

Igor's Winter

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(Book 7)

.1.
Randall's Bakery

The doors chimed with a familiar sort of “ding-a-ling” as the brass clanked against the slightly oversized bell. I took a sip from the hot coffee in front of me, sitting in the chair with my back against the wall, sleepless nights etched into the linework on my face. Blood pumping underneath my eyes, veins bulging where they’d seen too much stress and too many heart-wrenched years. Maybe some heart-filled ones too.

I took another sip. *Much needed improvement.* For all the things Randall was capable of, coffee forging was not one of them. Connor, on the other hand, uncanny skill with bean and water. Another swig of molten liquid passed my lips. Another soft sigh before the ding-a-ling ringing started again.

“Hey, Igor.”

Bronson piped up with a laidback slur and youthful air, though he wore the mark of one who’d travelled between realms.

“Hi, Bronson. Is he here?”

“Uh, yeah. He’s in the back. Want me to go get him or –”

I stood slowly, my joints aching and snapping back into place while my spine elongated deep into my back, resetting itself. I saw the boy cringe and smirked, taking a sip and walking behind the counter through the doors marked “Employees – everyone else sit the fuck down and wait.”

The scent of sweet tobacco filled the air the deeper I got into the small shop’s posterior, a few doors lined a small hallway and the haze of a dense smoke slipped from around one of them. A faint dark glow emanated from underneath, giving the wavering strands of smoke an eerie, aethereal glow. Then a loud crash followed by an annoyed grunt and the unmistakable sound of skin on skin.

I chuckled and tapped on the door. Another thud, another frustrated grunt, possibly a growl, and another infuriated impact between competing fleshy bodies. The handle tilted downward slowly before the door opened and a large plume of smoke escaped; outlining a large, lean man with a war-torn glow behind crimson eyes.

“You’re early.”

Randall took a long drag from the cigar in his mouth, blood coating his knuckles as he pulled it from his lips. He stared unwavering as a set of small rings floated through the air, a long smoked tendril lashing through them hastily as he finished his exhale. I nodded and took another sip of coffee.

“I am. Do you have something for me?”

“Yeah.”

He snapped his fingers casually. A small chest floated toward him. I couldn’t help but chuckle when his confident, half-lidded eyes widened to an enraged point. The lights flickered before he turned around slowly, veins streaked across his skin as if he’d inflated them with some sort of thick liquid, or

frozen air.

“You wanna try that again...?”

A set of hands appeared from the other side of the smoke, grasping the box slowly and receding before limping up to him, the box firmly in hand.

“Had to try.”

Marcus stood next to him with a somewhat bloodied exterior. He handed Randall the box, a crooked grin on his face before he raised a hand to wave at me.

“Hey, Igor.”

“Marcus. Good to see you’re still in one piece.”

He chuckled and nodded.

“Barely, this guy’s kind of strict.”

“Good, you need strict.”

He groaned and clicked his tongue.

“Not you, too.”

I took the chest from the angry Zawadski and chuckled again.

“Me probably more than most.”

“Heh, yeah. Fair enough.”

Randall took another deep draw on his cigar, signaling the end of my conversation with his new protégé. Marcus chuckled again and nodded.

“Well, it was nice talking to you. Fucking slave driver’s got me back on the clock.”

Randall clapped him in the back of his head hard enough to hear the bone reverberate in Marcus’ skull.

“Watch your mouth and go clean that shit up. Ain’t a fucking resort.”

I chuckled and nodded my niceties as Randall closed the door and ushered us out, leaving Marcus to his chores.

“You come with me. The other guy’s got a request.”

“Alright.”

We walked down a small flight of stairs into what used to be a basement. It was now some sort of working storage, doubling as an office for less public activities. Possibly a workshop, judging by the tools and toys these two had set up.

He sat in an old armchair, distressed ash tray to the left. Another ember-clad draw. Another slow exhale. Though this time his eyes shut completely, posture shifting from one to the other as the cigar found its way to the ash tray. The Zawadski opened his left hand, a glass of crimson liquid appearing in it before he took a long, seductive drink, as if he and the glass were the only two in existence for a moment.

I gave him a little more time before arching a brow and taking a seat of my own.

“You needed something from me, Peklenc.”

“Still direct.”

“Of course. I don’t see that changing.”

"I'd hope not. And yes. An artifact. Your original pantheon has it, though I'd imagine it's not being kept with them."

"Where?"

"Well, that's what we need you to figure out."

"Oh, so this is a "we" thing now? Your other half is in need as well?"

"Yes, but not the buffoon. *Fuck, you.*"

He shook his head and sighed with frustration.

"Ah, your better halves need it."

Peklenc nodded and took another sip. I nodded as well.

"Alright."

He chuckled.

"No wonder you're so highly regarded."

I shrugged and finished my coffee before standing.

“Is this the artifact I’m thinking of?”

I bypassed his “compliment.” Peklenc was not one for altruistic compliments. Though he was famed for providing sardonic observations when his requests bore an unmentionable task or caused some sort of disruption.

“It is.”

I sighed.

“They will not simply give it to me, you know this, don’t you?”

He nodded.

“Fine. They will not give it to me without something in return, though. The question is, who would you rather owe? Me or your kin?”

He chuckled, crimson lined with a royal violet hue shaped his eyes as he spoke.

“Of course, I’d prefer to owe you the favor, my friend.”

'Of course.' He says...

"Alright. But you will need to let your other half make extra. You will probably owe him for that too."

"More than likely, but it's a fair trade for what I'm asking."

"No, it isn't. But you know that."

"I suppose you're right."

A grimacing smirk followed by a final swig of his drink. The glass slowly settled into its place next to the cigar as he stood.

"Joking aside, it's vital you return this, Igor. We'll need it."

We will all need it. Assuming you know what you're doing.

His brows were steadfast but trembled slightly. I simply nodded, searching the old god's eyes for a moment. I'd seen the look before. Caution overrun by a brief relief quickly drowned by the very real probability of failure.

His tone shifted to a more somber one, though he only spoke two more words before receding:

“Thank you.”

These were not the words Peklenc normally uttered to anyone. But to me, he’d not only uttered them but meant them. *Hm.*

Randall picked up the cigar and took a long, deep drag, holding it for a few moments, as if regaining his strength from the smoke, and exhaled a slow, descending fall of smoke from his mouth like a majestic stream descending from a cliff.

“Whatever you want, on the house.”

“Ah, now we are talking. Mint cakes. Five dozen. I’ll come for them tomorrow, yes?”

“Fuck, yeah. Sure. I can do that. Just make it a little later.”

“No, I will be early.”

A jest, but he took it as such, indicated by the half-cocked crooked smile.

“Right. I’ll have ‘em for you tomorrow morning. Grab a few dozen donuts on your way out.”

I nodded in agreement and followed him out. Peklenc did not often request things, let alone items nearly impossible to get ahold of. I was curious what he had in mind, what scheme he and his other half were concocting in service of the All-Beings. It was truly the only way Peklenc did much of anything outside of self-interest and duty. But what did they tell him that would have him going out of his way to ask me for my help.

Eh, oh well.

.2. Deshi's Shop

Deshi's was a quaint shop, tucked away in the hills and wood of the rural landscape. While unassuming, the location was neatly seated amongst the wellspring of natural resources and power. The elements protected him from the lesser-tiered threats, and hid him from most things larger, though he still had his due diligence to perform; but Deshi was set up to stay functional.

I heard the kettle turn on upstairs, the soft shift in the breeze wafted its way down to my level as I approached the door. A gentle knock is all it took for him to unhook the latch

and let me in.

“Igor, good to see you. Come in.”

I nodded my thanks and entered, pulling a small pouch from my pocket. He stopped mid-stride and turned around, looking down at his tattered sweatpants then back up at me with a furrowed brow in his unshaven shadow.

“Did you bring—”

The pouch found its way to his hands before he had a chance to finish the question.

“Of course, my friend. I would never forget anything so precious to you.”

He sniffed the bag for several moments before nodding and smiling. I hadn’t seen a smile so wide across Deshi’s face in quite some time. I couldn’t help but shake my head and give a small, abrupt chortle.

“You always get the best stuff.”

“They aren’t often combative when I go to harvest.”

“I’d imagine you’re not disrespectful to

them. Possibly even bring them the *correct* offerings.”

I laughed. The old practitioner knew me well.

“I cannot stay long. I have a few more deliveries to make but I wanted to bring this by, see if maybe you need anything.”

He pulled the pouch away from his face and nodded before scuttling away to a small box sitting on top of a dresser. He opened it and removed what looked to be a shard of metal encased in a vine.

“Is that what I think it is?”

He nodded.

“I need a few more. But I can’t go to that realm. Not without a miracle, but if you’re going anywhere near it, I’d like a help retrieving some more of this.”

I nodded. Deshi typically didn’t ask for much, and when he did there was a reason. I typically didn’t ask for the reason... but I was curious.

“You’re not the first to ask me for something so rare today. What do you plan to use it for?”

He took a moment to ponder what I’m guessing was whether he should tell me his true feelings on the matter or whether he would cloak it under some cryptic response.

“Something is wrong. I’m not sure what, but it doesn’t feel right. More not right than usual. “

I sighed. He wasn’t the first to tell me such things either. A nod was all I could muster afterwards, before collecting my thoughts enough to shrug and recommend a good drink between friends.

“How about we have a cup together. Nothing intrusive, I need to make my way to Leonie’s, but it’s been too long... And if what you and I are thinking is true, we should make the most of this, huh?”

He nodded and finished his walk to the kitchen where the kettle still steamed slightly. He pulled two mugs from his cabinet and opened a stash of green tea in an old clay pot.

From the pouch he took the herbs and crushed them into his cup. I opted to help him and grabbed a small glass tea pot with a center straining mechanism. He filled the strainer, then added the slightly cooled water from the kettle to it as not to burn the leaves.

It was relaxing to watch him, even if only for a few moments. However, his hands started to shake before he had a chance to pour the water. The veins in his eyes pulsed against the whites, darkening the centered orbs with a thick reddened hue, like garnet. I pulled a small vial from my pocket and handed it to him. He stared at it and the crimson liquid inside of it.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded.

“It seems to me that you need this more than I do. At least until you can take what’s left of your normal medicine.”

He extended a trembling hand. I took the cork from the top and handed the opened vial to him. There was a slight distress to his expression as he looked it over, as the trembled started to worsen... As the pain of his

extended life slowly started to creep in.

“Drink it, Deshi. It was an offering from a willing friend. It’ll help.”

“Keep many willing friends in your corner do you?”

I chuckled and nodded as he sighed and took a deep swig. His eyes stayed closed as he let the liquid work its healing magics. After a few long seconds, he opened them again, displaying the deep earthen orbs under tired lids.

“Thank you.”

I nodded in response as he put the vial down and went back to the tea, pouring enough in both cups.

We sat and enjoyed our beverages in a peaceful quiet before I made a single gesture of noise.

“Thank you again for the tea and the company.”

“Of course. You’re an important part of this whole... whatever it is. The least I

can do is give you some respite, huh?"

"Are you this nice to everyone?"

"No. Because they don't let me sleep or have my tea, or do anything that calms my nerves without breaking something."

I laughed and stood.

"Well, enjoy it while we still can, hm?"

He rolled his eyes with playful candor.

"Are you making your way to Leonie's now?"

Another nod from me.

"Basement. We can make it a quick trip."

He pushed the teacups in a bit and got up, straightening his tattered yet somehow more comfortable clothes and made his way through the shop into the basement. There was a small door with ancient markings around it humming a slow and deep tonal cadence. Outside of it sat a basket of what seemed to be sweets.

“Here, you can use this.”

I nodded and picked up two of the sacks as he whispered a foreign and strange language. The hum of the door grew louder before opening.

Within seconds, I’d entered the doorway. The door itself closed gently behind me, leaving the doorway as a small flame danced over a bronze bowl with the same ancient markings carved into it. I placed one of the bags of treats inside the bowl and opened the top before walking down the dark corridor.

There was a squelching sound followed by several skittering legs behind me. I kept my attention forward as to not catch the focus of the creatures lurking in the darkness, though a small one resembling a sea-turtle scurried next to me. Again, I reached into my pockets, the runes on my hands glowing as I did so.

“Where is it...”

The little creature glanced up at me.

“One second.”

I checked my other pocket. *There it is.* I wrapped my fingers around a small treat and placed it on the back of the turtle as it walked alongside me. Its small tail swayed with excitement as it continued down its path, the treats slipping into its ethereal shell. I could not help but smile at the creature. It was somewhat adorable. But our paths quickly became uncrossed as I approached the door in front of me.

“Safe travels, little one,” I whispered.

A gleaming light sparked in response as the creature faded away. I smiled, though short-lived. The skittering from the Keeper was getting louder. A hushed gnawing from just a few yards behind me. I placed another round of treats in a similar offering bowl, though this door had a jagged crystal filled with a dark fluid and an iridescent glow. The door unlatched instantly as the breeze of the Keeper’s breath brushed my ears. Within seconds I slipped through the doorway.

It locked behind me sealing the Keeper along its path. I took a deep breath and calmed my nerves, looking around the darkened room.

My breathing slowed further. A deep

inhale filled with the scents of those who
wandered this place filled my nostrils.

Ah, they're here.

.3.**Leonie's Snack Shack & Bar**

I walked up the stairs to find Leonie waiting for me with a stiff round of vodka and a comforting smile. She handed me the drink as soon as I was close enough to the top of the stairs, and in a fashion known to the North, I finished it in one take. The veins in my arms started to relax as the hard pounding notion across my chest took the moment to release the swell of tension building inside me.

“Better?”

“Much, thank you.”

She took the empty glass, set it down

and wrapped her arms around me.

“Good to see you, Igor.”

I followed suit and held her close.

“You too. I have items for you.”

She let me go and looked up at me, braids along her shoulders and hat slightly cocked to the side with the brim somewhat ruffled.

“Do you ever go anywhere empty handed?”

“I try not to.”

She chuckled and ushered me through the door to her private apothecary. There were herbs lined in jars, some from this realm but many from several others. Underneath the resinous smells of the flora sat a deep bourbon and what seemed to be some sort of cinnamon and lemon.

Without missing a beat, Harold appeared and pulled a chair for Leonie, kissing her cheek as she sat. I leaned against the counter, folding my arms and admiring the

couple. For someone so uncannily disturbing, he was a gentleman at the very least.

Once satisfied she'd found her comfort, he made his way over to me, offering his hand. I uncrossed my arms and shook. His grip was just as firm as it had always been, though there was a slight wonder in the way he released me.

"I take it you have deliveries to make?"

I nodded and ruffled through my pocket, more runes enveloping my arm, this time to the elbow. He watched with a stoic yet ribbing stare. If I'd been part of the many he intimidated, I'd never have noticed the invisible smirk on his lips. Another chuckle, another shake of my head and slight smile of my own.

It didn't take long to find the small orb circling what appeared to be the preserved eye of some otherworldly creature. He reached for it, the orb spinning faster and changing from its soft blue hue to a violent black as the eye began to dot around in its stationary prison.

"Perfect..."

*He's going to—*Almost as if he'd read my

mind, he opened his mouth and forced the small trinket into it, his jaw detaching from the upper mandible, blackened tongue curling around it as his eyes turned an eerie pale yellow.

Harold slowly closed his mouth around it as the lights dimmed and flickered. I could see the bulge running down his throat as the preserved totem continued its journey deeper into the wraith's stomach.

"I have seen many things... but not many as disturbing, off-putting or disgusting as that."

He chuckled and sat as the yellow shifted to a deeper gold around the irises, the whites darkening to a desolate black as he chuckled.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Leonie smacked his leg and chuckled. He smiled at her, large strewn daggers in his mouth as he took his seat next to her. I took the opportunity to summon a large metal box tied in some sort of sacred root. Leonie's attention immediately shot in my direction.

“Oh, now that is a beaut.”

Her thick Cajun accent thickened ever so slightly as she cleared a space on the table for her prize. I gently placed it in the spot, the roots taking hold of the table and opening slightly toward her.

“I won’t keep you two.”

“Nonsense. Stay for another drink. Even if not long.”

Harold’s voice was deep and drenched in an otherworldly power, though his speech was somewhat slowed and husked. I nodded and went to pour myself a drink. The glass evaded me slightly. I reached again. Again, it evaded me. I stopped and stared at it for a moment before the thought sank in fully.

“Ah, I take it Lex is here.”

“You know he is. You think this brigand would let him out of his vicinity again?”

As if on cue, an almost innocent looking man with bright blue eyes and a toned physique, clad in fit jeans and $\frac{3}{4}$ sleeve shirt walked into the room carrying a tray of three

drinks. He made his way over to me, offering me the tray before the others. His smile was wide and brilliant, his voice a cool and calming tenor as he spoke.

“Hey, Igor.”

“Hello, Lex.”

I took my drink quickly. *No need for stalling or rudeness.* I nodded my thanks to the seemingly younger man, then to Leonie and Harold. Lex quickly made the rounds to Leonie, bowing to her and avoiding eye contact but still smiling, nonetheless. She also took her signature cocktail and nodded her thanks before he found his way to Harold.

I watched the two, my drink in hand and waiting for the first sip. Leonie followed suit. However, Harold didn't take his drink. Instead, Lex placed it down in front of him, careful not to spill or disrupt the aesthetic of his beverage. Something of a gnarled smirk made its way to Harold's lips. Lex glanced at what looked like his chin and stole a chance to broaden his smile.

“Do you need anything else, Sir?”

“No. Go tend the shop.”

Lex nodded and stood straight, quickly walking out but not without giving me a wave. I nodded back. *Possibly the happiest Zawadski I've met...*

“Alright hun, stop showing off and let's have a drink. I'm sure Igor's got things that need doin'.”

“Right... My apologies.”

“No problems. Did you need anything?”

Leonie took a long deep swig, as did Harold and myself. After savoring it for a moment, she thought for a few seconds and nodded.

“I could use a few items from Jötunheimr if you're heading that way.”

I sighed and nodded.

“Unfortunately, I am.”

“Why so unfortunate?” She sipped again.

“On business, it is never pleasant. On

pleasantries, that's when it's pleasant."

"I take it this is a business trip..."

Harold's slow drawl garnered my attention again.

"It is."

"Doesn't have anything to do with that weird shift that keeps flingin' all these doors open, does it?"

Leonie chimed in, taking another swig but glancing over her glass

"It may be. Honestly, I do not know and would like nothing more than to find out."

She nodded and rose to her feet. Behind the bar she bent forward and tapped the ground three times, a small shard rose above her from the floor. It shook slightly and created a ripple of vibration as it hummed gently in the air. My veins rose to the surface as my heart matched the pulsing vibration now emanating from the shard as it summoned a small box with strange markings on it.

“This should be payment enough for your journey, hm? At least for the Aesir and the Jötnar. Only open it when you reach one place or the other; ‘else it’ll fuck up your plans.”

I nodded my thanks and took heed of her instruction before taking the box. My veins pulsed wildly for a moment, the blood rushing to my eyes forcing them to shift into their more lupine form. She chuckled and touched my hand gently, calming the reaction just enough.

“Thank you. What did you need me to retrieve?”

“An artifact. A rare one you’ll only find—”

“On the last breath of the dying conduit... yes?”

She chuckled and nodded.

“Deshi’s looking for something similar, hm?”

I nodded.

“As are Peklenc and Randall.”

She arched a brow and studied my face with a great intensity. Had I been more awake, I’d probably have mimicked her just for the fun of it, but I didn’t have the egging energy within me.

“Be careful. This doesn’t feel right.”

I nodded in both agreement and affirmation. Harold stood, knowing my patterns enough to know when I was ready to find my way out and get started on this treacherous journey. I gave Leonie another hug, cleaved my beverage and followed Harold back to the lower room.

“Igor.”

His voice was cold but concerned.

“Hm?”

“You’ll need help.”

“I always need help. Maybe I’ll get it this time.”

He nodded and gave me another satchel of offerings for my journey to the next hub. Hearing him say I would need help and feeling Leonie's meant calling in a couple of my own. I could only hope that they would be able to grant me that favor.

"Be well. And come back in one piece."

"Any other day, I would mock you for that statement. But today, I'll take the well-wishes. I have a feeling I will need them."

He gave me his hand again to shake, this time grabbing my forearm as I did the same to his. Neither of us broke eye contact. Neither set of eyes able to return to their full human illusion.

With that, I took my leave, entering the doorway leading to my hopeful salvation on this journey...

.4.**The Butcher Shop**

I'm not sure if it was the scent of another from a foreign realm or Harold's unsettling ascension, but getting to James was not as easy as getting to Leonie or Deshi. I stood in the basement, door latched behind me and clothes ripped in the back from the Keeper who nearly grabbed me. I waited for a few moments, making sure the droplets found their way back into my flesh before I trudged up the stone stairs, what felt like three flights.

There was some commotion happening behind the door as I reached the top of the stairs. I slipped in, hoping not to add to whatever ruckus was happening. I heard an

entitled screech demand “vegan burger meat.” And I heard James’ cleaver bury itself in the wooden cutting board. *Oh boy.*

Rachel crept up next to me.

“I thought I heard someone come through down there. You look like shit.”

I chuckled and she grinned a wide, strong spread.

“I feel like shit. I was attacked on my way here. I’m slowing down in my old age.”

“One of those creepy Keeper things?”

I nodded and turned to show her the missing pieces of my clothes. She looked it over before running her fingers over the baren skin.

“Ouch. Let’s get you some new clothes, huh? He’ll be done in a minute.”

“Thank you. I don’t suppose he’d be free for an adventure into an incredibly dangerous situation that may actually kill one of us?”

“Probably not, but you’re welcome to ask. Although I may be a little offended.”

She led me to another of the back rooms in the old butcher shop. A cabinet sat in the middle of the back wall with glass doors. It was filled with shirts, pants, shoes and accessories.

“Offended because I did not ask you?”

“Duh.”

“How do you know I was not going to?”

“I don’t. That’s why I said ‘may be a little offended.’ You gotta keep up, Oldling.”

I laughed at the moniker and nodded in agreement.

“You’re right, I do need to keep up.”

She tossed me a large shirt and new set of pants that just barely fit with a tie.

“Hey, how are you doing anyway? You know, after the whole Bates and Ike thing?”

She shrugged, steadfast as she'd ever been.

"Fine, honestly. I was more worried about them, but Jimmy seems to have all of that under control as well."

"He's a good leader."

Abrupt yelling cut my thoughts short as I heard the clank of the 20 pound latch that held the door to the back counter locked. Then the skittering of more sharp words. Followed by dense breathing, the chime of the door and a dense roar that sternly urged "Get the fuck out," without any further volume adjustment.

"Usually."

Rachel laughed then turned her attention back to me without missing a beat.

"Where'd you fuck off to, anyway? You left right before we got into it."

I sighed and looked down.

"I needed to chat with an old friend. The same old friend that told me where to find you."

“Think I’ll get to meet this old friend and give them a proper thanks?”

I chuckled. Rachel was very forward in her requests but polite all the same. I nodded.

“More than likely. She’d probably love meeting you.”

She cocked her head slightly to the side, chin down and brows raised over her glasses.

“That’s a turn.”

“Eh, it isn’t but... well there is no but. It isn’t.”

She stared for a few moments longer before erupting in an infectious laughter; I erupted in the same laughter not long after. James walked back to the hallway we were standing in and chuffed hard, his eyes wide with irritation, enough so that you could see each scar still adorning them.

“Whatever’s happening here, keep it going. I’m gonna need some of it.”

“You want us to keep having a good time? I dunno if we’re capable of doing

that, honey.”

He gave her a small smile and nodded before leaning down and kissing her cheek. He pulled the gloves off his hands, mitts big enough to lift an animal like a toy.

“Well, for my sake I hope you are. I’ll be right back.”

His footsteps were hefty and loud this time, filled with an intent to calm oneself down, but fighting the uphill battle of being justifiably angry. Rachel chuckled and shook her head.

“He’ll get back to normal soon. I think all the visits from Sam have been weighing on him.”

“His brother’s been visiting?”

She nodded.

“Is that a problem?”

“It might be... Does he seem okay when he comes to visit or something of a mess but trying to keep it together.”

She thought for a moment, staring through me as she collected her memories. After several seconds of what looked to be mental debrief, she landed at a conclusion.

“He seems exhausted. Too exhausted for it to be comfortable or put together. But he seems to be trying to find normalcy... which is obscenely abnormal now that I think of it.”

James rounded the corner, a towel in his hand and the apron pulled down, exposing his green and black t-shirt underneath, only a few flecks of blood spatter on the collar and sleeves.

“Talking about Sam?”

I nodded.

“I see. Cass is somewhat concerned about him, but not enough to go prying. I told him I’d let him know if anything else changed about him.”

“Eh, well not to add more strangeness to the fire, but there have been a few strange requests for items coming my way. It is why I am here. I was hoping

maybe I could enlist your help. Either of you."

I winked at Rachel, she grinned at me as James chuckled and shook his head.

"I wish I could, but I have a few other things to do here."

"I'm free."

Rachel chimed in with a large smile on her face.

"And I don't have to be offended."

"You should take Vinnie and Walt with you."

I stared at him for a moment. She also stared at James. James stared back at us. We all sat there in a strange and quiet contemplation before bursting out into an incessant laughter. The walls echoed with our voices as the waves came and went fueling each other. After several moments, we managed to find our calm and I nodded.

"Well, if nothing else, this will be an entertaining run."

“If things go sideways, you should utilize them.”

James mentioned through brief residual chuckles.

“You should use them anyway. Maybe shit won’t hit the fan if we deploy their bickering rage early.”

“I may have to just give them the list and instructions and let them go off on their own.”

Rachel and Jimmy laughed even louder, recalling a few times the duo had gone off on their own. While successful in their missions...

“Everyone would be dead.” I chuckled.

“But in this case, everyone may need to be dead. I don’t know yet. They’re a good idea.”

Rachel nodded in agreement.

“I’ll give them a call.”

With that James pat my shoulder, making me sink slightly under the weight and walked up the stairs. Rachel watched him for a few moments. The slight fall of her face told

the story of her worry, but she quickly came back around and shook it off.

“Do I need gear?”

I nodded.

“Yes, but you won’t need to bring anything besides comforts. The gear is provided. This realm is not equipped for Jötunheimr. “

“Wait...”

Rachel’s excitement started to swell and pique at the thought of entering another realm, one acclaimed to be a land of those large in more than just stature and depth.

“Oh, fuck yeah. I’m in. Meet you at your place when we get these two chuckleheads from whatever fight they’re having?”

“That sounds fine to me.”

I started for the basement again, heading for the doorway when I heard her footsteps behind me. She caught up, gently placing her hand on my shoulder to stop me. I

turned and looked up at her. She was far from a short woman and honestly fitting for James in every way.

“Any chance you can get some rest before we head out?”

I chuckled with a soft reservation.

“I can try, but I feel as though it will not happen. I will be alright, though.”

She nodded. Rachel understood the drive of the warrior and the need for atonement, my need for redemption.

“At least eat something before we leave. Try to relax. Maybe watch something with Lyle?”

“Maybe.”

I smiled at her and finished my walk down the stairs. James left a small fragment by the door for me, as to not send me down the same road as before. *Thank you, James. Fuck...*

With treats in hand and the stone ready for use, I entered the doorway and traveled home.

.5. Home

I pulled into the driveway, groceries on the seats of my truck. The engine cut off. The lights dimmed to a full darkened halt as I stared at the wood in front of me. My thoughts ran rampant in my mind, carefully pulling apart each interaction of the last few years. Leaving James and Rachel was particularly difficult... But Sif was not one to call me without reason...

The night she'd summoned me still read easily on my breath...

* * *

- Sif's Home -

I could smell the feast just behind the door. Sif was a master chef, hunter and warrior. All of which she found ways to incorporate into some peaceful notion of daily routine.

Her home was a simple one of ancient design, though not lacking in space. The door was made from the shed ashen remains of the oak used to carve the effigies to her mortal body. The rest was dense wood and clay, adorned by long vines and spruce sprigs.

I tapped gently on the door, waiting for her to appear. Within seconds she stood in front of me with a smile on her face, the large door pulled open just enough to expose her and leave room for anyone she may want to invite. Still as brazen as ever.

"Hello, Svell."

I chuckled and nodded my hello.

"Hello, Sif. I haven't heard that name in quite some time."

"I know. Figured I'd bring you back to your roots for the time that I have you."

Please come in."

She turned to the side to give me a little extra room to enter. Her scent was just as comforting as it was when she was in her mortal shell. I entered and placed a small offering on the table nearest the entry.

"I take it you still have a carnivore's appetite?"

I nodded again.

"I'm glad that hasn't changed. It's good to see you."

"You as well. How've you been? And the others?"

She walked back to the hearth in the middle of the room, stirring the large pot in the center. I followed her, glancing at the spread across the table and shook my head. Meats of all sorts, berries, meads and wines, even cheeses from the Aesir's realm.

She continued her work as she spoke.

"I've been well, as have Ullr and the others."

"Ullr still makes it a point to darken my doorstep now and then, along with Bragi."

She laughed, golden strands falling over her face as they slowly dislodged from the stash of hair pulled behind her.

"Ullr's roped Bragi into quite a bit of late."

"I don't think it's such a bad thing. Maybe he can help with that tone-deafness he inherited from his father."

She laughed loud and heartily, the room filling with the breeze of her enjoyment.

"I'm not sure much can help with that, but he can try."

We continued on for several moments. She asked about my kids now, the others. Though sadness ran through my eyes recounting the ones I'd had to kill to preserve balance, the joy felt when talking about those that followed the flow of balance were well. However, I assume it was nothing compared to the sadness... Her eyes grew kinder still.

"Svell. You aren't to wear their sins as your own. You've committed enough and paid for them."

I searched her eyes for some sort of backlash, something else that maybe I deserved. But she only gave me her kindness. So, I gave her my acceptance.

"Thank you. You were one of the best things to happen to me. Losing you was far from easy."

"Well, Svell. I didn't stay gone for long. Besides, your new beloved is very good for you. Ullr even tells me you've brought some of our traditions to share with him."

"Ullr says a great many things doesn't he? But that is not a lie. I enjoyed our traditions, I still do. I share them where I can. Especially feasting."

She laughed again and pulled the large pot from the fire, placing it on an earthen ring nearest the table.

"You always did love a good feast."

"Yours in particular. I'm glad we still talk,

Sif. I've missed our conversations. Your cooking. Our time together as warriors, recounting battlefield stories. We shouldn't wait to see each other next time."

She smiled at me and nodded. Though we'd been together many centuries ago, Wyrð had another direction for us to go in. She'd been summoned back to her duties with the Aesir after Casey ripped her mortal body apart. And I clearly had duties I hadn't thought were mine to keep until recently. Either way, we both maintained our friendship... Though something about this visit feels off.

Sif's grin faded to a smile then to a gently neutral line. She looked into the swirling pot and I followed suit.

"Svell, I hate to do this to you. Truly, but I think we need help. Yours in particular. Undoubtedly, this request would kill a vast many others who'd try to complete it."

I chuckled, leaning against the wall nearest the pot as an image began to form.

"Deathlessness is my craft. I'd do

anything for you, Sif."

A smile crossed her lips as she closed her eyes and thoughtfully shook her head.

"Almost anything."

I laughed slightly and nodded. She was right. There were a few things that I couldn't do, even if she were the ones to ask. Hopefully, this is not one of those things...

The image formed fully and began moving. She gestured with her brow for me to watch as her emerald, green eyes opened and drifted toward the images.

I saw Ullr and Loki in Sif's house, having a conversation. Ullr's thick husk hit my ears as he bellowed "MOM", pulling me deeper into the vision. He stood there, clad in a mix of furs and ... Cargo pants? Oh, Ullr... Arms and chest thick, a bow on his back and patented wintering sporting "gear" by his side. He opened his arms to hug Sif, obsidian skin with brazen opal veins running through it contrasting heavily against her orthoclastic derma.

Loki stood behind them, lean and brazen, though clad in what seemed to be the attire of a

decrepit artist. His eyes were sunken in and buried behind a waterfall of exhaustion. Perhaps paler than usual, giving way to a strange grey tone.

He kept his distance, as to not offend, but there was a mischief about him still. Ullr and Sif released each other. Sif nodded a kind greeting to Loki, who reciprocated fully. Ullr took a deep breath as his signature smile faded into a more sullen demeanor.

"Oh, that look. So, this is as bad as I thought it is."

Loki piped up with a demented chuckle, a stack of insanity whispering behind his words as he spoke.

"I wish it wasn't, but I'm afraid so."

Sif stood with arms folded, her stance for absorbing information and new strategy. I couldn't help but chuckle as I watch the trio take on stances known only to them. Ullr's voice contrasted Loki's hushed seduction as his words crashed through their conversation.

"The winds from the south blow cold with poison. There's something off about them."

They pull life from all they touch over nourishing and healing them."

"I too have felt something different... I can't seem to find the joy in my other responsibilities... And my trickery is beyond even my control, bordering on unsound."

Sif stared at both of them for a moment.

"Unsound in what fashion?"

Loki looked directly at her, his eyes slowly burning a deep red. She stared for a moment longer.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Well, we aren't sure, exactly."

His voice was just as vapid as his essence.

"I may know someone, but he no longer lives the way we do. He's grown fond of his new life too... But if this needs to be looked into, and death is a fear for many, then I suggest we find him."

"Are you talking about Igor?"

Ullr's voice filled with excitement as he chirped. Loki jumped slightly from the pitch change and clasped his heart breathing deeply.

"We're going to summon something called 'Igor' and hope it can help? I enjoy this line of helplessness."

Ullr glared at him as Loki put his hands up in quiet retreat. Sif chuckled.

"He used to go by Svell Valdyr. He still might if you catch him on the right day."

Loki stared, unblinking as his eyes wavered slightly.

"You mean to put our hunt in the hands of your ex-husband? The frozen beast of the slain realms? Well, I dare say we're right on target for top fuckery then, aren't we?"

Ullr huffed, blowing a small but dense ball of frozen wind at the trickster, landing him firmly on his ass. I laughed at the gesture. Ullr always did enjoy calling me "Dad" and upholding my honor, for whatever reason.

The image faded to a simple hushed brew

of herbs Sif pulled from the pot with two cups and served us both. I looked at the cup. She looked at me. I sighed.

“To the old traditions.”

I raised my drink and she followed suit.

“Thank you, Svell. Truly.”

We toasted each other and drank the beverage down instantly. The herbs were pleasant yet thick with the musk of the earth of this realm.

I'd accepted the favor. Accepted the responsibility of finding what ails the Nine Realms and those around them. Surely if this, the Realm of the Aesir had found the poison from the south winds, there were others affected.

It didn't take long for the peace and gentle conversation between friends to evaporate. The air shifted slightly, a dense scent of girth-laden hunters filled my nostrils. My eyes began to deepen as the veins pressed against the surface. She placed a hand on my shoulder.

"I haven't had fun in quite some time."

"There are many of them."

"Svell, you forget you're still in the presence of a warrior and a god."

I chuckled. I certainly had forgotten that washing her floors with the bloods of her enemies was a long standing pastime of hers. She enjoyed watching them writhe beneath her exceptional power. Most importantly, I'm fairly certain she enjoys the use of items not intended to be weaponry.

The air grew cold as her hair darkened, the cold now overlaying the raven-colored black that grew in from the roots. I loved watching her warrior's spirit rise from within her, like a force of great movement and destruction.

She pulled the spoon from the pot and stood. The hunters grew closer.

"Would you mind taking a step back against the wall?"

"Not at all."

I backed up against the clay walls and

folded my arms again. Though calmness had taken hold, the veins and the blood that ran through them still craved a good meal and a better fight. But Sif had laid claim to these intruders. And I was not going to step between her and her kill...

One of the hunters came at her from behind, hoping to subdue her. He had strange markings running down his neck and arms, over his fingers into his nailbeds, where blood had pooled and darkened the flesh under the nail itself. The spoon found itself lodged deep in his throat, then down his throat and out of his chest cavity where his heart used to live.

She tossed me the still beating organ and gave me a wink as she pulled her thigh-divided cloaked shirt back and taunted the next duo of hunters. They lost their edge easily, as she spun behind one and ripped the spine from his ribs and wrapped it around the throat of the other. She chuckled as she removed his head from his shoulder. The foul thing popped off like a pair of testicles during an Old World castration.

I took a bite of the heart as another appeared from the doorway next to me. Okay, maybe I stand between one. I stuck my foot out while having a good chew and the blundering

behemoth found his way to the corner of the table, immediately slamming his head and bleeding out across the floor.

She turned to look at me and shook her head before giving me a hearty laugh as I took another bite and shrugged.

* * *

My Truck

I enjoyed my time with Sif. We drank, ate, showed our camaraderie through tests of strength and might. The memories were pleasant though the reminder of her message was frighteningly affirming.

A sigh crossed my lips as I climbed out of the truck, the keys jingling in my pocket as I leaned over to grab the groceries. The door closed with a muffled slam. Cliff left one of his many footballs in the front lawn; Barry and Rick a few tires here and there from their vehicles; Willie's pocketknife had slipped out again and found its way to the garage floor; and Kyzer's ... rock. *These boys.*

I unlocked the door and entered the house, placing the groceries down on the

counter. The dishes had been cleaned and a note sat next to the fridge. It was from Lyle and read: *Trying to get Robert's manuscript... again. Wish me luck! Signed with a heart.* Another note sat beside it in perfect penmanship saying: *I'm going with him. Jela.*

"Ah, good girl. Keep them civil."

I poured myself a drink, homemade vodka. It was a recipe I'd crafted for the elders of an old village. They were often drinking poisonous vines and herbs... Things that killed them fairly quickly. Then they had something that would kill them slowly. It was cold and crisp against my tongue but burned the sides of my cheeks just enough to make me exhale with relief. Even my blood found some solace in the beverage.

Soft rapping against the front door, however, pulled me away from it. I sighed and walked to it, opening it slowly. A man stood in front of me, his skin cracked and breaking like old stone and dry soil, though his tone was that of a mortal man. He fell forward just enough to force me to catch him, and in a thick accent covered in pain and exhaustion uttered:

"Are you Igor?"

I nodded.

“Who sent you?”

“Your father.”

“My f—Boris.”

He nodded. I sighed again and lifted the fallen man with a single arm. He held as much of my shoulder as he could muster, but it didn't provide much stability outside of my effort.

“What is your name?”

“Skogovlad... But... ‘Skog’ works just fine.”

“Boris is not my father, Skog. Though for him to tell you that means he trusts you...”

He nodded.

“He spoke highly of you... I’m hoping you’ll be able to assist me.”

“That depends on what you need assistance with.”

He started to open his mouth, the intention for communication evident, though the stream of blood that flowed from his lips and crawled from his throat obstructed him. I pulled a cloth from my pocket and handed it to him. He nodded his thanks and wiped the blood from his mouth.

I had a chance to take a better look at the cracks and tears in his skin. They resembled earthen fissures and shattered rock. Even his eyes were dense like a raw, heliodor beryl crystal – amber over a bout of gold and enticing bronze. His fingers were cut across the beds and told the story of another battle he came close to losing, though his life and presence in front of me aimed to tell me he was the victor in that last fight. *Though he may not be the victor again, should anything else happen...*

“You are Djinn, right?”

My mind started taking inventory of my herbs and ingredients. Surely there was something that could stop his wounds from worsening. He nodded.

“Stay put, I’ll be right back.”

Again, he nodded.

I made my way to the kitchen, pulling away the fake back of the spice cabinet. There was a small jar filled with herbs and resinous sap, beside it a burned branch from an Ash tree. I removed both from the cabinet, placing them on the table, and immediately went to the fridge.

The boys left their leftovers in marked containers on the bottom shelves as a variety of marked meats adorned the top levels. One read “Boar” in my native tongue, and it was wrapped in old interlocking twine.

I pulled it from the shelf and tucked it under my arm, nicking the vodka bottle from before as I passed it. Skog sat in the same place with the towel over his mouth, speaking with vast strain and intent.

“I.. I do not want to... put you out.”

“Hush.”

I took my seat again and placed my ingredients and the flesh on the table. The jar started to ripple.

“You are not Djinn of the same kingdom.”

He shook his head.

“My people hail from the Northern Realms.”

“I said to hush. But that is good information to have. One moment.”

I got up and went back to the kitchen; there was another ingredient, one gifted to me by a dear friend. In the adjacent cabinet sat a small orb filled with what seemed to be pure, crystalline liquid. I grabbed it and brought it with me back to Skog. His nostrils started to flare slightly as the liquid responded.

“I thought your people were extinct.”

“Where did you find those?”

He strained to speak as I opened the container, breaking the ball and releasing the liquid into the jar with the resinous fluid. I twisted the lid back onto it and shook it vigorously. He watched me carefully, unable to take his eyes away from my task. Within moments, the ingredients and liquid blended,

creating a perfect liquid with a gently glow and soft hum. The hope in his eyes made it difficult not to smile.

“Drink this, then we talk.”

He nodded and grasped the jar with feeble yet eager hands. I removed the lid for him before he slowly began to drink the concoction before him.

Small gusts of steam escaped the fissures in his skin as they slowly began to heal. A mound in his chest appeared, opening slightly and displaying a small glowing shard that seemed to grow the more he had.

I unwrapped the boar and offered it to him once he came to the end of his beverage. After setting the jar aside, he dug his stone-thickened fingers into the flesh and tore off pieces small enough to fill his mouth but large enough to tell of his hunger. There were three clean glasses already on the table. I kept them around in case Lyle and Jela wanted to join me for late night talks. But tonight, that honor went to my new friend.

I flipped two over and filled them to the brim with the vodka while he polished off the

meat.

“Do you mind if I stay like this for a few moments longer? It’s been a long time.”

His accent was thick and a combination of both realms I’d called home.

“Not at all.”

“Where did you get those tears? If I may be so bold, of course.”

“A friend of mine.”

“They seemed fresh.”

“They were. He keeps me stocked.”

“Then please, thank him for me.”

“If what you’re asking for is not outrageous, you can thank him yourself when we are done.”

He lit up slightly and nodded. I slid the glass toward him and lifted my own. He followed suit as we then drank. After a few moments, he put the half empty glass down and looked at me through healing eyes.

“I hope you don’t find my request outrageous then. Probably ambitious and perhaps foolhardy, but not outrageous. I want you to help me protect my people. Find them a new place to call their own.”

“So, you are not the only one.”

He shook his head.

“I am not. There are only a couple hundred of us left. We’ve been hunted and poached nearly to extinction for our bodies and connection. But we are so tired of running. Of dying...”

“What would you need me to do?”

“There is an essence from the realm of the Aesir that could help my people sustain their lives here. Appear among the mortals as they seem themselves.”

He wanted peace. Stability. Safety for his people... And given the state of the Earth herself, she could use them back in her corner.

“Before I agree, is it true that your

people consume the sorrow and tears of this planet at will?"

He nodded.

"I would have thought those tears would have been enough."

"John is an interesting man. There may have been more in those tears than just the remorse of a juggernaut."

"I see."

"I will help you. But you must be open to others accompanying us on our journey."

"O-Others?"

Familiarity quickly hit my ears as bickering started to escalate just outside. I chuckled and shook my head. Skog seemed somewhat on edge though the unison "OW!" seemed to take him from there to a more relaxed state.

"Those would be the others."

He chuckled softly.

"I suppose if you trust them, I can trust them as well."

I nodded and rose to my feet before the others had a chance to knock. There Rachel stood with Vinnie, a bulky man with a fairly decent sized nose, blue eyes and scruffy brown hair, and beside him Walt, taller than Vinnie but equally as intimidating with piercing hazel eyes, a perfect sneer and rugged scruff. *And he's a teacher...*

"Ready to go?"

Rachel cheered in. I shook my head.

"Let me put away the groceries and introduce you to our new traveling companion. "

"Oh, someone new?"

"Yeah. Come in, meet him. I will be ready soon."

With that, the trio entered... *Oh boy.*

**.6.
Randall's Bakery – Again**

We walked into the bakery, the five of us. Skog's face was that of delight and wonderment as the scents of warm mint hit his nose. Vinnie and Walt stopped bickering for a few moments to indulge in the quietude of the bakery. And Rachel simply walked up to the case on the top of the counter and opened it, helping herself to one of Randall's famed apple cider donuts.

The redhead peeked out from behind the counter wall.

“You're early.”

"I told you I would be."

"And I see you've brought company.
Good. You'll need it."

With that, he walked out holding several large containers of treats and offerings.

"By the gods, you are a baker with extraordinary talent, my friend."

Randall looked at Skog and arched a brow, pulling his cigar out of the ashtray and taking a long draw. He held it and stared at him a moment longer, then blew a perfect ring around Skog's face, watching as subtle marks appeared under the skin.

"Thanks. You're one of his, too, huh?"

"One of his?"

I shook my head.

"Randall, one epiphany at a time. I'll get you both what you need."

His cold eyes landed on my tired gaze, emitting something of a mischievous light behind the cold green garnets.

“Well, now. That is a good thing to hear.”

“Seems you and Peklenc aren’t the only ones in need to a dead conduit and the artifacts it provides. But I feel I need to tell you three of you have asked for similar items. And I was shown another god’s... descent.”

“Then I strongly suggest you head out and be on your way. I’ll stick around here. And do what needs to be done.”

“And what is that?”

He smirked and blew another ring around my face. My blood rose to the surface as my eyes changed slightly before returning to their human appearance.

“One epiphany at a time, Igor.”

I stared at him for a few moments longer before calling out over my shoulder, refraining from a break in eye contact.

“Take the whole case.”

Rachel grabbed several bags and filled them with every confection she could muster.

Randall chuckled at the gesture.

“At least the five of you will be fed.”

“At least.”

“Least is right,” she jibbed, “But you do pretty well for a sidebar bakery.”

He looked at her and grinned a smug, almost malicious grin.

“Sorry we’re not all in-tuned with being crammed and forced to suck on each other’s bodily essence. I think it’s the musk that really makes you fuckers good at what you do in that sinking Apple of yours.”

She stared for a moment, somewhere between offended and shocked that he responded so quickly and with such wit. Then an eruption of laughter filled her lungs and face.

“Well shit. You got me there.”

The Old God chuckled.

“Laughter is good before something like this. Keeps your spirits high. And you five are gonna fucking need it. “

“Also not the first to tell us how perilous this journey is.”

“Then maybe we should get going.”

Randall and I both nodded at Rachel’s suggestion.

“Great, another ‘difficult undertaking’.”

I glanced at Vinnie as Walt glanced down at him and rolled his eyes.

“You should fucking be happy.”

Vinnie looked up at him and glared, his frown making it somewhat hilarious as his eyes widened.

“The fuck does that mean?”

Walt’s posture changed as he turned to face him fully, a glare and scowl of his own to top Vinnie’s frown.

“It means you’re a fuckin’ powder keg

and could use a goddamn outlet.”

“Outlet?! Since when do I need a fucking outlet?!”

Vinnie turned to fully face Walt, both standing uncomfortably close to each other as the veins in their foreheads started to throb, a faint symbol appearing on the sides of their necks, though fading as quickly as they appeared.

Randall gave a confirming nod to himself, possibly Peklenc as well.

“Since you started ripping up the fucking house with your goddamn temper tantrums!”

They closed the distance between the two of them.

“My goddamn temper tantrums?! You’re one to fucking talk you hulking lunatic!”

As if she’d read my mind, Rachel took the opportunity when both idiots opened their mouths to shove perfectly glazed donuts in them.

“You’re both problematic. Stop bitching and let’s go.”

Randall and I chuckled together as Skog perused the treat cases.

“Perhaps I can run off with a few before our journey?”

Randall nodded.

“Sure, just hurry up. And don’t forget those boxes.”

He opened the door to the basement and started to descend into a more spacious area lined with old wooden and stone doors. I followed first with a set of offerings, followed by Rachel with another set of treats, then Vinnie and Walt angrily chewing on their punishment boxes in hand, while Skog brought up the rear with a bag full of his personal confections.

He groaned with a soft sated pleasure.

“These are fantastic. You have such talent, truly.”

“Thanks. Glad you like ‘em, uh...”

“My apologies. Skog.”

“Right. Thanks, Skog.”

We walked together to another part of the room where a small table stood with a passed-out Marcus slumped over it, snoring as his legs rose and fell in the air with his ebbs and flows.

Randall blew a large smoke ring over him before slamming the table and immediately breaking his slumber, causing him to fall to the ground with a thud, then spring up and bash the back of his brazen skull against the table.

“Shit!”

Rachel burst into raucous laughter, nearly dropping everything in her hand as Vinnie and Walt stared at him muttering: “Fucking idiot” in unison under their breath. Skog merely observed, filling his face with delicacies and blinking between enjoyment.

“Wake the fuck up.”

Marcus scooted back quickly on his terse feet and rubbed his head, spidery

markings growing from his eyes.

“Get that shit under control.”

Randall sneered.

“*Now.*”

Peklenc commanded.

The marks faded slowly as he continued rubbing his head, nodding.

“Yeah, okay. Sorry.”

“Is the door ready?”

“Yeah, just need to know where.”

“The Rhodian Forge.”

I answered with a slight chuckle in my words. Marcus nodded and searched the table for a small bag and brought it to the stone door encased in flame and iron. He drew sigil on it before placing the bag in the bowl, muttering an incantation behind it.

Randall put his hand on my shoulder.

“Be well. And come back in one piece. We’ll need all of you if your story matches mine.”

A warning and concerned farewell. Neither were typical of rough-edged baker, but the warrior’s soul was firm within him. He knew what was coming just as much as I, and how chaotic times were about to get. I nodded and he recoiled his hand, allowing us to approach the door.

I looked at the others and spoke with direction.

“Listen. Stay on the path. Do not stray. Do not look back no matter what you hear. And most importantly, do not doddle. The creatures along the path are not to be messed with. They will destroy everything you are, were and are intended to be. And it will not be pleasant.”

“Shit, Igor. Where the fuck are you taking us?”

Walt questioned, but something under the surface was buzzing. Excitement, if I had to guess.

“Many places. But first, we see the Rhodian.”

Vinnie sighed and readjusted in his clothes, his dog tags under his shirt clanked just enough. Walt followed suit, his doing the same.

“You guys should get going,” Marcus warned. “They know the door’s active.”

“They?”

Vinnie and Walt again in unison. I nodded and placed another offering in the door and walked through. Rachel followed, then Walt and Vinnie, and finally Skog. As the door shut, I caught a glimpse of Randall speaking with Marcus, who nodded in what seemed to be agreement before the redhead walked away. Marcus breathed a sigh of relief and melted back onto the mussed table as the doorway shut and sealed behind us.

I placed another offering in the door. Skittering and demented laughter followed close behind us. *Shit, they have found us already...*

“We need to move.”

Rachel nodded and we started off on a light jog toward the next doorway, trying to find enough hope to get there without the Keeper tearing us apart.

.7.**The Rhodian Forge**

The ring of metal clanged through the air as soot fumes spread along all of our noses. The Forge was large and open, the walls stone and vast with ornate and ancient arches towering above us. On the walls were weapons crafted from bone, metal, precious stone and other undertakings of materials. Vinnie and Walt took a moment to admire each piece against the walls as Rachel and Skog followed me further down the corridor.

Bernerd had his hands submerged in the embers and molten delight of his current project. His face was solemn and bore the look of one who'd lived a thousand centuries,

though some would confuse him for a man in his early to mid-thirties. Without looking up, he greeted us, eyes blackened and dotted with a deep burning ember swirling around the colorful rings.

“Harold and Leonie said you’d be coming. I’m glad you made it.”

“It was not without its perils. But eh. We’re here.”

I walked closer and watched him work. Rachel surveyed some of the weaponry on the walls with both familiar and foreign elements akin to our realm.

“You speak the truth, Svell. Many of these weapons were born of intrusions.”

“I do not suppose you’re going to need anything on this journey.”

“I do not, but you will.”

He pulled his hands from the flaming liquid and wiped them clean with each other in the belly of the forge. I nodded and waited for him to finish as he pulled his robe on over his barren chest, stoic eyes falling on mine as he

outstretched his hand. I did the same and shook at the forearm. He smirked. I returned the gesture.

Rachel watched with some curiosity but was well accustomed to the warrior's greeting.

"The doors between realms have been opening, expanding and shifting at an alarming rate."

I nodded.

"Even the Keepers seem to be more erratic and intense."

We released each other as he guided us to a room, ancient smithing pants filled with pockets and embroidered metallic weaves. Rachel followed, in awe of the architecture. She was something of a "nerd" for this kind of thing. Skog followed, his curiosity caught by the seemingly conscious forge bellowing flame and smoke as it cooled itself.

He entered another room, something of an armory, I'd guess. There were hammers and axes lining the walls. Knives, daggers, chained metal balls clad in elemental magics. In the center of the room lay a stone table, rounded

in nature with several compartments in the siding. He tapped one, the drawer opening almost instantly under his touch. He pulled out several small arms and a few talismans and tools.

“Are these for us?”

He nodded at Rachel’s inquiry.

“Not that I’m not thrilled for the otherworldly backup and badass weaponry. But what exactly are we in for?”

He looked at me and I sighed.

“You know that we are going to Jötunheimr, right?”

“Of course, I’m excited to go.”

“Heh, of course you are. The reason we’re going is the artifact retrieval requests I’ve been getting. All from our Cabin, but they all need something from a dead conduit in a frozen realm.”

“Like literally frozen?”

“In some parts, others are frozen in flow, some dead, some continuously moving in the same path. It sounds desolate, but the worlds that live within the Jötunheimr realm are vibrant and imperative to maintaining balance. A polarity, if you will.”

She couldn't help her grin. It continued to spread and spread until she spoke again.

“Okay, so why all the tools? The weapons I assume we'll figure out, but the tools. Those have me a little more intrigued.”

Bernerd stepped forward, displaying about different tools and devices. He picked one up that resembled forceps, but denser in material and more brutal in the clawing and spreading mechanism.

“Some areas will need to be harvested and cannot be harvested without being forced open.”

She paused for a moment.

“Igor.”

“Yes?”

“Who asked for these items?”

She’d finally caught on, possibly more than the rest of us.

“Deshi, Leonie, Randall *and* Peklenc.”

Her grin fell into a bout of shock as her mouth fell open slight and she uttered:

“Oh fuck. That can’t be good.”

“It isn’t.”

I picked up what appeared to be a talisman filled with the flame of the Infernal. Another was wrought with shards of metal encased in some sort of ball that was smooth to the touch. The others were simply otherworldly tools that reacted much like Swiss Army Knives.

“Either one of you strapping old and otherworldly gentlemen want to narrow this down for me?”

I nodded and took a deep breath.

“The winds in the realms of the Aesir are blowing in reverse. The southern winds are bringing death, poison and frozen breath. I’d imagine the northern winds are about to do the same only with scalding heat and wrenching thirst.”

Bernerd walked around the table, examining another area before touching it and opening the drawer.

“That explains your Djinn friend out there.”

“He’s Djinn?”

Rachel’s curiosity came back to her. I nodded my confirmation.

“Skog is from the realm of the Djinn, but he is a Djinn of the North. They’re rare, now. Hunted for their skins, organs, the substance they give back to the earth and creatures when they feed on Her tears and strife. But they have been poached, murdered and forced to separate to stay out of the way.”

“Well that’s fucked up. How’d he find

you?”

“My father.”

“Boris?!”

I laughed and nodded.

“How the fuck did he find Boris?!”

“That I do not know.” I said through chuckling tears. “But back to Skog’s people. One of the things his people’s skin is used for is harvesting realm fragments. If my blood could be exhumed safely, and I wasn’t one of the Deathless, they’d do the same to me.”

“They’d fucking try.”

I smiled at her brazenness.

“What would they use the fragments for? Just realm hopping?”

Bernerd handed us both talismans bearing his mark.

“Imagine hunters with keys to infinite realms and their infinite need to

decimate Balance.”

His voice was husked deep from millennia forging from his primordial hearth. That alone was unnerving, but the way he spoke about the misuse of pathways made it all the more eerie. Then he said what he said next...

“The Keepers are already losing their bearings on their boundary. Some fail to see the offering, while others simply choose to ignore it in full.”

“I take it that’s a bad thing”

Bernerd nodded.

“Keepers are an extension of those who watch the doorways. If the Keepers are acting up... The doorways stand a chance of being unstable.”

I sighed and looked at the tools and weaponry before packing them up.

“Okay. We should go.”

Rachel stared at me for a moment before Bernerd tapped the table, tools and

weapons fanning out across the top.

“Perhaps you stay a little while longer and rest. You’ll need your wits, and your stamina.”

I shrugged it off with a gruff “Bah” before Rachel smacked the back of my head.

“I think we should take him up on that offer to relax. Have something to eat besides donuts and delicious pastries.”

“I do have what to prepare a roast. Perhaps not quite what you’re used to in your realm, but it’ll be more than enough to help you regain some much needed strength.”

“Did someone say a feast?”

Vinnie walked in, looking around at the craftsmanship. Walt came in behind him, stopping at the tool section, admiring the work put into each and every piece, noting the curvatures and markings on them.

“I’m up for food. Always up for food.”

I sighed again, something of a new favorite pastime of mine and nodded my defeat.

“Fine, but I will help prepare the roast. It is the least I can do and the only way I won’t fight all of you about it.”

I saw Rachel’s grin and softened my resolve further, allowing myself to smile with the rest of them. Skog entered and looked around, blinking at the smiles he was witnessing then forging one of his own.

“Why all the smiles? Not that I am complaining.”

“There is to be a roast, and you five will be my guests this evening.”

Walt nudged Vinnie, giving him a knowing smirk. Vinnie stared at him as if he’d lost his mind for a brief moment in time before returning the smirk.

“Went to Hell.”

Vinnie whispered.

“Just to dine and regroup.”

The two slapped hands and clasped them firmly, their smirks turning to grins as the slight marks in their necks began to show more. Bernerd caught a glimpse and pulled two daggers from his drawer, both wearing the ancient alchemical sign for Antimony.

He gave me a knowing nod. I stared in some shock but mostly hopeful excitement.

Ah, we are not so fucked after all.

.8.**The Forests of the Realms**

We all stood and readied ourselves roughly at the same time. Vinnie and Walt started shoving each other, clearly ready to fight about nothing, while Rachel checked over the munitions and supplies, making sure nothing was lost. Skog examined some of his wounds. It was obvious he was checking for reopenings or missed fissures, but nodded relief to himself when he found nothing of interest or harm.

I made sure the offerings were intact and ready before Bernerd arrived with a set of sharpening tools and a kit for repairing any issues that may arise with gifted items, though there was severe doubt a problem would show

itself.

“Svell.”

Bernerd’s voice pierced my ears for a moment before I realized he was standing just a few feet from me.

“Yes, my friend?”

“Find my brother, Tom.”

“Alright, any particular reason?”

“He’ll have what you need. At least be in proximity of it.”

“Cryptic. Okay.”

“Be well, Journeyman.”

“You as well, Smith.”

He activated the doorway and the five of us stepped through. This doorway was somewhat different than the ones we’d originally used. Bernerd’s opened directly to the wood of the Aesir instead of the passageways between realms.

The others took a moment to survey the lands. I took a moment to feel the breath of the realm deep within my lungs. Skog followed suit on both accounts.

The woods were large and bore many trees, some familiar to the mortal realms and some native only to the realm of the Aesir Pantheon. No others could sustain them, though their fruit and resources could be used nearly anywhere.

I checked the talismans, handing one to Skog, one to Rachel and a set to Vinnie and Walt. The marking engraved in their matching set was familiar to the marks they had against the skin of their necks. I couldn't help but shake my head with a slight smirk on my lips.

"Cunning smile from an old hound.
Lesser warriors be wary."

Rachel joked.

I waved her off with a playful chuff.

"Back in my warrior days maybe."

"So, yesterday."

“Yeah, yeah. Come. We should make use of the light. No one goes to this realm without intervention from the Aesir or those close to them.”

We started our journey, walking along a path, exploring the rapidly twisting vines and other flora, the set of roots running from the sides of the path to the skies above, the vines intertwined and keeping them tethered to the earth, as if a synergistic dance... possibly an agreement.

“Is he normally so quiet?”

Rachel glanced at me then back at Skog before shaking her head. I could have spoken up, maybe changed the subject, but I felt no desire to do so. The only need I had was to make sure my knowledge hadn't become rusty. And probably figure out what Tom had to do with any of this. I'd not expect them to be part of whatever was going on. Not in this manner... The Rhodians seldom made note of their kin, let alone directing one to find them once they'd broken free of their bonds to Rhea.

I kept pondering what reasons Bernerd would have. *Could they have been the same reasons behind my conversation with Sif?*

Behind the requests? Maybe I was slipping too far into my thoughts. The sound of Vinnie gently yelling my name brought me back slowly.

"Igor. Hey, Earth to Igor."

"What?"

"Where the fuck were you, man?"

"Not Earth."

"Yeah, we got that much. You hear that noise?"

I listened closely. Walt kept pace but his attention drifted slightly as he sniffed the air, his nostrils ebbing and flowing with the breeze.

"Yeah, somethin' ain't right here."

I got my bearings back and glanced around. They were right. The forest had an eerie mist rising from the ground, one not foreign to any of us, though it was not one that any of us would have chosen to endure... It was pretty creepy. And spreading quickly.

“Are you certain we should not just turn back and possibly request the Smith come with us?”

I shook my head before calming my tone. Skog’s fear seemed to be growing slightly.

“No. I’ve spent many seasons in these woods. While off, progressing is truly the best way. Besides, I’d hate to piss him off by going back the way we came through.”

Bernerd certainly wouldn’t care if we needed to reenter his home, but the jest was enough to snap Skog back and even grace us with a smile. He nodded, as if thanking me for calming his mind and continued with us, his stride moving with a bit more confidence.

Shadows slowly started to appear beneath the fog, the whispers popping up and dying down slightly, as if waves on the ocean crashing against the broad side of a skiff.

“When you say ‘off,’ how bad are we talking here?”

Rachel’s eyes were more on a swivel

than Skog's nerves, Vinnie's observations and Walt's surveillance combined. The group was right to be concerned.

"They can be pretty off. But we should not stop moving just because it's normal."

"So creepy eyes, growing whispers, shadows that seem to move without light, that kind of stuff."

Rachel looked at me, though she was ready with weapon in hand, hidden by the cloth of her pocket.

"I appreciate you soothing my mind, but perhaps we should go while we still have energy. Get as close to our destination as possible. Especially if attack is imminent."

I nodded. Skog spoke wisdom and the rest of us accepted it, regardless of how we are...

"Okay. Let's keep moving then."

I held the front of the group, Rachel and Skog behind me with the bickering duo in the

back, surprisingly quiet for once. Something deep within me knew we were being watched and the creatures that lurked under the fog's hunger... A desire to be redeemed... To regain the honor they'd lost through nefarious means, never to find their peace again.

Their stench filled my nostrils, forcing me to shake my head, as if that would save me from the rot filling my nostrils. Rachel placed a hand on my back, letting me know she was still there. I nodded and took in more of the putrid aerosol poultices. There was another underneath this dishonorable dead.

“Step back.”

I halted our walk as the others heeded my warning, Rachel's hand leaving my shoulder region as the shadows moved. Then quieted themselves. Skog's weapon began to vibrate slowly in his pocket. He reached in as the metal climbed over his hand, forming some sort of glove.

“I hope this is supposed to happen.”

Rachel's slowly wrapped itself around her back, head and chest like a vined upper suit of armor.

"I really fucking hope so."

"It is."

The others were untouched by their artifacts, as was I. Rachel and Skog looked at each other before a twisted rotting hand reached from the vines mangled in the wooded roots. Skog grabbed it before it had the chance to grab any of us, the glove humming and shattering the hand instantly, removing the essence through the splatter of lifeless ooze seeping from the corpse's parts. The creature slid back into the mist. Chittering.

Odd.

Skog looked at his hand, the glove separating and moving as he'd done when feeding. Cold steel overlaid with molten beauty.

"What is this wonderful horror?"

"A gift from a Master of the Forge, my friend. I suggest we not get distracted... Both damned and dishonored seem to writhe beneath this ebbless fog."

Vinnie and Walt paused and looked at

each other, then me, then each other.

“First of all, why are you talking so fuckin’ weird?”

Vinnie started as he slowly grew in size; Antimony pressed hard against his neck as the talisman in his pocket began to hum. Walt’s followed suit as a similar marking for antimony burned into his skin, though he seemed unaware.

“Yeah, what’s the deal with the ancient speech.”

“Ancient times...”

I caught another whiff of putrid stink coming from below. I glanced again at Rachel just in time to see a half torn damned, flesh coated in rotted blood and filth, bones protruding from the wounds and ripped bite marks, lunge for her.

The armor slid around her head, chest, neck and shoulders now. A small stem ran down her spine as it started to spark and concentrate where the damned flesh struck. The creature lunged for her, but it’s flesh ignited and splattered across the part, though

the armor itself seemed to have spared her from the mess by igniting every shard that touched it.

“Oh. this thing is awesome.”

Skog laughed, a slight demented joy among his chuckles as his eyes blackened with emerald delight.

“This Smith is quite skilled!”

“Yeah he is.”

Rachel mused and watched the embers settle. Vinnie wiped the sludge from his face, Walt followed suit as his nostrils twitched and grabbed the essence of another. His size grew slowly as his amulet carved its way into his chest, blood rolling from the bottom of the sigil, Antimony’s horns blazing deep against his flesh and dying his shirt.

Walt glanced at his counterpart. Vinnie’s size slowly started to increase as the same symbol appeared across this throat, spines running through his skin and into his jaw. Walt’s forced it’s way deeper into his chest as the blood spread across it like vines across a sea of blood.

Another of the damned slid between the two growing warriors, digging its rotting fingers into their legs and dragging them down to their knees before taking a swipe at their chests. And both hulking men grabbed the hand, stood to their feet and ripped it in half. They breathed in tandem, inhaling and exhaling as the other moved followed suit.

Their wounds healed instantly, quickly stitching themselves back together with a metallic seam that only *seemed* to increase their rage and the intensity of their attacks. Before I could even utter a warning, both men turned in tandem, eyes cold and wild. Another of the damned coupled with several of the dishonorable rose from the fogs and attacked us all. And Vinnie and Walt both put them down without a second thought, limbs and fleshy pieces raining from the sky... the bits that weren't ground to pieces or sloughing from the duo's uninjured hands.

"Holy shit."

"'Holy shit' indeed my iron-clad warrior friend."

Rachel looked at her hands and the armor as it ran down the length of her body

like a defensive coat, complete with hood as it relaxed over her. Skog's glove now resembled more a piece of clothing than a weapon.

"You are all alright?"

"Find us a place to fuckin' shower and the answer'll be 'yes'"

Walt piped up, spitting to make sure his mouth was clear. Vinnie did the same and shook off his hands.

"Fuckin' things were gross, man. What the fuck, Igor?"

Rachel looked at me and pulled her hood down nodding the same question.

"They should not be so..."

"Abundant?"

Skog contributed.

I nodded.

"And they shouldn't be this aggressive. These are deserters, liars, cheats. Not Berserkers or wronged warriors. They

tend to stay in their misery before attacking out of sight. And they are far from strong enough to trigger the full might of a Forge Master's weapon... Let alone four of them."

"So, somethings wrong."

I looked at Rachel, a slight panic in my eyes, one I'm sure she'd never seen. She got closer and gave me a reassuring silence before I nodded.

"We should keep going. There's a village up ahead... if there's still a village."

Skog placed his hand against my shoulder. There was an old reassurance about the way he spoke. His touch like that of my fellow travelers from a life gone.

"The village is there. You only need to get us to it."

He speaks like the healers on our ships...

"Right. Thank you. Come... It's close..."

.9.
The Village

We came up on the small village. It hadn't changed much. The roads were still cobbled with a rich stone, and the buildings dense wood with chimneys that bellowed the smoke of lives being lived within their walls. People walked along the sides, finding their wares from various merchants along the path. I felt my blood rise to the surface, as if it remembered this place.

"There should be a place, an inn with a full tavern attached, just up ahead."

Rachel was quiet, obviously observing what was happening amongst the patrons of

shops and the children running along the streets. There were familiar glyphs and runes etched into doorways and some that spelled a familiar word, though she seemed to have some trouble transcribing it.

Vinnie and Walt looked around, now back to their original heights, and sizes. Just slightly larger than the average man and the average large man.

“Is the whole place so old-timey?”

Vinnie’s eyes darted around, taking note of the less modern ways. I couldn’t help but chuckle and nod.

“It is, but they aren’t as convoluted as the rhetoric in our realm. They do have amenities you’ll find modern or even futuristic. You’re not to worry there.”

“Alright, so what about you? You planning to keep sounding like an old Nordic play or something?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Even in his insults, Walt showed his intelligence and knack for getting information to stick.

“Probably, but I’ll let it go a little here and there if it makes you feel less crazed.”

He opened his mouth to rebut but closed it and nodded instead. Vinnie watched, making some sort of mental note as Skog examined the displays lining the roads. The inn was a now just a few doors from where Skog stopped, observing the clothing left by the merchants to entice a visit. I gestured for him to keep moving, lest he deal with the merchants of the Aesir.

“They are far more pushy than your average merchant, my friend. I will come back for whatever you desire, if only to save you from their lures and wiles.”

He chuckled and nodded, as if he knew of these types of sellers.

“Thank you for saving me. I will prepare a list for you when this is all over, huh?”

“A list I will gladly take.”

Rachel stopped at the patio of the Inn and pointed to it. I nodded and she entered,

holding the door for Vinnie and Walt then Skog and myself. We nodded our thanks and walked into the large room, a Hearth in the center with several chairs and tables lining the sides and area around it. The barkeep was in the corner, polishing the bar as several halls lined the back ways just beyond a transparent wall of perfectly spaced pillars. Patrons were wandering back and forth between the tavern arena and the rooms.

“What do you say we get a room with a fucking shower”

“Two showers.”

“How about we get a couple rooms, huh?”

Again, Rachel’s input was invaluable. I nodded and the others agreed.

The barkeep was a burly man with a long red beard, reminiscent of Randall’s former self. He wore Tyr’s sigil across his throat and seemed to have seen many years of bloodied paths. His gruff demeanor put Vinnie and Walt on edge, though his words seemed to calm Rachel and Skog.

“Yer lookin’ weary. Don’t suppose you’d need a room for the night. Maybe rest before you set out again. Forget some of your tragedy for a bit.”

I nodded and walked up to the counter.

“Two rooms would be great. Food and drink too.”

The barkeep nodded before summoning another from the back. I could only imagine it was the owner of the inn. A less surly man wearing something close to jeans and a t-shirt appeared, but stopped before blinking and rubbing his eyes profusely.

“This must be a trick of the eyes. Perhaps I’m now too old to figure out what’s real and what’s not.”

The barkeep arched a brow and looked at me, then back at the owner.

“You two know each other, do you?”

I chuckled and shook my head out of pure amusement, not denial. I could feel Rachel’s inquisitive eyes on me, wondering if I’d be able to catch up to her line of

questioning before she had the chance to question me herself. I looked at her and shrugged.

“He remembers a version of me, whether I am that man or not, I am not sure.”

“Svell Valdyr.”

“Another one of your secrets. He’s like the third person to call you that.”

She was right. And she had a right to know more. I turned to meet her inquisition and she gave me a knowing smirk.

“I was known as Svell here, as well.”

The inn owner couldn’t refrain from speaking.

“He was a god in his own right. Highly revered by all and a herald of better times to come. Please, follow me.”

The barkeep arched a brow and folded his arms. Vinnie immediately noticed the posture change and began getting somewhat irate in his movements. Walt tried to calm him

by shoving him slightly with his shoulder, but it didn't faze him.

"You got a problem, bud?"

The barkeep shook his head.

"Not a problem, just didn't think I'd meet the man who answered my prayer and he'd seem so... normal."

"The fuck does that mean?"

The barkeep poured two large drinks, mead from an old clay jar and shoved one toward Vinnie, one toward Walt, then poured one for himself, raising the glass slightly and tipping it toward them.

"It means we were all young once and we all believed in something. And this man was that something. TO SVELL VALDYR!"

A raucous blend of cheers and excited shouts filled the air as everyone raised their glasses and took a large drink in my honor, Vinnie and Walt following suit, despite the gore still lingering on their hands. Rachel stared at me then looked back at the tavern,

then back at me.

“All that’s for you, huh?”

The owner nodded profusely before ushering us back down the hall and down a small flight of stairs, wooden sconces littered the walls but were ignited by sacred flame and ember that glowed with a soft green and amber hue. That is, until we reached a large door.

“You still have my room?”

“Of course! I would never give this up, not for anyone. It belongs to you, Svell.”

“Will it be large enough to house us all?”

Skog dropped in again with the pertinent questions.

“Yeah. The room is very large with several beds. I think you’ll find these accommodations well fit. And if you’re hungry, and I can’t imagine you not being so, I will have the kitchen prepare a feast! Of course, in your honor.”

“My friend, the toast was honor enough.

Now I'd simply like a place where my friends and I may rest for the evening, and these two can wash the stench of the damned from their bodies."

"Yeah, that'd be nice."

Walt seemed to remember that he was covered in a slew of rotting dust and grime. Vinnie did not seem to forget, as his arms remained puffed and away from the rest of himself, undoubtedly, to remove the stickiness from his list of probable reasons to get angry.

The owner opened the doors and nodded profusely. I thought his weathered face and peppered beard would catch in his clothing, but he seemed often expressive and seasoned at nodding in such a manner.

"Of course! There are two bathing quarters in this room, and half dozen beds. Svell rarely traveled alone then. We'll bring your feast to you. And please, Svell, I beg you to accept it. This is the least we can do for you."

Rachel arched a brow and looked at the stocky innkeeper.

“And why is that, exactly?”

“He saved our young, protected our village. He singlehandedly removed the draugr that plagued us and the demented dishonored that haunted us for our wares and health. And should the Aesir ever not hear our prayer, Svell carries our message by hand to them and provides great diplomacy between our people. He is our most honored guest.”

I felt my blood turn hot beneath my skin. He was offering too many of my secrets, but I was not one to stop him or stand between Rachel and information. He took a breath as if to continue when Skog stepped in.

“Do you have roasts and heated drink?”

A nod, again of profuse manner.

“Oh yes! I’ll start it right away. And please, none of you hesitate to call me if you need anything. I will give you whatever it is you need. You’ll be treated with the same reverence.”

Rachel gave a long “oohhh” as the

strange grinning man ran off to fill the order. I entered the room as runes across my arms started to appear again in cadence with the energies surrounding the arena. There were large crystals glowing and holding flame, hovering over sconces. Runes slowly danced across the walls, shimmering softly through the water falling from the ceilings and into the rivers and motes below us. He'd kept the beds separated by small earthen walls and the bathing quarters were between two falls encased in twisted vine and root. Skog found a small fissure ebbing heated air before blowing a cloud into the room.

"My friend, this place is fantastic."

Rachel removed the armor and sat on one of the beds before falling back and immediately humming her contentment.

"Oh fuck, these beds are amazing."

Vinnie made his way down the halls and entered the bathing quarters before exclaiming a bright and loud "HOLY SHIT THIS IS FUCKING HUGE!" Walt followed suit with a "Fuck! Is that the fucking shower?!"

I couldn't help but laugh as they took

their places in their respective areas.

“So, tell us more about your life, *Svell*.”

Rachel teased but she was clearly curious about what I’d done before becoming a Journeyman and meeting James.

“I will tell you anything you want to know. If... you can find a barrel marked with a large “V”.”

She looked around and sat up slightly to point at the table where several barrels containing the V branding sat. I lit up slightly before making my way over to it and popped the cork, taking a long deep drink from it. My veins retreated and blood cooled as I sat back in the chair and relaxed.

“You can start by telling us what that is.”

“A very special blend of mead. Similar to my vodka back home, but less of the normal ingredient and more ambrosia and balanced sweetness. It calms me.”

“Well drink away and fucking share.”

She sat up completely and sat at the

table with me, flipping one of the wooden cups in front of her. Skog followed suit.

“If you’ll have me, that is.”

“I would have it no other way.”

I poured a steady stream into both cups and refilled my own before placing the barrel back in its original position. They raised their drinks, and I did the same before we all drank. Both surprised by the delightful balance of the beverage and the certain toxicity.

“Igor, holy shit. This is amazing.”

“If we survive, we can bring some back. Or perhaps I will ask for a delivery.”

“That would be fantastic. Do you often journey as such? With your friends?”

“Eh, yes and no.”

“First time I’m doing this with him.”

She took a deep swig.

“Ah! So, it is a time of many firsts! This is great!”

“You are an excitable individual, aren’t you, Skog?”

He chuckled and looked deep into the liquid in the cup.

“I try to keep my spirits lifted. It is all I could do to stay alive for so long... Now I just keep the practice up, it feels good to feel joy even through pain.”

We stared at him for a moment before laughing. Neither of us felt pity or needed to poke fun at Skog. It was quite the opposite. We’d found a kindred spirit who understood the triumph of finding solace amidst the chaos and destitution. And when we realized the other had started laughing, we laughed more... To the point where Skog started laughing right behind us. The three of us sat there, laughing and crying at the ridiculousness of our existences and how we’d all fallen into the others’ lives.

“You’re right. Feeling joy through pain. Camaraderie during uncertainty. Thank you, my friend.”

“Of course! It is sometimes easy to

forget.”

“Ain’t that the fuckin’ truth.”

Rachel took another swig.

“Okay, let’s get back to your interrogation. What’s the deal with you and the Innkeeper, not the giant barkeep with the gnarly arrow tattoo.”

“Tyr’s sigil. And the Innkeeper and I have an almost comical story, really. He was aided in totality, by accident. This entire village was.”

Skog swallowed hard, trying to keep himself from laughing and speaking while full of brew.

“You must tell us this story.”

I took a deep breath and chuckled, finishing my drink and placing the cup on the table. Rachel made it a point to refill it and top both of theirs off.

“Yes, you must.”

She echoed. I took a deep breath and sat back against the wooden chair, slumping my

arm over the back and taking a breath.

“Oh, this is gonna be a good one, huh?”

“Yes, Rachel. It will be incredibly good. I must get comfortable before I start. Okay.”

“Are you starting?”

Skog’s excitement was overflowing. I laughed and nodded.

“Yes, okay. Here is the story of me and the innkeeper.”

They sat up a bit more and listened intently. I could feel my impish nature growing as I stared back at them with cold ideation.

“I saved him from some hunters.”

Skog stared waiting for me to continue and Rachel’s face twisted into some amalgam of one who ate a tart grape and sucked on a salted lemon. Laughter erupted from my chest.

“I am sorry, I could not help myself. The real story is that I did rescue this village from rogue hunters who wanted to use it as a ... base of sorts. They are worse

than the exiled, but more cunning and much smarter. They had the notion of wiping out all the Aesir enjoyed, created or maintained. They wanted to subjugate the people and use them, turn the children into hunters much akin to themselves. Eh, but they were thwarted."

"By you."

She took a swig.

"Yes, but –"

"BY ACCIDENT!"

Skog blurted, making an upward pointing motion with his finger as he listened closely, much like a child waiting for their teacher to complete a story for them.

"Right, how the fuck did you pull that off anyway?"

"I wandered often and drank more often than I wandered. Sometimes I'd get lost in that fog just to see if my own ghosts would come back to haunt me. But they never did. So, I was just drunk and tired.

I saw the smoke from this inn and decided to make my way over.”

“So, who was getting abused when you got here.”

“Our host. The hunters had a certain stink about them, almost like the dishonored. Cowardice wrapped in bravado and tainted with weaponry stolen or forged from stolen goods. The innkeeper told them he’d run out of a spice needed for their meads, but they had the normal stuff. This was somewhat normal. Most people don’t want to go out in that fog without skill and blessing, let alone the wood.”

“Tell us more of your intrusion.”

“I didn’t intrude. I just wanted to sleep, but the belligerence of the hunters started getting under my skin. I’d have had quieter times and better luck outside than wherever this ardent fool decided to creep from. I told him to be quiet, his friends got involved and I put them all down.”

“You knocked them unconscious?”

“He killed them. Probably brutally. Am I right?”

A chuckle and a nod.

“The innkeeper was so thrilled that he gave me a room for the night free of charge. I opted to stay for some time longer. Those who hunted in a village usually didn’t come alone, and it typically wasn’t long before significantly more appeared. And it wasn’t.”

“Then what did you do, my friend? This is riveting.”

“I waited for them...”

* * *

The air was cold and stank of death. I took a long drink from the clay jar the innkeeper left by my side. Their scent slowly thickened, choking the life from any freshness that may have clung to the frigid winds, but that was to be expected. They were missing a half dozen of their comrades... I was a little amused by how long it took them to mobilize.

The village was scared but still curious about what was to happen. Windows laid open but only ajar, curtains pulled closed but leaving just enough space to peek, and the merchants had boarded their wares inside, along with themselves, only staring through a small crack in the wood.

The innkeeper peeked outside before bringing me another jug of brew.

"Are you sure about this? Wouldn't you like a clear head over ... whatever this will do for you. What if you're killed?"

I had to laugh. Death and I were familiar, but we rarely took long journeys together.

"Don't worry for me. This will do more wonders than bring harm to myself or you and yours."

He hesitated in placing the jug but did so and retreated just a few steps back to the opening of the inn. I nodded my thanks and lifted the jug by the small handle and rested it on my forearm before knocking it back in what felt like one fell swoop. I drank quite a bit before my veins receded back into my flesh and the blood inside them thinned enough for me to

move.

"You should go back inside."

The keep watch for some time longer before realizing the breadth of my warning. He scurried back so fast I'd worried his salt and pepper beard would be caught in the doors. But he was skilled with such manners.

The wind shifted and I rose to my feet. There were at least a few dozen of them walking into the village as though they'd already laid claim. One mentioned to another that the shops were closed as another laughed and made some crass joke about their lack of need for merchants and wares of slender caliber.

I'd heard enough. I stood and met them along the cobbling. One opened their mouth to speak but I threw the empty bottle into it and cracked their jaw. Another growled some sinister retort but swallowed a stone the size of a spoon and failed to finish his ridiculous monologue. The broken jawed hunter tried to speak but found a stone of similar size lodged deep where their eye once blinked. Now it leaked crimson regret. Both statures hunters fell in seconds. And in seconds the others took to

arms, save for what appeared to be their leader; a tall gruff individual wearing skins and furs from creatures and persons alike.

“Who the fuck are you?”

I leaned back on one leg lazily and tucked my hand into my pocket, the other hanging by my side.

“Eh, it does not matter. I’d say to leave but it doesn’t seem like you will.”

My heart slowly began to awaken, beating just a bit harder than normal, but maintaining its rhythm, like a forge being warmed and smith hammering in time with their metal’s casting.

“Enough talk.”

The first wave of hunters stood ready to remove me, and they attempted. One ran for me, but was easily evaded by stepping back, then tripping him with my less dominant foot. Into a stack of crates and loaded barrels he went. The next pulled their weapon and threw it at me. Again, easily evaded but why not show off? I caught the instrument and threw it back with a flick of the wrist. I made a face when a geyser of

blood projected its intent to remove the life from its captor and decorate her friends with her failure.

I suppose that's all it took for them to continue coming for me, this time in more than singles and couples. Now it was waves. I preferred waves.

Another tried to pierce me with a blade; I stepped back and turned against him, kicking him from behind and listening to his spine snap in several places before he made contact with a post and crumbled into a bloodied heap on the floor. The next came quickly, knuckles clad in some sort of melee weapon akin to Jonathan's brass knuckles. But he also fell short when my own connected with his face and removed the head from his shoulders.

One by one they fell to me with such ease I was unsure if I'd need copious amounts of liquor pumping through my veins, sedating my own blood from reaching its thirst. But I'd be something of a liar if I'd told you I wasn't excited to see the large behemoths towering behind them. They'd enslaved a set of Berserkers and left them enraged.

Their eyes were wild with violence,

mouths chained shut with evidence that sewing was far from viability. Their arms were cut, healed, gashed and bore signs of tears that had formed and reformed through terrible battles. All the while, I felt myself slipping into my own blood-drenched desire.

The leader wasted no time, seeing as how a majority of his following had been slain. He released them and they set their eyes on me. But not before doing as true Berserkers would do. They grabbed the remaining hunters steadfast behind the others and ripped them to pieces, attempting to shove the mangled bits between the chains holding their jaws shut. Instead, they merely shredded the meat and released a shriek of incomprehensible agony and frustration.

The leader took a step back. He was going to run... And I could not allow that.

"Where are you going?"

My distance was mere inches from him now. He pulled a small blade, and attempted to cut me with it, flailing wildly. I took it from him like a scorned child and buried it in the underbelly of his jaw, strait through the top of his skull before dropping him to the ground and focusing my attention back on my true prize.

The first of the two charged me. I dodged fairly easily by stepping back and pivoting but the second put its fist into the meat of my face and sent me flying into another set of barrels. The first came charging, not giving me the time to stand as he trampled me beneath his foot and turned on the ball to come back and finish the job.

The second followed suit before I stood completely, my clothes torn and runes appearing across my flesh as small cuts made themselves known. My blood crawled from each of them, slowly consuming the broken wood and bent metal around me, until it noticed the corpse of a hunter not far off and crawled over it, breaking him down bit by bit until nothing was left. The first Berserker wailed and came for me, charging and swinging a column it had ripped from a nearby building.

I stopped the log with my forearm, then plunged my free hand deep into the Berserker's innards. His bones punctured my flesh as I pulled the sharpened shards from their places, piece by piece, bit by bit, drop by drop. As my blood continued to enter its body, the poor beasted warrior continued to swing, to fight and gnash and gnaw as best he could. But my blood

reached his heart and consumed it immediately before I removed my arm from his innards. The second, however, caught me off guard. It'd been so long since I'd fed on the heart of another warrior, I got lost in the euphoria of the spoils of the fight and forgot there was another.

He beat his chest mercilessly before blowing heated steam through his nostrils. My eyes reddened fully, I felt my face slowly elongate and my teeth become weapons as my spine cracked and distorted. It seemed intrigue had fallen upon my opponent and some of the rage subsided long enough for him to regain his warrior's edge.

Within seconds he charged me again, and within seconds I leapt up and buried both feet in his chest, riding him down to the ground and ripping the chains from his face. He dug his hands deep into my sides, cracking my ribs and returning the favor, though the blood coating his hands started ripping his skin from the flesh and the flesh from the bone. He roared at me, his mouth now bloodied and free. I growled back leaning in and immediately biting the tongue from his face and clawing the windpipe from his throat before spitting them to the side as my blood ran through his living corpse. For a few moments, I felt some sort of peace and the

bloodlust felt controlled and sated. Something it had not felt in quite some time.

The innkeeper braved the bloodied streets; corpses piled around the merchant stands and corners. There was a horror in his eyes, but a relief coating his face.

I looked at him, my eyes still as red as the blood that pumped through them as my body slowly returned to its less intimidating state.

"Please go back inside..."

He looked around and attempted to speak before his eyes caught mine and he nodded profusely, running inside and locking the door.

* * *

"And then I cleaned up the streets, and he offered me this room as a permanent thank you for ridding them of whatever hunter nonsense they'd come into contact with."

I took another swig as Skog stared in great awe and Rachel rolled her eyes as she mocked me.

“And then I cleaned up the streets’ as if you’re just telling us some story about a parade. You murdered dozens, and two Berserkers, saved an entire village by ‘accident’ and then just went on your merry way. Because of course you did.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“It was a few dozen hunters and a couple enraged and engorged Berserkers. Not really much to croon over too much. Though the Berserkers were fairly delicious. The hunters were not but they were there to be taken care of.”

“You’re a menace, Igor.”

Rachel smirked and filled our cups again, pouring another round for Vinnie and Walt who’d appeared sometime between me impaling and the hunter with the knife in the underbelly of his mouth. They sat at the adjacent table, nodding their thanks and taking a swig that nearly finished the drink completely.

“Accident or not, you are a good man to

protect these people. I see now why your father sent me to you.”

“Fucking Boris...”

I sighed and chuckled as the innkeeper tapped on the door.

“Come in.”

Without needing a second notice, he entered with a few of his staff and they placed several large dishes and platters before us as the barkeep from before walked in with a large roasted stag plated on something only he could clearly carry.

“If you need anything else, Svell. Please do not hesitate to let us know. It’s the least we can do.”

The innkeeper grinned with delight as Vinnie’s eyes slowly changed, deepening in color. Walt’s also began to shift, giving way to a more lupine nature. Both men garnered the antimony sigil again, but the violence was absent from its appearance this time.

“Thank you, old friend. I think we are sated for now.”

“Not quite. Have anymore barrels of that stuff lying around?”

Rachel pointed to the barrel marked with the V. Both the innkeeper and the barkeep nodded.

“I’ll grab what’s left from the back.”

He bellowed. I shook my head.

“Only three barrels. We will be leaving in the morning.”

The barkeep nodded and left as the innkeeper followed suit bowing again. I chuckled again. If only they’d known my thoughts that evening. The demons I was facing, trying to find my solace in them instead of fighting them. The acceptances I forced myself to retain... *Ah, but it is over now. There is no need to bring it back... Not yet.*

That night, we ate and drank as old friends and warriors before a dark day of unsure battle. While the gravity weighed on us all in its own way across our minds, we found a way to enjoy our time at the small tavern.

.10.**The Unknown & The Unknown Narrator**

Igor and his merry band of misfits... The black liquid swirled around against the ground, showing me their journey so far.

I didn't know if they'd make it this far, though I'd hoped they would. Something was wrong with me... wrong with my appointment. Something I couldn't control but hoped it'd just fucking go away on its own. Having been around for as long as something like me would have been around had time been quantified by the nothing... I thought by now this would lose its sting, at the very least. But... Existence enjoys its cycles, no matter who or what you may be.

This was an exceptional group of individuals and I'd hoped they'd find a way to begin correcting what I was about to do to them. *What I'm about to do to everyone...*

The soft chittering of my Keepers slid into my ears, pulling at the scars across my face, turning my grimace into a grin.

"Igor... I hope you'll forgive me for this... I hope everyone will forgive me for this..."

My sanity slipped as a twisted upheaval of voices wrenched around in my chest and a brutish chuckle turned into a demented cackle across several vibrational tones. Ripples formed in the puddle in front of me before I slapped it away, the Keepers' chittering getting louder as they mirrored my tormented laugh. *I hate that fucking laugh...*

Doorways opened, and dozens of them ran through them, one after the other. I sighed, then laughed. Then sighed... then laughed... and laughed... and laughed... The scars on my cheeks pulled themselves apart as I laughed more, bloodied smear running out of them.

I tried to stop myself from laughing

again but it was no use. I just kept laughing... and the more I laughed, the more doorways opened. The more doors that opened, the greater the number of Keepers running through them... One stayed back, though. Only one...

It looked at me, its head knocking against its shoulders, face spinning with a lack of expression other than my own cackle. It waited for me to make a sound...

“The Sphinx... and the Soulless One.”

Those were the only words I could muster. The only things to slip through my lips before another demented cackle erupted, the Keeper mimicking me as six heads circled the one and it skittered off in a backwards crawl, joints dislocated as it ran off into a cavern.

I sat and laughed... and laughed... and laughed... alone.

.11.**From the Tavern to the Wood**

I left a few items of protection on the bar with the barkeep while the others packed their things and stuffed leftover food in their gear for the trip. The innkeeper tried to grace us with more of the tavern kitchen's delicious menu, but we declined, still warm from our dinner the night before and full of palpable scraps.

The barkeep, however, had but one thing to give us. A note that he mentioned came from a woman with piercing blue eyes and a man that looked as though he'd not slept in several seasons. I opened the note and read it, then looked back at the barkeep. The large

man shrugged slightly but nodded his blessing all the same. I returned the favor and gave the note to Rachel, who'd been looking over my shoulder to get a glimpse of what it said.

We met the others outside. Vinnie and Walt seemed to have a renewed sense of vigor, and had yet to realize they weren't arguing about anything. Skog appeared enamored by the realm and full.

"Shake a leg, Gramps. Time to go."

Walt teased with a confident smirk. Vinnie secured his gear and unfastened some of Walt's causing him to have to resecure his. The two immediately started bickering, nearly breaking out into a fight until Rachel hit them both with loose bits of cobble from the road.

"Get it together, fellas."

I chuckled and started off through the village to the other side. The other followed suit, though Rachel made it a point to stand close to me while we walked, undoubtedly to continue her earlier interrogation.

"Alright, what's with the name and the reverence? I know you saved this town, but

really, Igor. What's the real story behind all of this."

My legs felt electrified at the thought of telling her more about my past. About telling any of them. Not out of fear or misunderstanding, but out of the knowledge that I knew I was still exactly the man that gained respect through fear and this newer version that gained favor through deed.

"Where do I even start with that?"

"How about your name?"

Skog, again, guided me to the next bit of information that may satisfy the group's curiosity. I nodded.

"Okay. I was made in our home realm. Made of dirt and bone from the earth and blood from deeper still. But I was not born."

A soft breeze caught my nose as whispers slowly entered my ears. I shook them off for a brief moment before continuing as the path into the wood became less beaten and more gnarled.

“A woman from a nearby... we will say village, found me and took me in. She lived outside of the others, so there was no thought when she brought a seemingly wild wolf cub home and returned with a boy.”

“Wait,” Rachel pondered, “So you were never a human?”

“Nope. I’ve always been other. Technically more than a wolf, but that is what the Earth deemed me to be when my existence came time. So that is what I am. It isn’t so bad. But being that she pulled a wolfling from the ice, she named me Svell Valdyr – or the equivalent. There was not much in the way of structured language, but structured enough to communicate.”

“Alright so you were a baby mutt found by a good-notioned woman, and then what? You just lived with them?”

Vinnie’d joined the conversation, taking a break from teasing and fighting with Walt for a moment, if only to put his curiosity back to bed.

“I did. I grew with them and learned their ways. She taught me to heal others, I taught them to listen to the Earth and her guidance. We lived well together.”

“What happened?”

An exhale ran from my lungs to the air outside my body as the veins pressed against my skin, blood thickening.

“We don’t need to bring it up if you don’t want to, Igor.”

Rachel was good for giving me a way out, but the least I could do at this point was let them in a bit more. So, I shook my head and took a slow breath.

“Thank you, but I should finish... Casey was also in the vicinity and hungry. There weren’t many like him and even fewer still, being the Hertz that he is. He slaughtered every last one of them... Including a young girl I’d grown to call my niece. I took my pound of flesh that day, and he attempted to take his. I could see the madness in his eyes and the remorse when he came to, but I did not care to explore it. I left soon after

and began exploring again on my own.”

The fog began to thicken across our path as the trees darkened around us. There was a strange scent wafting about, but nothing like the dishonored and damned. Not like the draugr either. No, this was mischievous but still something to keep a caution about. I let myself slide from the memory for just a few moments to ensure we were not followed, then continued on with my story, as though nothing had happened.

“How the fuck do you still talk to that guy?”

Walt questioned.

“I know his madness now... and they’ve forgiven him... And I know what happened to me when I held it. I grew cold, and enraged for many years after. Only helping those I saw fit to help... Until I met Sif in her human form. The gods of many pantheons tend to walk among mortals at least in some regard... at least once. I was lucky enough to be there when she was walking about as a human woman. We became very close very quickly and ‘married’ soon after.”

“Shit, Igor.”

I chuckled as Rachel made a mental note to herself. You could see the gears turning, having lived a similar experience of losing a loved one to the hands of someone she now cared for.

“Heh, it was not all bad. We enjoyed centuries together. She was very good at living as a mortal but maintaining her duties as a god. But ... she was also taken from me. In the same manner... I knew she’d have to return eventually, but that was not the method I wanted it to happen.”

“Wait, hold the fuck on. You mean Casey did it twice?!”

Vinnie’s voice cracked slightly in disbelief.

“He did. And that is when my mind broke... I hunted him. I aimed to kill him. And I began leaving destructive trails everywhere I went, unable to connect with the realm the way I’d done before. But by then, other civilizations started taking solid form and he became a thing of my past though my vow

never wavered... Not until James."

Rachel chuckled.

"Of course, Jimmy is somehow involved in your rehabilitation."

"Of course, indeed. I became a warrior, one with honor but an insatiable appetite for death. I sat with vikings, kings, chieftains... I did not care... as long as there was blood to fill my lungs and wet my hands, I did not care... Until I did."

If Skog had a bucket of popcorn and an understanding of what it was, he'd be crunching loudly on the edge of his seat. Vinnie and Walt also seemed enthralled by my story.

"What made you care? I mean fuck, I dunno that I'd fuckin' give a shit after everything was taken twice by the same person."

"Yeah, I'd probably just flip my fuckin' lid and kill everyone until I found that fuckhead."

The two were correct in their thoughts.

They certainly would have lost it, giving that the creeping sensation of what they were was correct. And there was not much of a way we would have gotten them back. Though Skog and Rachel seemed to understand what it was that made me care.

“I saw what I’d done... I fell prey to a worse hunger and did something far more devastating than anything Casey could have done to me. I’d killed, slaughtered, gorged myself so much on death for so long, I failed to realize what it did to the living... That I’d done to countless others the same that he’d done to me... but I chose to do it. Jimmy is the one who helped me realize, he did not.”

“You started adopting and saving children after that, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“I’d orphaned a girl and her sister... and I could not hold the guilt without finding a way for her... So I killed my own party. Devoured every bit of them so there was nothing left to tell others what had

happened other than a basic raid... One an onlooker may consider successful."

"Fuck."

Walt and Vinnie swore in unison.

"Indeed yes, this is very 'fuck'."

Skog agreed in broken understanding. Rachel chuckled and I smiled.

"Alright, all of that tracks. But how did the legend start?"

"I don't know. I thought I was going about it quietly. But children did as children do and started singing about it. The girls never told anyone that I was the one who orphaned them. They only held that a wicked party came and killed everyone... And when it was their time... I killed the evil ones and saved their lives... Heh, you know if a child cannot find me, they pray to them? The two girls I'd wronged."

"Fuck."

The whole group swore together this

time. I laughed. Possibly a bad move on my part due to whatever was hunting us, but I could not help myself.

“Before you all ask. The sigils let me hear them. When Sif and I were together, she taught me her forms of magic. Between what she’d instilled in me and what the woman from the wood showed me of her own healing practice, I learned to work and create systems of my own to help them find me... and only me. So now I wear a sigil for every system I’ve given away...”

Rachel stared at me before rolling her eyes in such a dramatic way, she rolled her entire head.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Igor! Are you sure you’re not a fucking god yourself?”

I nodded.

“Formidable but not a god.”

Skog opened his mouth to speak but the fog rolled in thicker over his skin, cracking it and stunting his verbal ability. Vinnie and Walt immediately ran to his side to help him as his

legs began to buckle. Rachel looked at me with fervor in her eyes and a dangerous glare behind it. I pulled a small vial from the pouch buried in my pocket and knelt beside him, finding the largest fissure in his skin and pouring it into the hissing cracks. He cried out in a stunted scream, one only audible to those next to him.

I whispered and drew three runes in the dirt beneath us before slapping it hard, careful not to pierce my skin on any stones below. Skog's screaming came to an abrupt halt as relief set in and the cracks began to come together, albeit still highly visible.

"Again, you save me."

"You are not saved yet, just not dead either."

Vinnie and Walt picked him up and steadied Skog as Rachel snapped her fingers, the armor within her cloak acting as a conduit underneath the small explosion to grant her a miniscule flame. But miniscule was all she needed. A branch from a nearby tree hung low enough for her to reach up and grab it. She pulled hard and ripped it from the rest of the tree and snapped her fingers over the end, the

armor again acting as a conduit, but this time allowing the flame to migrate toward the broken limb, creating a torch.

“Bernerd might be my new favorite person.”

“If we get out of this in one piece, I’ll make sure to tell him when we see him again.”

She nodded and walked closer to us.

“What’s the deal with the fog? It just kinda happened all of a sudden.”

Vinnie picked up a wet boot and shook his foot.

“Yeah, and what’s the deal with all this sloshy shit? Weren’t we just on dry fuckin’ land?”

I looked around, gaining my bearings. The fog was thick enough to break a knife... the ground a marsh... And an odd possession between realms of a man that has little business in these lands... not many would know to possess him in such a manner...

The bark of the trees was blackened, not uncommon in this realm but highly uncommon in this particular wood. At least the wood we'd thought we were walking through. As if on cue, mouths spread across the trunks as bloodied teeth showed through, and crimson tides ran from their lips and around the bark. The mouths started cackling in a terrible unison, the disharmony causing my eye to twitch.

"Is the realm of the Aesir always so... strange?"

"Yes, but not this creepy... or dangerous. Can you walk?"

Skog attempted to stand on his own as Vinnie and Walt released him. He nodded with shaken confidence but moved forward.

"Stay with Rachel... I don't see this going well... Nor do I see you coming back from anymore injuries even remotely similar to that one."

He nodded. Rachel seemed to agree with the decision, her normal playful sass taking a backseat as the soldier in her took over. Her armor responded almost instantly to her change in air, covering her. Skog's glove

reacted to her change and immediately formed a protective barrier around him, though it seemed it was no longer permitted for offensive use in this form.

The duo sniffed the air again, their bodies slowly bulking up. Vinnie's began to thicken around the shoulders and down the spine. Walt's elongated but grew outward in, like a lean barrel ready to be made a shield. Vinnie's girth ran through his legs creating trunks of enduring power. The two stood full, looking around, nearly double their size from before. A dense growl escaped Vinnie's chest as his teeth thickened in his head creating cylindrical weapons. Walt's did something similar, though his face pulled further out, elongating in the snout region. The two seemed attuned to something that none of us appeared to be picking up on.

"You two okay?"

Rachel checked in, her hand in her pocket, no doubt searching for her weapon of choice. The duo nodded.

"Is *that* normal?"

"Only when they're about to fucking kill

something.”

“It would be in your best interests to stay away from them. This place has sway over their nature...”

“Yeah, you can tell us more about that later.”

“You know nearly as much as I do...”

Walt snarled, ears elongating though he still held the form of a man. A large man, but a man, nonetheless. Vinnie hit his chest and screamed to the heavens, the cackling dying down as his voice split, ringing thunder through the land.

As if being summoned and right on cue, a large creature erupted from the water, its joints flipped in ways not even tree knots understood. In the center was a mouth filled with other mouths all laughing then crying, then a mix of the two, repeatedly. It had six heads, all spinning slowly and rotating like a revolver chamber.

It ran for the duo before sliding into the ground and disappearing. What arose behind them instead were several sets of six eyes...

The eyes rose from the ground and immediately started clicking and chittering to the side. Another set appeared and did the same. Then another. By the time our heads swiveled around, at least a dozen of those creatures stood before us, a dozen more around us.

The creatures were larger than Vinnie and Walt, but smaller than the Jötnar. They were decrepit, much like all dead or corrupted being in this realm. The problem was, their flesh was of this realm, but their bones were of another. Hailed from the Halls of their Dead deep-seeded within the tombs of Jötunheimr. They wore the dead flesh of the Aesir, stitched with the ills of the draugr hordes.

There are too many of them...

One reached for Vinnie, landing it's deadly grip on his arm and attempting to fling him across the marsh. Vinnie, however, had other plans. He ripped the throat from his assailant and proceeded to shove it back into the hole, forcing his hand down through it and coming out of its chest before being dropped and landing on the ground. Many would have stopped, but the rage behind his eyes was clearly unavoidable. He grabbed the creature

and proceeded to disjoint it, tearing tattered skin from sopping flesh, crushing the bone beneath his fingertips. In a matter of seconds, he'd obliterated the creature, his hulking mass becoming visibly denser though the size didn't seem to change much. He roared toward the sky again, this time shattering the grinning trees around us, crushing a few of the decrepit beasts.

As if feeding off of his enraged psychosis, Walt grabbed one attempting to sneak up on him and flipped it around, biting and tearing it's heart out of its chest, consuming it raw as he started ripping pieces out of the creature, the bulk of his body taking in what pieces it felt it needed and burning the ones it didn't to cinders. Another attempted to sneak up on him, but was met by Vinnie's fist now protruding through his chest. Walt turned around and ripped the shoulder from the hole Vinnie'd made clean off with a clawed hand.

Though as well as the duo was doing on their own against the undead Jötnar ... things, more began to surface. I looked at Rachel, who gave me a stringent nod and whistled loud between two fingers.

The duo finished their slaughter, now

attuned to her and started to sprint toward her. Vinnie grabbed her and took off, Walt grabbed Skog and followed suit as I stayed behind, hands clasped together as my veins rose to the surface, breaking free of the skin and pulsating where it once held smooth constitution.

The deformed dead stared after the others before turning the creaking heads toward me. The wet gurgle of their disturbed slumber filled the air as their putrid lungs quivered in their chests. It wasn't long before my veins ruptured, a couple of the creatures helping in such a way as to rip the blood from the tubing themselves. *Thank you.*

I grinned wide, my face flayed open as if raked with a large weapon, blood running from every opening, every pore, every slice. As more of me dripped into the water, the marshlands became a steadfast ally instead of the hinderance they'd assumed it would be. *Whoever "they" are.*

My blood traveled through the wet and mash, slithering up several of the creatures all at once, and devouring their rotting corpses piece by piece. One cleaved my shoulder with a large yet crude weapon. I felt my shoulders

slump back and relax as my spine slowly crawled from my back and into the water, the rest of me following suit and breaking into as much a disgusting amorphous thing as they could possibly imagine or even be themselves.

The water infused with my blood carried the pieces up into the cleaving beast's carcass. I could feel myself adhering to every facet of its being and consuming it whole while animated. It's screams were like a tormented chorus of beautiful noise. I reconstituted quickly, my clothes tattered by the ground, and only a few pieces still clinging to my midsection. The rest of my blood continued taking out the outer reems of creatures while I looked around for whatever was allowing these creatures through to our world.

But before I had the chance, the corrupted Keeper slid underneath me and seemed to phase through me before grabbing my shoulder and attempting to toss me. I grabbed it's hand and removed it with my own, eyes black and filling quickly with over fueled blood. The skies darkened as glyphs and runes ran through the lightning, the crackle carried on the wind, a similar set appearing against my forehead, running down my face. I felt their malice cross my eyes and run into my

mouth, down my throat and over my neck before exploding across my back.

If there were any Aesir or Jötnar that didn't know of my return, they did now. I felt Rachel's pull toward checking on my wellbeing. I sent a mental signal to continue with a direction. I'd rather they not see this...

The remaining dead came after me. Their speed like a message against the wind, faster than that of the ravens' wings. But my blood cut them deep from underneath and consumed them instantly. The corrupted Keeper came again, it's hand sprouting another three, all of which reached for my throat. I took the other piece I'd removed earlier and pulled it in two, using it as a moving defensive shield until my bones grew strong enough. I slid underneath it, snapping my forearm and forcing the bone deep into its underbelly. The creature laughed and howled in pain as my blood ran through it. I reconnected my hand as I slid out from underneath it, a large grouping of runes pulling the tendon's together.

The creature howled and ran off, pieces of its flesh hitting the water as my blood flowed through it. Might not have been enough

to kill it, but it was more than enough to give the others some space from whatever malintent created that thing.

The runes slowly faded as the glyphs followed their direction. The skies slowly opened and leaked tears of relief as I released them. I closed my eyes and held my face high, letting the rain wash what filth still persisted on my skin.

“Svell Valdyr. You never fail to put on a brilliant show.”

The voice was like smoked honey and gravel, but spoke with the same confidence it had always spoken with.

“Loki... I do hope you are not the one to send those creatures or to corrupt that Keeper.”

He chuckled and handed me a small talisman. I outstretched my hand and the item stitched itself into my flesh, a similar barbed wireframe did the same around Loki’s neck.

“Before I answer, I want you to know I don’t have time for my usual trickery and impishness... I will only tell you the

truth... I did not send them. But I'm beginning to fear who did. That power belongs only to the All-Beings. Not even we can access that power... nor can the Jötnar. Not that they have the time to do so."

The talisman sank beneath the flesh of my palm as the barbs made themselves more prominent across his throat.

"You are right to assume that if what you're hoping is untrue is indeed true. But I imagine you don't have the time yourself to begin unraveling your impish pleasantries now."

"Astute as ever."

A familiar darkness ran from the corners of his eyes, splintering and spreading as a cracked spider pattern would in the long frozen ice. I gave an understanding albeit saddened smile.

"What is it that you need of me, my friend."

He reached down and pulled the bones of my earlier foes and handed them to me, now

clad in a sheepskin sack. *Ah, some power still resides in the old god...*

“Be ready. Collect your items... Find your friends... and enter the realm of the Dwarven Masters.”

I stared at him in disbelief, still holding my arm outstretched with the sheepskin-clad bones still hovering.

“Loki, not even I have the authority to enter a forge of that nature.”

“You didn’t... but things aren’t quite what they were. Rules being broken and bent. I’d say the end is near but truly we know he is just the beginning.”

“For the sake of us all, I hope the end comes quickly and does not follow course.”

He nodded and snapped his fingers. I stood before him wearing an old linen outfit I used to walk around in, though these felt somewhat different... perhaps enchanted by the old god. I nodded my thanks. My brow furrowed as something clanged together in my pocket. *I know that sound...*

He winked at me and vanished, a blackened raven with silver-tipped wings erupted from the wood as I found myself close behind the others. I looked upward nodding my thanks before I heard the grunt and chuff of the beastly duo, now returned to their normal hidden sizes.

“The fuck are you wearing, Igor?”

I chuckled and shook my head.

“I lost my other clothes. It’s all I could find. Very comfortable though. Maybe I find you a matching set.”

Vinnie made a disgusted face as Walt laughed hard enough to double over. Skog laughed as well, though his skin seemed to still hold the damage from the earlier attempt. He wasn’t healing... and he wouldn’t with the corruption spreading so far.

“Let’s keep moving. We are taking a slight detour.”

Rachel watched me, reading my face, the lines that somehow appeared in the last few moments since she’d seen me. I nodded. She gave me one quick sharp downtick of the head.

“Alright, fuckers. Pick up the pace and stop dickin’ around. We have ground to cover.”

Vinnie and Walt immediately pulled themselves together and picked up the pace, grabbing what items they needed to grab and held Skog, as Rachel and I led them to the next stop.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?”

I shrugged.

“Only if it has be.”

She rolled her eyes and I chuckled.

“Always such a damn dad.”

.12.

The Realm of the Dwarven Masters

We approached a cave. Runes littered the opening of it as a small engraved bowl sat next to the opening. Entering as it was would surely result in death or imprisonment in some endless dimension run by gnomes or Druden or something.

I pulled a small set of items from my pocket. The items consisted of a stone, a gem and some sort of nectar. Loki'd given me a one-way pass to the inner heat fueled by the Tree. I placed the items in the bowl before a tall woman with piercing blue eyes and silken blond hair walked from behind a blackened tree. Another, a man of impressive stature

with a similar scent to that of Harold appeared, hair a deep rusted red and sandy brown, his face covered in scruff with bags that signaled an end to the era of sanity and sleep.

“I told you they’d be here.”

She spoke with Harold’s confidence and a smooth richness that only stood to command respect and lure the unsuspecting into a false sense of security.

“Right. Which is what you are frequently.”

He sounded as if he was only somewhat attuned to the physical world, like some of him stayed with the souls of the damned and departed while the rest of him wandered with purpose.

“Holy shit. I didn’t think you two actually existed.”

Rachel laughed as she offered Sonya her hand. Sonya took it and shook.

“We get that a lot.”

Vinnie shook Ivo’s, then Walt. It was like

a somewhat intriguing dance as the partners switched until everyone had shaken hands.

“We should go.”

“You really don’t mince words, do you?”

Ivo looked at the cave then the bowl.

“I really hope we’ve got the last in—”

I opened the cork and poured the nectar over it, uttering softly in a language only known to the Dwarven Masters and their inner circles. Sonya smirked.

“Now that is just delightful. I haven’t heard that language since we got stuck in the Gaelic Aisles.”

Ivo chuffed to himself.

“You mean since we got trapped in the fucking hellscape of the Morrigan and were rescued by a bunch of drunks with smithing skills.”

“Yes, that.”

“Come. We cannot afford to waste

time..."

Skog's breathing was getting slower and his vitality seemed to leak from his wounds as he stood between Vinnie and Walt.

Ivo took a look at him and nodded as the doorway became clearer.

"Probably a good idea to get the hell out of here."

I ushered everyone through as the doorway began to close. I took the stone and gem from the bowl and continued through until the path back closed completely, displaying a stone wall behind the archway.

"This place is fuckin' huge."

Walt looked up toward the ceilings and the large, draped archways clad with metal chandeliers. Fire bellowed from the torches hanging in the rings about the light fixtures.

Deep within the confines, the strike of a hammer forging some sort of mineral into a useful item rang through the hallways. We followed, Skog slowing more as we continued on. I gestured for the others to hand him over

and go on without us, moreso that we'd catch up. Skog nodded his agreement.

"You'll need to stay behind this time, Skog... You cannot handle the journey in this condition."

He chuckled, his distinct hooded eyes smiled before his lips got the chance, though sadness rang through his acceptance.

"I would like to argue... but I know you are right. I only hope our hosts find the notion endearing and not out of arrogance."

"They will not find your request to heal anything but wise. When we're done here, and I come back with the others, we'll find a place for you and your people to start anew, hm? But you have to be alive to help us make that happen... Besides, I'd never hear the end of it from Boris if I let anything happen to you."

He laughed and winched, holding his side.

"You sound like you've endured this

torture before.”

“I have, as will you. At least if you keep him around. And you will.”

“You will need to tell me the story of how you two became so close after meeting in such a desolate way.”

I nodded agreement and he did the same.

It wasn't long before a dense man stepped forward, forearms round like barrels, hands thick as padded gloves, and his fingers held extra joints and fortitude. His face was more slender than Bernerd's, nose straight but beard full and perfectly braided with several rows all joined to a point and tied off. His hair was tied back and died a harsh steel, no doubt from the eons of working against shards of metals and flames.

“This way. We have a room ready for him.”

Sindri guided us to another place in the back of the forge away from the harsh metals and magics. Skog limped toward the room as best he could, his legs eventually giving out

before reaching the room. I put him over my shoulders and carried him the rest of the way, laying him in a bed clad with royal silks and fine linens.

“Please, I do not want to ruin your fine cloths.”

“These are many. We have several.”

His voice was clearer now as he spoke but still held the husk of flame and shards.

“Oh. Then I thank you...”

Skog’s eyes rolled deep into the back of his head as his consciousness left him, wounds still unhealed but not worsening. I placed him down atop the linen and sighed.

“Please, take care of this one for us. He is vital.”

“I know.”

Sindri began cleaning the wounds after cleansing his hands of excess dusk and slag.

“I take it Loki found you.”

"Of course. I only apologize that I have nothing to offer you other than sweets from our world... well, whatever's left of them."

"I'll take those. Your realm's Midgard is filled with interesting pieces and treats. Were they made by the Mad God? I've heard he's found a new solace."

I nodded.

"Then you should absolutely leave them here."

Again, I nodded.

"We will. Sindri..."

"Why are you here?"

"Yes. He didn't have much for me."

"You will fail if you don't use our doorway. And you will lose your nerve if you don't find the Rhodian you're searching for."

"He's here."

“He is. I’d say stay and rest...”

He slowly cleaned and treated Skog’s wounds before pulling the poison from them, his joints locked in strange and distorted positions, though his thumb pointed direct toward the wound as a soft poison hissed from the cracked fissures.

“But I know you won’t listen... And I couldn’t recommend that stagnation on your mission. So... get the fuck out of my recovery room and go talk to the Rhodian.”

I chuckled as he smirked. I pat his shoulder, lingering long enough to hold a moment of reverence and thanks before walking out.

The bickering grew louder as I sauntered through the halls, every step pulling another set of runes forward against my skin. It wasn’t until I reached the Hearth’s doorway that I heard the full breadth of the bickering. Truly a question of which steel is stronger when it came to blade making. Rachel, Sonya and Ivo stared at the two of them right as fists began to rise.

“They both suck.”

A voice pulled through the smoke and soot, basked in flame and slathered in poignancy. There was a soft velvet undertone to his baritone voice, underneath the husk of the forge fire.

His laugh was deep and lived in his lungs though the fire spurned from his belly as air passed his thickened teeth. A bar of ingot flew through the air and landed in the middle of his face.

“Ow! Fuck!”

“Pay a-fucking-tension to the job, boy.”

A deep, dense bellow of smoke with the tonality of an old beaten horn rang through. Biceps anchored in his shoulders and his trunk as thick as it was wide, jointed twice along the waist as he arms bulked, resembling a canon melded with a torque press of some kind. His frame was haunting, eyes small and honed, skin and beard as black as the soot that spurned the forge.

“Right, sorry.”

“Boy? That guy’s like 40-something.”

Vinnie mentioned as he looked at the various items hanging from the wall. Walt nodded, inspecting the weapons.

“He is more around the same age as myself. Much older than 40. Though to Brokkr, he is nothing but a boy in terms of age.”

“You otherworldly Nords age really well.”

“You should see how your people faired.”

Brokkr tended the bellows as Tom continued to work the Hearth and hammer. The strangely stocky Dwarf glanced at Rachel with a smirk.

“That *is* where you’re goin’ isn’t it?”

I chuckled and nodded.

“My people?”

Rachel looked somewhat confused but there was also an excitement behind it.

I nodded at her as some sort of

realization set in.

“And y’brought two from the Berserker’s lineage. I didn’t think it still existed in your world.”

“Heh, surprise...”

Brokkkr chuckled and gave the tuyere another treatment from the bellows before releasing them and easing the flame of his forge.

“Temper your metal, son.”

Brokkkr instructed Tom as he walked over to the lot of us standing around a central table. He wiped his hands on his apron before pulling down a large box from the top shelf of his unheated station.

“Listen, we’ve been instructed to give you these if you make it back with whatever it is you’re going to that dead world to claim. Make it back in one piece and we’ll send you to your certain misery with new tools, hm?”

“Shit, you fucks don’t mince words do you?”

Walt examined the box.

“Don’t have time to mince words. You need anything before you head out? I see that look about ya. You ain’t stayin’ for very long.”

“Can’t say that we are... And unless the others are in need, I don’t think so.”

“You got what the boy’s been waitin’ for?”

“Waiting?”

“This involves all of us, Svell.”

I took a moment to ponder his words before nodding and handing him the small token. He closed his meaty mittens around it and nodded. The other watched the exchange but stayed silent. I wondered if they were considering their options or if they were simply accepting how bleak all of this seemed to be. *Perhaps a third option.*

We all stood for a moment before agreeing in silence the time had come. Brokkr led us down the hall toward a series of arched

doorways similar to the one we'd entered before. Brokkkr nodded his thanks and offered me his arm. I took his forearm and he took mine, we exchanged one more knowing glance before releasing each other.

He activated the gateway.

"Get going before they notice."

Rachel walked through first followed by Ivo, Vinnie, Walt then Sonya.

"Sindri's treats should be on the table where Rachel left them."

"Sindri's treats' my ass. We're sharing these. If he gets out here in time."

"Share, Brokkkr..."

With that, I walked through the doorway, looking around at the rocks and debris falling around us.

"Jesus, does anything stop fucking falling here?"

"No. This world is dead. And soon will be claimed. We need to go."

Sonya walked past me with purpose, the soles of her shoes knocking against the stones beneath her feet as Ivo followed.

“I could not agree more,” She uttered as she walked by.

“Follow the Sphinx.”

“The what?”

Vinnie spun in a circle slightly, then stood still and shook his head just enough to regain consciousness.

“Gonna assume he means the woman with the eyes who just walked off, idiot.”

Walt insulted him and slapped the back of his head as he followed her.

Rachel caught Vinnie’s hand before he had the chance to turn it into a fist. She shook her head.

“Later. Come on.”

.13.
Jötunheimr

The land was cold and desolate as we traversed the stones and undertow of a dying world. Vinnie and Walt kept the outer regions of our group tight along the rock-torn path. Pebbles clacked against boulders as they fell from the clouds.

“So this place is dying huh?”

I shook my head.

“It has died. It’s waiting for reclamation... But what exists here exists only here.”

“What’s going on? I mean honestly, Igor...”

I sighed.

“I didn’t know it at first, but the requests from the Realms of the Aesir, the bones of an abomination so vile it could only exist if corrupted by a Primordial existence or older... Now the heart of a dead world...”

A vine slithered next to us. I took a moment to examine it before reaching down and pulling it from the ground, listening to it squelch and squeal in my hands before entering a rune-etched sack.

“The last remnants of flora.”

“So what does it all mean?”

Rachel asked again, this time with more conviction. Sonya looked back at her and turned around, walking backwards.

“It means Balance has tipped its hand in favor of chaos, and we now need to worry about an All-Being.”

Rachel looked at me as Sonya turned around and followed Ivo down the pathway. She and her uncle knew as well where to go just as much as I did. Undoubtedly they'd been visited by someone similar and spoke of the same problems.

"Oh, great. So there's nothing to worry about then. We'll all be just fi—wait it's not Sam is it?"

"Doubtful. Last I checked Samael wasn't one to manipulate doorways and test the limits of genetics in creatures that should not exist."

"Sounds like some kind of insane mad scientist."

I stopped short as the pieces stitched themselves together. All it took was Walt making a crass connection and a joke befitting the children he educated.

"No..."

Rachel stared at me, slowing her stride.

"Igor?"

“We... Cannot be here.”

“Well, it’s a little late for that.”

Ivo piped up with just enough energy to make himself fully heard.

The group continued walking as I brought up the rear. I’d heard stories of an All-Being losing control of their stewardships. *Do not worry yourself with the details... Only proceed with your task. That is how we correct what is uncorrectable.*

My thoughts were brought to abrupt halt as the familiar fog ran over our legs and rose to meet our waists.

“Rachel...?”

She stopped and looked at me again, then down at the rising fog.

“You have got to be shitting me.”

The chittering crept closer, soon overtaken by the harsh reminder of the laughing blackwoods and the corrupted Keeper.

I shoved her out of the way just in time to take the hand of a Keeper deep in the well of my gut. Blood erupted into my mouth, but I kept my lips closed as to keep the blood from running over and devouring the others. Rachel backed up just enough to stay out of the immediate flow, but the spatter from the immediate and unknown intrusion caused a few drops to land on her.

I tried to recall the droplets as I'd done before but couldn't focus enough to bring them back to me. They slowly reacted, beginning their attempt at absorption, but curiously stopped once they touched her skin. They hadn't stopped trying to consume, but something about her didn't sit well with them... *or maybe it did.*

The droplets slid from her body and landed on the ground. The corrupted Keeper again recoiled to attack, ripping its hand from my insides and sliding back into the fog, it's heads rotated one after another, laughing and cackling as it started to consume the droplets before they had the chance to do their damage.

"Well, that seems very not good."

Ivo chimed.

“I suggest we get moving then, Uncle.”

Vinnie and Walt started to bulk again, though this time, they'd lost the advantage of a quick and violent transition. Instead, another Corrupted Keeper with more heads above the revolving six appearing with sickening cracks. It wore an additional eight faces as it spun uncontrollably but in the opposite direction of the first six... and the mouth within its center was beyond anything the first Corrupted Kreeper could bear. A circle of mouths opened from within the darkened center, then another, and another.

The smaller six-faced Keeper hopped around, all heads giggling as the center mouth cackled loudly.

“What the fuck is that?”

Vinnie shrieked.

“Something we run from, Vinnie.”

Rachel grabbed his arm and ran as Walt followed close behind, though he paused for a split second to return for me.

“Go!”

It was all I could do to get the words out of my mouth and into the air before my blood slid from my nose, mouth and eyes. Walt's conflict sat on the surface, but he ran with the others as instructed.

The larger Keeper ran after them but failed to notice my blood now hanging on to its legs. The smaller corrupted Keeper, however, did not fail to notice and took off after the others.

I swore under my breath, unable to catch the Corrupted abomination. But that was a problem the others would need to figure out on their own. Instead, I turned my attention to the massive being now stuck in the malice of my bloodlust.

I couldn't hold it, nor could I fuse with it, but tearing it apart and feeding it to the dead was an option. I ripped the beast open from the point of contact and allowed my blood to leave my body and slide into the beast. It slowly broke it apart, though the beast pried at the wounds appearing along its legs, then arms.

However, getting to any of its faces was

beyond easy. I attempted to climb its spine but found its distortion difficult as it flipped back around, replacing head and joint for another head, another joint, and expanding their purpose.

Shit.

.14.
The Tomb of the Jötnar
-Ivo-

Felt like absolute shit leaving Igor to fight those things by himself, but given the alternative, I'd say it was a calculated risk. We made our way to the edge of a large circling tomb. It was strange to see the ruins falling from the sky, crashing into each other and destroying pieces of this forgotten world. Even stranger thinking what we were here to get was actually sitting in an actual tomb of a dead world. *On the fucking nose...*

Sonya scouted the area looking for a way to cross. As many non-humans as there were, none of us seemed to have adapted to fly

or even glide with precision.

“Well, this was short-lived.”

Sonya chuckled. Her sense of humor was often in poor taste and sardonic on the surface but rested somewhere between “Dad Joke” and realistic expectation. Rachel peered over the ledge down through the darkness. It was as if she was trying to formulate a plan the rest of us hadn’t thought of. But given her precision and what I’d heard from Harold and seen in passing, she was equipped to handle this.

We watched her circle the ruins and look along the walls and floors that still existed beyond the ledge. There was a large tower in the center, perhaps some sort of elevator, but the bridge work had long since crumbled.

Sonya watched, her eyes somewhat cat-like as she did so.

“I don’t suppose you’re formulating a plan.”

“Reading... actually... somehow.”

Sonya seemed intrigued. She looked at

me with a knowing glance, a glance she'd given me time and time again while facing other oddities, like her father.

"You can read all of this?"

She asked with some surprise and almost as if she'd known Rachel's instincts would pique.

"I think I can. Alright... That pillar leads down. Obviously. But..."

She stared at some scratch still etched into the massive stones decorating the ground and looked up at the tower again. Before long she pulled her wrist to her mouth and bit into it, tearing the flesh just enough to get a good pour.

Her blood filled the etchings before a small, weakened stream of light appeared between the platform and the tower. Sonya gave a small, literal round of applause.

"I guess you have some Jötnar in there after all."

"Yeah, I guess. And I guess you have quite a bit of teaching to do when we get

out of this.”

I’d seen Sonya meet up with other women before, but there was something between her and Rachel that made the three of us temper ourselves just enough to feel at ease. Walt and Vinnie both appeared to be more ready than before, and I felt as though my mind was clear enough to do whatever the fuck it was that we needed to do ...

“We should probably get going. Got a bad feeling about whatever’s back there. Igor was in some fucked up shit back there, and I think I saw one of them run after us.”

“Fuck that, everyone go.”

Rachel responded to Walt with a calm vigor as we all started walking across the diminishing light bridge with Sonya at the head and Rachel behind. There was a strange chitter coming up quickly though still a decent distance away.

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

“Keeper?”

“Yeah. Come on.”

With that, she ushered me through a small stone doorway that seemed to be sturdy enough to maintain its shape, but it was pretty obvious it'd crumble under pressure and potentially seal us in or out depending on where we stood. I expected to see some sort of concern on her face, but she was as iron-clad as the man she married, maybe even more so.

Sonya led the others through the door and down an obvious winding staircase as Rachel paced us up to the others. She spoke a language for a brief second as she read the ground and the bridge flickered out of sight.

“Don't suppose you could do that to get us out.”

I wondered aloud.

“Maybe, not sure. But what we need is down those stairs and what we don't want is behind us, so I say we go this direction before we don't get a choice.”

I nodded and followed her in as a large piece of stone from the sky fell over the doorway.

“Well, that was lucky.”

She laughed.

“You and I have slightly different variations of lucky.”

I chuckled nervously.

We caught up with the others within seconds. Sonya nodded and gave her signature smirk with a hand tucked away in her pocket while Vinnie and Walt canvassed the staircase.

“You know what they are right?”

Rachel nodded.

“Gonna go with Berserkers for 800.”

I laughed and nodded. She grinned.

“Hey, we should keep moving. Rocks wouldn’t keep us out, doubt it’s gonna keep whatever that thing is out for long.”

Vinnie spoke with ease and sense. Something I’d imagined he didn’t do without cause. The cause in this case seemed to be

traveling into the tombs of a dead world to retrieve some unknown artifact that only the bloodied Viking outside knew anything about.

“You wouldn’t happen to know what we’re looking for would you?”

Rachel... nodded.

“He showed me before we got here.”

“Did he show you how to get in, too?”

“Nope.”

“Well shit. Okay, Sonya you’ve got some lessons to teach if we get out of this.”

“We’re getting out of this.”

Walt went from worried and somewhat stoic to...silently aggressive. *Weird.*

“I will, and he’s right. Let’s keep going though.”

We all agreed and started down the staircase as pebbles seemed to dislodge themselves from the walls, rolling down with us as if letting us know just how fucked we

were. The air in the party shifted from hopeful and willing, to ready and possibly deadly. I'd traveled with warriors in the past, but these three were something different. And if Igor was still alive, well that I'm still not sure what to make of...

.15.
The Staircase to the Tombs
-Sonya-

There was a strange essence about this place. Ivo and I had been around the realms, both living and dead. But this one felt like it was ... sacrificed.

The halls were dark with a vague flicker of light as we all descended the staircase. Vinnie and Walt had their ears perked and heads on swivels as Rachel fiddled with something in her pocket. I'd heard about her abilities to create explosives, but it seemed she also had the ability to resist Igor's blood.

As I pondered the events leading up to

this moment, Vinnie stopped and turned his head. Walt followed. A deep chitter echoed down the corridor followed by a slide of sinister laughs. I couldn't help but smile.

"I think we have company."

My uncle turned around and stared at me. He could tell I had a plan formulating, but he wasn't quite sure what. I may have garnered a reputation for being callous, lawless, or just plain crazy. To me, it was simply a matter of figuring out the right strategy in the quickest manner with the least amount of risk, even if it seems risky...

The walls started to whisper loudly. Hands groping at us through the stone as the chitter grew louder.

"I do believe it's time for us to start moving with a little more briskness."

Rachel turned and ushered the others down the staircase as the cackling and hands reappeared, pushing on bricks and stones. Vinnie and Walt crashed into each stone they passed that seemed to come out, forcing a pained howl to erupt from the creatures trying to push through.

It wasn't until we'd nearly reached the bottom that the whispers were loud enough for me to hear words. They were chasing us down with a riddle. *Quaint.*

I stopped and spun on the stairs, now facing the cackling mouth flowing down after the others, hands pushing the stones, one actually finding the audacity to put its grubby fingers on my back with intent to grab.

"Ew, no."

I took the hand. There was a slight sting behind my eyes as the area illuminated with a dense sage glow. The hand inverted itself and simply vanished in a juicy pop. The chittering grew closer as the darkness caught up. The now-laughing mouth opened wide, as if to consume me. The heads appearing slowly as they spun, whispering the same riddle in a strange chorus of foul harmonies.

I put a sole finger up and waved it back and forth.

"How about you answer this instead...
And I'll let you maul me to your ...
broken black hole of a heart's content.
How does that sound?"

It chittered and backed away slightly, the voices serenading “she wants to play.” The gears turned as it came back around to its answer.

“No. We don’t play... with—”

“With what? I’d imagine you have an inkling of what I am and could possibly even pinpoint one of the many things, but truly. The only part of the riddle you know is the only part you have to abide by, and that just seems like such a bummer... for you.”

“Speak your riddle...”

“When you give me an answer you’ll know the riddle was spoken long before you laid breath on me.”

I could see the creature’s feeble mind turning. Picking up an amalgam of scents and energies.

“What’s wrong, hun? Too much to sift through? Not enough juice in the tank?”

I took a step towards it. It backed away.

“Why don’t you just go ahead and take a shot. Come on. It’s a freebie. Give me your best.”

It screamed, it’s faces folding back in on itself as it scurried back up the stairs, the hands receding into the wall as I turned and walked quickly back to the others.

Rachel was the first to catch a glimpse of me. She checked behind me then nodded and clapped.

“Don’t get too excited. That won’t hold it back for very long.”

“Well, that fucking sucks. Shit. That really kind of sucks. We’ve hit a snag here.”

I looked around her and noticed a large, rune-covered pillar. A blend of runes from all the adjacent realms to Jötunheimr.

“Oh, now that is a pickle. Uncle?”

“Damn it, Sonya. Can’t you just read it?”

“I can, but the only thing it says is to fuck off and we’ll get no entry.”

He rolled his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Fuck. Alright, give me a minute.”

.16.
The Snag
-Ivo-

As if we hadn't hit enough of a problem with the Keepers running after us and the walls coming to life, there was now an immovable fucking pillar of immovable, dense, Jötnar rock complete with warding. I stared at it for a moment before looking back at the others.

"Do I have to do this?"

"Yes, Uncle."

She was right but I really didn't... *Fuck enough with the bitching. Alright.*

I walked up to the pillar and looked it up and down. The creatures had stopped coming but the building was collapsing and the ground below it was no more stable than the other parts crumbling.

I saw the Berserkers staring at me, Rachel as well with a brow half arched.

“Can’t we use her blood again?”

I had to try one more time.

“Too far removed to bring this down. You do know what’s at the heart of this tomb other than us if you don’t get a move on?”

“... Sometimes I forget you’re Heartless’ kid... And then you talk.”

She laughed and ushered me to hurry up. I gave her the finger with a loving smirk and exhaled.

“So, this will either be ... disgusting or disturbing?”

Walt watched me prepare with a noxious face; brows knitted in the center and

nostrils flaring. Vinnie just stood with his arms folded, watching me.

“Probably both.”

Another exhale and my body went limp. I crawled out of it, a slick coat falling over me as my body began to decay and disintegrate. I looked at the pillar and slid into it, leaving another slick trail.

“What the fuck?!”

Again, Walt and Vinnie in unison.

“Tick Tock, Uncle.”

She was correct to rush me a bit. I found the core of the stone and dispersed within it. Every piece of my essence melding with the rock. The stones pulled at me, tearing my essence apart as I did the same. I could hear murmurs on the other side but losing focus now meant ... well it was probably pretty obvious.

I felt Sonya tap the side of the slab and immediately uttered something resembling “hurry up.” My body was decaying rapidly, which meant my strength was depleting as

well...

Fuck.

I took a moment to recenter myself, feeling for my fraternal twin's obnoxious and potent energy. A benefit to having such an arrogant prick of a little brother, he always makes himself known. As if he knew exactly what I was doing, I felt my energy pick up, the stone finally bending to my... or perhaps his... will. Either way, it didn't matter. We were successful.

The stone took my shape and form, eventually condensing into a new body for me to inhabit, again slick with otherworldly film. It took a few seconds to adjust as it took my old image and shape fully, restoring all of my abilities as I cracked my neck.

"Fuck. I hate doing that."

Vinnie stared at me with horror and disgust running across his face, mouth opened just a little. Walt had a similar look. I'm not sure what expression Rachel was wearing, like it was horrific but ... not the worst she'd seen...
Gonna ask about that later...

"Bravo, Uncle. Now we should probably

get going. Hm? I don't think this place has much left in it and we are doing everything in our power to drain this thing just by being here, aren't we?"

I looked over the edge and back at the rest of them.

"We need to find a way down."

"Hey, wait, what about Igor?"

Vinnie was right. I'd thought he'd have made it back by now, but there was no sign of him or his essence. Sonya didn't seem worried and while concerned, Rachel didn't really seem too bothered either.

"He'll be fine. How much time do we have?"

She questioned.

"A disheartening amount."

Sonya responded.

"Vinnie. Walt. Think you two can get us down there?"

They both peered over the edge then back at Rachel.

“Yeah, we can make that work. It’s gonna suck.”

“This whole fucking thing sucks right now.”

They nodded in agreement and slowly began to bulk as the Antimony symbol appeared on their necks. As if we didn’t have enough of a crunch, a loud thundering of legs came crashing through the halls, growing louder by the second. Rachel looked at me, then Sonya. Walt and Vinnie were large enough to do whatever foolhardy plan they were concocting. And I was hating every second of what was happening.

Goddamn it...

.17.
The Big Fucking Hole
-Rachel-

Fuck. That pretty much summed it up. Stuck between a rock and a hard place would have been a welcome reprieve instead of stuck between a big fucking hole and a horde of death-defying hall monitors.

Vinnie and Walt grabbed Sonya and Ivo before jumping into the hole. Ivo griped as Sonya whooped, and I stayed behind, looking down the dark corridor with creatures approaching at fucking irritating speeds. I held a piece of gum in my pocket and popped it in my mouth, giving it a nice chew as I waited for the creepy things to get closer.

“Alright. These things seem a little more pissed off than before. Okay. That’s fine.”

Bernerd’s armor covered me like it did before but ran down to the floor this time. It moved around me in strides against the chain tracks, and left enough room for me to keep fiddling with the wrapper in my pocket.

A rock from the wall slid onto the floor. I looked at it then at the hole. I expected maybe a hand? A set of eyes? Something a little creepy and telling. Something normal. *Not sure why I expected that...*

Nope. Instead a mouth with dripping fangs grinned at me then opened to display a set of eyes centered by hungry mouths.

“Oh come on!”

I tossed the wrapper into the hole, igniting it and blowing the damn thing wide open. The creature on the other side lunged at me but the armor seemed to have some intuition of its own as it wrapped around my hand and ignited against its skin, sending it back into the wall.

“Too easy...”

Definitely too easy. Another set of eyes appeared, then another, then another and another. I looked at the armor and then at the wall.

“Don’t suppose you could make yourself into a weapon too?”

Not sure if the armor heard me or if it sensed my need, but a set of mid-sized hammers, decked with picking spikes appeared in each of my hands.

“Fuck. Yes.”

And not a second too soon. The creatures burst through the wall, reaching for me and gnashing around my limbs. I buried a hammer in the head of one then pulled its brain from its skull with the hook once it’d gone through completely. Another made contact but was instantly wounded by the armor’s combustion and conduit features. While three more went for my legs and were met with the flat end of their stupid decision.

I’m not sure if the armor was growing stronger from use or if it was alive enough to eat, but with every one of them I took, we seemed to flow with more sync.

I cleared the first wave in a matter of minutes, looking around for more...

No more showed themselves. Nothing else seemed to make a sound other than the pebbles falling from the ceiling. And no strange smells... There was nothing... *Too much nothing...*

I cleaned off the hammers with a flick of the wrist and went for the cavernous hole. I took a step back and thought for a minute, wondering how bad the injuries would be if I had to jump down and just land. *They'd probably do more harm than good...*

There was nothing around other than rocks, though. Nothing helpful like rope, vines, notches in the wall. Sure, I'd survive but ... would it be worth it?

I pondered for a while longer before the irritatingly familiar sound of chittering appeared behind me.

"Fucking really?"

It sounded like it was in a hurry, running with its legs pounding against the floor and its arms and hands scaling the walls

as it ran hard toward me. But the more I braced, the more I heard. There was a faint sound behind it, like a rushing water or... *blood.*

The scent finally hit me as the creature came into view. For a brief moment, I thought it may be coming for me, but the more I watched the more I realized it was running for its miserable life. It attempted to pass me as the blood caught up and slowly adhered to its limbs, dismembering it piece by piece.

“Oh fuck.”

I took a look down the hole again, then back down the dark corridor as the bloody wave careened toward me.

“Double fucking fuck.”

The hole was now a little more inviting but not by much. I paused for a moment, regained my head and jumped down the big fucking hole as the Kreeper was swallowed by the wave. The wave that found its way over the ledge and hurdling toward the rest of us.

As it caught up with me, it seemed to cover me completely but didn't come over me

like it had with the Keeper. Instead it seemed to protect me and lessen the fall when I hit the bottom; granted it still hurt like a fucking bitch. I laid on the floor for a few moments just to regain my wits and let some of the broken joints snap themselves back together and heal properly. And as I lay there with my eyes closed, making the shit decision to open them, a husk of a body hit the ground next to me in a puddle of blood with so much force, I wasn't fully sure if the blood came before or after the sickening pulverized slap of flesh on stone.

I looked at the corpse and then at the ceiling, blood droplets crawling toward the damn thing like demented and compelled micro demons.

“What the actual fuck... why... why is this happening?”

A familiar voice groaned through the squelching of blood on flesh.

“... Because....” The flesh bag gurgled.

I glanced at it again and chuckled.

“Always a fucking dad.”

.18.
The Tomb
-Igor-

My body took a few long minutes to string itself back together, heal the broken bones, regain the blood droplets still attached to the walls. But once I did, I was able to stand and shake off the fall. I looked up toward the opening we'd slid down and at the dissolving Keeper corpse.

"Are those things supposed to be killable?"

"Depends on who does the killing."

"Fair point."

Rachel dug through one of the traveling pouches we'd brought with us, throwing a pair of pants at me. I turned around just in time to catch them with my face.

"I love you. But you're fucking naked, Dad."

I looked down and chuckled as I peeled the pants off my face and slipped them on.

"Eh, yeah I suppose you'd be right. Wish the clothing came back with the skin, huh?"

"I think we all wish that for everyone with sizing dilemmas."

"Such a kind way to put 'freaks who change forms.'"

"That just wouldn't be fair. There are other people besides you and Jimmy who do that, you know."

It felt good to laugh with little worry, even if it was just a few moments.

"Ah, Touche."

She smirked and we continued down the corridor, following the scent of the others. It wasn't long before we all met up in the central tomb. Vinnie was still large with blackened veins pressed against his skin and his jaws somewhat larger as he looked around wild-eyed but controlled. Walt bore the same large size, but resembled a sacred wolf over a man, spines across fur, eyes piercing and darkened by a desire for a fresh kill. But he still stood upright and carried some bipedal characteristics, though his sigil lay inside the mouth of a beast, and Vinnie's spurned with spike and flame.

Sonya turned and opened her arms both in play and relief. Ivo turned to look at us, examining something deeper than what the others were capable of seeing. No doubt doing his due diligence to ensure we were ourselves. Once we'd passed, he gave a tired smile and exhaled with some respite sitting in his eyes.

"You've made it."

She laughed. Rachel joined in the laughter and pat her shoulder on her way over to Vinnie and Walt. Sonya chuckled and returned to her relaxed state, hand in pocket, posture resembling someone with confidence

and intelligence over arrogance. Ivo returned to a somewhat tired slump. As the others triaged and found a moment to catch their breath, I walked to a wall and placed a hand on the stone, runes unfamiliar to the previous realms ran over my skin and into the wall.

Small flames appeared across each rune, holding its own against the air and intrusions of crumbled stone. As the room illuminated further, icons and depictions began to appear. It seemed to be a story of sorts, but I'd not seen this language or these types of drawings.

“Seems to be some sort of story or warning. Something about a being of immense power... but confined until they weren't. Huh. Doesn't look like it ended well for these people.”

We all stared at Walt as he continued staring at the iconography on the walls. All except Sonya who nodded in agreement.

“How the fuck do you know that?”

Vinnie growled.

“Fucking History teacher and Linguistics professor, shithead.”

Vinnie stepped up on Walt just enough to send a threat but stay away enough to indicate some playfulness. Walt growled back in response. And Rachel stood between both of them, her hands outstretched and large enough to take a good portion of room across their chests.

“Fellas. Keep that shit together.”

Our Berserker companions eased their shoulders and took a step back, nodding in respectful submission.

“Well, you don’t see that every day.”

Ivo slid into the moment with a wry charm. Sonya chuckled as I offered the group a slight smile before going back to the story on the walls.

“What else does it say.”

Walt looked back at the wall and squinted.

“There’s no way to actually stop this being from unleashing whatever shit happened here, but... I think this says

something about healing them. Only way to make the ... whatever bad shit that is stop. Goes without saying, bunch of really fucked up stuff gets loose or made, a lot of suffering, fear, screaming, the whole thing.”

“The fuck is healing them gonna do?”

Vinnie growled again.

“They fuckin’ fix what they broke going forward, you dumb fuck.”

Rachel sighed.

“How Jimmy put up with the two of you, I don’t fucking know.”

I laughed hard at her exasperation with the duo. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that it was only going to get worse between them, and yet somehow infinitely better.

“So, what do we need to do?”

Ivo kept his focus.

“Keep going through the tomb. Should be a core of some sort just up ahead.”

“Don’t suppose it talks about what nasties are also just up ahead.”

“Not a fucking word.”

“Great.”

It was pretty clear about what needed to come next, but the darkness ahead of us seemed to also be heralding our failure. My gut sank far into the abyss of my mind as everything started falling into place. If what Walt said was true, and these are any indicative signs, the being is an All-Being.
Damn it.

We kept going through the tomb together, though Ivo’d taken a moment to look behind us at the last remnants of the Corrupted Keeper corpse.

“Igor.”

“Hm?”

“That creature you consumed back there.”

“A Keeper.”

“Yeah, but it was wrong. Too big, too many heads.”

I nodded.

“Yep... And not the only one after us. I’m sure you’ve also noticed the infected Jötnar dead and voracious damned and dishonored.”

“Now that you mention it... That’s not good.”

“Not at all.”

“Are we thinking of the same person for this one?”

Sonya asked quizzically.

“Yep.”

Ivo and I answered at the same time.

Within seconds, the ground shook. We all turned to take a look at the environment when Sonya’s eyes began to glow.

“Oh. It figured it out... We should hurry

a little bit.”

“Damn it. Didn’t have anything more difficult in you?”

“In that moment, no. Now let’s get a move on.”

The ground behind us started to dislodge from ... well down. Each stone floating just a bit from its place, a pitch black nothing behind us, even the flames had vanished. The stones continued to hover for a few more moments before violently hitting the ceiling and uprooting faster.

“SHIT!”

Rachel, Vinnie and Walt all exclaimed and began to take off down the corridor after Sonya and Ivo. I opted to keep my position behind everyone, if only to give them something of a buffer.

We ran until we entered a large room with a rotating core. It’d seen better days but something about it seemed to have some semblance of vitality. Around the hovering orb a dense set of rings consumed by every element known to the realms. They gave off a

strange fiery appearance but pulsed with a vast darkness.

I placed my hand against the wall, bloodied runes ran hard against the surface as ice spread from side to side across the doorframe, splinters forming as my blood formed a lattice throughout the crystals. Rachel looked back at me and stopped running for a moment. Walt did the same and Vinnie followed suit as Sonya and Ivo walked up to the core.

“That gonna hold ‘em?”

Rachel asked as her armor took its hooded form again. Vinnie and Walt both remained in their Berserker forms, but seemed to have more clarity as Antimony faded back into their respective areas.

“Long enough to figure that out.”

“What about getting out of here, got a plan for that?”

Walt asked through snarling breath.

“No. But I’m hoping we figure it out soon.”

Rachel looked at Sonya and Ivo, then at the core in the center of the room.

“Guess we should figure that out first.”

Sonya walked around the large item, taking in its appearance and runic markings. Ivo reached for one of the elemental orbs but was stopped by his niece’s quick reflexes. She shook her head.

“Not even you can get through this.”

“Alright, so what then? Know anything that can?”

“Nothing we’ve got in this room...”

She looked at me and made a slight realization.

“Unless we can weaken the field.”

I took a deep breath and sighed.

“How positive are you of this thing’s success?”

“Not very. Maybe 50/50.”

“50/50 ... We’ve dealt with worse odds.”

Vinnie uttered through a hissing growl. Walt nodded his agreement. I looked at Rachel, wondering if she felt they had it in them to continue. She nodded with duty and a slight bloodlust.

“Alright, what are you thinking.”

Sonya grinned like some sort of nefarious feline.

“That blood of yours is quite handy at dismantling things and removing any harmful effects. These balls are radioactive with pure Primordial energy.”

“You want me to absorb them.”

“Not all, just a few.”

“And then what?”

“And then we hope our mutual impish friend comes through.”

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and shook my head with resignation.

“Okay.”

“Oh, wow. Alright. I wasn’t expecting you to accept that fast.”

“We don’t have time for me to fight about it. If it’s what you need, it is what I will give you. But that wall will not hold once I start.”

“I had a feeling it wouldn’t.”

Rachel looked at Vinnie and Walt. They nodded at her, she nodded back.

“We’ll take care of it until we can’t.”

I opened my mouth to object before Rachel interrupted me.

“You don’t have time to fight about it, remember?”

My nostrils flared in defeat and irritation. And she was right. I gave a slight nod and went to the core, readying myself. The orbs were humming a strange tone that pulled my Lupine nature forward. I felt blood rush to my eyes and face as my body slowly started to change. *Can’t do this without thumbs...*

I grabbed the spinning ball in front of me, my skin instantly flaying open as it ripped my veins from my hands. Blood covered the ball as the veins in the ice wall began to crack. I grunted and pulled my shift back, though my eyes had fully been taken by the crimson force.

Rachel focused on her armor for a moment before a set of hammers appeared, one in each hand. Vinnie bulked up and cracked his knuckles, again face full of cylindrical daggers, the talisman from Bernerd burrowed deep into his chest as blackened veins touched the surface of his skin. Walt's did the same, though his seemed to force his fur to spine in more a defensive mechanism. Both Berserkers stood beside Rachel as the wall cracked down the middle.

I felt the first orb crack and shatter in my hand as a strange force erupted from it, shooting toward Sonya and Ivo. But my blood now had a taste for it... And just as soon as it spattered, my blood consumed it, taking the orb and its fragments into its hold.

Blood erupted from further up my arm, consuming two more. I felt the bone touch stone as I grunted, the Keeper breathing hard behind the wall, six heads spinning as it

uttered “killable.” Rachel held her gaze, watching the creature try to run headfirst into the room repeatedly, still unwavering. Walt snarled, a dense heat inside him as he snapped a bite toward the creature. Vinnie growled, thunder erupting with a frozen wind encapsulating it.

Ivo looked at me, then Sonya. There was a strange spark behind his eyes, one I’d seen in his brothers, but never had it crossed him. Sonya stared at her uncle, the unfamiliar sting of the unknown hitting her like a soured fruit.

“You cannot be serious.”

“Only if I have to be.”

My blood took hold of a third orb as the others began spinning uncontrollably. The wall of ice shattered, letting the Kreeper free about the large tomb. Rachel took no time in rearranging one of its faces, her eyes glowing a deep royal purple as the realm’s markings appeared down her neck.

The Keeper screeched swiping once at her, but catching Walt’s sharpened forearm in its hand instead while Vinnie wrapped his arms around one of its heads and pulled it

from the chamber. The creature howled in psychotic laughter as it spun the trio off of it and retreated into the walls. Vinnie pounded his chest hard and wailed into the air, forcing the creature and it's now many minions forward. Each one screamed at the top of its lungs, crying and laughing, spinning and dancing. Some doubled over and floundered wildly, while others simply rocked.

Sonya and Ivo covered their ears immediately, trying to pull the dense thunder from their skulls. Rachel and Walt, however, were unharmed by the wail and took the time to dispose of several dozen of the hundreds of miniature abominations. Vinnie then grabbed as many as he could and proceeded to tear the heads from their bodies with the weaponry hanging from his mouth.

The big Keeper recovered slowly from the stun of Vinnie's wail and refocused on us, cackling and running toward the core. Sonya stared at Ivo and tilted her head to the side attempting to say "Don't." But Ivo'd already made up his mind. His form slowly vanished into a thick mist eventually becoming a dense fog itself. There was a thick moisture about it as he concentrated himself into a slickened tendril and forced himself into the center

mouth of the creature, down into its belly and forcing it to take his form. It howled in agony and began to thrash about.

“You fucking – guh!”

Sonya turned her attention to me, fury and concern in her voice.

“Do not consume the core!”

Now she tells me...

“I do not know if I will have a choice...”

The minions screeched and ran from Rachel, Walt and Vinnie and immediately jumped on the Corrupted Keeper’s limbs, gnawing on it, pulling to pieces. They grew bigger, reconstituting as several dismantled and dilapidated versions of the Keeper. All just as viciously dreadful as the last with some unknown horrid nightmare attached.

Sonya growled, her skin paling instantly as her eyes blackened, the orbs in the center now a disorienting yellow as she ran at the creatures and seemingly passed through the remaining smaller ones causing them to explode like reprehensible sludge pouches.

The transformed now focusing on her before running for what was left of Ivo and the Corrupted Keeper. She shook her head and slid into the ground before detonating upward through the creature, holding Ivo in his original form. Walt used his fresh kill as a stepping point and leapt for her and Ivo, catching both of them and turning to put himself through the opposing wall.

Rachel had taken several hits, some of which still left remnants of Keeper bone and weaponry in her flesh. She grunted slightly and forced the pieces to detonate one by one, holding the pain inside and channeling it into her hammers. Meanwhile Vinnie turned his attention toward me.

I attempted to pull the blooded drops away from the core, as only one protective orb stood before it. The veins ran from my face as vined tendrils toward the piece in the middle. Vinnie dug his fingers into the ground, inhaled deeply and howled a primal roar at me. The blood instantly released the last orb retreating into me with such force I flew into the wall next to Walt and the others.

“Fuck...”

The word slipped out of my mouth as my bones shifted back to their hidden form, reconnecting slowly.

Sonya stood and helped Ivo to his feet as Walt brushed himself off looking at Vinnie and Rachel. Both stood ready as the new host of Corrupted stood before us.

“These fuckers don’t stop.”

Ivo coughed.

“And I dare say we’re running out of power...”

Sonya seconded.

“Didn’t hear anyone say we were out.”

Vinnie kicked in.

Walt growled his approval.

“Not a bad way to go out. You know, if that cunt’s got it in ‘em.”

Rachel rallied. The three of them grinned as the host of Corrupted joined again now into two distinct bodies. They rushed the

trio. Vinnie and Walt took point, distracting them and taking whatever damage they could muster. Both Berserkers now covered in chains and bone melded from their own flesh. They wrapped them around the Keepers and pulled the two to the ground as Rachel Ignited both hammer heads and buried them hard into the first of eight rotating heads in both beings.

They flailed in tandem before inverting their joints and shedding the heads. I fumbled slightly but found my footing enough to spit the pooling blood from my mouth toward the dismembered heads allowing it to split. It now had a taste for power... a taste for corruption... *balance.*

The core began to spin wildly as Sonya stared at it, trying to formulate her next contingency. It seemed time was running short, and as fortuitous as the warrior trio was, they knew the battle would be at a loss. Ivo glanced around, looking for something he could use, something he could transcribe himself into, if only momentarily.

“Ivo.”

“You have one more trick, right?”

"Last one, I'm afraid."

"I'm all ears."

"You can use the dead, huh?"

He nodded.

"Good."

My fingers blackened as I forced myself to stand and emerald runes ran over my arms and face, they quickly blackened and turned a sickening yellow before burning a deep red. One of the unharmed tombs' doors crumbled from the wall as a large creature pulled itself from the hole. It landed on the ground, cracking and clicking as it pulled together the cobblings of rubble we'd left about and the remains of blood splatter from the others to give itself sustenance. Ivo watched it reconstitute for a moment before looking back at me.

"How long can you hold it?"

"As long as I need to hold it. You?"

"As long as we need to."

Ivo's voice split pulling Harold's in with him. I nodded and gave a slight smirk. The single-bodied twins walked up to the dead, their eyes glowing green and pale yellow as they walked into their conduit.

It howled as Ivo slowly regained control and Harold's essence pulled the being together, fortifying it. I continued to feed it what I could from the pieces of the Keepers that Rachel and the others were pulling apart, and what bits and pieces they sacrificed of themselves.

The Dead Twins pulled the Keepers from behind and threw them across the tomb before distancing themselves from the warrior trio, giving them time to recover. The Keepers immediately stood and began some sort of twisted synchronized dance. They sprouted another set of arms as they stood up on hind legs, now mirroring a human-like creature. The heads interchanged together as the creatures quickly dissected part of the Dead's body, though I was able to stitch together another piece to replace it.

Sonya looked at the core, then the piece of writhing Dead on the ground and grabbed it. She drew a sigil on the stone and uttered

something of darkened origin. The Twins ran toward the Keepers as Rachel, Vinnie and Walt flanked them from behind. While they landed successfully, the Keepers seemed to have gained some nuance to their strategy that caused the three to go flailing backwards as it made a b-line for the Twins. The core started to vibrate and wail, giving off some sort of noxious fume.

The ground started to tremble, the stones rising from beneath. Walt and Vinnie rose from the rubble and grabbed the Keepers, pulling them backwards toward the ground. Rachel's hammers flipped, exposing a pointed pick at the back of each she found favor in impaling the abominable corrupted with as she ran between them, igniting them again. They screeched then began cackling as four more heads appeared across the creatures' arms and shoulders. The chorus of laughter was enough to break the concentration of most of us. The Zapatas maintained focus, however. Ivo pulled Harold forward long enough to infiltrate the ground and pull the Keepers deeper into it, while Sonya continued to chant.

I repaired as much of the Dead as I could, but we were all losing what matter we had left, what little essence bellowed inside of

us... As determined as we were...

Silence. Everything fell silent as the core imploded in on itself. Just as it had, the Keepers found themselves ravenous with psychosis, sprouting from the ground. They twirled and danced as a mad jester with the vitality of all the Halls in all the Realms.

Sounds quickly returned in the form of a raging explosive as both Keepers careened back into the crumbling walls. From the voided core stepped two large beings with shadows towering over us, both possessing grey skin and bold lines running down their faces and arms. Their armor rested just under their skin. One grinned with a perfectly spiked set of teeth while the other stood with hammer over his shoulders and a terrible scowl. Their eyes blackened by forge fire.

“Fuck, I hope they’re on our side.”

Vinnie coughed.

“They are, my friends!”

A familiar accent and enthusiastic energy appeared behind them. Sonya took a deep breath and laughed in relieved insanity.

“Oh my fuck, it actually worked.”

The Keepers got up and crooned, running at the Rhodians with a fervor they had not shown before. Bernerd took the hammer from his shoulders and brought it down over the shoulder of the first Keeper, instantly dissolving its essence and body before swinging it high and over, taking out three of its heads and forcing it into the wall to his left.

Tom took the axed side of his hammer and spun it in front of himself in a figure-eight pattern slicing through his creature from a distance before throwing the weapon into the center face and recalling it, the force by which it returned sending the Keeper into the wall behind us.

“Shit!”

Walt shielded himself, Rachel’s armor turned the fragments into small mortars going off around them.

“Oh stop, you big baby...”

Ivo slid from the Dead as it returned to a lifeless state and fell to the ground, Harold still

somewhere inside his mind.

"Talk about a Hail Mary..."

"Not sure Mary's who we Hailed but it was one hell of a play."

Ivo chuckled to his brother.

Bernerd pulled the rest of the Keeper from the wall to his left as Tom opened his hand and summoned the Keeper behind us to his palm. The Dwarves smirked at each other and began to reforge the Keepers between the two of them. Tom held them steadfast as Bernerd pounded them with a blaze and force not even the Primordial could withstand en masse.

"The fuck are they doing?"

Ivo questioned.

"We need another way out, and this place is very obviously about to not exist."

Sonya responded.

I watched the two Rhodian brothers in

awe. I'd seen quite a bit in my life but to watch the them forge a doorway from the pieces of a corrupted guardian was a delight I'd never thought necessary until this moment.

Skog stood beside me, holding a brunt of my weight. His wounds had healed completely, and his skin resembled the stone and bogged ice his people were crafted from.

"I see you got some rest."

"Much needed, thanks to you and my other new friends."

I chuckled as the Rhodians pulled the doorway forward, Bernerd's anvil retreated into his forearm as Tom's bellows did the same respectively.

"We should go."

Sonya'd found a split second between her laughs of triumph to speak. Ivo nodded, as did the others. We couldn't see what was on the other side of the door, other than some fuzzy abstract of bronze and deep grey. But we knew it wasn't another pathway or corridor, which we were all thankful for.

Vinnie and Walt held each other up as Rachel and Sonya fronted the exit, both Rhodians standing as sentry and stabilizing force while Skog and I brought up the rear. I turned right before slipping all the way through and grabbed a small set of stones with a handful of gravel. Bernerd and Tom stepped through the doorway as it collapsed behind them.

.19.
The Dwarven Masters, Again...

Sindri brought us a barrel filled to the bunghole with a delightful mead while Brokkr popped a large roast on the table before us. The two insisted we stay and rest after our adventure through one of the condemned realms of Jötunheimr.

“Your son stopped by and left us a satchel of things he said you’d need.”

Brokkr’s voice bellowed through the halls as he spoke in as soft a tone he could muster.

“Ullr?”

“Of course. You know he takes great pride in being the son of both you and Thor. And obviously his lovely mother.”

I chuckled. Vinnie pulled flesh from the bones of his roast and stared at me. Walt did the same, as if they were both trying to figure out how to ask what they wanted to ask, now that they'd rested from their enraged states.

“Ah, you butter me up, putting me on their level.”

“From what I have just seen, my friend, you belong on their level.”

Skog quipped as he drank from his overflowing cup. Another chuckle from me.

“Yeah, Igor. You're pretty badass. We gotta talk about some of these secrets of yours though. You have way too many.”

“Rachel, I am old. I have so many I forget to tell you any of them.”

“That's fucked up.”

We laughed together, enjoying the recuperative meal and drink the Dwarven

Masters had prepared for us. To sit and laugh without cause for worry, if only short lived, was a relief after the trials we'd all just faced.

Questions still swirled about our minds, but it was blatantly obvious that none of us wanted to explore them in that moment. As Vinnie and Walt filled their faces, Rachel and Sonya chatted between each other, becoming fast friends. Ivo, Bernerd and Tom found themselves locked in conversation as well while Sindri and Brokkr took it upon themselves to repair our weaponry and gadgets.

"You know, I do not say this lightly, my friend... but I believe Boris was right in sending me to you."

"Eh, unfortunately, I agree with you. Do not tell him I ever said those words. Ever."

Skog stared for a moment and laughed, his essence fuller and without fear.

"I will not! But I do appreciate him for giving me the gift of your ability. I've found a new hope for my people... whatever ones remain."

“Likewise, my friend. Though I fear this is not going to be the last of the dangers we’ll need your help to face.”

“You have it, on my honor.”

A smile crossed my lips as I chuckled.

“I knew you were one of us, Skog. Glad to see I was right.”

We all continued our meal, enjoying each other’s company now that we’d been refreshed, treated and fed. Another triumph survived and day to be had.

After our meal, while the others rested a bit more, I found myself in front of a flame, a small dagger and reddened fruit in hand. I stabbed the dagger into the heart of the fruit and bled it over the flame, quietly whispering the words of the Aesir.

In front of me sat Loki with greyed skin, and spidered eyes. He chuckled with a dusted gravel in his voice.

“I see you’ve succeeded, Svell... Perhaps Sif wasn’t so odd to find comfort in you

after all.”

“Kind words coming from an imp such as yourself.” I jeered.

He chuckled again, but it was cut short by a small cackle and baren cough.

“Are you alright? Truly...”

He paused for a moment, wherever he was and spoke with a strange reverence.

“I will be... As long as you and that derelict family of yours can continue searching for some way to bring Balance back to the foreground... We’ll all be alright.”

“How long have you been like this?”

“A few decades now, but it’s gotten worse.”

I sighed.

“Are they all like you?”

“Only the ones he presides over.”

“... That’s a dangerous sect.”

“It is...”

“Every realm?”

Loki nodded.

“Every pantheon...?”

Another nod.

“How long?”

He shook his head.

“I see. It’s alright. We’ll figure it out...
Until we do, take care of yourself, Loki...
We would not have succeeded without
you... You invaluable prick...”

I granted him a sympathetic smile, one he took without quip before vanishing into the flames.

Brokk and Sindri approached from behind as Tom and Bernerd followed closely. I turned to greet them, but they only gave me satchels and bound gifts.

“You carry a hell of a burden, Svell.”

Sindri whispered.

“Not sure many could carry the same.”

Brokkkr confirmed.

“Eh, it’s not so bad... I have a good set with me this time.”

They nodded. Brokkkr extended his hand, grabbing my forearm as I grabbed his, both looking each other in the eye before nodding, him taking his leave before Sindri followed suit, extending his arm. Claspings. Nodding. Then taking his leave.

It seemed next were the Rhodians, both somewhat human-like in their appearance, though Tom seemed paler than most and Bernerd’s ears still held three openings in the center and a jagged point.

“So, you party like that often?”

Tom grinned.

“Eh, enough to be almost used to it.”

“Well, count us in. Probably good to find a place we can call home without being shady in an underworld.”

Bernerd cut his eyes toward him for a moment before closing them and shaking his head.

“There is plenty of room where we are going. You’re both welcome to come with us and join the rest if you’d like.”

“I think we will... our forges can really be held anywhere...”

“Then we welcome you even more so. You’ll have to have covers or whatever it is they say.”

Tom grinned.

“I like the sound of this already. I feel all covert.”

“You are an idiot...”

Bernerd responded.

The two offered their arms and we shook one at a time, much the same as Brokkr

and Sindri, though we touched foreheads as a sign of alliance before they took their leave.

I heard Rachel from behind chuckle.

“Always the fucking dad.”

“Eh, I cannot help it.”

She shook her head and joined me by the fire. We sat in silence for the remainder of the evening while the others slept, enjoying each other's company.

.20.**Leonie's Bar & Snack Shack**

Rachel and the others returned to their homes through doors provided by Brokkr and Sindri. We'd all had enough of the Keepers and their paths for the evening. Them offering a straight entrance instead of perils, well it was a no-brainer, as my boys would have said to me. Though I unfortunately was unable to return home, until I delivered as promised.

I walked up the stairs to the back door of the enclosed room at Leonie's. While we'd

been gone for several days, to those of the Earthen Realms, it was only a few hours. Leonie greeted me at the door, opening it wide for me.

“Don’t suppose I can interest you in a drink for a few minutes while you scuttle around in those pockets of yours.”

I chuckled and nodded. She led me down a lit hallway. The patrons were humming above us, though you could tell the call was coming as the murmurs softened.

In the back, however, there was a small circular table. I breathed a silent breath of relief as Randall and Deshi sat at it, Marcus delivered drinks to both and Harold as he appeared from behind the bar.

“Thank you for the help earlier.”

I noted.

“My pleasure.”

And that was all he and I spoke of it.

Randall blew a ring of smoke and nodded his thanks as Deshi sipped his tea. His demeanor was back to its sardonic air. I

offered him a satchel filled with the gnarled bark of the boggy marshes. He nodded his thanks as Randall arched a brow. I slung the small wrapped package from around my shoulder, the one filled with the bones of our first true battle of the journey. He smirked and gladly seemed to accept his prize.

“I hope they enjoyed their desserts.”

“I’m sure they did, no one complained about anything.”

He nodded his thanks before I turned and slid my hands deep into my pockets and gave Leonie a jar of pebble and ashen dirt from the tomb.

She took it with great care and nodded her thanks. Marcus brought me my drink as Harold pulled a seat for me. I sat and took the drink, Leonie leaned up against the bar, Harold close beside her.

“Good to see you. Did you get what you needed?”

Deshi chimed in.

“I... yes and no. I couldn’t get precisely

what I needed... without making a friend."

"You made a friend? Now ain't that sweet."

Leonie jeered with a smile. Just the lighthearted jest I needed.

"I did. Skog. He and his people, the Djinn of the North, carry what we need and... I was not going to ask him to give up his life for my cause."

"So, you opted to invite him in instead."

Randall noted.

"Yep... He came in handy, though the core your other half needs lies with him."

"Probably safer there... and if he's a friend he can keep it until we need it."

Sound logic.

I nodded.

"Did you figure out how all of this

happened?"

Deshi asked, finishing his tea and diving into a vat of Leonie's homemade plum wine.

"An All-Being."

"Which one?"

Harold asked gently from behind the bar. I sighed, not wanting to give him the answer. Though my silence may have given him some inkling, so why not come clean.

"Raph."

The room fell silent, everyone looking around at each other with concern and bewilderment.

"He's not gone yet... We wouldn't have been able to make it as far as we did without his and Loki's help... But you were right. The Jötnar had the answer on their walls... written in desperation..."

Her brow furrowed.

"How did you know to read it? Rachel?"

I shook my head.

“Walt.”

Deshi gave an “oh” sound as the others nodded to each other.

“That makes sense.”

Leonie filled my glass as I placed the empty down on the counter.

“How are *you* doing?”

I chuckled.

“I am tired and hoping to rest before we all need to come to terms with what this truly means. The doorways, the Keepers, Beings of Knowledge like Sonya and Nick not having the knowledge they need... It’s a shitshow now, but something tells me it is not quite as hard as it soon will be...”

The others nodded in agreement. Again, a round table of silence as we all drank for several moments. I finished my drink for the last time and stood.

"I should get home to my boys and Jela."

Harold rose and nodded.

"I'll take you. It's the least I can do."

"Thank you..."

The others gave me a nod, Marcus waved and Leonie kissed my cheek as she tucked a small pouch into the palm of my hand. It hummed softly with reassurance.

"And thank *you*."

She spoke right before we separated and I followed Harold to the parking lot.

.21.
Home

Harold pulled into the driveway and stared forward before speaking. His tone was low and gentle, something I could see him using with his subordinates.

“You’re a good man, Igor... No matter what you’ve done, you’re a good man now.”

I stared forward as well, letting his words truly sink into my ears and penetrate my mind. I nodded my thanks.

“So are you... Nick is lucky to have you... as is Sonya.”

I opened the door and exited the car, closing the door gently and nodding as I walked up the driveway. The boys had picked up their items, and the sweet smell of a fresh roast filled the air. I opened the door and slid into the house, my eyes tired and mostly closed. Cliff had come home for a few days, and fell asleep on the couch, head in Lyle's lap, who'd also fallen asleep. I pulled the blanket from behind them and covered Cliff. There was another on a recliner close by. I grabbed it and gently placed it under cliff's head, draping it over Lyle's legs before kissing both of their foreheads.

I trudged through the house, down the stairs to the kitchen. A covered plate sat on the stove with a handwritten note from Jela that said: You need food. Don't be dumb.

I chuckled and lifted the cover. Venison. She always knew what to bring home when I needed a pick-me-up...

The oven was still warm when I turned it back on, sliding the porcelain dish into the heated belly. I took a deep breath and exhaled softly, reliving the events of the last few days... or... hours here I guess.

The oven sounded. I pulled the meat out and sat at the table. She'd left me a bottle of my favorite drink and a large antler. I couldn't help but smile as I tore the meat from the bone it was attached to.

Barry slowly sat next to me with a plate of his own, his long black hair shaggy in his face, covering scars as he smiled at me with tired eyes and a few new lines over a fair jawline and brow. I smiled back at the young man and nodded. Another sat beside him, Rick... a wicked look about him but as kind and caring as the next... Then another... Willie... his skin smooth like well-oiled coffee beans, but his air was cold and somewhat harmed. He nodded with a drink in hand taking a seat as Kyzer shoved him over, longer features like Arvid, his father... a child I'd lost long ago. Now I cared for his boy... And Jela. Blond with a wayward yet fearless look about her with a pony tackled in back and a slight mischief about her in that twinkle... One of my eldest and most stubborn.

We all ate and drank together, murmuring lowly, as to not wake anyone else who may have been asleep. It was nice to breathe together again... to see what Harold seemed to think I deserved...

While I wasn't sure if I was truly
deserving of these souls... I was as grateful as I
could have been... And felt full with them
around... No matter what came to pass, I
would not fail them... And they could never fail
me...

-End-

Epilogue

-Max-

I hung up the phone. Contemplating the news Leonie'd just given me. It seemed we were bound for some sort of corrections, something necessary to maintain Balance.

I sat in my study and thought about what to tell Koda. What to do with Mike and Julian. It didn't take long for me to realize we were going to need a significant amount of people to stave off the coming fuckery.

Perhaps, Kevin would have insight into how to deal with an Arch or All-Being on the verge of collapsing our existence.

I knew Raph personally. He was far from stable, but there were rumors that he'd once been a pillar of stability. Able to correct a twisted reality with a single thought. I'd often wondered where all of that malice and conflict went. I suppose it was the same place the logic and sense went.

I had a feeling this would be an expensive endeavor... as well as a particularly dangerous one. Perhaps even a bit fun...

I couldn't stop the smirk from crossing my lips as I drank a stiff glass of iced seltzer.

As dangerous, and expensive, as all this was about to be... or was already... I felt a rush of excitement.

"It's been far too long..."

The Books

1. Death of a Creative Soul
2. The Organ Donor
3. Sin's Doctor
4. Peklenc's Journal
5. The Butcher's Stone
6. Twin Medicine
7. Igor's Winter (this one)
8. The Meat Man (Coming 2026)

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Thanks and Cheers, Mates.