

The Fields of Elysium. The paradise for heroes who worshipped the Olympian gods. For some, it was serene. Peaceful. All of the old hurts they suffered in life, the trials and tribulations that gave texture to their stories were washed away by the river Lethe. What came to define the residents then, were only their joys. The nature of their greatness that took shape in whatever made them famed across the land.

For many, that was warfare. For many, that was the path of the warrior. And so the trio of deities met resistance as they pushed their way into the paradisiacal land within the Olympian realm of the dead. And yet, while it was resistance that they met, a delay toward their goal of escape, it was an infectiously joyous resistance.

They each had their own reasons for feeling pleased at doing battle with the greatest warriors to ever live. For Zagreus, it was nostalgic. A trip down memory lane, back to the days when he did this on a regular basis as part of his duties of managing security of his father's realm. For Melinoé, who took a more personal role in managing the spirits who resided within this realm, she always took joy from her work. These souls lived for challenge, and in death they were little different.

Atreus? He had no connection to this realm, to these souls, to any of this. And yet he wore the widest grin on his face of all of them. While Melinoé understood this was what these souls loved, Atreus could *feel* it. It was a tangible experience for him, their rapturous euphoria. Like a great relief, a river in the desert, a hearty meal in a barren wasteland, another kind soul met on the road in a long journey of isolation. They wanted something to fight, something new, something strange.

The spearmen gravitated toward Zagreus, wishing to see the techniques, the abilities of Varatha and the one who had come to wield it. They faced defeat with gladness and satisfaction.

The swordsmen and shielders wished for nothing more than to taste the dancing blades of Melinoé.

The archers felt such soaring emotions as their arrows were shot out of the air that it nearly brought Atreus to tears.

... What kind of paradise was this, that invaders despoiling it were met with such euphoria? It was almost a mirror to Valhalla in Atreus' mind, though it permitted more than great warriors entry, so long as they were those who made their name known across the realm. A realm where the greatest were permitted to feast, be merry, and battle until the end, until—

... *There* it was. There was the difference. Atreus understood what sudden and inexplicable joy these spirits experienced. And it was with that realisation he called out. "You want something to fight?!"

"Atreus?" Melinoé asked, parrying a sword strike.

"Ulfr Hlaup!"

A mighty wolf. It towered over every restless spirit of Elysium. With a reverberating howl it shook the confidence of each and every one of them. It was like unto a beast of legend. A great and terrifying phantasm with fangs and claws shaped to tear a man in half with a casual swipe of a paw or snap of its jaws.

The change that overcame the once languid souls of Elysium was overwhelming for the young god who could feel it as it happened. In that one single moment, it was like every single one of them truly came alive again. Those with command experience fell right back into that role as though their aeon of lethargy hadn't happened at all. They formed units. Squads. Shield walls to guard the archers, swordsmen and spearmen forming ranks. The heroes of Elysium were ready to go to war, to defeat a monster worthy of song.

Tears ran down Atreus' face. Not just for the feelings he could understand from these joyous souls. But because he knew he would have to take it all away again.

"Well, looks like they're good and distracted," Zagreus commented, sweeping the sweat from his forehead and into his hair. "How long can you keep that thing going? Think we can make a run for it?"

"I can keep it up for a while," Atreus answered, wiping his eyes. "We should... It'd be better if we stayed for a while so they'll focus on that more."

The youngest of the three could tell Melinoé saw right through him. Zagreus on the other hand, "I suppose that's fair. Besides, when else would we get the chance to see the greatest heroes go to war?"

And so they watched for a time. Brave charges, honourable sacrifices for even modest gain, valiant defense of their fellows, inspiring rallying cries from those in command. Spirits warred, they fell to the beast a half dozen at a time and each time it was a burst of satisfaction that Atreus vicariously felt from them. A challenge they couldn't, might never, overcome. The lessons he had learned of combat from the most experienced warriors the world had ever seen, they paled in comparison to the true lesson of all this.

"We can go now," he said finally. He would keep the summon active for as long as he could, let them experience this for as long as he could. He didn't owe them anything but... Well. Father had told him a momentary relief was nothing in the regretful existence of a spirit, but Atreus thought that was wrong. Even if it was only momentary, even if it would end, it was something.

"Well, they were all as spirited as ever," Zagreus said as they made their way to the largest structure in Elysium. A wall that refused the sky's view beyond its curved facade. "This though, just, bit of advice. Focus on the big guy first. The other is more annoying but he only gets worse if you put him in a tight spot. So—"

"I might've guessed all the commotion was your doing, blackguard."

Zagreus stopped. Blinkered in confusion at what he was seeing. The great structure they had yet to enter, the blond man, spirit, sitting on its steps with a bottle in hand. "Theseus?" Once

again he looked up at the wall as if what he was seeing was nonsense. “I thought you’d be— Wait, are you *drunk*?”

The languid spirit took a long pull from the bottle filled with a familiar golden liquid. “Usually. It’s about all this place is good for nowadays.”

“What? But you love this place! Champion of the arena, basking in the adoration of the crowds, fighting alongside Asterius—” The once king of Athens took a much longer pull from his bottle. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” the embittered hero answered. “For over a thousand bloody years, nothing.”

Zagreus frowned at him. “Okay, you’ve always been a prick but this is just unsettling. Where’s Asterius? He’ll get you back to your old self—”

“Zagreus.” His sister spoke his name softly, gently, as if telling him his heart was in the right place but he should just stop talking. “After you were imprisoned, the Bull of Minos moved on.”

“Moved on? To what? This is the Realm of the Dead. There’s nowhere to move on *to*.”

“Reincarnation. To be born as a mortal again.”

Zagreus blinked in confusion again. “I didn’t know they could do that.”

Melinoé rolled her eyes with fondness. “That’s because you were always so rubbish at administration you didn’t know half of what goes on here. The prisoners of Tartarus, the denizens of Asphodel, they’re trapped here, the former more than the latter. But Elysium?” She gestured around them at the perpetually pleasant realm of peace and tranquillity. “Those who reside here are heroes. This is their reward. If they have enough of paradise they can return to the cycle of reincarnation whenever they like. Though they have to petition Father through the appropriate channels, and the paperwork is a nightmare. I’ve handled them all for the past eight centuries or so.”

“So... Asterius is...”

“Gone!” Theseus snapped, irritated for the entire conversation. “Decided to go and be somebody else rather than stay here with me! We were champions! We were *brothers*! We were the best! He was my best—!” Angry and upset, the bottle flew from his hand to bounce against the grassy pavement and sink into the waters of the Lethe. But Elysium would always provide for the residents of Elysium. Another bottle appeared near him in short order.

“I remember Father speaking about it,” Melinoé said. “The Biblical God snatched up the bull’s soul the moment it left Father’s authority. He’s a Sacred Gear now, Refuge Labyrinth.”

The king had picked up the new bottle, was in the middle of trying to force it open, only to stop. “Really? Those are the artefacts that house the souls of the most powerful creatures, aren’t they? Ha! Of course Asterius would fit that sort of criteria!” Much as it might have

come as good news, it didn't stop him from opening the bottle, toasting to someone who wasn't there before taking a swig from the fresh bottle.

"Wait, but that still doesn't make sense," Zagreus insisted. "Why would he just go? This is still Elysium. It's still a paradise. The spirits that reside here don't want for anything."

"That's exactly why," Atreus said with complete certainty. "This is going to sound dumb but... They don't have anything to live for anymore."

Melinoé offered him a melancholy smile as she realised he understood something in only moments that took her centuries to figure out. Atreus returned that same smile. It was times like this his ability to understand people was both a blessing and a curse.

... The words stuck in his mind. 'Understand people.' To understand and be understood. It felt like an answer he had forgotten he was searching for. Or an important step that brought him much closer to one.

Zagreus though, remained confused. "Of course they have nothing to live for. They're *dead*. Comes with the territory, doesn't it?"

"They might be dead but they still exist. They still think and feel. Everyone wants to do something that has meaning to them. The ones back there, they loved fighting, their souls sing for how happy they are to fight someone new... To fight someone *new*. It's been what... A thousand years or more since people stopped coming here?" Since the Biblical faiths truly gained dominance over the Olympians and new souls entering Hades' realm slowed to a trickle. To say nothing of heroes granted entry to Elysium. "Fighting the same few thousand people over and over again? No purpose to it, no meaning to it, not fighting for anything. They're heroes, right? They had something to fight for. Maybe they did it for themselves in life but... Even *that* doesn't mean anything down here."

Theseus spoke up. "The boy has wisdom beyond his years."

"You must have noticed, Zagreus," his sister prodded the increasingly despondent son of Hades. "Just how empty this place is." Many had been distracted by Atreus' wolf, but the warriors of Elysium numbered thousands... At its peak.

"I thought they were just leaving us alone."

"They moved on, you fool!" Theseus barked. "More than half by my counting. The boy has the right of it. Paradise is boring without something to strive for. I've considered it many times myself. Fighting here in the arena alongside Asterius, it truly was paradise so long as I could keep doing that. The roar of the crowds, the beautiful dance of axe and spear side by side." His expression shifted, looking at the son of Hades almost like an old friend. "I'd even say you were a highlight, blackguard. An opponent worthy of being felled by us over and over again until you just barely managed to eke out a victory."

"But you only beat me four times and then I never lost aga—"

"It was a bleak day when Lord Hades imprisoned you, blackguard," Theseus continued as if the interruption never happened. "You were an endless challenge. Oh the plots the others would hatch trying to bring you to an early grave! And the times when Death himself would join the fun! They'd regale me with tales of it for *weeks* afterwards!" The old king paused, perhaps a little hope coming into his eyes. "I don't suppose this is the renewal of such games? I ask not for myself of course, but for the others. It—" The words had come off as a pretence at first, like he was asking for his own sake in truth. But that suddenly ended as his maudlin brooding returned to him. "It simply wouldn't be the same without Asterius by my side."

Zagreus looked uncomfortable for many reasons that were beyond Atreus' understanding. "Uh, no, that's not really in the cards, mate. If we die this time we're not coming back."

"Huh." The once king of Athens looked at his bottle again, then dropped it by his side as he pushed himself up onto his feet. "Well then... If you'll excuse me, I think I have some paperwork to fill out. Be well, daughter of Hades, boy I don't know. And rot in the foulest pits of Tartarus, blackguard."

"Oh no, that's fine!" Zagreus shouted after him. "Probably never going to see each other again, can't be a decent, considerate person for once in your afterlife!"

"Not to you, blackgaurd!"

Melinoé smiled the smile of someone amused at a family member's annoyance. "He seemed nice."

"Augh, let's just... Let's just go."

As Theseus had hinted, the arena that might have held hundreds of spirits in its heyday now held none. The grand battleground stood hauntingly empty as a space that had lost its purpose. Perhaps that was why only Theseus came close to it. A man who had been comfortable wallowing in his ennui, while others desperately sought a reason to keep on existing as they were. The arena was a reminder that there was no reason, and there may never be.

That was the difference Atreus had realised between Valhalla and Elysium. Those who the valkyrie took to Valhalla, they had been chosen for divine purpose, to their perspective. On the surface the two realms served similar functions. Rewards for the honourable dead. But Elysium was a final rest. An ending. Valhalla... It was a promise. A contract, even. Those chosen would enjoy lavish pleasures, share the company of great warriors, and engage in battle to their hearts' content. But not for its own sake. It was the promise that one day Ragnarok would come, and they would heed the call of Odin to defend Asgard. A day would come that would see the greatest battle they had or would ever see.

Purpose. People wanted their lives to mean something, whether it was something simple, something humble, something personal, or some grand ambition. Living or dead, that didn't change.

Maybe that was why Atreus had agreed to Melinoé's plan back then. Agreed to help her. In Midgard, he had his whole destiny written out for him, even if he hadn't known it. There was security in that. Knowing what he was supposed to do, or that there was a path that he would take and... That was that. Mother knew. She had set him on that path. It was comforting. But then he was sent here, and it was growing harder and harder to believe that he was still on that same path.

He had wanted to return to his father. But maybe he had also wanted to feel that way again. Like his life had meaning, had purpose.

They passed through the arena, to the hidden staircase beyond that would lead them to their final destination. The last hurdle of their escape.

"This is it then," Zagreus breathed. "He'll be waiting for us out there. We either escape or..." He didn't finish his sentence. It wasn't certain what would happen to them if they failed to get away. Not to Zagreus or Melinoé. Atreus though... Alecto had said it outright. Hades wanted him dead. Zagreus looked back to see his sister and her collaborator looking at one another. "I think I'll... Scout around just outside the door there. See what's happening."

Melinoé smiled at her considerate brother. "He's always been like that, you know," she told Atreus. "Usually thinks he's subtle about it, too." She sat down on the stairs, gently pulling the young god down with her. "I'm sorry. For everything, Atreus."

"I told you already," he reminded her. "There's nothing to be sorry for. I knew what the risks were and I wanted to help."

"I know. That makes it worse, not better. You trusted me."

"I did," Atreus said, taking her hand and threading his fingers through hers. "I do. Regrets won't make things better. We have to focus on what we have to do now. What we *can* do now."

The blonde death goddess gave the slightest nod. She gave no further indications before reaching out and pulling him toward her, kissing him.

That same fruit-like taste found its way to his tongue from hers, growing more intense as he pulled him deeper into the kiss. He soon let himself reciprocate, valid thoughts and concerns only allowed to process once she let him take a breath. "Not quite what I meant."

"We're probably about to die. I had to do that now in case I don't get another chance."

Morbid. But that was her nature. "I know Zagreus left, but we're still kind of being watched," he reminded one goddess, gesturing upward to indicate the other who was probably not especially happy at that moment.

"I don't care if Artemis watches," Melinoé stated boldly, maybe a little too boldly. "She can figure out what she wants to do if... *When*, we get out of here. But I know now, and I've known for a while."

It wasn't like Artemis didn't know, Atreus realised. The huntress had admitted she had been watching the whole time even if they weren't aware. Which meant she had definitely seen the kiss outside the temple. It was far too late to try to spare her feelings, though whether that meant he should make things worse—

Those were maybe worthwhile thoughts to have. His lips conspired to throw caution to the wind, however. Indulging with her for a moment longer, the kiss became more intense, her hand rested on his leg, his on hers.

Another pause for breath. "We have to go."

"We might die," Melinoé reminded him. An argument to keep going while they still could.

"Every second we spend here is another second Hades has to prepare for us. We need to go while it's still our best chance..." His hand moved from her thigh to her cheek. "So we get the chance to figure out where this goes."

"Still looking forward, huh?" the goddess asked with a defeated sigh. "Don't die, Atreus. You'll leave at least two wonderful women very sad if you do."

"I didn't know Hestia cared so much," he said with a smile in an attempt to lighten the mood. To a perfectly flat expression in response. "... Sorry."

"Hm," she grunted, though a tiny smile crept through. "Let's go."

Zagreus stood waiting for them just beyond the top of the stairs. "Just in case it becomes relevant, I have it on good authority that Zagreus is an excellent baby name. For either gender!"

"Oh you can shut up too," the death goddess grumbled with a blush. "You've fought Father before."

"Many times."

"What are we in for?"

The son of Hades sighed. "This whole escape has been an education in just how little my knowledge matters after a millennia. But, he has a spear like Varatha," he raised the legendary spear, "but better. He has a withering curse like my bloodcurdling curse," he raised his other hand to demonstrate the very spell, "but better. He can turn invisible, he can shoot lasers, he can summon the spirits from anywhere in his realm, he can summon totems of punishment that harm you if you harm them, and that was just what he could do when he was holding back." Zagreus shook his head. "I fought him a few times when he said he was giving it his all. I never beat him then, and I genuinely believe he was *still* holding back."

"... Wonderful."

“Just to make it clear. If we try to fight him, we won’t win. We just won’t.”

“Then the only way we get out of this is to run,” Melinoé concluded. “Get far enough away that he can’t follow without picking bigger fights. Zagreus, did you ever learn teleportation magic?”

“Oh, you mean the sort I couldn’t use in Father’s realm at all and so had no use to me whatsoever? Oh yes, complete mastery of it. Bit of a waste of time in hindsight.”

“Is it really the time to be a smartarse?”

“The way things are going there’s not much opportunity left, is there?”

“Okay!” Atreus cut in on the sibling argument, waving his arms to distract them from each other. “So we run. Either me or Mel can get Zagreus away, whichever is easiest at the time. The other gets away on their own. Okay?” The two stared at one another. “Okay?”

“Right,” Melinoé agreed.

“Naturally,” Zagreus followed with a smirk.

“You’re still a smartarse.”

“You’re still a brat. Just like I remember. Don’t die, Melly.”

“... Same to you, Zagreus.”

Zagreus grinned. “Don’t you mean ‘Zaggywus?’”

Melinoé gasped, blushed furiously as she glanced back at Atreus before staring furiously at her older brother. “I was six bloody years old! It’s not even been a full day and you’re already set on embarrassing me?!”

“Big brother privilege! It’s what we live for!”

The argument didn’t really stop as they walked through the temple, and Atreus fully gave up trying. Maybe it was them trying to handle the tension. Maybe they were just like that. It wasn’t like Atreus had siblings to compare the relationship. But if they were going to distract themselves, it was up to him to be the grown-up in the room.

And in that role, he noticed something that the other two needed to be aware of. “Where’s Cerberus?”

The brother and sister stopped bickering to look back at him. Melinoé looked toward the temple entrance, where Cerberus had been standing guard when they first arrived. “Maybe Father sent him home.”

“We’re not that lucky.”

With greater caution and focus, the trio emerged from the temple gates, out into the verdant outdoors. Birdsong filtered to their ears, the wind rushing past them, sunset giving the scene a golden hue and staining the water red.

He wasn't looking at them, but they knew, he knew they were there.

"Do you know how long it's been since I saw the real sky? Since I witnessed a sunset as opposed to the perpetual light of Ixion?" His tone wasn't wistful. It was resigned. Like he understood what would come next. What he would do. That he would not refute such a fate and instead allow it to consume him. "It was three days after the last time I saw her. The last time we faced one another, Zagreus. Right here in this spot. Time has left its mark on the landscape, but it was here all the same. I had no idea that as I played foolish games with you, that she was suffering. That in those very moments, as I felt joy, she was subjected to torture and pain... By *them*."

"Father—"

"*Be silent*." The robed figure slowly turned. Regarded his children who while physically prepared, were in no way emotionally ready for what was to come. The skeletal eyes unable to blink, stared intensely at his progeny. "This is where our paths have led us. This is where our fates intertwine for the last time. It was ordained before either of you were even born. The God of the Dead shall have no heir. That was the decree of the Fates themselves. I may loathe it, but it isn't for me to decide the cruelties I endure, and neither is it for you. After tonight... It will come to pass. I will be as I was always meant to be. No longer subject to the whims of the wheel of fate, instead its instrument. An eternal warden of the dead and the damned, alone."

"But first." The god's empty eyes turned upward. "Cerberus."

Atreus turned, seeing the three-headed hound mid-leap from the roof of the temple, howling for blood. *His* blood.