

THE ANOIAD

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I

Long ago, before the dawn had risen over the Old Empire, there were no kingdoms anywhere in the world. There were no unified people, there were no great alliances - there were only villages and towns, each as large as its resources allowed for. Rudimentary trade existed between neighbors, but there were no great networks, nor any other means of connecting. None, aside from worshiping the Gods.

In that age, the Gods walked among the mortal races and gave their boons to whomever was found worthy. All walks of sapient life flocked to the Gods and sought to prove their worth, creating great temples and dedicating their lives to serve these divine beings. These temples, and the faith in the Gods that rested in their foundation, were the only other link between all people.

Alas, that was not a strong enough bridge to hold all mortals, and they spilled out over its railing, falling into the pit between the lands connected by it. Even those who remained faithful and sworn to the Gods failed to establish links between themselves and others. The fault for that inability was placed upon mortal beings, and their imperfections in contrast to the Gods, who were perfectly united among themselves.

As a result of that judgment, the mortal races were tasked with eternal penance for their misdeeds. Many gave up on that penance before it could even begin, others faltered halfway, and those few who managed to remain faithful for the entirety of their lives died regardless, for the Gods promised salvation in the next life.

Thus, this age of wonder, during which the Gods walked among mortals, was also an age of infinite strife. With nothing to bind them, aside from the assertion that they had wronged their creators and each other, the mortal races were nearly robbed of their reason, of their sentience, and they were like animals.

However, there were those who sought something better. There were those who saw that this state - although apparently natural for the mortal races - was not beneficial, and they craved to change it. They came together, those few great individuals who shared this desire, and allowed it to unify them. Through that alliance, they devised a great plan which would lead to the unification of all folk in the world, so that there would no longer be strife.

The greatest of those was M'nous, a man who had suffered greatly at the hands of others, yet who retained an infinitely great love for them. M'nous had learned much in his lifetime, growing up as a humble farmer, frequently harried by bandits and warbands. He transitioned into priesthood after a great tragedy took his previous livelihood from him, and ultimately became the apprentice of a wizard, whom he eventually eclipsed completely.

M'nous was the driving force behind the unification of those individuals who sought a change in the world, for through his mastery of magic and the understanding of life's countless mysteries it brought, he knew much. His knowledge allowed him to speak to all dead and living beings, and he considered them, he consciously recognized them all for what they were, which brought them great joy and comfort.

Along with others who sought unity, M'nous set off to sow the seeds from which peace would grow. They gained the trust and respect of all the dwellings of sapient beings and convinced them of the good that a change would bring about. At the end of a long and arduous journey, they completed their task... And the world came to know peace.

For they had unified all peoples into great kingdoms, to be held together by great and wise individuals - kings - and if there were any issue between the people, the king would resolve it.

However, the great individuals who had thrust the world into the future were now old. They had grown frail and weak, and some even showed signs of senility, losing their grasp of reason. That, in turn, led to a weakening of their authority and ability to solve the problems that arose, lessening the respect the people had for them.

The kings convened and sought a solution, and concluded that, since the children were often-times better than their parents, those kings who felt too old to adequately fulfill their obligations to the people of their kingdom would step down and pass on their duties to their eldest heir.

M'nous, however, knew that this solution was fraught with great dangers. He decided to part with the kings so that he could look into understanding Life and Death; though, in truth, he left his comrades out of grief - for seeing them as they were now and remembering how they had been decades ago brought him immense pain, pain he could not bear for much longer.

M'nous secluded himself in a grand fortress of pure black, wherein only he resided, and with his magic he was lord of it. His studies led him to uncover many important things related to the topics of his research, but the deeper he dove into the obscure facets of the foundations of existence, the more time he needed to decipher whatever sense was left within.

The Gods took note of his deeds, though.

Already, what M'nous had done was audacious enough. Without their permission, he had instigated a great change in the world, one that was not detrimental, but that would require acclimation and that exhibited a very unsavory trait. This mere human had the gall to act against the Gods.

For they claimed rulership of the world, and it was known to all that they had created the world, which meant that, by proxy of their perfection, the world, too, was perfect as it was. Anyone seeking to change the world doubted the perfection of it, and thus the perfection of the Gods themselves. That was a denunciation of their being, and as such could not be allowed to pass.

However, the Gods were good and merciful, as all mortals knew, and were willing to forgive M'nous. In fact, so benevolent they were that they had forgiven him outright - for, as he had forsaken his penance in ceasing the performance of his priestly duties, he was bound to be punished regardless. There was no value in making his mortal existence any worse than it already was, for a man as wise as M'nous was always hounded by the dread that his encroaching demise carried.

That would have been all, had he not begun work on coming to know Death and Life as they truly were. Upon discovering that the most powerful wizard in the world sought answers to questions that were intended to remain unanswered, the Gods convened.

"He must be stopped," simply stated the Old God, father to all other Gods, as he regarded his children. His love for them was unrivaled by anything, yet precisely that love stopped him from traveling to that black fortress and taking the wizard's life.

M'nous was simply too powerful to be assailed directly, and a battle between him and a stronger opponent - such as the Old God himself - would lead to a great catastrophe, which could easily threaten the other Gods. Thus, the Old God wanted to test his children by having them formulate a solution to this problem.

"That is a simple matter," spoke Krenth, God of Worship, who knew that Divinity was to be groveled before - and thus one who was not divine could not defy one who was. That was an ontological requirement, it was simply how things were, and so it was a good answer. "For we need only command him, and he will cease at once!"

“It is not that simple, brother,” retorted Ormus, God of Knowledge, who knew of knowledge and its pull, and the great sweetness of wisdom. “Forbidden knowledge is most coveted, and often most worthwhile. It would only spur him onwards, if we were to command him to stop.”

The Old God nodded approvingly. While Krenth’s suggestion was what should have been done, or, rather, what should have not even been needed to be done, as M’nous should have known that it was folly to do as he had been doing, and should have simply not done so. Alas, there were some who were born different, exceptions to a rule, which reinforced the rule, but remained exceptions.

Dangerous, anomalous exceptions that could cause immense damage. As a result of that, Ormus’ warning was very proper, for since M’nous was not as he should have been, he had to be treated with more caution.

“What, then, are we to do?” asked Krenth, accepting - as he was accepting - the retort that had been presented before him.

“Why are we even considering it, father?” piped up Ad, God of Might, and his suggestion was known to all before he even made it. “Let us just kill him and be done with it!”

“And cause the deaths of countless others?” objected Viisas, the Goddess of Sanity. It was an objection that invoked the decimation that would come, the damage to the prosperity of the world itself. For Viisas, that was problematic, as good had come of M’nous’ deeds, too.

The security that peace brought meant that mortals were free to travel, and that, in turn, meant they could undertake more pilgrimages, reigniting faded flames of faith in the hearts of many. If that were to be lost, it would be a blow not just to the transient begins, but also the Gods themselves. The Old God nodded approvingly.

“Indeed, the black fortress can not be breached without his knowing, so he will be prepared to meet any challenger,” Zir, Goddess of Sight, added, and with that the Gods fell silent for a moment.

It was something that had never come to pass, this quiet that had taken hold. A challenge like none other had presented itself to the Gods, and they knew not how to handle it. Nay, they knew how, but now had to decide the best approach - or so they told themselves. In truth, their Divinity had already been put to question by the fact that M’nous wielded power enough to make them reconsider direct assault.

For how could they be Gods, truly, if they could not exert total mastery and unquestionable lordship over existence? And they could not do so, nor could they maintain the illusion of their ability to, so long as M'nous was.

"Then, brothers and sisters," began Habari, God of Lies, rubbing his hands together in a manner most mischievous, "we must kill M'nous without him knowing that he has been killed..."

Nods of appreciation and agreement, met by a few displeased murmurings. Alas, not all could be pleased - never was that the case - but they knew that to get the job done was more important than doing it the way they each wanted. The Old God raised his hands, ceasing the prattle.

"Habari has made the correct conclusion, my children, but a solution is not yet reached!" He announced, gazing at each of the Gods as he did so. "Thus, the discussion will continue!"

As soon as he was done, a hand was raised. All turned to regard the one who had done so, curious to know why he had not spoken immediately. Lemah, God of Sickness, had drawn their attention, and as all eyes landed upon him, he chuckled awkwardly. It was true that being seen and considered was antithetical for him, yet still his lithe frame bristled with power.

"I would like to suggest that a disease be used," he stated, though he moved his glance to his brother Sakit, God of Plagues, rather than looking at the Old God as was proper. "If we seek his demise, yet still we desire to play a part in it, perhaps it would be best to afflict him with an illness that will weaken him... So that he may be later slain."

Those who had expressed displeasure retained it, for Lemah clearly did not understand their reasoning, but the suggestion he had made held great merit. Mohau, Goddess of Weakness, was very pleased - so much so she even applauded the proposal.

"A good solution," complimented the Old God, pleased by his child, "elegant and very discreet. However, it appears as though you seek to make this a collaborative effort - why would you want to do so?"

"For, father, M'nous knows me, and if I were to attempt to enter his dwelling - that miserable black fortress of his - he would know that I had come, and I would be unable to afflict him," admitted Lemah, a certain measure of pain in his eyes. That was truly a blow to his divinity - a realization of his inability to act within his supposed domain, and the forced admission of that powerlessness.

“Who, then, would you suppose is to aid you? Sakit?” inquired the Old God, looking to his other son. The God in question shook his head.

“I appreciate the faith you place in me, father, but much like Lemah, I am known to M’nous. Not only that, but if I were to attempt to afflict him with a disease, he would come to know of it - for those I wield are carried by others; one would need to carry this illness to him, afflicted by it as well,” regretfully informed Sakit, his voice uneasy and wavering. Again, one of his children was being demeaned in a horrendous manner, their very being threatened. Righteous anger swelled within the Old God, and so he allowed himself to raise his arm and interrupt his son.

“If that is the case, Sakit, Lemah, then perhaps a disease is not the proper solution, lest you have not shared with us something instrumental?”

“Indeed, father, there is something...” Lemah admitted, moving his eyes from his patriarch to his brother, Lih’ve, God of Death. “I think that if this disease were not extrinsic, even M’nous would be unable to know that it had entered his puny fortress.”

Again, silence fell upon the congregation. They all waited for a response from the one who had been addressed, for Lih’ve - much like Deh’ta and the Old God - occupied a special position in the pantheon, which was one of the reasons he allowed himself to be more aloof when not directly performing his duties.

“I am not he whom should be sought, if that is what Lemah proposes, for M’nous is not dying,” replied Lih’ve, each word drawn out, yet hurried. The God of Death was one who considered time very important, and he was the only God who was always in a hurry for some unknown destination. “I have yet to be needed at his fortress, and so I, much like yourself, can not enter.”

“Then it will be I who aids in solving this conundrum!” Announced Deh’ta, Goddess of Life, putting her hands on her hips. Victories over her brother, Lih’ve, were always welcome to her. Not only that, but the situation at hand was one that she considered deeply important - important enough to admit that she would not be willing to count this as a point in her favor, as it was far more prudent to deal with the matter, rather than engage in playful competition.

“Good,” stated the Old God, glancing at Lemah. The God of Sickness nodded, confirming to his father that Deh’ta would aid him. “Then, children, it is decided. Lemah and Deh’ta will devise a means of weakening M’nous, so that we may put a stop to his transgressions. I announce this meeting adjourned, but all of you must make yourselves available and ready to assist the two tasked with this!”

And so the Gods started leaving one by one, in fashions as spectacular and magnificent as were fit for the lords of the world, until only Lemah and Deh'ta were left. They set to work immediately, for they recognized that time was of the essence.

At length they spoke and considered how they would weaken M'nous, how they would afflict him with whatever ailment it was that would drain his might from him. As Lemah never had the pleasure of working with the opportunity to affect life itself, from within itself, he was overwhelmed by the many options at his disposal, and his ambitions grew.

It was clear that M'nous was an exception, an anomaly, something that would not repeat itself often, but it was not unlikely that in the eternity that the Gods would continue lording over the world, keeping mortal beings prosperous, there would be other M'nouses. It was possible that some of them could learn of the first M'nous' demise, and that they would devise a means of protecting themselves from the disease that Lemah and Deh'ta were developing.

So the God of Sickness proposed to Deh'ta that they fundamentally alter the mortal races - for they were mortal and they died, but they never died of their own accord. Always death came for them in the form of Lih've's arrival, or a disease borne by some other creature, or a blade, or a fall, or some other external source. As it was, mortals had no set expiration date, as they had not needed one.

However, now that peace had spread across the land, and people were much less violent in their relations with one another, mortals were not dying nearly as often as they had, and they were living much longer than before. M'nous was one such example - he had lived nearly three life-times and was older than any old man had any right to be - yet Lih've himself had said that the wizard was not dying.

Deh'ta saw the wisdom in Lemah's suggestion, but reminded him that they needed to first devise the disease itself, and so they set out to examine all the diseases that were known to them. Many did they observe, yet a flaw was found within each - some were barely potent enough to weaken an ordinary person, and the one they sought had to bring down the most powerful man to have ever lived. Others were very dangerous indeed, but they could be detected by even untrained people, and as a result M'nous would be able to identify them before they reached their full potential.

Many diseases had Lemah devised in the countless years of his existence, yet none of them seemed fitting, and all came from outside, all were extrinsic. Thus, they concluded that no disease from among those that *were* would suffice, and so started seeking a thing that could be used in their favor.

In their work, they resolved to call upon Tsabo, God of Fear, and Ormus, God of Knowledge and Lord of Wisdom. They asked those assembled what the most dangerous thing was, and each had an answer.

“The greatest fear is rooted in that which is not known,” spoke Tsabo, “for within that infinite realm of possibility lies everything that could be, as well as everything that could not be, and he who does not know has no means of telling them apart. It is the most potent instrument I wield, and none are able to stand before its face!”

“Indeed, that which is not known is understood to be most dangerous,” agreed Ormus, “for within that contradiction - the knowledge of the unknown - lies the understanding that it, the unknown, could be dangerous, for it is unpredictable. And those things that are not predictable are dangerous, for they could hide consequences of unfathomable magnitude.”

“How, then, are we to make use of that dangerous unknown, brothers?” asked Deh'ta, pleased that the two Gods had not only come to an agreement, but were moving along very similar lines, even if it seemed that there was nothing that could be channeled just yet.

They stood in silence for a moment, as the four of them thought. Lemah wondered how this idea could be turned into a disease, yet in a matter that was not purely temporary, unlike the effect of fear. Ormus was pondering how the danger of the unknown could be used to weaken M'nous, for it appeared to him as though the man was one who embraced the unknown, who had overcome the contradiction of knowing it. Tsabo smiled as he came to a conclusion.

“Had we not the knowledge that M'nous was acting against us, had we not the knowledge that the realm would be damaged in direct battle with him, we would have been fearful of the unknown relating to M'nous,” he started explaining to his brothers and sister, and they nodded in agreement. “Yet we know why things will occur in that manner in the event that we battle M'nous. We know, for he knows, does he not?”

“Ah, I see...” mused Ormus, taking the word, “M'nous is dangerous because he knows, and thus there is no danger for him, there is no weakness within him that can be abused by us. However, if he were to stop knowing, then we would be able to do with him as we pleased... Very elegant, brother.”

“Thank you, brother, I found myself reminded of this possibility by the pang of... Concern that is felt by mortals when they realize that they have known something but no longer do!”

“So we must make him forget?” inquired Lemah, putting his hands together. “Yes, that can be done, perhaps. As diseases affect the inner workings of mortals, perhaps this one can affect one’s mind in such a manner... But no, it would still be extrinsic, and he would know that it was brought to him!”

Ormus and Tsabo departed, having aided their brother and sister as was proper, leaving Deh’ta and Lemah to ponder. After many days and nights, the Gods had found a solution - one that would rely on the very life that all mortals clung to.

Deh’ta convened with Lih’ve and the Old God, telling them of her plan, and they approved, though the God of Death expressed dissatisfaction at the increased workload he would have to bear. Regardless, the three traveled to the depths of the world, so far down that not a single memory of the sun’s light remained.

Down there, in the darkness, they grasped something that was not meant for grasping, that could neither be seen or tasted, nor felt or heard, and it had no smell as well. Their grasp did not exceed their reach, for they were three, and they twisted it and turned it, even though it could neither be twisted nor turned, until the desired change was in place.

However, the task was far from done. Like a cool breeze, the alteration traveled through the world, unnoticeable even to the other Gods, laying in wait and preparing itself. Now, Deh’ta’s task became one of solitary activity, for all others would be recognized if they were to visit M’nous. Only she, from among her brothers and sisters, could bear this disease to him, this invisible poison that would slowly bring his ruin.

She traveled to the black fortress, taking on the form of a young human woman from the south, her skin charred by the sun and her body harrowed by the elements. Clad in simple clothes and streaked with joyous colors, Deh’ta presented herself as a Bard. It occurred to her, however, that if she were to be asked to perform a song she would be discovered, as her divine voice would undo her disguise.

So she called upon her brother, Bili, God of Wind, for he was the Master of all Songs, and asked him for a lesson. And he taught her how to sing a song, one that was deceitful and wrong, one that should not have made its way past her lips; yet it was a convincing one. The words were rough and coarse, and they were lacking that perfect harmony a God would give them - but it was a mortal song with a mortal sound, one that would fool even M’nous.

Armed with that tool to make her disguise believable in the eyes of the wizard, and clad in the skin of a mortal, Deh’ta stood before the black fortress. It was grand and imposing, yet there was an odd

smoothness to its form, as if it meant to indicate that it meant no harm. No sharp edges, no pronounced angles - purely from its form it looked strange enough to urge most beings who beheld it to stray.

Not because they would find it dangerous or dreadful, but because it was so clearly dark. M'nous had made his fortress such that it appeared as a great void - though it only appeared as such to animals. To mortals, it was a curiosity that almost invited them in with its intrigue, yet that same darkness was something that beseeched them to depart, to be on their way and leave the one who dwelled within to his own devices.

A great gate separated the fortress from the outside world, and so complete was that separation that even Deh'ta, goddess of life, could not tell what dwelled within, aside from M'nous himself, whose existence shone like a beacon.

That place disgusted her, for it was wrong, far more foul and improper than even the song she had learned to sing as a means of disguising herself. It defied and defiled the world itself, being so distant from it while existing within it, and its lord was no better. It also exhibited such incredible hubris and pride, to instill within all who sought to enter the need to knock upon the gate and wait for a welcome, that her disdain for it grew by the second.

Deh'ta knocked upon that colossal gate, her hand feeling only the solidity of the surface. There was no texture, nor was there a temperature - the black fortress was made of something that was neither stone nor wood, neither skin nor bone, yet it was smoother than all of them and harder than them combined, it was simply magic.

The knocking echoed, but not because the acoustics of the place she had come to were meant for that - no, there was an echo, for there was no other sound. The thumping of her knuckles against the gate was taken and carried away by an invisible, gentle hand, so that it could reach the lord of the fortress.

Being made to wait was something almost new to Deh'ta - for she was a Goddess, and all mortals served her unwaveringly - yet there was one who did not. M'nous took his time, considering his guest before allowing her to step into his fortress, but no matter how wise and careful he was, there was nothing that could be done about the goodness within him.

Upon seeing a human, with clothes slightly tattered, with a considerably bewildered and even concerned expression upon their face, he reckoned that she had traveled all this way to come to his fortress, and that it would be proper to invite her. So he did, and the gates swung open - slowly, of course, so as to not

accidentally injure the guest, but there was indeed a swing to their movement, a grandeur that was not necessary, yet he allowed himself to add it. A bit of flair, to play up the part.

With those thoughts winding up in his head, a smile attempted to brighten his pale features, but it could only do so much. While his guest walked through the great hallway, being guided by the lack of other directions, aside from rearwards, M'nous put the scroll he had been examining down on the desk.

There were many things beside it. There were also many things on the plentitude of other tables littering his study, and no matter how neatly they were organized, the piles sorted and the pages marked with thin strips of colored string, he felt as though it were somewhat disorderly, and that no matter how impressive it was, any guest would find it an indication that the host was not very suited in that field.

However, he could do something else to better greet his guest. Raising his hand - though that was unnecessary - the volume at which the music was being played rose.

Deh'ta heard that first, out of every other possible sound, and was a bit taken aback; so much so that she stopped dead in her tracks, frozen, almost startled by it. This song was not one made with the voice of a being, but, rather, with the air itself. There was no life to it, and yet it conveyed a very real, very tangible liveness.

A juxtaposition like that - between the eerie silence that had been broken up only by her light footsteps as she walked through the dark, foreboding corridors of the black fortress, and the nearly bombastic arrival of the song - it was jarring.

What was more unnerving was that it was enchanting, even if there was no spell weaved into it, nor was there any magic involved in the way it was carried on the air. The music was there, reminiscent of a hundred birds singing in very particular and specific manners, yet neither truly factual - for there was no bird that could sing as these instruments of M'nous' did.

Gulping down her indignation, Deh'ta grew more convinced that the lord of this black fortress was truly reprehensible. To twist nature in such a manner so that it became nearly unrecognizable, to display such mountainous pride - it was an affront of the vilest quality. Yet as she came into the hall whereto the dark and winding corridors led; corridors that appeared dug inwards rather than laid and crafted, she pondered how they came to be. The Goddess of Life could not stop herself but experience an amount of awe that was not slight... Not in the slightest.

Shelves rose far beyond the reach of any mortal being, lined with countless tomes and scrolls, objects and containers. Like a vast library, this hall stretched on for what seemed to be a far greater distance than was reasonable - though the walk through the corridors was similarly lengthy. No matter how grand the hall was, she noticed, there was no shadowed spot. Small things - for they were not beings - fluttered about, spinning in an intricate and impossible dance, illuminating every single nook. The light their frames threw off was soft and gentle, pleasing to the eye and even warm for the body.

The music was also present, slightly louder, but not overstepping the boundaries of amicable. Deh'ta saw that the walls of the hall were filled with niches, within which rested objects that slightly bobbed in the air, and they were not just objects, but contraptions with inexplicable purposes. There were indentations that swelled up and then emptied themselves, there were strings that were brushed by other, thinner strings, and then there were taut lines that found themselves stricken by tiny hammers.

Those were the implements through which M'nous created his music, she recognized, and her disdain for him grew. They were pale imitations of what life had achieved with the birds and the beasts of the land, and even with mortals themselves, yet there they were, creating a sound so unlike anything she had ever heard that it made her feel both queasy and enthralled by it.

She knew her task, though, and did not allow herself to linger, even if the observation of these macabre doohickies was appealing. Her feet carried her forward, towards a slightly more open space in the hall, wherein tables were strewn about in a most haphazard manner. In between them all, right at the center, rested a large chair that looked like an egg with a section of its shell removed, its insides filled with soft plumage.

There, in that chair was seated a man. Yet, as she laid her beautiful eyes upon him, she found herself befuddled. In that soft, fancy chair sat the body of a frail old man, so fragile in appearance that, were she to touch him, he would undoubtedly shatter like a glass hitting the floor. His flesh was marred by dark spots, while his features were distorted by the looseness of his skin, and made all the harder to discern as a result of the thousands of wrinkles that weighed upon him.

His thin frame, clad in a robe that was all too loose, was that of a sickly, starving man, and it was easy to count his ribs, even through his skin, even underneath his garment. His brows were wild and unkempt, with strands of hair poking in every possible direction, some even going as far as to end up in his eyes. His graying hair was the most unfortunate variety, the one that resembled something that had once had color and had lost it as a result of being bleached by time itself.

His ears drooped low, and he barely looked like a human being, but, as soon as her eyes met his, she knew he was acutely aware of everything. Like a pair of black coals, his irises smoldered, as if their flame had not gone out, but was simply waiting for the opportune moment to erupt.

“Welcome to my dwelling,” greeted M’nous, raising his bony arms into the air and showcasing the chamber’s magnificence. Deh’ta put on a smile, and performed a curtsy; making herself appear curious and bewildered by him.

“Thank you for allowing me into your home - but I know not what your name is, nor do I know who you are!” the Goddess of Life exclaimed, “You, who are so old and wise in appearance, could you tell me who you are?”

M’nous laughed at her words then, for he could tell that she knew of him. His laughter did not come as a result of seeing through her deception, but rather as a result of her claim that he was old.

“I am not old, for old is the world, and old are the Gods. Me...” he stopped for a moment, as if looking for the words to utter. Deh’ta observed him intently, for what he said was truly new to her. His voice was gravelly, worn and torn by the ravages of time, yet it was also soft and gentle, pleasant to hear and filled with an emotion that she had not expected to discover.

There was a great amount of appreciation in his voice, and in his eyes. He looked at the disguise, at the foreign skin as though it were a precious individual of his, perhaps a family member, and he spoke in that manner that a father spoke to his child as he put it to sleep. How could he, though?

“You needn’t regard me as old, for, by comparison, I am but a baby,” M’nous informed, flashing a toothless grin. His gums were colorless and swollen, and the lack of ivories was indicative of just how truly ancient he was, for one of his kind; yet it appeared as though that incredible age had made him truly remarkable.

Not a moment had passed, but her mind was filled with thoughts of so many varieties that she could not encapsulate them all within that moment. He was a treasure, a true gem of life - for was it not exactly that wondrous quality of life that made it so valuable, that ability to find joy in even the most sour taste and to enjoy even the darkest of days? Was it not life itself to see another and to be filled with appreciation for them, simply based on the fact that they lived?

“Very well then, mister baby, I will not regard you as old!” stated Deh’ta, bestowing upon him a slight chuckle. The sound of her voice, the expression of her joy, made him giddy as well; for a Goddess was

capable of many things, and, even when she did not mean to perform a miracle, it wound up simply happening. And a miracle it was, to make M'nous chuckle just because. "But what is your name, oh wise man?"

Once again she probed, finding herself fiendishly greedy for understanding of the man before her. A man so close to death, so precariously teetering over the edge, yet so undeniably filled with life... Perhaps she could do more than simply sing to convince him...

"You know of M'nous, as does everyone else, do you not?" he asked her in return, and she nodded. "Well, I am him!"

As he said that, the old man pointed at himself with his scrawny thumb. His nails had grown so long that they had broken by themselves, and were yellowed and nasty, sharp like talons and crooked like dead trees. But, again, with how intimate he was with death, his liveliness was perplexing to no ends. He spoke as though he was in the springtime of his youth, his eyes flickering with intense *being*.

"You are M'nous?" she feigned incredulity. "Why, that's why you have this music, and you have this great fortress!"

"Yes, it is why I have this music and this great fortress..." M'nous confirmed somberly, and Deh'ta knew that things were to be set in motion.

The old man before her, albeit frail and ancient, apparently incapable of much but speaking in hoarse whispers, was truly the most powerful man to have ever lived. His eyes alone necessitated that she focused on her disguise, for, otherwise, he would see right through it. The unease that realization left her feeling was intense, because she was a God, and she believed-- nay, she knew - that she was not meant to feel such things.

Not just because of the fact that she was incalculably far above him, ontologically, but because she was Goddess of Life. That meant that he, as a living being, was beholden to her will, to her power. He was her servant by definition...

And yet there he was, sitting, barely moving, barely speaking, exuding immense power, and it made so little sense that she could barely wrap her head around it. A human, of all mortal beings, had reached such incredible heights of existence that he rivaled the Gods. That much was already impossible - again, by definition - and yet here he was, violating nature.

The truth of nature had been established by the Gods, and so it was absolute, as well as perfect; but, somehow, it had been subverted. It had missed the mark. It had made a mistake, and that mistake was seated before Deh'ta. A mistake so beautiful and alluring to her, due to its dependance on her, that she felt an intense desire to remain and observe him. And yet...

M'nous was powerful. Powerful enough to not be worth fighting, for the prospect of doing battle with him sent shivers up her spine. It made her feel uncomfortable, in a most foul sense, and it questioned her superiority, her stature as the pinnacle of being. After all, the Gods were perfect manifestations of Existence. How could they be matched by anything?

It had already happened, she could tell. He was already afflicted by the foul disease that she had concocted with Lemah's help, and his life was about to start fading away from him; that light in his eyes would grow fainter and fainter, until there was none left. But there he sat, serene and apparently content with his lot in life, as though he was ready to die at any moment, and that captivated Deh'ta.

He was powerful and dangerous indeed, but he had fallen for her disguise. She could weasel her way into visiting him a few more times, to observe this life...

"M'nous, could you tell me about yourself?" she asked, kneeling down on the cold floor, placing her hands in her lap. Looking up at the corpse-like frame of M'nous, she felt a hint of pity for him. A foolish little thing, so frail and prideful, he had dared defy the natural order. His sentence had already been passed, and he was currently in the process of being executed, but no matter how clearly Deh'ta saw the immense danger that he posed, the perverse distortion of reality that he was, she was captivated.

"Why would you want to hear about me?" he retorted. "I would have thought people would come to me to learn my secrets, not... Not to hear of my accomplishments, as there is no value in those..."

Humility. Not just humility, self depreciation. Her fascination grew even more, as her disgust at the sight before her expanded. M'nous was putting on a front, feigning just how humble he was, for he sought to influence all mortals. She knew that much without even needing to investigate - and the statement he had presented was more than enough to confirm it.

Perhaps she could play with his pride, with his boundless arrogance...

"Because I find it strange, M'nous, that you are so great!" She spoke, excitement welling in her voice. "Such greatness is surely fit for a God, and yet you claim to be human..."

He placed a hand under his chin and let out a long 'hmm'. Contemplation in the face of such blasphemous words was not the proper reaction, but it was partially what she had expected. The utterance of such things was unpleasant for her, but the fact that he did not attempt to immediately correct her or dissuade her was far more pleasant; after all, it confirmed that he did not care for the rule of the Gods.

"You would like to be told of me, so that you can know that I am human, and not a God pretending to be one of the mortal races?" he asked her, gleaning some kind of reason in her statement. She nodded, bothered by the fact that he went along with his own equation to a God so willingly, but nevertheless, he was prone to present something very interesting.

"Yes, for I am a Bard, and would like to sing of your great deeds... Though I can only do so if I am certain that you are human!" She said and he sighed, leaning back into his chair. The old man's narrow frame was almost completely engulfed by the cushioning, and he seemed to barely be visible above it... But he *was*.

"Very well. I have time, so I will tell you about myself..." he paused. "But what should I share with you?"

"A memory you treasure dearly. That way, I will know it is that of a human, and it would make for a wonderful song!" Deh'ta proposed, clasping her hands together. Again, M'nous let out a long 'hmm', and then nodded, her deception clearly going unnoticed.

"Yes... Yes, I can do that..." The music of the dead orchestra died out, and then slowly began anew, though a bit different. He had not moved his fingers, he had not moved his lips to utter any word, nor had anything changed in their surroundings - no material had been used. Deh'ta recognized that through his will alone, he made the instruments play - something that was meant to be achievable only by the Gods.

Her shock went unnoticed as he prepared himself, thinking up a memory to share with her. It was quite quaint, how he struggled to conjure even that, when he had barely a hundred years in his mind. Deh'ta had thousands in hers, and she could easily recall any minute detail from her own memory. It demonstrated how futile this man's bid for longevity was, as mortals were not meant to last that long.

But, in truth, he was pondering which to present, for he knew that there were many memories that could be shared. Many of which could also easily be fabricated, for through the sheer observance of a human life one can imagine scenarios that would be indicative of humanity. He, however, wanted to present one that was so indicative of his own being that it would be impossible to misconstrue as a lie.

“Let me show you,” M’nous beseeched her and extended his bony hand. Palm upwards, utterly helpless and submissive, but there was no weakness to be found. Deh’ta, afflicted with slight unease, extended her fingers and laid them within his palm.

And they were gone.

Not gone, in the sense that they no longer were, but gone, in the sense that they were now elsewhere - or so it seemed. Nothing Deh’ta could do, without rousing suspicion in M’nous, was capable of either taking her back to the black fortress or revealing her whereabouts.

He was with her, but there was something else about his presence. He was not standing beside her in the same manner he would stand beside her if he had left his chair and walked up to her, nor was he standing at all. The two of them were suspended in the air, among a countless multitude of clouds, yet that was unimportant by comparison to him.

M’nous was not simply situated adjacent to her, within an arm’s reach, but he was all around her, and she was within him.

“Where are we?” she asked, maintaining her character while also earnestly seeking an answer, for this was quite unlike anything she had experienced before. Even so, she had some suspicions as to what this place was - she had followed the thread of their conversation and allowed herself to deduce, based on the overwhelming presence from all around her...

She was in his mind, not only allowed to probe and wander, but invited and about to be given a tour. The clouds that filled this place were solid enough to stand upon - or so M’nous made them appear, as he ceased floating and his feet came to rest on the surface of the fluffy shapes. He moved with great grace and a lightness fitting of a fairy, not an old, decrepit man, yet the fact that this was - probably - his mind meant he could appear in whatever manner he desired.

“This is... A vault,” he started, and things became clearer, as though they had been obstructed by fog up until that moment. Obstructed, but impossible to discern as such - to Deh’ta it had appeared as though there was a vast realm of clouds within this place, and nothing else. However, as M’nous spoke, things took shape - doors appeared in a lengthy line, one to the left, one to the right, reaching obscenely far into the distance, yet failing to disappear from sight.

Beneath them were another set of doors, and beneath that more, going all the way down until the white and wondrous clouds turned gray and somber, and the illusory sky darkened from soft blue to black as ink.

“In this vault I keep my... Treasured memories,” he somberly finished his statement, looking down towards lower floors. Deh'ta considered them floors, as the doors were perfectly aligned and leveled, with the distance between those that stood opposite one another being about as great as the space between the walls of the corridors in the black fortress.

“And you’ve brought me here?” she excitedly inquired, glancing around with unbridled curiosity. This was both very quaint and quite impressive - the former, because it was indicative of M'nous' inability to adequately convey his thought, neither through words nor images, and so he would directly share the memories he had of the moment he had chosen to share with her.

A thing only a pitiful mortal might find himself struggling with, naturally, and that brought great pleasure to Deh'ta - for, until now, all of M'nous' deeds and belongings had been direct affronts to the Gods. However, by showing this off, he was admitting to her that he - even he - was imperfect. His hubris was not as boundless as he might have wanted it to appear, but by doing such a thing he was showcasing an even more putrid arrogance.

He had such faith in his ability and power that he was willing to invite a complete stranger into his mind - regardless of how well guarded it was - and allow her direct access to his memories. To Deh'ta, this was more than just an admission of guilt, for only the Gods could allow themselves to do such things - after all, they were perfect, and that perfection carried with itself an immovability that was only matched by the unstoppable force of their power.

Yet it was also impressive, for it showcased a great deal of ingenuity - one that was rooted in weakness and inability but ingenious regardless - to make do with what was available.

“Yes, I have,” he responded, looking down into the depths of the tower of clouds. Before saying anything else, the old man strode over the fluffy surface the two of them stood upon - though he moved as though the surface was no different than that of a grassy field. “I believe it would be most convincing to show you that humanizing, treasured memory of mine... Directly.”

With that, he turned and beckoned for her to follow. The gesture held no ill will and was incredibly friendly in presentation and intention, however to Deh'ta it was repugnantly demeaning. Her, the

Goddess of Life, being beckoned? Commanded by a mere mortal in such a nonchalant manner, one that completely disregarded her hierarchical position as infinitely far above his?

Had she been closer to his base level, she may have ground her teeth in anger, but she was divine. Thus, she played her part perfectly, nodding appreciatively while maintaining an expression of serene curiosity on her face. She followed after the black-clad wizard excitedly. The clouds were solid - so solid, in fact, that it felt as though she was walking on stone and their appearance as celestial objects was simply tacked on. Or, perhaps, these pseudo-clouds, as they were willed into pseudo-existence by M'nous, had different properties to real clouds which made them the way they were.

"So, how will you show it to me?" she asked, noting that the pace of his movements was in no way inferior to that of a man just entering adulthood. Was it even him she was observing, or a projection of him? Or, perhaps, a combination of both?

"How do you expect me to show it to you?" he retorted curiously, getting closer and closer to a certain door on the floor they had appeared on when they had entered. There was no floor above them, and it seemed odd that a memory of his from long ago would be so close to the top. For mortals, time was very linear, and in the case of M'nous, who had arranged them in this tower-esque manner, it seemed only appropriate that the most recent memories would be at the top floor, and the older ones would be deeper down.

Regardless, the question was one that Deh'ta could not simply answer by deceit. She did not have a particular idea as to how he was going to show it to her, but there were a few options that presented themselves. Still, the more interesting question was why he was so alive when walking about this pseudo-dimension? Was it because this was his mind, and within it he was unhindered by his aging body?

"I don't..." she came to a halt, crossing her hands over her chest to simulate effort in finding an answer. M'nous stopped and turned to regard her, and he did, indeed, appear more youthful, though the signs of age remained present. "Maybe as a whole set of paintings?"

He chuckled at that, turned around, and beckoned her once more.

"No, not quite. You will see everything as though it were a painting, yes, but I've not seen a painting so closely resembling life," the old wizard stated as he resumed his stride. Deh'ta followed, growing ever more insulted by his deeds and demeanor. "I will show you that memory, and you will see it as though you were scrying through a... Crystal ball."

“Does it involve a crystal ball?” Deh’ta asked, genuinely intrigued. If he was going to show it to her as it had transpired, then describing it as scrying could be a sufficient answer. However, it was the past that was going to be displayed - and how could a mere mortal claim to be able to even glance into the past via the art of scrying?

“No, not quite,” he replied and stopped walking, standing aside the door. M’nous turned around and presented his gaunt hand to Deh’ta. “Now, I’d advise you take my hand, for we need to make our way down, and there have been many months since that event. The way down is lengthy, and having something to hold onto makes it less frightening.”

“Frightening?” the disguised goddess raised an eyebrow, tilting her head to the side. Regardless of the fact that M’nous was talking to the human bard standing before him, to a being that was driven by fear and one that knew very little, Deh’ta found the almost infantilizing manner of speech to be annoying and even aggravating. “What could be so frightening?”

“We’ll jump down,” his answer came quickly, delivered as though it was a very simple thing that he was saying. And, indeed, it was - Deh’ta could soar through the skies if she so willed it, and wizards of a far lower grade than M’nous could similarly fly.

“Oh!” She feigned realization by putting a hand over her mouth, then looked over the ledge. There was no actual ledge, but she did direct her eyes downwards, and there was a nearly infinite drop, past countless doors. “Alright then... I’m in your care.”

Her hand reached out and took hold of his wrinkly digits, and before she had even had the chance to properly prepare herself, a force pushed her forwards.

Stifling a gasp of surprise, a very good performance on her part, Deh’ta found herself in free fall, as though the gentle nudge had sent her over a ledge. M’nous was similarly barreling downwards, his features momentarily straightened by the air billowing into his face and temporarily reverting the effects of age upon it and giving him a very stern expression.

He was holding her hand very gingerly, as though it was intended to truly be a calming presence for her. Deh’ta found herself unimpressed on principle, but did note how emphatic the action was. Had she truly been a normal human, this free fall would have been unfathomably terrifying and M’nous’ hand would have had the intended calming effect.

They fell past many floors and even more doors, but it appeared as though the wizard's memory was very distant. The azure blue of the skies above them slowly gave way and darkened slightly, as if evening was approaching; when Deh'ta started considering the possibility of him showing her the moment he was born, the two of them started slowing down.

It was such a smooth transition that she barely felt it, as though a strong wind became a breeze and then grew so weak so as to make the leaves rustle with its greatest efforts. M'nous landed on his feet upon a cloud, though this one was much grayer than the ones they had previously traversed. He then helped her get to her feet, as she played the role of an inept levitator perfectly.

"That was a very interesting experience!" She exclaimed, running her hands through her hair to smooth it back down, though considering how she had been falling, there was no need to do so. Still, that would not be known to an ordinary bard, thus it was part of the role she was playing.

"I am glad you think so," said M'nous and nodded in the direction of a door that was close to them. "I hope it does not overshadow what I am about to show you!"

She forced a giggle in response and followed him to the entry point. The door was identical to all other doors, with the vague exception of a number carved on it. Actually, no, it was not a number. It was a series of numbers arranged in a sequence that made them almost too complex to follow.

They signified something, but she could not tell what... Ultimately, though, she did not need to know, nor did she have any great desire to. Deh'ta knew many things, and she knew that these doors hid memories behind them. It was obvious that the numbers somehow denoted the memory behind this particular door in a most precise manner, one that was so accurate that only someone who could count out all the moments that M'nous remembered, and who could list them in chronological order, could tell which one was hidden behind it.

He opened the door, pulling it outwards, and revealed beyond its frame a thin cloud of fog. It was so meager that it was almost transparent, and to Deh'ta it seemed so insubstantial and pointless that she could not understand why it was even there. Maybe it served as a means of severing the substance of the memory, whatever it was, from the marrow of the mind? Perhaps it served as a means of maintaining M'nous' position in the now, rather than allowing a relapse into the past.

"Please," spoke the wizard, nodding towards the fog, "after you!"

II

And in she went. Before making even a single step, she could already see that ahead of her was a pathway, framed by hunched trees whose crowns had intertwined, creating the appearance of a tunnel. Past them could be spotted the beginning of a wooden bridge. Her entry into this memory was so shocking that she stopped herself as soon as she knew she had plunged herself into M'nous' past.

Her nostrils were assaulted by the smells of nothing particular, beyond those of the forest. No, it was not exactly a forest - there were scents that emanated from that alone, but they were framed by something else. The air was fresh, as though it had just arrived on the breeze- the produce of the sturdy trunks and the thickness of the woods, which themselves halted such winds.

In addition to that, there were other scents. One was the faint, but unmistakable sense of a river bubbling nearby - and it was not discernible because of the sound, no, it was knowable because of... Because of the air itself. Deh'ta was beyond astonished by this. She had expected a very convincing recreation of his memories, but not presented in this manner; an illusion made of magic that tricks the eyes and ears. However, what she was currently experiencing was more than just sight and sound.

The smell was one of those things that had an impact, as did the feeling of the earth beneath her feet, but the most important thing was the... The familiarity she felt for this place. There was something about the sensations, some faintest inkling of reminiscence.

She knew of it, but had not felt it. She was a God, and she had been here for eternity, and she had not lost any part of herself so as to ever need to reminisce. Time was something else for her. It did not loom over her as it did over mortals, and it did not take away from her. It was a line she could examine from outside, one that she could even exert control over.

There was no point in remembering anything, and there was no emotion that her memories were steeped in. A God was perfect, and so every moment for her was always good, and there was nothing to deviate from that goodness; there was no such thing as a peak or a pit. Mortals, on the other hand, felt great joys, but also struggled through great sorrows. Those emotions sank into their lives and permeated them like water is sucked up into dirt.

There he was, M'nous, presenting that particular dirt of his, the one in which he had wallowed all his life, and it was forced upon her, muddying her clothes and skin, marring her very mind. For the first time,

Deh'ta was reminiscing, or at least feeling the sensation one is overtaken by when they reminisced. What was more bothersome than that was the fact it was someone else's past that she was reminiscing about.

She heard footfalls, very gentle and soft, and there was an immediate sense within her - those were ones that were occurring now. Deh'ta turned and regarded M'nous, walking after her, his eyes filled with emotion as he glanced at the crooked trees surrounding them. The sound of his footsteps, the sensation she felt as she heard them, was clearly one that was current, one that was present. At the same time, the smell of the forest, the surface of the ground at her feet, the sights themselves - those were past.

Somehow, in an almost instinctive manner, she could tell what had been and what currently was. It was not her godhood that allowed her to know this, for if it was due to her divinity it would be knowledge of a far more rational variety, rather than sensory data as it was here. M'nous had spent a lot of time devising a means of showing others his memories, so much so that he had instituted a mechanism for feeling what was past and what was present. Again, it was impressive ingenuity, but it was also affirmative of her superiority, for he clearly had not just known as a God would, and had to reason a way to make do.

"Come, it's up ahead, just a bit further..." he urged her, allowing himself to take the lead. Deh'ta felt the sting of his belittling demeanor, and each made her disdain for him grow, but she maintained the role she had chosen to play, and followed in his footsteps.

He did not say anything else, nor did she ask any questions. Instead, they simply walked through the forest, walking out onto a wooden bridge that crossed the river, which was barely big enough to not be classified as a stream. Its burbling was very pleasant to the ear, occasionally joined by a bird's call.

That, by itself, was not intriguing at all, nor was the bridge's ordinary construction. What was interesting, however, and was most likely the place wherein this memory would transpire, was a house on the other side of the stream.

Calling it a house was a disservice, actually, for it was clearly a home. Built upon a hill, which was framed on three of its four sides by the river, this building looked incredibly quaint and featured a feeling. That feeling, of course, Deh'ta knew was not naturally occurring, as it was heavily steeped in the past - but aside from just reminiscence, it also featured another sensation that was both joy and sorrow, one that was both glad and distraught.

The contradiction in that emotion was very foreign to the goddess of Life, but there was a word she figured could, potentially, be used to describe this - nostalgia. Or, rather, Hiraeth, for this was a home that M'nous could no longer return to, no matter how much he wanted or how hard he tried. She

momentarily stopped looking at the house and glanced at the wizard, only to find him wistfully gazing at the building. In his eyes she could see the genesis of tears.

Not wanting to observe that, for it was a beautiful and bothersome sight, Deh'ta turned back to the house on the hill. It was situated right at the top of the swelling in the relief, and to its right was a big, ancient oak. No, the oak was not *to* the right of the house - it *was* the right of the house, it was its northern wall and part of its northern roof. That great tree was truly colossal, easily being about as thick in diameter as the house's southern wall was long. Its trunk had grown in such a manner that it bent harshly, becoming perpendicular to itself, ultimately becoming an incredible natural umbrella, or roof. The crown covered almost half of the hill, throwing a spotty shade over it, and countless creatures called that particularly old oak their home.

M'nous, by the looks of things, had chosen to also do so. The house had two floors, with the upper being smaller, allowing for part of the ceiling of the first floor to be used as balconies on the second. The building was made exclusively out of wood, with a number of support beams being unprocessed tree-trunks. Of course, there was a display of great opulence, as there were windows on each wall, and each window was large and clear.

The house was framed by a number of snaking pathways, going through a wondrous garden filled with flowerbeds and bushes, with the plants being so plentiful that it was impressive, even for M'nous, to have gathered all these varieties and managed to accommodate them in his pleasure. Clematis, daffodils, poppies, roses, daisies, gladiolas, hydrangeas - all were present and distinctly arranged in dashing, enchanting manners. Even the borders of the garden were overflowing with color, going from yellow to blue, mauve through red and orange, mixing to create the conditions for a near sensory overload.

"Is that your home?" inquired Deh'ta, having observed the building long enough. Her interest was now upon the wizard, and while observing the immensity of the life within him was amusing, it was also bothersome, for she found herself filled with not only disdain for him, well deserved and righteous, but also a sense of pity, for he was a truly remarkable product of life.

"It was," M'nous replied and let out a long, heavy sigh. Having stopped to look at his previous dwelling, he once again started walking towards it. At just that point in time, another shape appeared, from behind one of the bushes - it was a woman who was now slowly moving past the middle of her life.

"And who is that?" asked Deh'ta, observing the fiery-haired lady with curiosity. She was strong of body and clad in royal garments, which looked impressively good on her. The glittering greens, outlined with a red and gold trim, with designs so intricate it was clear that the upper dress must have taken at least half

a year to complete. Underneath it she wore another dress, slightly plainer than the other, but matching in color nonetheless.

“That is Meydl,” said M’nous, not stopping this time. The woman in question had fair, but rugged skin, proof that she was not a gentle noble. However, in her hand, she carried a flower - a mouse’s ear, particularly blue petals and a radiantly yellow center. “She was one of my closest friends, and a great ally in the task of bringing peace...”

Meydl appeared to be incapable of noticing them, due to the fact that she was a memory of M’nous’, yet she seemed incredibly lifelike. She went on to open the front door and walked on in. Deh’ta and M’nous followed her, only to enter a large room with a multitude of uses, occupied by three other people.

The chamber was, essentially, a number of smaller compartments with no walls separating them. To the right of the entrants was a long section filled with shelves, some with doors, others exposed, attached to the walls. Beneath them were situated many countertops, one of them - right at the northernmost wall - being made out of stone and about three times wider than its wooden counterparts. The space did not have a chimney, or even a hole, though it did have a door whose purpose was unknown to Deh’ta. However, she could tell that this part of the room was supposed to be some sort of kitchen.

To the left of the entrants was a large, open area, with two of its three walls being covered in windows and providing a very pleasant view of the wondrous scenery outside; garden, stream and forest included. There was a short wooden table in the middle of the section, framed by four sofas with particularly dark, burgundy upholstery, adorned with pillows with similarly colored cases. At the very center of the table was situated an empty clay vase.

On two opposing sofas were seated two men - the one seated to face the entrants was a huge man - by human standards - clad in vestments seemingly more fit to be under a suit of armor than worn out in the open. That opinion was also held by their wearer, for they looked as though they had been creased, thoroughly, by such use.

The rest of him looked about as disheveled as his mostly white outfit itself. His distinguishing feature was long sandy blonde hair, reaching his shoulders as well as covering his face in a bushy beard. His eyes, blue as the sky, glimmered with excitement as they regarded the woman who had just entered - that being Meydl.

The man whose back was facing the entrance of the house was far slimmer and a bit shorter. He, too, wore common clothes, though even if the pants were beige and the shirt was a dirty green, they were well

crafted and suited him well. His hair was black and styled in a very odd fashion, reminiscent of a nest more than anything, but his beard was styled as well as such a feature could be.

In front of the entrants was a corridor, leading deeper into the house. The third wall of the big chamber separated it from another, smaller room up ahead. That one actually had a door, so Deh'ta could not see what was inside. Directly opposite of the entrance was another door frame. Empty, because it either had no door, or the door was opened outwards as wide as possible, as a result of which it was not visible.

That corridor featured a flight of stairs, to the right of the frame, leading up to the second level. In between it and the kitchen was a mirror, next to which was seated a spotted dog. It was white with black dots over its long, well groomed fur. The pooch had a very friendly expression on its face and excitedly wagged its tail, because a young man with a cleanly shaven head was playing with it. Well, had been, because he had stopped and turned to regard the newcomer.

This man was M'nous, but from the past. His face was unremarkable, for even in his youth he had a very drained appearance that seemed as though he was of lesser constitution. He wore the same, or at least a similar in appearance, black robe. Just from a look at his eyes Deh'ta could tell that he was the same man, if only slightly changed by age. The fiery coals that gazed at Meydl held that same conviction, that same arrogance and unrelenting hubris.

"Oh, that's you!" She exclaimed, clasping her hands together excitedly.

"It is, though there is still a bit of milk on my lip," replied present M'nous, and he smiled. "Now, I suggest silence, because you might miss some important details."

Deh'ta almost furrowed her brows in indignation - almost, for she managed to stop herself from doing so. It was clear that M'nous did not know that she was the goddess of Life, and so he was treating her like just any other human woman. There was no reason for her to become overwhelmed with fury at the prospect of being treated as somehow lesser, at the fact that she was being given orders by a mortal.

Still, even if the context of the statement mattered, it was exactly the context that was so infuriating. Had M'nous not disrespected the Gods and subverted the laws of nature, she would not have been in this situation. She would never have disguised herself as a human, nor subjected herself to this demeaning experience.

He would get what was coming to him, however.

“Did you find it?” inquired past M’nous, talking to Meydl. His voice barely resembled that of present M’nous, yet it was very clear that it was, still, that particular man speaking. This was the memory that proved his humanity, M’nous had claimed, yet as Deh’ta watched and listened carefully she did not find it profound or special.

“Yes, I did!” Replied the red-haired woman, whose eyes Deh’ta finally saw clearly. The most intense shade of amber, indicative of a great spirit and unbreakable will. Perhaps that was why she had been made queen?

“Honestly, how do you leave your gifts in the garden? We didn’t even do anything in the garden!” With a gruff voice, the blonde man spoke. He was loud, bombastic, and clearly very direct, but there was no ill-will to be found anywhere on his person; that much could be gleaned even from the sight of him. Or, perhaps, it was not the sensation of him being there, but, rather, the memory of him? Perhaps, much like the feeling of Hiraeth that Deh’ta had come to know, she was also feeling what M’nous had felt towards those people, and, in a sense, coming to know them as well?

“Do’st, I think you shouldn’t really care,” stated the man with the nest-esque hair, and in so doing shared the name of his blonde friend. His voice sounded as Deh’ta would have expected it to - refined, in a sense, with great diction and a sophisticated ring to it.

“But what if I care?” piped up Do’st, which caused his conversation partner to let out a sigh. Meydl and past M’nous were looking at the two of them with an entertained set of expressions, merriment being present and accounted for.

“You might ruin something,” drew out the black-haired man.

“Oh!” Exclaimed Do’st, putting a hand over his mouth in a very sheepish manner, as though he had made a mistake of some magnitude.

Past M’nous let out a chuckle, which drew everyone’s attention to him.

“Now, the meat is going to get too cold if we keep dallying about, so how about we go through with this exchange?” he proposed, petting the dog affectionately.

“Alright, but you should be first!” Demanded Meydl, and there was a nod of agreement from the black-haired man, as well as an enthused grunt from Do’st in support. Past M’nous appeared to get a bit

flustered, his pale cheeks gaining on a semblance of color, but he plunged one hand into his robe as though he was looking for something, evidently agreeing.

From within the folds of the black garment he procured a bracelet and, holding it gingerly in the palm of his hand, presented it to Meydl. The object looked as though it was made of wood, but there were many elements, socketed directly into it or simply tied to it via thin, black strings, that were not. A golden trim outlined a number of words written in such a manner that they were laid over one another, thus becoming nigh illegible.

“So be it - here, so that it may keep you safe from any harm that might befall you!” Proclaimed M’nous and Meydl allowed him to tie it onto her wrist. As he did so, he tapped the letters with his index and middle fingers and they shimmered for the briefest of moments, before returning back to being written in unremarkable, ordinary ink.

“Well, M’nous had the right idea, but this!” Piped up Do’st, almost leaping from the sofa and making his way to the two of them. The black-haired man also stood up and approached, but in a far less bombastic manner. Meydl and M’nous’ attention was occupied by the procural of a small purse, which the blonde man opened with a bit of difficulty, for he was a bit too big for such tiny things.

From within appeared a gorgeous golden ring, inlaid with a pair of black opals at the sides of a topaz, above which rested a very sizable ruby. The whole thing was so well polished that it almost glowed, and, written on the inner side of the band, in letters so fine and elegant, was a message.

“Four is made with one and three...” read Meydl as she accepted the magnificent ornament. “Thank you, Do’st!”

“Bah, you needn’t thank me, for it is only proper that a king bears great signs of power!” Exclaimed the blonde man, putting the satchel back in one of his pockets before placing his hands on his hips. It seemed as though there was some kind of rivalry, some kind of competitiveness in the group - though the only one who participated seriously, who actually cared, was Do’st.

“Well, then I will thank M’nous for the bracelet,” Meydl teased, which prompted the wizard of the past to raise his eyebrows. She regarded him with a warm smile and took hold of his right hand with both of hers. “Thank you, my friend... And may this object of power do as you have commanded!”

“It is you who should be thanked, Meydl,” retorted past M’nous, his own features softened by a smile of similar warmth. “But don’t let me or Do’st distract you from the gift that Eyngl has prepared for you!”

With that, the man with nest-like hair made a step forward and presented a small leatherbound book to Meydl. Initially, she did not take it, expecting that he would say something, however, as it became evident that he wanted her to receive the gift first, her hands - one framed by M'nous' bracelet, one adorned with Do'st's ring - took the object.

"I am afraid that, once you take up your post, you will have scarce opportunities to go out carousing with us, and that we, too, shall have things to busy ourselves with. So, to keep you from feeling forgotten, I have compiled some of our exploits and collected them here in these pages... So that you may not only remember us, but be with us whenever you wish!"

Deh'ta watched and felt. Foreign sights and memories, foreign emotions and feelings, but even though she was a divine being, a Goddess, even though she was incredibly far away from these unremarkable things, she could appreciate something within them. There was a great longing in all four of these people. A desire, a want - which was what made their existence, itself, possible - that would never come to pass. From what the Goddess of Life saw, she knew that they did not truly believe in the possibility of their dream's actualization, but despite this there was immense hope within them that, through their deeds, they would wind up close enough to see it.

The future had not been kind to these fools, she thought to herself, as their dream had all but fallen to shreds. That was to be expected, as the laws of nature, those immutable things that stood above all mortals, and bowed down only to the Gods, were absolute. Even though she knew what she knew, and even though she had no pity for them, knowing that they had acted against their divine lords, there was a pang of sadness within her.

It was not her own, but rather of M'nous. The memory of this moment was filled with sorrow, perhaps due to his ability to see further than any other mortal... Or perhaps because of the mundane thing; the humanity of this situation - because he would be parting ways with his friends. Because he would not be seeing them again for many months.

"Thank you, Eyngl..." muttered Meydl, her eyes becoming slightly teary. Evidently, the feeling was not just M'nous'. "You never fail to live up to your name!"

"It is a great effort, always," replied the dark-haired man, his expression somber. Had it been up to the three of them - M'nous, Meydl and Eyngl - this would have probably remained an impressively saddening experience, but Do'st was present, and he seemed to have no patience for wallowing in sorrow.

“Well, we’ve given you our gifts!” He announced, clapping his hands together as if to bring all the attention to himself, though there was no need to do that, seeing as his voice was distraction enough. Upon doing so, however, the dog excitedly darted over to him, wagging its tail and letting out a little bark. “Now it is your turn!”

The mood lightened slightly, with Do’st bending over to pet the animal and usher it away. To its credit, the canine was very intelligent and obedient, for it did exactly as desired, sitting down in front of the mirror between the staircase and the kitchen. Its tail was, however, still wagging very excitedly.

“Very well,” said Meydl, putting the book between her left arm and her torso, and reaching with her right arm behind her back. That was when Deh’ta noticed that she had stashed the three blue and yellow flowers in her belt. As the woman procured them, she continued talking. “My gift is similar to that of Eyngl, but a lot simpler. Still, it carries meaning, and it features one request.”

One of Do’st’s eyebrows rose in befuddlement as he was handed one of the flowers. To him, it evidently meant nothing. Eyngl, on the other hand, gingerly received it and observed it with a measure of affection that was quite strange, lightly twirling it around in his fingers. Past M’nous smiled at Meydl, taking the third flower and making an attempt to put it in the crevice between his earlobe and his head, but a stern glance from the woman made him reconsider that.

“A mouse’s ear is very unremarkable, in a sense, because it is just a flower,” she stated, pursing her lips for a moment, as though considering her next words. “But at the same time, it is something quite precious... And quite short lived. I suppose we, too, are like it, short lived and, in a sense, unremarkable. Still, both the mouse’s ear and I have one great desire. You three... Promise that you will forget me not!”

“I promise!” Immediately proclaimed Do’st, puffing up his chest and squeezing onto the flower’s stem. His readiness to do so elicited a chuckle from past M’nous and Meydl, while Eyngl let out a sigh.

“I suppose if we are promising, there’s no harm in making one of my own - I will not forget you, nor will I forget either of you!” The wizard stated, first talking to Meydl, then turning and nodding at Do’st and Eyngl. The blonde man nodded back, as if this was not just a small gathering between friends, but some kind of oath-taking ceremony.

“I will not forget you,” stated Eyngl, still looking at the flower in his hand as he twirled it by the stem.

A moment of silence came over the four, as each considered what had been said and done this day. Deh’ta watched and took part in that quiet interlude, with a particular thought prominently occupying

her mind. It was both a question and a gleeful exultation. Why had M'nous picked just that memory? Had it been purely because it was, truly, the most important one that he had, or had it been because he suspected something? Could it be that he had picked one that was so centered around that - remembering - because he had become suspicious, or outright had come to know what Deh'ta's intentions were?

For a moment, she dared not turn to regard present M'nous, as the concept of him looming over her, glaring at her in a knowing manner brought her deep discomfort. After all, she had never known the concept of being queasy, as a result of it her first time experiencing it at the hands of this old man was bothersome.

Yet as she did glance at him, her worries disappeared. He was so focused on looking at his friends, and so moistened with tears were his eyes, that it was obvious he had no idea of what was truly afoot here. Such immense elation overwhelmed the Goddess of Life that she almost missed what happened next.

"That, my friends, calls for celebration!" Proclaimed Do'st, raising his flower up high, his clenched fist dwarfing the petals. Such jubilation was written on the face of the blonde man that his companions also smiled, their sad thoughts washed away by the mirth on display. "I have prepared, with M'nous' help, a bottle of the finest wine in these lands, made with grapes bathed in the sun for seven years, drenched in water from the springs of Orun!"

"Go on, my friends, the glasses are empty and waiting to be filled!" Exclaimed past M'nous, joining his friend's excited offer. He did not need to say more, as Do'st was already walking towards the frame opposite the entrance. Meydl and Eyngl followed, giving the wizard an appreciative glance. "I'll bring the meat in just a moment!"

The wizard, strangely, remained behind and walked into the kitchen. From within one of the wooden shelves he procured a large clay dish. It was not exactly a plate, as it was a bit deeper than one, yet it could not be called a bowl on account of its relative shallowness. Thus, it was a dish of medium depth, which was lined with blue and yellow elements, giving it color.

The silence that fell over the house, the blossoms drift from the trees, was odd. There was a weight to it, as if someone had something to say, or something was about to happen... Even so, nothing did transpire. Past M'nous opened the stone container's door, unveiling a number of food products. The container was a means of introducing cold storage into the house itself, rather than depending on a cellar.

Alongside the silence, which was broken only by the dog's rapid breathing and the wet, slapping sounds made by the slices of meat moving from the cooling shelf onto the plate, another thing became apparent. It was not a sound, but rather a feeling; and it was not that heavy, pregnant tension that came with silence, but rather something completely unfit for this situation.

Present M'nous was smiling as he observed his old self diligently prepare the ingredients for the meal. Deh'ta watched, but she was more interested in the sensation that spread through her. It was happiness, though not as she knew it. For her, happiness was mirth, joy, jubilation - explosive, overwhelming emotion that left no room for anything but itself; that - much like the Sun - obscured every other entity that would try to compete with it. This feeling was not that.

It was a quiet, background noise, if it could be called a noise at all. It was simply there, nearly unnoticeable, but steady and immovable. It was a foundation for other emotions, though it did not carry them with it. That contradictory nature of it left her perplexed for a moment, until she concluded that it was such, for it was a mortal sensation.

"So, that was your memory?" she questioned, looking at past M'nous walk by, stopping next to the dog and giving it a pet. Then, the man gave the animal one of the slices of meat, and it excitedly jumped with joy, eliciting a chuckle from the wizard.

"It is..." replied present M'nous as everything slowed down, the dog's movements becoming more and more tardy, the air harder to breathe in, the blinks of the past becoming so staggered that they completely came to a halt.

M'nous looked at M'nous. The past version of the wizard was standing in front of the mirror, looking into it, looking at himself. Simultaneously, the present version of him stared at that... And there was longing in his eyes. Longing that meant so much, though it required a similarly vast wealth of knowledge to decipher.

"What did you think of it?" asked the old wizard, slinking back into his cushioned seat, the darkness and fabric enveloping him. Deh'ta was back in his fortress, and the speed of her arrival, of the transition from his memories to the real world, was so great that she found herself uncertain that she had ever left the confines of this black realm.

"Should I share my thoughts with you?" she inquired in return, smirking, but feeling a slight discomfort. The sudden removal from his past was alarming, in the sense that it indicated that something had changed within M'nous' demeanor. Perhaps he had simply grown saddened by remembering those

things, perhaps he had become suspicious. “What if I tell you that I was not convinced, and you smite me for my audacity?”

At that statement, M’nous erupted in laughter. He doubled over, still seated in his chair, and even raised his bony hand, slapping his knee as his cackle echoed through the halls. At that point she noticed that the music had stopped. The instruments still floated in their spots, ready to perform their next macabre piece, but they were silent.

“I would be impressed by your doubt!” He answered, when his laughter died down, leaning toward her. There was an earnest smile on his face, which simultaneously made him appear more hideous than before, but also breathed life and youth into his visage. “But I would let you depart. I am curious, however... What happens if that is not the case?”

It was Deh’ta’s turn to smile, though hers was not genuine like that of M’nous. Still, it appeared to be as earnest as his, as she was the Goddess of Life, and such things came easily to her.

“I would ask that I am given some time to write down these events, so that I may later put them into song,” she replied, prompting his expression to change slightly.

“A song?” he mused, putting a hand on his chin.

“Yes - a song, for I believe that you are a great man, one whose humanity should inspire all others!” Exclaimed Deh’ta, though saying those words wound up being far harder than she had anticipated. She wanted to purse her lips, to furrow her brow, to spit them out, if she absolutely had to say them; yet there was no room for such acts of disdain. No matter how undeserving of the faux respect she was giving him, M’nous was, as a human, something incredible when compared to other humans, and it was only natural for them to know that it was so. It was only natural for them to be drawn to him, to consider him greater than them, to grant their subservience to him.

He let out a long sigh, leaning back into his seat. As he did so, the instruments sprang up, beginning a movement that produced a sound, which in turn began resembling music. The wizard thought for a moment as the song slowly moved from a tentative quiet to a slightly louder, but still faint and gentle volume.

“I do not agree with that,” M’nous simply stated, his expression soured. “Still, you may do as you desire.”

Upon pronouncing those last few words, a table flew in from behind one of the many shelves that obscured much of the vast chamber. Alongside it arrived a chair, a parchment that fluttered like a bird and a quill. On the table's surface rested an inkwell, and as soon as the piece of furniture landed onto the ground, the floating lights dotting the hall converged above it, providing ample light for writing.

"Thank you..." muttered Deh'ta, emulating embarrassment and gratitude, and went over to the table. The parchment came to a halt in the center of it and splayed itself open, leaving ample room for writing. The quill had dipped itself in the inkwell and was patiently waiting for her hand to take it.

She pulled the chair back, sat down, and was about to push herself forward, so as to adjust herself, but her seat moved and positioned itself as she would have liked it to. For a moment, Deh'ta lingered, thinking to herself about the incredible nature of what M'nous was doing for her. He had shown her his mind itself, he had taken her into his memories, and he was not putting on a show, the likes of which miserable, half-mages would perform in the middle of a small village for loose coins.

Her hand reached for the quill and it floated into her palm, almost nuzzling itself against her fingers. The music played, piping up in intensity and volume, as though it was, itself, curious to see what she was about to write down.

Her writings were not of great interest, however. She simply wrote the most important aspects of the memory - those which featured the greatest meaning, the greatest proof of humanity. As she did so, Deh'ta once more went through and considered them, and examined the point of those little things. Or, perhaps, it was all one big thing - the memory?

Ultimately, she did not care. It was a feature of mortals, and it was, in its very nature, to be fallible and transient. For Deh'ta, there were no memories, there was no challenge in remembering things. For M'nous, perhaps, there was a workaround through which he managed to maintain his recollection of events pristine... But that would not last.

A knowing smile spread over the Goddess of Life's lips as something devious occurred to her - an idea most appropriate. She would have to confer with her sister, Mohau... But for now, she had to maintain her ruse. Upon finishing her writings, she laid the quill down on the table and stood up.

"Are you done?" asked M'nous, who had spent the time Deh'ta took to put the memory to paper simply staring into nothingness, listening to the music and thinking. It was evident that he had found himself provoked by her words and by his recollection of the past, but at the same time he had remained aware.

“Yes, though a moment is needed for the ink to dry—”

Before she could finish her statement, a warm, dry breeze billowed in her direction - or, rather, in the direction of the parchment - and silenced her for a moment. Had she not been keeping a disguise, she would have continued talking, however an ordinary human would have been totally startled by that display, even if it was a very meager one.

“Oh...” she muttered, tapping the latest, and supposedly least dried letters on the parchment. They were very dry, and no ink stained her finger. “My thanks!”

“You needn’t thank me,” replied M’nous, looking at her. His gaze was penetrating, unnerving and very lively. It was as though those coals in his eyes had been ignited, as if something had spurred him on. “I should be the one thanking you. It is not often that I get visitors... Nor is it often that I am made to remember.”

“In that case,” Deh’ta immediately took the opportunity that she saw within his words. Similarly, she took note of the danger that dwelled within the latter half of them. “When I write this song of your humanity, I will tell others to come and visit you!”

He chuckled. Yet again, it was an earnest expression of joy, and in his eyes it meant nothing bad, there was no ill-will within it. However, to Deh’ta it was poison. He was laughing at her, at the Gods themselves, for he had attained a level of greatness similar to that of the divines. People would come to him, as though they were on a pilgrimage!

“Do what you will,” he said as she rolled the parchment into a scroll and bowed her head in a sign of thanks. Naturally, it was disingenuous, but well-acted.

“Again, I thank you, and I bid you farewell! May we meet again!” She exclaimed as she started walking away towards the corridor, waving her free hand at him. To her surprise, he raised his own hand and gave a weak wave, his features twisting into a smile. It carried great meaning, but Deh’ta had to interpret it. Did he smile at her in a condescending manner, or was he smiling at her because he had revealed her secret?

For a moment she wondered if there had been a mistake that she had made, but no, there was none. She was a Goddess, and so she was perfect. There could have been no error in her approach. Thus, it was clear that M’nous was simply laughing at her, poking fun at this fellow mortal. That indicated just how great his hypocrisy was, how he was, in truth, arrogant and full of himself; how he considered those equal to

him - for all mortals were the same in the eyes of the Gods - to actually be beneath him. Such vile hubris sickened the Goddess of Life, and she was convinced that the punishment in store for him was not enough.

So, after leaving his fortress and making her way to a shack in the most distant, obscure and frightening woods, Deh'ta removed her disguise and knocked on the door out of courtesy. It was opened by her sister, Mohau, Goddess of Weakness, who wielded cruelty as though it was her own two hands. Her form was perfect and beautiful, much like that of Deh'ta, but in it hid something else. There was a sharpness to Mohau, one that lent itself to her ever-present desire and willingness to inflict pain upon mortals, to torture them and to be cruel to them.

"Dear sister..." spoke the Goddess of Weakness, her lips curling into a smile. "I take it you have come to speak of your task?"

"Indeed I have, sister!" Responded Deh'ta. "I have decided that what I have planned for M'nous, and for all the mortal races, is not enough of a punishment for them. I have seen first hand the magnitude of his transgression and hubris, and simply dying will not suffice. Thus, I have come to you, for you are Lady of cruelty, and you can devise a most fitting fate for all who would dare to defy our will!"

Mohau smiled, and her agreement to assist Deh'ta did not even need to be pronounced. They convened and spoke excitedly about their plans. The Goddess of Life shared what she had done, she regaled Mohau with the tale of the seed that she had planted within M'nous - and, prior to that, all mortals - of how it would slowly grow and gnaw at them, until, one day, it would completely consume them.

Deh'ta had done a great job, and even if she never returned to the dark fortress of M'nous, he would die within a month. However, it would be a calm, gentle death, as though Lih've himself would approach and embrace the wizard, then gingerly take him. For an innocent being who had fervently worshiped the Gods, that fate would be well deserved - but for one who had acted against them? For one who threatened the very order of the world, the way things were?

So Deh'ta asked Mohau for advice, and her sister was happy to oblige. She reasoned that, while the seed would feed on the memories and the knowledge of the person within whom it was planted, it could also do other things; things that would bring great anguish to its host. Her suggestion was that the host be made aware that something was amiss, but in a manner that left them uncertain and incapable of further investigating.

That feeling of wrongness, that underlying certainty that something was not right - perhaps accompanied by a nigh unnoticeable feeling of illness - would be like a thorn in the afflicted's side. They would be unable to sleep, they would lose focus easily, they would be tormented for as long as they lived, and then they would die. But Mohau was in her element, and she made more and more suggestions.

That the seed could not just sap the knowledge away - it could also alter it, to make it seem as though things were not as they had been. To feast not just on memories, but also on pain and suffering. As an ultimate punishment, Mohau advised that the dying one, a second before the seed fully bloomed, would be allowed to glimpse at what had been. An understanding of what had transpired, so that all that was lost would be known, so that the anguish would be absolute... And then death.

Deh'ta watched her sister revel in cruelty, devising such a good solution that her adoration for Mohau deepened. They did what needed to be done, they willed it so, and the fate of all mortals was altered ever so slightly, their very beings shifting by a smidge, one so small and unimportant to the Gods that it was reasoned that none would notice it.

And none did.

So Mohau and Deh'ta parted ways. A week later, the Goddess of Life returned to M'nous' fortress. This time, she was clad in light chainmail, and her flesh was darkened by exposure to the sun. Her hair was short and black, and her frame was bulky. In the form of a warrior, she would visit the old man, and see what was happening to him.

She was confident her deeds had gone unnoticed, for they were very delicate; but deep within herself she held concern that, perhaps, he had noticed. She had faith in herself. She was coming to observe the fruits of her labor, to bask in his anguish, to enjoy his suffering as it was meant to be; nature's will had been reintroduced and was once again taking hold of this haughty wizard.

While that was true, she nonetheless required hope; hope that she had managed to trick him, for any interception could spell disaster.

She knocked on the gate of the black fortress, and, after a moment, the entrance was uncovered for her once more. She ventured into the great, maze-like halls, and they were unchanged. Her strong legs and certain stride carried her past the hoard of knowledge and right into the chamber wherein she had met the old man.

To her pleasant surprise, she noticed things that had not been present before.

The many desks surrounding him were an indication of something. Even the one before him seemed more disorderly, in a manner entirely improper. This was not a sign of focused, purposeful work that had been interrupted, no... It was a sign of something else, of a mute, inconspicuous struggle. There were documents, books and papers piled onto every surface, and metal objects, from which clothes hung, adorned the sides of the countless bookshelves.

The orchestra was still present, and its performance was about as robust as before, though the song had changed slightly; yet it still elicited the feeling of disgust it had easily done before. In short, there were no concrete signs that things had truly changed, but there were tiny inklings of doubt. Even the little creatures that fluttered about and shone brightly seemed off, though it was hard to tell exactly what about them was amiss. For Deh'ta, however, that was easy - their movements were slightly more rigid, and their paths were concrete. They were no longer as alive as they had been before.

M'nous, then, had been changed - even if his visage was the same, and he exuded just as much power as before. Not only in that internal, impossible to clearly discern way, but also his outfit. Whereas he had worn a simple, monotone black robe, now he wore a similarly dark cloak with a silver trim, giving it an air of elegance. His eyes were aflame, but the fire within burned in a particular manner, as though it was being blown by a very persistent wind. Those orbs that stared as deep within Deh'ta as she would let them... Appeared a little aloof.

"Hail, great M'nous!" she exclaimed, putting a fist up against her chest and bowing to the wizard. In the role she had selected now, she would be bombastic and powerful - if a bit dull.

"Greetings, warrior," he replied, though when compared to the previous greeting he had extended to Deh'ta, this time he lacked much in the way of emotion. Still, he had spoken as soon as he had seen her approaching. "What brings you here? Not, *uh*... Not looking for a fight, I hope!"

The orchestra quieted down as their conversation began, but that was not noticed by her. She was transfixed by the momentary stumble he had displayed - for he had been unable to find the right word. Still, he had retained his wit and humor, but the sheer fact that this intelligent man, this pinnacle of what mortality had to offer, had been stunned - if only for the briefest of moments - in his own speech... That was so reassuring that Deh'ta's mood soared through the heavens.

"Thank you, sir! And no, sir, I would never wish to pick a fight with you!" She replied, standing at attention, though her facade was nearly cracked by the great smile adorning her otherwise rugged face. Such was her joy that it was emanating from her and affecting everything around her, including M'nous,

whose own face was made finer by the addition of a smile of his own. In fact, the immensity of Deh'ta's mirth momentarily made him appear young and charming. "I thank you for the warm welcome, sir!"

"Oh, there is no need to thank me," he replied, weakly raising his hand and waving the words she had uttered off. "I have not welcomed you at all, not yet, at least. Would you like a drink, or perhaps something to eat?"

"My thanks, master M'nous, but I have come well prepared!" Informed Deh'ta.

"Very well then, warrior, but if that were the case... Why have you come so well prepared?" he asked, slightly tilting his head to the side.

"Great M'nous," started Deh'ta, pulling her hands behind her back. "I have come because I heard of your great humility. I am an accomplished warrior, decorated with honors and praised wherever I go, and so I find it difficult to remain humble. Yet my achievements are nothing when compared to yours, and I wish to know what allows you to remain as humble as you are?"

Her story was believable. While the armor she was clad in appeared damaged by battle and a bit worn, it was very finely crafted. The weapon that rested at her side seemed well used and masterfully made, and the scars that she had painted upon her flesh were many, indicative of many combat encounters. The way she conducted herself also lent credence to the tale she had spun.

"Ah, I see... The bard's song, yes?" the old wizard recalled.

"I know not what song you speak of, master M'nous. I was told by a bard, yes, but she sang no song and made no music," informed Deh'ta, giving a shrug of her shoulders. He raised his head, as if about to nod in understanding, but he stopped halfway through. Then, she realized he had rested the rear of his bald cranium against the backrest of his egg-like seat.

"Hmm... Interesting, but not that unexpected," M'nous said, reaching for and rubbing his chin. "Well, did that bard not tell you the answer to your question?"

"No, sir!" She replied, prompting the wizard to raise an eyebrow. "I found it hard to believe that a man of your station, sir, would ground himself with a memory of final parting!"

"You do?" he asked again, his eyebrow rising even higher up along his wrinkly forehead, moving the creases about as if to make space for itself and making room for others beneath them. The sight was very

unusual, and the signs of his ancientness became apparent to Deh'ta once more. So striking they were that, had she not been a Goddess, she would have been stunned by them. "In that case, how am I to... Convince you that the case is as you've been told?"

"Sir! I would like to be shown this memory of yours, if my request is not a display of impudence," she started, swallowing her pride with great difficulty as she made herself appear almost subservient to him. The lumps were quite large, and they got stuck in her throat, but she was capable of overcoming them. "Following that, I would, with your permission, weave the spell known as '*Spatium Veritatis*', and ask you whether that is, truly, your... I suppose most treasured memory... Sir!"

"My... You have quite the plan in place. It would be rude of me to not agree with allowing you to go through with it, no?"

"Sir, feel no obligation to humor me!" She requested, and his smile reappeared on his face while the raised eyebrow returned back to its normal elevation.

"Then, of my own free will, you will be humored!" He announced and raised his hand, palm upwards, extending it towards Deh'ta. "Come, take my hand..."

And she made a few steps forward, taking hold of his hand. Again, they were gone, but this time she had to pretend to be shocked and bewildered by the experience. The part was played perfectly, and when her feet came to rest upon the soft surface of the clouds, she pretended to have lost her footing, swinging her arms about in an attempt to keep herself upright.

M'nous stood next to her, but to her surprise he did not appear as youthful as he had before. Now, he was simply himself, old and wretched, if clad in a fine robe. Why had he put it on, she wondered; and then the answer seemed to present itself to her. Because she told him to expect visitors, he naturally made himself presentable. The slight changes in his appearance had gone unnoticed, for they were not important, but now she noted that his nails were trimmed and proper, and his nose and ear-hairs had been singed off.

"Worry not," he urged, taking hold of her shoulder. "No harm can come to you here, for this is my mind."

"Your mind?" she repeated, feigning incredulity. She pretended to slowly calm down, looking around, hoping to see differences. Alas, nothing seemed to be amiss. "You have let me, a person who can use magic, into your mind, sir? Is that truly wise?"

“Why would it not be wise?” he inquired in response, smiling knowingly. Deh'ta managed to suppress her concern, instead raising her brow inquisitively. “You, yourself, told me that I was too great to humble myself with a simple memory. Perhaps I am arrogant enough to believe that I am under no threat here, even with an able spellweaver?”

“Sir, I... I did not—”

“Worry not!” He interrupted her, his expression changing so that his smile was not simply a knowing one, but, rather, a sly one. “I am simply... *Hmm...* Pulling your leg.”

“Oh...” Deh'ta would have grit her teeth, had she not been playing the role of a dull human woman. He gave her a pat on the shoulder and made a few steps forward, looking down at the countless lines of doors on the levels beneath them.

“But your concern was correctly raised, warrior!” Consoled M'nous, turning and nodding towards the pit at his feet, urging her to follow him. “It is, indeed, not wise to invite anyone, let alone a weaver of spells, into your mind. I have simply decided that the risk, for me, is lesser, on account of my knowledge - be it of the world or... Or magic.”

“I apologize for having doubted you, sir!” She said, following him to the edge, though her stride was nowhere near as confident as it had been when she had walked into his fortress.

“Do not apologize for being reasonable,” he advised and presented his hand once more. “I, on the other hand, should apologize, for we must be unreasonable now.”

She took his hand in a most subtle fashion, even if she knew what was about to follow, and when the gust of wind pushed her forward, and when they started plummeting downwards, Deh'ta let out a scream of fright.

“Fear not, I have you!” Commanded M'nous, and squeezed her hand slightly. Their swift descent slowed down, as if done with the express goal of calming her down, so she ceased her bellow. Still, she maintained a shocked and utterly boggled expression, opting to say nothing until they landed.

They did land in front of a particular door, the sign of which bore a familiar set of markings, and as soon as her feet hit the solid cloud, she fell to her knees, supporting herself with her arms, and started breathing heavily. M'nous crouched next to her and put a hand on her shoulder.

"I should have warned you more... Explicitly. I apologize wholeheartedly!" He said, keeping his hand in place until her breathing steadied. She pushed herself up on her feet, dusting her knees off, and then turned to regard him.

"I... I accept your apology, sir!" Deh'ta stated, though the bombasticity of her voice was tempered with a crack and an uncertainty that no doubt appealed to M'nous in some manner.

"Thank you, and again, I am sorry that I caused you such distress..." he bowed his head to her, which appealed to her quite greatly - though she knew it was purely performative, rather than earnest. A man who would oppose the Gods was incapable of genuine remorse, she knew. "But you'll be happy to know that through this door lies the memory that you've heard of."

"The farewell?" she inquired, and he nodded in response.

From simply looking at it, Deh'ta could not tell if the door was the exact same as it had been before. Maybe there was a slight difference that she could not pick up on - perhaps on account of the fact that some change had occurred, due to the passage of time, and maybe the presence of more doors had altered things slightly, or perhaps it looked off in a most unnoticeable manner.

Regardless, it was that door, she knew. M'nous was not trying to present a different memory, nor had his mental state deteriorated to the point of being unable to remember that this had happened... Even if Deh'ta would have been glad if things were different.

"After you," he said as his decrepit hand found itself on the handle and pulled. The door opened, revealing the same sight that had been on display before - fog; though in regards to it she could tell that there was a difference. Perhaps the fog was thicker, perhaps there was more of it, perhaps it behaved in a different manner - moving a small bit more erratically, spurring on a question that she had not asked herself previously.

Was it moving because it was being spat out by something in the upper corners of the doorframe, or was it moving because it had been made to move? If so, what was the purpose in its movement? Perhaps it was meant to move, because fog tended to splay out over a surface and dissipate with time, and M'nous, evidently, did not want for it to dissipate. Thus, had he altered the very nature of fog to create this weird, wrong fog, so as to fit his designs?

Yet again he was displaying his disregard of the hierarchy that was in place, that was ontologically required for the world to be what it was. Deh'ta's anger, which had slightly subsided and had been

replaced by curiosity - for she was incredibly excited to see the results of her work with Mohau - flared up once more.

She walked through, and instantly things were clear to her. Her anger was so thoroughly washed away by a sense of satisfaction, of such immense quantity that it would have made any mortal to feel it have a heart attack and die on the spot. Had she not been putting on an appearance, she would have not looked around, with a slight fright, and glanced at everything with surprise and wonder.

No, she would have leapt into the air and exclaimed her victory, she would have laughed and skipped over the landscape in mirth that would affect every living being around her, making them feel absolute euphoria, for the joy of the Goddess of life was infinite in that very moment. Success had presented itself before her, in its most wonderful form.

The forest was there, as were its scents and sounds, and everything was as colorful and wonderful as it had been before, but a very particular thing was missing. The feeling that had been forced upon Deh'ta during her previous visit... Was nowhere to be found.

There was, of course, a feeling, as that was one of the most important traits of a memory - the feeling that was carried by it, no matter how insignificant - but what mattered was that the feeling that was present was, clearly, not the same as she had experienced before. The path, framed by the bowed trees, seemed a lot more clearly illuminated - though that was, perhaps, owed up to the great joy that Deh'ta felt. When one was happy, things tended to appear finer.

And when a Goddess was happy, things that appeared became finer.

M'nous came in after her, stepping past her and looking around himself. He was now of the present, again, for there would be a M'nous of the past - though this time, there was going to be no difficulty in discerning which was which.

"Follow me, and I will show you what you wish to see!" The man stated and started walking. She followed, completely content to be shown. Perhaps there were other signs that things were progressing as they had been planned to?

Fortunately for her, the stoic soldier she had chosen to appear as was observant and a fan of brevity, of saying only what needed to be said, and being quiet otherwise. As a result of that, she simply followed M'nous, to the bridge over the river, past it, up through the house's garden. Again, just as they were about

to reach the door, Meydl cut in front of them. In her hand were the three flowers, of the same variety as before, perfectly vibrant and alive.

She, herself, did not look different at all, either. It appeared as though only the finest, most minute details that would normally be missed by anyone who was not a God were being deteriorated at the moment. Regardless, that promised progression of a very proper variety, and so Deh'ta joyfully watched and listened.

Meydl went in, and there were the three others - Do'st, M'nous of the past and Eyngl. The interaction went the same way as it had before, with the blonde man being interested in finding out why Meydl had kept them waiting, and then they had exchanged their gifts, in much the same order. M'nous presented an enchanted bracelet, Do'st bestowed upon the future queen the ring, and Eyngl gave her the leatherbound book. She thanked them by granting each one of the flowers.

The dog was there, too, and it did as it had done before. And then the three walked off to the backdoor of the house, and M'nous of the past remained to prepare some meat for them.

All throughout the memory, Deh'ta was more interested in M'nous of the present than the memory itself. She had easily come to know that there would be no differences that would need to be observed, and those that were present could be felt by her fine senses. However, the thing that would indicate changes, was the man himself, and how he remembered things, or how they made him feel.

For the most part, they were consistent with what had previously happened. Everything was almost exactly the same as it had been before, and M'nous reacted to it in the same manner... Save for that last part of the memory.

From within one of the wooden shelves, he procured a large clay plate, lined with blue and yellow elements. The silence fell over the house. This time, its weight was slightly different. It was a pregnant silence, but not with a sensation of happiness or contentedness, no. It was something so clearly different that Deh'ta was almost amazed at just how it affected the entirety of the memory.

Past M'nous opened the stone cooler's door and procured the meat. The dog was breathing, looking at its master, wagging its tail and waiting for a slice, just as it had done previously. Present M'nous, however, was not smiling as he observed his old self diligently prepare the ingredients for the meal.

Deh'ta watched him closely, and she felt that emotion carried by his memory. It was no longer that quiet, background noise, that gentle fondness. It was a heavy *thing*, one that suffocated the observers and

attempted to crush them spiritually. Both of them were strong, though, and so they were not affected by it in that manner - but even Deh'ta's explosive joy at finding yet another difference was smothered.

"So, that was your memory?" she echoed herself from her previous visit, as past M'nous walked by, stopping next to the dog and giving it a pet and a slice of meat. Even though the wizard chuckled at the animal's excited yapping and tail wagging upon being granted some food, the weight that hung over the observers grew more intense.

"It was..." replied present M'nous as everything slowed down again. The air had already been difficult to breathe, for the sensation that permeated the last moments of the memory was so totally unfitting for a Goddess to experience that she was almost glad that her difficulty with inhaling was now coming from the air itself, rather than it being the feeling of the air.

M'nous did not look at M'nous. The past version of the wizard was standing in front of the mirror, looking into it, looking at himself - but the present version of him was staring at a point somewhere beyond that. He was not looking at anything in particular, as though he was deep in thought; reminiscing about the moments he had just shown to Deh'ta.

The feeling kept growing in intensity, and while they had been back in the black fortress by that point during her last visit, they remained. Everything seemed to start moving again, but in an improper manner, as though someone was running a hand covered in blood over them, and yet they were the blood that was being rubbed onto the surface.

Longing. Longing for something that was no longer there, longing for something that would never again be, longing for something that was so clearly impossible that the act of longing for it became painful. Deh'ta did not want to feel this sensation, and yet she did - for she was still in his memory, and she was experiencing it as though she was him, even if in a vicarious manner.

"Sir M'nous?" she asked, and suddenly they were in the black fortress. M'nous was sitting in his chair, looking off into the distance. Her hand was still holding his, though he was not holding hers. The expression on his face was so weighted by an inexplicable thing, so heavily altered by the memory he had just experienced, that it appeared as though he had grown thrice as old.

"My apologies," he said, slowly turning his eyes to regard her, though even that appeared to require great effort. "I am simply... Affected by my memories. Memories of... Better times."

She nodded in response, indicating that she had understood. In truth, she did understand what he meant - for it was obvious that in his youth things had truly been better for him - but in a manner that lacked the situatedness that a person would add to that understanding. In a sense, her understanding was true and superior, but at the same time it lacked that element of mortality that would make it authentic.

“So,” he piped up, as if having resolved his torment. He had not - Deh'ta could clearly see that in his eyes, but he was putting a front now. “Are you satisfied with what you saw?”

“I am, sir M'nous!” She exclaimed and procured a scroll from within her pouch. Deh'ta started unfurling it. “But I would still prefer to proceed as previously discussed.”

He did not say anything, but moved his hand in a gesture that indicated she was free to do as she wanted. Her hands further unfurled the scroll until it was entirely open. Then, she read the words that were written upon it. Doing that was all incredibly performative, as due to the fact that she was a Goddess she did not need to use a scroll at all. However, weaving the spell without a scroll, for a mortal, would require other components she was not interested in procuring.

In a sense, performing a spell in that manner was entirely alien to Deh'ta; for she simply needed to will something, and then it would be so. She wielded what could be described as an intellectual intuition, allowing her to bring forth anything she thought of without the need for external stimuli. Thus, all that was needed was to think - and it would be.

Weaving a spell in the way mortals did was, in fact, impossible for her, for it was outside of her nature. It was such a meager, miserable attempt at emulating the mastery of the Gods over reality, that it failed at doing what they did - whereas the Gods created, mortals transformed. That was why components were needed; be it a streak of a particular plant, or some kind of excretion.

The thin, conceptual connections between those things and the effect of the spell were used as a means of actualising the connections to such an extent that the object transformed into the spell's effect, being irreversibly lost in the process. That sort of transmutation was alien to Deh'ta, for it indicated an inability, a state of being that was lesser.

Yet there she was, making use of the ingenious tools that mortals had devised. Weaving the spell into a scroll allowed for the process of transmutation to be automated, in a sense, but also bypassed. Instead of requiring a particular ingredient or component, all that needed to be done was to unfurl the scroll and read aloud the words.

So she did. And the spell, having already been woven, transitioned from the reality of the scroll onto reality itself. Around the two of them a thin ring of shimmering, golden light appeared, almost as if it was painted onto the floor. As that happened, the scroll within Deh'ta's hands started crumbling to dust, and within less than five seconds it was gone completely.

"The spell is cast," stated the Goddess, looking at M'nous. She felt the effect of it, the tendrils of magic reaching for her mind and gently beginning the process of administering judgment, as it was according to her. No statements could be made by her or by him, so long as the speaker knew, or at least believed, that the statement being made was false.

"So it is," replied M'nous, completely unphased by it - in appearance, at least. However, due to the fact that she had been the one to cast it, she knew that he had allowed himself to be entwined in its coils just as she had. "Ask away."

"Is the memory you showed me your most treasured one?" Deh'ta inquired, doing as he bade her to. She did not like that she was following his orders, or that she was being given permission by him. However, she found herself far less bothered by it now - perhaps because of her knowledge that justice was served, and the portions were being doled out by the moment.

"Yes, it is," said the old man.

With that, Deh'ta's goal was completed. The role she had chosen to fulfill had no other reason to remain, or to make use of the spell that had been weaved. However, there was something inside the Goddess that spurred her on, that urged her to ask another question.

It was not curiosity, though. She did want to know the answer, but not because it would make her satisfied in some regard, no. It was because knowing the answer would make the future unraveling so much sweeter...

"Why?"

M'nous raised an eyebrow. He did not answer immediately, perhaps because he was confused at the question. After all, a question like that was not entirely dependent on one's truth; or, rather, a mortal was so meager and ineffectual at living that they failed to truly consider every moment of their existence as a God did. Thus, it was entirely possible that M'nous was just now deciding why it was that the memory of his farewell was his most treasured one.

“Why, indeed...” he said, leaning back into his seat and looking upwards. “Because it reminds me of the good in the world. Because each of my friends came from a different place, and yet they all managed to overcome their... Conditions and prejudices, they came together for a common, worthy goal.

“Because that memory reminds me of the truth - that mortals are not cruel or evil by nature, that they are simply... Nurtured into being such by their circumstances. That their circumstances are the products of not only other mortals, of their environments or even the Gods - no, they are also the product of their nature itself. Mortals are affected by their end, which they always must turn to and acknowledge, for it is a certainty that always defines the way they act.

“It is evident in many - those who live longer are able to acknowledge the influence of their circumstances and... Material conditions, and they come to understand others, and they note the value in the lives of others. Thus, that memory is treasured, for it was the... Culmination of our first step towards bettering the world, and now we reap the fruits of our sowing.

“But it also reminds me that there is far more work that needs to be done. It is a... Stark reminder that no matter how good mortals become to one-another, how well they treat illness and wounds, how rarely they kill one another... They will grow old. They will be afflicted by their age, and their minds and bodies will start slipping away from them... Until they simply cease to be.

“It is my most treasured memory, for it is the last time I was together with my friends. Death has separated us, even if there was no reason for it to do so. So much was taken from the world, so much was lost... Irreversibly. I am reminded of the reasons as to why I must do more, as to why my work is as important as it is...”

He finally teetered off, taking a deep breath and relaxing into his seat once more. Over the course of his answer, he had risen - almost as though he was about to stand up, his passion for what he was saying driving him forward. Even in his old age, no matter how haggard and decrepit he was, his intense will made him seem as though he was young and full of physical power, and his pathos was so intense that Deh'ta was reminded why it was that he was dangerous.

She remained silent for a while, expecting him to continue his speech, though it was relatively clear that he was done. He had said what he wanted to say, he had expressed his reasoning, and the fact that he had been able to do so, even in the zone of truth that had been created, indicated that he believed his words.

"I see..." Deh'ta muttered, and then ended the spell, severing the ring of light. Like a piece of string that had been ignited at the point where its two ends met and formed a circle, the illumination faded in a progressive manner until nothing was left. "Thank you for answering, sir. I will take my leave now, if you will allow it!"

"Of course I allow it!" Exclaimed M'nous, managing a smile. "I hope you were left... Satisfied by my answers."

"I was, sir!" She replied, bowing her head in a display of her gratitude and respect for him. All as part of maintaining the role. "Thank you again, sir!"

He sent her off with an appreciative nod and a renewed performance. The instruments piped up, coming back to life and singing their ghastly song. Deh'ta pursed her lips after turning around, feeling her disdain for the man grow even greater.

Judging from his answer, he genuinely believed what he was saying. He genuinely believed that he knew better than the Gods. Perhaps, as a mortal being, he could see the wisdom of the Gods' decisions as troublesome or restrictive, without being able to see the truth and necessity behind them. The Gods had made things as they were, because that was how they should have been, and there was no room for doubt.

Those who fostered any feeling of resentment for their current situation were, simply, unfit for it. M'nous, himself, was thus also unfit for his circumstances, regardless of the fact that he had managed to grow in power to such an extent that he could alter them - in so far as a mortal could. Only the Gods were more proficient in the alteration of reality and the elements of it that served as confines, for they truly could alter it - whereas a wizard, no matter how powerful, could only exist within the confines of reality, and could only alter elements within that.

As Deh'ta made her way out of the black fortress, a thought occurred to her. A spark of curiosity, one that would have been far more fitting for Ormus to experience, but regardless one that had shown itself to the Goddess of Life. How far would M'nous have been able to go, had they not acted to stop him? What would this man have been able to achieve?

Considering the fact that he was older than any other human, the answer should have been nothing. But Deh'ta had seen him, she had seen what he was capable of, and she knew that the defining trait of humanity was to will. To be, for a human being, was to want, and so the longer one lived the greater one's will became.

These thoughts were banished from Deh'ta's mind, as there was no point in engaging them. The fate of the wizard had been decided, and he was going to die before he could grow any more, as was proper.

She convened with Mohau and Lemah, sharing her observations regarding the progression of their plan, finding herself more and more excited to once again visit M'nous' black fortress, for she knew not what would happen to him. How, exactly, would the disease affect him? Even if she had no great certainty, she knew one thing - it would be terrible.

III

For her third visit, Deh'ta dressed herself in the skin of a man. She made him a priest, and marred his body with many imperfections. Then, slipping into a rough, burlap frock, she made her way to the dwelling of the wizard. Her movements were slow and deliberate, for she carried herself as though she had a lame leg, and the walking stick she made use of clanked whenever its tip came upon a stone.

Time had passed, and there she was, once again, standing before the great gate. The fortress was completely unchanged visually, but there was something about it that seemed different. Its darkness was seeping outwards, making everything around itself appear afflicted by a malaise. It did not simply spur things away from itself, it actively brought anguish... It was almost hostile.

Regardless, Deh'ta knocked upon the gate. Touching its surface, even if with only her knuckles, and even if only for a moment, was disturbing. A chill ran up her spine, making her feel uncomfortable and queasy. Sensations that were not naturally occurring within a God, ones that were clearly outside of the ordinary. M'nous was brazenly doing everything in his power, by the looks of things, to continue following his hubris.

Inflicting such things upon a random stranger, for that was what Deh'ta had appeared before him as, was troublesome. Allowing himself to make the enchantments on his fortress strong enough to affect even a God - that was far too much. It was as close to hostile action as he had gotten, and for a moment she thought that this was a warning sign.

So she pulled away. Half in preparation for an incoming attack, half out of her desire to keep playing her role. After all, knocking on a door was followed by that door opening, and it could easily open outwards, especially if one knew not in which direction it came unfurled. For the limping priest, the door was completely unknown.

Silence lingered. The creatures of the forest, which had previously been vocal enough to be audible, were nowhere to be found. The gate loomed over Deh'ta, the miasma seeping out of it, as though the door was a gaping maw, and it exhaled poisonous fumes. Then, a cry echoed from within.

"Whooooo seeeeeeks M'nouuuuuuus?" the voice of the wizard was carried by the wind, reminiscent of a growl, or, rather, a howl. It was combative, it hissed and tore itself as he spoke. There was a threat within it, as though the sheer act of seeking M'nous was some kind of transgression.

"I... Joachim!" She replied, her own voice coming out meek and weak. She had chosen that her role would be of a pathetic little priest, a man who had barely any reason to live, yet had found goodness in the embrace of the gods. One with a very dedicated soul and a pure heart, one who would not harm an ant. Thus, she spoke quietly, and upon her scarred face she wore unease and great shyness.

"Whyyyy seeeeeek M'nouuuuus, Joachiiiiim?" the wizard roared once more, and it seemed as though his howls were growing louder and louder with each word. Like some unnameable beast, he tore at his own throat with these questions, deafening and silencing anyone close enough to hear.

Deh'ta's ears were ringing, and she felt dizzy. Keeping herself upright with her cane, she managed to avoid falling to the ground. Half of this was, again, performance, but there was some honesty and genuineness in it. Even the most stable man could be made to wobble if he had not prepared himself.

"I seek... Wisdom!" She said after she regained her sense of hearing.

For a moment, there was silence. Then, with a thunderous crack, the doors came open.

"Enter!" Commanded M'nous from within the fortress, and Deh'ta hurriedly toddled forwards.

Concerningly, the doors closed behind her, leaving her in darkness. As soon as she noticed them moving, she slowed down, and came to a halt as they were shut completely. There was something wrong, but she could not tell exactly what it was. Thus, she put more effort into her disguise, into obscuring her being as best she could.

The darkness seemed alive, and within it moved shapes that were no less wrong than the one she had adopted. It hissed and stared at her, and tendrils made their way toward her, as if sampling her flesh, as if testing her. She grit her teeth and withstood this assault, for it had become clear what was behind it.

Cold, unwelcoming, averse to any visitors; the fortress had closed itself, mirroring its owner. M'nous, even without having been seen by Deh'ta, had revealed to her what she had wanted to know - the disease was progressing at an incredibly rapid pace. Soon, she wagered, even this combative front would be dropped. But for the moment, she had to contend with it, and so she started walking forward, braving the darkness.

Then, she saw it. In the distance, a faint light, flickering at the very edge of her vision. The priest Joachim was filled with momentary hope, and then started almost running towards it - almost, for he walked with a limp.

The darkness let up, allowing Deh'ta to enter the fortress in earnest. That was when she realized that there had been a roar deafening her as she wandered the darkness. A roar not like that of an animal, but like the billow of the wind, or the rush of blood in one's eardrums, so potent and intense that it drowned out all other noises.

Now, she was hearing a single sound. A sad, miserable little sound that seemed more pathetic than anything else. It was a single instrument, one of those M'nous had employed to artificially fill his fortress with song, but whatever user was wielding it was not very proficient. The same applied to the source of the light - it was not one of those floating, whimsical illuminants, but instead a crude, old torch, strapped to M'nous' seat.

The amounts of disorder present in the great hall were staggering. Tables strewn about in every possible direction, books and scrolls layered on the floor, some thrown in a fit of anger upon yielding no satisfying result, others simply falling as a result of being pushed aside in favor of some other read.

M'nous himself looked as though he had grown two times older. His face had sunken, in a manner similar to the face a mortal made when encountering deeply bitter tastes. His eyes were wide open and thoroughly bloodshot. Within them glinted madness.

"You!" M'nous exclaimed as he saw the priest Joachim, raising his right arm. His robe was different this time, even more flamboyant than the one he had worn during their previous meeting. "Who are you and why have you come?"

"I... I am Joachim, a priest of Lih've, and..." Deh'ta performed her role as earnestly as possible, but under the scrutiny of the wizard's maddened eyes she felt as though every single motion could break her disguise. "...And I've come to seek wisdom!"

M'nous furrowed his brows even more than they already were, which was surprising for the Goddess of Life, as that had appeared impossible. Then again, she had never seen a human being as old as him, so perhaps it was possible.

Regardless, she was captivated by his appearance. By the way he stared at her, by the fact that he was intently trying to read her, to unravel all of her mysteries, and it was not her disguise that was preventing him from being able to do so - no, there was something else. Perhaps it was concern, or maybe some unease that left him in a state of discomfort, as though he was seated in a bed of thorns and, for the life of him, he could not see anything amiss.

His eyes flicked to the side, glancing at something outside of Deh'ta's field of view. As he tried to decide what to do, she felt her heart lighten. The sight before her was absolutely mesmerizing, so much so that she had to constantly force herself into maintaining her disguise, for the immaculate pleasure she felt at seeing the enemy of the Gods in that state was unrivaled by anything else she had felt before.

He was sick. He was ill, irreversibly so, and he could *feel* it, but he could not tell what was wrong. He knew that something was amiss, he could see it in his hands, in his body, in the fortress itself. He could observe it even in the great difficulty he was experiencing with his concentration.

Deh'ta was so overwhelmed by joy, by gloating, that her jubilation started seeping out, threatening to envelop M'nous and improve his spirits; to, maybe, even cure him of his affliction.

"What wisdom would a servant of Lih've need from me?" asked the wizard, pursing his lips. He did not trust the priest Joachim, but the latter smiled broadly. That was, actually, Deh'ta's smile, for she could clearly see, with the loss of theatrics and good manners, that M'nous was no longer able to obscure his disdain for the Gods.

"The secret of life, master M'nous..." she stated, giving a small bow. He was hers. He was in her hands, and much like a ball of dough, she could do whatever she wanted with him. Maybe not yet - not just yet - but within less than a month, perhaps even after just a week!

"And what makes you think I know it?" M'nous inquired. His nostrils flared, as if out of indignation. If she could allow herself to speak, Deh'ta would have kept goading him into admitting that he had failed, that he had not uncovered the secrets of life and death.

"I have heard from many people that you know it. You have shown it to them, in a memory of yours - one of a farewell!" Exclaimed the priest Joachim, his eyes aflame with excitement. Much of it was Deh'ta's unbridled mirth, but some was his own. "Could you show it to me?"

M'nous raised one of his brows. Confusion, on the face of the most powerful wizard in the world? Uncertainty, in the most certain human to have ever lived? Deh'ta stifled a chuckle.

"Who could have told you such a story?" asked M'nous. "I haven't shared my... Memories, even though I could..."

“But master M’nous, why would they lie?” retorted Deh’ta, fighting off the urge to break into a dance. “A bard and a soldier told me. One had a scroll with the tale written upon it, while the other had cast a spell to confirm its truth!”

The wizard’s expression changed again. His brows were no longer furrowed, his eyes - no longer narrowed. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but could not find the words - or perhaps he simply knew not what to say. A pinch of fear lingered behind his shoulder, and Deh’ta was glad.

“Very... Very well, I... I may have done that,” muttered the man, sinking back into his seat - as if he was trying to make himself... Small? As if he was trying to push his back against whatever certainty he could still cling to? “But what use would you have of the... Secret of life?”

“I seek it to humble myself, master M’nous!” Exclaimed Deh’ta, looking at this tiny little man, at the miserable state that he was in. Oh, how sweet it was for her to see him as he was now! The incredible progression of the disease, the twists and turns of life itself! So miraculous was it all that only through her essence as a God could she understand what had transpired.

His knowledge and understanding of his predicament was so limited, too faint and insufficient for him to do anything, that he had clearly pulled himself back. M’nous had not just physically receded from the world, he had now mentally drawn himself as far away as possible. The fear that gnawed at him was tangible, and like ambrosia it dripped down his back, in the form of cold sweat, and gave itself fully to Deh’ta.

“To... Humble yourself?”

“Yes, to humble myself. I feel that I have become complacent, that I have grown too distant from my fellow man, that I am too comfortable with death. No longer do I truly live, master M’nous, and so I need help!” Deh’ta pulled at a number of strings. Whatever was left of the wizard - and there was still more that was present than what was lost - it clung onto the most fundamental things for him. And one of those he had shared with her during their last encounter... So it was completely understandable for her to make use of it, was it not?

“Is that... So?” mused M’nous, his fright and uncertainty momentarily receding, as though the opportunity to do as he desired had given him a breath of hope, a semblance of certainty and power. “Very well then, I shall show you my memory!”

And before she could do anything, Deh'ta found herself being pointed at by M'nous. It was his index finger, and it was directed at her forehead, and then it was as though she was touched by him.

Everything around her was enveloped in darkness, and she was falling. The wind billowed as it passed by her, her clothes flapped violently, and there was nothing in sight. Then, slowly, her eyes recognized certain things. There were clouds here and there, but they were very malformed and misshapen, very few in number. There was light emanating from somewhere far away, but it was so distant that it appeared to be lacking in concreteness.

It was as though there was a possibility of there being a light, but there was no certainty of its presence.

M'nous's form appeared next to her, his robe flapping in the wind with as much intensity as her own garments. His appearance was as haggard as it had been before, and there was something entirely off-putting about the expression on his face. There was certainty and comfort in it, but at the same time there was something else. That madness which had nestled itself within his eyes remained, and it coiled about his face, twisting his expression and distorting his visage. He roughly resembled himself, but not quite.

Then, they landed. In just the last moment, he took hold of her and slowed her fall, allowing her to wind up on her feet. Strange as it was, this was the same space - the clouds, the ever-darkening pit beneath them, the doors... But something was wrong.

"Is this your memory, master M'nous?" she inquired, looking around herself. No longer did it feel comfortable and cozy, no longer was the sensation of safety and splendor present. Instead, there was unease... Even something else, something that Deh'ta did not know and could not know.

"It... It is," he somberly replied. Just now she took note of his stance - whereas previously, whenever he had stood before her, his shoulders were broad, his back straight, his chest puffed out and his chin raised, now he seemed crushed. Slumped over, more reminiscent of a fishing hook than of the fishing pole, M'nous was defeated - or, at the very least, he was beginning to recognize his fall.

"What a miraculous place..." mused Deh'ta, taking note of the fact that there were some doors that were missing. No, not missing - because they were *there*, and there was no space between the doors to indicate that any were missing - but she could tell that there were fewer of them. Had he forgotten something? Or, better yet, was he in the process of forgetting?

Perhaps he had been unable to remember the visit from last week? Perhaps it was meant to be here, beyond one of the doors, but the disease had affected him thoroughly enough so as to make him forget? Indeed, without his knowledge, M'nous was just another man, and that confirmed what Ormus had said.

"Yes..." the wizard muttered, making a few steps toward a particular door. It looked different, markedly so - but it was still *the* door. He pushed the handle and pulled it open, revealing beyond it the fog... Which was now somewhat transparent. "Come, let me... Let me show you!"

She dove headfirst into the memory, the limping priest Joachim stepping upon the wooden surface of the bridge over the river. Deh'ta could not help herself, putting a hand over mouth as she gasped. Things were there - the house, the garden, the forest - but something about them was off.

M'nous of the present stepped next to her, and noted that she had placed a hand over her face. Whatever he interpreted that as, he did not react. Instead, he looked around himself - much like her - and let out a sigh.

Everything was bleak, as if the color had been drained from the memory. The vibrancy of the flowers, the magnificence of the sun's rays shining down upon the wizard's home - it was all faded, as if battered by a losing battle with time. The further away Deh'ta looked, the more obvious it became to her that the landscape dissipated into fog.

"This was my house," he said, pointing at the building. Calmly, he strode forward, still slumped over, as if he had a hump. Deh'ta expected to see Meydl jumping out from behind one of the bushes, holding the three flowers, but she did not do so. In fact, she noticed that there was no movement at all - nor was there any sound, aside from a deep, distant rumbling.

She stopped herself and looked at the river, only to realize that it was still. The wind was not blowing, no birds were chirping... Nothing was taking place at all. Only the fog slowly, unceasingly crawled towards the house. It was very, very far away right now, but it moved... And beyond it was nothing. Or, rather, it was nothing.

"That's a very nice house!" Exclaimed Deh'ta, tilting her head to the side. "Why, though, master M'nous, did you come to live in that dreadful fortress?"

"I..." M'nous pursed his lips, thinking. Then, he took hold of the door's handle and provided Deh'ta with entry into his home, shaking his head. "Times change. Come!"

She followed him inside, and her astonishment at the progression of the disease failed to leave her. Instead of the three friends of the wizard being there, alongside the past version of him, there was no one. Only phantoms, shapes that flickered in and out of sight, that stood still and were completely immobile, that were faint imitations.

They stood next to one another, looking at each other. Meydl, with an amalgamation of green draped over her. M'nous could not remember the finer details of her dress, nor could he remember the sequence of events, at least not clearly enough, as a result of which she simply stood there. The same applied to Eyngl and Do'st, who stared, with dead, empty eyes, at flowers in their hands. Blue and yellow...

"These are my dear friends," stated M'nous, coming to a stop in front of Meydl. She was holding the third flower, her arm extended towards the wizard. "And this memory of mine is... Well, us saying goodbye."

He licked his lips. Deh'ta stood, silently, taking the sight in. There was no dog. There was no peculiar stone container. There was no room opposite of the staircase at the bottom of the corridor.

"We had exchanged gifts," said the wizard, raising his hand and pointing at the bracelet on Meydl's wrist. It was that enchanted object he had presented her with. "Because we were not going to see each other again. We did not know that at the time, but..."

"But, well, it wound up being so. Me, Do'st and Eyngl gave her something, and then she... She granted us a flower, each. And she told us not to forget her."

M'nous went quiet then. He was facing Meydl, and his position was such that most of his face was not visible for Deh'ta, so it took him letting out a quiet, barely noticeable little gasp for her to notice. The greatest wizard in the world was crying.

The Goddess of Life realized that, had she been in his position, she, too, would have wept. After all, his punishment was as horrible and as severe as it could be made. He knew what was coming for him - he could tell that he would forget, yet even with that knowledge, even with the great number of things he knew beyond it, he simply could not do anything about it. And seeing as this, his most treasured memory, was so damaged by the disease, it was only a matter of imagining just how bad things were in regards to his other, less vital memories.

Taken by nothing. Completely lost - much like what he said happened when death reached a mortal. Deh'ta wanted to smile, but considering the situation at hand, it was most improper, and it would break

her disguise. How quaint, that he wept as what he knew would happen to all mortals was finally happening to him.

Instead of being grateful that the Gods had granted him such a long and prosperous life, he was filled with regret and sorrow. There was, undoubtedly, a very healthy amount of disdain, too. In his mind, in his limited little mortal brain, he somehow considered what was happening to him to be wrong, to be an evil thing.

Oh, how twisted he was, to consider any deed of the Gods evil. To put them under the same scrutiny as mortals put themselves to. Such hubris, to assume that these mortal concepts, of evil and good, could be applied to the Gods! Indeed, even in this weakened state of his, M'nous was drenched in faults.

"So that is the secret of life, huh..." Muttered Deh'ta, maintaining character. Whereas Joachim had been excited to see what was on offer, now that it had been revealed, and now that M'nous had reacted in the manner that he had, it was clear that things were not as rosy and wondrous as they had, at first, appeared.

"What?" the wizard turned around and regarded the lame-legged man. Tears lingered in his eyes, and his already ugly visage, made such by his age, was further pushed into being grotesque. The madness in his eyes was present, as was anger. Had he interpreted her words as mockery?

"I mean..." Deh'ta licked her lips. "I mean to say that the secret of life would be living for the sake of others. Even though your friends are gone, master M'nous, you have kept living for them. You have kept working as a means of honoring and remembering them, right?"

M'nous' features softened. He looked down, then back up at Deh'ta, then at the silhouettes of his friends. His lip quivered.

"I..." the wizard could not find the words. "I... I... I- Yes, yes, I suppose that's it!"

Suddenly, they were back in the fortress. M'nous' expression carried as much distress as it had accumulated during his reminiscence, but there was also something else written upon it. Again, it was that emotion, that sensation that Deh'ta could not know, that she had no facilities to even comprehend.

"There, I hope you're satisfied!" Announced M'nous, sniffing once.

Deh'ta looked at him. She looked at the enemy of the Gods and smiled.

"I am. Thank you, master M'nous!"

"Good, then get out of here!" Barked the wizard and waved his hand. The darkness in the corridor dissipated and the doors opened with a loud crash. The light seeping in from outside was pleasant and brought warmth - something that was sorely missed in the great hall.

"Thank you, master M'nous!" Exclaimed Deh'ta as she started hobbling towards the exit. "Farewell!"

He did not say anything to her, but she did not take offense to that. She wondered just how long would he remember the priest Joachim - or if he remembered him at all? She wondered just how soon would she be able to visit him again, and just how far would the disease have progressed? So much to share with Mohau and Lemah, such great news to bring to the Old God and all her siblings!

Upon walking out of the black fortress, the gates slammed themselves shut behind her, passing at just a hair's length away from her. The din of their closure echoed, though no living thing reacted to them. Indeed, M'nous' black fortress was slowly becoming his tomb...

The news of the disease's progression was joyfully accepted by all who heard of it. Some of the Gods congratulated her on a job well done, others expressed great pleasure at the fact that there had been no reason to worry about M'nous in the first place - for, after all, he was a mortal. In truth, there was nothing that he could find that would allow him to change things. Others were less enthusiastic - though they all were appreciative in some regard.

Even the Old God, who rarely gave praise, was left impressed.

"Such an intelligent solution to the problem - and not just this particular problem, but also future problems of a similar variety!" He exclaimed, looking at Mohau, Lemah and Deh'ta. His eyes shone like lightning, and his smile was intoxicating. "I am proud, my children, proud!"

And he embraced each of them, and the Gods organized a great feast. They drank and ate; they danced, sang songs, played games, and enjoyed themselves so thoroughly that - as is customary - the festivities continued on into the next day, and the night after that, and so on until one of them decided to leave.

Normally, that would be Lih've, for he had decreed that his duties were more important than even the greatest joys the Gods were privy to. However, this time it was Deh'ta who wound up departing. After

seven days and seven nights; of ceaseless debauchery and merriment, she found herself unable to satisfy the itch that had remained within her.

That incessant curiosity regarding the fate of M'nous, the total degradation and downfall that he was to experience - she craved to see it, for it was a facet of life that was so incredibly potent, so incredibly indicative of life, that it would be wrong of her not to do so.

Thus, upon the dawn of the tenth day, Deh'ta rose from the countless pillows strewn about the forest clearing, gave her beautiful siblings one last glance - many of them still locked the pleasures of the festival - and departed.

This time, she concluded that she could be as brazen as she desired. So she decided to appear before M'nous in an authentic form of hers, one that did not aim to mislead him. She would go to him as Deh'ta, Goddess of Life, clad in naught but a simple white dress, her golden locks framing her perfect face, topped off by a laurel wreath.

In her footsteps followed all sorts of creatures, be they great or small, ferocious or timid. Where her bare foot fell, life sprouted. Lush, green grass, adorned by flowers with petals so vibrant they seemed impossible. The procession followed her until she could see M'nous' fortress, at which point she bade them leave her. After all, it was a tomb.

Upon walking up to the gates of his black fortress, her radiance met no resistance. It became clear to her that he was no longer projecting his power. This place was nothing but a building now.

Expecting to have been noticed, she was made to wait a bit too long. Around her sprouted vegetation that grew and grew, bushes and trees so great and mighty that they wound up obscuring the fortress from view. Then, she walked up to the gate and knocked.

It echoed. Not because she had applied a great force, or because she had willed it to, no. It did so because the fortress was empty, and it was void of that which had made it what it was, previously. Currently, as she stood before its great gates, she felt absolutely nothing emanating from within. The imposing presence, the effect that urged all to veer to the side and pass it by - those were gone.

What was left was a hunk of matter, so indeterminate that it was difficult to attribute any sort of being to it. Then, a sound reached Deh'ta's ears - footsteps. From within the fortress she heard someone walking, dragging their feet over the smooth floor and approaching the gates. Amused, she took a few steps back.

The one approaching drew ever closer, until one of the gates opened, pushed by a miserable creature that resembled someone the Goddess of Life had seen recently.

It was M'nous - old, decrepit and filthy. His robe was soiled and he reeked. His face was adorned by a vacant expression, even if his eyebrows rose and his eyes widened in a display of surprise at the sight of her. His movements were sluggish, almost as if he was struggling with the most basic things.

In his eyes there was nothing of what once had been present. The smoldering coals had been replaced with glazed orbs, radiating uncertainty, discomfort and even fear. Everything that happened, everything that he saw, left him in a state of confusion and befuddlement, as if he had no idea how to react or what to do.

Even now, as he leaned against the open door and looked at Deh'ta in all her glory, his mouth agape and eyes opened wide, he could not find a set of words to use. Perhaps he had completely lost his ability to speak, or perhaps he had lost his senses and did not know what to do in this situation.

"Greetings, M'nous..." she said, reveling in the immensity of the gap between them. It was so refreshing to stand before him in the fullness of her being, to not obscure herself and her sublime beauty. To be true to who and what she was, rather than draping herself in a mortal coil and pretending.

What was even more exhilarating was the fact that he no longer stood where he had before. No longer did he have any claims, be they verbal or mental, to be at a level similar to hers. Whereas his power had impressed her and spelled danger, now it was nowhere to be found. Now, he was exactly what he was supposed to be - a worm at her feet, incapable of anything but eating and excreting his food.

"H-Hello?" he replied, his voice cracking. Of course he had not spoken to anyone since she last came... And she had been hopeful that he had forgotten how to speak at all. Though, at the same time, looking at him, listening to him speak, observing his mannerisms - which were somewhat reminiscent of a child's - was interesting.

"May I come in?" Deh'ta asked, smiling widely. Her joy was contagious, and the radiance of her being clearly soothed his anguished mind and body - and she did not mind, for she was merciful. After all, in his final moments, who but the Gods could give him the comfort he so desperately desired? Who, but the ones he had wronged, could present him with kindness?

He nodded and stepped back, allowing her to enter the black fortress. Setting foot within the structure, without hiding, was a victory in and of itself... But there was more to it. She felt a very peculiar scent - that of smoke, of burning wood and paper. At the same time, she felt a chill trying to envelop her.

“Can you show me your library, M’nous?” she asked him, for he was simply standing there, looking at her. Deh’ta suspected that, had she not inquired and prodded at him with her words, he would have simply gawked for a while longer and then walked off. He would have not greeted her, that was a certainty, and he would not have invited her in.

“Y–yes!” He exclaimed and turned around, setting off down the corridor. The wizard evidently intended his movement to be swift, but his decaying body could not sustain anything faster than a hobble, and so he moved slowly, helping himself maintain his balance by leaning against the wall.

Deh’ta was in no hurry. She watched, taking in the sight, enjoying it fully. Throughout the entire walk from the entrance to the great hall, M’nous neither looked at her, nor did he say anything. He was absorbed by his thoughts, or whatever it was that was going through his horribly addled mind, and it appeared as though he had barely any object permanence... To him, Deh’ta was not there, even though her bare feet made a sound as she stepped, even though her radiance illuminated the dark corridor, even though her presence itself brought warmth to the fortress.

He started humming a melody. Very faintly, and interrupted by his inhalations, but it was one that the Goddess of Life recognized. It was the motif of the song performed by the instruments he had animated with his will - which were now splayed in their niches and were silenced forever. M’nous walked into the great hall, and the sight that revealed itself explained everything.

One of the bookshelves was burning. Another one had burned down already. The torch that had been strapped to M’nous’ seat had burned out, and there were many indications of fires on the floor. They overlapped with the positions of the tables that had been present during Deh’ta’s last visit.

Smoke reached up to the ceiling and painted those few elements that were not already black... Though it did not linger for too long, as if there was a system in place that would allow it to dissipate. A chimney, perhaps, or a network of such things? Regardless, Deh’ta was pleased, for in his current state, M’nous could have easily died from suffocating himself with the flame’s smoke.

“Are you cold?” she inquired, looking at the burning shelf. The wizard stopped, then turned around and regarded her. He was surprised by her presence and by the fact that she was speaking to him.

“Yes... It is cold,” the man confirmed, continuing to look at her. Was he captivated by her perfect visage, or was it her presence’s effect on him? Perhaps it was both, perhaps it was neither. Deh’ta waved her hand and a gust of wind put the fire out. She turned to M’nous and smiled.

“Well, shouldn’t you sit down on your chair?” the Goddess of Life suggested through a question, glancing at M’nous’ seat. He followed her gaze, letting out a gasp of recognition, as though he was in agreement with her.

As he started wobbling over to it, she wondered if he had not already reached the disease’s heights. After all, what more could it do? Would it completely take away his ability to move, to eat and care for himself? Would it totally silence him? If so, would he truly die from the disease, or would his death be caused by dehydration or starvation? For, if he could not satiate himself, he would surely die.

Perhaps that was how the disease was intended to end him, though, and it was a truly elegant approach. It would not be someone else that killed him, no, it would be he, himself, who brought about his own demise, for he was not being stopped by anyone, he was not being forced to starve. His great efforts were, ultimately, rewarded with a death that would come about due to the fact that he had put no effort in. Poetic.

The old man reached his seat and made himself comfortable. He sank into it, and the amount of him that remained visible was surprisingly small. That indicated to Deh’ta that he was already malnourished, that he had stopped feeding himself properly - perhaps because he no longer felt hunger at all, perhaps because his body had finally realized it was time for him to die.

“Say...” she probed, walking up to his seat and leaning against it. He was looking at her, having craned his neck to be able to take in the entirety of her visage. So beautiful was she that even in his sullen, dying eyes her magnificent appearance was reflected. “Why don’t you show me one of your memories?”

M’nous did not react verbally. He did, however, lower his head. He stopped looking at her, and instead stared at his hands. She smiled, allowing herself to lie down upon the air, treating the backrest of his chair as a pillow which her arms wrapped around. Her feet sprang up, playfully kicking at nothing every now and then.

The weight that hung over this little man was so great, so overwhelming that it made everything else around him seem as light as a feather. Deh’ta chuckled.

“You know, maybe that one memory...” she mused, goading him to act. “The farewell...”

“Are you sure?” he asked, slightly surprising her. His voice was still minuscule, but the fact he understood her and knew what she spoke of indicated that there was some resistance to the disease, even now.

“Of course!” Deh’ta exclaimed, dropping one of her hands down and hovering it next to his face. “Should we hold hands?”

He pursed his lips. His brows furrowed, but not in an angry manner. It was the type of motion that came with the onset of tears, as if he was about to start crying. But he did not. Instead, he took her by the hand and slowly, almost sluggishly, everything around them was overwhelmed by fog. Replaced by it...

Until they stood in front of a door. Around them was darkness - not a pure, inky blackness, but one that was very reminiscent. In truth, it was as though a moonless, starless night had descended upon M’nous’ mind, and aside from the cloud they stood upon, there was nothing else. Even the source of light that was potentially there was no longer present. Instead, it was Deh’ta who illuminated everything and, in a sense, allowed it to be.

She looked at M’nous, and it was clear to her that even here he was confused and lost. He glanced around himself, placed his hand over one of the few remaining doors - for this time there were truly doors that were missing. Some had crumbled, leaving only their frames. Others looked worn and damaged by time, covered in moss and cracks. Third had fallen over, ajar and leading nowhere or closed and difficult to open.

Out of all of them, however, seeped fog. Like the smoke that the flames in the black fortress were producing, it moved upwards, seemingly disappearing into the indeterminate distance of M’nous’ mind. But the fog was not dissipating - it remained and it obscured things.

“Through which door, M’nous?” she coyly asked, pretending that she did not recognize the marking on one of the few doors that remained whole. He glanced at her, then looked around himself. His eyebrows were raised, showing off his befuddlement, and it was clear that he could not tell.

Deh’ta allowed him to wallow in that emotion of his. In fact, the entirety of his mind was flooded by it - but, initially, the Goddess of Life had been unable to notice it, due to the fact that her own happiness was so heightened and so outwardly directed that it was drowning it out. Now that she took the time to take things in, she reckoned that it was the only thing he felt.

It was like fear, but not quite. Fear was something relatively concrete, something that had a source which could be identified. M'nous was overwhelmed by something akin, but slightly different. The distinction was very faint, but also very macabre. Very eerie and subtle, swollen with viciousness.

Perhaps it was an entirely human emotion, perhaps it was something shared by all mortals, but Deh'ta did not know. For, after all, she was no mortal, and it was not in her nature to feel such things. She did, however, have the ability to discern whether this was something that animals experienced, and it was not. That made it all the more interesting to her, for it was a facet of life she had been so rarely exposed to... But her time with this man was limited, and so she turned, regarding the proper door.

"Is it this one?" the Goddess of Life asked, pointing at it with a finger. After presenting her question, she looked back at M'nous, tilting her head to the side and smiling coyly. He nodded.

She liked this reactive, docile version of the wizard. It was such a nice contrast to the pro-active, commanding man he had been before, taking the reins and deciding how things would be done. Now that he was so meek, Deh'ta could do whatever she wanted with him. She could be herself, truly.

He hobbled over to the door and took hold of the handle. A grimace momentarily shadowed his face as he attempted to open it by pushing, but she intervened, placing her palm over his fingers and pulling. The door creaked open, and a thick blot of fog burst forth. She chuckled, waving an arm about to make it dissipate, while M'nous looked through the frame.

Deh'ta took an interest as well, and leaned in to see. The fog was both transparent and incredibly thick. The memory had been washed away, or washed into his consciousness in a manner similar to how paints were mixed, leaving very little of what it had been before. Still, it was there - though the darkness that enveloped everything was even more unsettling than the one present in his mind.

She nudged him with her hand, and he walked forward, entering. Deh'ta stepped in as well, and found herself in a deafeningly quiet, nearly empty space.

It was nighttime... Or, at least, so it seemed to be. They stood in front of a wooden house, which was also a tree, but also distinctly a house, yet at the same time it was both and neither. There were impossible to describe plants in front of the house; not impossible for their quirkiness, but for their smudged forms in his mind

They seemed to be so far away that their features could not be discerned, even if they were within arm's reach. The same applied to almost everything else that Deh'ta could see - it was simultaneously right in front of her and also almost far enough away to be invisible, to merge with the horizon and disappear.

M'nous stood, watching the house. Whatever was it that went through his mind at this moment, wondered the Goddess of Life? The bewildered expression on his face did not convey much, but there were a few faint inklings of feeling. Perhaps there was recognition, perhaps there was sadness, but they were all so tiny when juxtaposed with the overwhelming confusion that it was easy to dismiss them as facets of it.

"Shouldn't we go in, M'nous?"

He nodded, and once again put a hand on the door's handle. He pushed, and it gave way, coming open. The inside of the house was far less concrete than the exterior, however.

Deh'ta watched as M'nous stumbled inside, his feet completely covered by the thick fog that clung to the floor, the ceiling and even the walls. There was no sign of anything - no shelves, no containers, no dedicated kitchen. There were no seating arrangements, there was no table, there were no windows.

She put her hand against the wall and waved it about rapidly, making the fog give way for a moment, revealing beneath it a *surface*. It was... It *was* reminiscent of brown in color. It was not color, nor was it a real surface. That, which was beneath the fog, was exclusively the reminiscence of brown. The very being of things had become unclear to M'nous, she realized. As her hand stopped waving, the fog rushed in and covered the surface up.

The Goddess of Life was astonished by the sight before herself, by the difference that was so clearly observable. The loose outlines of the chamber were the same as those she had previously seen, but everything else was missing. No, it *could* have been here - there was enough fog to obscure everything that had been present, though at the same time there was, clearly, nothing in the room.

All that remained was the staircase leading up, the mirror next to it, and a shape that stood next to M'nous. There was nothing concrete about that silhouette, but there were loose indications that it was a humanoid form. It had appendages and a stance that resembled a person... And it held, in its one outstretched *hand*, a flower.

A blue and yellow flower. A mouse's ear.

“What is that, M’nous?” asked Deh’ta, taking a few steps closer. She noted that her reflection appeared in the mirror, and she was radiant and beautiful, almost to the point that she was blinding even to herself. But she could not see M’nous - though that could be owed up to his position and the angle at which she was looking at the mirror.

“A... A flower,” he stated, looking at the vibrant petals.

It was a bit odd that the myosotis was so clearly the same as it had been the very first time she had seen it, but it made sense for it to be such. After all, it had been delivered with the demand that the deliverer not be forgotten. Ironical, considering that neither Meydl, nor Do’st or Eyngl were here. There was an amalgamation of the three of them, perhaps, present in that shape, the extended arm of which presented the flower.

M’nous was still looking at the mouse’s ear, but that, albeit curious, was not the most intriguing thing for Deh’ta at the moment. No, that was the mirror.

“Come, M’nous!” She urged, walking forward. The wizard was just about to reach for the flower when the Goddess of Life swept him up with her left arm, holding him by the shoulder. She thought to herself about just how tiny he was as she led him to stand in front of the mirror.

There, she was rendered speechless. Although in her hands she held him, one on each shoulder, and she loomed over him, her blonde locks framing his face and her chin right above his head, he was not in the mirror. Deh’ta was present there, having been smiling so far, only for her eyes to widen, just a smidge, and her mouth to come slightly ajar.

But M’nous was not in the mirror.

He did not seem to notice, or at least care. He was looking at Deh’ta’s reflection, enraptured by her beauty, but for her his absence was everything!

“Oh, M’nous, how great a delight you bring me!” She exclaimed, wrapping her arms around him in an embrace. Indeed, he made her rejoice; for he had forgotten himself, or, at the very least, lost his sense of self.

There was no longer a man named M’nous. Perhaps he could no longer effectively make the distinction between himself and the other, or maybe he simply could not construct himself out of what he knew - for did he even know anything at all?

He knew what a flower was, and he could react to words that were spoken, but he, himself, did not speak - not of his own accord. Perhaps, had Deh'ta not pointed at what she was referring to and had she not guided him verbally, they would still be at the gates of the black fortress, looking at one another.

Would he do anything of his own accord? Would he leave this memory, or would he remain within it until he perished?

She let go of him and made a few steps rearwards, leaning against the wall of fog. She was enveloped in the gray *thing* that was not even a thing, and looked at him. For a bit longer, he continued staring at her reflection in the mirror, though, then, he turned around.

His eyes scanned the room, his face wan, his manner furtive. At that point, he once again caught sight of the flower. It was the only thing that featured color in his memory, aside from Deh'ta, though she was not part of the memory... Even if it was incredibly difficult to discern those two things from one another. After all, seeing as he had no concept of his own self, or that the concept in question was hemorrhaging content at a rate greater than what could be generated, it would be difficult to consider what was a memory and what was actual.

The Goddess of Life watched as he made a pusillanimous step towards the humanoid shape, like a moth drawn to a flame, and even extended his hand. M'nous took hold of the flower and as he did so, the silhouette started emitting fog. To the wizard, that was no longer something at all, she concluded, and so... It became fog. It became nothing.

The old man held the flower in his bony, spot-covered hands. His fingers were reminiscent of twigs, and so there was some odd kind of harmony in the sight, but the fact that he was looking at it, mouth slightly open, a trickle of saliva making its way down its side, eyes staring blindly at the mouse's ear... That did not mesh well with the painting.

Deh'ta raised her own hand and put a finger up to her lips. She was not thinking, nor did she feel the need to be coquettish, yet there was an exhilaration within her, a pressure that needed to be, somehow, lessened.

He remained in that state of observation, of contemplation, even, for a long while. The only thing that moved were the tendrils of the fog and his body, with each breath he took. He was wheezing.

Then, he closed his mouth, swallowed the saliva that had been pooling in it, and looked upwards. His eyes missed her - or, perhaps, intentionally passed by her. Instead, M'nous directed his gaze towards the staircase. Deh'ta watched, intently, as the wizard started walking, making his way to the first step, while holding the flower in his left hand, squeezing it tightly.

He kept himself stable with his right appendage and started going up the stairs, slowly... He started humming that same melody from his trip to the great hall; for, in truth, he had gone back to the great hall from the gate by himself. It was now clear to the Goddess of Life that he had forgotten that she was present, both back then and now.

As he climbed up the stairs, she followed, but kept her distance. Her curiosity was far too great to allow her to interfere in any way at all, and so Deh'ta observed. M'nous reached the second floor and walked out onto the platform. There were three doors on the walls, one right next to the flight of stairs, another opposite of it, and a third which, paradoxically, was situated right on top of the door through which entrants would come into the house, though there was neither a balcony nor a room above the entrance.

Deh'ta watched as, in his stupor, M'nous stopped moving and looked around. Somehow, this place was new to him - so much so that it was as though he had never seen it before, even if it was in his mind. She reasoned that it was an amalgamation of locations he had seen before. Maybe the layout was taken from one building, while the materials out of which the walls were constructed from, another...

Regardless, the human mind, even when under such duress, was astounding. Deh'ta could see the immense desire within him to simply keep on being, to remain alive, which clashed so thoroughly with his body, which was already dying and had decided to expire. Such a contradiction brought about an exalted sensation of pleasure.

M'nous tried the door closest to him, but it did not budge. He pushed, he pulled, yet it remained solid, as though it was part of the very wall. The old man let go of the handle and looked around again, eyes locking onto the other door. Deh'ta watched as he wobbled over to it, grabbed the handle, pulled, pushed, and then made a step backwards. There was a measure of disappointment in his eyes, but it was so faint that it was only knowable to the Goddess of Life. Any other observer would have only been able to discern that there was confusion and distress.

Then, the last door - the one that should have led nowhere - opened. What was beyond it featured a corridor that was remarkably filled with color and texture. There was no fog present in it - and even the wisps that fluttered about as M'nous walked in failed to enter alongside him.

Deh'ta followed, wondering what this was. The walls, floor and ceiling were reminiscent to those of the wizard's house, at least as it had appeared in the first recollection of the memory she had beheld. However, there was more to it, even if she could not exactly tell what it was.

There was a feeling now. M'nous' memory carried with it a sensation, which was not that overwhelming, stifling thing, unknowable to Deh'ta, no. It was a recognizable calmness, a serenity, the relief that one experienced upon laying down after a lengthy day of hard work.

So, he was actually dying, and the disease had progressed to its peak - all of that while Deh'ta had been present and observing... That made her glad that she had left her siblings and had come here, for now she could see the final stage. M'nous would lose absolutely everything. All of it, with no exception. Even the flower that he clutched so tightly in his hand would fade away...

And when it was all gone, he would, for a single moment, be given all of it back, so that as he died he might know what had transpired and be filled with the greatest anguish to have ever been experienced by a living being.

As the Goddess of Life considered those things, the furtive old man reached the end of the corridor. There on the walls were mounted paintings, beneath them rested potted plants of many varieties, and a single mirror faced the new arrivals. M'nous was nowhere to be seen in it, while Deh'ta was present and accounted for.

Right in front of the mirror stood a small shelf, with a number of spherical, colorful stones, each no bigger than the tip of M'nous' thumb. Oddly enough, they failed to get the wizard's attention, even if their vibrancy indicated to Deh'ta that he would react to them in a manner similar to how he had reacted to the mouse's ear.

What did provoke him into acting was the object in the middle of all this - a bed. It was a simple bed, featuring a wooden frame and, upon it, a mattress that was wrapped in a white sheet. Above that was splayed a red quilt, topped off with a puffy white pillow. For a mortal, this was as comfortable as it would get, and the old man seemed to be in great need of comfort.

Thus, without even a moment of consideration, he walked up to the left side of the bed. First, he placed his right hand on it, pushed himself onto it, then shuffled until he was laying on the quilt. For a little while longer, he adjusted himself, ultimately coming to rest in a simple position. Legs splayed a bit, each foot pointing towards its respective corner of the bed, while his arms were resting over his chest, hands clutching at the flower.

He stayed like that, all the while the fog licked at the frame of the door through which they had entered. Slowly, it would fill this chamber as well, until even he, himself, was dissolving into nothingness.

Then, Deh'ta was no longer with him. She was leaning over his chair, back in the black fortress, looking at his seated form. His dull eyes did not see anything. His mouth was ajar, and he was not moving at all. The only thing that indicated he was alive was the wheezing accompanying his every breath.

The Goddess of Life moved, repositioning herself so as to be standing before him. Now it was time to wait, to look deeply into his empty eyes until the moment presented itself. There would be a flash of insight, followed by immeasurable distress... And then death.

The Flight of M'nous

At first, it was as though there was nothing. Not in the sense that there was nothing, but in the sense that nothing was left. There was no primordial emptiness, no pure being that was void of anything, which could act as the basis for the creation of all that would be; no, there was, simply, nothing.

It was impossible to tell why it was so, and where all that had once been had gone, but it was not present. There was, simply, nothing, and there were no avenues for the being of anything. There were no tools at one's disposal which could be used to recognize something - for there was no seeing, no hearing, no tasting, no smelling, no sensing. As there were no such things - and even the concepts for the existence of them were so muddled that they were less existent than otherwise - there was no potential for the existence of anything.

In fact, there were no concepts, either. There were flashes of potentialities that illuminated his mind for a moment, but they were so inconclusive and so malleable that they had no concreteness to them, no form. There was simply some matter that could be interpreted or interacted with in some manner, but when there was nothing he could do about it - much less define these blotches of matter - there was nothing for him to do.

The sheer concept of him was also very muddy, as was the idea of a thing being muddy, or a thing itself. Faintly, incredibly faintly, there was something that indicated something, something that was positioned somewhere, in such a manner, that it was presupposed by everything else, but it was so distant and so faint that it was more akin to not being there.

M'nous was not. He could not be, for he had lost all that had once been him. He had lost all of his memories - his lived experience. However, by losing that, he had not just lost moments of some kind of history, he had lost the knowledge to wield himself, or to even perceive himself.

Without knowing how to move his arms and legs, without the knowledge of how to speak or what language was at all, without the ability to frame things, he was unable to have even himself. So little he knew, in fact, that he had forgotten how to see, how to hear or how to sense. He knew so little that he could not even think, nor did he have the ability to learn how to.

A formless chaos. A blinding light. An all-consuming darkness. What it was, he could not tell. He had no ability to conceptualize, to consider, to contemplate. He was not even him.

And there was no feeling, aside from a peculiar sense, which came from nowhere, but also from everywhere, all at once. It did not actually come from anywhere - it was, simply, everywhere. And it was constant, or, rather, it was the only thing that was. It was everything. However, due to the fact that it was everything, he could not know it, he could not describe or define it. It was just a feeling...

Yet, at the same time, it was knowledge. He knew something - and he knew everything, for he knew that feeling - and that, which he knew, was that something was missing. What, exactly, was it that was missing, he could not know, nor could he even conceptualize it. For, after all, everything was everywhere. Could something be missing from everything? No, for it would not be everything. But he did not know that. He had no capacity to reach that statement. That claim was impossible to make, as was any other.

Then, he suddenly made it.

As if at once, without any delay, everything became clear to him. To M'nous. He recognized that this sense was one of loss, for something was missing, and he recognized that he had been in unbelievable agony throughout the entire duration. But as that came back to him, everything else also did.

All that he had done, all that he had been, all that he had learned, all that he had experienced. His eyes were open and they saw, once again. His ears could hear, his nose could smell, his tongue could taste, his body could sense, and so could he.

And within that singular instant, he heard his wheezing breath, he smelled his frame, soiled by his incontinence. He felt his grimy skin, unwashed for weeks on end, and he felt his clothes brushing against it. He tasted his saliva, and its taste surprised and shocked him, for he had never truly tasted it and known its taste.

M'nous also saw. He saw himself in the mirror, laying on a bed, holding onto a flower - a myosotis. He saw that he was somewhere he had never been before, and yet he knew exactly where he was. In that instant, during which everything came back to him, he realized what had happened.

He knew now that it had been Deh'ta who had come to him before, clad in the forms of people, and she had done something to him. He had felt the strangeness, he had been concerned by it, but he had been unable to find a source, and so he had been unable to deal with it.

The wizard also knew that he was dying. That was known to him as soon as his reason came back to him, before even a moment had passed. So much was known to him in that single moment that to process it

would take hours, maybe days, but he knew that he had no time. For, indeed, up until that point there was everything, and now, too, there was everything, but it was at the very end of time.

M'nous was going to be dead in one second, maybe a bit longer than that. His body was frail and broken, without having been exposed to the harshness of the elements or to any kinetic force that would leave it such. He could barely move himself, even if he tried, and he knew that without moving a muscle.

A wave of desperation overwhelmed him, as he came to terms with the truth of his situation. His great task had failed, and his hopes for the future were thoroughly dashed. He would leave all mortals to a fate worse than the one that would have awaited them had he not acted, for he felt, within himself, the source of the disease that had gnawed at his mind and had killed him.

And he knew that it was of himself. It was in his nature, as a mortal being, to succumb to it. It was so clearly part of him, written in the vast scroll of his fate, that he realized he had been unable to see it because he had been blinded by the conception that he had known his own nature...

But he had known it. To know one's nature was the first step to being able to do what he had done, so there was something else. Deh'ta, who had brought this disease to him, had not brought it to him alone. She had not infected him, no. She had changed the nature of all mortal beings, and had given them this quirk.

M'nous could not allow this. To torment him and kill him for his hubris, so be it - he had earned that much, he deserved it. But no other mortal had done as he had, and no other mortal had any right to be afflicted by this. All his life he had worked, tirelessly, to ensure that the lives of his fellows would be better, but if, ultimately, his existence ended with the condemnation of all mortal beings to grow old and be tormented by what he was going through?

He would not allow it.

The wizard, although dying and completely bereft of energy, formulated a plan. With his will he would prop himself up so that he may leave his memory, so that he may leave his mind. He had to do that quickly, so that he could prolong the measly remainder of his life through the use of his magic and his will. The cost that would be exacted would be terrible, but far more terrible would the future be if he were to not act.

His hands moved, and his time started flowing. The sands in the hourglass, the three-or-so little shards made their way through the hole, one by one.

M'nous propped himself up and sat up, his frame wracked by agony. He grit his teeth, he furrowed his brows, and he willed himself to move. Such was the immensity of his command that it was not his body that moved, but his mind that grabbed his body, as if with a large number of invisible hands, and dragged each component to where it had to be.

He got off the bed, landing on his feet, but they could not support him. The wizard started falling, however his hand found purchase upon the shelf in front of the mirror. It slammed against it with great force, and the colorful stones were thrown in disarray. They were scattered, not through his mind - for in that very moment he was pulling himself outside of himself - but into the world itself.

Deh'ta was looking at him, ten feet away. Her beautiful blue eyes were locked onto his own, and her vibrance was something to behold. From her stay in his fortress, for what must have been at least a few days, so much life had sprouted around and within it, that he could feel it.

She was surprised, but before her eyes could fully widen as her expression changed, he was propping himself up, standing up from his chair.

The first horrible spell he would weave found its way onto his mind. Those countless, invisible hands that held his body let go for just a moment, as their fingers grasped the strings of magic and quickly, within an instant so short that it could not be perceived, fashioned the perverse tapestry.

Such mastery he wielded, still, over the arts of magic that this evil he was unleashing upon the world was a complex network of others. First, all life around him, save for that of mortals who thought according to the mechanisms of his own thought, would be ripped from the bodies of those who housed it. As it was being ripped from them, it would be obscured, coated in a darkness that even M'nous could not see through.

Since it was hidden and unobservable, it would be changed. Following the principle of superposition, it would be in all the possible states that it could be in... But also linked to him. And through the principle of entanglement, when revealed, this energy, this life-force would come to be in such a state that would change the state of M'nous' own, ultimately sustaining it.

A dreadful, deafening roar echoed through not just his fortress, but the forest around it as well, as all life was violently torn from its inhabitants. The trees wilted and died within an instant, the animals were turned into empty husks, the insects were smashed into paste that evaporated before the process of their bodily compression was even complete.

And M'nous knew he would spend a bit more time dying than he would have otherwise.

Deh'ta's hand was aflame with magic, as she had managed to negate the effect of his spell on herself. However, the disgust on her face indicated that she was thoroughly shocked and appalled by his deed. He, himself, was not pleased either - for it was a great evil that he had performed, but it gave him time.

Another spell was woven by the now countless invisible hands that swarmed about him. Time seemed to stutter, as he made himself as fast as the sun's rays themselves. Deh'ta, on account of being Goddess of Life, could still keep reacting to him, as well as perceive him, but nowhere near as quickly as he could act.

A thought occurred to M'nous. If he was to die, his fortress would remain here. Its secrets - these terrible spells he had devised - would be accessible to all who could enter. Thus, he had to hide it, but to do so he had to remove Deh'ta from the premises.

He pointed at her with his right hand's index and middle finger. The wizard willed her dead for the unfathomable cruelty she had displayed by changing the nature of all mortal beings, but he doubted his ability to bring that desire to fruition. No matter how violently his will burned, no matter how blinding and all-consuming it was, no matter how powerfully it radiated from him at this very moment, tempered by his acceptance of his own death and the recognition of his own failure, it was not enough to kill a God - especially not the Goddess of Life.

Still, M'nous weaved the spell. All matter between the tips of his fingers and the wall of the black fortress, situated behind Deh'ta, was heated up. Not by a little, but by a quantity so great it would have been outmatched only by Kempu, Goddess of Fire. Still, it made everything between those two points hot enough to melt into its liquid form and evaporate into its gaseous form.

The affected area turned white from just how intense the heat was, as a swirling, curved line burst forth from his fingers and disintegrated everything in its path. Even the wall of the black fortress was torn open, becoming gas that, considering how hot it was, flew rearwards with such speed that it was spread over the entirety of the world.

Deh'ta's left arm and the better part of her chest were replaced by a circular, gaping hole, while the rest of her combusted. The kinetic energy released by the rapid heating was directed, by the spell itself, rearwards, and so the Goddess of Life was propelled through the hole at a speed that would break the bones of any mortal that experienced it.

Another spell he weaved, as he grabbed himself with his invisible hands and moved himself forward. Everything around and inside the fortress was dead, and he needed to siphon more life-force to prolong his stay. Just as he was outside of his abode, it was swallowed up by nothing, and disappeared without a trace. He caught up to Deh'ta's fluttering form and looked at her, and he sought the seed of the change his nature had gone through within her.

She was linked to it somehow, but it was not within her. Again, those invisible hands that were free spurred into action, weaving yet another spell. He focused on the change within himself, he isolated it and sought to define it. Stages of its development he described, and a name he gave to it, and reasons for its occurrence he devised, and through that concreteness of it he managed to find the same thing within Deh'ta's mind.

The spell worked, and it managed to break through the Goddess' defenses, for perhaps she was so shocked and addled by the great damage she had sustained that she could not react.

A blood vessel in M'nous' head burst, and the skin on his scalp tore. The scarlet liquid sprayed outwards, and he realized that, much like the disease that afflicted him was in his nature, it was not within his nature to know the thoughts of the Gods, to put his fingers in their minds. Only through the constant consumption of all life he was passing by did he remain alive, but the agony he had managed to stave off returned.

M'nous let out a loud cry of pain, momentarily dropping himself. However, before he could hit the ground and break himself, he recovered and grabbed his body. Another spell. He grit his teeth as his skull cracked, another blood vessel popped and more of his head's skin was torn.

He followed the concept, the disease he had found within Deh'ta's mind, and sought its origin, its source. With his left eye he looked for it, with the other he remained alert for any action that the Goddess of Life might undertake. Already, the flames had subsided and the burned flesh was perfectly healthy, and the hole had filled up with organs, bones and muscle tissue. Even her arm was almost wholly back.

A trail appeared before him, leading into a hidden cave. Down in its depths, far, far below the earth, was *something*— but as he was about to see it, the eye he was using to see it was cleaved in twain, and most of the left side of his face was left with a gruesome, bloody gash that appeared of its own volition.

Still, he had a goal. In the moments between his departure and the discovery of the location wherein the source of the disease rested, Deh'ta swung at him. She touched his left leg, and her finger only glanced the surface of his shoe, but that was enough.

It cramped up violently as he felt the flesh peeling off of it, the nerve endings exploding and the entire thing refusing to respond. Again, the terrible spell he had cast maintained him, managing to stave off whatever it was that Deh'ta had done to him, limiting it only to his leg. The skin was torn off by the flutter of his pantaloons, and the overwhelming pain that took hold of him threatened to knock him out of consciousness.

However, he managed to react in time - the hands fluttered swiftly and severed the network of nerves in his leg from his system, and suddenly there was no more pain. However, the limb flailed about loosely, nothing but dead weight.

In the blink of an eye he moved, reaching the cave's hidden entrance and forcing his way through. The vast tunnels beneath, filled with all manner of beings and secrets, now turned into corridors of death as he drew the life out of them. Deeper and deeper he went, until finally he reached the place where the source of the disease was. However, there was also nothing that lived down here, and so his time was, once again, running out.

But his goal presented itself to him.

The darkness herein was so palpable and complete, that it was difficult to discern anything at all; but M'nous' countless hands weaved a spell and light shone out from above the wizard, and his one whole eye widened as he realized what he was seeing.

It was a box. A black, cubical box, just one foot long. There were no defining elements, and there was no latch that kept it closed. In fact, it was impossible to tell, by simply judging its external appearance, that it was a box and that it contained anything; but M'nous knew that it was such, and that it was filled with more than he could even imagine.

He drew closer to it, reaching his hands outwards. This was the framework of the world. This was what allowed the world to be, this was what defined the world and everything within it. M'nous knew now what he had to do - he had to take hold of this box and open it, to reach inside and tear away the disease. If he could, he would also take out many other things, or change them, for this was the source of the Gods' divinity.

This was what positioned them above mortals. They were greater not because of anything beyond the latter, no, they were such because they had taken hold of this box and had written the laws of the universe with it. The Gods, M'nous realized, had trans-substantialized reality. This transformed form

was, truly, not natural - it was made to appear as though it was, it was made to be natural, but, in truth, was not.

Just as he was about to touch the box, he felt a presence. Dread grasped him by the throat, and he turned to regard the opponent that rose from the darkness. It was a thing of pitch black flesh that danced like flame, with a pair of arms and legs, with a torso and a head, but it did not look humanoid. It was older. Far, far older - even older than the Gods.

M'nous was threatened by this being, for it was about to attack him. He had dared reach for the stars, even though he was not meant to. Whereas the box was the governor of the world and its confines, the determinant of its limits, this thing that stood before him was the enforcer. In a sense, it was the world, and it was far more than all the Gods combined, and than all mortal beings combined.

To fight it would be to die.

Upon its face was carved a symbol of pure, radiant light, and within its hand fluttered a blade which had not been there before. M'nous looked up at this colossal being, acknowledged his small stature by comparison, and took heart. He was not fighting for himself - he was already dead. In those few seconds that remained, however many there were, he had to get his hands on the box.

The many invisible fingers tugged at the strings, and the spell was weaved. The wizard grasped time itself and held it down. He could no longer draw from the lives of those around him, for there were none; thus, he made use of a third horrid spell - he stopped the sun, the moon and the stars, he stopped the wind, the seas and the earth itself.

He pointed his index and middle finger at the world and burned the space between them and the wall behind it. The flash of light, the deafening crack, the intense power released left the opponent unfazed, and it moved to attack.

M'nous reacted quickly enough, allowing himself to be swallowed up by nothing, only to reappear far enough away from the weapon of the enemy to avoid being cut in two. The radiant symbol was directed towards him, as if the world was looking at him. Then, the opponent moved, its speed as great, if not greater, than that of the wizard, and it swung again.

The old man tore himself from danger once more, appearing slightly outside of the world's reach, and again avoided an attack. Building up distance between himself, the guardian of the box and the box itself was how he wagered he would be able to get his hands on it before his time ran out.

However, he had no knowledge of the enemy's abilities. As he reappeared, a spear of dancing darkness was thrown by the world at him, and he could not avoid it. The weapon pierced his stomach, pulling him backwards. Only by grabbing it with all of his hands, M'nous managed to stop its movement, preventing himself from slamming against the wall and dying.

He felt vomit bubbling up from within him - and not just bile, but also blood and viscera. The spell was being cast as soon as the first inkling appeared, yet he failed to stop himself from coughing up the crimson liquid. Stitches ran through the entirety of his abdomen, stabilizing him temporarily.

Another spell, as the enemy moved forward. M'nous flicked his wrist, and the air around him became so dense it was like a wall. Its components were pierced with needles as the spell ran its course, and of those atoms a particular type was picked out, only to be torn to shreds.

The chamber was turned to glass by the heat released from the explosion that followed. That glass was then packed so incredibly densely by the kinetic power of the blast that the unoccupied space more than doubled.

A cloud of debris blinded M'nous momentarily, but still he could rely on his other senses, for the spell incorporated defensive mechanisms for the caster. His opponent was upon him, apparently unphased by the attack. The wizard waited for just the last moment, being swallowed up by nothing.

It spat him up right next to the box, and he reached for it once again. To his shock, however, his enemy appeared above him, the blade still moving downwards. The world, too, could blink in and out of existence, which he should have had in mind - for, how else but by performing such a maneuver could it have appeared from nothingness as it had initially?

The countless hands yanked on M'nous frantically, and they largely pulled him out of the weapon's path; however, his left leg was caught. Thanks to the fact he had severed its nerves, he did not feel pain when it was cut off, but his blood seeped from the stump regardless.

M'nous recognized that he had failed. He could not trade his life for a chance at grasping the box and altering the essence of the world. The guardian was there to ensure that such a thing could not be done - evidently, to make any changes, one needed to best the world itself.

The wizard grit his teeth, blood pooling in his mouth, as he was embraced by despair. His many hands dragged him out of the chamber as a number of them weaved yet another spell. He made himself light,

so light that he could pass through solid matter, and he carried himself through the earth, up to its surface.

Frantically, he sought an answer. He could not change the borders of the world, he could not go outside of them. However, could he operate within those limits? Could he abuse the laws, could he find a loophole that would let his life have a shred of meaning?

M'nous looked with his one remaining eye, his hands tugging at the strings. Perhaps he could not stop the disease from taking the memories and lives of mortals, but whenever a mortal died, what transpired? Did Lih've, God of Death, take them somewhere beyond the world, or did they remain? If so, then that space beyond the world could be the answer!

He strained himself and sought the souls of the dead. Blind to the world, his body was carried up into the air by his many invisible hands, while he sought. There!

His eyeball burst open, but he had seen the space beyond. It was within the world, still, within its borders and confines - but there was infinite room for more. The wizard, kept afloat by his invisible hands, weaved one last spell.

M'nous knew that mortals would not be content with what had been decided for them by others. He knew that they were curious, and that their curiosity would lead them to the same places they had led him. He knew that they would surpass him - that they would seek answers to questions he had not even considered.

And he knew that the Gods would not approve. He knew that they would act, and that they would resort to collective punishment. Thus, M'nous endeavored to keep them from doing that.

With his two, mortal hands, he grasped the land itself. The spell's weave was complete, and it went into effect. He pushed, the force required to do so causing him great pain, but he pushed. Two arms tore through the earth's crust, their hands open, palms facing upwards. They were holding the earth's surface.

In this final act, M'nous tore the Gods from the world, grasping them in his hands and thrusting them up into the sky, into a space beyond the world. The exertion that caused, the pressure applied on his arms - it was all far too great. He felt his bones shattering, his muscles tearing, but he kept pushing. His countless invisible hands supported the mush that his limbs were becoming.

He took the earth's surface and inverted it, and raised it above the world. The highest peak of mount Orun became the greatest depression of this afterlife. The Gods, thrust up there were forever separated from the world, so that they may never again walk its surface and torment mortals.

At the very edge of this new world, M'nous placed his will to oppose the Gods. It took form - a place and a being, an eternal enemy who would always seek to bring down those who had damned him so. The Devil was then born, and Hell was made his domain.

The great arms that lifted the afterlife up into the heavens, no longer needed, fell, crashing onto the continent with such force that a great cataclysm came about as a result. Mortals, however, would survive it - M'nous was certain. With that final deed, he took himself, all that was left, and gave himself, to be swallowed up by nothing, for he had died.