

ADVENT OF ANNIHILATION: DIES IRAE PART I

Odin receives a pair of cordovan gloves from his squire and walks along the arcade, leaving the palace grounds in humbler attire than what one sustains for the pretenses at court. A blue-necked canid trots along the cobblestone untethered. Although its ears twitch, tempted by activity nearby, some other resolve overrides its curiosity and carries it off in a steady pace towards a destination with purpose privy only to the crude workings of its bestial mind. Odin lets the creature cross before him politely before continuing along the main way. He nods to each peasant he passes, the woman conveying ecru eggs in her apron, the girls carrying baskets of fresh rolls back to their homes, the journeymen hurrying between shops with errands and the earnest urgency to impress their masters with expedience in lieu of experience. The prince strolls past the fountain where four caryatids hoist a shell above them, which sputters water like comets catching glints of sunlight. Before he can make his way forward, two labourers hoist voluminous bundles of sticks. He yields again for them to truck past and casts a swift glance to his flanks to prepare for any other oncoming carriages. Upon confirming his path, he continues through the open market, stepping along the tasseled edges of blankets sprawled under shop windows with ceramic jars, an assortment of wares, and knitted goods copiously displayed.

Light decants from the noon sky, sifting between the three storey buildings. It glints off the glass ewers and dazzles Odin briefly. He shields his eyes and steps aside, careful not to elbow the maid walking past him with three jugs of ale arranged precariously while her hood bobs behind her partially detached. He sighs and turns into a secondary street, evading traffic in exchange for the stench of offal and unsightly substances smeared along the lower portions of brickwork and cobblestone. He avoids the shards of broken terra cotta tile, and holds his breath a bit until he reemerges by the textile shops.

Bolts of brightly arrayed fabrics cascade on either side, either matte or shimmering with bucolic motifs and geometric patterns. Odin continues further along the gallery, edging past wide jars of Casimir nuts, Bobola pistachios, and Addai albino olives. Most of the bins remain lidded while merchants and barterers break for a midday meal; however a flock of clever little pigeons with heads like triceratops worm their way into a basket of dates. As Odin passes, they flutter away, squawking, but moments after he departs, they land and hop closer with their spindly legs, returning to their mischief.

From there Odin proceeds straightaway to the St. Bademus parish church where he meets up with two other squires, who join him with voluminous baskets swaying from their elbows. One of them sets his down in order to wind a linen scarf about his face, and the other does likewise, also gloving his hands with leather. They take up their baskets once more and head around the western side of the church. The faint fragrance of myrrh improves the air as they walk under one of the elevated, stained-glass windows depicting the third scene of the Passion of Christ. After a series of five empty pedestals, they approach the porch by the transept where a motley throng gathers among the recesses and bays of beveled pilasters, sprawled along the steps. A pair of friars already engage the more desperate among their ranks, treating their wounds with complimentary care and due attention.

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A woman holds her feathered toddler and bounces it gently upon her knee while it chortles with glee. Her hair fans out behind her in a tsunami of tangles, her kirtle and smock likewise unkempt. The senescent man sitting below looks up with pearly eyes and smiles revealing seven ochre pegs jutting from glossy, cerise gums—framed by scabrous lips. Five flies orbit the odor of ordure that clings to his form. Odin takes one of the baskets from the squire and conveys it over dutifully. He sets it down and crouches before the elderly man, searching for something to offer that wouldn't be too difficult to chew. He pushes aside a few fruit and tests the rolls one by one, squeezing them in his gloves. Beyond him a pair of eyes light up with interest, and one of the mendicant's hands darts out, almost seizing the edge of the basket. Odin immediately places something inside the encroaching hand to discourage further aggression. The hand springs away, and the mendicant withdraws with his treasure, devouring it savagely.

“May the Lord be with you.” Odin delivers firmly. He glances back to his squire and moves away to let him take over while he services another section. More limbs jut out, and the squires place plums, small loaves of bread, and other victuals in avaricious palms—some brandishing, some clawing at the air, their arms terminating in gnarled talons with sores, warts, horns, and other protuberances—hands with seven fingers, hands with three, hands with soiled bandages, tattered gloves, and all sorts of rime and scum, but nowhere a hand immaculate.

“May the Lord be with you.” The prince deals out the loaves, careful not to let his eyes linger upon any one recipient for too long, but as he nears the bottom of the supply, a lobster claw hooks onto the basket's rim. Odin studies the crustacean appendage and follows its limb to the misshapen creature, which lowers one antenna to gander back. He extends a citrus fruit reflexively and smiles kindly, holding his hand out flat as one would feed a horse. The claw snaps the fruit from his palm and conveys it to its gullet, shuffling it into the hole with a grunt, the closest qualification of gratitude.

“May the Lord be with you.” Odin nods his head reverently and glances around, realizing that they did not bring nearly enough aliments. He withdraws with the basket and turns away, adjusting his hood before scornful eyes array with lips parting to protest.

Odin pulls one of the squires aside by his shoulder in a fraternal gesture and leans in to level with his gaze. “We may have to go back for more.”

“Why certainly, Master Odin.” The squire nods, swallowing.

The prince folds a small purse of coin into his palm to conceal the transaction. “More bread—and a pitcher of water, too—as much as you can acquire and carry.” He mentions softly and looks up from his dark brow with direct intensity.

The squire bows slightly and tucks the purse carefully into his waistband. He then peers down into his basket and scoops out the remaining five rolls. He offers them to the prince, who nods and accepts the bounty, adding them to his own supply. Hoisting the empty basket under his arm, the squire hurries off to fulfill the request. Odin sighs and redirects his attention to the throng, watching the beggars become uneasy and exchange hostile looks. He divides the foodstuffs and spreads them out further among competing hands. “Peace be with you.”

“May the Lord be with you.”

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“Thank you,” one croaks.

“May the Lord be with you as well.”

“Thanks.”

“May the Lord be with you.”

The beggar nods and eats the plum without comment. The juices drain between his knuckles and bead at his wrist while he gnaws at the pit, straining to extract fibers from every last bit.

“We’ll have more soon.” Odin smiles weakly and turns to the other squire who joins him with an empty basket.

“*Water?*”

Odin looks over his shoulder. “It’s on its way.” He nods and redirects his attention to the squire.

“Your Lordship, many of these beggars are capable of finding work and *means*. Does that ever trouble you?” The squire addresses him privately, but still in the proximity of ears.

Odin examines the squire carefully.

“One would think that hunger might serve as impetus for labour; however, as we feed them, this very impetus would be slaked along with the hunger.”

“I’m still hungry.”

“Quiet, you. You’ve had some already.”

“Have any ale?”

The prince frowns. “Many do not have homes or have fallen on hard times. Please show some clemency, Peitross.”

“I didn’t even get a piece yet.”

“You could have shared *yours*. I only got *half*.”

“—and I got *half* of a half!”

“Are these hard times truly the product of misfortune—or indolence?” the squire mutters. “I see that many are genuinely ill—but just as many are robust from alms and charity. What if we exhaust our generosity on *those* who are not deserving such that those who are *truly* in need—are *deprived*?”

“*Hello?* Is that *it?* I didn’t get any yet.”

“If you don’t have food, I’ll take coins!”

“Yeah—**hey** over there, you *hear us?*”

“Ale? Do you’ve got any ale?”

“It is not ours to decide whether they are deserving.” Odin exhales. “We give freely and generously. Although our supplies may be exhausted, our generosity shall never be exhausted.”

“Even if they are fraudulent in their poverty?”

“Hey, where’s our food?”

“I haven’t eaten in *four days!*”

“Is that *really it?* My daughter’s hungry.”

“Water?”

“Lord have mercy!”

Odin glances obliquely at the crowd. “It only matters that we give and do good works. We are not here to question *why* they ask and *why* they are in need. It is

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not our business to inquire. It is not our station to judge.” He explains with authority and earnest.

“I understand.” The squire bows his head, conscious of the provocation he’s inspired—however minor. Odin closes his eyes for a moment, offering a silent prayer.

“Come on, here—they’re holding back!”

“Shhhh, you. Be quiet.”

“*HEY THERE!* I haven’t eaten for *three* days!”

“Yes ye have, *Morten*. You took one of those liuwaba tarts from the window’s ledge by Marwid’s.”

“Did *not*.”

“I saw ye myself with m’own two eyes—God as my witness. Ate it all fer yerself. With m’own two eyes, I did see. Ate it all. It’s enuff fer three or four of us. That’s why yer teeth are rotting out—from all that *glutt’ny*. Serves ye right.”

“Well, it’s not like *you* should be hungry—after rummaging through the midden. Did you find anything tasty in all that spoilage? Maybe a maggot-laden cutlet?”

“Better than having a maggot-laden soul. Yer a liar and a thief—and *yer* going to rot fer all yer vices.”

“Please!” Odin starts over suddenly, having heard his fill of their contention. He eyes each of them in turn, challenging them to continue their disruption whilst he evinces disapproval. “Peace.” He assuages with a gesture. “Peace be with you. Please be patient. We shall have more food for you soon, God willing.” He smiles weakly, trying to disarm any hostility. Each beggar withdraws. One lowers his head while he plays with his drooping antenna, tugging the tip. The other gets up and quits their company, planting himself at the other end of the steps by the feathered child and its mother.

Odin closes his eyes once more. ~Our Father, please give them the strength and wisdom to achieve harmony in all of their affairs—and guide them with Your Grace, Amen.~ He opens his eyes gradually, puzzled by the apprehension that stirs among the penurious, some of which rise in a tide of relief. He traces where they direct their attention, and there sets his sights upon the returning squire.

The prince sighs and hurries over to help the squire with his parcels, which are almost exploding with more fruit and rolls of bread. Some of the items are pressed inside so tightly that the weave buckles, ready to fray. The other squire catches up a moment later to also assist.

Odin notices the two jugs swinging from the squire’s belt. “I’ll distribute the water. Please divide the bread among those who have not eaten.” The squire moves a basket aside so that the prince may untie the two leather thongs that secure the jugs to his belt. Odin unthreads the leather and holds a jug from each hand, backing away.

“My prince, how might we tell that we are not giving food to beggars who have already eaten from your hand—or from another’s kindness?”

Odin glances over, a touch exhausted by the other squire’s reluctance. “Please have faith. We shall feed everyone here eventually.”

The squire nods and wraps the handles around his arms before slugging the second basket off. The bottom skips along the ground, almost dragging. He sets it

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down for a moment in order to readjust his gloves and sweeps his eyes across the multitude while a pungent bouquet of odors visits his nostrils despite the scarf. The squire clears his throat and directs his load a few feet closer to begin with a young family nestled in the shade.

“Here, I’ve brought you some food.” He unties the twine and folds back the lid. At the periphery of his vision he notices a few mendicants beginning to flock nearby. “Please stay put, if you will. I’ll get to you shortly.” He glances obliquely, deterring them with the palm of his hand. He then returns his attention to the family and removes a few loaves. “These are for you. God be with you.”

“Bless you.” The father reaches forward into the sunlight and receives the bounty with a knotted piece of yarn wagging from his thumb. His wife leans out beside him, half of her face shrouded with a crested hood. They distribute the bread among themselves and pass off smaller pieces to the two pale faces, curiously peering beyond the mother’s mantle. The squire smiles endeared by what he perceives as innocence. He turns to the next beggar who lies supine, offering him a loaf. “God be with you.” The squire lowers the bread, keeping it in plain sight. Thereupon he begins to notice something amiss.

“Master—uhm, Master! Come quickly.” He flags Odin, flailing his arm. The prince withdraws the jug from a terra cotta bowl and seals it, uncertain of the measure of urgency. He steps back and squints. The pauper behind him douses his thirst then lifts the bowl higher, expecting another dose.

“Master. Over here!” The squire hops, waving impatiently.

“Lord be with you.” Odin mutters before heading over hurriedly. He steps over two sets of legs and waits for the spectators to move aside before he joins the squire.

“Master, this man—he’s—” The squire peels back part of the blanket carefully, revealing an *ad hoc* bandage swarming with maggots. They twist and writhe excitedly, pouring out of the folds of luteous flesh mottled with purpura. Several roll off onto the cobblestone, curdling along the cracks like lively grains of rice.

Odin draws part of his hood over his mouth, holding back his breakfast. He presses his head against his shoulder, keeping it in place while he contains his revulsion. His free hand reaches for a holy book suspended from a pouch along his belt while the other maintains a grip around the neck of the jug. “*In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti—Amen.*” He lifts the hidebound volume over the injury and chokes a bit, struggling with each subsequent syllable. “*O Sancta Virgo Maria, nunquam esse cognitum a saeculo quemqua—quequam ad tua currentem praesidia, tua implorantem auxilia, tua petentem suffragia esse derelicta. Nos tali animati confidentia ad te, Virgo Virginum Mater, currimus; ad te venimus; coram te gementes peccatores assistimus. Noli Mater Verbi, verba nostra despiciere, sed audi propitia et exaudi. Amen.*” He continues his solemn prayer, petitioning the savior and his blessed virgin mother to impart healing.

The squire removes a flask from his satchel and exchanges it with Odin, receiving his jug. Odin nods reverently and pours the holy water from the flask over the wound while chanting “*Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison. Christe, audi nos. Miserere nobis.*” The maggots and filth wash away, leaving only a light scar of sealed skin. The audience of eyes nearby arrays to betake the feat with amazement. Odin bows his head

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meekly and tucks the holy book back into its pouch with two attempts, since the binding snagged on the buckle.