

Prologue

Anger and fear were the fleeting sensations of mortals. And yet, those very same emotions washed over Asherah in her last moments. She was the Goddess of Light, now reduced to a frightened mortal. Asherah found herself bound and shackled alongside her brethren, four other deities, powerful gods of their own domains, being bled out of their divine essences like sacrificial lambs. Her spark faded in and out with every red drop of her existence, but she held on, not for hope nor revenge, but for a meager opportunity to ask one simple question. Why?

That single answer evaded Asherah as the inevitability of her demise tickled at her soul like a predator playing with its prey. The other gods had already passed onto the void, their divine embers forever snuffed out. Despite everything, Asherah remained with gritted teeth and a scornful glare. There was a feral desperation as she failed to comprehend the reasoning for their stolen essences. It was maddening to have the one thing she desired just within a hand's grasp, yet so far away.

As Asherah began to falter against the ever-encroaching darkness, her eyes began to droop to the floor as the weight of gazing up became too much. Below her lay an intricate array of arcane hieroglyphs and runes engraved into the stone. Despite the drowsiness affecting her mind, she attempted to study them as they filled with the red trickling of her blood, but like everything else that led to this moment, Asherah struggled to comprehend the purpose. Frustration became her final companion as the answers slipped further away, as an onslaught of meaningless inquiries and suspicions ran amuck in her wooziness.

Why would these self-proclaimed Gods of Rule aid mortals in the imprisonment and sacrifice of other deities? Surely the threat of holy war would be enough to prevent such barbaric acts, yet here she was, a goddess bleeding out like a hunter's trophy. Why weren't these treacherous gods here now to gloat in triumph? What greater purpose would her death serve than her own divination of light?

Asherah's inner turmoil ended when one of her executioners, a cultist, approached the edge of the ritual circle. This particular cultist caught her attention, not for any other reason but for his clothing. He wore the robes of a Reaper, despite it being evident that he was no such entity. That, however, was another mystery she wouldn't be able to solve before her death. Asherah discarded that thought as she struggled to focus on his words.

“My pure brethren, sisters, our elvish gods above and below, we gather here on this momentous day upon the end of the Conjunction of Realities. **The chains upon Tartarus have been broken!** As I speak, that little blue rock has been brought back to our reality and now shatters itself upon the heavens of Völuspá. And with it, the Titans, our enemies of old, **now shatter**, or rather these so-called humans as they now call themselves.

“But it does not end there, ney, my devoted brothers and sisters. The true threat hid like a viper amongst our enemies for countless millennia. **Ney, like a coward!** Our sacred duty is to ensnare,

shackle, and **enslave this villain!** With the blood of these unjust, fake pretenders, these false gods, we will capture the adversary to our Gods of Rule—**Life herself!**”

Cheers of thousands filled the amphitheater, either oblivious to Asherah’s sheer horror or in celebration of it.

“We commence our sacred birthright upon the Moons of Völuspá, starting now! May the purity of the High Elves and Gods of Rule guide us all.”

With a thunderous roar, thousands bellowed out in unison.

“GUIDE US ALL!”

Asherah knew her divine life was forfeit, but she refused to let her last drops of essence be used for such a violation. It was not her fading divinity nor her death she now feared. It was the infringements upon the directives that governed gods and mortals. Her executioners’ scheme was what Asherah now dreaded. Their actions were a declaration of war unlike any known since the fall of the Eldritch Gods. She often viewed the younger gods as petulant children, and these acts now confirmed her opinion of the Gods of Rule. Only the generations of deities created closer to the beginning of creation remember the old wars with the Eldritch and, most of all, the Primordials who had defeated them. That thought brought back a chilling memory of Cthulhu, the Eldritch Abomination, which sent a shiver down Asherah’s spine despite her failing existence.

Finding renewed determination, she steeled herself to do all she could to prevent such an atrocity before her death. Reexamining her shackles for anything she could have missed, she was quickly disheartened to reconfirm what she already knew. There was nothing she could do, nothing to be exploited. Not even at full strength did she have the power to break free from her bonds; none of them had as she glanced at the husks of four dead gods.

At that moment, Asherah stopped her struggles as she bore witness to the manifestation of pure mana igniting across the surface of the hieroglyphs. The ritual had begun! Magic coalesced into a swirling vortex of white flames. The manifestation contained within the ritual lashed out in a cyclone of raw life magic that roared for release. Inside the tempest was a light show of arcing magic that repeatedly struck the center of the ritual like a lightning storm within a tornado. With each bolt strike, remnants of the arcing power remained behind, forming a silhouette of an entity long since lost.

Asherah noticed the speaker at the edge of the runes with his crimson eyes glaring into the firestorm as he reveled in triumph. He held a sphere of phantasmic energy in his outstretched hand, no, a heart of a Reaper. Asherah wasn’t sure what the speaker’s intent was with the heart, but she refused to find out. And yet, she was too weak to act. Even with the blinding firestorm of raw mana before her, she was powerless to do anything.

Asherah knew she was dying. The ever-approaching darkness was upon her. However, in her moment of defeat, she had a sudden revelation, an inspiration borne from desperation. Closing her eyes, she embraced Death with a final prayer that went unheard by her executioners.

“I call upon the remaining Pillars of Existence. I call upon the primordials Magic and Death. Use my eyes and see the crimes upon your commandments. See for yourselves whom they’ve found and now summon. They’re enslaving her with the blood and essence of her own children! Magic, please, I beg you, rescue your sister! I beseech you, use whatever remains of my vanishing essence as you see fit. Death, please, safeguard the heart of your existence. Please, protect Life!”

Asherah was the Goddess of Light, a gentle and benevolent healing goddess. She was feared by the undead and worshiped by healers, paladins, and the sick. It was why here, in the end, she closed her eyes and felt a sense of irony as death and darkness washed over her. Her light forever snuffed out by the suffocating sensation of Death’s arrival. However, Asherah still remained. The essence of The Ender, of Death herself, had answered Asherah’s plea. An all-encompassing power of a Primordial now ran through the former Goddess of Light’s soul.

Hatred, rage, and something else long since forgotten came along with the borrowed power. Asherah could not tell if it was love, longing, or guilt. It did not matter! All Asherah knew was that it was indeed a borrowed power and that once it was returned, she would follow. Regardless, for now, Asherah could feel her wounds heal and her energy rising to the echelons of nothing she had ever experienced.

Opening her eyes with renewed vigor, she took in everything that played before her. Lightning was still striking, but a female manifestation of pure light and mana was now revealed within its heart. The female figure didn’t move or acknowledge her surroundings. She levitated there, rising higher into the sky with each arcing strike as she shined in all her brilliance. Asherah had observed the birth of stars firsthand and walked along their surfaces. What she felt now at this moment was something entirely different. This moment was like witnessing the universe be reborn and, with it, the endless possibilities of life.

Noticing the blood runes were now shifting within the engravings, Asherah grew concerned she would be unable to prevent the enslavement portion of the ritual in time. Her shackles contained their own powerful eldritch magic that flickered and glowed in objection as Asherah battled against their sinful arcane nature. She struggled against them with all her might as she attempted to stand.

“ONE OF THE PRETENDERS IS TRYING TO ESCAPE!”

A startled scream from one of the spectators sent off a horde of fanatic elves that descended upon Asherah like an ant nest under attack. Her executioners formed a semicircle and started bombarding her with a wave of spells that tore flesh and broke bones. Even with her loaned power, the bindings’ enchantments were eldritch in origin, which allowed injuries to be inflicted by meager mortal magic. Nonetheless, if not for being knocked around, Asherah would have been unperturbed as her body mended itself as she continued to fight against her restraints.

Sparks of magic shot out from Asherah’s shackles as the magic within started to fail, but it was already too late. Streams of divine blood slithered towards the heavens, defying gravity as they latched onto the entity of light wrapping around her like chains, dimming her brilliance as glowing eldritch runes engraved themselves upon her flesh and soul.

Asherah screamed in rage, and with her, so too did the darkness within. A dark, hate-filled power diverged from everything she stood for as the Goddess of Light surged forth. And with Death's power, Asherah obliterated her shackles in an explosion of magic. In the process, the blastwave sent elves tumbling and shattered the already strained barrier of the ritual. To Asherah's relief and the elves' horror, the maelstrom of raw mana was no longer confined.

Gurgling pained screams of burning elves were barely noticeable over the tempest of bellowing magic as it spread out over the amphitheater like a hurricane making landfall. All while Asherah containing more power than the heavens themselves, felt beyond helpless as a faint porcelain-like figure, now covered in ancient eldritch blood runes, plummeted from the sky.

Those few still living watched the self-proclaimed Goddess of Light standing on the edge of the ritual and, in a blink, was in the center. The goddess caught their gods' foresworn foe with unrestrained love and reverence. As soon as it happened, it was already over. The Goddess vanished in a vacuum-like implosion of mana, sucking up corpses and debris. Nevertheless, the elves had fulfilled their gods' decree. It was only a matter of time before the Gods of Rule found and reclaimed their property.

Teleporting throughout the universe was a simple task for Asherah. So, jumping to any number of the moons on the other side of Völuspá should have been child's play. Unfortunately, it was the hardest and most excruciating undertaking she had ever done, considering her borrowed power was quickly diminishing. Assessing her options, she felt a subtle force, as if made of pure magic, guiding her to Yaddith. Not knowing what to make of it, Asherah accepted the guidance as if it had a reason that was beyond her diminishing understanding. Besides, Yaddith was the safest destination with her dwindling resources. It was a small tidal-locked moon residing on the far side of Völuspá.

The girl looked so young, and Asherah wasn't sure how to address the primordial, nor did she dare call the manifestation of Life what Asherah's heart desperately knew to be true, Mother. Regardless of her conflicting emotions, she could feel the girl in her arms stir. Before the entity could open her eyes, they arrived in the middle of a small meadow upon a hill surrounded by lush tropical rainforest. The smell of fresh morning dew was in the air. Sadly, the wonderful sound of animal calls and birds chirping was cut short when three corpses, along with a random assortment of debris, came crashing down around them, remnants of the goddess's rushed teleportation.

Asherah didn't have much energy left and felt her existence slipping away. She laid the unconscious primordial down and went to work with her remaining time. Resting her palm upon the entity's chest, she closed her eyes and examined the runes with her own senses in utter disgust. Asherah was relieved to find there were no tracking charms concealed within. Nevertheless, she recognized the enchantments embedded within the runecraft, and they infuriated her.

The runes were an ancient abomination of creation, eldritch magic, and far too powerful and complex for Asherah to destroy. And yet, she thought she might be able to alter them. The runecraft was an abhorrent matrix of spells, hexes, and enchantments that enslaved and tortured. Before they were defeated, the Eldritch Gods used such cruel creations upon other deities.

“Damn it! How did those petulant gods get their hands on eldritch knowledge? And of all the reasons, why give it to the damnable High Elves? This knowledge should have been all but destroyed.”

Asherah’s angered murmuring went unanswered as she rushed to lessen the effects of the runes.

The first two runes were domination and dominion, which worked in conjunction with one another. The two runes, in unison, essentially removed all sovereignty over one’s body and soul. Domination attacks one’s body removing all free will. And dominion bound the victim’s magic, giving complete control over to their master. Asherah couldn’t break the runes, but she could tweak the ownership. The girl would be, in all sense, the master of herself, causing the domination rune to be worthless. Dominion, however, refused to cooperate with Asherah. It was like the rune forbade the enslaved from having any autonomy over their own magic. Asherah struggled to weaken the rune but to no avail.

Asherah’s impatience grew as the magic stubbornly fought against her, wishing she could torture the elves for eternity. It was then, in that moment of rage, that she found inspiration. Asherah could use the third rune, the torture rune, against the matrix itself! If it went how Asherah envisioned, whenever the girl attempted to cast a spell, the torture rune would activate and attack the rune matrix instead, weakening it enough for a sliver of her magic to slip through. It wasn’t ideal, but hopefully, it would be enough for the girl to survive until she found a way to break free.

All that remained was dealing with the horrid tattoos that marred the primordial’s flesh. The girl was covered head to toe with flaming green eldritch hexes outlined with smears of divine blood. The blood runes stood out in contrast to her porcelain white skin and soft luminescent white hair. Once a rune was cast and its purpose was engraved into an individual’s soul, it was an effortless task to reshape the design into a more attractive appearance. Asherah was quite familiar with her worshipers doing such things, and it was the least Asherah felt she could do for failing to prevent them in the first place.

Asherah was uncertain about what design she should go with as she battled her fluttering lightheadedness. Her palm remained firmly pressed against the girl’s chest as she forced the smoldering eldritch runes to twist and morph with her will... But into what? Her time was short. Sensing her inner turmoil, she felt the last traces of Death take over, pushing her own dark magic into the runes and finishing what Asherah had started.

The gruesome eldritch burn softened as it twisted and morphed. In its place, the girl’s body was covered in a runic mask of black thorned vines with hints of neon-green blended throughout with an assortment of blood-red and black roses. Yet, her face had taken on a harlequin-like appearance. She had a blended mist of black and neon-green eye shadowing with narrow black slashes stretching below each eye and down her cheeks. There was also a black line going from her dimples and fading into her blood-red lips, giving her the facade of a deadly grin. It was all in contrast to her true nature, Asherah thought, but perhaps enough to keep her hidden. Asherah grinned in satisfaction as she swayed.

At that moment, Asherah lost herself as she locked eyes with a set of white irises that blazed with the raw mana of creation. Asherah's work was finished, and she gently removed her hand while smiling at the motionless primordial who gazed up at her. Without ceremony or formality, nor with a warning, Asherah collapsed. Asherah felt Death claiming her, but she still had enough of a spark for one last action, one last purpose, one last breath. With everything she had remaining, she spoke her final words.

“I hope I made you proud....”