

Giessam let out a slow, heavy breath through his nose. Though he was meditating, his thoughts were far from empty. Keeping his eyes closed, he turned his head ever-so-slightly to face an enormous crystal. Surrounding the crystal were aromatic candles, burning incense, and runic symbols carved into wood or painted onto harder surfaces. A collection of strange trinkets littered the floor in the poorly lit room - talismans, shark teeth, boar tusks, large reptilian scales, and other, more exotic, artifacts. From outside, the hum of a passing maglev train faded into the distance.

He turned his head back to face forward, rested his left hand on the cover of an ancient and worn book, and inhaled deeply to resume his meditation.

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Gilmore Branch peeked up from his book and his eyes grew wide. He stood quickly, knocking his chair backwards.

The shapeless mist that had gathered before him took shape suddenly, revealing blue pulsating flesh scarred and torn by battle. The creature howled, and he saw the razor-sharp rows of teeth lining the inside of its mouth. It lunged at him, and he tumbled backwards, tripping over the chair and landing on his rear with a thud. The rattling of chains reminded him of the magical bonds placed on the creature, holding it to the wall behind it. He breathed a heavy sigh as the door to his left opened.

"Gilmore, what are you doing on the floor?" Giessam asked with a smirk. Gilmore stood shakily and pulled at the collar of his shirt to straighten it.

"It tried to dematerialize, Frank," he muttered. Giessam allowed himself a small chuckle.

"The magic I've cast upon it prevents any escape, even if it dematerializes itself. You know that. I've told you before."

"Yes, well, it surprised me. Not everyone is as used to these sorts of things as you are."

Giessam gestured in the air and opened a small portal in front of himself. He reached in and pulled out a dagger, rusted and chipped, that glowed with a sickly aura. He set it on the table in front of the creature.

"Is that - "

"Yes," Giessam interrupted Gilmore before he could finish. He waved his hand at his friend, his expression now much more solemn. "This could get rough. You may want to leave, Gil."

Gilmore swallowed hard, but remained standing beside the toppled chair.

The creature slowly approached the table and reached for the dagger, the magical chains stopping its hand just inches short. It snorted and turned to face Giessam.

"I know who you are," it said. Giessam said nothing in return. "You have lost much to the gods over the past millennium, Giessam."

"I know what I have lost," he replied.

"Do you, or do you only imagine you know?" the creature mused. Giessam remained stoic.

"You will tell me what I need to know," he stated. The firmness of his voice surprised Gilmore. He had never seen his friend so dour. The creature retreated to the wall to which it was chained.

"What makes you believe I have your information?" it spat.

Giessam vanished and reappeared beside the creature, his hand around its throat.

"Which god do you serve?" There was no anger in his voice, only calm severity. The creature hissed and clawed at his arms, drawing blood, but Giessam held firm. "Which god do you serve?"

"Beytus, I serve Beytus!" it screeched. Giessam released his grip.

Gilmore flipped to the index of the book he still held in his hands and found the pages referencing Beytus.

"Beytus is dead," Giessam said. "Which god do you serve?" He punched the creature, full in the face, and it fell to the floor, leaking steaming blue blood onto the concrete. It turned back around to face him..

"What do you mean, Beytus is dead?" it hissed. Giessam looked at the dagger on the table, and the creature followed his gaze.

"Do you recognize that blade?" he asked. The creature stood shakily and approached the table once again. Giessam followed and flicked his hand towards the dagger.

It stood itself on its point and shimmered for a moment. The creature tried to step away from the blade, but Giessam pushed it forward.

"Do you recognize that blade?" Giessam asked again. The creature yelped and tried desperately to retreat to the wall again, but Giessam held it in place.

"That blade is forged of gods' blood!" it shrieked, fighting against Giessam's grip. Giessam spun the creature around and forced it to the floor with a push.

"And whose blood could produce a dagger with such particular magical properties, demon?"

Gilmore's eyes were glued to the book once again, as he read the history of Beytus, Forgotten Ascended God of Rot and Decay.

"How is this possible?" the creature asked. Giessam motioned in the air and his longsword appeared in his hand.

"There are few alive with the power and will to kill gods," he answered, "but I am one of them. Now answer me. Which god do you serve?" With this last question, he pressed the point of his sword against the creature's throat, listening to the hissing steam of its blood coming in contact with the air.

"You, my lord. I serve you."

Giessam smirked and made another quick gesture in the air. Another longsword appeared in his other hand. He removed the tip of his blade from the demon's throat and held the second sword out to Gilmore.

"Shall we begin your training?" he asked, his focus no longer on the demon. Gilmore hesitantly took the sword from him and tested its weight in his hand.

He looked up as Giessam pivoted and swung his sword. Gilmore rose to block it, but before the clang of metal rang out, he heard a rush of air and felt a sharp sting on his left shoulder. The sword dropped from his hand and clattered on the concrete floor.

"Dammit, Frank," he muttered.

Giessam reappeared in his previous position in front of Gilmore, laughing lightheartedly.

"You may not be magically adept, but who's to say your opponent in a true conflict will not be?" He picked up the sword Gilmore had dropped and handed it back to him. "Pay attention this time. Not with your eyes, not with your ears, but with your very essence."

"What the hell does that even m -" before Gilmore could finish his sentence, Giessam had vanished, and he felt the same sharp pain in his shoulder. This time, he held his grip firm on the hilt of the sword and swung around in an arc, meeting only air.

"Faster!" he heard Giessam's voice from behind him. He swung back and, again, missed.

"I think he's doing this to embarrass you," the blue creature hissed from the corner. Gilmore glanced in its direction, but swung back the other way once more.

"Shut up, demon," he grunted. His swing was met with a metallic clang as he interrupted Giessam's thrust with his own sword. Giessam took a step back, still smiling.

"Better," he said. "But I cannot feel you reaching with your essence. Again!"

Gilmore swung in a low arc behind him, and was immediately met with a jab to the shoulder. He grunted and threw down his sword.

"This entire time you're blinking behind me with every stroke and now you decide to stay in place?"

“Just because your opponent is trained in magic, you assume he’ll use it every time?” Giessam laughed.

“Why won’t you just train me in magic instead of swordplay? It seems more my expertise than this.”

Both swords vanished and Giessam’s expression turned somber.

“Swordplay is a kind of magic, Gilmore,” he explained, placing his hand on Gilmore’s shoulder. He channeled healing energy into the shallow cuts he’d made on his friend’s flesh. “A physical magic. A magic of mortal will, rather than of the gods. Deific magic is not to be taken lightly. It drains the magicker of his soul, and binds him to things immaterial.”

Gilmore stretched his arm in a slow circle.

“You’re always so cryptic, you bastard,” he said. “You’ve been a magicker for, what, thirteen hundred years? You’ve managed to maintain your soul, your essence, and seemingly your freedom.”

“It takes its toll,” the creature said. It nodded its head toward Giessam. “If you could see the essence of this man, you would know his words are true.”

Gilmore sighed.

“Is there some name we should call you, demon?” he asked. The creature responded with sullen silence.

“Demon will do,” Giessam answered. “He will never tell you the answer to your question.”

Giessam’s eyes drifted toward the ceiling.

“We have a visitor,” he stated. He pointed at the demon, silencing it and tightening the chains around its arms and legs, then placed his hand once again on Gilmore’s shoulder. The two of them suddenly found themselves in the room above, and Gilmore could now hear the knocking on the front door.

“Come in,” he shouted. The door opened, and a young girl, maybe six or seven years old, sheepishly stepped inside.

“Hi, is this The Branch Library?” she mumbled. Gilmore smiled warmly at her.

“It is indeed, young lady,” he replied. “Is there something in particular you’re looking for?”

The girl began twisting a strand of her hair nervously.

“My mom said you might have a copy of *The Forgotten Mythos* I could borrow?” Her inflection turned the statement into a question. Gilmore laughed.

“Of course, of course,” he said. “I have a few copies of it in fact. May I ask what you need it for?”

“My mom needs it for...research,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Giessam pulled a copy of the book from the shelf and held it out to her.

“I can bookmark a page in it if you’ll tell me what field of research she’s looking at,” he offered. The girl looked up at him, her face turning red and her eyes brimming with tears.

“Daddy’s gone away and she wants to know who has his soul,” she whispered. Gilmore’s smile fell and Giessam pulled the book a few inches away from the girl.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked. The girl began to sob pitifully.

“Daddy disappeared and mommy thinks someone took him and took his soul and she wants to find out who but none of the regular churches will help and then she heard about the Forgotten Gods and she wants to try everything she can and -” her sobs turned into hiccups as she ran out of breath. Giessam shot a glance at Gilmore.

“What’s your mommy’s name?” Gilmore asked, now crouched to be face to face with the girl.

“S-S-S-Sandra,” she replied.

“And who told her someone took your daddy’s soul?”

“Marcus, m-my brother.”

“Who told Marcus about the Forgotten Gods?” Giessam asked, holding out a glass of water for the girl.

"I don't know," she said after a gulp from the glass. "He's a lot older than me so he knows a lot of things I don't know."

Giessam slid the book into the inside pocket of his coat and held out his hand for the girl.

"Come on," he said, smiling again. "We'll come with you and help your mother with her research. We've both studied the Forgotten Mythos a lot."

The girl's eyes grew wide and she took the offered hand.

"Really?" The pitch of her voice raised with childish hopefulness.

"Yes, of course," Gilmore said. "And what's your name young lady?"

"My name's Marion," she whispered. Giessam followed her out into the alley as Gilmore retrieved his key, joining them after locking the library.

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Soon after returning to his meditative state, Giessam began to hear voices in his mind. He sighed.

"Why have you called upon me this time?" he asked.

A handful of beings materialized in his mind, most of them humanoid, all of them with looks of disappointment and disdain.

"We have tried to dissuade you from your path, Giessam," the muscular, grey-skinned man said. "And still you defy us." Murmurs of agreement arose from the others.

"Araan, you are not my master," Giessam stated. "None of you gods gathered here are. Why have you not enlisted Lady Iraga's help in dissuading me?"

The gods gathered before him shifted uncomfortably, until one, a green-skinned humanoid with tusks protruding from its lower jaw, spoke up.

"Lady Iraga has chosen not to join us, despite our pleas. She does not believe your mind can be changed." The Orc's voice was distinctly feminine.

"And from your years of contact with me, what would you conclude?" Giessam asked, his arms now folded across his chest.

The gods were silent, staring into his eyes with hatred and regret. A mass of flames pushed its way forward until it was inches from his face. Despite the crackling of the flames, he could feel no heat. From within the flames, a deep voice emanated.

"Giessam, you showed us reverence and respect, worshipping us centuries ago to garner our favor. Your continued resolve to kill or otherwise bring low our fellow gods has now lost you that garnered favor. We have withdrawn our support from you. You will no longer be allowed to make use of the magick we have granted you."

Giessam did not flinch.

"Has Lady Iraga also withdrawn her support, Messien?"

The crackling of the flames increased in intensity, and the voice became tighter as the First God of Fire's anger manifested.

"Not yet. But I would advise you to tread more carefully henceforth."

"I appreciate your advice," Giessam said, a smirk on his face, "but I will tread only as carefully as I desire. When I am finished with Thrache, and have Nesyra by my side once more, I will come for you as well. Your indifference towards your followers and neglect of their needs these many millennia will cost you, I swear it."

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Marion led the two down the alley and onto the main thoroughfare. Foot traffic here was heavier than they preferred, and Giessam kept his head down to avoid eye contact.

Twenty minutes later, the girl pulled Giessam to the left towards the entryway of one of the rundown tenements that populated the majority of Atlanta's poorer southern district. They passed under a maglev rail that ran, frankly, too close to the building, and Marion flashed an ID card by the door. The lock clicked and she opened it with both hands, letting Gilmore and Giessam enter ahead of her. They followed her up a flight of stairs and down the hallway to a door with no number on it.

"Is this where you live?" Gilmore asked, surprised at the apparent lack of maintenance in the building.

"Mmhhh," she replied. "There used to be a number on the door, but it fell off and Marcus says the landlord is too lazy to come put a new one on."

She turned the knob and pushed the door open a few inches before the chain inside clattered and held it from opening further.

"Mom, I'm back," she shouted into the apartment. She closed the door as soon as she heard the creaking of floorboards from inside, and a moment later the chain was released and the door opened to reveal a middle-aged woman with deep bags under her eyes, her hair frazzled and starting to go grey. She froze when she saw that her daughter was not alone.

"Marion, who are these men?" she whispered. Gilmore and Giessam both smiled their friendliest smiles.

"My name is Gilmore Branch," Gilmore answered. "I run The Branch Library. This is my associate, Franklin Judge." Giessam extended his hand, but the woman did not respond.

"I only asked for the book," she croaked. "Did you not have a copy of *The Forgotten Mythos*?"

"We were, perhaps, too inquisitive about a seven year old asking about such a book," Giessam answered. "Marion told us about her father. I assume you are her mother, Sandra?"

Sandra's eyes burned with fury, but her face otherwise remained motionless.

"Marion, you know better than to talk to strangers," she snapped, pulling the girl into the apartment by her arm. As she tried to shut the door, Giessam pushed his foot in the entryway, stopping it.

"Ma'am, both Frank and I are well-versed in the *Forgotten Mythos*," Gilmore said. "We had hoped to help you and your family find some peace, if you'll allow it."

Sandra kicked Giessam's foot out of the way.

"I will not."

Gilmore caught a glimpse of Marion's teary eyes before Sandra closed the door on them. He sighed and turned to Giessam.

"That went about as expected," he muttered. Giessam smirked and knocked on the door lightly. "What good will knocking do Frank? She's clearly not interested in talking to us."

After a brief wait, the door cracked open and Marion peeked out into the hall.

"Marion, we want to help," Giessam said, crouching down to meet her at eye level. He held out a small medallion to her, and she took it gingerly before closing the door once again. Giessam straightened his posture and waited, enjoying the confused look on his friend's face. Within a few seconds, the door swung open and Sandra stood in front of them once again, fuming.

"What the hell is this?" she screeched, throwing the medallion squarely at Gilmore's chest. He fumbled to catch it, and began stuttering an apology before Giessam interrupted him.

"That medallion was a form of currency over a millennium ago," he explained. "If you seek information about the *Forgotten Gods*, there are no two better sources in the city, or perhaps even the world, than we."

Sandra eyed him suspiciously before turning and walking back into the apartment, leaving the door open for them to enter. Gilmore seemed surprised at her sudden change of heart.

"What the hell man?" he whispered.

"I'm not wrong am I?" Giessam answered with a smile. The two of them stepped into the apartment, and Giessam's smile immediately vanished.

"What is it?" Gilmore asked. Giessam quickly scanned the room in front of them with his eyes, making a few discrete hand gestures as they walked.

"Something's here," he replied.

Gilmore clenched his fists and tensed his neck.

"Calm yourself," Giessam hissed. "I can't quite determine what it is yet."

They came around the corner of the kitchen hesitantly. Sandra was seated in a chair at the table, and Marion sat on the floor, drawing in a spiral notebook. Sandra did not look pleased.

"How do you two think you can help me?" she asked as she folded her arms across her chest. Gilmore glanced around the room before replying.

"As I said, Frank and I have both spent extensive time studying the mythos of most major pantheons throughout history, including the Forgotten Gods," he answered. "Marion says you believe someone has taken your husband's soul? That he may not, in fact, have passed on?"

"Correct," Sandra replied. Gilmore waited for further explanation, but received none.

"Many people find death hard to grasp sometimes -" he began. Sandra slammed her fists down on the table.

"No!" she screamed. "I saw him, the night after he disappeared. He came to my bedroom window, and he was pale as a ghost. Before I could say anything, he just vanished, like something pulled him away from the window."

Giessam put his hand on Gilmore's shoulder.

"Did you happen to see what pulled him away?" Giessam asked. He had yet to make eye contact with Sandra since entering the kitchen. His gaze was intent on the hallway on the other side of her. Sandra looked taken aback.

"No, no I didn't, but something took him. I know it. He would never abandon us, not in this piece of shit city." Marion covered her ears with her hands and looked up at her mother. "Oh, honey, I'm sorry. Piece of *filth* city." Sandra gently flattened out a section of Marion's unkempt and unwashed hair.

Gilmore opened his mouth, but Giessam interrupted him once again.

"What about the rest of the family? Did Marion or her brother see or hear anything that might lead us to an answer?" he asked.

"No, or at least they haven't said anything to me about it."

Giessam squeezed Gilmore's shoulder slightly as a door in the hallway opened and a teenage boy sleepily stumbled towards them.

"This is my son Marcus," Sandra said. "Marcus, these men are here to help us find out what happened to your father."

The boy yawned and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Giessam took a step forward and extended his hand.

"My name is Frank Judge," he said. Marcus took his offered hand and looked up into Giessam's eyes with a smirk.

"Marcus," he greeted. "What do you think happened to my father?"

Giessam felt the boy's grip on his hand tighten before he let go.

"We can't be sure yet," he replied. "We haven't gotten much information. Can you tell me about him?"

Marcus turned to the refrigerator and opened a bottle of milk, taking a few swigs straight from the bottle.

"Dad liked to gamble," he finally said. Sandra leapt to her feet slapped him, knocking the milk out of his hands.

“Why is that the only thing you ever seem to remember about your father?” she shrieked. Marcus picked the bottle up from the floor without a word, screwed the cap back on, and placed it back on the shelf in the refrigerator.

“Because it’s the truth,” he said. “I mean, he was good at it wasn’t he? Isn’t that how most of our bills got paid?”

There was a loud clap as Sandra’s open palm connected with the boy’s cheek once more.

“Go to your room! Your father was a good, hard-working man, and you would do well to remember him that way before you have to get a job.”

Marcus locked eyes with Giessam before slowly returning to the room in the hallway.

Sandra angrily grabbed a towel from the counter and started to clean the milk that had spilled. Her tears dripped onto the floor as she did so.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “Marcus hasn’t taken his father’s disappearance very well.”

“It’s quite alright,” Giessam replied. He removed the book from his inner pocket and set it on the table, opening it to a page about three quarters through. “I think this book may help you in some ways.” He tapped Gilmore on the shoulder on his way out of the apartment.

Once they were back in the main hallway and had closed the door behind them, Gilmore shot him a confused look.

“That was no boy,” Giessam growled. Without waiting for a response, he vanished.

Gilmore was halfway back to the library before Giessam reappeared a few feet ahead of him.

“I was tempted to wait for you, in case you needed help,” he joked. Giessam held up a glass vial filled with dark red liquid.

“No, Gil,” he responded grimly. “There was no need for you to stay for that one.” He pocketed the vial, and the pair walked in silence for a moment.

“Did you kill that boy?” Gilmore suddenly asked. Giessam shook his head.

“That was no boy, but no. He still lives.”

“What happened then? I assume that vial is full of god’s blood? How did you get it?”

Giessam pulled a smaller version of *The Forgotten Mythos* from his pocket and flipped to the same page he had left open in Sandra’s apartment. Gilmore read the title of the chapter: *Greed, Death, and Negotiations - The Ascended God of Wealth and Luck, Tind*.

“Tind had taken that boy’s body along with his father’s soul,” he explained. “Harris had somehow found himself engaged in a gamble with Tind, and nearly won. Of course, debts to Tind are generally not payable with mortal coin. He had agreed to sell his soul in the event he lost, on the condition that Tind would watch over his family and keep them safe.”

“And if he won?”

“Power. Wealth. Knowledge. Typical human desires.”

“So how did you get the god’s blood?”

“A trade.” Giessam smiled, but it was not a warm smile. “I told him he was released from his duties to the family. That we would keep an eye on them instead. On that note, perhaps it is time I began teaching you what magic I can.”

They returned to the library in silence.

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Giessam made a quick hand gesture in the air, opening a swirling dimensional portal before him. He reached in and removed a glass vial filled with a viscous crimson liquid. He turned it around to the mark he had carved in it so many years ago, a bird wearing a skull mask and gripping a coin in its talons.

“Tind,” he whispered.

He placed it back into the portal and removed a second vial, this one marked with a flame in the shape of a skull.

“Eranbius.”

He continued to replace and remove the marked vials filled with the blood of gods and goddesses until at last he came to an empty vial marked with a skull, cracked down the middle from the top of the brow to the base of the jaw.

“Twelve down, one to go.”

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“What the hell did you do?” Gilmore shouted.

Giessam whipped around and flung his arm out toward his friend. A bolt of lightning extended from his index finger, knocking a demonic-looking golden statue away. He remained silent, his jaw clenched tight, and sweat began to roll down his face.

Gilmore swung his sword down hard, shocked by the metallic clang his target produced when hit. The strike was solid enough to dent the creatures metal plating, but it rose slowly to its feet again.

“Then at least tell me what these things are!” he shouted over his shoulder.

“Golems,” Giessam answered, swinging his own sword low and tripping one of the statues. He raised his sword and stabbed down at its head. As the blade came down, it became suddenly translucent, and passed through the golem’s armor. A horrid screech rang out as the golem convulsed and eventually stopped moving entirely.

“*Gold* golems,” Gilmore said accusingly. “I read up on Tind. I know these things are his. One of us did something to piss him off, and I’m fairly certain it wasn’t me.” He swung his free hand in a sideways arc and the golem rushing towards him was pushed sideways into the wall.

Giessam vanished and reappeared standing above the golem hit by Gilmore’s spell. His sword translucent again, he swung downward, severing the thing’s head from its body.

“Are you going to tell him, Giessam, or shall I?” the blue demon jeered from his place against the wall. He pressed against his chains, but they held firm.

“Silence!” Giessam commanded, his foot connecting with a golem’s chest. The golem gripped his foot in both hands and pulled, dislocating Giessam’s hip and throwing him to the floor. A metallic clang rang out again, and the golem slid to the side, a golden horn missing from its head.

Gilmore extended his hand and pulled Giessam upright. The two were surrounded by the gold constructs.

“These things move a lot faster than they look,” Gilmore said. Giessam pressed his back to Gilmore’s and brandished his sword in both hands.

“Giessam,” the demon pleaded. “Giessam, release me and I will aid you!”

Giessam spat and jabbed at the nearest golem, piercing through its armor through sheer force this time. He pointed his right hand toward a second one and clenched his fingers tight. The golem’s armor dented in, producing loud cracking sounds with each dent, until it was crushed to the point of being unrecognizable. It fell to the floor and he pulled his sword out of the golem in front of him.

“My Lord Giessam, release me!” the demon cried out.

Gilmore cried out in pain, and Giessam glared across the room at the demon. As he did so, the noises of battle slowed. He spun around and dashed to the golem holding Gilmore’s arm. Gilmore and the golem seemed not to be moving, and Gilmore’s mouth was still twisted open in agony.

Giessam sliced through the golem’s shoulder, severing the arm at the joint, and time resumed its usual pace. Gilmore’s arm dropped to his side, twisted at an unnatural angle.

“So that was temporal magic,” he muttered. He picked up his sword with his left hand and swung at another golem, but was easily deflected. With a painful swing of his crushed arm, he sent the golem flying backwards.

“Gil, don’t let up,” Giessam said as the golem he pointed at bent over backward and snapped in half, crumpling to the floor. “Tind can only send so many of these.”

“But why is he sending *any* of them, Frank?” Gilmore responded, jumping backward out of a golem’s reach.

“I’ll tell you when we finish here!” Giessam finally answered through clenched teeth.

One of the golems wrapped its arms around Giessam from behind, catching his offhand arm in the embrace, and squeezed. He grunted in pain as his arm and several of his ribs snapped. He twisted his head to see Gilmore, backed into a corner by three of the things, desperately jabbing his sword at them. He kicked at the golem holding him, but it squeezed harder, cracking more ribs. He turned his attention to the demon.

“Amderil, I release you! Fight for me!” he shouted. The demon howled and the chains holding it to the wall disappeared in wisps of smoke. It rushed forward, knocking over a golem on its way through, and tackled the one holding Giessam. The three of them crashed to the floor, Giessam’s sword clattering away and then vanishing.

Gilmore cried out in pain again, and Giessam jumped to his feet, his sword reappearing in his hand. A metallic screeching sound filled the room as Amderil pulled the head from the golem beneath him with his powerful maw.

“Amderil, to Gilmore!” Giessam commanded as he lunged at one of the golems surrounding his comrade.

Amderil threw the severed head at one of the golems in the corner and jumped onto the back of the other. Giessam’s sword once more turned translucent and he slashed through the nearest golem. It collapsed in two pieces, falling onto Gilmore’s body. Amderil twisted the neck of the golem he’d mounted, producing a cracking sound, but dealing no apparent real damage. The golem grabbed him by the shoulders and threw him against the wall. He was up on his feet again instantly, snarling and spitting acidic saliva on the floor around him.

Giessam jabbed at the other golem, his now opaque sword clanging off the armor. It turned to face him and raised its arms. He rammed it with his shoulder, slamming it into the wall. It gripped him by the throat, but as he wrapped his free hand around its wrist, the gold armor protecting it began to melt at his touch. It dropped him, but the gold continued to melt until the golem was nothing but a gleaming puddle. He turned around in time to see Amderil detach an arm from the last golem and smash its head in with it. It collapsed, and Amderil dropped the arm on the floor and looked to Giessam.

“My lord, it appears we’ve weathered this battle,” he stated. He followed Giessam’s gaze to Gilmore’s crumpled body in the corner.

“Indeed we did,” Giessam agreed. Amderil approached him cautiously.

“Gilmore is dead,” he said, his eyes now on Giessam. Giessam turned to meet his stare.

“Gilmore Branch is not the first human to die in my name,” he replied. “And he likely will not be the last.”

He moved to the overturned table and pulled one of the legs off of it, setting it alight with a touch of his finger. He lowered the flame to the rest of the table to catch it alight, then to the wooden door leading out of the room, before throwing it on top of Gilmore’s body.

“And the family that you promised Tind you would protect?” Amderil’s voice reached him over the crackling blaze. “Did they die in your name, or by your hand?”

Giessam stared for a moment at Gilmore’s body before replying.

“They were an obstacle,” he stated. “I didn’t think Tind would care so deeply about such an agreement. Leave me Amderil. I no longer require your services.”

“My lord, you have already lost one friend today. Would you so readily dismiss me?”

“Gilmore Branch was not my friend. He was a tool that I used to help achieve my goal. I would have preferred to keep him in my service a while longer, but some things do not go as intended. Leave me. I release you from my service. I don’t need another creature judging my actions. I will handle that on my own.”

Amderil bowed and dematerialized into a blue mist, seeping out through the cracks in the door.

Giessam sighed and teleported himself upstairs into the main area of the library. He moved several books into a dimensional portal, before teleporting out onto the main street. A crowd was beginning to gather outside, pointing and watching as smoke poured out of the library.

A young boy caught Giessam’s eye and looked away sheepishly, pulling his mother’s face down close to whisper in her ear. The woman looked at Giessam, rolled her eyes, and shook her head, much to the boy’s agitation. He pulled her over to Giessam, pointing and smiling at him. Giessam smiled back.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the woman said as they approached. “He thinks you look like a character from a movie and he’s very insistent.”

Giessam looked down at the boy.

“Who do I look like to you, young man?” he asked. The boy’s face was red with embarrassment but he pushed the words from his mouth.

“Giessam!” he almost shouted. Giessam’s eyebrows raised. “One of the last of the Harbingers, who fought against the evil forces of Dru Kulkodar in Virtue City!”

“I’m so sorry,” the mother said again. “He watches way too many movies.”

Giessam smiled wider and crouched down to speak to the boy at eye level.

“I’m sorry, son,” he said, “but I’m not who you think I am. My name is Frank. Besides, the Harbingers fought in Virtue City almost sixty years ago. Do I really look that old to you?” The boy shook his head vigorously. “And I’m certainly no hero. I’m just a man who works in a library. But don’t stop looking for heroes. They’re out there, I promise you.” He tousled the boy’s hair, gave the mother a friendly nod, and walked away down the street.

\* \* \* \* \*

Giessam reached to his right, feeling around the artefacts nearby until his hand met the cool smoothness of a small, perfectly spherical stone. Still, he kept his eyes closed tight. He wrapped his fingers around it and squeezed, pushing his energy into it.

The stone’s temperature began to rise. Giessam redirected a portion of his energy to shield his palm from the heat. After a few moments of concentration, he squeezed the stone harder and it shattered. A swirling mass of smoke made its way around his seated form and materialized into the shape of a woman in front of him. He opened his eyes and met hers.

“Morla,” he greeted.

The woman leered at him. She was tall, nearly seven feet, with short black hair and stone grey skin. Giessam waited for her response.

“Who are you?” she demanded. She stood proud over him, an intimidating stone figure radiating malice.

“I am Giessam,” he stated simply. He pressed one hand against the floor beside his mat and pushed himself to his feet.

“Who are you?” she repeated, her voice firm. Giessam smiled.

“I am the last surviving magicker of the Temple of Iraga, First Goddess of Time.” He bowed to Morla. “I welcome your presence in my home and wish for a favor.”

Morla sneered.

“It has been a long time since last I was summoned,” she said. “And you, a mere mortal, have the gall to request favors? Did I receive your tribute? Your worship? Your reverence?”

Giessam made a quick hand sign with his right hand and a sword appeared in it, inciting a barely noticeable defensive shift in the goddess.

“No, but I am no mere mortal. I haven’t been rightly mortal in over a thousand years.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The sound of rushing water filled Giessam’s ears. He opened his eyes to the familiar sight of the Hidden Falls on the Tsangpo River and unfolded his legs.

He stood and, seeming to glide, walked across the stones in the river to the opposite bank. A middle-aged Tibetan man greeted him with a nod of his head.

“Welcome back, Giessam,” he whispered, the level of his voice a soft reminder of the sanctity of the place. Giessam smiled warmly and grasped the man’s hand in both of his.

“It is good to return to this place,” he replied. “Though, I wish I had made further progress in my research.”

The other man turned and walked in the direction of a large structure, mostly obscured by the mist.

“I know that your research troubles you, Giessam,” he said. “But there are events in motion that will change the history of the world forever. Do you not wish to be a part of them?”

Giessam followed a few steps behind the man. As he did so, the fog seemed to part in front of him, giving him a clear view at least a few feet ahead.

“World politics are not my concern, Dorje,” he replied. “And I wish you would stop referring to me by my Iragan name. In this time, I prefer to use the name Wilhelm Porota.”

The Tibetan waved his hand in the air with a chuckle.

“Yes yes, Wilhelm, of course.”

As they neared the structure obscured by the fog, distinct shapes began to emerge. The building nearest them was squarish and flat, made of hardened clay that had been bleached white by the mountain sun. The building farther beyond - and the one towards which they were walking - was also white, but it had been painted such by the monks. This building was taller than the first, with a tiered roof that opened into a dome-like structure on top.

“Have you found anything new since last I was here?” Giessam asked, his eyes scanning to the top of the stupa ahead. Dorje nodded.

“We have found a few new artifacts in the past twenty years,” he said. “We got luckier with our searching than you did, evidently.”

Giessam sighed.

“I do wish I could work in a team, as you and your monks do.”

The pair entered the stupa, pausing to bow to the two monks stationed at the open front entrance.

“You guard the artefacts now?” Giessam whispered, his voice reverberating in the halls despite its low volume. At this remark, Giessam noticed his friend’s face grow dark.

“As I told you before, friend, there are events in motion now. The Qing Dynasty has fallen, and rebellion and revolution are sweeping across the Orient. One day, likely soon, it will reach our quiet Order. We may have need to defend ourselves and our relics.”

Giessam placed a hand on Dorje’s shoulder and smiled to try to lighten the mood.

“Is that what all the noise has been about these past months?” he said with a laugh. Dorje’s expression remained grim. Giessam dropped his hand back to his side, and the only response to his jest was the echoing of their footsteps in the hall.

After descending several staircases, the pair stopped in front of a set of double doors guarded by two monks.

“Giessam,” Dorje said. “I must warn you. Our newest artefact has a dark energy pouring from it.” Giessam raised an eyebrow and scanned the doors top-to-bottom.

“Our brothers stand guard not only to keep out intruders, but to keep this dark energy in.”

“Have you tried to identify it?” Giessam asked, his eyes back on his friend. Dorje nodded.

“Tried, yes. My best scrying yields nothing more than darkness and ill intent.”

Giessam took a deep breath and pushed open one of the doors. Immediately, he could feel the aura emanating from the object on the eastern side of the room. He managed to hold back the shiver running down his spine.

“This aura is familiar to me,” he whispered.

Within a case of warded and blessed glass lay a stone. From mere appearances, the stone was nothing special. Dark grey with a few streaks of white. Almost round, save for a few imperfections. Roughly the size of a baseball. Giessam approached the case slowly, guardedly.

As Dorje followed him inside, he whispered a few words in Tibetan to the monks outside the door, and they followed him inside, easing the door closed behind them.

Giessam glanced back at the three as the guards took up their position on either side of the doors. Dorje cautiously made his way to his side. Giessam noticed beads of sweat forming on his brow.

“Worry not, brother,” he reassured. “This is not a Thracian aura.”

He turned back to the case and furrowed his brow in concentration.

“Can you identify it?” Dorje asked. His voice was hoarse with anxiety.

Giessam hesitated before replying.

“Are you familiar with Morla?” he asked, his furrowed brow changing to an intense frown.

“Giessam, you know that my knowledge of the Forgotten Ones is very limited.”

Giessam motioned to the case, encouraging Dorje to open it.

“Morla was an Ascended Goddess in my time. Her primary domain was that of resentment and betrayal.” Dorje unlocked the glass case and pulled the side hatch open. “I’ve dealt with some of her tricks before. I’ve seen her servants and artefacts cause the closest of friends to come to blows.”

Dorje backed away from the case as Giessam reached inside and held his hand barely above the stone.

“Giessam, I fear for your safety then,” he whispered. “I will not be in your presence with this artefact’s powers risking my loyalty to you.”

Giessam laughed lightheartedly and took the stone in one hand, easing it off of the cushion and out of the case.

“Dorje,” he said, “if this artefact affects either of us in such a way, it is *your* safety I would fear for.”

By the time the jest was out of his mouth, Dorje had retreated to the doors.

“What is the extent of its power?” His face had gone pale, and the sweat trickled down his face, dripping from the tip of his nose and chin. “Is it powerful enough to have instigated the Wuchang Uprising?”

Giessam dipped his head back and forth a couple of times.

“It is very powerful, though in its current dormant state I doubt it would have that sort of reach. I believe it was just the Qing Dynasty’s time to fall.”

He made a quick hand sign in the air and a small, swirling portal appeared. He carefully set the stone inside the portal and made another hand sign to close it.

“Thank you Dorje,” he said with a smile. “I’ll take this back to Sarajevo and study it more in depth.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Morla eyed Giessam's sword, her face cold with indignation. She looked around the room, eyeing the artefacts and weapons scattered throughout, before resting her eyes on the crystal that stood amongst the candles and incense. Her expression turned to one of amusement.

"I see," she said, returning her gaze to Giessam. "You need me to reverse the freezing spell placed upon the person in that crystal."

Giessam dug the point of his sword into the crack between two floorboards.

"No, Morla," he replied. "Ice magic is something I've studied in quite some depth over the last thousand years. I need your blood." He returned her gaze, his voice level and his eyes focused on hers. He was met with a malicious laugh.

"My *blood*?" Morla snorted. "You are a brave one, I'll give you that. In the two millennia since my birth and ascent to godhood, not a single mortal has gone so far as to even suggest such a thing."

"Nor has one. If you'll recall, I told you moments ago that I have not been a mere mortal in over one thousand years." He strode to a shelf opposite the crystal altar and pulled down a box. "What was your relationship with Beytus?"

Morla's cold composure broke for a moment.

"Beytus was my husband. I would assume an Iragan magicker would know that, and would know that Beytus was slain some years ago," she hissed. Giessam's lips parted in a half-smile.

"Indeed. That is why I have called you here."

He opened the box, revealing the corroded dagger he had forged from Beytus' blood over two hundred years prior. Morla recoiled from the weapon, knocking over a wooden end table and the talismans resting on it.

"Who are you?" she demanded again, fear and rage in her now quivering voice. Giessam closed the box and brandished his sword, pointing the tip at the goddess. At the end of the blade stood a glass vial.

"I am Giessam, last living magicker of the Temple of Iraga, and deposer and slayer of gods. I have given you free choice in this matter, just as I gave Griem and Tind. Fill this vial with your blood and begone, or I shall take it from you."

\* \* \* \* \*

The heavy double doors of the monastery flew open, banging loudly against the interior walls. Dorje snapped from his meditation, startled but maintaining a facade of composure. Two of his fellow monks were already on their feet, moving to put themselves defensively between the intruder and their sensei.

Giessam stood in the doorway, haggard and exhausted. The two guards relaxed their stances. A slight popping noise came from the older monk's knees as he stood. The twenty years that had passed since last he spoke with Giessam had not been kind to him.

"Dorje," Giessam greeted. His voice was hoarse and he staggered with each step.

Dorje spread his arms as Giessam approached, letting him fall into his embrace. He noticed now the layers of dirt, sweat, and blood caked on his young friend's clothes.

"Giessam," he whispered. "What has happened? Where have you been? What have you done?" Though he kept his voice low, the tones echoed softly around the corners of the still room.

"I made a grave mistake, my brother," Giessam replied. One of the other monks held a bowl of crisp water out to him, and he drank deeply of it. "The stone, Morla's stone," he muttered, sliding the artefact from his pocket and setting it in Dorje's hand. "Her aura was stronger than I anticipated."

Dorje rolled the stone around in his palm for a few seconds, feeling the slight warmth emanating from it. He thrust it back into Giessam's hands, eager to hold the blasted thing no longer than he must. As he did, he caught a glimpse of an insignia on his friend's grime-caked jacket collar. It bore two stars in white over a blue background, and the now-familiar shape of the white edelweiss flower.

"My friend," he said, shock entering his voice, "did you enlist to fight for Austria-Hungary?"

Giessam let out a sigh before replying.

"You know I have no interest in the affairs of world politics. I was conscripted. My choices were to go willingly or to lose my secretive studies to a government seizure. I have not been back to that place in nearly two years. I can feel my books and my artefacts, as though they reach out to me and long for my return to research."

Giessam had by this time gripped Dorje by the shoulders, firmly, but with no intent of pain. The stone pressed uncomfortably into Dorje's shoulder as Giessam held it still in his palm.

"You must rest before you can return, Giessam. Do your fellow soldiers know you've gone? Where is the rest of your unit?"

"Dead," Giessam replied, no hint of emotion crossing his eyes. "My commanding officers will no doubt assume the same of me, once they discover the state of the bodies. I cannot rest now. I have but a limited window of time to return to Sarajevo, retrieve my documents, and retreat to another place under another name. Will you help me?"

Dorje appeared more pensive than Giessam had anticipated. As he stared into his old friend's eyes, he thought he saw a glimpse of worry, or perhaps something deeper. Dorje's silence affirmed Giessam's searching gaze. The old monk was afraid of him.

"Dorje, friend, brother, why do you fear me?" he asked. The question caught Dorje off-guard, and with his trained senses, Giessam felt the other monks shift around him. He kept his eyes locked on the man before him.

"Giessam," Dorje started. Before he could appeal to his friend to rest at least a night and to wash himself, two of the monk guards collapsed, their throats slit. Giessam gripped only one of Dorje's shoulders tightly now; in his other hand, a gleaming longsword had appeared, fresh blood coating the edge.

"If I truly wanted to kill you, I could," Giessam whispered. The other monks leapt toward him, but all fell short as the blade in his hand became stained with more and more red.

"You abuse the gifts of your matron goddess, old friend," Dorje answered. His voice was quivering now.

"I am surprised you recognize what has happened here. Most mortals cannot comprehend the flowing magic of time. Will you help me, old friend?"

Dorje shook Giessam's hand from his shoulder and took a cautious step backward.

"Still you expect my help?" he hissed, his composure now fully broken. "After you killed 6 of my dearest friends and best students?"

"I had no further use for them," Giessam stated. "As I will have no further use for you if you refuse my request for aid."

Dorje straightened his back and pulled at the sleeves of his robe, straightening them after Giessam's ever-tightening grip had misshapen them.

"You're becoming callous, Giessam," he whispered. "But I do not fear death, and I know you will be merciful and end it quickly." He locked eyes once more with the man he had called brother for so many years. Giessam's face flushed with rage, and Dorje collapsed to the floor, blood pouring from a fresh wound in his chest.

"Humans continue to disappoint me," Giessam muttered, sliding the stone back into his jacket pocket and wiping his dirtied blade on the hem of the monk's robe.

Giessam approached the crystal slowly, almost reverently, turning the now filled vial in his hand and watching the blood stain the sides black. He glanced to his left at the crumpled, bleeding body of Morla. As he stepped closer to the crystal, the light played on the surface to reveal a dark shape in the center. He reached out and touched the side of the crystal at waist height, sliding his fingers along the side of it. The ice began to melt at his touch, and he stepped back from it, his eyes focused on the humanoid shape within.

The ice melted away with a hissing noise accompanied by rising steam. Slowly, the figure inside became visible.

It was a woman, similar in apparent age to Giessam. Her hair was as black as his, but nearly a full foot longer, and her sharp facial features were accentuated by her pale white complexion. She was almost equal to Giessam in height and musculature. Her hazel eyes stared straight ahead, open, as they had been when the freezing spell was cast on her almost two millenia prior.

Giessam turned away from the melting ice and vanished, reappearing moments later with a long bone in one hand. The bone had been carved with runic symbols and hollowed out from one end. He removed the corroded dagger from its box and carved another symbol into the bone before gesturing his hand toward the vials of blood on the floor.

The vials raised themselves from the floor and hovered to where he waited. He turned the bone in his hand, and one by one, the vials opened themselves and emptied their contents into the hollowed end. When the last one was empty, he swiped his hand away and the vials flew to the wall, shattering and raining shards of red-stained glass onto Morla's body.

He glanced at the altar once more. The ice had melted further to reveal torn, decaying, festering flesh just above the woman's right hip.

Giessam stood the runed bone on the floor in the center of a circle of talismans. Before he could begin reciting the chant he had prepared, he became intensely aware of a presence to his right. He turned slowly to face it and stared into the eyes of the copper colored demon before him. The demon seemed amused.

"It has been a while, hasn't it?" it said. Giessam's sword was immediately at its throat.

"Thrache," he greeted. "I see you haven't forgotten." Thrache laughed again, ignoring the blade pressing into his flesh.

"Forgotten?" he said. "You don't think I've been watching you this entire time, Giessam? Or, what was the last alias you were using? Pierre Bourreau? Should I call you Pierre?"

Giessam pulled his sword away with force, slicing into Thrache's neck. Still, the demon seemed amused.

"Did you call me here to kill me?" he asked, slowly walking around the circle of talismans. "Or to have me remove the curse from your beloved Nesyra?"

Giessam's jaw tightened as his eyes darted to the woman floating just above the altar. All of the ice was gone, and the festering wound on her hip was slowly oozing pus and blood down her leg.

"Cure her," he demanded, his voice level. Thrache laughed harder.

"That's no way to speak to a god."

Giessam spat at Thrache's feet.

"What are gods to me?" he retorted. "You say you've been watching me, surely you know what I'm capable of."

Thrache paused in his circular path.

"That's true," he mused. "What was it you called yourself before you butchered Morla? 'Deposer and slayer of gods?' What hubris."

Giessam pointed with his sword at the body of Morla, still crumpled against the wall.

“Hubris?” he said. His voice was beginning to crack with emotion. “Are you blind and stupid, demon? What am I if not a godslayer?”

Thrache stared longingly at Morla’s corpse.

“She was beautiful, you know,” he replied. He looked then at Nesyra. “But I suppose so is she, in an oddly human sort of way.”

Giessam leapt forward and swung with his sword, but Thrache blocked it with the hard scales on his forearm.

“You will cure her, Thrache!” Giessam shouted. “You will cure her or I will kill you and find someone else who will!”

Thrache clicked his tongue a few times in disapproval.

“Only I can reverse this curse, Giessam, you know that. You’ve spent almost two millennia studying and mastering magickal arts, I’m sure you’re well aware of the power of that festering curse. And if you kill me, you will never be able to remove it.”

Giessam lowered his sword.

“A trade then,” he offered. Thrache broke out into laughter again.

“You think you can offer me anything I cannot readily obtain myself?”

“Tell me how to cure her, you bastard!”

Thrache looked back at Nesyra once again.

“I grow tired of this,” he said with a wave of his hand. Nesyra’s wound immediately became clean and the flesh pulled itself back together, leaving three claw-like scars. The blood and pus flowing down her leg served as the only evidence of its presence.

Giessam dropped his sword. It vanished before it hit the floor.

“You and your mission have been an excellent source of entertainment for me these many years,” Thrache said, his eyes following Giessam’s footsteps toward the altar.

“All these years,” Giessam whispered, “and it took next to nothing to have you fix this.” He ran his fingers along the newly formed scars.

“I do have a request,” Thrache said. Giessam turned his head to face him. “You’ve killed or negotiated blood from all thirteen of the gods and goddesses in my charge in order to summon me here. I want to see how powerful you truly are.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Giessam could hear Nesyra’s laugh from his place by the altar. He chanced a quick look over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of her flowing hair beneath the entryway to the temple as she jumped backward, dodging a swing from her trainer’s quarterstaff.

A sharp pain on his ear caused him to turn back to the altar, and to his trainer’s angry face.

“Giessam you must focus,” his trainer hissed. “The First Goddess of Time grants her powers only to a select few, and she will not tolerate distractions. Nor will I.”

Giessam grunted an apology and resumed his meditation, blocking out the sounds around him.

He could hear, from deep within, a feminine voice greeting him and welcoming him back.

“Lady Iraga, I beg your forgiveness,” he heard himself whisper, though his lips did not move. A stout, dark-skinned woman appeared in his mind, smiling and holding back laughter.

“Giessam, my son,” she said, “have no fear. Master Lotrys is more severe than I think is necessary. I have plans for you as I do for all of my children, and no intention of changing them just because your focus is broken by a pretty girl.”

Giessam smiled back at her.

“You are very kind, Lady Iraga,” he said. She held a hand out to him, and he reached out to grasp it.

“Kindness is power, young one,” she said.

She began to lead Giessam through the halls of his own mind, regaling him with stories of the other gods, stories of heroes and powers that he had dreamed of since he was a boy.

She opened a door further down the hall and gestured Giessam inside.

“My Lady Iraga,” he whispered, his face flushed. “Do you believe I could ascend? Do you believe I could become a god?”

Iraga’s eyes flashed with sadness momentarily, before returning her natural kind expression.

“Yes, Gie,” she said. “I believe it is possible.”

The two continued deeper into the room.

“As you can see,” she said, pointing to Nesyra washing her feet in a small basin of water, “Nesyra is more than just a pretty girl. The two of you are soulbound, connected by the infinite threads of time and fate.” She broke off suddenly and her face grew grim.

“Lady Iraga, what’s wrong?” Giessam asked after a brief hesitation. Iraga looked at Nesyra, then back at Giessam.

“Awake, Giessam,” she whispered. “It is time for an important lesson.”

Giessam’s eyes snapped open, and the silence that greeted him shocked him. Master Lotrys grabbed him by the arm and pulled him outside into the main square, where a crowd of masters and apprentices had gathered. They pushed through the main part of the crowd to where Nesyra and her trainer stood.

In the center of the square, surrounded by dissipating red mist, stood a crimson colored demon, twice the size of the largest man present. Its face was contorted in a malicious grin.

“Greetings,” he boomed. “I am a servant of the Demon-God Thrache, sent here as my final test of ascension. If any one of you believes you can face me and live, step forward.”

The crowd erupted in shouts of anger and pride, but Nesyra was the first to step out towards the beast. As she did, the shouts died down. Giessam reached for her arm, but the high priestess of Iraga snatched his arm away.

“Lady Telyral,” he pleaded.

“She is as ready for this as any of the rest of us, Giessam,” she whispered.

Nesyra drew her longsword from its sheath and brandished it.

“Who are you, demon, to challenge us in our sacred home?” she said. The demon laughed.

“You need not know my name yet, child,” he replied. “But I will tell you at the end of this. It is only fair to know the name of the demon who takes your life.”

The demon rushed forward, covering the few yards between them in the blink of an eye, and clawed at Nesyra’s face. Just as quickly, she bent herself backwards and kicked up, connecting with his jaw and flipping away by springing on her hands.

Giessam’s eyes widened. He had known she was a better fighter than he was, but it was impressive that she was able to slow time enough to escape the blow and land one of her own. The demon laughed.

“Iragan, eh?” he said. “Time magic may help postpone your death, but this battle is mine.”

He crouched and swung his arms through the dirt, kicking up a thick dust. Nesyra slowed time and peered into the dust, but saw nothing. She looked back to the crowd, to her trainer, and saw the gleam of frustration in her eyes before her face suddenly hit the ground.

The demon was perched atop her, one foot on the ground, one on her rear, with a clawed hand pushing her face into the dirt. Her cry of shock was muffled by the ground and she kicked and flailed her arms in an attempt to twist around.

“This was the best warrior you had to offer?” the demon shouted at the crowd. He was no longer amused so much as he was agitated. “This apprentice? This was no challenge!”

Giessam tried to run toward the beast, but again, Telyral held him back.

The demon flipped Nesyra over onto her back and tore the midsection of her robes open, revealing her stomach.

“Since you could not offer me the honor of a decent challenge, I will not offer you the mercy of a quick death,” he said. He pulled his claws along her right side, opening her flesh, and began to chant.

“Master Lotrys,” Giessam pleaded, “we have to do something!”

Lotrys slapped Giessam with the back of his hand.

“Nesyra took up this challenge alone, so she must face the consequences alone,” he snapped back. “Lady Telyral has instructed us not to interfere, and we will heed her command.”

As the demon finished his chanting, a putrid stench suddenly met the crowd. Those with more sensitive stomachs turned to the grass at the far sides of the square and vomited. Giessam’s eyes began to water from holding back his own retching.

Nesyra let out a small gasp as the demon stood and pulled her upright by her hair to face the crowd.

The claw marks above her right hip had turned gangrenous and were beginning to bloat and ooze pus along with the blood that ran down her body and stained her robes.

“Let it be known that Beytus, servant of Thrache, defies Iraga and her followers!” the demon shouted. “In completing this challenge, I ascend to godhood, as Thrache himself did centuries ago.” He vanished into a red mist, and Nesyra fell to the ground, gripping her wounds.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You’ve slain lesser gods,” Thrache jeered, “but you can barely touch me!”

He jabbed forward with his spear as Giessam vanished and reappeared a few inches out of its reach.

Giessam’s breath was ragged and he gripped his sword in his left hand, instead of his bloody right hand. He’d been a moment too slow and an inch too far to the right before, and it cost him his sword hand.

The pair had been shuffling around the room, lunging back and forth at each other, for several minutes. Thrache had the clear advantage now, and for the first time in centuries, Giessam was worried.

“Are you disappointed?” he asked, shaking the blood from his right hand. Thrache smirked.

“I am,” he replied. “Now I understand Beytus’ frustration when he returned from his bout with Nesyra.” He jabbed forward again, this time arcing the spear at the end of the jab. Giessam jumped backward to avoid the tip, then lunged forward and swung down hard with his sword. Thrache pulled the butt of his spear around to block and shoved away from Giessam with it. As he swung his arm back to stab at Giessam once more, he felt a pull on the spear from behind him and whipped around, ready to swing, but hesitated.

The ghostly form of Gilmore Branch stood defiantly before Thrache, his hand wrapped around the base of the spear. Thrache’s hesitation turned to laughter and he whipped back around to face Giessam again.

“You truly have ascended the mortal realm, Giessam,” he said. He clapped his hands in mock applause. “Who knew killing thirteen gods was enough to make you a god yourself?”

Giessam lunged at him once again, but was easily blocked.

“Gilmore, why are you here?” he shouted. Gilmore swung the dagger at Thrache and was likewise denied.

“I served you in my life,” he replied. “I shall serve you in death as well.”

Thrache swung the point of his spear in a wide arc. It passed through Gilmore without any resistance, and he vanished in a cloud of smoke.

“You own at least his soul,” Thrache said, pulling his swing full circle towards Giessam, and feeling it connect with flesh. He smirked. “How many people died in your name over the years, Giessam?” He looked up toward the end of the spear and recoiled in surprise.

The tip of his spear had hooked into flesh, but not Giessam’s. Amderil stood with his hands on the shaft of the spear, his blue acidic blood dripping onto the floor with a hiss.

“Amderil?” Thrache spat, his surprise quickly shifting to anger. He pulled on the shaft of the spear, but Amderil held firm. “You dare defy me?”

“Giessam slew my old master and took me as his servant,” Amderil stated.

“And he treated you with no respect, with no love, just as he treated the humans who helped him on his journey,” Thrache hissed. He felt a stab of pain in his back and whipped around, leaving the spear embedded in Amderil’s side. Gilmore had reappeared and jammed the Festering Knife into his lower back. He clawed at Gilmore, but once again, only succeeded in destabilizing the ghost.

“Loyalty is bred from fear, Thrache,” Giessam said. Thrache turned back around too late. Giessam had appeared between him and Amderil, and he jammed his longsword through Demon-God’s skull.

A spray of blood covered Giessam’s face as he pulled his blade out. It burned like acid, but he wiped it off quickly with his sleeve as Thrache’s body slumped to the floor. He turned to Amderil, and Gilmore reappeared beside the demon, along with Dorje, Sandra and her family, and a host of other familiar faces.

“Why are any of you here?” he asked after a moment.

“We serve you, my lord,” Amderil answered.

“Why? You especially, Amderil. I specifically released you from my service.”

“We’re bound to you,” Gilmore replied with a sad smile. “Whether you like it or not, and whether we want to be or not, we’re stuck.”

Giessam scanned over the crowd of ghosts and demons whose souls were now his to command. He waved an arm at them.

“Well, your work here is done,” he said nonchalantly. “Thrache is slain, Nesyra is cured. Begone, that I may speak with her.”

The crowd of souls bowed and vanished, Amderil’s mist leaving behind a small pool of steaming blood. Giessam turned to face the altar, but was halted mid-turn by a sudden sharp pain in his chest. He looked down and saw the corroded dagger’s hilt protruding from a fresh puncture just to the right of his heart. His gaze followed the hand that held the dagger and eventually his eyes rested on the hazel eyes of Nesyra, filled with tears. Nesyra caught him as he collapsed and held him in her arms, gazing longingly into his eyes.

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Giessam ran to where Nesyra lay bleeding, Lotrys finally no longer holding him back, and slid to his knees at her side.

“Giessam,” she croaked. Her eyes looked desperately into his, and her lips continued to move, but no sound escaped.

Giessam lifted her in his arms and ran to the dispersing crowd.

“Master Lotrys,” he cried. “Mistress Amane, there has to be something we can do to save her!”

The two trainers looked briefly at the wounds, then at Nesyra’s pleading eyes, and shook their heads.

“This curse is too powerful for mortal man to counteract,” Telyral replied somberly. “Thrache himself must remove this curse from our dear Nesyra.”

“Thrache will do no such thing,” Lotrys said. “Thrache is corrupt with power and bloodlust. He will let her die in agony, and it is doubtful there is anything we could say to change his mind.” He turned and walked back towards the temple of Iraga with Amane and Telyral, leaving Giessam holding Nesyra, incredulous at their seeming indifference.

“Gie,” Nesyra whispered. He looked down into her eyes and she formed the word “please” with her lips, but couldn’t muster her voice.

“I will find a way,” he promised. He looked around at the surrounding temples, and ran to the nearest one, the temple of the First God of Fire, Messien.

“Messien priests!” he shouted as he entered. A handful of men and women turned their eyes to him. “Please, is there a way to save her?”

Two of the men turned away without answering. One of the women slowly approached and looked over the wound.

“I could cauterize the flesh here,” she muttered, “but that would not stop the festering. The infection already within would still spread, and she would still die.”

Giessam gave the priestess a small bow with his head, and turned and ran back into the square.

He approached three more temples with similar answers before he entered the temple of the ice goddess Athilic.

“I could freeze her in crystal,” the priest whispered as he examined the wound. Nesyra looked at Giessam, expecting him to turn and run to the next temple.

“Would that help her?” he replied. The priest nodded.

“She would not be, traditionally speaking, alive; however, the crystal should maintain her body in its present condition.”

Giessam looked down at Nesyra once more. She nodded weakly.

“Place her on the altar, Giessam,” the priest said.

Giessam hurried to the altar and placed Nesyra on top of it, taking great care to avoid touching the wound.

“Nesyra, I swear to you, I will make Thrache remove this curse from you,” he whispered. “No matter the cost.” Nesyra grabbed his hand and squeezed. Her lips parted in a smile as the priest began chanting and making wide sweeping motions over her body. Giessam pushed her hand up onto the altar and released his grip, letting it rest at her side as a solid sheet of ice engulfed her.

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“Why?” Giessam croaked. The blood filling his lung splashed out when he spoke. Nesyra let her tears drip onto his face.

“The Athilic priest was wrong, Gie,” she whispered. “I could see. I could hear. I was alive inside that ice all these centuries.” She grasped his bloodied right hand in hers. “I saw what you did for me. I saw you devote yourself to study. I watched every week as you cast the spell on yourself to remain young. I watched as you mourned the deaths of your friends. And I was there when you stopped mourning.”

Giessam coughed up blood and pus as the enchantments from the dagger took effect, rotting his flesh around the wound and infesting his lungs with disease and decay.

“I watched as you used people - real, living, human beings - to achieve your goal. I watched you fall, Gie. You were so good, so kind. And you fell so far. You fell so hard. And you fell alone. You became everything we were not supposed to be. When was the last time you spoke with Lady Iraga? Do you remember her teachings? Do you remember what she told us whenever we started to get angry?”

Giessam's lips moved, blood and pus dripping out and running down his cheeks, mingling with Nesyra's tears. Nesyra nodded

"Kindness is power," she whispered. She looked up, noticing the crowd of souls that had gathered once again around their master. "You attained power, Gie, but you lost your kindness. I can't allow an unkind man to love me. It goes against my very soul, and had you not given yours up so long ago, you would have seen it go against yours."

She kissed his forehead and laid him on the floor. His heart had stopped beating as she spoke her last words to him. She stood and faced the souls before her.

"Your god is dead," she stated. No new tears flowed, but she made no effort to dry the ones that stained her cheeks. "Those of you who wish to remain may serve me if you choose. Those who wish to be free may go with no fear of repercussion."

The majority of the spiritual host vanished, including Gilmore and Dorje. Amderil stood among the few who remained.

"Lady Nesyra," he said, "with my original master, Beytus, long since passed, and now Giessam and even the Demon-God Thrache slain, I have no purpose, in Terysin or on Earth. Tell me what you intend to do, and I will make my decision with this knowledge."

Nesyra was silent for a long moment, then slowly bent down and plucked the dagger from Giessam's chest. She looked it over carefully, his blood still fresh on it.

"Giessam started something that needs to be finished," she said. She wiped the blood from the dagger on her robes. "The gods are mad with power, toying with humans, demons, and all other mortals alike. I intend to bring them low."