



Spring 2023
Bildungsroman

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by Various

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Vidby

by /a/non

I

Vidby the Thief

Vidby was nervous and he ought to be. He looked to be little more than a boy of twelve although in truth he was a man. He lurched in the back of the wagon as his partner in this crime guided their cart, pulled by a single ass. It was just him and three other boys. All thin, all small.

And they were on their way to be sold to the wizard. Vidby did his best not to think of what the wizard would be doing with the boys, the other ones. He knew the kinds of perversion that men liked. It took hours, out of the city, into the country into the quagmire that housed the wizard's tower. As they headed down the hill into the swamp Vidby could see the tower and for a moment, he thought he could see the wizard himself. Staring at him from the top, but it must surely be his mind run wild.

When they finally arrived at the tower, Vidby wondered how the thing stood at all. It was visibly crooked and as a result had juts to one side or the other to keep its precarious balance. Here and there were awkward balconies and windows. When his partner approached the tower, he did the strangest things. Walking backward, clapping and shouting "Hey Dol and a Soul, Merry Meet I bring friends as bidden." He did that three times before coaching the boys how to do it themselves.

Wizards were a tricky lot and Vidby could only presume from the fervor his partner in thievery had deployed in getting all of

the boys to do the actions, say the words at the right time that whatever it prevented must be very bad. After having passed that invisible barrier his partner, an older man the age of 30 or so called up. "Magister, I have brought your shipment as we agreed. I have paid my respects as instructed as have the boys."

And with the mention of boys Vidby was certain he could hear the tower itself moving. Soon there was other noises, cursing and muttering and a rotten wooden door from the side of the tower opened. There was an old man, 40 or more, his hair a mess, wearing clothes so dirty that even beggars would not have touched them. "All of them?" he asked in a high pitched, almost panicky voice. Vidby didn't know why the Wizard kept such a pathetic servant.

"Ayyy Magister, as agreed." His partner was bowing low, lower than Vidby had ever seen him do. When the man had approached Vidby, it was for a job. A secret job. Soon the man was smacking the children around Vidby forcing them to bow and low. Vidby glared when his partner clapped him hard enough to make him see stars and forced him to bow. This was all according to plan. He would be sent with the other boys for whatever noncery the wizard demanded and then Vidby would slip away. He was good at that. Going unnoticed, even when he was right in front of your nose.

His partner stood and the Wizards Servant was suddenly upon them, stinking of filth. Vidby thought that this was the first time he had seen the older man scared. Vidby thought he could smell it on the man for a second but noticed the tremor in his partner's leg. An old tell but a true one. The grimed man pressed an equally dirty bag into his partner's hand. This was according to plan. Vidby could smell the servants breathe as he muttered "Don't open it before you get back to town or it will be the last thing you do for me."

Vidby was confused, was this wretch, who would put even beggars to shame in appearance and slovenliness actually the wizard. His partner nodded and bowed and soon the Ass and the Cart, now empty of its cargo was leaving just as fast as he could

haul the donkey. And the animal for once offered no objection. Soon it was just Vidby and the boys and the wizard.

“Come,” the wizard intoned and Vidby watched in amazement as his legs followed. The boys walked in lock step into the tower and the rotten first floor. Vidby thought back to asking his partner about the wizards magics but it had never occurred to either of them that he could simply move their legs, command their bodies as easily as a man might wiggle his own fingers. They walked in, controlled by the hands of the man that Vidby had no doubt now was the wizard he had been sent to steal from.

They were lead through a bottom dirty storeroom that seemed to beg for Vidby’s attention and then upwards, up a narrow staircase switching back over itself past a second and third floor until finally they reached the forth floor. Vidby realized that this must be the highest that he had stood in a building. It never occurred to him to think that the Wizards tower was the tallest building in miles and miles.

Past the first floor things had gotten cleaner, as if the first was just for show or for shock. When they found themselves in a little room, a rack of bunks shoved against the wall and smaller tables and such, not sized for kids but too small for adults sat about the floor. “Here, you will wait in this room until I come to get you.” the Wizard said sharply and everyone felt his control over them stop. Just as swiftly as it had come.

Only Vidby asked “Why?” and watched as the wizards eyes moved over and focused on him. The eyes would twitch and focus, twitch and focus as if trying to comprehend that the filth had just talked to him. “Because, I am a Wizard and I said so,” sai the bedraggled wizard, who looked more like a poor man after his debt collectors had dragged him down a shit filled street. After a moment, as if realizing that such a statement may not be enough for little boys the grimy wizard added. “I have a ferocious beast, and it prowls these halls. It will rip the flesh off your bones. And braid your eyeballs into your hair.” The wizard nodded as if that ended that. Vidby nodded, trying not to imagine how you could braid an eyeball.

“Eat, Children,” the Wizard nodded, and with his mucky hands waved and suddenly the tables, small and odd that they were, were filled with Bread and Barley sweets, Honeyed Teas and goat milk. Vidby was amazed. The food had not been there and now it was. Just another sign of the wizard’s power, Vidby had begun to think he was a fool for coming here to steal from this filth in the shape of a man.

But he knew that he didn’t want to stay and find out what had happened to the other boys. There were regular shipments of waifs and children out here. The wizard’s tower had become a byword for the terrors that adults inflict upon children in their little village. Vidby moved to sit and eat the same as the rest. None of them could remember ever seeing so much food or it looking so good. The wizard nodded again, to himself and left, Closing the door behind him.

Vidby waited for the long count of a dozen then crept to the door and listened as the other boys ate and stuffed their faces. He turned back and started seeing the signs. He wiped whatever crumbs he had had touched on his pants as the boys began nodding off, on the floor or in their seats. “Just as easy to poison as to feed,” Vidby said softly. He waited a long time before opening the door to find the hallway empty. This was what he wanted. A chance to explore, to find the fabulous wealth of the wizard and steal it.

Vidby thought of the bottom floors, the storerooms he had walked through before thinking better of it. He instead crept up the stairs, wincing as they squeaked and shifted. The Wizard had mentioned a beast but Vidby saw nothing of one. He snuck up the stairs and found rooms and halls, many of them. He crept along fearing greatly being found by the wizard. He finally found a room that looked like it might be a study or a display room. He could see books and knick knacks and jewelled things. He didn’t hear the woman behind him and nearly shrieked when she bent down and brought her lips nearly to his ears when she asked “What are you doing?” which sent a peculiar thrill through him.

Vidby pivoted on his heel and then planting his feet but con-

tinuing the motion in his upper body did his best to wallop her in the guts, but she stepped back quickly. "I supposed I deserved that," she said a smile on her face, like a cat with a mouse. "What are you looking for little boy..." she said trailing off before stepping in and grabbing him by the cheeks. She was stronger then she looked, she looked scrawny, like all her weight had gone to her ass and stuck there. Still now she had him by the cheeks, keeping him from saying much or getting away. "No, not a little boy, I think," she said as if disappointed. "A man, small though, tougher then you look too."

Vidby looked at her face and he found her plain. She had wide eyes and cheekbones and probably the nicest thing about her was her smile and it wasn't saying much. Jerking out of his grasp he asked in a low voice, "Are you going to tell him?" and the woman looked considering for a long moment, before shaking her head. "He told me to watch out for boys, and you are not a boy." Vidby took that as his cue and slipped into the study, doing his best to forget about the strange lady. She stood there for a minute, licking her lips as if remembering something tasty before backing off and walking away. Vidby checked outside the room again after a moment and looked back out only in time to watch her behind as she turned to go back down the stairs. "This is a madhouse, surely," Vidby said to himself as he reentered the study. The air smelled of dust and more dust. A thick coating was applied to everything thick enough to show his every fingerprint and footprint but not thick enough to hide the jewels that sat on display.

Vidby tried to be fast but the room was full of books. How was he to know which ones would be valuable. He tried to pull out a few and they resisted as if they had stuck together in their moldiness. Leaving them for a moment he tried his hands at the display pieces and found them equally stuck to, as if someone had poured gruel over everything and let it set in that. He had no tools and his only options were to break something or stick to the books.

Vidby was pondering how long it would take his little legs to get out of this place when he heard a harrumph from the hallway

and he recognized the wizards voice. "Damnable Succubus, is it the time already?" The footsteps came closer and closer. Vidby hid in a corner holding his breath as the footsteps seemed to almost be on top of him and then they started going further away. Vidby's absence would be found soon if the woman hadn't reported him already. Vidby waited for a long moment and then kicked over the stand of the most valuable thing he could lay eyes on, a pendant with a flat ruby in it, as big as his fist. The case and stand shattered on the floor and Vidby grabbed the ruby and went to run, when pain started to radiate up his arm. The amulet was still on the floor but his hand was bloody. Bleeding, he was bleeding. It was dripping down his hand and it seemed to be pouring on the dirt on the floor, splatting the dirty floor in dark spots. Vidby rubbed his hand for a long moment before realizing his last two fingers were gone. The pain had just begun, the radiating crushing sort of pain that only comes from being very hot or very cold.

Vidby did his best to ignore the pain but it kept growing. He tried to walk but he doubled over from the pain and he thought he would throw up. He could still see his blood flowing freely from his hand. Vidby jabbed his hand, or the stump of his missing fingers as hard as he could into his pants and nearly screamed, tears rolling unbidden down his face. Vidby cursed to himself, he would not go empty handed.

Grabbing the Amulet by the chain this time and realizing he would have to bolt for the door as he realized he was so sick to his stomach he could barely walk. Vidby walked as best he could, with the ruby clutched in one hand and the other bleeding he held painfully to his side. Vidby stepped to the stairs, taking them quietly, hoping that the blood would not give him away or lead a trail to him. He would just have to run, he realized. So Vidby started down the stairs. Past the hallways, past the studies, past the room of the little boys whose door was still locked shut. The woman was standing there now, Facing the door as if daring for any of the boys to open it. She gave him a wink as he continued down the stairs.

He was soon back in the grimey warehouse that was the first couple of floors and the smell of something wrong hit him. It didn't smell like shit, it smelled like. He saw the wizard then, sitting by the door. He tried to run, he didn't get far. He didn't know if the wizard made him collapse or his own blood loss did that. His face at the floor as he passed out, was mere feet in front of the wizard.

When he came to he was in a room that looked more like a farmer's front room than the storeroom he remembered. He had been cleaned and his hand still hurt. "The pain will never leave you, it's one of the prices that you will pay for its magic," the wizard told him. The Wizard, much like the storeroom, had changed. He was merely an older man now, his beard and hair full and wild but there was a smile there that made Vidby think of a gambler. He positively glowed in the sunlight of the room. "Whysit different," Vidby asked feeling half sick.

"You're awakening to a new world, strong willed, lucky, and more than a little dumb. What a world it is going to be for you." The wizard said it, without much trace of emotion. He didn't seem upset that Vidby had tried to steal from him. Vidby realized that his words were half slurring, as if he had drunk wine and was now just sobering up.

"Whatdid yadota me," he slurred out. But the wizard just shook his head.

"You did that to yourself lad, the consuming crimson, It's a flawed school of magic, one that demanded sacrifice, but powerful for what it is," the wizard stopped and looked kindly for a moment, "The reason that you feel the way that you do is that the magic is settling in, you can see through the glamour I had cast, you can feel the magic now I wager. Two fingers is a lot for a nobody. Most Consumption mages would feed only a single knuckle maybe two until they reached their third or fourth decade at least.

Vidby held up his hand, which had been cleaned. It wasn't red anymore. A splotch of pink covered where the base of his fingers had been. It still hurt like hell but it wasn't bleeding. He

felt sick to his stomach. "It ate my fingers?" he flatly asked. And the wizard nodded.

"And it will eat more too. It's full for now but it will grow hungry again, always offering more magic, for more flesh. Vidby looked down and saw he was wearing the ruby pendent, under his shirt and panicked for a moment, fumbling it out, fear it would rip a hole in his chest or his neck. "And just like that, safe," the wizard said as he handled the ruby. He could feel the magic radiating off it now like body heat. "Probably be years before it feeds again," the wizard nodded, "but don't forget that it will."

He called up irritably to the upstairs and the woman flounced down the stairs "Berelaine, make this kid a basket and get him out of here." The wizard watched as Berelaine moved around the fire, always seeming to find something, food just out of sight. Vidby couldn't quite figure out where she was getting it from or at least not yet. The wizard watched as the Succubus moved and soon a right proper basket was made. "I don't eat that well myself Berelaine," to which Berelaine only dipped her head a little as if caught blushing. "He is a man my master, they must be fed properly if they are to attain their full size." The wizard scoffed asking "Am I not to attain my full size." and Berelaine snapped back "You are a wizard, it is a different." Soon they stood, looking more like married farmers than a wizard and his fantastic beast.

"Why are you letting me go?" Vidby asked his slurring seemingly almost gone. The wizard leaned up against the wall. "When you get to my age, things happen for a reason," and after a thoughtful few minutes, "Besides, just think of all the chaos you'll cause." The wizard nodded to Berelaine who kindly but firmly helped him gather his basket, which he saw was full of breads and meats and a capped beer stein bringing him to the door like a mother would a child stopping only for a moment, to bend down and kiss on him high up on his head, almost in his hair.

It left Vidby with a rather nice view of her cleavage which, he had to say, seemed more considerable now. When he felt the heat on his forehead suddenly burn he pulled away and he could see

the barest trace of his blood on her lips. The way she licked it off, robbed him of his reason for a moment and he fumbled his way out the door. Soon he was out of the tower, with a basket and a ruby and he had no idea what to do next, but he would be damned if stayed here for the wizard to change his mind.

II

Vidby the Bridegroom

Vidby looked down at his hand, his two fingers and the rest of his hand looked back to him. Covered in the same cauterization marks that had nearly killed him at the time, or he guessed it was the blood poisoning that had almost killed him. And here he was now, at the ripe age of twenty and about to get married.

Vidby adjusted his armor, It was dirty, stiff and unyielding. It stank of dried blood but it was the enchantment that was important. Vidby in the years since he had paid his price of admission to this world of magic and enchantment, had sat down and taken notes. His partner betraying him had been expected, Vidby hadn't realized just what he was stealing until it had happened. A real magical artifact.

Vidby was still figuring the full use of that power. The amulet of consumption as the Wizard had called it, seemed to want him to understand. For a long time he didn't know what he was doing. When he had reached out two whispers of magic, that were as solid and real as any cord any appendage, he had known what he was doing. He could feel those cords, his missing fingers. Vidby hadn't expected the gurgling and crying and the drumming of his partner's heels as his two fingers strangled him like a lariat to his death.

Vidby had told himself at the time that he did now know what he had expected but he knew. The magic of his fingers, the missing fingers was controlled by his intentions and will, the same as his other body parts. Vidby watched his partner, hung by the

magic he controlled, gasp and gurgle and end up black in the face, with a lurid black tongue swole up in his mouth. Vidby could still remember it, the thin gurgle as the last of the air was expelled from him after he dropped him. There was no blood, no one had any way to connect it to him, but he knew. Vidby had Sworn never to do that again at the time, it had nightmares but it wasn't long before it happened again. Before he killed with magic, over and over again.

Snapping back to focus, Vidby touched the ruby as if to make sure it was there, on his chest, under his armor. It wasn't long after that, that the ruby had begun instructing him, in his dreams, when he focused. He could still feel his fingers, that they were part of him. That the flesh was missing but the sensation was not. There was so much more he could do with the amulet instead of just murdering people and he was going to accomplish something with his life. He was going to be Important.

Reaching out with his power he focused and the air around him, moved it with his will, as if stirred by two giant fingers. There was so much he could do but right now, all he wanted to do was intimidate. So a breeze was enough, just enough to remind the people watching him. He had the power and they did not.

He walked into the chapel and he saw his henchmen leading up against walls, they took their feet. They were only mercenaries, only there for the coin but Vidby did not mind that. It made them easy to motivate. One of the men, some shitstain missing his front teeth offered up a 'Con-Grat-Ul-ations M'Lord' and Vidby took him laying his good arm and hand over his shoulders and holding him there. The man almost looked like he was going to wince but Vidby eased up. "Thank you, Soldier. Celebrate, it's a Celebration!" and Vidby waved his two nonexistent fingers, he moved them and the amulet reacted. There was the plinking sound of coins dropping. He was using his magic to summon golden coins, well mostly golden.

The Coins were a rosy gold color, but his men knew that by now they were worth half their weight in gold and the rest in

copper where the rosy color came from. It was good enough for them. They scampered about, cheering and collecting coins off the floor and as they appeared in the air. He leaned in to tell his man, "Go make sure the priest is ready and that her father is there. It's time to make it official."

Where the Dashing Lord Vidby had come from and his seemingly endless chests of Roseygold had been the hot topic among the nobles of the kingdom, if you could call it that. It had seemed so grand from far away when he was a kid, and now he knew it was the jumped up domain of a Marquis and a Count that the larger countries had never bothered claiming, mostly on the account of nothing of value came out of there. No gold mines, no silver, no coal, no iron, the women did not brew or mill or weave the men did not fight, or at least not well. It had been why his roguish coins had been so effective. It was the land of his youth and like his youth, it was misspent and to be discarded, but not before he extracted every inch of use out of its rotting hide.

He watched as the henchmen disappeared into the chapel and more of his soldiers came, no doubt drawn by the idea of gold. There were even a few women there, Camp doxies Vidby guessed by their pocked faces. Even the whores here were not much. It had barely taken him two companies, not even 200 men to murder his way past the Viscounts and Lords of the Land, He had no interest in the capital such as it was, but he had instead seized the 'royal grounds'. Little more then a lord's manor and servant houses and a chapel.

And all that was left was to take his prize. It was not the life of the poor backwoods County that ruled these lands, it was the hand of his daughter, who also had a bloodline going back to her mother's country. It was quite wasted here, but it would be a start. Vidby imagined that those lands might be more of a challenge and he aimed to make sure his foothold there was established there before he even stepped foot into those lands.

Waving to his mercenaries, when he turned around and was surprised when some of them started playing a wedding march, it was a tin whistle and some drums but it was his wedding

march. Taking a moment he stepped into the hall, his merry band of murderers behind him. He could see his henchmen now, making sure the priest was there, the priest who was now sporting a black eye and whose holy vestments were now ripped in places where the gold decorations had been ripped off by some quick fingered men of his.

“Where’s her father,” Vidby growled as someone dragged him up. The father had more than a black eye, and Vidby took over from his enthusiastic underlings. Pulling out a rag from his pocket and spitting on it before starting to clean up the old man’s face. Vidby could see the defiance on the man’s face. “I will never...” and Vidby pulled him in with his good hand. “Listen to me you old fart, if you don’t give your daughter to me. She will be of no further use to me. And if she is of no use to me, the only value she would have to me, is as a plaything for my men.” Vidby put his hand on the man’s swollen cheeks and smiled when he winced. Vidby waited until he caught the man’s gaze in his again. “Have you ever seen a woman, who’s been torn apart by the men’s enjoyment. Ripped open, her insides falling out, her teeth knocked out, beaten so bad around the face that she’ll never see again.”

Vidby let the question settle in the man’s mind . He moved to the side so he could see his daughter. She was pretty in a plain way Vidby guessed. He had said it quietly, but he wasn’t sure if his men had heard or not or just reacted to his stance. There were snickers from behind, not nice ones, hungry ones, cruel ones. And Vidby could see that the old lord would give him no further trouble. He had not figured him for a sentimental one, to love his daughter.

So they strode up and talked to the priest. The priest seemed to want to sink into himself. He jumped every time his mercenaries cheered, which was often, he said his vows and Vidby could see him mouthing to the girl “I’m sorry they’ll kill me, they’ll kill you,” when he thought Vidby was not looking. He didn’t care. The sooner that the girl understood this the better. When the priest finally announced him, Husband, under the

eyes of the gods and grace and her father there was a big cheer. Vidby asked in a low voice, "Is that it, is it official?" and the priest nodded.

"To the Town Square!" Vidby shouted. His day was just starting after all. If his new Father was going to cede his title and lordship to Vidby it had to be done publicly. So they marched, his wedding processing. The men loyal to the lord made a few attempts to stop him. At once point even mustered a company, almost 50 men to fight his 200. Vidby rarely showed off, he considered it something of a character flaw, like a wart on the end of a beautiful person's nose. But he cried out "Behold, the might of Vidby!" and for a long moment reached up to the heavens with his two fingers. A few sling stones scattered about to the pavement before he pulled his hand down and with it, two streaks of lightning crashed down. Blasting the men. Scattering men and wood alike easily. His men were on them in minutes. Clubbing the rest down, taking their coin, scavenging for boots or shields or a belt or armor before the men even realized they were defeated.

To say that the Village square was empty was an understatement. It was dead empty. So again his men, went out and soon more lasses, kids, men to old to fight were gathered. While Vidby waited, he pulled his knife and told his wife "You might as well start undressing, it would be a shame to have to cut that dress off of you." Her father tried to respond but was flummoxed.

"There there, almost over. Father just one last thing for you to do and the first one for your daughter." Vidby laughed a mean laugh. He had sometimes been told that, but Vidby wasn't sure he had a nice one. He began walking to his wife, knife in hand when she stood up and got in his face. She had a fierceness he had not expected. "I'LL KILL MYSELF I'LL DO IT I'LL END THIS," and Vidby rather flatly said "No you won't" before slapping her hard enough that some in the crowd gasped. He looked down at the woman, who seemed to be in shock. Perhaps it was for the best.

He dragged that knife over her face a bit harsher then he

intended. The cut, flat, horizontal on her cheekbone. It bleed but she did not cry. She even undressed herself, out of concern for her dress more then anything else Vidby guessed. Once the crowd was gathered what he had to do was short, although as is in the way of men when he retold the story it was much longer. He fucked his wife in front of them, in front of everyone. "This woman is my wife, as attested by priest, and witness and her father." There was no word from anyone in the crowd. "Attend her and my Father," who recited the words, "I the count, have approved and witness the consumation of this marriage, do declare Vidby of the Roseygolds to be married into the family and my sole heir." There was no cheer, only the whimpering of some people in the crowd and the bay of an old hound.

III

Vidby The Bloodgold

Vidby Bloodgold, it's what they called him. He didn't mind, Technically he was only a viceroy to the King, but everyone knew he was the power behind the throne, everyone knew that his coin was marked in blood, What was left of his arm hung raggedly at his side. He could feel his arm, it was a crushing kind of pain but all that was left was scraps of flesh hanging from his shoulder. The arm was still there, in his mind. The only time it stopped paining him was when he was casting. He almost felt whole during those times.

His clerk looked at him dourly. He was one of the lovers of children that had been too well positioned and too well connected for Vidby to just tear apart. So he got a first hand seat to Vidby and his power. Sooner or later Vidby would break the man's neck. He would have already if the man hadn't been an accomplished accountant. The two men looked at each other, detested each other, but they made a good team. He had his hands well hand he supposed on every pulse of coin in the kingdom. His

taxmen had brought a kingdom that was on the verge of collapse into wealth and prosperity.

And the fact that they had debtors gaol most of the commoners who had thought that they would escape his attention by virtue of being only craftsmen. There were more of course, you couldn't arrest everyone, you needed an enemy after all. A real enemy, not his more clandestine operations. He took his cuts from the official guilds of course, the armsmen and the magisters, the nobles. How it must gall them to hand him chest over chest of their coin.

"Have you found it?" Vidby asked and his dour accountant nodded, "Ayy, the Arm of Tichroma, some sort of cursed relic, we have it crated in the warehouse." Vidby gritted his teeth and he could feel his arm, every flesh raked, bone shattered, his skin scraping along the length of it. It felt like someone was separating the strands of his stump and nailing it to a board.

It was electric, and the magic it produced as sublime. There was a pressure around his little accountant, as if he was being caressed by a hundred fingers. "Let's go." The accountant nodded but it was a little too slow. Vidby smiled through the pain, and let the fat man go.

It was a little less than an hour before he was in front of the crate. His assistant was beginning to sweat, there was something planned here. Vidby didn't know what but he needed this fat fucking pedophile to see who was in charge.

The fat man looked like a blanched vegetable, pale and wet. The first attack was fast. Vidby turned his back to the crate, he now knew what he had suspected. The crate was a distraction, the arrow thudded into the crate just missing him, thunked into the wood with enough force to bury the arrowhead into the wooden crate. Vidby listened as something caused the arrow to smoke and bubble as well. Vidby spread his arm wide as he took in the scene.

There were more than a dozen attackers, all wearing dark clothes, short horn bows in the southern style, all young men. Vidby didn't recognize them and he had more experience with

assassins then most. "Outsiders," Vidby thought as he smiled and spread gestured with his remaining arm. His fat accountant friend positively seems to be steaming as he yelped. It was a barb through the fat man's foot, affixing him in place. It was a simple spell, brutal as if you had ran your foot through a blunt nail, but it was effective.

Vidby put the fuckers whimpers out of mind as he began deflecting arrows. He didn't bother trying to send the arrows back, it was enough just to protect himself. After two dozen more arrows, his assailants dropped their bows and drew strange blunt cleavers. "Someone with enough magical prowess to equip a dozen assassins in the same equipment." He murmured to himself, as they closed they struck with a force that surprised Vidby.

The cleaver for half a dozen of them was hanging only inches from his flesh. To the untrained eye it would look like they were just pretending or playing. As if it was a rehearsed movement but Vidby could see the dozens of fingers holding wrists, arms and elbows. He could see the killing intent in his assassins' eyes. His Fingers had saved him. It was only an instant later that the assassins were flung away.

The next wave of attackers didn't get as close, He could hear their arms and bones breaking but they were standing again in seconds. That should have been enough to keep them from moving. Vidby noted the pain dampening magic as he blasted the rest of his attackers across the warehouse. The attack continued but their strength was broken. Vidby battered them, before pinning them to the floor like his accountant.

It was over in less then 5 minutes. "Really southerners? I'm a little offended, accountant," he said as put his arm around the fat little man. He hadn't been touched but there was blood on his robes. Not his blood. The accountant shrieked at the touch, even louder when he asked him, "So who paid for all of this?" It took a long time for the account to calm down, to convince him that Vidby wasn't going to kill him. Especially when he was, just as soon as the fat little man stopped being useful. Vidby let up on the man, not wanting to break him past the point of usefulness.

Vidby took his time to see the carnage left by the attack, the dozen bodies. It brought a smile to his lips, a little chuckle to his throat. The account was saying “The roseygold supporters and rebels to the south,” hoarsely as if he had repeated himself for some time, Vidby didn’t remember for how long.

“Now watch what happens to people who cross me.” Vidby withdrew his fingers and brought his good arm up in front of his betraying assistant. It was just a single gesture. A thrust upwards of his single remaining hand. The screaming had just begun, His dozen assailents were picked up, and then pierced with a spear made of blood and magic. He left them there screaming as the spear snaked out and spread through their guts, frying their nerves. Keeping them alive.

Vidby didn’t know how long they would live like this. He was hoping to find out “Come along accountant, I need to rearrange my black market investments if shit like this can happen.” Vidby stopped for a moment to let the little fat man empty his guts noisily as he began weeping. He then followed, limping after him, whimpering, covering his ears as the wailing began.

IV

Vidby the Emperor

Vidby smiled, today was the day. He had dressed in his very best, velvets and lace, His face painted with the whites and rouges that had come to symbolize his reign. His very expensive wig, made with the finest of unicorn hair sat on his head, the ribbons. No one seemed to get his sense of humor, He enjoyed watching them squirm, to follow his example, mindlessly. It was an obedience that he couldn’t even expect out of his serfs and slaves. Vidby tented his fingers, an act that he had never stopped enjoying after recovering the Arm of Tichroma. Where his left arm had once hung and been absent from decades there now was a delicate gold filigree approximation of an arm, his missing arm. He could

move it as naturally as his other one, and most importantly it had stopped the pain from his amulet but not the magic.

It didn't look organic. It had about the same volume as a skeleton arm but was only about the width of his thumb in rectangular bars that seemed to be made of smaller almost organic gold shapes shoved into the shape of a bar. It was from after the age of consumption magic, his organic hand felt his chest and found the ruby there. He lifted it up. He had had to shatter the ruby to install the arm. It had left him without his magic.

For a time. The Arm of Tichroma, in the same way it had repaired and was repairing him had done the same to the ruby. The ruby's shattered form had been repaired with gold itself, now truly the symbol of the Bloodgold Dynasty that he ruled as. And as it repaired his amulet it had repaired his magic, enhanced it. Made it even stronger.

But today, was going to be the day that history remembered. He had won in every sensible measure. No army could stand against him, no noble dared. They painted their faces and shaved their heads and hoped he didn't deign to notice them. But there was always people who would risk everything to be remembered. He didn't hate them. He had done the same thing he thought, although they would disagree. No one loved him, as an emperor he felt he was beyond such things but they felt differently.

So they shuffled in. The ruins of Fantsi, where he had installed the arm. Even now the arm was slowly converting more and more of him. Vidby smiled, the pain was gone but the magic, the terrible magic still remained. He had ten thousand fingers now as he tented his bloody and golden fingers together.

He looked over the rebels, it was a motley collection, adventurers mostly. They were always an awkward fit between what was pragmatic and what fit in his empire. Some had even rose to the nobility, he smiled at them, his reddened cheeks and painted face cracked under his mirth.

"Welcome Adversaries," he said as he stood, picking up his mirror that seemed to be made of black felt instead of mirrored silver. Naturally out of the adventurers there was one who spoke

and the rest listened. It was the way of the world.

It was the wizard Amadesis. "We will not allow your rule anymore. Step down now, while you still can fiend." It was simple, Vidby had no doubt Amadesis had practiced it. Vidby strode forward, crooking his mirror in the elbow at this arm. As he strode forward he gestured with the Arm of Tichroma, his arm so that all could see his mastery over the sorcery. "And if I do not?"

They laughed, how could they not. He must look so very silly, a painted face and a golden arm. They thought him a jester perhaps. He looked over the crowd he saw barbarian kings, the remnants of the thieves and assassin guilds, a few outlawed mages, priests of temples that he had toppled. He waited for a long moment. These people were already defeated.

His smile broadened when nothing happened. They had nothing after all, He turned around and he felt his consumption magic, then thousand fingers all thinned to a thickness thinner than a hair but stronger than steel, unbreakable. He raised his arm when they tried to protest his exit and when he dropped it the finger wires sprang to life, wrapped around arm and neck and middle.

At first there was only screaming and then his strange bone like golden hand made its fist and there was the sound of people and armor being pulled apart. Skin stretching, ligaments breaking, bones being pulled out of their sockets, entrails hitting the floor, the hot stench of innards. Vidby turned and paced back to his throne. The screams and ripping sound filled the ruins, and then there were five. The Barbarian King Kami, the Mage Amadesis, the Priestess Naiur, the Assassin Billi and the Mercenary Prince Modoto. He was not looking at them strictly speaking, he was walking away but he could see through his fingers he could sense the vibrations of the floor through his skeleton of Tichroma. He threw the mirror at Amadesis and saw the Mercenary getting caught as the blackness seemed to turn that section of the room into darkest night where things best left unseen prowled and pulled and bit.

The Barbarian struck only moments later. A veritable wall of muscle, wielding an axe that he shouldn't have. Vidby tried to stop it, Fingers manifest through around it but just like his threads from before they simple disappeared around King Kami, The Axe came thundering into Vidby's side, cutting into his spine , He turned around to see Kami's Triumphant face. When the great king pulled out his axe, Vidby did not bleed like those fools that were scattered across the back half of the ruins, ripped and torn apart in pieces.

Vidby bellowed "YOU FOOL" as great gouts of Golden metal spurted out where the blood should be. The Metal was sticky and soon he was as patched up as his ruby. But he was getting faster, he gave up on stopping the Barbarian King and used his fingers on himself instead. Moving faster then anyone could, leaping, flying like some sort of demented top, dribbling gold wherever he goes.

To Kami's credit, he did not stop, not for one instance. That strange axe, no doubt the result of the mage or the priest was always a threat, always a hair from crumpling Vidby's form. Vidby snarled as he flung himself into the air and dodging perfectly timed assassins blades. The assassin was joining in now. Sure that the Barbarian had lost when Vidby strut, he came thundering down on the priestess, who had been using her magic to hide the rest of them. Priestly magic was weak but when he skittered down from the ceiling like some sort of demented spider, he planted his face into an invisible barrier, invisible even to his magical senses as the mercenary, assassin and barbarian struck all at once. They knifed, shot and axed Vidby as he was pinned into the barrier. Dragging him along the invisible screen like a bug leaving a streak of gold behind him as the weapons thundered into him. "Die now, Traitor, by all that is holy," the priestess solemnly declared as he was driven into the ground. Soon the other two had control over his arms as the barbarian raised his axe to decapitate him. It had not even been a second.

How foolish he'd been. Everywhere you look, there were these people, the little people he thought as he watched the axe

begin to descend on his life, the helpers. They would never accomplish much and they were glad to do that little. But they acted like a multiplier, they turned brave men into heroes, heroes into kings, and kings into gods. Vidby barely had time to gurgled "DIE BITCH" as he violently jerked himself to the side, a new arm, golden and skeletal in the same make as his right arm but emerging from his back making it possible. Vidby slammed his fist, his flesh and blood against the earth and you could see her realization that her barrier didn't extend under ground. Hear the fear in her voice as she screamed "AMA—" was the last thing she said before the very ground under her feet rent as if by some giant monstrous force, chemical or supernatural he didn't care. There was nothing left of the priestess except the rain of fine red mist that complicated his golden smear across the barrier before that too disappeared.

The Barbarian and Assassin continued their game but Vidby was winning. The Barbarian was immune to his magic but not the effects of it, the blood of Naiur stained him just the same, and soon every step he made turned into an explosion, his face and body scored and scared by hundreds of ragged gashes, each shallow but beyond number caused by the erupting earth under his feet.

The assassin struggled to remain hidden but he was the next to die, Vidby could see with his fingers and nothing was hidden from him for long. Dagger, Vanish, Dagger, Vanish and then the assassin stayed vanished. If they had found what was left of his corpse, it was lashed with the force of thousands of whips at once until it was imprinted into the stone itself. The mercenary also vanished after firing his strange alchemist cannons at Vidby but Vidby didn't care. It was another sign of his victory, perhaps he would hire him later he thought, as he and the barbarian played their deadly game.

It was soon the mages turn, using the last of King Kami's strength as a distraction. He didn't know where he was but he could feel magic. It was soon evident what was planned. Amade-sis was hoping a spell, that spell, that one perfect perfection of

magic, magnified by his very life blood, would be so large, so powerful it would be enough. The air above this duel with the Barbarian King continued until he felt it coming. Vidby felt the spell *ULTIMA* finalize and muttered "Coward". Perhaps for the first moment in his life, Vidby felt at peace. Kami didn't stop his attack and when the entire air and earth was filled with nothing but rumbling and searing hot blue light he was still striking.

V Vidby

When Vidby awoke he was in a crater, it was hundreds of feet deep and covered in scraggly low plant growth and mud. There was no more sign of the ruins of Fantsi, or Kami or Amadesis. The bodies like the ruins had been scrubbed clean by the cleansing fire of *Ultima*. As Vidby struggled out of the hole he was surprised when a woman helped him out, He didn't know why he didn't use magic but he had simply wanted to feel what was happening. Vidby stood whole, his arm, golden but appearing as a normal arm otherwise. Vidby recognized the woman. He had half thought maybe his wife would come to gloat at him in the afterlife but he wasn't dead and this wasn't his wife.

It was Berelaine, from the wizard's tower. Vidby looked around and saw the wizard himself sat on a make-shift chair, a basket with some green bottles of a dark beer and some bread and grapes were near him. As if the two of them had planned to picnic. "Bravo my boy, surviving that spell is a feat," the wizard said, seemingly happy to see him.

Vidby didn't know what to say, "They called it *Ultima*," and stopped, touching his body, confirming he had survived. The wizard said, "And you figured correctly, look at you, healthy and whole." Vidby suddenly felt like that kid in the tower from decades ago and was distraught. Anger welled up in him and he walked up to the wizard and planted a single golden finger in his

chest, "You did this to me! This is all your fault! Do you know what I've done, WHAT I'VE HAD TO DO!"

There was a sly and just briefly dangerous look from the wizard as he effortlessly redirected the finger away from his chest. "Did I?" he asked and after another long second the wizard asked again, "Did you?" The wizard seemed to not know the answer to the questions. Vidby looked at the wizard speechless and then turned to Berelaine. She was a beautiful creature, designed to prey on baser instincts than his and she smiled at him, waving in a happy manner from what she thought was a safe distance he supposed.

"I...Am..." Vidby started. The wizard seemed rapt, looking deeply with eyes that betrayed not a thought. "Confused," Vidby said holding his head. The old wizard nodded, "Happens to the best of us. Come sit and have some bread, I have some good beer here." And so they sat and talked and ate and drank. They didn't say much, just enjoyed the day, the weather and the beer. Vidby stood up and asked the wizard, "So what now?" and the wizard stood brushing the crumbs off his robes and said, "Time to study real magic, Vidby." When they left they left together, as wizards do. Not with magic, but with a flourish and a bow, in between written words and heart and minds. So I say to you, dear reader, thank you for reading. Let me wink and say Goodbye here.

– Vidby the Wizard

What It Means to Be a Hero

by /a/non

Prologue

A storm brewed atop Olympus. A young man stood before his father Zeus at the peak of the mountain, having labored many days in climbing it. His black hair glistened with the sweat of his task, but his heavy breathing now was of rage, not exhaustion.

“Father,” began the demigod, “this is not fair! I have climbed this precipice at the risk of life and limb and succeeded – I have earned my place by your side!” His face was red with rage at his father’s apparent disregard for his achievement.

“Enough, I said,” spake Zeus, whose very speech set the great mountain rumbling. The youth, though silenced, was still fuming. The god sat in his great throne, looking down on his son. His wife Hera looked upon the boy with contempt, for he was not her child but the child of a human woman with whom Zeus took a brief fancy.

Zeus continued after the thunder subsided. “My son you may be, and great may have been your effort, but I issued no such challenge to you.”

“But nevertheless I achieved it! Am I not great for that?” He stood with his arms outstretched, his naked body undamaged despite the perilous climb. “Do I not deserve your-”

“Be silent,” hissed Hera. “Zeus has spoken.” The man replied with a glare of daggers.

“No man or god is deserving of anything thanks only to his willful behaviors,” began the god Zeus again. “Tell me, who did you climb Olympus for?”

“For you, father!”

“Liar!” The sky shook once more, thunder’s peal ringing in the ears of all men of Greece and beyond. “Your true intention is obvious – your effort was merely self-indulgence.”

As if you’re one to talk, father, thought the youth to himself. His father’s “indulgences” were famous the world over – in fact they were responsible for his own birth. He clenched a fist and prepared to speak to his own defense, but the raised hand of Zeus kept him quiet.

“Now, I will hear no more of this. Begone, Markos. Return to your home.”

“But—”

“You may take the winged sandals for your descent.” His tone made clear that his decision was final, and so the young man took Perseus’s old winged sandals from their pedestal and moved down the mountain ten times as quickly as he ascended, hot fire burning in his belly.

Once he landed the sandals, as if of their own accord, slipped off his feet and flew back up to Olympus’s peak once more. He’d landed near the clothes he left behind at the foot of the mount and begrudgingly dressed again. The walk home went through the city, after all, and he wanted not to endure two humiliations this day.

Markos, after a long and angry walk, burst into his home to find his mother sitting alone at the kitchen table. She looked like she’d been waiting for him – no doubt Zeus sent a messenger to let her know what had happened.

“You could have told me where you were going, son,” she said with a frown.

“I thought it best not to worry you.”

“I’d have worried less than I have the last few days.”

“Still, you’d have tried to persuade me not to go. That wouldn’t have done.”

She sighed. "Suit yourself. I'm just glad he or his wife didn't do you any real harm. You know that's rare luck." She stood then and hugged him. "Don't go running off like that again. Not without warning me."

"Fine, fine." He separated the hug and smiled at her. "But don't expect to stop me when I decide to go off on another adventure." She nodded and he made for his bedroom. There he found a couple of suitcases and boxes, full of many of his things; clothes, books, and so on were neatly packed away.

"Did you think me dead and trash my things?" He called, half-joking. His voice rang through the small home loud as his father's had atop Olympus, but without the accompanying peal of thunder and flash of lightning.

"Have you forgotten, Markos? We're moving soon. I went ahead and packed your essentials."

"Moving? Where?"

"You really did forget," she said, shaking her head. "I have to move for work. Demigod though you may be, you still have to have a legal guardian. None of my family here can take you."

"So I'm coming with, then. Where to?"

I Arrival

*As an oak tree falls on the hillside
Crushing all that lies beneath
So Theseus, he presses out the life,
The brute's savage life, and now it lies dead.*

Namigawa Junko read the passage again and again, the too close to her face, gripped by the adventures of Theseus. With each word she moved the tome nearer to her nose, anxious to see what would befall the great hero next though it was a tale she'd read a dozen times.

Alas, her dream-world was wiped away like so much dust when her mother called her from downstairs. “Junko, you’re going to be late for school if you don’t get going!” Her distant voice sounded like it echoed from Minos’s own labyrinth.

“Coming...” said Junko just loudly enough for her mom to hear, dragging herself out of bed and getting changed into her uniform. She absentmindedly got her books and things ready while her mind wandered back to the tale she was reading, then back to a few months ago...

“What are you going to do when I graduate, Namigawa-chan?” The memory of Harima-senpai asked, peeking over a heavy-looking book with *Ancient Myths* written on the front in English. “There won’t be enough members for the mythology club to stay open.” Her brown hair was tied up in a ponytail. The setting sun shone through the half-open curtain between the two girls.

“I’ll think of something,” she replied timidly, both back then and today, to herself.

“Well, whatever you decide—”

“Junko! Are you going to school or not?” Once again her mother pulled her out of her daydreaming, though this time she was thankful for the reprieve. Her cowardice and lack of resolve in the face of Harima-senpai, who worked tirelessly at the start of her third year to recruit for the mythology club, was a shameful memory.

“I’m coming,” replied Junko again, a bit louder. She put on her glasses and rushed down the stairs, nearly tripping over her long, navy skirt in the process.

“Here’s your lunch, sweetie,” said mom, who was waiting for her at the bottom with a wrapped bento. “Did you forget anything?”

“I have it all. Thanks, mom,” said Junko, her voice elevated a little thanks to the mixture of nerves – some about being late for school and some about the fate of the club for which she was now de facto president. “I’m going!” she called behind her as she made for the door.

“Your shoes, Junko.” Mom had the kind of smile only a parent could have for her child’s mistakes. “Or do you want to go barefoot?”

“Oh...right.” She stopped in her tracks, slipping a little on the wooden floor thanks to her socks. The nerves were starting to overwhelm her, and she fumbled with the straps on the shoes. Rushing only served to make her fidget and flounder more, and it took an embarrassing amount of time before she could finally stand, shod, and open the door.

“Have a nice day,” called mom behind her.

The walk to school was mostly uneventful, as usual. Junko lived a little out of the way of the main road, and she seldom if ever saw other students on her path. Once in a while a stray cat or old man would laze in the sun, but she spent most of her commutes in solitude. That was fine by her – usually those walks, while boring in reality, were full of adventure and peril in her head. Some days she was aboard Jason’s Argo, with the school playing the role of Colchis. Other days she walked along with Heracles on his journeys, and still others she quested with Perseus or battled the Trojans with Achilles.

Today, she had no such daydreams. She was fraught with worry, in fact – what if no one joined the club with her? What if the club was disbanded? She’d be forced to join another club thanks to the school’s policy, and she’d probably end up in the literature club where they talked about much less interesting stories than those of the Greeks.

But what can I do? I’m not like senpai... Junko thought. Harima-senpai put in a Herculean effort to advertise for the club after she was the last remaining member a year ago – she left posters all over the school, barged into classrooms to announce the club had openings...She even put on a play acting out part of the Odyssey by her lonesome. Junko lacked the charisma or confidence to do any of that and even with all the effort, only one person joined the club after checking it out – Junko herself. She didn’t know a thing about mythology back then, but something about Harima-senpai’s effort compelled her to at least give it a look. She walked

past a couple of second-year boys on her way that said, “So you just talk about old stories? Lame!”

Junko thanked every god in the pantheon that she didn’t listen to them and entered the room herself. What followed was a year of the most fun she’d ever had with the first friend she’d made at Akamori High. They play-acted the myths, debated the characters, laughed at the comedies...it wasn’t so much a “mythology club” as it was “two friends hanging out together” half the time, but the school rules were lenient on the number of members required to be considered a ‘club’ with two.

The memories made way for the present as she stepped past the school gate – stepped off the Argo onto the coast – and made her way to the lockers. Despite her mother’s anxieties about arriving on time she managed to make it; she was fumbling with her shoes once again when she overheard some conversation on the other side of the locker.

“Did you hear the second years are getting a new transfer student?”

“Which class?”

“2-2, I think.”

“Know anything about him?”

“Get this – he’s a foreigner! I don’t know which country he’s from, though.”

“It’s a guy, huh?” The boy sounded disappointed.

“Oh, like you’d have a chance if it wasn’t!” Their voices trailed off as Junko made her way to class, books in tow.

I wonder what he’s like, she thought as she moved toward her seat in the back of room 2-2. She sat in the center column of the second-to-last row, totally surrounded.

I hope he’s quiet...

She found out quickly that he wasn’t. In fact, “quiet” was the last word one might use to describe the transfer student. He threw the sliding door to the classroom open with a force that could only be described as “excessive” – an apt descriptor of the boy himself – and marched to the front of the room, the teacher shuffling in behind him with a look of apprehension. The boy

was so much taller – bigger in general, really – than his teacher that it appeared as if their roles were reversed at first.

The boy's face was full of impatience as the teacher awkwardly stepped through the now-silent room; the latter's small footsteps scraped along the floor like a child trying to build up static electricity in his slippers. When the tension was at its highest, he spoke up: "Class, please quiet down," he said to the silent, staring students. "You may have heard that we're getting a transfer student in this class, and as you can see, he's arrived today from Greece. This is Nephus Markos-san." He sheepishly turned to the massive student, nearly shivering with apprehension. "Please introduce yourself to the class."

Without missing a beat, the boy said in a booming voice that practically echoed through the entire school (and in surprisingly good Japanese), "My name is Markos, son of Zeus." Junko perked up. "My hobbies include mountain-climbing and wrestling." One could hear a pin drop in the room. "Pleased to meet you." He bowed awkwardly, like he was unaccustomed to deference.

The students whispered among themselves as he went to his desk – an empty one near Junko – about his introduction.

"Son of Zeus? Like the god?"

"Maybe that's just a religious thing for Greek people?"

"What a huge guy..."

"I bet we can get him to join the Judo club. That's like wrestling, right?"

"I'm going to try to get his LINE."

"No, but what does he mean son of Zeus?"

They talked away, abuzz about the new arrival who couldn't seem less interested in what they were saying. Despite all their talking, though, none of the students had the courage to actually approach him. They watched him from their desks and whispered to each other behind their hands until the teacher quieted them down and began to teach.

I wonder what he means... thought Junko, ignoring the math lesson. She'd studied a fair bit about modern Greece with the intention of one day visiting, but never read anything about Greeks re-

ferring to themselves that way. The only ones who *did* were the ones in her stories...*but there's no way, right?* She wrestled with her uncertainty all the way through lunch.

Classes went by uneventfully; by halfway through lunch no one had approached Markos. He ate a surprisingly Japanese affair of onigiri and other bento staples which looked clumsily prepared as if they were someone's first attempt at the dishes. Then he stood, which once again brought the room to an awkward silence. One poor boy was in the middle of moving his desk; his arms were shaking the whole time everyone waited for Markos to make his move.

He simply left to go to the bathroom, and once the door closed – loudly – behind him everyone went back to their usual routines after a sigh of relief. Junko flipped through her book while Harima-senpai's voice echoed in her head once again, both the guilt of failing to keep the club alive and the fear of being forced into a club with strangers suffocating her.

“What are you going to do?” asked Harima-senpai again. And again.

She remembered all the work that senpai put in to keeping the club alive after her own senpai graduated...remembered the posters and advertisements and the solo play...

I can at least ask one boy a question, right?

“What are you going to do?” she found herself asking. She didn't even remember standing up, let alone walking over to Markos's desk through the silent room after he returned.

“Do about what?” he asked in his baritone.

“Um,” she said, now acutely aware of all the eyes on her. An unusual feeling. “About clubs. We all have to join one.”

“I didn't really think about it yet.” He looked up at her with half-closed eyes, barely interested.

She nearly turned around and walked back to her desk, before she remembered Harima-senpai's smile. “Well, whatever you decide...”

“Well, whatever you decide,” she quoted senpai. “I think you should check out my club. You're from Greece, right? My club is

about the myths from there. I thought you might be interested, since you said you're the son of Zeus." She could nearly punch herself for how bad she was stuttering and making a total mess of this recruitment attempt. Any second now he'd turn her down.

He raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? I'll come by."

* * *

Markos still had some trouble navigating the labyrinthine halls of Akamori High School, but eventually he managed to find the room the girl in his class mentioned earlier, 3-C. He tried to pay no mind to all the eyes that fell on him as he walked through the unfamiliar territory, but it was hard to ignore the burning stares.

And that wasn't the only thing he didn't like about having moved to Japan. Things were too stuffy, for one. There were crowds everywhere and the people were so consumed by good manners that he could scarcely breathe without worry of offense. The language was simple enough – a bit backward perhaps, but nothing complicated. Writing was another matter; there were too many characters that meant too many things and it was frustrating to keep track of.

The worst thing, of course, was the distance from his destined greatness. Sitting around all day in school was not conducive to becoming legend.

He popped open the door to 3-C and saw the girl from earlier nose-deep in a book labeled *Ancient Myths* in gold lettering. She didn't notice him enter, so he just shut the door behind himself and waited for her to finish.

And waited...

She wasn't going to finish any time soon, was she? "Excuse me." He said it like a command, rather than a request, out of habit.

The girl jump a foot. "Oh! You're here." She looked surprised to see him somehow.

"I said I would be," he retorted before taking a seat across from her by turning the chair in front of her desk around.

“Right,” she stuttered back. “Well, welcome to the Mythology Club room. In here we mostly talk... about Ancient Greek mythology but we also sometimes talk about the myths from other countries...”

He wasn't sure how to respond. It was difficult to understand what she was even saying with all the stammering and pauses. Noticing his silence, she continued. “But, um. Sometimes we don't just talk about stuff. When senpai was still in the club last year, we would do things like re-enactments and debates and so on...” she trailed off.

“Alright, then.” Markos cut her off before she could keep going and dig the hole she'd made for herself deeper. “Let's talk. What are you reading now?”

“It's about...Atalanta and the Calydonian boar hunt.”

Markos recalled the tale. “A great deed was done that day by Atalanta and Meleager.”

“You've read it?” Junko looked surprised, and happy. “I like the story, even though the ending is a little sad. Or maybe it's because of the tragedy that I like it...”

Markos was surprised in turn at just how quickly she opened up when they spoke about this. They talked about Atalanta's role as Artemis's adoptive daughter and the confusing motives of Artemis, who herself sent the boar to ravage Calydon.

“Maybe Artemis just felt bad about it and changed her mind?”

“Not likely...the gods aren't known to do that. Artemis herself is pretty stubborn, and mean.”

“In which story? I must not have read that one...she did change her mind about Agamemnon's daughter and switched her with a deer,” Junko replied.

“Not in a story – though you're right that she did free Iphigenia. This happened to me a few years or so ago. I was playing in the woods near my home when I came upon a funny-looking frog. I picked it up and poked at it for a bit; I was a boy after all. Well, Artemis didn't take too kindly to the way I was teasing the poor thing, so she came to me and said, ‘Markos, for the torture

you've visited upon this frog – rather than hunting mercifully – you'll be turned into one yourself.' Then she transformed me into the same kind of frog as the one I was messing with."

"What?" Junko was shocked.

"Right? What a thing to do. Anyway, I was stuck as a frog for a week and it took my father to finally get her to relent, but even then only when it was agreed that I would hunt with her band for a year." He leaned back in his seat. "That was tough...I was too young for it then, and they were harsh taskmasters."

"No, wait, stop for a second." He looked back at Junko's face. "You're telling me the goddess Artemis turned you into a frog?"

"Well, yeah. Is that so strange?"

"And your father...you mean Zeus, then?"

"I already said I was his son." He wasn't sure how to interpret her reaction.

"So then...you're a demigod, right?"

"Obviously. Are you alright? Did you hit your head?"

"No, I'm fine, it's just...I didn't expect you to be so into this stuff."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, coming up with your own myths and so on...you're an even bigger fan than I am."

"I'm not a fan of anything. It's true!"

She stared at him in obvious disbelief.

"Watch, I'll prove it. Uh..." he looked around the room. "Would a feat of strength do it?" Before she could react he was already walking over to the lockers. "If I can pick this up, will you believe me?"

"You're going to hurt yourself," she started, but he'd already squatted down and wrapped his arms around the box – about the only thing in the room that was taller than he was. "Heave, ho!" he shouted, so loud the whole school probably heard him. Junko gasped, afraid that he was going to accidentally drop it onto himself and get seriously injured...but then, with a grunt, he hoisted it over his head, balanced on a single hand. The locker's contents rattled and banged. Something inside it broke.

“See?”

* * *

Junko could scarcely believe her eyes. Lifting it up off the ground was one thing...he was pretty strong- looking so she expected he'd manage to raise it a half-inch or so up before setting it back down with heavy breaths. To so effortlessly heave it off the ground and *keep it there with one hand*...he really was some kind of super-human.

“See?” he repeated. She realized she'd been stunned silent.

“Yes, I...that's amazing!” Junko couldn't hide her excitement. It was like a myth come to life!

He set it down gently. Something else in the locker broke anyway. “Believe me now?”

“I do!” She was practically shouting. “That's incredible! You're actually a son of Zeus? Brother of Heracles, and Perseus?” Her face hurt from smiling so much all at once.

“That I am.”

“Well...tell me another story, please!” she set down her book and closed it.

What followed was a thrilling account of Markos's ascent of Mt. Olympus. He climbed the steep slope, he said, in the nude – the thought of which made her blush – and fought off the elements and the beasts that ran astride its peaks to appeal to his father, Zeus. But it was to no avail; Zeus would not accept this feat as great enough, and bade him return to the foot of the mountain in shame.

There wasn't any other myth like it; not that she'd read anyway. To be rejected by his father, Zeus...it had an air of tragedy but it was still inspiring. “That's so cool...” she said to herself.

“What?”

“Oh, uh, I said, ‘that's so cruel!’ Of Zeus, I mean.”

Markos nodded.

“It's kind of different from what one would expect, though. Usually the great task a hero undertakes isn't for its own sake.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s like...” she thought for a moment, poking at her bottom lip. “Like Achilles. He didn’t invade Troy just because he wanted to. You can argue about the validity of his reasons, but he had reasons beyond simply wanting to look cool or gain someone’s favor.” She was debating with senpai in her head about whether it was valid as she spoke; they’d had heated discussions on the topic several times. “Or Odysseus. His great journey wasn’t just for the purpose of going anywhere – he had to get home, you know? Or Heracles...sometimes he did great feats just to do them but, for example, the twelve labors were a punishment. He did a lot of that – making a mistake and making up for it I mean – since he was a pretty hot-headed guy.” It was like senpai was there with her – they had gotten into the habit of casually referring to the greatest heroes in all of history as “that guy,” and it didn’t occur to her until after she said it in front of one of their siblings that it might be kind of rude.

Markos sat in silence, thinking.

“Oh, but...I’m not trying to say you’re wrong, either. It’s just different from what I’m used to reading.” She thought she might have offended him – if he was half as emotional as his half-brother, that could be trouble.

“I’m not angry.” He sounded it, though.

“Well...”

They sat in silence for a while. Junko fidgeted, peeking up from her lap at Markos every few seconds to see if his expression changed. He remained deadly serious. She wasn’t sure whether to start reading again or not so she just sat there with him, nerves on overdrive as the sun sank behind the horizon and the room went dark.

“Alright then.” He finally spoke, standing as he did. “This was good. I’ll come back.”

Huh? What? “Come back? Are you joining the club?”

“I am. You gave me much to think about. I hope you’ll do so again.” He started to leave.

“Wait, wait!” He stopped. “You have to sign this...” Junko sheepishly produced the club membership form, which she’d prepared just in case after class.

As they walked out of the room together, form in Markos’s massive paw, the judo club was walking back home from practice through the same hall.

“Nephos-san! I was looking for you after class.” A dyed-blond boy from their class, Tsujika Kenta, approached them. “I wanted to ask if you were interested in checking out the judo club. It’s a lot like wrestling, but...”

“Sorry,” Markos cut him off. “I’ve already joined a club.”

“Huh? Which one? Soccer or something? That’s too weak, you should be—”

“No, I joined the Mythology Club with Namigawa-san.” He gestured to Junko, who hid her face behind her bookbag. *Please don’t ask me about it, please don’t ask me about it.*

“What? Why? That’s so lame!”

“You’re way too strong for that!”

A chorus of complaints emerged from the group of five, still in judogi.

“Quiet.” Markos didn’t yell, but his voice still dominated the others’. “I’ll hear no such talk about my club.” Without another word he walked past them, pushing Tsujika out of the way.

Junko followed behind slowly, still hiding her face and bowing feverishly at every confused judoka they passed. *Is this going to be okay...?*

II

Departure

Junko pulled her bag up over her shoulder. “I’m going!” she called from the foyer.

“Be careful on the way,” called her mom back to her. “You don’t want to end up like those missing girls.”

“I will,” she replied as the door closed behind her.

Lately she’d been excited to go to school. Ever since Markos joined the club, Junko found herself looking forward to class and the time after that she got to spend talking about her favorite things. Markos’s perspective and one-of-a-kind experience with the subjects of the stories were just as fascinating as the stories themselves; sometimes even more. Junko recalled on her walk the story Markos told about his wrestling match against a Cyclops.

According to the story, Markos was swifter than the monster but lacked the strength needed to pin it properly; the monster in turn was too slow to subdue Markos. They fought for three days without food or water, said Markos, and in the end the Cyclops surrendered due to exhaustion.

“We’re still friends to this day, that Cyclops and I, though his brethren hate me as much as you might expect.”

“And why did you wrestle him exactly?” asked Junko.

“I’d been forbidden from wrestling other mortal men, you see – too often I would hurt them by mistake, not knowing my own strength in my youth.”

“You’re in your youth now, aren’t you?” she was a font of inquiry when he told his tales.

“Hardly – I’m 16 now. I was only 12 then, and naive.” How he could talk so brazenly of naivete made her laugh to herself.

That laugh made her think of another she and Markos had shared – they play-acted the battle of Heracles against the Nemean Lion – she made a paper puppet of the lion in question and Markos had a hell of a time convincingly “strangling” it. Little did she realize, she laughed right as she crossed paths with Tsujika and his friends from the Judo club.

“What’s so funny, Namigawa?” she nearly jumped when she heard his voice.

One of his clubmates chimed in. “She’s probably laughing about her new boyfriend.”

The other boys laughed. "Yeah right! She's more likely to get kidnapped by the Oni than date a guy like that," chortled Tsujika.

"The Oni?" asked a third, out of the loop.

"The one that's been kidnapping girls around here! Haven't you watched the news?"

"I don't really watch TV..."

Junko took the in-fighting as an opportunity to leave and soon she found herself at a comfortable distance from the rowdy lads. She wondered at the Oni story that had been going around. Some girls had gone missing, that much was true – one person saw a huge, red man snatching a girl off the street and fleeing with her into the mountains, but many (Junko included) wrote that off as a bid for attention from the one who "saw" it. Most agreed that the events were related but a suspect hadn't been named. Oni weren't real after all, and "photographic evidence" consisting of blurry, obviously edited photos wasn't enough to convince her otherwise.

Then again, demigods weren't supposed to be real either...

Tsujika and the others called out to her, but she couldn't make out what they were saying at the distance she'd put between them. They were probably just trying to tease her anyway. They kept calling, though, louder and more frantic.

"Run!" As soon as she understood, the massive fist collided with her head, instantly knocking her out.

* * *

"She's taking a while," Markos thought to himself at the school gate, the skies graying overhead. "Hope she brought an umbrella...at this rate she's going to get caught in it." He checked his watch, and as he did one of the boys from the judo club bolted past him in a frenzy.

Sensing something was out of place, Markos snatched the boy up by the collar of his shirt before he could get away. "What's the hurry?"

“I have to tell the teachers!” cried the boy. He had a look of sheer terror on his face complete with bloodshot eyes and a pale complexion. “Tsujika and Namigawa are in danger!”

“What’s going on? Why is Junko in trouble?” A grim countenance befell Markos, and the boy saw that nothing would convince him to let go, so he explained.

“Junko was attacked by an Oni on the way to school,” he panted, scarcely believing the words coming from his own lips. “It clubbed her over the head and snatched her up. Tsujika chased after him. Nomura went to the police and I came here to tell the teachers that other students might be in danger.” He said all this in a flurry, the words swirling together in the air before they reached Markos. But he got the gist – Junko was attacked by some kind of monster and Tsujika went off to help her.

“Where did they go?”

“You’re not thinking of—”

“Where did they go?” repeated Markos, sternly.

The boy explained the path the Oni appeared to be taking, and where the incident itself took place, but he wasn’t sure of the Oni’s destination. Markos dropped him. “Go warn the teachers. Tell them to shut the school gate.”

Without another word he was off toward the area in question. It didn’t take long to get there – the attack took place alarmingly close to the school – and there were signs of the commotion still laying on the sidewalk. Junko’s schoolbag must have come open when she was struck; assorted notes and pens lay on the ground in a helpful trail. Tsujika’s bag was left behind as well, probably so he could catch up to the monster.

No stranger to hunting and tracking, Markos followed the trail of stationery as quickly as his legs could take him, hoping for help of some kind from the goddess he’d offended in his youth. The trail wore thin as Junko’s bag ran out of things to drop and soon enough he came to the last of the fallen utensils. It began to rain, then.

Just as he pondered his next move he heard a boy shouting in the distance over the descending droplets. It sounded like a cry

of great pain and lingered in the air for long enough to make a normal man's spine tingle.

No normal man, Markos charged toward the source of the sound with a renewed speed and vigor, effortlessly vaulting over the rocks and stumps that littered the most direct path to the wailing, which rang out yet again on the way.

He arrived at a fearful sight – as Tsujika lay on the ground in a one-man heap, thunderous footsteps echoed from a nearby cave entrance, mixing with the thunder that fired off in the distance. Markos knelt down to the injured boy.

“Tsujika, pull yourself together! What happened?” He inspected the fallen judoka and found no blood was spilled, but many bones were broken.

“That monster...it's too strong...” groaned Tsujika. “I tried to fight it but I was no match...”

Markos smiled. “That was heroic of you. Rest here. I'll finish the job.” He hoisted the boy into the cave entrance and out of the falling rain.

Tsujika couldn't reply further; he was in pain too great to stay awake and fainted. Markos lay him down gently on the cave floor and followed the sound of the footsteps into the cave.

“Oni!” he called. “Return the girl!”

There was no reply. Cursing the lack of light, he stepped forward with caution. There was a distant voice speaking in a rhythm; Markos couldn't make out the lyrics over the rain but he could tell that it didn't belong to a girl. Guessing the monster hadn't heard him, he called out again. “Monster! I'll spare you if you leave this place at once, and return the girl to me!”

“Fool!” Finally, a response – Markos moved toward the voice, ignoring the other paths in the winding cave. “I'll break you like I broke that boy that tried to stop me! The girls are mine!”

Girls...? Markos picked up his pace; now a faint light flickered against the stone walls, guiding him toward the Oni.

“Then I'll slay you in your home, beast,” taunted the demigod, hoping the Oni would reply again. The path split, and there was light coming from both sides.

The monster took the bait. “Damn human! Your race is too weak to stand up to me!”

A labored grunt came next – the monster rose from his seat. Markos charged down the right-side corridor after tossing off his soaked gakuran, correctly pinpointing the location of the Oni’s lair. Alas, there was only Junko, her ankle-length skirt torn at the bottom. The other girls must have been down the opposite path.

Seeing his friend sprawled on the ground as he marched inside lit a new fury in his heart. “I’m no mere human – you face Markos, son of Zeus!” Outside rang another peal of thunder. Markos threw his wet shirt onto the floor.

Without a word or a breath, the Oni lunged at him, two red arms the size of tree trunks and ending in long, sharp nails swiping at Markos’s head. The demigod ducked and struck the beast’s belly with a fierce uppercut.

The oni bellowed, staggering back. Markos held his ground, expecting a feint from the cunning monster. Its leopard-printed loincloth played with the firelight as it took a deep breath to collect itself. A pair of sharp horns stood tall on its forehead.

“Finally,” it shouted, “a real fight!” It reached over to the cave wall where rested a fierce-looking weapon; a club of dark wood with spikes made of bone and stone covering it all over. “Come!”

Markos grinned. “That stick won’t save you from my fury!”

The oni took a swing at his head with the kind of wild abandon reserved for a savage monster. Markos deftly ducked out of the way, then jumped forward and landed another great blow against the beast’s belly.

But the monster was no weakling – it stood tall after taking the fearsome blow and retaliated with another swipe of its club, this one finding Markos’s side and piercing his skin. Warm blood oozed slowly from the wound; crimson dripped from the club’s spikes.

Thinking Markos would be crippled from the blow, the Oni laughed. Its taunting was cut short, though, by a punch to the throat that any mortal would have found deadly.

The two exchanged hits like this for minutes, neither giving any ground. Markos had endurance on his side, but the Oni's savage nature proved unpredictable – several times Markos found himself on the receiving end of that brutal weapon...

* * *

Junko stirred, finding her bed harder and much less comfortable than usual. Her head was throbbing; waves of pain emanating from a single spot on her skull wrapped her in agony. As her eyes fluttered open she found that she'd fallen asleep wearing her glasses. Through the lenses she witnessed something out of a dream or myth, or perhaps it was a fusion of the two.

A tall, dark-haired man stood face-to-face with a blood-red, horned demon wielding a vicious-looking club. Neither wore a shirt and the firelight – she was dreaming she was in a fire-lit cave – shone against their bodies, both soaked with rain and sweat. They were breathing heavy, as if exhausted; judging by the effort each movement exerted they had been at it for some time. Blood ran from both of them, trickling onto the floor.

The man moved in to attack just as Junko started coming to, throwing a straight punch into the toothy jaws of the monster. He was both swift and strong, as his physique suggested, and a deadly fang launched out of the beast's maw and clattered against the floor.

With a roar of retort the oni charged forward, lowering its head. The man took the beast's neck with his arms as it lunged, falling into a sit but keeping firm hold. There was a fleshy crunch, then grunts of struggle as the man held his grip around the monster's throat in a guillotine choke. He strained with effort, the veins in his arms bulging. The monster slapped and scratched at him vainly, pushing with all its might against the force of the hero, but he was overpowered. Eventually, all fight left him, and soon after followed life.

Junko realized some time in the middle of the fight that this was no dream – memory of being struck in the head on the way to

school returned to her. Shock gave way to panic as she saw blood flowing from Markos's torso; his breaths were labored and dry.

"Markos!" She ran to him as he forced the monster's corpse away, and it was then that she saw the blood-red horns of the oni had found a home in Markos's belly. "You need a doctor!" She got up to run, but he grabbed hold of her hand. Even in such a state, he was too strong for her to get away.

"It's too late," he coughed. "I won't make it more than a few more seconds."

"We have to try!" She could feel a lump welling up in her throat.

"Save it." He forced himself upright against the cave wall. "My lung is pierced. My tale ends today," he managed with a wheeze.

She relented, against her will, and watched as his breathing grew more and more haggard.

"Thank you," he said finally.

"What? I should be thanking you!"

"No," he began, hard, wheezing coughs interrupting his speech. "Were it not for you, I don't think I'd have really understood what was holding me back."

"What? I didn't do anything..."

He smiled. "You'll understand later...for now, there are others. In the cave next to this one. They need saving, too...and Tsujika. He's at the cave entrance."

"What about you? You can make it!"

"No...this wound is too much. Even if I live, I'll be a cripple. Pointless."

"But..." she choked on her sadness.

He took her hand in both of his. "Goodbye." His grip weakened and finally slipped. Junko wept, the desperate weeping of a woman who lost her love without knowing she loved him until it was too late.

Afterword

Sad, huh? Maybe not? I hope it had some kind of impact, anyway. It took me a long time and a lot of restarting to settle on this idea, and what you've read here is the product of just a couple of weeks of effort despite the rather large challenge window.

I wanted to use the bildungsroman theme to express a bit of what I believe in, and I tried that with several different stories about possible futures and the past, but in the end I couldn't get anything going that I was satisfied with. There was an effort to write a story about the future-cities described in the infamous "welcome to 2030" world economic forum article and I put quite a lot of words about a sci-fi retelling of the prehistoric Yamnaya invasion of Europe, but in the end I found those stories a little too difficult to condense into a short enough story that it would feel 'complete' by the end of this challenge. The latter might make for an interesting book, though...

Anyway, what we're left with is a condensed version of my most core belief about dying young, beautiful, and with purpose. I thought that would tie in nicely to the Greek god angle, and I kept it /a/ and /jp/ related by setting it in modern Japan. Even then, I wasn't sure how to kill Markos - my previous story about a god-like figure roaming through Japan was much more violent than this one and I thought that kind of thing wouldn't suit my purposes here - but I settled on an Oni as a fairly appropriate counterpart to the Minotaur.

I'd have liked to include much more of Markos and Junko's club activities, but I didn't have time to include it. Given another week I think I'd do that just to make the connection more genuine while still keeping it as fleeting as it is now. As for the ending, there's a world where this ends with Junko teaching mythology at a university, but I can't decide how to make that satisfying or to keep it from taking some of the punch out of the ending. I decided not to include it since it would be clumsy.

Anyway, I hope you could enjoy my story. Thank you.

Anon.