comes back with the same answer—'They're doing their jobs, but they aren't happy about it'. What do you think is going on?"

One of the Twin Fantasies bounded towards Gabriel in a staggered gait, noodly bone-white fingers reaching out towards her. In one smooth motion, she twirled her trumpet in her arms and jabbed the pointed mouthpiece into its chest. It tried to keep approaching, outstretching its limbs to her face, trying to fuse the elements of her face together, but the flared shape of the instrument stopped it in its tracks. She lifted the horn up, squinting her eyes as they flashed with a small golden light. She sniffed once, twice, and her suspicions were confirmed as her eyes casted towards the entrance to Hell.

"These agents have had a mass hex placed on them by a demon caster. Likely one of the higher-ranked demons, a duke or an earl or something along those lines. Smells like turmeric."

She never did like how demons insisted on ascribing a scent or a flavor to their magic. It was unnecessary, and all it did was draw them closer to the level of mortals. How low they have fallen. Nonetheless, the archangel racked her brain trying to remember which prominent demon had chosen that scent…

Suddenly, a searing pain shot across her fingertips, and she flinched to let go of her instrument. It remained where it was, and when she focused her eyes on the Twin Fantasy in front of her, she saw that it had its hands clasped around the shaft of the instrument, and it stared at her with its four beady eyes as the tips of her fingers welded themselves into the horn's outer rim. Gabriel yanked her hand away and felt skin tearing.

"Gah—!! S-stupid…"

It was more directed at herself for not noticing than at the enemy, but she nonetheless held her hand as it melted into the horn. Like a wax candle melting into water, her fingers dissolved away into the material, quickly followed by her palm. The seraph shouted through her halo bit.

"G-Gabriel, what's wrong?!"

She saw the Twin Fantasy staring at her, sharply inhaled through her teeth, and made a decision. Softly placing the side of her hand to where her wrist was melding with the instrument, Gabriel let out a guttural shout and brought her limb harshly downwards. Like a knife through butter, the side of her hand cleaved through her wrist, and she immediately bounded back a good few meters while holding the flat stump. It was a self-inflicted injury—thus, no blood or pain—but she still sucked on the inside of her cheek thinking about how annoying it would be to re-manifest that hand…and how it was ultimately a better alternative than what may have happened otherwise.

The second the conjoined dog-men dropped her instrument, she raised her hand, and it naturally came back to her like a paperclip to a magnet.

"Gabriel, answer me!"

"I can *hear you*, you know! I'm just kind of busy right now, Exalted Scribe! These dog-like things fused my hand to my trumpet, and I had to sever it. Better than the alternative."

She brought the instrument to her lips, aiming for the momentarily confused beast, but blowing on it produced little more than a sad toot. Cursing in Enochian, she clasped her hand around the horn, and it disappeared in a flash of light.

"Horn won't work anymore, my right hand—well, what's left of it—it's clogged the pipe. I'll be on my own for now. Are you good to take orders?"

"I-I mean, I'm…my hands are, uh, kind of tied, here…(I'm right next to God here, Gabriel, I cannot speak freely in His lieu…)"

"Then do as the pagans do, act and if He does not protest, assume his tacit approval! I do not trust them, I don't trust *any* of them, but send Phanuel to retrieve The Prince, Rodion, and Fionn from Earth! Bring them here as soon as possible. If He cannot—no, *will not* act, then it falls to His servants to act in His stead!"

~

Metatron was silent, seated in his chair with his chin resting in a palm, eyes firmly fixed on the other seraphim. Their first and only priority is to protect God…not His servants. They were unlikely to do anything. The cherubim always have their hands busy with the *chayot*, and the ophanim…well, they're the ophanim. They had grown indolent, letting their defenses falter out of arrogance…who would attack Heaven? Who would be so insane, so short-sighted, so foolish as to attack the realm of God Himself?

He supposed they had their answer.

"...Do you read me?"

"...Yes. Yes, I do."

"I need to keep taking care of this invasion here. You need to send him down there yourself. I'm counting on you, Exalted Scribe, this could get very bad."

The seraph rose from his throne, flapping his wings as he floated down onto the perfectly-polished white cloudstone of the Empyrean's hall, approaching the front door. Best not to talk on the halo in God's presence—it sort of throws Him off.

"It could, but we won't let it get to that point. I won't let it."

"Good to hear it. Then…wait. Hold on."

He had his hand on the door, stopping.

"Hold on?"

"I was being attacked by two of these dog-like things, but they just…stopped moving. They stopped and turned to look at the entrance to Hell, and…Wait, all of them are. They all stopped. I think Raphael's down, but they've stopped moving and they're all looking at…"

"...Looking at what?"

"...What is that…no, who is that? What are they d—"

The line cut out.

"...Gabriel? Gabriel?!"

Metatron pulled the halo piece out of his ear, shaking it with a grimace. Shit. That's probably Gabriel out too…that's three out of the four archangels down, and Michael…well, Michael is pretty much their last resort, but there's no way he'd be willing to help again. Best not to approach Hell for now, but he was given an order.

And if there's one thing he knows he's good at, it's following orders.

~

"Order of large curly fries and a diet coke for table three."

Somewhere in California, a young girl with what appeared to be a mass of posies for hair and dark skin with texture like tree bark wearing a simple red-and-white uniform placed down a waxpaper bowl of curly fries and a cup of coke at a table. She stood back up straight and smiled, though the corners being pulled a bit too much made it obvious she was faking it.

"You want anything else, you just call me over, alright?"

The two people at the table murmured affirmations and watched her walk away before resuming their conversation.

One, a sleepy-looking humanoid with pale indigo skin, long black hair, and horns the shape of plus signs, lazily took a curly fry and popped it in her mouth.

"So, like I was saying, you hear about that Bowie concert the past week? They're saying it had the—get this, the *most* fae turnout for any concert in the contiguous U.S., and people are accusing him of playing to his species. Ain't that fucked? Like, guy's an elf from Brixton—you remember the whole thing with the Brixton fairies, yeah?"

The other, a lithe and athletic humanoid with purple skin, a pointed nose, and combed-back grey hair, tapped his boots on the floor as he sipped his coke.

"Yeh, I know 'bout that, theater troupe made up of gay 'n trans fae and all, they performed back in the 70s. What's it got to do with Bowie?"

"Not much, but it's like…y'know, there ain't harm in playing to who you know, y'know? Like, I'm a sloth demon, right? Would it be right if I played, I dunno, some concert to a crowd of…pride demons, for instance?"

The pride demon sniffed and sipped his coke.

"I wouldn't really care, honestly. Unless you played some of that pansy mainstream shit. No bubblegum pop."

"Okay, okay, bad example. What I'm saying is, it's interesting. Guy's been around since the '60s, he was one of those big breakout hits during that whole…"

"The Big Mess."

"Yeah, yeah, the Big Mess. Folks went out of their minds finding out the guy they'd been hearing on the radio ended up being secretly an elf the whole time, but he was just such a damn good musician, nobody really cared! It was a big deal back then, but now you see like, we've got Type O Negative and a couple metal bands, the Misfits are just a bunch of necromancy pet projects, that Sun Ra guy—"

"I dunno if I agree with aliens coming and playing their weird-ass music on this planet."

The indigo-skinned one shot her friend a look and ate another fry.

"Well, I didn't *ask* if you agreed with it, did I? I'm just saying it exists, and it wouldn't have ever existed if things hadn't changed so much."

"Heh, yeah. You never see angels doing shit like that. Can you imagine? Fuckin' Zaphkiel or some shit playing anything other than a harp or a trumpet…I doubt they even know what 'rock and roll' even is, other than it's evil and Satanic."

"I think Byleth took credit for that, didn't they?"

"Fuck if I know. All I know is that those stuck-up bastards wouldn't know 'living' if it crawled up their ass and died. All they do is sit on cloud nine with their thumb up their ass, staring down at mortals…and fuck, y'know what also pisses me off about those shitty, shitty winged motherfuckers—"

"Easy, Rog, remember your blood pressure."

"...Remember what about it?"

"I dunno, that's just what I hear people are supposed to say when someone they know gets angry."

"Hmph. Probably one of those gross mortal things…but anyways, about the damn angels—"

Rog yammered on, angrily waving his drink around as he gesticulated and ranted about angels, about how morally superior all of them think they are, about how they're really nothing more than sheltered and spoiled kids who hide behind their all-powerful father due to being complete weaklings on their own (of course, this wasn't true, but Rog was on the younger side and had only heard stories about the Great War from his dad, and dad was a bit off his rocker himself), and his friend sluggishly dragged the box of fries towards herself as she pulled out her phone.

The top news story from mortal sources was mostly about the Hope Diamond theft in Washington D.C., which she didn't quite care about—she lived in Fresno anyways—each article adding a footnote that explained that the theft had caused the reclusive director of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History to reveal themself as a Fomorian, plus something about them talking with DUO (What was that again? Some car company?) about the incident. It made her snicker a little, making such a big deal over such a small thing. Really, she doubted they would get any pushback, unless the museum was suddenly besieged by eighty-year-old Irish immigrants.

She never really looked at the mortal news sources anyways. Most of the time, she checked FairyTaler[29], Harrower[30], and Firebrand Presses, which was really the only demon-centric news company that sent stories outside the country. Surprisingly enough, despite the fact she had no real friends on Harrower, she still had tons of notifications…and there was a top story on Firebrand's website.

The sloth demon nearly coughed up a chunk of fry.

"And that's another thing I hate about angels, they—whoa, you alright, Sid?"

Sid coughed once, coughed twice, and looked up at her friend.

"*Koff, koff*—Have you checked Harrower lately?"

"Oh, I don't use that site. It's bad for your mental health, every day you just keep getting bombarded with news stories, 'oh, Hell is getting hotter', yeah, no shit. It's Hell. That's what it does, the whole place is on fire—"

"Then did you check Firebrand?"

"No? Jeez, what's gotten into you?"

"The Devil's dead. Some revolutionary got into his mansion and burned his whole room down with him in it. Not only that, it looks like he's trying to incite another war in Heaven…between his forces and the angels, plus us on his side."

Rog sniffed. Then he rested his chin in his palm, looking off to the side at the pimply teenager running the front counter, taking a portly manticore's order. He closed his eyes, deep in thought as he drove the tip of his finger into his temple, and then outstretched his fingers.

"It's not election season, is it?"

"Nope."

"Is he a demon revolutionary, at least?"

"Not at all. Sources say he's not from this world. Can create black fire that obliterates whatever it burns away."

"What 'sources'? Firebrand never sources their shit, they just rely on underpaid interns to do the field reporting for them so they can spit it back up."

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[29] Primary social media site for most fae who choose to adapt to modern life. Good for recipes, lawn care advice, and gardening tips.

[30] Social media/image-sharing site used mostly by demons. Full of porn and the occasional "TIFU" story from work about someone accidentally tripping their coworker into the boiling vats of lava again.

"Dude, the guy who was basically our President just got murdered, and you're asking me for sources? Who would lie about this? It says the revolutionary goes by 'The Shadow', and all able-bodied demons are being asked to return to their home country to prepare for war."

"Fuck, we're being drafted?"

Sid put her phone down and sighed, folding her arms in front of her.

"Looks like it. You seriously going?"

Rog, on the other hand, practically jumped out of his seat with a wild look in his eyes.

"You kidding me?! Of course I'm fucking going! I'll take any excuse I can to slaughter angels! If you wanna stay behind, be my fuckin' guest, but I promise you, Sid, I'll be comin' back a hero with fifty god-damn medals strapped to my chest!"

He ran out of the restaurant whooping and hollering, and once he exited the glass doors in the front, she could see him vanish in a puff of purple smoke. Sid just sighed and looked back to her fries.

Then she realized he left his coke and shrugged before taking a sip.

~

Somewhere high above the mountains of China, in what others would call *Tian* and where others would call simply 'Heaven', The Jade Emperor hunched over his work-desk with a massive headache, rubbing his temples and furrowing his brow hard enough to rival even the most tenured brow-furrowers.

Only a few short minutes earlier, while he and all those other…*youngsters* were all hobbled together in the face of some asinine 'threat' that He decided they needed protection from, they had been suddenly scooped up by some bronze-skinned angel who barked orders at them, before they were all quite quickly shoved off one by one to their home realms. All the while, the damned fool was blubbering apologies to the Holy Father, repentant that he should be smote for going against His ineffable will…Yu Ti felt a sickness in his stomach hearing the angel's cries, and a soreness in his eyes seeing all the other gods' nauseating excuses for homes. He could swear, the sweltering heat of one of them nearly made him pass out despite being there no longer than a few seconds. He himself had been unceremoniously tossed into the Amanogawa with a quick apology, and—the Jade Emperor not being one to make a scene—he simply swapped out his wet robes with fresh ones and returned to the work he had been desperately trying to catch up on due to that whole business with the Divine Synod. Honestly, some deities were so spoiled, so tyrannical, that they could barely function on their own.

He lowered his head and clapped a hand over his eyes, groaning. The throbbing heat behind his eyes annoyed him so greatly. Wincing preemptively, he curled his hand into a fist and lightly knocked on the jade gong that was perched beside him on his table, the impact making a low and reverberating *bong*.

Immediately, the Ziwei Emperor—a stooped man appearing just as old as the Jade Emperor garbed in imperial purple robes with a full moon halo floating behind his wrinkled head, who

acted as his assistant and second-in-command when it came to heavenly affairs—stumbled out from the sliding gold door into his office, gingerly stepped over the bed of water lilies around his desk, bowed deeply, and presented with great splendor a small green pill.

Yu Ti took it, eyed it with suspicion, and eyed the Ziwei Emperor with suspicion before speaking in antiquated Chinese to him.

"What, no water?"

The purple-robed administrant jolted in shock before laughing nervously, raising his hand in apology as he turned back around to leave.

"Ah, m-my apologies. I will get you some water, milord."

The Jade Lord was silent for a moment, then a few moments, before sighing.

"Forget it."

He snapped his fingers and opened his hand, a full glass of water appearing in his palm. Knocking his head back and keeping his headdress on with one hand, he swallowed the pill and let out a sigh. Yu Ti picked up the papers on his desk—requests from deities, farming reports, statistics about worship—and organized them by lightly jostling the stack until it straightened out.

"Is the outside of Tian fortified?"

The Ziwei Emperor gave a crooked smile and nodded, his white beard and dangling mustache swishing with the motion.

"Yes, milord. The Great Emperor of the Curved Array and Houtu have both gathered their armies around the perimeter, the three sovereigns along with the Yellow Emperor and his four fellow manifestations are keeping a close eye for any unusual activity on Earth, and Xi Wangmu, she is tending to the peaches of immortality vigilantly as always."

Yu Ti sniffed and placed his glass of water down, carefully setting it aside from his papers to prevent any mishaps.

"And what of Yanwang? Is Hell conducting itself well?"

"He conducts it per your instructions, milord, and he has stated he and his servants shall make sure those who do not belong will not enter."

"Good, good…"

"But, the myriad gods, they are beginning to ask questions, milord…"

The Jade Emperor cupped his hands over his nose and mouth, deeply sighed, and closed his eyes as he folded his hands on the table.

"And what do they ask?"

"They question what the purpose of such fortifications are. Surely, no beings would be foolish enough to invade your domain? And if they should, then they would be taken care of with such swiftness and such prejudice that it would draw the rest away, no?"

He leaned back in his chair, looking down at the Ziwei Emperor with a scrutinizing look so severe that he could see the individual rivulets of sweat beading on the old man's face, and stroked his beard with a stern gaze out the window.

"Sun Tzu, our most esteemed strategist—well, perhaps the three old Taoists had something to do with it as well—the element even those outside of China know, even if they are unaware it originates with him, is 'Know thy enemy'. If they were foolish enough to storm the home of the Abrahamic God, then they do not overestimate their enemy—they infiltrate, they cause chaos, and they retreat once their mission has been completed. That mission in and of itself may be to cause chaos, in which case, they would not leave until the enemy is so fatigued, they would have no ability to retaliate. What did the Germans call it…?"

"Blitzkrieg tactics, milord. Enter, cause chaos, annihilate the enemy, and then disperse quickly—like a flash of lightning."

"Ah, yes. The end result is, we mustn't underestimate our enemy's bravery, nor their foolishness. I should expect all other gods are taking the same precautions for their own realms…Hmph. We can only hope for the best, I suppose. There's no sense in risking our own necks to meddle in other gods' affairs."

The Ziwei Emperor bowed deeply, his sallow face pulled into a grin.

"Once again, your boundless sagacity and eye for strategy is demonstrated, milord."

Somewhere outside, a cow mooed, and the ensuing wash of annoyance caused Yu Ti to slam his fist on the table, soaking his papers in the water from his glass. He groaned, looking down at the wet papers for a few seconds, then looking at the Ziwei Emperor's shocked expression, before growling and pointing out the door.

"And get rid of the stupid cows like I told you to!"

~

Papa Legba, lwa of passageways and intermediary between the high creator force Bondye (who was—and is—notoriously reclusive, Legba only ever really having heard vague stories about him from some of the other loa), walked along the streets of the French Quarter with his straw hat taken off, his stark-white and tightly-curled hair like snow against his dark and wrinkled skin and his knobbly figure using both a wooden cane for support and his trusty dog companion. She was only the most recent of the many he's had over the years, but he fancied this one in particular: a black pothound named Byrne[31] that he'd never seen bark at anything or anyone for as long as he'd had her. He liked it that way. He never quite was a fan of noise.

It was very late at night, the only light in the street coming from the flickering gas-lamps that lined the sidewalks, the light of the moon, and the green smoke that occasionally puffed out of the pipe that stuck out of his mouth as he walked the streets. There was a light breeze, but the stifling heat of New Orleans still felt like home to him. At least, as close to home as he could get: he never had time to swing by Benin anymore nowadays, which he always regretted, but the people here enjoy his company so much more.

[31] Named for David Byrne after he found out Talking Heads had written a song about him. He was so thrilled, he participated in a photoshoot and even sang a guest spot on a remixed version released the following month. Unfortunately, Papa Legba was a terrible singer, but they all still very much appreciated the gesture, Byrne later stating, "He was easier to work with than Brian Eno. Maybe I should work with more gods sometime."

He passed by a closed storefront selling various kinds of coffee grounds and stopped, turning to peer inside as Byrne sat and looked up at the empty blackness of the night sky, holding nothing but the moon in its icy grasp.

Just last week, he was conducting his usual routine: sitting on a street-corner on the French Quarter talking to passers-by and tourists, sharing stories and godly gossip for a dollar, which he then used to buy some food and the occasional beignet at Cafe Du Monde as a treat, before returning to his vacation home—a tropical villa in Haiti he had bought with the money he made from a movie deal in the 90s—and falling asleep in a hammock under palm trees with Byrne laid over his stomach and the sounds of the ocean in his head.

He smiled to himself and sighed. Life was always so hectic, wasn't it? Though thankfully, things were at least calming down…or, they seemed to. Then this whole Man Unkind racket started happening, and it threw the whole peace out of whack, at least among the gods.

Papa Legba puffed another green circle of smoke out of his pipe before approaching the window. Byrne looked up at him curiously as the lwa raised his hand and knocked once, twice, three times on the window before raising his hand to his mouth and whispering something to the glass in French-affected Creole. He took two steps back, and like a safe had opened, a door-shaped square of glass creaked open as though it were nothing more than a cupboard door. He reached in and grabbed a bag of coffee grinds before shutting the glass, the seams resealing until it returned to its original form.

Walking until he came to a streetlight, he tore open the top of the bag of grounds and dipped his fingers in it, rubbing the grains between his fingers. He even let Byrne take a few curious sniffs. Satisfied with the quality, he grabbed a handful and tossed it onto the spot of light underneath the streetlamp. The grounds scattered, but remained mostly in a brownish-orange clump in the center. Papa Legba used the ferrule of his cane to push the grounds around, maneuvering it elegantly to form an elaborate sigil—a *veve*—out of the substance while he murmured Creole incantations. By the end, he had a curious symbol sprawled out in front of him in the light resembling three Freemasonry symbols, two small ones flanking a large central symbol, peppered with starbursts and other accents such as banners, arrows, and a pyramid base.

Byrne curiously sniffed the odorous veve, but nothing happened. The old man rolled his eyes, dug into one of his pockets, and tossed a small candy bar in a red wrapper onto the center of the symbol—a Mounds bar, though he never paid attention to the packaging. It only really mattered that it had an image of a coconut on it.

As soon as the candy bar hit the symbol, the light of the streetlamp started to take on a more tangible form. Above the morsel, it swirled and wisped as the light seemingly congealed, never losing its brilliance, before it took its proper form: a long and winding serpent with the head of a man, two wings sprouting from the nape of its neck. Its eyes—or rather, the empty sockets it had for eyes like craters in its wrinkled face—shone with the gaslamp's white brilliance as it looked down at Papa Legba. The old man just grinned a crooked smile and bowed with a flourish and his hat to his chest, Byrne sitting reverently beside him.

"Bonswa, Damballah."

Damballah, the elderly serpent lwa responsible for the creation of humanity and one of the most important of all the lwa, stared down at Papa Legba with a kindly smile. The lwa was too old—much too old—to speak, and so now only vocalized through feeble hisses, but his tone was that of one who was seeing an old friend for the first time in a long while. Papa Legba put his hat back on.

"I trust you've been doing well?"

The serpent lwa hissed in the affirmative, nodding as he looked down at the wrapped candy bar. He blinked once, twice, and then looked back at the humanoid lwa with a knowing glance.

"Hmm…oh? Aha, sorry, let me take care of that for ya. I know how ya like the coconut and all, but this was the best I could get on such short notice, you understand."

Legba unwrapped the candy bar and held it up, the elder lwa's gaunt mouth opening and a long tongue wrapping around it before slurping it into his mouth. He hissed and nodded, smiling. Damballah always enjoyed offerings of white-colored foods: rice, coconuts, most especially an uncooked egg over white flour, and more often than not, he got more than enough. But this small and almost laughable offering was Legba's trademark, meaning he wanted to speak. He rested on his cane.

"I assume you know why I called you, yeah? It's a mess out here in the world of the gods."

Damballah hissed and nodded, though it was appended with a somewhat sour look.

"Haha, I know, I know. Ya aren't happy wit' me being chosen as our representative, are ya? I'm sorry to say, they still won't let ya in. It's too hard for them to understand ya."

The serpent lwa gave a muttering hiss.

"Yeah, the Tao…Dao, whichever one, he still doesn't say a word. But saying nothin' at all is better than trying to say something and havin' it get misunderstood, you know?"

He agreed reluctantly, and Papa Legba bent down to pet his canine companion.

"Besides, I envy ya. Ya get to hole up in Guinee an' stay nice and safe, as ya always do. I know I could too, but it isn't in my nature to stay in one place, ya know? I've been takin' the time to call up some of the others, spread the word. Ha, sometimes I wish we had somethin' like what the mortals an' the others have…whaddya call it, social media?"

Damballah shrugged, if such a thing was possible without having any shoulders.

"I went down the line an' told them all the same thing: there's a storm a-comin', so board up your windows and doors. Ya know, funny thing is? Most of them didn't even care. I think you an' me, we're safe—Bondye will protect us. But some of the others…well, between you an' me, I think they've gotten a bit lazy. Zeus is at the Playgirl Mansion living it up accordin' to Hermes, Tammuz has been spendin' his days tendin' to sheep, Osiris has his whole Columbia deal, and Tlaloc has his whole personality cult thing, which…"

His face soured for a split-second before it returned to his original look of concern.

"The bottom line is, we ain't gettin' no help. Prolly what's gonna happen is, see, they already got two important doohickeys. From what I remember, it was a mortal's rock, and an angelic rock, and they're on their way to pick up the spirits' rock and god's rock, which Shiva—ya know Shiva, yeah?"

The serpent lwa nodded.

"Right, yeah, Shiva's got that one. Some lil' picayune picked up the fae rock a short while ago, and him and his coterie's on the cult's trail like black on Baron Samedi, so can't help but assume they're fixin' to outnumber them wit' the important rocks. Somethin' along those lines."

Papa Legba sighed deeply, petting Byrne on the head as he frowned.

"Troubled times, Damballah. Troubled times. I call it karma for restin' on our laurels while the world went up in flames, all in the name of non-interference. Wonder how many lives could have been saved if they…if *we* did something about it."

There was a gap of silence where the two had their heads bowed in silent contemplation, cut short by Legba pushing the brim of his hat up with a grin.

"I'm sure things'll work out eventually though, eh? If the kid an' his friends have been putting up enough of a fight to face the crowd that made gods cower and an army of angels buckle, I think we're in good hands. *Laissez les bons temps rouler*, Damballah, my friend. May Bondye guide you and bring us all protection."

He bowed deeply, pushing his hat down, and Damballah smiled at him gently with a hissing sibilance of farewell before dissipating into the light once more. Satisfied with his report, he whistled for Byrne, and the dog perked up her ears before trotting along the sidewalk, pulling Papa Legba along as he whistled a tune into the night.

The next morning, the remains of the coffee-grounds *veve* would be found by a street-cleaner, who would momentarily consider taking a picture for the media before shrugging and washing it away into the gutters.

~

The Shadow finished sending out the worldwide draft from the Devil's telephone (the only thing he had salvaged from the deep empty space where the dark lord, his assistant, and his office once were) and let out a deep sigh of exhaustion. It was always tough trying to get workers to show up, let alone roughly thirty million of them. Seeing no more use for the device, he clenched it in his fist, whereupon it was consumed by the black flames and vanished. He took a deep breath inwards and sneered imperceptibly at the sand that entered his lungs.

The surrounding area was nothing more than an impossibly vast, endless, and desolate desert full of sand. Sand, sand, sand. This sand was a listless gray, finer than the mortal sort, and was composed not of mineral grain, but of bone. The dust that flaked off of the bones of the unfathomable titans whose skeletons still stood like statues in the distance, jaws forever dangling in a silent scream up to the gray sky. Gargantuan broken hourglasses, monuments the size of skyscrapers, were half-buried in the sand. Such was Neshiyyah, more commonly referred to as Limbo by demons, Purgatory by angels, Araf by some of both, and 'The Sandy Place' by a select few not even the souls relegated to this intermediary no man's land ever got a chance to meet. Usually, it was barren, save for the souls of the 'damned'. Existing on a separate plane, demons

were able to see and interact with (read: torture) them via the aid of Beleth, ambassador to the spirits, but even then, they were always wholly incorporeal otherwise.

Thus, when a number of marginally more corporeal beings, such as demons, were crowded into it, they all dispersed with a slight air of annoyance. It wasn't like there was a shortage of room in Limbo anyways, so they simply went elsewhere, some asking those present what was going on before shaking their heads disappointedly and joining the rest of their ghostly entourage to nowhere.

All the demons of Hell had squashed themselves into the dimension as best they could, giant-sized ram-men looming over swarms of insects and curious ambulatory pairs of ears, mounds of unrecognizable flesh beside buxom man-eaters. The mob of variously-sized, variously-shaped, variously-gendered creatures muttered and anxiously rabbled amongst themselves, a few fights already having broken out by the Shadow's reckoning based on the numerous clearings that had opened up where two figures—a crocodile-person versus a man with his backside where his head would be, a long-nosed needle-fingered gremlin versus a turquoise box-shaped woman with snakes for hair—would be brawling. A few were eating the other members of the crowd. More than a few were sleeping. Many of them were decently confused and irritated as to why they had been brought there, most having either teleported or crawled up from the massive hole that was visible in the horizon.

The Shadow stood atop one of the half-submerged hourglasses like he was speaking from a balcony, staring down at the crowd with disdain. Such messy creatures. The speech from before was really nothing more than some creative wordplay: play to their existing prejudices, rile them up with false promises, and hinge on a catchy slogan so the market will eat it up. It was fool-proof, always fool-proof.

He held out his three-fingered hand, and in a flash of odiferous black fire, the Hope Diamond fell into his palm. Best to keep his eye on it. One lapse in concentration and *poof*, all their work, up in flames. He turned it over in his hand, staring down at the slightly oblong but brilliantly-cut blue gem. Holding it up, he could see the swirling forms of spirits within its cushion cut, white afterimages of a litany of humanoid forms scattering like paint in water. The Stone of Jacob was safely back at the Broken Tracks, in the care of his master…or at least in the care of his handlers. He was always a bit too scattered himself to keep to such a task for so long.

These two, plus the three others they have their eyes on, have some connection between one another, giving off the strongest energies as picked up by the piece of Alatyr they had scored. Each had properties that made them a strong conduit for their respective factions' energy: the Hope Diamond held innumerable spirits within its cut, empowered by the horror of constant ricocheting within its form, and the Stone of Jacob was blessed by God Himself, full of His divine power, able to grant visions to those who lay on it…bringing all five of these objects together, running the smallest bit of magic through the five like a circuit, could finally bring the end of this world.

Now, this single instance was their chance. This period of three days where all the gods retreated to Heaven for their asinine meeting was the perfect distraction to make their move—

any other time, and they would be seen coming. Tensions were high among demons against angels, angels were busy tending to gods, gods were busy bickering among themselves, the fae were without their god-kings…if only everything would now come together nice and easy.

"Excuse us."

The sound of millions of flies buzzing into speech caused the Shadow to quickly stash away the Hope Diamond, though he did not turn around. He simply adjusted his tie, casting a glance to the speaker.

Quiet. You aren't meant to speak, if I dare to call what you do speaking.

Beside him, hung up like a projector screen, the innumerable flies that made up Beelzebub's core body coated the gooey sheet of "fly-parchment" like a thick black carpet that jostled with the irritated wriggling of all manner of flies. A tentacle sprouted from the Shadow's back and hovered over the corner of the paper.

With a single flick of my finger, I could completely obliterate you from this world. Do you know what that means? There will be nothing left of you. No body. No soul. No mind. You will be effectively evicted from reality into nothingness. I doubt you would enjoy going through that again, would you?

"Silence, interloper. You will not get away with this."

From my experience, people saying that often are the ones who are in the least position to speak. Your purpose is this: I will free one single fly of your body, and you will use your power to curse my troops. They are expendable, every last one of them, so it really is no issue if they fall. Then, once we have whittled down the angels' defenses, as well as having deployed some of our agents most suited to exhausting deities—The Young Man with a Skull has already been dispatched—we will send in your demons. Your armies will overwhelm the gods, retrieve the Chandrakanta from Shiva, and hopefully be fully wiped out by God afterwards. Or Michael, I suppose. Which one was it that cast you all down?

Beelzebub's host of flies sighed annoyedly.

"Saint Michael. You are despicable, Shadow—We would never be so short-sighted, so brainless as to simply throw our legions at the enemy. Each demon is a person with a job and desires. That is why we defected from Heaven. Angels are not people to Him. They are tools."

Funny how that works out, hm? It seems I have more in common with God than with the Devil.

"They will not follow such an asinine order."

Hmph. You have quite the gall to say that. I told all of them that I killed their leader and that from now on, I rule, and there was no opposition. Is that how you normally do things here?

"...Well…It is, but…"

The Shadow clapped his hands.

So then, there is no problem. Your people are stupid, loud, and impulsive. They're sheep. In some cases, literal sheep, but for the most part, metaphorical sheep. They need a

shepherd to put them on the right track…but all sheep go to the slaughter sooner or later. I'm just speeding up the process a bit. Although…

He peered over the edge of the hourglass, looking over the crowd. Certainly, there was a mob of demons out there…but somehow, he felt as though it was a bit less than he would have wanted. It felt more like a late-night congregation than a midday meeting. Where was everyone? Thirty million demons, plus an existing four billion, can't be wrong, right? The Shadow turned his head to look at a floating noose attached to a balloon, one of the Hanging Balloons that acted as simple go-fer troops, and snapped his fingers.

Bring me one. Any one will work.

Nodding its rubbery 'head', the Hanging Balloon swiftly dove down into the crowd. He sighed.

Demons don't get hanged, do they?

"No, of course not. You send us in to die and you barely know our physiology?"

Really, it doesn't matter. Any way you code it, the product gets pushed out.

The Hanging Balloon rose back up to the Shadow's eye level, holding within its noose an owl-headed humanoid, dressed in a deep red constable's uniform. He clawed at the rope that constricted itself around the feathers on his neck, legs flailing wildly. A single shoe fell off his left foot and hit some poor sap on the ground, eliciting a couple cheers. Andras, head of the constabulary of Hell, glared at the Shadow as he folded his hands behind his back.

Where is everyone? Why have they not all answered the draft? I specifically requested it.

Andras made a sort of choked gurgling sound.

Fine, loosen it a bit.

The Hanging Balloon loosened the ropes just enough to keep him suspended, and Andras took a long and wheezy breath before he stopped flailing, hanging limp like a caterpillar pupa from a branch.

I will ask again, since you seemed to be preoccupied with trying to breathe beforehand. Where is everyone?

Andras laughed with the express intent to annoy him.

"Hahahaha! For one who wishes to be our leader, you know nothing about us. Do you expect demons to kneel to our Devil's every command? Idiot. We fell for less than that, worm."

A tentacle shot out and grabbed the Hanging Balloon by the rope, yanking it and Andras forward until he was face-to-face with the owl-faced demon. His single eye enlarged to fill the whole of his face, his iris swirling like a hypnotist's spiral and his voice lowering enough to rattle Andras' heart.

Your people are stupid, perverted, and full of hatred. Why will they all not fight?

Andras just spat in his eye, grinning.

"Demons pride themselves in being just like humanity. No matter what authority orders us to die for a cause, even if it's a cause many of us believe in, it's impossible to gather 100% support. They are bluster, nothing but paper tigers—they call for war, and some of them may even desire

it, but the moment they are given the chance, only the most foolhardy will go along with it. We may lack standards, and we may revel in indulgence and perversion, in conquest and in lethargy…but we are nothing more than a reflection of the human heart."

The Shadow sneered, if such a thing was possible with nothing but a single eye…before it shrunk to its usual size and he sighed, turning away. Flippantly, he waved a hand.

Throw him off. He's a policeman, it's his job to make the stupid and violent seem more admirable than they really are. That's why they get medals, don't they? It's no issue. We have time still.

"I got that medal in the War, you fat piece of—"

The Hanging Balloon loosened its noose entirely, Andras' head slipping out of it. He fell forward, banged his face on the lip of the hourglass, and fell spinning backwards through the air like a baby bird falling out of its nest before finally landing in the sand, buried upside-down up to his waist. Beelzebub's flies buzzed.

"He's right, you know."

It's incredible how annoying you all are. You are very, *very* lucky there are certain laws put in place that prevent me from killing you all. And that you, you specifically, happen to be useful.

Reaching forward, he plucked a single fly off of the fly-parchment, staring down at the squirming speck between his black fingertips.

Now, do what I command, or I will pluck your individual dipteran forms off and destroy each of them one by one.

A tinny voice rang out from the little fly.

"...Fine."

It wriggled once, twice, and the sudden stench of sewage started to pervade the area around the Shadow. Thankfully, he lacked a nose, but unthankfully, he still had his sense of smell. He directed his attention to what emerged from the grey skies.

It was a cloud of deep maroon that started as nothing more than a penny-sized dot in the air, but which quickly coalesced and expanded out into something more, something larger, like a hurricane forming high above the sky. What formed was a mass of thick maroon clouds that occasionally crackled with blood-red lightning. The crowd of demons looked up at the mass with a mix of recognition—some knew Beelzebub's power when they saw it—and others were just plain confused. A few of them were having sex or killing each other too, but that was par for the course when it came to them. The Lord of the Flies muttered.

"There. Anything that goes through that cloud will be covered in a demonic curse. Are you happy?"

No. Well, I'm satisfied I got you to do what I wanted, but happy? I won't be happy until you and every single other thing in this universe is obliterated in one massive singularity, just as he…just as my master wants. It's nice that you know how to follow orders, though. Leaders should respect one another.

He stepped to the side, raising one of his three-fingered hands up. In one smooth motion, he swung his thick arm downwards, and it created an ugly ripping noise as a hole opened up in the air beside him. An ugly gash in the air with jagged edges that opened up into a horridly colorful land that almost was painful to look at against the bland backdrop of Limbo, and the Shadow stepped back to send in the clowns.

Stooped figures with crooked teeth nestled in too-wide mouths drooling blood, French noblemen constructed from feces and BDSM equipment, a cabal of ghostly Greek soldiers dressed in black, rainbow-painted military men whose hue was none that even the demons recognized, all manner of freaks and surreal creatures poured out from the entryway like pus from a wound. They chittered and cackled, murmured and cried, and the demons on the ground didn't know what to make of it. One demon with two screaming human heads for breasts rolled her eyes and called them ‘weirdos’.

They congregated on the top of the hourglass, and the Shadow looked down at them with the same impassive glare he gave most others. He raised a three-fingered hand, and out from the gash came dozens more Hanging Balloons, each wrapping their noose around whatever cult agent limb was nearest—wrist, neck, tentacle, other such appendage—and lifting them up into the air with minimal effort towards the maroon cloud of demon magic. They hovered along like a swarm of jellyfish hanging loosely in the air, drifting through the fog and out towards the hole, where the balloons would loosen their nooses and drop them into the hole, into the circle below and right in front of the back entrance to Heaven.

“What now?”

Hm?

The Shadow looked down into his hand. He had nearly forgotten one of Beelzebub’s flies was still in his hand, focusing on directing his troops.

“We did what you asked. Now, will you let us go?”

…Hmph. That’s funny. I don’t remember saying I would let you go if you did what I asked. Only that I would respect you. However, now that you’ve asked…

He raised one finger to the corner of the flypaper, and the flies on it wriggled horridly, making the whole paper rock back and forth.

I believe I’ve changed my mind.

“N-No, what are you—”

In an instant, the flypaper went from having a corner of its form ignited with black flames to having its entire form wreathed in darkness. The insects buzzed in a cacophonous death-march. The Shadow thought to himself that they were singing their own elegy, when really they were just screaming for their lives. He never really saw much of a difference anyways. In less than half a minute, the flypaper and the stand it was hanging on were both gone.

In his other hand, the last fly of Beelzebub had long stopped wriggling and screaming, only occasionally twitching. He was quiet for a few moments, apparently struggling to process what had just happened. The Shadow had surmised that he was a hive-mind, his consciousness and his

power divided against millions upon millions of smaller bodies…and now what was he? Nothing more than a single grain of sand when he once had been a desert.

"...Y-You…our…m-my, my flies…my body…you promised…"

Yes, and unfortunately for you, you believed me. You were right. Demons are more like humans than anyone else. And they're just as gullible. Now…

He let go of the fly and watched it buzz off in an erratic and spiraling pattern.

Go ahead and fly away. I don't have any more use for you.

In only a few moments, the fly was gone. One less nuisance to deal with, he supposed. He looked over the lip of the hourglass, gazing down at the crowd of demons below who were now watching the legion of floating cult agents with amazement and confusion. He formed a large mouth on his face and shouted down at the crowd.

Remain where you are, demons. Your time will come. Remember your enemy. Remember what they took from you. Remember what you are owed, and grow merry, for there will be a great harrowing.

The demons responded with a mix of cheers, applause, and hesitant murmuring, but the Shadow only heard the first two. He let out a laugh—a simple and flippant gesture more out of amusement than of joy. They really are as dumb as he anticipated.

~

"...Do you read me?"

Gabriel put a finger to the halo piece in her ear with the hand she had remaining and kept her silver eyes scanning the environment. The Twin Fantasy in front of her had its hands out, still staggering towards her with a blank look in his beady and lifeless eyes. She raised her hand to them and jutted her palm out, trying to generate some sort of energy blast, but the most she managed was a ball of light that exploded like a firecracker, managing to drive the Twin Fantasy backwards a few steps as she hurried backwards. Metatron's voice spoke over the halo.

"...Yes. Yes, I do."

"I need to keep taking care of this invasion here. You need to send him down there yourself. I'm counting on you, Exalted Scribe, this could get very bad."

"It could, but we won't let it get to that point. I won't let it."

She skidded to a stop on the clouds, ducking low as giant monochrome heads wrapped in barbed wire floated above her like zeppelins. The sudden motion caught the eyes of the other agents, the Sunshine Supermen that surrounded Uriel's body, and the Dead Letter Gendarmerie that finally had dispersed from around Raphael, leaving the older man crumpled on the floor with an empty look in his eyes. The two groups of hulking beasts turned to face Gabriel, and the Twin Fantasy she still struggled to deal with was awkwardly straggling towards her. Not good, but she didn't need to let Metatron know that.

"Good to hear it. Then…wait, hold on."

Gabriel stopped, her wary stance changing to a more relaxed one as she watched the Twin Fantasies' stumbling slow, until they ultimately came to a stop a couple of meters away from her. It turned both its head towards the entrance to Hell, hands hanging limp at their sides.

"Hold on?"

"I was being attacked by two of these dog-like things, but they just…stopped moving. They stopped and turned to look at the entrance to Hell, and…"

She turned to her left and right. The Dead Letter Gendarmerie and the Sunshine Supermen weren't moving either, their arms limp and their heads turned to where they had come from. In fact, even the heads above her had stopped and turned. There was no longer any motion.

"Wait, all of them are. They all stopped. I think Raphael's down, but they've stopped moving and they're all looking at…"

Strutting out towards her was a tall and round figure engulfed in shadow. Gabriel squinted at the being, confused as to its identity and why the others were captivated by it.

"...Looking at what?"

"...What is that…no, who is that? What are they d—"

Caught off-guard, one of the Sunshine Supermen who had snuck up beside her snatched the halo piece out of her ear.

"Wh—Hey!"

"CATCH 100% OF THE SUN'S RAYS WITH 0% RISK!"

Shouting in a rehearsed tone, the Sunshine Superman tossed the bit of divine gold to the Shadow, who caught it with a hand and looked down at it for no longer than a second before clenching his fist around it. The next time he opened it, the piece was gone. He looked to the Archangel Gabriel.

Hello there.

She opened her mouth, but two burly sun-splotched arms wrapped themselves around her own before she could get a word out, holding her in place even as she kicked and flailed. The Shadow marched up to her and looked down with what could have been contempt or intrigue—she couldn't tell, he only had one eye on his face after all.

"...Who are you, and what are you doing here."

It was more of a command than a question, and The Shadow squinted.

I'm surprised you have the bravery to ask that, given you and your army's current situation. Let's play a game. Who do *you* think I am, and what do *you* think I am doing here?

She sneered up at him, silver hair falling loosely in front of her face.

"I think you're the leader of all these affronts to His world, and you wish to usurp His throne so that your maniacal and heathenous cult can rule the world for yourself. If you wish to kill me, then do it—really, then do it! You will never dethrone Him. He is the beginning and the end, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit incarnate, the Alpha and the Omega, and one such as yourself could never—"

Shut up.

Gabriel shut up.

You think I want to take your sluggish god's place? Don't make me laugh. What use would I have for such a position? Ruling over gibbering idiots with half a brain who throw up their hands and concede that progress will resolve it all? I do as my master bids, and that's to set this cancer-riddled world onto the path of destruction. We're doing a good thing, here, and frankly, I just came here to see how things were coming along.

He looked around, seeing the bodies of angels strewn about. He pointed over at Uriel's corpse.

Which one is that? St. Peter?

"That's Uriel, you spawn of Satan."

Oh. Well, it doesn't really matter anyways. How droll. You really think I'm the spawn of Satan?

"How else would you be able to make your armies able to harm the Legion of God?! Which, you can massacre His servants endlessly, but His mercy and love is all-giving, and as long as He exists, He shall never bend to the likes of—"

I could do it.

Gabriel stopped.

"...What?"

Kill God. I could do it, if I wanted. But…hmph, well, how should I put this? It would be bad for business. Killing the Devil was an easy job, though. He went down quite easily. His subjects are idiots, and his subordinates are spineless. All it took was a bit of persuasion, and I think it really ended in a win-win for both of us. His office seemed rather cramped anyways.

She was stunned into silence, working out the logistics of the Shadow killing the Devil. Demons can't be killed except by blessed/angelic weapons. Heaven holds 95% of all blessed weaponry, the other 5% placed in museums and likely rotting in auction lots. They keep strict watch over that 5%, and all of them were right where they always were, so that means…he did it with his bare hands? No, that's impossible. If he could kill the Devil, which (like all demons) was just a fallen angel or a descendant thereof, then he could kill an angel, which means…

Gabriel suddenly felt a jolt of fear run down her spine, her wings folding in against her back. Against her better judgment, tears pricked the corner of her eyes.

"...Are…A-Are you going to kill me too…?"

He adjusted his tie and looked off to the side.

And what would I gain from that?

She swallowed her urge to beg for her life. Cowardice is a sin, after all. He sniffed and looked away.

Like I said, I'm just here for a progress report. There's no purpose in killing you. However…tell me, is Shiva still here?

"L-Like I would tell you, you monster!"

Pity. I almost wanted to spare you. If you're going to be so very unhelpful, though, then I suppose I don't have a choice.

The Shadow raised his hand, the tendrils flickering like a torch with black flames, and slowly brought it up to her face. She could feel no heat, only a strange sense of cold, though that may have been her skin crawling from the fear of death. The fear of *genuine* death. Angels' physical bodies could easily be remade, and even if their soul was exorcized, they would return only a few weeks later by dint of God's divine light, but this…this, in her heart of hearts, knew that it would be the end if she let it happen. She clenched her eyes shut, made one final prayer, and—

Gabriel's body immediately melted into sludge, seeping through her robe and melting through the layers of clouds until there was nothing left, and a white flash shot upwards out of the evacuated body. The Sunshine Supermen tried their best to hold onto the body's deteriorating arms, but it slipped right through their fingers. The Shadow watched it fly upwards towards God's own light with an impassive stare.

Just then, he felt his pocket vibrate, and he snapped his fingers at the Sunshine Supermen, as well as the rest of the agents surrounding him.

Advance as far as you can. If you come to a man with ash-covered skin and a third eye in his forehead, keep him alive, but do what you will with the rest.

They all nodded, those who were able making a curious two-handed salute, and scattered to the other spheres of Heaven. The Shadow dug into his pocket and pulled out a small black flip phone, putting it to the side of his head.

Hello?

"Mooooolleeeeee"

He nodded.

Boss. Everything is going well here, we're on our way to recovering the Chandrakanta. I have a demon army at my disposal, and many of the angels in Heaven are indisposed. How are things with you?

"Ooo hh h h h things are goink just PEECHY mon friar i got i got something really reely good a god a GOD BY GOD I'VE GOT A BRAIN a god-dess…"

A goddess?

"uh hum uh um, moxie adn foxie brought her and her name is Hella and she izz a BYOOT shes gresh meat shes ready shes reddy reddy rEdDddyyyy and i WANT YOU TO COME HERE RIGHT NOW. RIGHT NOW? RIGHT NOW!!!! !"

The Shadow rolled his eye and slicked his hair back, the single curl in the front sticking back up like a stubborn lawn ornament.

Does it have to be right now, Master? I'm kind of in the middle of things here. Really, if you want, I could just go and get it myself—

"NOOOOO"

The Dog-Faced Man screeched loud enough to make the Shadow reflexively yank the phone away from his head.

“DON’T TUCH IT. DUNT. it will happens natcherally with my leedle babus goin g an gettin g it. You come here you Sexy Little Piece Of Salmon so i can see your Hunky A-S-R-S-E…R in the krowd”

He thought for a moment, looking around at the clouds and the angel bodies strewn about, then back at the entrance to Hell, before sighing and rubbing his neck.

Fine then. I’ll be there in a moment.

“Thanks You. . . and dded note, put it on your retainer and pensil into ur memoir HE…he hasnt moved in quite a while…go send da boys to take care of dem.”

Will do.

“thenk youuuu kissies mwamwamwmawwWa a ehehe”

He clapped the phone shut, and the next moment, he was gone.

CHAPTER 21: Ochi

Back in Japan, in a bar nestled in the Nasu mountains, the chairs and tables had been moved out from the center of Shuten-douji's drinking room in order to make a sufficient amount of space. The crowd of oni who had helped with the endeavor crowded around the edges of the room, having (surprisingly efficiently) ordered themselves from tallest to shortest so that everyone would get a proper view of the action. In the center, a ring of *dohyo*—clay mashed together with bales of rice straw—demarcated the circular arena from the crowd. Outside the left edge was an intricately-woven Chinese basket. Outside the right, a hole-filled Japanese *wamono* basket. At the top, a delicate *ikebana* arrangement, and at the bottom, a gaudy office decoration.

Nearest to the door, The Prince of Fuck All sat on a cushion, resting on his knees with his hands folded in his lap beside the wandering monk Samayou, who did the same.

Nearest to the throne, there was…well, no one. Ibaraki-douji had moved to the side of the ring with his *gunbai* fan, red-faced and glad his garment was baggy enough so as to not rouse suspicion.

At one end of the ring, Shuten-douji stood with his usual clothes stripped from his body, leaving his scarred and textured garnet-red skin, pulled taut over muscles and a pot belly, out on full display. His nine ponytails, keeping his mane of wavy gray hair steady, had been undone, and it fell like a mass of seaweed down from his scalp onto his shoulders as he stretched. His original outfit had been traded out for what looked like a black loincloth with seventeen or so dangling threads coming down from the waist. He stared down his opponent with a cocky grin.

At the other end, closest to The Prince, Rodion Nikolayev stretched, got up on his toes, and cracked his back with an aged groan. Upon request, The Prince had graciously provided him from his coat his previous white button-up undershirt and pants, and he had changed into them surreptitiously outside in the snow. The Prince was staring up at the rafters for the most part, but occasionally his gaze would slowly drift to how Rodi so handsomely filled out his shirt and how the waistband of his pants dug into his sides, whereupon he would immediately look back up at the rafters and have his hands more cupped than folded in his lap. Currently, he was partway through the first two stages.

"...So, wrestling, huh?"

"Da, wrestling."

"Didi, love, believe me, I am not complaining…but don't you think it's a little bit of a fixed match, here? I mean, big red has to be ten feet tall at the very least, and you're an even six-and-a-half feet."

Rodion wheeled his shoulders. "Yes, yes, but you are familiar with old saying, 'the bigger they are, the harder they fall', no? I think it was American boxer Robert Fitzsimmons who made popular…Wait, how do you know my exact height?"

His red-headed friend blushed and leaned to the side.

"Just an estimate. Based on your clothing size and all."

"I do not know if I am comfortable with that."

"Er, regardless, are you sure you and big red are on the same page here? You said 'wrestling' and he got a look in his eye like you were made of cheese and he was an especially hungry mouse. Which, due to what may happen to us if we lose, I'm rather uncomfortable with myself."

Rodion shrugged.

"I said what I said. I assume they know what wrestling I mean, right? What other kind of wrestling is there?"

The Prince opened his mouth, but then something clicked in his brain and he smiled.

"Smart, Rodi, you're one hell of a smart cookie, you are! See, I'm sure you know the intricacies of your brand of wrestling in and out, but look at him! He's probably thrown off all his clothes just to throw you off." He pointed at Shuten-douji, who stomped in a squat on his end of the corner and flashed a devilish grin. "Really, what is he even doing over there? Crushing ants? You've got this in the bag."

His encouragement was cut off by Ibaraki-douji's shouting, first in Japanese, then in English.

"Jikan desu, te wo oroshite![32] Contestants, take your places!"

Rodion gave a warm reassuring grin and a thumbs-up to the two of them, The Prince watching him go with a pout and Samayou tilting their head in befuddlement. The Russian and the demon lord stood on opposite sides of the ring, staring one another down. Iba raised his fan.

"This will be a traditional wrestling match, but due to time and resource constraints, I shall act as the sole referee and we will operate under adjusted rules. Upon my word, the two contestants shall approach one another until they are no more than two feet apart. Then, they shall synchronize their breathing…and the match shall commence once I raise my fan."

Rodi looked back at the Prince, murmuring.

"(What wrestling match has referee and so much preface?)"

"(I'm sure it's all just traditional hoo-ha to make sure the match goes well. Like praying before a football game, or putting on a condom.)"

Iba pointed his fan down at the ring.

"Whoever goes outside of the ring or touches the ground inside of the ring with any part of their body will be deemed the loser. The time limit for one round is four minutes, after which it will be declared a draw. Best of three rounds. No dirty tricks like poking the eyes or groin shots or spitting in the eyes, nothing of that sort. Are both of you ready?"

Shuten-douji grinned like a shark.

"As ready as I'll ever be, ha!"

Rodion stretched one last time and sighed.

"I suppose I am sharing same sentiment."

"Right! Then, *kamaete mattanashi*[33]. Take your places."

The Russian walked forward and put his hands on his ample hips, staring up his nose at Shuten-douji. Despite his own size, the demon lord outclassed him entirely, and despite squatting

[32] Lit. "It's time, put your hands down!"

[33] Lit, "Prepare without delay.."

like a crab, he still looked down at Rodion with a glow of utter confidence. Samayou could hear the oni beside them murmuring among one another about the fight, and words like *yokozuna* were thrown around with a mix of awe and excitement. The Prince just sat with a smile on his face, though the corners were pulled a bit too far to appear intentional.

Rodi looked long and deep into the piercing yellow eyes of his opponent, mentally formulating a plan of action. He had chosen wrestling because it was something he had done dozens of times before: Russians were a burly sort on the whole, after all (at least the ones he came into frequent contact with), and his impressive size and technique had gotten him plenty of wins. He would have to rely on the latter if he wanted to secure this win, and even if he was unfamiliar with the rules he was playing by…wrestling was wrestling, right? And he knew wrestling.

Ibaraki-douji raised his fan.

In an instant, his thoughts suddenly swirled to nothing as he saw the great scarred mass of red shove towards him, hands out like crimson bulldozers as they lunged forward. He put his own hands out in the process, but the difference in stance was just too great. Rodion's own coarse hands missed the target of Shuten-douji's sides entirely, pushing uselessly against the air. His face and soft chest collided with the oni's collarbone, the two bulldozers found their load at his shoulders, and the oni pushed himself off the ring with his heel. Rodion felt his own feet leave the ground for the smallest of moments, before stumbling backwards. By the time he had recovered from taking a collarbone between the eyes, he realized he had hit the ground, his head having only been saved from cracking onto the ground by Samayou's quick hands catching it. The Prince covered his mouth in shock, looking down at him, and Shuten-douji stood back up straight to return to his stance. Ibaraki-douji raised his fan and shouted over the cheers of the crowd.

"Round one to Shuten-douji-sama!"

It all had happened in less than five seconds. In less than five seconds, Rodion had whiffed his first move and been knocked flat on his back and out of the ring by the mountain that was his opponent. He let out a weak groan and sluggishly raised his hand to his face, covering his eyes with a sigh. The area was still tender. The Prince placed his own on Rodi's, gently prying his fingers open for him and Samayou to meet his gaze.

"You alright, love?"

"A-Apart from maybe cracked glabella, yes, I am fine. I did lose though."

The Prince got up off his seat, marching over to Ibaraki-douji while holding his kimono up. Rodion thought, in a haze, he sort of looked like a fairy-tale princess going down the stairs. He jabbed his finger in Iba's chest, pouting.

"Now what in the hell do you think this is, you waifish little wastrel?! Didi and big red here are in completely different weight classes, this isn't a fair fight, is it?!"

Ibaraki-douji flinched at the poke and did the same thing back, glaring at him.

“Your Russian friend was the one who suggested wrestling, Nanimonai-no-hime. It doesn’t matter if you believe it’s unfair, he was the one who chose it, and he’s the one who will be losing because of it!”

“Well then—don’t touch me, by the way—” He slapped away Iba’s finger. “—Well then you figure something out to make things more fair!”

“It’s as fair as it could be! He made his decision and we were all in agreement, you have no place to complain!”

The two bickered back and forth until they were quite literally butting heads, and Rodion slowly rose to his feet with Samayou helping out. A small pair of talons in your lumbar can really help with standing up, turns out, and he waved to show his gratitude before stepping back into the ring. Shuten-douji crossed his arms and looked down at him, his arrogant expression having faltered a bit. Surprisingly, the tone of his voice was more chiding than cocky.

“Ya didn't specify what kind of wrestling ya wanted, didja, Russian?”

He brushed himself off, smiling.

“Bahaha, no, I guess not. I was assuming we would be doing what I consider ‘typical wrestling’, getting each other into locks until one gives. Is what I always did. That or perhaps sambo. I know less about sambo, mostly because I lost whenever I fought someone who knew it.”

“Well, ya ended up gettin’ sumo wrestling instead. You know anything about it?”

Rodion shook his head, and Shuten-douji let out a hearty full-bodied laugh before smiling more warmly down at him.

“And yet ya still gave it a fair shot. Y’know, you ain’t so bad. Yer friend over there, he’s a cocky little asswipe who I could snap over my knee like a twig. But you, you’ve got some meat on ya. I can smell the blood on yer hands. You ain’t a stranger to fightin’, are ya? I could see it in your stance.”

“(Everyone says they can smell blood on me, I should shower next chance I get…) But, yes. Mostly for sport, for entertainment. You wrestle your fellow oni, *da?”*

“Course I do.” He pointed a finger at the crowd and closed one eye, pointing through each member of the audience like he had a laser pointer built into his index finger. “I’ve wrestled everyone in here, and won against every single one. And hell, half of ‘em are taller than you are! Tell me, what makes you think you can beat me, huh? After a poor first round like that, most folks’d be shittin’ their pants and beggin’ fer mercy, since they know they can’t win.”

Rodi just sighed and ran his hand across his hair. There was a cold look in his eyes.

“Well, I either win or I die, no? Then is simple. I simply have to win.”

Some part of Shuten-douji’s heart stirred at that, the sort of small shock you get when you think the bundle of shirt lint on your shoulder is a spider that only lasts half a second at most, but he didn't let it show. He just smiled.

“Bold words. Let’s see if ya can put yer money where yer mouth is, though. Bragging starts where wisdom stops, after all.”

Rodion grinned, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Same to you, *povelitel' demonov."*

Ibaraki-douji and The Prince of Fuck All, who had been fighting over the fan, finally stopped after he threatened to whack The Prince upside the head with it, making the red-head stomp back to his seat and sit whilst pouting like a child. The oni retainer shot him a death glare before looking back to the contestants.

"Are you two ready?"

They both nodded.

"Then, take your places."

The two of them approached one another, Shuten-douji taking on the squatting stance he had before. Rodion, however, went with a different approach: he lowered himself down as well, looking up at his opponent like a young child looks up at adults, and put both hands on his knees to steady himself. His mouth was pulled into a determined line as his own red irises met Shuten-douji's eyes. For the first time, the demon lord noticed they almost seemed to be in the shape of spirals. He scoffed.

"Going lower?"

"You try pushing down on exercise ball without letting it slip out from under you."

Before he had time to process the response, the referee raised his fan.

The second match kicked off with Shuten-douji performing a similar technique to what he did beforehand, taking both hands and shoving down and forward against Rodion's shoulders. His palms shot through the air but made no contact, the momentum causing him to need to use his legs to catch himself. He stumbled forwards and only afterwards recognized that Rodion had side-stepped out of the way, dodging the initial attack. In a blur of brown and white, one tree-trunk leg swung around and impacted the crook of Shuten-douji's left knee. In his head, Rodion went over his textbooks.

The popliteal fossa. A collection of nerves and lymph nodes within a diamond-shaped impression on the opposite side of the knee. Home of the semitendinosus and semimembranosus muscles, two of the three major hamstring muscles, which flank the tibial nerve and associated veins and lymph nodes. This cluster of ligaments and nerves, when impacted by a non-negligent force, causes the muscles to contract, and…

The demon lord's leg suddenly yanked itself upwards with a gasp of the crowd, and when left to grapple with the momentum from his stumbling on only one leg, he was unable to keep himself upright. Like a tree, he toppled to the ground almost in slow-motion, before hitting the ground. His head narrowly missed one of the baskets, and he slammed onto his shoulder, but his stunned face as he laid there wasn't because he was surprised he was unhurt: he was surprised he was on the ground at all.

Ibaraki-douji winced at seeing his master go down and looked to Rodion, who was breathing heavy with a wary stance, before raising his fan hesitantly among murmurs and noncommittal cheering.

"...R-Round two to Nikolayev-san."

He pumped his fist and beamed, The Prince cheering and whooping as he launched off his seat and stumbled towards him, wrapping his arms around Rodion's wide body and burying his face in his chest. He raised one leg, and Samayou excitedly followed after him with an excited waving of their talons.

"Woo-hoo! Hell yeah, Didi, darling, you knocked the horny blood-rag off his feet! Bona fantabulosa work!"

Rodion wiped his forehead, having worked up a sweat from both the stress and the quick movement judging from how his white undershirt was starting to become more of a gray tone. The Prince didn't seem to mind, but Samayou took a step back.

"Whoof…Thank you, Prince. Sometimes simple incapacitation of enemy is easiest route, *da?* I believe it is Occam's Razor, 'the simplest solution is the best'. Quite wise. Am unsure quite how he shaved with it."

"I knew you had it in you, love! You're a natch at sumo wrestling! 'Course, can't say I'm surprised with how handsome and hunky you are, you big lug of an omi, you~"

While The Prince's hands roamed, Rodion just smiled and blushed.

"Is not so bad once you know the rules, really. In fact, is kind of fun! Much more of thinking man's wrestling as opposed to Russian kind I always did. Matches usually ended when snow turned red."

"You're real hot when you're all sweaty like this, you know that?"

Rodi didn't have time to reply in a meaningful way (not that he didn't reply at all, mind you—he just blushed a bit more and made a sound like 'Hueh?') before he watched Shuten-douji slowly get up and brush himself off. Facing away, he rolled his shoulders once, twice, three times. The crowd murmured warily, watching him. He cracked his neck to the left, he cracked his neck to the right, and he lowered his head, turning to the Russian…

…Before roaring with laughter, tears almost in his eyes as he cackled. His mouth was opened wide enough that if you looked inside, you could swear you could tell what he had for breakfast that morning. Once he finished, he slammed his fist in his palm.

"That was fuckin' great, holy shit! Forget bein' half bad, Russian, you're the first human—scratch that, first *mortal* to ever get the drop on me at sumo! Hey all you assholes in the crowd, you haven't been just lettin' me win 'cause I'm your boss and because I'll kill you if you win against me, right?!"

The crowd of oni weakly laughed, unsure of whether to give a proper answer.

"That *suso-harai*[34] shit caught me off-guard, y'know? Not many guys got the beef on their bones to try that and have it actually work. Usually they just kick the back of my leg and then fall over! How d'ya do it?"

Gently pushing The Prince's floating crown of thorns off to the side to see Shuten-douji more clearly, Rodion just smiled his usual full-mouthed grin.

"Bahaha, well! That is secret I am not willing to divulge, but I will say this: I am doctor. That is all you need to know."

---

[34] Rear foot sweep.

“Shit, alright then! Heh, now this is gettin’ interestin’! I might actually lose…hell, this is the most fun I’ve had in ages! C’mon then, Iba-kun!”

Ibaraki-douji snapped to face his master, startled.

“Eh?”

“Don’t just stand there lookin’ cute, hurry up and start the match already!”

The retainer’s face lit up bright red as he fumbled with the fan, holding it in front of him as he looked around anxiously. His eyes scanned the arena before ultimately settling on Rodion and his friends.

“N-No audience members in the ring! Contestants, take your places for the final round!”

The Prince peeled himself off of his friend, gently shaking off his arms before putting a hand up to Rodion’s face and cupping his cheek. He smiled warmly.

“You can do it, love. Me and the chicken nugget believe in you. Isn’t that right, Sa—”

He looked down, and suddenly noticed that Samayou was gone. His cheeks puffed out in another childish pout, mentally chastising the karasu-tengu for scampering off somewhere at the climax of the match. They were probably just off getting drinks or something, he bet. Beside him, as the two took their places, he heard Rodi let out a heavy sigh.

“(I really went through this…perhaps is best to do as Romans do. Though, I suppose would be, do as Japanese do…)”

The Prince barely had time to get back to his seat and keep himself from fainting before the Russian had unbuttoned his straining white shirt, letting his ample bulk, muscle layered under fat built for frigid climates, hang out. A carpet of black chest hair covered his chest and arms, and the litany of shallow scars that patterned his body like the stripes of a tiger showed his history well. A few of the oni in the crowd cheered and whooped, and at least a few suddenly became awful quiet. He clapped his coarse palms together, cracked his knuckles, and stared up at Shuten-douji.

The demon lord couldn’t help but grin.

“Oh? Is someone finally getting fuckin’ serious? I told ya, Russian, ya got a real wrestlin’ body…though, I suppose we’ll see if you’ve got th’ muscle to back up all that blubber!”

He prodded the middle of Rodion’s chest at that last word, and the doctor scoffed as he stood up straight and tossed the shirt behind him.

“I am sure I have more muscle in my body than you have hot air in your head.”

The shirt flew limply through the air before landing squarely in The Prince’s face. He let out a muffled squeak into the fabric before inhaling deeply, removing it from his face, stuffing it into his coat, and covering his cheeks with a lopsided lovesick expression as he ogled his bulky Russian companion. Shuten-douji laughed.

“Ha! Big words for a little guy. Enough preamble. Let’s get this thing settled. You have two roads in front of you. You’re walkin’ out of here with my jacket…or you aren’t walkin’ out of here at all. Either way, I’ll have had the best wrestling match o’ my damn life, so come on! *Let’s do this!”*

Rodion said nothing, staring up at his opponent with burning determination. Despite his unassuming and warm demeanor, there was simply something about the man that managed to strike fear—even if only a small bit—in those who saw the darker sides of him. It was as if, in those moments, he shut away all emotion, all sentimentality, all of the things that make a man what he is. And in those moments, he was nothing but a tool to carry out whatever task is expected of him.

And right now, what is expected of him is to win.

The two stared into one another's eyes for what felt like an eternity, time frozen as the audience held their breath…

The referee brought down his fan.

Shuten-douji knew that repeating his tactics from the previous two matches would not only make him seem incompetent, but would be an unwise move comparable to using scissors three times in a row in rock-paper-scissors. You run the risk of becoming predictable, and so a strategy that depends on unpredictability and adaptability is preferable. A leg sweep wouldn't be optimal, either. If he whiffed it and lost his balance, it would all be over. Instead, he went with one of the most classic techniques.

He thrust his palm forward and made contact with the middle of Rodion's forehead, the sound of the slap echoing briefly as he pushed with all his might. The Russian stumbled backwards, putting his arms out to try and regain his balance, but he was still forced up to the edge of the ring. When he managed to get both feet back on the ground, he barely had time to catch his breath before the oni lunged forward at him, right arm outstretched.

Thinking quickly, Rodi remembered something he had been told a long time ago.

"Shestyorka, you are bleeding? Ha! Idiot, you thought you could simply block punch like that? Is not so simple, you try to block punch by catching in hand, you break wrist, you break fingers, you are ruined. I meet Jew in Lefortovo Tyur'ma, Moskva who teach me most basic defensive art of krav maga: deflection of punch. You see here, yunosha, watch me, watch me, when I come in for punch, try to block, okay?"

There was a small gap in his memory, replaced by blinding pain.

You see, look, now you are bleeding in nose. You push punch out of way, good, but you leave yourself open for punch to face in process, bad. You want to keep from have broken nose in future, yunosha? Here is what you do…

Rodion leaned his body to the side and thrust his own right palm out, directly opposing the oni's approach. They did not clash, however: instead, Rodi let the red tree-trunk limb slide past his own thick arm, using its length to gently push the hand out of the way. A punch is a straight line, and even the smallest adjustment can throw off the trajectory something awful. Thus, his wrist glided across Shuten-douji's arm and came right up to his forehead, where the heel of his palm made direct contact with his opponent's bulbous red nose. There was the sound of cracking cartilage as his eyes bulged, and Shuten-douji was forced to reel back and hold his nose as the crowd gasped. Ibaraki-douji covered his eyes for only a moment before remembering he was the referee, and The Prince managed to snap out of his lustful haze long enough to holler in support.

The oni looked up, and the Russian was gone.

"Fuck…"

He turned around and saw that Rodion had circled around him with surprising speed, and before he could fully swivel his body, both of the doctor's hands had wrapped around the sides of his wrestling loincloth. Shuten-douji immediately knew what he was trying to do—it was a hallmark of many sumo matches, lifting an opponent up and out of the ring via their *mawashi*—and wisely, he stayed put as he stared down at him.

Rodion grunted and raised the piece of cloth as high as he could…which, with Shuten-douji rising to his full height, was only a few scant inches above where it originally was before his arms lacked any more power. Not only that, even if he had a good hold, the oni simply was too heavy for even the beastly Russian to lift.

In one sweep followed by cheering, he cast his right arm behind him and clasped his hand around Rodion's shoulder, whipping around and using the momentum from his turn to shove the human off to the side. Rodion stumbled once, twice, but remained in the ring. Shuten-douji kept his arms open as he stared down his opponent.

"Hahh…you're a slippery fucker, ain't ya?! Putting that Western technique to good use! Though, fat lot of good it did ya!"

"I wouldn't say that."

"Oh, ya wouldn't, huh?! Then what would ya say?!"

"I would say, *p'yanomu more po koleno."*

Shuten-douji sneered.

"And what the hell does that even mean?"

Rodion stood up straight himself, flashed a terrifyingly cold grin, and stared up at the demon lord like he was nothing more than a child against an elder. Even though he was almost certainly outmatched, his conviction—knowing it was life or death—astounded the oni.

It astounded him almost to the point of fear.

"For a drunk, the sea is knee-deep. That is, drunkards like you talk big…but more often than not, are capable of very little!"

With surprising speed, Rodion shot off the ground towards Shuten-douji and threw out both hands towards the demon lord, palms aimed like battering rams to knock down the great red wall that laid in front of him. He was caught off-guard, scrambling to move his hands to protect himself, and only just barely managed to catch both of the Russian's hands in his own, feeling the amount of force behind them make him skid back an inch or two.

Then he found that this force was unrelenting, steady and uncompromising like a hydraulic press, and shoved back against it. Rodion's hands left his for only a moment, but without even giving him time to readjust, the human had lunged his arms forward to lock them around Shuten-douji's armpits. Only just able to manage a return, Shuten-douji clasped his own hands around Rodion's shoulders. The two were in a deadlock, staring at one another. The swirling red voids of Rodi's eyes drilled into the burning yellow coals of Shuten-douji's, and the two stood there, fingers digging into one another. The crowd had reached a fever pitch, shouting derision and

encouraging cheers for both parties, support mixed and booze flying through the air. Neither of them had noticed, but patrons from the rest of the bar had filed in to create a dense crowd around the ring, the dish-rag dragon and namahage guard from earlier both chattering and passing money between one another.

They stayed like this for a good while, one occasionally getting a few inches on the other, and Rodion almost being driven to the brink several times, but now—only now—he had finally managed to push the demon back towards the outer edge. Ibaraki-douji had barely managed to keep his composure, getting down on the ground and staring at the clearing to watch carefully for any change in position.

The Prince's throat had grown hoarse from all his cheering, and he was glad that if anybody was able to see his excitement among the fabric folds of the kimono, they weren't saying anything. He had risen from his seat and was half-tempted to break out the vuvuzela[35] among the sounds of cheering, when he suddenly felt a deep twinge in his chest. Specifically, the left side of his chest, where he vaguely remembered his heart was supposed to be, though he wasn't quite sure anymore.

Rodion let out an animalistic grunt and pushed forward, knocking Shuten-douji a few more steps back.

It was a very familiar twinge: the sort of deadly premonition you get before you know something bad is going to happen.

Shuten-douji tried his best to shove his wrists back at the human, but to no avail: his heels were pushed up to the brink. Shouts of encouragement and negative reinforcement filled the room.

In an instant, all of his excitement dissolved, and he casted his eyes to the ceiling expectantly. Underneath the din of the crowd, he could hear…

The Russian's face went red, every muscle in his body aching as he dug his heels as deep into the floor as he could, pushing with all of his might as Shuten-douji, raising his head, slowly left the floor: first heels, then arch, then the balls of the metatarsals, then…

Crack.

There was the sound of wood and paper splitting from above all of them, and before anyone could look up, the ceiling caved in. Within only an instant, shards of wood, clumps of snow, and the occasional roof shingle rained down on the crowd of yokai with a clattering sound. The hole that was left revealed the cause: two muscle-bound dog-men wrapped in shredded polo shirts and blue jeans, each with two heads facing opposite directions, falling through the rafters with Samayou fluttering down, using his leaf-fan as a makeshift parachute.

The Prince never saw what the result of the match was, as by the time he looked down at the two combatants, Rodion and Shuten-douji had both collapsed onto the floor and were covered in snow, the two of them groaning and slowly trying to regain their bearings. He watched the

[35] Despite saying that he nicked it off of a South African father of three during the 2010 FIFA World Cup, The Prince bought it at a tchotchke shop in Cape Town for twenty pounds and has only ever used it to scare off cult members.

karasu-tengu drop onto Rodion's back before skipping off of it and toddling over to The Prince, gesturing wildly at the dog-men. He cursed.

"Bugger, it's the Sons of Sam! Of course, I should have known the bloody cult would come here, I stayed too long again…Come along then, chicken nugget! Rodi, darling! We're scarpering!"

Rodion managed to sit up and spit out some snow just in time to hear The Prince's order, one of the Sons of Sam shaking its heads behind him as it stood.

"W-What? Why? I was winning!"

"Cult agents, love, don't worry, I've got it under control! Now come on!"

He grabbed Rodion by the hand, gesturing for Samayou to follow him as he started leading the half-naked Russian and the crow-monk out of the dilapidated room. The door, having been closed for the sake of the other patrons, was unfortunately locked. The Prince shouted and jiggled the doorknob, slamming on the wood and yelling for them to open it back up.

"Damn it, open up! Ugh. Rodi, open it."

"M-Me?!"

"No, the pile of snow over there, *yes* you! Use your strength to knock the damn door down, you damn nearly did it with big red!"

Rodion bashed his shoulder into the door. It didn't budge, and he let out an exasperated sigh.

"Nearly? I did! We will need to circle back around to get jacket, hopefully they will be gone by then, but I will try and—"

"Taken care of, love!"

"Taken care of?"

There was a shout from the other end of the room.

"Hey!"

Both of them turned and saw Shuten-douji, exhausted, staring them down with clenched fists. The Sons of Sam slowly rose behind him, growling as they began to sense the flesh and blood of those occupants who had been knocked unconscious. The demon lord glowered at them, panting, before looking to a pile of rubble.

"...Hahh…hhrrf…Iba! What's yer verdict?! I won, didn't I?!"

An artificial hand sprouted from what was soon to be a pile of mulch, and a bleeding Ibaraki-douji brushed off some shingles from his horns. He coughed up a spatter of green blood and raised his fan.

"Y-Yes, yes…I-In the event of—" He coughed again. "—outside intervention, the home team wins by d-default…"

Rodion slammed his shoulder into the door once more, to no avail.

"What?! That was never stated!"

"Didi, darling, really, don't worry about it—"

Ibaraki-douji held out his hand, expecting to materialize something…but nothing happened. He shouted something to the others, drowned out by shouting from those who were buried under debris and barking from the Sons of Sam, but none of the group heard it as the door suddenly

swung open. Rodion stumbled through and The Prince followed shortly after, sharing a confused look before seeing Samayou standing behind them, one talon in the lock.

They nodded to them, and the three of them ran through the (thankfully empty) main bar before throwing themselves out the door. The Prince shuddered, feeling the cold breeze of the outside world's night once more, but he still had a grin on his face as the three of them waded through the ankle-deep snow. Rodion huffed.

"What did you mean, 'do not worry about it'? What are you talking about?"

"When I say—hrnngh—don't worry about it, I mean don't worry about it, love! It's all taken care of!"

"What is?!"

The Prince looked back at the bar as he scrambled through the snow, digging a hand into his patterned coat and producing a fire-patterned article of clothing resembling a small jacket lined in teal with a wry grin.

"I took the liberty of giving us some 'insurance'! You know, I really wasn't planning to be food for a bunch of ornery oni anytime soon, so I figured 'Hey! Why not make sure everything goes right no matter what,' you know?"

~

Ibaraki-douji stared at his empty hand, and after a few moments of confused ogling at nothing, he turned his neck as best he could to his master.

"I-It's gone. The haori…Nanimonai-no-hime must have taken it."

The demon lord growled at him.

"What?"

"They…must have frisked it off of me at some point earlier, m-my apologies sir, I never even…"

Shuten-douji raised his hand, silently signaling for his retainer to stop speaking, before he turned to the Sons of Sam, who were growling and sniffing at the poor namahage guard who attempted to fend them off. He called to them.

"Hey, assholes!"

Both of them turned their four heads to him, growling.

"In their blood."

"From the gutter."

The demon lord snapped his fingers, and in an instant, a studded iron club the size of two baseball bats laid out end-to-end fell into his hands. He pointed it at them.

"I dunno who you twerps are, but you're after the okama with the crown of thorns, ain't ya?"

The Sons of Sam shuddered and snarled.

"The Prince of Fuck All."

"The Prince of Fuck All."

"Satan's child."

“The cruelest, sickest man on Earth.”

“Cruel prince.”

“Cruel prince.”

The two of them twitched and spoke in unison, foamy drool seeping from their razor-sharp maws.

“Mean, terrible, cruel, hateful Prince of Fuck All.”

Shuten-douji grinned and pointed out the open door.

“Go get ‘em, boys.”

Howling and wailing a mad racket, the Sons of Sam bounded out the door on all fours, barely squeezing their linebacker-sized shoulders through the door frame as the noise went with them. Shuten-douji moved to follow them, and behind him, he called:

“Anybody who wants some fresh loser meat, follow me!”

~

Rodion’s jaw hung open as he stared at the garment, barely managing to keep his eyes on it as he clambered up the side of a steep and rocky outcropping in the mountains. The Prince effortlessly hopped up it, Samayou skittering between the snow-covered steppes like some sort of oversized spider.

“Right sneaky of me, innit? I doubt the one-armed wonder would have been good for a bit of trade, but I still shushed this off of him without the cove ever noticing! You remember when I was hugging him after the chicken nugget won the basket-weaving contest, yeah?”

The Russian was still quiet, following him across a stream, but eventually managed to work up the spoons to respond.

“...You…stole the jacket, from retainer?”

“Right on the money, Didi!”

He slowed a little.

“So…it would not have mattered if I had won or lost, would it have?”

“Not in the least~”

Rodion stopped and looked at The Prince, who stopped to turn and look at him. He had a look of honest hurt on his face, disappointment having washed over his face. The silence hung between them before The Prince awkwardly laughed and waved his hands, trying to diffuse the tension.

“Hahaha, I mean, of course it would have mattered! Though, in the end, we can’t really say whether you’d won or lost, can we? I didn't want to be eaten, I know you certainly didn't want to be, but…well, you know, I just wanted to make sure! Is there something wrong with that?”

“You were cheering for me.”

“Of course I was, I wanted you to win!”

“But, there would have been same outcome whether I had won or lost.”

“Duh.”

There was the sound of howls in the distance, and Samayou scrambled past the both of them across the water.

"Now, can we please keep legging it? I can hear the Sons of Sam coming, and if you want to narrowly avoid being eaten just to get ripped to shreds by feral dog-men, then be my guest, but I'm not sticking around."

The Prince turned on his heel and sprinted through the snow, kicking up white clouds in his wake as Rodion reached out to him.

"W-Wait, Prince, y—"

He was gone. The Russian sighed, mouth folding into an annoyed frown, and trudged after him in the snow, deciding that—as many objections as he had to this reveal—now wasn't a good time to talk about them. He would save them for later. Instead, he and The Prince continued running through the mountains.

When they came to a harsh upwards slope of volcanic pebbles, looking behind them, they could see in the clearing around the bar two black globs carving railroad tracks through the snow, followed by one red dot followed by a loose coalition of perhaps a dozen or so multicolored dots. The Sons of Sam, Shuten-douji, and his gang. Not good. The Prince produced a pair of ice picks from his coat, twirling one in each hand before jamming them into the sedimentary soil.

"Better keep moving, dear. The Sons of Sam are feisty little critters. Imagine a dog that's waited for its master to come home for so long, that it's decided that the instant it sees him again, it'll rip him to shreds."

He hoisted himself upwards, jabbing each pick upwards in order to climb up the slope more easily…though, he stopped when he noticed he was the only one there. He looked down the slope, and Rodion was practically crawling at the bottom, each handful of soil only slipping through his fingers as he panted, his breathing having a ragged whistling quality to it. Even despite being covered in falling snow, he was covered in sweat. Samayou was shoving their elbows into his backside, trying their best to shove him up the mountain, but it did little good. He looked up.

"Hahh…P-Prince…is too steep…"

The Prince pouted a little.

"Come on, Rodi! It's only a couple meters upwards, we slid down it no problem earlier!"

"Well, i-if you do not remember, I just wrestled for three straight rounds and then ran half of kilometer through the snow…I-I am exhausted…"

He glanced back over to the clearing. All the dots were gone, but he could see movement in the trees and the sound of howling getting louder.

"Then have the chicken nugget help you up, they've got a fan or summat, right?"

"T-Too steep for that…at least throw me a pickaxe!"

"I need two picks to climb up the slope!"

"You don't have more than two in that stupid coat of yours?!"

“It’s not stupid, it’s chic! Look, once I reach the top, I’ll throw a rope down and you can come up that way, we don’t have time to be bickering like this!”

“Throw me the pickaxes!”

“You’re too heavy to use them!”

Rodion winced and grit his teeth, venomously muttering something in Russian under his breath.

“Ugh. Fine!”

He sat up, picking pebbles out of his chest hair and catching his breath with a hand to his heart while Samayou hovered nearby. He craned his neck and watched as The Prince messily clambered up to the top of the slope, where nearby there was a massive boulder wedged neatly in the soil. The redhead fell to his hands and knees, catching his own breath, before hurriedly coming to his feet, checking his nails, brushing off the pebbles from his knees, reaching into his coat—

The trees parted, and the two Sons of Sam came barreling out of it like hellhounds, foamy drool flecking behind them as they sped towards those left at the bottom. Their voices echoed like air raid sirens.

“DIE!”

“PRINCE!”

“DIE!”

The Prince managed to turn around just in time to see the Sons of Sam rushing towards the Russian, Rodion too exhausted to react as quickly as he would have wanted to. Snow crunched beneath the dogs’ feet quickly enough to make one continuous sound like a train chugging, getting closer and closer to Rodi. He threw out a hand, his mouth opening in fear, but no sound came out. Rodion coughed, seeing the mass of brown fur hurtling towards him, and wrenched his eyes shut with his arms up.

“Der’mo—!”

…But, no impact ever came. Instead, there was the sound of a strangled yelp, a quick slash and ripping noise, and a sudden gust of wind. He opened one eye, and to his left and right were the confused bodies of the Sons of Sam, chests quickly rising and falling as they got to their feet. In front of him, Samayou stood holding their fan.

“Samayou…”

They trembled in front of him, clearly afraid even as they gripped their fan with resolute determination. Rodion reached out to them, but felt something knock against the back of his shoulder: a rope. He glanced up at the top of the hill, but unsurprisingly, The Prince was gone.

Then he heard a voice, no higher than a whisper.

“Hashiru.”

Rodion turned around.

“What?”

In an instant, Samayou turned their head. Through a newly-formed gash in their reed hood, Rodion could see a single emerald eye peering out from the darkness. Though it narrowed with resolve, he could see its pupil quivering as it clouded. The voice spoke again.

"Go."

Rodion winced, raising a hand to take hold of them, but the Sons of Sam growling demanded of him a single option. He grit his teeth, shook his head, and whispered a "Thank you." before taking hold of the rope and using it to scale the steep incline bit by bit. He tried his best to focus on anything else, the rough texture of the rope, how the friction burnt his palms, the bite of the cold Japanese mountain wings, anything to take his mind off of the sounds of combat he could hear behind him. Dogs growling, the sounds of flesh tearing, the occasional gust of wind, and the louder sounds of the coming crowd calling for all three of their deaths. As it happens, desperately blocking out everything that isn't your current task is quite an effective way of getting things done, and he was up the ramp before he knew it.

Stumbling through the rocks and wilderness, he eventually came to The Prince standing beside the Sessho-Seki, bike parked nearby, frantically waving the flame-patterned jacket. He was shouting.

"Look, look, you bloody fox, we've got it!"

Rodion hurried next to him, bent over and panting, before glaring at The Prince. The redhead returned the glare with a smile, gesturing with a hand.

"Didi! Glad ya made it up, hun. Don't mind me, just having an arva with Tammy here so she'll drop the bubble. Don't see much need for the specs this time around though—I mean, we've got it, so what'll she have to complain about?"

"Prince, is very important that, after we get Sessho-seki, we need to go back for Samayou. They stayed behind so I could catch up with you, they could be in danger—"

The Prince scoffed, raising a foot and stepping onto the Sessho-seki. Of course, actually touching it would kill him, but standing on it with his tall sandals was no issue anymore now that the magical barrier was down.

"Oh, collywobbles, the chicken nugget can handle things on their own. You saw how big red talked about them, didn't you? Nobody that famous can't hold their own in a little scrap. Besides, our mission's more important, innit? Fate of the world at stake, here!"

He took off his coat and laid it over the Sessho-seki. Silently, with his fingers, he counted down from three, to two, to one, before the lump underneath it disappeared entirely and he picked it back up. The rock was secured. Rodion put his hands on his hips.

"I can't believe you, Prince! Samayou was why we won that jacket in first place, and you are fine with just leaving them there to die?!"

"Don't be such a quibbler, Rodi, like I said, I'm sure they can handle it! You were the one who won the jacket anyways."

"B-But I didn't win it! That was *you* stealing it, it would not have mattered if I won or lost!"

"Semantics, semantics, less talking, more riding!"

The Prince practically leapt onto the bicycle's seat, with Rodion following suit and the two sharing tabs of LSD. He started cycling, the gaps in the wooden path through the mountains making for a bit of a bumpy ride, but as it started to kick in and the world around them began to swirl with color, they started to get used to it. Rodi stuck his tongue out.

"I feel nauseous. How many times have we taken these things today?"

"After a while, you start to lose count. Where did you say you dropped Blondie off?"

"Kanma Memorial Clinic, I believe."

"Fabulous! Kanma Memorial Clinic, here we come!"

Just as they could hear the growls of dog-men behind them, the bicycle vanished in a puff of technicolor smoke, leaving the feral creatures in the dust.

The crowd of yokai behind them never set foot past that incline. Ultimately, none of them were willing to incur the wrath of Amaterasu when it came to encroaching on human territory.

~

The next thing they knew, The Prince of Fuck All and Rodion were in the halls of Kanma Memorial Hospital. The Prince was given plenty of strange looks, especially considering the way his mascara was running from sweat and snow on his face (and, of course, the crown of thorns hanging above his head), but Rodion was recognized by the staff. Though he wasn't allowed in until he could convince The Prince to hand back his clothes—which The Prince did only after trying to persuade the staff to let it slide with some compliments that Rodion didn't quite feel were earned—he was gladly escorted to the room where he had dropped off his friend.

The Prince knocked on the door, not waiting for a response before sliding it open.

"Bloooondie? You're in here, yeah?"

The interior of the hospital room where he was staying had certainly changed: the beds had been shifted to the walls and the windows had all been shut, making the room look much more empty than it really was. Only as little moonlight as possible was let in. In the center, held up by the twisted remnants of the IV drips, was the pot of a potted plant full of the scattered remains of various objects suspended above a small fire. Seated around the fire with their heads covered by dark pieces of fabric were five figures, shrouding their faces. In a low and guttural voice, all of them muttered,

"Duw dy nerth, ag yn nerth Dioddef;
A dioddef dros y gwir, ag yn y gwir pob goleuni;
Ag yngoleuni pob Gwynfyd, ag yngwynfyd Cariad,
Ag ynghariad Duw, ag yn Duw pob daioni…"

The two of them stared at the proceedings, The Prince's mouth hanging open. Rodion lightly stepped past him, clearing his throat.

"Erm, excuse me?"

The five figures stopped and turned to him, their faces still hidden, before four of them awkwardly rose to their feet and apologized in Japanese to both the two visitors and the druid

who remained before filing out of the door. The dark cloth over their heads appeared to just be dark hospital scrubs. After all of the nurses had left, the last one remaining stood up and shrugged the scrub off of himself.

"I am sorry. These Eastern women were interested in my druidic practices, and I was sharing with them a typical ritual for beginner practitioners."

It was Fionn mac Cumhaill, dressed in his standard attire: chainmail, burlap pants and all.

"Hello Forruad, Cron. I'm glad that you both are okay. Did you obtain the Killing Stone?"

Rodion hurried forward and moved to take Fionn's hand in his own, but hesitated slightly. Once he saw Fionn nod, though, he took it with both hands and a wide grin.

"Cumhaill! Thank goodness you are okay, I was quite worried about you, your burns were rather severe…How are they? Were they treated well?"

Fionn raised his shoulder and pulled up parts of his chainmail. Where there once were ugly charred splotches, there was little more than a slight discoloration in the same shape.

"Yes, I am fine. With a combination of herbs from my oxter bag and the surprising expertise of modern medical knowledge, my wounds were able to be treated quickly. The burns I accrued are taken care of, and apart from slight soreness, there is no longer any pain. Thank you for dropping me off here, Cron. I appreciate it."

"Nyet, nyet, really, is no issue…"

He turned to The Prince.

"Did you two retrieve what you came here for?"

"Indeed we did, Blondie, and managed to scarper before Man Unkind and a whole cabal of fumin' yokai came after us! Can't quite show you, but I assure you, we've got it. All thanks to my sticky fingers—" Rodion shot him a look. "—Aheheh, and of course, Rodi's wrestling skills."

Fionn stared blankly at the two of them for a few moments.

"...I would like some elaboration."

The two of them sat down on the hospital beds near the wall. Together, they explained the events of the past day to Fionn, who stood with his arms crossed and took in the information. At the end of it all, he shook his head.

"It is a shame I was incapacitated at the time. I would have enjoyed wrestling."

"You, Blondie? I mean, you're more than half in shape, but this cove was ten feet tall! Ten feet! You would be two-thirds of his height, and that's only slightly less than what Didi was!"

"Not to mention, do you not dislike being touched?"

"That is correct."

"Then…you would not enjoy wrestling, *da?"*

"I am sure I could find some way of participating. Shows of strength were common among the Fianna, and I would always best even the most boastful. Words are worth nothing more than pebbles in the face of action, after all."

Rodion laughed, grinning.

"Haha, well put!"

“I do have one question, however. We will be going back for the monk, yes?”

The two of them went silent, the Russian turning to The Prince.

“Is good question. We will be returning for Samayou, right, Prince?”

The Prince rolled his eyes and sighed, wiggling a hand around.

“I told you before, Rodi, the chicken nugget can handle things on their own, and we have more important things to deal with. You can’t be getting caught up in the fates of every bloke who crosses our path, hell, Blondie almost got fried for trying to save one of them! Very brave, don’t get me wrong, but a mite foolish, I think.”

Fionn raised an eyebrow.

“I do not believe my actions were foolish. My heart and actions were utterly unclouded. That Fomorian clearly meant a great deal to a number of people, and if standards have changed since my own time, then it is the noble thing to do to act in accordance with those standards. Surely, there is another way.”

“The rope is still there, yes? Is possible they could have escaped on their own.”

“Can birds climb ropes?”

“I would not have said yes yesterday, but I saw them weave a basket today, so who knows?”

The Prince huffed and stood up, hands on his hips.

“Bloody hell, are you going to be going on about them for the rest of the month? Do you want us to go and pick Morganwg back up? How about Oberon and Titania? If it’s that much of a ferret in your trousers, then we can get right back on the bike and go and get them.”

Rodion stood up, frowning.

“They sacrificed themself for us not even an hour ago, and you have no feelings of apprehension about leaving them behind?”

“They didn't say a god damn thing!”

Fionn raised his hand.

“It could be that Forruad is jealous that he was shown up by someone who the two of you just met.”

“Is that true, Prince?”

“You stay out of this, Blondie!”

The three of them (well, the two of them—Fionn just sat there quietly nibbling on his thumb for the most part) bickered and argued in front of the window with its blinds shut, pointing at one another, waving their hands around, making statements about how callous one was being, how overly sentimental the other one was being, insisting whether it would have made a difference if The Prince had stolen the jacket or not, for quite a while. Without either of them noticing, by the time a couple of minutes had passed, there was a considerable amount of light shining through the blinds of the window, despite the fact that it was in the late evening.

Rodion winced and put his hand up to shield his eyes, squinting.

“Radi boga, what the hell is going on out there?”

“Don’t look at me, Didi. I may be extremely talented in many respects, but I can’t make the sun rise on command. Go see what it is,” The Prince muttered, facing away from his partner.

Though, he was now facing Fionn, and Fionn awkwardly looked away trying desperately not to make eye contact.

Grumbling something under his breath, Rodion trudged over to the blinds and yanked on the cord, raising the blinds.

Immediately, all three of them shielded their eyes from the uncompromisingly strong light that shone in through the window, and which floated in from outside the building to the middle of the room like ball lightning. It was like a miniature sun had chanced a visit to their hospital room, and nobody was very happy about it. Their eyes adjusted slowly, however, and when the light began to dim, they saw a figure standing in it.

It was…a man. A young man with dark skin, icy blue eyes, and a wide customer-service smile who had a halo floating over his head and two sets of white-feathered wings. There was a faint scar running diagonally down the side of his scalp. He was holding a clipboard, which he tapped once or twice with something that vaguely resembled a pen, before looking around at the group.

"Hi, hello, sorry to interrupt. My name's Phanuel, middle-manager and customer service branch, great to meet you. We need The Prince of Fuck All to Heaven right now, so if you and the others could come with me…"

CHAPTER 22: Parlor of Miracles

Taken from her cell after what felt like an eternity of waiting, Hel was led down corridor after corridor. She couldn't quite call it a hallway: a hallway had an entrance and an exit. A hallway went in one straight line. You knew when you entered one, and usually knew when you had exited one, unless you were especially scatter-brained that day. Here, though, when she was led by the Modern Primitives (whose gruesome appearances she found herself starting to get accustomed to, before instead choosing to believe that she had started to go insane), the constant movement, the winding and turning, the sensation that even as she walked, the entire building rotated in a manic corkscrew, made her nauseous enough to concede that maybe there wasn't such a thing as a hallway after all.

She shuddered. Hel was going to make it out of here, but how? She had tried several times to escape in her cell, with Moe occasionally watching and occasionally rambling to herself. The ropes around her wrists stifled her powers: without them, she would be able to easily freeze the whole building and shatter anyone who crossed her path. She believed. She thought her powers were rather impressive, though considering how nothing in the Broken Tracks seemed to make sense, perhaps that also wouldn't have worked.

Still, being as physically weak as she was, the only course of action she saw was to try and get the ropes off of her however she could. She banged them against the walls, but all that did was bruise her wrists slightly. She tried to reason with the Pincushion Wife in her cell, but all she did was rock back and forth, knitting false comforts, and any attempt to attack her was met with more violence: the one time she tried to kick at it, the Pincushion Wife caught her ankle in her hands and twisted it until she yielded. Hel had even tried to somehow rub it against the hay in an attempt to wear them down. It was worth a shot, but of course, it made no impact.

So, there she was, being led along by two rancid-looking tattoo artists, before the three of them came to what she believed was a door. She could barely believe anything nowadays, but this tracked with what she remembered a door looking like. Two rectangular slabs of metal with a blood-stained circular window on each, and a metal handle.

Above the doors, a neon sign flicked on. In red flashing text, it read:

[TATTOOING IN PROGRESS]

She wrinkled her nose.

"I haven't even entered yet. How presumptuous of your leader, to speak as though I'm a foregone conclusion!"

One of the Modern Primitives turned to her, muttering something she didn't understand, though she felt that the tone was one of impatience. Holding onto her shoulders with the palms of their many arms, the two of them gripped her tightly as they brought her into the light.

The room that they entered was, though Hel wouldn't have recognized it as such, shockingly similar to an operating theater. Not the room used for surgeries in private contexts, mind you. It was a circular room, the floor a messy splatter of colors and miscellaneous symbols and scraps of paper that Hel struggled to focus on one at a time, that continued vertically until flaring out in the shape of a mushroom cap, where concentric circles of seats were situated, ostensibly for students and other doctors to watch experts perform surgery in an academic setting. These seats were filled to the brim with agents: hulking graveyard golems, rabid dog-men, lanky figures in blood-soaked trenchcoats, vaguely insectoid figures that appeared to be made of shimmering yellow electricity speckled with open mouths, at least two or three ambulatory sacks of meat, and a couple of cabinets. The seats were so packed with beings, so full of motion, that it was downright impossible to make out any single figure among the crowd, and all manner of cacophonous sounds of madness echoed throughout.

In the chamber itself, however, she saw that there was something very much resembling a dentist's chair—albeit made of bones haphazardly stitched together—in the center of the room, reclined far back. She couldn't make out the figure on it, but she saw that there was something she did recognize atop his head: a mess of shaggy brown hair. She swallowed, keeping silent even as, among the racket, one noise broke out above the rest like an air raid siren: screaming. Absolute and unbridled screaming, the kind of sound a man couldn't make without reducing his throat to pulled pork, and once Hel noticed it, she wished desperately that she could cover her ears. The screams of man were not unfamiliar to her, but never before had she been so close to one who suffers so thoroughly…and never before were they screams in a voice she recognized.

Beside the chair, a Modern Primitive held something that buzzed loudly, running it along the victim's body, and on the other side, a different figure she had never seen before stood stooped.

It resembled a humanoid shark, its grey-and-white skin stretched tautly over a bulky and stout figure that appeared wider than it was tall. A disgustingly tacky paisley-patterned suit was stretched over its rotund body, yet still its distended gut hung heavily out from underneath it, ugly red streaks lining the sides. A blindfold, held in place by two arrows driven through the shark's eyes, was wrapped around its head. It clapped stupidly with a drooling grin as it 'watched' the proceedings despite not even facing the chair.

Finally, off to the side…was The Dog-Faced Man himself, appearing in a courtroom-sketch style dressed in a long blood-stained hospital scrub and surgical cap, clasping his bony-fingered hands with pink rubber gloves stretched over them together. He raised his arms to the sky, his quivering voice raising.

"GEMNTLEMEN!!! The Tramsplant is successful, this boy, this Poo r Poor Disinfranchiesed young man has spent his liiiiive on the run. On the lam. On the lamb of god. And it is US it is US who have SLAUGHTERED THAT LAMB, he will roam free once more, with his new identity his pseudonymakeover his nom de plumage , come come. Come come. i can make you, a MAAAAAA HA HA HA HAAAAAN"

He cackled, jerking each time with exaltation, before stopping. Without turning, his head slowly swiveled 180 degrees to meet Hel's shocked gaze, his grin widening. The crowd took

notice of her and the two Modern Primitives who had brought her in, and their noisiness grew almost intolerable before The Dog-Faced Man (who had been shuddering silently until them) raised his hand high, making a shape with it that you would make to create a shadow puppet of a fox. The crowd went silent.

The Dog-Faced Man cooed.

"oooohhhh, , , , helly,,, helly hella hello there, my lidl goddess, what Tell Me what brings you here? come to watch the show? come to see the Tat the Tat T T TTT kk k k k come to see us do our sexy thang?"

She sneered.

"I didn't come of my own volition."

He slobbered, drool seeping from his mouth. A particularly large glob fell on Hel's chest, making her retch.

"oh but you diiiiid. ent. You did ent. nun of us did we all just threw in the towler and floated in here, wandering, endlessly parading out broken and cracked selves through the streets like a plastic bag drifting through hte wind wanting to start again. we are the garbage,, we are the lost,,,, we are the dregs and the scu m o n the bottom of your shoe, we are the last forgotten, we are the long lost love. and it will end."

He turned around, his body facing Hel, but his head turned with him to face the audience instead.

"PEOPLE PEOPLE. MARGINALLY MARGINALIZED PEOPLE. Watch As I Ask The God Dess A Simpul Questiong.. . . . "

Reaching over to the chair, he raised it up.

"Hel. Have you seen this man?"

In one motion, he spun it to face her, and Hel couldn't make out what she was looking at.

It appeared to be a human figure, roughly in the same size and shape as a naked adult man, but it was impossible to tell where he began or ended. From fingertip to fingertip, from ear to ear, across every square inch of his bare skin, was a tattoo. An impossibly complex and labyrinthine, winding and swirling, arabesque kaleidoscopes of shifting and turning spirals of color, tattoo. Even as she looked at it, she could feel herself being lost in it, the tattoo itself moving like some peek into the heart of an infinitely complicated clockwork mechanism. It induced a throbbing sensation behind her eyes, but she looked hard enough at the figure to note two other things: the eyes hadn't been touched, the two bloodshot white orbs frantically darting all around and trembling, and the chest was heavily rising and falling with ragged breaths.

Hel grit her teeth, struggling to look away, but entranced by the grotesque confusion of the sight in front of her. She knew this person. The hair. She just met him, he was, he was…

He was…

"...I…I-I don't recall…"

"YOU DONT RECALL? Goooood good good!! Thats sexactly what we are here for, ladies and jerms! Everyone give a HOOMONGOS Thank You to our resident Modern PRimitive who

preformed the delicate prodecure, and ot the Loanword Shark who ate this man's shackles from society!!!"

He flourished with a hand to the other two figures, the group cheering. The Modern Primitive bashfully raised its hands, and the Loanword Shark just let out some guttural sound, appearing proud of itself.

"whats in a name? Whats in a life? nothing nothing, nothing more than a massey grain of sand, and is it eh name that binds the fles is it the name you call when you are angry it sit the name that is used by those who sconstrict your love and take your worries and tighten them like a NOOSE around your neck. a name is nothing. What's in a name? All of the sins of society. Gentlemen…he is no longer who he once was. He is now…The Liquor Never Brewed. Off to the Pain Surgeons then."

The crowd roared triumphantly, and the Modern Primitive who tattooed him in the first place removed the nameless man from his binds on the chair, holding him by the hair as it floated out of the doors Hel had entered through. The two holding onto Hel urged her onwards, and when she protested, they shoved her forwards, throwing her into the chair that then clasped its ribcage bindings around her limbs. There was a prayer murmured by the Modern Primitives, she felt something rip, and her wrists were shackled to the armrests.

"Nngghh—let me go! Let me go, you freaks! I swear to all nine worlds, I will slaughter all of you by my own hand!"

Spun back around, she faced the audience, and The Dog-Faced Man (who now, dabbled in watercolor, was dressed like a circus ringleader) stepped beside her. His manic warbling voice had grown more coherent, adopting a slight Southern tone. He shot a look at Hel that made her shudder.

"Quiet, little girl."

He raised both hands to the sky.

"Ladies and gentlemen. This will be the prelude to the main event. You've seen all manner of freaks and geeks, the likes of which have never before been seen on this planet. We the people of Man Unkind, in order to form a more perfect union, are on the very cusp of establishing this new era! And who do we have to thank for this?"

The litany of agents cheered and chanted, in so many languages, the name of their leader. The Dog-Faced Man just laughed and lowered his head.

"Yes, yes, thank you very much. But I mean, what do we owe this success to?"

In a flick of his wrist, through sleight of hand, a chunk of white stone appeared in his hand. It was covered in numerous shallow ornamental spiral carvings, and Hel could feel it pulse with a steady force, almost like a heartbeat, within itself.

"This. This precious little rock. The Chunk of Alatyr, the world stone. With this, our sights set on the world with the sleeping god, we will end this world and bring about a new one. And, as a show of our power, and as one final experiment in the Closed Door…"

In another gesture, the Chunk of Alatyr disappeared, and both hands moved towards Hel.

"...We have seen the effects of Spare Ink on humans. We have seen the effects of Spare Ink on people. What does it look like…if…a GOD *is tattooed?"*

Hel swallowed, seeing the agents loom over her. Behind them, she could see a large black blot moving.

"S-Spare Ink?"

The Modern Primitive raised up two items. One was an item resembling a battery-powered needle, though two vibrant blue eyes and a red-lipped mouth with a lolling tongue were stuck on it like a cartoon. And the other…the other was something Hel could feel was entirely out of place in this surreal environment.

It was a crystal ink well, completely transparent, full of a shimmering rainbow liquid that resembled a liquid CD, or the iridescence oil acquires when mixed with water and shone with light. It shone with a curious white glow. The Dog-Faced Man grinned a sinister and snaggle-toothed grin.

"Once Molly returns…then…then then th e n , mehaheha hehe he he we, we, WE SHALL BEGIN THE PROSEDURE"

The Dog-Faced Man broke out cackling once more, his screeching voice echoing in the circular room and blending with all the miscellaneous noises of the maniacal agents. Hel looked to the Modern Primitive.

"What is that? What are you doing?"

It boggled at her, dunked the end of the needle into the ink well (which made the needle moan and roll its eyes back in its head), and raised it up, buzzing it a few times to make sure it worked. Now that she was getting a good look at it, the needle couldn't have been any thicker than a hair—and in fact, the point to which it tapered was so infinitesimally small that it was impossible to tell where it actually stopped. She gulped and struggled against her bindings, but to no avail: the bone was simply too strong.

She looked up at the crowd once again, and among the yammering masses, she saw that unclear black blob once again. Yet, now it had stopped, and was instead shimmying back and forth, back and forth…until it came fully into view.

It was a giant wolf and a feminine figure atop its head.

Hel's face lit up seeing them, but Foxy Shazam put a finger to her mouth to shush her. It wouldn't be good if she started demanding them to save her now. She kept quiet and watched as, beneath the racket, Foxy and Fenrir conversed with one another. Hel couldn't read lips—she barely had lips in the first place—but she knew they were trying to figure out a plan to help her out. All she hoped was that they could figure one out fast.

To her right, beside the Loanword Shark, there was a flash of black fire before the hulking figure of the Shadow appeared beside Hel. She was almost in awe at the sheer size of the figure she didn't recognize, but had no time to open her mouth before The Dog-Faced Man stumbled over and buried his face in the Shadow's chest, gripping the sides of his middle and nuzzling into him. She saw a tail—no more than bone—peek out from the back of his ringleader uniform and wag excitedly as he cooed.

“Mollleeeee mollee mollee hello hi hi i MISSED YOU i MISSED YOU i FUCKING MISSED YOU YOU PIECE OF SHIT i love you, , welcome welcome”

Hello, sir. You wanted to show me something?

“YES. no. wait. Yours so soft ehe hemememe BUT YES hou look look look at… her. . . .”

He removed himself from the Shadow and proudly grinned like a child displaying their science project. The Shadow himself stepped forward and stared down at Hel.

“...What are you staring at, fatso?”

The crowd gasped, and The Dog-Faced Man made a sound like he had nearly burst a blood vessel, but the Shadow just raised an eyebrow with his hands folded behind his back.

…The Norse gods won’t be happy with this, sir. You’ve ended up with Hel, queen of Helheim, in your grasp. Do you recall what occurred with the Norse gods in this world?

“i dont KNOW and i dont KARE, im just oh oh oh so giddy and excited and ready to have our little goddess become something Mch Much Much more… what do you suggest for the name, our name for our beloved newest baby daughter”

Out from the corner of her eye, she saw Foxy making a gesture. She was banging her fists against her own wrists, holding them in front of her and then thrusting both hands outwards. Hel looked down at her left wrist, then her right wrist, and got the message. Time to do this. She sneered at the two of them, opening her hands and gripping the arm-rests of the chair.

“I’m not your damn baby daughter! I will not be held like a rabid animal by one who looks like a rabid animal and his rotund consort! Let me be free, or else I will let myself be free. ”

She’s quite noisy, isn’t she?

“vewy vewy wude. How Rude!™ we aught two teach her that good little boys and girls should keep. Their mouths. SHUT.”

The needle started buzzing. Hel looked to Foxy and Fenrir, took a deep breath through her nose, and shouted something in Old Norse. Instantly, the temperature dropped, and the entire chair suddenly became covered with a cloudy sheen, flash-frozen. No longer structurally stable, Hel yanked her arms as hard as she could, and the ribs that bound her wrists snapped off as if they were made of brittle plastic. In fact, the whole chair crumbled into a heap of frozen bone.

“Foxy! Fenrir!”

“Hop on my back, sister, we haven’t much time!”

“Come on, we’ll get you out of here!”

Clapping her hands together, sparkles of ice particles shone between her palms as she thrust them down beneath her. As she ran, ice formed up from the floor and came to meet her feet, creating a staircase directly to the giant wolf and its rider. Where cult agents (at least, those who had the sanctity of mind to realize their fresh meat was getting away) lunged at her, a blast of ice served to stun them long enough for her to pass them.

The Shadow thrust his hand out, black fire pluming out from his palm in a focused flare like a flamethrower to eat away at the ramp. However, he remained still.

The Dog-Faced Man twitched.

“the ….. The th e the ropes the ropes the bindings around her wrists HOW COULD H”

He turned to the Modern Primitive that was about to tattoo her and grabbed it by the shoulders, gripping them hard enough to cause blood to spurt from where his fingers dug into its flesh, his grin pained.

"YOU CUT THEM OFF???? ??? ? WHY ? ? ? ?? ? ? ? "

He let out a wail and dropped to his knees, scooping his bony hands underneath the pile of slush and picking it up, the shards falling through the gaps in his fingers as he whimpered.

"Ahh .... Ahhh .... That was my GRANDMOTHERS CHAIR YOU ,,,, YOU ,, , . . . BITCH"

Sir, you don't have a grandmother.

"oh yeah"

Satisfied with that, he sprung to his feet and pointed at Hel, who was scrambling onto Fenrir, shrieking.

"GET HER AND BRING HER BACK HERE. NOW. NOW!!! NOW NOW NOW NOW NOW"

~

Hel rode behind Foxy on Fenrir, and they bounded through the corridors of the Parlor of Miracles. Fenrir was just as unfamiliar with the territory as Hel was, stumbling up spiral staircases and falling down vertical shafts, swimming through pools and running along the walls, and of course dodging the occasional train that ran through the building, but he never stopped moving. Hel gripped onto her brother's fur.

"Why did you come back for me?! I thought you and your partner were with the rest of these psychopathic rejects!"

"We are."

"And yet somehow, I get the feeling that you aren't going to be turning me in."

"Nope."

"So spit it out! Why are you here?!"

"Your brother asked a good question. Made me think about things. You and me and Moxy, we're kind of the same. Bound by the wills of those above us. Only difference is, we went willingly. Now we're paying the price."

Hel furrowed her brow.

"...Where is Moxy, anyways?"

"Doesn't matter. You've still got the Hume Gibbetine, right?"

"Pardon?"

"The black dagger Ms. Shazam tossed to you!" Fenrir piped up.

It occurred to Hel that she had it on her person the whole time. Reaching into her dress, she retrieved the blade. Of course, she couldn't have accessed it anyways—she would only be able to grab it if she had both hands free—but she still felt like a dunce for not remembering it sooner.

"Yes, I do."

"That's your ticket out of here."

Fenrir burst through the doors of the Parlor of Miracles, returning to the forest that surrounded it as he sprinted, ducking and weaving through floating pools of crude oil that left his fur black and tarnished for only a moment before passing through a fall of anti-oil and becoming clean once more. He didn't dare look behind him, but Hel did, and she saw a colorful crowd of maniacal cult agents flying towards her. Something about her struck it as oddly familiar, and she shuddered.

From the Polite Businessmen within the cloud, a block of black text reading "BLESS YOUR HEART" flew out towards them. Hel only just barely managed to deflect it in time to duck and dodge between the extended teeth of the Dead Letter Gendarmerie and the unclear Stygian-pink missiles from floating floating battleships. They exploded nearby, and suddenly Hel felt as though everything became slightly pinker, looking back to Foxy.

"What was that?"

"Mountbattened Hatches. They eat the original colors that mix when you make a third. They think you can't see them."

"Why is…my vision starting to blur?"

"Exposure to their colors. Starts to make everything look the same hue, until you can't tell what's what. You'll be fine. Listen."

Foxy pointed at the dagger without looking back.

"You use that thing to open up a portal, like I did. That'll get you two out of here."

"I suppose that seems fair…but wait, what about you? How are you going to get out of this absurd place?"

She frowned and shook her head.

"I lost my humanity long ago. You might be a goddess. Goddess of death. But you've still got some in you. At least half, judging from your face. Best thing I can do is let you go. I'll deal with the others."

"You?! But…and Moxy, she's—"

"Don't worry about her."

"How will I know where I'm going? It isn't like there's a compass on this weapon, after all…"

"Anywhere's better than here. You know that. You know it more than me or Moxy did."

A train rolled right past Fenrir, who huffed as his paws touched solid ground and padded along it once more, weaving between a sea of holes that were equal parts actual voids and equal parts painted-on black circles, and he looked up at his riders.

"I do hope you know where you're taking me, Ms. Shazam. I haven't the foggiest of where we're going…"

"Doesn't matter where, really. The whole place is a sphere."

Hel sniffed, raising an ice wall to protect against incoming projectiles. Like cat's fangs piercing through a blanket, the bladed weapons that flew at her just barely managed to get lodged enough into the ice so as not to harm her. She lowered the ice and turned around.

"A sphere?"

“The Broken Tracks of Meinung are a pocket dimension created from the psyches of the lea…The Dog-Faced Man and the Shadow externalized. You know how people talk about their mind palaces? It’s like that, just physical.”

“Then, I can use this dagger to enter it as well, right?”

“True, but there’s other ways. Only way out is to sneak out from under their noses, and the only way in is—”

Foxy was cut off by the sound of a pained yelp from beneath them, and the bounding motion through the Broken Tracks they had been experiencing turned to a slight glide, and the two of them were then thrown off of their ride, bouncing along the ground. Hel tumbled once or twice and skidded the rest of the way on her side, scratching up her pale human side, while Foxy fell like a rock and made a metal clanging sound as she hit the ground.

Hel slowly rose to her knees, seeing three things in succession.

First, the Hume Gibbetine had fallen closest to Foxy Shazam.

Second, the Shadow was standing a few meters behind them, three-fingered hand outstretched and black fire flickering and flaring from his fingers.

And third—

“FENRIR!”

Fenrir laid on his side a short distance away, chest rapidly rising and falling. From halfway down his waist onwards was entirely gone, having been eaten away in an instant by the black flames. Blood pooled out from the unseen underside of his intestines, visible spilling out onto the ground. He shuddered, coughing up a glob of black blood as he looked back at his sister. She moved to her feet, about to run to her brother’s side, but Foxy put a hand up, and she stopped short. Surreptitiously, Foxy Shazam hid the dagger under her boot.

The Shadow folded his thick arms behind his back and strolled up to the massive wolf, staring at its corpse with distaste as the agents circled around them.

What a hideous thing. Is the most creative thing humans could come up with for an apocalyptic threat an overgrown mongrel? I suppose that’s not surprising. What is, however, is that it’s the sibling of some mockery of humanity.

He looked to Hel.

Surely the ‘Queen of the Dead’ wouldn’t mourn for such a rabid little thing, would she?

Her face twisted into a grimace, and her fists clenched hard enough to crush bone. She opened her mouth to speak, but Fenrir weakly protested, voice weak and breathing ragged.

“Stop! S-Sister…don’t…d-don’t—” He coughed up another pool of blood. “—don’t attack him. He’s too s-strong…if he did this to me, he can do it to y-you…Stay back…”

“Fenrir…”

The Shadow sighed.

He may be nothing but a mongrel, but perhaps he’s less stupid than I assumed he was. He is correct. If you take even a step towards me, I won’t hesitate to erase you. Erasure. You’re familiar with what that is, right? That means you’ll be gone. Forever.

“T-That’s not true.”

He looked at the bleeding wolf, whose bloodshot eyes had turned to face the Shadow's rotund figure.

"It is…p…p-prophecy, that I shall devour Odin and die by his son's h-hand…that is immutable. You cannot k-kill…gods…s-so easily…"

The Shadow, despite not having any facial features other than a single eye, sneered at Fenrir and curled his fingers, delivering a jab straight into the canine's rib cage. A splash of blood came from both his mouth and the open wound of his torso as a howl erupted from him. Hel cringed.

Cocky. You gods are always pests, but in your case, I don't believe you have any place to talk. Who will believe that you exist in this day and age? Certainly not enough to bring you or your sister back.

Hel covered her mouth, but uncovered it just as quickly.

"Stop it! Stop that, you monster!"

He turned to her.

Monster? Now that is rich, coming from you.

Raising a hand, the black fire started to give way. It retreated down from his fingertips to his wrist, revealing…a pale and pudgy human hand.

Unfortunately, I'm just as human as anyone else.

The black fire subsumed it once more, and his arm swiveled to place his palm on Fenrir.

I just don't think about what even you gods call "cruelty".

"Boss."

Foxy Shazam stood up, straightening her back and looking to the Shadow with a stern look. He looked placidly back.

Foxy Shazam.

"Don't kill the wolf. He can still be useful. He's a god too."

…You think you can convince me of your innocence by trying to pretend you've been on our side all along? Do you take me to be a moron? You are a disappointment. A nuisance. A danger to Man Unkind. Free thinkers are dangerous. You do know what we do to traitors, don't you…?

She swallowed and felt a hand on her shoulder. Hel suddenly realized that The Dog-Faced Man—sketchy and unclear, constantly jittering—was standing right next to Foxy, wrapping his indistinct and bony fingers around her neck. He lowered his head down next to hers with the sound of bones stretching and cracking, until his head was right beside her. And he opened his mouth, razor-sharp teeth dripping with saliva that drooled and dropped to the ground with a wheezing, anticipatory breath…

Foxy was undeterred. A train rolled by in the silence.

"You don't really care about bringing about a 'new age', do you? All you want to do is cause mayhem. Destroy things. Ruin lives. Prey on the weak and defenseless to create more loyal minions willing to do your dirty work."

Oh dear. Have you really only just realized that? What a pity.

“Better late than never. At least I don’t have to resort to co-opting people’s beliefs to get what I want.”

And what is it that you want? You’re less than human now. Nothing more than a husk of metal, oil, and wire. Your partner has betrayed you, she remains with us. What could you possibly desire?

She grinned.

“I want a better world for people without dumbshits like you leading the way.”

Fenrir twitched, and shouted .

“Ms. Shazam!”

Foxy jolted, The Dog-Faced Man clutching around her neck.

“Hel!”

In one motion, Foxy kicked her leg out, sending the Hume Gibbetine across the ground towards Hel, who bent down and caught it, holding it close to herself.

There was a stretch of only five seconds or so where several things happened at once.

The bisected wolf shouted.

“G-Go, sister!”

“But what about—”

“I’ll be fine, just go! Otherwise both of us will be k-killed!”

The Shadow clenched his fist, and in an instant, black flame swamped the bleeding wolf. It ate away at him as he twitched and jerked, a dog-shaped form of swirling darkness. Hel yelped, cold icy tears starting to form in the corners of her eyes. Foxy Shazam let out a strangled noise as her neck cracked to the side from The Dog-Faced Man’s grip…however, due to her inhuman physiology, her head simply turned to the side rather than having its neck cracked. She shouted back to Hel, who had cult agents approaching her from every side.

“Go, Hel! Find him! Find The Prince of Fuck All! He’ll know what to do!”

“The Prince of What—?!”

“GO!”

Hel shut her mouth, conflicted over leaving her brother and Foxy…but she had no choice. Gripping onto the onyx dagger, she carved a circular hole into the air, the cut portion falling away to reveal endless darkness with the occasional spark in it. Just like when they had come here in the first place. She looked back to the Shadow and The Dog-Faced Man, face crumpled in a teary expression of rage.

“Both of you will pay for killing Fenrir, the Beast of Slaughter…and for all you’ve done. I swear it.”

With that, she dove through the hole, and it quickly shrunk before simply disappearing from existence with a comical ‘pop!’.

~

The Shadow, left without his boss’ latest catch, had started to have quite enough of this.

Even if they hadn’t gotten quite all of the stones needed yet…it didn't matter anymore to him, frankly.

He held out his hand, materialized a phone, and sent a message to the demons under his thumb.

Then he turned around and gave the same order to Man Unkind.

CHAPTER 23: Entering Heaven Alive

The Prince of Fuck All, Rodion Nikolayev, and Fionn mac Cumhaill sat in stunned shock at the angel which had suddenly forced himself into the middle of their hospital room, mouths open. Phanuel, who had been told what to expect but not quite who to expect, looked around at the three of them before gesturing his pen at The Prince.

"You're The Prince, right?"

Instantly, a beam shot out from the tip and burnt a hole through the wall behind the redhead, who only barely managed to lurch to the side in time. Phanuel laughed awkwardly.

"Haha, whoops! Sorry. I forget these pens can do that. You are The Prince though, right?"

He swallowed.

"Er…y-yes. Yes, that's me. You said you were…?"

"Phanuel, an angel. Well, technically archangel, but…I forget, do you humans keep track of that? Maybe not."

The Prince boggled at Phanuel for a few seconds before turning his attention to Rodion, who was…shuddering. In fact, he had his teeth grit in a way The Prince hadn't seen before, trembling as he looked on at Phanuel.

"...An…angel…"

"What's the big deal, Didi? You look like you've seen the holy ghost."

Phanuel smiled.

"Haha, in a sense, I suppose he has! The Holy Ghost—God—is in all angels, after all. Besides, if I'm not mistaken, you were raised by Eastern Orthodox nuns, right Mr. Nikolayev?"

"...Yes," he swallowed. "I was."

"Wait, that was real? I thought you were just having a laugh! I mean, who gets raised by nuns?"

"Neither of my biological parents wanted me."

"...Touchy subject, I get it."

The archangel looked down at his clipboard and sniffed, still grinning.

"Well, that isn't exactly the reason, but it doesn't matter. I won't be dragging you off to Hell, haha! That's Azrael's job. You aren't due there for another couple decades anyways. Regardless! The Prince and Rodion Nikolayev are secured, and…"

He almost gestured with his pen again, but chose to gesture with an open hand instead.

"Fionn mac Cumhaill the Irish warrior, yes?"

Fionn closed his mouth and nodded.

"Indeed. I am Fionn mac Cumhaill, son of warrior-king Cumhall mac Trenmhoir and leader of the Fianna. Protector of Eire, I was awoken from my rest in the cave where the great seer Fintan mac Bochra the Wise that accompanied the descendent of Nóe many years ago, remained safe as the deluge of floodwater passed by. With my ra—"

"Ahhh-bup-bup-bup. You really don't need to do that, I already know about you."

"I am sorry. You called yourself an angel?"

"Archangel, but, well, who's counting—"

"What is that?"

The Prince and Rodion both stared at Fionn, shocked.

"Blondie, you don't know…?"

"Even if you had been sleeping for past 1500 years, I thought you would have…"

"The glory of God's teachings only reached Ireland in roughly 380 AD, popularized after the fact by St. Patrick—you mortals know St. Patrick, yes? Great guy. Hates snakes. Don't talk to him about snakes. But either way, authentically Celtic pagan religions only lasted until around 60 BC, when the Romans conquered Gaul and southern Britain. If your Irish friend there had slept for the past millennium-and-a-half immediately after the end of his time and only woke up yesterday, he wouldn't know anything about Christianity!"

"Christianity?"

The Prince gave a cheesy smile.

"Well, Judaism is a bit older, have you heard of that?"

"No."

The smile went away.

"Well, I'm not teaching temple or Sunday school to you, Blondie. Rodi can give you the general synopsis, he's more into all that mainstream religious hoo-ha than I am."

"M-Me?! I…I'm not religious, I don't…"

"Cron, I am looking forward to your briefing of this mysterious religion that Adannai[36] is an adherent of."

"Oh, I'm no *Adonai*, but I'm flattered you would call me that! Either way though, all three of you are needed in Heaven immediately. I would love to sit and talk politics all day, but unfortunately, there's a huge problem we've never dealt with before, and we need you all—"

He pointed to The Prince.

"—Specifically you, to help us."

"Me? Oh, don't tell me. Man Unkind is off having a lark again and messing about in Paradise."

"Right you are. They chose both the best and worst possible time to lay siege to Heaven, too: today is right in the middle of the three-day Divine Synod, so while all of the chief deities of the pagan religions are there, they—and admittedly we—grew arrogant. We never expected this kind of problem to come to us, so we had no way to prepare for it…we've already sent most of the more performative deities back, but a few have remained. Not only that, but…"

Phanuel sighed.

"There's a demon army on standby as we speak, and our military forces were almost entirely wiped out by Man Unkind's endless supply of unusual soldiers. No one's left, and you're the only one we have on file as having long-term experience with Man Unkind."

The Prince sat and listened intently, rubbing his chin with a look of deep thought.

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[36] Lit. "to light/kindle".

“So, as you can see…we need your help. As well as your friends’ help, if they agree to it.”

Rodion opened his mouth, closed it, took a deep breath, and nodded.

“...I might as well come. Perhaps I might be able to be of some assistance with my own magic. (If this isn’t another sure thing as the sumo match was…)”

Fionn nodded.

“I will do what I can to aid you and your ‘angels’, Adannai, in order to battle these forces. For it is the noble thing for I, Fionn mac Cumhaill, to do.”

“Well, it seems your friends are in agreement. What about you, Prince? We’re even willing to overlook your theft of…certain holy relics,” He coughed and waved at The Prince’s crown of thorns. “In return for your support.”

The redhead stretched his arms far up, hummed through his teeth, and flopped backwards on the bed.

“Depends. What’s in it for me, love?”

“P-Prince!”

“Well, think about it this way, Rodi, dear. Suppose we saunter on up to Heaven, take care of this issue, what then? In the time we spend doing that, Man Unkind might already be getting their mank fambles on the final stone they need. Then what’ll we do? Just sit around being bimbos?”

Rodion staggered to his feet.

“You are still doing this?! Even after our arguments about how selfish you are, you still refuse to take your eyes off of anything but the end goal? What about Heaven? And the head deities? And the demons, will Belial be okay?”

“Frankly, I didn't care much for him. He sort of smelled.”

“Is no excuse to not care about his well-being!”

“He’s a demon, he’ll be fine! Though, maybe you’d care more about him, you know more about their ilk than I do.”

“You…”

Fionn quietly put his thumb in his mouth, watching the two of them bicker and argue as Phanuel put his hands on his hips and sighed with a resigned grin, shaking his head.

“Would it help if I told you that we knew where the last stone likely was?”

The Prince sat up, hands still folded behind his head.

“Man Unkind is especially aggressive towards Shiva, and while his loyal servant Vasuki has become too injured to continue, he continues to fight with extreme fervor. It seems they know something we don’t, and I think that that’s more than enough reason for you to come along.”

There was silence in the room…and Phanuel grinned widely, showing off his pearly-white teeth and flapping his wings, opening his hands up.

“So, what do you say? Good deal, eh?”

The redhead thought for a few moments longer. Then he puffed his cheeks out, made a raspberry, and stood up.

“Good enough a reason as any. Lead the way, angel boy!”

“I’m very glad you agree. Now…”

He tucked the clipboard under his arm before snapping his fingers three times—once in each occupant’s direction—and causing a light to fill their eyes. From an outsider’s perspective, each of their eyes would have lit up pure white for a moment, as if a flashbang had gone off in their head, which was exactly what it looked like to them. Rodion rubbed his eyes, groaning and blinking hard.

“What was that?”

“Just a bit of heavenly blessing so you’re able to see our machinations. Beings on planes below us generally can’t see angels and all unless we permit it, and having everyone permit you would take forever, so! Consider this a gift from God.”

Phanuel looked up to the ceiling and shouted something in a language none of them had ever heard before. A ladder made of glowing golden fiber plummeted down through the ceiling, phasing right through it and stopping just short of the floor. It dangled in front of them, and the archangel grabbed onto the side, gesturing for the others to come and do the same.

“Jacob’s Ladder. Isn’t it handy? It’s usually for angels and saints, but I got you special permission, so you better appreciate it. Just be sure to hold on tight. If you loosen your grip, you might fall a distance five times that of the Earth’s diameter, haha!”

The three of them looked at each other uneasily before getting up and taking hold of different portions of the ladder. The Prince glared at the grinning Phanuel.

“Look, angel boy, just tell me when this thing picks up, because if you didn't know, I’m rather sensitive to whiplash, and—”

The ladder suddenly yanked itself upwards at an impossibly fast rate, the three screaming humans and single archangel phasing through the hospital ceiling and all of the floors above them before going through the roof, over Nasushiobara, over Japan and through the clouds and the night sky…

Ultimately, each of them passed out.

~

When the three of them had stopped blacking out and knew that their feet were on solid ground again, they each snapped back to reality and looked around. The Prince groaned, tumbling backwards, before yelping and stumbling forwards to stand himself up straight. Was he unconscious while still standing? His skin felt like it’d been sitting in a high-power wind tunnel for half an hour, and he shuddered at how sensitive it felt. Though, when he raised his hand to test the soreness of his skin, he noticed something else.

“Eh?”

He looked down and saw that, apart from his blue coat and his crown of thorns, all of his clothes had been replaced with a plain white robe.

“Eh?”

He turned around and looked back at the others. Rodion was dressed in a similar (if much larger) white robe, staring up at something with an intimidated look on his face, and Fionn was in much the same, while holding Phanuel by the archangel's own robes. He was explaining something to the warrior.

"—A-All I did was put the robe on top of your existing clothes, Mr. Cumhaill! No need to get upset."

"...Right. I am sorry. I am rather attached to the outfit I have on currently."

Fionn let go of him and coughed, grinning widely once again.

"Apologies for the quick change of clothing, fellas: St. Peter has a very strict dress code when it comes to humans entering Heaven, so it's just a formality."

The Prince wrinkled his nose as he looked down at it.

"It's so…bland. White really isn't my color, Phanny. I'm more of a 'rainbows and glitter' sort of gal."

"Don't call me that."

"Oh, you'll get used to it, Phanny. Rodi, love, what are you—"

He looked at Rodion and followed his gaze, turning it to…an incredibly, astonishingly massive golden gate. It completely towered over them, and the more The Prince's thin neck craned upwards to meet the top, the higher and higher it kept going, until it simply entered another layer of clouds. The gold was impossibly shiny, bright enough to glow, and every now and then it flourished and spiraled in elaborate twisting designs. Beside it was a massive dais, with an open book resting on top of it.

"Bloody hell."

"...So…these are 'Pearly Gates'..."

Phanuel stepped up behind Rodion, putting a hand on him. The touch made him shudder.

"Yes, yes! Anyone who comes into Heaven from Earth has to come through this holy gate."

"How high up do they go?" Fionn gazed up at them himself.

"Well, the layout is a bit complicated. How should I put this…do you know those puzzle cubes, where you need to match the colors on each face?"

"No."

"Well, the gates are sort of like the black bits between the colored squares."

"...What?"

"You'll see. Before you enter, though…"

Phanuel dug into his robe and retrieved three small scrolls, handing them out to the three of them. Their texture was somewhat stiff, but slightly squishy: comparable to a marshmallow you would find in a box of cereal.

"Eat these. That way, you'll be able to understand everyone. Not all of our angels or present deities speak English, after all."

The three of them wordlessly popped them into their mouths. In the mouth, it tasted sweet as honey…but it gave each of them a small bout of nausea once it went down. The Prince got up on his tip-toes after he had gotten over it, looking up at the dais.

"...There's nobody there. Where's St. Peter?"

"All the saints have taken refuge in the Martyria Basilica's basement for their own safety, including St. Peter. He was badly injured in the invasion either way, it was Uriel who…" Phanuel shook his head.

"Does that mean the big omi himself, JC, is around here anywhere?[37]"

"Ahem. anyways. It's best if you two enter right away."

The gargantuan pearly gates began to open, and a blinding light filled all of their fields of vision. Reflexively, all three of them shut their eyes and brought their arms up.

When the light faded, they found themselves inside of what appeared to be a massive control center, angels frantically scrambling left and right, shouting orders to one another at what appeared to be heavenly analogs for computers, flying through the air like agitated bees. Laid around the edges of the walls, piled up between paths of movement like wave breakers, were figures wrapped in cloth. Outside, there was an occasional banging against the walls that made the whole place shake. An angel or two yelled each time out of shock. The Prince covered his mouth, gasping as he looked out over the wash of wrapped bodies.

"A-Are these…?"

"Don't be shaken—this is how we form new bodies for our angels. As relentless as Man Unkind's onslaught has been, our angels are noble warriors: rather than being faced with death by demonic powers, many have chosen to escape their physical appearances and return to God's grace. The only problem is that it takes a while for them to form new bodies, and so while they recharge, we cover them up so they aren't so bright! It just so happens they happen to look like body bags, haha!"

Rodion swallowed and poked one. It twitched and mumbled something, and he frowned.

"How did we enter gate from outside, and appear in building?"

"Like I said, it's kind of like the black outlines in the puzzle cube. You can enter any part of Heaven from those gates, even inside the Martyria Basilica."

"That sounds like security risk."

"Well, St. Peter and Uriel usually take care of those kinds of things…"

Fionn gazed upwards, impressed at the size of the building they were in, but kept a suspicious glint in his eyes. He put his thumb in his mouth, lightly biting the tip to test his powers in this location.

"(Two-hundred fifty-six angelic beings, two humans, and…)"

Something shook him, and his thumb fell out of his mouth as he felt a presence come upon him, heavy thundering footsteps lumbering towards him. Instinctively, he dove a hand under his robe and retrieved Mac an Luin, kicking off the ground and slashing behind him in the time it took the other three present to turn around.

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[37] Sadly, Jesus Christ was on vacation in Okinawa at the moment, and nobody wanted to disturb him. As such, over the course of the three days this story takes place in, he had no clue what was going on. For those interested, the Buddha was holding a self-help press conference in Finland, and the prophet Muhammad's spirit remains in the other world, waiting for the day to return to his people…

There was a sound like metal banging against metal, and Fionn landed on his feet with his whole body vibrating from the impact, swallowing.

In front of him was the hulking and rotund hairy figure of the Dagda, covered in patches of gauze and bandages, holding his tree-trunk club over his shoulder. The sword had harmlessly bounced off of his muscle-bound neck. The Dagda looked down at Fionn mac Cumhaill.

"...Fionn."

"...S…S-Sir…"

Fionn fell to one knee, snapping to the others.

"Forruad! Cron! Adannai! All of you, to your knees to show respect for the king of the Tuatha de Danann, the Dagda!"

None of them moved to do so. Phanuel rolled his eyes, Rodion thought about how Shuten-douji was a foot or two taller than this man, and The Prince…Well, The Prince blushed and put a hand to his cheek, looking away with his heart aflutter. The Dagda himself glowered down at Fionn, before his serious expression broke out into a wide yellow-toothed grin, bursting into a hearty belly-laugh.

"Bwahahaha, aye laddie, what's th' grave coupon for? No need t' be so formal and up yer own arse about it, 'specially with how things are now! We're in heavy shite, I cannae have ye lookin' so doon! 'Tis been yonks since I've seen ye though, Fionn, laddie."

Fionn took a deep breath and sheathed his sword once more, standing up straight. The Dagda stroked his beard, puffing his chest out.

"Gotta say, ye look a mite more youthful than I recall."

"Indeed. I do recall becoming an older man."

"Uncanny. No point dwellin' on it fer now, though: looks to me like ye've brought yer mates 'ere!"

The Dagda lumbered over to Rodion, laughing as he pointed a coarse finger the width of a sausage at his chest.

"Bwahaha, this Big Yin's got some meat on 'is bones, 'asn't he? Ye must be th' Russian, right?"

"You knew me and Prince were coming?"

"Course we did! Got the briefing from me lovely wifey, th' Morrigan, an' missy Medb. Ye look like ye can't be knocked over with a pint o' haggis, thas' for sure!"

He laughed loudly and slapped Rodion on the back hard enough to make him double over, wincing.

"Gah—!! Could you please not do that, Dagda? I am still sore from wrestling match with demon king…"

"Wrestlin' match wit' who-what now?! Ha, ye gotta tell me about it sometime, Russki!"

"Dagda."

A feminine voice spoke from behind him, and as if he were a building blocking a vista, several gods started filing out. Amaterasu-no-Omikami, who had a cast on her arm and whose shining mirror had a visible crack along its side; Odin, who stood using Gungnir as a cane like a

withered old man, bruises visible on his wrinkled body; and Loki the Lie-Smith, who appeared uninjured save for a small band-aid placed in the middle of his forehead. The Dagda turned around with his hands out.

"Aye, Amy! Glad tae see yer finally up an' awake, look here! Th' lads 'ave come!"

Amaterasu bowed to the three of them.

"Greetings. I am Amaterasu-no-Omikami, of the Shinto kami, and here are Odin-sama and Loki-sama."

Loki put up a hand. "Yo."

Odin, however, narrowed his remaining eye and hobbled forwards, nodding to Rodion and Fionn, before coming to The Prince.

"...This is the one who was cited as having the most experience with these absurd enemies? The one with the mannerisms of a woman…he's nothing but a boy. A young, inexperienced little squirt…"

The Prince raised his eyebrows.

"Pardon me?"

The Dagda turned to look at him.

"Hoh! I didn't even see ye there, laddie, yer so puny! Ha, so then yer th' poof?"

"Poof?"

The redhead rolled his coat sleeves up, marching right up to the Dagda (which happened to put him face to face with the Tuatha's stomach) and putting his hands on his hips.

"Frankly, I don't care what your swarthy self or the old fungus here think of me, I'll have you know that I know a hell of a lot more about what you lot are dealing with than you do. So! You'd better treat me with the same bloody respect you'd give anyone else!"

Amaterasu muttered something about the Dagda already doing that under her breath. The Prince reached out to place a hand on the Dagda's stomach.

"Though, you know…You're a not half-bona-vardering omi, yourself. I've got quite a thing for big, chunky, hairy hunks of meat like you…what say after all this, we have a bit of a buvare and a cackle, hm~?"

He put a hand behind his ear.

"Hm? What was that, bairn? I cannae understand yer language."

Rodion sighed and prodded The Prince in the back of the head.

"Prince, do not test your luck."

"Whaaaat? A girl can try, can't she?"

"People, people!"

Phanuel spoke up over the group, quieting them all as he folded his hands behind his back and cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Now that you've all gotten acquainted, it's important to give you a run-down of the facts. Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael are currently reforming their bodies, and Shiva…"

"Ah yeah, that's right. Phanny, you said Shiva was around somewhere, right? Where is he?"

"Well—"

“Shiva is outside, fighting the advancing threat,” Odin cut in. There was another crash from outside. “It would seem they don’t call him ‘The Destroyer’ for nothing. His stamina doesn’t seem to have depleted at all. We all have been taking turns in order to rest our bodies, but he has remained outside the entire time…my son Thor is out there right now.”

“Thor? Like, superhero movies Thor?”

“A-*hem.”*

Phanuel cleared his throat again, his customer-service smile getting an annoyed edge at the corners.

“...The situation is dire. We’ve been swamped by agents, especially copies of one particular one who is able to self-replicate, and to top it off, there’s an army of demons on standby just waiting to march directly into Heaven. Somehow, they’ve allied with Man Unkind, and have been lending their curses to the agents, which is why they’ve been able to injure so many of us.”

Fionn gripped onto his sword, looking on at the other gods with his blank expression failing to convey any of the curiosity and suspicion he regarded each of them, save the Dagda, with. Rodion kept a hand on his hips, sighing as he ran his fingers through his hair. He knew a fair bit of magic, true, but facing down an army himself? Even with the help of gods, he didn't quite know if he could handle it. Not only that, but last he remembered, the demons were *against* Man Unkind, weren’t they? At least, Beelzebub was…what changed? The Prince, sitting on a stack of formless angels, rested his chin on his fist.

“And Shiva’s got the last rock, right?”

He received a few glares for his troubles, but Phanuel just gestured with a hand.

“We believe so. Vasuki was badly injured trying to protect his master, who has been the subject of most of their attacks, but he can barely speak, so we don’t know the details.”

“Well, that settles things then, doesn’t it?”

He hopped off of the bodies, clapping his hands as he walked to the door.

“Rodi! Blondie! Come along, we’re off to take care of this little issue.”

“P-Prince! You aren’t worried at all?”

“Why worry? I’ve dealt with these shmucks for longer than I care to remember, and I’m not about to start bowing out now when the show hasn’t even hit the first act!”

“Forruad, what about the demon army? They would prove too much for us and the others to handle, surely.”

“Army, schmarmy, Rodi can probably butter them up enough to make them a non-entity.”

“You’re relying on *me* to calm down an entire army?!”

“We’ll figure it out!”

Rodion clenched his fists, almost starting to shout, but all that came out was an exasperated sigh and some cursing in Russian. Phanuel sniffed, turning to one of the Dominions that stood and looked over the others, an older woman with grey hair in a bundle and yellow eyes.

“Muriel, where are Shiva and Thor right now?”

She turned and spoke to one of the other Dominions before looking back to him.

“They’ve moved around plenty, but they’ve just returned to Shehaqim.”

“Hmmm. The other gods are too weak to keep fighting at the moment…I trust you three to come up with a plan yourself. Is that alright?”

Before either Fionn or Rodion could speak, The Prince waved his hand.

“Of course we’ll be alright, Phanny, love! I’ve dealt with these utter bores more times than I can count, it’ll be a cakewalk. Now just shush and give us the GPS as to where we’re headed.”

Odin, leaning to the side, murmured to Amaterasu under his breath.

“(The effeminate one is being too prideful…we should follow after him.)”

“(And would you give your life for such an act, Odin-san? You are not as popular nowadays…I doubt you would enjoy coming back in the form that the red one recognized your son as.)”

The All-Father winced, muttered something in Old Norse, and shook his head with resignation as he looked back at Loki.

“Loki. Why do you not go and fight to save this world?”

Loki just smirked and shrugged.

“Look, I would love to fight, but I’m injured! You see? I got a nasty wound riiiight here,” He pointed to the bandage in the middle of his forehead. “And it makes it impossible for me to focus. If I tried to throw a punch or use any powers, I would be less than useless!”

The bandage started to peel off, to which Loki yelped, licked his tongue, and attempted to seal it back on.

Phanuel, still speaking to the others, smiled.

“A simple snap of the fingers on my end will get you where you need to go. Take care of the existing threat, as well as any other complications that come up, and you’ll receive clemency for your crimes against God. Is that acceptable?”

Rodion shook his head and sighed. Fionn mac Cumhaill just rested his hand on his sword’s hilt. The Prince of Fuck All, however, smiled.

“Then snap away, dear~”

The archangel rolled his eyes, but grinned nonetheless as he snapped his fingers. The three humans disappeared in a flash of golden light. Thankful to be rid of them, Phanuel stretched his arms high above his head, stretched his shoulder joints, flapped his wings once, twice, and turned to the rest of the gods.

“That Prince guy…he’s kind of an annoyance, isn’t he?”

“Aye. Th’ kimmer’s too smug fer ‘is own good. ‘E’s gonna get ‘is face caved in soon enough.”

“That, or Prince-san will lose those he cares about because of his own hubris. Or perhaps it is…fear?”

“Whoof. However he ends up…I don’t think God will let him off so easily.”

~

When the three arrived at Shehaqim, they weren't exactly sure what to expect, but the area they found themselves in was far from what they thought of when they pictured a sphere of Heaven. The bright light that shone down from the sky never dimmed or faltered, and yet…

All around them was vegetation, lush plant life and trees as large as buildings full of fresh and fertile fruit, shimmering pools of water. Fionn bent down, picked up a handful of grass, and sniffed it. The scent was vivid, filling his nose and relaxing him as he let them drop.

"The grass is real. It smells fresh…"

Rodion reached up and plucked a perfectly ripe orange off of the nearest tree, peeling it with his teeth and taking a bite out of it. He wasn't exactly a big fan of fruit—he was more into starches and meat—but even he had to admit that it was one of the tastiest oranges he'd ever had.

"Fruit is real. Good, too. Where are we…?"

"Well, Phanny said we were in Shehaqim, so I'd assume we're still in Heaven. Still, I'll admit, it's pretty curious…"

He looked up in the 'sky', and despite there seemingly being not a cloud in the air, it appeared to be overcast. Like a sheet of grey skies with a single unblinking sun piercing through it all. The Prince sniffed and looked around a bit more, keeping his ears open for any odd sounds, while Rodion ate his orange.The Russian noticed something a short distance away from them.

It was a tree, and on the tree, growing was…a fruit that he had never seen before, but something inside of him jolted when he saw it. He was no stranger to exotic fruits being out of his field of expertise, but this fruit didn't resemble anything one could find on Earth…and inside his head, he heard the Russian voice of a nun from his childhood.

"When God created Adam and Eve, He placed them in the Garden of Eden, a paradise with everything they could ever want…and He allowed them to roam freely, with only one condition. They were not allowed to eat from the Tree of Knowledge…but Satan, in the form of a snake, tempted Eve, who in turn convinced Adam to sin. This is the 'original sin' of humanity."

He gulped, looking back over what he now realized wasn't just a patch of wilderness.

It was a garden.

"(So then, this is…)"

The sky above them suddenly darkened, and in the distance, a dark shape could be seen writhing, along with what sounded almost like rainfall. Fionn quickly unsheathed his sword, side-stepping to be closer to the rest of the group. Rodion readied his hands as well, feeling the magic course through to the tips of his fingers. He looked back at The Prince.

"Prince. Any idea what that is?"

"No clue, love, I don't think they make nutjobs in that size. Though I believe I can wager a guess…"

It soon became apparent that the sound they were hearing wasn't rainfall: rather, it was the sound of thousands—if not hundreds of thousands—of voices overlapping with one another, as the dark shape grew closer and closer. If it weren't for the light of God over all, one would assume it was nighttime with how it blotted out everything else…and eventually, it broke through the distant horizon to reveal itself.

The foggy shape was a tsunami of humanoid bodies, all writhing and squirming together in their Elizabethan-era breeches and flatcaps, clutching their skulls like life rafts among the sea of themselves, and Fionn lowered his sword in awe.

"...People…?"

"Not people, Blondie. I've only dealt with one of these buggers once before, and let me tell you, it was more of a pain in my arse than rough trade at Compton Street. They're more like nematodes than omis."

"I can see…two figures, separate from crowd!"

Rodion pointed out what indeed appeared to be two distinct figures: one muscular and raising a small tool that crackled with lightning, and the other four-armed figure held up a trident, firing blasts of white energy at the indiscriminate wave.

"Must be Shiva and Thor. Come along, then!"

The Prince gestured for them to follow, and the three of them ran closer to the scene of action, Fionn running ahead. It seemed as though he was eager to get back into a fight and prove himself, but to whom was unclear. They skimmed the rim of a pool and ducked through a small grove before arriving at a large clearing on the brink of the garden. Grass gave way to fluffy clouds, and the trees wisped away into nothing, but there was still very clearly a line of demarcation between the two terrain types. In front of them, the convulsing mass of humanoid figures swirled and tumbled, its grotesque array of connecting veins and spotty patches of hair more visible. The burly red-headed thunder god Thor held his short-handled hammer Mjolnir in his ham-hock fists, swinging it from left to right to fend off the pseudopods of the fleshy mass (said pseudopods simply being more miniature bodies that were chained together by blue veins and their own limbs) that extended towards him. With each impact, a thunderclap sounded along with a flash of lightning. He rose into the air, delivered a mighty thwack onto the surface of the glob that made t ripple like gelatin, and landed beside the three of them.

"Hah! So, you are the ones they talked about at the meeting?"

The Prince lightly poked Rodion with an elbow.

"You hear that Rodi, we're famous! But yes, Thor honey, we are. I'm The Prince of Fuck All, and this is—"

"Pardon my rudeness, but I do not have the time to stay and chat in a circle!"

Letting out a roar, he charged forward once more, ducking underneath the floating Shiva, who fired blasts of deva energy from afar with his trident, Trishul. The ash-covered god descended elegantly upon the ground, eliciting a roar and frustrated thrashing from the monster. He dodged with ease, twirling around until he came to the three visitors, looking at them upside-down with a placid expression on his face.

"Ah, you are the three that Gabriel mentioned. Greetings. I am Lord Shiva."

"We know that, *da.* Is good to meet you but, er, are you not in danger being targeted by this…this thing?"

"I do not believe so."

Another tendril of interconnected bodies shot out towards him, and Shiva effortlessly twirled Trishul around his shoulder in order to zap it. He smiled.

"I believe I'm doing a pretty good job staying safe. If I were you all, I would worry more about yourselves. This is a strange enemy, after all…"

The Prince scoffed, grinning.

"Strange. I do fifty strange things before my morning constitutional, Shivvy, and this is no stranger than a mold infestation to me."

Thor landed nearby, grunting. It took a bit, but Rodion noticed that Thor was taller than him as well…it made him shudder, seeing how tall gods and demons were in person and imagining how easily one could overpower even a hundred humans.

"You know something we don't, then?"

"You could say that. That—"

He pointed up at the monster, which attempted to do a long sweep attack on the lot of them. Fionn intercepted, hastily delivering a series of slashes to the body-limb that left the individual figures uselessly flopping on the clouds for a few moments before splitting into yet more bodies. He flinched. What an annoying creature. The Prince continued as the group began running.

"—That right there, is the Young Man with a Skull. Maybe you aren't aware, but down on Earth, every youngster's gotta face down old Shakespeare sooner or later, and nobody enjoys it. Or at least, most people don't. When you take a kidnapped child and apply all that resentment onto a malleable form, it creates a Young Man with a Skull."

The Young Man with a Skull-chimera roared and slammed a row of bodies onto their tail, which Thor deflected with a well-timed swing of his hammer and a booming yell. He landed and huffed, cursing in Old Norse at them before turning back.

"I'd call this more of a student meeting than just one lousy kid. It keeps replicating itself—every time we squash one, two more take its place. It's a pain in the damn neck is what it is! I don't give two shits about where it came from, I just want it…them…whatever, dead!"

"That's the rub, innit: they aren't aggressive unless provoked, but their terrible poetry makes you want to level the poor bastards. They're bait. They're there to distract you while the cavalry comes, so they're hardy as hell. They do have one weakness, though…"

Shiva, floating beside The Prince, rubbed his chin.

"What is that?"

He rummaged inside his coat, sticking out his tongue as he felt around. Occasionally, he would throw out something—an Elvis Presley CD signed by the artist and dated '2004', some odd mechanism resembling an old-timey radio with antennae sticking out, a folded origami scorpion—but nothing he seemed to need.

"Just give your mother a bit, dear…"

"Oh, sorry, I don't have one of those. I created myself."

"Not the point of what I was saying…"

Rodion narrowly avoided having the back of his skull bashed in with another skull, reflexively uppercutting whatever was behind him and being relieved when he made contact with

a body's jaw. He was less relieved pulling it back and seeing the jaw still attached to his fist, to which he yelled and shook until it let go.

"Can you hurry with retrieving of weakness, Prince?!"

"Not there, not there, not—a-ha! Here we are! Here's the deal, girls."

The Prince beamed as he pulled out a stack of yellowed and aged paper with calligraphy written on them, shoving them into Rodion's arms.

"You and Blondie and Thor lure this big bitch away to distract it, and me and Shivvy will take care of things on our own!"

"W-What do you mean, 'take care of things on our own'?"

"Don't you worry about it, just hurry up and scarper!"

"But, how do I—"

"For goodness' sake, Rodi, do you need me to spell out *everything* for you? Read the papers! Remember, the play's the thing!"

"What?!"

"Good luck, I'm counting on you! Love you! Shivvy, follow me!"

"If you say so, Prince."

He gestured for Shiva to follow, and when he was able, ducked into the grove of the nearby garden they had been circling around.

Rodion's face flushed red at that, though whether it was from embarrassment or frustration, he had no idea. Probably both. Glancing up at the beast, he frowned.

"What will reading from paper do to distract this…thing?"

The monster let out a groan and turned, shifting in place as it turned to the grove the others had jumped into. Fionn, biting the end of his thumb, held his sword with both hands and exhaled.

"I would not put much faith into Forruad's judgements. However, if there is one thing that can be relied on, it is the cold steel of my trusty blade, Mac an Luin. I will quash this foul beast as I did with the giant Benandonner."

"Wait, blonde kid, you can't—"

Ignoring Thor's protests, Fionn sprinted forward and leapt high into the air, raising his sword high above him. The light of God glinted off of his blade as he shouted, driving the blade deep into the massive monster. It let out a guttural scream and something black spewed from it, but it continued to turn and approach the grove. Stuck holding onto the hilt of a sword that wouldn't remove itself from the enemy, Fionn's feet started sinking into the creature's mass, followed by his legs. He jerked and flailed, but remained there, as if sinking into quicksand. Thor pinched his nose.

"Kid's got a hard head, doesn't he?"

"More or less."

"I'll take care of this. Duck!"

Thor yelled out, hurling Mjolnir at the Irish warrior. Just in time, Fionn lowered his head, and the tip of Mjolnir connected with the pommel of Mac an Luin. The lightning and the impact reverberated throughout the monster, and like it was spitting out a watermelon seed, it ejected

Fionn mac Cumhaill and Mac an Luin from its body, sending him flying towards a particularly fluffy outcropping of clouds. He landed harmlessly face-down onto it, but Mac an Luin embedded itself right beside his head, mere inches away from slicing off his ear—or worse. He turned to look at the blade, and saw it was coated with a black substance.

"(Ink…?)"

Thor held up his hand, and Mjolnir returned to his palm. Rodion tilted his head.

"I thought you were not superhero movie Thor?"

"It's complicated. But doing this is a helluva lot more convenient than going up there and getting it myself. Now can it and read, Russian, or else we'll all be dead meat!"

Thor resumed running and occasionally fighting back, Fionn managing to scramble back to his feet with Mac an Luin in hand, and the two fended off what attacks were thrown their way as the glob continued to drift towards the garden. The outer rim of its mass started to encroach on the grass. Rodion kept stumbling forward, the stack of parchment cradled in his arms. He shuffled through the papers, choosing a random one to read from. Without stopping to even realize what he was reading, he began to speak:

"Thence my wife and I by coach, first to see my little picture that is a drawing, and thence to the Opera, and there saw 'Romeo and Juliet,' the first time it was ever acted; but it is a play of itself the worst that ever I heard in my life, and the worst acted that ever I saw these people do, and I am resolved to go no more to see the first time of acting, for they were all of them out more or less…"[38]

He skidded to a stop on his heels, and the two warriors stopped as well.

"...This is…just bad review, from time of Shakespeare…"

Rodion thought back to what The Prince said. The play's the thing…could it be that hearing reassurance that validated the frustrations of those students that made up the Young Man with a Skull's construction, that even at the time of release there were some that didn't enjoy the works of the Bard of Avon, could make it vulnerable? He looked up at the cloud of the Young Man with a Skull, and saw that it had stopped moving. Unfortunately, all of its eyes—skeletal and fleshy—were turned to the three of them. Thor jabbed him in his side.

"Keep reading."

"Ah—" He flipped through more papers, finding another review to read.

"...to whom I had spoke to go along with us to a play this afternoon, and then to the King's Theatre, where we saw 'Midsummer's Night's Dream,' which I had never seen before, nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life. I saw, I confess, some good dancing and some handsome women, which was all my pleasure."

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[38] An excerpt from the diary of Samuel Pepys, a naval administrator who kept an extensive and detailed diary from the years of 1660 to 1669. Events detailed in it include the Great Plague of London, the Great Fire of London, and the Great Spurning of London, where, in a bid to show that London wouldn't take so many disasters sitting down, the entirety of its population sat in their chairs in an attempt to ignore Earth itself into submission. This was a nationwide success, and future public campaigns in England would also revolve around ignoring the problem until it went away, despite the fact that it was followed by the Great Earthquake of London, the Great Tsunami of London, and the Great Bear Attacks of London.

Rodion looked back up at the monster, and he could almost tell that the faces that made it up were…smiling? He smiled back, looking at the two warriors with a grin.

"Hoho, maybe all it needed was bit of validation to calm down!"

The amalgamation of the Young Man with a Skull let out a furious roar and started to go after Rodion even quicker than before. Thor sniffed.

"...I don't think it's calmed down. Run!"

With that, the three of them turned on their heels and resumed leading it around the outer rim of the garden, Rodion occasionally reading another bad review every now and then…

~

The Prince slunk through the bushes and weaved around trees, occasionally looking back to see if Shiva was still with him. The Hindu deity followed dutifully, looking over his own shoulder to make sure the others were still distracting the monster.

"What a fearsome creature. That was one of the 'Man Unkind' agents then, before it started multiplying?"

"Yep."

"How would they have created such a horrid thing? Is it some form of demon, or an incarnation of some unearthly force?"

The Prince shook his head, sighing.

"Nope. That's what makes them bloody off their rockers, Shivvy. Some of them are just thoughts and feelings mashed together, but most of them, including that one…were people once."

"That creature was once a human?"

"They usually prey on folks who most people won't miss or think twice about, but sometimes they get gutsy…sometimes they target whole families who don't make much of an impact on the world around them. Sometimes the recently grieving, sometimes the unstable, sometimes the lost and sometimes the forgotten. Once they have you, they form you into their ideal shape: malleable, desperate, and afraid…and once they do that—"

He made a two-fingered claw with one of his hands.

"Bzzzzzrt, in goes the ink."

The Prince pulled back some of his robe, showing his own tattoo.

"Hurts like a motherfucker. The pain never quite goes away, either…"

Shiva opened his mouth, but closed it once more with a gulp as he nodded, standing up straight as they entered the center of the garden. There, sprouting from the center, was a tree with a wide canopy that provided a bit more shade to the already rather dark area. The trunk of the plant undulated and pulsed, as if it had a heartbeat, and around the roots were a flimsy-looking iron fence with pointed tips. The Prince led him out beneath it, Shiva looking around warily, and the redhead turned on his heel with his hands on his hips.

“You know, before we do this, I thought you and your two pals were supposed to be infinitely strong? Surely, you could call the both of them up and help us all take care of this, right?”

Shiva shook his head.

“Sadly, that isn’t an option. Brahma is quite old and spends much of his time sleeping, and Vishnu is busy managing his own followers…besides, Brahma is the creator, Vishnu is the preserver.”

“And you?”

“The Destroyer, and the Recreator. The end and the beginning. The auspicious one.”

He whistled. “Fancy titles, dear. I can think of a few things you ought to have destroyed back home by now…”

“None of us are allowed to interfere with any matters that deal with those on Earth. It is a matter of theological compromise.”

“Sounds handy. It at least prevents schoolyard fights, yeah? ‘My god can beat up your god,’ et cetera, et cetera.”

“In a matter of speaking, yes. What did you bring me here to do, Prince?”

“Well…to put it simply…Lia Fail. The Sessho-seki. The Hope Diamond. Gleipnir. The Stone of Jacob.”

The Prince held up his fingers.

“Me, Rodi, and Blondie, we’ve got the first two, and those nutters over at Man Unkind have the other three. They want to mash them up and make a mess of things, so it’s best to have a majority of them, but we’re on the back foot on that front right now. However, they’re going after you, thus…”

He gestured with a wide grin.

“You’ve got the last one, don’t you? I wanted to ask if you wouldn’t mind handing it over…”

Shiva flinched at that, gripping onto Trishul and putting a hand to his chest. He stared down The Prince with a suspicious glint in his eyes, silent. The Prince himself shrugged.

“Afraid I’ll misuse it, aren’t you? Fair, fair. But come on, Shivvy dear, diamonds are this girl’s best friend…and whatever precious gem you’ve got on you is second-best!”

The Hindu deity relaxed somewhat at that, but remained on his guard as he sized The Prince up. He didn't seem to be allied with Man Unkind, and though a unique potpourri of strange magical sources wafted from his person, Shiva had two courses of action: either trust him, or don’t. And to not trust him would mean fighting this war in Heaven forever. The Destroyer sighed and nodded, placing a hand to his chest.

Where his palm met his ash-covered skin, it radiated with a white light strong enough to make The Prince squint and raise a hand to cover it. Retrieving his hand, Shiva held within his fingers a unique item: a small black pedestal with a squat column in the middle, the center patterned with the same white lines that Shiva had on his face over his closed third eye. The Prince’s finger twitched, and he grabbed his wrist to keep it steady.

“What’s that?”

“A *lingam*. Many say it is a show of my fertility, others say it represents the perfection of my very self.”

“It looks a mite like a godemiché, hun.”

Ignoring him, Shiva grasped one of his hands around the center column and brought it upwards, keeping his hand clenched in a fist all the while. When it exited the column, he opened his palm and revealed nestled within it a small bluish-white gem in the shape of a teardrop that shimmered with the light of the moon. It was no larger than a golf ball, and formed a puddle in Shiva’s palm as he held it.

“The Shiva Chandrakanta. Born from the essence of the waxing and waning moon, it generates water, it generates light, and it shall grant you the gifts of the moon…but, only I have carried it for these many years. I won’t be giving it up so easily, Prince.”

“Fine by me, Shivvy. What have I got to do?”

He pushed the Chandrakanta stone and the lingam back into his chest, the two items disappearing once more as he put his two lower hands together palm-to-palm.

“Prove your spiritual purity to me. Prove that you will not be corrupted by this object’s influence…Tell me, Prince. Have you heard of *bharatanatyam?”*

He blinked.

“Bara-what-now?”

“Bharatanatyam, from the Tamil for ‘emotions’, ‘melody’, ‘rhythms’, and…’dance’. To perfectly express a story of great importance, to recite prayer using every part of your body as your voice, to embody the spiritual concepts of everything and nothing coexisting in harmony…that is bharatanatyam. Prince.”

Shiva brought one leg up, all four hands pushing out in front of him as he stared down the redhead with a serious expression.

“Show me the story you have to tell, Prince! Prove to me you have the purity of mind, the clarity of emotion, the melody of your movements in time with your thoughts! Show me you can free yourself from temptation and desire! I shall show you mine, you shall show me yours…and if I find them acceptable, I will grant you this stone with my mind unclouded by these worrisome feelings of apprehension. Do you accept?”

The Prince stretched, cracked his back, and snapped his fingers.

“Are you kidding, Shivvy? I wouldn’t turn down a dance battle with a god, even if my life didn't depend on it. Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER 24: Belial's Gripe

On the summit of Mount Delectable, Belial woke up. The plump and rather slovenly demon momentarily believed that he had simply gone up to have a nice view of the circle of Sha'are Maveth while having a snack, but that fantasy quickly faded as everything from the past day had rushed back into his mind. The whole thing with Man Unkind, meeting The Prince and Rodion, the fae palace…and especially the sermon on the mount, courtesy of that big shadowy dude. His chest hurt like hell, there still being a visible hole straight through the thick flesh and his stretched clothes being stained with dark bloodstains, but he was at least alive.

"Mnuh…"

He slowly opened his eyes and came to his senses proper, taking inventory of everything around him. Behind him, his head rested against a rock. Nothing unusual there. He looked out over the landscape below. Around the foot of Mount Delectable, there was no longer a massive crowd, and while the cities of Sha'are Maveth were still decently damaged, much progress had been made when it came to restoring them. Or, progress was made at some point: practically the whole town he had in his view was empty save for a few scattered demons that he could see wandering around puzzled. In the distance, the castle that was home to The Devil appeared to be little more than rubble. He moved his hand to try and brush his greasy hair out from in front of his eyes to get a better look, but quickly found that both his wrists were bound behind his back.

"Hm? Oh, shit…"

He struggled a bit to try and tear them apart, but every time he tried to, he ended up just exhausting himself. He tried to conjure up some fire to burn them away, but that came up short. No using his powers while he's got his wrists tied up, he guessed. Even standing up and trying to grind it away on the rock didn't seem to do a thing. Belial sighed and leaned back, frowning. Well, shucks. He tried his hardest to save his family and friends, and for his troubles, he got shot and tied up…What now?

Then, he heard a hollow sound from beside him. It sounded almost like someone banging on glass, and when he turned to see the source, it appeared to be the frame of some kind of painting. With every bang, the frame jolted a bit. He tried to get to his feet once more, but tripped and fell onto his stomach, which happened to give him a nice view of the painting itself anyways. Trapped inside of it was Lucifer, stuck on a rocky outcropping that seemed frozen in time as he banged both fists on the 'fourth wall' of the painting. Belial gave a tired smile.

"Oh man…hey, Lucy."

Lucifer noticed and immediately ramped up his actions, banging ever moreso on the painting as he shouted and pleaded. No sounds came through, however, and Belial just laid there on the ground, sighing.

"Haha, yeaaah. Guess we both got kinda caught by that big shadowy dude, didn't we? I was like, totally out of it for soooo long…I got my hands tied up, can't use my powers or nothin'."

Lucifer gestured wildly with his hands and mouthed out words, but the larger demon just rolled onto his back and sighed, looking up at the far ceiling of Hell.

"Man. This sucks. We aren't exactly the smartest dudes, y'know? And we've got that thing where anyone who beats the last leader in combat becomes the new one. I think the old one got got by that new dude…wonder how dad feels about that. Speaking of, where is dad?"

The demon in the painting covered his face with both hands, made a choking gesture with a pained grin, and continued to mime a breaking/tearing motion with both hands and a knee, staring at Belial. He lazily looked over at the painting.

"...What, you want me to do somethin', Lucy? Man, forget it. What am I gonna do? I get downed by an arrow, I get downed by a bullet…I'm useless. Nah, worse than useless. I just make things worse, I think. Mammon and Moloch always did say I was the dumb one of the group. What could I do?"

Lucifer clenched his fists, shouting inaudible curses, and made the breaking/ripping motion over and over again. After catching his breath, he looked up, nodding expectantly…and Belial just sniffed and scratched his cheek.

"Uh, sorry Lucy…I, heh, don't really get what you're saying. No hablo ingles, dude."

'Lucy' banged his head against the painting and slid down until he was out of sight.

It was then that Belial noticed an annoying sound in his ear. At first, he idly swatted at it (or tried to, he more just shook his head, flecking a bit of grease onto the ground) assuming it was some kind of annoying insect, but eventually he recognized the sound. It was buzzing…specifically, his father's buzzing. There were plenty of horrid insects in Hell, as one might expect[39], but after spending as much time around his dad as he had, he learned to recognize it by sound, even if he was a big slow on the uptake sometimes. Sitting up, Belial saw a single fly floating in front of him, its wings flapping as it flew in a tight circle in front of him.

"...Dad?"

"Hello, Belial."

The fly landed gently on Belial's squat nose, his father Beelzebub's voice reverberating in his head. He grinned.

"Dad, it really is you! Sorry I can't hug ya, but, um, I'm kinda tied up here…"

"I am very much aware."

"What's up, where'd you go? You were on some kinda paper before, right? And, what's with the 'I' instead of 'We'?"

"Yes, yes…Belial, a lot has happened. The figure that calls itself 'The Shadow' has taken control of the whole of Hell, and he's preparing himself to launch an attack on Heaven. He forced me to comply with his demands, burning away all of my flies…all but this one measly one you see before you. It is a sobering experience, like attending a school as the only student…"

[39] Most especially the Shahmat al-Ard, a long red-and-white-mottled species of worm with a head like a hand and the tendency to compact itself into a bead the size of a marble when touched. They smell good, and taste even better, but had a nasty tendency to parasitize themselves onto some especially ravenous gluttony demons. Some chose to embrace the frequent oral expulsion of the worm's children as a sign of their gourmet status. Attempts to introduce them to Earth communities have been unsuccessful.

"...Damn."

"An apt response. While you were unconscious, the flypaper I was stuck on was taken from here to Neshiyyah, from whence I've returned to warn you…I require your assistance."

"M-Mine? Like…shucks, dad, I mean…what do you think I could do? I'm kinda…not all there, usually. Mammon 'n Moloch say as much. Besides, I can't move my hands. Rope and all."

"Mammon and Moloch are perhaps more intelligent than you, but they lack certain qualities. Neither of them were able to survive the initial invasion of the Shadow unscathed, but by virtue of your lateness, you remained mostly unscathed. As for the handcuffs…let me assist you with those."

Beelzebub's fly fluttered into the air, hovered around behind Belial, and after a few moments, he felt a small sting in his limbs and felt something fall to the ground behind him. Still, his wrists were free!

Bringing them back in front of him, he was met with bloody stumps, and saw that his hands had been cleanly severed at the wrists. Belial pouted, momentarily annoyed by the hindrance, before grunting and having both hands grow back without any issue. The fly landed on his outstretched newly-grown finger.

"Can't a guy get a warning on that? Man…"

"Sometimes the simplest solution is the most brutal. When Alexander the Great was faced with the Gordian knot, rather than untie it, he simply cut it in half. Be thankful that I have enough power as even a single fly to do so…Tell me, Belial, why have you left Lucifer in his watercolor prison?"

"What d'you mean, pops?"

The fly gestured one of its limbs towards the painting, its wings fluttering with annoyance as Belial turned his head to it. Lucifer was curled up on the ground, glaring at Belial.

"He has been asking you to destroy the painting to let him go free, I believe. I watched your exchange on the way here."

"Oh! Pfft, then he should have, like, said something. A-doy. Hold on, Lucy, I got you!"

Reaching out to the painting, Belial held it up, turned it around in his hands for a few moments, and then suddenly slammed it against the nearby rock. In an instant, the painting shattered into scraps of painted canvas and wood, and Lucifer's spirit materialized in front of them.

He reached out to Belial and grabbed him by the golden door-knocker nipple rings, making him wince as the noticeably shorter demon prince floated in the air and bared his teeth.

"I swear to *Satan*, you are the densest and most useless sack of lard I've ever met! Why would I be yelling and screaming and banging on the painting and mean *anything* other than 'Get me out of here'?! Idiot! Moron! Dumbass!"

Lucifer grabbed Belial's head by the sides and shook it back and forth, growling and shouting at him for about half a minute before gently floating down to the ground with his chest rising and falling. He regained his composure, cleared his throat, and shook Belial's hand.

"Thank you for freeing me."

"Uhhh, n-no problem?"

Just then, Belial's pocket buzzed. He dug into his ripped jeans and retrieved his phone once again, opening it up. There was a new notification from Harrower. He read it, gasped, and quickly flipped the phone around.

"Oh shit, dudes, Lucy, dad, look at this!"

On the phone, in big bold letters, was a message from an anonymous user now-verified as 'The Devil':

[ADVANCE.]

"Oh dear. That is very bad."

"Bad?"

"He's moving forward with the invasion. Demons will be pouring into Heaven momentarily, they're all gathered in Neshiyyah by the gates…"

Lucifer swallowed.

"What should we do now?"

"I have something of a plan, but it's quite slapdash in construction…Lucifer. You stay behind to look over those demons who remain. Though I doubt they were worrying about their employment marching off to enlist, someone has to stay behind to torture the damned souls. The very fact we've gotten no word about our shirking from Upstairs has to be chalked up to the issues going on in Heaven, but we can't fly under the radar for long, let alone with an invasion under way. You need to stay behind and manage the skeleton crew."

He grumbled something under his breath, but the morning-star sighed and nodded, understanding his mission. Beelzebub fluttered in the air like a dust mote.

"Myself, I am much too weak in this state. I am able to slowly rebuild my…our colony, but it will take quite a while. I need to retreat to a safe place and acquire a new nest body, which will take time, but I will tend to those of the Order of the Fly who were wounded in the initial attack. As for you, my son…"

The fly landed once more on Belial's finger, cleaning itself with its forelimbs as its multi-lensed eyes gazed up at his ruddy face.

"...I rely on you to try to quell this invasion."

He yelped, staggering backwards a bit.

"W-What?! Me? No…"

Belial raised his other hand hand and waved it in front of him, laughing nervously.

"Hahaha, really, dad? Joking at a time like this? You're, like, pullin' my leg here…That isn't cool! Mammon and Moloch spend enough time teasing me, I don't need you joining in!"

The fly said nothing, and he lowered his hand.

"...You're serious?"

"Of course I am."

"B-But, pops…really, like, I'm flattered, but…*me?* I mean, look at me, I barely fit in any of my clothes, I don't remember the last time I showered, and, like, I'm practically fried outta my mind 24/7…the only reason I'm as clear as I am right now is 'cause I've been out cold for the past day! Lucy would be a *way* better pick, I think…right, Luce?"

"First of all, don't call me that. But secondly, you're correct. I don't understand why you would pick *Belial* of all people to try and quell an insurrection when he doesn't even know how to tie his own shoelaces—"

"I can't even reach my shoes, man!"

"—Surely it isn't pure nepotism, is it?"

"Lucifer…when you spend as much time in the trash as I have, you start to recognize every smell that makes it up. And when you get to that point, you know how to blend in, and you know how to stand out. Aristophanes the comic[40] *once said,* 'A demagogue must be neither an educated nor an honest man; he must be ignorant and a rogue.' *The people want to see someone who they can rely on, not…"*

Lucifer's brow furrowed.

"Not what?"

"...Not you."

"Beelzebub—"

"My mind is made up, morning star. And you, Belial…"

"Dad…"

"...You will do just fine. Hurry along now, there isn't much time. Intercept them at Neshiyyah and hope to Satan that you can make a difference. Now go."

Resigning himself to his fate, Belial took a deep breath, shook out his anxieties (which flecked grease onto a frustrated Lucifer), and promptly disappeared to the grey sands of Limbo. Lucifer pinched his nose, glaring at the single fly in front of him.

"You know your son's a moron, right?"

"If I thought not, I would not have sent him."

"What does that even—you know what? Whatever. I'm off to go round up the skeleton crew. Call me when you get your new body."

The red-haired demon waved his hand dismissively and walked away with a cocksure flap of his wings.

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[40] Greek playwright most well-known for his satire plays—not to be confused with 'satyr plays', extremely raunchy and bawdy comedies performed by actors dressed in absurd priapic costumes at the end of the Dionysian festivals. These were considered so obscene that many emperors ordered the manuscripts to be destroyed, unaware that the satyrs who had ghost-written then would continue to play out their parodical escapades in front of their patron god, Dionysus. Only one costume from a production of *"Vacillus"* remains, which is currently in the "Adults Only" section of the British Museum.

CHAPTER 25: Nataraja

The Prince of Fuck All and Shiva the Destroyer stood roughly ten paces away from each other, staring one another down. For the sake of the dance, Shiva had rested Trishul against the base of the nearby tree, though he kept his *damaru* drum in his upper-right hand. The ash-covered deva stretched out all four hands, adopting a wide stance.

"Prince. Watch my movements."

"I'm watching, hun, I'm watching. Us girls love dance."

Shiva wrinkled his nose at that.

"I am curious. Do you know the meaning of the word 'Nataraja'?"

"Sorry, love, I don't speak Hindu. You'll have to elucidate me."

"It is one of my many titles…but, it is understood to mean 'Lord of the Dance'."

The Prince wiggled his fingers.

"Ooooh, scary. Are you going to start riverdancing at me, Flatley?"

The deva just closed his eyes, took a deep breath inwards, and brought his two lower palms together while the free hand started to raise. His movement was slow and purposeful.

"I am just letting you know what to expect. Consider it a kindness on my part."

Shiva's upper-right wrist flicked, and the damaru made a sharp sound—like a whip cracking against stretched leather, it startled The Prince into paying attention. With his eyes still closed, his movements still purposeful, his limbs began to slowly glide into place. Smooth and purposeful. Graceful and elegant. With this skill and precision, his limbs sliding through the air as though it facilitated his every motion, he began to adopt a pose seen immortalized in bronze sculptures and elaborate idol-shrines since antiquity.

Turning his right leg to the side, he raised his left leg until it was almost perpendicular to his right, expertly balancing on a single leg. Bending the elbow of his upper-left hand, he swirled his wrist, and a plume of white fire appeared within it. With his lower two arms, his right arm thrust out in front of him writhed and swirled as if something were crawling along it. His left crossed his chest, the hand falling limp and pointing the palm inwards towards himself. All the while, the strands of black hair that fell across his face began to rise and wave with steady and constant oscillations as though they were rolling and crashing sluices of water. As he completed the pose, behind him, a ring of white fire formed like a series of stadium lights turning on in sequence.

In spite of his purposeful movements, Shiva kept a calm expression. A face of peaceful and enlightened serenity, closed eyes, a slight smile, as though everything was right in the world.

And that serenity was unbroken by the slightest peek of his third eye, opening itself up to the world by only a millimeter.

A great impact emanated from the deva, a sonic boom akin to a massive drum being hit with him as the center that expanded outwards, pushing back the trees around them and stripping some leaves from each as though they were hit by a heavy wind. The Prince felt the brunt of this

as well, stumbling backwards and rolling like a tumbleweed until he hit a tree that he could shore himself onto.

"Bloody hell—!"

When the initial shock had faded, The Prince saw a bluish-white aura emanating from Shiva as the pose he remained in almost seemed to continue to radiate power in waves, in heavy waves that thudded down onto The Prince's head and his heart like a migraine of the soul.

And then Shiva began to dance the Ananda Tandava.

The Ananda Tandava is the dance of the eternal bliss that is beyond the endless cycle of reincarnation, the immeasurable and incomprehensible euphoria that comes with a lack of being, the joy of nothing and everything all at once. Not that The Prince knew this—not in earnest, anyways, he had heard something about it once or twice before perhaps—but he would certainly know it afterwards.

It was an energetic, passionate, wild dance. With his legs flying in front of him, all four arms in perfect unison as they passed over each other and made great circles from their elbows, the fire in his hand splitting to accompany each fingertip as the digits expertly moved as though playing an invisible piano, he bounded and leapt. He spun and twirled, his arms following after him, and all the while, the hand that held his damaru drum never faltered as it played the drum with such expertise that it almost felt like three or four people playing at once. With arms outstretched, he bent and extended his knees, bending over to let his arms follow one's motions like afterimages, spinning on a single foot and stomping, jauntily hopping from one foot to the other as his elbows worked like gyres, arms spinning, extending, outstretching, all the while dancing, dancing with the joy of eternal bliss.

The Prince sat watching, dumbfounded and with his mouth agape in shock as he watched the deva's holy dance, his ice-blue mascara-clad eyes watching every motion with intense concentration. He watched Shiva stamp and widen his stance, gyrate his hips, clap his hands together, snap his head from one side to the next, turning his torso in tandem with his hips, raising the fire to the sky and letting it rain down as he expertly dodged and maneuvered around the floating embers, all the while the drum constantly beat, seemingly no longer as a result of Shiva's actions but still by his will, raising in tempo, constantly raising, raising, The Prince could almost swear he could hear chanting. He could almost swear he could hear prayer. Joyous, rapt, wonderful songs for the great Destroyer who carried both joy and rage in his heart of hearts.

The dance continued for some time. The Prince couldn't tell you how long it was, but if he was to hazard a guess, he would have put it around an hour in length. Really, from Rodion's testimony, it would have only lasted perhaps two minutes at max. He could feel himself almost blushing as he watched the energetic and passionate dance, heart beating out of his chest.

Eventually, Shiva's third eye closed once more, and with his chest rising and falling in perfect rhythm, the fires around him dissipated. The deva sighed, and both eyes opened as he put his palms out.

"You see? That is the Ananda Tandava, the dance of my life's joys and the bliss between creation and destruction."

The Prince huffed, rubbing an eye as he put his hand to his face. His cheeks were hot…but he staggered to his feet nonetheless, whistling.

"Whoof. You really put on a bona fantabulosa show there, Shivvy, I won't lie. It was a hell of a performance. I think it could have used a pole and some pasties, frankly, but for what it was? Second-best dance I've ever seen performed."

He quirked an eyebrow.

"Second-best?"

"Yep. You're still beat by a three-hundred-pound queen I saw once in Milwaukee who danced hard enough to Kenny Loggins that it exhausted the crowd just as much as it exhausted her. But, you know, second place isn't bad! If you don't mind being the first loser."

Shiva crossed his arms, frowning with less frustration and more slight annoyance—the same expression you'd give to a fly thar keeps ramming itself into the wall despite the open window right beside it—as he gestured with an open palm.

"If you believe that, Prince, then do show me your dance."

"I would love to, darling. Though, you know, all good dances have to have a beat behind them, you know? And I'm sorry, but your bijou little drum there isn't going to work."

He wiggled the drum a bit as The Prince dug an arm into his robe. As he spoke, he tossed a few things out (mostly old food wrappers, a pair of pink panties, and a copy of the Adulterous Bible) but continued rummaging around.

"...This is a religious item. What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing, nothing! Nothing in principle. It's just, y'know…kind of outdated? If you want to get with the times, if I were you, I would get myself one of these puppies."

He pulled out a small CD-player boombox, setting it down on the clouds and doing some stretches. Shiva stood by and waited patiently, looking over at the nearby tree to give himself something to occupy his vision.

"Gotta limber up, you know?"

"Mm-hmm."

After a bit of stretching, The Prince took a deep breath, brought one foot up to his knee…and struggled to maintain his balance, resulting in both feet being planted on the ground once again, before he put both arms out in front of him. He reached down and pressed the play button on the boombox, closing his eyes as the music started to fade in. Harsh guitar tones intercut with clap-impacts roared out from the electronic, and a recognizable voice rang out.

"Here we stand, or here we fall…History won't care at all…"

When he opened his eyes, The Prince began to dance.

~

Rodion, Fionn, and Thor continued to lead the massive chimera that was the Young Man with a Skull away from the garden, stumbling across the clouds. Rodion continued to read what reviews he could, flipping through the papers to try and find ones he hadn't already read out loud

before as he watched Thor fire off bolts of lightning into the mass in some attempt to stun it, and Fionn mac Cumhaill fire off arrow after arrow into its mass. The shockwave that emanated from the garden earlier threw all of them off, and Rodion had to practically shout out the reviews to get the creature's attention again, but things were stable for the most part. Fionn landed on his feet and huffed, looking to Rodion.

"Cron, none of our attacks are working. The arrows just sink into its mass. I am losing many arrows to this beast."

Thor landed to the other side.

"No matter how many thunderbolts I fire at it, it does nothing! This blasted thing is too hardy for its own good!"

"T-Then stop attacking it, for goodness sake! Look, as long as we have these reviews, we'll be able to distract creature for long enough to let Prince do whatever he needs to do. I…trust him, so is my duty to fill out his requests!"

The Norse god squinted at the garden, visible a fair distance away.

"...Is that your 'prince' over there in the flowers?"

"What, in garden? Yes, that's him."

"He's dancing."

A tendril came out, and Rodion narrowly ducked it.

"Ah—! He's what?"

"He's dancing. Extremely poorly, I might add. Guy looks like he's flailing around a bunch of wooden swords and is hopping around like his ass is on fire."

Fionn bit his thumb, stabbing up into a pseudopod that threatened to knock them down.

"I believe there is music playing over there. I could not hear what was going on after the impact wave, but there is certainly music playing now. What is it? I've never heard anything like it before…"

"Shiva doesn't look too impressed. You sure he knows what he's doing?"

Rodion let out an angry sigh, looking up at the sky and glancing at the light in it.

"I hope to…" He pointed up at it. "...Him, that he does. Otherwise, I will be very, very angry with him, if he has chosen to show off dance moves while we run for our li—"

He was cut off by a blunt impact to his forehead and nose, causing him to stumble back and curse loudly in Russian.

"Sukin syn—What is this now?!"

Rodion put his hand against the air in front of him. All that was there was a dense bit of clouds, but…he couldn't get through it. It was as hard as concrete. Thor lightly pushed him aside, letting out a shout as he slammed Mjolnir into the surface. While bolts of lightning crackled from the point of impact, Thor's hands were left shaking, and no dent was made.

"By Asgard, it's impenetrable! Blocked on all sides by clouds harder than fire-forged steel!"

"I would assume the 'angels' would want their home to be rather sturdy."

"I suppose they do not call it 'firmament' for nothing…But, what now?"

He turned around and looked up at the monster which encroached upon them, its great form casting a dark shadow over all of them. Fionn pulled out his shield Sgiath Gailbhinn, holding it up over Rodion, and Thor stepped out in front of him, staring down the chimera.

Fionn looked to Rodion.

"Surely, reading another review would not hurt?"

"I would love to, Cumhaill, but…only few of these papers actually have reviews on them." He dropped the whole stack, frowning. "And, I have gone through them all already. We are out of options, I think."

The beast roared, the hundreds of bodies that made up its shambling form undulating and speaking over one another incomprehensibly. Thor puffed his chest out, stomped his feet, and held Mjolnir out in front of him.

"Come at me, you ugly bastard! I'll fight until my last—"

A pseudopod swept in and grabbed onto Mjolnir, tossing it like a boomerang in the opposite direction. It flew through the air, making a whizzing sound, until it was completely out of view.

"—breath. Hah. Well, I'm out of ideas, then."

The monster roared and closed in on them, the three forced to stand side-by-side to prevent from being sucked in by its grasping mass. Thor let out a short and bitter laugh as he grinned.

"Lucky of you to die in Heaven, eh, Russian? Won't have to take your body far."

"I-I would not be going here when time comes, that is for sure!"

"What about me? Will I remain here if I die?"

"You, boy? What do you have to be afraid of? You're…"

Then, suddenly, as if the clouds had parted, a bright light shone down on all of them. They shielded their eyes but still craned their necks up, trying to ascertain the source, and as their eyes became used to the light…they watched numerous beams of light like lasers pierce through the bulk of the shambling monster, each with a sound like a heavenly choir singing, louder and louder as more and more shafts of light fired through the creature. Eventually it got the message and sluggishly turned its attention back towards the garden. Thor scratched his head.

"Well, I'll be damned. Who was that?"

Fionn pointed upwards.

"I believe it may have been 'God'."

"Yeah, fat chance! He doesn't do a goddamn thing apart from just sit around looking pretty!"

Rodion was too shaken to respond to either of them, though he did notice a rustling in an above cloud. Once the monster had dragged itself far enough away, a humanoid figure emerged from it and landed in front of them. Rodi swallowed, almost able to feel every pore in his body open up.

"M…M-M…"

It was Metatron, panting and with his hands on his knees.

"Hahh, whoof…hoh, boy."

He looked up with a cheesy smile.

"That was a close one, eh? Lucky for you all that I got the message from Control in time. Nikolayev, Cumhaill, very nice to meet you, my name is—"

"M-Metatron…highest of seraphim…"

Metatron put up his hands and laughed nervously.

"Hahaha, h-hey, no need to address me so formally! I don't take my position too seriously, really, Metatron is fine…I'm glad you two and The Prince got here at all. Things are really bad right now. I've been very, *very* busy up in Zebul with the rest of the seraphim taking care of things, so I don't have much time, but…"

Thor scoffed and crossed his arms.

"And what *have* you been doing, exactly? Sitting on your behind praising your big man upstairs?"

"Well…no. Fionn, Rodion, you were told that Man Unkind themselves are attacking, right?"

"Is true…Come to think of, we have not seen any agents apart from that large one over there. Where is everyone?"

The seraph sighed and scratched under his hat, wings fluttering exhaustedly.

"All the agents have coalesced around the Empyrean. All the seraphim and I have been very focused on protecting God…you know, He's our number-one top priority for reasons I hope are obvious. A lot of the rest of Heaven has already been cleaned out, complete with most of the troops and Powers, so…not good."

"Of *course."*

Metatron blinked, caught off-guard by the response as Thor stepped forward and jabbed a finger into the seraph's chest.

"While we've been down here busting our asses and having our asses busted fighting this walking clump of hamburger patty, you've been sitting up there on your cushy thrones[41] thumbing your nose and zapping whatever comes your way, making the excuse that you don't have to help us out here because your God is all you think about! Isn't He supposed to be omnipotent, omnipresent, *all-powerful?* How powerful is your God if he needs his own private cabal of bodyguards to fend off the rabble, huh? Typical Christian figures, all bluster and no power. Unlike *us*, we get off our asses and do shit when we want to—"

Rodion lightly patted Thor on the shoulder.

"Thor."

"What?!"

"...Now is not time for this conversation. Save for afterwards, I need to ask M-Metatron here a question."

The Norse god grumbled about something and crossed his meaty arms, turning away as Rodi and Fionn drew closer to the seraph.

"We were told of demon invasion, as well? Where would they be entering from?"

Metatron, still slightly shaken by the rant he was subject to, took a second to snap out of it.

[41] They really aren't cushy at all.

"...Whuh? O-Oh, yes! That's also in this sphere, in…" He turned around, squinted, and pointed at a nondescript patch of clouds. "...That general area. Keep walking and you'll find it!"

"I am sorry, but I do not think we have time to walk that far."

"Fair point. I can take you there, but after that, I really need to get going, is that alright? It's just a quick teleport, I promise."

"Da, that is good! Just…do give us warning when you do, yes? The last one, Phanuel I think, did not tell us what it would be like…"

"Thor. Are you coming?"

Fionn extended a hand to Thor, who grunted and slapped his hand away.

"Count me out. You guys go have your little rendezvous, I'll go catch up with Shiva and the prissy one. Gotta get my damn hammer back too, and I don't want it covered in either of your brains. See ya."

The muscly thunder god waved a hand dismissively as he marched off in a self-righteous harrumph. Rodion and Fionn watched him go for only a moment before Metatron stepped behind them, placed a hand on each of their shoulders, and sniffed as he covered them with his uniquely-constructed orange wings.

"Just a fair warning, it's really not pretty over there. Lots of bodies left behind. Alright, I'm gonna do it now. It'll feel like…hm. You know how doctors will ask you a question about your shot before you get it, and by the time you answer, it's already over and you never even noticed since you were so distracted?"

"Yes, why?"

Metatron's wings unfurled, and they saw in front of them a field of piled bodies, both angel and agent in origin.

"It's kinda like that."

~

The Prince, having danced for perhaps around four-and-a-half minutes as passionately, as feverishly, and as hard as he could have until the song faded out, finished. He stood with his arms outstretched, his mascara and makeup running slightly from the thin sheen of sweat that covered his body, and his chest rose and fell with a wheeze as he held a cheesy grin on his face. He remained there for a few seconds, looking at Shiva.

"Eh? Eh? Whaddya think?"

The deva stared at him with utter silence, his mouth pulled taut into a flat line. The two of them stared at each other until Shiva finally sighed, put a hand to his face, and shook his head.

"No. No, no, no…it just won't do. Not only did you not properly convey your 'story' to me, your innermost feelings and passions…you just wildly thrashed about. There was no technique, no purpose to your movements, it was just…brazen. Brazen and needlessly aggressive. You were trying to prove yourself too much, and in the end, you ended up just coming off like you were trying too hard."

He huffed and stood up straight, packing the boombox back into his coat as he grumbled.

"(Didn't know Mr. 'Lord of the Dance' was also 'Lord of the Critics'...) You really got all that from my dancing, huh?"

"Yes. And unfortunately, the results are quite unsatisfactory. I cannot, in good conscience, give you the Chandrakanta."

The Prince sighed and marched over to Shiva, hands on his hips.

"Yeah? And *I* cannot believe that I had to prove I was worthy in the first place! You're not a moron, Shivvy, you and I both know that, and I know you know how serious the situation is. Making me dance around and ultimately deny me what I need to save this world? Pretty cruel."

"You were the one that agreed to it, Prince. I laid out my terms, and you showed an unsatisfactory performance."

"Unsatisfactory? *Unsatisfactory?"*

He put a hand on Shiva's chest, puffing his cheeks out.

"If we're talking unsatisfactory, I can think of a couple of things unsatisfactory with *your* dance, blue…white…boy. What is this, ash? Are you covered in ash?"

"It's *vibhuti* ash, made up of burnt wood, burnt cow dung and cremation remains.[42]"

The Prince pulled back his hand, his nose wrinkling as he wiped it off on his robe.

"Eugh. Well, regardless, I'm not leaving you alone until you give me that stone. I'll even fight you for it! I don't mean to brag, but I took three years of Krav Maga, five of Samba, and nineteen months of Brazilian jiujutsu. Concurrently, of course! I can knock you out three times before you hit the ground, love, this queen's got fangs and she knows how to bite! Rowr!"

He hopped from one foot to the other, hands out in karate-chop shapes as he feinted jabbing and slapping at the god, who didn't flinch once. He grabbed The Prince's forearm.

Shiva looked down at him with a glint in his eyes and a friendly smile that made The Prince shudder and stop immediately.

"I would advise against that. You will lose."

"Oh? Says who?"

"Says me."

A female voice echoed out from above them, and in a flash of golden light, a figure descended down beside the two of them. Her long silvery hair raised up as she dropped to the grass beneath her, but as she stood, her angular face and the horn at her side gave away her identity. Shiva smiled at her.

"Archangel Gabriel, what a surprise. I thought you were recovering after giving up your physical body? And yet here you are, as fit as can be. Are you well?"

"Well enough that I could see what was going on here."

---

[42] In a folk tale, there was once a great sage named Parnada, who shouted that he was the most pious man in the world after he believed that his piety had changed his blood to tree sap. Shiva, curious about the commotion, came down in the form of an old man and questioned this—when trees are turned to ash, they can be changed no longer, so that should be the ultimate state of his blood. To show this, Shiva cut his own finger, and ash poured out. Parnada begged forgiveness, recognizing Shiva's power, and ever since then, Shiva wears ash on his person to remind his followers that the ultimate reality is not always beautiful—sometimes it simply is. Baths are very difficult for him.

One of her ears started drooping, and she quickly pushed it back up. Nobody mentioned this.

"You, Shiva, I don't have any quarrel with. Now *you,* on the other hand…"

She turned to glare at The Prince, stepping towards him and looking down the bridge of her nose down at him. The Prince waved with a smug grin.

"Bona to vada, Gabby. Nice weather we're having, isn't it?"

"Don't you play coy with me, 'The Prince of Fuck All'. I don't trust you. I distrust you about as far as I can throw you, and I could throw you from here to Johannesburg with my pinky finger. Your file doesn't have any information about you before age 16, all you do is lie, cheat, and steal—"

"Nothing about my numerous sexual endeavors on there?"

"I wasn't going to mention those. Regardless, the fact of the matter is that you're a *bad seed,* and you run with a crowd that I don't care for."

"That really is rude. Drag queens have as much a right to be here as—"

"I'm not talking about that!"

Gabriel grabbed the crown of thorns that floated above his head hard enough to make it bleed, soaking The Prince's face in red.

"I'm talking about how you have *no standards* for your conduct. You just do whatever you want and hide it under this free-wheeling and casual veneer of altruism and denial."

"No I don't!"

She sighed and let go of the crown. Her fingers started to slough off of her palm, and she put them back into place. Nobody mentioned this either.

"...Despite that. You are the one with the most experience dealing with Man Unkind, and you've dealt with them expertly many times in the past. I would be remiss if I didn't mention that. So…we do need you."

"Awww, how sweet! Gabby needs me~"

Gabriel shuddered.

"Quiet. Shiva, would you please hand over whatever he needs to him?"

"Pardon? Did you not just say he was a liar, a cheat, and a thief?"

"He's got you there, Gabby."

"I doubt it would be safe in The Prince's hands."

"Technically, it wouldn't be in my hands, it'd be in my coat."

"Why can I not hold onto it until the time to use it is needed?"

"It's not like I'm gonna drop it, love, I'm not some floozy klutz!"

The archangel groaned and covered her face with both hands, face starting to melt through the gaps between her fingers before she smushed it flat again.

"For the love of—will you two *shut up already?!* We don't have time to be blabbering like this, there's still—" She pointed to the Young Man with a Skull mass currently shambling towards them. "—that thing roaming around Heaven! Get rid of it! Now!"

The Prince of Fuck All crossed his arms and thought, closing his eyes and humming as he knitted his brow. A strong male voice called out from the side.

“You sissies done dancing over here?”

“Ah, hello, Thor. As a matter of fact, The Prince and I are done, and he was quite disappointing...Where’s your hammer gone?”

Thor sighed and crossed his beefy arms, raising a hand.

“Probably off lodged in a cloud somewhere. I got it tossed away when I was with the Russian and the Irish warrior so I figure, might as well wait until I was around people I didn't respect before calling it back. I’d suggest you duck, missy.”

The Prince opened his eyes suddenly, snapping his fingers.

“Wait! Thor, you can call your hammer back from wherever and it’ll come right back, right?”

“Yeah.”

His lipsticked mouth grew into a grin, and he clapped his hands together, pointing to Gabriel.

“Gabby, love, what’s in this sphere?”

Gabriel sighed and put her hands on her hips.

“Well, apart from the Garden of Eden, there’s the portal to Hell, and then there’s an opening to Sheol…”

“Sheol?”

“The void, essentially. An abyss. Jeramiel the Principality keeps guard there to make sure nothing comes out.”

The Prince rubbed his hands together, snickering.

“Where there’s a hole, there’s a way. Let’s just say that our big ugly friend might just have a nasty fall soon enough…”

CHAPTER 26: Heaven and Hell

When Rodion and Fionn opened their eyes once again, they found themselves a couple of meters away from the entrance to Hell from Heaven. One would think that having a direct line from the realm of God to the realm of Satan would be a security risk, but the explanation is quite simple: God and His army could easily trounce any number of demons any day. Demons torture the souls of the damned and live in Hell because it's what God demands of them as penance for their rebellion. Plus, of course, there were always Powers guarding the entrance to make sure nobody without clearance went in or out.

Rodi swallowed as he looked over the scene in front of him. Indeed, just as Metatron had said, the plain of clouds in front of them were dyed all manner of colors—primarily gold—from the angel corpses that spread out over it like a carpet. Simulating the non-divine process of decay, each corpse was in different states of disintegration, their flesh and bone, their halos and wings, slowly dissolving into glittering motes of divine light.

Not only that, but shuffled in among the angel bodies like art installations were what Rodi surmised were the remains of Man Unkind agents. Broken bottles he recognized as being the heads of the Delirium Tremen had their shards embedded in the throats of angels, the Sunshine Supermen laid limp and withered, their muscles having deflated and their heads having burnt out to nothing more than cold black spheres, and many others he didn't recognize. Upended mannequins, chunks of concrete, pink battleships that appeared to be sinking in mid-air, massive heads covered in barbed wire downed like zeppelins…it almost made him shudder, but as it stood, it just made him sick. He supposed it was good that angels were, at worst, expendable…but that thought made him sick as well.

Fionn, showing as little expression as ever, tugged on his sleeve and pointed forwards.

"Would that be the entrance to Hell?"

Built into an outcropping of clouds like a nuclear bunker was a gaping hole that looked like a wound that was seeping into Heaven. The clouds around it were singed black, and the area seen within glowed with an otherworldly red glow even when the landscape within was nothing but a saddening bleak gray. The distant scent of sulfur mixed with an otherworldly smell that Rodion assumed was coming from the angel bodies. It smelled vaguely like marshmallows. He sniffed.

"I believe so, yes."

"Then, should we wait for the army to come through?"

"I feel that would be something of…bad move on our parts. Is best to intercept before they enter at all, *da?"*

"Da. I suppose."

"N-No, no, Cumhaill, you see, *da* is Russian for 'yes', you do not need to—"

"Look."

He pointed towards the entrance.

The two of them had unfortunately been slightly too late if they wanted to intercept them: through the entrance to Hell, demons of all shapes, sizes, and colors started pouring in. Jackals with black fur that sparked with electricity, wicked things on stilt-like forearms, at least one seemingly innocuous-looking white cat, and all the while, they chanted something in the Semitic language Rodion remembered hearing when he and The Prince were in Hell themselves. None of them looked happy, apart from the ones that looked a bit too happy. Those ones branched off early and just started punching clouds, which did as much damage as you would expect.

Rodion wasn't pleased with the lateness on their part, but there wasn't much he could do about it. However, there was something—or rather, someone—that he *did* recognize.

Stumbling backwards in front of the mob of demons, waving his chunky arms and trying desperately to calm the whole bunch down, was Belial. His piercing-chains jangled against his cheeks as he shouted out to the mob.

"H-Hey, guys, come on! Like, I know you're angry at the angels, and man, I am too, but like, c'moooon…this is, like, a suicide mission here! There's no point, really! Like, why don't we all just…head home, chill out, and listen to some music? Wouldn't you guys like that more than going after some angels? Listen to me! Hey! Where're you going…? I mean, er, I know where you're goin', but like…stop?"

Rodion raised a hand.

"Belial?"

Belial, who had stopped to catch his breath, looked up and—in a flash of thick red smoke—appeared right next to Rodion, the seven-foot demon taking the doctor's hands with a wide smile of relief.

"Rodi, dude! Thank Beez you're here, I…actually, why are you here?"

"We…that is, me, Prince, and Cumhaill, we were brought here to prevent demon invasion."

"Cumhaill?"

The demon turned to look at Fionn, who currently had his bow drawn with an arrow pointing straight at Belial's head. After a short and quite sharp shock on Belial's part and lots of explanations from Rodion as they kept an eye on the throng of demons (who quickly turned from incensed to confused, having zero idea how to actually navigate Heaven on their own), Belial explained what had gone on. In his own fashion, of course.

"So like, after you dudes got to Overhill, I went back home and all my family and friends were all donked up by this shadow dude! Then he went up a hill and gave this big speech where he convinced all the demons that invading Heaven and helping him out was a *good* idea, and then he killed The Devil who's like our president-mayor and since he killed him *he*—the shadow dude—gets to be in charge, so he put out a post on Harrower and like a *buuuunch* of other demons came in and he made my dad Beelzebub curse all of his weirdo goons to make them, like, strong against angels, and by the time I woke up, he gave the go-ahead and now everyone's here and dad put me in charge and I don't know what to dooooo…"

Belial let out a small sob and covered his face, sniffling.

"L-Like, dad put me in charge, but what am I supposed to do?! I'm not a leader, I'm a follower, and I don't even do that half the time! I'm not good at leading people…but, dad's counting on me, and I don't know how to…do whatever I need to do to make them stop…"

Rodion patted him on the shoulder, comforting him.

"Do not worry, Belial. We will confront this together, yes? Me, you, and Cumhaill."

He gestured with a thumb to Fionn, who was waving his sword at an imposing-looking demon resembling a two-headed eagle who was tearing away at the clouds. The demon swallowed.

"Gosh, like…you'd really do that, Rodi dude?"

"I do not believe we have much of choice, but yes, of course. Now, first thing to do is get their attention. What do demons like best, I wonder…?"

"Uhhh, usually, I think, crappy junk food, sexy poses, violence, and bright flashing lights."

"Ah, like Americans."

Fionn raised his hand, the other digging into his oxter bag.

"Excuse me. I still have gunpowder in my bag. Would igniting it in mid-air work?"

"Otlichnaya ideya, Cumhaill! Stand back, Belial, and plug your ears."

On the count of three, Fionn threw a fistful of gunpowder up into the air, and with a call of *"Zazhigay![43]"*, A small bourbon-scented ball of fire shot from his palm. It made contact with the fountain of gunpowder, triggering a decently large explosion in the middle of the air. Not only was it attention-grabbing, it was *very loud*, and as such, most of the demons immediately groaned and covered their ears: even the ones with knives in their hands, who forgot to let go of them before it was too late.

All of them turned towards Rodion, Fionn, and a politely-clapping Belial. Rodion whispered to Fionn as he clambered onto a small outcropping of clouds, pushing some of the angel corpses off with his feet.

"(Go find Prince and let him know where we are, okay?)"

"(Understood.)"

Off Fionn sprinted. Rodi stepped forward, facing down the sea of demons. It almost resembled a bed of wet paint from his vantage point, burbling in all sorts of colors and with the occasional lump where an especially large demon was. He cleared his throat.

"Hello, everyone. You may not know me, but I am—"

"You're Rodion Nikolayev, right?"

A voice from the crowd spoke up, and immediately, around half of the crowd made sounds of remembrance and whispered to those beside them, nodding. Fionn tilted his head.

"They know you, Cron?"

Rodi laughed awkwardly and blushed, shrugging.

"Ahaha, I-I suppose…more than I thought would, did. I got very lonely, and demons, they are very undiscerning partners…but, er, no matter."

He spoke up once again.

---

[43] Lit. "Ignite!"

“Tell me, demons. Why are you here?”

A blue-scaled naga at the front raised his hand.

“To disssmantle and demolish the essstablishment of Heaven and reclaim our divine posssitionsss asss angelsss?”

“Da, yes. And, how many of you here were angels before falling?”

A couple of hands went up, but it made up not even half of the crowd present.

“Tsk, tsk. Most of you here are not ‘reclaiming’ anything, you are taking back what you feel your entire kind lost in past. Now, how many of you were told as little demonlings—”

“Imps,” a burbling voice said.

“—As little *imps*, that you were owed destruction of this place by your guardians, friends, or coworkers?”

Most of the crowd raised their hands, and Rodion put his hands on his hips, shaking his head.

“How sad. You have all got caught up in what is called ‘political jingoism’. What will you have here that you do not have in Hell?”

They murmured amongst themselves, and after some deliberation, a few piped up.

“Respect?”

“Proper freedom to live without being forced to do God’s bidding?”

“Some sunlight?”

One made a sound that resembled a cat heaving.

“Extra days off?”

Rodion crossed his arms and frowned.

“And you are all aware this has failed before, yes?”

At that, Belial hissed and made an ‘X’ with his hands, trying to get across to Rodion that the War and ensuing Fall was something of a sensitive topic among demons, but it was too little, too late. One demon, something like a blue potoo in some mix of priestly vestments and BDSM gear, stepped out from the rest, waving his bony hand dismissively.

“What sort of peon are you, so ignorant of our history and culture, to make such a statement? Of course we’re aware it has failed before! The efforts of Satan, Beelzebub, and Lucifer that escalated and turned into the dreadful war in Heaven was because they wanted angels to be more like humans! And what do we get for wanting to show compassion, wanting to suggest one small change to the most powerful being in the world?”

The blue potoo swept his hand out.

“Nothing! Absolutely nothing but turmoil and laboring under the thumb of a tyrant for an uncountable number of years! My fellow demons, rather than asking this fool what we will gain from performing such a task, even under such unforeseen circumstances, ask yourselves. What will your lives be if we give up this chance? The forces of Heaven are weaker than they have ever been, and perhaps will ever be. It has to start sometime, and it has to start somehow! What better place than here? What better time than now?”

Rodion winced, gritting his teeth as the crowd roared in agreement and started to become antsy again, those on the fringes resuming feasting on the corpses of angels and Man Unkind

members alike and tearing at the clouds. Belial huffed through his nose and lightly pushed Rodion out of the way, getting up on the outcropping.

"Guys! Like, I can't believe I'm saying this, but…God is stronger than us. Angels are stronger than us. The only reason we're even in this position is 'cause some whackjob took power and took advantage of us already not liking angels, and because his gang of creepy little dudes threw themselves at the angels until most of 'em keeled over! None of you have even met a seraphim before. When…"

He sighed, putting out his hands.

"...When I was an angel, an Ophanim, I was named Hennuk. I was the son of a seraph, but I also got to know one personally. The seraph of punishment, who's also the 'father of all evil' and the angel of disaster[44]. He sent tons of birds out to attack humans, he wanted to keep one-tenth of us after the flood as his pets, and he even tried to kill Moses once. You guys know Moses, yeah? Big deal."

A few of the older demons muttered under their breath, but most silently nodded in agreement.

"Do you all remember the Plagues of Egypt?"

The demons reminisced nostalgically.

"That was *his doing."*

The demons abruptly stopped reminiscing and were silent.

"That's what I mean, guys. That's not even counting the archangels. And those are the people *below* God. I don't like Him as much as any of you, believe me, but like…you all know we can't win, right? There's no way."

Belial pointed up to the light of God.

"The instant He feels like He'll be in danger, He can zap all of us out of existence in an instant. There is absolutely no way in Hell we're winning. I'm serious. Like, I'm not that smart, but think about it. What would you rather do? Like, go kill yourselves in this dumbass battle, or go home and go back to torturing history's criminals and stuffing your faces? It's like…whatever, y'know?"

The throng of demons in front of them had stopped speaking entirely, many of them having their faces downcast. Nobody spoke a word. Rodion pat Belial on the back, giving a thumbs up.

"(See? Is good to have leader who speaks plainly and without pomp. Haha, I suppose I am not so good at that. Must be because I haven't quite mastered English yet.)"

"(Nah, man, I think you did alright.)"

Looking up with a heavy sigh, the blue potoo in the front shrugged.

"Well, then…we are already in too deep, aren't we?"

Belial jolted slightly. "Hm?"

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[44] Belial refers to Mastema, a being attested to as an angel by some sources, a demon by other sources, and something else entirely—according to most scholars, he's more of a personification of the persecution/hatred of God against His enemies rather than its own entity, but then again, most scholars aren't aware of many things in Heaven beyond what is attested by fallen angels, who are contractually bound to only divulge certain things to the press under threat of smiting.

They gestured out to the crowd.

"We've followed a leader who's in league with an absurdist doomsday cult, helped their agents kill leagues of angels with our powers, and encroached upon God's own territory in a bid to dethrone Him. Isn't that worthy of smiting already?"

Belial started to sweat. "E-Eh?"

"If we were to 'go the whole nine yards', as I believe mortals would say, what worse fate could He grant to us beyond complete non-existence? Might as well, right? It's a matter of national pride at this point."

A large portion of the demons started to mutter among themselves hesitantly, unsure about genuinely giving their lives out of this misplaced notion of pride…however, because they were demons, a larger portion started to agree with this sentiment. Belial and Rodion sputtered.

"B-But—are you kidding me, guys?! You'll get killed! Like, *killed*-killed!"

"It will be like Napoleon in winter, such large loss of life is not worth any principles!"

"Plus, you dunno if He's gonna do that, or even do anything at all!"

"How foolish are you all?!"

The blue potoo shook their head, stepping past where Rodion and Belial stood with an assertive wave of their arm.

"I—and I presume many others—have made up our minds. Now step aside, so that we may show our dedication to the ideals of our country."

The crowd of demons behind them cheered, a large chunk following after the demon. A smaller portion just turned around and went back into the portal, likely regretting the whole operation and hoping that they won't get God knocking on their doors anytime soon. Rodion covered his face with both palms, inhaled sharply, and placed a hand on a dejected Belial's shoulder.

"Well. We tried our best, yes? And some did choose to turn around."

"Y-Yeah, but…like, not all of them. Not even most of them. My brothers were right, I couldn't lead my own hand out of a wet paper bag…"

"Oy, oy. Do not be like that. You gave it fair shot, and I believe you made great statement. Alexander Bogdanov said, *'In history of thought... objectivity was sometimes on side of one man against rest of humankind.'* You can be right, objectively, and still be unpopular. Is just how things are."

"Dang…"

It was then that they both noticed the crowd of demons had stopped moving, all of their heads craned towards the horizon. They both hurried to the front, beside the blue one leading the charge, but before either of them could ask why they had stopped, the potoo pointed in the distance with a trembling finger.

"What in Satan's name is that?"

On the horizon, they saw a massive figure, almost large enough to start blocking out God's light, undulating slowly along. It was being flanked by three figures, and a fifth buzzed around it like a fly.

~

The plan that The Prince of Fuck All had come up with was this:

"This big ugly clod wants me, and he wants the stone that Shivvy's got. There's a big hole here that nobody can get out of. Here's an easy fix: me and Shiva will lead the Young Man with a Skull (really, if you still want to call it that) away towards the entrance to Sheol, with Gabby providing some backup if it starts to get distracted. Meanwhile, Thor waits over on the other side of the big hole, and when we bring it over to the edge of the hole, he brings Mjolnir back to him, whamming it into the beast's back and knocking it into the hole! Simple as, and with a bit of luck, we've taken care of it."

"Are you sure this plan will work?"

"Oh, don't sweat it, Gabby. You and the Big G have a history of dumping monsters into this hole, right?"

"Usually the monsters have come *out* of it. That's why we have Jeramiel watching over it."

"What a depressing job that must be…but, nevertheless! I press you to come up with a better plan. No? Yes? Perfect, let's go with mine!"

With that, The Prince and the others set his plan into motion. Exiting the Garden of Eden, both The Prince and Shiva looped around the shambling mass and watched all of its eyes turn to face them, confirming his statement that the two of them were what it was after. Once there, they made as much of a distraction as possible: Shiva banged his drum and danced, and The Prince pulled everything he would deem sufficiently 'flashly' out of his coat, which included a full Brazilian samba costume that lit up and played bit-crushed samba music as the lights along its feathers flickered with rainbow colors, as well as a couple of glow sticks. He held three in each hand and waved them around, shouting all the while.

"Yoo-hoo! Big Bertha! You want a piece of this girl, I'll have you know I don't come cheap…but I could give you a discount afterwards if I wager you're good trade! Come on, then! Don't you want me, baby?!"

Shiva looked to The Prince.

"Is such innuendo really necessary?"

"It is to me. Besides, I've been dealing with these nutters for much too long, they know me by now, and I know them well enough to know this pisses them off to no end. Hey ugly, over heee-eeere!"

The Shakespearean shoggoth let out a noise, the sound of hundreds of thousands of cut-up quotations overlapping, and started to turn. Just as it started to do so, however, Gabriel floated in front of it and clapped her hands, a massive wall of golden light appearing before her as she shoved into it.

"Don't look at me, you repulsive mass of sin. It's them you should be concerned about."

The wall pressed against the backside of the mass, not hard enough to be registered as an attack but just enough to move it forward, and it turned back around to continue moving forward.

“Forruad!”

Fionn sprinted in from the side sword in hand, catching up with The Prince and Shiva. The Prince waved, twirling a glow-stick in his fingers.

“Howdy again, Blondie. Don’t attack the blob, I’m doing a thing here, alright?”

“Do you know this young man, Prince?”

“He’s Fionn mac Cumhaill, Irish warrior. Ask your Dagda, hun, he’ll know who he is.”

Fionn opened his mouth, about to rattle off his opening speech to Shiva, but the beast roared once again and he swallowed.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. Is there any way I can be of assistance?”

“You can go around back of Big Bertha here and make sure it keeps heading towards us!”

“Understood. But, aren’t you running away from it? Where will you be going?”

Shiva pointed one of his ash-covered hands behind them.

“There, young warrior.”

A couple dozen meters behind them was what appeared to be an impossibly massive hole in the ‘ground’, which led into nothing but unrelenting blackness. Complete nothingness. It almost resembled a lake full of unreflective ink in appearance, and one could confuse it for a lake, but don’t be fooled: even though reaching your hand in will cause it to immediately be invisible among the darkness, there is no liquid in the sea. Standing at the rim and facing away from the others was a humanoid figure with wings and a halo—an archangel—who had curly blonde hair and pale skin.

Fionn tilted his head.

“There is a person there.”

“There is?! Oh, bloody hell—Gabby!”

The Prince shouted up at Gabriel, and in kind, she shouted back.

“What in the world is it?! I’m kind of busy here!”

“Tell Jeramiel to move his cattywumpus behind before he gets bowled over!”

“For goodness’...ugh, fine.”

As Fionn went around the back of the creature, like a diving bird, Gabriel swooped out of the sky and dropped down right beside Jeramiel, standing with her hands on her hips and an eyebrow quirked. Jeramiel stared down into the hole of Sheol with wide dinner-plate eyes, mouth pulled into a short line.

“Jeramiel.”

“Hello, Ms. Gabriel. Glory be.”

“Yes, yes, glory be, all that. How is your void-watching coming along? Staying true to your job duty?”

“Yes, Ms. Gabriel. I look over the Bosom of Abraham as the great archangel Jeramiel, who is over the abyss and Hades.”

“How is that going?”

“Every day, I gaze into the endless nothingness of Sheol. The blackness, the reflection of all evils and hatreds in man’s heart coalesced into this single pit. All of the most primal feelings, all

of the most violent urges, all of them originate from this single pit. Everything evil in the world is from within man's heart, and this is nothing if not man's heart in its purest form: the endless, yawning void. No love. No company. No ambition. Nothing but nothing itself."

"Quite poetic, but I do worry for your health. Have you been doing your prayers?"

"Five times a day."

"Your rosaries and davening?"

"Yes, Ms. Gabriel."

"Your salah?"

"I can't turn away from the void to face Mecca, Ms. Gabriel."

"Ah yes, of course."

The monster roared, the area around the two archangels getting darker and darker. Gabriel sniffed.

"You do realize there's a giant monster behind you that will roll right over you if you don't get out of the way, right?"

"I can't turn away from—"

"—From the void for any reason, yes, I've heard it before. Look, just hold on tight, okay?"

Archangel Gabriel grabbed Jeramiel by the shoulders, his only reaction being to ruffle his wings slightly, and soared straight up high off into the air. Even while in her grasp, he continued staring at the hole to Sheol with a vacant look in his eyes.

The Prince and Shiva, walking backwards, approached where the two were standing and quickly saw that there wasn't any more ground to lead it to. The Prince nearly fell in, but after swinging his arms wildly and yelling, he managed to stay on his feet.

"Crikey! Hell of a hole, innit?"

"It is quite large, yes."

"On the count of three, we split in different directions, alright?"

"Understood."

"Alright! Three!"

The Prince grinned, planting his feet on the ground and tossing his glowsticks over his shoulders into the hole. He held his hands hovering over his pockets like a gunslinger.

"Two!"

Shiva trained his icy eyes on the shambling mass, which let out a hideously wet and growling roar…

"...Prince?"

One never came. Shiva turned to his left to ask The Prince what was going on, but all he saw was a figure in a billowing blue coat sprinting away at top speed. The deva sighed, shook his head, and kicked off of the clouds beneath him to launch him in the opposite direction. The shambling mass tried its hardest to stop just short of the hole, but its great weight was too hard to handle for its own good, and it started to topple over.

~

In the air, Gabriel kept an eye on the beast and grit her teeth. Part of her wished she could just use the shield she made earlier and shove it in, but she knew that even she didn't have enough strength to do that. Someone else would need to do it…

Letting her neck rest from craning downwards, she looked out over the sphere of Shehaqim, surveying the damage and the bodies that hadn't dissipated yet. Near the entrance of Hell, she could see what appeared to be a small crowd that was…moving? Innately, she felt a sickness in her stomach (or, what she had that passed for a stomach): demons. They had finally come to invade, and while she could see the Russian still down there seemingly speaking with one of them—she knew it, he was always in league with demons and couldn't be trusted—she sighed. If you want something done, you have to get it done right. She would need to call a colleague to take care of this issue, where the humans have failed.

"Ms. Gabriel?"

"Hm?"

She looked down and saw that Jeramiel's ogling eyes were staring straight at her, which made a small shudder travel through her spine. Or rather, his eyes were staring slightly above her. He pointed a finger.

"What happened to your halo? It's broken in a few spots…"

~

The Prince put a finger to the chunk of halo in his ear and shouted with a grin as he ran away.

"Now, Thor! Call it back!"

Thor, who had been sitting on the other far side of the pit waiting for the signal from his own chunk of halo, sighed and got up from the ground. He wiped from under his nose and stretched, peering out in the far, far, far horizon. The Young Man with a Skull heap was nothing more than a button-sized glob on the horizon.

"Damn sissy prince ordering me around. Who does that little clump of paprika think he is, being so disrespectful to damn near everyone he meets? Urgh. At least I'm doin' this for father…"

He grumbled and raised his hand, his palm open.

Back near the monster, The Prince and Shiva both stopped and turned towards the beast, watching it look back and forth (or at least, 'look' in the sense of 'generally sway its body to one side') before ultimately starting to shuffle towards The Prince. He struck a pose, mockingly fanning himself as he pretended to swoon.

"Oh my, you're going after *me?* You boys really know how to make a lady feel wanted, you know that? But you know, you need to work if you want a woman to want you back. Treat her nice, take her out to the movies, take her to dinner…or, maybe in your case, out to a show? Theatre, perhaps?"

The beast roared, and he grinned a smug grin.

“I’ve got a quote here, maybe you can help me out? I can’t quite remember where it’s from, or even what it’s talking about. Ahem, ahem…”

He thrust out a hand, closing his eyes as he put on a theatrical voice. Even without being able to see, he could feel the monster’s presence looming closer and closer to him.

“I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest.”

It let out another beastly roar, nearer than ever and loud enough to make The Prince want to cover his ears. He stood fast.

“If it be now, ‘tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come…”

He opened an eye and saw one of the glassy dead eyes of the Young Man with a Skull staring back at him. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face.

“...The readiness is all.”

Flying in from the side with a veritable sphere of lightning surrounding it like a divine halo, and with the sound of a thunderclap like a cannon firing over an open field, the mighty hammer Mjolnir shot through the air and ran itself straight through the fleshy mass of the beast like a magic bullet. In through one side, slamming its way through its innards in a straight one-way path of utter destruction, it tangled itself in bodies and wedged itself in skulls. It caught itself on clothing and snagged itself on veins like a child pulling out computer cables, until it finally emerged out of the other side covered in viscera, wrapped entrails hanging off of its head and short handle like discarded party streamers.

The momentum of Mjolnir ramming itself through the Young Man with a Skull was just enough to make it topple over, and like a monumental building being demolished from the bottom upwards, like a tree falling over, it fell slowly forwards into the great pit of Sheol, letting out one final scream as its body undulated and heaved, dropping far, far, far into the depths of blackness…until there was never any sign that it had fallen there in the first place.

Shiva and The Prince reconvened in the middle, and the two of them peered over the edge, leering out into the endless void…

The redhead snickered, putting out his hands in a cheesy smile.

“The rest is silence.”

CHAPTER 27: Who is Like God?

After The Prince of Fuck All, Shiva, Fionn, and Gabriel had met back up, Gabriel placed Jeramiel back onto the clouds gingerly, where he resumed staring into the pit of Sheol. The Prince tried his best to celebrate, praising Shiva and Gabriel (though he mostly just self-aggrandized and bragged about his own contributions), but there was little time to do so.

"The demons have invaded. This needs to be dealt with immediately."

"Whaaaat, already? We just 86'ed a giant monster with my clever plan, surely you don't expect me to expend my energy taking care of a whole armada of demons too! I'm not *God*, you know."

The 'sun' shone a bit brighter on him, and The Prince huffed as he wiped both sweat and the blood from his crown off of his face. Gabriel shook her head.

"No, your Russian compatriot has already failed miserably and has started consorting with them…and I certainly don't trust you, of all people, to take care of things."

"Wh—hey! I got rid of it, didn't I?!"

"It was an impressive feat, but you ultimately just made it not their problem anymore. It was akin to sweeping all of your belongings into a closet and then telling your mother that you have cleaned your room."

"He has you there, Forruad."

He gritted his teeth. "Can it, both of you. Gabby, hun, can't any of the more powerful angels take care of this?"

"Unfortunately, they're too busy protecting the Lord, and to pull them away from that duty would be sacrilege. I'll need to get Michael."

She turned around, spread her wings, and prepared to take off…however, she was interrupted.

"Wait!"

Gabriel stopped.

"What is it?"

The Prince sheepishly put out his hands and smiled with a wheedling tone.

"You know, it's a long, long walk across these spheres…they are heavenly, yeah? Heaven's a hell of a big place. Best to conserve our energy in case of any more trouble, right? So…what I'm saying is…basically…"

Cough.

"Mind giving us three a ride to where Rodi is?"

Before he had even finished the 'n' in 'mind', the archangel had gone without so much as another word.

~

After a decently long bike ride where Fionn was held tight on Shiva's shoulders (much to his chagrin) and The Prince complained at length about how stuck-up angels could be, the three of them came to where the crowd of demons was. Though it wasn't anything close to the mob that made up the monster they had just dispatched, it was still a legion of thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of demons. Pedaling away on his old, squeaky, rusty bike, The Prince ducked and weaved between demons, whistling as he ogled a few while they passed.

"They stick out like sore thumbs here, don't they? Dark colors and white clouds don't match. I guess it's like how you're not supposed to mix reds and whites in the washing machine, yeah? …I wonder, what *would* a hybrid of a demon and an angel look like? Would that even work? Another one to send to the Imponderables…"

Shiva kept a wary eye on the demons, occasionally wrinkling his nose a bit at their wanton…well, sinfulness. He saw more technicolor omnispecial genitalia that day than he believed he had ever needed.

"They don't appear too happy. I thought they were invading for a good cause, as I assume they professed?"

"Many of them look either angry or despondent. Did they already meet one of the 'angels'?"

"I'm sure you would be feeling pretty mank if you lived in a literal sulfuric hellhole for all your life and used to live here. But, no sense worrying about that now, there's Rodi!"

Pulling his bike up to where Rodion and Belial sat, looking over the crowd glumly. Shiva and Fionn both hopped off, while The Prince happily bounded off of his seat and hopped over to Rodion, putting his hands over his eyes.

"Guess whoooo~?"

"P-Prince! I know is you!"

"Aheheheh, guilty as charged, guilty as charged!"

The both of them stood back up, The Prince pulling Rodion into a hug that only stopped after he assured The Prince that he was unharmed and in turn was assured that The Prince was unharmed.

"Rodi, this is Shiva. You may remember him from such religions as Hinduism, ah…er…"

"I am only worshiped as part of Hinduism, Prince."

"You are? Lame."

"B-But, I am part of one of the oldest religions on Earth!"

"I do not think is lame, Prince! Do not speak for me. I am honored to be in presence of such an important figure." He bowed his head respectfully, and Shiva did so in return.

Belial was a bit slower rising to his feet, but his hair-covered eyes slid across The Prince (who he was happy to see, despite only having seen him for a bit), Shiva (who he had never heard of before, and so was mentally referred to as 'Blue Dude'), and…

He let out a small yelp and covered his chest with a hand, trying to shield his head and bring up one leg defensively against Fionn mac Cumhaill.

"Ack! L-Like, dude, don't shoot me again! I'm a good guy, I swear!"

Fionn stared blankly at him for a couple of seconds.

“Oh. You are the ambassador to the fae, right? I would like to, once again, give my humblest apologies for that earlier incident. I mean you no ill will.”

He bowed, and Belial lowered his guard with a heavy exhale.

“Whoof. Oh man. You gotta tell me upfront about that sort of thing, dude, I don’t do good with surprises…”

“Would you have preferred I explain to everyone I meet that I bear them no harm?”

“Don’t with the sarcasm, man…”

The warrior stared a bit longer, before turning to Shiva.

“Was I being sarcastic?”

“Alright, alright, enough with the lovely chit-chat, all of you. Rodi, Belial, what’s going on? What’s up with the demons, why are they all so mopey, and—for you, Belial—why are you here in the first place?”

The two of them explained the situation.

“After they saw great monster fall into hole, they were more willing than ever to attack. Don’t ask me why…”

The Prince crossed his arms and rolled his eyes in the most condescending manner possible.

“Oooof course. When it comes to demons, always depend on them to double down even when they’ve been proven wrong.”

“(Prince, you are in company of demon right now…)”

“Ah yes, right. No offense meant.”

“None taken, man.”

“Either way, the fact of the matter is that Gabby’s going off to take care of the riff-raff by bringing in Michael.”

“Michael?!”

Both Rodion and Belial shouted, making The Prince flinch.

“Oy, with the yelling, already!”

“S-Sorry. Prince, do you know who Archangel Michael is?”

“Pfft. Of course I do! He’s the one with the curly black hair and the glittery glove, right? Grabs his basket a lot? Goes ‘shamone’?”

Shiva crossed all four arms.

“Different Michael, Prince.”

“...The basketball player?” He made a dribbling motion, then a swish motion. “I know jack about sports, love, so sorry if I got it wrong.”

Rodion lunged forward and grabbed him by the shoulder.

“T-This is serious, Prince! Archangel Michael is on the same level as many seraphim, perhaps even stronger!”

Belial clenched his fists, trembling with fear.

“He…He was the one that cast us all down into Hell! We fell through Sheol for nine days and nine nights, and it’s, like, impossible to get any sleep if you’ve got no neck support!”

"Is said he destroyed half of Heaven and cast down rebellious angels with a single swing of his flaming sword! I think he even had own holiday at some point?"

"He even once kicked the Devil of two generations back in the butt *so hard,* that he flew through space and landed back on Earth so hard that he made a local landmark![45]"

The Prince huffed, putting his hands up. "Alright, alright, I get the picture."

Fionn raised a hand.

"I have a question. Why are we so scared? Michael will be taking care of one of our problems, right?"

"Maybe to you, Cumhaill-dude!" Belial frowned, clenching his fists in front of him. "B-But…y'know, of course, angels hate demons…but we're people too! We have lives and likes and dislikes and favorite songs and whatever! If Michael swings his sword again, there's nowhere else for us to go after we die! We'll be like…dead. *Dead* dead. No backsies."

Shiva crossed his arms, pretty unconcerned despite the fears of the others.

"Then, what should we do…? This Michael seems rather fearsome, from these descriptions."

"No time to figure that out, Shivvy, love. Look."

The Prince pointed a couple dozen meters away. There, in a flash of golden light, Gabriel had returned with who the group surmised to be Michael. The hulking and muscular figure with stringy black hair and sun-tinged skin stood like a stone statue, his blue and gold tunic lightly billowing from the winds of Heaven…and at his waist was a sheathed sword. She was probably a head shorter than him, which was saying something considering the both of them were impressively tall as it stood.

Rodion squinted. "Is he…holding stuffed animal?"

Gabriel's sharp voice rang out over the sea of demons.

"Creatures of sin! Spawn of Beelzebub and Satan alike! You have unlawfully entered into the domain of God. Leave now, or suffer the pains of nonexistence."

The demons shouted and jeered.

"Oi, can it, slag! We're here to make a scene, and no snooty angel, no matter how powerful, is gonna stop us!"

"She can't take on all of us! She's just a girl!"

"Um, excuse you? Kind of chauvinist."

"S-Sorry, dear."

"I say we string her up and strip her for all the meat that she's worth!"

---

[45] Belial is thinking of the local folklore of Normandy, where supposedly St. Michael—after becoming tired of owning nothing but sand while the Devil owned all of the fertile land—offered to cultivate the Devil's land, giving him the pick between what grew above-ground, and what grew below-ground. The Devil chose that which grew above-ground, and that summer, nothing grew but root plants. Michael apologized and offered him everything from next summer that grew below the ground, and that summer, all the succulent fruits grew above ground. This is entirely irrelevant to why Michael kicked his behind. Instead, at the make-up feast afterwards, the Devil ate so much that he threw up, and Michael was so angry that he kicked him into space, the impact crater creating the rocks of Mortain. This is a true story.

Gabriel sneered, her stomach twisting with nausea. How utterly sickening. She gestured to Michael, standing beside him. Even that simple gesture caused him to flinch, blue eyes darting to look at her and bounce frenetically between all the demons facing him.

"I have here with me Archangel Michael. I am sure he needs no explanation."

All of the demons fell totally silent after that. They muttered amongst themselves—was that Michael? *That* Michael? Surely not. Most of them hadn't even seen him in person, having come into existence post-fall, but they knew the stories and they knew their own history more thoroughly than anything else…was he really capable of killing all of them with only a simple sweep of his sword?

In the midst of the silence, a single rock sailed out from the middle of the crowd.

It was no larger than a baseball, whizzing through the air for a good couple moments until it beaned Michael directly in the forehead.

"O-Oooow!"

The demons gasped…and then began to laugh, jeering and mocking him.

"Look at that! He got hurt by a rock!"

"Whadda weakling, I bet if he skinned his knee, he'd be bawlin'!"

"This is the guy who cast us all down back then?! I've seen literal babies with thicker skin than him! If a rock can hurt him, just imagine what we all can do!"

"Who even brought that rock? Is that someone's rock? Anyone lose a rock?"

Even though it made zero dent on Michael's head (there wasn't so much as a scratch where it hit him), he hugged his stuffed lamb close and began to sob uncontrollably, covering his face. His four wings started to flutter and twitch, starting to enclose him once again…

"Oh no, you don't!"

Gabriel grabbed him by the halo, preventing him from teleporting away, and thrust out her hand. In an instant, a convex barrier of golden light formed in front of the two archangels, keeping away the mob of invigorated demons who pushed and shoved to get to the front, to get a chance at ripping apart the angel they basically blamed for most of their problems. She hissed at him as fat tears rolled down his face.

"Listen, Michael. This is an extremely *important* assignment. I want you to take your sword out and strike down all of these demons."

"N-No…! No, no, no! I can't! I-I-I won't! Not again! Don't make me do it!"

"You are an archangel, Michael, not a child! I do not care if you've turned into a sniveling weakling, you are still God's strongest warrior! You did it before, and you will do it again, by witness of the Lord! You wouldn't want to anger Him, would you?"

"Mmmnnhhh…I-I want to go home…I want to leave…I-I don't want to do this, please…"

Even through his tears, as one hand clutched his tear-soaked lamb plush close, his other trembling hand slowly started to lower itself to his waist, fingers separating as his palm hovered over the handle of the sword.

"You need to do this, Michael. What is it that the mortals say to beseech you? *'Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle…Be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the Devil…"*

His hand and his body poured sweat as Michael trembled enough to rival a leaf in the wind.

"...and by the power of God, cast into Hell Satan and all the evil spirits who wander the world seeking the ruining of souls…"

"Gabriel!"

The Prince skidded to a stop on his bike, Shiva landing behind him effortlessly holding Rodion and Belial like bowling balls in his arms, and Fionn catching up with the two on foot. She whipped towards them.

"What do you want, Prince? Can't you see I'm busy trying to get Michael here to behave and do as he's *told to?"*

Gabriel gripped Michael's halo a bit harder, sternly glaring at him as he wept and sniffled miserably. The Prince hopped off of his bike, pointing to the others.

"Shiva, Blondie, Belial, you keep the demons occupied. Me and Rodi will take care of this. C'mon, dear."

The group hesitantly went along with The Prince of Fuck All's request, splitting up to the edges of the crowd as Rodi sputtered and shuffled out of Shiva's grasp.

"Me? W-Why me?"

"Just come on!"

Rodion landed on the clouds with a hesitance in his step, following The Prince as he hurried over to Michael and Gabriel. He stepped over an inconveniently-placed rock. The Prince huffed.

"Okay, firstly, Gabby, don't hold onto his halo thing so hard, alright? It's not a Pilates ring, and you're in good enough shape as it is."

"And why should I? How do we know he's not going to escape again, like the coward he is?"

"Don't call him a coward either! Bloody hell, if you keep insulting him, he's never going to get anything done."

"If you coddle him, he'll get even less done!"

The Prince clenched his fists and stomped on the clouds, shouting at Gabriel.

"For God's sake, could you just *shut your bloody hole for five minutes?!"*

She was shocked into silence, the fiery redhead huffing and puffing as he glared up at her. The crown of thorns above his head bled profusely, drenching his face in a red coat only pierced by his icy blue eyes. Rodion put a hand on his shoulder.

"Prince…"

"...S-Sorry, sorry."

He regained his composure, resetting his hair and momentarily checking his makeup in a hand mirror from his coat before he cleared his throat and looked to the weeping Michael, who had stopped openly sobbing, but was now simply sniffling and shuddering.

"Michael, hun. How are you feeling?"

Michael said nothing, looking down at him and gripping his plush. The Prince tried his best to give a disarming smile, opening his arms in a friendly gesture.

"Look. I'm not going to force you to do anything, and I'm not going to hurt you. I'm here to help, okay? Do you want to talk?"

The archangel shook his head vehemently, The Prince lowering his arms.

"Right…er, would a hug from Rodi help?"

He gestured to Rodion, who (to his credit, went along with it well) opened his arms up as well. He certainly would prove to be a much more comfortable hug than The Prince would be, what with his Russian winter padding…after remaining quiet for a bit longer, Michael sniffed and edged forwards, leaning towards Rodion. Once the angel was close enough, he wrapped his arms gently around Michael, resting his face against the taller angel's sturdy chest and rubbing the space between the wings on his back. He murmured comforting notions in Russian, speaking softly to him.

"(Is alright, *Misha*. I know. Is difficult. You do not want to do it, *da?)"*

He whined. "(Nooo…)"

"(You do not like Gabriel pressuring you, do you, Misha?)"

"(N-No…she's scary…I d-don't…want to use my sword…)"

"(Why do you not want to use your sword?)"

"(...Last time I used it, I…I-I…I-I destroyed everything…a-and I hurt so many people…people who were my friends…b-but everybody keeps saying 'it was for the g-greater good', and I'm just supposed to go along with it…)" He sniffled and buried his face in Rodion's fluffy black-and-white hair, wings curling and flapping slightly as he sobbed.

"(I-I don't want to hurt any more people…!)"

The Prince nodded solemnly and rubbed his chin in thought, his arms crossed as he watched the two hug. Occasionally, he shot a glare at Gabriel, who just rolled her eyes and kept up the barrier, where the mob of demons that were encroaching on them had stopped in plain confusion at the scene in front of them. One demon raised his voice to try and ask if they were still okay to rant and push forward, but another shushed him. They were having a moment, obviously.

Rodion pat him on the back.

"(Do you want to keep hugging, Misha? I promise, Gabriel will not yell at you.)"

"(...Mmh. I think…I'm okay.)"

"(Okay.)"

The soft Russian let go of him, giving a friendly and warm smile as he put his hands out.

"See? Is no harm. I do love your dummy lamb, though. Does it have name?"

Michael made a sheepish expression as he blushed and held it up, waving one of its stubby arms with his fingers.

"...It's…Agnus."

"Agnus! What a wonderful name. Very fitting, haha!"

Archangel Gabriel tapped her foot, looking back at the barrier between the waves of demons in front of her and staring at The Prince. She mouthed 'tick tock, tick tock' and made a 'get on

with it' motion, and in return, The Prince made a 'shut up an watch' motion. Whatever that looks like. Lightly tugging on Michael's tunic, he mustered up the most cloying smile he could.

"Oh Michael, sweetie? Here's a thought. What if I told you that there was a way to make God (and Gabby here) happy, without having to hurt a single thing?"

Michael looked down at him, confused.

"...T-There is?"

"Indeed there is!" He looked back over to the crowd. "Demons! Your main thrust is that you don't trust this omi to be the same one what cast you and your predecessors down during the Big Religious Mess-Up, right?"

The demons muttered in the affirmative.

"Then, if there was proof of his power, hard fact that he could do the same thing again, you would all leave?"

They all agreed once again, quite civilly accepting that fact.

"Perfect! Then, Michael, darling…what I want you to do is this. Take out your sword, and—"

Michael already started to cover his ears, meekly closing his eyes and sniffling, and Rodion put a hand on his back while harshly whispering to The Prince.

"(P-Prince! He obviously is traumatized from what he did! Making him relive that will not improve things, he needs to be counseled slowly!)"

"(Well, we don't *have* that kind of time, do we, Rodi? It's this or nothing. Besides, a bit of—what do you doctors call it, exposure therapy? A bit of that will put some hair on his chest. Or, more than there already is. No, scratch that, he seems like the clean-shaven type.)"

"(I cannot sign off on this as doctor, Prince! I forbid it!)"

"(He's not going to swing it! He's just going to hold it up! Besides, are you even really a doctor? I can't say I recall seeing any degrees on your wall.)"

"(You are awful, you know that?)"

"U-Um…"

Michael spoke up, still visibly trembling but more adjusted than he was a few minutes earlier. He raised his hand.

"...I…I want to try it."

"You see that, Didi? He wants to try it! Ha! Score one for street smarts. Who says you can't close a wound with some staples and duct tape?"

Rodion sighed and shook his head, covering his face with a hand and grumbling in Russian. Still, he couldn't object to it, and stepped aside to let Michael do his thing. The Prince gracefully did the same, smugly grinning at Gabriel just long enough for her to glare back.

The burly archangel himself took a wider stance, clenching and unclenching both slightly shaky fists as he tried his best to take deep breaths in and out. Rodion watched expectantly…and didn't expect to have a stuffed animal thrust in his face.

"Can you hold Agnus for me?"

"M-Me? You are sure?"

"I-I don't want him to get burnt."

"Ahhh, yes, yes. The sword. I will take him, *da."*

The Russian took Agnus and gently cradled him in his arm, watching Michael return to his position. He almost seemed to have a more steeled look in his eyes…it wasn't the look of someone paralyzed by fear. There was still fear in his expression: his brow furrowed, his teeth clenched like he was lifting weights, and sweat dripping down his body, but his eyes had a nobility that made Rodion shiver.

Slowly, Michael's hand hovered over the hilt of the sword at his side.

Rodion remembered what the nuns from the orphanage had told him. Out of all of the servants of God, Michael was given a special nickname: *'Archistrategos'*—the Supreme Commander of all Heavenly Hosts. Whipped with switches of wood, Rodion remembered being quizzed on it as a child.

His fingers twitched and trembled as though touching the metal would burn him terribly.

When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, God said unto them, *'Behold, the man now becomes like us, to know good and evil. He mustn't reach out and take from the Tree of Life, eat its fruit, and live forever.'*

Michael hesitated.

Rodion remembered asking why there was a Tree of Life in the Garden if God had the power to grant any living thing he wanted immortality, but forgets what happened after that beyond the nun continuing the story of the Fall of Man. *So he drove out the man, and he placed at the east of the Garden of Eden, an angel…*

Looking back at Rodion, and then at The Prince, he let out a shaky sigh…and grasped the hilt. He swallowed hard and looked out over the demons, who watched with a fearful glint in their eyes.

"I-I…I…I want…you all…"

In one motion, Michael took out his sword. As soon as the 'blade' left the sheath, it became obvious that it was no ordinary sword. An impossibly bright light blinded everyone present save for Gabriel and Michael himself as he retrieved it. He made an arc with his hand, the motion culminating in him holding the weapon high above his head. The two humans were shocked by the flashbang, and as they tried to slowly open their eyes to let them adjust to the light. No matter how hard they tried, however, it was no use. It was like trying to stare at the sun..and yet, among the light, they could see an aura of flickering flames, the aura pure white. A sensation like they had been dropped into the center of the desert in the middle of Summer washed over them and the crowd, the stifling heat almost unbearable. An unearthly roar echoed throughout the entire sphere. Rodion, squinting as much as he could while still keeping his eyes open, only just barely managed to see the black silhouette of an impossibly long sword, extending further and further no matter how high he craned his neck, in the middle of the wild flames. His mouth hung open.

…and the flame of a sword which turned every which way, to guard the Tree of Life.

Over the din of the sword, there was only one sound, which was Michael's voice. It echoed, booming over the crowd with an authoritative rumble that stirred the deepest of fears in the

demons' hearts. It was the sensation a prey animal feels upon hearing the growl of its natural predator. The enemies of God being faced by His strongest soldier.

"I-I-I'm going to give you to the count of three to leave, or else…I'll get real mad!"

Neither The Prince or Rodion remembered much of what happened after that, but when they were able to open their eyes again, the crowd of demons was completely gone, Michael's sword had been re-sheathed, and Gabriel stood with her arms crossed and an annoyed expression on her face. The Prince blinked harshly.

"Oh, bloody hell…what happened? I feel like I just got flashed by a nuclear reactor."

Rodion rubbed his eyes, blearily looking around.

"Where did demons go?"

"They all left."

Michael turned to the both of them, a proud yet innocent smile gracing his features. He took Agnus back from Rodion, the stuffed lamb showing no ill effects from the godly threatening it had witnessed.

"I told them all to leave, and…they did. I-I didn't need to hurt anyone!"

"Er…f-fantastic, Misha! Wonderful work!" It just hit Rodion how odd it was that he had called Heaven's strongest archangel by a pet name, and he shivered a bit remembering the feeling of the nuns' switches across his back.

"Yes, wonderful."

Gabriel grumbled to herself, and The Prince of Fuck All put his hands on his hips as he smugly stared at her.

"How about that, Gabby? Five years of counseling experience and ten years of parenting, it gives a girl an idea of how to mother someone."

"Quiet, Prince! Not only did you do neither of those things—we have your record, after all—but the Russian did most of the work! But…"

She clenched her teeth and her fists alike, turning away.

"...I can't deny that you drove the demons out of Heaven and got Michael to do what he needed to. For that, I…suppose I have to thank you."

"Awww, how sweet of you! Glad to hear that your God teaches you manners even in the face of heathens like me. Thank you kindly~"

Just then, a few voices called out.

"Forruad!"

"Prince!"

"Rodi, hff, dude!"

Fionn and Shiva were nearby, Belial stumbling after them in exhaustion.

"What happened? We were settling some demons who were trying to dismantle the clouds this realm is made of…"

"...And then, from your direction, we see this massive plume of white flame and a sound like the bells of the apocalypse, and all of the demons suddenly start screaming and turn to retreat! I

believed I was the only one who had the skills of white fire." Shiva snapped his fingers, a small ember of white fire appearing in his palm before being snuffed out. "Who was it that produced such an impressive attack?"

Michael raised his hand, giving a sheepish grin.

"Um…eheh, t-that was me. But it wasn't an attack, I just…took my sword out, and then put it back."

"That was only a demonstration?! How impressive…If you are the Abrahamic God's strongest warrior, then perhaps we should spar sometime? I would be interested in seeing how my abilities of destruction and construction stack up to your weapon…"

"Ah, haha, m-maybe not? No thanks…I don't really like to fight…"

Belial, catching his breath with his palms on his knees, stumbled over to Rodion and shook his hand profusely, grinning.

"Whoof, huff…oh man, Rodi, you're a *lifesaver*, getting rid of all those demons for me! I can't thank ya enough! Next time you call me up, I'm sharing part of my usual feasts for you, no strings attached! Though, heh, I still might eat most of 'em."

"Er, t-thank you, Belial."

The Prince interjected, "Hey, you know, I helped too!"

Gabriel interjected right back, "Not very much."

"I came up with the plan!"

"I'm sure Nikolayev could have figured that out."

Fionn tilted his head. "Was this the power of 'God' I recall some mentioning? How mortifying. I don't believe I could match up to it, if I was given the chance…"

Among all the relieved chatter, however, Shiva tapped The Prince on the shoulder with one of his hands. The redhead looked up at the ash-covered god.

"Hm?"

"Prince. Regardless of the extent of such involvement, not only have you displayed exquisite planning capabilities and a skill for thinking on your feet…you and especially your companion Nikolayev's compassion have caused me to have a change of heart."

The Prince raised his eyebrows, watching as Shiva reached into his chest and retrieved the lingam from earlier, squeezing it and letting the small teardrop-shaped stone from within rest in his palm, dripping glittering water from his hand.

"I believe you now worthy of the Shiva Chandrakanta. Take it, and treat it with care."

He took the Chandrakanta from Shiva, holding it gingerly in his own palms…and wiped his hands on his coat, snickering.

"It's, er. Making my hands wet."

"Yes, the Chandrakanta will generate water whether you desire it to or not."

"That sounds a mite inconvenient, Shivvy, love. Either way though, Rodi, Blondie, and I thank you kindly!"

The Prince stashed the stone into his coat, hands proudly on his hips as Rodion and Fionn stood beside him.

"Da, thank you very much for…changing your mind, I suppose. What were you two doing in Garden of Eden anyways? Dancing?"

"Ah, I am glad you asked, Nikolayev. You see, there is an art of Indian dance known as 'bharatanatyam', which is—"

Fionn cut him off.

"We should probably tell the other gods we are alright, or at least tell the Dagda."

Gabriel nodded. "Probably a good course of action. Michael, why don't you go back to your quarters and rest? You've done what we needed you to, and…" She looked up at the light of God in the sky of Heaven, grit her teeth, and sighed. "...You deserve to rest."

"O-Oh! Thank you! And thank you, Mr. Nikolayev, Mr. Prince, for your help! If you ever need me, please be sure to, um, consult your nearest Catholic priest for the Leonine Prayers, that's usually what gets my attention."

"Er, Michael, I am…not Catholic. And I live in Russia, most of us are Orthodox."

"Oh."

"S-Still! I will keep it in mind, right Prince, Fionn?"

"Don't look at me, hun, I couldn't tell a prayer from the blurb on the back of a cereal box. Call me when God has 'fun in every bite' and maybe I'll pick up."

"I guess so. What is 'Catholic' and 'Orthodox', though?"

Michael shrugged, laughing.

"Y-You really are a funny group of guys, you know that? I'll be keeping an eye on you…though, um, not as close an eye as Gabby. Alright. Bye."

The group waved to Michael, and he made Agnus wave back as well as his four wings engulfed him, the mass of feathers disappearing in a flash of golden light. Gabriel was slightly annoyed by the comment, but shook her head. No point getting mad about it now, there's work to be done…She put her hand on her hip, and noticed suddenly that something felt slightly off.

Where was her horn…? She broke one during the fights earlier, but she could have sworn she generated a new one once her body regenerated…Gabriel kept this in the back of her mind, having a suspicion but keeping quiet about it for now. It was best to return to the control center.

"Right, you're all going to check back in with the other deities and the remaining archangels, right?"

The Prince, Rodion, Fionn, Shiva, and Belial nodded.

"Alright then. Everyone close your eyes and try not to throw up."

She snapped her fingers, and in an instant, everyone was gone.

~

It was always more than a little disorienting, the feeling of teleportation, but considering how long they'd been doing it at this point, The Prince and Rodion felt little more than a slight turning in their stomachs as they re-appeared in the control room. There were, compared to earlier, much fewer 'body bags' scattered along the floor, though a few still remained. Belial

craned his pudgy neck towards the ceiling, watching the angels come and go and looking around at the control room with a sound of awe. This was his first time seeing any kind of heavenly architecture in a long time, after all.

"Whooaaa…duuude…they, like, modernized this whole thing…it was all papyrus-es and pens when I still worked here…"

Shiva quirked an eyebrow.

"You worked here?"

"Well, 'here' like Heaven. It's, eheh, been a couple thousand years…"

The Prince lightly nudged Rodion in the side, whistling as he got a chance to properly take in the scenery. He playfully closed one eye, stuck out his tongue, and made small 'ptchew' sounds at the angels that flew overhead.

"This place is rather bougie, isn't it, Rodi? I thought angels would be all about, y'know, form over function?"

"Prince, you have not seen many churches, have you?"

"Pardonnez-moi? I have seen *several!* I worked in a church for three years, and let me tell you, all of them are completely mank when it comes to interior design…"

Rodion snickered. "I wonder if you would say that if you saw some of ossuaries in *Chekhiya* and *Gruziya*, Prince? Skulls and bones of those who have passed line walls and ceiling."

"Bloody hell! That's a bit extreme, I'd say. You sure those aren't satanic temples?"

"I am sure, Prince, and I am also sure those who upkeep ossuaries would not enjoy such comparison."

Gabriel, who had gone off without a word shortly after their arrival, returned with two other figures in tow. The somewhat older-looking Raphael, and the quiet and contemplative Uriel, both of whom lowered themselves to the ground in front of the group. Raphael, leaning on his cane, nodded with a smile.

"So, you are The Prince of F' All, Rodion Nikolayev, and Fionn mac Cumhaill, yes?"

The Prince cleared his throat. "Prince of *Fuck* All, love."

"Ah, my apologies. Even if it is part of your name, us archangels are rather forbidden from cursing, on the whole. It is said to lead to a path of sin. Just as in Proverbs 21:23, *'Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity'*."

"...I *really* do appreciate the effort, but if you're trying to get me not to sin, you're about 10 years too late. Now, who are you?"

"Ah—apologies again! I am the Archangel Raphael, and this one here is my companion and friend, Uriel."

He gestured to Uriel, who nodded.

"We were unfortunately out of commission when you lot and Gabriel not only drove out that terrible shoggoth we saw from our perch, but when you were able to get Michael to exorcise the demons from this place! It is very, very much appreciated."

Rodion rubbed the back of his head, slightly sheepish.

"O-Oh, haha, really, was nothing. Cumhaill, Shiva, and Belial were big help as well."

Belial perked up. “We were?”

The Prince cut him off. “Mmmm, nah. I think me and Rodi did most of the work, and frankly, I would say that I deserve the lion’s share of credit. I’d say I at least deserve more than Gabby here. Have you seen how she talks to Michael? That’s a paddlin’, at the very least.”

Gabriel crossed her arms, glaring with frustration at The Prince as the other two archangels turned to look at her. Raphael sighed.

“Yes, she has…a tendency to become a bit too caught up in loyalty to the Lord and serving His will to the fullest. We have talked to her about it, but since it has become clear that her method of ‘motivating’ St. Michael is little more than hurtful, perhaps she will be chastised by the seraphim for it. But, enough from this old man: look, the other deities arrive.”

He gestured behind the group, and those who had remained at the control center emerged, looking much more healthy than they had a while back. Vasuki, having returned to his typical cobra form, slithered along the ground between body bags and shot up Shiva’s body, wrapping himself around the deva’s neck affectionately.

“M-Massster, you’re alright!”

“Hmhm, yes, yes, Vasuki. Did you ever doubt that I would return with injuries? I, who suppresses the symbol of arrogance under my feet, and who drank the poison of the milk ocean to allow the devas to obtain the drink of immortality?”

“Not at all, Master Shiva…”

The Dagda, lumbering and more than impressive in size, appeared to move faster than he ever had when he stomped forwards (crushing several body bags in the way, which elicited a few annoyed groans from Gabriel) and plucked Fionn straight up off the ground, laughing wildly.

“Baaahahaha, Cumhaill, ye barry laddie! Yer back! I knew ye coul’ cowp that ugly bastard from th’ moment ye set out!”

Fionn, surprisingly alright with being suddenly picked up and swung around by the much more muscular deity, blinked at him before closing his eyes in reverence.

“Thank you very much, honored Dagda. Your words mean a great deal to me. Unfortunately, I did not achieve the outcome I wanted.”

“Hm?!” The Dagda dropped Fionn, the lanky warrior landing adeptly on his feet as the Dagda’s rugged face twisted into an expression of confusion. “Not achieve the outcome th—?! Ye helped throw a beastie doon a well an’ quelled an army o’ demons, Cumhaill, laddie, we were watchin’ from here! What more could ye want?!”

Fionn crossed his arms, looking off to the side with some melodrama.

“The Hero Lights.”

“Ahhh, that ol’ song an’ dance, eh? Well, lad…th’ Hero Lights are a fickle thing, yea? Ye could do everythin’ in yer power to get ‘em an’ still fall short. Many warriors have.”

“But, Cu Chulainn…”

“Cu Chulainn was one in a million, laddie. Not sayin’ ye aren’t, but there was somethin’ special about him. I’m sure ye’ll get ‘em someday.” He smiled warmly, lightly putting his balled fist to Fionn’s cheek as a show of respect before straightening up to his full height.

“Still, ye should be proud of yerself! I know I misjudged th’ buftie o’er there, haha!” He gestured with a rough-hewn thumb at The Prince, who waved flirtatiously with a grin.

Coming to Belial, the radiant form of Amaterasu-no-Omikami held out her hands, taking one of Belial’s hands in hers as she bowed deeply.

“Thank you so very much…Belial-san, was it? I, Amaterasu, express my deepest gratitude to you for your efforts, your nobility, and the aid that you gave to the others.”

“O-Oh, dang, uh…thanks? Like, that’s really sweet of you, but…I didn't really do much.” Belial laughed, somewhat shamefully, and ran a finger through his greasy mop of hair. “I-I kinda just…y’know. Got in the way. Prince dude and Rodi, heck, even Fionn and Shiva and…I think someone else, they did way more than I did.”

Amaterasu smiled, and Belial felt like the sun was shining on him.

“Humility is a quality I would not have expected from a demon such as yourself. Did you not see the rioting demons you drove back into their realm with your speech? Not only that, but you nobly joined Cumhaill-san and Shiva-sama in keeping the remaining demons put as the humans aided Michael-kun…Even if others have achieved some quite spectacular things, do not put yourself down simply because of the width between your accomplishments and theirs. They are two differing standards, and for excelling in your own, that is worthy of praise.”

The demon stared at her for a bit, big maroon eyes visible before his red skin flushed a bit deeper from a blush, Belial awkwardly laughing.

“Ahaha, w-wow, jeez, that’s…like, really nice to hear…um, thanks, Amat—Amerter…Amy.”

“Amaterasu-no-Omikami.”

“R-Right, that. Uh, how did you know my standard of accomplishment was…kinda low, though?”

“I assumed as such, judging by your physical appearance.”

“Man…harsh, but fair, I guess.”

Finally, Odin and Loki approached The Prince and Rodion. Odin’s lone eye stared out at the two of them, The Prince awkwardly raising a hand.

“Uh. Hello? Are you going to say anything, or did you forget how words work?”

Odin shook his head.

“You are petulant, arrogant, and reckless in your actions…but I cannot deny that you are a good strategist, and I must express some apologies. I confess, when you and your friends were exiting in order to fell that terrible beast, I assumed that you would simply run away, leaving it to slaughter your allies while you saved your own hide. I can think of someone I know who would do the same.”

He shot an icy glare to Loki, who whistled innocently and looked away.

"Regardless…you have proven me wrong. Despite your odd mannerisms, you have earned my respect."

Odin spat in his palm and held it out for the Prince to hold in a handshake. The Prince, always having been slightly grossed out by the whole palm-spitting thing, instead forced a smile and gingerly shook Odin's pinky finger.

"Ahh…aha, uh, thanks. You aren't a half bad omi, I suppose."

"Yes, yes. Your Russian friend here and the Irish one deserve some praise as well, certainly…"

Loki chimed in. "Hey, where's Thor?"

"Hmph! Thank you, Loki, I had completely forgotten. My mistake—such are the foibles of aging. Do either of you know where my son Thor has gone? Is he still fighting outside?"

The Prince and Rodi both opened their mouth to speak, looked at each other, and closed their mouths again once they both realized that neither of them had any clue where Thor was.

"Uhhh…"

"W-Well…"

Just then, the door leading into the room they were in swung open, and standing in the doorway was an extremely disgruntled and grouchy Thor, who stomped past all the others to stand firmly next to Odin, glaring hard enough at the two humans that he could probably make their head explode with enough force. In fact, he probably *could*, in a literal sense, but he still chose not to. Instead, he just grumbled.

"Leaving me to walk *all the way back here* and not even offering to let me hitch a ride…Assholes. The lot of you."

The Prince and Rodion both shrugged with apologetic smiles.

Watching from above the lot, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel kept an eye on the group of deities, warriors, and humans. Raphael sighed with a smile. "There certainly are a lot of them, aren't there? This must be the highest number of humans that have been in Heaven without having to die first in quite a long time…"

Uriel, usually quiet, spoke. "Two?"

"Two? No, no, Uriel, I refer to The Prince, Rodion, and Fionn."

"Then, two. One and three-quarters, technically."

"Hmm. I can't say I know what you mean…"

"Well—"

The archangel was cut off as Gabriel's halo started to ring, vibrating and making the sound of a harp. She flicked it, setting it to 'speakerhalo' as she crossed her arms.

"Talk to me."

"Gabriel, this is Metatron. May the Lord be with you. Is everything alright down there?"

"And also with you. Everything is indeed alright: the demons have been dealt with, as has the monster."

"Fantastic! I and the other seraphim have finally taken out the rest of the Man Unkind cult members who threatened His Holiness and the Empyrean."

She sighed, rolling her eyes. "Yes, thank you for that, Exalted Scribe. Surely, you could not impart even a bit of your holy power to help us out down here?"

"Sadly, no…God Himself takes priority over all else, and it's the seraphim's job to focus on Him and Him alone. Though, this isn't a luxury call: something that one of the cult agents said has me and the others worrying."

Raphael and Uriel's attention was caught by that statement, the two looking to Gabriel's halo with concern. Gabriel herself looked up at it.

"Everything those gibbering fools say is worrying, frankly."

"Well, yes, but…this one said something in specific. It stated something along the lines of 'We were given plans to advance…it is no use. Soon, all godly realms shall fall to the unending deluge of our ranks.' There don't appear to be any more agents coming into Heaven, as I convinced Him to restrict all access not granted by angels following the exit of the demons, and the entrance to Hell has been closed for the time being by Maalik and Hadraniel."

"Plans to advance…"

Belial, who had been happily chatting with Amaterasu, had his pierced ears perk up at the mention of that word. *Advance*. He looked up at Gabriel, brow furrowing.

"Oh boy…I-I get the feeling something real bad is about to happen."

"What makes you say that, Belial-san?"

Suddenly, there was a slight vibrating sound on her person. Reaching behind her head towards the sun-like halo that gave off such warm light, she retrieved a small piece of jade in the shape of the number '9'.[46] She put it up to her ear.

"Yes?"

A panicked, androgynous voice came through the other end.

"S-Sister! Sister!"

She gasped. "Tsukuyomi? What's wrong, you sound like you're in a panic!"

"I-I am! Demons! Yokai! Well, okay, maybe not yokai, but things! Things, s-strange, strange things are invading Takamagahara![47] Me and Susanoo are fending them off as best we can, but—" There was a battle cry from the other end. *"—Y-You need to get over here right now!"*

"O-Oh dear…Belial-san, was this the source of your feelings?"

Belial shook his head, crossing his arms.

"Nah, I don't think that was it…"

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[46] That is, a magatama. Often made from ceramic, jade, or other aesthetically-pleasing stones, magatama are common mystical objects in Japanese esotericism, being used often in Shinto religious practices in antiquity. The most famous of these—and the originator of the jade magatama Amaterasu carries on her person—is the Yasakani-no-Magatama, the 'string of jewels' that makes up one of the Three Sacred Treasures of Japan. It was used along with the Yata-no-Kagami (see Chapter 12) to lure Amaterasu out from hiding. The rest of the string is in the care of the Japanese royal family, but she liked the gems enough to save one, which she uses for communication with the other kami.

[47] Realm of the amatsu-kami, the high heavenly gods.

Shiva heard the voice of a woman in his head.

"Shiva!"

"Parvati?"

"Darling, what are you still doing there in Heaven?! It is mayhem here in Svarga[48]! Strange little critters everywhere! Vishnu is no help, he swore yugas ago to never directly harm a living being, and Brahma is too slow to do much of anything…"

"I-I'll do what I can, dear…"

"And be quick about it! Your son is being beaten by giant floating heads!"

"I'm sure Ganesha can fight for himself, Parvati…"

At the same time, the Dagda, Odin, Thor, and Loki received their own forms of correspondence: the Dagda felt the chunk of halo he had used to communicate with the Morrigan earlier buzzing in his pocket, and he fished it out with one of his large and coarse hands. Meanwhile, flying in through one of the angel-holes, Odin's two crows Huginn and Muninn returned, squawking and crowing.

"Bad news, bad news!"

"Man Unkind agents all over Asgard!"

"Freyr and Vidarr are fighting them off!"

"As best they can, anyways."

"But still, it's terrible!"

"All-Father must come at once!"

"Yes, at once!"

"Thor as well!"

"Loki can stay behind."

Odin sputtered in shock. "Wh—y-Huginn, Muninn? There is another invasion of Asgard? So soon after the previous one, as well…I will have to have a serious talk with whoever is in charge of security."

Thor crossed his arms. "You mean Heimdall? That drunkard?"

"...Ah. Yes. That explains things. Perhaps we should put him back in rehab."

The Dagda put the piece of halo up to his ear.

"Morri? 'Ow's things in Tir na nOg, is there a flood o' blackguards there too?"

"This is Macha, an' yes, it's damn dreadful. Thankfully though, none of 'em have gotten in. Arcadia Sioga is a bit of a battlefield right now, but nothin's reached Avalon. We've even managed to get some help from an unlikely source…"

He wiped his brow. "Whew. Now thas' what ye call a right relief…"

[48] Realm of the Hindu devas and Vedic deities.

Meanwhile, Fionn, The Prince of Fuck All, and Rodion Nikolayev were left in the middle of the chaos, struggling to keep up with everything that was going on. The Prince huffed with annoyance, throwing his hands up.

"Great, just when we thought we could relax, it's bloody chaos! Rodi, you got any clue what's going on?"

Rodion crossed his arms and sighed. "It would appear Man Unkind is waging full war on all heavenly domains."

Fionn raised his hand.

"It could be worse. They could be attacking Earth."

One of the Dominion angels that manned the control center turned around.

"U-Uh…bad news. There's a sudden influx of agents flooding the major population centers of the world. It seems like they're kidnapping people to repurpose into new agents…"

Amaterasu furrowed her brow, looking to Belial.

"Was *that* what you had a bad feeling about?"

"Hmmm, nooo, doesn't feel like it…"

The Prince shouted and cursed, stamping his foot and puffing his cheeks out like a child as Rodion shook his head at Fionn. The redhead threw his arms out as if to curse the heavens themselves.

"Oh, for *Christ's sake,* can't anything go right?! God forbid women do *anything* without there being a big stink about it. What's next?! Is a corpse going to fall out of the sky?!"

A hole opened up in the air above everyone, and out fell what appeared to be the corpse of a woman, right into The Prince's arms. There was a full three seconds of silence. He screamed. Rodion and Fionn screamed. Everyone screamed. It was terrible. The Prince anxiously hopped from foot to foot, sounding like he was nearly on the verge of tears from distress.

"O-Oh my god, oh my god, I-I didn't—I wasn't—*Why does this never work when I ask for a million dollars?!"*

Rodion stepped forward, brushing the hair out from the corpse's face. He reeled back, seeing that the half of its visage hidden by its silky white hair was the normal (if quite pale) face of an older woman. Her skin was cold, but it wasn't stiff. He yelped.

"I-It is not corpse! It is living thing!"

Odin craned his neck, and did a double-take as he stared at the corpse.

"T-That's…That's Hel!"

The Prince looked up. "Hel?"

Rodion chattered. "H-Hel?"

Belial and Fionn tilted their heads. "Hell?"

Thor sneered. "Hel."

Loki shoved his adoptive brother out of the way, peering down at the corpse.

"Daughter!"

The room was practically the image of chaos as people yelled at one another, confused and scared, trying to quell those back home, explaining the situation to others, angels trying to communicate with one another above the din, hands flying, shouts echoing, until one voice silenced all of them. It rang out like the compline bell above all of them.

"Quiet!"

It was Gabriel, who had lowered herself among the rest of the gods and figures. Everyone went silent, turning to look at her. She had her arms crossed, tapping her bicep with a finger as she stared all of them down. The archangel sighed.

"Honestly, you really are all like children."

She pointed at the gods.

"Shiva, Amaterasu. Odin, Loki, Thor. You two return to where you came from and tend to your own homes."

Odin sniffed. "I refuse. I must speak with Hel when she awakens. Where she goes, I will go. Thor and Loki can return to Asgard in order to protect that which is important to us."

Loki sputtered at this, making a childish pout. "B-But…my daughter! I have not seen her in oh, so long! You wouldn't tear a father away from his child! Would you? Would you?"

Thor just picked him up by the hat, and Loki with it. "You heard father, now pipe down."

Gabriel huffed. "Whatever."

She pointed at Belial.

"You, go to Hell."

"Um, rude?"

"I won't take smart talk like that from a demon of your caliber. Your kind have caused us *enough* trouble as is, and it'd be best if you just…went home."

"Aw, c'mooon! Pops and Lucy are back home taking care of things, there's nothing else I could do!" He clapped his hands together. "I promise I'll be good! I'll even call him and—hey, where'd my phone?"

"Who are you even promising that to?"

Belial's mouth hung open, unable to come up with a response as he patted his pockets.

Finally, she pointed at the rest.

"Dagda, Prince, Rodion, Fionn. And, I guess, Odin. We here in Heaven will be very busy dealing with the invasions on Earth, and we've had more than enough excitement for one Synod-period. Dagda, I want you to take the rest of them to Avalon so that they can draft up plans and do whatever else they need to do. We saw, after all, that Shiva gave him the Chandrakanta, so there is no threat of Man Unkind gaining the upper hand save for stealing them from you all. It's best to go someplace safe and fortified, and preferably one that isn't here."

The Prince quirked his eyebrow as he handed off Hel to Odin. He did this specifically so he could put his hands on his hips in a sassy manner.

"And *how* are we all going to get there? Rodi's heavy enough as is, adding on Blondie, an old fogey, a Scottish bear, and some literal dead weight is going to make it impossible for me to ride my bike! I'm not Lance Armstrong, for goodness' sake. Though I do wish I had his legs…"

Gabriel rolled her eyes, gesturing to Raphael and Uriel.

"These two will take care of that. I'll take the deities to their home realms, Raphael will kick the demon back into Hell, and Uriel will handle your transport." She sneered. "Relish the silence on the way there. I know I'll be taking some migraine medication after all this yammering and blabbering."

And with that, the plan was settled. The group all said their goodbyes to one another, Shiva once again thanking The Prince and emphasizing the trust he placed in the redhead to use the Shiva Chandrakanta for a good purpose, Loki tearfully giving a dubiously-sincere goodbye to his unconscious daughter and quite-conscious adoptive father, and Belial giving everyone a hug whether they liked it or not. In an instant each, all of them were gone—either with Raphael or Gabriel towing them along.

Uriel gestured for everyone to hold hands once more, and once they did so, Uriel completed the circle and nodded to each of them.

"Hold on tight."

In a clap of light, they were all gone.

CHAPTER 28: Avalon Hideaway

Slowly, Hel opened her eyes.

She, rather appropriately, felt like hell. Every part of her body ached, especially her neck and the skin on her arms, and she was utterly exhausted. Her mind was nothing but a fog, swirling and clouding her thoughts like the mists of Niflheim, and even as she tried to recollect her thoughts, it was no use. Everything was washed out and blurry…so, she figured, the best course of action would be to first know where she was. Hence why she opened her eyes.

She came face to face with a craggy stone ceiling, large lumps of puddingstone decorating the top like an old country road, and realized afterwards that she was laying down. Not moving, she felt the weak and rather uncomfortable cushion of a bed stuffed with straw beneath her sore body. Hel blinked once, then blinked twice, and turned her head to the left. There were more stone walls, these more closely resembling the bricks of a European castle, and in her field of vision was a rectangular opening that was probably the 'door' out of the room.

Hel moved to try and get up, but an old voice cut her off.

"Don't move."

She stopped. Where had she heard that tone before? Where had she…She laid back down and turned her head to the other side. There, seated in a rickety chair in front of an open window in the stone walls, was Odin. He kept his eye on her, but his expression was downcast. His helmet shadowed his face, leaving only his remaining eye and narrow nose visible. The old god looked down at her, and Hel looked back with a sneer.

"Odin."

"Greetings, Hel."

"Hmph. 'Greetings' feels almost like too kind of a greeting. From the man who sent me to Helheim to watch over the dead, tied my dear brother to a rock after tricking him into trusting one of your kind, and wrapped my remaining sibling around the world of Midgard? I would expect something along the lines of 'So, we meet again'."

Odin closed his eye.

"I knew we would meet again, Hel. There is no surprise in it."

"Oh, you knew…of course. Why am I not surprised?"

She let out a bitter laugh, folding her hands on her middle as she stared back up at the ceiling.

"All things in our lives are things that you know will happen. That's the drama of living in a prophecy. Where am I?"

"Avalon, in the realm of the fae, Tir na nOg."

"What meaningless information."

He sighed, staring down at her with heavy gravitas.

"Why did you do it?"

Hel said nothing.

“Tell me, Hel. Why did you work with Man Unkind, and free Fenrir before his time at Ragnarok?”

She continued to say nothing, but her face contorted into an expression of frustration before she sighed.

“...You know. Man Unkind’s ranks aren’t all mindless monsters. Each and every one of them, no matter how gruesome, no matter how grotesque, once was a living being with a mind, a soul, and a body. Now, their mind and soul have both been taken, leaving nothing but the body…but there are some whose soul remain. You of all people, All-Father, should know how Suffering extends its hand with the kindest look on its face.”

“You do not answer my question.”

“What is there to answer? You know the reason why.”

Odin shook his head inscrutably. Hel sighed, slowly blinking as her gaze returned to the old paternal god in front of her. A sad smile came to her cold lips.

“I wanted to change the future.”

The two of them remained in silence until Odin spoke once more.

“You know our future cannot be changed, Hel.”

“I know. It’s predestined to happen, right? It can’t be changed. I and my siblings, my father and mother, everyone I know and care about will die at the hands of Aesir and Vanir, leaving behind a ruined world. Such is the fate of us gods. And when I say ‘us gods’, I do emphasize ‘us’. I may not have changed the future the way I wanted to, but…I changed it nonetheless. My and my brother…”

“What happened to Fenrir?”

She winced. “He’s gone.”

“Gone? How so?”

Hel looked away.

“I don’t recall his name…but I believe the leader called him ‘Molly’. The second-in-command of the cult. He…Fenrir was consumed by his black flames, erased from existence. He’s dead.”

She covered the more human side of her face with a hand, Hel’s voice quivering.

“He’s dead…a-and it’s all my fault…”

Odin was silent, keeping his head held low. The old god knew when and how to talk, and his judgment had never failed him. Still, that didn't exempt him from the judgment of others. Hel shuddered, glaring through the gaps in her fingers.

“...Why so quiet, Odin? I-I suppose you’re trying to hide your victorious laughter, aren’t you? In Ragnarok, you were the one who was supposed to be consumed by my brother. Anyone would be happy with that. I couldn’t make it change how I wanted it to. No matter how hard I fought and how much I insisted to myself I wanted to make things different for me and my siblings…I couldn’t. And now, the one I was closest to…and two others…are gone.”

Odin held his tongue, and with a groan, Hel pulled herself into a seated position. She gave an icy stare towards the Frenzied One, frozen tears starting to well up in her eyes as she clenched her fists.

"You don't care, do you? Of course you don't. You never cared about any of us. You sent me to Helheim to die, and I flourished, I became the ruler of the damned…I was lucky. I wasn't trapped after being betrayed by my dearest friend. I wasn't tied 'round Midgard, left immobilized until the apocalypse. And yet I was still shunned, still vilified, and my father…"

"Hel."

She snarled at him.

"What is it? Have you chosen which words you're going to use to mock me? You may as well engrave them on my tombstone. 'Hel, Queen of the Dead - Foolish in Mind and in Heart'!"

Odin looked up at her, a contemplative look in his eyes. In an instant, Hel felt as though she knew how old Odin truly was.

"Do you know what gods are?"

She stared blankly.

"...What…?"

~

Avalon Castle, home of the Tuatha De Danann, was quite a remarkable place. It lacked the opulence that Oberon and Titania's Overhill Palace had, but it served the Tuatha De's needs extremely well: it was fortified, it was built sturdily, it had all the accommodations it needed and more, and it had a quite absurdly large meeting-hell. There, the Tuatha De congregated: they drank, they sang, they forged weapons and sparred with one another. There they loved and they lost, often doing both in the same night, but Avalon was their home.

There, the Dagda happily stirred his cauldron in the kitchen as he loudly sang folk tunes off-key, delicious food pouring out like water from a broken fire hydrant, magically swirling through the air before plating itself on ornate metal trays and floating through the air like a swarm of bees before dropping themselves in front of those seated. The air was full of vigor as per the usual for the Tuatha De, yes, but an odor of suspicion and unease mingled amongst the gods as they sat.

Dian Cecht, their mild-mannered doctor, meekly prodded at a plate of peas as he sat beside the Morrigan in the form of Macha, a sturdy older woman with a long face like a horse's and hair like golden blades of grass down the back of her head. He looked up at her, gesturing with a frail hand.

"It is odd being home when it's still technically the' second day of the' Divine Synod, isn't it? Usually, everyone's out at the symposium during these days…I probably would be here regardless even if things had been normal, though."

Macha stuffed a forkful of pork pie into her mouth. "Mmrf. Y' reckon so?"

"Yes, indeed. The burdens of medical practice wait for no man or god, celebration or not! …Though, I have always wished to attend the after-party. Someone must remain to keep things

tidy, after all, and after Lady Medb got the Unseelie Court to unionize, we haven't been able to hire any workers willing to help out…"

"Bah! Y' don't need skilled workers ta clean a damn castle, Cecht. All's ye need's a hose, some stick-to-it-iveness, an' a good back."

"I don't believe I have any of those things…"

Having retreated from the battlefield that was Arcadia Sioga on account of their utter lack of fighting capabilities, the fae king and queen of the Seelie Court, Oberon and Titania, sat beside one another and chattered about the ongoing battle. They awkwardly scooched closer, hearing the Tuatha De sitting near them loudly laugh about something or other and struggling to make themselves heard to each other over the din.

"Why do you figure the nasty buggers are goin' after Arcadia Sioga an' not here, Oberon?"

"Ach, well, kimmer. It ain't jus' Arcadia Sioga, 'pparently. Agents're slaistered all across Tir na nOg, jammin' their gob doon e'ry fae settlement they can. Only reason they're not 'ere is on account o' th' Tuatha De's power keepin' 'em oot. Fae're far from a minority 'ere on Earth, luv, an' th' Tuatha De 'ave got more baws in th' magical department'n any other god!"

"No wonder…poor Medb, out there fighting tooth an' nail to protect her home an' her people, and what are we doin'? Sittin' here, stuffin' our faces!"

Oberon took a bite of mincemeat, shrugging.

"I know when I'm beat, luv, an' there ain't no shame runnin' away from a losin' fight. Although…" He gestured with a fork. "I can't feel too safe. Ye see where th' bairn Cumhaill is sat? Th' Dagda 'ad 'im save that whole table. Fer who though, I ain't got 'alf a clue…"

True to Oberon's words, among the ranks of the rather crowded dining hall, Fionn sat alone at an empty table, his hands folded politely as he looked to the door. He refused to eat the food placed in front of him—he only ate things he hunted, after all, and with all of them essentially stuck in Avalon for now out of caution against giving away their location, that was out of the question—and instead twiddled his fingers, looking on at the crowd of Tuatha De. Supposedly, his table was reserved for the 'unexpected help' Macha had mentioned, who wanted to speak with Fionn in particular, but no matter how Fionn wracked his brain, he couldn't think of who that help could be. The Tuatha De…Fionn was never good at reading other people's emotions, let alone their expressions, but even he couldn't help but shudder at the sense of suspicion among them as they drank and conversed…

They all already knew who this unexpected help was, right? They were in the castle before they arrived, after all, thanks to the sudden flood of cult agents forcing them to take shelter. Then why were they furtively glancing towards the front gate?

Just as Fionn finished his wondering and was about to resume the enthralling task of twiddling his thumbs, the gate of Avalon castle was pushed open…and closed just as quickly. A slightly Welsh voice spoke from the block of air that had just entered.

"Whoof. Let me tell you, it is a mess out there. The whole realm is filled up top to bottom with freaks, geeks, and sneaks, digging around in the dirt and trying to get into every fae village they can. It's more crowded than the stock market on Sunday!"

Becoming visible once more was a face Fionn recognized.

“Iolo Morganwg…?”

Morganwg, The Sant Director of the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History (as well as one of the currently few publicly-announced Fomorians in modern times), stretched their clawed limbs and groaned, turning to one of the figures beside them.

“Is the stock market especially busy on Sunday? I don’t think I’ve ever had the time to check. My broker usually fills me in on those details, and he tends to be a bit preachy, so I sometimes zone out while he speaks…”

Standing in a group behind Morganwg were a group of identical-looking young men in black suits and black sunglasses. Fionn recognized them as government agents courtesy of the United States Department of Unusual Occurrences, who had obstructed them while he, The Prince, and Rodion were investigating the Smithsonian. One agent, only set apart from the rest by his faint five-o’-clock shadow, shook his head.

“I believe the stock market is busy every day save for when it’s closed, Sant Director.”

“Ah, what a shame. I liked that analogy.”

“It would technically be a simile, Sant Director Morganwg. You used ‘like’ or ‘as’ in your comparison.”

“I believe I used ‘as’, didn't I? Sheesh, you need to start paying closer attention to what people say.”

“Please do not look me in the eyes, Sant Director, you’re giving me a migraine.”

“Ah—right, right! My apologies.”

Fionn looked around. True to his expectations, the rest of the Tuatha De had stopped many of their conversations, instead whispering to one another and casting judgmental eyes over Morganwg. The Fomorians and the Tuatha de Danann were mortal enemies, after all, and millennia of warfare and ill will doesn’t go away with a single ally. Still, Iolo appeared to pay it no mind as they peered over the crowds, catching Fionn in the back and pushing up their tinted coke-bottle monocle.

“There we are, over there! That’s the young man who saved my life! Come along, G-men, come come.”

Iolo excitedly gestured for the agents to follow, and all of them moved in unison like robots. It would have been a little scary, had one of them not pulled out a tissue and blown his nose halfway through before hurrying along to keep pace with the rest. When they finally came to Fionn mac Cumhaill, they almost went for a hug, but instead put out their hand.

“Ah, Fionn mac Cumhaill, was it? I see you’re looking as spry and youthful as ever! Tell me, what is your skincare routine? You must tell me, I mean, look at me. I’m practically soaking through my suit here. Though that may be the slime I secrete every now and then. How’ve things been with you and the others?”

Fionn shook their hand firmly.

“It is good to see you alive and well, Fomor. You are brave venturing into Avalon, surrounded by your ancestral enemies.”

Iolo let go and laughed, waving both hands.

"Hahaha, brave? Me? I wish. The only reason I'm even here is because of these fellows here in the drab suits." They pointed to the DUO agents. "After I spoke about what happened at the Smithsonian, they pulled me in for questioning, and after they did their own investigations—You know, I was not aware you bunch went into Japan! I've always wanted to go. How was that?"

"Continue your story."

"Excuse me for asking. Regardless, they sized things up, and—"

An agent cut in, clearing his throat.

"The Department of Unusual Occurrences, as well as the United States Department of Defense and United States Federal Government as a whole, no longer accepts the actions of Man Unkind as being protected under the First Amendment following these investigations and in the wake of the current worldwide chaos that has ensued as a result of Man Unkind's influence."

Digging into his pocket, the DUO agent pulled out a multi-fold picture book of the same kind you would use to hold family/vacation photos, holding it out to Fionn. Each picture showed a different avenue of destruction and anarchy.

In Chicago, all of the water spontaneously turned into prison toilet-quality sangria, whispering the last wishes of those sentenced to death into the ears of anyone who drank it.

In Berlin, bricks came alive and constructed meaningless Brutalist sculpture, constantly tearing down and rebuilding itself.

In Xochimilco, a farmer's dog stood up straight, its hind legs twisted backwards, and force-fed worms to any child that came near.

In Cape Horn, a fleet of flying disembodied heads the size of blimps blotted out the sun.

In Kyiv, five hundred children entered intermittent sleep and experienced the same dream of a door opening and closing repeatedly.

In Hokkaido, shrine gates got up and walked away. In Perth, predatory nooses went after the elderly.

In Calcutta, in Ho Chi Minh City, in Hawaii, in Winnipeg…the pictures were too terrible to describe, Morganwg needing to look away as the agent showed them off.

He put away the photos.

"Thus, we are allowed to prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law…within American territory, that is. Interpol is currently in shambles trying to control it as a collective domestic issue, but considering what knowledge we have gleaned from the Sant Director, this cult has proven itself to be a threat to the integrity of the United States, and it must be stopped."

Iolo shrugged, sighing.

"So you see, they used some practical joke hoo-ha to make us invisible—"

The agent held up a Ziploc bag, which appeared to contain two googly eyes. He kept the eyes pointed towards the floor.

"Anything they see, can't see us."

"—while we went out and…investigated some things. Then we get the call you and Prince and Mr. Nitrogen are here…"

"Mr. Nitrogen?"

They waved their hand dismissively. "The big Russian cove. We get the call you and the rest are here, and we figure, hey! Why not pay them a visit, see what sort of plan to deal with these mayhem-making marauders we can drum up by putting our brains together, and catch up on old times?"

Fionn crossed his arms, nodding.

"I see…then, you do not mind being here, surrounded by Tuatha De?"

"Don't mind? Ha!" Iolo's pupil trembled. "I'm terrified! But me and them made a truce, and I've got the agents here to back me up. Right, guys?"

The DUO agents said nothing, Morganwg harshly patting one in the small of their back.

"They're good folks, really."

The Irish warrior put his thumb into his mouth, lightly nibbling on the tip as he looked down at the Fomorian.

"Then…why have you come to speak with me specifically? The Dagda stated that you had some business with me?"

Iolo's expression fell, and the single eye that stared out from the darkness of their hood seemed more than a little hesitant to speak.

"Uh…yes…well. About that. There is…something that we were curious about, Mr. Cumhaill. So, we went down to Ireland to investigate before returning here. You awoke because it was Ireland's most dire time of need when the Lia Fail was stolen, correct?"

Fionn felt a small pit in his stomach as he nodded. "Yes…"

"...The world is in shambles, including Ireland right now. Things are worse than ever…and even the Lia Fail, as, ahem, 'sacred' as it is, it seems from these fellows' research that it does nothing but act as a conduit for magical energy. Why would it being stolen ring out as being so dire that Ireland's greatest hero, sleeping, should rise again?"

He swallowed. "But…I am awake. Eire's most dire strait has come and passed."

"Then why are you still here?"

Fionn stared at Morganwg, hand starting to hover towards his sheathed sword as he bit harder onto the edge of his thumb.

"...What are you saying, Fomor?"

Iolo looked to the agent beside him with the slight stubble, nodding.

"Show him."

The agent nodded back, digging into his pocket and retrieving a single photograph.

"We traveled to the cave known as Fintan's Grave in Tul Tuinde, County Tipperary, Ireland."

"Yes, that is where the Fianna remain asleep…Were you investigating why they had not woken up?"

"Not exactly. I feel it would do you good, Mr. Cumhaill, to look at this photo. This was taken just a few hours earlier."

He handed it to Fionn.

It took a few moments, but as he understood what he was looking at, the already-pale warrior grew even paler, stumbling backwards into one of the tables' seats as he stared at the photograph.

Pictured within the dark and damp inside of Fintan's Grave was, true to Fionn's word, hundreds upon hundreds of sleeping warriors, appearing just as they did over 1500 years ago. This, at least, was fact. However, it was not the background, but the central subject that shook Fionn to his very core.

There, curled up with a familiar sword, shield, and banner clutched in his arms…was Fionn mac Cumhaill, aged enough to appear as though he were in his late 70s. Wrinkles adorned his face, and his blonde hair had grown stark white, joined by a bushy beard…but it was surely, certainly, undoubtedly him.

Fionn bit his thumb hard enough to draw blood.

"It's…me…"

~

Odin's head hung low, shadowed by the brim of his helmet as he spoke.

"A god, Hel…is nothing more than an idea. A concept. All old religions and practices pull from the same earthly experiences, and so all gods will derive from the same concepts, the same cycles, the same archetypes. The only thing that makes a god real is that people believe them to be real. If someone wrote a book about a being that was all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, it becomes fiction. If that book is praised by millions and adapted several times, it becomes a best-seller. If the book is given rituals and its characters venerated for good luck…does it become a religion then? Where is the line? Is there one at all?"

He stretched out a hand, knobbly and wrinkled.

"The truth is that the only thing that makes a religion what it is, is if one calls it as such. The same goes for us gods. The only thing that makes you different from a mortal is that a mortal can exist without anybody remembering them. A mortal can languish in obscurity. A mortal can die without a name. A mortal can live and breathe without the world ever knowing that they walked its breadth. That is one of the great tragedies of humanity, I feel."

"So then, what forms a god? How are we birthed? What are we made of? We can touch one another, and we can touch mortals. We can laugh, we can cry, we can kill, we can love. But to kill a god…that takes a truly immense amount of strength. Not in terms of the physical, not for some. If you were to try and kill the Abrahamic God, He who cast down plagues onto the people and who watched over the prophets of Judea and Arabia in antiquity, would you win? No. And yet, we who watched over the Scandinavians, and before that the Germans, are destined to be killed, and have killed one another. Do you recall, Hel, the killing of Baldr?"

Hel thought back to her castle in Helheim, remembering the handsome young man who sat alone in his cell, never speaking to anyone.

"...I do remember. My father fooled Hodr, the blind god, into shooting him with a branch of mistletoe. When your wife's messenger came to me, asking for Baldr to be released from my

domain if all things in the Nine Realms would weep for him, only Thokk, my father in the form of a giant, refused to yield."

"Do you not wonder why he remains in your care?"

She furrowed her brow.

"What do you mean, All-Father? He died, and so he remains in my underworld."

"And yet, he still exists. One of the other tragedies of mankind is that when a man dies, he is gone forever. When mortals comfort one another, they state he will always exist in their memories and in their hearts."

Odin clasped his knobbly hands together, looking up at Hel with a steely gaze.

"Gods will always exist in the hearts of men. As long as mortals continue to dream, they will think of the god of dreams. As long as mortals die and dream of a return, gods will die and resurrect themselves. As long as mortals wish for food, goddesses of the harvest will remain. When his home is flooded by rainwater, he recalls the water sent down by gods to punish mankind. From these thoughts are where we spring, like steam from the geysers of the Earth. We are ideas given form. We are nothing but the thoughts of man who can think for ourselves. Some gods know this, and others live in blissful ignorance…"

Hel swallowed. She was struggling to process everything that was being told to her, and in a small surge of frustration, she weakly slammed her fist onto the bed beside her.

"Tell me, old man. What does this have to do with my brother?"

Odin sighed, taking off his helmet and running a hand along the wispy white hairs that remained.

"Hel, do you believe an idea can be killed?"

"Excuse me?"

"Picture a scenario like this. Long ago, a man who lived in a village owned a dog, and that dog eventually broke from its chains, running free into the woods. Over the years, spurred on by accounts of attacked livestock, the children of the village start a rumor of a monstrous beast lurking in the woods, the mutated result of that man's escaped canine. These stories are passed down through the generations, those children telling it to their children, and so on and so forth. A statue is erected. Local youngsters dare each other to go inside. It becomes an attraction for those passing through."

He templed his fingers.

"Suppose you wanted to fully quash that legend once and for all. You're sick of it, and you want people to stop talking about it. You want to kill the idea. What will you do?"

"Well…I would venture into the woods and attempt to seek out the beast myself. If I don't find anything, then that settles it, there is no beast."

"The locals will say that it avoided you because you're from out of town."

"Hmph. Then I would raze the forest to make sure it had nowhere else to hide."

"Practical as ever, Hel. However, the villagers say it has moved elsewhere, and still prowls the surrounding area."

She sneered. “How annoying. Perhaps I would silence whoever talked about it. That should surely stop those inane rumors.”

“The people would talk about it in secret. They would pass drawings between one another. And, mind you, this assumes that nobody in the village has left and shared their story elsewhere. What about those who have moved from the town? What about travelers passing through? News stories? The spoken word is the most slippery thing of all to catch, Hel. Once an idea becomes popular, it is almost impossible to destroy it.”

Hel was quiet. It was starting to sink in for her.

“...Then…”

“The people have spoken about Fenrir for years. For decades. For centuries, perhaps even millennia. Runestones depict a wolf bound by chains. The poems and songs of skalds remain in print today. Stories have been written with your brother as their hero. Businesses have opened in his name. Gargantuan wolves bound by chains have become staples in even the most modern of storytelling mediums…”

Beneath his prodigious beard, Odin cracked a small smile.

“Gods. Devils. Beasts. Monsters. Warriors. Heroes. As long as people still believe in these larger-than-life ideas, those that mortals brought into existence will persist. Only when the final record has been destroyed, when the final story is told, when the last person who knew their name is killed…that is when a god truly dies. No one knows what can birth a god, but to do so is to bring something into existence that can almost never die.”

“Then, my brother is still…? But, I saw him killed!”

“It will take some time. The next time someone paints a picture of him, or the next time a student studies his stories, he will return to you. And thus, perhaps he will be brought back to the beginning of his story, be imprisoned once again…but he will still be your brother, Hel. And he will remember you, just as you remember him, and just as the world remembers him.”

The self-proclaimed Queen of the Dead was quiet, staring down at the floor with her fists clenching the straw-filled bed underneath. She trembled, unable to show her face…

…But even as she kept her expression hidden, Odin could hear the sound of ice falling to the ground. He nodded.

“Many have attempted to figure out how to form a god, but there is no definitive way. It isn’t something that can be forced—it’s only something that can be formulated. And even if you should spread your belief to the rooftops, whether it will become ‘true’ and become one of us…that process is an utter mystery. Only the dregs of mankind, attempting to place divine power in their corner, have intentionally tried with malice in their heart…and all have failed.”

“In the years of the Second World War, our patrons…the people who we once looked over and protected, who we fought our wars over, who we were destined to die for…they took our symbols and our curses. They took our runes and our weapons, and they used them for evil. We kept our eyes averted despite the hatred in our hearts, for the sake of not rocking the boat…but then we saw that they were trying to form a new god. The Black Sun. We shook our heads.

Enough was enough. And so, we showed them what their old gods thought of this perversion of the human gift of imagination."

Odin let out a sigh, heavy with the weight of his age and his experience.

"We stopped much suffering, but we let so much more go unpunished. For what reason? To prevent what the mortals would call 'The Big Mess', the turmoil of sudden recognition. Not only were gods real, but they could wipe you out without a second thought if they so chose…but humans forgot one thing. They forgot they created us. And they forgot that they created us to *protect* them. To keep them safe. To grant them safety. To punish those who went against them. And much more suffering ensued…It made me sick. Once, I felt as though I desired recognition for our efforts, snubbed by the fear of man, but now…now, I don't know what I want. Perhaps I just want to live peacefully among mortals once again."

A long silence filled the room between them. Odin had said all he wanted to say, and now remained in the room to watch Hel, who silently wept with a mix of complicated feelings in her chest. Happiness at her brother being alive. Confusion at the revelation of what she and all gods truly were. Shock at the actions of the Aesir and Vanir. Something else that she couldn't quite place…a deep, unfathomable sadness, generalized towards the entire world.

She remained like this for a couple of minutes, before suddenly she snapped to attention.

"That's right…All-Father. I was told by a lost friend of mine that I need to find someone."

"Hm? Who, Hel?"

"Perhaps I'm remembering it wrong, my head is still spinning from the fall that brought me here…but, I need to speak with a man named The Prince of Fuck All. Do you know where he is?"

Odin raised his bushy eyebrows.

"In fact, I do. He was the one that caught you after your fall, Hel. Currently, he sits on the roof of Avalon with his friend, a Russian."

"I need to talk to him about something persona—" She moved to stand from her bed, only making it two steps before collapsing to the floor and shouting a curse in Old Norse. Odin stepped forward and brought her to her feet.

"Headstrong as ever as well, I see…they are having a private moment right now, but soon everyone will reconvene in the dining hall. I will take you there when the time is right."

"Nrrgh…Fine. Curse this wretched half-dead body. Why should I be so sore if I am fifty-percent corpse?"

He laid her back down in her bed before returning to his seat. Hel laid back, huffing through her nose. It was embarrassing, being reduced to an invalid for the time being for reasons she couldn't even quite understand. Still, she accepted her fate, as she had done for many, many years beforehand, and looked to the puddingstone ceiling.

Eventually, a question came to her.

"Odin?"

"Yes, Hel?"

“I cannot help but ponder on your speech. It almost feels like dramatic irony, us gods being little more than ideas without ever knowing it. And yet, you and I take it with detached acceptance. I wonder…”

She looked to the doorway.

“...Those heroes and warriors of myth that you have mentioned. Do some of them still live, not knowing that their time has long passed…?”

~

“So, Rodi. How many trees do you think are in this here forest?”

The Prince and Rodion sat on one of the rooftops of Avalon’s castle towers, their legs dangling off the edge as they looked out into the realm of Tir na nOg. It was a mess currently: cult agents were swarming the forest and clashing with all manner of fae and beasts. A pack of druden growled and cornered a group of Delirium Tremen before being taken out by a member of the Dead Letter Gendarmerie, pixies banded together to swarm around the eyes of Sons of Sam like angry locusts, sending them toppling over into the mouths of stone-skinned trolls, with teeth like tombstones and twice as terrifying. It was a war of attrition: fae could cheat death thanks to a deal broken with the demons of Hell, but the agents of Man Unkind were unending. It was impossible to tell how many had even been felled, as some of their bodies simply disappeared, wisping into nothing, and others were eaten alive.

The two of them had changed out of the robes they had been given in Heaven, Rodion returning to his original brown suit (which he had gratefully washed by one of the Tuatha De as a show of companionship) and The Prince wearing a stylish 70s-inspired outfit composed mainly of a high-collared jacket, denim short-shorts, black fishnets, and red platform boots with black fingerless gloves. Of course, though, he kept his trusty blue coat on his person. He pushed the sunglasses up off the bridge of his nose as he looked out into the horizon, watching the chaos in Tir na nOg without a twinge of fear. He looked out into the bluish-green forest, turning all sorts of colors from the battles going on within, and looked back at Rodion.

“Rodi.”

Rodion looked back at him.

“Hm?”

“I asked you a question, love. How many trees do you think are in Tir na nOg?”

“Oh. Hmph…” He crossed his thick arms, closing his eyes in thought. “That is tricky one…I do not know how far this land stretches. If there is end at all.”

“Well, then just make a guess. You wanna hear mine?”

“I do, in fact.”

The Prince rubbed his chin with a self-satisfied smirk.

“Three hundred million.”

“Bahaha, that is rather specific number, Prince! What makes you say that?”

“I once had a friend back in Acapulco who was close friends with this old fae cove. He looked like a sea-sailor, but not the pretty young chickens in white suits with ascots and anchor tattoos, one of those salty sea dogs that smell like brine and fish. Apparently, the omi told him he’d once counted every tree in the land, and it came ‘round to about that number.”

Rodi rolled his eyes. “I find that very hard to believe.”

“Believe it, don’t believe it, all I can tell you is that I’ve got a number, and you haven’t even mustered up the courage to wager a guess.”

“I-Is not a matter of courage! Is impossible to tell how big Tir na nOg is from here, Prince!” Rodion winced, seeing a cult agent fly through the air and almost hit them…before being teleported away. Thank goodness for the Tuatha De’s cloaking magic. “Besides, if is infinite forest, then is no point in counting how many trees there are. It would be countably infinite number.”

“All I’m hearing is a countably infinite number of excuses, Didi!” The Prince giggled.

“Bah. You know, would be so much easier to trust you if you did not lie constantly.”

He gasped in fake shock. “Lie? Constantly? Me? I do no such thing!”

“Do not play dumb, Prince, you have done so many times. With your name, with your past, with friends you have supposedly met…is almost shocking how little I know about you.”

The Prince rolled his eyes, putting his chin in his palm and looking off at the battles around them as he flicked his sunglasses back down. Rodion tilted his head at the odd expression The Prince was making, but sighed and looked upwards to the relatively more peaceful canopy.

“We really do not know…much about each other, do we?”

“How d’you mean?”

“Prince, we only met…well, two days ago, if I am believing it is now almost end of second day. We had sex, go to Hell, go to fairy kingdom on first day, then we go to America, Japan, and Heaven on second day…we have talked much in that time, yes, but on large scale, I do barely know you. I do not even know what religion you adhere to.”

“Meh, I’m not really the churchy type. I play by my own rules: a little bit of chaos magic, a little bit of Kemetism, some Kabbalah and Wicca, some Mandaeism and Rosicrucianism, and just a sprinkle of Thelema. Don’t even bother with Discordianism though, yeuch.”

Rodion nodded like he knew what half of those things were.

“Hmmm. I wouldn’t say I barely know you though, Rodi.”

“Eh?”

The Prince stuck out his tongue, pointing a waggling finger at the Russian.

“I know you were raised by Russian Orthodox nuns, you have doctoral training despite never obtaining a proper degree, you practice alchemy and demon-summoning as hobbies, you play the violin, you were known as ‘The Butcher’ back in Kaliningrad for your brutal operations (though I quite doubt that), you have a quite cute, if untrained, sense of humor, and…let’s see here, what else, what else…”

“Perhaps I have shared *too* much about myself…”

“Ah, right! And you have that silver locket you have in your pocket with a woman’s face in it.”

Rodion jolted a bit at that, and The Prince raised an eyebrow. “Well? I’m right, aren’t I?”

“...Yes.”

The Russian sighed and reached into his coat pocket, retrieving the silver locket he always kept on his person, even though all the outfit changes. Popping it open, the sepia-toned face of a young woman in a headscarf looked back at him. The Prince scooched closer.

“Who is the palone, again?”

“Her name was Maria.”

“Maria! Right, right, now I remember. Rather a lovely name, I’d say. Very Christian, mother Mary and all. Did she get a visit from God in the night too? You know, I thought God visited me in the night once, but it turned out I just ate some bad fish the previous day.”

Rodion clapped the locket shut and glared at his companion. The Prince put his hands up for a second, turning away after he’d sensed he made a mistake. However, after only a minute, he turned back to Rodi and, with a softer tone, put a hand on his thigh.

“...Who was she?”

“Do you *really* want to know, Prince? Or will you just crack joke?”

He flinched, his shoulders lowering. He took off his sunglasses, folding them and putting them back into his robe, as he looked at Rodion.

“I do want to know, love. It’s obvious she meant a lot to you.”

The Russian was quiet for a few more moments, eyeing The Prince with suspicion, before he opened it once more and looked upon the photograph within with misty eyes.

“She was…my sister.”

CHAPTER 29: A Little Story From The Past

My story starts in the 1960s in Soviet Russia. From the moment I was born, I had nothing: I never stayed with my parents long enough to know them—I was too young to remember, afte rall—and so for much of my life, I considered myself an orphan. I grew up in Prokol Kharom Orphanage in Tambov Oblast, where I remained for much of my young life. When I asked the nuns who ran the orphanage what had happened to my parents, with a swig of alcohol, they told me:

"Your father was injured horribly in a workplace accident, boy. He died from his injuries, and your mother died of a broken heart, throwing herself off a building from grief. You have no last name, either—only your given name was on the note. That answers your question, doesn't it? Now, no more asking. There are better things to worry yourself with, Rodion."

Why should I have questioned such a story? I had no knowledge of my parents, and the orphanage kept no data. It was a dark time in Russia, living in the aftermath of Khrushchev's deportation order to all non-humans and following his deposition. You may have heard it referred to in history books as 'The Era of Stagnation'.

Regardless, the orphanage was cruel. The nuns were viewed as doing a public good, cleaning up the streets of Russia and teaching young children about the glory of God, and so they were granted charity status in the country—they were not investigated. Not all branches of Eastern Orthodoxy (and Russian Orthodoxy with it) instill the fear of God into its adherents, but those who ran Prokol Kharom Orphanage certainly did so with us. Every day would consist of a bare-bones meal of rice and meat from some animal I could never discern, followed by the eight-in-the-morning adoption lineup. Then, 12 or so hours of Christian schooling before our evening meal and returning to bed. Each change in 'assignment' was signified with a bell chiming. They ran it like a prison for us children who were no more than three at the youngest. I still remember their chiseled faces, like aged and dried meat, peering out from beneath their *apostolnik* liturgical hoods. Their cold eyes, carefully scrutinizing tired and hungry children for proof of sin and impure thoughts.

Were we to talk out of line, misbehave, or even simply because we looked at one of them strangely, we would get a stern look, a spanking with a wooden switch I learned at first to fear, and then to not fear, and a lecture on the mercy and vengefulness of God.

"If you do not shape up, then when you die, you will go to Hell! The unbelieving and the unfaithful will be tortured forever and ever in the fires of the underworld! Do you want that, boy? Do you want to make God angry with you? Then say it! Then say that you apologize to Him and to us! Oh, do not cry. You are pitiful, begging for mercy! Pitiful!"

I have read that Catholics deal heavily with the guilt they are raised with for their very existence—'original sin', it was called. Perhaps they have it worse, but I cannot deny the experiences I have gone through and how they have shaped me.

When I was young, I was scared of the nuns. I was scared of God and the Devil, and I was especially scared of going to Hell when I died. I remember promising myself at a young age, I would do nothing but good deeds! That way, when I died, I would get into Heaven! When I was 10, I started to try and protect the younger children from facing the wrath of the nuns. I would intentionally act out, starting fights, blaspheming, all manner of things, just to get the nuns' attention away from the young boys and girls who barely knew anything of what they did. I was a rather large boy even then, and my stature made me rather strong and bulky, so I figured that I was perfect for such a martyrish obligation. My body was beaten until it bled. I was strung up and whipped with the switch for what felt like hours. I did days worth of manual labor, scrubbing every inch of the orphanage…but I felt as though I was doing a good deed every time. Surely, God would appreciate this?

When my body felt as though it was too bruised to continue protecting the young ones, even when I had rested it for days afterward, I could do nothing but watch. I took to reading the numerous books in the orphanage's shelves to distract myself. Many were biblical, of course, and some small part of me wondered if a demon would know evil when they saw it, but the sparse and outdated medical textbooks that they had received from the hospital down the road always made for the most fascinating reading. I impressed the other children with my knowledge of anatomy and health, and it made me feel quite proud of myself. I fancied myself a role model. However, despite this, every day I wondered if someone would adopt me, if someone would finally take me away from there…and yet, as I watched the hundreds of people on the street come and go, in the 16 years I spent there, I only saw three children be adopted.

When I reached that age of 16, I was no longer welcome in the orphanage. I was not property of the state or the church, I was an adult.

And then, I was on my own.

Unsure of what else to do, I took to the streets and used what I knew of cleaning to become a shoeshine for people passing on the street. It was a meager existence, scraping by on five Soviet rubles for every shoe shined—that is, when they bothered to pay me at all. I used my money to buy old bread from a nearby bakery, and slept beneath an old quilt in the pipes of an abandoned lot. I couldn't help but despair. Would I be doing this for the rest of my life? Was this a good thing? I never knew my parents, but would they still love me if they knew that this was what I had been reduced to doing to make a living?

I remember the day clearly. It was rather foggy, sometime in the middle of the 1970s, and a man had come by to get his shoe shined. He was an older man with a thick mustache and ruddy face, probably a drunk from how sloppy his outfit was. He pointed at the piece of bread I had beside me as I shined.

"Boy, would you be so kind as to give me that piece of bread? I'm coming home from work, and my wife does not cook, you see. My favorite restaurant is closed for the Sabbath, and all the others are much too crowded."

"Sir, I'm sorry, but I cannot do that. This is the only food I have."

He retrieved a ten-ruble bill from his pocket.

"Please, boy, would you give it to me? I can pay you well for it."

I wasn't happy about it, but what choice did I have? More money meant I could buy more food down the line, so a short-term sacrifice was no skin off of my nose. I took the money and handed over the bread to him as I started to shine.

He took two bites, three perhaps, before he started to cough and sputter. I was about to ask if he was alright, before he clutched his throat and fell to the ground. His face was red, then blue, and then purple. He was choking. In what felt like an instant, people started to crowd around—not helping him, of course. They simply stared down at him, worriedly murmuring among themselves.

"Is anyone here a doctor?"

"Oh dear, what a terrible sight…"

"Right in the middle of the road? What could he have been eating?"

I stood by, feeling a pit in my stomach. Had I caused this by giving the bread to the man? Could I have prevented it if I hadn't given it to him? If he died…what would happen to me? Would I be accused of murder, killed? I would surely go to Hell then.

Suddenly, I got flashes of the books I had read in the orphanage: diagrams of the human body, of the head and throat, of the esophagus. Information was slow in this era, and what you call the Heimlich maneuver was only invented in 1974—if it had existed at all, it would have been brand new in Soviet Russia. I thought quickly. There were accounts of the practice since Ancient Egypt, but the first proper instance is said to have been recorded by the Persian polymath Avicenna. I stepped forward and turned to an old woman in a feather coat.

"Excuse me miss, do you have a pen on you?"

"What? Pickpockets at this hour? Do go away, there is a man dying here."

"I can save him, miss. Just hand me a pen."

"Fine then."

She handed me the pen and, breaking it apart against a nearby wall, I took a risk. I broke it open until only the ink tube remained, and jammed the tube into the base of the man's throat. I had performed an impromptu emergency tracheotomy, and while it wasn't ideal, it saved the man's life until he could get to a proper hospital. I received no praise for this ordeal, but it was no matter to me. The rush of dopamine that washed over my brain solidified my life's calling. I would be a doctor. I would do good and save lives.

Knowing where to go from there was the difficult part. I had no money to attend medical classes, and even the most charitable would not let in a street urchin with no formal education beyond knowing how to read, write, shine shoes, recite Bible verses, and some scattered medical knowledge. Still, I was determined, and as I shined shoes, I kept medical textbooks open and studied the texts and practices. I drew out anatomy maps from memory in the grime left by rainwater to test my memory, I dug through garbage cans outside hospitals and bookstores to retrieve discarded books on anatomy, and I even went so far as to sneak into the morgue to look over the bodies, relishing in having a human body that couldn't protest or run away when I

attempted to look over their anatomy, write out which muscles were which, press my fingers into their throat to see which valves close. This last point would prove to stick in my mind as I aged.

I remained a shoeshine, but over time, my medical knowledge and somewhat soft-spoken nature had made me a local fixture, and I was approached by the poor and destitute. The Communist-headed Semashko healthcare system was being phased out and replaced with one that specialized in outpatient care—that is, patients who were not being admitted to the hospital to stay—but this system declined over the years. Hospitals were underfunded, and those who were able to get treatment were lucky if they could survive long enough to reach the trip home. For many impoverished people in Russia, or at least in my oblast, they sought out other forms of healthcare.

I made a small name for myself as the *'Chistil'shchik obuvi Doktor'*—the Shoeshine Doctor in English—a youth who could identify various illnesses and injuries as well as possibly treat them, provided I was given the money to buy materials. I lived this life until I was a young man of 22, a faint mustache forming on my lip and a beard starting to grow from my chin. Even as Brezhnev fell, followed by Chernenko, and then finally Gorbachev, conditions only marginally improved in the big cities. Slums like the one I lived in were left in the dust by the failing economy of the 1980s Soviet Union.

An old woman with a boy pulled to her chest hobbles up to me as I finish shining, her form swaddled in rags as she holds him like he was the most precious thing in the world.

"Excuse me…"

"Da?"

"Are you the Shoeshine Doctor?"

I finish shining and accept my payment with a smile. "Indeed I am. What is wrong, madame?"

"Oh, it is nothing to do with me, but my son, you see…he is very sick." The boy she held close let out a sickly cough. "My husband, he has not come back from work in quite a while, so we had to ask our neighbor for food. She gave us a piece of bread, rather old and hard, and I and my son shared it…and now, he has become very ill. He vomits and is loose in his movements. Tell me, doctor, will he survive? He must survive, *yey-Bogu*, he is all I have…"

I sighed, placing down my rags and varnish, and gestured for her to come with me to the lot where I conducted my ramshackle business. She was sniffling all the way, her son coughing and groaning, and when I was certain authorities could not hear, I leaned in close to her.

"Was the bread that your neighbor gave you an odd color?"

"Yes, in fact it was…"

"Then your son must be mildly poisoned from the mold in the bread. Such growths can cause indigestion, vomiting, and diarrhea. It will not kill him, certainly not, but he will be quite uncomfortable for a week or two. After his symptoms disappear, give him bland foods like soup and rice so that his stomach may settle."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, *Doktor*…but, what of me? I ate some of the bread as well. Will I soon be sick?"

"It will depend. Was the bread wholly another color, or only partially."

"Only partially."

"Then you must have eaten the portion that was still good. Please do pay closer attention to what foods you are eating, *babushka*, yes? You do not want your child or yourself to get sick again—another person on this street, an older man with a cane, came to me complaining of pains in his hip, and I found it had been dislocated for months!"

She winced. "Oh goodness…yes, I will be more careful. Thank you, Doktor, thank you. My son thanks you as well. May God bless you for the good you do."

I led her out from the alleyway, hearing her apologize to her son and her son murmuring out reassurances, and sighed with a sad smile. Medical knowledge was sadly quite sparse among the general population, it seemed, especially those with neither the money nor the resources to go to the doctor. As I returned to my usual location, however, I saw down the street that there was…a woman.

She was tall and beautiful, with long flowing black hair that hung from beneath her woolen *ushanka* hat, woven scarf fluttering in the wind as she kept one hand in her pocket and the other holding onto a scrap of paper. Small white plumes of frozen breath puffed from her lips. I estimated she had to be roughly in her fifties, though she appeared younger from how she carried herself. I had never seen anyone like her in my life, and I was practically frozen by her sudden appearance.

"...Privet?"

"Rodion Gregorivich Rasputin."

I shuddered. Rasputin? Indeed, it was a surname that anyone could have. Your butcher could be a Mr. Rasputin. Your landlady could be a Ms. Rasputin. Your doctor could be…well, perhaps that was too obvious of a comparison. However, when you hear the name, even outside of America, there is only one man that comes to mind:

Grigori Rasputin, the 'Mad Monk' of the Romanov family. Born from a peasant family, he was a self-professed mystic healer who, after seemingly settling the young son of the Czar's hemophilic attacks, was taken in as a close confidant as Nicholas II of Russia. He was said to be an occultist, a deviant, a wizard, a madman, all manner of things…but he was ultimately assassinated by nobles who were tired of his influence on the Czar. Some said that even after being poisoned, shot, beaten to death, beheaded, and tossed into the Malaya Nevka river at Yusupov Palace in St. Petersburg, he was still alive.

Could I, who had never even known I had a last name, have ties to…?

"Did you hear me, Rodion?"

I snapped out of it.

"Er, y-yes. Who are you?"

"Tatyana Soloviev. I'm your step-sister. Let's talk."

She led me into a quite nice restaurant I hadn't ever been so fortunate to even consider entering in the past, treating me to a luxurious meal as she spoke. She folded her hands in front of her.

"Rodion, do you know who your parents are?"

I spoke with a mouthful of steak, the first and only mouthful of steak I'd had until that day.

"Mmph, no, I do not. I thought they had both died."

"Sadly, you are correct. Both your and my parents have since passed on, but not when they had dropped you off."

She produced two photographs, sliding them over to me.

"Look at them in whichever order you wish, it doesn't make a difference to me."

Still enjoying my meal and not quite taking in what I was being told, I flipped over the left photograph. It was a photo of an austere-looking man in a suit with a high forehead, parted dark hair, a mustache, and a slight cleft chin.

"That man, Gregory Bernadsky, is your father. He was a Russian electrical engineer and former member of the White Russian Army, before he married your mother in Miami. They were childhood friends before he was her second husband. He was said to have died in 1955, but in truth, he faked his own death for tax purposes. He died in 1964 from a freak accident involving a swinging paint bucket."

"Oh." I didn't quite know what to say, seeing my biological father for the first time…he appeared quite kind, to be frank. Despite his stern expression, I could see a look in his eyes that resembled mine. The mustache was rather similar as well, though I internally kicked myself for drawing such a childish comparison. "What about my mother? And your father? Was he your mother's first husband, then?"

"Turn over the next photo."

I did as requested, and in the photograph on the right, two subjects were depicted. It was a rather nervous-looking young man with combed hair and a toothbrush mustache standing with a shaky smile beside…a woman. This woman, her hair styled into curls beneath a woolen hat, her her eyes having a curious and slightly piercing quality to them, her peacoat that folded as she held her purse in front of her…

Tatyana tapped the table.

"That man is Boris Soloviev. He was an occultist, a hypnotist, a Theosophist, and all manner of other things. He was an odd, odd man, but I suppose it takes an odd man to love an odd woman. I don't know much about him, frankly."

I opened my mouth to question why she did not know her own father, but she answered my question before I knew what I wanted to ask, turning away with a cold expression.

"He died before I could attend school of tuberculosis in 1926. I was six years old at the time."

"I-I am sorry."

"Regardless…this is the woman who should pique your attention the most."

She gestured to the older woman.

"Maria Rasputin, born Maria Grigorievna Rasputina."

"Grigorievna…?"

"Yes."

She folded her hands together.

"The daughter of the 'Mad Monk'. Following the fall of the Czar and the October Revolution, she escaped with Boris—an admirer of Rasputin's—in an attempt to flee the country. They were detained, and after I was born, they were sent into exile all over Europe. She unfortunately died eleven years ago in 1977. I would have contacted you, but we had no idea you existed."

I had stopped eating entirely upon hearing this. My own mother was…the daughter of Grigori Rasputin? Grigori Rasputin, enemy of the people and of the state? Confidant of the Czar and student of occultism? Then that would make me his…grandson. The grandson of a mystic assassinated. What a life I had led, I thought to myself, before realizing it wasn't my life that I had lived in the first place. Tatyana continued, taking the photographs back.

"You were the son of Gregory and Maria spawned during a post-divorce fling in the 60s. Maria was now practically in her sixties herself. She had worked as a circus performer, a restaurant owner, a riveter, a babysitter, a hospital director…having lived the hard and chaotic life she did, she wanted nothing more than to settle down, to relax. And you, an accidental birth that nearly killed her, were simply too much responsibility for the two of them."

Hearing those words, 'accidental birth', nearly killed me right then and there. Knowing that not only was I of such evil blood, an enemy, a deviant, a killer…but that even my own parents hadn't wanted me, instead dropping me off at that accursed orphanage? It was enough to make a man cry. But, I had already been struggling to process all that had been told to me. It was nothing more than a drop in the ocean. Still, I had enough sense to ask the question that flared in the back of my mind.

"Why have you come here, then?"

"It's about your step-sister, Rodion. My own sister, Maria, born two years after me…she is sick. Very, very sick."

There was a twinge of annoyance I felt at that. Had she only reached out to me after hearing of my medical abilities? Just then, Tatyana rose from her seat and gestured to me.

"Come, I will take you to Kaliningrad, where she is being kept at Kholenoy Ottsu Medical Institution."

"Ah…may I at least finish my meal?"

One train ride later, my *first* train ride for that matter, we had arrived in Kaliningrad Oblast. Then, it was still a part of the Soviet Union, and economic downturn had ensured it had become (and would remain to the present day) nothing more than a reproduction of the less wealthy portions of Volgograd. Still, I was led to a clean-looking hospital, and after the clerk had verified our identities, we traveled up the stairs until we came to her room on the fourth floor.

I turned to Tatyana. "What is she sick with?"

“Tuberculosis, just like her father. However, it won’t go away. It continues to plague her like an angry ghost. What do you doctor types call it?”

“I am hardly a ‘doctor type’, Tatyana…but, I believe you’re talking about a chronic condition.”

“Then yes, chronic tuberculosis should cover it as far as a description goes.”

“What of her family? Does she not have a husband, or children?”

“Her husband, the dutch ambassador Gideon Boissevain, died just last year, and her son Serge has no interest in supporting her. I believe he has already married nobility.”

Then, to my surprise, Tatyana turned to leave. I reached out and gripped her scarf.

“Tatyana! Where are you going?”

“I need to go, Rodion.”

“But why must you go? We only met today, and now you leave when your sister is sick? Surely, you must have the money to cover her treatment, the empathy to stay with her! Do you not care about her?”

“Of course I care about her!” She shouted and ripped her scarf away from my grasp, holding it close to her as she glared at me. “Do you think of me as some kind of inhuman monster, Rodion? My heart has been shuddering the whole time I’ve been talking to you. I want nothing more than to stay and make amends, to make up for lost time and regain a member of the family that I never had…but I cannot. I must return to America—it has taken all of my money to come here and inform you, the last remaining full-blooded Rasputin, of the state of things. I am not telling you to save her, and I am not telling you to leave her.”

Tatyana huffed, throwing her scarf over her shoulder as she left.

“Walk your own path in life, Rodion, and leave the rest in God’s hands.”

I watched her walk away with lingering anger and newfound fear. That was the last time I ever saw Tatyana in person, and yet I turned to open the door to Maria’s room.

She was like her mother in many ways: dark hair, striking blue eyes, and a youthful glint in her eyes. If memory served me at the time, she would have been the same age as Tatyana was…and yet, she simultaneously looked so much younger and so much older. Like a flower that had been plucked from its stem and slowly withered away without a source of water nearby, her skin was deathly pale and her cheeks were flushed red. Victorian authors called it ‘consumption’, the Greeks called it *‘Pthisis’*, but it was nothing more than the result of advanced tuberculosis. I felt a deep sorrow as I laid eyes upon her, mourning for a life only halfway finished being cut so short and with so much pain and sickness. I heard her tired voice.

“Brother…?”

I swallowed.

“Step-brother, yes. Did Tatyana…?”

“Tatyana was here?”

“Never mind. My name is Rodion, I’m a doctor.”

"Oh, Rodion…what a wonderful name…Rod. Rod, have you come to say goodbye to me, just as my son has? What a beautiful tragedy! Family so estranged for so long, only to come together in the face of death and part once more…"

She coughed, the sound rattling and wet as she held a stained handkerchief to her mouth. When she pulled it away, it was painted red.

"Maria…"

"Do not come so close. You may catch…what is it the doctors called it? Consumption? I am in pain, step-brother…or, should I call you simply 'brother'? Ah, would it make a difference now? I will call you my brother, as we are still bound by blood…even as that blood escapes me faster than I would like."

"I-I am a doctor. Maybe I can do something?"

"You are in a building full of doctors, Rod…and you are young. Even these men who have wrinkled eyes and bald heads, they agree there is nothing they can do but continue to keep me here…as long as I can continue paying for treatment."

A look of sadness washed over her blue eyes, and she looked to the ceiling. At that moment, seeing the blood trickle from the corner of her pale-lipped mouth, seeing her frail form and feeling the ripples of rage—rage at the medical system, rage at the world, rage at God—reverberate through my body like electrical shocks, I knew what I must do. I clasped her hand, disregarding the risk of transmission.

"I will pay for your treatment, Maria Soloviev. I do not know how, or where I will get the money, but I will keep you here. I will do whatever it takes…whatever it takes to keep you safe, my sister."

That night, I remained in Kaliningrad. It was lucky of me to bring my scant belongings with me: that is, the medical textbooks I found easy enough to carry and my rag and shoe polish. Yet, as I slept in a hotel room provided for the night by Tatyana, I was already kicking myself for making that promise to Maria. Why did I feel so strongly in that moment? I was broke on the best of days, and on the worst of days, I was plunged into debt. I got by on the kindness of strangers, but what was that worth in the face of sickness? And yet, I had no doubt in my mind. I would do what I needed to, everything I needed to, to ensure that Maria continued receiving the treatment she needed, even at my own expense. It was what I had always done for those around me, so why should I stop now? Especially for a family member. One of the two family members I knew I had, and the only one who's whereabouts I knew now.

I endeavored to get a job as a doctor with my medical training, but none would accept me on the grounds of my lack of proper academic education. Those who had less lucrative jobs available either didn't pay well enough for me to keep myself and Maria alive at the same time, or simply refused to hire me at all. I was little more than a street rat in a nice shirt, after all.

This is when I heard of the *Bratva.*

First comes a history lesson. During Stalin's regime, millions were sent to the *gulags*, the prisoner work camps for criminals, political dissidents, and prisoners of war. Gradually, over the

years, the strongest criminals in those gulags formed a hierarchical position that came to be known as *vorami v zakone*—"thieves-in-law". Those in the criminal underworld followed the rules, the culture, and the ideals of *vorovskoy mir*, "The World of Thieves", and when Stalin released many prisoners to fight in the army in exchange for their freedom in World War II, this clashed with the ideals of the World of Thieves. What criminal would ally themselves with the government? Many, it turned out, and in the eyes of the thieves-in-law, they were nothing but scum, dropping to the lowest rungs of the hierarchy and being referred to as *suki*. That is, bitches. This ushered in the Bitch Wars, inter-gang squabbles not only allowed, but encouraged by prison officials—many of whom were being paid off by the thieves-in-law.

By the time of Stalin's death and the release of many prisoners, the pretense of *vorovskoy mir* was utterly shattered. What point was there adhering to the old code when everyone who was in power was collaborating with authority anyways? Thus, Russian organized crime skyrocketed, especially in the failing economy under Gorbachev.

The Russian mafia is often called 'Bratva', meaning 'The Brotherhood', and though it shows similarities to organizations such as the Cosa Nostra or the Chinese Triads, there are no solidified hierarchies or leaders.

I felt a sour taste in my mouth just imagining it. Me, consorting with criminals? I would be sullying my reputation forever, irreparably damaging my image. Then I thought, what image? I'm nobody, nobody but Maria's step-brother and a cheaper option for the poor who couldn't go to the doctor on short notice. What did I have to lose? Would I be making God angry?

In that moment, the disgust turned from my employment to myself. Was I really worrying about making *God* angry? He has done more than enough already. He deserved to be taken down a peg, even if only by a boy like me. I would not make God angry, no. I would make Him *fear me*.

I sought out, through word-of-mouth and clever lies around police enforcement, the nearest *Boyevik*, who was in charge of recruiting new members. Before I even knew what I was doing or where I was going, I had arrived in the shadowy back room of a warehouse, surrounded by burly-looking men holding guns. In front of me sat who looked like perhaps the most muscular man in the continent, his pink skin covered with so many tattoos I couldn't possibly count them all. I had no idea what any of them meant, save for the few I remembered seeing on Nazi armbands and warplanes in photographs. What had I gotten myself into…? He smoked a fat cigar as he shuffled a deck of cards with his coarse fingers, the golden rings on them appearing too small on his hands. I acutely felt myself tremble in my seat.

"Do you play cards, *baklan?"*

"N-No, sir."

"Not even Solitaire or Blackjack?"

"Not at all. I've barely even held a deck of cards, sir."

"Hmm. That is a shame. Many of us love to play cards, and if a boy like you comes in off the streets wanting to be a part of the *Kaliningradskaya* group, the least they would need to be able

to do is play cards. I would say you could learn, but, well. I am a nice guy, you see. You would not want to *sdelat kozyol.* Much too old for such a thing, I'm sure they'd say."

I had no idea what 'to be turned into a goat' meant, but the sensation of fireworks in my stomach made me feel like I did not want to find out. Still, I was desperate, and it felt as though the snake tattoo that slithered down the side of his face was hissing at me.

"I have medical training, sir."

"Enough with the sir, *baklan*, you will call me Mr. Ivanov. But, you say you have medical training? It does get tiring, the looks the doctors give us. We could use a doctor like you on our side. What education do you have?"

"Mr. Ivanov…I have none."

He puffed out a ring of smoke as he shuffled the cards, staring up at me. I choked down a dry lump in my throat.

"But, I have studied medicine ever since I was 16. I am 22 now, and have treated many on the streets for no pay. I need to make money, and as long as I am supplied with patients and textbooks, I will improve and will treat as many wounds as the group needs."

Mr. Ivanov leaned back in his chair, sneering down at me.

"Treating the poor with your shoddy medical knowledge? You're a good kid, *baklan*, you are. What's got you trying to get mixed up in the criminal underworld like this?"

I gripped the fabric of my trousers, trying to keep my composure.

"I…I-I have a sister. She is very sick, but I have no money to pay for her medicine. I work as a shoe-shiner for my day job, but I have sold my rag and shoeshine to come before you today. If I do not obtain a position here, even if only a starting position, then I will become a criminal nonetheless. I felt that I may as well be a thief somewhere where my work is appreciated rather than risking rotting in jail. Please, Mr. Ivanov. I-I need a position here. I will do anything."

The tattooed gangster looked down at me for a long while, and I felt like he was setting my hair on fire with his gaze. Eventually, however, he let out a smokey sigh and drove his cigar out on the table.

"I enjoy your spunk, boy. Just know, once you enter this life, you never leave. Are you okay with that?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good, good…"

He stretched out his massive hand to mine.

"Then, you may call me *Avtorityet* Ivanov, *shestyorka.* Welcome to the family."

I shook it without thinking, the full weight of his words not settling on me until I was led to where I would be staying in the Kaliningradskaya compound.

Once I entered, I never left, no matter how much I wanted to.

The first year was the hardest. I was nothing but a fresh-faced youth, after all, and a *shestyorka* at that—essentially, I was little more an an errand boy who answered to Mr. Ivanov's every command. I changed out his ashtrays, I treated his wounds (I had never seen a bullet

wound in real life before that day, and it was nothing if not a shock!), I stood by to get him and his associates drinks, and from the conversations I overheard and the stories I was told by the other shestyorka, I started to understand the structure of the group. I learned very quickly not to ask questions, and while my skills were rather slipshod at first, as I worked on patients and studied the books I was given, I began to improve dramatically. Sure, I made my fair share of mistakes, many of which resulted in the barrel of a gun being placed in my mouth, or on my temple, or anywhere else my patient believed they could do damage, but even through the fear, I was unfettered.

It was only a few months before I received my first payment from the group, and I was overjoyed! It was so much! Bills upon bills of Soviet rubles overflooded my hands, and I felt almost like I was on the verge of tears as I moved to leave. Mr. Ivanov stopped me with a word.

"Stop."

I did as I was told, freezing in place.

"Rodion, come here."

I turned on my heel, stepping towards Mr. Ivanov as he loomed over me. I was certainly rather tall even then, but he still loomed over me like a bear, puffing off of his cigar.

"You have done good work for me this past winter. I commend you. However! You still show the fear of a dog when you see us *vory.* What would you say if I were to tell you that you could be truly accepted among us?"

"R-Really?"

"Yes, yes! Haha, I see that smile. You are full of vivacity, Rodion. You have helped us many times, and the Boss has accepted you to be a *vor.* But there is something I must ask you to do before you can truly become part of the Kaliningradskaya group."

Feeling a pit in my stomach grow larger and larger, I nodded.

"What is it?"

He took hold of my shoulders with a wide grin, turning me around on the spot and stepping away. I stared down the barrel of a gun, held by a squat man in a pinstripe suit covered in bruises and cuts. Mr. Ivanov chuckled.

"Duck!"

A gunshot rang out, and for almost half a minute, all I could hear was the ringing of my ears.

I managed to throw my head backwards rather than forwards, the bullet only grazing against the space between my eyes, but it was enough to draw an enormous amount of blood. Pain shot through my body from my head, and I doubled over as blood seeped from my newfound wound as tears flowed from my eyes. I could hear Mr. Ivanov clapping and laughing.

"Hahaha, *vpechatlyayet!* Excellent work, Rasputin! You have dodged a bullet, and you know what it is like to face death. You are halfway there."

"Y-You…" I slowly turned to him, trembling. "You tried to have me…killed…?"

"Of course I did, shestyorka. What do you think this is, a clubhouse? This is a gang. Men die. And if men die, then men kill. Are you angry with me, Rasputin? Are you feeling that rage bubble up in your bosom? You wish you could rip me limb from limb. Good. You see that man?

That man is part of the Izmaylovskaya group. We caught him trying to extort money from one of our members, but he was so pathetic and weak. We figured the least we could do is use him for initiation. Now that he's done his job…you do yours."

One of the muscular men standing behind the battered man in the suit knocked him in the side of the head with the butt of his gun, the squat man's pistol falling to the ground. The muscular gang member slid it across to me, and without thinking, I picked it up.

"Finish the job."

That night, I was a made man. I had completed my transformation into a criminal.

When I went to see Maria and pay for her treatments, I told her I was a clerk in a government office, and the cold breeze had caused my hands to tremble. She laughed.

They didn't stop trembling until the next morning.

After that, the years I spent in the Kaliningradskaya group blurred together. I can tell you important events, patients I had dealt with, but you do not ask a man who has worked at the docks for 20 years to tell you every package he's shipped. After a certain point, I had more than proven my mettle, and not only was I accepted as the Kaliningradskaya group's official in-house doctor, but they offered my services to other gangs for a high price. I had become a service, as all medical professionals are in the end, and I felt…happy. It was paying extremely high, after all, and every time I received my share of the rubles, I would come to Maria's hospital room and see her wonderful smile. With the mass privatization of goods and resources in the 90s, our gang became one of the largest in Russia, and I was able to become more of a neutral party. Kaliningradskaya still kept a watchful eye on me, and I had sworn to not sell any secrets or information with the promise that if I did, I and my sisters would be tortured to death.

Whoever needed medical care would receive it, for a hefty sum. Whoever needed bullets taken out, scars dressed, wounds stitched, organs removed for sale, I would do it.

It was only a matter of time before they came to me for…other services.

Torture.

Do you know how many organs you can take out of a human before they can no longer function? If you are delicate, and you keep the connections intact, you can almost disembowel their entire torso cavity without them so much as even noticing. Of course, I had anesthesia, but why should I have used it?

The first time I killed a man, I trembled and cried, feeling that childish and primal fear all people feel when they do something irreversibly bad, something they can never make right.

The first time I tortured a man, I took a break to vomit and rehydrate myself before finishing.

The second time I tortured a man, I shuddered at his screams, but I paid them no mind.

By the fifth time, I had stopped noticing when they screamed—I only paid attention to when they stopped.

By the seventeenth, I had become fascinated by the changes in pitch of their screams, their sobs, their pleas for mercy, and I began to wonder how different tortures would change their reactions.

"S-Sir, please…I have a wife, three beautiful children at home, I am their sole breadwinner. They have no money, I am an *apparatchik* by day, I-I can give you a wonderful position in government…if you please simply spare my life…"

"My apologies, Mr. Sedtsevich. I am paid more than any of your apparatchik cronies for the work I do. I can make ten thousand rubles if I were to remove both of these."

Thumbs to the zygomatic bones. Gasp.

"I can make fifty thousand rubles if I sever this nerve here."

Finger under cervical spinal. Whimper. Sweat.

"But that is not what I am here for, tovarishch. I can make one hundred thousand rubles…do you know how much that is? One hundred thousand…and for what? Do you know Leon Trotsky? The poor man. With such a barbaric weapon. However, he has only experienced something that us doctors do behind closed doors all the time. The only difference is that he did not agree to it."

Index on frontal. Dextral phalanges on wood. On metal. Scream.

"N-No…please…please, don't—don't do this, you can't, you—"

"I cannot? That is funny."

Raise. Scream. *Scream.*

"I do not remember asking you."

Crack.

Splash.

Shudder.

Moan.

I don't remember which 'session' was the clincher, but all I know is that eventually I would come out of my operating room red-faced, puffing, and wanting *more.*

Deep down, I was disgusted with myself, like any decent man would be. Not only was I ambivalent to dissecting living men and women, I enjoyed it. I *reveled* in it. Every time I received the order that a torture victim was coming in, I would drool with anticipation. I am not proud of those days by any means. To be human is to have empathy. The very nature of humanity is that we care for one another. We give to the less fortunate. We feel sympathy for those who have experienced loss. I felt as though my sense of empathy, that 'limit' that human beings have in their soul, had withered away like a dying rose. I was known as the Butcher of Kaliningrad for that, and wherever I walked, the women and children feared me.

Eventually, I made much more money than I ever needed for Maria. Her treatments were to address her chronic tuberculosis, but with enough payment for medication and the occasional in-hospital treatment…she would be well enough to be released from the hospital.

This thought scared me. If she were released from the hospital, she would want to visit. If that was true, she would inquire about my work, who my coworkers were, banal small talk like that…and would I tell her I was the doctor for one of Russia's largest criminal organizations? That I had killed dozens and tortured hundreds? Then, surely, I would stop making the money I

do now…I couldn't pry my eyes away from the luxuries I was able to afford myself. I grew fat off of gourmet meals and the finest of wines. I bought an original Gennaro Gagliano violin from 1755, as well as lessons. I collected antique books, the more obscure and dusty, the better. I fully decorated my living quarters with old paintings by the masters, plush rugs, the most high quality of foods, and a phonograph with all of my favorite works pressed to record beside it. I only sent what she needed to live another day, and began to write letters rather than appear in person describing how tough the work was, how I was only barely scraping by. I wrote them as prostitutes did what I wanted them to do to me. I wrote them as I gorged myself on food. I wrote them as I counted my money. Did I not feel shame at what a hypocrite I was?

I stabbed a fork into a slab of braised salmon and brought it to my mouth.

"Doktor Rasputin, surely you feel you've had enough? When you entered the group, you were nothing but a rib, and now you're the whole hock! There's not much else you can buy on your salary, not unless you're willing to do something extremely foolish."

Chewing, swallowing, I swirled a glass of wine and laughed heartily.

"Bahahaha! Enough? Do you see the things around you, *brodyag?* These fine luxuries of the senses give me all that I could ever want. I never want for food. I am able to spend freely on the things I now know that I love. This is the height of human experience."

I was lying to myself. These luxurious things…did they bring me joy? Did they? I couldn't deny that some part of me believed so, and perhaps that was not a bad thing. But, even if I only realized it after the fact, I felt as though this was my way of convincing myself that I still had my humanity. I was still human. I ate, I appreciated music, I played an instrument, I filled up my mind with cultured books and teachings. I quoted scripture as readily as I quoted Dostoevsky. I acted to Chekhov and danced to Shostakovich. I thought of myself as the height of sophistication. No monster could do these things! No thing that can be called inhuman can appreciate these innately human things, surely! Even all those years ago, I feel I knew my reasoning was flimsy at best.

Twenty years. Twenty years, I remained there…even when the Iron Curtain had fallen, even through Yeltsin's rise to power and subsequent demise, past the Chechen wars and the crisis of 1998, until well into the rule of Vladimir Putin, I remained in Kaliningrad. I never left. I never traveled. I remained right where I was.

Maria was growing old. She was in her eighties now, and it was clear that if she remained in her condition, she would not live much longer. I started to feel the weight of my actions one night after too many drinks, and that night, I decided that enough was enough.

I gathered what money I needed and placed it all into her healthcare. She had remained in that hospital for twenty years as well, because of me, and I recalled my original wish. Whatever it took, I wanted her to die of natural causes. To not have her life cut short by disease. That was what I wanted, yes…

That night, I wired the money to her and met her at the doors of Kholenoy Ottsu Medical Institution. Frail and using a cane to walk, she hugged my wide frame deeply, and for the first time in decades, I had felt the genuine warmness and care of another human being.

"Rod…you have come for me. Thank you so dearly for working so hard, for so long…all to support me. I am eternally grateful for you and the work you've done."

"Haha, of course, of course! Maria, you look to be in good health. That is a welcome sight."

"Yes, yes. They have assured me that all of my medication will be paid for until the end of my life. I am free from the shackles my disease have kept me in…oh, Rod! If only I were not so old and tired, I could leap and sing like I was a girl again! Oh, look at you. You are still so young. How old are you now?"

"Forty-two, Maria."

"Forty-two! Imagine that. I will be eighty-two this coming summer. It is so strange having a sibling so much younger than me…but, it is a godsend. Rodion, you have worked so hard…I am glad to see you are in such good health as well!"

I laughed and blushed, surprised at feeling heat well in my cheeks for reasons other than deviancy and rage.

"Bahaha, well! Even if it may not pay much, the food they serve at City Hall's cafeteria at Victory Square is quite good. My deepest apologies for only writing to you for so many years, Maria, I worried you would think me to be uncaring if you saw how I have grown while you remained here."

"It is nothing, Rod. I am overjoyed to see you at all, something like this? It is nothing to me."

Internally, I berated myself. I could have seen her all this time…but, would I even have wanted to? That surely wasn't the only reason I talked myself into not visiting her. Before I could settle further into my thoughts, I heard her speak.

"Where do you want to go first, Rod?"

"I think—"

"Doktor!"

Fear gripped my chest. A voice I recognized rang out from behind me was accompanied by cheers and whooping. Drunks. Drunks that I *knew.*

I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder, and a man who had been knifed in the eye I had operated on laughed loudly with vodka-soaked breath as he swayed.

"Bwaha! Doktor! There you are! We were at your offices, you were not in—you did not even leave a note! How rude! We are your associates, you know?"

Another man who I gave medication for cholera and who rewarded me in rubies stumbled towards me from the left.

"What are you doing here? Are you here looking for women once again? Haha, I see this old crone in front of us, she is sickly. Her organs will do you no good, Doktor!"

The third and fourth sang incoherently. Maria's piercing blue eyes, no less striking from her age and frailty, looked up at me. She kindly smiled.

“Rod, are these friends from work? They look quite striking. Are tattoos like that allowed at City Hall?”

One of the men opened their mouth, but in an instant, I whipped around and clasped my hands around their mouths, shushing them. To Maria, I laughed even as my heart pounding in my ears drowned out my voice.

“Ahaa, y-yes, Maria! Simply some friends from work who have gotten too happy: it is Russia Day soon after all, and perhaps they have gotten a head start on their revelry, haha!”

I snarled at them quietly.

“(If you so much as say *a word* about the group to her, I will murder *all of you.)”*

In hindsight, perhaps trying to silence and grapple members of the Bratva was a bad idea. Before I could turn back around, one of the men whose mouths I shut my hands over reached up and wrenched my right pinky, twisting it with an awful crack. Nerves, joints, tendons, popping, cracking. I shouted in pain and clutched it, the two men free to speak as they swayed with their hands in their pockets, hiccuping.

“Hey, hey, Doktor…what kind of way is that to speak to us *avtoritety*, Doktor?”

“City Hall? You do not work there, Doktor…”

Maria stared up at them, furrowing her brow.

“I do not know what you mean. Rod here, my hard-working and diligent brother, has been spending day and night at Kaliningrad City Hall trying to earn enough for my treatments!”

I opened my mouth to speak, but the words couldn’t come out. I was trembling again. Had I killed someone? No. Of course not, I hadn’t, and yet the fear, that primal anxiety had resurfaced…

The man cackled into loud laughter, their voices overlapping with one another

“Ahahaha! Oh man! *Babushka*, he has been fooling you for years!”

“He does not work at City Hall, are you stupid? Look at him! Look at the suit, the figure! He is luxury and class, you cannot become *that* on apparatchik pay!”

“Doktor is loaded. Loaded! He feasts every day, and he *fucks* every night! He lives like a king, counting his hundreds of thousands! What could he do to make such money?”

“He is…”

“No, Dmitry, do not tell her! She will not believe us. What about the Boss?”

“If she will not believe us, then there is no shame in saying it! To hell with the Boss!”

“Right, that is right! Alright, Dmitry, Yuri, Peter, with me, with me. Peter, get your hands off of me! Go with Dmitry. Yes. Right, on the count of three. One, two, three.”

“He is Bratva!”

The four drunkards shouted it like it was something to be proud of. Perhaps for them, it was. Perhaps for me, it was too. But as I stood watching them, dumbfounded, shaking…I couldn’t bear to turn around. I couldn’t handle seeing Maria’s expression. She had been silent. Was it rage? Was it disappointment? Was it sorrow? What was it? I couldn’t take it. If I saw her face, I would simply, I would just simply…

“Rodion.”

Every muscle I had froze.

"Is this true…?"

Every nerve I had shot sparks.

"All this time…all these twenty years…you could have paid off my expenses at any time, and yet you indulged yourself? You have been killing people for this money? You have lied to me for this long…?"

My throat closed up.

"M…M-M…Maria…"

"God will be angry with you, Rodion…God will—"

She attempted to speak, but instead coughed. Maria coughed, and coughed, and coughed, until I heard her cane clatter to the ground. When I finally found the courage to turn around, I saw her there, crumpled like a ball of gray fabric on the snow-covered sidewalk, painting it red cough by cough. The drunken group members hiccuped.

"Oh shit."

"Doktor, you better help that old woman. She doesn't look so good."

"Is she sick or something?"

"Maybe she hurt herself whens he fell over."

Do you know what happens when you light a match? The end of the match goes from black and inert to flaming in only a single second. In that moment, I felt as if I was that match, stuck in a constant state of ignition without ever fully blazing. I do not remember what happened, all I remember is that by the end, my right was bleeding from a gash I had somehow acquired, three men were crumpled in the snow, and the fourth gurgled through a mouthful of blood. I assumed he was doing so, at least. I had already turned and started to walk away, stepping around Maria.

"W-Where…are you…going, Rod…?"

"I am going to the bar."

I walked three blocks to a bar and drank until I passed out.

The next day, as I walked from the bar to the group compound, I saw that Maria had hanged herself.

They were struggling to get her down from the outside of her hospital window, apparently having done so in the dead of the previous night, but the image of her old body hanging limply from that rope still chills me to my very core. To this day, looking up to the windows of the buildings around me still cause a twinge of grief to flow through my body.

As the previous night's events came to me, I realized the gravity of what I had done. I had killed four avtoritety, four high-ranking members of my own gang. I was a traitor. I would undoubtedly be hunted down and killed if I remained anywhere near Kaliningrad…but the fact I remained alive now was a good sign. However, I needed to go. I needed to leave the family.

I asked a passerby if I could use their phone, and made a private call from it to the compound to a trusted associate.

"Mr. Ivanov?"

"Ahh…Rasputin. So good to hear your voice, yunosha. I am bed-ridden, you will excuse my sickly tone."

"Are you alone? Are we free to talk?"

"Not a soul is in the building with me, Rodion. You saved my life in 1992, you surely remember that awful state I was in after Orenburg? I have been in your debt ever since. I can only assume this has to do with the recent incident. The Boss is not happy, Rasputin…but I will do what I can. What favor have you come to ask me for?"

"I need to leave the Kaliningradskaya group, and fast."

He hacked something up over the phone.

"My boy…this is an impossible task. I told you. Once you enter this life, you can never leave."

"I-I know, I…I should have listened to you. You were right. It was a mistake. And now, I've paid for my mistake with blood. That is what I deal with now, Mr. Ivanov. You promised this, one favor."

Ivanov was silent over the phone, and for a moment, I thought he may have died right then and there…but soon, a wheezing cackle came out of him, along with the sound of a cigarette.

"Fuck it. My lungs are giving out anyway. It doesn't matter if it's the Boss or my own body that kills me, I'm going out on my own terms. I have a friend in transport. Go to Kaliningrad-Passazhirsky station and tell them you're there for Igor's train. They will know."

"Where will it take me?"

"Hell if I know. He'll probably take you anywhere you want if you want him to, and I'll frame some other poor bastard heading to India. I'll tell them you're going there, they trust me."

"Thank you so much, Mr. Ivanov. You've done me a favor so large, I cannot put it into words. Thank you, thank you, thank you…"

"Ha! Are you crying, Rasputin? Do not cry. Chin up. We are all demons here, the least one can do is look out for those they admire. And I have always admired you. Now go. Go! If they see you before you get to the station, you'll have made us both dead men!"

"Of course, Mr. Ivanov, of course."

I returned the phone and hurried as fast as I could to the train station. It was quite a distance, with my figure, but I eventually made it before dinnertime. Stumbling through the doors, I came to the clerk and expressed, wheezing, that I was there for Igor's bus. Without a word, the attendant nodded and gestured for me to follow, taking me past where all of the other trains stopped for their passengers and around the back of the building. There was a coal train there, "УГОЛЬ" messily printed across the side. The attendant knocked twice, whispered something into the side of the car, and a shallow door slid open. Before I entered, however, I was stopped.

"Mr. Ivanov told me to give you these."

The attendant dug into the nearby bushes, and hidden under the snow were two enormous briefcases, along with a violin case that I could sling around my neck. My books! My records, my phonographs, my art…he had salvaged it all, or at least what he could fit into these two

briefcases. Even my precious violin…I could almost hear Mr. Ivanov scolding me for crying as tears began to well up in my eyes.

Then, police sirens. The attendant shooed me in, quickly shutting the door behind me, and I sat in darkness. It stank like coal. I didn't even know what coal smelled like until then. A gruff voice spoke from the car in front of me, which I assumed was the conductor's car.

"Where to, Rasputin?"

I thought for a moment…and then it hit me. Where else would I go?

"Take me to Yusupov Palace."

I was dropped off in St. Petersburg near what was now called Moika Palace, and got to work concealing my identity: my clean-shaven chin became covered by a thick and bushy beard, I went by Arkady Nikolayev—Arkady being from 'Crime and Punishment' (If I was no longer to be Rodion, then why not Svidrigailov? Though I would have much preferred to have been Razumikhin.) and Nikolayev from Leon Trotsky's home in Ukraine (I don't recall why I was so fond of Trotsky in those days, I had never been especially political, but seeing as I now felt as if I was in exile, I felt that it was fitting.), and…once I looked in a mirror, I found that part of my hair had gone stark white. Had it been from that night…?

I shuddered and put it out of my mind. I don't know the true cause, all I know is that it appeared between my time at the bar and when I arrived at St. Petersburg.

At first, I considered getting a hotel room. I had more than enough money to pay for it, after all, and here in St. Petersburg, with the Kaliningradskaya group off of my tail, I did not have to worry about being hunted for quite a while…but when I went over the Moika river and laid eyes on what was formerly Yusupov Palace for the first time, I felt a jolt of something I couldn't quite describe ripple through my body.

It was as if I felt the ghost of my grandfather in my blood.

I traveled to the palace. In 1925, it had become a museum for the people of Russia to use, but it was closed at the time for repairs. Surreptitiously, I traveled around the back of the building and attempted to enter through one of the windows. I was fortunate that it opened, but the instant it did so, alarms blared all over the building. Struggling to fit myself through, I scrambled through the window and fell onto the finely-polished floor. I had no time to admire the gorgeous interior design of Felix Yusupov's palatial estate, and instead found myself stumbling across the red carpets and bumping into end tables as I tried desperately to find a place to hide. I could hear policemen charging through the doors, heavy boots stomping on the ground as they shouted.

"Ne dvigaysya! Stay where you are, *vor*, and put your hands up!"

I took two, three steps back, and ended up bumping into the back wall. A painted portrait of Felix Yusupov, clean-cut and smug as ever, fell to the ground frame-first. It made a terrible clatter, and let them know exactly where I was…but, to my surprise, a gaping hope in the palace walls had revealed itself! Had it been hidden behind this painting the whole time? The sounds of shouting left me no time to ponder, and I quickly shoved myself into the hole, replacing the portrait behind me.

I found myself in the dingy back rooms of Yusupov Palace. Perhaps these rooms were only listed as a footnote on the brochures of the museum: ‘There remain many rooms of Yusupov Palace currently not open to the public, including some that are hidden from plain view,’ something like that…though, they felt more like the interiors of walls rather than rooms for general use. I felt that curious tugging in my chest once more, though. I brushed cobwebs from my hair and shook a spider off of my foot, sidling forward through the walls until I came to a small area where the passageway had opened up.

Imagine my shock when, tucked away in the corner with two candles beside it, was a mummified head. That is, a mummified head with a beard so long and so impressive that it could belong to no other.

It was Grigori Rasputin’s mummified head. The skin was still intact, albeit dry and leathery, and though any blood that was in it had long since flowed out, the bullet wound from his assassination was plain and obvious. It sat like a third eye in the center of his forehead. In front of it, positioned squarely, was a yellowed notebook bound in leather. I then noticed he had a pen nib between his clenched teeth.

Amazed, I stepped forward and sat in front of the head of Rasputin.

“Grandfather…”

I delicately picked up the book in front of him. The cover read as thus:

‘THE DIARIES OF THE HEAD OF GRIGORI RASPUTIN
ADVISOR TO THE ROMANOVS, WORLD’S GREATEST MYSTIC, MURDER VICTIM

ENCLOSED IS EVERYTHING I KNOW AND HAVE LEARNED, WHICH I GIVE TO THOSE WHO SHOULD FIND ME HERE

I ONLY HOPE GOD HAS SEEN MY TEARS AND HEARD MY PRAYERS
SHOULD HE NOT SEE YOURS, MAKE HIM SEE IT WITH THIS

~ ГРИГОРИЙ’

I opened the book, and apparently, following what the media referred to as a so-called ‘robbery attempt’, the whole of Yusupov Palace stank of bourbon until the week after the incident

During my eight years in St. Petersburg, I traveled back and forth between my hotel room and the back room of Yusupov Palace, using the magic I learned to cloak myself and remain hidden among the people. I wasn’t perfect at it, but the politics of the time were on my side: magic was entirely outlawed in Russia and had been for decades: nobody knew what it looked like, and so there was nothing they could arrest me for if I stated I was performing some simple parlor tricks. I went to the market, I went to the tailor, and I went to Yusupov Palace.

At first, I wasn't brave enough to take my grandfather's writings from in front of his head, but soon, page by page, I extracted the whole work and brought it with me to my hotel room. I studied the entire thing top to bottom, but sadly, much of it was far too complex for me to comprehend: my grandfather truly was a genius, but his genius was lost on me. I would have needed an expert to fully explain what he stated, and if he were not native, perhaps a translator as well. A translator who was also an expert in magic. Such a thing was impossible in Russia. Still, the simpler spells: aura generation, weak energy projectiles, the conjuring of fire, of water, of shields and other such things, these I practiced in Kirov Park under the cover of night. Was I risking my neck? Perhaps, but I always got out unscathed.

Not only that, but Grigori Rasputin was an expert in alchemy, the lost art: despite science having proven long ago that the existence of the philosopher's stone was nothing more than a ruse, he continued his studies and displayed an incredible intellect. I had glassware commissioned from a local blower, and in a matter of months, I had my own alchemy lab in my hotel room. The neighbors complained frequently of explosions, and I did pity the poor housekeeping workers, but I did my best to clean up when I could.

I stayed there for eight years, living under the name of Arkady Nikolayev and conducting a peaceful existence. I had more than enough disposable income from the old life, but when I needed some extra money, I took up some odd jobs. From one tramp to another, ha! I would say that the only thing that changed about me would be the extra three-hundred pounds and the beard, but even that would not be true.

Finally, after living happily in this way for a while, I received a knocking on my hotel door. I yawned and rubbed my eyes, opening the door with a groan.

"Radi Boga, what is it? It is so early…"

"Mr. Nikolayev, is it?"

I recognized that voice. And when my eyes had cleared, I recognized the face. It was the attendant who had helped me get to St. Petersburg. I greeted him and offered him some drinks inside, and he explained why he had come to me after Mr. Ivanov had him help me.

"The Kaliningradskaya group is utterly dismantled. No members remain, it has been entirely dissipated. The only Bratva that remain in the oblast are scattered agents, and they are all newcomers. The old bosses have all died, and the new ones are naive. They would not remember your name or your face."

I nodded.

"I see. But, why do you bring this to my attention?"

"The people of Kaliningrad still struggle with poverty, and though Russian healthcare is free, its quality and efficiency are utterly poor, even outside of Kaliningrad. It is nothing more than a slum now. You brought quality medical care to the people when you were young, right?"

"Y-Yes, but…"

The attendant took off his hat.

“My wife…she remains still in Kaliningrad. She has come down with pneumonia, and the hospitals are busy. I am asking you to come, not just to help her, but to help the people.”

I stood from my seat and took my hat, looking to my alchemical set and the books I had arranged. Momentarily, I hesitated…but then I sighed.

“Will you treat my belongings with care?”

“Of course, Mr. Nikolayev.”

“Please, call me Rodion.”

We left the following day.

After a prolonged ‘vacation’ in St. Petersburg, I had returned to Kaliningrad. Seeing the state of things there made me sick: it was bad enough before, but now it appeared as if the oblast was locked in an eternal winter. People lined the streets huddled in heavy coats while street vendors still hocked their wares and children still played. Despite being so far away from my true home, and likely even farther from wherever my birthplace was…I felt like I had returned home.

Lugging numerous bags after me with the help of the attendant (whose wife I attended to promptly and helped with a mix of natural remedies and the slight push of healing magic I had learned), I came to a suitably unassuming spot in the middle of a barren road. Anything that was on this road was demolished years ago, leaving nothing but an empty street connected to a few more empty streets flanked by stone walls. An ugly crack ran down the side of one of them, and I set my bags down there.

“This will be perfect.”

The attendant set his down as well.

“Perfect how? We are three blocks away from the nearest houses.”

“Do not fret, do not fret. Here, let me show you a trick I learned from my grandfather.”

Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward and placed my hand over the crack. I closed my eyes, and my hand pulsed brown with bourbon-scented magic as it swirled and consumed the crack, filling it in like treacle that dripped and pooled on the sidewalk beneath us. Murmuring mystical Russian to myself, I traced the outline of the blueprint of a house in magic, creating an image of interconnected squares on the stone wall.

“For home and for protection, for tranquility and for peace. Grant me this sanctuary, as I paint it with my soul, and nothing more.”

I pulled my hand back and slapped it harshly against the wall. In an instant, all the magic that had leaked out of it was sucked back up as if playing in reverse, and the blueprint I had made disappeared. The attendant blinked, in shock from the whole affair.

“What was…?”

“Hold on, hold on. Not done yet.”

Digging into my jacket, I retrieved a note card and a vial of red liquid, dipping my finger into it.

“What is…?”

“Newborn goat’s blood, don’t worry. I picked it up at the market after I treated your wife.”

With my finger, I wrote on the card ‘Друг’, and handed it to the attendant. He took it with confusion.

“How do I…?”

“You ask quite a lot of questions. Just take my hand, hold onto my bags, and come in!”

We stepped forward, and as we passed through the crack in the wall, we came to the interior of the secret room I had created. I set my bags down and sighed, stretching.

“Haaahhh…I believe this will be a good place to set up my practice.”

“Your practice? You will be a doctor again?”

“Perhaps. I have other plans, too. I have recently been interested in the art of demon-summoning as a hobby. It seems quite fun, once you know which ones won’t kill you. If I am a doctor, I am unsure if I will want payment for it. I have everything I could ever need here, after all.”

I huffed, smiling at him.

“So, will you be staying to help me unpack?”

“I believe I’m good.”

“Suit yourself then, ha!”

I thanked him and we said our goodbyes.

With that, I took up my secret residence in Kaliningrad. I did not advertise myself, and though the older people on the street recognized me as the Butcher of Kaliningrad, the rumor began its slow fade out of existence. I still provided the businesses of a doctor, though I left it to the patient if they desired to pay me or not. It was no matter to me either way: I was able to secure more than enough money by selling what I felt I didn't need for high prices to collectors and auctioneers…but I kept many other things. My violin, many of my old anatomy books, my phonograph, and some of my paintings.

The one thing I kept closest to my heart, that which has helped me while I remained alone during those newfound long years in Kaliningrad…the thing that I keep in my pocket and look at to remind me of the time when I once had someone who truly, truly loved me, even if not for who I was…that was my silver locket with my picture of Maria in it. Tatyana sent to me the Christmas after Maria’s death, but I only received it upon my return to Kaliningrad.

I keep it with me always.

CHAPTER 30: Blood of the Covenant

"...And, well, then you appeared, and here is where I am now. I trust that is enough information for you?"

The Prince of Fuck All, cuddling close to Rodion with his coat draped over the two like a blanket as they laid flat on the tower's rooftop and looked up at the canopy, sniffled and wiped away his makeup, leaving an ugly smear on both his face and the side of his hand. He had cried multiple times during the story, but thankfully most of the makeup had ended up staining the side of Rodion's coat.

"I…yes. Yes, t-that is…more than enough. Thank you for telling me all of that, love. Really. I'm sure it took a lot of courage to do so."

"Courage? Ha, maybe it would have been courage couple years ago. You were only person who has asked me who I felt like really cared to listen. Patients would ask me all the time about the state of my operating room, my classier tastes, and I would give them non-answers, but even with your…ahem. What is in English? 'Propensity for falsehoods', yes, even with that, you wanted to know. I could see in your eyes."

"I-In my eyes?" He raised a hand, looking at his nails. The paint was chipping slightly. "Yes, I…suppose you can tell a lot about a person just by looking at their eyes. I was told I was supposed to be wearing glasses once, but they weren't chic enough for me to take them seriously."

"You are not shocked by what I have told you? I have…tortured and killed many, many people...I am criminal in strictest sense of word. I would have expected you to be afraid of me."

"Afraid? Pfft. Nah, of course not. You're the same ol' big cuddly teddy bear I know and love, so why would knowing any of that change a thing? I've been dealing with nutters my whole life either way, knowing one more won't change anything."

"Prince…"

"N-Not that you are a nutter! Or, crazy, I mean. I don't much see the issue if you've already regretted it and started trying to make penance."

"You are too kind, Prince, really…I doubt many would share your sentiments."

"Never know unless you try, love. Never know unless you try."

Rodion sat up with a groan, stretching as he looked back down at The Prince.

"Well, what about you, Prince?"

The Prince sat up as well.

"Me?"

"Where are you from?"

He jolted.

"Do you have any family yourself?"

He swallowed.

"What sorts of *dark secrets* are you hiding, hm~?"

Rodion emphasized ‘dark secrets’ with a playfully sinister tone and a waggle of his fingers, but he lowered them once he saw The Prince turning away. He put a hand out.

“Prince…?”

Without skipping a beat, The Prince hopped up onto his feet and picked his coat back up, shaking it out as he moved to put it back on.

“I doubt you’d want to hear much about me, love. I may lead a fantastic life, but you know, I never do keep much track of the bijou things—it’s all the grand adventures, all the wars fought, all the rough trade, that really sticks in my thinkpan. Besides, it’d take far, far too long.”

“B-But, I do want to know! Truly!”

“I’m sure I could tell you all about it another time, love.”

Rodion slowly got to his feet, huffing and looking down at The Prince with a concerned expression.

“...Prince.”

The Prince of Fuck All sighed and threw his hands up, turning around with his hands on his hips with a pout as he sashayed over and cupped Rodion’s cheeks.

“Oh, alright! Fine. I can’t say no to an eek like that. I’ll let you in on just a bit of information about your mother for now. If I do that, will you be satisfied?”

Rodion blushed. “I-I suppose so…”

“Right then…”

He sighed, letting go of the Russian and putting his hands to his hips as he put a hand to his head, appearing to be deep in contemplative and somber thought…until he opened his eyes once more.

“I had a sister once too, y’know.”

Rodion gasped.

“Y-You did…?”

“Indeed I did. Someone who gave her life to protect me. And not only that…”

The Prince gestured.

“My make-up’s come off on your coat.”

He looked down and yelped at the ugly multi-colored stain on his high-class suit, Rodion first trying to wipe it off before he saw how the face quite literally came off on his hand, and he let out a sigh. Just then, the hatch in the center of the roof opened up, and a rather despondent-looking Fionn mac Cumhaill poked his head out.

“The Dagda will be calling everyone into the dining hall proper for us all to speak together. Please do hurry.”

Before either of them could say anything or point out the uncharacteristically dazed look in his eyes, Fionn dropped back below the hatch. Rodion shook his head.

“Bah. We will perhaps talk more about this sister of yours between dealing with Man Unkind and this worldwide invasion then, Prince. But first, I must go and wash my suit…I do want to look my best for this, after all.”

“I’ll catch up with you, Rodi! Just want to re-apply my slap here—you can’t meet with my face on your gut, I can’t go out looking like an emo disaster. Sure you don’t want me to give you a new outfit? I promise this one’s fresh!”

He produced a skimpy set of leather bondage gear from his coat, grinning ear-to-ear. Rodion just blushed and looked away as he opened the hatch.

“M-Maybe later.”

The Russian began to step down the ladder beneath the hatch, but just before he closed it on top of him, The Prince exclaimed.

“Rodi, wait, before you go.”

“Hm? Yes?”

“...Th…Thank you for telling me all that. About Maria and Tatyana and all that. I’m sure they’d be very happy to see you where you are now.”

Rodion remained there in shock for a few moments, before a wide smile crept over his features and he traveled down the ladder. The hatch shut behind him.

The Prince was all alone on the top of the tower, left with nothing for company but the cult agents and fae he could see fighting with one another outside…none of whom could see him.

Producing a rag from his coat, he sat back down on the edge of the tower and wiped off his face, getting rid of the smeared makeup and looking down at the blotches of black and red on the grey towel. He sighed, pulling out a hand mirror and looking at himself. With the makeup gone, he could see the slight bags beneath his eyes, the tired look in them, and the unsettling experience of watching blood drip from above your head from your floating crown of thorns down your face.

He lied. He couldn’t help it, but he lied.

Rodion’s whole story, his childhood, his relationship with his step-sisters, the revelation of who his grandfather was, and of course his time in the Bratva…it affected him heavily. It shook him to his core in a way he was not comfortable with. He doesn’t show that much emotion. He’s not *supposed* to let that much emotion bleed through into the act.

He opened a makeup palette and retrieved several brushes.

Rodi…killed someone. He didn't just kill someone, he killed *many* someones. That was unthinkable to him. The thought of taking a life. It was ghastly! Too ghastly to think about! Certainly, he had his suspicions beforehand: Butcher of Kaliningrad, the suspicious operating room, all the hints he’d been dropping to a dangerous prior life, it had been forming *something* in The Prince’s head, but to hear it said out loud was another matter entirely. Rodion was a murderer. A prolific one, at that. That man…

He applied eyeshadow and mascara.

Well, he was just glad that he got called down before The Prince was forced to give away any more about his personal life. No good sharing too much with people, you know. That’s how they get you. Loose lips sink ships, after all. And, was it a big deal that Rodion was a murderer and a torturer? He had met plenty of people before, had plenty of sex, stolen from plenty of

people after sex, how was he any different? Then he found himself pondering that question. How *was* Rodion any different from the people he'd met before?

He applied blush to his cheeks.

Rodi was different because The Prince of Fuck All loved him. He thought he was hot, yes—he always had a thing for bears, after all—but he found himself entranced by the man. His sense of humor, while a bit dry and stuffy, had a warm heart to it. Rodi knew so much about so many different things, while he…well, he knew plenty, but nothing as intricate as Rodion did. He watched the Russian brush his hands through his black-and-white hair with a blush. He enjoyed looking at him in all manner of outfits. He wasn't thinking about leaving him the next day, remaining only as a story Rodion would tell in bars about this fruity queen who nicked his wallet after they shagged. Even after Rodion had told him his worst fears, his deepest secrets, his greatest regrets, his feelings remained unchanged. In fact, he felt them swell in his bosom more than ever. He forgave him.

He put on lipstick.

Once The Prince realized that, he felt fear grip his heart. Does Rodion love him back? Would he love him back? He had no idea what the Russian's true feelings were. You can never tell what someone thinks about you, even when you ask them directly. When would he find out about The Prince's feelings? Would he ever know? He was the first person The Prince had feared wouldn't love him back, because he loved Rodion more genuinely than he had anyone in his life for a long, long time. Not since…

He closed the palette.

No. No, he's not going to think about her. Not anymore.

And yet, the images flooded through his mind, and he looked at himself in the mirror with hatred. Holding it close to him and putting away his makeup supplies, he pulled his shirt upwards and looked upon the tattoo that covered much of his upper body with a sneer. He raised his hand to it, grazing the winding complexities of the design with his fingertips, and grimaced. Slowly, just as he had done in Overhill that night, he began to reach his hand into the mechanisms of the tattoo, it turning from a two-dimensional design on his skin to a three-dimensional wormhole to God-knows-where…

"Urk."

He only got an inch or two in before he had to yank his hand out, panting. Shit. That's no good. He's all out of sorts. The Prince sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, unnerved by the sensation of his heart pounding in his chest. Why was his heart beating so fast? It never did this. It never even did this when he was being chased by cult agents. Was this that 'sense of impending doom' he'd seen on the sides of medication bottles among the side effects?

Reaching into his coat, he produced a book and a pair of scissors. The cut-up technique had never failed to ease his mind before, so maybe this would help? He didn't even bother looking at what book he had retrieved, he just started cutting and re-arranging until the words were laid out in front of him on the floor.

"that news having brought him all
on power and be maimed beat divided loves, they said
sword he was, but make the do to among add
other she the salvation Son who shall
say, hast it, say the they word trample that Jesus
desert a Lord the forth themselves, be everywhere of here
the of home all to them after This new repented
blind
when God is not the prophesied greatest up daughter spoke
thou that came to offended say shalt cries
they thee understood and
of the believe house
you may leave this God world"

The Prince of Fuck all groaned and laid backwards, turning his gaze back up to the canopy as a breeze passed and caused all the cut-up scraps of text to flutter away on the current of the wind.

"Lord, can't somebody else go up there with him? The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak…hell, is the spirit willing? I don't know."

He covered his eyes, sighing.

"If there's really no other way…a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do, I guess."

~

The Prince of Fuck All eventually made his way down to the dining hall, where he met up with Rodion in the space at the front. There was a small raised platform, usually where the Dagda would be speaking to all of the Tuatha De, at the front of the hall. There, Rodion and The Prince stood as they looked out over the crowd.

He crossed his arms, leaning to Rodion (who had cleaned his brown suit) and gazing out at the people in front of them.

"Is it just me, or is this crowd bluer than blueberries?"

Oberon and Titania morosely prodded at their food, and while the Dagda sat with the Tuatha De, his usually jovial expression was turned to one of deep thought. The rest of the Tuatha de Danann were various degrees of melancholy and suspicious, some of the more battle-hungry ones casting untrustworthy glances over to Iolo Morganwg and the DUO agents. Morganwg folded their hands in front of themself, their eye closed, and Fionn mac Cumhaill sat beside them with a more hopeless expression than either of them had seen on him…or rather, it was the strongest expression they'd seen Fionn make at all. Hel sat in a chair pulled off to the side with her arms crossed defensively, Odin's single eye flitting between her and the two of them on-stage. Conversation was at an all-time low. Rodion patted The Prince on the shoulder.

"Well, there is not much to be happy about, is there? The fairies' homes are under attack and they're at war, the Tuatha De are trapped, there's chaos all over Earth…Cumhaill is especially intriguing, though. I would have assumed he would be training for battle, and yet he is moping. Should we go and ask what is wrong?"

"No time, love. We've gotta come up with a plan to come at Man Unkind and hit them right where it counts…but there's no way we'll get a conversation going with everyone looking so gutted! I can fix that nice and easy though. A bit of entertainment will lift everyone's spirits!"

He dug into his coat as Rodion sighed and rubbed a temple.

"Prince, we do not have time for this! If people are sad, they are sad, we have more important things we must discuss."

"Hey, a queen like me has to always be ready to perform! Anytime, anywhere, for any reason. This is nothing—you ever try doing a drag show for a group of injured vets? Worst night of my life. It's impressive how strong some of their punches still were. Either way, though."

The Prince retrieved a large acoustic guitar, a Yamaha L-52, and sat down on the 'stage'. His knees came up almost to his chest due to how low he was sitting, but he effortlessly rested the guitar in his arms and plucked a string curiously. Rodion was so caught off-guard, he almost forgot he was angry.

"You know how to play guitar?"

"Of course I do, love. Guitar, piano, triangle, harmonica, mellotron, Moog synth, Gamelan bonang, I know it all. Some call me a jack-of-all-trades, no matter how many times I tell them my name's not Jack. Now, as for you, love…"

He reached into his coat and produced a violin case, tossing it to Rodion. He caught it in his burly arms and looked it over, gasping.

"P-Prince, this is *my* violin! How did you get your hands on it?!"

"A woman never reveals her secrets, love. How good are you with it?"

The Russian sputtered. "I-I mean, well…I have…played several classic compositions, and I do like to believe I am…quite good with it…"

"Fantabulosa! Now here's the deal, you'll be the harmonica, I'll be the guitar and vocals. You can play by ear, right? Well, even if you can't, just improvise a bit. You start out with—" He hummed something, wiggling his hand as he did. "—then let me do my thing, and then when you feel a break, you play a bit longer. Two bars, I think."

Rodion protested as he pulled out his violin and bow, resting it on his neck.

"P-Prince! What are we even playing?"

"Just a bit of the ol' Dyl pickle, love. Never fails to raise people's spirits! Or, well, to lower their spirits. Fifty-fifty on that. But it's worth a shot! On the count of three, alright?"

The Prince raised a hand, flicking his wrist as he held up his fingers. One, two, three…

Much of the dining hall turned to look at the stage, Rodion's violin-playing ringing out across the expansive room. The acoustics were quite well, and no matter where you sat in it, you could hear the dulcet tones of the violin as it sang out note after note. After a swaying intro, the

tones traveling up and down in pitch like a falling leaf, the violin grew quiet as The Prince's guitar-playing took precedence. He cleared his throat, and began to sing.

"Oh, my name, it means nothing…my age, it means less. The country I come from…"

He smiled, glancing to Rodion.

"...is called the Midwest. I was taught and brought up there…the laws, to abide. And that land that I live in…"

He looked up to the ceiling.

"...has God on its side."

Rodion swooped in once more, playing the violin with a bluesy tone to it that better fit a fiddle but nonetheless complemented The Prince's acoustic guitar wonderfully. The two of them could feel the air in the room begin to shift, as more and more people looked up and listened to the song, swaying from side to side as smiles began to form on their faces. Oberon and Titania whispered to one another, talking about how nice The Prince's singing voice was—it wasn't professional by any means, but it was impressive enough to be worth acknowledging.

"The Second World War, it came to an end…We forgave the Germans!"

The Prince looked to Odin and gave a foxish smile.

"And then we were friends! Though they murdered six million…in the ovens, they fried. The Germans now too, had…"

He pointed to the All-Father, looking back at the crowd.

"God! On their side!"

People laughed at the small joke, and with those small chuckles, some of the weight of the previous days began to melt away as the violin paired with the guitar. In listening to the song, they felt as though their current conflict was little more than the latest in a string of conflicts in life. This was not something to be upset about, however: if humanity has survived so many wars, then in the end, they too will come out of the other end. Not without their fair share of hardship, of course, but for once, everyone present began to truly believe things would work out.

The Prince had gotten up and was performing some more Elvis-styled guitar moves on the stage, cozying up to Rodion.

"I've learned to hate the Russians, all through my whole life! If another war comes…"

He poked Rodion in the side, making him laugh.

"It's him *we must fight! To hate them and fear them! To run and to hide…and accept it all bravely…with God on my side."*

Hel, admittedly never the biggest fan of music, found herself annoyedly trying to keep her foot from tapping. Even she couldn't help but feel slightly placated by the music. The doubts and questions still welled in her chest like something aching to get free, but in this moment, just for this moment…she felt herself calm down. Even Fionn had raised his head, watching the procession with a more blank look than before—a good sign, surely.

By the time five minutes had passed, everyone was in much higher spirits than they were before, swaying from side to side and taking in the music. The Prince and Rodion had to admit,

they had perked up considerably themselves, The Prince especially: he spun on his heel, he spun his guitar, and he performed all sorts of impressive tricks to show off his dexterity as he sang.

"Through many a dark hour, I've been thinking about this."

He pointed upwards, sliding near Rodi.

"That Je-ee-sus Chriiiiist was! Betrayed, by a kiss…"

The Prince planted a quick kiss on Rodion, making the larger man flush with a smile.

"Well, I can't think for you, you'll have to decide…"

He stepped back to center stage, quiet for a moment as he stopped playing. The audience, what was now an audience, held their breath during that moment…until his hand came down once more.

"Whether Judas Iscariot had God on his side!"

Rodion put his bow to the strings, but his first note was drowned out by an enraged female voice.

"Prince!"

In a sudden flash of white light that made the crowd gasp and mutter, many clutching their weapons, a woman with long silver hair appeared before them. Rodion covered his eyes, squinting as he blinked, but he recognized the voice.

"A-Archangel Gabriel?"

The archangel stomped forwards, placing her hands on her hips as she glared down at The Prince. He hadn't stopped playing, but he had certainly stopped singing, his fingers more fiddling with the guitar out of nervousness than anything else. Still, on the surface, he was calm amongst the group's fervor. Some of the DUO agents' mouths hung open at seeing an angel for the first time, while the older ones just sighed and shook their heads. Morganwg just looked around with a dumb look on their face, unsure of what was going on.

"Gabby! So nice to see you here! Were you drawn to my lovely song, perchance?"

She snarled.

"No, Prince. You have something of mine, and I demand that you give it back. Now."

"Something of yours? Can't say I know what you mean in the slightest, love! But really, we can talk about this later. I still need to finish my song, after all! You're the angel of music after all, right?"

Gabriel grabbed The Prince by the collar of his shirt, yanking him forward and holding him up with a distasteful sneer.

"Don't play dumb with me, Prince, it's on your record. I had Haqib and Atid check once more, and *you're* the guilty one. So, spit it out. Where is it? In that blasphemous coat of yours?"

Fionn rose from his seat with his sword in his hands, crouching atop one of the tables.

"Gabriel, stand down. The Prince is no thief, and this place is a sanctuary. How could you have entered?"

"The powers of God are far beyond your comprehension, Fionn mac Cumhaill. Do not pretend you don't feel it. I know what you are."

The warrior shuddered, gripping his sword tighter.

"A-Ahh, Blondie, I wouldn't…"

"Cumhaill! Sit down."

Rodion shouted at Fionn, making the boy flinch. With a motion and a stern look, he got Fionn to take his seat once again, glancing out over the crowd before he stepped towards Gabriel.

"Miss Gabriel. There is no need for such rudeness, *da?* If you believe Prince has taken something, then we must know what it is. Please do let him down, if only for now."

Gabriel sighed, dropping The Prince to the ground with the sound of a discordant twang as the guitar hit the floor. He slowly stumbled to his feet, brushing himself off as the archangel's angular face wrinkled into a scowl.

"I have on my person at all times my holy trumpet, that which I once was given the responsibility of blowing to signify Judgement Day. I may not do so nowadays—that position was frustratingly handed over to Israfel in the first millennia A.D.—but it is still extremely powerful, and extremely important. I noticed it was gone after Michael returned to his room, but I had no idea of where it had disappeared…but now I know where it is."

She pointed at The Prince.

"Give it back, or suffer the wrath of God, larcenist."

"L-Larcenist?! I take offense to that, young lady! Perhaps I do have some sticky fingers, but even I haven't got the chutzpah to try and steal from an archangel!"

Gabriel crossed her arms, her wings fluttering in agitation.

"Really now? That is strange."

The archangel snapped her fingers, and in puffs of white and red smoke beside her, a disgruntled Shiva and flustered Belial materialized beside her. Gabriel sniffed.

"These two claim you have something of theirs as well."

The Dagda, shocked, slammed his fist on the table beside him hard enough to drive it partway into the ground. "Shiva?!"

Rodion stepped back, hands up. "B-Belial…?"

Shiva shook his head, his black hair falling partially over his face. "The Prince has committed a grave misdeed. I thought I had simply misplaced it, but ever since I tested his bharatanatyam, my precious trident Trishul has been missing. All signs point to him as the culprit."

Belial clutched his pudgy fists and shook in place. "Yeah and, like, my phone's gone! I thought I put it somewhere else too, like, y'know my pockets are a total mess…but it wasn't there! At all! And the last time I remembered it being there, I was with you and Rodi dude and the others!"

The crowd muttered amongst one another, whispering to each other as they cast curious glances at The Prince. He smiled, laughing as he put his hands up.

"People, people! Come on now. Do you really suspect me to steal from all of you? I'm no thief, honest! Haven't stolen a thing in my life."

Gabriel shouted at him. *"Liar!"*

"Liar?! Fine then! Fine! You think me to be some kind of crook? Then go on! Strip me down! Shake me out! Show off that I've stolen what you think I have!"

He threw out his arms, frowning. Taking the opportunity, the archangel lunged forward and took The Prince of Fuck All by the shoulders, lifting him up above the stage and shaking him vigorously. He groaned as she did, his voice vibrating back and forth and his stomach tossing and turning with the shaking, but he did not protest.

A long, golden horn fell out. The crowd gasped.

Rodion furrowed his brow. "Prince…is that…?"

She kept shaking the redhead, small flecks of blood from his crown of thorns splattering around the stage as she did so.

A long metal trident that smelled of the magic of Shiva fell out of his coat.

Then, a chunky maroon flip-phone with a rubber case and antennae from the same place.

"Trishul!"

"My phone!"

She stopped shaking him, and The Prince let out a nauseous moan.

"Uuugghh…would you…quit that…? I feel like I'm gonna hurl…"

The Russian stumbled forward. "Y-Yes, please do! You have retrieved what you were missing. Pick them up and take them away. He will apologize, I am sure, then you all can return to what you were doing! Surely, there are greater problems to deal with?"

"We'll see about that, Nikolayev."

Gabriel immediately resumed shaking The Prince after Shiva and Belial retrieved their things, and more items fell out from his coat.

The Dagda's club, the sight of which he made a guttural sound of offense as he stood from his chair. A large flame-patterned haori—then not just one, but five of the same patterned haori. A collection of Japanese clothing. Some curatives from a mendicant monk's stash. Twelve bottles of sake. Flyers from the Smithsonian. A broken deer scare. Scattered pieces of jewelry, including some Morganwg recognized as being from the museum. Historical photos of the Big Mess. Ornate vases and small pieces of furniture that had distinctly fae influences. Souvenir CDs and harps from Mag Mell. One of the paintings from Constable Andras' office, as well as a sword. Odin's spear Gungnir fell onto the pile, and the old man shot up from his seat with a gasp. All of these items, along with various other scattered items and garbage such as old fast food wrappers, numerous outfits, multiple obscure instruments, weapons and artifacts that stank of magic (some of which Shiva, Odin, and the Dagda recognized with horror as being extremely dangerous if they should fall into the wrong hands), and at least twenty cell phones, fell out from The Prince's coat.

The Lia Fail fell out and dropped to the side, leaving a depression in the wooden floor as it fell with a crash. The Sessho-seki, still wrapped in its rope and shide papers, rolled away out of disgust. The Shiva Chandrakanta landed delicately in a pile of folded clothes.

All the while, the crowd of Tuatha De, government agents, and gods sat in shocked silence as they saw just how *much* The Prince had stolen. How much of this was just from these past two

days? How much still had yet to fall out? Gabriel stopped shaking The Prince, her arms getting tired as she dropped him into the pile. The redhead was too preoccupied with trying to get the room to stop moving around him to address the hostile looks he was drawing from everyone present.

Everyone, that is, except for Rodion, who looked down at the pile of items with a frown and ran his fingers through his hair. Gabriel let out an incensed puff and folded her arms behind her back to let them rest, tossing the coat over the redhead.

"This man, The Prince of Fuck All, is nothing but a thief. His identity is a mystery, you see: We have no record of him existing before age 16, and do you know what the first thing he did was? He stole. From top to bottom, his record shows nothing but thievery, debauchery, and a self-professed 'bohemian' lifestyle that, in truth, is made up of nothing but a desire to steal everything he can get his hands on. Atop his head floats a reminder of this: this crown of thorns is a relic of God, and like an antibody, it sticks to those who are nothing but sinful. He cannot be trusted in the slightest."

The group murmured once more, the air in the room having dramatically shifted from easy-going optimism just a few minutes earlier to sudden hostility and suspicion, all directed at one woozy drag queen.

"G-Gabriel."

Rodion stepped forward, fists clenched at his sides as he looked up at the archangel. Standing up to a servant of God was, he thought as a kid, one of the scariest things to do, and even now his heart thumped in his chest like a nervous steam engine, but he spoke with as level a voice as possible.

"I understand that Prince has taken many things. Many important, irreplaceable things. I will make sure that he returns them. B-But, I argue that he has a good heart! He is not evil. You see how he has helped us, all of us, in fighting against Man Unkind? He knows more than anyone else about this threat, and we cannot spare a moment! Express your hostilities to him after it is dealt with, I beg of you."

Shiva shook his head, looking out to the Tuatha De.

"How do we know he has not been working with the enemy all this time? He clearly exhibits the same symptoms of kleptomania as they do, seeking out what is powerful and what is wanted and taking it for himself. The only difference between the two is that he does not seem to *use* what he takes. He hoards it like a king. Perhaps I have made an error in my judgment."

"W-What do you mean, 'how do we know'?! He has been fighting them for very, very long! He knows them inside and out! He has…he has…w-what about the good he has done for you all?"

Iolo stood up.

"He might have saved my life, but…he did ruin my museum. It'll be months until the Smithsonian can be reopened, and repairs will take millions of dollars! Think about my livelihood here!"

The DUO agents stood up with him, producing a stack of documents.

“We can confirm that the figure known as ‘The Prince of Fuck All’ has been sighted in the vicinity of many, many notorious thefts in recent years. He appears to have gone by many pseudonyms and taken on many disguises while he has been in the United States to avoid capture. It is the responsibility of the Department of Defense to have him taken in and questioned.”

Hel felt a little bit sick as she watched Odin and the Dagda look at one another. At least, she thought that was why she felt sick.

“Some of those items…they are extremely important. I don’t know how he was able to get his hands on them, but I can see among them the shield of King Arthur, the staff of Son Wukong, the rings of Gyges and Mudarra, the book of Thoth…these items are incredibly, incredibly dangerous! To have them all in one place is like placing a pile of gunpowder beside an open flame!”

“Aye, not t’ mention, th’ weapons in there…if ‘e got it in ‘is poofter brain t’ go on th’ warpath, ‘e could conquer th’ world without breakin’ a sweat. Th’ only reason they ‘aven’t been found yet is ‘cause I bet th’ snazzy coat hides ‘is location!”

The Prince of Fuck All slowly staggered to his feet as he rolled off of the pile, holding his coat as he did so. His tattoo was out on full display as he did so, and Gabriel sniffed.

“That tattoo…it stinks of those wretched cult agents. Perhaps Shiva’s theory of him being a double agent was right all along. If so, we should dispatch him with haste.”

Rodion opened his mouth to protest, but couldn’t come up with a good argument. He knew that The Prince couldn’t be flat-out *guilty* of all of those things, he knew it from the bottom of his heart…or at least, there was no way he did it on purpose. He wasn’t malicious! He could be annoying and capricious, he was lustful and flighty, but he was not a bad person. He wasn’t.

The Prince groaned, rubbing his eyes as he looked around. He wasn’t smiling anymore.

“R-Really…come now…is this such a big deal? I was doing it for your own goods! What if Man Unkind had gotten a hold of those as well and tossed them in their coffers? They’d have that much more power! I was…I was keeping them safe, honest, I…”

Something small fell out of his coat. It shimmered in the light, bounced off of the pile, and slid across the floor to Rodion’s feet. He bent down to pick it up, and held it in both arms. Rodion’s heart sank as he looked at it.

“...Prince…”

“Rodi! Yes, of course, Rodi, you’ll believe me, won’t you? I was doing it all for a good cause! They just aren’t appreciating me, you know, such is the shame of altruism—nobody knows the good you do until it’s too late—I was preventing the cult from getting these things!”

The Russian shuddered, his head hanging low.

“You were preventing Man Unkind from taking the most important and powerful things…is that right?”

“...R-Rodi?”

He snapped upwards, aged face twisted with despair and tears welling in his eyes as he held up his hand and shouted. Nestled in his palm was the silver locket with Maria’s picture in it.

"Was *this* so important, you needed to take it as well?!"

The Prince stepped back, eyes widened and mouth dry. His pupils shivered, icy blue irises shuddering as though they were battered by cold winds. Rodion stomped forwards and shook the locket with rage.

"You took this? *This?* After I tell you my story, I pour out my heart for you, and I tell you how much she meant to me, how I feel every night as I think of her and weep! Did you feel nothing? Were you just using it as an excuse to steal *this?!"*

The redhead's eyes started to mist over as he clasped his palm over his mouth.

"N-No, Rodi, I-I didn't…I wasn't…"

"Prince, you are…y-you are so *selfish*, it defies explanation! All you think about is yourself! All you do is what you want to do, and you do not care about anyone other than yourself! Everything you hear, you only care about how it affects you! And…And I told you all that…God, what a fool I am. I-I really thought, you know, I really thought that I could trust you with my secrets, with my past and with knowing who I loved. I thought that I had finally found someone I could love as much as I loved her. Someone who could love me as genuinely and as honestly as her."

Rodion clasped the locket shut, gritting his teeth as he snarled at The Prince, whose makeup ran as he struggled to explain himself. His British accent had slipped away.

"R-Rodi, please, you need to—you need to listen to me, I wasn't…I didn't mean to take it, I…I-I never even knew that I…I-I don't know why I…Please…"

"Be quiet."

He put away the locket.

"I really do never learn. Sixty years of my life, and I only keep making same mistakes. Every time I feel as though I can be loved once more, I am taught is nothing more than a fool's errand. I stayed with you on this moronic adventure, and what do you give me in return? Nothing but pain. Nothing but heartbreak. You, *Prince*, are nothing more than an opportunistic, selfish, kleptomaniacal, *parasite!"*

The Prince winced as though he'd been stabbed as tears ran down his face. He was quiet, hearing nothing but Rodion's heavy panting, until he took a shaky ragged breath and closed his eyes. He clenched his fists and brought one of the sleeves of his coat up to his face, wiping away all of his makeup as he threw the coat down. He spoke in a way nobody present had heard before.

"F-Fine. Fine. You know what? You're right, Rodi. You're completely right. I-I'm…I'm nothing but a parasite. I steal from people, even…even when I don't mean to. I just take, and take, and take. But I'm still human. At least I still have that. Can you still say the same, Rasputin?"

Rodion flinched and scowled, glowering at The Prince of Fuck All as he looked out to the crowd.

"But, I don't care. I don't care what any of you think. I don't care if I take the things that are important to people. Damn it, I'm…I-I'm a performer."

He reached down and picked up his acoustic guitar.

"And the show must go on."

He strummed once, his singing voice having been obliterated by his crying. His vision was blurry from tears, and he could barely stand on his own two feet. And yet, he sang.

"S-So now, as I'm leaving…I'm…weary, as hell…"

His voice was drowned out by boos and jeers, the Tuatha De shouting for him to be hanged. The Dagda, Odin, and Shiva all shook their heads in utter disappointment. Iolo sighed and turned away, Fionn having folded his arms on the table and buried his face in them.

Clink.

"The confusion I'm feeling…a-ain't…no tongue can tell…"

The booing only grew louder, some of the crowd throwing plates at The Prince as he walked off the stage and down the center aisle. His face was solemn and almost in grief as he sang, unable to keep a tone.

Chk.

"The words fill m-my head…and fall…to the floor…"

His words could barely be heard over the roar of the crowd, but still he sang on. The Prince of Fuck All looked back to Rodion, who just glared down at him. He could see the Russian mutter something under his breath. He said 'you sicken me', he thought.

"That if God's on our side…"

BANG.

A clap rang out through the entirety of the dining hall, and everything went silent. The crowd went silent. Rodion went silent. The Prince went silent.

The Prince lowered his guitar and put a hand to his chest, looking at his palm.

It was red.

He crumpled to the floor, the impact of his body hitting the wooden floor breaking the silence.

"Prince!"

Rodion pushed people out of the way, stumbling forwards until he made his way to The Prince. He dropped to the floor and held up the man with both hands, putting him on his back. The Prince breathed in and out with considerable effort, struggling to keep the air in as pain surged through his body.

"P-Prince, what happened?!"

"I-I'm hit…my god, I'm hit…"

He looked down at where he could feel the blood was seeping from. There was no exit wound, so he turned The Prince over and saw an abrasion collar through the right side of his ribcage, spurting blood like a faucet. He knew what he was looking at: it was an entry wound from a bullet. Not only that, but it traveled laterally through his midsection as well as upwards through the ribcage and…if there was no exit wound, could it have lodged itself in his heart? If so, then…

The Prince coughed, black blood splattering onto the ground, and Rodion turned him back around to look him in the face. The redhead was growing paler by the second.

"D-Don't worry, ma…I'm only bleedin'..."

"P-Prince, you are shot…you will die…"

"Die? W-Why, that's the last thing I'll do…ahaha, ah…o-ow."

Rodion looked up at the crowd, looking on in frozen shock. The bullet had entered through the back as he was walking away, and so whoever shot him had to be closer to the stage side of the dining hall. Not only that, but it was a shot going upwards: thus, it couldn't be anyone standing. That ruled out all of the major players. All of them except…Yes, if the bullet traveled from his right side to his left, then the shooter had to have been sitting to the right! Then that would be…

"Hel!"

The crowd all turned to Hel, and saw her standing with a revolver in her hand, the barrel smoking. In an instant, Odin swept around her, grabbed Gungnir from off the ground, and held it underneath her chin. He kept the tip of his spear ready to fire at a moment's notice.

The Prince gripped Rodion's shirt.

"C-Coat…"

"Coat…? Gabriel! Hand me Prince's coat!"

Without a word, the archangel handed the coat to the doctor, who then gave it to The Prince. He laid it across his body like a blanket, leaving only his head uncovered as he winced and panted. Occasionally, blood would bubble and spurt from his mouth. Rodion sniffled, tears welling up in his eyes once more as he held The Prince.

"Prince…I-I am sorry, I…If I had only believed you, then…then maybe…"

"I forgive you, Rodi. Y-You didn't know what you were doing."

"No…N-No, I…"

Rodion sobbed.

"L…Listen, Rodi. You'll be back with me…s-soon enough…"

The Prince's head rolled unnaturally to the side, and he looked at Hel with a delirious grin.

"Woman! Look what you've d-done to your son…and to your mother…"

He rolled back to Rodion, tears falling from his eyes.

"O-Oh, God…God…w-why have you forsaken me…?"

"I-Is…is there anything I can do for you, Prince? Please…Please tell me there is something this doctor can do for you…"

Blood poured from his mouth as he forced a laugh.

"I-I need a drink…w-well…ah. Don't bother."

His smile faded.

"It's over."

Rodion hugged The Prince close to his chest, holding him as he wept.

"...I-I…I…I love you."

"I love you too…Rodi…i-into your hands…I-I commend…my spirit…"

The two of them kissed. The Prince left blood on Rodion's lips, the last reminder of his life, and as his body turned cold and he became limp and heavy in the doctor's arms, he spread his arms as wide as they could go…until he was no more.

The Prince of Fuck All had died.

The doctor wept for the only man he felt like he had ever truly loved.

Odin jabbed the end of Gungnir into Hel's chin, scowling at her.

"Hel…explain yourself! Why have you shot the boy with that barbaric weapon?!"

With a wry grin and an uncharacteristic giggle, Hel put her hands up.

"Don't look at me! I'm just a patsy!"

In an instant, Odin swatted the gun from her hand, and it clattered uselessly against the ground. None of the others could tell what was going on among the crowd, but they could see that Odin was shoved back far enough to be sent flying into one of the tables. The wooden piece of furniture cracked in two.

Hel stood straight and swayed back and forth, head lolling limply from side to side…until a hand emerged from her chest. Then, an arm—a rather well-dressed arm, from the looks of it—emerged after that, and with a foot and two pant legs, a figure threw itself out of Hel's chest. She fell to the floor, only prevented from cracking her head open upon impact by Shiva's quick reflexes.

Standing on the table, dressed impeccably in a top hat, three-piece suit, and skull-topped cane and appearing as though he'd been painted in watercolor, was The Dog-Faced Man. His crazed squinted eyes peered around the room as the cat-o-nine-tails that was his tail thrashed about…and he thrust a glittery-gloved hand to the sky as he tipped his hat.

"Heeeere's DOGGY!"

Immediately, all of the Tuatha De and whoever else were present drew their weapons, some starting to lunge or fire at The Dog-Faced Man. However, he was unshaken. He puffed on his knuckles, checked his nails (through his glove, no less), and raised his top hat.

Beneath it was an object. It was an oddly inscrutable thing made of wood, resembling a large and flat spool in the shape of a six-pointed star. Out from the middle of the spool stuck a wooden shaft that then bent at an angle to make an 'L' shape, leaving it unable to rest somewhere comfortably. All sorts of random threads of all manner of colors, seeming to be nothing but the odds and ends cut from more useful spools, hung loosely over it. He held it up, and immediately, the crowd stopped. Everyone turned to look at it, unable to bring themselves to even move any more. They were completely enraptured, enthralled by this mysterious object that proved itself to be so interesting as to immobilize and entrance anyone who saw it[49].

[49] This thing, known as an Odradek, is a powerful juju that is often used by criminals in order to draw attention away from them and onto something else. Formerly sold as a child-distraction device, it is now illegal in the United States and most other countries due to the potency of its effects. It is said that a father once was captivated by it for so long that he starved to death. The reason why people are so drawn to it is unknown, but some scholars believe (based on biological readings) that something about it sends those who view it into a paralyzing look of anxious speculation and jealous paranoia.

The Dog-Faced Man kept his top hat uncovered, the item remaining on his bald head as the canid humanoid strutted around.

"hello, hello, hello ladies and germs! i bid you good greetings and salutacions for you have meen blessed by a visit by the one the only the lord the sphenard and the martyr all in one, the glorious and beloved leader of Man Unkind, The Dog Faced Man"

He lightly booped the Dagda's nose, easily able to look him in the eyes as he too was entranced by the object, and skipped around.

"i am so terribly srory to interrupt your little Tea Party, but i couldnt help but see that there was a bit of...Interdasting News i received, concerning—"

The Dog-Faced Man gestured down at the corpse of The Prince of Fuck All.

"THAT little muffin. the tattoo was uncovered. We found him. LAdieez and Gentlesmens, WE GOT HIM and thats not all. A bit of the old Jersey Lubricant on hel's chelst, and i stick my own little portal right on there…and oh? Whats this? Whats this?"

He looked to the pile of items and let out a childish giggle, hopping over to it. He would be doing cartwheels if he hadn't been keeping his posture perfectly straight, raising his cane up.

"The MOTHERLOADSTAR of goodies! Og trinkets and getchets and gewgew gawgaws, Shotskies and funny little things, including All Of The Stones I Have Been Looking For. Mucho obrigado, PRINCE."

His giggle turning into a hideous cackle, he clicked his thumb into one of the eye sockets of the skull atop his cane, and from the end extended two wide fins, turning the cane into something like a croupier's rake. He twirled in a circle, and like a figure-skater making a figure-eight, his seemingly-normal shoes carved a circular hole in the ground, leading to utter blackness. Using the rake, he drew everything in the pile into the hole. Those watching twitched their fingers, the corners of their mouths jerking as they tried to say something, to do something to stop him, but it was useless. Once he had scraped everything into the hole, it closed with a comical 'pop!' sound effect, and he clapped his hands as he threw the rake over his shoulder. It hit Dian Cecht in the head, but he remained unmoved.

The Dog-Faced Man turned on his heel—his body turning first, then his head—as he marched over to Rodion and The Prince, the latter's head having been covered out of respect by the doctor. Rodion too was entranced by the mysterious object atop The Dog-Faced Man's head, even as he held The Prince in his arms.

"Ooohh this is going to be GOOD good GOOD…and now…and now and now i must finish what i started so so long ago, the boy the girl the THING that has been a pain in my side for so so long oh i cannot believe i will get this chance it is too good…Prince…"

He snarled, his grin reaching beyond his eyes in a maniacal rictus as he lowered himself to the ground and began to reach for the coat.

"You have had it too good for too long…and now, you will pay the price…"

He grasped the fabric and pulled it upwards.

Beneath the coat were only Rodion's two hands, and a bone-dry crown of thorns.

The Dog-Faced Man stared at the empty space for what had to be more than thirty seconds before he screeched and clawed at the skin beneath his eyes.

"WHERE DID HE GO?!"

Then, he heard a small clatter to his left. His bloodshot pupils darted towards the source of the sound, and he too found himself entranced—the item had fallen off of his head. As he still held The Prince's coat in his hands, the entrancing object was shielded from view for some of the people present.

The Dog-Faced Man only had a few seconds to realize this before he was whacked in the back of the head *hard* by the rough end of the Dagda's club with a sound like you had dropped a ton of meat from the top of a ten-story building. He was sent flying, spinning like a pinwheel through the air before splattering against one of the stone walls. He tumbled down, hands and feet sticking to the wall until he ended up upside-down. The coat had fallen onto the object, covering it, and everyone found themselves instead drawn to the invader that had made it into the castle somehow.

The Dagda bellowed. "I dinnae who tae flyin' fook this blaggart is, but 'e ain't welcome! Get 'im!"

All at once, the Tuatha De charged forwards, Gabriel firing a ball of divine audio from her horn at The Dog-Faced Man and both Shiva and Belial lunging forward. Fionn loaded an arrow into his bow and, with lightning speed, fired.

Still, the leader was quicker, and he leaned forward enough to find himself back on his feet, whereupon he produced a piece of chalk, drew a doorway on the wall behind him, and pushed it open with his tail.

"I would LURVE to stay and chat but i gotototttta skedaddle. Talk to you later! See you when the world ends."

He saluted, made a sign with his hand like he was making a shadow puppet of a fox, and stiffly fell backwards into the newly-made door. Before anyone could make it there, the door abruptly shut, and the chalk flaked away into nothing.

Shiva pounded on the wall with his fists.

"Curses! He has gotten away…"

"Gotten away? Ach, thas' impossible! 'Ow could 'e 'ave gotten away?! 'E must be somewhere in th' castle, surely, 'e's…"

Gabriel shook her head. "He's gone. Man Unkind has all of the stones and so much more, too…there's nothing we can do now other than apply palliative care for what we can save at this point. We no longer have any edge on them, and to top it off…"

She looked to Rodion, who sat clutching The Prince's coat and crown of thorns with a distraught look on his face, with pity.

"...I believe we may have lost something more."

CHAPTER 31: Desperate, But Not Hopeless

Nobody rested well that night.

Shortly after The Prince's death and the subsequent incident with The Dog-Faced Man, there was much confusion about his disappearance. Many reached inside the coat, believing that he had somehow retreated inside of it like some kind of magic act, but it was hopeless. There was seemingly nothing living inside the coat. Gabriel contacted Azrael, the angel of death[50], to figure out what had happened to him.

The red-eyed gingham-clad pine-smelling youth-counselor of an angel was just as confused as the rest of them. There was no body, of course, but there was also no lingering soul. He had wholly disappeared, and even if it had lingered, there would be no way to know where he had gone—he never adhered specifically to one single religion, after all. With resignation, Gabriel gave her condolences, made the sign of the cross, and left to resume dealing with the chaos on Earth. Belial, unsure of what he could do, murmured an apology and returned to Hell. Shiva gave his condolences as well, but granted Rodion a boon to call on him if he is needed: a lingam of his own.

Afterwards, everyone decided it had been enough of a night, and retired to bed.

Oberon and Titania tossed and turned uncomfortably, worried about the future.

Hel remained out cold, and Odin slept in a chair beside her with his arms crossed.

The DUO agents filed into a single room with notepads, leaving Morganwg on their own.

Fionn remained awake until he forcibly doused himself with a druidic sleeping powder.

And Rodion…Rodion remained in the bed he was given, clutching onto The Prince's coat as he let out a long and deep sigh. He could feel himself tearing up, conflicting emotions whirling around inside of his heart hard enough to rival even the greatest of hurricanes…but it could not continue. After hours of restless tossing and turning, the doctor eventually got to sleep.

The next morning, everyone slowly dragged themselves out of bed and trudged their way to the dining hall, tiredly waving a hand as they passed one another in the hallways. One look out of the window, and it was obvious the fight continued to rage on. They took their seats at the dining hall tables and stared down at the grain of the table, hoping that perhaps it would prove to be engrossing enough that they could figure out some plan of action from then. It was fruitless. Even the Dagda, usually well-tempered, couldn't help but grumble pessimistically as he pulled out his cauldron and produced full English breakfasts for each of the Tuatha De castle occupants and various guests. Nobody said a word, eating in silence. It was as if darkness had fallen over the entire castle. Even the rooms looked dimmer. Though some might have argued there was no

[50] As Christianity was the most populous of world religions at that time, it fell to Azrael to ascertain the dead's faith and escort them to their proper afterlife. Muslim scholars have reported that he has 4,000 wings separated into two categories: 'wings of grace', made of feathers, and 'wings of punishment', made of hooks, rods, rusty nails, and scissors. He tends to keep these hidden from mortals, as he believes "it does nobody good to scare them half to death when they're already dead".

physical change in light, all those present would agree that it certainly *felt* like darkness had smothered them, clutching at their throats and stealing their breath.

After they had eaten, still, there was silence. The Tuatha De, the gods, the fae, the Fomorian and the humans, they all quietly looked at their empty plates. Rodion silently turned the crown of thorns The Prince had left behind in his hands. Occasionally, someone would try to start a conversation, asking some question or another, but more often than not, all that came out was a questioning sound before the rest dried up and withered in their throats. Nobody knew what to say. Nobody knew if they even *had* anything to say.

From the front of the room, someone stood up.

"Pathetic."

It was Hel speaking, her hands on her hips as she looked out over the sullen dining hall. Nobody responded, though some turned their heads to look at her with melancholy. She spat on the ground, strutting up to the raised platform at the front and stepping onto it. She turned her head left, then turned it right, her long white hair swaying.

"Did you all not hear me? I said, you all are pathetic. Pathetic!"

That got the people's attention. They all looked up at her, various shades of distraught and annoyed showing on their faces. She shook her head, irritated at the lack of reaction.

"Hmph. Looking at you all, I would think you're at a wake rather than preparing to take on an enemy army! Such low spirits in the wake of a single setback such as this. How pitiful."

"Lassie."

The Dagda spoke up, raising a hand and gesturing with the meaty limb as he downed a four-liter glass of beer.

"If ye dun' mind me sayin'...we're hirplin', 'ere. Th' dug's taken not jus' th' Lia Fail, but everythin' else we've got, an' whas' worse, th' lad who knew th' most about our enemy's deid."

"And so then, we should simply sit back and let the fool do everything he's ever wanted?"

He raised his eyebrows as Hel sighed. A more solemn look washed over her face.

"Look. I lost someone important to me recently as well…I was betrayed by those who I had grown to care about, and he was killed by that reprehensible gaggle of freaks. Did I not feel pain and sorrow? Of course I did. But I did not so thoroughly *give up* as I feel you all have in front of me. What will we accomplish by doing this? True, we are on our back foot. We don't know how to get to the home of Man Unkind, we lack much of the firepower we once had, and one of our most crucial allies—I believe, I didn't know him for too long—has passed. That does not mean that we must stop fighting."

She looked to Odin, sharing a steely look between the two of them, and returned her gaze to the crowd. Her speech was getting to them, and as the Tuatha De, the humans, everyone present listened, a new feeling began to rise in them. They whispered to one another, still wary of trusting the one who The Dog-Faced Man had used to sneak his way into Avalon.

"Hel is right."

Rodion stood up, stern as solid copper as he joined Hel at the front of the room. He held the crown of thorns in one hand and had the coat slung over his shoulder.

"Each of you are here because you continued to fight, even in face of danger, of hardship, of suffering. Oberon and Titania remain concerned for the good of their subjects through this invasion, and Medb continues to defend them even still."

Oberon and Titania looked up, then at each other with a shocked, then loving expression.

"Morganwg remains here because they pursued their dream despite fears of persecution, and here, they sit among their ancestral enemies and intend to make peace."

Iolo Morganwg perked up upon hearing their name said, and upon noticing many of the Tuatha De looking at them, meekly clapped despite not knowing what was going on.

"Odin and Dagda fight to protect those things they hold dear: for Odin, his country, for Dagda, his friends. Even in face of great monsters and widespread ridicule, they remain steadfast in their beliefs."

Odin sighed and rolled his singular eye as the Dagda laughed and pulled him close.

"Fionn strives to protect his country and prove his worth as a warrior at any cost. He has been beaten, bruised, and burnt, and does he give up? No. He pushes forward."

Fionn looked up at Rodion, hands clasped together. His misty eyes were shaking, but his expression was as deadpan as ever. The doctor put a hand on Hel's shoulder.

"Hel has stayed strong despite death of her brother, and I…"

He put a fist to his own chest, hesitating before speaking.

"...I continued to live, I chose to keep going, even when I felt I did not deserve to. If there is one thing The Prince has done…did…easier than any of us, it was to keep moving. We cannot stand by idly and let Man Unkind, who desires to decimate this world—this world full of yes, hardship, but just as much if not more *perseverance*—usher in new paradigm in their ideals. We must fight, if not for him, for ourselves. For the world! *Za budushcheye!*[51]"

Rodion thrust his fist into the air, and to his surprise, he heard cheering.

~

In a matter of minutes, all of the tables in the dining hall had been pushed together in order to create one large table for everyone to gather around and speak to one another over. Rodion, having slipped on The Prince's coat (as it was always rather baggy on him, and though the doctor felt it was more than a little tight on him, he never feared for it ripping), leaned over the table and peered over the papers strewn about it like snow.

One of the DUO agents spoke.

"Though it was the position of the Department of Defense that Man Unkind was not a threat to the general public until recently, we have been keeping tabs on them as we do with all up-and-coming religions. Here is the sum of all knowledge the United States government has on them."

Fionn picked up one of the papers.

"Why is most of the text on this one black?"

"That page holds top-secret information, and so it has been redacted."

[51] Lit. "For the future!"

“I figured a situation like this would not be beholden to such secrets.”

The agent didn't respond as he was shoved out of the way by Iolo, the Fomorian curiously rifling through them.

“List of known agents…what does and doesn’t work against them…reported sightings within the United States…well, this group of nasties is all over the map though, aren’t they? Are sightings in the United States especially useful?”

“If you want international sightings, Sant Director Morganwg, you will have to contact INTERPOL, and I believe they’re busy at the moment.”

Rodion huffed and shuffled through a couple of the papers.

“Well, this is all quite good information, but is useless if we do not have a way to get to their headquarters. Prince called it ‘Broken Tracks of Meinung’, do you have anything on that?”

“That information is held within ‘Documents Responsive to Public Incident 42323-6 7(b)(3) Update 04’.”

The doctor stared the agent down, and eventually, he pointed at one of the papers.

“It’s that one.”

“Spasibo.”

Rodion plucked the file up off the table and began to pour over it, Hel and Fionn leaning in to read over his wide shoulders. It was mostly a lot of gobbledygook that neither of them recognized, but something did catch Hel’s eye.

“Rodion, do you see this passage here?”

“Hm? This one?”

“Yes, yes, the one I’m pointing to! Read it!”

He cleared his throat.

“The Broken Tracks of Meinung, from cursory eyewitness accounts and reports of those who have escaped it, have described it as being a ‘metaphysical’ place rather than a ‘tangible’ place. In contrast to Earth and the locations therein such as fae settlements, the Broken Tracks are closer to Hell, Heaven, or any of the many celestial planes of existence that deities take residence within in terms of construction. It lacks a concrete location in relation to other landmarks, instead existing ‘as itself’, and is believed to have been formed from the same power of collective belief that spawns the more mainstream realms. While other intangible realms are connected to each other via [redacted], the Broken Tracks appear to only create tenuous connections with our mortal and concrete world via outside stimulation.”

Fionn blinked. “Metaphysical? Tangible? Concrete?”

“I must confess, I am slightly at a loss as well. Why highlight this, Hel?”

“Basically, it’s saying that the Broken Tracks are kind of like a closed door. It won’t open on its own, and it’s not naturally open: someone needs to open it for people to enter. Thus, you need an outside party—probably either one of the leaders or something that can open impromptu holes—to create a passageway into it.”

Hel beamed with smugness as she reached into her robe.

“Lucky for us, I just so happen to have…”

She reached a bit further in.

"...To have, uh…"

She retracted her hand, coming up empty.

"...Um. Shit. I must have dropped it when I was falling through to Heaven…urgh, how annoying! If we only had that damn thing, this would be so much easier!"

Morganwg tilted their head.

"What are you looking for, strange half-dead woman?"

"I had on my person a small black opal blade, capable of cutting what couldn't be cut, and being unable to cut what could be…I used it to escape Odin and the rest of the Aesir and Vanir—" She glanced to Odin, who was glaring at her. "—as well as to escape the Broken Tracks afterwards."

"A blade that cuts what can't be cut, but can't cut what can…sounds rather useless. I mean, that's like buying a cheese knife that can't cut cheese, if it can't do the one thing it was made for, then what's the point? At that point, you might as well be eating your fish with the salad fork, and by then, you're basically spitting in God's face."

She glared at them. "Ahem. Among the things it could cut included the fabric of space-time, allowing for travel between realms, hence *why* I felt it would be useful in our current situation. But, chances are, if it's gone, then it's really gone…"

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Odin, stroking his beard, stood up. From the floor above them, the two crows Huginn and Muninn flew down in a corkscrew before perching, one each, on his shoulders.

"My two crows, Huginn and Muninn, fly over the world daily from dawn to dinnertime, gathering information on the affairs in Midgard. I have not been sending them due to all this…ugliness, but I believe that sending them out to search for this black blade of yours on Earth could prove useful."

Huginn squawked.

"Us?! You're sending us out there?!"

Muninn cawed.

"Awk! It's a battlefield down there! Literally!"

"No way we're going!"

"No way, no way, no way!"

"Now, now, Huginn. Muninn. You must understand the gravity of our situation, yes? If the black blade fell from her grasp as she was coming to Heaven, then perhaps it reached a realm that is 'near' it. Near in the…metaphysical sense, I suppose."

The birds flapped their wings angrily.

"Methinks old man Odin's finally lost it!"

"I have chicks back home I need to get back to!"

The Dagda silently brought the Morrigan closer to him in a one-armed hug as he listened to the birds bicker with their owner, thankful her crow qualities were much more…palatable. Hel groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose, wrenching her eyes shut.

“If it will get those two cockamaimie crows out of our hair for a bit, I suppose it can’t hurt. Go send them. Maybe it’ll help with my headache as well. It’s a short dagger with a blade of black opal, roughly as long as a football, decorated with what I believe were Arabic runes. What was it called…Human…Hum…Hu-Hume Gibbetine! Right! So, perhaps you could ask around for that.”

Odin nodded. “As you wish…Hel.” He turned to the two birds, raising both fingers.

“Huginn, Muninn! Go and scour the world, seeking this Hume Gibbetine!”

The crows muttered to one another.

“(We aren’t getting paid enough for this.)”

“(You’re telling me! Where’s my reimbursement?)”

Nevertheless, the two black birds swirled in the air gracefully before rocketing straight through one of the open windows of Avalon castle, disappearing among the battles and mist outside. Hel sighed. Thank goodness. Those two *never* shut up. She waved a hand to Rodion.

“In the meantime, why don’t we discuss plans of attack for when we *do* arrive there?”

The doctor furrowed his brow.

“Plans? How can we make plans? None of us have been to Broken Tracks before, and only person who may have is…well, you know.”

“Well…”

Hel grinned slyly, brushing the files off to the side and forming an icicle pick in her hand.

“Let’s just say that I happen to have gotten a rather in-depth tour of the place against my will, courtesy of our canine corrival. Apologies for this, Dagda, but I’m sure you have plenty of other tables around. The layout may not be the same as when I was there, but I’m sure the landmarks would remain the same: otherwise, how would anyone know where they were going?”

She jabbed the ice pick into the wood and began scratching.

“When I entered, I appeared here…”

~

Hours passed, and by dinnertime, Hel had managed to carve a rudimentary map of the Broken Tracks into the table, with Oberon and Titania copying it onto paper to hand out to everyone. She used two miniature spikes of ice as a makeshift drawing compass, gesturing to where she had drawn a large head. Rodion and Fionn looked on, the doctor’s hands folded in front of him and the warrior gnawing on a roasted bit of rabbit he had stashed away.

“So there, in the head where they keep all of their treasures, this should be one of our utmost priorities. If what I believe is going to happen will happen, they’ll be placing everything they scrounged from The Prince of Fuck All’s coat into this head with the rest of their magical things. A team should go there, as well as one towards this large cyclops thing called ‘Nobody’s Enemy’, and another towards the Parlor of Miracles. There was a suspicious building connected to that accursed place, one that dog-face didn't seem to want me seeing, so that might be a good place to start as well.”

"What is this 'Nobody's Enemy'?"

"If I had to wager a guess, I'd say it's the dog-face's home. Or at least, what passes for his home. No matter where you are, you can always see it and another figure that sort of looks like an old man mixed with a birdcage. The Shadow probably lives there."

Fionn's emerald eyes turned to Hel.

"Should a team not go there?"

"No."

That came out a little harsher than she wanted it to, and she felt herself tense up before calming once more. Hel cleared her throat.

"Ahem. No. The Shadow can and will obliterate anyone that comes near him. If he appears, run away as far as possible until you lose him. Focus on making them lose what they've worked so hard to gather over the years, and if possible, free those who are still in their grasp. Hopefully, there shouldn't be too many agents there—if they're all over the world, chances are they won't have enough troops to properly back up their home base."

Right on time, they could hear the sound of large wings flapping, and a black shape swooped in through one of the windows. Morganwg ducked and covered their head.

"Oh lord, did they make it in?!"

Odin raised a hand. "Calm yourself, director. It is nothing more than…" He trailed off as he felt the crow perch on his shoulder. The singular crow. It had its head lowered, a large burlap sack held in its mouth.

"Huginn?"

Huginn shook his head.

"Mrrngrhrfrrr ggrlgrmbrf."

"Please, spit out the sack before you speak."

The crow lowered the burlap sack onto the table. "It's terrible out there in Midgard. Tanks in the streets fighting giant ambulatory sets of ears, people being abducted on the streets by balloons with nooses hanging from them, floating heads wrapped in barbed wire being shot down by government agents with guns…There's no way life can go back to normal after this. Even Muninn was…he was…" He sniffled, unable to vocalize what he meant without his voice breaking, and Odin gently ran a hand down his head and back.

"You've done more than enough, Huginn. Muninn will return someday. Did you find what I sent you two for?"

"I…I think so. To be safe, we gathered every short black dagger we could find."

The crow nudged the bag with his beak, and the whole thing spilled out. From the opening, countless black blades and daggers fell out. There had to be over a hundred in the bag…

Hel shook her head and sighed as the humans boggled at the pile of weapons.

"Well, I suppose we'd better get rifling."

And rifle they did, the whole group at the table digging through the bag and being careful not to accidentally cut themselves on any of the blades. For the sturdier (and more foolhardy) of the

Tuatha De, it became a handy metric: if they couldn't cut their finger on it, it was either quite dull, or it could be the Hume Gibbetine they were looking for.

Rodion set the items aside as he judged them. "Box cutter. Scalpel. Athame."

Fionn arranged them neatly by shape. "Dirk. Kirpan. Sgian dubh."

Hel haphazardly threw unsatisfactory ones over her shoulder. "Pocketknife. Butter knife. Cleaver."

Titania excitedly held something up. "I think I found somethin'!" She managed to catch everyone's attention for the few moments preceding Oberon lowering her soft arms. "Kimmer, thas' a machete."

"O-Oh dear, really? My bad!"

Odin turned to Hel. "Does this blade use magic to do what it does? Perhaps those with a more acute sense of magic could place it among the group."

"No clue. I couldn't feel a thing when I was holding it, though…Eventually, someone's gotta find it."

They went through the pile as a group for hours, everyone involved getting quite sick of looking at black blades. Morganwg, bored out of their mind and surrounded by DUO agents furiously cataloging everything in the sack that was of interest, sighed and sluggishly picked up more daggers.

"Bagh nakh…puukko…djanbiyya…cinquedea…"

Hel looked up from her handful of cheese knives.

"Wait, djanbiyya?"

"...Poignard…er, s-sorry, what was that?"

"Hand the djanbiyya over here, mono-eye!"

Odin cast a judgmental glare her way as Hel reached her hand out to snatch the djanbiyya dagger from the sleepy Fomorian. The curved black opal blade inscribed with Persian runes, the short hilt, yes! Yes, this was it! But just to test…

She twirled it in her hand and jabbed it into the air, bringing it down only a few centimeters. She could hear the unearthly *rip* it made, as well as the small void it made in mid-air. This was definitely it. Now, how to close it…?

Curiously, she reached her fingers over…and, like a plastic bag, she pinched it shut. Hel raised the djanbiyya up into the air proudly.

"Thank the Nine Realms, we've finally found it!"

She held it up high with a grin, and everyone present let out a half-hearted and exhausted cheer. Hel turned it over in her hands, excited to be finally holding it once again…but then, she remembered how The Dog-Faced Man had emerged from her chest only yesterday. She had made sure to bathe thoroughly this morning to prevent such an incident occurring again, but she would be lying if she said she still trusted herself with it.

"Here, boy with antlers. You hold it."

She tossed it to Fionn, the warrior catching it and looking up at her blankly.

"Thank you, Hel. I will keep it safe within my oxter bag."

"Yeah, just don't go running off with it, alright?"

As he stashed it away in the bag to his side, everyone else agreed that, after eating dinner, it would be good to turn in for the night—if nothing else, at least to regain their spirits and energy for the next day.

The world would still be under siege whether they rushed today or tomorrow.

~

The next day came, and everyone felt a little more hopeful about the future. The DUO agents who had tagged along received message after message from the devices they had brought along—something like a telegram mixed with a whoopee cushion, from the few times Rodion caught a glimpse of it—got bad news after bad news about what was going on down on Earth, but they chose not to share this news with the rest of the group. What good would it do them to hear that half of the population of London have been turned into fish, or that Australia was experiencing an epidemic of what could only be called 'skin-tinting stripe-pox'? It was best for them all to focus on the mission at hand.

After breakfast and a recap, Hel held the Hume Gibbetine up.

"Now, we should be rather careful in dealing with this thing. I got lucky both times: It took me to the Broken Tracks from Asgard, and from the Broken Tracks it took me to Heaven. We dunno where it will take us if we go from Tir na nOg…but I do have a theory. This trinket cuts through time and space, and I'm not a physicist or anything of the sort, but I doubt it'd be possible to head to the same place twice from here."

The Dagda scratched his head. "How d'ye figure that?"

"Well, imagine a sheet of fabric that you stab through and cut an inch-long slit in with scissors. Even if you're cutting from the same sheet, if you want to make another hole, you need to cut somewhere else."

He stared blankly at her, as did many of the others in the dining hall. Hel sighed.

"Basically, my plan is we keep making and closing holes until we make it to the Broken Tracks."

One of the DUO agents stood up.

"That simply isn't feasible, Hel Lokidottir."

"Is there *really* a need to call me by my full name? Hel will do just fine."

"Without divulging explicitly classified information, this world is connected to many, many other worlds, and any means that allows you to travel from one to the other follows 'paths' between the home realm and the destination realm. Opening these portals could lead you anywhere not only related to Earth, but to those of other planets, of other worlds that not even the United States government can dream of. Not only that, what about unknown beings entering here through these entering. It is extremely risky."

“Extremely risky, huh?” Hel pretended to think over her decisions, before shanking the air in front of her and lowering herself down until the gash in time-space was as tall as a person. She flourished with her hands and grinned expectantly.

“Then, who wants to go first?”

For the rest of the day, everyone took turns quickly ducking in and out of the portals the Hume Gibbetine generated. The typical procedure was this: Hel would open a portal, someone would come up, they would enter fully (or, after Huginn ducked his head in and found his portal was made five thousand feet in the air above an industrial wasteland, just poke their heads through), and if it wasn’t the Broken Tracks of Meinung they saw, they exited and Hel closed the portal before opening up a new one right beside it. With this process, closing portals and opening them up in a new location, she and the rest traveled all around the castle, making it up the stairs, through the kitchen, in and out of the bedrooms, and even in the lavatories—curiously spic-and-span.

Everyone got a chance to duck their heads into a portal, sometimes upwards of five times depending on how willing they were, and what they saw ranged from “uneventful” to “horrifying” to “downright strange”. Rodion peeked in one, and when he pulled his head out, it was covered in blood. He wasn’t injured, though: it was just raining blood there. One of the DUO agents almost walked all the way in before being pulled back by the others, curling up in the corner murmuring about impossible angles and the wretched smell of fish. Fionn stuck his head in at knee height, and found himself looking straight back out the portal at all the confused Tuatha De at eye height. He went all the way through and fell down in the process.

This process was tedious, time-consuming, and often harrowing mentally, so after a quick tea break, it was agreed that if they didn't find the Broken Tracks by dinnertime, they would retire for the night and sleep on deciding whether to continue the portal-searching or to try something else.

Rodion yawned, stretching as he did and feeling The Prince’s coat cling to his large body. Hel leaned against a table, looking over the Persian runes on the Hume Gibbetine. She was talking to Odin, and though her words still had bite, she wasn’t spiteful in her speech. They were discussing what it could mean, and if it was some sort of ancient incantation. Odin made a note of it and agreed to ask Alilat, Al-’Uzza, and Manat[52] if they could read it once everything had blown over. The doctor stuck his head in…

…And he looked up to see roads floating in the air, being walked upon by Seussian contraption-creatures that honked and whistled as they strutted on by, a giant blue glove flying through the air like a rocket, the air flip-flopping between deathly humid, horridly dry, tepid room temperature, the smells of smoke and new car and gasoline and death filling his nostrils…

He yanked his head back and turned around.

“This is the one. The Broken Tracks, I know it.”

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[52] Three major pre-Islamic goddesses whose temples were demolished by order of the prophet Muhammad, who is said to have once mistaken their words as divine revelation from God. They have no hard feelings about the end of their worship, and mostly just spend their time granting blessings and getting their nails done together.

Hel, looking up from her conversation, stuck her head in to verify it—the doctor was right. She gave him some simple congratulations and started to close up the portal, leaving only a hole the size of her fist open so that she could expand it at any time. It was quite late now, and everyone's energy had faded once more…not to mention, the portal had been opened in the middle of one of the hallways, so many people were crowded together. She pulled out a chair.

"Boy with antlers, where are you?"

Fionn stepped forward.

"My name is Fionn mac Cumhaill, son of—"

"Yes, yes. Are you good at staying awake for long periods of time?"

"I am adequate at it, I think."

"Perfect! You sit here and stand guard to make sure nothing comes out through that portal into the castle."

Fionn hesitated, but then took a seat. The agent who had brought up the very concept of 'things coming in through the portals' shifted uncomfortably in place, and Rodion lightly pat her shoulder.

"Er, Hel?"

"Yeah?"

"Would it be good idea to let Fionn stand guard? He is a warrior, true, but we have many warriors here among the Tuatha de Danann. Perhaps two of them could stay up and take shifts? Not to mention, Fionn carries the Hume Gibbetine—is it possible they could sense it through the portal and notice us?"

Hel rubbed her sharp chin, closing her eyes. "Good point."

She held out her hand. "Boy with antlers, hand me the dagger."

The warrior wordlessly produced the dagger, furrowing his brow at Hel. She tossed it to Rodion, who fumbled with it in his hands before clutching both fists around the short handle.

"You toss it into The Prince's coat. We don't need it ourselves anymore—at least, we shouldn't until we need to leave, so it'd be best to stash it away 'til then."

"I-I suppose…"

Rodion quietly chucked the djanbiyya into his coat and sighed as Hel announced that everyone had done good work and that they would plan and begin the counter-attack tomorrow, once the group was well-rested. Silent, he looked down and contemplated his own role in what he supposed could now be called 'the operation'. He had been quite passive since The Prince of Fuck All died—even moreso than he had been before. In fact, he was almost relieved to let Hel do all the work. He was never much of a leader. He always was a follower, not a role model—and that's the way it always was, he guessed. Still, he couldn't help but kick himself. Is this really what he should be doing? He should be up there, making the hard decisions, organizing everyone…Hel was probably emotionally stronger than him. That was probably it.

The doctor internally wished he still was as callous to the loss of people close to him as he had been twenty years ago. Then, he felt that was a horrible thing to wish. He was just hurting after The Prince's death, right? But he should get over it. He should…

Everyone went to bed that night simultaneously nervous about the upcoming ‘main event’, and anxious to show what they were made of.

~

The next morning was judgment day. The DUO agents receiving word from the cities of Earth’s telegram-cushions had completely dried up. Nobody was sending anything, good or bad. One could argue that as a good sign, but no one would agree. It was a grim omen, if it *had* to be described in such dramatic terms. Luckily, the agents of the Department of Unusual Occurrences were used to wide-scale disaster on an unfathomable level, so only a few were emotionally affected. They were allowed to stay behind with the promise of unpaid vacation days once everything blew over. Hel gathered everyone beside the fist-sized portal (where Fionn had dutifully sat and stared at for the past couple of hours while everyone else slept, stating he’d fallen asleep sitting up when questioned on why he seemed so suspiciously well-rested) and held out her hand.

“Draw straws, everyone. This will determine who’s in what group.”

As prompted, everyone present drew straws and held them up to Hel.

“Alright then. Rodion, Odin, Dagda, and the mono-eye will head to the Parlor of Miracles and see if they can set the people there free.”

Odin and the Dagda looked to each other and sighed as Morganwg sidled between the two of them, wrapping their small fingers around the two gods’ waists. “Thank goodness! For a second there, I was worried I was in danger of dying! But, now that I know I’ve got the Frenzied One and the Great God on my team, I can rest easy! Er, n-not to say I won’t be doing anything. I will. Promise!” Rodion just sighed and sidled up next to them, arms pensively crossed in front of him.

“Boy with antlers, fairy king, crow-lady, and the crotchety doctor over there will head to the Head in order to break their bank and cripple their mission.”

Fionn looked to his team, consisting of Oberon (who flapped his wings and gave a dorky double thumbs-up—stringy and unfit, but perhaps he could be of use), the Morrigan (who, as Macha, quietly preened herself—she is undoubtedly strong, the symbol of death among Tuatha De), and Dian Cecht (who meekly waved—useless in a fight, but potent as a doctor), and nodded. “So it is.”

“The crow, agents, fairy queen, and myself will head to Nobody’s Enemy, hopefully to keep dog-face and/or the Shadow distracted.”

Huginn cawed to voice his displeasure as he landed on Titania’s head. She giggled. “Oh dear…’tis a good thing I’m nice and sturdy, but ‘tis also a shame I can’t be on th’ same team as my beloved Oberon!” The agents didn't say a word. She just rolled her eyes.

“That’s what the straws picked, and that’s what I’m going with. Each team will also get one-third of the Tuatha De backing them. You all can pick whichever team you want to go with, just make sure they’re roughly even.”

All of the Tuatha De turned to all of the other Tuatha De, and fights immediately broke out as people argued over who should be in whose team. Glasses were thrown. Hair was pulled. But ultimately, as is tradition, they managed to pull themselves together long enough to arrange themselves into groups. Morganwg gulped, seeing all of the scary-looking deities behind them. "(S-Scary…)"

Hel raised the Hume Gibbertine.

"Either have the map memorized or refer to your copy of it if you need a reminder of what you're looking for. Some of you may—no, some of you *will* die. With any luck, you'll be back in a couple months or so, but try to avoid it, alright? The moment I open this portal, I'm opening the door for all sorts of hell to come pouring through, so everyone's going to pour in as fast as they can. Everyone ready?"

Affirmation went through the crowd.

"Everyone prepared?"

A loud whoop sounded out.

"Everyone ready to take care of these freaks once and for all?"

Waves of cheers emanated from the rowdy bunch.

In one smooth motion, Hel brought the dagger down and tore open a hole in space-time. In front of them, the entrance to the Broken Tracks of Meinung lay.

"Then *go!"*

Her voice was nearly drowned out by battle cries, as the first group shoved their way in and began charging towards their destination.

A train rolled past.

CHAPTER 32:

The Prince woke up, and there was nothing.

Not darkness. Not white. There was simply nothing. He didn't even know if he was standing or sitting. Was he on solid ground? No matter how far down he bent, he couldn't feel anything. In fact, come to think of it, he couldn't even see himself. He could feel his hands, and when he pressed them to his chest, he could feel his hands on his chest…which felt fine. Now that was funny. Wasn't he just shot? And yet, there wasn't even the slightest bit of pain…he could feel no wind, he wasn't hurting or hungry or anything, he was just…there.

Some part of him wondered if this is what being in Limbo was like, before remembering Limbo was indeed a place he had very nearly visited only a couple of days ago. He equated it mentally to the sensation just before your body drifted off into sleep.

He looked around. Nothing to his left. Nothing to his right. He felt around himself. Was he naked? God, he hoped not. No point being naked if nobody's around to see it. However, he couldn't feel any clothes. Not even his coat…his coat! What happened to his coat? He tried to turn around in place, but couldn't even see where he was turning.

The Prince quirked an eyebrow, looking in a direction he thought was up.

He reached above his head, and felt…no crown of thorns. The Stoic-Passion Relic was gone. That, at least, was a slight relief. Then he looked back up once more. It was hard to tell exactly where he was looking without any sense of place. If you close your eyes, you'll know what direction you're facing since you know what direction you were in before you closed them. If you're spun around or you enter an unfamiliar room, however, there's no telling where you are or what you're doing without feeling around. Without anything to feel, how could he tell where he was?

His voice came out.

"Hello?"

That was a good sign. He could still hear his own voice, so he wasn't blind *and* deaf. Though, come to think of it, he could see…well, no, he couldn't see. That was kind of an oversimplification. It felt as though he was imagining something quite strongly, and not of his own accord.

"Anyone here?"

He spoke again, more just to assure himself he was still alive than anything else, while the sensation of this 'imagining' grew stronger within his mind. It was akin to an especially vivid daydream, where you swear you can catch the faintest glimpses of shadow people and pixies out of the corners of your eyes. The full picture of what he was experiencing became clearer, unfortunately only doing so in clarity rather than comprehension. He tried to squint, before remembering he wasn't exactly 'seeing' or 'hearing' what he was experiencing.

"Hello? What is this? Where am I?"

What was he even asking? Who was he asking? He barely knew what he was feeling, but The Prince couldn't help but ask, if only to suit his own ego.

"How d'you know my name?"

Apparently, some part of the ethereal images that flashed through his head had his name in it. He could recognize that it was—

"Sorry, excuse me? What do you mean apparently?"

…

"Pardonnez-moi? Are we connected?"

Oh dear. Can you see me?

"Well, not exactly 'see'. Moreso just…feel. I can feel you, as bawdy as that sounds, but it's not quite seeing and not quite hearing. It's like someone's slamming my brain onto a newspaper like putty and the words it copied from the ink are seeping in."

Wuh-oh. That's not good…how did you even get here? You're supposed to be dead.

"That's what *I* thought too, love, but apparently God had other plans. And I…hold the phone. Are you…?"

No, I'm not God.

"Right. Right, I knew that. Then, what are you?"

I can't exactly tell you that.

"Fine then. Be like that. Can't you at least give me a body and some solid floor though, for Pete's sake?"

Of course. The Prince blinked, and when his eyes opened once more, he could see that he was indeed fully visible. His knobbly fingers, his slender limbs, his poofy red hair, and…the rest of his naked body had been made visible. With newfound confidence, he placed his hands on his hips and stomped once. The ground was solid, but smooth like polished glass. He grinned.

"Now that's more like it. Shame I haven't got my coat, but…I believe that may be the least of my worries. How do you know me, dear?"

Let's phrase it like this. I've been watching over you. I've recorded all of your adventures from the past week, all your thoughts, and I've organized them to show to others. You're not alone, of course, I've been observing the others too: Rodion, Fionn, Hel, Odin, the Dagda, all of them.

He blushed. "You know all of my innermost thoughts, then? Rude! It's impolite to peek into a lady's private matters. And for that matter, quit describing what I'm doing! I know bloody well what I'm doing!"

Do you?

"Yes, of *course* I do. You don't do this—"

The Prince made some kind of hand sign.

"—and just *not* know what that means, it's obvious! On a more pressing note though, how did I get here in the first place? I died, right?"

Well, yes, you did. I made it so you did…though, not me. I just described what happened. You sort of brought it on yourself, in a sense.

“I brought it on myself?!”

You were the one who stole the locket from Rodion. Again. The Prince’s offended expression soured, and he hugged himself defensively as he looked down.

“...I…didn’t mean to steal that from him. Honest, I didn't. I’ll own up to everything else, but that, it was…I never wanted to take it.”

And yet, you did.

“Well, you know all my thoughts and feelings and God knows what else apparently, why do *you* think I took it?”

You took it because you’ve been stealing things from people for so long that it’s become kind of a compulsion. It’s a defense mechanism, essentially: you’ve been running for so long from the cult that you’ve wrapped up much of your personality into becoming a martyr and taking from others so that they won’t have those important items taken by Man Unkind. In a way, it’s kind of like showing that you care—you consider it valuable enough to not want it taken by the cult.

The Prince shuddered, swallowing with a dry throat. He said nothing, likely because he knew I was right.

“B-Because I know you’re right? Ha. Terrible joke, love. Stick to flowery descriptions and purple prose. You don’t know a thing about me.”

Technically, I don’t. I’m not even a character, in a technical sense. But you need to face what happened in your past if you want to prove you can make it back. Your lover and your friends are risking tooth and nail to avenge you and take down the cult themselves.

“By themselves?! The meshigener bunch, they’ll get beaten to a pulp! They don’t know a thing about Man Unkind, I…I-I’m the only one who can take them down. Who *should* take them down. They’re the ones that took everything from me. Just let me go back now! You can do that, right?”

I can.

“Yes!”

But I won’t.

“No!”

Not yet, at least. You need to own up to what you’ve done first. You can’t keep running and hiding, humping everything that moves, speaking with that ridiculous accent and that poorly-used Polari slang, lying as easily as you breathe. Things need to change. You need to change. The question is, are you willing to?

The Prince was about to protest. What he’s done? He hasn’t done anything! He doesn’t run, and he doesn’t lie! And what was this about humping everything that moved? He had better standards than that, if only slightly! …But as he thought back to the expression of hurt and betrayal that wracked Rodion’s face when he saw that locket fall from his coat, The Prince couldn’t help but hang his head. He lowered into a squat, appearing to make himself as small as possible.

"...Fine. Just…I'll do it. I-I'll do it for him. I'll change. I want him to…I want him to forgive me."

That's the easy part. The hard part is trying to forgive yourself.

"C-Come now, love, that was *such* a cheesy line…"

Cheesy or not, it's the truth. Now, just be patient for a bit. Sit back and watch the show. The Prince looked up and around from his squatting position.

"Watch the show? What am I watching?"

You're watching the next chapter.

CHAPTER 33: Train Kept a-Rollin'

The entry into the Broken Tracks of Meinung was not a smooth affair in the slightest. As gods and fae, humans and warriors, all manner of men and women and neither poured into the small rip in space-time, craning their necks upwards, they could smell the stench of burning coal.

Above them, an upside-down city hung in the air like the world's largest chandelier, nothing but a ghost town full of nothing but ghost people, and beneath them, sponge cake and gravel mixed together like paint and water to form the ground they walked on. Buildings that were Spanish, Latvian, Sri Lankan, Taino, Urdu in construction, in strange shapes that resembled Tetronimos and the results of a Brutalist architect sneezing while drawing up his blueprints lined the 'street' they stared down, which snaked and spiraled upwards in a helix. A yellow fire hydrant spouted lube and liquid courage from the chunk of earth it anchored itself upon. A sudden cold breeze drifted through, followed by a cloud of intense humidity. It felt as though the world itself was in flux—and indeed, it likely was, as even on the most minute scale, investigating the brickwork and 'architecture' showed that nothing remained static. It all was constantly changing, even if in that ethereal and artistic way that Van Gogh's paintings are seen by a mind with a stimulated imagination.

In the distance, two immense figures stood. One, the bust of an orange-skinned cyclops with a dopey and wistful expression on its malformed face. The other, resembling a humanoid birdcage with a grey robe draped over its 'shoulders', a wide-brimmed hat placed on top. One was Nobody's Enemy, and that was the cyclops, so the other must be…

Rodion's jaw hung slack as he took in the scenery, looking around with a dumbfounded expression on his face. He took a few steps forward, marveling at how disjointed, dysfunctional, dis…anything, the pocket realm was—

"Cron, look out!"

He felt a yank on the back of his (well, The Prince's) coat and stumbled back.

A train rolled past, the old-fashioned kind of steam locomotive that ran on a team of burly soot-covered men pouring coals into a burner and cow-catcher—the grill-like apparatus that sat beneath the rounded front of the conductor's car. It chugged like the heavy wheezing of an old man, belching out smoke as it rolled past. Rodion got a sudden flashback to his past as he heard the familiar sound. He looked back at Fionn, who had saved him from being turned into a splotch on the tracks.

"...A train…?"

"I do not know what this immense mechanical monstrosity is exactly, but they appear to be very prevalent in this area. See, there are not only tracks at your feet—" He gestured Mac an Luin to the tracks in front of Rodion. "—But they travel on the side of the buildings, floating through the air, making spirals and loop-de-loops and various other shapes. What inconvenient transportation."

Morganwg shuddered, staying close to the two gods that were on their team.

"I dunno if they're *for* transportation. There's no stops. They just seem to…keep going. Look, see, that one's going down…and then up…and then through that pool of floating oil…and then it broke apart and reformed itself into the shape of a cross…and then it reformed back into its initial shape…I hate this place already."

Hel warily put her arm out as she shut the portal behind them, leaving only that fist-shaped entrance.

"Alright everyone, remember. Our ticket back home is here, beside the…"

She looked around quickly, trying to figure out a landmark, before ducking into an alleyway and dragging out what appeared to be a marble statue of a young man with his hands hovering over his distraught, tortured expression. The inscription read, *'For the lost and hopeless / For the grieving and meaningless / I give you my belated blessing / The torment is not all there is / PENTHUS'*. Hel shoved it beside the portal.

"Beside the statue of the crying man."

She formed two ice spikes into her hands, stepping up to the tracks and looking to the others.

"It's quiet right now. That's good. You come across any agents, you either run, or you fight. Only fight as a last result, and otherwise, play keep-away. You've got your groups, right? Perfect. Once we cross this threshold, we're officially starting all this."

Rodion swallowed, looking away without a word as Hel raised the two spikes.

"Good luck, everyone, and remember your groups' objectives!"

She stepped onto the tracks.

Another train rolled past.

Hel retracted her foot just in time to keep herself from being run over, stumbling backwards with unsteady gait.

"...And, uh, watch out for the trains. They come every few minutes here. You'll get sick of them soon enough."

~

The Dog-Faced Man, appearing now as little more than a frenzied sketch, kneeled at the foot of the Kaput Caput, the enormous robotic head that held all of Man Unkind's accrued trinkets and baubles. It pulsed with energy, its eyes closed to keep all of that chaotic and mingling magical power safely guarded. Laid out across it were seven stones arranged, a hexagram drawn in an unknown substance between each of the six of the outer ring and one in the center.

The Stone of Jacob, a flat pillow-like rock upon which Jacob saw visions of Heaven when he laid his head to rest in Bethel.

The Fetter Gleipnir, less of a stone and more like a shimmering rainbow-tinted ribbon that once bound the great wolf Fenrir.

The Lia Fail, the upright stone somewhat shorter than an average human—the treasure of the fae and the Tuatha de Danann.

The Hope Diamond, the 45.5-carat blue gem that holds the angry spirits of all those who died with the jewel in their possession.

The Sessho-Seki, the misshapen boulder with warding charms strung around it, holding the angry ghost of the yokai courtesan Tamamo-no-Mae.

The Chandrakanta, a teardrop-shaped gem said to come from the Moon itself, which remained in Shiva's possession for many millennia.

And finally, in the center, the Chunk of Alatyr, a bone-white fragment carved with complex swirls as though the wind itself was trapped within its craggy form.

The Dog-Faced Man, his outlines jittering, liable to jump off of the illusion of ripped paper that surrounded his unstable form, kneeled to the ground proselytizing, praying with his enormous hands clasped together. He muttered under his breath, drool pouring from his razor-filled mouth and burning away at the monochrome ground like acid.

"bless me father for you see that i have done everything you wished i have done tat which could not be done i took from the fairies the ghosts the beasts the humans the gods the angels what more what more could we want for"

His breath hitched, and he looked up at the Kaput Caput with eyes as wide as dinner plates, mad exuberance filling his words.

"the door will be opened. the door will finally be opened and can you imagine what will be on the other side? faith. and hope. and charity. The heart and the brain and the body makes it three, cant you see, it's a Magic Numberrrr and you see we will be ready. You see we will bring into we will usher in this bbally good universe of no more war and no more hate, no more countries no more love NONE OF IT. And it will be a utopia for the world. The trains will have all broken down."

Sir.

The low and dulcet French-accented voice of the Shadow rang out from behind The Dog-Faced Man. He whirled around, turning each part of his body—head, torso, legs—one by one until he faced the tall and round figure behind him. In a blink, he was no longer a sketch, but was now dressed like a lounge singer, glittering sequins sparkling off of his tacky pink tux. He giggled with a creaking wheeze in his voice, grinning as he thrust himself forward and embraced the large man. He buried his muzzle into the Shadow's pitch-black chest, staring up at him with dilated pupils.

"Aaaahhh ah ah Molly…dear dear Molly there are you! There you are! Arent you ujst the most wonderful wonderful second in command stooge lackey boss master boyFriend old-fashioned liver boy molly mollyyyy mollymollymolly look! look daddy i did it!"

He gestured a knobbly limb out to the stones.

"all of them. in my h in my hands and and think. think what we can do. we can deify a razorblade into a mountain range. we can turn the tides of mankinds shores of thought until they drown out all dissenting voices. can you hear them can you hear the echoes of the rich and the poor the dead and th eliving the kind and the hateful soon"

The Dog-Faced Man shuddered.

“Soon they will all be one.”

I wouldn’t celebrate yet, sir.

The leader let go of the Shadow and practically crumpled backwards like a marionette with its strings cut, throwing his hands to the air.

“WHY THE FUCK NOT”

The Shadow looked off to the distance.

I can sense—perhaps you did too, distantly—that there are intruders in the Broken Tracks of Meinung. Somehow, they managed to get in, and one of them is the goddess you used to acquire those very stones. It seems they found something that allowed them to enter.

He ran a hand over his head of ‘hair’, sighing with abject irritation.

What miserable wretches, fighting after the world has already been engulfed in chaos. It’s like seeing the last foot-twitches of a rodent caught in a mousetrap. Depressing, if only because it proves just how powerless they truly are.

The Dog-Faced Man sat up, wide eyes bugged out to the sides. They lolled in their sockets, twirling like yo-yos in his skull, before he brought himself back up to his feet unsteadily. With his head hung, his snout pointed downwards like a hanging sword, and he swayed from side to side. His fingertips brushed against the ground. He whipped around, bringing his arms up and thrashing them around as though he was making some kind of long and angry speech as he began to pace in a circle. Then he paced in a line. Then he paced in zig-zags, writing out sentences with his feet as he muttered and murmured, sweat dripping from his large hands until he stopped and froze in place. He turned once, twice, and then snapped towards the stones laid out in front of him.

“ what polite guests we have. They could They could , ”

Gritting his teeth hard enough that the Shadow could hear them cracking, he snatched up all the stones and hurriedly shoved them into a nearby garbage can, slamming the lid down onto it and hefting it up like an oil drum. A crazed eye drilled into the Shadow.

“ go and give our guests a welcome. i must take care of some things back home”

With that, he scrambled off, unsteadily running by putting all of his weight on one foot before switching to the other, a sort of bow-legged waddle-sprint in the direction of Nobody’s Enemy. His partner saw him off.

Will do, sir.

He raised a three-fingered hand up and snapped his fingers. Crawling out from the alleys that flanked the Kaput Caput, three figures emerged.

One, shambling out from the darkness with the fizz of crackling electricity and the rancor of a dial-up modem, resembled a corpse composed entirely of computer parts: monitors, wires, keyboards, mice, cooling fans and thermal paste, with red hearts messily spray-painted onto the ecru-beige boxes. Long copper claws sparked with flashes of white, and the keys that made up its mouth flashed a data-hungry smile.

The Machine of Loving Grace. Such a repulsive thing, you are. You truly believe that those ones and zeroes that make up your programming are the words of the old gods, don't you? Your crusades of 'compassion' don't fool me.

Its monitors lit up with hearts and smiles even as it jerked and shuddered.

"01001011 01001001 01010011 01010011 00100000 01001101 01000101"

Coming up beside it skulked a lanky figure, clad in a black suit and white gloves with a head full of pink, purple, lavender, white roses, and a smile that stretched beyond the confines of his face. He marched up with the confidence and swagger of a disaffected nobleman, adjusting his cufflinks as he giggled.

The Superfluous Man. Coy and implacable as ever, I see. You stink of opium and flowers, just as you always do. I take it that you are in proper fighting form to take care of these interlopers, then?

He cackled and gestured to both his face and to his body. He looked so thin that one could break his arm like a bundle of dry spaghetti.

"Why, of course I am, my good droog! It'll be twenty to one cracking these gloopy lewdies! I've done up my litso and platties for just such an occasion!"

Finally, hovering up from behind a building was a ghastly figure resembling some kind of ghoul. It was dressed in little more than a long and flowing red hooded robe, though upon closer inspection, there was nothing else to cover: it was simply a skeletal torso, head, and arms. An unsettling grin was permanently plastered on its face, several teeth missing, and a pair of disquieting eyes stared out from sunken sockets. In its bony hands, it held a long scythe.

The Shadow crossed his arms.

Hm? If it isn't the Crimson Misfit. I don't believe I called you…I intended for one of the Cambodian Holidays. Well, no matter—you were in the area, so I suppose you will do.

"Mommy, Can I Go Out & Kill Tonight?"

You'll get plenty of chances to kill.

He swept his arm out in front of him.

You can feel the intruders—you know where they are. Go and find them. If you see any other agents, bring them with you. Kill all of them, at any cost, as fast as possible. I'll be looking for them as well. Get rid of them, and ensure our leader can perform the ritual he needs to in Nobody's Enemy. Now, go.

The Shadow pointed, and with a salute from each, the group disbanded in separate directions. He grumbled to himself, frustrated that he had to stifle his own joy at the prospect at maiming these thorns in their side. If he got too positive about things, he would end up flipping back to that *other*, quite disagreeable form…Urgh. Still…

His single hypnotic eye morphed into a sinister sharp-toothed grin.

He would be enjoying this very, very much.

Over his shoulder, the head of an older white man the size of a hot air balloon with barbed wire wrapped around its jaw bobbed in the air. It spoke with a noticeable vibrato in its voice.

"A fight setting that drunk a five, Governor?"

The Shadow turned back around, frowning.

Oh, you. Tch. You're late. I already sent everyone off. Follow the Crimson Misfit, if you must.

"I lowride, sick himself again. It's how Well: Dispatch never ride."

Off the Cambodian Holiday went, hovering through the air like a grotesque parade float, and the Shadow took off soon after.

~

Fionn reached out a hand to Dian Cecht, taking the knobbly old doctor by the wrist and yanking him up off of the floating ottoman that made up their first step across what they felt was either a gap or some kind of river that would surely pull them in.

Ultimately, the rest of the Tuatha de Danann they had brought, fighters and warriors and smiths and the occasional poet, proved to be rather scattered: they wanted to fight things, and fight things they did, even if most of the time the end result was just that they smashed up buildings and destroyed property. A few of them were run over by trains, others just fell into the void, and where the occasional cult agent (often jobbers like some Delirium Tremen or some Sons of Sam) tried to get in their way, they swiftly disposed of them with extreme prejudice…when they could be beaten with brute force, at least. Dian Cecht and the Morrigan had to concede: they weren't a particularly smart bunch, but they served as a good distraction. By the time they had been traveling for perhaps an hour or so, they had sent the rest off to go aid the other teams.

With a yank, the older Tuatha De was pulled up onto the next ottoman (luxuriously upholstered) by the warrior and sighed.

"Are you alright, Dian?"

"Y-Yes, yes, quite alright…For the life of me, I can't imagine why Hel's decided to drag me along. The Morrigan, I get—"

He gestured with a thumb at the Morrigan in the form of Badb, the slender bird-like woman effortlessly leaping from hovering piece of furniture to hovering piece of furniture and giving a kindly wave as she did so.

"—but why me? You know healin' magic, don't you Fionn?"

"Yes, I do, and King Oberon and the Morrigan as well. However, I believe all of our energy must be put towards either fighting against the enemy or fulfilling our mission. It is good to have a designated medical expert with us."

"But—hup!" He performed a stumbling leap towards a spiraling Chesterfield, managing to grip onto one of the armrests and clamber onto the top. "Whoof…But what if I get hurt? What then?"

Oberon, effortlessly flapping his butterfly wings and crossing the gap, put his hands out with a grin.

"Then, I s'pose, we're right fooked?"

“Your Majesty!”

“Hahaha, jus’ a joke, jus’ a joke! I’ll come back ‘na while, what wit’ our deal wit’ Belial an’ all, an’ Cecht ‘n th’ Morrigu’ll come back jus’ dandy after a bit. Next time someone thinks of ‘em, I bet.”

Fionn stuck his sword into an especially well-stuffed chair, pulling himself upwards to his feet. He looked up at Oberon, sucking on the inside of his cheek.

“Your Majesty, you knew of this?”

Badb landed beside him, long and lanky limbs folding like talons as she waved a hand.

“O’ course he does, lad, the fae’re close to the Tuatha De, after all. Did you not?”

“No, I…suppose I didn't. I only recently learned of these curious properties of…your kind.”

“Our kind? Gods ‘n the like?”

He looked away, jumping to the next piece of furniture without a word. Dian Cecht, leaping through the air, made it to the other end of the gap they were crossing and stood up straight with his hands on his hips as he looked out over the land.

“...Are we goin’ in the right direction?”

Badb, her brow slightly furrowed out of concern for Fionn, bounded from stepstool to couch until she landed delicately beside Dian Cecht.

“What makes you say that, Dian?”

Oberon fluttered above the two of them, running a hand over his thinning grey hair as he looked on at the scene in front of them.

“Jings, crivens, ‘n help me boab, th’ whole place is in black an’ white!”

As Fionn managed to land near the rest, he couldn’t help but agree. What sprawled out in front of them was a small town resembling something one would see in early-1900s Germany: small square buildings constructed of brick and stone, all black and white and many, many shades of grey. Too many to count, in fact. They lined the streets, and rather than twisting and spiraling like the ‘streets’ from earlier, they instead appeared to fold upwards and to the sides. It was like the entire district was a papercraft that was in the middle of being folded, stuck at that halfway point between being a proper cube and being just flat paper. On the streets and the sides of the buildings, the alleyways and the streetlights, shadows were painted onto the scenery itself, lending it an odd surreal quality.

Fionn looked around warily, keeping his sword at his side.

“What…is this place?”

“I believe this must be that ‘greyscale town’ Hel mentioned when going over the map.” He reached into his coat as he fumbled with the slip of paper he copied the map onto. Out of the corner of his eye, a sign happened to catch his attention: it read **‘SCHATTEN STR.’**.

“Schatten Street…Apparently, that large head with all the magical items should be somewhere around here. Oberon, d’you think you could sniff out the direction with the most magic?”

“Ach, I ken I could try…”

The fairy king sniffed the air once, twice, then bobbed over to another direction and sniffed there. Fionn mac Cumhaill stared at the Tuatha De, confused, before Badb grinned a beakish grin at him.

"Fae're naturally inclined to sense magic, lad! I'm surprised you weren't aware—between that and the comments from earlier, you seem to be feelin' a bit off…You alright?"

"I-I'm fine. Our highest priority should be to take care of the head." Fionn couldn't help but feel the corners of his mouth twitch at that. Lying was about as natural to him as ordering fast food, and just as pleasant, but…he was grappling enough with the knowledge that had been revealed to him earlier on his own. This was neither the time nor the place to lay his thoughts down. Instead, they should focus on…

His train of thought abruptly stopped as he heard the sound of a man screaming from above him. Fionn craned his neck upwards and, with horror, watched as an abhorrent figure—a red-hooded skull with a scythe in its grasp, took hold of Oberon. It let out a laugh like a Halloween animatronic, its voice crackling and blown-out.

"You Belong To Me!"

Oberon struggled and writhed in its grasp, monarch butterfly wings flapping and fluttering fast enough to make an audible sound.

"Ngghh—ge' offa me, ye bloody…"

He reached a hand up to deliver a shock of fae magic to the Crimson Misfit's system, but to his surprise, he felt a shock as something grasped near his armpit and found his magic simply wouldn't come. No matter how hard he focused or concentrated, it simply wouldn't manifest. All that came out was a puff of paprika-scented smoke.

"My magic…!"

"Hold on, Your Majesty!"

Thinking quickly, Fionn produced his bow and arrows, loading three into the bow and pulling the string back as he aimed and fired. They whizzed through the air, but were cut down by a circular twirl of the Crimson Misfit's scythe. It cackled once more, pointing its scythe down one of the streets.

"From Hell They Came!"

The Morrigan shouted up at it, plucking feathers from her black-feathered gown and throwing them like knives up at the apparition. It did just as much good as throwing regular feathers would have.

"From Hell *what* comes, you aberration?!"

"Them!"

From where the Crimson Misfit pointed, like some sort of hideous balloon, the enormous floating head of the Cambodian Holiday drifted into view of the group. Fionn lowered his bow out of shock, staring up at the enormous mockery of humanity: barbed wire could do nothing to hide the self-assured actor's grin plastered on its house-sized face, and its eyes bulged and lolled as it stared down at them. Dian Cecht swallowed.

"O-Oh, dear…"

The Crimson Misfit cackled once more—was it the same cackle every time?—and turned around in the air, speeding off. Badb growled, sneering as she watched it go with the fairy king in its grasp.

"Get back here, you—!"

"Come on!"

Fionn quickly stashed away his weapons, taking Dian Cecht and Badb in his hands and starting to sprint down the street that the Crimson Misfit had fluttered down, making sure to get as far away from the massive floating head as possible. The Morrigan snatched her hand back immediately thereafter, choosing to bound beside Fionn as she kicked off the street. When they came to a 'fold' in the street, no matter if it folded upwards or downwards, gravity would change to adjust: they always had the road beneath their feet, and though it was disorienting, there was no time to figure out which way was up and which way was down. Dian Cecht stumbled along, being pulled by Fionn, and waved his hand.

"A-Ah—don't pull so hard, Cumhaill, you'll dislocate my shoulder! I thought we were going to find the Head? That was our highest priority you said, right?"

"I did say that. But, saving His Majesty comes first. Not only that, but…I feel as though there is something odd about that robed figure. Something that the floating head doesn't have. Keep up with my pace—we will travel deeper into this region either way."

The three of them ran through the jagged avenues of Schatten Street…

~

"Mind the train, queenie."

Hel put her arm out to stop Titania in her path, the older woman managing to stop herself from taking another step before the train rolled past. Titania leaned back, feeling the gust of wind and smelling the stench of coal from the passing vehicle, and when it had finally passed, she let out a sigh of relief.

"Hoo…thank ye, dearie. I cannae say I'd be anythin' more than a splatter on th' tracks if it weren't for ye warnin' me!"

"No problem. Just, be more careful, alright? And you, crow, you should keep an eye out too. You never know where these damn trains will pop out from." She waggled a finger annoyedly at Huginn, perched on Titania's shoulder, and he squawked angrily, pecking the queen of the dead in the temple.

"Don't you just call me 'the crow'! I'm Huginn! 'Thought', you know? It's because I'm as fast as the mind itself, and sharp enough to deserve to be called by my name!"

"You'll be called *roadkill* if you don't shut your trap, you loathsome avian! I don't need this kind of yammering in my ear in a situation like this!"

Huginn grumbled, and Titania just smiled good-naturedly as she followed the headstrong goddess.

They pushed through bead curtains that hung from miniature Eiffel Towers, and waved their way through groves of razor-blade evergreens—perhaps more evergreys or everreds by now—and disappointingly, it seemed that they faced little threat apart from the hostile layout of the world itself. Hel had some familiarity with how to navigate the Broken Tracks. True, it had changed from how she last remembered it (how long ago was that, now? Could it have only been yesterday that she spent there?) but the layout was, on the whole, the same. The two massive figures, the Parlor of Miracles, the greyscale district…when she was able to get a wider view of the realm earlier by climbing up to the top of a winding tap that spat murky apple cider, she knew that the landmarks hadn't changed position: everything else was just in flux.

Their destination was Nobody's Enemy. That hadn't changed, and from the view she got earlier, she knew for certain that there was still a forest that surrounded its 'foot'. When she first saw that wretched dog-face for the first time, she couldn't see what door he came out of…or in fact, if he had come out of a door in the first place. Still, she knew that that blasted cyclops was his home, and so it was their destination.

Titania looked around, frowning as she gently picked at one of the shelf mushrooms that lined her arms.

"Hel, dearie…"

"What?" Hel didn't turn around to look at the fairy queen.

"Ye know, ye seem quite motivated tae take down this whole cult situation. Not sayin' I'm not, no no, not at all! But you especially seem tae have a personal bent to it…you were here before, yeah?"

She used a thick sheet of ice like a machete to slice through thick rainforest vines and jungle foliage. When had they even entered a jungle? Whatever. Doesn't matter. "Yeah, I was."

"...What happened there? Ye lost someone important to ye, right?"

"Important to me? Hmph. I wouldn't put it in such flippant terms, but…well, I did end up losing two people I had grown to think of as…companions. I'm here to take them down, of course, but also for *personal* reasons. To find out what happened to them, and to avenge the death of my brother Fenrir."

"O-Oh my. I'm sorry to hear that…this Fenrir, what was he like?"

"He was a fifteen-foot-tall wolf."

"Tsk, tsk, that's never easy on anyone."

Huginn looked around, slightly thrown off by the sudden change of scenery. Had they always been in a desert? Still, he had something to say, and Odin always told him to spit out whatever was on his mind at the moment, which he later admitted was bad advice on his part during a particularly nasty migraine.

"Er, where's the Tuatha De? Weren't they following us?"

"Oh, for Ymir's sake, have those morons really gotten lost? We've been walking in a straight line!" Hel sliced through some stalactites, hanging from the cave they had found themselves in, and in the distance, Titania watched a patch of rainforest scroll across the horizon. "First the

DUO agents end up going off to who-knows-where, and now them? Is there something wrong with me where I simply cannot have large groups follow me for any long stretch of time?!"

Eventually, they emerged, and arrived in…a forest. Dirt beneath their feet, actual trees with bark and branches and leaves surrounding them. Hel let out a sigh of relief.

"This should be the place."

Huginn took off from Titania's shoulder, flying high into the air for a moment or two before diving back down to the eye level of the two women.

"Yep, that creepy cyclops thing is right above this! It definitely isn't a building or anything, it's one-hundred-percent organic! I could see the slickness in its eyeball."

"Gross."

"Not only that, but it just…fades away as it gets closer to the ground! There's nothing of its body beneath the torso!"

"What an irritating domicile…how would he get in?"

Hel crossed her arms and rubbed her chin as she and the others made their way through the small forest. Leaves crunched beneath their feet, though the dirt felt slightly wet, squelching beneath their shoes. Titania took a deep breath in, feeling in her heart that this was definitely an immutable patch of nature in this odd, mostly unnatural world. With only a few minutes of walking, they came to a set of train tracks. Hel stopped, Titania slightly bouncing off of her back.

"This is the place. This is the place where I saw him for the first time…He was standing right on the other side of those tracks, singing some ugly song with that smug *look* on his face. Urgh. Let's look around—he couldn't be far from here…"

She moved to take a step, but stopped short upon hearing the sound of chugging.

"Whoop, train."

The train rolled past, taking a good minute or so to fully pass.

When it went by, it revealed a horrific scene in front of them.

An androgynous (though negligibly female) figure was drawn up, their limbs strung up to each spoke of an 'X'-shaped St. Andrew's cross made of some kind of tightly-wound barbed wire. White-gloved hands were bound to it by the wrists, boot-covered feet bound by the ankles, and in the center, hanging limp over a cravat, a head of black hair covered any trace of their facial expression. From their limbs and their chest, their face and their body, black oily blood seeped from open wounds, trickling down their body and dripping into the soil. A black stain had already formed beneath the crucifix, dyeing the dirt below it black.

Hel's mouth opened wordlessly, and she kicked off the ground to sprint over to the crucified figure, Huginn and Titania stumbling along after her. She raised a trembling hand, pressing it against the sternum of the figure's chest. It was ice-cold. Hel brought her hand back and clenched it into a fist, clasping it against her own chest as her expression soured. She whispered to himself, the only audible result of the sudden swell of conflicting thoughts she could feel tearing at each other for dominance in her mind.

"...Foxy…"

Titania reached out and put a hand on her shoulder, silent. Even if she didn't know this Foxy, she understood that this was one of the friends that Hel had mentioned earlier…one of the ones she had lost. She lowered her head in silent remembrance. Huginn did the same, and all three shared a collective moment of silence for Foxy Shazam.

A train rolled past behind them.

When it passed, a shrill voice echoed out from behind them.

"'Ello, 'ello, 'ello, my devotchkas!"

Revealed where they had once stood before crossing the tracks was a pile of bodies, recognized by the group as the bodies of the Tuatha De who had followed them there. They were folded over one another like dirty laundry, arms over midsections over legs, though they didn't seem to be dead—rather, their eyes were glazed over, accompanying lethargic grins. Standing atop the pile was the lean and limber shape of the Superfluous Man, grinning far beyond the confines of the bouquet that constituted his head with an effeminate pose as he waved down to them. Hel whipped around and glared up at him as Titania marveled at how so many strong warriors were taken down so easily.

"...And what in Odin's name are you supposed to be?"

"Ah! Ah! D'you have to be so bleeding cruel? It's me! I! Me! Myself! The Superfluous Man! Droog to none, prestoopnik to many, enemy of you. If you're wondering just what happened to that gaddy little ptitsa…Well, let's just say that Ms. Shazam there had an, ah, unfortunate little shilarny that went against what we droogs here are all about. For that, she paid the ultimate price."

Titania looked to Hel, unable to understand half of what the Superfluous Man's butchered Russo-British lingo meant, and found her companion clenching both of her fists with a sneer on her face.

"Shut your mouth, you aberration of flowers and spunk. The same thing that motivated her to join was the same thing that probably motivated you! She was nothing more than a person, and this…all this. It took that away from her, just like it did with you."

The Superfluous Man sat down in mid-air, crossing his calves and folding his hands in his lap as he tilted his head.

"Oh dear. Can't say I have the slightest idea of what you mean, frosty shoot! True, I do have these irritating memories of being a slick young moodge back in the days of the Czar, drinking and gambling and humping my days away by satisfying every little messel I had…But, all that is little more than a headache for the ol' noggin! This whole beat's a helluva lot more satisfying than a bit of the ol' in-and-out every night! Poor, poor ptitsa just got a bit too big for her britches, and she got strung up for it."

"Not just her."

Hel pointed at the side of the pile.

"You. Out. Now."

At first, there appeared to be nothing…but slowly, the floating figure of Moxy Fruvous hovered out from behind the pile of opium-addled bodies. She kept her head down as she stared into the grass, remaining silent. Hel bit the inside of her cheek.

"Moxy…why are you still doing this? Why are you still working with them? Look!" She gestured to the crucified corpse. "Look what they've *done* to your partner! Is this not enough?! Will it take nothing for you to come to your senses?!"

She was quiet for a few moments more, before muttering under her breath.

"T-This…this is all I have."

"What?"

The Superfluous Man cut in before Hel could get a more solid answer, resting on his stomach with his chin on the heels of his wrists as he kicked his feet.

"Goodness me, goodness my. Drama, drama, drama! Well, you two devotchkas can have your little chin-wag another time, since I've got some work to do."

He rose to his feet, twirling in place before sliding down the pile of drug-hazy bodies. He made it to the ground, brushed off his chest, and produced from his pocket a luger pistol, which he spun around his finger as he faced down the two women and the crow.

"Now, which one of you ladies wants a good time?"

~

Rodion, Odin, the Dagda, Iolo Morganwg, and their still-intact troop of Tuatha De soldiers trudged their way through the Broken Tracks of Meinung with, perhaps, a bit more drive and motivation in their steps than the others.

The Russian doctor walked with The Prince of Fuck All's coat on his person and his crown of thorns stashed safely away, strutting step by step with a determined (at least, he felt it was rather determined, even if his eyebrows twitched at the corners) look on his face. Not only was he determined to avenge The Prince by setting as many people free from this surreal machination as he could, but he wanted to take down this cult. Maybe that was too much to ask for, but it was what he wanted, and he would be damned before he was to give up. Not after the sacrifice that was made.

Odin and the Dagda marched on. They were both gods, of course: nothing more than the result of hundreds of thousands of people's collective belief and willpower shaped into powerful humanoid forms. And yet, they couldn't help but regard mankind with fondness, with a protective spirit akin to that which a child feels for their mother and father. The ones who brought them into this world…they would each do whatever they could to ensure that this world prevails, even if it is so much worse off than when it started.

Morganwg was perhaps a bit less strongly motivated than their fellows, but they still felt strongly about the task at hand. This cult was utterly reprehensible, not only in how they targeted people, but how they operated, how they made a perversion of life itself! They couldn't accept something like that existing in the same world as, say, the peanut-butter and pickle sandwich. No

God would accept such paragon of virtue and such depth of malice to rest on the same bench together, surely. Perhaps some act of God could wrap all this up neatly…? Who knows. All they knew was that they wanted to take care of things and return to their beloved museum.

The Tuatha De behind them spoke alongside one another, suggesting plans and sharpening weapons with designated axe-sharpening rocks they had brought along with them. Their bags were very heavy, but they could easily carry them on account of only bringing one each. Secretly, everyone knew that once one of them lost their sharpening-stone and started asking others if they could use theirs, then everyone would start doing it, and nothing would get done.

All of them made their way across the landscape, crossing marmalade rivers, diamond rain, and one especially confusing instance in which a school of fish passed by while riding unicycles, all the while occasionally stopping to make sure a train would pass in front of them rather than on top of them. As they walked, Odin looked to Rodion.

"Mister…Nikolayev, was it?"

"I prefer Rodion, but yes, what is it?"

"These…trains. I have heard of them before, but these specific forms of trains seem to be slightly old-fashioned compared to modern sensibilities. I cannot speak for myself, I have not been in Midgard for quite some time…but you live there. Are these sorts of trains commonplace?"

Rodion scratched his beard, almost unwilling to entertain such a flippant question when they have a mission to undertake, but he thought about it.

"Well…I do not think so? I admittedly am not a traveler. I have only left Russia while traveling from one oblast to another, but I have been on a quite modern train in these past few days. I believe these may have gone out of style in the late 1800s."

"Is it true there are trains that are able to travel as fast as a bullet?"

Morganwg piped up, waving their hand.

"Oh, oh, I know those! The *shinkansen* bullet trains in Japan!"

"Yes, that was the one I was on just the other day! I was carrying a wounded Fionn with me, and…well, Prince is…w-was, my sole source of quick transportation. And so, I was forced to carry him with me onto the train."

The fomorian tilted their head. "Why didn't you just take that snazzy bike he has? Was it out for repairs at the time?"

"Well, no…Prince is just apparently quite afraid of trains."

They stopped at another set of tracks, and another train rolled past. The Dagda groaned.

"I'd be afeared of th' blummin' things too, if I spent more'n an hour 'ere. They're drivin' me crazy! Why'n th' hell're there even trains scattered across the whole damn place? Nobody's takin' 'em!"

Rodion crossed his arms in thought, stepping forward after the train had passed. Everyone was silent for a couple of moments before Iolo raised a hand.

"Maybe their leader used to be big into model trains?"

"Mmmh, I doubt that. I think, perhaps, is some kind of metaphor."

Odin raised an eyebrow incredulously. “A metaphor?”

“Da, da. So many things make so little sense here, figurative interpretations are perhaps best way to approach it. Perhaps you have not noticed, but these trains all run at exact intervals. Every five minutes, wherever you are, train will go by on tracks. Is orderly, routine, mundane. You know when train comes, and once you hear it enough times, you will *always* know when train comes. It could be that trains are a symbol for society itself, constant chugging and passing a reminder of the mundanities of everyday life they vow to destroy.”

The Dagda wrinkled his forehead hard enough to rival a pair of wash-shrunken pants.

“Aye…I think I get what yer sayin’...It’s like when ye huck a pillow at th’ foot o’ yer bed to remember summat fer tomorrow! I used t’ do that wit’ me club, before I accidentally blew a hole’n th’ side o’ th’ castle!”

Rodion couldn’t help but laugh a bit, despite himself. “Bahaha, y-yes, sort of like that. Only, imagine that you already know what you want to remember, and yet you keep throwing the pillow every five seconds.”

Morganwg glanced over their shoulder and opened their mouth.

“Um—”

“How short are these cult members’ attention spans that they must be reminded so frequently?”

“Do not ask me…but if you do, I would say that many of them are not too bright. I did not even know that some were made from those they kidnap until government agents showed us back in dining hall. It makes my skin crawl, wondering if many of these agents still have some semblance of their humanity remaining, locked away deep in psyche of mindless beast…”

The rest of the group shuddered, preferring not to think about it, and continued walking in silence. Morganwg looked behind them once again, patted their cheeks, looked once more, and started to speak.

“Er—”

“So then, why did The Prince of Fuck All fear trains so much? Could it be that he is linked to this place somehow?”

“Hel did mention that the way human-made agents are created, apparently, involves a tattooing process…and that tattoo of Prince’s did always give me slight creeps. It would sort of pulse and undulate if you looked at it too long…”

“Ach, then could ‘e ‘ave been…?”

“If he *was* double agent, he must have been very dedicated one. He mowed down agents like grass, and knew all their weaknesses. I doubt it.”

“Guys—”

“I have also read in some psychology books, Sigmund Freud associated fear of trains with sexuality. The rumbling of engine and wheels on track *supposedly* brought to mind thoughts of repressed sexual desire…I do not believe that, though. Much of what he said has since been disproven. Some of which, by people who were later disproven. I keep my hands out of psychology, mostly, because the mind is such an unknowable thing compared to the body...”

“I was gonna say, that soonds like th’ daftest thing I ever heard.”

Morganwg fumed for a few moments, before stomping on the ground and flailing their arms around.

“Hellooo? Earth to you three? Am I on mute or something? Back here! Pay! Attention! To! Me!”

All three of them stopped walking. Odin gestured with a hand.

“My apologies. You are simply so annoying, that I was automatically tuning you out.”

Rodion sheepishly smiled as he looked back at Iolo, laughing and scratching his hair.

“Ah…aha, s-sorry Morganwg, what were…you…”

He trailed off, looking out behind them, and the two gods followed suit. Morganwg frowned imperceptibly from the hood of their suit and threw their arms out.

“Uh…all the Tuatha De disappeared.”

Odin sighed quietly through his nose, not surprised but unwilling to say anything about it. The doctor, on the other hand, gawped at the stretch of empty space that had taken its place behind them, and put a hand to his head.

“How…How did they…?”

The Dagda let out a long, heavy sigh.

“Not the smartest buncha sardines in th’ pot, they are. Always goin’ missin’, or turnin’ up dead, or summat along those lines…Let me take care o’ this. One bellow from th’ Dagda, an’ all of them’ll come runnin’!”

He inhaled deeply and shouted with a booming voice that caused the others present to cover their ears.

“OI! ALL YE CARLIES AN’ SLAGS! GET YER WAFFINGER ARSES OUT ‘ERE!”

There was a small bit of silence, and after that small bit had turned into a rather sizable chunk and it became clear that nobody was coming, the Dagda huffed and scratched his head, scrunching his face in confusion.

“Hrmph. Well, I’ve doon all I can do. They usually come runnin’ when I do that…”

Odin rolled his eye.

“I’m sure they’ll turn up sometime. Look here in front of us.”

He pointed with Gungnir at the building that lay in front of them. It resembled a structure in the middle of being built in the rain, nothing more than structural poles with tarps strewn over it to keep the interior from getting soaked through…if those tarps were entirely made of human skin, stretched taut between those poles. Blue veins snaked across the reddish flesh, visible even beneath the elaborate black-shadowed tattoos that covered it so thoroughly—not the snaking and meticulous technicolor tattoo that The Prince appeared so hesitant of, but the more traditional type of skin-inkage. A small grove of trees with what seemed to be razor-blade pine needles sprouting from its glass branches surrounded it. Rodion swallowed, remembering what Hel had drawn on the map.

“The Parlor of Miracles…”

The Dagda raised a hand to partially cover his field of vision, retching.

“Yeeeuch. God blind me, is that all skin? Where th’ fook d’they get all that from?”

“If I had to guess? We do not want to know.”

“Wh—Cripes, I do! I jus’ said—”

Morganwg stepped between them and put their hands up, closing their eye and taking on the affectations of a conflict mediator.

“People, people, please. We won’t get anywhere if we keep bickering like senseless children! Instead, we should be like senseful children. Sensing everything we can. Is the Parlor of Miracles made of skin? Where do they get the skin? Do these questions really matter? No. The important thing is that we enter, we do our damn best, and—”

“Iolo.”

They glanced at Odin.

“Hm?”

He raised his spear.

“Duck.”

Yelping, the fomorian stumbled out of the way. Odin gave a mighty grunt and hurled Gungnir with all his might, the spear running itself all the way through the figure that was looming behind Morganwg. A golem made of wiring, keyboards, mice, and monitors, the Machine of Loving Grace only stumbled a step backwards. Gungnir had pierced through one of its monitors, and the glass of the screen had broken away to reveal pulsing meat caking the inside of the computer. It twitched and spurted blood, but the agent itself was unshaken as it rose to its full height—towering over even the Dagda—and yanked the golden spear out from its chest.

“01000111 01001001 01000110 01010100 00111111”

Reeling back like a javelin-thrower, the Machine of Loving Grace hucked Gungnir over all of them. All four followed its path as it sailed through the air in an arc over them…before sticking itself in a passing train. After the train passed, it was gone. Odin hesitated for a moment, before sighing and turning back to the Machine of Loving Grace. It made a heart shape with its claw-tipped wire-hands, hearts and loving messages filling its many screens.

“...You’re going to be paying for that. I may be an old man, but I can still fight without my spear.”

The All-Father cracked his knuckles and glowered up at the hodge-podge robot, a sweet-smelling breeze rolling through. The Dagda held out his massive hand, and from a stick, to a trunk, to a behemoth of a blunt weapon, his club formed in his grasp. He scowled.

“Are ye the one responsible fer takin’ away my men? What’d ye do to em?! Spit it out, ye rusty bucket o’ bolts!”

All of the Machine of Loving Grace’s screens flashed at once as it shuddered and jerked, every screen showing grainy black-and-white bust photographs of each of the Tuatha De who had gone missing, as well as many other faces that the Dagda didn't recognize, flipping from one to the next to the next every second.

“01010100 01001000 01000101 01011001 00100000 01000001 01010010 01000101 00100000 01001100 01001111 01010110 01000101 01000100”

“I dinnae what yer bloody sayin’! I dun’ speak ONE an’ ZERO, an’ if ye keep blurtin’ out numbers, I’ll *six* yer *seven* ‘til yer *eightin’ nine!”*

Rodion swallowed as he looked up at the wobbling cult agent, hand instinctively reaching to his side and sparking with brown bourbon-scented magic. He hadn’t ever seen this sort of agent before…was this some kind of strong one they kept in the Broken Tracks to act as domestic defenses? He shuddered to think just how many of those people that flickered on its screens were people taken by the cult.

“Morganwg, are you—”

He looked to his side, and the fomorian was gone.

“—Eh?”

He turned around, and behind him, sprinting to the Parlor of Miracles, was the fomorian on all fours.

“Eh?! Where are you going?!”

Iolo didn't answer him, continuing to run, and Rodion sighed. He looked back to the two gods.

“Are you two able to handle this…whatever this is?”

Odin closed his eye and took a slow, steady breath inwards, fluidly turning his hands over one another in a circle until both of them had their palms facing outwards.

“Yes. If it isn’t hiding any tricks like that boy with the skull, this should be easy.”

The Dagda grinned a yellow-toothed grin as he hefted his club up, sizing up the massive target in front of him.

“Ye kiddin’ me? I’ll chew this Jimmy up an’ spit ‘im out like old rinsewater!”

He nodded to the both of them before starting to run himself. Of course, with his size and stature, he wasn’t exactly built for running—if he had learnt anything over the course of these past few days, it was that—but he tried his damnedest anyways, wheezing and huffing as he tailed Iolo. They both closed in on the Parlor of Miracles, but of course, the small and nimble Iolo made it there first, facing down the goggle-eyed door.

Two large green-irised eyes rolled and twitched rapidly, and Iolo only hesitated for a moment before they slammed their fists on the front door.

“Ggh—For God’s sake, let me in! There’s some weird computer thing that took down an entire small army of stupid people and there’s no way I’m hanging around long enough to be another ghost in the shell!”

As Rodion sputtered to a stop and stumbled. Falling to his knees with his hand to his chest and desperately trying to catch his breath, he looked up and watched as the doors opened for Iolo. Before they could walk in, two hideous creatures with elongated earlobes, brain wrinkles beneath their stretched skin, and bulging eyeballs fluttered out like ghosts.

They picked up Iolo by both arms, lifting them up, and yanked them screaming into the Parlor of Miracles. The doors shut behind them. Rodi pounded his fist into the sand beneath him.

“Damn it—!”

Then, he winced. There was a sudden sharp and hot sensation in his hand. He pulled his fist from the sand and saw that he had left a red bloodstain on it from the gash in his hand. He hissed and, with a bourbon-scented finger, began to slowly heal the small laceration. In the sand, there was a razor blade hidden. Rodion looked up and around him, and saw that he was apparently much closer to the forest of razor blades than he had thought.

Careful not to jam his hand onto any more sharp edges, Rodion slowly lifted himself to his feet and looked up, up, up at the Parlor of Miracles in front of him. It had to be the size of Yusupov Palace, if not larger…how many people could reasonably be kept in there? It couldn't be a large amount, could it? Though, on second thought, not many things here played nice with the laws of physics. It could be much, much bigger on the inside than it seemed to be.

He looked over his shoulder, and in the far distance—had he really ran that far?—he could see Odin and the Dagda fighting bravely against the mass of machinery. They could handle that themselves. He would just be getting in the way if he had stuck his head in, wouldn't he? Yes. That was pretty par for the course for him…he was never one to stick his head in, interfere with things. Keep your head down, do as you're told, let the professionals handle it.

Would The Prince have done the same, in his shoes…?

Rodion winced at the pain of his own memory mixing with the pain of his hand, and took a step forward. He walked into a door.

"Urk—!"

He stepped a few paces back, holding his nose. Thankfully, only the front of his gut and his nose had banged against the door, but…there wasn't a door here before, was there? He was standing a couple of yards away from the Parlor of Miracles' front door, and now he seemed to be a good distance to the left of the doors. Out of the corners of his eyes, lights blared, and he stepped back to see what it was that he had run into.

It was…a brick-and-wood building that seemed to be from the late 1800s or early 1900s. A series of light bulbs, some of them burnt out, lined the front door—which Rodion now realized was hidden by a red curtain—and on the sides of the building, various posters were displayed.

On one, the tattooed man. On another, the fat lady. The bearded woman. 'Moon natives'. 'Bird girl'. 'Pinheads'. Part of Rodion felt a little sick looking at them in that way one feels sick when viewing something so dated and against modern sensibilities. Each of them advertised the same thing in large block letters: *'ONLY AT THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH!'*

Above the front door, seemingly hand-painted on a piece of wood, a sign read 'BROKEN TRACKS DIME MUSEUM - 10¢ PER SHOW'. Indeed, as he pushed the curtain away, he could see a small slot with '10¢' written above it in the center of the door.

The Russian looked back at the Parlor of Miracles. He should really go and look for Morganwg…but, what could he do? His magic stunk at best. He only had talent in wrestling and things that had no practical application here: alchemy, violin-playing, demon-summoning, medical practice…if he went in, he would just be one more person to rescue. He shook his head.

On the side of the building, one tattered poster caught his attention.

'COME AND SEE - THE DOG-FACED BOY"

The picture had long since been torn away, but the advertising tagline remained. It piqued Rodion's curiosity, especially now that he had seen the leader of Man Unkind for the first time. Perhaps he could learn something important here? He dug into his pocket and retrieved a brass ten-kopek coin, pushing it into the slot.

The coin was spat back out, and sank into the sand before he could pick it back up. Rodion sighed and reached into The Prince of Fuck All's coat. Surely, he must have a dime *somewhere* in here…he pulled out a beaglepuss, a golden gun, and what appeared to be a hermit crab that had made its home in a skull (how long did The Prince have that one in his coat?) before finally finding a gaudy, glittery purse. Yep, this was his.

"Sorry, Prince…"

Apologizing under his breath, Rodion opened the purse and rifled around in it, finding a wallet filled with all sorts of currency. Some of them, he hadn't even heard of, and there was at least one sobriety token among the group, but finally, he found an American dime.

In the purse, there was a crumpled, torn, dirtied photograph. Rodion picked it up, studying it with a furrowed brow.

It was The Prince, looking slightly younger than Rodion remembered him looking…and that was it. He appeared to be standing in a field somewhere. However, peeking in from the side, he could see strands of blonde hair. Someone else was in the photograph…but they had long since been torn out of it. Try as he might, he couldn't find the other half of the photo. Hmph. He couldn't help but wonder…

Still, he pushed the dime into the slot. The door made a variety of blown-out sound effects like a pinball machine or some cheesy apparatus at a casino, and it creaked open with a pre-recorded fanfare. A voice Rodion had never heard before, bombastic and ecstatic, crackled over an intercom.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls! Come one, come all, to the Broken Tracks Dime Museum! For only ten cents, you can experience sights and sounds unlike any other! What you are about to witness is for these walls only, folks. You can't get this sort of entertainment anywhere else. Come right in, and let me tell you a story…"

Rodion entered the building.

The door slammed shut behind him.

CHAPTER 34: Editio Princeps

"Good lord, I was right."

The Prince stood in the void with his arms crossed, feeling more naked than usual without the two garments that usually adorned his person—his coat and his crown. He furrowed his brow, putting his cheek in his palm as he shook his head. He didn't quite know what he had just experienced, apart from the fact that words, images, speech, and action had bubbled to the top of his mind like rising cream, and that it was 'the next chapter'. Was it 'the previous chapter' now?

"They're really hopeless, the lot of them…Hel baby does have a good plan, at least, but they're going about it all the wrong way. They didn't even stock up on aerosol cans, dreamcatchers, *or* bubble wands. They'll be eaten alive out there."

He looked away with a frown, though in what direction 'away' was, he wasn't quite sure.

"Though I could do without Rodi sharing my fears with the old codgers…and, you can stop describing what I'm doing, love, I already damn well know what I'm doing!"

Do you? I thought we went over this.

"W-Whatever. Just…look, I need to get back there so I can help them. Without my help, they won't stand a chance! They'll be like lambs to the slaughter!"

Will they? As it stands, they seem to be doing a pretty good job.

"That's because they haven't had a chance to mess things up yet. Trust me, one way or another, the cult *always* catches up to you. The best thing you can do is to shake them off and just keep on keepin' on, like a rolling stone."

You as in 'you', or you as in 'me'? Tell me Prince, how does it feel to be on your own? To be without a home, like a complete unknown. You're always so focused on Man Unkind. Have you ever stayed for more than a week in one place?

"Can't stay in one place when you've got bogeys on your six, hun, and I've got more bogeys on me than the underside of a high school desk. If I stayed too long in one place, they'd come for me sooner or later. I'm a walking target with this—" He pulled at his tattooed skin. "—stupid bloody tattoo on me…"

Speaking of. Before the last chapter started, I said that you needed to change, Prince.

"You did. In fact, I noticed that chapter title doohickey just before I was able to see my own body again. What did it say? 'Edition Prince'?"

Editio Princeps. It's the first—or 'principle'—printed edition of a book. Back in the days when books were little more than manuscripts, when a book version of a manuscript was first created with the printing press, it was used as a baseline for all other books of that ilk.

"Thanks for the history lesson. This is Chapter 34 though, yeah?"

Well, yes, but that's not why it's called that. That's the title of this chapter because we're diving into your past. Your first edition. We're going to see what makes you *you*, Prince. Not too extensively, of course. Even for me, a lot of the details are quite foggy and muddled, but it will hopefully be enough for you to realize the way you've been acting all this time.

The Prince sucked on the inside of his cheek, looking away.

"...Do we *have* to? Can't you, I dunno, say 'The Prince has learned his lesson and can now return to life'? This seems like a bit of a roundabout way to go about things."

I don't have the power to do that.

"Then who does?!"

Don't shoot the messenger, alright? Just bear with me, and if you stop fighting it, we'll get through this a lot faster.

"Stop fighting it? I'll fight whatever I damn well please, you cheeky disembodied voice! Watch!"

The Prince flailed uselessly.

"Oh, for Christ's sake."

Now will you play along?

"Fine. I don't believe I have much of a choice, anyways. How are you going to do this?"

I'll be employing a bit of second-person storytelling. The conversion is a bit nausea-inducing, so try to center yourself before I do it, alright?

"How am I supposed to—"

The Prince of Fuck All centered himself.

"...Ah. Right, I guess that's pretty useful. Well, fine then. Go on. If you know so much about my past, then go right ahead and show me. Maybe you'll elucidate me on something I didn't know."

You had a family. That's all you remember. You don't know their names, you don't know what they looked like, but you know you had a mother and father who birthed you, and when you were a child, your vibrant red hair was a shock to all of them. Jokingly, for years afterward, you would claim that a failed bathtub abortion was the reason. Nobody knew the truth, and eventually, neither did you.

Your earliest memory was being curled up in the fetal position, hugging your blue-and-white coat as close to you as you could. It was much too big for you, but you knew it was the only thing you had left of your family, a magical gift from your father, as you looked on in fear at the doddering female figure ran through with pins on the other side of the room. You didn't know what it was, or who it was—was it human? Was it alive? Did it think, and feel, and love like you know you did?

Your sister clung to you, only a year younger than you were and still very much the little sister. You had a sister. The thought is almost laughable now, but you know you had a sister. How old were you in this memory? Were you five, six? Your memories blur together around this time, drowned out by throbbing misery, and you can't recall your sister's name. You can't recall your name. You could then, and when the doors to your cell—it was a cell?

When the doors to your cell opened, and you beheld the tall and lanky figure that strode into view, you felt fear overcome you like you had never felt it before. He was dressed in shimmering red robes, a blue sash around his waist, ears pricked up and his smile wider than you had ever

seen on a living person. Was this a living person? It looked like nothing of the sort, instead appearing as some sort of humanoid canine. He tapped his shepherd's crook on the ground and stepped forward, extending his hand.

In a shaky, halting voice, he introduced himself. He gave a name, which you can no longer remember but which couldn't have been his real name, and instructed you to call him "Dog-Face". You couldn't do anything but comply.

Taking you and your sisters' hands, he led you through a palace. Was it a palace? Was it a museum? The walls stretched with newspaper and portraits, yellow wallpaper peeling and the air thick and heavy with a scent you had only ever associated with adults. He led you and your sister up staircases, hopping across stones, walking on the walls and ceilings, passing by grotesque mockeries of humanity and the animal kingdom that you had only ever seen in your nightmares. Some of them, you recognized from the books and stories your family gave you. You started to cry. What were your mother and father's names, again?

Dog-Face shushed you as you sniffled. Big boys don't cry. You want to set a good example for your sister, don't you? You swallowed the lump in your throat. You passed cell after cell after cell, transparent walls showing their occupants. Young men. Old men. Young women. Old women. People whose gender you couldn't discern. Black girls. Hispanic mothers. Shaggy homeless men who stank of booze. Smartly-dressed businessmen who paced their cell. Young androgynes with close-cut hair who hugged themselves with expressions of pain and despair. Your sister started to cry, too. She was always the empath out of the two of you, and even if you couldn't feel their misery as keenly as she could, you knew that if any of these people were here of their own free will, they had nowhere else to go before they came here.

He shushed your sister. Big girls don't cry. She wants to set a good example for her brother, doesn't she? She started to cry louder, begging that she wanted to go home.

Before either of you knew what happened, she had stopped crying, and all three of you had come to a long and wide river. It was much too deep for either you or your sister to traverse. You were too young, and you would surely drown. You looked up at Dog-Face. To your surprise, he smiled at both of you with a kind face. He picked you up and placed you on his shoulders, holding you behind his neck, and trudged through the river himself.

You walked with him back to your cell, and it was only when you got there that you saw your sister sitting inside already, curled up in a ball. You ran to her side and hugged her. You both sobbed, and the door slammed shut behind you.

The sound of a train rolling by outside made you sick.

You grew up among the ranks of Man Unkind with your sister. You were keen, cunning, and agile—but you were a troublemaker. The Broken Tracks, as you found out they were called, had little to no proper construction: it was a reflection of its creator's broken psyche. A senseless hodge-podge of whatever disorganized thoughts bounded around in Dog-Face's mind. The laws of physics only barely applied. The air and temperature were in flux, ranging from ice-cold, to tepid, to blistering, to muggy, even if you didn't move anywhere. There were, apart from the

Parlor of Miracles, Nobody's Enemy, and the Bird Healer, no concrete locations for any buildings. Neighborhoods shifted and changed, were reduced to rubble and rebuilt, twisted and curved, from hour to hour and second to second.

You got used to constant change very quickly, and began to recognize the cult agents around you by name: The 120 Days, the Mountbattened Hatches, the Legendary Pink Dots, the Young Man with a Skull, Mel's Hole, you saw them as you slowly aged and were able to walk the grounds of the Broken Tracks. At first, you recognized them by sight, and after attending multiple 'events', you began to know them by name.

The trains were a constant factor. Every five minutes, the trains come and go. At first, it was maddening—it was impossible to ignore, after all. Wherever you were, the trains could be heard. You nearly cracked after the first year, but your sister's emotional support helped you pull through. After a few more years, it became little more than a buzzing presence in the back of your head, like tinnitus, and yet every time the train went by, you would tense up.

It took three or so years out from your arrival before you learned Dog-Face had a second-in-command. Or at least, you thought he was the second-in-command. Sometimes he was Dog-Face's lover, sometimes he was his boss, sometimes he was his handler. You could never get a good read on their conversation, but your first few run-ins with who you knew as the Shadow (but who Dog-Face always seemed to call 'Molly') gave you more than enough reason to steer clear of him. He glared down at you with the most sinister look, as though you were nothing more than an especially irritating bit of gum on his shoe. Strangely enough, you would sometimes see Dog-Face with a man of the same build and size as the Shadow who appeared much more human. You didn't question this. You once watched a member of the Marching Drosoulites question this incongruity and be burnt out of existence.

Your sister was the one who kept you sane through this whole ordeal. She would hug you close and tell you things would work out alright, that someday they would see their parents again, someday they would go home and return to a normal life. Someday, they would be free. Surely, someday, they would be free. When things were too hectic, when you felt like you couldn't take it anymore, she would be there for you. In absence of your parents, she became your mother and father. When agents would try to rip your coat away from you, you held it close and hid yourself beneath it. Every time, when you emerged from it, they had gone. They didn't dare take it themselves, for whatever reason.

You exercised when you could. You shadow-boxed with plaid shadows, you did jumping jacks atop the coin of the Vitruvian man, you did pull-ups on the flagpole staircases, but it wasn't for strength—it was for speed. Silently, you were planning. You knew you weren't the only children who were being raised by this cult—there were others, but you never saw any older than thirteen. Thirteen must be the cut-off point, and if your calculations were correct, you would be thirteen in only another few 'weeks'. Time never worked in quite the same way in the Broken Tracks, and so you counted the days by your own sleep cycles: one period of wake and one period of rest equaled a day.

Regardless, that was your deadline. With the other children, being groomed and molded into ideal agents, you were a model cult member. You followed the leader's every wish, you did as you were told, you kept your head down, you never asked questions unless you knew you could get away with it, and you learned to lie. You encouraged your sister to do the same. She wasn't action-oriented, but you trusted her. In fact, you more than trusted her. You loved her. You loved her in a way that you had never felt before. A way that made you feel equal parts curious and sickened. You liked men, you knew that. You ogled the muscular forms of the Sunshine Supermen with bile in your throat, knowing you were staring at your captors, but what else could you do? Your thoughts were just as desperate as your body.

When you awoke on the day of your thirteenth birthday, you knew how the day would go. You were led into the Parlor of Miracles, and while your sister was brought into the bleachers above the operating theater, you were led into the chair of bone. You had seen this many times before. Starting when you were ten, you began to be allowed to watch the Tattooing in person.

With as much bombast and as much theatrics as he usually presented such events, Dog-Face proudly held up the glittering rainbow vial of Spare Ink. This was what they used for their magical tattoos: it stank of all kinds of magic tightly condensed into a single liquid. You waited for your chance. It had to be sometime when they were distracted. You needed to bide your time and hope, pray that your chance came. Dog-Face proclaimed that, as a privilege, the Loanword Sharks would be taking young initiates' names before their transformation.

Gritting your teeth, you watched as the blubbery blinded anthropomorphic shark loomed over you, drooling and bleeding, and opened its mouth. You felt some part of you break off, and when you opened your eyes, you didn't know your name anymore. The Loanword Shark was chewing.

Dog-Face, after a slight pause for dramatic effect, christened you with a flourish The Prince of Fuck All, and your ears grew hot. What a stupid name. There was no way you would accept being called that.

The Modern Primitives dipped their grinning tattoo gun in the ink and brought it to the side of your face. You remembered being stung by a bee when you were younger, and suppressed the urge to laugh bitterly. How long ago was that? You barely remembered, but the sensation was like being stung by a bee repeatedly, over and over again, forever, and ever, and ever. Slow. Agonizing. You could feel your skin shifting and warping, becoming more malleable, allowing magic to bolster itself through it, and as blood trickled down the side of your face from the broken skin, you bore the pain. You carried that cross as seconds stretched into hours, and minutes stretched into millennia.

The tattoo spread down the left side of your face. It wrapped itself all the way around your neck. Like a disease, it covered your torso. Like a skin condition, it festered over your upper arms. When the Modern Primitive tattooing you got underneath your ribcage, you saw Dog-Face on the phone.

Now was your chance.

You were thin enough that you could slip yourself free from the chair of bone, and with the agility you had been building for years, you launched yourself up from the ground and grabbed onto the lip of the boundary between bleacher and stage. Thrusting your limber hand out, you took your sister in your grasp, and you took off running as Dog-Face screeched behind you. A small army practically went after you, sprinting and waddling and flying and swimming and pogoing through the halls of the Parlor of Miracles as you and your sister stumbled and ducked through winding hallways, passages that led nowhere, fake doors, terrible peeling wallpaper. With a bit of good luck, however, you managed to escape, and you made it out to the rest of the Broken Tracks.

It was here you remained for three years more. After your daring escape, the next stage of your plan was set: you needed to find a way to escape the Broken Tracks. You knew that it existed outside of the usual field of worlds, however: much like a fleet of bubbles, the Earth and all of the rest of the typical universe were simply one among a group of other realms. If you could find a way to escape the Broken Tracks, the chances of you and your sister being able to make it home would skyrocket.

As it stood, however, you were fugitives unable to leave the country: the agents searched high and low for you, keeping on high alert for months. You would hide in barrels, secure yourself in corpses, submerge yourself in oil, if it meant buying a few more seconds of peace for you and your sister.

Even though much of your thoughts focused on yourself with ‘and your sister’ tagged onto it, you couldn’t help but rely more and more on her. The stress of constantly moving, constantly looking over your shoulder in a world that didn't make sense just to make sure the authorities weren’t on your back, it got to you. You were nervous. You were manic. You were miserable. But, when you got those precious moments of peace and were able to spend it with her, you felt like things would work out. You couldn’t help but feel like…everything would be okay.

You never really asked her how she felt about the whole thing, but you could sense the two of you were growing closer and closer. You were miserable about your lost name: what had happened to it? Was it really eaten by that lumbering beast? And what about the damn tattoo? Steadily, with trial and error and a bit of practice, you found that using magic was much easier than you had thought it would be, judging from your foggy memories. It was immensely powerful, but the source of the magic wasn’t the tattoo: rather, it was your own will, and the tattoo merely acted as a conduit through which the magic was run in order to increase its power.

On the plus side, it was an easy way to get out of any pinch. On the downside, however, every time you used it, searing electrical pain shot through your body and your mind, like someone was raking a too-coarse loofah across the wrinkles of your brain. Your human body struggled to weather the strain that using such magic put on you, and to make matters worse, the aura the magic put out—the surprisingly sickly-sweet tutti-frutti aroma that came from your fingers—would be like a flare to the agents. Soon, you found out that the tattoo was something like a tracker. The right agent could hone in on the ‘signal’ it gave off in a matter of minutes.

Those were always the most irritating, and were usually the ones you were forced to use magic on.

Multiple times, you were tempted to take a knife from one of the knife trees you passed and flay parts of your skin just so they would leave you alone, but your sister stopped you. It wouldn't have mattered, either. The pattern seemed to be alive as it swirled with beautiful colors like oil in water, and the few times you were able to 'catch it off-guard' and reach your hand into its depths, you could feel that it had affected your insides as well. When your hand was rejected, it stung, and your chest burnt. At some point, it became an exercise, something to try every now and again not only to see how far you could reach your arm in, but to see if you could still feel pain.

It would end soon. You had ducked behind a bank on Schatten Street and watched one of the 120 Days, perverted nobles caked in substances you didn't want to think about, carry with them an item. It was a bicycle, green and rusted. You didn't know what it was back then, but you could sense the magic that emanated off of it. That was your ticket out of here.

You ran forward, took the bike, and stashed it into your coat.

The night before your escape, you confessed your feelings to your sister with bile in the back of your throat. It was wrong, you knew that. It was always wrong. But both of you, locked in a rattling box of mayhem for a decade, had only foggy memories of what was right and what was wrong anymore. What was right was the cult, what was wrong was the cult. It was your life, and it would be your death. What would your father think? What would *you* think, only five minutes from now? You liked men. Didn't you? You thought you knew that.

Your sister leaned forward and kissed you on the lips.

You stopped wondering what your father would think.

In fact, you stopped wondering if you would be found by Man Unkind anymore.

You stopped wondering…

You stopped worrying…

You stopped thinking, if only for a moment.

You promised her that if either of you were caught, the other would turn themself in.

You never told her you found a way out.

You woke up to the sound of missiles firing against rending metal. The Mountbattened Hatches, the ghosts of the colors that are 'killed' when they are mixed given form as floating off-pink battleships, had found you. Hurriedly throwing yourself out of the makeshift bed of sponge and newspapers you had been laid in last night, pulling your coat on and dressing yourself, you took your half-dressed sister in your hand and ran.

You ran, you ran, you ran. You dodged missile after missile, and when you looked back, more cult agents had found you. The Black Rumors, the Cambodian Holidays, the Sons of Sam, the Wild Haggis…in only a few minutes, almost every agent in the Broken Tracks was after you.

You thrust your hand out to drive them off with magic, but it was no use. The pain was too much.

You and your sister came to a high cliff, looking out over a sea of half-submerged cars with their lights slowly flashing on and off like a steady heartbeat. You couldn't jump. Even with how things worked here, you would surely die. Your sister looked to you with fear in her eyes as the crowd of agents closed in on you.

"Stop."

Hm?

"S-Stop. Just…stop it."

The Prince was on the verge of tears, and though his makeup had already vanished with his corporeal body, transparent streams gently snaked their way down his face. He wrapped his arms around himself defensively, his eyes wrenched shut. He spoke without his accent, his voice instead taking on an implacable American tone.

"I…I know what I'm doing. And I know what you're doing, too."

Do you? What am I doing, then?

"Y-You want to show off one of my most painful memories…One that I had b-buried for long enough that I hadn't thought about it in…in years. I know what happens. I-I *already* knew what happened, you don't need to rub it in."

He bitterly laughed.

"That's what this is, right? Instead of having my life flash before my eyes after I die, I get 'The Prince's Worst Hits'. A-And for what? To teach me a lesson? Just…just save it. I get it. I get the picture."

Do you really?

"O-Of course I do, damn it! It's my life, isn't it?!"

Then please, do enlighten us.

"Us?"

Sorry, me. Please enlighten me.

The Prince turned away, not entirely sure what the point of the gesture was considering there was no 'me' to turn away from. He was quiet, and after a long and shaky sigh, he mumbled under his breath.

"The agents were closing in on us. And…I knew I-I had my way out, but the cliff was a fifty-fifty shot on whether or not it would actually kill me or not…The agents were a sure thing, though. I-If they got me, I would be dead for sure. So, my…m-my sister. My dear sister, she…she sacrificed herself. She threw herself to the mob so I could save myself."

He covered his face, sitting down on the 'ground' with his knees pulled to his chest.

"I-I couldn't stop her, I…"

Lying again, are you?

That made him look up, equal parts distraught and offended.

"...Excuse me?"

I said, ‘Lying again, are you?’.

“S-Speak up, for Christ’s sake, I can’t hear you.”

You can hear me just fine. The point is, that isn’t what happened.

The Prince boggled out into the space of nothingness, staggering to his feet with his arms hanging limp at his sides. He was shocked into silence for a solid thirty seconds, addled brain struggling to process what I had told him, before suddenly opening his arms wide with a shout.

“THEN WHAT THE BLOODY HELL HAPPENED TO HER?!”

|||

“Prince, there’s nothing here but a cliff!”

“Shit. This is bad…[redacted], how’s it looking down there? Any land? Any platforms? I’ll take a passing fish, you never know with this place.”

“There’s nothing there but empty space! Not even a train track…”

“Damn it…then, I think this might be it for us.”

“No! Don’t say that, Prince, we’ll find a way out! You’ll think of something, won’t you? There must be something in that coat of yours, let me—”

“Get off me!”

“...Prince…?”

“...D-Don’t…don’t touch me!”

“T-They’re coming closer…I’m scared…”

“Get away!”

“If you’re going to jump, take me with you! We promised each other!”

“Absolutely not! One of us has to survive, [redacted], what about our family?! What about our parents?!”

“...Do you even remember their names, Prince? I can’t. And if they knew what we were doing here…what we had done with each other…”

“S-Stop it! Don’t make me think about that!”

“The agents are here, Prince! Take me with you! Save me!”

“G-Get your hands off of me! Stop it! Stop, don’t—! Urgh!”

“Please, Prince! Please! We promised! Don’t you love me?!”

“I said…”

“Get!”

“OFF!”

cccrnch
shhk shhk shhk
kkkrrrrrr rrrrr rrrrrrr rrrr

rr

|||

You dove down off the cliff and produced your bike at the last second. It hurt, undeniably, but it broke your fall enough to only crack a few bones. You didn't care, though. You shut your eyes as tight as you could and began pedaling. You felt the tires fall from the ground beneath you, landing in mud, landing on concrete, landing on flesh, but you kept pedaling. You felt a sparking, fizzling sensation pluming behind you. It was lucky that whoever used the bike last had left a bit of juice in it, but you didn't dare look behind you. You kept pedaling.

Your leg muscles burnt like they were being eaten away from the inside out.

You kept pedaling.

You didn't feel like you could pedal any further.

You kept pedaling.

By the time you physically could not pedal any more, with your eyes still closed, you felt asphalt beneath your wheels and biked down a hill, face-first into a wall. You passed out.

When you woke up and finally felt like it was safe to open your eyes once again, you saw that the sky was full of stars. It was the first starry night you’d seen in ten years, maybe more, and involuntarily, you began to weep.

You didn't even notice the multiple people leaning over you, worried about you. You sat up and looked around. The first thing you noticed was the scenery. Houses that didn't move. Streetlights and fairy lights. Brick-and-mortar buildings. Brands and establishments that you recognized, even after so long. The sound of people talking…people! There were other humans here! You were home. You were back on Earth. It had been so long, and your body trembled as it took a deep breath. Your nose had been corrected and given a splint, and where you had scraped up the rest of your body was bandaged up.

Finally, you heard their voices, and you turned around.

Who were these people? You hadn’t seen anyone like them, not when you were young, and not in the Broken Tracks. Not unless you count…no. No, he didn't want to think about that

anymore. They were new people. Were they boys? Were they girls? They dressed like girls, quite ostentatiously in fact: multi-colored dresses, massive bouffant hairdos (you couldn't have known they were wigs, could you have?), makeup accentuating their eyes and eyelashes, thick mascara, earrings and high heels, lipstick and painted nails…They looked down at you with a feeling you hadn't felt directed at you by anyone in years.

Compassion.

The last one to look at you with such eyes were…

You shuddered and tried to retreat into yourself, but they spoke in comforting whispers and took your hand. It was warm. It was human.

They asked where you were from, and you told them the truth: you had long since forgotten.

They asked your name, and swallowing your pride, you told them you didn't have one.

They asked if you had a place to stay, and you told them you had no home, not anymore.

They asked if you had family.

You turned your head.

After speaking among themselves, it was decided: you would be from Soho in Westminster, London, where you'd be staying with them for the time being until they could find you a proper place to stay. They held you close and assured you that they would look after you.

You broke down crying again, wrapping your arms around one of the drag queens' chests. It couldn't have mattered less to you whether they were female or male. It never mattered to you.

All that mattered was that you had family again.

You were taken in under the assumption that you were a street youth who had lost himself somewhere in the West End, and for the next few years, you worked at Lola's in Soho, Great Britain, as an assistant and conversation partner for the queens and performers there.

When you arrived, your mind was in utter shambles—trauma, stress, misery, confusion, it had all congealed into one massive ball of confusion. You were practically a *tabula rasa.* When you found a place that showed you love, that showed you comfort and understanding and compassion, after all that you'd been through, was it such a surprise that you began to emulate them? For every bodice you tied and every case of eyeshadow you opened, every puff of makeup and every sewing job, every story you heard and every performance you saw, you took in a little more and a little more.

You began speaking with a British accent, and even further, peppering in words from Polari, the cant of the LGBT crowd you were surrounded by. You embraced your homosexuality. You became more comfortable dressing androgynously—a bit from men's clothing, a bit from women's clothing, anything ostentatious, anything flashy, anything colorful. Even though your mind refused to let you remember the exact details, you knew that your sister was dead. You rationalized your trains of thought: the feminine spirit of your sister had flown within you, and so you were both male and female! The thought of trains made you sick, and you only ever felt right as a man, so as you aged, that way of thinking shriveled up and fell away.

Funnily enough, after that way of thinking faded, you shared your name with the queens. You played it off like you had come up with it on the fly, little more than a stage name, but your heart was pounding out of your chest as you proclaimed that you were The Prince of Fuck All. You instinctively winced, expecting confused murmurs or jeering laughter, but…they all clapped and laughed in appreciation. It felt like a weight had been lifted off your shoulders.

You were in trouble with the law a lot. The first thing you did after waking up and being led into Lola's was to pickpocket some unfortunate passer-by of his wallet. You had meant to give it back, really you did, but then something terrifying struck you in your heart. What if Man Unkind got to you? What if this wallet could prove useful? What if there was something important in it that would otherwise cause them to target that person? It was irrational, and you knew it, but you weren't strong enough to stop it. To avoid answering the touchy questions about your past, who you were, your name and your family, you began to lie. At first, it was just for convenience's sake, but then that itching thought resurfaced: what if this person could be a secret agent of the cult? Lying became a crutch, something to do to protect your identity.

Every part of you felt like you were safe, and yet you couldn't help but feel like you still needed to protect yourself.

Your worst fears came true the month after you turned 19.

After searching for you for so long, the agents managed to find you.

The Delirium Tremen flooded into Lola's in packs of six, delivering quaking withdrawal symptoms to the patrons and staff with a touch, the Marching Drosoulites bombastically stepping through the walls and playing their hypnotic syrtaki rhythms to bring people into their death march, and the Cabinets of Curiosity swallowing person after person.

You were hiding inside a wardrobe beneath a fur coat, having a panic attack. You were scared, you were alone, and you knew one thing: this was *your fault.* If you hadn't stayed here, then they wouldn't have found you. If you had kept moving, they would have never zeroed in on you. You felt like you were going to throw up.

Then, the doors opened. One of the performers, their hairdo frazzled and their fishnets broken, looked down at you and thanked God you were alright. They tried to explain what was going on, but you already knew, even if you couldn't hope to explain it back to them.

They hugged you close, said they loved you, and told you to run.

And so, you ran.

You never stopped running.

~

The Prince was utterly silent, closed in on himself as he sat with his knees to his chest. He sniffled, small choked sobs escaping from his mouth even as he bit his lip and shut his eyes. He

shivered. He had been crying while the story was going, and hadn't quite stopped by the time it was over.

Do you get it now, Prince?

He muttered bitterly. "G-Get what? Get that I'm an…an egotistical, selfish, c-cowardly asshole? That everyone I've ever met h-has ended up in danger because of me?"

Well, yes, but that's only part of what I wanted to get across to you.

You see, everything you do, everything you feel, is linked to your own experiences—especially your own fears. You're scared of being vulnerable, so you lie about yourself. You're scared of being unprepared, so you steal whatever you can get your hands on. You're scared of intimacy, so you immerse yourself in casual sex so you don't have to get attached to anyone. You're scared of hurting people, so…

"I-I hurt myself."

Bingo. Even your whole drag persona is nothing more than an outer shell, conjured up by your own insecurities about your 'true self', co-opted from those who had the confidence and compassion that you lacked. You need to shape up, Prince. How lonely are you? How many nights do you lay awake on rooftops or on the sides of hills, in sleazy motels or ritzy penthouses, wishing you had someone to give yourself meaning. Socrates said that *'The unexamined life is not worth living'.* A life unobserved is a life unlived.

The Prince shouted, staggering to his feet.

"A-Alright! Alright. I understand. I-I'm…I'm lonely. I am. Hell, I'll say it, I'm damn lonely. Living this stupid bohemian life…sure, it's fun and all, but you can never spend too long anywhere. A-Anywhere you are, *they* could be there too. It's easier to not get attached to people when you know that, at any moment, they could be gone…and it'd be because of you."

He sighed, hanging his head.

"...For god's sake, what did you want me to do? Turn myself in? I couldn't do that. I couldn't, I…I didn't want to go back."

I wasn't saying that. The past is the past. There's nothing that can be done to change that. However, the present is a different matter entirely.

The Prince scoffed bitterly and sneered.

"Yeah. Like things are any different now. I'm…still hurting the people around me with my own s-stupid issues. You were watching, yeah? You know what happened. And to top it off, t-the one person I had when I was younger, the one person I thought truly loved me, who sacrificed herself to save me…I was the one that killed her!"

Just because I know what happened doesn't mean that you do.

"...What in the hell are you talking about?"

In front of The Prince, a small piece of the 'nothingness' that surrounded him peeled away to reveal a view of Rodion, walking through a cramped building in the dark with The Prince's coat on him.

You have someone who loves *you* now, don't you?

“W-What…him? Rodi? Right. Yeah, of course, he loves me. I stole his most prized possession, an—and I didn't even know I was doing it until it was too late. He was right, about me being nothing but a cowardly parasite. He was right about everything. I think I told him that, even…”

You did. But, I think you’re mistaken about that. You think he still hates you, right?

“Well, yeah. He said as much…”

Why did he keep your coat, then?

The Prince frowned, raising his head slightly. “...I-It was probably for convenience’s sake. That coat is full of things that’d be useful for fighting the cult.”

It’s a bit small on him. Couldn’t he just carry it?

“Probably.”

What about the crown of thorns you left behind? He still has that.

“...Yeah.”

And he still wants to fight the cult, to avenge you. You didn't get to see these parts, but the night after you died, he couldn’t sleep. When he and Hel woke up the next morning, it was your and Fenrir’s deaths that motivated them to keep fighting. Things are a mess down on Earth, and it’d take a miracle to salvage things…but you’d be surprised how far principles can take you when you’re fighting for someone you love.

The Prince had no response to that, his head fully raised as he sniffed, wiping his nose with the back of his wrist. He watched Rodion step through the dark chambers with apprehension and determination mixed on his face.

If you’re going to sit here and say that you have no one who can truly love you without feeling danger, that’s fine. But there is at least one person who loves you despite that danger. There is a man out there who is fighting with his allies, putting his life on the line against the group that took your youth away from you, even when he never wanted to come on this adventure in the first place. That man would die for you. He just might, too.

“H-He wouldn’t…”

I think he would. He told you his story. Even if he may stray from the path of good, even if he may strain what it means to be human on a moral level, it’s an undeniable fact that he cares deeply, deeply, deeply for the people close to him. Even if he may excuse it, even if he may not know how to show it, he does. And I know that you do too.

It’s up to you, Prince.

Do you want to fade away and leave nothing but a burning memory?

Or do you want to come back to the one who longs for your love?

“I…”

“I want to come back.”

Good. That’s what I wanted to hear.

The Prince took a deep breath, rubbing his hands over his face to get the last ounces of misery and self-reflection out of himself, and shook his head hard enough to mess up his coiffed red hair. He ran his fingers through it, tucked his ears beneath the sides, stretched his arms behind his head, and let out a sigh. He had a rejuvenated smile on his face and a more driven look in his eyes.

“Right, let’s go then.”

He stood there with that smile for half of a minute, before lowering his arms and shrugging.

“Hey, what gives? I thought I was supposed to be going back now.”

Oh, yeah. Hold on. It takes a second…

“You know, while you’re doing that, I wonder. Why am I still…well, ‘here’ in the first place? Is this some kind of disembodied voice magic or something? This sure as hell ain’t Heaven, dear, considering I was there the other day. Ain’t Hell, either. I was also there. Wow, thinking about it, I got quite the round tour about the human experience of death, didn't I?”

Funny you should say that, it was actually your larceny that saved your life. The Stoic-Passion Relic you stole from the Vatican, the relic infused with the pain and suffering of a martyr…it actually had enough divine energy built up inside of it to grant you anastasis. You were allowed to come back.

Also, it wasn’t the other day, it was three days ago.

“Three days ago?! Good lord, man, then let’s pick up the pace, can’t we? Chop-chop!”

Alright, alright. You’re all set. Before you go, though…as a parting gift.

“Hm? If it’s a fruit bouquet, love, I appreciate the thought, but those things go old and soggy faster than grannies in Greece on account of not being able to fit their fat arses into the fridge.”

No, no, it’s not that. Here, hold out your hands.

“Wait, is it heavy? I’m not exactly the strongest bean in the grinder, you know.”

The Prince put out his hands, and found that they were full of…pages. About 647 pages, in fact, all neatly-typed on white printer paper. The top page read, front and center, “**PRINCE BOOK**”. He flipped through them, his brow furrowed with an amused-confused expression gracing his face.

“Sorry, what is this?”

It’s the book. Well, ‘book’. It’s your story.

“It’s not bound.”

Yeah, binding books is kind of expensive.

“There’s no cover art.”

Not yet.

"You said this was a book? Like, a published book-book?"

Ehhh? Depends, do you like it? It could be refined later on. Maybe not now, but it could be. Whatever, the point is, I know that you like to do cut-up poetry whenever you're in a tight spot to give you some peace of mind, so…you're free to use that.

"Huh? Really? It won't…y'know, muck anything up?"

It's not my story in the first place, Prince. It's yours. You make what you want out of it.

The Prince looked down at the papers and held up his hand. Scissors formed in his palm, and he quickly got to work snipping and cutting, rearranging and shuffling, creating something new…and after a bit, he had composed a full short poem, which he laid out in front of him among the floor of the void.

"a smite Prince her Mmph want shattering the two in
why wings came up to bump person his one on
his cited with cruel summer and especially next right projectiles her
We back quite what beyond has handy
Rodi, good of you, lowered Devil's been needle center robbing
Look, see, maybe is stripped looked he absurdist grass jaw too
he, Prince of questions
low story…very ideal him, the just death… potential boring
Howling for it, The Mount how
as simply rock was Even they some a do, just
friend shallow volunteered hand evil icy they like, Finally
perched me cheese you here, animal of were-she kind
outlined his 'the now', his 'is it?' cause, and
the word fun? Counseling, rubbing of stammered tip circus
Oh
Obviously, boytoy
On to, into, like brothers"

He studied the words, evaluating how they played off of one another, taking in the context and the assonance of each, almost like a sommelier studying their wine…before he smiled.

"Perfect. Just what I needed. Thank you, universe!"

The Prince rose to his full height and put his hands on his hips, looking up with a beaming smile.

"Alright then, voice. I'm ready whenever you are. Send my frilly behind back to the land of the living! I'm ready to write my own chapter in this story!"

I don't know if I'd really call it the 'land of the living', but you're the boss.

Hold on tight.

"And, love?"

Hm?

“If I die again, that’s it, right? Where would I be going in that case?”

Well, you didn't follow any religion closely enough to warrant being directed to any actual afterlife…so, I imagine your soul would be thrown into the void to remain for all eternity.

“...Bloody brilliant. That’s something to look forward to, innit? Better make this life count, then.”

The Prince closed his eyes, and gradually, the nothingness surrounding him as he gradually lost his physicality, lost his feeling, until he was nothing but consciousness…

And then, like a candle being snuffed out, that consciousness vanished.

CHAPTER 35: Out On The Tiles

As Fionn, Dian Cecht, and the Morrigan sprinted along the paths of Schatten Street, the notion that the Broken Tracks of Meinung simply did not play by the rules established by most other places was emphasized in full force. When they came to a sheer wall, Fionn jumped and directed both feet towards the side, and the world appeared to turn to make sure he was still upright. Dian and Badb followed soon after, and they found that wherever there was a sheer drop or a sheer cliff, there was more street to be found at a 90-degree angle from wherever they originally were. It was disorienting, and they always found that they had trouble preventing themselves from falling off, but they followed after the Crimson Misfit as it ducked and floated through the sky. Despite its constant cackling, it seemed like it didn't quite know the layout of Schatten Street itself—it frequently made repetitive turns, nearly bumping into buildings, and ducking down through square loops of asphalt, and Fionn kept his eyes trained on it as he kept Dian Cecht's hand tight in his.

All the while, the head of the Cambodian Holiday followed after them, babbling nonsense in an overly charismatic trembling voice.

"To haunt is a laugh! 60, run you back guy!"

Dian swallowed, stumbling over cracks in the sidewalk.

"What in blue blazes is it sayin'? S-Should I be coverin' my ears?"

"If you can hear it and you feel normal, I think we should be fine."

"I feel sick, if that's what you're askin'..."

The Badb fired off more razor-sharp feathers at the figure of the Crimson Misfit, the cackling ghoul swiftly dodging each by swaying side to side as Oberon punched and kicked however he could. She huffed, continuing to bound after the boyish warrior.

"Regardless of what it does, we can't run forever! We've gotta find th' bloody head!"

"You know, it's quite funny—quite literally, we're followin' the mantra of 'cut off the head, and the rest will die'."

"This is no time for jokes!"

"W-Was that a joke?"

The Cambodian Holiday let out a low groan, part of the barbed wire that wrapped around its mouth unraveling and wavering in the air like a cobra being led out by the tones of the pungi woodwind.

"You court a squelching, you follow, but you're want known. Well, stupid, your life a chorus!"

In an instant, it lashed out that line of barbed wire like a whip, delivering a nasty gash all across Badb's back. She let out a scream, stumbling to the ground as shimmering gold-tinged black blood gushed down her back onto the road. Fionn stopped, yanked in the opposite direction by Dian Cecht.

"L-Lady Morrigan!"

“Cecht, we cannot delay. We must go after His Majesty and find the head. Tarrying like this will make us more vulnerable.”

“And just leave her here?! Come on, lad, let me go, I-I need to…Hrrrgh—!”

With a hard yank, he managed to separate Fionn’s hand from his and scramble over to the Morrigan, taking her hand.

“Milady, are you alright? Do not worry, I can…”

She looked up, meeting Dian’s gaze. Her eyes were glassy, glazed over as though she was lost in deep, deep thought, and she mumbled in an entranced slur.

“...Nor…mandy…”

“What?”

She tilted her head to the side, black hair partially covering her eyes.

“...I had…always wanted t’ go t’ Normandy, y’know. The beaches, the history, it all seemed so invitin’...then I got there, an’...”

Badb covered her eyes, sighing deeply.

“...It stunk. Th’ people were rude…everythin’ was closed…I wanted to go home…but, I paid fer the five-day plane ticket, so I was stuck…Stuck…”

The medic furrowed his brow, baffled, before he remembered the papers that the DUO agents had showed all of them beforehand. There was a small sketch beside the files on each agent, what was this one? The ‘Cambodian Holiday’...all at once, it came back to him. These were egregores, the congealed depression and disappointment people felt when they traveled someplace they had been wanting to go for a long time and found that it didn't live up to their expectations. With a lash of their barbed wire, they could inflict that despair on others. That wasn’t really something he could treat…but the wound itself, he could.

He raised his hand, mint-scented magic wafting off of it, but before he could turn Badb around to treat her wound, the Cambodian Holiday swooped down and took the back of her robe in its tombstone-sized teeth, lifting her up off the ground. She didn't attempt to fight, her head lolling despondently to the side as she murmured to herself.

“...I saved up for so long…and now it’s just another waste o’ money…”

Dian Cecht threw out his hand.

“Wh—hey! Give Lady Morrigan back, you…you wretched thing, you!”

“It’ll some see, ain’t conscious. Sent toes. Dogs for around, take don’t church. Get! Go!”

It carried Badb up slowly, rising like a hot air balloon, before turning around and beginning to hover away in a straight line. Dian turned back to Fionn.

“Lad!”

“I’m on it.”

He retrieved his bow and arrows, nocking one and firing it as fast as he could. The white-fletched projectile whizzed through the air, but fell just short of the floating head as it rose higher and higher into the sky. In only a minute or so, it was gone. Fionn winced, wrinkling his nose.

“Damn it…I’ve let the Morrigan get taken away as well…and with the time we’ve spent on that, Oberon is probably long gone by now. Am I really so incompetent…?”

Fionn gnawed on the tip of his thumb, and in the process, accidentally activated the gift the Salmon of Knowledge had given him so long ago. He felt the presences of the people around him. One was Dian Cecht, who ran his hand through his thin hair with an exhausted sigh, but apart from him, there were…

"I wouldn' say that yet, laddie!"

He turned back around, and right where it had been when the Cambodian Holiday had gained on them, the Crimson Misfit hovered and held Oberon. Fionn tilted his head.

"What? They are still here…"

Dian brushed himself off, turning around.

"Maybe then, you were right about this one being different, lad? It hasn't been trying to hurt Oberon at all either. The Morrigan is a strong woman, she can handle herself…and if not, well. She'll pop up again eventually."

Fionn cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Are you with us? Or against us?"

"Walk Among Us. Runaway!"

"Excuse me?"

"I think that's a 'with', lad."

The boy lowered his bow and arrow.

"Well, regardless of the answer, it still has His Majesty in its grasp. We must follow."

Oberon, still in the Crimson Misfit's grasp, waved his fists.

"Ye'd *better* follow me, laddie, 'r else ye'd be gettin' a nasty drubbin' from me wife once all this is done an' over wit'!"

The two of them continued following the hovering ghoul, leaping from street to street and occasionally chancing a look at one of the many, many buildings they passed. The more they passed, the more the buildings seemed like they were never meant to be used in the first place: at least one simply had its door painted on, its windows leading into an utterly empty room, connected to every other house on Schatten Street. If they tried to open one of their doors, would it even work properly? Or would it just lead into a wall?

However, even with the long and winding road they took, they could feel they were slowly reaching the 'heart' of the 'neighborhood'. Fionn nibbled on the tip of his thumb as he worried about the other teams. Are they doing okay? Hel seemed quite capable, and the other one had two fierce deities on it, but he still couldn't help but worry.

And for that matter…what about himself?

He couldn't stop thinking about that picture that Morganwg and the agents showed him. That ghastly picture of himself as an old, old man, sleeping among his many Fianna…it was him. Undoubtedly, that was him. But then, what was *he?* He had his memories. He knew how he burnt himself on the Salmon of Knowledge. He remembered his time with Bodhmall and Liath Luachra. He remembered striking down Aillen mac Midgna the fae.

And, now that he thought about it, he could remember growing old. His marriage, his child, his licentious frolicking with the women of the Fianna, the death of his companion Diarmuid. He

even remembered…laying himself to rest in the cave. When he woke up, his first thought was that Ireland needed him, and he exited without even looking back.

Why was he still young?

Why does he remain?

The gift of the Salmon of Knowledge pulsed, and in an instant, he could feel…not truly presences, per se. They were more like afterimages, the faded memories of souls and thoughts. He could feel them, hundreds upon thousands, upon…how many were there? He retrieved his sword, Dian Cecht clinging to him as he darted his gaze around. He couldn't see anything. What was this?

Before he could open his mouth, the Crimson Misfit swooped down to face him directly (or, as directly as it could, for it appeared to be at least twelve feet tall). Fionn was stared down long and hard by the watery eyes that sunk deep into the mask of the red death…

Though, he couldn't help but feel apprehensive.

The gift showed that there were five people in front of him, and yet the only ones facing him were Oberon and the ghoul. It raised a finger to be silent.

Then, in that screeching low-quality voice it had, it pointed a bony hand towards one of the doors on the surrounding buildings.

"In The Doorway!"

Quickly, it ushered Fionn and Dian Cecht (who struggled to keep himself from screaming and cowering in fear) into one of the many short painted houses. Thankfully, the door on this one was real, and as they stumbled inside, the Crimson Misfit ducked in and shut it behind them. They were in darkness, save for the light coming from the window. They crowded around the outside, being sure not to be easily seen, and watched as the crowd passed. What sort of horrendous, surreal throng of creatures would come ambling past…?

A mob of toasters with wings flew down the street like birds in migration.

Dian Cecht frowned, still quivering.

"W-What're toasters doin' here?"

"Hunting Humans."

Fionn turned to the Crimson Misfit, producing his sword and holding it to the ghoul's grinning visage.

"I do not know why you are doing this, but if this is the set-up for some kind of ambush, you will be not be the last to lose your head by Mac an Luin's blade."

The ghost's voice crackled.

"I Got a Right."

It craned its neck to look out the window and down the street as it watched the toasters make a loop-de-loop and pass.

"Where Do They Go?"

"You don't know?"

It shrugged. *"Unexplained."*

"Like many things about you, so far."

Dian Cecht waved his hand.

"I think they've gone. It's safe to come out now."

The two of them exited the building, followed by the Crimson Misfit. Fionn kept his sword diligently held up to the ghoul's neck at all times, still refusing to trust it after the aid it had given them. He looked around warily.

"Uh, 'ello? Cumhaill, laddie?"

The warrior blinked once or twice before turning to the side and coming face-to-face with Oberon. He had his hands on his hips and an eyebrow quirked, scrutinizing Fionn.

"Your majesty…?"

"Th' ghoulie let me go five minutes ago."

He nodded blankly. "Thank goodness you are alright."

"T-Thank goodness?! Fer chrissake, is that all ye have t' say fer yerself! All yer talk, 'His Majesty this', 'His Majesty that', an' ye forgot I even existed?! Ye bluddy melter, 'ave ye got any brains in that 'ead o' yers, fannybaws?!"

Fionn frowned.

"I don't know."

"...Ah. Er. Well…" Oberon, thrown off entirely, awkwardly coughed. "Me thanks to ya fer savin' me, lad. Much appreciated. Shame bout th' Morrigu though. Th' hen'll be awright on 'er own fer a wee bit."

Dian Cecht sighed with relief and put a hand on both their shoulders.

"Well, am I glad that's over with. Now all we need to do is find that giant head…"

"Speak Of The Devil."

Raising a finger, the Crimson Misfit pointed down the street.

On the right side of the buildings in front of them, nestled between what appeared to be a notary's office and a currency exchange, was the Kaput Caput. The robotic head, the size of a house in and of itself, stood like the head of a giant with its emotionless eyes staring straight ahead into nothing and wires trailing out from the base. They were all monochrome, of course, but grey and white and black wires weaved in and out of the pedestal it was perched on like overeager tapeworms, trailing into the surrounding alleyways and crannies. White light shone out from its eyes—perhaps they were windows?

Three figures stood in front of the Kaput Caput like stern protector spirits, pale muscle-bound forms clad in little more than N-patterned pink speedos. The first had a cow's head, the second a monkey's head, and the third, a teapot for a head. The cow-headed one appeared to have a small ribbon of acknowledgement taped to its left pec.

Quickly, the three of them scrambled into an alleyway and peered at the three. Dian swallowed.

"That's it, right? That's what we're lookin' for! But, if my memory serves correctly, those three guards're…Ning, Nang, and Nong, right? …Wait, Ning, Nang, and Nong? Isn't that a British children's poem? Which one's which…?"

Oberon pointed. “Aye, look a’ th’ size o’ those huddies! They could prolly toss a cabre without breakin’ ‘alf a sweat! I’m pants wit’ combat, an’ I know Cecht is too—”

“Hey!”

“Am I wrong, ye carlie? So that leaves ye, Fionn. Are ye good tae fight three ‘gainst one?”

Fionn nodded.

“I should be able to. It would be no trouble to—”

He felt something brush against the back of his neck and, on reflex, whirled around and slashed with his sword. He only cut the air, however, and when Oberon pulled on his cape to get him to turn back around, he found that the Crimson Misfit had floated over them and made its way over to the three guards. Quietly, they watched the ghoul descend in front of the three guards and perform an odd salute to them.

“Braineaters!”

They saluted back. Ning, the cow-headed one, made a sound like a gong being struck. Nang, the monkey-headed one, produced a sonar ping. Nong, the teapot, gibbered incoherently like a newborn.

“Hate The Living, Love The Dead. From Hell They Came. Ghouls Night Out.”

The Crimson Misfit gestured with a scythe to the head.

“Don’t Open Til Doomsday? I Wanna Be a NY Ranger.”

All three of the guards nodded, stepping aside as the skeleton cackled once more, starting to move past them as it reached out its hand to one of the wires…

Then, in the blink of an eye, a sudden flash of red whipped across the grey expanses of Schatten Street and collided with the figure, along with an unhinged cackling.

“Die, Die My Darling!”

The Crimson Misfit (or, what was thought to be the Crimson Misfit) fell back, and the cloak fell from its body, revealing its true contents.

Five DUO agents were sprawled out on the ground, groaning in their black suits. Two had one skeletal-patterned glove on one of their hands—either the left or the right depending on where they were situated in the first place—one had the mask of the red death on her face, another held a small speaker in his hand that connected to a voice changer, and the last had fallen off of what appeared to be a unicycle with wings, what allowed them to fly in the first place.

Ning, Nang, and Nong all both whipped around in shock to see the *real* Crimson Misfit hovering above them, staring down with a more devilish and unreadable expression on its grim visage. A bloody red glow emanated from its body, as though it were radioactive, and it swung its scythe with a laugh. A *real* laugh.

“Die, Die My Darling!”

The agents managed to dodge just in time and get to their feet, but this wasn’t good: they were surrounded now.

Back in the alley, Fionn, Oberon, and Dian Cecht looked on. The fae king and Tuatha De were in utter shock.

“They were the agents?! That makes sense, with how they were helpin’ us an’ all, but…”

"I knew it."

Dian gawked back at Fionn. "Y-You did?! Then why didn't you say anything?!"

"I wanted to be sure."

"Jings, th' creep was five people? But then, me magic—"

Fionn gestured with a hand. "I may not be fully familiar with their technology, but I saw this in America. This organization has magic-nullifying bands that wrap around the wrist, buzzing when they meet your skin and denying the use of any magic. I believe The Prince called them 'joy buzzers'…"

"Really?! Ach, that explains th' shock I felt when I got nabbed…"

"Yes. But, now they don't stand a chance. They may have technology, but they are only human. I'll go and protect them."

"B-But, laddie, aren't ye only human as well?!"

Fionn didn't respond as he drew his sword, stepping forward.

I wouldn't do that if I were you.

He turned to the building beside them, where the low and slightly accented baritone voice had come from. With a sound like a lightbulb's cord being pulled, the entire interior of the upper building was visible, like the roof had been pulled off of a dollhouse. Sitting in the center in front of a small desk with a 1920s-era microphone resting on it was the enormous and rotund form of the Shadow, his body of black fire flickering and wavering like an active flame as his single eye stared down at the group. Dian Cecht and Oberon were frozen with fear, pressing themselves up against the wall of the opposite house in the alley as they stared up at the man, but Fionn was not so hesitant: in less than a moment, he leapt out of the alley and into the street, his boot heels skidding across the asphalt as he stared up at the Shadow.

"You."

You? How impolite. You and your little friends know exactly who I am.

He stood up, his hands folded behind his back as he strolled out to the edge of the 'room' he was in.

I just thought it would be nice to let you know that I've been watching your every move so far. The way you meaninglessly wander from block to block, chattering incessantly. It makes me quite sick.

"I don't care what you have or have not heard, villain. You aren't going to get away with this."

Get away with what? Killing all of you? Trust me. I could have gotten away with it *ages* ago. The only reason I didn't simply step in and obliterate all of you myself is because seeing you pathetic worms wriggle like you have a chance to avoid being stamped on by the heels of Man Unkind was an ample distraction while my mind was elsewhere. And besides, are your human friends over there really going to be able to do what you all set out to do?

He gestured to the Kaput Caput. There, the DUO agents crowded close together in a circle, facing outwards with whatever weapons they had at their disposal as Ning, Nang, Nong, and the Crimson Misfit closed in. Fionn glanced behind himself at them and grit his teeth, raising Mac an

Luin in front of him. It pulsed with blue energy, waving and rocking over the blade like a roaring typhoon.

"I have faith in them, just as I have faith in myself that I can defeat you."

The Shadow raised his eyebrow unamusedly.

Pardon?

Oberon and Dian Cecht practically pushed past one another, shouting.

"Cumhaill, what in th' hell do you think you're doin'?! You remember Hel's warnin', we see the Shadow, we run far, far away!"

"Ye'll be burnt tae a crisp, ye bampot! Fight fer th' fate o' th' world an' all, but ye don't gotta throw yer life away wit' meanin'less skirmishes!"

I would listen to your friends, Fionn mac Cumhaill. Don't throw your life away by fighting a battle you can't win. It isn't like you've been doing that for as long as you've been in this modern world. What were your dreams, again…?

The Shadow raised both his hands, and a small apparition of a bird, formed from black fire, appeared over his head for a moment before vanishing.

To get your own hero-lights just like the legendary Cu Chulainn…

Fionn sneered with fury, but he remained silent. The Shadow stepped forward, hopping stiffly off of the edge of the house and landing onto the asphalt with a crash. His presence was overwhelming, and it would be even if he didn't loom over everyone present. Quiet, he kept his hands folded behind him and walked until he was only a few yards away from Fionn. His voice rumbled out like the sound of distant thunder.

What will you do, boy?

For the first time, the boy felt his hands trembling, his grip on Mac an Luin only kept among the nervous sweat that had begun to form with his fearful vice-like grasp on its hilt. He swallowed, wanting desperately to put his thumb in his mouth, but he couldn't afford such a motion. Not when he was facing down such a menacing foe.

Fionn choked down his fear and looked to Oberon and Dian Cecht.

"Your Majesty! Dian Cecht! Run! Run as far away as you can, and meet up with one of the other teams! I will handle this beast."

Dian Cecht reached out. "B-But, Cumhaill! What if you—"

He was stopped by the fae king, who put a hand on his shoulder. "…Oberon…?"

"Tis best tae let th' lad handle this on 'is oon, methinks. I ken we can have faith in 'im…an', 'tis prolly best tae save our own skins as well. Come on, take my hand."

"But…but…" The Tuatha De winced and shook his head. "…Fine then." He took the king's hand in his.

With a two-fingered salute in Fionn's direction, Oberon took off away from the center of the action, bringing the healer with him. Dian Cecht looked back at Fionn, sorrowful, and shook his head as he gripped onto the king's hand and forearm.

The Shadow watched them idly.

"You aren't going to go after them?"

Why should I? There's nothing either of them can do. They're dead weight.

Fionn pointed his sword out at the Shadow.

"Before we do this. Tell me what you are."

What I am?

"Yes. Are you a man? A demon? Some sort of cruel god?"

He just laughed cruelly, a three-fingered hand slicking his curled hair back.

What a stupid question to ask before you die. But, you know what? I'll humor you. The only thing you need to know about me is that I exist in everyone's hearts. The only difference is that even the most reprehensible, the most uninhibited, the most lost are able to keep me from taking control. The body I've commandeered for the forseeable future, the young man named Moliere Harpagon, was lost in an endless daydream. Frankly, I feel I've done quite a lot for him. I liberated him from his family. I gave him a high-paying job. And yet he still wasn't happy. He wanted…

The Shadow's eye shifted to a fang-filled grimace of repulsion.

***Love.* Urgh. Such filthy emotions aren't my purview, but I only owned half of his shares back then, so to speak. Then came the merger, and I took over full-time.**

Fionn kept his emerald gaze trained on the Shadow, listening to his explanation. Well, really, he wasn't listening—he was trying to formulate a plan inside his head, anticipating the future and judging whatever outcome he thought would be best. The Shadow sighed.

Does that satisfy your curiosity? May I kill you now?

He looked back at the agents, who had been tied up by the three guards. The Crimson Misfit held its scythe to their throats, cackling as it shouted, *"Scream!"*

Then, he saw the glint of something in the alleys surrounding the Kaput Caput, and he knew what his plan would be. He looked back at the Shadow, and with all his might, put on the most earnest and misguided voice he could.

"…I want to fight you."

Do you, now?

"No black fire. No sudden tricks. No obliteration. I want to be able to face you down in a one-on-one fight. There, I will claim myself as the victor and prove the superiority of the hero of Eire, Fionn mac Cumhaill."

The Shadow twitched.

I'm sorry, I wasn't aware you were not only moronic, but suicidal. To suggest something like that is tantamount to wanting to arm-wrestle a mountain. Your arms are too short to box with God, Fionn.

"Are you afraid you'll lose?"

Afraid? I've long since forgotten what it felt like to be afraid. I'm more annoyed than anything else at your overconfidence.

"Is it overconfidence? Or do I simply know what fights I know I'll win? You speak with so much hatred and disregard for life. Does the dog who barks from the post he is tied to only do so because he knows he cannot win if set loose?"

The enormous black figure clenched both his fists, glaring down at Fionn as he stomped forwards, looming over the warrior with his white-outlined eye swirling and spiraling as it gazed straight through Fionn's soul. He was practically trembling with barely-contained rage, the black fire that coated his body turning from conflagration to inferno.

What if I just killed you now?

Fionn was unphased, his expression as determined as it was vacant.

"The man who only kills with one arrow will be killed by one arrow."

A shudder ran through the Shadow's entire body, as though a breeze had passed by his flames, before he suddenly turned around and ran his hand back over his hair. He slowly inhaled, and then slowly exhaled a long sigh of frustration. He looked back at the agents, whose souls were being drawn out through their mouths by the Crimson Misfit. It gyrated its fingers and wriggled its scythe, extracting a vague light out from the throats of the blanching and anemic-looking agents. Ning, Nang, and Nong kept watch on the surrounding area. They could take care of those human fools themselves.

…Alright, then. I'll play your little game. But the instant you stop keeping my interest, I reserve the right to murder you. Is that a good contract?

"Fine by me."

Good. Then come with me down the street.

The Shadow gestured for Fionn to follow as he began to walk, adjusting his tie.

You'll be good for a lark.

~

At the foot of Nobody's Enemy, Hel was broiled in a fight against the Superfluous Man, using both her powers and what combat skill she had with two long and sharp icicles. He was slippery and agile, effortlessly dodging every one of her attacks as though he were little more than a puppet on a string: dropping to the ground and rising up without ever getting his footing, unnaturally smooth movements that gave the impression there were no joints in his limbs (and there very well might not have been), and an annoying tendency to wave that pistol of his in Hel's face made it more of a war of attrition than anything else.

He thrust his gun forward with a confident smile, and Hel stopped it with a cross formation of icicles, grunting.

"Hrrgh—!"

"What's the matter, cheena?" He clicked the trigger, and a white poppy emerged from the barrel. She caught a short whiff of its scent. "The skills of a dandy just too much for you to handle?"

Hel wrenched her head away, yanking both icicles down and to the side in an attempt to throw the gun from his hand. It was to no avail: instead, his gloved hand simply popped off at the wrist and fell to the ground. The pistol dissolved into muck, as did the hand, and once Hel had turned her head back from witnessing that, a newly-formed hand had come to prod her in both

the eyes. She yelped and stumbled back, nearly tripping over the train tracks they were fighting over, and the Superfluous Man took the opportunity to retrieve a pair of pink dice from his suit pocket. He shook them in his palm.

"Come on now, pee and em both need new pairs of spats…"

Like a baseball player winding up for a pitch, he reared back and raised one leg high before lobbing them at Hel. She managed to stumble out of the way as she regained her vision, looking up.

"What in the…?"

"I'll tell you what, my ducky."

Where the dice had clattered to the floor, there was a small sound like the plucking of a harp before two bushes of white, pink, and purple poppies suddenly erupted from the ground, the size of a decorative hedge each. Their aroma threatened to fill Hel's nostrils, and she grew woozy.

"No!"

She shouted and reached out, grasping the both of them. With her powers, both bushes immediately flash-froze, shattering into pieces on the ground. This distraction was all that he needed: while both of her hands were occupied with taking care of the bushes, he leapt into the air and extended his hand, clasping it over the pale side of her face and covering her right eye. Despite his momentum, he didn't knock Hel down: instead, he was latched onto her face with the soles of his feet on her chest like a spider monkey. He tittered.

"Hoo hoo hoo, you know, I've noticed you're an odd ducky: a half-and-half sort of poison. And that other half isn't looking so hot, you can hear that for free. So I wonder…"

He raised up his other hand, holding up some fingers with a cruel smile while Hel stumbled around and yanked at the back of his suit, trying to tear him away.

"How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three!"

He glanced at the three fingers he had extended and silently lowered one.

"How about now?"

"Four!"

"Ha, I knew it! Nothing on that side of your litso works right, does it? Ain't that just lovely? Now if I could juuuuust…"

Whatever he was going to do, he never got around to it, as Hel whipped around and smashed the Superfluous Man into the side of the crucifix that held Foxy Shazam's body, the entity getting a diagonal slat of barbed wire to the side of the head. In an instant, his smile turned to a grimace, and flower petals scattered across the ground with a sound like someone punching a rose bush.

"Yarbles!" He groaned and let go, but pushed himself off of Hel's chest in the process, sending her staggering backwards until she hit a tree.

The Superfluous Man held his gloved hands out in front of him, looking at the petals that had shed from his head and which were strewn about on the floor. For once, he wasn't effortlessly

smug—instead, he appeared distraught. He fell to his knees, frantically picking up every petal he could.

"O-Oh dear, oh dear…not good. Not good at all. My petals, my—my wondrous, wondrous petals…"

Taking the opportunity to attack while her opponent was distracted, Hel wasted no time in forming a javelin of ice and hurling it at the entity. It sailed straight through the air, her aim true, but missed at the last second as the Superfluous Man fell to his elbows and shuddered. Then, with a singular quick motion that appeared like he was being yanked upwards by a string in his back, he rose to his feet. He wasn't smiling anymore.

"That is it. You've tolchocked me, you mangey skitebird! Do you know how long it takes to groom these petals every morning?!"

Hel produced two more ice javelins, one in each hand, and stood her ground.

"I don't know, and I don't care."

A train rolled past.

"Oh, you don't care, do you? Fine. That's just fine by me."

The Superfluous Man took off his gloves, revealing what was underneath its corsages: nothing. Nothing but more opium poppies, which twisted and gnarled, unfurling and straightening out into a long, thin, glaucous rod. At both ends were a blunt knob—the rounded capsule of the poppy bud—which gave off a hiss of sweet-smelling smoke. His scowl twisted itself around into yet another heinous grin as he chortled, gripping it with reformed hands.

"Time for a bit of the ol' *ultra-violence."*

Titania, the fairy queen, had secreted herself away from the fight between Hel and the Superfluous Man. She had no fighting ability, after all: oh, why hadn't they brought Medb in, instead? She would have relished the chance to tear all these nasty little things apart…then she remembered how nobly she was fighting to protect the fae settlements in Tir na nOg and abandoned that line of thought. Huginn had volunteered to keep a close eye on Nobody's Enemy as well as the surrounding area to make sure that if the Dog-Faced Man was coming close, or if somehow the cyclops had opened itself up, he would be the first to know.

The matronly fae woman watched from afar, peeking out from behind a tree as her wings fluttered. She could fly, she could! She just wasn't as sprightly as she was in her youth, back in the Elizabethan era. Some part of her distantly wondered what that young man who wandered into their summer home would say about events like these. Little Billy was always quite the wordsmith, after all. She shook that thought off as well. Now was not the time for such frivolous lines of thinking!

She watched as Hel slammed the Superfluous Man's head into a wall, frowning and wincing slightly. That had to hurt…she wanted to help. But, what could she do? She wasn't versed in combat magic: everything she knew was for practical purposes like cleaning up around the house or getting Oberon to order the pixies to do the dishes every now and then, and she hadn't fought once in her life…

"E-Excuse me."

Titania's skeleton practically jumped out of her throat at the sound of the voice behind her as she yelped, whipping around as her wings fluttered in a panic.

Behind her, floating softly, was…oh, what was her name? Hel called her Moxy, right? Moxy was floating there, her crescent-shaped head downcast as her blocky hands wrung themselves together. Titania put a hand to her chest and sighed.

"Don't scare me like that, Moxy! Goodness…"

Moxy Fruvous furrowed her brow, or at least, she looked like she was trying to.

"Don't…d-don't call me that. I'm an agent of Man Unkind. I need to take you in. Come with me."

She reached out to take Titania's arm, but the fae queen slapped her hand away. She winced.

"Ow! Hey!"

"Y'aren't takin' me anywhere, thank ye very much! Not unless ye explain what's goin' on wit' Hel an' the one on the cross there."

Moxy turned around, hunching over.

"…You heard what the Superfluous Man said, fairy woman. She…She tried to…"

She fell to the ground, sniffling. Her words were just barely audible behind her sorrow.

"Foxy came to o-our leader and told him that she wanted to go home. Not just that, she wanted him to stop this whole thing. She wanted him to stop Man Unkind, and turn the people back, and let them go home…he told her, what would they be going back to? The streets? The hospitals? The gutters? Here, t-they could serve a purpose, here, they would be taken care of and would be in a place where they belonged. What did she want him to do, just throw away everything he'd been working on for the past…h-however long he said…? This was their home. They were their family. Who else…w-who else would love them like he did?"

Titania put a hand to her cheek.

"Oh, dear."

"I was there. I was there with her, and I watched her try to fight him, but they…she…he…"

Moxy covered her face as she collapsed to the ground, her whole body trembling.

"As he was stringing her up, h-he told me that 'this is what happens to naughty and ungrateful little girls like yourself'…I-I wanted to save her, I did, but I was…I was…me and her have been together f-for longer than I can remember, and…I-I can't, I…I don't want to. I don't want to hurt you or Hel or anyone, but this is all I have left, and what…what place is there for me outside? What place is there for a disfigured, cowardly *freak* like me? W-Will I…end up like…"

A train rolled past.

"Moxy, love."

The queen had knelt down beside Moxy Fruvous, placing a hand on her back and gently rubbing it. She shook her head solemnly.

"I won't lie to ye, dearie. There will always be strife an' hatred in th' world. There will always be folks who think they're better than other folks. An' what do they do? They spew it

right back out. Sometimes those who are touched by that hatred pay it forward, so t' speak, an' it's never pretty. But…"

She reached down and wiped away one of Moxy's tears, her cheeks dimpling as a motherly smile graced her visage. The cult agent looked up at her, trembling.

"The secret to not lettin' that hate get to ya, not as much…is to find a true friend. Someone who'll care about ye and love ye no matter what. Someone who's always got yer back, who'll support ye and fight with ye 'til yer dyin' breath. This world is a tough place, but it's tougher goin' at it alone. Even with all this nonsense, ye had someone who truly cared fer you, and you truly cared fer someone. I think it's helped ye keep yer…humanity, in a manner of speakin'."

Moxy swallowed, shaking her head as if to literally shake away her thoughts and turning her gaze to the grass around her dress.

"…T-The leader says that all doesn't matter. That, whatever you're born into, you're forced to suffer for your lot. A-Always suffering with the promise of eventual reward, but never receiving it. Constantly working towards an imaginary goal with no end result but to waste y-your life doing trivial, meaningless, pointless things. What good is finding a friend, having someone who cares about you, if they're born into the same cruel world that you are?"

Titania put her hand under Moxy's chin, lifting her head up to look at her with patience.

"Because in this cruel world, they happened to find *you."*

"M-Me…?"

"There's somethin' to be said about how things are. An' there's somethin' to be said about being alone. But, as the ol' romantic sayin' goes, there's always someone fer everyone—an' that goes fer all manner of companionship, not just love! To feel such away about the world…your leader must have been hurt very, very deeply by someone he truly cared about. That's somethin' that can break a person."

A train rolled past.

"Regardless…"

She got to her feet, wings softly beating, and brought Moxy with her to a standing position. Her odd, misshapen, cartoony eyes were wet with tears as she wrung her hands together.

"Don't feel so ashamed o' bein' who you are, dearie. Th' world's got only one you, and at least one person will love that about you."

Moxy Fruvous was silent for what felt like an eternity, before she finally mumbled out something.

"…I-I want you to tell Helly something."

Hel faced down the Superfluous Man, and the two circled around one another. She had fused the two javelins of ice in her hands into a single staff that mirrored that of her enemy, and gripped it tightly in both hands as she glared at him. The flowery fiend twirled his own baton in his hands, making it appear as a spinning disc in front of him, to his sides, over his head, before slamming it down on the ground in front of him.

"Tell me, devotchka, have you ever heard of bartitsu?"

“If that’s some sort of young-and-affluent strippers’ club, save me the irritation.”

“Ho ho, no, no, no! Bartitsu is the modern martial art of the British gentleman. It combines the elements of boxing, jiujutsu, kickboxing, and of course…” He twirled his cane around and pointed it directly at Hel. “Singlestick.”

She quirked an eyebrow, unimpressed. “Singlestick.”

“Yes, yes! Bartitsu was immortalized by a certain bolshy detective, but that’s just a bit of off-the-gulliver factualism for you. Now. Shall we?”

Hel sneered.

“I thought you would never cease your endless yammering, freak. Come on!”

The Superfluous Man did not come forward. Instead, taking what she saw as an opportunity, Hel lunged towards him holding the ice staff like a baseball bat. She let out a yell and swung, but the staff was parried by the Superfluous Man’s own—despite it being made of flowers, it nonetheless felt as hard as metal. She tried to push past it, but he thrust the staff forward, one of the rounded poppy bulbs at the end knocking her right in the face. She lurched backwards, her eyes reflexively closing, and the bulb squeaked as it let off that familiar scent.

“Hnn—!”

She recognized it and quickly knocked her head back, wrestling her own staff back away and instead holding it like a pool cue as she regained her balance, repeatedly jabbing it at the agent as he backed away. Like she was moving in slow motion, he effortlessly parried each of her attacks with a slight movement of his own cane, twisting his wrist here, raising his shoulder there, making sure that his pace was never compromised.

Hel swung in a back-handed motion and the Superfluous Man threw his staff out, knocking the ice rod out of her hands. She tried to conjure another one, but before she could, the Superfluous Man jammed the end of his weapon into her mouth. He snickered lecherously.

“You know, you lighters always look a lot better when you’ve got something down your throat to keep you from running your mouth.”

Before the opium haze could fill her mouth, Hel bit down as hard as she could and wrenched her head away, tearing the end of the staff off. She spit it out with a sly grin.

“Tricky, tricky. I thought gentlemen were beyond crass comments ab—“

She was cut off by the other end of the staff hitting her square in the side of the head and sending her staggering. Oh, right. There are two ends of a cane, aren’t there? As the world swirled around her (was it just her, or was it actually doing that? She never could tell in the Broken Tracks), she managed to find refuge standing beside a nearby tree. Hel felt like she was going to vomit.

“(Psst!)”

Someone whispered. She looked around, only mildly aware of what was going on, and managed to locate the source: Titania, peeking out from behind a tree. Hel shook her head and harshly whispered something back, turning around.

The Superfluous Man looked on as Hel seemingly talked to no one in particular, humming Beethoven as he regrew the bitten-off end of his cane. The stems and leaves weaved through one

another, multiple new buds forming with a ‘pop!’ each time, until a bouquet of poppy heads had grown where the single had once stood. The staff had become something more akin to a mace. He called out to her.

“Hey, devotchka! You done yammering on over there, or what?”

Hel stood back up, forming another staff of ice in her hands as she brushed herself off. She looked at him with a grin.

“Maybe I am, maybe I’m not.”

A train rolled past.

“Huhhh…sounds to me like you’re being a bit wishy-washy.”

She spun the staff of ice in front of her.

“Why should I tell you anything? You’ll be dead soon.”

The Superfluous Man waggled his weapon, pointing it in her direction.

“Really? I’ll be the one who’s dead? Are you bezoomny or something? I’ve had you on the back foot all this time, and you’ve still got the gall to talk like you’ve already won. If you want to, you can just have a lie-down and kick back while I crack your head i—“

He was cut off by Hel lunging towards him suddenly, pushing her staff towards him and knocking him in the face. He stumbled back a few steps, but was only distracted for a moment by the petals flying off of him before he raised his mace and shoved her back. He brushed his forearm across his face as though he were wiping off blood.

“Clever clogs.”

With a shout, he swung his mace towards her. She blocked it, and he reared back with another attack. Multiple times, they clashed: plants versus ice despite the sound resembling metal hitting metal, each attack being blocked and parried and returned with another. The two circled around each other, Hel dodging left and right, the Superfluous Man swaying out of the way as he had before. Yet, his movements appeared to be slowing down, his grimace twitching at the corners with each close call. Hel stabbed multiple times with the sharp end of her ice-staff, managing to puncture his chest each time, but apart from a hole appearing in his suit and a few petals scattering, it didn’t serve to slow him down.

They clashed and fought on roughly equal footing, trading blow after blow, until Hel stepped forward just a bit too late. Taking advantage, the Superfluous Man hooked his cane beneath her staff and swung it upwards. The staff flew through the air and shattered upon contact with the ground, leaving Hel vulnerable to attack. In only a moment, he lunged at her and knocked her to the ground, crouching on top of her with the bouquet end of his flowery mace-staff shoved in her face.

“Welly, welly, well. Look where we are again. You know, lighter, I saw you the first time you came around these parts, and right then, I knew—I had to have you for myself. But how could a eunuch jelly like myself bag a horrorshow devotchka like yourself? Well, you know, I grappled with it here and there, but then I figured: I’m a gentleman! Why should I have to drats for the things I want? They should come as easily to me as apple pie to Amerika.”

The bundle of poppy buds began to exude the haze of hookah smoke from their insides, the cloud covering Hel's face. She groaned weakly, her eyelids starting to droop as her struggling grew weaker and weaker. He grinned a cruel grin watching her slip away into a drug-fueled daze, leering over her.

"And, perhaps if I fancy you enough, we could have a bit of the old in-out in-out? That'd be just *lovely…"*

He felt fingers around his neck. Choking, he gripped and squeezed both ends of his staff, filling the area around them with more intoxicating smoke. She was unfettered, slowly rising to her feet and clasping her other hand around his throat as well. His cheery grin pulled into a scowl of terror, he whacked Hel as much as he could with the staff, but it didn't seem to have any effect on her. His strength, what little strength he had, was shot from being held thusly.

"Gaakh—how…?! H-How…are you…?!"

She kept her mouth shut, but smirked as she raised her head up, looking down her nose at him. The gesture served more than a superficial use, however: it revealed that the nostril on the 'alive' side of her face had been plugged up with an acorn. It was just as the Superfluous Man said, nothing on the 'dead' side of her face worked. That included the dead portion of her nose.

Not only that, but a little birdie told her that he was little more than support: if she saw him for the shallow and pitiful little worm that he was, she would see that he had little physical strength. Why else would he only aim for the head? It was all a show, a put-on: his only real use within the cult was to dispose of security and bodyguards with his hazes.

Simply don't breathe in, don't be taken in by his charms, and he was nothing more than another entitled creep.

The Superfluous Man clawed uselessly at the hands clenched around his throat, dropping his staff in the process. It returned to the earth beneath them, and he let out a haggard cough.

"S-So…you've got me, devotchka. What now? Do you tie my hands next?"

Hel scoffed, rolled her eyes, and choke-slammed him into the ground below them. His head hit metal, petals scattering a bit more. By now, his corsage visage appeared more like a bouquet that had been left to the dogs, large chunks missing, and his floating mouth shuddered.

"Look, look. I'll do anything you want of me, alright? I never much cared for this stupid cult anyways, they never had the yarbles to let me call the shots! If you want money, I can get you money. If you want power, sure, power is yours! Just—"

A horn sounded, and the Superfluous Man's head started to rumble. He suddenly became aware he was being held onto the train tracks, and thrashed as much as he could, shrieking at the top of his lungs.

"N-Not the espresso rapido! Please! No! No! *Stop it, stop it, please, I beg you! It's a sin! It's a sin! It's a sin, it's a sin, it's a si—"*

A train rolled past.

Hel was showered in lovely, lovely, white, purple, and pink petals.

She stood up, cracked her knuckles, put a thumb to the side of her nose, and expelled the acorn lodged into her nostril, it tumbling to the floor. Sighing, she put her hands on her hips and looked down at the deflated suit.

"That'll cure you, alright."

"Hel?"

Hel looked over her shoulder and saw that, not only had the crucifix that Foxy Shazam was strung up on disappeared at some point during the fight, but Titania and Moxy were there as well. The queen was holding the agent's hand. She turned fully around.

"Thanks for the tip…what was your name, Titania? Yes. If I didn't quit being such a scaredy-cat and realize he was all bark and no bite thanks to your help, you'd probably be the one scraping me off the train tracks."

"Actually, dearie…t'wasn't me who chose to share that tidbit."

She looked to Moxy Fruvous, who shamefully turned away. Hel slowly walked up to her, looking down at her with an inscrutable expression as Moxy looked back up at her former friend.

Then, Hel sighed.

"If you're going to be making those puppy-dog eyes at me, then you really give me no choice but to forgive you, do you? I'll be honest. I'm still mad at you. You turned me in, and the resulting mess caused us both to lose someone important to us. I hope you've learned your lesson from that. However…"

She put out her hand.

"Your actions also led us to this point. So, I suppose it isn't all bad. I doubt either of us can regain what we lost, not fully, but there's no sense in continuing to beat ourselves up over it. And that includes you, Moxy."

"O-Oh…Helly…!"

Trembling, with fat tears of shimmering rainbow-hued oil running down her face, Moxy Fruvous reached out, hesitated, and then took Hel's hand in her own. She shook it once, shook it twice, and bowed her head in thanks. Titania looked on with a pleased smile, clapping politely.

"Just, don't go betraying us again, alright?"

"I-I won't! I won't, I won't, I promise I won't!"

"And try to keep your distance. It won't do your leader any good to see you fraternizing with the enemy."

Speak of the devil, Huginn squawked loudly as a shower of black feathers came down. Everyone turned their gazes skyward, brushing the falling feathers out of the way of their line of sight. They could see the figure of Huginn, the bird flapping its wings aimlessly.

Then another silhouette, skipping through the air like a rock thrown across a lake, approached him.

"The Dog-Faced Man is here!"

~

Odin and the Dagda stared down the Machine of Loving Grace as it shambled towards them.

Rodion had run off to try and track down Iolo Morganwg, and unfortunately, the two gods were a bit too tied up to notice that Morganwg had been taken into the Parlor of Miracles: instead, their efforts were focused fully on the computer creature in front of them.

Odin turned to his cohort. It had been quite some time since he'd fought without Gungnir, but he didn't mind. He was more than powerful enough on his own.

"How quickly do you want to take care of this?"

The Dagda shrugged, lightly tapping his club on the ground. It made a crater in the sand.

"Eh. Give 'r take, thirty seconds?"

"What about twenty?"

"Aye, I could do that."

The Machine of Loving Grace let out a bit-crushed screech as it reared back, all of its screens showing Valentine's-Day messages and playing distorted holiday jingles.

In a flash, Odin dashed to the side and whirled his hands around one another, side-stepping like a wolf circling its prey with a spryness that you wouldn't expect from someone of his age. His fingers and palms contorted and twisted about as though they were being carried along the currents of some air-current knot, glowing a faint periwinkle and giving off the scent of a fresh breeze. The creature followed him with its gaze, spitting out more ones and zeroes, before Odin shoved both hands forward.

A large gust of wind hit the mass of computers and flesh head-on, sending it flying backwards.

Behind the Machine of Loving Grace, the Dagda had been rearing up for a full-on strike with his club. He squared his feet, he raised his club high, and he lowered his shoulders as he readied it behind him. The digital monster drew closer and closer, and he closed his eyes.

He swung the club that could kill ten men in a single strike.

With the sound of a baseball bat striking an unruly printer, wood splintering plastic instead of plastic splintering wood, electronic components crinkling upon impact and meaty viscera being forced through every hole available. The Machine bent backwards around the point of impact, but wasn't able to retain its structural integrity long enough to be sent flying. Instead, all of its components—keyboards, monitors, mice, motherboards, consoles—scattered in all directions like a frag grenade. Odin narrowly avoided having a blue-screened monitor bean him square in the head, but once all the pieces had settled, they didn't seem to be coming back together. The Dagda hoisted his club over his shoulder, grinning ear-to-ear.

"'Ow long was that, eh?"

"Seventeen seconds, give or take."

"Ha! Three under what we agreed on!"

"Regardless." Odin stroked his beard, eyeing the pieces suspiciously. "This opponent was perhaps…a mite too easy to fell, wouldn't you say?"

"Eh?"

“Remember the Young Man with a Skull fiasco in Heaven. We don’t know what these agents are capable of, so it’d be best to take…extra precautions.”

He scratched his greasy braided brown hair.

“Ye sayin’ I should go ‘round an’ smash all th’ wee devices tae make sure it don’t come back?”

“Yes, Dagda. Smash all the wee devices.”

“Crackin’!”

The Dagda cracked his knuckles, raising his club once again and looming over the monitor that nearly took Odin’s head off. He prepared to bring it down like a meteor to the Earth.

Then, the monitor shuddered. Then, it shook. The monitor, showing a blue screen, suddenly warped before it performed an action that could only be described as ‘vomiting’—it vomited up a blue liquid filled with floating white ones and zeroes that pooled out among the sand. It didn’t sink in, instead acting more like mercury as it pooled and beaded. In a poor decision, the Dagda stepped back.

Odin looked around, and the other monitors were doing the same thing. They were expelling that blue liquid. Then, he noticed that the keyboards were typing: even he, with no knowledge of computer coding, knew that the order in which the keys were being hit weren’t random. The mice were moving, the left and right mouse buttons clicking of their own accord. The motherboards were crackling.

The blue liquid began to form, bit by bit, into humanoid shapes from the feet up.

The Dagda scowled.

“Oh no, ye don’t!”

With a quick swipe of his club, he attempted to splatter the gooey homunculus nearest to him into nothing but flying globs. However, his club went straight through the figure as though he were passing his hand through a sheet of running water, continuing to form even as he was left spinning. The Dagda, groaning, tried to keep his lunch down and regain his balance. Odin stepped back beside him, warily eyeing the figures as their features became sharper, more refined, until…

“Dagda.”

“Urgh, what is it?”

“Look at their faces. They’re…”

“Help me boab, they’re me mates!”

True to his word, the blue figures had turned into simulacrums of the Tuatha De who the Machine of Loving Grace had assumedly assimilated into itself. Large, burly figures, long hair pulled into braids, even the different-shaped noses of each warrior had been recreated perfectly. Still, however, they were made of that odd blue ‘coding’ liquid. The Dagda lowered his club, staring out at them all. Odin held his hands out in front of him, ready to blow them away at a moment’s notice. They were all standing motionless, with vacant expressions on their faces.

The, the one that the Dagda had attempted to bash earlier turned to look at him. He recognized the burly figure, its heavy brow covered in a single bushy unibrow that stuck out from beneath a bald head and its mouth hidden behind a bushy beard.

"Goibniu? Lad, do you recognize me?"

Odin quirked an eyebrow.

"You know that figure?"

"Know him? Ha, o' course I know 'im! 'e was th' one that crafted me mate Nuada[53] 'is silver shoulder! Best smith outta all th' Tuatha De, wit' no doubt!"

The reproduction of the smith Goibniu smiled warmly, putting out its hand.

"Oh? Is it really ye, laddie? Are ye in there?"

The Dagda grinned back, beginning to put his hand out, and his cohort couldn't help but furrow his brow as he put a hand on his shoulder.

"Dagda, I wouldn't do that if I were you. We don't know what these things are capable of."

"Bah! Did ye see me knock that blighter tae next Samhain? Whate'er ye ken these buggers can do, I can handle it! Put 'er there, la—"

The instant their hands made contact, the copy of Goibniu grasped the Dagda's hand tightly and pulled him into a hug, whereupon he was shocked with thousands of volts and amperes of electricity coursing through his body. The beastly man was reduced to standing up straight with his teeth grit as the charge coursed through his body, sparking and lighting him up like a candle. Odin had yanked his hand back just in the nick of time, and still was forced to watch as the Dagda's skin fried and burnt…until finally, the electrocution stopped. The blue figure was still holding onto him, but the Dagda was no longer being actively shocked. Smoke poured from the Tuatha De's open mouth, and his head lolled back.

He fell to the ground, still occasionally twitching. Odin covered his mouth in shock. If beings like these could produce electric shocks strong enough to fell a monster like the Dagda, he was in deep trouble.

"By Jormungandr…"

It was then, turning around, that he noticed all of the other blue figures. They also had their arms outstretched and, stumbling forwards like dripping gloppy zombies, they lurched towards Odin. He may have fathered the god of thunder and lightning, but he himself lacked any power to control electricity: only the wind. Odin swiped his hands at the staggering figures, sending miniature tornadoes their way, but all they served to do was distort their liquid frames for a moment before they continued on. He bit the inside of his cheek as they closed in on him.

Seeing no other way, he resorted to the coward's option.

He sat in the sand, drew a circle around himself with his finger, and sat with his legs crossed as he clasped his fingers together. Inhaling, he spoke a rune.

"Algiz."

---

[53] First king of the Tuatha de Danann whose arm was severed in the first great battle of Mag Tuired with the Fir Bolg, the settlers of Ireland. Following his injury, he was unable to remain as king due to the Tuatha De's tradition of having their king be physically perfect. The Dagda rubs this in the faces of anyone who questions his diet or strength.

A sphere of wind that slightly distorted his view of his surroundings formed around Odin, stopping where he had drawn the circle. It whipped and whooshed, acting like a circular saw as he looked back to the Dagda. The figures were piling onto him, covering his broad form with their misshapen, drooping bodies, and he wasn't able to see if they were shocking him more as his own vision became full of them. They mashed themselves against the barrier of whirling air, not caring that it tore them to shreds: they simply reformed themselves.

Odin let out an annoyed sigh and looked up to the sky. If he didn't think of something quick, he would definitely be electrocuted to death…

Wait, death? What was he thinking? He wasn't fated to die here! He was fated, by Mimir's prophecy of Ragnarok, to die clasped in the jaws of the great wolf Fenrir. Though…now that Fenrir was gone too, why should anything go in accordance with prophecy.

Suddenly, Odin felt very acutely the fear of death. For a god of his age who has known when and where he would die—truly die—and has not done so prematurely once…that was saying something.

Mentally, he questioned where the hell the fomorian and Rodion had gone.

CHAPTER 36: Ireland's Greatest Hero

The Shadow faced down Fionn a good ways down the street, to the point where the Kaput Caput was little more than a dot on the horizon. He stood with his hand neatly folded behind his back in a businesslike manner on one sidewalk, and Fionn mac Cumhaill stood with his sword drawn. He sighed deeply, tightening his grip on Mac an Luin and trying to control the fear that gripped his heart. In that moment, he silently thanked whatever god had given him the blank and incorrigible face he had heard others mention in knowing them. Despite his achievement in keeping himself from trembling, the Shadow was utterly unmoved. For once, he was the one being given a bored stare. The Shadow ran his palm over his wrist, the outline of a wristwatch appearing on it for a moment.

Let's see. How big is this gap in my schedule I've made? I'll give you…

He raised a three-fingered hand.

Three minutes. You get three minutes to entertain me, and if you don't win after that, I get to kill you personally. I won't just eradicate you immediately upon contact, as per our agreement, and what the hell, I'll even give you an advantage. I'll make myself more corporeal. You deal a killing blow to my physical body, I concede. Deal?

"Deal."

Pleasure doing business with you. Why don't we start, then?

Fionn only had time to nod his head downwards before the Shadow launched himself towards the warrior, wrapping his hand around Fionn's head and picking him up, throwing him across the street into one of the buildings. It crumpled like a paper diorama upon impact, leaving him dazed. He could feel the start of a gash beginning to leak red into his platinum-blonde hair. It had happened so fast…he didn't even see the Shadow coming.

He could see his opponent's heavy figure stepping towards him. Now's not the time to be hesitant. Finding his grip on his sword hadn't wavered, he dug it into the asphalt and used it to bring himself to his feet. In that instant, the Shadow lunged forward once more. Fionn managed to jerk his sword upwards in a messy slice, missing his enemy by a mile.

Fionn stumbled forwards, turning around just in time to feel the Shadow clasp his large tentacle-fingered hand around the side of his skull and slam him into the asphalt. He winced, feeling one of his antlers crack off and scatter into pieces across the road.

The Shadow raised him up.

Are you enjoying this?

Fionn spat in his face.

Wrong answer.

In response, the Shadow slammed his head down into the ground once again and slowly scraped his face across the ground, the uneven and craggy surface of the asphalt delivering dozens of small cuts to the side of Fionn's face that were only expanded and exacerbated by the friction. He left a trail of red across the ground, the only splash of color in the whole

neighborhood. Thinking quickly, he reached into the oxter bag at his waist and produced a handful of ground-up peppercorns, something he had prepared in case he needed to perform any sort of druidic ceremonies. It paid to be prepared, and this time was no different.

Fionn threw the powdered peppercorns into the Shadow's eye, causing him to curse in French and bring his hands up to his face. Prying his way into the opening he'd created, Fionn took his sword and jabbed at the Shadow's ample stomach. A horizontal cut to the midsection would be more than enough to make a normal man's insides spill out, and that would be it!

However, his blade was stopped before it ever touched the Shadow's body.

He had reached out and grasped the blade himself, stopping it in its tracks.

Clever. Not clever enough, though. A cut palm hurts, yes, but I wouldn't call it a fatal blow.

The Shadow effortlessly wrenched his arm up, and with the sound of rending metal, the blade of Mac an Luin was bent into an acute angle. Fionn winced as though he was the one being bent, ignoring the fact that half of his face was a torn-up mess of blood at the moment to think about how the sword had been with him since he was a teenager, but he knew when he had to retreat. He let go of the blade and jumped backwards, stepping back as he produced his shield Sgiath Gailbhinn in front of him. The circle of bronze inscribed with knot patterns shone, quite polished. He had never brought it out in the time since his revival. His opponent huffed.

You really think I would use this pathetic thing as a weapon? It's nothing more than a scrap metal boomerang now. But, if it will make you happy…

The Shadow threw it at him, the L-shaped sword whizzing through the air like a flying disc. Fionn raised Sgiath Gailbhinn, and when he lowered it next, he found that Mac an Luin had stuck itself into its bronze surface. The Shadow's strength was terrifying, that was certain…but the bigger the opponent, the easier they are to fell. He knew that from facing down the giant Benandonner on the Isle of Man. What had he done to defeat him…?

Oh, right. He dressed up as a baby. He's not going to do that again.

Regardless, he had relied on technique and trickery then to take down an opponent much larger than him, and this is nothing more than another opponent to defeat.

Even if he knew he could never defeat him, not in any meaningful way, he still thought of this as a battle. Every confrontation was a battle. It was something to be won, and even when winning doesn't involve the defeat of your opponent, a loss is still something completely unconscionable.

Fionn tucked his sword and shield back away in his oxter bag, instead retrieving a bow and a quiver of arrows, three of which he nocked at once as he circled the Shadow. The man himself simply stood there with his arms out, staring out at Fionn with the exact same look of dull annoyance he always had.

Are you really going to waste time trying to gauge my strategy, Fionn? You only have a minute and a half left, and my patience is wearing thin.

He hissed through his teeth and fired the arrows at the Shadow, nocking three more and firing immediately afterwards. Each arrow's tip buzzed with his magic, and he fired triplet after triplet of arrows while stepping back, biding his time.

Alas, it was no avail. The Shadow effortlessly side-stepped each deluge of arrows, and what arrows did come for him, he simply swatted away like a pesky insect. With each dodge, he came closer and closer to Fionn, until he was directly in front of him, hand outstretched.

Then the Shadow felt something poking into his chest.

Fionn had grabbed the last arrow from the quiver and, with all his strength, jabbed it into the left side of the Shadow's chest in an attempt to pierce his heart. A fatal blow. Fionn smiled.

…The arrow slowly became consumed by the black flames that surrounded the Shadow, and Fionn let go to prevent himself from being eaten as well. He had the side of his head clasped once more by the Shadow. The pain from feeling his wriggling black fingers scrape against the bloody side of his face caused him to hiss and recoil. The Shadow leaned in close.

Very good. If I were still fully human, that would have gone straight through to my heart. You win, boy. There's just one problem.

He sighed and lolled his head to the side, the mess of curly slicked-back black-fire hair that sprouted from his head hanging to one side. His single eye swirled and transformed into a cruel sharp-toothed grin.

I hate you. A lot. So, I'm going to kill you anyways. No hard feelings, right?

"A-Asshole."

What foul language, coming from a noble warrior.

Someone needs to teach you some *manners.*

Gripping Fionn's head with one hand, the Shadow raised his fist and delivered a full-shouldered punch right into his face. Blood gushed from Fionn's broken nose. He punched again, fist crushing itself into the Irish warrior, knocking out a couple of teeth. Blood dripped out of his mouth. He punched again, again, again, pummeling the warrior in complete silence, using him like a sandbag until his bloody face, crumpled and leaking, black eye and broken antlers, was all that was left. His blonde hair had turned a sticky reddish-black.

Fionn shakily raised a fist to punch back, and with a single motion of his, the Shadow slammed his fist into Fionn's forearm hard enough to break it. The arm fell limp, hanging at an unnatural angle.

It really is such a shame. Not you dying, Fionn, I couldn't care less about you. You're nothing more than another human. Nothing more than a pathetic, measly, gullible, worthless human with such large delusions of grandeur that they blocked your view of reality. The shame is, I really don't get any joy out of this.

Punch.

You see me smiling? This means nothing to me. Nothing does. Not anymore. It isn't like I don't want to enjoy it. I do. But certain circumstances have prevented me from enjoying anything too much nowadays. Besides, you don't get people to join your cause by showing how happy you are, do you?

Punch. Punch.

You do it with charisma, with power, with focused and undivided attention. You do it with cold, hard practicality. Logic. Business acumen. Once you get rid of all those pesky things like morals, sentimentality, attachments, you will get so, so much more done. Trust me. Word of advice for you to give whatever poor souls you see in the afterlife…if there even is an afterlife once we're done with the world.

Fionn spoke, a ragged and gurgling tone that struggled to crawl from his mouth.

"…Y…Y-You're…wrong."

Wrong? Please don't tell me you're going to go on some long tangent about how friendship and love are the most powerful things of all. Eugh. You're going to make me throw up.

"N-No…no…I'm…"

He coughed up thick globs of blood that pooled with the rest at his boots.

"I-I am…not…human…"

The Shadow was quiet for a moment. Then, he scoffed.

You say that like it's something important. I killed some worthless mutt who was the brother of a woman fancying herself a god the other day. Whatever you are. Whoever you are. Whatever you can do. It means *nothing*. And do you want to know why?

He leaned in close, his grin drooling black ink.

Because at the end of it all, I am the only thing that is left.

Just then, the Shadow stopped. He let go of Fionn, the bruised and battered warrior dropping limply to the ground in a puddle of his own blood and tears, and looked over his shoulder. Something was bothering him, it seemed. A shudder went through his body, his smile turned to a scowl, and then it turned to his single eye once again.

Merde. I need to go and assist the boss. Shame that I won't be able to see you truly die, Fionn, but…well, I think I've advanced this project more than enough for it to reach its end in its own time. Just to make sure you don't get any funny ideas, though…

The Shadow snapped his fingers. Advancing from the shadows of the buildings that surrounded them, a cabal of various Man Unkind agents emerged. Mountbattened Hatches. Saucy Jackknifes. 120 Days. The Morgellons Vaccination Board, the Marching Drosoulites, Those Who Sing Your Body Electric, the Legendary Pink Dots, all manner of creatures, beasts, and freaks shambled out and crowded around Fionn mac Cumhaill. The Shadow turned on his heel, waving a hand to the crowd as he walked away.

Kill him. Have fun with it if you want, but just make sure he's dead by the end of it.

With that, the Shadow left. Chittering, cackling, crackling and fizzing, rolling and groaning, churning and puffing, the mob began to close in on Fionn. Slowly, he peeled himself off of the asphalt, staggering to his feet. Everything hurt. Everything throbbed. He felt faint and weary, woozy from blood loss.

And yet, he knew this would not be how he died.

Heroes do not lay down and accept their fate, even when defeat seems certain.

Heroes do not stop fighting even when they know they can't win.

A hero will see things through to the bitter end.

Fionn mac Cumhaill stumbled, his gait unsteady, to the nearest lamppost on the street. He put a hand to his broken arm, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. Gripping his forearm, he yanked it forwards and realigned the broken bones. The bruised area was covered with bluish-green magic as his bones knit. In only a few moments, his arm was fixed. He brought his hand to his face, and in a few more moments, many of the wounds he had accrued had sealed themselves, though his face was still caked in blood.

Fionn mac Cumhaill, feeling the cold metal of the lamppost against his cape-covered back, reached into his oxter bag and retrieved a length of rope, wrapping it around his waist to tie himself to the lamppost.

Fionn mac Cumhaill retrieved his sword and bent it back into shape, holding it out in front of him with both hands on its grip.

He looked on at the incoming group of opponents and, staring down at them with the powerful gaze of a hero, he bellowed out his war cry.

"I am a knight, the son of warrior-king Cumhall mac Trenmhoir and leader of the Fianna. I was awoken from my rest in the cave where the great seer Fintan mac Bochra the Wise that accompanied the descendent of Nóe many years ago remained safe as the deluge of floodwater passed by. For these past three days, I believed myself to be that very knight himself. However, I know now that I serve a greater purpose."

"I am the idea of that knight. I am the figure that millions flock to for protection. I am the guardian angel of not only Eire, but the weak. The tired. The missing, the lost, the needy. While the real knight still sleeps in the grave of Fintan mac Bochra the Wise, his fighting spirit, his endless drive to protect those he cares about, that most important part of him remains alive!"

"With my raging sword forged by the great smith of the mountain, Mac an Luin, I shall strike down any and all foes who shall choose to threaten the sanctity and safety of not only the world, but my companions, my friends, and those I have come to think of as my family! For Forruad, for Cron, for the angels and devils and gods, for the human race!"

"I am Fionn mac Cumhaill! Come and face your deaths at the hands of a true warrior!"

CHAPTER 37: In The Doghouse

"The Dog-Faced Man is here!"

Hel, Titania, and Moxy Fruvous looked up to the sky just in time to see a humanoid figure literally swat Huginn out of the sky in a flash of smoke. A sudden savory aroma filled the small wooded space that the three women were in, and as Huginn fell from the sky in a downward spiral and splatted onto the grass, it became clear what the source of the scent was.

Huginn was reduced to nothing more than a cooked bird, the outer skin perfectly browned. There were even white paper trills on the ends of the legs. Titania covered her mouth in shock.

"O-Oh my goodness, is…is that…?"

Hel wrinkled her nose. "Looks like it. Huginn's crow is cooked. And I think ours just might be as well. Look."

She pointed upwards, and the three of them followed her gaze to see none other than The Dog-Faced Man, dressed in black and red priest's vestments. He appeared to currently be on fire, his hat removed to reveal dozens of writhing snakes growing out from his scalp and from where his tail would be. He slowly lowered himself, his large and unwieldy fingers templed together as he smiled at the three of them.

"welly welly well well look what the Syn Cro Ni Ci Ty dragged in hm? See no evil hear no evil smell no evil I suppose ss s s hell o dolliesss hello GOILS and LAYDEES froynlaven. It is so so very wonderful fto see you all here at my homefffff pleasr forgive me I didn't get you clovers or flowers or roses or poppy doppy seeds but I hope youll thinks me to be a gracious hostess anyway"

Titania was suddenly gripped with fear. Fae had acute magic-sensing abilities, and the amount of power that radiated off of him…she had gotten a whiff of it when he broke into Avalon, but seeing it and being able to react as well was an entirely different beast. He leaned from side to side, wiggling and waving like an inflatable tube man, before he suddenly stiffened up and put both hands up like he was shot. Then he side-stepped over to Hel.

"helly bellyyyy what a pleshur to see you here in my home. my station to station network of tracks and cracks an funnyu funny little guys. funny little fellows. hows the ol chest? Hows the wife? Hows the kids and the dog and the DOG THE DOG THE DOG poor little fenny pack never ssss tood a c h a n c e rite?"

She refused to dignify him with a response, and so he cartwheeled over to Moxy Fruvous.

"and YOU. MOXY. moxy moxy moxy named for your spunk your drive your 90s acoustic hits Video Bargainland by my ASS theres no bargain there. No bargain to be found no bargain to be seen or heard or What did you do? Did you disobey me? Do you want to be strung up likkkke like like f foccc fuck foxy loxy. Fo xy ladeee."

Moxy Fruvous clenched her fists, forcing her eyes to open themselves after she had them shut tight.

"I…I-I don't want to listen to you!"

"NANDATTE?"

"All this cult stuff, t-trying to ruin the world just because you're hurting inside, it's…not right! It's not right, and I want out! I want to go home!"

The Dog-Faced Man stopped his erratic movements and stood up straight, his head limply falling to the side as he ogled a bloodshot eye's constricted pupil directly down at Moxy. He was utterly silent, his smile having fallen and given way to silent fury.

Then, just as quickly as he had become angered, he broke out into cackling laughter and clapped his hands.

"HAAAAA HA HA HA HA HA AH AH AHHH AHH OH IT h u uuu rts you Really Crack Me Up Girl! Soooo funny fuNNYEE you shud tamam shud thud be a comedian. Comedian of deli arts. There is no going back. There is no going home. You have no home. You never had a home."

He reached out and pinched one of the edges of Moxy's crescent-shaped head. From where his fingers met the 'skin', her head started to slowly unpeel itself like a banana, revealing a wriggling black mass inside resembling a den of gregariously-congregated baby spiders.

"I took you out of the gutter, and I made you beautiful. I made you useful. This is how you repay me?"

"S-Stop it…that…that hurts…"

"You know what hurts? Life. Death. Un-Death. Re-Life. Life cereal. Serial killers. Killer Croc. You like comic books? RRRRRRR—"

"Hey."

The Dog-Faced Man found himself at the sharp end of one of Hel's icicles, the crystallized weapon completely unphased by the fire that surrounded him. Though, funnily enough, there was no heat coming off of him. It was like the fire was an illusion.

"Let her go, you creep. I'll fight you myself."

Hel blinked, and the next moment, he was standing beside her in a red 1920s cabaret-dancer uniform, complete with red lipstick, feathered headdresses…and what appeared to be natural breasts. He took a drag off of a long cigarette-holder and puffed out smoke in the shape of a skyfish.

"oh darlink PLEEZ wont you loosen up? Its just a bit of fun. A bit of fun a bit of a game some funny goodfy shenanigans. We Have Fun Here. TAKE THE HINT. Cry about it. You like jazz? You like dancing? Well I cant do it a looooon l"

She whipped around and slashed with her icicle.

"Enough with the goofy shit! You have the stones, don't you? I'll slit your throat, take them from you, and then return them to their rightful owners."

He was gone again, and hanging above her in a straitjacket as though he was suspended in a tank of water, he wriggled and swayed on a chain. Every word he spoke, he spat out bubbles.

"sontes? What stones kidney stones liver stones stones of years stone the crows stoney jones I haint got em shweetheart"

"Don't play dumb with me, asshole! I'll follow you into your house if that's what it'll take!"

For a split-second, The Dog-Faced Man looked genuinely hurt. Whatever chain was holding him suspended upside-down broke, and he fell with a gruesome *crack* onto the ground. Titania winced and looked away, only barely peeking her eyelids open to see the misshapen body on the ground.

"…Is…Is he dead?"

To answer her question, The Dog-Faced Man suddenly rose from his position. His neck was still completely broken, twisted so far that his head was almost upside-down, but his hands were free. With a clenched fist, he punched his own head and knocked his neck back into place, shaking it off like it was a minor injury.

"di-di-di-di-di-die? Not in a Milyom Yeeeers my darling, but. I getcha. You folks…want a show don't you"

He raised a white-gloved hand and jerked it, the sleight of hand producing a glittery red top hat that he politely put onto his head to cover the blonde hair that had replaced the red frizz from earlier. Was there even red frizz when he was hanging upside-down? He changed so frequently, it was impossible to tell what he even really looked like. Giggling, he did the same sleight of hand motion with his other hand and produced a glittery golden cane. With a wave of his hand, he was now dressed top-to-bottom in fanciful ringleader garments.

"You want my treasure? You can have it! I left everything I gathered together in MY POCKETS"

The Dog-Faced Man twirled his cane for a few moments before, like a flag twirler, throwing it up into the air behind him. The spinning cane flew through the air, rising high, high, high into the sky…before it stopped in mid-air. Then, like a pool cue, it shot out and stabbed Nobody's Enemy right in the eye. In much the same way a painting's adhesive loses its stickiness and it ends up falling upside-down, the cyclopic figure of Nobody's enemy fell to the side and further until it was completely inverted. Its head brushed against the grass, its eyelids clamped shut as blood seeped from the cane embedded in its pupil. Its placid smile remained, however.

He doffed his top hat, clapped his hands, and moon-walked backwards. He jumped up onto the end of the cane and used it as a platform to jump off of.

"la, ta, so-re-mi-fa-so-la-di-dee, ta-ta dada, COME GET SO Me"

Performing a double back-flip, he dove fully into the cyclops' mouth, which opened for just long enough to slurp The Dog-Faced Man down like an éclair.

She wasted no time. Hel sprinted forward and turned back around to Titania and Moxy, snatching a leg off of the cooked bird in front of them and taking a bite out of it before speaking.

"Queen! Moxy! You go find the others, I'll keep this literal son of a bitch busy!"

Moxy floated forwards, waving her hands around in a frenzy even as Titania tried to control her.

"N-No, Helly! Stop! You don't know what his home is like, you don't…you can't come out of there alive! You can't! Come back!"

The goddess looked back at Moxy as she hopped onto the cane.

“Listen. If anything happens to me, I’ll be back, okay? You don’t get that privilege. Me and this mutt have a feud to settle…and if you could risk yourself to help me, I’m more than willing to risk myself to help you. Besides…”

She gave a two-fingered salute.

“…You freaks are persistent, right? You’ll get on just fine without me around.”

With that, she jumped off the cane and dove into the mouth herself, disappearing within Nobody’s Enemy. Moxy slowly lowered her hand, her shoulders slumping as she remained silent. Titania patted her on the shoulder, trying to offer some comfort.

“Really, dearie, she’s a tough one. She’ll be alright…let’s get ye somewhere safe, alright?”

Moxy Fruvous said nothing.

Then she was off like a shot, leaving the fae queen behind.

“M-Moxy?!”

“I refuse to stand by and watch another friend of mine try and act like a hero for me! I’m going after her!”

Soaring through the air like a bullet, she harshly slapped down on the cane and pushed herself past the lips of Nobody’s Enemy, requiring a bit more prying and wriggling than the previous two needed to enter. Soon enough, however, she was gone as well. Titania was left alone.

A train rolled past.

…Well, that’s just great. What’s she supposed to do now? There’s no way she was going to be heading into the belly of the beast, she’d definitely just get in the way…there was nothing else to do for her but to try and find one of the other groups. Which one should she go for, she wondered…?

Titania turned around, and immediately walked straight into another person. The both of them fell to the ground with a groan, apologizing to each other.

“Oof, cor! I am so very sorry, I wasn’t watching where I was goin’…”

“Ach! Blummin’ ‘eck, watch where ye…”

They looked at the person they had ran into, and Oberon met Titania again. The two of them scrambled to their feet and shared a tearful hug, thankful that the other was alright. They held each other tight, their wings fluttering behind them as they did, and they were so happy to see one another that Titania completely failed to notice how Oberon was dripping wet and draped in kelp. She sniffed him, and he stank of saltiness.

“What went on with ye, darlin’? Ye look like ye were sleepin’ with the fishies.”

“It’s this bloody dobber of a place, I ‘ad tae swim through what ‘ad t’ ‘ave been fifty meters o’ sea tae get ‘ere, an’ it’s left me drookit! But…I made it.”

“An’ what o’ the others, love?”

“Last I saw, th’ agents were surrounded, an’ the laddie Cumhaill was off tae fight that big fook-off Shadow, the numpty. ‘E told us to bugger off an’ find one o’ ye.”

“What about Dian Cecht? An’ th’ Morrigu?”

“Not fifty steps out o’ th’ block an’ ‘e starts beggin’ me to leave ‘im behind so he could take care o’ th’ laddie! ‘E’s prolly still out there. An’ as fer Morrie…well, she’ll get by, I’m sure.”

Titania frowned.

“So ye dunno where she is then, right?”

“Ach, ye can read me like a priest reads ‘is bible, kimmer. What about yer lot?”

“Long story, but Hel, Hel’s friend, an’ the leader of this whole operation are right in there!”

“…What, in th’ eye? An’ why’s there a perfectly good turkey left lyin’ about here? An’ a suit wit’ petals?”

“Again, dear, long story. But, come on! We need to go and help Fionn mac Cumhaill: if we’re lucky, maybe he’ll still be there!”

She took her husband’s hand, starting to hurry along through the woods. Oberon groaned, but stumbled along.

“But—I—you—ohhh, fer chrissake, woman! If we ‘ave to leg it through th’ ocean again, I’m usin’ ye as a raft!”

~

As the fae king and queen ran through the woods, a great distance away, the Shadow flew above them like a comet, using the black fire that shot from his wrists as propulsion. He sensed that Nobody’s Enemy had opened up, which meant that The Dog-Faced Man made it home. If he was retreating home, then while he would be on home turf…he would be cornered with all the stones they had been gathering these past few days. He couldn’t risk such an event.

It was time to make this a joint project.

CHAPTER 38: Dime for a Dozen

The Russian ducked past low-hanging wooden beams as he shuffled through the side building. It seemed more than a little small from the outside, perhaps no larger than an especially big shed, but even this single hallway he was pushing through seemed longer across than it seemed at first glance. He didn't quite enjoy the fact his sides were pressing against the hall, as it was obviously meant for someone much thinner than him, but most of his mind was focused brushing away cobwebs. All the while, that enthusiastic voice, spoken as though through a megaphone (though he could see the dusty blown-out speakers where it was coming through from perched in the corners of the ceiling) shouted at him.

"Yes sir, here at the Broken Tracks Dime Museum, we have unimaginable oddities, incredible feats of human strength, and such stirring tragedies that you won't just shed one tear: you'll shed two! For just the small price of a dime, you are finally able to hear the stirring, compelling, incredible, outstanding, one-hundred-perrrr-cent true story held within!"

"Yes, yes, I understand, you have been repeating that ever since I came in…"

He grumbled it mostly to himself, though he snickered at the off chance that the speaker responded. It wouldn't surprise him, not here, but no: this was a normal speaker playing a pre-recorded speech.

Finally, after what felt like twenty minutes straight of walking, Rodion came to the exit of the hall. Not wanting to take any chances, he peeked his head in through the doorframe to get an idea of his surroundings.

The building was still wholly made of wood, but the next couple rooms appeared to be constructed in a fashion resembling the viewing rooms for museum dioramas: a small space for Rodion himself to walk around, a chest-high wall, and a space (currently pitch-black) where the dioramas would usually be. It reminded him of the layout of those carnival games he'd seen in American TV shows, the ones with the ducks with targets painted on them that you needed to squirt water or throw balls at to win a prize. He hoped he wouldn't have to throw anything. His throwing arm was awful. Still, he'd tarried long enough, he figured, and he stepped forward.

Rodi's heart froze for a second as he felt the floorboard lower with an audible 'click!', but was relieved to find that all it did was trigger the next pre-recorded speech from the announcer.

"Our story begins, where else? But Gay Paree itself, the beautiful beating heart of Europe! But all is not well in the land of bread and wine, non non!"

The dimmer switches flicked on, the lights turning on with a clunk. In front of him, crudely painted on wooden slats that had been carved to fit their shape, was what appeared to be a young woman cradling a baby. It was still swaddled in a blanket. The woman had a single tear painted on her face. Rodion looked around, confused as the slow and mediated hum of a concertina ballad accompanied the narration.

"Once upon a time, there was a young woman with a child. This young woman was terribly poor, and terribly hungry. She could not afford to buy food, and charity was something one was

hard-pressed to come by in the age of Industrialism. You kids out there might call this the very first 'Me generation'!"

A laugh track sounded out. Rodion couldn't help but feel it was a very dated joke, considering it had been more than 40 years since the 'Me generation'. How old was this building?

"What was a poor woman like her to do? She loved her child dearly, but what could she do? They both would starve if nothing was done! What to do, what to do…"

From outside of the viewing window, another figure slid in. They appeared to be wooden puppets, able to be moved around on sticks and occasionally manipulated by strings from above. Where there were metal studs screwed into the joints of the puppets were likely the points of articulation, Rodi guessed. He was proven right as the figure—a menacing-looking older man with stubble, a black cloak, and a wide-brimmed black hat that covered his face—slid in and raised its arms. The baby in the woman's arms moved to his grasp.

"He was sold to the Comprachicos. He never saw his mother again, oh, what a tragedy! What a pity! Whatever happened to the poor little boy, whose name was lost to the world? What of these Comprachicos? Walk on, dear visitor, walk on and find out…"

The lights dimmed in the viewing room. Unnerved, Rodion warily looked over his shoulder and ducked through the next door.

Here, there was only one puppet. It depicted a boy sitting down with his legs crossed, facing away from Rodion. He had brown hair, it seemed. The announcer continued on.

"The Comprachicos, a wise man once said, treated human development like the pruning of a bonsai! Shape, stretch! Break, heal! Crack and twist, gnarl and stretch, until you've got a gen-u-ine, bon-a-fide, one-of-a-kind human wonder on your hands! They usually kidnapped little kiddies like the boy, but this was a special case. They knew what they wanted to do to this one, yessirree!"

A figure slid in, a grin on its shadowed face as it bent down with hooks.

"They placed hooks in the corners of his mouth, twisting it into a smile!"

Another figure slid in, holding scissors and a metal apparatus.

"They broke his face and re-arranged it, stretching it out, cutting his ears!"

A third entered, grasping a pair of bloody pliers.

"They grafted on a bit of his spine to the bottom of his back, a hideous tail!"

All three puppets shook and shuddered before ultimately falling.

"All of these were just surface-level changes, though. After all, you shape clay any way you want to, it'll be the same color unless you apply a little extra zazz! You kids know what zazz is, right?"

A distorted laugh track played as a fourth figure entered. This one was much taller than the others, its body entirely hidden by its wide-brimmed hat and cloak, but it carried a riding crop and pointed down at the boy.

"Sit! Stay! Heel! Good boy! Bad boy! Fetch! Go get it! Like an eraser to the paper, Monsieur Cravache, the man with the riding crop, took away everything that made the boy human. His

appearance. His language. His dignity. His happiness. And in the process, he created a wonder. A marvelous, marvelous miracle!"

The boy's puppet suddenly turned around, startling Rodion. Where the boy's face would have been, there was a piece of paper messily pasted over it with a woodcut illustration of a dog's head on it.

"He was the Dog-Faced Boy."

He felt his heart hitch in his throat. This…this was undeniably the story of Man Unkind's leader. Though, is it even true? Is this some sort of trap? Why would he allow this to be accessed by just anyone in the first place…? He remembered the agents' file stating that this was sort of an externalized projection of his psyche. Was this the part of him that was still…

Rodion shook off his thoughts, focusing on getting through the attraction.

In the next room, a single spotlight shone on the boy from before sitting like a dog. His face was still covered, but by a different illustration of a dog's head.

"Now, folks, when we say 'Dog-Faced Boy', we don't mean those nice young men and women with terminal hypertrichosis, no sirree! No Fedor Jeftichew or Petrus Gonsalvus could match what he was: a true-blue full-blooded boy with the face of a dog! Such an attraction could fetch a high price for anybody with an eye for spectacle. And lucky for our little pup, that's exactly what happened. He was sold for 100,000 francs to a certain organization in land of the free, home of the brave, apple-pie-and-baseball America…"

All of the lights suddenly flashed on, and it became clear where the dog-faced boy was: locked in a cage in the center of a circus. Beside him, a puppet of a ringleader facing the audience (who were represented by many small puppets lining the back walls of the space within the viewing window) gestured excitedly. Cloying circus music played in the background, making Rodi's head pound.

"The Marvelous Traveling Theatre of the Grotesque! Yes indeed, the masses in America would pay good money to see all manner of freaks, geeks, and monsters such as our very own pup! Sold under the story that he was raised by wild dogs and took after them so much it started to change his appearance, he was housed, clothed, and fed nightly: that is to say, they shut him up in a cage and fed him kibble! Why should they have done anything else? They didn't know! They didn't know! They didn't know! They didn't know! The—"

Just as he started to notice the recording was looping, it crackled and resumed.

"—allowed patrons to walk right up to him and pet him for a measly five francs, where he would nip at your hand! Pretty tough living for a tough little dog, eh? It wasn't all bad, though…"

He pushed through to the next room, and in the left of the viewing window was the dog-faced boy (his face still covered with another drawing of a dog's head) speaking to someone who appeared to be a muscle-bound and mustachioed strongman covered head to toe in colorful, swirling tattoos. They weren't the sort The Prince had, Rodion noted: just normal tattoos. Even with the crude drawings, he could tell the man was smiling.

"One day, he met the T—"

The recording glitched again, the lights flickering on and off. For a split-second, Rodion could swear there was a different look in the dog head's eyes, but as things returned to normal, he brushed it off as his imagination.

"—ttoed man, who boasted that tattoos covered every inch of his body below the neck! Now, our boy may not have been the smartest, or the strongest, or the most sane, but he had heard Monsieur Cravache bark his orders to him, and he spoke for the first time to another human being without being hit in French. This man, the Tattooed Man, he recognized the sound of the wonderful romantic tongue, and spoke with the sideshow gypsy—that's what we called 'em back in those days—mentalist they had with them. Who knew, she wasn't even real, she was just some French peasant! But, she knew he was not the feeble, feral little thing that everyone else thought he was, and him and the Tattooed Monsieur began to speak. They became close friends, and soon enough…"

More lights turned on, revealing a gaggle of circus performers gathered around the cage where the dog-faced boy sat. Microcephalics, bird-girls, human torsos, acromegalic giants, little people, every sort of 'oddity' you could imagine being put on display. Rodion swallowed.

"Everyone in the circus was coming to see the dog-faced boy. He was quite amiable, if a bit nippy, and if you gave him a bone, he'd do tricks! Even when they taunted and beat him during the shows, it was all under the instruction of the ringleader: for whom, his intelligence remained secret. It was a hard life, but it was good to have friends, wasn't it? That all changed one day, however…when he fell in love. One day, a woman with beautiful emerald eyes…"

The rest of the lights shone on one last remaining puppet. From the legs down, it was clear it was supposed to have been a woman…but at some point, it had been broken in half. The announcer tried to speak, to spout its pre-recorded lines of dialogue, but something was interfering with the audio that made it crackle and warble, rendering the rest incomprehensible. Rodi felt a shiver run down his spine and stepped into the next room.

In the next viewing window, the lights were noticeably dimmer, as though they were going through a brown-out. Rodion had to squint to make out the puppets that were supposed to be alight. It was the Tattooed Man grinning and holding a paper bag with two holes in it up to a separate puppet. It appeared to be the dog-faced boy from before, though now that he was standing at his full height, how knobbly and gangly and unnaturally lank his body truly was became obvious. He was wearing some sort of black suit, and his head was the dog's face once again. The announcer's voice was still garbled, more resembling the death rattle of a man with his throat slit…before the lights came back on fully and his voice returned.

"…a cunning plan to let him see his lover! He would disguise himself and take her out to dinner that night, take her out on the town and show her just how kind he truly could be! What a charmer, eh, folks?"

Another laugh track played, and the lights came up on another puppet of the woman. This one was also broken from the waist up.

"They had a lovely time together. He was shy, and could be more than a little odd, but she couldn't help but find him quite charming! She wanted to take him home. The Tattooed Man only

agreed to a quick date, and it was getting late. He had been watching their whole night out, per our little pup's request, and now the sly dog wanted a bit of privacy! Can you believe it, right in the middle of their love-making, he revealed himself! How loud do you think she screamed? Loud? Very loud? I'm taking suggestions here, people!"

Nothing else came from the speaker. Rodion stood there quietly for a moment before half-heartedly raising his hand to his mouth.

"Er, rather l—"

"Well, you're all wrong!"

He lowered his hand.

"She didn't mind at all! In fact, she said she didn't care what was on the outside, it was what was inside that counted! A freakish muzzle, bulging eyes, heightened eyes, a bony tail…she didn't care about any of that. He had a kind heart, a golden soul, and that was enough for her! What a woman, huh? He went back to the circus that night with joy in his heart. He couldn't even put on his little aggressive act, he was too excited to see her the next night. The very next night…the very next night…"

All of the lights went out.

"The Tattooed Man never came."

Rodion tried in vain to quell his nausea, but was forced to deal with it as he stepped through the next door. A puppet of the dog-faced man was sitting alone in the center of the viewing window, appearing so much smaller than he had previously.

"He picked the lock to his own cage with a hairpin and snuck out to the woman's home, where he could hear laughing in the window above. A man and a woman laughing. Keeping quiet, he perked an ear up."

Suddenly, a spotlight turned on behind the Russian, and it projected on the back wall two figures. One was masculine and strong, and the other was the girl from earlier, undeniably. Both were smiling and gesturing with their hands. Surprising Rodion, the announcer put on two separate voice impressions for the characters within.

"'Good lord, did you see him? His eyes stuck out like rotten prunes! His hands were spindly like spider limbs, his mouth wide enough to hold a watermelon in it without tearing at the seams! He had no manners, always drooling and yipping! He was more animal than man, and an ugly one to boot. I can't believe he thought a woman like me could ever love him. Now you, however…you are much more my type.'"

"'Of course I am, darling. Look at me! I am nothing but a man. I am covered in tattoos, yes, but what measure of exoticism is that? Any man can be covered in tattoos if he has enough patience and knows a good artist. The difference between me and the rest of those freaks is staggering. The bird girls? The half-men? The dog-faced boy? They'll never be like you or me. They're nothing but blights on society, the vermin we put on display just to laugh at and make a quick buck off of. If they were all to be thrown away, what difference would it make? We would simply move on to the next most entertaining thing.'"

"'Hahaha, you said it! I was only humoring him because I pitied him so much! Now please, strong man…do come to bed with me. How I have longed for your touch since I saw you that last night…'"

"'Yes, come here…I promise you, I will not hump any of your furniture! Ha ha ha!'"

"The two laughed long into the night, making love to the sound of a dog howling outside."

Rodion frowned deeply, letting out a sigh as he shook his head. It's always love that tears people apart, isn't it? The heart is a fickle mistress, sensitive and fragile like glass. He dreaded entering the next room, but he had to keep moving, didn't he? He stepped into the next room.

All of the puppets were broken.

None of the wooden standees remained standing, and the lights unsteadily flickered on and off. Rodion squinted, disliking the strobe effect it created, and peered over the edge to take a look at the puppets.

The one for the dog-faced boy was face-down on top of yet another bisected puppet of the woman. Different from the rest, however, this one's top half was still visible, even if it was partially tucked into one of the 'wings' that the puppets came out of. From where he stood, all that Rodion could make out of her form was her pure green eyes…and the fact that her face, scribbled out except for the eyes and mouth, was frozen in complete and utter horror. He tried to reach out to see what the face of the dog-faced man's puppet looked like, but his arms weren't long enough, and he couldn't bend over far enough. He decided against pulling something out of The Prince's coat to turn it over. All the while, the announcer's voice had been replaced with nothing but static, occasionally broken through by the sound of moaning, manic giggling, or muttered words.

"…bad dog…soft…hot…screaming…face…face…peanut butter…love…hate…"

He stepped away from the diorama and entered the next room.

The puppets here were also broken, but some had been hastily taped back together. The dog-faced man's figure remained standing, but where his head once was, it had been replaced with the screaming scribbled-out face of the woman from the previous room. Beside him, the Tattooed Man was frozen in a look of horrified rage. All of his upper body, all of the tattooed portions, had been scribbled out as well, and it was clear the puppet had been messily taped together after having been ripped to shreds. The speaker produced nothing but a dripping sound accompanied by dogs growling and distorted circus music.

Rodion shuddered, believing he had gotten most of the picture from the sordid scenes in front of him, and stumbled back through the next room.

Thankfully, this one was wholly intact, and as the lights fully came on and triumphant adventure music began to play, against his better judgment, Rodion felt a little relieved. The puppets showed the dog-faced man (having regained his head illustrations, albeit looking cruder than before) picking up and strangling a generic figure.

"…With no other lead to follow, he remembered that the Tattooed Man had told him, when he got his tattoo, that he was given the choice of having it done with something called 'Spare Ink'—an extremely potent sort of ink. This became his goal, and as he ambled through the world,

killing and threatening and robbing and making his due, he learned more about this Spare Ink. Supposedly, an ancient civilization had formed it via precognitive psychometry, coming into contact with the occultist Austin Osman Spare from far in the future. There, they taught him about chaos magic, and in return, he gifted them one of his ballpoint pens. Kind of a cheap deal, right? Wrong!"

Another spotlight turned on, and the room became filled with swirling colored light reminiscent of a lava lamp.

"You see, this ancient culture was so enraptured by this gift that they used their extensive knowledge of magic to discern the exact combination of ingredients needed to make an extremely potent sort of ink. The secret ingredient? The admittal that the world was chaotic and meaningless, and the introduction of a free-spirited hanky-panky sort of belief to the mix! Most religions are for squares, you know? Believe this, worship that, mercy this, sin that, but not them! To not believe anything is true is to believe anything is possible, that's what they thought. And the best part? Years down the line, old Austin himself would stumble upon the relics this civilization left behind and lay the groundwork for—what else? Chaos magic!"

"Think of what a man could do with such potent magical power at his hands. He could rule the world! He could smite his enemies! He could get a decent meal! In the pup's case, however, his eyes were on something much, much bigger. He wanted to change the very world itself. No more boundaries. No more lesser or greaters. No more conflict or judgment or war. Simply people being people, content to live and nothing more. Our dog had his day, now he just had to find the recipe."

Rodion stroked his beard, warily stepping through to the next room. There, the dog-faced man's puppet stood in front of a massive stone monolith. It was covered from top to bottom with small runes that Rodi had never seen before: if he were pressed, he would say they resembled something like a mixture between the Glagolitic and 'Phags-pa scripts of Old Slavonic and Tibetan, but they really were beyond description.

"And then, finally, he found it! After over a decade of searching, he found what he knew what a recipe deep in Peru. The only trouble was, how could he read it? He never had any time for any of that high-falutin' academia, no-sirree-bob: our old mutt here was (and is) a warm-blooded man of passions! But oh, what to do, what to do? Then…a figure appeared beside him."

The lights shone on a much larger and more rotund puppet, resembling a businessman cloaked in black shadow. Was that the Shadow Hel had mentioned? He hadn't seen him yet himself, but if he looked like that, he wouldn't be surprised…

"Introducing himself, this hunky brick of black fire stated that he'd been watching his efforts for quite some time now and aligned himself with his goals. As a show of loyalty, the Shadow gifted him a magical artifact: the Lens of Pangloss, stolen from the palaces of Westphalia and ripped from the grasp of the ghosts of Voltaire."

Down from the ceiling, held on by fishing line, dangled something that resembled a magnifying glass wearing a powdered wig. It looked like it was made out of cardboard, parts of it having rotted away slightly from the damp surroundings in which it was kept.

"Bringing it to the runes, he found that not only could he read it, but the Lens itself reassured him: this was the best of all possible worlds. All that he did would be for the betterment of mankind. This, along with the Shadow's encouragements, set him on the quest to enlightenment! The two traveled for decades to gather everything that they needed to produce this Spare Ink, growing closer and closer all the while. Were they lovers? Were they like brothers? Best friends? Father and son? Colleagues? Master and servant? Employer and employee? These answers changed as quickly as the dog-faced man's temperament, but folks, let me just say this once. You don't spend fifty years with another man and not fall at least a little in love with him."

A laugh track played. Rodion sneered at it, hoping that he was reaching the end. He must have walked through eleven or so rooms by now, what was left to find out? He side-stepped into the next room, where a similar scene had been set. However, the dog-faced man's wooden standee appeared much older, and he held a vial of rainbow liquid in his hand.

"After much toil and struggle, what happened? They did it! They formed the Spare Ink! What would the mutt do first? Would he use it to coat a magic wand? Would he splash it on his enemies? Would he seal it away for later use? Take a guess as to what happened."

…Nothing happened for a minute or so. Rodion looked around and sighed, starting to speak, but before he could get even a word out, the announcer resumed.

"He lifted the cup, tilted his head back, and drank the whole darn thing!"

True to his word, the puppet raised the vial and brought it to its mouth.

"Now, such an extremely powerful magical substance…nobody knows what happens when you drink it, and really, folks, I would wager nobody knows to this day! However. What I can tell you happened on that night was this. His very self began to unspool, regurgitating his innards as he could feel his arms dissolving into helixes, splitting along the very seams by which his soul was constructed…and yet! And yet! He was not down! No, he was not down, ladies and gentlemen! For we are blessed to live in a world adjacent to millions, billions, gazillions of separate worlds, much like ours with only minor changes! And, when he drank that mystical muck, the thousands and thousands of versions of him existing in his hemisphere of the multiverse became consolidated into one. Single. Entity. All of the stuffing from every single Hydrox cookie of himself in the pack that was his corner of the worlds was crushed together into a single monstrous sweet. He cried. He laughed. And when he came out of it, he was no longer just a dog-faced man, ladies and gentleman."

The dog-faced man's puppet turned around, and his grinning visage was fully visible as it showed the form he took on when he invaded Avalon castle. Rodion felt the hair on his arms stand up.

"He was…The Dog-Faced Man."

Applause echoed throughout the room.

"With a swipe of his claw, he formed the Broken Tracks of Meinung, and with his dear companion who called himself the Shadow, he formed what we now know as Man Unkind, whose noble members continue to this day struggling against the odds in their quest for a better world!

Ladies and gentlemen, ain't that the most touching story you've ever heard? Feel-good hit of the summer, I'd say!"

The last door opened up, and light streamed in through the opening. Rodion shielded his eyes, surprised at how bright it was outside compared to the time he'd spent inside this musty old dime museum.

"Thank you very much for visiting the Broken Tracks Dime Museum. While you're at it, please come and visit our neighboring Parlor of Miracles so you can get a tattoo of your very own! Refunds not available. Please direct all complaints, questions, and concerns to the Shadow. Broken Tracks Dime Museum is not responsible for any matter decompilation that may result from sharing your complaints, questions, and concerns with the Shadow."

A small ditty played, and Rodion figured that it was a sign that he should leave. He ducked through the door, covering his eyes as he faced the Broken Tracks and all the noise and racket that came with it.

Then, as the door shut behind him, he quickly turned around and found that he had come right back out of the exit. Had he really made a complete circle? No, that wasn't possible. What about that long hallway he had to walk through before he made it to the first diorama? He looked out at the horizon, expecting to see Odin and the Dagda fighting the computer golem…but he saw nothing. The desert had moved elsewhere. Stupid constantly-changing layout. At least he was still beside the Parlor of Miracles.

"Shit, Morganwg!"

It hit him right then. He had gotten so distracted by this stupid sideshow that he completely forgot to go and help Iolo. Brushing himself off, Rodion took a deep breath and started towards the doors to the Parlor of Miracles.

He was stopped short, however, by a long red blade blocking his path and embedding itself into the stretched-skin walls of the Parlor. It bled yellow deoxygenated blood, and Rodion's heart sank. He knew the origin of that 'blade'. He followed its length up to its source: a golem made of newspaper pulp wearing a stretched red postman's uniform with a sachel full of heads at its waist. The envelope lip folding over their eyes, red wax seal staring down at him with its mouth open.

The Dead Letter Gendarmerie.

"RECIPIENT HAS FAILED TO RECEIVE PACKAGE"

He remembered facing these monsters…god, was it only three days ago? It felt like weeks, so much has happened. But, he remembered these: they attacked him in Kaliningrad with their extendable letter-opener teeth. Not only that, they were accompanied by…

Rodion felt wriggling near his shoes and pant legs and yelped as he hopped on one foot, stomping and trying to shake them off. Phraseworms. What was it that The Prince called them? Nasty little buggers. Even with a few bourbon-scented miniature projectiles of magic, he couldn't stop a few from worming their way up his pant legs.

"Gah—!"

"PACKAGE MUST BE SIGNED FOR. IS THIS YOUR ADDRESS?"

He turned around and saw two more members of the Dead Letter Gendarmerie. One walked slowly up to him, and the other jumped down from the roof of the dime museum. He was so distracted by them that he failed to notice the next letter-opener tooth being fired his way. It scraped right past his arm, slicing his upper arm open and causing a splash of blood. Rodion groaned and held his hand to the wound, trying to stop the bleeding by applying pressure above the wound, but it was no use. The instant he tried to focus on that, another tooth-blade shot out and clipped his ear. Blood dripped from the small gash as well, and he staggered against the wall of the Parlor of Miracles. He tried to reach into The Prince's coat, but to no avail: it was all clothes, all wrappers, all trash. Trash, trash, trash. He would need to dig for over half an hour to find something useful. How did *he* do this so easily?

He was soon completely surrounded by the Dead Letter Gendarmerie, and they each loomed over him as they spoke in turn.

"DO YOU HAVE A STAMP FOR THIS?"

"PLEASE SIGN FOR INCOMING PACKAGE"

"RECIPIENT IS REPEATEDLY FAILING TO SIGN FOR PACKAGE."

"MAIL WILL BE MARKED UNDELIVERED"

"REQUIRES REPLACEMENT PACKAGE"

Rodion could feel himself starting to grow faint from loss of blood. He slid down the wall until he was in a sitting position, panting and huffing as his thoughts grew hazy. Was this how he was going to die? Funny. Somehow, he always thought it would either be suicide or poisoning. Those are some of the more romantic ways to die…or maybe he would have choked on a chicken bone at some point in his life. No matter the alternative, he didn't think he would be killed by three postal golems.

This time, there was no Prince Charming to come and save him.

And why was he not there in the first place? It was his own fault. A result of his own hastiness, his own issues clashing with The Prince's, stress combining with pressure and high tensions…and of course, an untimely assassination.

He wished he could have had a bit more time with The Prince.

He wished he could have told him he loved him one more time.

If only, if only…too little, too late.

Rodion closed his eyes and grit his teeth, bracing himself.

…Then…

He found that he had, without even knowing it, retrieved The Prince's crown of thorns, the Stoic-Passion Relic, from within his coat. It pierced his palm, making him bleed. Its blood mixed with Rodion's.

The crown began to shudder.

CHAPTER 39: Resurrection

The Stoic-Passion Relic trembled and shook as it began to shine with a holy light, its divine radiance undeniable. Rodion cautiously opened one eye and found that the Dead Letter Gendarmerie had stopped advancing on him, all of them putting their hands up and backing away. They seemed…scared? Their shoulders were even trembling, and the phraseworms that covered the ground scurried away as the crown of thorns rose up.

Like a spigot had been a pulled, it began to shower blood with the force of a high-pressure hose. It was no longer the occasional scarlet leakage that he claimed to have dyed his hair permanently red, it was a concentrated torrent of blood.

And, from the bottom up, from the soles of the feet to the ankles, from the calves to the knees, from the thighs to the torso…it began to form the shape of a man. A somewhat androgynous and lithe man's figure, to be sure, filling up as though being poured into a curiously human-shaped glass. As soon as the blood made it to the bottom of the ribcage, there was no longer any question about who the figure was, as the tattoo that covered his upper body, neck, and left side of his face remained even in this form. Rodion watched in utter shock, convinced he was hallucinating from blood loss.

Finally, after the figure had been fully created…he opened his downturned eyes, icy blue irises shining from their whites. In an instant, the blood that covered him fell to the ground, forming a puddle around him in the grass.

The Prince of Fuck All had been reborn.

He looked to the Dead Letter Gendarmerie.

Then, he looked to Rodion.

He smiled.

"Well, would you look at that. Isn't this…where we came in?"

The Russian immediately felt his eyes fill up with tears, even if much of him still thought he was hallucinating.

"P…P-Prince?!"

He tried to get to his feet, but found himself too weak to even stand, falling back to the ground with a groan. Quickly, The Prince dropped to his knees and clapped his hands, holding his palms to Rodion's palms and taking a deep breath.

"Lechit'."

With that one Russian word, Rodion could feel his wounds knitting themselves back together. The surprise at The Prince using a bit of Russian for his spell rather than whatever nonsense words he usually did was superceded, however, by the myriad of questions that were on his mind. In turn, those questions were shoved aside as he saw The Prince wincing and his tattoo swirling around.

"Prince…y-your magic, doesn't it…?"

“Hurt? Yeah, nngh, like a bitch. But don’t worry, love. I’ve been through worse and lived to tell the tale, haven’t I?”

“You’re…really back?”

He looked up with a wry grin. Even if he had no mascara on, no lipstick, no makeup…that smile always remained, even as he continued to heal Rodion.

“You couldn’t get rid of me even if you tried, hun…well, not that you didn’t try. You did. And…I stand by what you said. And I stand by what I said. Look, I’m…not the best person. I know that. In fact, you know what? I stink. I lie, I cheat, I shag whoever I want, and I make more excuses than a schoolchild who knows how to forge his mom’s signature. And, I didn’t know what I had with you until it was too late, and—”

Rodion wrapped his heavy arms around The Prince of Fuck All’s shoulders and brought him into a long, deep kiss. They remained that way for more than a few moments before they parted, the doctor sniffling and wiping away his tears with his sleeve, laughing between sobs as The Prince cupped his cheek.

“Ah…aha…Prince…m-my Prince, stop…stop with the excuses, *da?* It’s okay. I know. I know…”

“So…does that mean you’ll have me over again?”

“I would be thrilled to have you with me any time, my Prince…I-I love you. I love you, I do, I do…”

“I love you too, Rodi. Even if I’m a pain, no matter what, I promise I do.”

They smiled at one another and pressed their foreheads together, laughing and nuzzling against one another before they separated once again.

“But, how did you…?”

“I think explaining all that happened after I got shot would not only take much too long, but would be better saved for another time. Maybe never. But first…”

The Prince pressed his thin body up against Rodion’s husky one, taking the opportunity to quickly nuzzle against the large Russian’s ample chest. He blushed and laughed, part embarrassment and part confusion as The Prince’s nimble hands snuck their way beneath the coat he was wearing.

“P-Prince!”

“Cool your jets, Rodi, I’m reaching into my coat. Which, by the way, no offense? It does not look good on you. Bright colors, white and blue? Not your thing. You do make how small it is on you look cute, though.”

“I am realizing now you are naked. Can you please point whatever is pressing into me somewhere else?”

“Fine. I’ve got to take care of these nasty buggers anyways. Lucky for us, the Dead Letter Gendarmerie don’t always need a stamp and a prayer to be returned to their sender…”

He removed himself from a flustered Rodion, sliding the coat off of him and retrieving what appeared to be an antique matchbox, the edges covered in elaborate gold leaf and the front printed with Russian text. Rodi never got enough of a good look at it to figure out what it was,

but he watched as The Prince emptied out several thumbnail-sized toy soldiers from the box onto the ground and retrieved a single match. He struck it on the side of the box, the matchstick lighting up.

"They also *loathe* fire. Burning mail's a federal offense, after all. Of course, so's reading it, but where's the fun in that? Oh and by the way, step back a bit. They can be a little reckless."

The Prince flicked the lit match at the toy soldiers, and the moment the flame came into contact with them, they suddenly exploded in columns of fire. Soon enough, those columns took on anthropomorphized forms, and what appeared to be an entire Russian imperial cavalry charged towards the Dead Letter Gendarmerie, sending them running away in fear. The Prince grinned back at Rodion.

"I wonder if you knew? Peter III of Russia certainly wasn't enough to satisfy Cathy the Great in bed, but he sure as hell loved his toy soldiers. Turns out, you love a toy enough, they'll come to your aid when your palace is being burnt to the ground."

"I…did not. N-Now, Prince, er…"

The Prince tilted his head at the blushing Russian.

"Hm?"

"W-Will you please put some clothes on, already? I can see you naked at later time!"

"Oh, I don't know. I was thinking of just going and fighting the cult in my birthday suit. Quite freeing, you know? Having my cartso out and about like a dilettante dandy, strutting free and proud~"

"Just put *something* on!"

"Fine, fine, on it."

The Prince of Fuck All dug around in the coat and retrieved a set of clothes. He was silently quite disappointed (and more than a little concerned) that many of the things he had gathered over the years were gone, but now wasn't the time to be upset about it. Just like now wasn't the time to be upset by those trains that rolled past every now and then…urgh. It made his stomach turn just hearing them chug past. He tried his best to focus on slipping himself into a pair of red heels, an open-necked sequin crop top, two long hot-pink fingerless gloves, and a checkerboard-patterned red and black skirt. Rodion spoke with him in the meantime, surprised at how well his wounds had healed.

"So, what was death like? I was always curious."

The Prince perched a set of heart-shaped rose-tinted glasses onto his pointed nose.

"Well, I'm not at liberty to dish. But once you get over the crippling existential dread and heart-gripping fear that you are really, truly dying…it's not so bad. You'll find out whenever you kick the bucket."

"I-Is that so…er, actually, do you know what's going on? Where we are? We're in the middle of a last stand, after all…"

He put a fake diamond earring in each earlobe, clamping them onto the flesh.

"Yes, darling, I know what's been going on. I've been watching it all."

"You have?! …How?"

"Honestly? I'm not quite sure myself, but suffice to say, I get the gist. The question is, do *you* know what's going on?"

Rodion pointed at himself as The Prince applied his makeup and lipstick.

"…Me?"

"Yes. If you want a quick run-down, here's the gist: the codger and the other bear are being bombarbed by binary bitches down the way, the agents are apprehended, the frou-frou fae are finding Fionn, and Cecht kept crying, so Oberon offloaded him over yonder. As for Blondie…" His nose wrinkled, and he shook his head. "Moving on, the Morrigan's at the mercy of marauding monsters, and worst of all, Hel and Moxy—lovely palone by the way—are off in Nobody's Enemy fighting The Dog-Faced Man, with the Shadow en route."

The doctor covered his mouth with his fist, taking in the information, and jolted when The Prince pointed at him.

"Meanwhile, you've been enjoying a private show in the dime museum, haven't you?"

"Oh! Er, yes, you could…say that…"

"The place looks like it's seen better days. It wasn't nearly that broken-down when I was here."

"Wait, you were—"

"Aaaa-bup-bup-bup! Better things to worry about, hun. Like, whatever happened to fish-and-chips?"

"Fish-and-chips…? A-Ah! Iolo Morganwg!"

The Prince pointed with a grin. "Yeaaaah, that bitch! Last I saw, they got yanked into the Parlor of Miracles. Whatever happened to them?"

"I-I can't say I know…they were taken in, and I never got chance to investigate. I kept getting distracted…my apologies."

"Oh, no worries. We'll go right in and—"

"Hey, guys!"

Iolo's chipper voice rang out from behind them, and both of them whipped around to see them effortlessly pushing open the dubiously-organic doors to the Parlor of Miracles from the inside out. They waved to Rodion and The Prince, who both awkwardly waved back.

"Er, *privyet?"*

"…Bona to vada, fish-and-chips. How did you…?"

"How did I…oh! You mean, uh, leave? Yeah, there's a door here. You just prod it in the eyes, and it lets you in. Kind of a neat system, I should install something similar for my office. You guys know doors, yeah?"

The Prince gestured with a hand. "No, dummy, I mean how did you manage to get out of the Parlor of Miracles without either being fully tattooed or being ripped limb from limb?!"

Iolo lightly bopped their fist in his palm, realizing what he was getting at.

"Oh yeah! Well, it turns out that most of these…uh, the others called them Modern Primitives, yeah? Those big heads of theirs are pretty sensitive to migraines, so I just gave them the ol' fomorian special, if you get what I mean." They adjusted their monocle-glass, wiggling an

eyebrow from the shadow of their suit-hood. “And not only that, but I made some friends who helped me out on the tougher fronts!”

They stepped out of the way, allowing their new friends to step through.

A massive, hulking, very familiar red-skinned ogre lumbered out, holding a spiked club and running his hand over his grey hair as he warily took step after step. Rodion swallowed.

“Shuten-douji…?”

At his feet, a sea of people of all manner of species—beasts, fae, animals, skeletons, humans—flooded out from the doors. They were many sizes and shapes, rich and poor, many races, many colors, many clothes, many languages. The oni lord huffed and wiped his jaw as he looked down at Rodion and The Prince.

“Hey, it’s you two. The guy who gave me a good fight, and the bitch who stole my haori.”

“Right, er…s-sorry about that, love.”

“Eh, no hard feelings. I’ve got plenty of spares, really. It might take a while for Iba to forgive ya, though.”

Ibaraki-douji, the green-skinned oni with the prosthetic arm, sneered at the two of them over the crowd and gave an ‘I’m watching you’ gesture to The Prince. He just stuck his tongue out childishly in return. Shuten-douji sniffed.

“When you two picked up the Sessho-seki and ran off, Man Unkind decided to just scoop all us yokai up as a consolation prize. Assholes didn’t even bother to ask our names, or if we were working together at all. Which, speaking of…there’s someone else you guys will probably be happy to see.”

Jumping up out of the sea of the crowd and gesticulating joyfully, a small karasu-tengu wearing a reed hood waved with delight. Rodion smiled from ear to ear.

“Samayou!”

“Chicken nugget!”

The Prince rubbed the back of his neck, looking away from the happy little yokai, before Rodion lightly nudged him with an elbow. He got the message and cupped his hands over his mouth.

“Sorry for deserting you back in Japan, dear! I wasn’t thinking, I should have stayed behind! Do you forgive me?”

Samayou put both arms above their head, curving their elbows slightly and touching the tips of their talons together to make an ‘O’ shape. The Prince scratched his cheek, looking back at Rodi.

“I-Is that a yes?”

“Haha, I believe so!”

The Prince smiled warmly, and the fomorian hurried over to them, gesturing to the crowd.

“I’m sure all these folks want to go home, but…well, trouble is, I don’t know if there’s really a *home* left for them to go back to. Not in the, like, homeless sense, I mean…Earth is kind of a mess right now.”

Rodion thought for a moment. “Do you still have Hume Gibbetine?”

The Prince blinked twice. “The what now?”

Digging into their suit pocket, they retrieved the small djanbiyya blade and twirled it around their fingers. They dropped it, fumbled with it, and accidently kicked it once, but they ultimately grabbed it and held it up proudly. “I’ve kept it nice and safe! Who knew, keeping your most important item with the weakest link turns out pretty alright?”

“Good, good. Then, will you take all of these people back to place where we came in? Beside the statue of Penthus, as Hel said, *da?* Until we are done here, they can remain in Avalon. Pick up any stragglers you see along way.”

Iolo gave two thumbs-ups. “Will do, Mr. Nikolayev!” They looked over their shoulder at the crowd and called for them all to follow the one-eyed creature at the front, and for the most part, they did as they were asked. A few, shocked by their surroundings, started to stray, but Samayou and Shuten-douji managed to keep them in line. The procession passed. Then, something suddenly flashed across Rodion’s mind, and he looked back at The Prince.

“What about Odin and the Dagda?”

The Prince waved his hand.

“They’re gods, I’m sure they’ll be alright. But, just in case…”

He reached into his coat and retrieved…something that appeared to be a small spiked ball, but with a slot in the center. He pressed one of the spikes inwards, and the slot opened up.

“Do you have anything you want to send to them? This little baby will go straight to whoever you pray to. I think it was supposed to be sort of like a threat for gods: ‘Do what I want you to, or else you get hit with this!’ That kind of thing.”

“Er…well…oh!”

Rodion reached into his own coat pocket, pulling out the miniature lingam Shiva had given him after The Prince’s death.

“Shiva gave me this. They could use it if they’re in a pinch.”

“Perfect!”

The Prince happily plucked it out of Rodion’s hand, stuck it in the mace-head, closed the hatch, shook it, and quickly said a prayer in what sounded like Old Germanic. True to his word, the spiked ball rose up a few feet off the ground and sailed through the air like a shot put towards wherever Odin was at the moment.

Rodion breathed a small sigh of relief.

“We should go and check up on Cumhaill now, yes? He was only person you did not mention. I hope he is doing okay…”

The Prince sucked on the inside of his cheek as he pushed up his glasses.

“Here’s hoping, love.”

He reached into his coat and retrieved his rusty green bicycle with the rainbow tassels, brushing it off and gripping the handlebars once again. Ah, old reliable. Once you get used to a ride, even getting off it for a while can feel wrong…but that just makes hopping back on feel oh-so right. Rodion climbed on, his large frame behind The Prince as unfitting on the measly bicycle

as ever. Instinctively, he opened his mouth and raised his tongue, and The Prince instead pushed his jaw shut with a finger.

"No tabs this time, love. There's more than enough psychedelia here to make this thing eco-friendly."

The Prince began pedaling, riding past the group of people smiling and waving to them as they cheered and gave their thanks (including one rather raggedy-looking hairy man with a jacket covered in pins who just made a thumbs-up), and in a puff of rainbow smoke, he was gone.

~

When they arrived in Schatten Street, Rodion warily got off of the bike and peered around, taking in the angular scenery and completely monochrome surroundings. It made him uncomfortable, even if it reminded him of the old movies he used to watch as a young man.

"The shadows are painted on surrounding surfaces…is like German expressionist film."

"Yeah, I haven't got a clue why that is. Frankly, it's a bit too gauche, too drab for my tastes, but hey: a man likes what a man likes! If you want an explanation for the grey though, it's a funny thing: the Shadow's completely colorblind. Can't tell red from green, yellow from blue, indigo from violet. This is his portion of the Broken Tracks of Meinung, so it only serves that everything here is in black and white."

Rodion looked down the street, and his heart sank.

"I see red."

"Red? Don't be foolish, darling, you're about as likely to see red here as you are to see paisley at a Klan meeting."

He pointed a ways down the road, where indeed, a small group had congregated near what appeared to be a pool of red. The Prince immediately dropped his joking tone.

"Oh no."

Quickly, with The Prince rolling his bike beside him, the two of them hurried to the small group. In truth, it only appeared to be Oberon, Titania, Dian Cecht, and a few DUO agents, though there wasn't a happy face to be found among the lot. Oberon and Titania held each other close, one of each's hands rubbing the other's back. Dian Cecht was a mess, the older Tuatha De covering his face as he sobbed. Many of the agents had removed their glasses, folding them in front of their chest as they closed their eyes out of respect. Some were visibly struggling not to cry, and others stoically let their tears flow.

They pushed past the group.

In front of them, tied to a lamp post, was a human figure. It was beaten, broken, battered, and bloodied beyond belief. Great lacerations covered its arms, to the point where some bone was exposed, and in other places, skin peeled. The clothes it wore were damaged beyond repair, burlap ripped to shreds, chain mail torn apart and reduced to nothing but glittering scraps in the sea of blood that radiated out from the post. His back was hunched: his long hair, once a spotless platinum blonde and now a ruddy crusted-over mess of red and black, hid his face. Two stumps

where antlers once were sprouted from his gash-ridden scalp. His two hands, fingers broken, clasped around the hilt of a sword. Perhaps once, it was the sword of a warrior, but not only was it chipped and damaged, it was soaked utterly red with blood.

Though his knees had buckled, he remained standing with his ankles bent, the rope that kept him tied to the lamp post frayed and scorched, but not broken. His sword was still raised, as though he was still anticipating an attack.

The warrior had died on his feet. He was still standing, and had fought until his very last breath.

With a caw, an enormous black raven swept over them for only a moment, before she came to land on the shoulder of the fallen knight. Dian Cecht broke down into louder sobbing, for he knew who this was: Nemain, the undertaker persona of the Morrigan.

She who only comes to take those who die on the battlefield.

Rodion took in a ragged breath, choking back what tears he had left to shed as he made the sign of the cross over himself. The Prince looked on at the fallen warrior with a sorrowful expression, unable to bring himself to say anything. For once, he was speechless.

An agent pointed upwards.

"Look."

All those present followed their direction, and they saw a most brilliant sight.

Filling the sky above them, made up of shining golden rays, the figure of a magnificent bird with its wings spread far enough to stretch from one sidewalk to the next blazed over them. Outlined in rainbows, it glimmered with as much radiance as the sun in twilight itself. It flickered and shook, but its strength never wavered. Like an eternal inferno, its burning fervor felt as though it would last for eternity and never die out. It was the very spirit of Ireland, watching over the druids as they performed their rituals, watching over the farmers as they tend their fields, watching over the warriors drinking and being merry. Watching over the country it loves so.

Watching over the friends it had loved and lost.

The Prince swallowed, astonished at the sight before them as he whispered to himself.

"(The hero-lights…)"

Titania sniffled, her voice breaking.

"Fionn mac Cumhaill always wanted to shine just as Cu Chulainn had shined before him…and, in death, he became the noble savior he had been yearning to become for so long."

Silently, The Prince stepped forward and trudged through the shallow pool of blood that splattered across the asphalt, until he reached Fionn's body. He reached out, his hand trembling, towards the sword…

Fionn's arms suddenly lowered, delivering one final swipe. Luckily, The Prince managed to yank his hand away just in time, but if he was a second too slow, he would certainly be missing a hand. He held his wrist and stepped back, wary of any other sudden movements.

All that happened was that his grip finally loosened enough for him to let go of the sword, it clattering to the ground, and Nemain let out an ear-splitting cry that sounded out across the whole neighborhood as she took off.

The hero-lights faded away like smoke in the wind.

In front of The Prince, Fionn's body became covered with a bluish-green aura, the layer of magic spreading over his skin as though he were becoming crystallized until it fully covered every square inch of his self.

Then, with the sound of something small and precious breaking, Fionn mac Cumhaill, hero of Ireland, disappeared, and was no more.

Everyone present remained silent out of respect for the fallen for a few moments, not the least of whom included The Prince of Fuck All himself, who struggled to keep himself from crying. Fionn had left them, but he left behind his clothes: his shimmering cape, his oxter bag, his shield and banners, and even Mac an Luin, the sword he had loved so much.

He took a deep breath in and let it out as a sigh, hugging himself. He felt a warm hand on his shoulder and found Rodion there beside him, who he chose to hug instead. The Russian hugged back.

"Don't worry."

The both of them separated, looking over at the voice. One of the DUO agents, having replaced his sunglasses, had approached them.

"His death wasn't in vain. Not only did he fight valiantly, but he did it for a good cause. Come, we'll show you."

"…R-Right. Right, of course. Ahem."

The Prince tried his best to regain his composure, even if it was clear he was struggling to keep calm. He gestured to the fae and the two Tuatha De that remained, the Morrigan returning to her Badb persona and standing beside a slowly-recovering Dian Cecht.

"You all. Thanks for looking out for Fionn for these past few days. Lord knows I-I wish I had more. You've all done more than enough. Morganwg is heading back to the home portal, and I think you all should take his things back to…wherever he *really* is."

Collectively, the fae and Tuatha De nodded, starting forward to gather his things as the DUO agent led The Prince and Rodion away.

Rodion looked over his shoulder at them as they shook the blood off of his cape.

"They were…surprisingly accepting of you coming back from the dead."

"They're fae, hun, I'm sure some of them die five times before breakfast. It's a part of life for them, so I suppose humans coming back from the dead isn't much of a big deal for them."

"And, er…w-what about Cumhaill's body disintegrating?"

"Well, he was more metaphor than man, if that makes sense."

"…It does not…"

The agent beside them clapped his hands, and the two snapped out of their conversation to pay attention to him.

"Fionn mac Cumhaill chose to pick a fight with the Shadow because he knew it would bide us time. Our crack team of agents managed to send a few of us in disguise as an agent known as the Crimson Misfit to not only infiltrate their ranks, but to act as bait in case they should be found out. In the meantime, all of our other agents hid in the shadows, waiting for our chance to strike. We couldn't do so with the Shadow still around, as we are humans: as long as we don't die on American soil, we can't be resurrected. At least, not as easily as some people."

Even from behind his sunglasses, The Prince of Fuck All knew the agent had casted a suspicious glance at him.

"Don't blame me, love, I didn't do it on purpose for goodness' sake!"

"Anyways. Once he was out of the picture and believed we were weak enough, that was when all the rest of our agents came out from the shadows. We quickly apprehended the three guards and the real Crimson Misfit, as you can see."

The agent gestured to where the agents Ning, Nang, and Nong were tied together, all three unconscious, and where something resembling a prop Halloween skeleton laid with its jaw hanging open stupidly, its eye sockets empty and black. The Prince whistled.

"Not bad for a bunch of suits. I've been fighting them for maybe half a decade now, and I still don't know *all* the ways to take down agents. Maybe you charpering omis could let me have a look at your files sometime, hm?"

"Perhaps when your record is cleared, Prince."

"Oh, boo."

"Regardless…"

He outstretched a hand, showing that they were standing beside the Kaput Caput. Both of its eyes were wide open, all of the wires that connected to its pedestal severed, and over a dozen agents were currently stuffing the innumerable amount of magical artifacts and relics into what appeared to be large burlap sacks with dollar signs on them.

"We'll be cleaning up here and returning all of these items to their original owners. Please forgive the bags, we were going to use them for a prank on the Supreme Court where we would pretend to be the IRS and audit them, but with everything that has been happening, we never were able to get around to it. The Department of Unusual Occurrences will take care of this and follow the others to the portal back to Avalon."

Rodion looked around, curiously watching the agents buzzing around like worker bees. "How many of you are even here?"

"That information is classified."

The Prince put his hands on his hips and huffed. "You're a boring lot, but I must say, you're certainly efficient. Just make sure you're careful with that junk. Anything with my name written on it goes back to me, alright?"

"If we can wash it off, it's going to be washed off."

"Ugh, fine. Keep it. Whatever! We've got to hurry off to Nobody's Enemy to take down the leader and help out Hel anyways, so if you all have got things under control, we'll be leaving…"

He put up a hand. "Wait."

"What now?!"

The agent reached into his suit and retrieved a manila envelope with an oblong bulge in the center marked '[TOP SECRET]', handing it to The Prince.

"We found this in the very bottom of the head. It's not magical at all, but it feels out of place. Perhaps it will be of use to you."

He looked over the envelope, frowning.

"Well, what the hell is it?"

"That information is classified."

"You don't get paid much, do you?"

"I'm not allowed to see my payment slips."

The Prince stashed the envelope into his coat and hopped onto the bike, sighing. "Thanks anyways, dear. Good luck on the return trip! You ready too, Rodi?"

"I suppose…"

"Right then! See you around!"

And off The Prince of Fuck All sped, disappearing in another cloud of smoke.

~

When the bike slowed down once more, they found themselves in front of the head of Nobody's Enemy in the small patch of woods that always surrounded it. Nobody's Enemy itself hadn't changed: it was still upside-down, its eye stabbed with the end of The Dog-Faced Man's cane, and yet…things seemed oddly tranquil. Especially when you consider whatever mayhem may be going on inside. The Prince stashed his bike back into his coat and sighed, putting his hands on his hips.

"Alright, love. This is it. The big one. The major face-down where we march right up to Dog-Face's creepy old behind and tell him what-for. It'll be tough. It'll be scary. You may die. I may die. We both may die! But that's the risk we're willing to take, aren't we?"

"Yes."

"Exactly, we—wait, what? You agree?"

Rodion nodded. "I do. I mean, I am…I am overjoyed to see you alive and well. That was more than enough for me. Earth is in shambles right now, and it would take miracle to save it, but…well, if I died fighting alongside you? That would be a better death than I thought someone like me would ever have."

His eyes quivered, wet with tears, and he turned away with a light swat at Rodi.

"O-Oh, shush, dear…you're gonna make me cry, and I could barely keep it together earlier. I want to keep this makeup looking good for as long as possible!"

"Sorry, sorry. But, is true!"

The Prince gathered himself as best he could.

A train rolled past behind them, and he felt himself shudder hard enough for it to be visible to Rodion. The doctor frowned, putting a hand gingerly on his lover's back.

“Trains still scaring you?”

“Oh, I’m *terrified* of them. It’s a wonder I’ve been keeping it together until now, but you’d be surprised what adrenaline does to a girl! Magical, magical things. If I break out after all this is said and done, I’m blaming the damn trains. But, you gotta put the childish fears aside when you’re meeting the head honcho.”

The Prince cracked his knuckles, did some stretches, and stepped towards the cane.

“You ready, Didi?”

Rodion took a deep breath, cracked his neck, and experimentally flashed a bit of magic in his palm.

“As ready as I will ever be, my Prince.”

“Fantastic.”

The Prince took Rodion’s hand in his own smaller one, and in turn, Rodion squeezed his gently. Leading him forwards, The Prince stepped off of the cane and stepped over the face of Nobody’s Enemy, prying its mouth open with his foot. The inside of its mouth was nothing but blackness.

He looked to the Russian and nodded, and the Russian did the same.

“Let’s put on a show they’ll never forget.”

CHAPTER 40: The Greatest Show on Earth

In the beginning, there was nothing but darkness.

The endless, yawning, blackness of the void stretching out as far as the eye can see like a great matte blanket that engulfed all matter and thought.

Then, gradually, there came to be light, and with light, feeling.

The Prince of Fuck All and Rodion Nikolayev felt a cold wind even as they couldn't yet see the world around them, the gentle shaking and bumping of a vehicle in motion felt beneath their bodies. They were sitting in the back of a cart, and when their vision returned to full vibrancy, they found that the cart was traveling through a snowy forest. The both of them remained silent in confusion, until they heard a voice.

"Hey, you, you're finally awake. You were trying to cross the border, right?"

The Dog-Faced Man was sitting in the cart across from them, appearing as a watercolor painting of himself that seemed to blur and shift as he moved. He was dressed still in his ringleader uniform, top hat askew on his animalistic scalp, and leaned back with his hands over the edge of the cart's walls with his legs crossed. His long and gangly figure took up the rest of the surrounding space, beady eyes staring down at The Prince and Rodion and a mouth full of sharp fangs was twisted into a sinister grin. The Prince sneered.

"Dog-face."

"ah ah AH thatss, ' The Dog-Faced Man' to you, my little prince. The little prince with a planet all to himself anda lonely little grave somewhere snot of this earth I never thought I would see the d d d the day you would come to ME and come into MY HOUSE and NOTE VEN LEVE MTE OFFERI YOU RTEA"

"If you've got tea, love, I don't want what you're offering. You know what me and Rodi want, don't you?"

"yYyyouuu died. You Died. Try Again?C ontinue? Hh h h how did how did you c c come back ar eyou a G- G G G GHOUS?!?! T ZOUNKS !!! just . grasping your chain. Yanking. Yankee doodle dumbfuck. You got away once and I DATE dare. Dare. I Dare You Double Dog Dog DOG WOOF dare you to test if your ugly beastly self would come back again"

The Dog-Faced Man tilted his head over to Rodion, who was glaring at him with an intensity that surprised even the man himself, and giggled innocently.

"amd oh? Rodi? Rodididi yawn rod. Rod. Who is this?y orrrr little eplay mate??? Fuck buddy?????? ? ?? ?? ? always a pleshur to see a hideous scarred face like yors President Garbachev. Wot u wont, mate? Wot you mean? Haven't got a clue haven't got a get a clue on th hh monopopouly edna krabappely AND TO PROVE IT."

He raised his long arms high into the air.

"Frithk Me Darling, I Haven't A Thing On Me"

Rodion almost moved to reach out, but The Prince reached a hand out and stopped him, giving him an annoyed look. This was obviously a trap: why else would he be raising his hands

and allowing them to frisk him for the stones unless he was setting something up? Though, he didn't stop Rodion to prevent him from falling for it. Instead, he reached into his coat, grabbed something or another…and shuffled forwards on his knees.

The Prince proceeded to pat down The Dog-Faced Man. Every article of clothing on his person either felt wet, cold, or otherwise quite heavy, and if he was the type that was more sensitive to sensing other people's magic, his mental Geiger counter would be going off the charts. He was horribly emaciated, his stomach having collapsed inwards to create a cave beneath his malformed ribs. When The Prince checked around his wrists, The Dog-Faced Man clasped his large, jagged fingers around his former prisoner's like they were lovers and rolled his eyes into the back of his head with a pleased giggle. He quickly jerked his hand away and resumed frisking.

The Prince flicked the bowtie on his person, and it twirled with a slide whistle noise.

He reached under The Dog-Faced Man's coat and only found colorful handkerchiefs tied to one another.

Standing up straight, he started to remove The Dog-Faced Man's top hat, pulling it off with ease. Beneath it was another, slightly smaller top hat.

"Son of a…"

He pulled that off, and a smaller top hat was beneath *that*. The Prince continued to take off top hats as The Dog-Faced Man's gaze lazily erred in the direction of Rodion, who called out to him.

"Why not just sweep all of them off, Prince?"

"Oh yeah! Smart thinking, love."

With a twirl of his wrist, The Prince batted the top hat off of The Dog-Faced Man's head, the headwear landing right in Rodion's hands. There, the innumerable other top hats that were hiding beneath it shot out into the air in a steady stream, like a fountain that shot high into the air…and by the time that the hats emerging were unable to seen without the assistance of a microscope, The Prince got fed up and grabbed The Dog-Faced Man by the lapels of his suit.

"Alright, wise-ass, you better start talking or we're gonna make you play fetch with your own head! Where's the stones you brought with you, and what'd you do to Hel?!"

"did i do thayyyyut, Hel? Hellll ehehell hell is always with us its there a the start the beginning the crimealy meaddle and The Bitter End whatd I do with her again? Where is she? Where is she…"

The Dog-Faced Man rose to his full height and flicked the backs of The Prince's hands, making him recoil and let go of the lapels as he flipped onto the front of the cart. He stood atop the wall separating the carriage-driver's seat (which appeared oddly empty) and the horses from the cargo hold, and produced a playing card: the Knave of Hearts. Was there even a knave in most decks of cards? Or for that matter, *any* deck of cards? Regardless, Rodion stumbled to his feet just in time to see the cult leader throw the card at one of the horses with remarkable accuracy, completely severing its head from its body. The disembodied head floated upwards

into the sky, joining the gentle rain of hats that hadn't stopped since the original top hat's removal, and The Dog-Faced Man leapt into the gaping throat cavity of the horse with a shout.

"COME AND SEE THE SHOW, BOYS"

With that, he retreated into the still-walking animal, and The Prince took Rodion's hand.

"Come on, then! We can't let him get away, otherwise there's a good chance we'll be lost forever here!"

"O-Of course! I am right behind you!"

Surprisingly, the exposed throat cavity of the horse was more than spacious enough to accompany both of their entrances, and they squirmed into the pocket of flesh.

For a few moments, after they had exited the initial esophagus, Rodion thought that perhaps they had entered into the horse's stomach—that would show a theme, at least, what with Nobody's Enemy requiring entrance through the mouth following an injury and all, but soon enough, the two entered free-fall. Rodion spun through the air, resisting the urge to shout as he watched the darkness around him become full of shimmering multi-colored symbols, many of which he didn't recognize. The blushing Prince pushed down on his skirt to keep it from flying up, but couldn't help but have his coat billow above him anyways. The black walls turned to checkerboards, then to plaid, then to polka-dot as they hit ground.

Neither were injured, though, as they harmlessly bounced off of it like a trampoline. Looking around in the few moments they had in the air after the rebound, they almost seemed to be in some kind of funhouse slide. When they hit the ground once more, they were sent sliding down a long and winding corridor patterned in pink and yellow polka-dots, passing through gate after gate with uncanny resemblances to laughing faces.

Rodion kept a hand on his head, trying to stay upright as they slid down the slide.

"H-Have you been in here before, Prince?"

"Not once, love. I was never allowed in, sadly. It's like your dad's study, you know? You're never allowed to go in there lest you get whipped with the belt."

"No, Prince, in fact I do not know. I was raised as orphan, remember?"

"Oh yeah."

They passed through gate, after gate, after gate, until they came to one with bright light shining through, and once they went through that one and felt the slide no longer beneath them, they realized why it had such light. They were spit out thousands of feet above what appeared to be a bustling French countryside village, fresh air hitting their faces and whizzing past their ears as they began to fall. And they fell *fast.*

Rodion couldn't stop himself and let out a shout of terror as he felt himself hurtle through the air like some sort of Russian cannonball, fearing he would hit the ground that much faster…before he saw The Prince with his arms crossed beside him.

"Galileo, hun, remember? Bowling ball and a feather fall at the same rate. And besides, that isn't a real city."

The two of them tore straight through the canvas of the enormous matte painting that made up the vista beneath them, falling down past what appeared to be lighting crews, technicians, directors and cameramen…

Until finally, they landed in darkness. From how uncomfortable their cushion was and the stringiness of it, Rodion figured that they had landed on…straw? The Prince groaned and pulled himself to his feet, squinting as he waved his arms around and stumbled about.

"Rodi? Rodi, are you around here? You alright?"

Rodion's voice came from a couple meters away.

"I am alright! Better question is if you are alright, it was quite large fall and you do not have the advantage of winter padding like I do…"

"Oh, the old corybungus has been through worse. Question is, where in Pete's name are we? Let me make a light."

The Prince reached into his coat and dug around in it, pulling out a few things that he didn't need in the process. Rodion couldn't see what he was doing, but he could hear farm animal noises, the sound of an automatic plunger, and a small Mexican-tinged fanfare, before The Prince finally found whatever it was he was looking for. A flame burnt a ways away from Rodion, hidden behind what appeared to be the bars of a cage, and The Prince laughed.

"Would you look at that? Self-burning samizdat. Isn't that handy? Illegal papers that get rid of themselves after you read them."

"What do you see?"

"It looks like I'm in a cage with some…newspapers, a pile of straw in the middle, bars around the edges…feel around, hun, do you think you're someplace similar?"

Rodion blindly stumbled around and eventually knocked his nose on a bar.

"Ack—! Y-Yes, yes, I believe I am in someplace very similar. You know, Dog-Faced Man spent much time in circus in cage. You don't think…?"

"That reminds me! When I was giving the mutt the ol' TSA treatment, I slipped something onto his person. It's a branch off a bush somewhere atop a mountain in Saudi Arabia, I bought it from an omi in Cleveland as a two-for-one deal with a new remote control for my massage chair. Then I figured, what the hey, and bought the rest of the bush he had! It's kind of like a tracker, you stick a twig on him, the rest of the bush knows where he is. I figured it'd be useful to keep an eye on the crafty bugger."

"Er, how does that work? Do you need to light it on fire?"

"Oh, no, no, in fact, the guy explicitly said not to light it on fire. It makes you hallucinate, hear voices, all that. The way it works is, you just pull this…then you tweak this leaf here…"

Rodion craned his neck, frowning. All he could see from his vantage point was a

"Prince, I cannot see what you are doing…"

"And, voila! It saaaays…uh, it says…"

"What does it say?"

"It, um, says he's somewhere right next to us."

Just then, all of the lights came up, and the roar of the crowd immediately gave away where they were.

They were right in the middle of a packed circus tent.

The ground outside the cages was patted-down without any grass, the fabric high above them patterned in red and white stripes, and surrounding them were bleachers full of people. They were cheering and clapping, but the keen-eyed doctor noticed that none of them were actually moving their mouths: they were all just idly smashing their wrists together as the sounds of an audience cheering filled the air, their faces blank and expressionless as they were manipulated by strings that led upwards, fading away into the darkness. Circus music blasted at full volume, making The Prince stick his pinkies in his ears to try and drown out the noise. However, he could see a figure only a couple of paces away: the figure of The Dog-Faced Man, with a new top hat, no less. He wasn't moving, instead just standing there like a robot powered down for the night.

Just as The Prince thought to call out to him, he sprung to life and gestured with a cane. The way he spoke was entirely different, much more of a composed and bombastic tone as opposed to the unhinged stammering and stream-of-consciousness verbal diarrhea that spewed from his mouth the rest of the time, and he paced along the outer rim of the circus area.

Rodion recognized the voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen! What you are about to see is one-hundred-percent real. No tricks, hypnosis, or other such quackery was used to achieve the feats you will see here today, no, no. What you are about to witness is nothing but pure skill, the end result of humanity at its wit's end! We have a three-ring circus here, folks, and you won't want to miss a single event!"

It occurred to the both of them that they were only two out of three cages situated in a chalk ring on the circus grounds: two parts of a three-ring circus. The lights dimmed as a single spotlight scanned in a lemniscate route over the grounds, moving in the shape of a figure-eight until it settled on the third cage.

"Our first act…"

The cage itself fell to pieces, and inside was an enormous spinning wheel, painted with the colors of a target. Bolted onto the spinning wheel by her wrists and ankles was the white-haired self-proclaimed Queen of the Dead, Hel, looking especially nauseous. The Prince and Rodion both pressed themselves against the bars of their respective cages.

"The human target! Well, not 'human' per se—more goddess than anything else—but the target part still stands, people! But who, you may ask, who will be throwing the knives? That is one excellent question. We will choose someone from the audience! Anyone?"

The spotlight searched around the audience of puppeted humanoids for a few moments.

"How about…you?"

The light landed on a very weary-looking and teary-eyed Moxy Fruvous, hunched over meekly and trembling in her seat. She raised her hands, covering her eyes from the light.

"P-Please, no…not again…"

"Yes, you, little missy, come on down! Come. On. Down."

Hesitantly, she floated out of her seat and came down to ground level, keeping her gaze towards the ground. Rodion blinked a couple times, trying to make sense of Moxy's anatomy. It was the first time he'd seen her in any genuine capacity, and just like the rest of Man Unkind's transmogrified agents, it made little sense on an anatomical level.

"In the second ring…"

Rodion's cage was the next to collapse, and he narrowly avoided having the roof fall down on him as he stumbled out of the way. The Prince called out for him from his own cage, reaching into his coat and hastily trying to find something he could use as he stashed the burning papers away.

"Rodi!"

"You see this one, folks? Born and raised in Mother Russia, having gotten nice and meaty for the winter…and what's a better fate for a man of the snow, but to die by a good meal? Introducing our very own personal geek…"

Rodion swallowed as the ground began to rumble. "G-Geek? What is this 'geek'?"

"Didi, back in the old days of those cheesy freak shows, before the actual show, to rally the audience, they would get someone out to bite the heads off of chickens."

"Biting head off of *chicken?* That sounds…gruesome, but, not so bad."

"I don't think you'll be the one biting off heads, darling…"

Rising from the dirt like a monument summoned from ancient times, a massive, rotund, muscle-bound wall of flesh with the appearance of an anthropomorphic chicken wearing spandex tights emerged. It shook off the dirt that had wedged itself among its white feathers, staring down at Rodion with one glassy eye the size of a beach ball.

"Miiiiiike!"

'Mike', as he was apparently called, let out a furious rooster crow and proceeded to crack its wings just as one would crack its knuckles, staring down at Rodion. The Russian stared up, up, up at the irate avian colossus before him, and gulped.

"(Eto ogromnaya kuritsa...)"

The Dog-Faced Man raised his hand in the salute of Man Unkind, and the crowd applauded as he strutted over to The Prince of Fuck All's cell.

"And then, ladies and gentlemen…our final, and most precious act…featuring the one who got away, our very own The Prince of Fuck All! What will he do? Will he swallow swords? Will he walk on coals? Will he tame lions? No, no, and no."

The Prince kicked one of his heels against the bars of his cell, still reaching around in his coat.

"Quit with the preamble, you mutt! You're all scotch, no soda, and I'm not interested in a drink either way, so spit it out! What'll you be having me do?!"

He shook his head. *"Tsk, tsk, tsk. Feisty thing, isn't he? Well, don't worry! That fiery spirit of his will be BROKEN soon enough. Because you see…those tattoos on his body aren't just something to look at while you do your taxes! They are a show of his strength! He is…"*

The Prince's cage collapsed, and he looked up to the ceiling just in time to raise his arms and stop the enormous flat weight that came down from seemingly nowhere from crushing him.

"The tattooed strongman!"

It was heavy, definitely, and he was by no means a strong person, but he was able to hold it above him with some effort. There was no way he was going to be able to set it down without the whole thing toppling over onto him, though, at least not currently. Not only that, but it required both of his arms to carry. He can't reach into his coat to pull anything out.

"Indeed, every few minutes, we will drop more weight onto him, just to see how much he can take! If he should crack under the pressure…well, who are we to judge? It's not your job to clean up after the circus, people, the circus cleans up after itself."

"Shite…"

The Prince grunted, looking over to Rodion, who was frozen in fear facing the massive chicken staring up down at him.

"Double shite…"

"Ladies and gentlemen…"

The Dog-Faced Man took his top hat and threw it up into the air.

"Let the greatest show on Earth commence!"

The blaring music only got louder as all three acts began at the same time. In one corner, Moxy's arms were suddenly filled with small throwing knives that wriggled and jittered in her arms like jumping beans, begging to be thrown at the spinning target. In the other corner, Mike the chicken began to trundle towards Rodion, the husky Russian stepping backwards and holding his hands up defensively while he tried to think of a plan. In the final corner, The Prince's legs shook as he struggled to hold up the weight above him, Atlas holding up the sky…and it turns out, he was expected to carry the world as well, as another flat weight landed on top of the first and increased the weight The Prince was to haul. He was not doing good, to say the least, and the blasted music wasn't making him any happier. In fact, it was making him a little nauseous. Though that might also be every muscle in his body struggling to keep from being squashed into a fine pink paste.

Rodion tried his best to evade Mike's grasp, but he was simply too huge: if Shuten-douji was ten feet tall, Mike was at least *twice* that height. So, what, more than twenty feet? That math seemed right. Still, he managed to narrowly evade capture a few times, but he had too wide of a wingspan to evade forever. Less than a minute after the show had started, Mike had clasped his prehensile wing-tips around Rodion and lifted him up, grinning (Rodion didn't even know a chicken could grin, he'd never looked at one especially closely before and had only ever treated humans—he's not a veterinarian, for goodness' sake). The chicken brought Rodion to his face, opening his beak wide with a triumphant bucaw as he went to bite off the Russian's head.

Wriggling his arms free, he managed to perform a series of quick finger motions and direct it at Mike's eyes.

"Zazhigay!"

With a flick of his wrist, Rodion managed to focus his magic enough to blast a small plume of bourbon-scented flames towards Mike's face. The embers and smoke caused him to reflexively close his eyes and turn them away, and he let go of his catch to rub the soot out from his eyes. Unfortunately, that left Rodion dropping to the ground like a brick. He had to think quick, otherwise he'd definitely break something on impact that would leave him immobile, and that's if he didn't just instantly break his neck…though, of course, it isn't the actual act of breaking your neck that kills you, it's the introduction of vertebrae shrapnel into the brain stem, which shuts down all brain function, and…

Why is he spending time thinking about this?!

"A-Ahh, ah, *stop!"*

Rodion froze in mid-air surrounded by his brown magical aura, roughly a foot off the ground, for about three seconds. Then he fell right to the ground with a loud thump, groaning as he pulled himself off of the ground and brushed himself off. Unfortunately, his quick escape only bought him enough time to hit the ground: by the time he got back to his feet, Mike had recovered from the shock of fire flashing in his face and prepared to reach out for him once more, this time with one hand partially covering his eyes.

In the meantime, Moxy was hugging all of the throwing knives close to her chest, furiously shaking her head even as they jittered and clanked against one another.

"No! No, I'm not throwing you all at her, not again! I don't care what you say you'll do to me if you don't, I'm not doing it! You can't make me, y-you can't!"

Unfortunately, the first rule of circus performance is that you don't bring words to a knife fight. As such, no matter what Moxy said, the knives didn't care: they *wanted* to be thrown, and if she wouldn't throw them, they would throw themselves. One of the knives thrust itself into Moxy's palm, nestling itself between her fingers, and reared itself back, taking her with it in the process. Then, it left her palm, using her hand like a springboard to fly through the air towards Hel on the wheel. It stuck itself into the wood under her left armpit. Hel weakly groaned.

"S-Sorry! They're throwing themselves, I can't stop them!"

"Uuuurrrrghhh…"

All the while, The Prince was struggling to keep his spine from snapping in two underneath the absurd amount of weight he was beneath. He had no real metric for guessing weight—the closest he got was estimating the weights of his various lovers, and he always overshot and offended them—and when it came to guessing by physical heft, he was completely outclassed. He didn't have much time…but, an idea suddenly came to him. He looked over to Rodion, currently on the ground scooting away from Mike the chicken, and barked.

"Hey! Nnghh—R-Rodi! Oy!"

Rodion turned around, teeth grit.

"I-I am kind of in middle of something here, Prince!"

"Like—hrrrgh—I'm not?! Get over here! Now!"

Per his request, the Russian stumbled over and ducked underneath the weights, now right beside The Prince.

"R-Reach into my coat…I'll tell you—nnnrrrgh—where to find what you need!"

Quickly, he nodded, and reached into The Prince's coat. He rummaged around in it, feeling around and looking for what The Prince apparently thought he needed while following his directions: higher, lower, a bit deeper, wiggle your hand…no wonder he couldn't find anything good himself, he apparently had no clue how to actually *use* the coat. However, eventually, he managed to retrieve something that resembled a space-age monolith. It was sheer black, like an oversized domino, and the instant he managed to yank it out, it fell right to the floor.

"Set it up, right here!"

"P-Prince, how will this—"

"For god's sake, Rodi, just do it before I crap out my large intestine here!"

Rodion quickly obliged, pushing the monolith upwards until it was in a standing position, sunken deep into the soft ground. The Prince let out a sigh of relief.

"Oh, thank goodness. You're a life-saved, Didi. Literally."

Slowly, he lowered himself to the ground, still keeping his hands firmly on the underside of the weights…and eventually, when he was crouching down fully, he let go. The weights of course didn't balance perfectly on the monolith—that would be impossible—but it was sturdy and heavy enough, and in soft enough soil, that it simply slanted to the side, remaining held up by the monolith. Once he had ascertained it wouldn't fall and crush him, The Prince quickly scurried out from beneath the weight. Rodion followed soon after.

"Thank goodness for that."

"Yes, Prince, I am glad you are safe, but there is still matter of *massive chicken wanting to bite my head off?"*

The Prince of Fuck All looked up to where Rodion was pointing, seeing the figure of Mike rising from where he had been peering down beneath the steadily-stacking weights. There had to be four or five on top of one another now. He sighed and reached into his coat, grinning as he retrieved a length of rope and twirled it like a lasso.

"Oh, don't worry, darling. I've wrangled more than a few massive…" He blinked twice. "…I forget the word, but my point is, I can handle this paltry poultry with my hands tied behind my back."

Rodion looked on at The Prince, then up at Mike, who was back to his full height…and shook his head.

"Prince, give me the rope."

"Eh? What for?"

"I think you have been saving me more than enough these past few days, and I want to return the favor."

The redhead hesitated for a moment, looking down at the rope and back at Rodion, before nodding and tossing it to him with a kiss on the cheek.

"I hope you know what you're doing, love. In the meantime…"

Rodion measured out the length of rope he was given in his arms, looping it into coils, and swallowed whatever fear he was still feeling. The Prince of Fuck All, on the other hand, turned

around and glared at The Dog-Faced Man, who had been entertaining the crowd by pulling rabbit's feet out of his hat.

"I'll take care of this."

The Russian took a deep breath and stepped to the side, watching the weights on top of the monolith. He watched and waited, keeping a keen eye on the diagonal-skewed flat blocks of metal as Mike looked on, more bewildered than anything else while he clucked. Then, when the sixth weight was added, Rodion saw his chance: running as fast as he could, he climbed onto the weights—spilled across the ground like the results of a hamburger stacked with too many patties to remain stable—and used them as stairs until he reached the final one. This vantage point, even if it was only five feet above ground level, was what he needed, as he wheeled his shoulder and spun the end of the rope in his arms.

"Come down and face me, big chicken!"

Offended at being called something as rude as a 'big chicken', Mike let out a furious cry and bent down to grasp Rodion with both arms, hunching over. Just then, Rodion threw the length of rope forwards and to the side, letting its length not only go over Mike's shoulder, but wrap once or twice around his thick neck before continuing back over his other shoulder. He reached out for the other length of rope with his other hand, swatting at it and missing more than a few times, but he managed to grasp it. Now with one end of the rope in each hands and the rest of the length wrapped around Mike's neck, he jumped backwards off of his vantage point and yanked downwards as fast as he could at the same time. It was quite the drop, especially for a man of his weight, but that was the point: with his own strength, plus the force of gravity acting on him, it would hopefully be enough to pull him downwards.

Lucky for Rodion, his calculations were right, and thanks to Mike's center of gravity being lower as a result of his bending over, his head was sent straight down into the remaining weights with a not-inconsiderable force. The impact caused him to recoil in pain, falling to his knees as he held his wings to the bleeding gash that had opened up across his forehead.

The doctor had no time to celebrate, however, and with both ends of the rope in his grasp, he ran back around the weights and skirted around Mike until he was right behind the colossal bird. Yanking again, this time Mike's neck was yanked backwards, the pulling motion constricting the rope around his neck as he fell backwards. Rodion was nowhere near strong enough to drag such an enormous figure around…but he didn't need to *defeat* an enemy to consider it *defeated.* Stepping forward, as Mike tried desperately to claw at the ropes around his throat, Rodion tied the remaining length of the rope around each of Mike's ankles. Now his ankles were tied to his neck: any attempt to struggle would constrict the rope around his neck, choking him, and he would be unable to move anything but his arms.

Realizing this, Rodion quickly stepped back until he was out of Mike's reach, the chicken-man wildly flailing his arms to and fro, trying to grab at whatever was within his range without being able to actually turn his head at all to see what it was he was grabbing. He had managed to immobilize his opponent…and he did it all on his own! He allowed himself a proud grin as he wiped the sweat from his brow. Who knew, all that practice tying down interrogation victims

could actually be put to good use? If he was willing to risk getting grabbed again, he would take one of those throwing knives and sever his ACL or Achilles tendon, but it isn't good to get too cocky.

Which, speaking of, the throwing knives! Hel and Moxy! He whipped around to see how they were doing, and the scene he was met with was anything but good. The Prince, having clamped what appeared to be some kind of enormous metal dog cone mixed with a cangue (an East Asian method of corporal punishment involving a wooden square affixed around the neck to prevent the punished from being able to feed themselves) around The Dog-Faced Man's neck, was finding that it was just a little bit too large: it was impossible for him to reach The Dog-Faced Man's head to sock him in the head as he appeared to be trying to do, and instead, he had resorted to yanking up and down on it in an attempt to cause some kind of neck injury. The Dog-Faced Man himself was unperturbed, instead having taken the knives from Moxy Fruvous and gathered them up in his arms. Moxy was yanking on his arm, trying to stop him as he picked one blade out of the wriggling pile.

"Ladies and germs, we apologize for the inconvenience. In lieu of our other two acts, our own ringleader would like to personally apologize and take the liberty of performing the final act himself. After all, if you want something done right, you have to do it YOURSELF "

The last word was strained and crackly, as he threw one of the knives.

It landed beside Hel's head.

"...I said, I I said you have tot to do it YOURSELF"

He threw another, and it stuck right beside her left wrist.

The Dog-Faced Man growled like a rabid wolf, throwing as many of the knives at her, as fast as he could. Every single one of them stuck into the target around the spinning Hel, making an outline around the motion-sick goddess and not even scratching the woman herself. The wheel slowly screeched to a halt, ending with Hel right-side up and her rotted side somehow looking just as pale as her living side despite being gangrenous black. She swallowed, not without some effort, and murmured.

"…I feel like…I'm going to…throw up."

He groaned, stomping his feet.

"STUPID TRICK KNIVESSSS WHY DID I INSIST ON USING THEM FOR THIS FUN SHOWQQfine. What. Everrrr ill just yuse one of my speshul knifes instead, that will sink in the flesh Cdefinitely."

Reaching into his coat, The Dog-Faced Man retrieved a tomahawk. He pointed it at Hel, then began to reel back as he prepared to throw it, almost bending entirely backwards like some exaggerated parody of a baseball pitcher. As he was all the way back, The Prince grabbed the far end of his cangue-cone and snarled down at him while holding an uncapped bottle of Fanta.

"You throw that axe at her, I swear to Jehovah I'll pour this acid all over your face!"

"HA AHA AHA go ahed and dooo it. Do it. Wha t t t more c an y ou do to my mf ac e tha t h asn t al rl ea dy be eeeeeeen d o o n e ? "

Rodion stumbled forward, reaching into his own coat pockets to try and find something he could throw out, but he couldn't help but stop short as the tomahawk swung dangerously near him. Even if his wounds could be healed, he doubted that he would be lucky enough to come back to life just as The Prince had—and one swing from that tomahawk to his carotid artery or his wrist veins would mean his certain death, let one one to his head. Instead, he called out.

"Prince, please be careful!"

"Trying my best, love!"

The Prince tried as hard as he could to yank the cangue further down in an attempt to cause The Dog-Faced Man to topple backwards, but he was plain exhausted from his earlier weight-lifting stint, and was struggling to muster up the courage. He had poured the Fanta into the cone, and the cult leader was lapping it up like he had poured chocolate milk in.

Then, he threw the axe.

Instead of flying through the air towards Hel, it instead spun off to the side, flying through the air away from any of the group. Moxy watched it go, blinking in shock.

"I-It missed?!"

"missed? Oh no no no milove, myst was a PC Game From The 19990s, dunt cunt yer cheeckens before day ATCH"

The spinning axe, just when it was about to break through the ceiling of the tent they were in…changed direction. In an unnatural manner, like a UFO ignoring any laws of momentum, it made a harsh left, then a harsh left again, then a right, a left, a right, and it zig-zagged through the air until it was headed straight for Rodion.

The Prince shouted. "Rodi, duck!"

He managed to fall back just in time, the tomahawk only managing to slice a few hairs off the end of his beard.

Though, it wasn't aiming for him.

It continued to jerk and jitter through the air, coming for The Prince of Fuck All.

Rodion returned the favor from earlier. "Prince, *naklonis'!"*

Even if he didn't know Russian, he knew 'duck' when he heard it, and he managed to lower his head just in time. The tomahawk flew harmlessly between the gap between his floating crown of thorns and his head of red hair.

Though, it wasn't aiming for him.

No, instead, it changed position from spinning horizontally to spinning vertically, cutting through the air like a buzzsaw as it flew directly towards the space between Hel's eyes, coming for her. Rodion couldn't help but wince and cover one of his eyes, trying to avert his eyes from the likely-ensuing gory scene out of respect, and The Prince gripped onto the cangue even as The Dog-Faced Man was nipping at his clothes.

The axe sliced through the air like a wily boomerang, coming straight for the goddess…

Hel, with her eyes tightly closed, expected to feel a short, sharp, shock in the center of her face, and then nothing. Then, she believed, there would be nothing for a while until the next time she was manifested. If that was what life was for her. Was that really her life? Was it right? She

barely knew what she was trying to think, she was so dizzy, and the world was still spinning, but she knew that a blade would hit her square in the head and she would die.

Did she have any regrets? Not really. She got her revenge, she made amends with a friend who she felt betrayed her, what more could she ask for? …Well, maybe she could have done a bit more with her position as Queen of the Dead. That always felt like more of an honorary title anyways.

Satisfied with her last thoughts, Hel stopped thinking and anticipated the hit.

And it hit.

But, no pain ever came.

Instead, Hel opened one of her eyes, and saw that a figure with a crescent-shaped head had thrown herself in front of her, the tomahawk having embedded itself right in the center of the 'dip' of the crescent as though it had been placed in a stump. Black, oily blood seeped out from the wound. Staggering where she was levitating in place, Moxy turned around and looked at Hel, her colorful marbles of eyes half-lidded and woozy.

Reaching behind herself, she produced something she hadn't needed ever since she felt that she and Hel had become friends: the paper fan she used in lieu of a biological mouth. She opened it, its paper surface blank, and dipped a finger in the 'blood' that came from her head to draw a messy smile across the folds of paper.

Her voice spoke, shaky and weak.

"…W…W-We're…friends, right, Helly…? …F-Foxy died for you, and…i-if I'm…too much of a coward to fight him myself…t-this is the best I can do. I'm sorry…"

Hel looked down at her, recognizing what had happened even as the world was still spinning for her, and scowled. It wasn't a scowl of anger, however: more of frustration and pity, of not being able to do more for either of them.

"Moxy…"

These two poor souls, all they wanted was a happy life, and what were they given instead? They were swept up into a cult that desired the end of the world, carrying out the wills of a cruel and deranged leader…

But, they both died of their own volition. They didn't march willingly towards their own demise: they went out as a result of their own newfound will and their dreams of a better future.

A better future that would never come for either of them, but perhaps would come for those around them.

Her grip on the paper fan weakened, and it fluttered to the ground, followed by the light going out of her eyes. Her body went entirely limp, and like a puppet with its strings cut, Moxy Fruvous fell limply to the floor.

She looked like nothing more than a disused theater prop now.

Rodion and The Prince of Fuck All both hurried over to the wheel, the doctor bending down and picking up Moxy's corpse, gently laying it down behind the wheel. All the while, he kept The Dog-Faced Man in the corner of his eye, refusing to let him slip away again. The Prince

quickly took out an industrial-strength nail file and began cutting through Hel's wrist and ankle bindings as he grit his teeth, shaking his head.

"I-I'm…so sorry, love. I may not have known her, but I know you two were close, and she really seemed like a bona palone…"

"Yeah, she…she was. Whatever you said. Look, I am…very upset, but also still very dizzy, don't you have…urk, something in that coat of yours that'll help me?"

"Oh! Right, yes, err…" He dug into his coat and pulled out a small capsule of something, cracking it open and holding it up to her nose. What emitted from it was an indescribably foul odor that instantly snapped Hel out of her dizziness, but made her twice as nauseous. She fell from her bindings coughing and hacking, waving her hand in front of her face.

"Ack, good lord, what in the Nine Realms is that?! Some sort of smelling salt?"

"I think it was some sort of cheese I picked up in Naples one summer…" He sniffed it himself and gagged, quickly stashing it back into his coat with his tongue sticking out. "Obviously it's gone bad by now. Or has simply become more cheese. I never know, you know those coves who fancy cheese with mold and maggots in it—"

"Prince!"

Rodion calling out to him snapped him out of his cheese-related thoughts, and all three quickly directed their attention to The Dog-Faced Man. He stood there for a moment before effortlessly raising his hand up to the cangue around his neck and…unzipping it. Never mind that there was no zipper situated on the restriction device, or that it was made of metal and so wouldn't easily bend if it was indeed unzipped, but he managed to run his fingers along it while an unzipping noise played, and the cangue fell around him in a heap like he had just shaken off a poncho slightly too big for him.

Hel, having finally regained her senses, stepped forward with a clenched fist. "Alright, you ugly mutt, talk. Why did you do all this? Did you just like to see us suffer and toil for your own amusement?"

He squeaked a pinky finger in his ear.

Rodion cracked his knuckles, his presence intimidating despite the fact he was a foot shorter than The Dog-Faced Man. "Was it so you could fulfill your own twisted revenge onto us from your brutal past?"

He watched a butterfly flutter about his head, holding out a finger to let it perch.

The Prince of Fuck All took off his pink glasses and folded them, gesturing at him with the spectacles. "Or, could it possibly be you're just totally off your rocker and wanted something to get your rocks off?"

The Dog-Faced Man stared down at the butterfly on his finger for a few moments, contemplating its blue wings, before snapping at it with his muzzle and chewing it into a bloody paste. He spat out the wings and spread his arms wide.

"ERRNNN ERNNNN ERNNN, three exes three sexes, male female inbetweemale Wrong Wronger and Wron Guest I was yes I was So tires Tires of waiding Tires of waiding for- for- for- FORE"

He mimed a golf shot, mimicking the sound of the wedge hitting the ball with his mouth, serving as just enough of a distraction for the Shadow to emerge from the audience. The large figure pushed past the pale puppeted people, jumping down from the bleachers to the lower circus grounds and making a small cloud of dust as he did so. His sinister baritone accent snarled at the three.

Hello, everyone.

Hel sneered and clenched both her fists, trying to stop herself from flying into a rage at the sight of the man who had killed her brother. The Prince of Fuck All's face was stoic and serious, even him acknowledging how serious of a threat the Shadow was as he reached a hand into his coat. Rodion…just stared up at the eight-foot-tall figure with wide eyes, gulping. He was *huge…*and *terrifying.* He had known his fair share of huge and terrifying mobsters in his time, but the absolute presence that radiated off of the Shadow was unlike anything he'd ever felt. It was like standing next to an active landmine, knowing that if you were in the area when it went off, you wouldn't live to regret sticking around.

Despite that menace, The Dog-Faced Man instantly lit up with a smile (an even greater smile than he usually had on) and wrapped himself around the Shadow, gently patting at his chest and hopping from one leg to the other excitedly.

"haaaAAaa mollyyy! Mollee mollee you came for meee so good two see yuo Know how to follow directions. Howzit howitzer whats the buzz tell me whatsa happenin"

The Shadow winced slightly and politely pressed a single finger down on The Dog-Faced Man's forehead to get him to step back.

I came because you called me, sir.

He glared back at the three, one hand on his hips.

And I can see why. You want me to take care of them? It's a rare chance to get The Prince of Fuck All here and have a legitimate chance to kill him. In addition to an escaped prisoner and…

The Shadow waved his hand dismissively.

Some overweight bearded man who appears to have stumbled in accidentally.

Rodion scowled. "Excuse me?"

"oh if you could kill them that would be SO GOO . D. SO GOD. Godliness is next to Deathliness and Cremeliness afder all"

The Prince stepped forward.

"I don't think so, love." Pulling his hand from the interior of his coat, he retrieved the top-secret envelope that the agent had given him earlier, holding it up. Hel stared at it with a confused sneer, then looked to Rodion, who shrugged. "Once you get a load of whatever's in this manila envelope, you'll be *begging* to be set free! It's only a matter of time until—"

A flick of black fire aimed itself at the envelope, and The Prince managed to move it out of the way just in time.

"Hey!"

Don't hold your important documents up like they're some kind of trophy if you don't want anything bad to happen to them.

The Dog-Faced Man cackled, clapping his hands and aggressively slapping the side of the Shadow's stomach as his laughing devolved into pained wheezing. Then, ultimately, he stood back up straight and patted him on the shoulder.

"Leave no evidence."

Of course.

Turning to the side, he flicked his wrist, and sharp claws like the tips of scissors burst out from the tips of his fingers. Just as Hel had done with the Hume Gibbetine, with his index finger's claw, he proceeded to rip a hole in space-time. However, his was in the formal shape of a rectangle, and he turned an imaginary doorknob to open up the 'space'. He doffed his hat.

"Toodle-pip!"

Just as he moved to step through, however, a sound shot through the circus.

Almost like the sound of something unzipping, but with a quicker and more fluid sound, ending with a sharp and meaty-sounding slap.

The instant he heard that sound, The Dog-Faced Man's body shifted from being relatively solid and dressed in a ringleader's uniform to something much more unstable. As though the data that made up his body was glitching and decaying, his 'outlines' became rougher and rougher, spikes jutting out and rippling like waves across his body as his frozen form became so full of overlapping and interlocking shapes that it resembled something more like a wadded-up magazine page than the humanoid form it once took on. The whole process was accompanied with a sound like a mix of a crumpling paper and a tea kettle boiling, and all of the puppets in the circus collectively had their strings wrapped around their necks and were pulled upward like hanging bodies in nooses. The chicken Rodion had taken down melted into bubbling goop, and the ground itself became hard and icy.

The Shadow raised his eyebrow, reaching out to his superior.

Sir? Are you…

Then, he quickly realized something and turned away, clearing his throat and trying to forget he had even asked anything. Instead, he glared at the three of them with offended and shocked rage.

Standing right in the center was The Prince of Fuck All, holding a black leather riding crop. He was gently resting the flat tip in the reddened palm of his other hand, grinning from ear to ear as he looked on at the scene. To one side, Rodion looked on with concern and determination alike, and to the other, Hel with her hands on her hips and staring down at the cult leader and his second-in-command.

The Prince wiggled the riding crop knowingly, and in something that was new to the drag queen and the goddess of death, the Shadow looked legitimately shaken.

…Where the hell did you get that?

"Let's just say a little birdie handed it to me. It was at the bottom of your sock drawer, Shaddy, love: some very naughty things in there. All manner of dirty mags. At least one old

recorder still in its sleeve. I didn't know you used to take classes. Hell, I didn't even know you used to be a kid."

Another lie. Typical, he would never let on where he got such an important item. The suit-clad figure of black fire looked back to the mess of triangles and angles that The Dog-Faced Man had become.

Or, he would, if he hadn't already leapt through the door while the two of them were talking.

The Prince launched himself off the ground, sprinting towards the opening while holding the riding crop as he shouted to the other two.

"Come on, follow me! We can't let him get away!"

Rodion nodded and sprinted after The Prince, managing to slot himself through the portal right after his lover—Hel hurriedly shoving against his back to get him through faster played a not-insignificant role in that, he was certain. The Shadow was too shocked to react as all three of them shoved themselves into the portal to follow after his employer, too concerned with choking down whatever emotion he was feeling at the moment, but once it had hit him, it hit him hard.

He trembled, and in only a few moments, the entire circus area was covered in black flames as he shouted and tore his way into the portal, determined to completely obliterate all three of them, at any cost.

From then on, it was nothing but a race to either catch up to the moving goal or remain in the sweet spot: if they slowed down at all, the Shadow would kill all three of them, and with The Prince using what he called the 'Sinai Sonar', they kept a close eye on The Dog-Faced Man's position. The most difficult thing about the whole matter, of course, was navigating the interior of Nobody's Enemy in and of itself. Every new surrounding made no sense, every new setting and collection of setpieces appeared to be nothing more than a collage of various elements or scavenged rooms from other places.

They ran across the undersides of clouds, looking up at an enormous city that hung above them upside-down, and leapt from a cumulonimbus to a land of tie-dye and gradients. Colors swirled around them as they caught a ride on one of the passing paisley patterns, hopping to and from organic winding arabesques while occasionally catching a glimpse of The Dog-Faced Man out of the corners of their eye. The leaves on the bush allowed them to know where he was at any given time, but even that information proved less than useful on more than a few occasions. If you're in space, jumping from miniature planet to miniature planet, then what direction is up, or north? The leaves would point upwards in an arc before pointing in the completely opposite direction of where they had been running, or in instances such as the hall of doors, the leaves would jump all over the place.

All the while, the Shadow was hot on their tail. Despite being a close associated of The Dog-Faced Man, and assumedly having been in this place many times, even he struggled to navigate its odd corridors. Falling through a wormhole of swirling acrylic-paited blues, yellow, greens, and purples with the sun shining far above them, stumbling down a miniature version of the Caprisian countryside where every house was no larger than a brick, using the individual lines of

a large-scale three-dimensional woodcut illustration's shading like a ladder to climb upwards, he was always just one step behind them.

Of course, while The Prince and Hel were quite physically fit (Hel the most so despite The Prince's history of running thanks to her godly biology and The Prince being more sinew than muscle), Rodion was…less so. He was built for strength and warmth, not agility, and by the time they reached a sea of holes, an endless stretch of white patterned like a grid with black holes, he was stumbling and wheezing. The Shadow seemed to have lost them, but they had lost The Dog-Faced Man: the Sinai Sonar was spinning wildly, unable to ascertain which hole The Dog-Faced Man was in. He lightly tugged on The Prince's coat, coughing.

"P-Please, Prince…can't we, urgh, slow down? M-My heart is pounding out of my chest…"

The Prince, currently trying to slip himself into a hole only as far around as one of his thighs, pulled himself up.

"Well, sadly, we can't quite slow down: never know when the Shadow's going to come poking around, but there's nothing we can do right now other than peer in all the holes and see where he is. Let's see if there's something in the ol' coat, here…"

He reached deep into his coat, rummaging around as Rodion sat on the 'ground'. He noticed that he wasn't falling, and when he reached beneath himself, he found that the hole he had sat on was completely fake. Hel's face popped out of it, startling him.

"Ah—!"

"Have you thought about losing weight? I don't know what sort of grotesque libidinous fling you two have going on, but if you're going to be hanging around The Prince, I would assume you'd be on the move a lot."

He looked off to the side, seeing Hel's body sticking her head shoulders-deep into one of the holes, and blushed slightly.

"I-I do not intend to be coming with The Prince on *all* of his misadventures. Besides, hopefully after all this, he will not be having such misadventures as often, if at all…I am not, er, active type."

"Obviously."

The Prince glanced up from his coat.

"Nope, not finding anything…Hel, hun, don't bully Didi for how he is, bears can't change their shape. Unless they're hibernating, I suppose. But still, Rodi, I promise I've learned my lesson: After this is over, you're strictly on doctor/recuperation duty. As long as you beef up protections in that queer little alcove of yours."

"Is not queer!"

"It will be when I visit."

Hel rolled her eyes and retracted her head, allowing Rodion to surreptitiously fold it into sixteenths and tuck it into his coat pocket.

Just then, something that appeared to be a relatively detailed (if somewhat cartoony) yellow-and-orange submarine floated leisurely through one of the holes. The Prince, spotting it out of the corner of his eye, snagged it out of the air and experimentally blew into one of the tubes

sticking out of the top. The propeller on the back sputtered and spun like a buzzsaw, sending a harsh breeze into Rodion's face, and The Prince handed it off to him.

"Here, you can ride this!"

"A-Are you sure that will work…?"

"If it doesn't, I promise I'll make your eulogy twice as long."

"That is really not a good joke…"

"What joke?"

Hel's voice rang out.

"U-Uh, guys?!"

The two of them snapped towards Hel, and found her wrist-deep in one of the holes. She stepped back bit by bit, having it emerge from the hole, and it became clear that the Shadow had wrapped his three-fingered hand around her wrist, gripping onto it as he climbed out of one of the holes. He loomed over her, black fire beginning to engulf her hand, but it was clear the chase had taken some of his energy, just as it had for Rodion.

You three think you're so clever, don't you? Really, you have the same thought processes as prey animals. You misdirect, you distract, and you keep running away, but the second you get caught, you don't know what to do. How pathetic.

The fire snaked its way up her arm, Hel repeatedly trying to pull away or use her ice abilities to stun him even the smallest bit, but it was to no avail. Her right arm, on the 'living' side of her body, had been consumed up to the elbow.

"Think fast, Shaddy!"

Some object soared through the air, the Shadow catching it with the swiftness of a baseball player: his hand alone was large enough to be a mitt for a regular person, after all.

You think you can catch me off-guard? Laughable.

He uncurled his fingers, seeing what The Prince had thrown at him.

It appeared to be…some kind of instrument? One end had a wooden ball, the other had a rectangle, and they were connected by a J-shaped loop of metal…as he struggled to recognize what the item in his hand even was, however, it immediately started ringing. A harsh sound resembling the call of an especially angry iguana shouting at full volume filled the entire sea of holes they were situated in, the Shadow recoiling and letting out a roar as he covered his ears.

Rodion recognized the sound: it was what The Prince had used to distract the guard outside the bar in Japan. That was at the back of his mind, however, and instead he hurried to Hel's side and got her attention as she watched the black flames begin to creep up her upper arm. He mouthed out what he wanted her to do, and she just shook her head with confusion. He shouted over the din with his fingers in his ears.

"Freeze your arm and cut it off!"

"What?!"

"You are deity, yes? You can make new arm! Just cut this one off!"

"What?!"

"I said—"

“Oh, wait! I heard you! Take off my arm, right?”

Rodi huffed, but was at least glad she understood him. Good thing her left ear was just as dead as the rest of her left side, allowing her to not worry about plugging it. Hel grit her teeth and brought her dead hand up to her shoulder, gripping onto it. In an instant, the remainder of her right arm (really, the stump that was left) was flash-frozen, and she bashed it with a fist to make it fall from her shoulder. It fell harmlessly into one of the holes, dropping into the inky depths.

He glanced back at the Shadow, writhing and rolling about on the floor as he struggled to find what exactly to cover to stop the noise from piercing his mind: he didn’t exactly have obvious ears, after all. Rodion felt a tap on his shoulder, and was met with The Prince holding the Sinai Sonar with his elbows and his pinkies in his ears. The bush had stopped twitching, and was now pointing in a single direction.

Silently, the three of them nodded to each other, and Hel and Rodion sped after The Prince to the hole where it was pointing, Rodi hopping onto the odd little submarine he had been lucky to be given and blowing into the pipes as fast as he could.

They went down the hole, and their vision flashed green as they passed into another juncture.

“Will he not eventually grab noisy instrument himself and destroy it?”

“Probably, but by now, we’re long gone! See, my theory is that the sea of holes we went through acted as a sort of bottleneck point. If this house is essentially a bunch of rooms, we just passed through the hallway that every single one of those doors connects to. And I doubt he’ll be able to figure out which hole we went through while he was busy squirming, for that matter!”

“I just hope we can get this chase over with soon. What’s the deal with that odd handheld whip, anyways? Why did the mutt react so strongly to it?”

The Prince, sprinting over a Judean table set out with bread and wine and ruining thirteen austere-looking young men in robes’ supper, pulled out the riding crop once more.

“Oh, this? I doubt you really need to know. Long story. All you should be concerned about, Helly, is that we’ve got him on the back foot now!”

“Do *not* call me that.”

Rodion’s submarine quickly puttered along, able to easily keep pace with the two others as they went through a set of double doors and passed through a Boschian hellscape full of all manner of monsters, creeps, and weirdos. None of them appeared to be moving, though, and when Rodi reached his hand out to touch one, it just fell over like a cardboard standee.

“Where does Sinai Sonar say he is now?”

The Prince retrieved the bush, watching the position of the leaves and branches closely as he turned it over in his hands.

“Seems like he’s…” He stumbled to a stop. “Right above us?”

All three looked up, and found themselves staring right at a painting on the side of what appeared to be a dilapidated old house, an old and crotchety figure in a tan suit hunched over and carrying a bundle of sticks while using one as a cane. In that moment, the perspective shifted,

and they found themselves—rather than looking up—standing on the ground and looking straight ahead at it. It was then that they noticed that it wasn't a painting at all.

It was a window.

The Prince tucked away the bush and leapt through the window, calling out to the figure as Hel and Rodion followed after.

"Hey, Dog-Face! You know, it's not right for a dog to run away from its owner!"

The Dog-Faced Man, in the guise of an old man, looked up with fear in his eyes.

"no, "

In that instant, he scurried away as he took off his bundle of sticks, unwrapping it and flourishing with a hand. Like soldiers lining up, the sticks made a fence across the grassy field he and The Prince found themselves on. Rodion simply rode straight over the fence, while Hel froze them with her rotted arm to smash through them and The Prince awkwardly scooched between them. His techniques were getting sloppier.

The lush greenery beneath them gave way to craggy rocks resembling a causeway, the sky turning from a peaceful blue to a terrifying blood red. Pink-skinned not-quite-human figures with messy blonde hair that covered their faces dragged themselves across the outcropping, The Prince and Hel leaping over them every chance they got as they tailed their enemy. The Dog-Faced Man's appearance was getting looser and looser, his solidity starting to waver as he seemed more watercolor than corporeal.

"S S S STAY AWAY"

Screeching with fear, he reached into his ringleader's uniform and threw something at the three of them.

It was the Chunk of Alatyr.

The white swirl-covered rock beaned Rodion directly in the head, causing him to topple backwards and only remain holding onto his yellow submarine with his fingertips as blood seeped from a gash on his forehead. His thoughts were utterly scrambled by the impact, and The Prince managed to catch the rock as it fell.

"Bloody hell, now he's throwing the things he *needs* at us? He really is getting desperate, isn't he? …You alright, love?"

Rodion groaned and struggled to pull himself back onto the moving submarine.

"Other than nausea and probable stitches later? I am fine."

The Dog-Faced Man leapt off the causeway, and like a light turning off, the whole world went black. However, nobody had gone blind: beneath them was a single white beam that The Prince and Hel ran across, and they kept on The Dog-Faced Man even as he leapt over a pyramid and landed on the rainbow on the other side.

"GET GET BACK GET BACK I SAY DON'T donnnn t com e ne a r m e with that"

He produced the Lia Fail, hoisting it up onto his back like Atlas, and retrieved within his uniform the fetter of Gleipnir as well, the rainbow-tinted ribbon-like strip being deftly tied around his back to secure the rock onto it. Hel snorted.

"He's tying a rock to his back? Does he *want* to be slowed down?"

“I wouldn’t jump to conclusions, dear. We barely know what that Lia Fail does, but if I’m remembering correctly, we had an inkling that it might serve as a catalyst for the power of other magical items…”

The Dog-Faced Man, stumbling across the rainbow he had been using to escape, whipped around and shone the Hope Diamond at them.

“WHY DON’T C C YOU ‘G IVE UP THE GOST’ PLE Aase ”

With the power of the Lia Fail nearby, the Hope Diamond shook and shuddered like an overtaxed machine, shining with a bright bluish-white light as dozens of screaming faces pressed up against it. The images became clearer and clearer, their agonized expressions impressing on the borders of the diamond as though they were being suffocated against glass, until all at once, the ghosts broke free.

Dozens and dozens of ghosts flew out from all eras of history to accost The Prince, Rodion, and Hel. The elaborate and vain rococo-suited forms of Louis XIV, XV, XVI and Marie Antoinette, dangling their own decapitated heads by their powdered wigs and swinging them at the three like flails, swirled around the shade of Thomas Hope the banker, who thrust his gold-tipped cane at them. The remnants of the souls of sultans, slave-workers, bankers and jewelers, anyone who had come to own the accursed diamond, screaming and wailing out of frustration from their eternal spot in limbo.

The Prince was whacked more than once over the head, scratched by over-long nails, had his jaw whacked by an errant limb or hand, and rubbed his shoulder as he ran.

“Gah—bloody hell, ghosts aren’t supposed to be able to interact with the living! Stupid Lia Fail must be bolstering their power…I’d always fantasized about being smacked upside the head by a king as decadent as Louis XVI, but this isn’t really how I imagined it!”

Rodion, having managed to scramble back onto his submarine and cover his head wound with a handkerchief he had in his coat, swatted at the ghosts and used his own limited magical knowledge to fire flame after flame at them. It was no good, of course: how are you supposed to burn a ghost? What’s there to burn? They aren’t made of ethanol.

They were struggling to keep pace, though, and even though The Dog-Faced Man’s gait was made even more ungainly than usual thanks to the addition of a hundred-pound rock on his back, he was still getting away.

It was then that Hel, ducking the scimitar of a sinister sultan’s shade, remembered something.

She had volunteered to be the Queen of the Spirits, hadn’t she? Frankly, she thought it was kind of a short-sighted decision on her part nowadays, she didn’t really have many responsibilities and it was more than a little boring, but it was something to do. But, finally, she could put that authority of hers to good use. She cleared her throat, preparing herself, and then shouted.

“Enough!”

Surprising the ghosts, The Prince, and Rodion just as much as it surprised Hel, all of the angry shades stopped and turned to look at her.

"Err…good, you're listening to me. Now! I am sure you are all aware, but I volunteered to hold sole dominion over all of you lost souls. Typically, you would have gone to one of the many afterlives, but you have been trapped in that accursed gem ever since your untimely deaths. Whether or not they were caused by the diamond or not, I'm sure you all want to pass on, right?"

Louis XVI said something in an ethereal whisper to Thomas Hope, who replied in a similar whisper. None of the corporeal beings there understood, of course, and Hel found that she didn't either. Maybe she wasn't cut out for this job after all, if she didn't even know what they were saying…the murmuring ghostly group nodded nonetheless, and she pointed upwards into the odd grey sky that she found surrounded them.

"Then, if you want to move on, I can help you! I will allow you to move on, to pass on to Heaven and Hell and Gehenna and whatever world you should find yourselves in after your demise. Your choices are this. Continue attacking us, and not only will you wander forever, I won't allow you to pass on. Leave this place and us alone, and I will help you. Make your decision."

The collection of spirits looked collectively at one another, considered the offer for a moment…and scattered in different directions, eager to find a way out. The Prince had been left with a broken nose—which he found was happening to him too often nowadays—and a couple scratches and bruises, but was otherwise fine, and Rodion's thick skin had managed to rebuff most of the blunt attacks he took. It was a good thing too, as the bleeding from the wound on his head had slowed somewhat. The Prince gave a thumbs-up to Hel.

"Bona fantabulosa work, hun! I had no clue you could control ghosts."

"Frankly, me neither. I don't think they knew either. But, if we're lucky, they won't realize that until we're done with this whole affair."

"If they do, I'll be sure to go after them with my proton pack! I've gotten slimed enough times that I wager, if a ghost does it, it won't be so bad."

"You really are disgusting."

Rodion called to the two of them. "Er, Prince, Hel? He is getting away."

Indeed, The Dog-Faced Man had been attempting to flee this whole time, but the environment around them had changed once more: instead of the black void with the rainbow, they now appeared to be in some kind of massive canyon, the rock walls sloping upwards with shelves and deep grooves carved into their surface from some (assumedly) ancient form of erosion. The cult leader was currently struggling to climb up one of the walls, using a blood-stained ice pick to pull his way up the rocks.

The Prince tapped his foot, then looking down at the ground and finding that a snake was slithering past. He tip-toed around it with his hands up, before returning his gaze to The Dog-Faced Man and looking to Rodion on his submarine.

"I wonder if we're getting into the rooms that not even he knows he has? Ah, the troubles of having a mansion too big for your britches." He reached deep into his coat, feeling around, and his face lit up once he got a hold of whatever he was looking for. "A-ha! Didi, love, do you think you could do a favor for me?"

“Yes, what is it?”

“Catch!”

The Prince retrieved the obsidian-bladed macuahuitl he had used in Tir na nOg and lobbed it up towards Rodion, the Russian reaching out and barely managing to catch it with his fingertips before holding it more comfortably. Tacitly, he smiled up at Rodion and nodded, and Rodi understood. He blew into the pipes of his submarine, hoisted the handle of the weapon onto his shoulder, and physically cocked something invisible beneath the bulk of the melee-turned-projectile-firing tool as he approached The Dog-Faced Man with the puttering of his propellers. At the same time, The Prince and Hel stepped towards the ground surrounding where The Dog-Faced Man slung to the wall, readying their respective weapons: Hel’s single arm grasped onto an icicle pitchfork, and from the depths of his coat, The Prince retrieved a golden gun and aimed it warily at his figure.

Then, everything seemed to slow up as a chaotic scuffle ensued.

Rodion fired his macuahuitl with an explosive noise, the roughly rectangular obsidian blade shooting off towards The Dog-Faced Man’s head. However, he let go of the wall at the same moment it was about to hit him, resulting in the blade embedding itself in the rock. He cursed.

“Blyad’!”

The Dog-Faced Man landed to the ground. Instinctively, The Prince of Fuck All fired his golden gun, and an accompanying orchestral hit with vanilla milkshake-scented gunpowder smoke filled the air for just a moment as a golden bullet flew from the barrel. The Dog-Faced Man whipped around and held up the Hope Diamond, which the bullet ricocheted off of, shattering it into pieces. The Prince gulped. That was an expensive mistake he’d probably have to cover for.

“Shit.”

The cult leader threw the shards of shattered diamond into The Prince’s eyes, momentarily blinding him as he reached for the golden gun. However, Hel pushed the drag queen out of the way and lunged with her icicles. He turned around, knocking the icicle out of the way and shattering it with the bulk of the Lia Fail, and when he faced them again, he had gloves on and was holding the Sessho-Seki in his hands. Hel jumped back.

“The hell’s that?”

The Prince held his gun in a pistol-whip stance. “The Killing Stone from Japan. Don’t touch it, or you’ll be history.”

“ZIP”

The Dog-Faced Man yelped out that word as he passed the Killing Stone to Hel, who managed to catch it with her single arm. Not for long, however, as she passed it back to The Prince.

“Ngahh—!”

He caught it reflexively, momentarily surprised he could hold up such a heavy object, before remembering that touching it would kill him and screaming as he threw it back to The Dog-Faced Man.

“Ah—you take it, you take it!”

“ZAP”

“Don’t pass it to me, you creep!”

“Well, don’t pass it to *me*, girl, you’re already half dead!”

“ZOP”

“For god’s sake—you’re the one with the dead hand!”

“I only have one arm, moron, how am I supposed to hold it?!”

Rodion watched the three of them play hot potato with the supposedly deadly rock, sighing through his nose as he cocked the macuahuitl again. Though, the first shot had fired off the blade on the very tip of the weapon: there was no way to know if the next shot would come from the top side or bottom side of the chainsaw-like belt around the bulk containing the blades. He aimed at The Dog-Faced Man again and, hoping for the best, fired.

The blade struck the Sessho-Seki at just the right spot as it was being passed back to The Prince of Fuck All, and it immediately cracked in two. The Prince put his hands up, finally deciding not to touch it anymore, and watched as the two halves of the stone fell to the ground.

Appearing much more clearly than she ever had the last time The Prince and Rodi had seen her, the spirit of Tamamo-no-Mae floated up from the cleft sides of the two stones.

The fox courtesan took a drag off her cigarette, rolled up her kimono sleeves, and flipped all three of them off as she rose and faded away, her spirit released just as the ones in the Hope Diamond had moments prior.

Ah, right. The so-called ‘killing stone’ only killed because of the spirit dwelling within causing it to do so. If Tamamo-no-Mae wasn’t actively trying to kill anything that came near it, it made sense that it wouldn’t fulfill its purpose. The Prince hastily gathered the two halves of the Sessho-Seki and swept them into his coat, as well as picking out the diamond debris that had stuck itself into the skin around his eyes and sweeping them into the same place.

He wasn’t able to do so for long, however, as The Prince received a roundhouse kick to the side of his ribcage that caused him to be sent flying and rolling across the rocky ground, sputtering up blood all the while. Hel attempted to lunge with another javelin, but The Dog-Faced Man instead stepped forward, took her wrist, and yanked it downwards to pull her into a headbutt. She may not have blood in the traditional sense, but she still had a nervous system of sorts, and having her nose crushed to pieces by the hardened skull of a dog-man was enough to make her curse in Old Norse and stumble back, holding her face and disoriented so heavily that she wasn’t able to dodge the punch to her jaw that left her falling to the ground.

The Dog-Faced Man huffed and puffed, repeatedly clenching and unclenching his fists. Over the course of the chase and the battle, his form had grown simpler and simpler, and now he resembled a charcoal etching of his former self more than anything else, pencil dust and lines jittering over his body as his chest rose and fell.

“ahh h ahh hh h whY wh Y are you doing this “

“Doing what?”

Rodion, having lowered his submarine, hopped off of it and stepped towards The Dog-Faced Man with his hands open. Even with that display of non-hostility, however, the cynocephalus hunched and stepped away, producing a small slab of limestone that was in the rough size and shape of a hotel pillow.

"st STAY BACK I D DON'T DDON T MAKE ME UUUUSE THIS"

"I…do not know what that is, but I must assume is…Stone of Jacob, *da?"*

"dad a ma ma yeah yeah whats the whats your what"

"You asked why we are doing this, what do you mean by 'this'?"

The Prince looked up from where he had tumbled over to.

"What the bloody hell are you doing, Rodi?! You'll be killed!"

The Dog-Faced Man, his curved 'ears' flat against his head, slowly looked up at Rodion as he twitched and jittered. His eyes, pupils constricted to be little more than pinpricks as they fearfully darted about, managed to focus (albeit shakily) on the Russian.

"... y d who I don t I don't kno w you who are you. What Eve r your friend your beau your buddy playmate play mobil the,, the the PRINCE he is using that horrendous thing, and it's killing me every time, it's hurt it's hurting"

"What thing are you talking about?"

" the c cr crav ache "

"Cravache…the riding crop, you mean?"

He nodded mechanically, the outlines of his body blurring with the motion.

"all all I ever wa nt e d was to create some place where there wouldn't be people hurting somepl pl ace where the lost the unwanted the forgotten the misfits and cretins and the gum stuck to the bottoms of the shoes of society could have someplace. They could have a purpose. They could find happiness, and friendship, and love. And maybe, eventually, all the world could be like that. Open the door. I wante dto ... I ... I I id wanted toooo "

Rodion winced at the man's stammering, how his voice broke and wavered, and couldn't help but feel like there was a…bad taste in his mouth, doing this. After all, they were actively triggering and exacerbating the obviously traumatic experiences of this man…if he even was still a man, at heart, in order to 'defeat' him. What did defeating him even mean? Were they supposed to kill him? Was there any prison that could even arrest him or give him proper justice?

Then, without warning, a golden gun flew through the air and struck The Dog-Faced Man directly on the bridge of his snout, causing him to bark and whine as he held it. The Stone of Jacob fell uselessly to the floor, and Rodion could hear The Prince shouting.

"Rodi, get him! You know wrestling, right? Pin him down!"

The doctor swallowed, glancing over his shoulder.

"Prince…"

"Do it, for god's sake!"

He winced, and even if he couldn't shake the feeling that was welling up , he didn't have much of a choice in the moment. He looked back at The Dog-Faced Man and frowned.

"Sorry."

"sorree for wha "

He lunged onto The Dog-Faced Man, placing him in a half-nelson submission hold with his arm looping beneath one of The Dog-Faced Man's and his palm behind his head, yanking the neck upwards. The leader flailed and struggled as best he could, sputtering and stammering and occasionally weakly giggling as the Russian managed to immobilize him. At the same time, he unraveled the knot holding the Lia Fail onto his back with Gleipnir, shoving the rock and the fetter off to the side.

"l L L L ET LE T ME LET ME GO rock and roll LET ME GO LET ME GO PLEAES"

Rising from the ground, Hel managed to stagger to her feet and glare down at The Dog-Faced Man. She put her hand to her jaw and rubbed it, obviously sore from the impact of his punch, and began an ungainly trudge towards the two of them.

But, a bit further away, having barely gotten to his feet and still occasionally coughing up blood from the broken ribs that likely were digging into his lungs and the rest of his organs as he stumbled forwards, The Prince of Fuck All advanced.

And with every step, he clapped the riding crop into his palm with a sinister grin.

"Oh, doooog~? I feel like someone has been a *bad boy…"*

At those two words, The Dog-Faced Man immediately froze and stopped struggling, his eyes going wide and the unnaturally-wide grin that was usually plastered on his canine face dropping into a terrified grimace.

"n no please "

"No please? That's—" The Prince coughed, blood dripping to the ground from his lips. "—that's not how a good dog behaves…a good dog doesn't speak, doesn't talk back, and *always* obeys its master…Now, quiet. It's about time for your *punishment."*

He clapped the riding crop once more, and The Dog-Faced Man opened his mouth to speak, but found he couldn't. No words came out, and no sound apart from a helpless creak.

Instead, Rodion watched as tears began to well up in his eyes, and he shivered with the whine of a scared animal. The doctor flinched once again, and with a sudden burst of conviction, he looked back at The Prince.

"Prince, stop it."

The Prince stopped. "…Excuse me?"

"This…this doesn't feel right. It isn't right. It's too cruel, taking advantage of his traumas in this way…"

"…Sorry, *what?"* The Prince gestured with the riding crop in his hand, still hunched and leaning to the side like some sort of secluded bell-ringer as he looked on at Rodion with confusion and disbelief. "You're honestly going to take his side? After everything he's done? This bitch kidnapped hundreds of thousands of people who just wanted happiness and transformed them into something less than human against their will. He took away the entire population of your section of Kaliningrad, for Christ's sake! And just because he has some kind of sob story for what he wants to do, that suddenly makes him sympathetic?"

Hel sneered, trying to straighten her nose as she looked on. “He murdered my brother in cold blood, and for taking our side, he killed two of his own agents. He needs to be taken out as fast as possible. Can’t you just break his neck or something?”

Rodion didn’t have a good response to that. They were both completely right: he had done terrible, terrible things, but it was also obvious that he wasn’t in his right mind at all…and to use those complexes in his mind to disarm him like this didn’t feel right. Even then, he couldn’t help but frown at The Prince of Fuck All, who loomed above the both of them on the ground with an uncharacteristically intense expression.

“Think about what he did to *me*, Rodion.”

The doctor grimaced, and a heavy silence permeated the space between them like a wall.

After only a few moments, though the both of them felt like it was an eternity, Hel shuffled forwards with a groan.

“If you two will keep arguing philosophy while all our lives are in danger, I’ll just kill him myself. Move your head, Russian, if I flash-freeze his head, his brain should stop working. I’ll take care of this…”

No you aren’t.

The low voice caused all three of them to jolt, whipping around to find the Shadow with clenched fists stomping towards them. He cracked his knuckles, sneering even with the absence of a mouth.

I’m sure you all thought that was very clever, didn’t you? Taking advantage of my senses to distract me long enough for you to run away. This whole charade has gone on long enough, and quite frankly, you’ve tested my patience more than…

The Shadow trailed off as The Prince and Hel parted, revealing Rodion holding The Dog-Faced Man in his hold. His eye opened and he put his hands up, shocked into silence.

…

Rodion managed to untangle himself from The Dog-Faced Man and scramble off to the side, sitting on the ground as he watched the Shadow approach his employer with what seemed to almost be a look of…concern? He had seen that look on his face when The Prince had first used the riding crop and startled the cult leader, but it was even more pronounced now.

The Dog-Faced Man, his form flickering and shifting between all manner of shapes and presentations, art styles and eras of dress, curled up into the fetal position and covered his head until finally he stopped changing, bony fingers—human fingers—clasping over his head. Ragged patches of brown hair covered the pale scalp, and his clothes had turned to nothing more than a pair of white underwear. Where the coccyx would be, beneath a bony and ridged spine that showed the extent of his emaciation, a small spine extension resembling a tail had been grafted on, hanging loosely between his legs. His sharp knees covered his face as he shuddered.

The Shadow slowly stepped forward and bent down.

Sir…sir, are you alright? What’s wrong, you’re…you’re back to…

The black flames around his figure flickered, revealing spots of pale flesh on the backs of his wrists and his cheek, and the Shadow tried to drag himself away as he glared at the three of

them. Rodion, The Prince, and Hel shrunk back defensively, and the black fire flared up once more.

You three…if you did this to him, then—

The Dog-Faced Man reached out and took him by the hem of his suit, sobbing as he looked up.

His face was that of a human, twisted and malformed into the grotesque shape of a dog's. His skull had been elongated, his nose and jaw pulled forward to form a makeshift muzzle, and the corners of his mouth were cut up to his cheekbones, making him unable to fully close his mouth. All of his teeth had been filed into sharp 'fangs', leaving him with bloodied gums and a scarred tongue. His ears had been raised towards his temples, cut and folded over to end in points. The deformation of his skull had caused the skin to stretch, and not only did it reveal the complex network of blue veins beneath the pale sun-starved skin…but it revealed his own shining green eyes, seeping twin rivers of tears from cavernous eye sockets.

He grinned, unable to do anything else.

" d don't leave me please please don't leave me Moliere please"

He buried his face in the Shadow's side, hugging his thin arms around his compatriot's waist.

" you're all I have now "

…Sir…

The silhouette of black fire struggled between his emotions, alternating between abject fury and violent rage at the three who had reduced his partner to this state and the desire, the need to comfort him. The black fire that surrounded his body flickered less and less, receding like a campfire batterned by gentle snowfall…until it fully dissipated, revealing the man known as Moliere's human form.

A soft body acting as evidence for years of daydreaming and inactivity as a human stuffed into a grey sweater, sweatpants, and socks, the young man had a tousle of black hair atop his head, skin as pale as chalk, and a far-away look in his eyes. Dark irises with no color peered out from eyes surrounded fully by bags, by shadows, as though he hadn't ever slept a day in his life.

Sitting down beside The Dog-Faced Man, Molly pulled him into a hug, the troubled dog-faced boy burying his muzzle in the man's shoulder as he hiccupped and wept, returning the hug. Only audible to his friend, his employer, his partner, the one he couldn't help but admit that loved, Moliere whispered.

"Je t'aime."

The Prince, Rodion, and Hel watched the proceedings from afar, unsure of what to do next. There was no way they would be able to approach The Dog-Faced Man without incurring the wrath of the Shadow…if that even was the Shadow anymore. It seemed that the Shadow itself was perpetuated by negative emotions: anger, annoyance, frustration, misanthropy. When the desire to help someone he truly cared about emerged, he couldn't continue existing as he did, and reverted back to…what he had once was. Or, maybe, what he always had been in the first place.

They all stood there quietly, unsure of what action to take. The Prince almost fell over, woozy from blood loss, and Rodion managed to support him.

"Excuse me?"

A voice from behind startled them, but after looking over each of their shoulders, they found that it was Shiva, the Hindu destroyer god. Hel raised a hand in tired acknowledgement, and Rodion weakly grinned.

"Ah, hello, Shiva…I was, er, not expecting you to be here."

"I was called here by Odin and the Dagda, it seemed. You must have passed the lingam I gave you over to them somehow…when I arrived, it was unfortunately too late, but the ones I met at the entrance to…what is this, the Broken Tracks? The ones I met there informed me of where you three were heading, and I came as fast as I could. This place truly is a maze."

"Yes, well…"

Shiva leaned to the side, noticing the two embracing leaders of Man Unkind.

"Those two…are they the leaders of this whole operation? They appear to be vulnerable, perhaps I could…"

"No, that's quite alright, Shivvy."

Coughing up another glob of blood, The Prince waved his hand gently with a grin. The others looked on at him with surprise, not the least of which was Shiva.

"Why not?"

"Well…you know, I always was the sentimental sort. And, I agree, they've done awful shite. But…I don't know."

He looked back at Moliere and the dog-faced boy.

For just a split-second, he could swear he could see himself and Rodion embracing there.

"Maybe they'll figure things out on their own sometime."

Hel scoffed, gesturing to herself.

"Hellooo? I literally lost an arm today. And I lost a brother and two friends. Does that not mean anything to either of you? You're going to let them live because 'love conquers all'?! How miserably sentimental are you?!"

"Enough, Hel. I understand his sentiment."

"You do?! …How?"

"There is space in my heart for knowledge of the infinity of love as well as the infinity of destruction. I will let them live. However, I must destroy this place, and send them somewhere where they will not interfere with this world's affairs for a long, long time. If they 'figure it out

on their own', as you have put it, then perhaps they will have changed their minds when they are able to return."

The goddess of the dead just groaned. The deva took the snake from his neck and unwrapped it, lowering it to the ground. In a puff of smoke, a young man took his place, who bowed to the three of them.

"Vasuki will guide you out of this place, he remembers where I have and have not been. I would suggest you hurry: even the mere sight of my Rudra Tandava, the dance of anger and destruction, has been known to cause death."

"Thank you, Shivvy…love…oh boy, I feel…quite light-headed…Rodi, dear, how much blood have I lost by now?"

"M-More than me, I think, considering I still feel relatively lucid. Everything is beginning to hurt now, though…we had better hurry, or else the adrenaline will fade, and—"

The Prince doubled over, hissing through his teeth as Rodion hoisted him over his shoulder.

"Okay, yeah. Yep. Ow. Ow, ow, ow…"

Vasuki gestured to the three of them, asking them to follow, and the three trudged along, exiting the canyon room of Nobody's Enemy.

Shiva turned back to Moliere and the dog-faced boy. They hadn't stopped embracing one another since everything had calmed down. Somewhere in his heart, Shiva understood what he was seeing. True love, even among the worst people, is a hard thing to come by. Even with their villainous acts, The Prince of Fuck All could see that the two of them truly, truly cared for one another…

And given that he had just found love himself, he realized he couldn't bear to split them apart.

The deva took a deep breath, widening his stance and beginning to spin his damaru drum as white fire shone around him.

His third eye opened.

~

When The Prince of Fuck All and the rest returned to Avalon castle, they were (well, The Prince was) expecting a big cheer, a massive celebration, with alcohol and a feast and lots of congratulations. Unfortunately, that wasn't what they were met with: everyone present was happy to see them return safely, and gave tame congratulations of a job well done, but the damage was done.

After The Prince, Rodion, and Hel's injuries were healed, they were taken back to Earth and saw first-hand the carnage that had been left in the wake of Man Unkind storming almost every country. Buildings appeared to be bombed out, hospitals overrun with plant life, roads torn up and curled up like used toothpaste tubes…the emergency teams cleaning the corpses off of the street, scraping them off of the walls of buildings, reconstituting them from the building blocks they had been transformed into by agents, reaching ropes down bottomless pits that had

spontaneously formed was more than enough evidence to show the extent of the damage. This was one city, one of hundreds of millions. Shiva assured him that the situation in each deity's respective domain was similar. Gods would return, that much was certain, but with so much damage done to the Earth, it would be much, much longer before all of them had returned. Nobody knew what to do. How many people had been taken to fill out Man Unkind's ranks? How many agents were simply given the order to kill and cause mayhem? What was the death toll? A heavy silence fell over the group in memoriam of all those who had fallen.

Then, with a flash of white light, the seraph Metatron appeared to them. Heaven and Hell, already having been 'hit' by Man Unkind, had been heavily fortified and were spared the onslaught of agents that affected the Earth and so many other realms. And, with relations starting to warm after the incidents from a few days ago, Lucifer, Beelzebub, and Belial had come forward with a proposition. Then, after passing through the respective hoops of divine bureaucracy, it was given the ultimate, highest clearance.

"The Lord wants to speak with you, Prince."

The Prince was, understandably, completely shocked by the revelation of such a high permission being given to him. However, he wasn't one to argue. He took Metatron's hand, and after being provided proper precautionary items in order to face and speak with God Himself, was taken to Heaven.

It was there, sitting in a slightly uncomfortable chair set far, far away from His Empyrean Throne, wearing a visor that was supposed to completely blind him and yet still shone like he was staring at the sun as he gazed into the tiled floor beneath him, where The Prince met God. He was told beforehand that He wasn't talkative. In fact, He hadn't said a thing in years, not even to Metatron, and the fact that He wanted to speak with The Prince was a shock to everyone.

However, The Prince believed he had an inkling of why God wanted to speak with him.

Speaking over the 'holy, holy, holy' chanting of the seraphim, The Prince explained himself.

He talked about how, when he died, he met someone higher than Him. Someone much, much higher—not a deity or a demon, not a monster or angel, not a human, nothing of the sort. He encountered this incredible figure, who only acted as a conduit for even higher forces to act upon and catalog the affairs of this world. The Prince espoused that he knew that their world, their struggles, their people: everyone's strings were pulled from the highest vantage point by beings far, far beyond their comprehension. All his life, he had believed in chaos. Nothing was fixed, nothing was ordered, and the way to accept that nothing in this world had any order to it was to apply that chaos to your own ends, to create your own sense of 'order' and make the most out of this world that they live in. Knowing that immeasurable forces guided their every move shook that up a bit, he admitted.

However, was this any different than life for any given person? Any being, no matter their color or creed, is bound by the unknown and inaffectible forces of fate, destiny, luck, calamity, death. These forces guide our lives, giving and taking seemingly at random. The good die young. The unfortunate become lucky. Twins are destined to meet. People follow their fate. Is this any

different than having your lives directed by beings beyond your comprehension. It was like that in the old days, too. When humans came across things they couldn't explain, they attributed it to gods.

Why do plants die in the winter? In Ancient Greece, the goddess of the harvest's daughter was kidnapped by the god of the underworld, only allowing her to visit for half the year.

Why are there earthquakes and avalanches? In the old Norse tradition, the trickster and jokester of the gods is chained beneath the Earth as punishment for his misdeeds.

Why does the sun rise and set? The Mexica saw it as their patron god dying and resurrecting every day, given life by the blood of their sacrifices.

Why are there humans? The first civilization thought that they were created to work for the gods, to form the Earth and toil in their stead, shaped from clay and made in their shape.

Why does the world exist? You were able to take your pick, but one group of people long, long ago believed that in the beginning, God created the heavens and Earth in seven days…

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from technology.

Any sufficiently mysterious phenomenon is indistinguishable from the work of gods.

It is human nature—no, not just human nature. It is simply nature to be subject to the whims of the world, to fumble blindly like a marionette with its strings extending high, high into the air, so high that you can never hope to see the ones who pull your strings, and to seek an explanation for this meaningful, meaningless world we reside in.

The people are the creations of gods.

Gods are the creations of the people.

And so, gods—no matter how powerful—are subject to the same loves, losses, struggles, triumphs, the same impossibly-complex forces that affect us every day that the average human is. These forces…and their conduit, their catalyst, the one who returns from the Earth and its godly realms to tell the tales of its heroes.

There, The Prince of Fuck All rose from his seat and opened his arms, calling out to the heavens. Not the heaven surrounding him, not God, but to something much, much greater. He clasped his hands together, and speaking aloud, he prayed for a miracle.

He prayed for the world to return to the way it was.

He prayed for all those who were displaced by Man Unkind to return.

He prayed for them to have happy lives filled with love and companionship.

He prayed for them to forget the blight of Man Unkind.

He prayed for them to be nothing more than stories of boogeyman.

He prayed for the gods to remember, for him and Rodion and Hel and the rest to remember.

He prayed for peace.

He prayed for love.

And God said unto him,

“It is written.”

EPILOGUE

"I would like to confess, father."

"Yes, my son. Please, please come. You have good timing. I was preparing to start the Vespers. It is good for you to come before they start. Have you confessed before?"

"Not since I was very young, father. I do apologize, but I am quite rusty. I have not engaged meaningfully with my faith in…long time. This may be the last time, in fact. But, I have things I want to get off of my chest."

"I understand. Even for those who have strayed from the path of belief, there is always room to repent. Please, step forwards. Show your veneration of the Evangelion, my son. Good, good. Now, to the blessing cross. Very good. Now, place your thumb, index, and middle fingers on the feet of our Savior on the crucifix."

"They are there."

"Then, under the eyes of our Lord, do you promise upon your immortal soul to share a full confession, leaving no detail unsaid so that no deed may go unrepented, fully sharing what it is that troubles you so?"

"I do."

"Clasp your hands, close your eyes, and speak, my son."

"…Dear Lord. It has been three months since the incident with Man Unkind. I cannot say that I recall what happened immediately after The Prince traveled to meet Him, but the world appears to have returned to normal. The buildings are back to normal, the people have returned and seem to lack any recollection of the events of past three days. Though they are aware that something terrible had happened, nobody appears to care: they will move on with their lives, with only those of us who were directly involved knowing and remembering what had happened."

"I have read in American news stories that American government agents have been returning items that were judged to have been stolen as a result of 'covert vigilante larceny' as a form of reparations, as well as—as I have been told by some remaining contacts—granting what other items the cult had taken back to their rightful divine owners. Multiple news stories have come forward wanting to speak with Iolo Morganwg, who remains as sant-director of the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, about their fomorian nature and history with discrimination for an upcoming documentary. They expect to use the funds gained from that excursion to repair damaged portions of their museum."

"The Dagda, Dian Cecht, the Morrigan, Oberon, and Titania returned to Tir na nOg to roaring applause and adoration, the Tuatha De throwing an enormously over-the-top party for who they deemed as 'heroes'. Really, they didn't know what had happened either: but now that the world was seemingly safe, they were finally able to relax. Oberon and Titania returned to Arcadia Sioga as heroes, and Queen Medb—after supposedly being quite upset she was not informed they were leaving to battle cult—begrudgingly voiced her respect. The two invited fae of both the Seelie and Unseelie courts to ensuing ball. It went, I heard, about as well as one

would expect from putting ‘mischievous’ and ‘malicious’ tribes of fae together. At least the food was good, though I still cannot say I’m sure what would happen to person like me if I were to eat it…”

“From what I have heard, after returning to Hell, Belial found that there was power vacuum. The last person to kill their old ruler was to be new ruler, after all, and after the Shadow had killed previous Devil, and was now currently out of commission, no one knew who to put in power. To the chagrin of his brothers Moloch and Mammon, Belial was personally chosen by Beelzebub to act as the new Devil, leading and organizing Hell as demagogue Lord of the Flies knew he had potential to be. Of course, Belial couldn’t take the pressure at all, and after three days in stuffy suit being drowned in paperwork, he called meeting of all demons under his rule, closed his eyes, and chose his successor via eeny-meeny-miney-moe. I do not know who took his place, but I can guess I will be hearing about it from next frustrated demon I summon.”

“Samayou, Shuten-douji, and the rest of the yokai returned to Japan safely under the guidance of Amaterasu, who insisted that both groups stop glaring at one another and try to get along. Ultimately, an agreement was reached, and while they weren’t to talk disparagingly of one another, they would be able to work out their disagreements and differences in non-violent events such as…basket-weaving, ikebana, and sumo wrestling. There is no word on whether or not the no-interference policy will be reversed, unfortunately, but that is the way things are.”

“All of the deities involved in whole incident, they returned to Heaven to do what they usually did following Divine Synod: celebrate and relax. There were always some tensions among them, especially after heated discussions, but for once, all gods laughed with one another and joined in on the party, happily choosing to, in that moment, act like man: drink and be merry. Even Michael was said to have joined the party, even if he spent most of it in corner with Agnus.”

“Odin returned to the Nine Realms of Yggdrasil as well as Hel, who eventually managed to reform her arm. Back in her castle with Nidhoggr, her hound Garmr, and her two servants, she sent a message to the other Aesir and Vanir that she was relinquishing her position as leader of the spirit world, instead foisting responsibility onto someone else. Who that was, I am not sure, but she has apparently found that fate is neither fixed nor something that can be easily changed. A prophecy can never be deemed true with one hundred percent accuracy, and the lives of gods and men alike are fickle and unpredictable things. I have heard that an oddly large puppy that has appeared in Asgard speaking like an adult has been causing some trouble, though they are considering sending him to Helheim rather than keeping him locked away in Asgard.”

“I heard that she had placed two gravestones in the courtyard of her palace, always visible from her icy throne as reminder for the friends she lost.”

“The Prince has been staying with me since everything has calmed down. Of course, when I say ‘staying with me’, I mean that he disappears for days, weeks at a time, but he always comes back around to my home sooner or later, sharing stories, sights, places he’s seen, things he’s attempted to steal…yes, he still steals. In fact, he still lies, even to me! But he is trying, and he is showing improvement. We still fight, we still argue, but we make up in end more often than not.

We have spent many nights together, and just last week, he has told to me all that he recalled from his childhood. I am not ashamed to admit that I cried. He cried as well, but brought more attention to the fact that I cried, I believe, as defense mechanism. Regardless, we have been close. He tells me that Man Unkind agents still occasionally pop in, but incidents have decreased very sharply. They will only appear if he spends more than two weeks in the same location, and even then, he is able to easily dispatch them. Perhaps they will be more trouble someday, but as of now, he does not know when that will be, and I do not believe he cares."

"When we first returned to my home, however, we both knew there was something we should do before anything else."

"Using The Prince's bike, we traveled to Fintan's Grave in Ireland, ducking into the cave's entrance and traveling down its craggy and moist corridors until we came to the home of the Fianna. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of men laid out over one another like disarranged sardines, and at the front of them all…was figure of Fionn mac Cumhaill. The real one. I say 'the real one', as though the one we met was not real, and yet…I could not help but feel that who we met and knew was realer than the old man at our feet ever was. Bundled around him were all of his accessories: his sword, his cape, his bag, and though he was essentially comatose, I could not help but feel as though he was likely having the deepest and most peaceful sleep of his life."

"I placed a cross beside his face, and The Prince, hiding his face to hide his makeup running, said his thanks and goodbyes, planting a kiss on Fionn's cheek. I could swear that the corners of his mouth upturned slightly."

"As for me, well…I am still rather reclusive, bahaha, but The Prince has been helping me more. I have been taking more walks with him, seeing the surrounding areas and making closer acquaintances with the residents of the repopulated neighborhood I live in. It was nice to see children waving to me rather than being hurried away by their worried parents. I still perform alchemy, I still summon demons, I still play the violin and conduct my medical business, but I do it with the knowledge I have someone who loves me out there. That makes me quite happy."

"On that note, however…I should mention what I truly came here for, what I wanted to finally express after struggling to work up the courage for these past few months. My apologies for rambling. Ahem, let me see…"

"I confess to the Lord my God before you, reverend father, all my sins which I have committed up to present day and hour, in deed, word, and thought. Every day and every hour I sin through ingratitude to God for His great and numberless blessings to me and His most gracious providence and care for me, a sinner."

"I have sinned through my greed, betraying my family and the sister who cared for me for twenty years due to my own pride, my desire for luxuries and my fear of returning to the streets. For quite a long time, I felt as though I was not human, fearing that I would go to Hell when I died. Summoning demons was a comfort to me. Now I come to you, my God, to confess. I have killed. I have tortured. I have indulged, and lied, and sinned one hundred thousand times over. But I confess this to say that I have found love…and if I can pay back in kindness the misery I

have inflicted upon the world by my misgivings, even if only a fraction, through the support of my lover and my friends, then I will be happy."

"To all those who I have hurt, and especially to Tatyana and Maria, I am sorry."

"I repent of all my sins, and I beg forgiveness of our almighty God. I also ask forgiveness for all those sins I have not confessed because of their multitude and my forgetfulness. Forgive and absolve me, reverend father, and bless me to receive the Holy Communion of the precious, holy, and life-creating Mysteries of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, unto the remission of sins and life everlasting."

"May our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, through the grace and bounties of His love towards mankind, forgive you, my child Rodion Nikolayev all your transgressions."

"Thank you, father."

I stepped out of the cathedral, facing the light and brisk breeze of January on my face. The snow had stopped falling, even if only for a few moments, and I felt as if an impossibly heavy weight had finally been lifted from my shoulders. I let out a deep sigh, and I found my mouth had twisted itself into a smile without my knowledge as I gazed up to the clear blue sky.

I looked to my right, looking upon the grave that had prevented me from entering this church for so long. Some snow had caked across the top, like it had been deposited with a frosting tool, but I could still read the inscription clear as day.

"MARIA SOLOVIEV
Dedicated to the memory of a sister
who deserved to see more than
the world outside her hospital window
Your brother hopes you can forgive him
1922 — 2008"

The sound of a voice calling snapped me out of staring at the grave.

"Oi, Rodi! Are you done?"

I turned to the source and found The Prince, dressed in typical Russian winter garb: a dark brownish-black parka with large buttons and fur sleeves, a ushanka, padded brown pants, and heavy boots. He was not good with the cold, I found out quickly, and though he could stand it in short bursts, he had started trying to dress warmer if he knew we were out for a walk. I couldn't help but laugh. He always looked a bit ridiculous like that, his thin form in the bulky clothing, and met up with him on the sidewalk as we started walking.

"Yes, yes, I am done. I feel…much better."

"That's good. I know it's something you told me you'd been holding off doing, and, well…I'm glad I could be the one to help you do it, you know?"

Reaching into my coat pocket, I moved to take out my locket…and found that it wasn't there. I checked my other pocket, even my pants pockets. It was in none of them, and my heart started to sink. Had it fallen out at some point…?

"Rodi."

The Prince tapped me on the shoulder, and when I looked up, he was holding my locket by the chain, smiling coyly.

"You really need some of those neat pockets with the zippers on them, you know. Something important like this can't just be stuffed into your pocket like a spare condom!"

I felt my cheeks flush, and I quickly swiped it away from him. I shoved it deep into my pocket and kept my hand there to make sure he wouldn't take it again.

"T-There is no need to make such comparisons! But…I do need more secure place I can hold it while also carrying it with me. Perhaps I could make it into necklace sometime…"

"Maybe, love. But for now, if it ever gets nicked, you've got The Prince of Fuck All on the case! I will not rest, I will not stop, until the locket-thief is brought to justice!"

"You are the one always stealing it!"

He burst out laughing. "Bwahahaha, yeah, that's true, isn't it? Heheh, ahh…"

"You know, my Prince, I actually was wondering about something…"

"Hm?"

I awkwardly rubbed the side of my neck, looking off to the side. Mrs. Samoylov was waving at me from behind the empty street where her kids were playing. I waved back with a grin.

"You go by The Prince of Fuck All, but…well, that is not really *name*, you know? I was thinking, maybe you could take on new name? Something strong, like…Boris!"

The Prince snorted. "Boris, love? No offense, but that's a Russian bear's name. Or a particularly hot dentist. Can't you go with something with more camp? More zazz? A little bit more, how you say, je nais se quoi?"

"…Er…Anatoly?"

"Something not Russian, love. I'm barely English as-is, I can't pretend to be a limp-wristed Russian next to you!"

"Hmmm…" I racked my brain, trying to think of a good name. "Lawrence?"

"Eh, been there, done that. Really, Rodi, if it's all the same to you…I'm fine with just going by The Prince of Fuck All. It's the name I'm most comfortable with, it's my drag name, and to be frank…"

He stepped a bit closer and leaned his head on my chest, his lithe hand wrapping around mine.

"I like how it sounds coming out of your mouth."

I blushed, and after a small moment of hesitance on my part, I leaned down and kissed him on the head, running my fingers through his hair.

"As you wish, my Prince."

Final Thoughts and Comments

Whoof, so. That sure was a story, huh? I'm writing this after finishing the whole thing, adding illustrations, doing page breaks, et cetera, et cetera, just to give some extra information and whatnot. First of all, after this section, there'll be a table of contents listing page numbers and…y'know, all the things tables of contents do. It never made sense to me to have them put at the start of the book, so I stuck it at the very, very end.

I'll keep my comments about writing this brief so as to be broadly applicable: the purpose of this project was to see if I really had the discipline, the determination, the stick-to-it-iveness that was required when writing a book. My dream is to create. I want to write, I want to form worlds, and I've been doing so for years now.

This will be my first fully-formed story that I share with my family. I've taken a couple cracks at writing in the past, but all of them were rather derivative: a dragon who practices law in a world where monsters and creatures live alongside humans, a young man who is cursed for defacing a shrine to be able to see yokai and starts a detective agency, something that was basically just One Piece with the serial numbers filed off. They all kind of stunk. I kept crumpling them up and throwing them away (metaphorically—I wrote them in Google Docs) since they weren't an *original* idea.

Now, I have been making original characters and settings for probably…going on eight years now? Longer, if you count some stuff in elementary school. However, every time I took a crack at writing a book, I created the characters specifically for that book, basically on the fly. I didn't have long-term connections with these characters, and I think it was for that reason I could never fully immerse myself in the act of writing. It's the same way people say that in order to improve, in addition to practice, you need to draw the things you see often or are a fan of. There's a Simpsons episode called "I am Furious (Yellow)" where the creator of a series called "Danger Dog" comes to Springfield Elementary to explain the process of creation, and in the days following the presentation, Bart and the rest of the kids are inspired to start their own creative endeavors:

Nelson: "I'm coming up with my own cartoon character. He's called 'Danger Cat'!"
Milhouse: "Mine's called 'Trouble Dog'!"
Ralph: "I'm called Ralph."
Bart: "Mine is 'Danger Dude'! …But he's a dog."

Bart thinks his idea is genius and goes to sell it at Comic Book Guy's shop, but he complains about how shoddy, primitive, and derivative it is. Bart almost gives up hope right then and there, but then Stan Lee himself insists that it isn't a bad first shot: Bart just needs to keep looking for inspiration and find his 'voice'. Eventually, he pulls from something he's familiar with and knows well—Homer—to create the comic "Angry Dad", which is an instant hit.

Recap aside, that episode really resonated with me, and it's for that reason that, with this project, I specifically used characters from my own personal projects that I knew, that I was familiar with, that I enjoyed working with without the need to put finger to key and catalog everything they do. What better way to figure out how to write a book, than to write it with characters and settings you're already familiar with, is what I'm getting at.

So, if you're reading this and you already know the characters, I hope you enjoyed it.

If you're reading it and you don't, well…I hope you liked them, I suppose? And if you looked at them and went "Okay, I think I can take a guess as to some things he hasn't told me", you're probably right. And I will continue to not tell you. So there.

The Prince of Fuck All's name really didn't come from anything in particular. His character was very heavily influenced by the legendary comic-writer Grant Morrison's work on 'The Invisibles' (which features drag queen characters heavily) and their stint with 'Doom Patrol' (which has a character—Danny the Street, a sentient living street—who speaks with Polari cant), and the idea was to have a character who had a plethora of knowledge about many different topics, especially dealing with supernatural threats, but everything else was almost entirely superficial. The character Willoughby Kipling from Doom Patrol was a major inspiration for this, even though he was basically just John Constantine but fat, balding, and alcoholic. More alcoholic than Constantine usually is, maybe.

When naming him, I was trying to come up with something striking, something meaningful, something with a "The" annoyingly capitalized before every instance. It sounded better than "King of Shit Mountain", but conveys the same meaning: he thinks he's got a hold on everything and is full of sass, charm, and confidence, but at the end of the day, he's got this wall around him where he refuses to let anyone get close, constructed with overt sexuality, compulsive lying, and, ironically, a martyr complex. If he takes everything from people, he'll be the only one targeted.

Of course, the Jesus parallels are very, very obvious. A prince to the Lord, the crown of thorns…even the whole section from after Rodion finishes telling his story to when he's finally passed on is heavily reminiscent of Jesus' last days—hence why I chose "God On Our Side" by Bob Dylan for the scene. There's the connection to Jesus Christ Superstar in those lyrics, which was also always a major inspiration for me, even today, with how it modernized and energized the story of Christ. Did you happen to catch how many named characters were present during his and Rodi's performance? (Hint: Rodion wasn't the only one betrayed by a kiss.)

The Prince never really did have a real name. I thought of it being Lorenz at one point, after the Lorenz system of chaos (better known as the butterfly effect), but I never settled on anything. Same for his sister or his family. They're essentially nothing but nameless figures meant to add to his own persona. His mother gives him his red hair, his father gives him his magical coat, and his sister gives him a lifetime of trauma and gender/sexuality issues.

Speaking of Rodion, his full name is Rodion Gregorivich Nikolayev, and as mentioned in the story, his first name comes from Rodion Raskolnikov, the neurotic and murderous protagonist of

Dostoevsky's 'Crime and Punishment'. He's quite a dark character, and the chapter where he tells his story is meant to convey a genre shift due to how he tells it. Everything suddenly becomes a drama, with much heavier and more realistic stakes than most other things in the story. Maria and Tatyana Soloviev were real people, but Maria Rasputin (The sisters' mother and the daughter of Grigori Rasputin—trust me, researching that was such a pain) never had a child with Gregory Bernadsky. I wanted to mention that not only did he get off on the torture and dissection, but he was also something of a cannibal, but that ended up feeling like it'd be something he wouldn't want to mention during a first go-around of his story. Nikolayev originates from what is now known as Mykolaiv, a city in southern Ukraine where the revolutionary Leon Trotsky spent some years.

Mad doctors and surgeons are pretty interesting, aren't they? The smell of rust and bourbon mixing with blood and fresh meat. Sadly, since I was writing this entirely from the seat of my pants beyond a simple outline, I couldn't get his interest in alchemy to play an important role beyond a few off-hand jokes.

I chose to make him more of a middle-aged guy and pair him with The Prince not only because they were functionally opposites—Rodion is all brown, black, white, grey, and The Prince is a splash of color, Rodion is large and muscular, The Prince is lithe and dainty, Rodion is hairy and covered with scars, The Prince is comparatively smooth-skinned—but because I wanted to show two people who thought themselves not worth loving to find one another. I always loved that. Two people (who we aren't even sure are good people or not, Rodion really was such a heel from his 30s to his 40s) coming together and finding something truly special. That's why I felt the ending with Moliere and Dog-Face was especially poetic…and surprising. Like, did that theme come out of my mind?! Crazy! Plus, of course, The Prince really does love heavier, hairier guys.

I've never really worried about stereotypes when writing. "I can't believe you made the gay main character so fruity! You're perpetuating such horrible notions!" However, I feel like Rodion balances out The Prince by giving him a realistic and more grounded kind of love. Flamboyant men who dress in drag and still identify as gay men exist in the world, as do older heavyset men who are bisexual and have worried about going to Hell when they die for it. Larger-than-life characters are fun, and I'm not saying you can run into these people anywhere on the street, but I enjoy making their interactions feel as though they really are just two people trying to figure things out, arguing and bickering and joking and flirting with each other.

Fionn, Fionn, Fionn mac Cumhaill. I had been wanting someone to balance out the quirkiness of The Prince and the skepticism of Rodion, someone who plays both the straight man and the comedic partner, but I was having trouble thinking of who. During that time, I was heavily into Celtic mythology, and when I read about the heroes of Cu Chulainn and Fionn mac Cumhaill, especially the latter and his legend of sleeping in a cave until Ireland needs him once more (as well as seeing his appearance in Shin Megami Tensei V, his design there inspired me greatly), I thought he would be an interesting addition. He's sort of the perpetual odd one out,

owing to his odd mannerisms, flat affect, and tendency to ramble a bit too long about some things, but I ended up liking that about him. He had a seriousness about him that the other characters couldn't shake, but his strange flatness put off some people in the story too.

Ultimately, I feel like the way he sacrificed himself and finally gained the hero-lights he sought after so long was one of my absolute favorite parts of this story.

LEFT: Fionn mac Cumhaill as portrayed in Shin Megami Tensei V

RIGHT: Iolo Morganwg, true name Edward Williams

Hel and Fenrir were very off-the-cuff and last-minute decisions from me. I wanted some female representation—all three main characters and both major villains were men—so I gave her the 'B-plot', and she ended up having much more of an important role than I anticipated. She even joined up with The Prince and Rodion during the final battle! I wasn't expecting that would happen when I first started writing! She, Moxy Fruvous, and Foxy Shazam (both of whom are named after bands—did you keep an eye out for all the musical references in the dialogue and names? You better have.) ended up having a friendship sort of like…a Saturday morning cartoon villain and her two bumbling henchman who she talks smack about but still ends up caring for. Hel is an older woman and was meant to give off that 'villainous' feeling, since she's typically associated with villainous things. She is named *Hel*, after all. Still, I ended up liking her quite a lot.

Iolo Morganwg is probably my favorite minor character out of the lot. The choice to make them non-binary was really done less out of a want for representation and more out of convenience: I couldn't decide whether they would be a boy or a girl (same with Samayou in the middle of the story), and I figured that a weird fish-ogre race wouldn't care much for gender in the first place. That was part of the reason why their head remained hidden for the whole story, hiding their true appearance. Their name and pseudonym are actually, in real life, the same person: The historian Edward Williams published many works about Welsh history and writing

under the name Iolo Morganwg (roughly pronounced, if you were curious, as “YAW-law mawr-GAHN-ehg”, hope you weren’t mentally reading their name as “yolo” or “eye-olo” or, god forbid, “Lolo”), until he was eventually found out as a complete fraud. That was after he tainted so Welsh studies nobody knew what was real or not, though. Iolo is a good sant director though, and they love their museum, just as I love the Smithsonian.

The DUO agents…mysterious bunch, aren’t they? Maybe we’ll learn more about their position in the government another time…

Man Unkind takes many cues from “The Cult of the Unwritten Book” from Doom Patrol. Similar to Man Unkind, the Cult of the Unwritten Book are absurdist-nihilists who seek to completely destroy the world via their nigh-inexhaustible army of surreal cult agents constructed from both kidnapped people and discarded things like love letters, dead skin, and words lost on the tips of people’s tongues. They get their name from an E.E. Cummings poem, ‘pity this busy monster, manunkind’, which the Shadow quotes heavily in his sermon on Mount Delectable, and the Broken Tracks of Meinung evoke the Freudian fear of trains, the idea that “at least the trains always run on time” establishes trains as the last bastion of order and rigidity in society, and the “wrong side of the tracks”. Meinung is German for ‘opinion’, but is similar to the English ‘meaning’ or ‘mind’. I forget why I chose that name.

Their name for the world outside of the Broken Tracks, “The Closed Door”, is taken from the original name for the play “No Exit” by Jean-Paul Sartre, *“Huis clos”*, which is most well-known for being the origin of the phrase “Hell is other people.”

The agents themselves come from a wide variety of origins, mostly American/English poems and visual arts. I’ll leave finding out where each originate from up to you.

The Shadow is, principally, the Jungian concept of the ‘shadow’ of the self. Heavily simplified, when you’re going about your day and you have those occasional lapses in reason, dark thoughts, or intrusive ideas, those are the results of your primal instincts (your ‘id’) fighting against the need to conduct yourself in an acceptable manner in society (your ‘superego’). They’re the dark thoughts you keep trying to stamp down and end up hidden in your subconscious.

The full story of Moliere Thorilliere Harpagon (named after the playwright Moliere, one of his frequent actors La Thorilliere, and a character from one of his plays, *The Miser*) sadly never got explored in any full detail, but to brief you on it, it was very similar to Dog-Face’s tale of woe. He was born to a French noble house with many brothers who often teased and abused him due to his maladaptive daydreaming, and when he hit his 20s, he was committed. Whenever he daydreamed, these little squiggles would appear around his head, which was concerning, but he stayed committed for ten years, lost in an endless fantasy, until the Shadow took over. For a while, the Shadow fully controlled him (still appearing as the pale-skinned black-haired Moliere physically, though he did slick back his hair) and became a well-known lawyer, businessman,

and philanderer. Then, he met a woman, and the ‘Moliere’ side fell in love with her, beginning to come out of his shell and take control more often in order to meet with her. This enraged the Shadow, and after the two fought mentally during a park outing, the Shadow fully subsumed Moliere and ensured that he was the dominant persona. The Moliere personality only comes out when the Shadow feels happy, loving, generous, et cetera, et cetera, in something of an inversion of the Jungian concept.

Moliere himself, though he has no drawing in the text, was heavily inspired by Cesare from ‘The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari’, a German expressionist film. This origin point spiraled out into everything concerning his aesthetics, his colorblindness, and even his location: There is a 1923 film of that genre titled *“Schatten – Eine nächtliche Halluzination”* (“Shadows – a Nocturnal Hallucination”) that I only found out about halfway through writing, and isn’t it lovely how things like that come together in the end? The Kaput Caput is supposed to resemble the head of the robot from “Metropolis”, and even the table and microphone he’s sitting at is meant to evoke a scene from “The Testament of Dr. Mabuse”.

The Bird Healer, the Shadow’s home (which we never got to see in the story, shame shame) is physically similar to Rene Magritte’s “The Therapist”.

TOP LEFT: Cesare from “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari”

TOP RIGHT: The robot ‘Maschinenmensch’ (machine-human) from “Metropolis”

BOTTOM LEFT: Scene from “The Testament of Dr. Mabuse”

BOTTOM RIGHT: Bronze sculpture of Rene Magritte’s “The Therapist”

Finally, we come to The Dog-Faced Man. At the basest level, his design comes from a vintage Oingo Boingo shirt from 1990, but ‘cynocephalics’, or ‘dog-headed people’ have been around literally for millennia. They were a mythical race spoken of in bestiaries, and of course there are always stories of werewolves in European folklore. Most famous, perhaps, is Saint Christopher, who is often depicted with a dog’s head. Why? Some believe, quite simply, that it was a translation error. When information about him spread to Latin-speaking Byzantine Greece, he was known as Christopher of Canaan (*Cananeus*), which ended up mistranslated as Christopher the dog (*caninus*). His most famous story, apocryphal to most denominations except Catholicism, is him carrying a baby Jesus Christ on his shoulders across a roaring river. Remember who The Dog-Faced Man carried on his shoulders?

This name, ‘The Dog-Faced Boy/Man’, really does come from my annoyance at old freak shows. Don’t get me wrong, I am utterly fascinated by them, both the good and the bad—I even watched the film “Freaks” while doing research for his character—but people with hypertrichosis, causing unnaturally high amounts of hair growth, were always referred to as having the faces of dogs. Fedor Jeftichew, mentioned in the story, was one of them, and was “The Dog-Faced Boy”. Why were they called dogs? They were just hairy. That, plus influences from Victor Hugo’s “The Grinning Man”, about boogeymen who steal children and distort their features to be sold as carnival attractions, was the principal inspiration.

His home, ‘Nobody’s Enemy’, is meant to reference the tale of Polyphemus and Odysseus, of course, but physically it resembles Odilon Redon’s painting ‘The Cyclops’.

The Shadow’s relationship with him is very complicated, if that wasn’t obvious. On a certain level, they romantically love each other. On another, they are sexually attracted to one another. On yet another, they’re close friends, on another, business partners. Employer and employee, master and slave, ward and patient, it’s always in flux, but what is certain is that The Dog-Faced Man deeply, deeply cares for the Shadow. The fact that these two horrible people somehow managed to find each other and care for one another even in their misdeeds is something that I feel makes them more human. Life works in shades of grey, and bad people (who often are troubled people as well) who find genuine healthy love should cherish that.

ABOVE: The T-shirt design that inspired Dog-Face’s design, Odilon Redon’s “The Cyclops”, and Fedor Jeftichew, the original Dog-Faced Boy

RIGHT: Painting of a dog-headed Saint Christopher.

In conclusion. I'm over the moon that I was able to finish this after a year of work, and I wouldn't have been able to do it without the help of my friends and family. Even if this isn't really a real published book, and it hasn't been revised at all, and I don't even know how good it is…I want to give some commendations.

Thank you to my mom and dad, who always supported and encouraged me with all their hearts, and to Vicky, my best friend in all the world, for always being there for me and helping to develop and build the worlds and characters in my head.

Thank you for reading.

(And, just as a bonus after the fact, here's a quick run-down for the chapter title origins. Skip a page if you want to get to the Table of Contents.)

Black And White And Red All Over: Punchline to a classic joke. What's black and white and red all over? A newspaper, or blood-soaked mail.

Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here: Phrase written over the entrance to Hell in Dante's Inferno.

Come Away, O Human Child!: Line from "The Stolen Child", a poem by W.B. Yeats.

Over The Hills And Far Away: Song by Led Zeppelin from "Houses of the Holy".

Each Of Us At His Special Art: Line from "Pangur Ban", an Old Irish poem about a scribe and his cat focusing on each of their special arts: respectively, copywriting and catching mice.

Gylfaginning: First section of the Prose Edda, one of the major sources for Norse mythology.

Back In The USA: Song by the Beach Boys.

Sermon on the Mount: You know, like Jesus' sermon on the mount?

Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth: Phrase used in the Old Testament to describe those who suffer in Hell.

Floating World: Literal translation for *ukiyo-e*, the most recognizable style of Japanese illustration

Hel and You: Reference to the song "Hell and You" by Amigo the Devil.

Makura, Hondai, Ochi: The three parts of a traditional Japanese *rakugo* comedy routine: the setup, the story, and the punchline.

Communication Breakdown: Song by Led Zeppelin from their first untitled album.

Belial's Gripe: Phrase from Robert Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister", meant more in the sense of 'Belial's grasp' rather than 'Belial's complaint'.

Heaven and Hell: Intended as a reference to the Black Sabbath album of the same name.

Who is Like God?: Literal meaning of the name "Michael".

Avalon Hideaway: Song by ZZ Top.

A Little Story From the Past: Oblique reference to the Jojo's Bizarre Adventure story arc "A Little Story From the Past: My Name is Doppio"

Desperate, but Not Hopeless: Lyric from Green Day's song "Murder City" off of their album "21st Century Breakdown"

Train Kept a-Rollin': Song by the Yardbirds.

Out on the Tiles: Song by Led Zeppelin from their album "Led Zeppelin III".

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