

I left the courthouse and went to my private domain to watch the consequences unfold. Like the ripples from a stone thrown into a pool, they would begin in obvious places and then slowly spread. Similarly, the interactions between multiple waves, between those waves and the pool itself, they were complex, difficult to model.

Interesting. Especially after so long without throwing any stones at all.

It started small. In Seoul, a kumiho walked the streets, enflaming the lust of all who saw her, taking the lives of any foolish enough to act on it. In Paris, a vampire stalked the night, killing with a freedom he hadn't felt since the sixteenth century. In western Russia, one of the few true necromancers to survive the Watchers' purges went into a mass grave, and left with power and an army.

And, naturally, sometimes it swung the other way. The necromancer and his horde were carpet bombed by the Russian military. A faerie who tried to assassinate the British Prime Minister for her own amusement was met with a hail of steel-jacketed bullets. A careless vampire left a trail of blood to his lair, and was staked at high noon by a group of vigilantes.

As I watched, the chaos spread. Ordinary humans, who had seen my broadcast or been told of it, began to worry. As news reports of the violence, the chaos, the insanity that was rampant in the world began to trickle in, that worry turned to panic or rage. There was rioting in the streets of almost every major city in the world. Police forces, unable to cope with what was going on, abandoned their mandate. Governments were paralyzed, unable to respond to something so far beyond their experience. Citizens turned to looting, to violence.

I smiled. A thousand years of rationalism and skepticism, overturned in a matter of days. Here, a suspected witch was stoned to death; there, a Wiccan was burned alive. The true mages began to retaliate, and now it was the mobs that screamed in agony as they were broken by immense forces, as they were skinned alive by summoned monsters, as their minds were crushed by overwhelming emotions.

It was exciting. Invigorating. Thrilling, even. The concepts of chaos, of entropy, and of madness were among those which I had chosen to define myself with. To see them writ large across the world, to watch the rapid collapse of so many social institutions....it gave me power, in a very real sense.

I floated in the dark and watched, not intervening at this time, but simply observing as the chaos unfolded and began to coalesce into new patterns. It was fascinating to watch, like observing evolution in real time, or a firestorm in slow motion. To know that nothing would be the same afterwards...it was intoxicating.

A new world, to usher in the birth of a new god.

And then, finally, the messenger I had been expecting arrived. It was a simple thing, ectoplasm shaped into a roughly humanoid form, but lacking many of the features of the human. I didn't know who had sent it, and it really didn't matter. Only one of us could have sent a construct into my private sanctum, and I knew what it meant.

I went elsewhere.

Standing in a darkened room—or, more accurately, a vaguely defined space which didn't bother with the concept of light—I was surrounded by my peers. I took note of those who were manifest, and particularly of those who were not. Brahma hadn't come, nor had Danu, nor Atum. No surprise, since none of them had left their sanctums in centuries. Coyote wasn't there either, which was unfortunate; I could have used another ally. Likely he was too busy amusing himself in the chaos of the mortal world, a child playing in puddles.

*Loki*, Odin signified. He was manifest in the form of a hanged man, putrid, head flopping on a broken neck. *You have overstepped.*

I signified amusement. *The agreement was made. The experiment was to be concluded; all meaningful data had been gathered. A new experiment was to begin.*

Nyx, who had chosen to manifest as a formless mass of shadow, signified hesitant agreement. *The agreement was made. But the suddenness with which you acted was not appropriate, nor was the magnitude of your declaration. The Allfather is correct; you have overstepped. You introduced unnecessary chaos into the situation.*

Shiva, manifest as a serpent, signified disagreement. *Chaos is the nature of change. To examine chaos, to observe the reaction of the mortals to this shift in their world, is the very purpose of our agreement. Loki is not to be criticized for doing so.*

*Enough*, I signified. *We all know what I have done, and we know why. My actions have brought about the greatest change, providing the opportunity for observation and learning. If you would condemn me for that, if you would sanction me, let it be done now.*

There was a brief moment for reflection, and then the gathered deities let their will be known. Odin, Nyx, Vishnu, and Izanagi were in favor of imposing sanctions on me, for various reasons ranging from the deeply personal to the entirely practical. Shiva, Gaea, Quetzalcoatl, Iblis, and Enlil were not. Xmucane and Xpiacoc remained neutral, as usual.

I could see that Odin wanted to continue, to punish me in some way, but there was nothing he could do without offending the others. *Go, then*, he signified, *and remember this.*

I smiled, showing it in my manifestation as a burst of flame, and left that place. To the extent that such a thing could be described as place, which wasn't much; like us, it was within space and time, but not truly *of* them.

Back in my sanctum, I examined the course of events once again, and then I began to change them. I was careful, subtle, delicate. A tiny nudge here, and the flame which should have snuffed out a

man's life splashes harmlessly against stone instead. A push there, and a bullet swerves ever so slightly in its course, penetrating the skull rather than deflecting off. A whisper is sufficient to sway a witch to the path of wisdom and weakness rather than power and death.

Nothing obvious, nothing that could be noticed or traced back to me, not even by my fellow gods. And if by some chance they did, they wouldn't, couldn't know why, couldn't see the goal I was aiming towards. Which was good, because if they knew what I knew I would be faced with something considerably worse than criticism or sanctions.

Fortunately, none of them could see what was obvious to me. Likely none of them had thought to look; if they had, they lacked the understanding to recognize what they saw. For much the same reason, they didn't understand that my goals in producing this chaos were farther reaching than my own amusement. I had an *aim*, and none of them had the capacity to grasp how I was working to achieve it.

We tend to specialize. To focus our efforts on certain tasks, certain skills, certain lore.

That Odin is the king of death, that he is the master of liminal states and the in-between places, that he is the lord of all transitions—these things are known. His is the knowledge of dark and terrible things, of magics that feed on sanity and blossom into power, of the strange and unknowable things which lurk beyond the limits of our worlds. None can match him in these fields.

Nyx is the mistress of shame and secrets. She knows everything that you'd rather she didn't, every guilty thought, every transgression, every moment of weakness. She is the subtle one, the quiet one, the schemer, who works in the dark and never shows her hand. The weaver of webs and tangled threads, she is the finest of all the gods when it comes to the long game, the scheme that unfolds slowly over the course of eons.

In much the same way, I am undeniably the master of entropy. To look at a thing and see its ending, to see the weak points in every defense, the path by which all things can be brought to ruin—these are my gift.

And my curse.

To understand entropy is to understand that all things must end. *All* things, great and small, the clearly transient and seemingly eternal, each is on its own road to ruin. The end cannot be prevented, only postponed.

But to be alive, and I think the term applies to gods, is to fight the inevitable. And thus, despite knowing that the end is near, I act to delay it. A man dies who might have lived, or lives who might have died, and the waves ripple out, a million tiny interactions that individually do little, but combine to shift the course of history into another path.

A butterfly flaps its wings, and half a world away the air spins into a hurricane.

It is, in an odd way, still an application of my specialty. To follow the path of a thousand random events, to predict the ultimate consequence of unpredictable events—these things are very much in line with my expertise. Not prophecy, exactly, since prophecy is essentially impossible. No, this was simply a matter of understanding chaos. Turning that understanding inside out, applying an intimate awareness of destruction to preserve.

The irony of it all amused me.