A family dinner.

This. It. Kratos of Sparta couldn't remember the last time—

No. He could. So long ago. Before he tried to be better. Before the regret. Before the despair. Before the vengeance. Before the rage. Before even the desperation. He had not yet become the Ghost of Sparta, the God of War or even the Slave of Ares. It was the day he first became a true commander of men. A warrior above warriors. He had been so proud then, had received recognition for his prowess in battle and his commanding presence. Lysandra had been proud as well, Calliope, she was so young. She didn't understand, beyond something good had happened and her mother and father were happy.

Happy...

That was the difference here. He had shared a meal with Faye and Atreus. It wasn't as common an occurrence as it perhaps should have been. He could not shake a lifetime of regrets and allow himself to be happy. The joy of simply being a family, of breaking bread with those he loved, he denied himself that, no matter Faye's protests. It was undeniably a factor in his strained relationship with Atreus. His self-flagellations taken as disappointment or disinterest in his son. Likely both.

But here. Now. As he sat at a table with the dwarves, Mimir, Atreus, even Zagreus, Megaera and Atreus' two... Romantic attachments. And even Adnvari had been taken out of his gem by Melinoé to eat with them as best he could. They were not all kin. Some he had known only a few days. Some even Atreus had only known a few days. Yet they all shared a meal together as though they had been bound together. Not blood, but bond. And Kratos was...

"Father?" Atreus said, looking at him with concern. "Is something wrong?"

"... No," the Ghost of Sparta answered, picking at his food to find an old friend. "Until now I had forgotten how much I missed olives."

At the same moment, "Thpuh!" Mimir spat one out. "Ye can keep 'em, brother. Weren't for me the last time I 'ad 'em, still bloody awful now!"

"They grow on you," Kratos answered, enjoying his with what could be called a smile if one were being generous.

Zagreus looked around the table. "Do I have to be the one to ask? Alright then. How are you eating, Mimir? Doesn't it, you know, have nowhere to go?"

"Well, yes, but you wouldn' leave me out o' this lovely dinner, would you? Doesn't satisfy the way it used to, but I can eat just fine. With the noted exception of these bloody things," the head said, nodding significantly at the remaining olive on a skewer, among several other skewers on

a plate for him to conveniently eat from. “As for where it goes, there’s a reason Ah’m set on a bowl, eh?”

“Now that we’re talking about it, I have to assume there’s a story behind that. Why are you a head?”

“I cut it off,” Kratos answered. At the perplexed stares he received, he elaborated. “At his request.”

“Your capacity for oversimplifying things’ll get ye in trouble one o’ these days, brother,” the head sighed. “Well! To make a long story short. There’s another Kratos here, aye? Well, there were another everyone over there, or at least the ones ye might care to name. Sure enough, there was another Odin. I was his advisor for a time—”

“Oh, you’re *that* Mimir!” Melinoé said in sudden realisation. “You’re much preferable to the one we have, I can say that much.”

“... Well. Not lookin’ forward to that meeting if it happens,” Mimir said. “Anyroad, our Odin was a covetous, duplicitous, conniving, manipulative, corrupt, malicious cocksmear of a—!”

“Er, we get it, also, we’re eating,” Artemis reminded him.

“Och, right, sorry. Well, I pushed back against his intent to seize control of the realms by force, slaughter, and deception. After assisting in it for far too long, mind you. Well, he took exception to that, hung my body from a tree to be tortured for over a hundred winters. Then one day, Kratos and his boy come along an’ we strike a deal. He cuts off ma heed to free me from Odin, an’ I help them wi’ fulfilling the last wish of a loved one. An’ we’ve been inseparable ever since, isn’t that right, brother?”

“... Yes.” How like Mimir to complain at Kratos for leaving details out, only to leave a great many details out himself. Not that Kratos was complaining.

“Hnh.” A slight hum at the back of Artemis throat. “Right. You did say you were raised in Midgard back then, didn’t you Atreus? It was simply a different Midgard. You lied so much while telling the truth the devils might be impressed.”

“Eh, that really doesn’t feel like something you should praise me for.”

“Good thing I wasn’t. I’m choosing to see it as you doing your best to be honest in a situation you really shouldn’t.”

“Thanks, that was what I was trying to do, but it still doesn’t feel great.”

The goddess of the hunt nodded. “And that’s why I’m not angry. *This* time.”

“So... You were facing off with gods even back then?” Zagreus continued, trying to change the subject from awkward relationship drama between his sister’s romantic interest and the woman who was not his sister. Even if Melinoé was completely comfortable with it as she continued eating. “You must have some incredible stories to tell.”

“Hrm.”

“We could trade if you like. I have more than a few. Battling through the fallen legendary warriors of Elysium, the Bull of Minos, King Theseus, the legendary Lernian Hydra. I fought him so many times I ended up giving him a nickname!”

Megaera, who had been listening to her lover speak grew more and more irritated as the list went on. “Are you forgetting someone, Zagreus?”

“Uh, oh, of course! How could I possibly forget the battle prowess of Megaera the mighty Fury guarding the exit from Tartarus!”

“I wonder,” Megaera answered in a whispery, threatening, yet oddly teasing voice. “Perhaps I’ll have to remind you later.”

“Uh, well, how about it, Kratos? Any stories to tell? What was your proudest victory?”

With him putting it like that, with such desperation in his eyes, Kratos didn’t want to refuse. Still... Proudest. That eliminated a great many of them. “The dragon guarding this realm was quite an experience,” he answered finally.

“Bit of a team effort though, aye?” Mimir added, chewing on a chunk of lamb.

“Indeed. And not what I would consider a true victory against the beast even if it was a victory in achieving our goal... Hm... I must say... Hraezlyr.”

Artemis’ ears perked up. “Wait... Wasn’t that the name of the dragon you said?” she asked Atreus. “That story was real as well? You two really killed a dragon?”

“Hrm. A crippled dragon, unable to fly.” The father glanced at his son out of the corner of his eye. “The boy said as much, yes?” he asked with a warning tone.

“Oh yes, though it only somewhat diminishes the accomplishment.”

“No kidding!” Sindri agreed nervously. “A dragon is a damn dragon! In fact can we stop talking about stuff that brings back terrifying memories? Heartwarming moment and all, but also in the top five most harrowing experiences of my life!”

"... You are why I chose it," Kratos admitted in a tone softer than usual. "I have slain more fearsome foes. However, a maddened beast, slain in defense of another. That was a victory worthy of pride. As was the Soul Eater. Unknowingly saving the soul of Andvari, putting an end to a great wrong. So many battles I have waged are now tainted with the bitter ashes of regret." Looking around the table, he met the eyes of those who only lived because Kratos had done the right thing. And as he looked at his son, he remembered why he had agreed to face Hraezlyr at all. Wanting to be a worthy father, an example, someone to admire and aspire to be. "Those fought to preserve the lives of those who sit at this table. It is those I look back upon and remember most fondly."

Sindri said something. It was hard to accept or listen to words of appreciation as old guilts and regrets reared their ugliness to him.

A creature of war. A creature of grief. A creature of rage. A creature of revenge. He had been all of these things, and all of these things turned glory to poison. A battle without purpose was mere violence. Violence he had gotten lost in, over and over again. He had been so close to becoming that creature once again. A moment later, a moment longer, and... Kratos didn't know what he would have done.

No. He knew. He *always* knew what that creature would do.

First it would have been Hades. No intervention from the Fates would have been necessary. Only a cloud of scorched ashes would have remained. Then, those who hovered in the distance. Those who forced such an outcome. The angels, the devils, the fallen. He would have carved through as many as he could before they fled, then chased them to their homes. Slain all who tried to stop him until he cleaved them into bisected, smouldering corpses. The thrones of their leaders would have been soaked in blood. It would achieve nothing, but that creature would not care. There would be nothing to fight for, but in absence of anything else, it was all he knew to do.

This. Moments like this. They were worth preserving. Worth prolonging. As long as he could.

It was to this scene that a swirl of darkness revealed the goddess of night. "Am I interrupting?"

"Nyx, join us!" Melinoé invited her, preparing another chair with magic. "Zagreus was just trying to convince us that his most dangerous opponent was a rat!"

"It *was!*"

"I'm afraid not." The sound of regret was barely audible in the ethereal nature of her voice. "I come with news. Lord Zeus has agreed to meet."

And so, the joyous moment was over. Kratos stood and stepped away from the table to face the goddess directly. "What are his terms?"

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The terms were surprisingly neutral, not seeming to favour Zeus in the slightest in terms of what might happen should violence occur. The meeting place was seemingly neutral, both sides would be permitted to bring as many as six. Zeus had outlined those who would be joining him, and by the number, he knew who would be brought along with Kratos and Atreus. And so, the father and son, Mimir, Melinoé, Artemis and Zagreus teleported to the location. A place Atreus had been to before.

It had all seemed reasonable. Though Atreus had explained some of the finer details of the where and why that filled in important gaps in Kratos' knowledge.

"Eateries..." Kratos grumbled, looking up at the building with the vibrant yellow sign ringing the roof of the building.

"Goddess of Hearth and Home," Atreus said. "Guess we're doing it this way so she can mediate and... Well... I watched her bring down Kratos in a second in there. This is her domain and nobody else's. The idea is if anyone picks a fight, she'll end it."

"You've grown a mite sharper in your time here, 'aven't ye lad?" Mimir praised Atreus.

"Mm," Kratos grunted in agreement. "And she is a neutral party?"

"Auntie Hestia is..." Artemis tried to explain, but struggled for the words. "She'll return to Olympus to keep the fires lit, but aside from that she stays in the mortal realm. I was surprised she attended the summons last time."

"I think she likes me?" Atreus hazarded.

"She does," Melinoé confirmed. "Or she did *then*. She's the most neutral party I can think of within our pantheon, and Uncle Zeus wouldn't accept anyone outside it."

"Hrm." Kratos walked forward, toward the building's entrance, pushing open the glass door as a bell rang in front of his eyes. Ducking below it, he observed the interior. An interior that looked not quite alike to what could be seen through the windows. The space was furnished the same, but much larger. And filled with several familiar figures.

Zeus. Ares. Athena. Poseidon. Hermes. And— "Kratos!" Atreus exclaimed, pushing past his father. "Are you alright?"

"I am well, young Atreus!" the god of strength answered, though with forced cheer. His hair had begun to grow back, the ashen colour of his skin returned to a bronzed olive colour. But... The marks on his body... The god of war knew them well. The branching markings etched into the

skin after being struck by lightning. The attempt at a heroic pose... It was enough for Atreus at least. Yet the two Kratos shared a look, understanding passing between them. That they would say nothing of what they both knew.

“Okay, everyone’s here,” Hestia declared as she leapt onto the counter of the diner, brandishing some golden contraption in her hand with a long barrel at the end of a bulky handle. “I’m going to make this clear once! Anyone decides to start anything, the end of it comes from Exagryph here!” With a flourish, the contraption snapped open and shut again as she hefted the large weapon in one hand.

“Oh, *shit*,” Zagreus breathed.

“Good! Someone on your side understands!” the goddess of the hearth acknowledged the terrified gasp. “My siblings over there know already, so you can explain it to your side! But I’m going to make clear the most important rule of fighting in my house in just one word. **Don’t.**Test that rule, and you won’t get the chance to realise the kind of stupid mistake it was. Everybody understand?”

Kratos began to wonder if the Hestia of his homeland was like this. If she was, what a missed opportunity that was.

“Hey! That includes you, Odin!”

“I heard you, crazy witch!”

The crowd near the door parted as two figures walked through. One coming together from an unkindness of ravens. An old man with long white hair and beard, an ornate piece covering one eye. Beside him, a young woman with silver hair, wearing clean and somewhat masculine clothing.

“*Odin,*” Mimir growled quietly, “So she didn’t mean just us when she said everyone’s here.”

“Mimir, keep a civil tongue,” Kratos warned. “If I must, then so must you.”

“I know, brother. I know.”

Unexpectedly, the chief god of the Aesir stopped on his way through the restaurant, halfway between the two quarrelling groups of Olympians. Then, stooped low, looked upward and whistled. “Nice panties. Do you do table service or just stage shows?”

In an instant, the strange weapon in Hestia’s hand crashed against Odin’s head, throwing him across the restaurant through several tables to slam into the wall.

Flush-faced and clutching the hem of her dress, she glared murderously at the very important guest she had just struck. Realisation struck her right back. “... Oops.”

“Don’t worry,” the silver-haired woman attending Odin assured her, “I’ll make sure everyone knows he deserved it.” She then joined Odin, got him back on his feet, and sat him down at one of the booth tables, far away from the major Olympians.

“R-Right!” the suddenly bashful goddess said as she hopped off the counter to show how short she really was. “A-As I was saying! This is my house! Mine and mine alone! What I say goes and what I say is that nobody in here starts anything, because I’ll be the one to finish it. So if you don’t want me to make you sit yourself on the grill over there powered by my own flames, you keep civil tongues in your heads while we hash this out.” Having said her piece, Hestia let out a breath of air. “Now speaking of hash. I’m gonna make some while you folks talk this out.”

“Then if we’re beginning proceedings,” Zeus spoke, looking not at Kratos, or Atreus, but instead at his own daughter. “I would like to speak to my daughter privately before we start.” The other group stared at him, distrustful. “If we cannot come to an accord over something so simple as a father speaking to his own daughter, we shall never make any progress at all.”

“It’s fine,” Hestia said, “Come to the back and I can make sure there’s no funny business.”

“Hestia, I’d really rather you didn’t intrude on private conversations—”

“Oh, you don’t think I can keep confidences?” the goddess of the hearth asked sweetly. “Then I suppose I’ll have to tell everyone about all the little things you’d rather I didn’t know. For example—”

“No no! That’s, it’s quite alright! For the sake of reaching a peaceful accord today, you may... Listen in.”

“Good.”

“Excuse me!” Atreus spoke up, mildly annoyed. “Pretty sure nobody asked if Artemis wants to!”

She graced him with a small smile of gratitude. “It’s fine, Atreus. I’ll go.” Though she said it was fine, there was a clear stiffness to her usually fluid movements that betrayed her discomfort to a warrior’s eye.

The next few minutes were filled with awkward silences, broken by Odin’s complaints at his rough treatment from the entertainment, and said ‘entertainment’ serving food to all. Kratos was warned to eat. Not suggested, but warned, as though there were consequences if he didn’t. Considering it was food served by the goddess of hearth and home, that sounded like a reasonable precaution. As it happened, the food was excellent. A mixture of familiar foods, yet prepared in new and novel ways that offered pleasant new textures and flavours.

Odin was served two bricks of charcoal. He still received a prolonged glare until he reluctantly took a bite of one.

Moments later, the simmering tension was broken by the return of a resigned Zeus and pensive Artemis. Both returned to their own compatriots. “Are you okay?” Atreus asked.

“Yes... Don’t worry Atreus,” she assured him, seemingly having gleaned something from the private conversation. “Everything will be fine.”

“Are we ready to get this started?” Odin asked. With no worthwhile reasons to object, he received no dissent. “Good.” His one eye turned toward Atreus. “You didn’t tell us Loki paid you a visit, boy.”

Atreus squared his shoulders. “No, I didn’t.”

“Good,” Odin said as he stroked his beard, smiling with satisfaction. “He admits it. The boy is responsible for all of this. If we knew, we might’ve done something, but we can’t do squat about what we don’t know.”

“Was I supposed to inform you?” Atreus asked. “You dropped me on the doorstep of the Olympians so quickly no one told me who among the Aesir I’m supposed to report to.”

Ares laughed. “Bringing back the tradition of sacrificial offerings, Lord of the Hanged? Bold to sacrifice to us what’s already ours and absolve yourself of blame.” The crimson god of war smiled threateningly as he leaned forward, one elbow on the table. “Your blood brother is making himself a problem even outside your circle now, and if he is a problem, *you* are a problem.”

Athena lay a hand on Ares’ arm. “Brother, cease. Provoking Lord Odin avails us nothing.” Her attention turned to the outsider at this meeting with a diplomatic yet cool stare. “That said, Lord Odin, if you claim you could have done something had you known, perhaps you can prove your sincerity by sharing with us now what is being done to stop Loki. His plan is half-complete. Until he is dealt with, all moon deities are in danger of his machinations.”

Odin grumbled to himself, glancing away from her stare. “We know Loki and his tricks. He’s our problem to solve. We’ll find him.”

“... A detailed and intricate plan, Lord Odin,” the goddess of wisdom said without a hint of emotion. “I admire your cunning.”

“Sister, cease!” Ares interrupted with more laughter. “Provoking Lord Odin avails us nothing!”

“Lord Odin,” Zeus joined the conversation. There was frustration there. Like he wanted to be done with all of this as quickly as possible for some unknown reason. “You were invited on the assumption that you would have something to provide to this current situation. Insight, action, some means to prevent from relations between our realms devolving yet further.”

“What do you want, Zeus?” the cantankerous Aesir asked. “To know where Loki is? Fuck if we know. How to get your boy’s power back to him? Can’t. Skol ate it and went into the boy over there. If Loki could get it out, he would’ve. Bastard gambled and won. You want something? Rossweisse.”

“Yes, Lord Odin.”

A spell circle appeared. Kratos noticed the strange weapon was back in Hestia’s hand. He appreciated her more and more by the moment. Reaching into the spell circle, the silver-haired woman pulled out a bag of small objects hanging from pendants.

“Wolfbane charms, courtesy of Freya,” the chief god explained. “We don’t know where that bastard is or who he’s after next, but we can stop his next move. Give these to your moon deities. Hati won’t be able to touch them.” Jerking his head to the side, Rossweisse took the hint, rising out of the booth to lead him out. “If you’ll excuse us, we’ve got a half dozen other pantheons to hand these damn things out to.”

The woman dropped the bag of pendants on the table with Melinoé and Artemis. Melinoé picked one up as the Norse pair left the diner. No one noticed Mimir letting out a tense breath the second the door shut.

“Is it what he said?” Atreus asked.

“Seems like,” the goddess answered, peering at the small object etched with an array of runes in concentric circles. “I’ll ask Mistress Hecate to have a look to be safe, but yes.”

“I can give it a look as well,” Mimir offered. “Wouldn’ call meself an expert on seidr magic, but I know a thing or two.”

At the other table, “Well, hoping for more, but it’s something,” Hermes said with a shrug.

Zeus didn’t acknowledge it. He looked even more weary. Even more frustrated. Poseidon patted him on the back, the brothers sharing a look. Visibly regaining his ruling decorum, he puffed out a breath as he rose to sit straight-backed in his seat. “Very well. Then we may move on to the matter that hangs over us all. Kratos of Sparta.”

Kratos said nothing. Simply stared into the eyes of the man who was not his father.

“Grievous crimes have been committed. Terrible harm has been wrought upon my kin by you and yours. Some... Was not of your volition or under your control or intentions. However, that does not absolve the harm caused, nor the crimes of your son to intrude upon our realm under false pretences. What comes of this meeting depends on the answer to one question. Whether it was your actions or ordained by fate, the Olympian pantheon find themselves bereft of a God of the Dead. Despite everything, you best fit the role. Will you take the vacant seat of Hades, and rule over the Realm of the Dead in my brother’s stead?”

Those moments... They were worth preserving...

“On the condition that no harm or hindrance come to those with me here, or were with me previously, through your direct or indirect involvement… I accept.”

A certain tension left Zeus’ shoulders.

“He really does know our ways,” Ares commented with a smirk.

Poseidon laughed. “Very good! Truth be told, there was no need to accept what was already yours, but the sentiment is appreciated!”

“Indeed.” Sensing something Kratos’ group did not, the gathered Olympians vacated their table, allowing Zeus to stand. “That matter settled, I shall make my final pronouncement and this matter will be closed. Your terms are accepted with one exception.” Even eager as he seemed to end it, there was also a reluctance. A need to get it done, but a reluctance to do it. “Kratos of Sparta, Atreus son of Kratos, Zagreus son of Hades, Melinoé daughter of Hades... Artemis daughter of Zeus, and Kratos son of Zeus. From the next moment the sun’s light no longer reaches the slopes of Olympus, neither shall you. You are all of you banished from Mount Olympus. This I decree.”

With one last look of resignation, first at his daughter, then at his son, Zeus disappeared in a flash of lightning, the rest of the Olympians soon following him.