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# **Ruin**

Senior Paper

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The following 8 chapters constitute the beginning of the novel *Ruin*, a fantasy story that follows two characters, Rhun and Mallory, after Rhun of them is selected by the gods to stop the world from ending. The two unwitting and unwilling heroes must travel across several worlds that are all in danger of being destroyed by a seemingly unrelated catastrophe. However, the novel also follows the pantheon and reveals their actions that have led to this point, and their true reasons for selecting such an unlikely pair of saviors. Eventually these two sides will meet, and the truth of why the world is ending will become known. I would like to thank two people in particular: Professor David Hopes, for reading and aiding me with editing and adjusting the first copy of this manuscript, and Thomas Norwood, a friend whose art can be found on page 15, and who brought to life an image I could never hope to capture in words. I can't thank either of you enough for the effort and aid you have given me.

## Chapter 1

This place has many names. For long ago they ensured that it would never be forgotten, and that no two people would see it the same.

This is where the gods dwell.

Even where divinity walks the halls, rests its head, drinks the wine, there is a place held sacred by its inhabitants. It is at the heart of the twisting hallways, and behind many doors. It is as secret as it is wonderful, and even though all mortals know of this place, none of them know of this.

When eternity was young, the first of the gods drew the world forth. They gave it form, laws, and life. And when they did they set aside a place where they could meet, as equals, away from one another's domains. For when they pulled it from the void, they left the void in it. It is formless and erratic. It twists and shapes to the will of the minds inside itself.

It now took the form of a garden. Plants of every kind spread throughout an endless expanse, dominated all by a tree whose branches raked at evening stars. The tree's kind had long

since vanished from the world, and only this echo remained. In the center of the endless garden lay a pool.

Through that pool, the pantheon watched over the worlds. Now their gaze narrowed, to one of the three. It swept downward like the eagle, until they came to a river. Above that river, they watched their champion, who fought and bled. Until, finally, she fell. Fell to the blades and bows of her enemies. Fell to the embrace of the rushing waters below

And they cheered.

At the head of the crowd of divines, a man adorned in the leather, fur, and horns of beasts smiled. This was the god, Actaeon. It was he who had groomed their champion since long before her birth, preparing for her arrival, and preparing the world for her deeds.

“We have her!” A woman with flames in her eyes, and her hair, roared out. “A toast!” The goddess of fire raised her goblet and drained it. Still smiling, Actaeon threw his antler graced head back with the other deities in drink.

Save one.

“We rejoice too soon.”

The horned god paused, his cup at his lips, sweet wine on his tongue. A silence grew from the crowd, as it turned away from the pool to the faceless god.

There are many gods. Gods of every aspect of humanity, and every part of the world he dwells in. There are gods of fire, of beasts, of death.

All pale before The Forgotten.

It alone sat, away from the crowd. It did not need to stand to see what occurred in the scrying pool. For the pool belonged to it, along with everything else in this realm. As every creature of tooth and claw was Actaeon's, this place was the formless god's. It was the one to create this room, long ago.

It had given all it had to do so.

The thing sat wrapped in a cloak woven from the same material as the garden around them. To describe the color of the cloak would be pointless, one man would call it red, another black. Both wrong. It was the thread of dreams. Of madness.

The hood rose by a fraction, a pointless gesture, one it made for their benefit. There was nothing to find under its cloak. "Her task has not yet begun."

None in the crowd spoke, most refused to look directly. It was the horned god that broke the silence. "We have waited-*prepared* this day for many years. Surely, its arrival is worth some celebration?"

The Forgotten stood, and the horned man felt a gaze of iron fall on him. "You think what lies ahead is cause for merriment, Actaeon?"

Many gods bowed their heads in shame, and fear, but the King of Beasts stood his ground. "This day ensures the survival of the world, and the mortals we watch over. Yes, old friend, I think this is a joyous occasion."

The nameless one turned. Drifting away, it called, "Come." The other gods began to whisper, some watching the earth nervously, wondering if this departure would mean the dissipation of the garden.

Actaeon travelled forth, the door heightening to allow his horns passage. The world changed as he walked through it. The endless garden faded away, to be replaced by stone hallways, lit by lanterns' eternal flame.

The formless god awaited him on the other side. The two fell together into a familiar pace as they wandered the grand halls. The only sound in the halls of the gods, was, for a while, the striking of Actaeon's hooves upon the stone, and his breathing the torch-warmed air. The other god made no sound. Not the sound of footfalls, it did not walk. Nor the sound of steady breath, as it moved no air at all. And no bump-bump, bump-bump of blood pumping, for it lost its heart long ago. Until finally, it made the only sound it could, with its voice. "...I think you are the only one to call me friend anymore."

Actaeon held his face as stone. Sharp angles moved as he spoke. "All in there owe all they are to you."

"All that makes me is Master. No, they have lost what made me their friend. One by one, their memories of me faded. Even you have forgotten all but my voice. So tell me, why do you call me friend?"

Actaeon answered without thinking. "I need no memories of ages past to tell me what I already know. Perhaps you are my master, but I know you first as my friend."

The faceless god smiled, Actaeon did not need to see it. "Thank you. But I think you have forgotten the task before us, Old Serpent."

Actaeon stopped, laying a hand on what had once been a shoulder. "You are the only one that calls me *that*, you know? I do not forget. I know that ruin will soon come. So I ask, take what joy you can, in a deed well done." He smiled down at his oldest friend.

The figure's shoulder shook. "Perhaps I should." The hallways looped and circled back to the endless room, and the faceless god remarked. "I think that name is something they wish to forget."

"And you?" Actaeon paused before they entered.

"Never, old friend. I cannot forget."

## Chapter 2

Mallory's lone vigil entered its second night, he had remained in this hall for forty hours, breaking only to relieve himself. His red-rimmed eyes stared at the cloister door as he clutched the old, gray habit's too-loose sleeves. He passed it, and his eyes fell once more to the floor. Someone should have come by to relieve him a day and a half ago, but no one had arrived. He was certain they'd send someone, so certain that he'd forgotten to ask the other monks about just who's turn was next. Instead, the dripping water clock in the hall was his only companion. He reached it, and turned around again, his pacing falling in time with the water falling.

His eyes sagged low, and so he bit his cheek to fight off sleep. The pain and the sharp taste of blood drove the shadows at the edge of his vision back. His thoughts felt slow, stumbling through his mind. He had thought to keep himself awake by moving, keeping his legs pumping warm blood. But now he wondered if he should have saved his energy. His stomach ached with sharp hunger pains.



His hunger helped to keep him awake, at least. The food the monks had given him had almost run out, and he saved the last apple carefully.

He'd almost forgotten why he was here. He'd given up hours ago wondering what message the gods sent his abbot, for if he began to wonder, he'd begin to dream. Dream as the abbot was, when the gods had pulled his mind to their halls. He had suddenly stood from his chair at breakfast, and said "I may be some time" before plummeting to the floor. The monks had placed his unconscious body within the cloister and sealed the door. They had placed Mallory as its sole guardian, one watchman for a madman touched by the gods.

The other monks left, then. Mallory had the thought, momentarily, that they could not bear to look at what may have been their old abbot's tomb, that his replacements had "forgotten" him here because they did not want to remember... Mallory swatted the thought away, like a slow and errant fly. Such thoughts were unworthy of his brothers and sisters. Perhaps this was their way putting him to the test, of seeing what how far his will could push.

Mallory pulled his head up, wiping at the corner of his mouth. Yes, that was it. He just had to keep awake, show them... Show them what, again? Why did he care?

His hand rose in a cupped shape and struck him across the cheek. The sound and the sting awoke and reminded him. It mattered to him. This was his family, and he would not disappoint them. They asked him to stand watch, and watch he would.

...Was the old man still alive? That was the thought he could not shake. What if his vigil was for nothing? What if the cloister became both of their resting places?... maybe the smell would finally bring someone.

He felt himself giggle at the thought of his own embarrassing demise. The idea of a cook starving to death shouldn't have been funny, but it was to his sleep-deprived mind.

*I wonder who's keeping the oven going? Who's weeding the gardens? Are all the books shelved where they should be?*

Inconsequential worries to anyone else (save perhaps the oven, a cold oven meant a cold breakfast), but to Mallory they were his life.

Poor Mallory. His life is about to end.

It begins (and ends), with a knock to the head.

When the heavy wooden door swung open, it opened right into the side of Mallory's drooping head. One of the iron rivets struck him in the temple, and for a moment, he heard the abbey bells ringing in the night. Then the other side of his head hit the stone floor of the hallway, and he realized he'd fallen over. Mallory lay there, for a moment, pondering if the blow was making everything fuzzy, or if the floor really was that comfortable of a spot to sleep. The stone did feel soft under his naked head.

"I have returned! Laden with knowledge!" Abbot Jermus looked out upon the world, and beheld his disciple lying upon the floor. "...Brother Mallory, what are you doing down there?"

Mallory's head still rung, but two decades of habit proved more difficult to break.

"Sleeping, Father."

"On watch?"

The ringing tightened, into a point just behind his forehead. "No, you're awake, which means I can finally sleep."

The Abbot looked around “And how long have I been out this time?”

“Forty hours, Abbot.”

“E-gad, man! Why didn’t you wake me up?”

Mallory considered the abbot very wise. He was one of the few people left in the abbey able to ask him questions for which he could produce no answer. The silence that this question created was eventually filled by a terrible grumbling sound.

“...forty hours, you said?”

Mallory nodded, then held his head as it nearly split from pain.

The abbot failed to notice. “Do you have any food, lad?”

Mallory had learned his lesson about nodding, and simply held out his last apple. The young monk smiled aimlessly, proud with his task, as fruit began to fly in the abbot’s frenzy. He couldn’t figure out why giving the abbot his last apple made him this happy, but he smiled nonetheless. Mallory’s aching head began to fall, and the abbot came up for air. “Mallory, you look like something I’d find in a ditch. Why and who threw you from a moving carriage into this cloister?”

Mallory was dimly aware of someone asking him a question, but wasn’t sure what. So he gave his best excuse, “Bn ‘n watch... frty hours... water clcks...” His words, thoughts, and brains began to slur together.

The abbot finished off the apple by tossing the core up into the air and down his throat. “Ah. Well, you look like you could use some rest, young one. Luckily for you, there’s a bed that’s currently vacant, and I can vouch for its level of comfort.” Jermus didn’t say what that

level was, but his back would take a few days to recover from the borderline stone of the cloister bed. It was, however, a bed. He helped up his disciple, amidst small groaning protests, that, if translated from Concussian, would have said “Please, I need a doctor. Take me to the infirmary. Why’d you hit me with a door?” He didn’t need to do anything else, as Mallory’s body landed mostly on the bed without any assistance with an audible *thunk*. He shut the cloister, and Mallory’s last image was, once again, the door he had been set to guard.

With the port closed, the abbot’s easy smile dropped. He turned towards the main building, the bell hanging above still and silent in the night. He left Mallory lying dead in the cloister and set off on a path familiar to him. This was not the first message the gods had sent his way.

But for he feared it would be the last.



The abbey was quiet, only a few pockets of sound stood out in the night. One of them was the kitchens, the ovens crackling as they consumed scraps of dead wood set to keep them alight until dawn.

Sister Olivia stoked one of them, pushing cinders to reignite and breathe heat back across the room. She set aside the poker and extended her hands, enjoying the warmth on her old bones amidst the cold stone of the kitchen. She eyed the meager pile of firewood on one side of the room. No one had cut any the previous day. With Mallory gone, the other cooks had forgotten to replace the diminishing supply. The head cook shook her head, sighing in disappointment at her underlings.

Olivia went to move onto the next fire, only to grasp empty air where the poker should have been. She cast around for it, and realized that the abbot was standing a mere few feet away from her, prodding another oven in front of him. The wood collapsed under the abbot's poking, and sparks flew high into the chimney. His face flickered as shadows fled from the fire, his expression seeming to shift as they passed over it. Relief, sorrow, fear, and then, nothing. He simply stared, lost, into the flames.

They stood together, baking in the heat, until Olivia breached the silence. "...Finally got out of bed, did you?"

Abbot Jermus, a man touched by the gods, was silent. Olivia spoke again, her tone as playful, warm, and controlled as the flames, "Sometimes I wish I could check out for a bit too. All you got to do is say something ominous sounding and fall out of your chair. Then they give you a room and leave you be until your nap's over."

She hummed for a bit, waiting for a response. It never came, so she continued rambling, hoping that he might speak just so that she would eventually be silent. "Of course, when you get to be *my* age you start to worry about checking out unexpectedly. If *I* tried to pull that off, they might not throw me in the cloister if the cemetery's any closer, eh?"

Jermus let out a low laugh at that, and Sister Olivia smiled. It was worrying to see the abbot so unnaturally reserved. He turned and began to rub his back amidst the heat of the oven. "I *have* thought about that, you know? Particularly when we play host to one of the less *reasonable* members of the nobility." His back popped, and he let out a sigh. "Confound it, with the amount of times I've used it, you would think they'd have replaced that rock in there with an actual bed. Or at least some straw. It's freezing in there, in winter."

“Well, in that case, it might not matter where they put me.” They both laughed at that, but sobered too quickly from it. “So, where’s your watchdog? The firewood needs chopping.”

“Mallory is fine. I left him resting in the cloister, actually. Was he-“

“Oh, yes. We all figured you’d be out in a few hours. Didn’t think he needed a replacement. But two days... you’ve never been gone that long. What happened?” Olivia’s eyes shone in the dark as she leaned in, “You didn’t have to wait in line, did you?”

Jermus shuddered. “Nothing so horrible.”

“Good, because I’d be worried if that’s what the gods’ home was like. To hell with bureaucracy.”

“You’d likely find it there.”

A small chuckle slipped from Olivia’s throat. “See, if you can still joke, it can’t have been that bad. How was it?”

“What took so long...” The abbot sighed. “I do not know. To me, it was as short as ever. The Messenger greeted me in the Grand Hall, only it wasn’t empty like always. I could see figures on the balcony, watching us.”

Father Jermus fell silent again, his face hidden in the darkness. Olivia was patient. She knew he would speak when he was ready. And he did.

“...Tomorrow, Olivia, we will have a guest.”

The sister began to look around the dim kitchen. “A guest, is it? Hm... let me see, what do we have in here? How many are we hosting? A noble and his entourage? Another order? Traveling players?” Her eyes lit up at the last.

“No... just one. A hero.”

Olivia’s mouth twisted. “A hero? What have they done? Haven’t heard about any great deeds recently, can’t be all that much of a hero.” She opened a cabinet and rummaged through it.

“They... have done nothing, yet. They have been chosen by the gods.”

A bag of flour nearly toppled over, and Olivia scrambled to catch it in time. She felt something pop in her hip. “Ohf... Chosen, eh? Chosen to do what?”

Abbot Jermus stepped softly over to her and took the bag from her hands. He placed it back and took her by the shoulder. “Chosen to save us all, Sister.”

That she required saving was new to Olivia. Typically, it was her that told people they needed it. “Save us? Why do we need saving?”

“Because apparently the world is ending.”

### Chapter 3

Morning mist upon the mountainside, rent and torn by the eye of the rising sun. Newborn light struck stone. Mallory thought he could hear it singing. The rays painted the rock and green of the mountain in shadows and blinding light.

The roots of the mountain ran deep. Trees fell and rose again in its cracks and crumbled monuments to ages past. Below, the roots never died, but burrowed and drank of the mountain, subterranean vines clutching the earth and stone; fingers in a lover's hair.

The mountain's brothers stood, side-by-side, shoulder to shoulder. A shieldwall of earth against sky. And the eldest centered them, completed them.

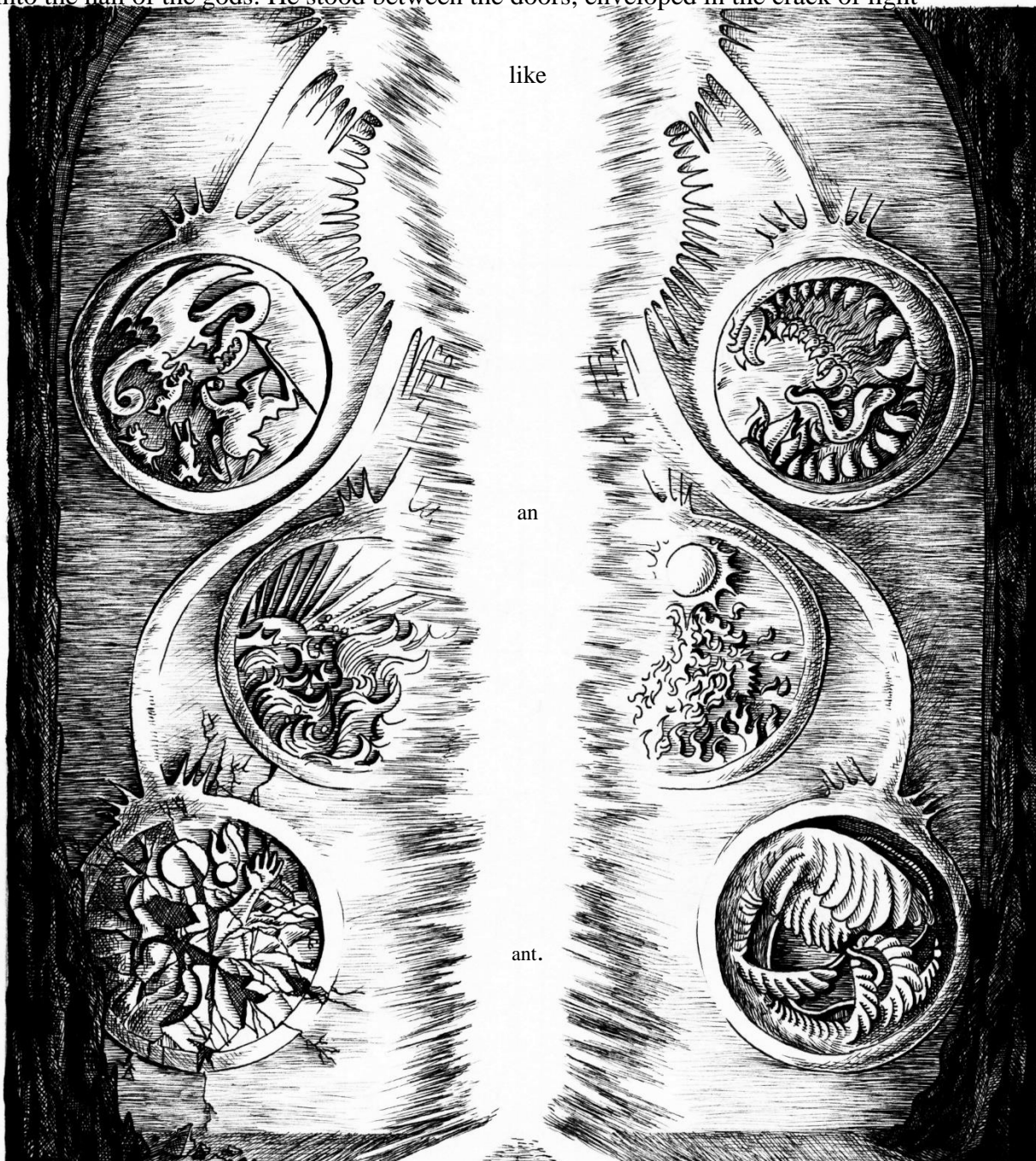
The Iron Mountain.

And above Mallory were its gates. He lay upon the path, felt the kiss of the passing mist, dew-covered as the grass. Everything shook, his body convulsing upon the red dirt to keep the cold at bay. Shaking, staggering, praying to the gods he hoped were home, he made for the gates. For this was where the gods dwelled.



Halfway through, he stopped, and looked back. He saw a valley below him, the path falling down through forest and stone. Never before had he been so high, never before so blessed to see the world. He left it behind, and carried on.

The doors of the mountain were of iron, stronger than the stone around them. Carvings, runes, entire histories rained from their arches like starfall. Between the iron titans stretched a crack of golden light, spilling into the cold dawn of the mountainside. Mallory could feel the warmth it let out into the world. With shivering hands he reached between the iron walls, and into the hall of the gods. He stood between the doors, enveloped in the crack of light



Mallory stepped through the light-filled ravine, the great doors by his side marking his passage in silence. Runes carved into the cracks of the monument to power beseeched him to stop, to read their tales. Mallory kept on. He wished he could stay, and see what secrets were engraved here, in the margins of history, but he wished more to see what lay inside. He reached out as he passed the markings, and felt the cold iron glide beneath his fingers for just a moment in time.

And with that touch, his world shattered, as knowledge began to flood into him, an overwhelming tide of images, sounds, smells, emotion. Mallory felt pride, warmth, tasted blood, heard laughter.

He tripped, and stumbled away from the right-hand wall, trying to flee from the whirlwind in his mind. His back struck the other door. Joy, fire, fear pumping through his heart he staggered away, towards the light. Again, and again, each fleeting touch of the gates brought unbidden and unknown memories.

The raging storm, order masqueraded as chaos. He howled, and the seas shook beneath him. Wings spread, he felt energy spark and strike within, and within his center he felt-

The endless hunger, controlling and absolute. It pulled and tugged him forwards, devouring sky and earth, leaving nothing. Everything flowed into him, towards an empty end. Throwing his head to the sky, he roared-

To the fire, raging forth from him. It burned and cleansed, re forging the land beneath him. He could feel the wings of the w yrm spread upon his back, they cracked open in the flames. Sweeping them down, igniting an inferno, the fire from his breath nothing more than the first spark for the kindling air.

Mere moments, lost to time.

Lurching from door to door, memory to memory, finally he broke through, trembling hands grasping at the edge of the Iron Gate, and as he did, he felt...

Rebirth.

Chest gasping, his knees struck the floor. Sweat poured off him in a cold shower, fear-sweat, a primal instinct. He clutched his chest, trying to stop. He couldn't stop shaking.

The hall of the gods is a grand place, and to the eye, appears welcoming. A great table lay out before him, dominating the hall. A breakfast feast lay upon it, adorned with the purest dreams of food. Golden light fell from the burning stars hanging beneath the arched ceiling. But the sweat, the fear, the memories would not leave Mallory.

*Mortals are not meant for this place.* A clearer revelation than what he had just walked through. So wrapped within his own thoughts, he missed the footsteps that approached him.

“Um... excuse me, who are you?”

He jerked away from the voice, sending him sprawling to the floor in a heap. As he fell back, he nearly touched the metal doors once again, and he over-corrected, which sent him scrambling into the legs of the man whom had spoken.

The first thing he noticed were the man's legs, they were surprisingly muscular. He looked as though he spent every moment the sun shone greeting it in the open air. The white wrap around him felt like silk where it touched Mallory's face. Crow's feet at the edge of his eyes deepened as he squinted at the monk wrapped around his shins. “Hang on a moment, didn't I just speak to you? Wait, no, that was... who *are* you?”

“Ah-I, I...” His overwhelmed mind began to work through the mountain of information set before it. “My name is Mallory! Mallory Stepson! Of the Order Ciscans!”

“Ciscan? No wonder I thought you were the man who just left. You all wear the same gray drabs.” The man shifted his grip on the bundle of papers he held and offered Mallory his hand. Mallory just had the presence of mind to grab it, and was pulled to his feet by the strange man. The man whom he was beginning to form a picture of, in his mind.

“You spoke to Father Jermus?”

“I spoke to your Abbot. Indeed, I’ve spoken with him many times, but I don’t think we’ve ever met before, have we, Mallory?” The man eyed him askance, like he didn’t believe Mallory could very well exist here.

Mallory stammered out, “N-no, sir... you’re...”

“Really? Well, if that be the case, then, Mallory, my name is Meriton.” Meriton smiled, and, realizing Mallory still held his hand in a vice, shook it up and down, at least until Mallory had the presence of mind to let go.

Mallory’s hand fell limp to his side, “The messenger of the gods...” he took in a deep breath, then another, another, until Meriton clapped the side of his face.

“Lad! Are you alright?” The hand of the god rested on Mallory’s shoulder. “Take it easy, just breath, in, out, good, good.”

“Then this is truly-“

“Yes, this really is the Iron Mountain. Yes, those are the Gates of History. Yes, you are dead.”

Mallory nodded, joy filling him, until he actually heard what Meriton said. “What?”

The god blinked. “You didn’t... oh dear, what was it? The pox-no, you look too healthy. An accident? Or perhaps something more deliberate?”

“I... I’m not dead! I was just resting, I’d been up for so long, and when he finally woke up, Father Jermus hit me... in the head” Realization filled Mallory’s face. “with the...”

Meriton winced. “I am... very sorry to hear that. You see, very few mortals come here, and most of them... get lost, really, on their way to the afterlife. Especially when they’re taken suddenly, before their time. Jermus is a bit of an exception. Perhaps it was your proximity to Jermus when you died. I really *am* sorry to be the one to tell you.”

Mallory nearly sank down to the floor again, prevented only by Meriton holding him up. “I... I was so young... I had...” What *had* he to live for? The abbey, certainly, but really, what else had he known? Stone walls, a garden, the fires of the kitchen, the lake, the library. That was the extent of his world. And he began to realize it wasn’t a very big one.

The god holding him up looked sympathetic. “Listen, I have to go, I’m rather busy at the moment. But, I’m sure, once you come to terms with this, and, uh, accept it, you’ll move on.”

“What am I supposed to do until then?”

“Well there’s a dojo down in the east wing... wait, wrong kind of monk, sorry.” Meriton paused, then shrugged. “Meditate on the nature of your predicament?”

“But that’s all I did at the abbey!” That, and menial chores. And cooking.

“Well, you’ve got plenty of practice in, then!” With that, the god clapped him on the shoulder and headed to the door. He paused to grasp a long, gnarled, staff that leaned against the

gates, “If you wish, you can find the library at the end of the right hallway. I think. It’s still Thursday, right?” And with papers under one arm, and his walking stick in the other, Meriton strolled out of the Gates of History whistling, leaving a stunned monk behind him.

Today hadn’t started out well for Mallory, and it had only gone downhill afterwards. So Mallory fell back upon habit. He started walking. Past the grand table, laden with food he wished he could eat, but knew he shouldn’t. Under the floating flames adorning the ceiling. He walked in a stunned haze, unaware of a presence in the balconies above, watching. Waiting with endless patience.

Mallory entered the hall in a dreamlike trance. He wandered down, scared to touch the ancient and sacred walls. He was in the halls of the gods. He knew their names and faces by heart. The statues, the paintings, the stained-glass pictures in the abbey. Meriton, the god of travelers, the messenger of the gods’ divine will. Sienna, the goddess of fire, warm and compassionate. And hungry. And, greatest of them all, Actaeon. The god of every beast, and the wild hunting dance they all formed a part of. Mallory knew as many gods as thoughts in his mind.

But these halls were empty, and dark.

As was his mind.

Thus, when he came to the room the gods had set aside, it took no form for him. Mallory opened the door and stared into the endless dark. The void stared back. Then Mallory closed the door.

At last Mallory marshalled his thoughts before him. “If I’m dead,” he said to himself “then I have nothing to fear. I can walk wherever I wish, and no harm can come to me. I did not

just see infinity in a single room.” His fists bunched to hide the shaking. “You’re *dead*. Mallory, what’s the worst that could happen?”

With firm denial taking the forefront of his thoughts, Mallory opened the door again... to reveal a library. Just as Meriton has said. Just as he had thought.

He felt... not relief, certainly. This was all too strange for that. But he did feel validated, in his own assumptions. He felt like the ground was back beneath his feet. He breathed deeply as he entered the library, its familiar scent filling him. Dust, leather, the creak of old wooden shelves. It felt like home.

Tentatively, he held out his hand to touch the books spines lined shelf to shelf. When they did not disgorge their full contents to him in an instant, he relaxed. He walked along, feeling the ridges and dust slip by under his fingertips. He walked by the stacks until he hit the opposite wall, turned left, and made another trip down. Down and down the rows of knowledge he walked, growing more and more uneasy as he did. Not because the stacks and rows of books in this library were unfamiliar to him.

But because they were. He knew this place. This was *his* library, the abbey library.

“So it is.”

Mallory had been shocked too many times today. He didn’t jump, he just turned slowly, to the hall of books he had just walked down, and beheld a gray robe. It drifted a few inches above the floor, and in the hood, where its face should be, he saw nothing at all. Beneath Mallory’s hand was a book of children’s tales, each one about a different god and their legends. He’d read it time and time again. None of the stories had mentioned this one. “Who are you? Are you a god?”

The hood twitched to the side, as though it was puzzled. “No, I would not say so... merely a servant.”

Mallory’s hand left the bookshelf to sweep wide. “This place, what is it?”

“A better question, Mallory,” A sleeve rose to point beyond him, “is what it *isn’t*.”

Mallory turned, to find the library faded into a sun-lit sea. The horizon of the waves cut the sun in half, as rainbows danced and shook upon the water.

“...I really am dead, aren’t I?” Mallory murmured in horror, sea foam on his lips.

“Perhaps not.” Mallory turned to confront the grey figure amidst the books, confusion on his face.

Give someone hope, and they will believe anything.

“What do you mean? Meriton said that only the dead can walk these halls.” A dull ember, glowing in Mallory’s chest.

The faceless god would have smiled. “Meriton? What does he know? Your abbot walks these halls often enough.”

Mallory’s face rose, and then fell. “But he’s an exception...”

“Have you never considered you are one as well?” Mallory looked at the robe with his face alight with aspiration, not daring to say the thought that came to his mind. The soft voice from the robe took on a more teasing tone. “You think that Jermus is the only mortal to step through those gates?”

Mallory’s heart began to pound, heat and hope rising in him. “So... I’m alive?”



*Finally.* “Indeed. You really should be getting back, you know. You have things to do, I’m sure.”

“I can just leave?”

“Certainly.” The formless one let out a low laugh.

“Thank you!” The shelves began to creak as Mallory went limp, leaning against one end, careful not to fall into the ocean he could hear crashing behind him. “What can I do to thank you?”

“What can you do? Nothing, really.” The figure’s laughter continued, as Mallory’s face fell. “No, no, it’s nothing to do with you! I merely *want* for nothing. So there isn’t anything-“ The Forgotten stopped, catching a lie. “Well... perhaps there is *something*. Not for me, but...”

“Anything! Anything for helping me out of here, and for telling me that I can go home!”

*You really are so eager to repay.* The faceless god thought. “A piece of wisdom?” When it saw Mallory’s face, it knew it had said the right thing. “Something for you to take back home?”

“I... I don’t know who you are, but, but you give me a way home, grant me knowledge, and say it is a favor to you?” Mallory shook his head, but could not shake the grin. “I gladly accept!”

The Formless god stood by his side, ignoring the space between them in a blink. “When the time comes, *do not forget*. Now, **wake up**

Mallory’s smiling form vanished, and, in a shut cloister room, a broken vein in his brain was re-knit. The faceless god sighed as the room faded back to its natural shape. He had been

worried, for a moment. Yes, He. The faceless god lifted his sleeves, eager to see if he could make out the faintest hint of his returning form. But nothing. *Ah, well*, he thought. *Soon, Mallory. So go forth, and find Rhun, and together...*

The grand architect wept, there in the void. Heard by no one, he cried for the future. *The two of you shall give me form, and I will put this shattered world back together. Before it tears itself apart.*

## Chapter 4

“Wake up! Mallory, I swear I will light the fires of Sienna under you if you don’t *get out of bed!*” The voice demanded many things. Attention, respect, a healthy dose of fear. Sister Constance’s bellows had that effect on people. “I’m going to count to three, alright? One... Two...”

Mallory’s mind snapped back, away from mountains and monumental gates. It fell through the ocean and broke through to the other side. He jolted up, gasping for breath. “I’m up, I’m up!”

The cloister was dim, lit only by twilight through a single window pane. As Mallory stared in shock at the stone wall, he realized that he was alone. He went to the door, to find no one waiting for him outside. No Sister Constance yelling at him to get out of bed, no one come to find him. Perhaps the voice was simply the last vestiges of a dream. He stepped to the familiar water clock. For the millionth time, he listened to it dripping. He suddenly felt anger, at such a simple, repetitive, pointless thing. He shoved his hands into the water and threw it back upon his

face. He felt the water shock his heart and mind to proper consciousness. *Why didn't I think of that while I was waiting here?* Drops fell back into the bowl, as the water churned and crashed inside. It reminded him of something... something just at the edge of his mind. He tried to grasp it, but the dream slipped through his fingers. He shrugged. *Ah, well. Can't have been that important if I've already forgotten.*

He blinked the last of the water out of his eyes as it ran down his skull. He noticed how full the bowl was. *How long was I out?* He looked through the lone window in the cloister's room, and saw it was facing west.

*Sunset... is it still the same day?* He could feel his hunger, his thirst, but he was still able to stand. He took a drink from the water clock, setting it back half an hour, and left it there. His steps were sure, sandals clapping upon the stone floor.

There was something... Mallory began to twitch as he walked the familiar halls. Something scratching at the back of his mind. He felt revitalized, *excited* even. And he couldn't say why. His exhaustion was gone, but so was his inner peace. He wandered into the apple orchard with a new gaze.

Discontented.

He walked through the rows of trees alone, so familiar. And suddenly so strange. He plucked a ripe apple the other monks must have missed, and devoured it. He tossed the pit to the side. It helped one hunger, at least.

But what to feed the other?

*Calm down. Mallory told himself. You just woke up. Let's check, make sure everyone knows we're awake ~~knows we're here~~.* He shook his head, as he neared the edge of the trees. *Was the orchard always this small?*

The smell of supper helped to come back to himself. A thick, heady scent reached him as he neared the kitchen, placed right near the orchard. Mallory's nose picked apart Olivia's stew, the strong smells of barley and beans, and the sharper odor of onions and parsnips caused his mouth to flood in anticipation. He'd become a cook solely because Olivia had gotten tired of shooin a child out of her kitchen. In her opinion, he was less likely to make trouble if Olivia gave him a task.

Idle hands drifted at Mallory's side. He closed his eyes and heard the sound of fresh bread crunching, of the hotpot steaming, the welcoming murmur of the abbey kitchen-

"Mallory! Where the hell have you been!"

Oh, and Sister Olivia.

He opened his eyes to behold the matron standing in the window, glaring at him, as per usual. "Wipe that simpleton's smile off your gob and get in here! Listen, we're- GET THAT POT OFF- running a skeleton crew here, I've been needing some help."

He kept the smile. "Sorry Sister, I was sleeping."

Her eyes cocked "Sleeping? It's five in the evening, boy! Did you get pricked by a sewing needle? I've been running around all day, with no one to-WATCH THAT STEAM- help me."

Mallory glanced around. “Why me, is there really no one else around to help? What about Brother Andurin?” *Why do they always look at me for these things?*

Olivia fixed him a glare that told him to quit digging. “Painting the front gate.”

“Sister Lachelle?” *If you can drag her out of the library.*

Now it was saying to start filling that hole of his back in. “Planting flowers by the front gate.”

“Brother Cadmus?”

At this point, Olivia was steaming as much as the pots behind her. “I can’t find him, he’s probably by the front gate.”

Mallory opened his mouth to ask why everyone was so concerned about one gate, when Olivia drowned the thoughts out of his head. “Mallory! If you’re not going to help me in here, I’ve got a different job for you.”



Fishing and sulking go together like cheese and fine wine. You can spend 99% of your time sitting and contemplating your troubles, safely grumbling where no one can hear you, and the other 1% frantically trying to kill a small creature with the intelligence of... well, a fish. Mallory usually wasn't one for either activity, but was taking to it like a duck to water. Sitting out in the middle of the lake, he set his line and began to think. The problem was that Mallory was a very good thinker, and because of this, soon began to realize that something was terribly *off* about today. Not only was he feeling so very anxious, he was talking back to Sister Olivia, and washing his face in a water clock out of sheer spite.

He grumbled up at the abbey on the hill from his little boat. For some reason, Olivia had badly wanted fish for tonight's meal, and had sent Mallory out to catch one in the next two hours. Just one fish. And in that moment, Mallory understood just how angry she had been at him for leaving her in the lurch. Because there was only one fish in this lake that could feed an entire abbey, the Grand Arden Trout. The size of a dog, and as strong as an angry pig, the creature from the deep was the reason Mallory's rod was made of iron, and his bait was a whole sausage.

*Today is just a strange day for everyone, I suppose.* Mallory had no idea why. Maybe that was how the universe worked. It stored up weirdness behind a dam, keeping everyone's lives simple and mundane, and periodically ruptured to flood everyone's world with strange happenings.

It was a nice sunset, at least. The great ball of fire had cooled its head, and was now winding down over the horizon, beneath the tree line. After Mallory cooled his own head, he realized that perhaps Olivia had sent him out here to give him a chance to collect himself. But even meditation could not bring him peace today. Still, there was little chance of him catching one of the legendary titans of the lake in an hour, even at sunset. Fishermen gave a million-to-one odds of catching the Great Arden in a single day.

But today really was a strange day for everyone. Amidst Mallory's fruitless musings and frustrated noises, the pole began to bob. All the energy Mallory had built up that evening came roiling out, and he grasped it quickly, and tightly. And a good thing he did, for it suddenly began to jerk and pull against him, out into the water. Shock ran through his arms, to his chest. His heart began to pound, and its beating drum was swiftly joined by thrashing in the water. He caught a glimpse of the creature, just before it dove back under again, and it was massive. He

nearly fell from the boat as it pulled downward and gave the line the barest bit of slack. *Is it trying to capsize me?* He felt the line come up, and pulled back, grasping more and more of the reel as he watched it struggle, just beneath the water. Something sparked in him, and his hand reached and pulled farther, determined only to see his enemy. The wire cut into his hands as Mallory let out the fiercest cry he'd uttered in two decades, wrapped in the heat of the moment. The water broke, and Mallory's cry was drowned by a roar from the waves. It struck at something primal in his mind, and he fell back as a monstrous figure breached.

The creature was as large as him, its limbs thrashed as scales and teeth shone bright with lake water. Writhing on the bottom of the boat, it kept up a low, rumbling growl. Mallory froze in horror as it snarled, and suddenly, blood sprayed across the boat. The figure trembled, and grew still. And as the pounding in his ears faded, Mallory could hear it begin to speak. "Slimy-cough-fuck. Gonna eat your-gah guts for breakfast."

Mallory did the first thing that came to his mind, and started apologizing. "I'm sorry! I didn't know this was your lake, I'll never fish here again, you can have the trout, that's enough right, please don't eat my guts!"

The figure hacked up more water, and looked up at Mallory. "What?"

Mallory continued to gape like a fish. "Please don't eat my guts." *They probably don't taste good.*

The woman blinked at him "Why would I eat your guts? Do I look like some kind of cannibal?"

"Ye-no!" *Come on, Mallory. Pulling strange women out of lakes is perfectly normal, they don't all want to eat you for dinner. Certainly not ones that have their teeth embedded into a*



*Grand Arden Trout when you do. Nope, that's completely normal. ~~She isn't going to eat you~~ Why would she ever want to eat me, that's absurd, so don't think that, just don't. I'm sure she's a perfectly normal... person.*

Everything about this was perfectly normal. So, Mallory tried to offer a perfectly normal question. “What’s your na- By the gods! Your hand!”

He failed immediately.

“Eh? Oh, this?” The woman reached up to the giant fishing hook stuck through her right hand. “Yeah, some jackass was compensating for something with a hook this big. It’s alright,” Her fingers wrapped around it, and, amidst Mallory’s small cries for her to stop, yanked it out. Not through the hole, but instead taking the shortest line between two points, with those points being “discomfort” and “agonizing pain”. Her face hardly changed, while Mallory’s shifted through the range of an entire three-act tragedy. “I’m a lefty, after all.”

Mallory stared at her hand, torn and raining blood onto the boat. “Doesn’t that hurt? Who are you?”

“Me?” The stranger grinned, her teeth stained with fish’s blood. “I’m Rhun. And if you think that looks like it hurts, you should probably take a look at my chest.”

Mallory looked down from her blood-raining hand. “What about your-” His eyes widened at the shaft of wood jutting out of Rhun’s sternum. “Why is there an arrow sticking out of your chest? How are you alive? What *are* you?”

## Chapter 5

Jermus exited the library, after spending the entire day amidst its stacks of books and ancient scrolls. The place was empty, even the librarian, it seemed, had found an excuse to hang about near the front gate. Just like everyone else, she wished to catch a glimpse of the chosen hero's arrival. Jermus passed the kitchen on his way out, and smelled Olivia's hard work. Almost everyone, then. You could always count on Olivia. Even if the world did end, Jermus felt confident he'd find her in the pantry, trying to piece together a last supper for all of creation. The delicious scent of roasting fish surrounded him, for just a moment. Flesh from the lake cracked and popped, a light hint of citrus, topped by a mix of spices from the garden.

The lovely air of nirvana was cast aside, when Brother Mallory poked his head out of the kitchen. He carried a bundle in his arms, and a curious frown on his face. "Father Abbot? What do you do for someone with an arrow wound?"

Jermus enjoyed his games with Mallory, the back and forth of words. Questions and answers, questions without answers, riddles in the library. He wasn't sure which one this was,

however, so he gave an honest answer. “Clean the wound, wrap it, and if the bloodloss doesn’t kill them, pray sepsis won’t.”

Mallory’s head retracted back into the kitchen. “Thank you, Father Abbot!”

Father Jermus shook his head, and kept walking down the hallway. He had almost reached the end when he heard the door open again. He turned and saw Mallory’s head about to speak again. “What is it, Brother Mallory?”

“What do you do if the arrow’s still in the person?”

“Remove it.”

“Ah.” Mallory’s head vanished, and Father Jermus waited a moment, until it popped back out for a third time. “How-“

“Push it through, cut off the head, then pull it back.” *What’s put this question into his head? A book? We don’t even have any bows in this place.*

Father Jermus reflected on this as he left the abbey proper, and began his journey towards the front gate.



“All I’m saying is, what if it’s all a metaphor?”

Sister Constance pushed her trowel into the earth and looked at Cadmus with a withering glare. “Brother, if you insist, one more time, that the gods are trying to confuse us, I know exactly where I’m planting this next bit of foxglove, understand?”

A biting laugh came from above, where Andurin stood atop his ladder. “But sister, that’ll never grow there. Try some mushrooms, instead.”

Cadmus kicked the ladder, and Andurin grasped the top of the gate to keep his balance. The newly painted sign creaked, and everyone took a step back, worried it might fall. It held, and the words, *Salve Latronem* swung at the top of the iron bars. “Fine, go ahead and laugh.”

Cadmus said, “But answer me this, why didn’t they tell us why, eh? The gods yank Jermus up there, and tell us the apocalypse is upon us, and then *don’t tell us what the problem is!*”

The four monks all shared a glance, when the last one spoke up, “Perhaps... we should not worry.” Three faces turned to Lachelle in surprise. “Because, after all, they’ve already appointed a champion to stop it. Maybe this message is simply so that we take caution against the coming storm.”

The group was silent for a moment, until Andurin had a thought, “If someone is already destined to stop it, then why say that the world is ending at all? They could have just said that a catastrophe was upon us, and a hero would face it. What if...”

“What if my disciples learned to stop loitering?”

The four disciples jumped, as Father Jermus opened the gate from the inside. The sign was knocked up, swung down, and clunked against the heavy iron gate. “It’s growing late, my children.”

Constance huffed. “I’m far too old for...” the Abbot spared her a glance. It was not an intimidating thing, but it did not need to be. Constance busied herself with brushing off her dirt laden hands, and not talking.

“The four of you have spent all day hanging about this gate.” Jermus began. “I’d wager that it has been cleaned, repainted, oiled, and decorated-at least four times.” Three of them found interest in the dirt, while on the ladder, Andurin studied a pattern of cracks furiously. “Meanwhile, wood has gone unchopped, books unshelved, and gardens unheeded. Are you all that eager to be the first to catch a glimpse of this chosen one?”

The monks shuffled before the abbot. Cadmus, in his eternal role, voiced the embarrassing thoughts of the group. “Yes, Father Abbot. Only...”

“Only what?”

“We were thinking,” Cadmus’s momentum took him onwards “what if there it’s not so simple?”

The man whom had received the god’s message was perplexed. “What do you mean?”

“Well, we’ve been here all day, and no one’s shown up. So, what if it’s not a newcomer? I mean, all they told you was that this hero would be at the Abbey today, right?” He looked around for support. “And... *we’re* all here.”

“Most days.” The abbot spoke.

“Er, right, anyways, so couldn’t it be one of us?” The other disciples looked up at that, as each began contemplating the same thought; *How heroic am I?*

“That’s very clever of you, Cadmus.” The abbot spoke softly.

Cadmus looked up in hope. “Truly, Father Abbot?”

“Indeed. I have not heard a better excuse for missing a day’s labor in years.” The smile disappeared from Cadmus’s face, and reformed on Jermus’s. “But, since you’re so keen on being

the first to see this hero, I will oblige you. You may stand watch, until they arrive. The rest of you, come. First impressions are important, but other preparations have been neglected.” Cadmus bowed to the abbot, as the other began to leave. Andurin scampered down his ladder and hefted it under his arms, rushing to catch up with Jermus, Lachelle, and Constance. The three disciples filed after Jermus, back to the red brick of the abbey proper. After a while, the abbot slowed, and fell back to Andurin to ask a question that had been bothering him. “Brother, what was on that sign you were hanging? I did not see.”

Andurin smiled, glad his work was already so acknowledged. “Just something I whipped up right and quick for the hero’s welcome, Father. It says ‘Greetings, warrior’. I thought our guest might appreciate a clear welcoming sign.”

“Well done, Andurin. In fact, it’s so well done, that I think we could use more of them.” The abbot was smiling again. “In fact, I think we could use one above *every* door, don’t you think?”

“...I’ll get right on it, Father Abbot.”

## Chapter 6

Back at the abbey, in the kitchen, there was not a problem. Oh, the cooks were understaffed, and the firewood was low, and Mallory was covered in blood, but the biggest concern was a problem that was conspicuously absent.

“How are you alive!?”

Olivia and Mallory stared at the hole in Rhun’s chest, with thrumming muscle visible and angry and red. “Well... I am.” *bump-bump* “Should I not be?” Rhun seemed more put out than anything else to learn she should be dead. She sat upon one of the many table in the kitchen with a disgruntled line for a mouth.

“No!” Mallory would have torn his hair out (much like the now discarded arrow), if he had any. “That’s your heart! Your. Heart. I can see it beating!” *bump-bump*

“Yeah, that’s what it’s supposed to do, right?”

“Ye...nu... ugh...” Mallory slumped down into a chair, only to yelp as Olivia smacked him with a wooden spoon to tell him that was her chair, thank you very much. What few other

cooks left in the kitchen watched and snickered. As per Olivia's orders, they kept working, sneaking glances over their shoulders constantly, save when Olivia cast her eyes over where they toiled. Gentle lights crept from oven fires in the red stone of the room, while a brazier lit the table Rhun sat on. The entire place, despite food nearly flying in some areas, was spotless. Olivia ran her little kingdom well, she'd had decades of practice. Despite the interruption of Mallory dragging in a near-dead woman, dinner was almost ready regardless.

Now she turned back to Mallory, and the cooks turned back to watching. "Is your sitting there going to do anything?" Mallory looked around, at everywhere but the old woman. "No? Then get me something iron."

"What good is that going to do? She shouldn't be--"

Olivia cut him off. "But she is. Quit denying what's right in front of you and get working." The young monk huffed and reached for a clean meat cleaver on the rack as the head chef shook her head. "Honestly boy, you spend so much time inside your own head, I'm surprised you can even remember our names."

Mallory grabbed the knife and spoke quickly. "Oh, I'd never forget you, Constance."

"*What was that?*" Time had not diminished Olivia's sense of hearing.

"Ah, nothing."

Satisfied, the Sister turned to Rhun, now lying on her back upon the kitchen table, arms spread wide. The woman with a hole in her chest was drawing most of the attention from the staff. Whispers ran around them, growing into a swirling vortex as every cook wondered aloud how-



“WILL YOU PEOPLE SHUT UP ALREADY!”

The entire room jumped, and Mallory nearly cut Olivia as he handed her the knife. Rhun’s outburst had killed the noise, and she set her head back down. “I haven’t slept in three days, so could everyone put a cork in it? Thank you.”

Mallory winced and leaned over her. His hands gripped her shoulders, to which Rhun responded with her eyes still shut. “Paws off, monk.”

Mallory’s grip began to tighten. “You may want to stay awake for this.”

Irritant Rhun cracked an eye open, “Huh? Why?”

“Well... we still have to clean the wound.”

Rhun grunted, swatting at Mallory’s arm. “Yeah, yeah, so get the cloth and water and let’s ge-*OHHSONUVABITCHOTHOTHOT!*” Rhun tried to bolt upright, but her struggling only made the red-hot knife Olivia was pressing against her wound hurt more.

Mallory had to fight to hold Rhun still. Corded muscle strained under his hands. “Olivia! You could have warned her!” *And me!*

The old lady took the hot cleaver away from the cauterizing hole. “Works better if I don’t, frankly. They tend to squirm away when I tell them it’s coming.”

Rhun gasped, a now closed chest pumping air like a forge, and Mallory let go of her shoulders to allow her to clutch the burn. “Well,” Mallory sharply spoke, “it isn’t respectful, just springing it on her like that.”

Olivia shrugged, and began to wash the cleaver in cool water. “You could have warned her yourself, if you wanted to so bad.”

“I was about to.”

“Sometime next week, by my estimate. Be more decisive, boy.” Olivia wiped off the knife and spoke quietly. “Nobody yells in my kitchen but me.” She placed the knife down and filled a nearby cup with water from a bucket. “Besides, wouldn’t have killed her. Crows, I don’t think we could kill her if we wanted to.”

Rhun rolled over onto her side, groaning. “What the hell are you talking about, lady? And can I-” Olivia placed the cup next to Rhun on the table. “Thanks.”

As Rhun drained the water away, Mallory asked Olivia “What do you mean? She’s obviously human. At least, her organs would say so. The hearts of the Unquiet don’t beat, and if she was some kind of spirit, she’d probably be throwing up that Holy Water right now.” Rhun looked over the empty cup in her hands. Then she shrugged and heaved herself off the table. Breathing deeply, she grabbed the water bucket and upturned it into her throat. “So,” Mallory watched Rhun drink and wondered if she actually required air, “why do you think she can’t die?”

“Because she was floating in a river for two days with a hole in her chest and she’s neither drowned nor pulsing with rot. And because she’s our Chosen One.” Olivia sighed in disappointment.

Mallory stopped thinking, Rhun stopped drinking, and they both turned to the head cook, proclaimer of the gods’ will. “Come again?”

Olivia cocked her head at Mallory. “...The reason we’ve been waiting here all day?” Her young disciple just blinked. “Whose coming was foretold...” Olivia recalled the day she’d had, “yesterday? Wait, no, today. Earlier today. Where have you been?”

“Sleeping!” Mallory threw his arms up. “When did this happen?”

Olivia’s spoon came up and hit him in the chest again. “Earlier today! The Abbot received a vision. Gods, boy, you should know, you were the one watching him!”

Mallory recalled his forty-hour watch, and not with fondness. “He didn’t tell me, he just hit me with a door and put me in the cloister!”

“If you don’t watch your tone with me, boy, I’ll put you back in there, understand?”

“Hey.” The arguing monks looked at their hero, still holding the bucket. “One of you get me some cloth. Need to wrap this. And then,” Rhun’s eyes made the cleaver look soft in comparison. “I’m going to get some fucking shut-eye. I don’t care about... whatever prophetic bullshit you’ve got going on in here, I. Need. Sleep. Got it?”

Mallory folded immediately, much like the kitchen rag he handed over. “Right! Um, here, cloth, and sleeping quarters are-“

“No,” Rhun stopped Mallory. “not the quarters. Something private. I know you people for a few hours, and already you’re muttering something about prophecies like you know a damn thing about me.” She tied the rag loosely around her chest, covering the burn mark. “I think I’d rather sleep alone tonight. Don’t care if I have to sleep on the floor, in fact I’ll leave right now if you’ve got a problem with it.”

“That’s not a problem.” Olivia spoke up, seemingly unconcerned with the untrusting request. “In the east hall, the cloisters there should be quiet enough for you. Mallory, show her where they are.”

“Of course, sister.” Mallory turned, only to find Rhun already leaving. “Rhun, wait, please. This place can be a bit-” He stopped, as an old and wrinkled hand settled on his shoulder. He looked down into, into Olivia’s serious expression. “Sister?”

“Take a cloister too.” Olivia spoke under the rising chatter of the kitchen. “One that’s near her, understand?”

The young monk’s brow creased. “In case she needs something?”

Olivia sighed. Mallory could be a bit... slow on the uptake, at times. “In case she... just make sure she stays there, alright? And doesn’t cause any problems.”

“I thought you just said she was our hero, or something? What does that mean, anyways? What did Jermus-”

“I’ll tell you in the morning. Now, get going. Before she gets lost and... I don’t know, Falls down a well or something. She seems accident prone enough.”

## Chapter 7

Mallory had to run to catch up with the abbey's new visitor. She moved like someone had lit a fire at her heels, her stride swift and sure. Full of purpose, almost angry. *She is angry.* A tendon in her neck pulsed, and long fingers curled into a fist as Mallory approached. "She said the East hall. I can find my way there without anyone. Go back, monk."

Stubborn. A quality they both shared. "Olivia told me to show you, and so I will. Besides, you don't know where the bedding is," Mallory paused, and sniffed the air. "nor a bath, if I had to guess."

"I just spent the better part of three days in the water." Rhun sped up, taking turns at random now. "How the fuck am I not clean?"

"You're going the wrong way." Mallory kept pace in the halls. "The cloisters are back--"

Rhun turned, short hair snapping in the shadows of the hall. Mallory found himself close enough to smell old fish, lakewater, and sweat all at once. "Listen, you bald oaf, you yanked an arrow out of my chest, burned me, and shoved a hook through my hand. So I'm really not in the

mood to be taking advice from some buffoon in a dress tonight. Understand? I'm finding a bed and slipping into a gods damned coma. And may those gods have mercy on *anyone* that disturbs me."

~~You ungrateful bi~~ *Breathe*. This woman... had probably had a far worse day than he. Three days awake in a river... Mallory thought back to his mere forty-hour watch, and it paled in comparison. So, he relaxed. "Alright. You don't want to be disturbed. That's fine, I can arrange that. Just... come this way. And I'll bring you some supper, too."

Rhun looked like she wanted to argue -*She always looks like she wants to argue*- but her stomach drowned out any protest. She winced and tried to recall the last meal she ate. She failed, and decided to maybe just go where the food was. "Aye, that... that'd do. Just hurry up this time, alright?"

"Of course, there's a shortcut here." Mallory stepped to a window, and opened it to let the fresh night air in. He put a sandaled foot on the window sill and pulled himself through, landing with a swift breath outside. "Come on, we can cut through the garden."

Rhun nearly lept out the window, only slowing with a hiss as something in her chest twanged and ached. She set herself down slowly, as Mallory shut the window. "Guess you know the place well enough."

"I've lived my whole life here." Mallory began his journey again through the garden, in winding paths through vines, stalks, and trees. "I know it better than anything."

"And not much of anything else, eh?"

They passed the apple orchard again, and Mallory felt a twinge of that strange hunger again, as something he could not recall strained at his mind. Until Rhun swiftly passed him and slipped up one of the trees, to the highest branches. Mallory caught the gleam of a moon-lit smile. She plucked an apple from its perch, and fell back down. Mallory felt like he should protest. “You shouldn’t strain yourself, your wounds aren’t healed yet.” *Frankly, you shouldn’t even be alive.*

Rhun tossed the fruit into the air. “They’ll heal quicker with something in my stomach.” That smile suddenly bared its teeth and snapped forwards, like a snake. Mallory took a half step back as Rhun caught the apple out of the air and tore a chunk from it. “Gah!” She spat and tossed it back at the tree. “Not ripe.” She growled. Her gaze flicked back up the tree, eyes squinting into the dark branches.

Mallory tried not to laugh. He wasn’t sure why he found it so funny, but maybe it was something in the way she’d moved. So sure, so sudden. And suddenly so wrong. Like a dog that stuck its nose into a hedgehog den. “Think I got the last one.” Her gaze turned on him. “Sorry.”

“Uggghhhh...” Rhun’s smile disappeared and her shoulders slumped. “You took my fish too, you bald bastard.”

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned my head. Why are you so bothered by it?” Mallor’s hand rose a bit involuntarily. “...Did they write something on it while I was asleep again?”

Rhun was tempted to tell him yes, and resolved to scribble something on it herself as soon as she found an opportunity. “No, but why are you bald in the first place? I thought

everyone here would be when I saw you, but I get in and it's just you! Do you have lice, or something?"

"Well, kind of." Mallory held up his hands as Rhun leaned away. "When I was a kid! I've been rid of them for years now."

"So why the blarney stone?"

"Because it's a bet." Mallory rubbed his neck.

Rhun smelled fear. "A bet?"

Mallory started walking again, with Rhun following him this time. "When I got lice, I wouldn't let the other monks cut my hair. Made as much of a fuss as I could. Cried, ran, hid. Didn't hide so well. Ran more when they found me. Went on for a couple of hours, and then the Abbot walks into the library, where I'm holed up in a little alcove, with his head shining like a beacon. He asks me what was wrong, and I figured, well, can't be that bad if the Abbot went and did it. So, I let them shave me."

"So you saw your abbot's head and thought 'yeah, that looks like a great idea.'?"

"He shaved it for me. But I couldn't grow any hair for a while, while the lice were still on me, so I got real upset when his hair started growing back, because I thought he was betraying me somehow... honestly I don't know what I was thinking. I was a stupid kid. But when *my* hair started coming back, he turned it around on me, and told me *I* was the one betraying him. So it's not really a bet, pre se, but more... a joke that's gone on for a bit longer than intended."

"The world's shiniest game of chicken." Rhun followed Mallory through a tall pair of wooden doors, into another silent, stone hall. This one, however, had doors lining the walls every



ten yards or so. Mallory's soft sandals slipped silently across the floor, while Rhun's damp boots clunked with every step. "Are we there yet?"

"Yes, actually." Mallory reached into his robe and pulled a key out. He slipped it into one of the door locks with a clean *clack*. The door complained as it opened, and Mallory frowned. *Have to oil those hinges soon.* "Here you are," Mallory swept his arms towards the bare stone hole in the wall, "your home away from home. Where the King of Arden rested while fleeing his treacherous brother."

Rhun entered, and looked around the room, eyebrow rising. "Really?"

"No, of course not." Mallory began walking away. "That's the room two doors down from here."

"Funny." Rhun poked her head out from the doorway. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Well, unless you like cold stone, you'll need bedding. And I'll go out on a limb here and say you like food too, so I'll also run by the kitchen again." Mallory's silent steps took him out of the tall wooden doors, shutting them as he left Rhun alone with her thoughts.

*...I'd better get some of that fucking fish when he comes back.*

## Chapter 8

He had many names. But long ago, he ensured that they would all be forgotten, and that no one would remember him as he was.

He was the faceless god.

Even to a god forgotten by the people, by the world, by his companions, there are pieces left over. Shards, scattered all throughout the worlds he abandoned. And now, for the first time in centuries, he had one. A sense of... identity. Nothing tangible. Nothing true. But, perhaps, it would be enough for now. Enough to begin.

The Forgotten raised his hood, acknowledging the other gods that now intruded upon his domain. He knew why they had come, and prepared accordingly. Gone was the endless garden, with its gargantuan tree and scrying pool. They had come to see their champion, how the plan was coming along, to watch the players in their grand game. This time, the room was made from mirrors. It was a world of light, and sharp edges. The light bounded, refracted, illuminated every surface, sourceless, ceaseless. And all the gods stepped carefully, seeing that light gleam from

mirror points sharp as spears, watching it run down edges like swords. False moonlight ruled this place tonight. He ruled this place tonight, a reflection of a reflection.

And now the gods were scared. Because for the first time in a long time, the plan had been changed. By, of all creatures, the faceless god. They whispered amongst themselves, huddled in pockets amidst the rising shards. The mirrors broke up through the ground and stretched out like trees. They climbed, and fell back downward like a willow, like a river. They ran along the ground and went up, and down, like a shark cutting the ocean.

The Forgotten concentrated for a moment, and a towering monument of glass rose in the distance. It bent inwards, forming traceless catacombs within itself. No mortal could ever make this, it defied creation. The formless god looked at the others. None spared a glance for his creation. They were all too trapped by what the mirrors held, the images they showed.

A hint of revulsion, of disdain. When had he last felt *emotion? Too long... too long.* When his sense of self had left him, everything had ceased to matter for him. But his fateful meeting with Mallory had given him something back, pulled something of him back into the world. The other gods did not know. In this room of light, he was the only one unilluminated. But they would not see it, because that would require them to see him. But now they only saw what was on the mirrors, never the mirrors themselves. Right in front of them, and all had missed it.

*Clink-clop. Clink-clop.*

Almost all, then. A mirror twitched next to the Forgotten, and showed him Acteaon approaching behind him. His stride was halting, and his steps sounded strange upon the glass ground. He eyed the landscape with suspicion. *Poor Acteaon. You would have rather I kept the*

*garden, with all its green and life. This makes a poor substitute, to your eyes. But, the faceless god thought, I needed a place to reflect.*

Acteaon's gaze travelled out, to the massive structure on the horizon. His gaze was sharp as a hawk's, and he spoke to this world's architect. "A beautiful thing, this world you've made."

The Forgotten had not expected that. Despite being uncomfortable here, his friend still had admiration for his works. He turned to face the Noble Beast. "...The hardest part was the light, in truth. I try to make the most of this place." This endless little world of nothing, his chambers, his castle...his prison. For only here could a thing like him ever exist. An impossible creature, in an impossible place. He was a lie.

But perhaps the world needed a lie, now. The truth was it was falling apart.