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Truth

By
Karina Ramirez

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the
University Honors Program

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ABSTRACT

Truth

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This work is a novella that illustrates the mythology and history of a fictional world. It begins with the birth of the gods and the creation of the universe, told in more abstract terms. The myths detailing the creation of sentient beings and the mortal and immortal race will follow. After that point, the story arcs diverge, and we follow the paths of the immortal races through the eyes of important historical figures belonging to said races. The collection of works will converge once again when addressing the calamity that causes the death of the gods, and then showcase how each race responds to that event. The works themselves will contain slightly different writing styles to evidence the personalities and mannerisms of the different narrators. Within the work, there are several references to mythology that bring further depth to the piece. This piece is also intended to provoke reflection in the reader regarding the existence of good and evil, fault and blame, and about what truth is and how storytelling functions.

Key words: Fantasy, Mythology, Creation

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Artist Statement

Ever since I was a young child, fantasy novels have always drawn me in and amazed me. J.R.R. Tolkien was the one of the first major authors to write an immersive, developed world that contained its own languages, histories, and religions. This set the tone for many fantasy epics to come from authors like George R.R. Martin and R.A. Salvatore. As a whole, this work was inspired by Tolkien's *Silmarillion*. This book was not actually published by Tolkien himself, but by his son after the author's death. It is a mix of various myths and histories of Ea, the universe where the *Lord of the Rings* series takes place. The concept behind this fascinates me as I am an avid lover of fantasy literature and mythology alike. I wished to emulate this work by creating a mythology and history of my own fantasy realm. In addition to creating fantastic worlds, the genre of fantasy allows exploration of human nature and other overarching themes by contrasting it to distinctly non-human creatures and alternative cultures. This thesis is comprised of a chapters that describe the birth and death of deities, the creation of the world, and the culture of the peoples that populate it.

Utilizing existing mythology as a base to write fantasy fiction is commonly seen. Rick Riordan is one fantasy author very well known for this. He is able to take classic characters that many people are familiar with, like the Greek, Egyptian, and Norse deities, and rework their myths in the modern world. For instance, the second book in the Percy Jackson series, *Sea of Monsters*, is essentially a retelling of the Odyssey mixed with Jason and the Argonauts. Percy and his friends quest to get the golden fleece, and on

their way encounter Scylla and Charybdis, the witch, Circe, and the cyclops, Polyphemus, as Odysseus is known to fight.¹

Tolkien also uses existing mythology to build his world, however his work is more subtle. He uses a lot of symbolism from ancient Norse myth.² Before the world was created in *The Silmarillion*, there was a void that existed, much like the Ginnungagap in *The Prose Edda*. Another similarity between Norse myth and Tolkien's writing can be seen with the Ents, a race of beings that are trees. They are seemingly inspired from the myth that humankind was created by Bor from two trees. Many more connections like these are littered through *Lord of the Rings*.

When it came time to create my own pantheon, I took a different approach. The deities were made to be personifications of forces of nature. They come about after their specific force is strong enough to form them and cause them to awaken. For example, the goddess Life does not awaken until after there are many living things in the world. In addition to being based off forces of nature, the deities are all paired. I wanted to create many dualities and opposing forces that keep each other in balance.

The first and most powerful of the deities are Order and Chaos. These two were based on the forces of space and time. Order, or space, is the force that rules the actual realms themselves and organizes the way that things are distributed within them. Matter is always trying to equalize and put itself into an orderly state. Movable particles like air and liquids readily diffuse so that there is an equal concentration of each molecule in any

¹ Rick Riordan, *The Sea of Monsters: Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, (New York, Disney/Hyperion Books for Children, 2005).

² Lykke Guanio-Uluru, *Ethics and Form in Fantasy*, (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 45-54.

given space. It is because of this characteristic that Order gained her name. The decision to make Order female is inspired by the common mythological trope of mother earth, a female deity that makes up the world that we live in. Chaos, or time, is the force that acts on space and makes things happen. He is the one that acts on the things that Order creates and gives them motion. Chaos allows development and growth through the passage of time. By acting on matter, he creates forces that prevent an equal gradient from being formed, which is how he achieved the name Chaos. The god also has knowledge of the future, which Order and the other deities lack. It is purposefully left vague and up to the reader's interpretation how much of the future Chaos can see. Perhaps he is completely aware of everything that will happen or perhaps he can see only glimpses. Even if he knew everything, there is also the possibility that he chooses not to dwell on the information he knows and tries his best to forget about it to live in the way he finds most interesting. Chaos was made to be a male to provide a flip side to Order's femininity. Together, the two balance each other out. Not only do they represent the two genders, but also the basic groundwork of the dual forces that make the universe possible: Space and the existence of things and time to move and change it.

The other deities are essentially subdivisions of Order and Chaos. They are more specific forces rather than the very general Order and Chaos. From Order, the elements are derived. First it is Energy and Void. These two are the personification of existing matter and the lack of matter in a space, respectively. In "Inception," Earth, Water, Air, and Fire are born from the interactions of Energy and Void. These interactions are written in a way that makes Energy be the one that is constantly acting on Void. Different concentrations of Energy and Void, or matter and the space between, is what make the

four elements. The four elements reflect the four states of matter; solid, liquid, gas, and plasma. These four are the only instance where there is a lack of duality among the deities; however, the goddesses form a balance among themselves. Each of them must exist in every living creature for it to thrive, so there is still that inherent stability between them that must be maintained. One element cannot completely overtake another. These six take the female gender because they are derived from the female Order.

The last four deities stem from Chaos. Destruction and Creation represent the actions that matter takes, the way that time causes changes within it. Similarly, Life and Death are the actions that time takes on a soul and the existence of a creature. As these four came from Chaos, they initially took a male pronoun in the story. After Chaos's exile, they decided to assume a female pronoun and form in honor of Order, whom they perceived as always succeeding and doing things right. In terms of the powers that these four have, some of them can see hints of the future as long as it is within their area of power. For instance, Creation sees that Nyx will one day become very well known in "Enlightenment" because she can see the tales and stories about her that will one day be written.

Stories change and evolve depending on when and where one hears them and the purpose the story serves. Mythology is a reflection of that, as stories and depictions of heroes and gods change with time. For instance, the evolution of one of my favorite Greek goddesses, Hecate. Since the history of humanity, she has evolved from a great mother deity and fertility goddess, to a liminal deity that rules over magic and ritual, to the goddess of ghosts, witches, and vengeful spirits. Her shift is due to the circumstances around which the stories of her were told and the use that humans telling stories had for

her character. This progression is an element of mythology that I truly love, which led me to incorporate actual mythological figures into this work. The final passage of this work, “Continuity,” shows that humans continued to live and thrive in many realms, including some where knowledge of immortal being was not present. The idea that I mean to invoke is that the series of events in this work can fit into our own reality. Within the work, I reference many deities from different cultures. This work if superimposed into our timeline would be set in the far past, at least 14.3 billion years ago. The implication of having characters bear the names of deities we know is that these immortal beings were so powerful that their names and stories of their exploits have been passed down by humans over the years and throughout the realms. In “Hopeless,” Valentine says that her daughter, Inanna, is being worshiped by a village. This line plants the seed that it is likely that immortals could one day come to be revered by humans.

When it came to determining which deities and myths to reference, I named characters in a mix of my own personal favorites and incorporated a variety of cultures. The first was Norse mythology. Ragnarok is one of the main characters within this work. Its name is not based on a deity, but rather the Norse apocalypse. Within the short story “Temper,” Destruction makes an offhand comment about Ragnarok having crippled multiple civilizations. Its name inspiration came from the idea that Ragnarok is this incredibly powerful creature that would be associated with the end of days. Due to the fact that Ragnarok has no gender and is referred to as an it, eventually its existence as a creature was eroded and all that humans know of it is as an event.

Baldur also makes an appearance in this work. In Norse myth, he was a god who was beloved by all others. His mother, the goddess Frigg, went to lengths to ensure his

protection, but due to a trick from Loki, he ended up dying. One of the signs that heralds Ragnarok, the Norse apocalypse, is the return of Baldur from the land of the dead. The use of this figure in this work is rather different; however there are several main themes that carry over. Here, he is a human who is beloved by two very powerful immortals, the crystal twins, that swear to protect him. However, he is betrayed by the one who loves him most and killed when she turns into a fearsome creature that wishes to bring about the apocalypse. In the end, however, the fact that he is not turned and revived gives the motivation to the other crystal twin to kill her sister, and it averts the end of the universe. Had Baldur been revived, this may not have happened, which is another small way that his death reflects the original mythology.

Some of the most well-known myths come from Greek mythology, so it is only natural that I incorporated some figures from it, such as Eris and Nyx. Eris is known as being the Greek goddess of strife and discord. She wreaks havoc and destruction wherever she goes. The use of her name in this work is primarily a distractor. People that know the mythology will look to her as being an antagonist and not the hero of the story. During the build up to the calamity, I kept the writing purposefully vague so that the reader is left to wonder which of the twins is the one to turn into the Calamity. Eris's name and her more aggressive affect hint slightly at it being likely to be her. However, it is her actions as a servant of Destruction that lead her to later become known as a cruel goddess.

Nyx in Greek mythology is a primordial deity that personifies night. She is one of the first created and spawns a great many beings without a husband, including the furies, the god of death, Thanatos, the gods of sleep and dreams, and the three fates. As such, I

thought she would be a perfect candidate for the incarnate of the goddess of Creation. In this work, Nyx takes up the Staff of Creation and gains Creation's powers, therefore taking up her mantle. Before she vanishes in "Rebirth," she has visions of barren realms, which is where it is assumed that she goes. Nyx is the first being to create things and begin the process of renewing life in ravaged realms, likely why our culture knows her to be incredibly old. I also wanted to use the figure of Nyx as a disciple of Creation to avoid the connotation that Creation is only a positive thing. The character Nyx is consistently pulled to act by some force within her and seems to sometimes have visions, which are a small reference to the power of the deity's children, the fates.

Christianity is one of the largest religions of our time, and I wanted to give it a mention as well. Valentine is the character farthest from her namesake, but it was done purposefully so. It is an interesting contrast to have a demon hold the name of a saint. When drafting her character, I wanted a love deity of some sort to be her namesake. One of the reasons I made that choice is because she is essentially a reflection of the love between Order and Chaos. Another reason lies in how receptive she is to love herself, enough to have so many children she becomes known as the great mother of demons. Valentine also plays the role of a matchmaker. In "Hopeless," she tries to set Ragnarok up with her children and his reaction indicates that it is not the first time she has attempted such a thing. This falls in line with the actions of St. Valentine, who is commonly said to have been arrested for marrying Christians. The actual story of St. Valentine is disputed and contains a few different myths, which is why I decided he would be an interesting character to adapt. In addition to the ties to the saint bearing the name, Valentine's Day is a day to celebrate love. In our American culture, the holiday is

widely celebrated and makes the name Valentine, as well as the association with love, easily identifiable.

Other mythologies that were referenced include Sumerian and Egyptian Myth. Inanna is the Sumerian goddess of love. I included her specifically to include more cultures, showing how immortals have a wide range of influence. She is also the first immortal to have a confirmed following of humans, which cements the idea that it is extremely likely that gods and goddesses we know of in our time are the echoes of actual immortal creatures that lived and that humans revered.

Isis is the Egyptian goddess of magic and is known as the mother of Horus and the wife of Osiris, the god of the underworld. Osiris becomes the ruler of the dead after he is killed by his brother. Isis then gathers the parts of his corpse and brings him back to life. As a whole, she is cast in a very positive light in Egyptian myth but still has very strong ties to death and the underworld, which is why she was cast as a priestess of Death. Within this work, Death is among the kindest of the goddesses, despite what she represents. The association with Isis only contributes to this image. I wanted to stray away from the typical trope that Death is a villain. In fact, to immortal creatures like elves, who do not have to fear death from aging, death as a whole is not something that would be feared. Humans will always fear it, as it is a time limit that will always hang over their heads with no way to escape it. What happens after death is shrouded in mystery, so the fear of the unknown contributes to the negative connotation of death. One of the primary reasons religions are formed is to answer the question of what happens after we die. For Elves, who are so closely involved with deities, know exactly what

happens, which is reincarnation in this work, so this is another avenue in which immortal races do not fear death.

In addition to creating a pantheon of deities, I wanted to touch on several themes within my work. One theme that I wanted to explore is the idea of good and evil. Fantasy as a genre has varied ways of looking at this perspective. In Tolkien, this view is very black and white.³ He builds his world with forces of good such as the elves and the good wizards such as Gandalf fighting forces of evil such as Sauron and the orcs. R.A. Salvatore and many authors in the Forgotten Realms universe also follow this common framework in fantasy. There are sources of temptation and lures to evil that must be overcome, such as the evil corruption of the ring in *Lord of the Rings*, but ultimately the good protagonist is able to overcome this temptation and put an end to the evil.⁴

Martin adds in much more complexity to this pattern in *The Game of Thrones*. There is still a force of evil, the White Walkers, but they are almost a far-off threat. Most of the conflict that occurs is among people. Characters that are paragons of good, like Ned Stark, are quickly killed. His books contain many protagonists but none of them can wholly be called good people. The vast majority have to do objectively evil things to meet their final end goals. For instance, Jon Snow, a very honorable character, kills his comrade, Qhorin Halfhand, so that he can gain the trust of his enemies, the Wildlings, to get a chance to kill their king.⁵ Even some of the most wicked characters have redeeming qualities. The queen of Westeros, Cersei Lannister, is a character that would happily have

³Guanio-Uluru, *Ethics and Form in Fantasy*, 41.

⁴Ibid., 42.

⁵George R.R. Martin, *The Clash of Kings*, (New York, Bantam Books, 1998).

countless people murder if it served her means, but above all she is a mother that loves and cares for her children. Martin very much likes to blur the lines of good and evil and create dynamic characters that are both. This is a aspect of his storytelling that I seek to emulate.

Truth has a variety of protagonists and antagonists, however all of them either have motivations that can be seen as good or honorable, or they did not intend to do the harm that their actions resulted in. An example of this is Chaos. He serves as both antagonist and protagonist in different stories. In the stories where he directly acts, he is generally portrayed in a positive, helpful manner. Despite that depiction, Chaos does create a species that kills billions of people, even if it was not purposeful. As a result, he becomes an antagonist and villain-like figure in many character's perspectives.

Conversely, Order is always painted in a positive light by others to the point of becoming revered by the goddesses and the elves. Despite this positive image, her actions in "Persuasion" and "Culpability" are rather insidious by nature. Order is fully aware that many will die when Chaos creates a new race. Nevertheless, Order pushes him into doing it to serve her own means, namely to restrict free travel between realms. The vast majority of characters likewise have elements of good and evil within them. The goddesses are a guiding force for the elves, but Ragnarok draws attention to their callous regard for much of the universe in "Temper." Ragnarok itself is similar to them in this regard, as references to it destroying entire civilizations is made, but it also takes strides to help mortals in the wake of the lesser demons in "Misfortune." The darkest character in this work is Lyla, Eris and Syra's mother. She abuses her children and drains their energy. However, could even Lyla truly be called evil? In "Slaughter," she suffers from

the traumatic death of all the people she knew and loved. Her fear and ineffective coping lead her to store vast reserves of power to prevent a tragic event from happening again, even at the cost of the happiness of her children. Showcasing so many different perspectives paints characters in a way that readers could empathize with them or understand their motivations. This is a tool to showcase how subjectable it is to call someone a 'good' or 'evil' person depending of the point of view from which they are viewed.

The idea of truth is another very integral part of this work, so much so that it was what ultimately became the title. What does truth even mean? Is truth the actual series of events that took place or what is reported by a reputable source? Does the truth even matter or will people simply believe what they want to believe? A person's own circumstances and knowledge affect how one perceives a work or character, as showcased by actual mythology in our history. The perspective of a story can also sway one's opinion of good and bad. Once opinions are crafted with input of circumstance and perspective, can they be remade with new evidence or will humans consistently seek information that strengthens their own opinion? All of these questions are what led me to write the stories in their somewhat vague formatting that leaves much for the reader to interpret.

The chapters in this work are split into two types; a main narrative that lays out a series of events from an impartial narrator and several smaller storylines that showcase turning points from various perspectives. However, these two do not always line up and there are small inaccuracies that appear. The biggest ones can be seen in "Determination." For the first time in the work, Syra mentions the goddess, Time. She

reports that Chaos killed Time and Order sacrificed herself to bind Time's spirit to the Onyxwood tree. Syra states this story as part of the teachings taught at the Grand Temple. Syra feels doubt in these teachings and is expressing this to her twin; however Eris shuts her down. One way to interpret this occurrence is that the elves of the Grand Temple are teaching an alternative version of history for some unknown reason. Perhaps the goddesses wished to still utilize the power of the Onyxwood tree after Chaos's banishment and skewed the truth so that they could continue to use that resource while still vilifying Chaos. Another way to interpret it is that perhaps the main narratives are not as unbiased or truthful as they appear. It is unknown who the narrator is that tells the main series of events. Perhaps a lot more happened that was never mentioned, or characters were left out for some reason or another. I will not confirm either theory as true or false, as this is something that I want my readers to think about and draw their own conclusion about.

A similar unknown series of events is what truly happens between the twins, Eris and Syra, and their mother Lyla. It is never stated that Lyla's actions are what pushed Eris and Syra to activate the crystalwood that swallowed their world. In fact, the passage in "Desperation" reads, "The brute hit her across the face." Lyla was never referred to as "the brute" before, implying that she was not the one hurting them in that instance. In "Exploitation," Lyla tells her daughters she is doing what she does to protect them from bad people. Later, in "Determination," Eris does not seem to wholly blame her mother for what happened to them. I decided to write the series of events vaguely to let the readers draw their own conclusions in a way that paints Lyla as the villain initially. If a reader pays closer attention, however, some of the details can cause doubt in that initial thought.

I wanted to add in subtle layers and intricacies to the story that could be picked up in a second or third rereading. George R.R. Martin was the inspiration for this kind of hidden Easter egg. In his novels, almost all of the major plot twists that no one saw coming were hinted at and foreshadowed in earlier works. An example of this is in *The Clash of Kings*, Daenerys enters the house of the Undying and has a series of visions. Many of these visions are exact depictions of future events to come, such as the infamous Red Wedding.⁶ All these tiny details are missed during the first reading but seem obvious the second time through, once the twist is known, which is something that I wanted to emulate.

One of the most popular universes in the fantasy genre is the Forgotten Realms franchise. It is a world, Faerun, with the addition of several celestial and infernal dimensions that many authors, like R.A. Salvatore, contribute to. Forgotten Realms came about first as a campaign setting for the fantasy game Dungeons and Dragons, and since 1988 authors have been writing epic stories and sagas that are all set in this universe. This thesis is not meant to be a fantasy epic itself, but a piece of the groundwork for a universe that a fantasy novels can be set in. Specifically, it focuses on the mythology of the universe. It travels through the birth and death of the gods, as well as the lives of powerful immortals that drastically impact the events that occur in the universe. “Truth” offers a history and lays the first building blocks of a fantasy world, paving the way for many stories to come.

⁶ Martin, *The Clash of Kings*.

Inception

Everything began with Order and Chaos. Order was first, filling up the cracks and iotas of existence. Then Chaos came, and the still tranquility was shattered into rushing, pulsating flurries. Chaos acted on the uniform bits of essence and clustered them. He created yawning divides, compacted them, and cleared them away. With these actions, Chaos paved the way for the birth of the two forces, Energy and Void, that which is and that which is not.

The twins quickly took to their existence and played, coming almost together before surging apart, again and again, leaving streams and furrows and walls in their wake. Chaos chased them, led them, and ran in time with them. All the while, Order watched fondly and she worked slowly but surely to straighten out the mess they made into something more organized, but that still maintained the essence of what the three were creating. And so the realms were made, one after another, stacked on top of each other like the pages in a book, but never-ending.

In their wake, others forces began to form. From the realms came the elements, created by the ways that Energy and Void touched and repelled each other. When the two embraced, Energy spread far and wide, exploding, crackling, burning, and shining. From this, wild, impulsive Fire came. When the two twirled and danced, Energy drifted towards itself, brushing by itself but still blowing, translucent and free. From this, whimsical, far-reaching Air came. When Energy and Void slid by each other and just missed the touch of the other, Energy flowed back into itself, lapping, cresting, and

flooding. From this, labile, persistent Water came. When Void was far away, Energy hardened, confined, and crushed itself. From this, stable, grounded Earth came.

In each realm, the deities began to play and fight. Order pulled them together and packed them into organized bodies for Chaos to twirl and spin and throw. For Energy, Order scattered bright pinpricks of pure force from which Energy could spread her tendrils through Void's murky depths. Void was pleased with what was left. It had ample space to rest and sleep, far removed from the others in quiet stillness and ample space to toy with the others and bask in Energy's bright glow.

On and on the first four frolic, from realm to realm eternally with Fire, Water, Earth, and Air following closely on their heels. Even to this day, the eight still expand and grow, blossoming and expanding further than any but they themselves know.

Encouragement

“What do you think I should make?” The question was intended to be excited and vibrant but came out rather soft and unsure.

“Whatever you want to.” Unlike his counterpart’s, his words were confident and firm. He stood on the beach, the soft waves lapping at his bare feet as he dug his toes in soft sand.

He was given a scoff as an answer. “Could you be helpful for once? There are so many things I could make, so many things to do. Where to even start?” She peered up at him from where she sat, knees folded under her as her hands ghosted across the water’s surface.

“Wherever you want to.” Once again, a firm response, but this time it was easy to see the hint of a smile teasing across his lips.

She pursed her lips and dropped her gaze back down to the clear surface. “I don’t ask for this often. You can’t even give me a hint of what’s to come?”

He tipped his head back and closed his eyes, the gentle breeze playing with his hair. She knew that he was looking into the future and burned to know the things he saw. “You know as well as I what’s to come. You know exactly all that you’ll make. You’ve already planned it out, I know that. You do too.”

“But—“

“Everything you create is beautiful.” The soft words stole across the winds and suddenly, it was almost as if all the sound had been sucked away. Their eyes locked and she had to take a moment to process the feeling in his gaze. Awe. Faith. His classic smirk

gentled in a way it rarely did towards anyone else. “It all goes exactly how you’ve planned it out. Trust me.”

She held his gaze for a moment longer before lowering her gaze once more to her hands and the cool liquid lapping at them. With purpose she raised them, held them cupped before her and let her power flow through her, gathering it and letting it pool in her hands. She grasped it tightly, ready to weave it and make, but her hands froze and shook, refusing to move. Emotion gathered thick in her throat, weighing her down and pulling into her gut. She sat there, poised and ready, but frozen, unable to move, her thoughts caught in a whirlwind, trapping her in her indecision.

He dropped to his knees beside her and reached out, sliding his hands alongside hers. “Breathe.” Once more, his voice was steady, a balm to her nerves. She sucked in a ragged breath and fought to exhale slowly, controlled.

“Start simply. Start with what you know.” Her eyes slid closed as she let his words wash over her. “You’ve been organizing and creating art out of our messes for as long as I can remember. For as long as you can remember.” He spoke slow and soft. “Where we are now, you’re responsible for this. You drew our energies together, you gave us form. You made it so that we could function. I could never do that.”

When her eyes eased open, they weren’t alone. Her struggle had called her siblings, each of whom manifested and gave her their divided attention. Energy laid back, golden hair spilling across the pale sand as she drank in the sunlight. Fire and Air played a game, their hands locked in a complicated system. Void was curled under their shade, knees hugged to her chest and tucked under her chin, by all appearances asleep, just like Earth who lay by her side, half buried in the sand. Water floated in the substance

that made her up, the edges of herself blending in such a way that it was hard to tell where her element ended and where she began. They were all preoccupied with something or other, but she could feel their attention, steady and comforting. They were here to support her, ready to lend their aid in whatever way she should ask for, but they at least attempted to give the illusion that they weren't watching with bated breath for her to begin weaving something entirely new into their simple world.

She took one last deep, steadying breath before locking eyes with Chaos once again. The gentle smile on his face has widened into a grin that spelled out trouble.

Order wrinkled her nose at his expression. He was planning something, likely something that would send her creations running amok or spiraling out of her control. For some reason, that was more comforting than anything else.

“Are you ready now?” He asked, his eyebrows quirking.

“No.” But even as she spoke her hands were moving once again, beginning to weave the first living thing.

Foundation

After a time when many realms were established, Chaos began to prompt Order into creating things that were new and different. Things that lived other than the first eight forces. Things to populate the places that she had built.

The first thing Order built were the sacred trees. First, she created Realmwood, a tree that was the reflection of herself. It was the perfect substance, a reflection of all the realms compacted into a single point. When gazing into the kaleidoscope of colors that wove throughout the tree, Order could see each and every realm in existence. The others were fascinated. Realmwood was a creation of pure order, and as such could withstand the touch of any of the gods and remain unchanged. Only Chaos could not touch it. When he attempted, his hand slipped right through the tree as if it were not even there.

Perturbed by his inability to interact with it, Order took Chaos's hand and had him help her infuse the tree with as much purely chaotic energy as she could, transforming the existing Realmwood tree into something new. The colorful images within multiplied to show scenes that had not yet occurred with more combinations than could be imagined as all of Chaos's knowledge bled into the tree. Scene upon scene clashed together until nothing was left visible and the entire trunk became pure black like onyx. Only the leaves remained the original color, twirling through the spectrum of light in a plethora of shades. When Order plucked a leaf, she could see the realms within it and when Chaos gazed into the trunk, he could view all the things that would one day come to be and all the things that had already passed. This tree would come to be known as the Onyxwood tree and would remain as the only one of its kind.

When the other deities saw this tree that Order had created just for Chaos, they asked for trees of their own. She obliged, creating several new types of trees that could be grown and cultivated by the deities. Order began with Energy first. She created a tree that could reflect all the boundless energy that Energy possessed. On its own, the tree held a dull, pale color, but after being touched by Energy it erupted into a brilliant golden glow. These trees became a source of light in times when it was dark, as it took a great time for the glow to fade. When the trees grew together in groves, the light never ended, for the neighboring trees would absorb and redirect the light back to their neighbors. This tree came to be known as Sunwood.

For Void, Order created a tree of the deepest black. It absorbed all light and heat that came near it, chilling anyone who approached to the bone. The places where these tall, spindly trees grew froze over and became barren, icy tundra. Where there once were vast oceans became great frozen plains. For this reason, it came to be known as Icewood.

For Earth, Order created a tree that held the strength of the minerals that could be found deep in Earth's domain. It grew slowly and surely colored a deep gray with patches of brown and flecks of crystals glittering across its tall, thick trunk. The metallic leaves that decorated its high branches were sharp and strong enough to be used as a blade. What could be seen from above the ground was nothing compared to the extensive, thick roots that dug deep into the earth. It came to be known as Ironwood.

For Water, Order created a tree that lived fully immersed in the element. Its leaves floated high on the water's surface and its branches swayed with the currents like blue-green vines. Its trunk was nothing more than a collection of the branches, braided around one another and rooted to the floor of whatever space it occupied. The water that moved

through the underwater forests of these trees was always left clean and pure, no matter what had been in it to start with. This tree came to be known as Mistwood for the soft clouds of fog that would form over its leaves.

For Fire, Order created a tree that grew only in places with the greatest temperature. The tree sucked in the warmth, and in return gave off a scalding, seemingly endless waves of heat itself. The ground that its roots sank into grew scalding and began to melt. Locales with forests of these trees had constant rivers of flowing lava, and the roots dwelled in deep underground pools of magma. This tree came to be known as Flamewood.

For Air, Order created a tree that was as light and buoyant as that the element itself and floated through the skies. The trees were pale and translucent, with almost glass-like leaves. Their roots and branches wound together from one tree to another, creating great floating forests that would drift along with the breeze high in the air. Thus so, the tree came to be known as Breezewood.

As Order created the sacred trees for the other deities, Chaos followed behind her. To the delight of the others, he gave the trees his own gift. When he touched them, the trees began to move and sway, and if one knew how to listen, the trees would speak to those that cared for them. Over time, vast forests of the sacred trees grew in various realms under the careful cultivation of the deities. Only the Onyxwood tree remained the only one of its kind. When Order wished to create more of her own realmwood trees, Chaos stopped her.

Chaos rarely spoke of the things he knew would come, but the potential for conflict was far too great. He told Order of the great wars that would one day wage over

the material that made up the realmwood tree and that it should be protected at all costs. Order took his words for the truth and instead of creating a new realmwood tree like the last, she used the realmwood to form the core of the first creature. She painstakingly crafted a soul from her own energy and breathed her own magic into it. Order named the creature Ragnarok. Much as she had the gift to create new things and realms, the creature had the ability to shape its body in whichever form it chose. However, the feature that would always remain constant was the gleaming branch of Realmwood that grew from its forehead. It was sometimes straight, other times curled and warped and twisted. Every thousand years, that horn would grow so large that it had to be molted. The remnants were either molded as Order shaped the realms and were gifted to people or deities Ragnarok deemed worthy or they crumbled to dust. It is from this trait that Ragnarok came to be called a unicorn.

Persuasion

Order lounged in the onyx tree, chin laid on her hands as she watched dim scenes filter across the black wood. Her eyes traced over each fragmented one, the visions holding her spellbound. The thick leaves above her rustled softly in the breeze and reflected rainbows across her skin. Chaos gazed up at her from below where he leaned against the tree and fiddled with a glittering leaf. “Sometimes I think you made this tree, not for me, but so that you could see into my head.” Chaos remarked dryly.

Order hummed in acknowledgment. “Of course. I’ll admit, that was part of it.” A pensive look flashed over her face and she leaned sideways so she could peer closer at the deity below her. “I also did it because you don’t make anything yourself.”

Chaos quirked a brow at her. “Is that you scolding me or just making a casual observation?”

Order settled in again, this time her eyes trained on Chaos as she studied him. To anyone else, he would look utterly bored and nonchalant. However, Order could see the tiny crease between his brows and the lack of the typical mischievous spark in his eye. He was worried about something. He likely wanted her to drop the conversation. It made her all the more curious. “It’s a bit of both. Did you think I made you this for free?” A smile pulled at her lips. For once she had a chance to turn the tables and tease him.

Chaos, however, didn’t fall for it. “Yes, you did. Just like you made everything else. You like the challenge of it.”

Order pouted down at him. “You’re right. But you get what I’m hinting at right?”

Chaos merely cocked his brow again and Order sighed. “Make something for me. I want you to.” She said firmly.

A flicker of uncertainty flashed in Chaos’s eyes. “I don’t think I should.”

“I do.” Order urged. “There are things here that I’ve seen that I know that I had little part in making. Some of those things are truly beautiful.” A warm smile spilled across her face to encourage Chaos. She knew how weak he was to her pleading.

“Some of those things are terrible.” Chaos protested but Order could see his resolve wavering. “I wouldn’t even know how to do it.”

Order scoffed and in the blink of an eye, she was standing next to Chaos offering a hand up. “Don’t lie to me like that. You know I hate lies.”

Chaos took her hand and let her pull him up so he was standing next to her. He hesitated, his hand gripping hers tightly. “Are you sure about this? Once you make me do this, there is no going back.” Chaos spoke, his voice grim and tight with apprehension.

Order only smiled. “How about starting with a realm? There are so many, some I’ve even made accidentally unlivable. You can’t do much worse than that.”

Chaos’s mood suddenly shifted at the challenge in her voice. A smug grin spread across his face. “Are you sure about that?”

Population

Much like the realms, life began with Order and Chaos. They teased and taunted and goaded each other to make, create, and to go above and beyond. Ragnarok was the first creature to be made, but after it came many others. As before, the other deities saw what had been created and wished for creatures of their own. With only a few beings in the universe, things were quiet and still and lonely. Order joined hands with her siblings and danced and sang and twirled amongst groves of sacred trees and thus the elves were born. They lived in harmony with the sacred trees, one immortal race for each species of tree. They loved their trees and their trees loved them. All that they needed, the trees gave them, growing fruit and food for the first time. The elves in return gave the trees their own energy and aided in their growth.

Just like that, the stillness of the universe was shattered.

Other beings began to wake and wonder. With Order quite busy attempting to fulfill the requests of the other deities, Chaos was the one who reached out to guide and pull one after another into existence. The rupture of the stillness and undoing of all that once was paved the way for Destruction to awaken first.

Destruction was stoic and somber but he crept over everything, working in the shadow of all others. For the first time, the others became aware of the difference, of how much was broken and lost. However, on the heels of Destruction came a twin that was the opposite side of the same coin. Creation followed and filled all the spaces that were left empty in the wake of Destruction. The realms were suddenly filled with diversity and change and growth. Creation dreamt of all kinds of things, big and small, that were

beyond anything that the others could imagine. They were awed at shoals of colorful fish and hulking underwater behemoths. They watched in amazement at the creatures he sent to run above the land, some with scales, then some with fur, then some with feathers. Some creatures even took to the skies. None loved these creatures or Creation more than Destruction. This beauty was something that Destruction could not do, but Creation could not work unless there was a blank space to work in, unless there were broken down, simplified materials to work with. Destruction cleared away the old and obsolete and gave Creation ever more room to grow. In all the realms, there was no one that Creation loved more than his twin that allowed him to always create more.

Creation made a race just for Destruction, a unique race that looked similar to the elves, but only lived short lives. That race would be the culmination of the twins, a race that would be able to craft the most wonderful marvels but also wage the most horrendous wars. Thus, humans were born.

Chaos, however, sensed one more pair sleeping in what remained of the stillness and he awakened them. The first to wake was Life. A bright beacon of hope who guided the living things. Life crafted new souls and allowed them to live and thrive and do as they wished. Life, however, was also cruel and often callous. The weak often became his victim and either died or suffered. All living creatures had souls that he played with and put under stress so that they could harden and be strong enough to be able to live as they wished in a harsh world. After all, those in his care had to fight one another and eat one another to survive.

Death, who arose after was far gentler. Death harvested the souls of those who could no longer keep living and cleansed them, soothed them and allowed them to rest.

Death rejuvenated the souls of those who passed into his hands before passing the souls back to Life to have them be reborn. The two endlessly worked in a cycle, one after another, making sure to keep the balance between souls that were living and those that were dead. When there were too many souls living, Death held onto the ones in his care longer, and Life created fewer new souls to come into the world. When Death had too many souls in his care, he allowed them to pass on easier and Life lessened the adversity those in his care experienced so that they might stay with him longer and made many more new souls.

Order saw that the increase of living things and the induction of new forces to play would only further complicate the formerly more simple nature of the universe. Before, she had had careful control over the realms and clearly defined lines as to what was in her domain and what was to remain in Chaos's to keep the balance between the two. However, with so many creatures now running amok, things would soon grow out of even her ability to control them. Thus, Order created two new races.

She created the dragons and all their cousins to watch over, guide, and teach the other beings. The first dragons had wings to reach the highest skies, legs to walk over the ground, and scales and gills to be able to breathe deep under the water. However, the monstrous forms frightened many of the races they were supposed to protect, so Order created new subspecies that would be better accepted amongst the creatures by taking partial shapes of those they protected.

The angels were created in a humanoid shape but with brilliant wings that swirled with various colors to cross the skies and care for those in the far reaches of the heavens as well as those living on the ground. The merfolk were created to be able to aid those

who lived in the water, with humanoid features, but a long, powerful scaled tail and fins to aid in their movement.

In addition, she created ninety-nine more unicorns as beings that could watch over the realms themselves. Much like Ragnarok, the being they were created to mimic, they each contained a core of realmwood to give them power. The creatures were large and powerful with four legs to run faster than any other creature and identified by the brilliant glittering horn of realmwood that grew from their foreheads but had a peaceful, gentle appearance as to not startle the mortals that the creatures would protect. She then taught the unicorns how to wield complex magic to craft themselves new forms to suit their needs in the many different dimensions they would travel to, instead of giving them all the traits and making their form appear monstrous as the dragons had.

These creatures were tasked to go forth and watch the various dimensions and planes of existence to make sure that the things living within them would not do anything to upset the balance of their own realities.

Exploitation

Elven twins were special. Very special and very valuable. That was why no one could know. Mother had told them this every day since they could remember. Mother said that if others found out, bad people would come for them and take them away. Their power was dangerous, terribly dangerous and would grow out of control if it wasn't contained.

Every day, when Mother called, Eris stepped forward and placed her hands over the crystal in her mother's palm and tried not to scream when all of her power was drained from her into the stone. Eris was older, if only by a few moments, and she would do everything to protect her sister, Syra.

It didn't always use to hurt. When she was really little, it was just tiring. The loss of energy felt like she just got really sleepy. Syra had to have her energy pulled back then too. Then the two would nap together and awake refreshed. One day though, the draining hurt her sister. She had fallen and gone very cold, her breathing nearly stopping. Eris had clung to her and screamed and cried and tried to give her what energy she had left, but there was barely any left for her to share. Her mother had told her to be quiet and left them in their room. Eventually, Syra woke up, but Eris had never been more scared. Since then, she screamed and bit and clawed and hit and did everything in her power to fight her mother if she went anywhere close to her twin. Eris's head was only as high as her mother's hip but if she fought and refused to give her energy, her mother couldn't take it from her. Syra had followed her lead and refused to give her mother energy, huddling scared in the corner of the room.

Her mother had hurt Eris then, slapped her and yelled mean things and pushed her so hard she flew across the room. Still, Eris was strong and she didn't stop until her mother grabbed Syra by the hair and dragged her from the corner and threatened to hurt her until Eris said yes. Since then, Eris allowed her mother to take her and only her energy into the stone that she grew to hate more and more every day.

As more time passed, she began to feel more than just tired from the drain, it began to truly hurt. It felt a little like when she had fallen into the rosebush but worse, like a thousand thorns ripping along the inside of her skin, inside her gut, down her throat, from her toes to her head. The pain came from every place her mother drained her energy from, which was every place. After the thorns came the pressure and the weight, like she was being forced under water or buried alive and her limbs filled with iron all at once. Even if she wanted to scream, she couldn't, her chest barely able to rise to draw breath, her vision darkening and filling with spots. Her body would fall to the floor and she would be unable to move or stop it but was still so aware of all that was happening. Eris was caught in that place for as long as it took Syra to run to her side. Once she touched her twin, her soothing energy flowed through her like cool water over a parched throat, filling her up, getting rid of that pressure and making her feel light and strong and good. Her twin always offered to take her place the next day, but the only thing that was more unbearable than the pain that she went through was the thought of her sweet little sister going through the same. She didn't think she was strong enough to watch that, to see her sister stop breathing and go cold ever again.

The gift of twins, after all, was the ability to share their energy as if they were one person, the ability to build it up off of each other and regenerate it very quickly. If her

mother didn't drain their energy, then it would grow to extremes. Mother said that that was dangerous and would hurt them, as well as let the bad people know where they were. Eris couldn't help but wonder sometimes if their mother wasn't the bad person herself. She couldn't imagine anything being worse than this.

Pandemonium

The creations of Chaos were nothing like that of Order. The first thing that he attempted to make was a realm at Order's prompting. He had witnessed the creation of countless realms, each neatly stacked on top of one another. However, when he attempted to mimic the same type of realm structure, it ended up inverse. The realm that Chaos crafted ran perpendicular to the other and overlapped all the others. Instead of the contents of the realm being nicely organized bundles of forces that operated within defined sets of rules, everything was randomly thrown together with no rhyme or reason at all. This realm of Chaos's eventually came to be known as the Abyss.

Order was delighted. She was eager to study and explore a realm wholly unlike anything she could have created. The other deities, however, didn't have sentiments nearly as fond. They viewed this strange realm as useless, as they themselves could hardly make anything from the way their energies were scattered within and no creatures that existed were able to live within the Abyss. In fact, any creature that entered the Abyss would quickly become lost. When they emerged, they were often in completely different realms or in a completely different time. Even if the creature only spent a minute or two in the maelstrom, they could emerge years later or rarely, years before they had entered. The farther one traveled into the Abyss, the farther they got from where or when they entered, but it was also true that if one traveled within the Abyss for a long time, one could emerge in exactly the same time and place that they had left.

Ragnarok was the first to take to excitedly exploring this realm. It got as lost as all the others in the beginning, but after some time, it started to realize something. Its horn,

crafted of the Realmwood that showed all the realms that existed, could act as a map. Ragnarok could see the seams within the fabric of the realm where it crossed another. When a piece of the horn was held close to this seam, images of the realm it led to would flash across the surface. Over time, Order worked with this knowledge, first using fragments of Realmwood and then without. She created a style of magic that allowed creatures to teleport from one realm to another even if those realms were far away from one another by taking a shortcut through the Abyss. Before this innovation, it was only possible to move from one realm to its neighbor. Now, multiple planes of existence could be crossed in the blink of an eye. Suddenly, creatures began to spread amongst the realms faster. Humans especially explored and settled any new realm they came across that they could survive in. Even the deities eventually grew to enjoy this new method of travel, and Chaos was almost redeemed from his slip up in creating the Abyss.

Order, pleased with how wonderfully the Abyss turned out and how her siblings had begun to accept the foreign change, urged Chaos to create more. Chaos decided then to play his hand at creating a race of creatures of his own. These creatures were called demons. They were formless spirits made of chaotic energy that could alter their form whenever and however they wished. One demon could split its energy and become a thousand. A thousand demons could form together and create only one. They could adapt to any environment and live in any condition. They fed off of energy itself in whatever form was presented to them. Thus, these demons thrived within the Abyss and soon grew to fill it. The demons were incredibly intelligent creatures, but they lacked a key aspect that set them far apart from every other living thing. Demons had no souls. They had no emotions, knew no happiness, no sadness, no love, and no hate. All they knew was greed,

a burning need to fill the emptiness that made up their existence. Above all else, they wished to have a soul so they tried to attain souls in the only way they could think of.

They feasted on and devoured every living thing in their way. The hordes of the creatures spread like a dark shadow across the realms. The deities were all horrified, none more so than Chaos himself. Quickly, he gathered all the demons and threw them into the Abyss, the realm that could support no other living thing, where they would only devour one another. Order lent her aid and strengthened the barriers between the realms, making it so that travel from one to another became all but impossible unless one was able to wield a piece of Realmwood. However, the damage had already been done. Several realms had been fully devoured, now nothing more than wastelands, barren of all life and energy.

The deities ostracized Chaos and turned their back on him as if he had never existed, and glorified Order instead, the four that had seen themselves as male even going so far as to assume her gender. To further distance themselves, the ten began to refer to themselves as goddesses. The goddesses banished Chaos, furious that he would imbalance the natural way of things. Chaos quietly acquiesced with their requests and traveled to the farthest realm he knew of to stay for as long as he would continue to exist. Order was furious. She pleaded for Chaos not to go and demanded that the goddesses forgive him. They refused. The goddesses pleaded for Order to forget about Chaos and join them, to take her place and lead them with her boundless wisdom. Order vehemently denied them.

Order stated that Chaos and herself were two sides of the same coin. She knew that Chaos and herself were like Life and Death, Creation and Destruction, Energy and

Void. There could not be one without the other. Until the day came that the goddesses welcomed Chaos back with open arms, Order too would join him in seclusion.

Temper

“How could you?” Ragnarok’s voice is soft but thick like it could barely get the words out of its throat. Creation and Destruction avoided its gaze as if not looking it in the eye could make up for the betrayal that they wore so blatantly in the newly feminine appearance of their forms. Their bodies were distinctly more curved than the last time Ragnarok saw them, their faces softer. Their hair at least was still worn in their usual style. Creation’s long silver locks flowed down to her hips with various braids woven through and Destruction’s short silver hair framing her face. Destruction’s hair had been that length since she had complained that the others could never tell her apart from her twin and Chaos had responded by grabbing her braid and cutting it off. Ragnarok could only think of a handful of other times it had seen the stoic goddess smile so brightly.

The memory felt like a dagger in its gut and it only fueled its hurt rage as it shouted at the two, its voice hoarse. “How could you? Chaos was... was like a *father* to you! To all of us! And you what? You just cast him aside like he’s nothing more than trash?” The words ripped themselves from Ragnarok and the twins flinched.

Destruction spoke first, her voice firm and even, but worn. “My job is not only to destroy but to keep destruction in check. It’s to prevent everything from falling apart. Those... *abominations* that Chaos produced forced my hand so far past *anything* that holds even a modicum of control!” Her crimson eyes gleamed with emotion when she finally met Ragnarok’s gaze. “You aren’t one of us, you wouldn’t understand! You couldn’t feel the way the balance shifted *so* hard and *so* fast, I’ve *never*-” Destruction halted, her voice becoming too choked to continue. Her jaw was clenched harshly, and

her brow was deeply furrowed, anger practically dripping off her as the goddess seethed, but Ragnarok could suddenly understand the emotion in her eyes.

It was fear. The goddess was terrified. Creation slipped her hand into her sister's to comfort her, her thumb stroking across her knuckles. Ragnarok felt sick.

“Creation... You and Life. Nobody loved Chaos more.” Ragnarok spat out forcefully, its eyes burning with unshed tears. “How can you... How can you just stand by and let them do this?”

“It... it's for the best.” Creation's words were flat as if it was something she had repeated one too many times, and still could not fully believe it.

“For the *best*? You say that I'm not one of you, and you're right, I'm not an omnipotent deity. But you forget that I've been around since the beginning. I'm older than the two of you! *You* weren't there! *You* don't remember what it was like before Chaos left his mark on things!” A hot tear streaked across Ragnarok's face. “When Order created me, I just, I felt so- so *cold*. I existed. I knew my purpose. But I didn't *feel* anything. I may have just been another one of the trees! But Chaos, he touched me and suddenly, I was more. I actually *cared* about things and people. I was curious about the world. I became me.”

Ragnarok clenched its fists to try and hold back the rush power that swept through it in response to its emotions, knowing that its skin was likely shimmering. The runes holding it in its humanoid form likely becoming visible in protest to the power surge. Ragnarok could faintly see the gleam of light that was coming off its crystalline horn and sucked down a deep breath to try and calm itself before it continued. “Order brought me

to life, but Chaos was the one who made that life worth living. And now you just want to ignore everything that he's ever done for you because he made a mistake?"

"That was some goddamn mistake! How many were slaughtered because of his *mistake*?" Destruction bit out sharply, glaring at Ragnarok.

The ground beneath them shook harshly. It was hard to say if Ragnarok or Destruction had caused the tremor, but all three ignored it, too used to such events to pay it much mind.

"How many were slaughtered when you decided you didn't like the way those humans in the twelfth realm ran things? You got angry and destroyed three fully populated planets! When Energy gets bored of a galaxy, she makes her suns explode for the '*pretty light show*'! Life will always be at the mercy of the deities, so don't even start in on that argument with me." Ragnarok surged forward, pointing its finger at Destruction accusingly.

"Perhaps, but in the wake of that destruction, new things can be made. Something is gained back! Even Creation can barely make anything of the wasteland those things left behind! Besides, of all beings, you're one to talk. Even *I* haven't crippled as many civilizations as you have!" Destruction exclaimed as she batted Ragnarok's hand out of her face.

Where their skin collided, Destruction's power sparked and Ragnarok's hand crumbled into dust, the destructive magic continuing to erode its arm until Ragnarok clutched at the wound and prompted its bones to regrow. The same multicolored crystalline as the horn protruding from its forehead burst forward and reshaped the bones of its hand, then was quickly covered by muscle and pale flesh. Destruction's expression

flickered with guilt for a second as if she had not intended to harm Ragnarok before settling back into her usual stoic, icy expression.

Ragnarok paid it no mind, its furious gaze narrowing in on Destruction and its vision bleeding red in its rage. The blow had hurt its pride more than actually injuring it, but the message it received from the action was clear. If Destruction wanted a fight, Ragnarok would give her one. It was one of the few beings that could trade blows with the goddess and live to tell about it. Before it could come to that, however, Creation forced her way between them, laying a hand on both of their chests.

“Stop it, both of you!” She shouted, her violet eyes blazing. “If you start fighting, this entire realm will be leveled *again*! You would think you two would’ve learn your lesson!” Creation scowled sharply at her sister. “You need to stop aggravating Ragnarok like this on purpose. Dealing with your feelings by punching it out with Ragnarok isn’t a healthy coping strategy. You are two million years old, start acting like it!”

Destruction clenched her jaw but nodded at her sister’s words. With that Creation whipped around to face Ragnarok. “And you! You need to work on your control. You’re even older than us! Otherwise, I’ll get you nicely reacquainted with the staff you made for me by shoving it through your throat.” Creation uttered darkly, her hand slightly outstretched towards said staff, ready to beckon it into her hand.

Ragnarok’s eyes drifted over to where the staff was embedded in the ground next to Destruction’s scythe. Both weapons shimmered in exactly same shade of multicolored crystal as the spire that gleamed on Ragnarok’s forehead. It had crafted the weapons as a gift for the goddesses from its molted horn. Realmwood weapons crafted by a unicorn, especially one as powerful and skilled as Ragnarok, had no equal. Any being that could

withstand wielding it could easily become as strong as a deity. In the hands of a deity, it became their greatest tool. Ragnarok had painstakingly crafted the two for the Creation and Destruction when they were still young, still learning about the world and fascinated by the first substance that they encountered that didn't crumble beneath the full onslaught of their energy.

For a moment, Ragnarok's ire spiked and it was filled with the impulse to take back the gift that it had given the twins. It could still feel where the great weapons were tied to its life force and it knew if it broke that tenuous thread, the weapons would become useless. After all, the goddesses had turned their back on Chaos, shouldn't they have a taste of their own medicine?

The thought hit Ragnarok like a wave of cold water. Its shoulders slumped, and all of its energy drained out of it. They were all family. That was the very reason it had come to confront the twins, to try to talk some sense into those closest to the newly-estranged deity. What was it doing by further hurting those it cared about?

Ragnarok lifted its gaze back to the twins who were both watching it with their heads slightly cocked and pensive, almost scared looks on their faces like they were waiting for it to blow up and start destroying this realm. Instead, Ragnarok pursed its lips and sighed. Its voice was worn and defeated.

"You know, I think I get it. Why Order did what she did. I didn't understand why she didn't fight all of you harder. But it's because she loves all of you. You goddesses are like her sisters and her children. You're like my family too." Ragnarok swallowed and forced itself to continue speaking. "Those two may just be the only ones with their heads on straight. I'm going to follow after them. I don't want you to bother to try to contact

me, because unless you're ready to also talk to Chaos, I don't want to talk to you. We'll likely only end up fighting anyways." Ragnarok forced a weak smile onto its lips, waiting for a response from the goddesses. The only thing it got was the same expression of watery eyes and a quivering lower lip on two faces.

Ragnarok nodded, not knowing how else it should respond. The air between them hung thick with tension. "You'll always have your scythe and your staff to lean on, even if I'm not here for you anymore." Another long silence hung between the three before Ragnarok spoke again. "What, not even going to give me a hug before I leave? Seems like it was only yesterday that the two of you were tiny and crawling all over me and swinging from my horn."

The wistful words were barely out of Ragnarok's mouth before its arms were full of two goddesses, one openly wailing, the other silently clutching onto him with a grip that would have crushed a lesser creature. Ragnarok closed its eyes and savored the last time it would hold them for a long time to come.

Slaughter

She knelt in the wreckage that once used to be her home. The tree was a burned-out husk of what it once was, the bright silver a dull, ashy grey. Lyla struggled not to gag from the heavy stench of death that permeated through the thick cloth she had tied over her lower face. The whole forest lay in ruin, painted with blood and soot, littered with carcasses that were malformed, but still terrifying, even in death. Their appearance varied one to the other, some covered in vicious pointed scales that could shred flesh, others in tough plates of chitin like armor, and others yet were covered in a rough wiry fur, the number of limbs and eyes ranging from 1 to 20 or more. The only thing the beasts had in common was their giant gaping mouths filled with razor-sharp teeth.

Lyla stared at the dead eye of the one that had almost torn her in half, her eyes caught on how those terrible teeth still gleamed, each one as long as her hand. She had thought for sure that it would be the end of her. It had been less than a foot away when the priestess of destruction had arrived and cleaved it right down the middle. Lyla herself had dealt fierce blows to the creature. She was one of the strongest fighters in her village, but no matter how many eyes she shot out with her bow or limbs she cleaved off with her sword, they just kept growing back. She had had her hands full just keeping one at bay while her mother and sister escaped; all the while other demons feasted on everyone she knew and loved. If only she had been strong enough then, if only she had had a Whitewood weapon like the priestess had wielded. Things would have gone very differently. The priestess had almost looked like Destruction herself, tearing through the ranks of the lesser demons faster than anything Lyla had ever seen in her life, the

enchanted weapon ensuring the beasts stayed dead. If Lyla had only been stronger, then she wouldn't have had to gather the pieces that were left of her little sister. She wouldn't have had to find her mother's favorite hairpin soaked in blood and nothing else.

A rough but gentle voice snapped her out of her reverie. "We've gathered all the remains from the rest of the village. If there is nothing else here, we should go." The priestess wore a look of sympathy on her face. Like the other elves that had pledged themselves to destruction, her original heritage had been stripped away. Her smooth, long hair was bone white and her eyes were a fierce crimson.

"What will happen now?" Lyla spoke as strongly as she could, but her voice still came out a soft whisper.

The priestess pressed her lips together, grimly surveying the land. "I will cleanse this place. Give everything to Destruction, so the next to come here can begin with a clean slate."

"And... us?" Lyla's hand dropped to her stomach, reverently stroking the small swell of her belly, the only thing she had left of her past life.

A look of understanding crossed the priestess's face. "The grand temple will always provide a safe haven for our kind."

She hesitated, before reaching down to her belt and prying off one of the glimmering ruby stones and handing it to Lyla. The slowly swirling colors were almost hypnotizing, and she could feel the power thrumming off of it.

"I can't do much for you, but I can give you one of my soulstones. You survived as long as you did from the strength that your child gives you. However, if something like this should befall you again, pull power from that. You can charge it with the excess

energy your soul produces every day, then call on it later. A classic trick we priestesses use to cast very large spells.”

Lyla clutched onto the soulstone harder, feeling the thrum of power inside and how it readily responded to her call, and felt the blooming of hope in her chest. With this, she could become stronger.

With this, she could ensure that both of the lives growing within her would be protected from the horrors she had had to face.

Culpability

“You knew this was going to happen, didn’t you?” Chaos didn’t glance at her when he spoke, gave no other indication that he acknowledged her presence, just continued to gaze over the land that lay beyond the cliff. It was barren, no vegetation or life of any kind visible for miles, just the rugged earth and rock.

“I had my suspicions, yes.” Order sat down next to Chaos, her legs joining his in dangling over the cliffside, her tone as placid as Chaos’s had been.

“And yet, you still encouraged me to create them.” Chaos toyed with the glittering leaf that hung on his necklace. “Why?”

“There was too much travel between the realms. As convenient as the Abyss is, it was upsetting the order that had been put in place for a reason. Your creations have typically been rather... unstable in the past. If this one proved to be too, then I figured you’d send them to live in the Abyss, and that’d be the end of it. Creatures then would be restricted from using the Abyss for travel unless they wanted to deal with whatever it was that you created.”

Order surveyed the blank landscape before them. She remembered this location. It had used to be a city, filled to the brim with bustling humans. Now, if she looked closely, she could only vaguely make out the edge of the foundation of some thick stone wall.

“I did underestimate just how powerful your demons would be, and how quickly they were able to get out of hand.” She admitted.

Chaos nodded gravely. “How many realms suffered as this one did? How many were killed, their entire civilizations wiped clean?”

“Do you truly want to know the answer to that?”

“I do.”

“Billions.” Chaos’ eye squeezed shut and a grimace crossed his face at her words.

“Do you want to know the exact number?”

“No, that’s... Enough.” He wiped a hand over his face and then up and over his hair. “I don’t blame the others at all for casting me out as they did.”

“I do. It wasn’t solely your fault. I’m just as much to blame.” Chaos finally turned to Order, shooting her a scathing look, but she continued before he could interject with a snide comment.

“You never would have created anything had I not urged you. You saw the chance that this would happen and didn’t want to take it. I convinced you to because you also saw that you would create a race that would be just like the others; strong and intelligent and empathetic and yours. I also knew, however, that the first time any of us try to make something, it typically doesn’t turn out right. Remember Ragnarok? I needed your help with that one. I figured your first creations would need some help too.”

“‘Need some help,’ that’s a bit of an understatement.”

“Next time, you’ll know-”

“Next time?” Chaos cut Order off. “If you think there will be a next time, you’ve gone insane. I learned my lesson. Never again.”

Evolution

After Order followed Chaos into exile, the familiar mold that had guided the lives of mortals and immortals alike was broken. The elves who had previously relied on the guidance of the creatures of order found themselves lost as many of the unicorns, angels, mermaids, and dragons scattered to distant unknown lands. The sacred trees that sustained the elves became a limited commodity. All of the trees crafted by Order were incapable of growth without the aid of a goddess, with the exception of realmwood that grew with every addition to the realms. Thus, Creation began to strive to create a new breed of trees that would be able to grow with the population. She crafted trees for the four youngest goddesses that lacked them.

For herself, Creation made a tree that gleamed in a silver hue so lustrous that when smooth, it provided a mirror of the things that stood before it. The tree itself was diverse and versatile, each branch different from the last. They held leaves of different shapes and sizes. Some branches jutted out straight, some fell in curling vines, others held sharp angles and tangled together like thick brambles. This tree grew readily and easily with minor interference from its caretakers and quickly became a favorite of the elves to inhabit. It could take on the properties of the other sacred trees when they were melded together and could form different textures and consistencies to allow the crafting of various products, from clothing and textiles to armor and weapons. It became the ideal home of all races of elves and came to be known as Silverwood.

For her twin, Creation made a tree of pure white with leaves of brilliant crimson that gleamed like Destruction's eyes. Anything that came in contact with the tree's clear

sap began to break and crumble away into nothing. Only creatures that devoted themselves to serving Destruction could touch and wield the tree. It became the most effective and glorious weapon against the demons that occasionally burst forth from the Abyss, the creatures that Destruction despised more than anything. The tree could devour and destroy even their shifting energy. Before, demons could only be sealed and cast into the abyss again. With this in hand, the realms gained a powerful gift that would protect them from the scourge. This tree came to be known as Whitewood.

For Life, Creation made a tree of pure glittering crystal that would imbue anything that touched it with its eternal strength. The tree would grow into the body of any creature or thing and become one with it, granting it life eternal. However, the nature of the tree was as cruel as its mistress, for if the tree did not recognize the bearer as worthy, then it would completely harden their body and the person, immortal or not, would be forever entombed within the crystal, wholly transformed and forever trapped. This tree came to be known as Crystalwood.

Lastly, for Death, Creation crafted a tree that was a plain, somber grey. It had no leaves, its branches arching elegantly through the sky, barren and weaving together to form intricate shapes. When cut, the tree leaked a thick, viscous black sap that sucked the soul out of anything that touched it. Those souls would travel directly into Death's hands for her to do with as she saw fit. If one merely gazed upon the black sap, they could see echoes of the memories and thoughts of the dead and hear the whispers of those that had passed. Thus, the tree became a source of comfort for those that had lost loved ones. They could see and talk to those they had lost to Death with relative safety, so long as

they did not touch the black liquid that they gazed upon. This tree came to be known as Greywood.

Enlightenment

The grand temple was a sight that took Nyx's breath away, the place of literal legend. The giant Onyxwood tree towered in the middle of the whole complex, its gleaming black trunk big enough that well over a hundred elves would need to join hands to create ring big enough to encircle it. The whole temple was grown from the tree itself, the walls made of the same lustrous black material as the thick trunk. Its great branches extended far overhead, creating a canopy that sheltered the huge central courtyard, that could easily have fit Nyx's entire modest home village within it, and most of the outreaching temple. The sunlight trickled down from above and off of the Sunwood tree which glowed strongly, filling the temple with a gentle golden light. It beautifully reflecting off the multi-colored leaves of the Onyxwood that grew in small clusters on vines that grew from the temple, casting rainbows over lustrous black walls and providing a gentle light to see by. Surrounding the Onyxwood in the central courtyard grew the first of each of the ten sacred trees of the goddesses. Behind their tree, within the onyx walls of the temple itself, each goddess had a sacred cloister that only their disciples were allowed to enter. The courtyard, however, was an open sanctuary for any elf. Smooth onyx pathways that grew up from the roots of the tree splayed out from the trunk at the center like spokes on a wheel, separating the domains of the different trees. They were decorated with a plethora of runes that kept each area in a barrier that allowed the deep tranquil pond that the Mistwood thrived in to coexist only a few feet from the slowly gurgling lava field that contained the Flamewood.

Two elven children giggled and shrieked as they threw snowballs at each other from underneath the boughs of the Icewood tree. A group of warriors, likely in training to become disciples of Destruction, sparred in front of the Whitewood tree. Soft chanting could be heard from the priestess in front of the Crystalwood tree, reinforcing the barriers that kept the tree from poisoning and overtaking the entirety of its courtyard. Wind elves danced and floated through the air, their almost clear forms hard to distinguish among the branches of the glasslike Breezewood tree. Eerie whispers floated up from the pool of thick black liquid that surrounded the Greywood, a lone elf sitting before it likely conversing with the dead. All the sounds wove together to create a surprisingly harmonious din that was oddly soothing.

Despite this, a tight ball of anxiety made itself known in the pit of Nyx's stomach. She was a Fey, part elf and part human, and so felt distinctly out of place. She had been raised amongst humans. All her life, she had been told tales of the terror of the elves, how they would butcher humans that wandered into their lands, kidnap children, and corrupt the innocent with their dark magic. At night, before she would sleep, her human mother would tell her that most of the stories that she had heard were greatly exaggerated. Her mother had told her tales of the different trees and the goddesses, and the way that the elves lived peacefully with them.

As she had gotten older, she had begun to exhibit more and more of the powers that were inherent in many elves. Things would move and rattle when her emotions were heightened, the pictures she drew were a little too lifelike, almost moving and looking as if they would come off the page, and her singing would sometimes make the townsfolk get caught in a daze. When whispers began to circulate around the town about the strange

phenomena that surrounded her, she had packed her things, said goodbye to her Mother and went deep into the forest of the elves before the simple and kind villagers she had known all her life decided that it was a good idea to tie her to a pyre and burn her as a witch.

It had been strange at first, to meet people that were so obviously inhuman with intense swirling eyes in various vibrant colors and a distinctly too-perfect cast to their skin. It had been even stranger to pull her hair behind her ears and flaunt the pointed tips that she had struggled to hide her whole life, the tips that were even more proudly pronounced on everyone around her. It didn't help the strangeness of the whole experience that she was treated as if she was an outsider. The elves that guided and directed her to the grand temple were polite enough, but reserved with a wary, distrustful gaze that belied their sweet tones of voice.

However, here she was at long last, standing in a place of legends and drinking it in with her own eyes. Nyx did not know exactly what she would do now that she was here, but she couldn't deny the yearning that flowed through her to come here. Somehow, she knew that this was exactly where she was supposed to be.

With one last deep breath to center herself, Nyx began to walk around the perimeter of the massive courtyard, hoping that maybe something would jump out at her, or someone would suddenly appear to guide her. Nyx had no such luck. As she walked, not an elf spared her a glance. She would have thought she was invisible if not for the way that the elves gave her a wide berth as they walked past.

Nyx had walked halfway around the entire courtyard by the time that anyone even met her gaze. She was passing by the area dedicated to the Sunwood tree, the bright

golden glow intense enough to hurt her eyes if she looked directly at it. In the next section stood the silverwood tree. Its leaves and branches gleamed proudly, reflecting a little of the light from the neighboring tree in various unique patterns from the different shapes of branches and leaves that made it up. One elf lounged against an upraised root, her long braided hair just a shade lighter than the brilliant silver of the tree. There was something about her, even from so far away that that spoke of power and grace. Her delicate features were so breathtaking that it made the other elves pale greatly in comparison, which spoke volumes as elves were known for their unearthly beauty.

As if she could feel Nyx's gaze on her, the elf blinked her eyes open, showing a vivid purple hue that was trained directly on her. Nyx wanted to look away but was held spellbound. That same yearning in her that prompted her to leave her village and come to the temple rose up within her again, but a hundred times stronger. She found herself walking forward, until she was underneath the branches of the silverwood and standing before the elf who smiled at her serenely.

"I don't believe I have seen you here before. What brings a Fey to the grand temple? Your kind are rare in these parts." Her voice was sweet and light, like tinkling bells, with only gentle curiosity coloring her words. Her expression was warm and open, so refreshing to see after having only been around cold strangers for the past few months of her journey. Nyx felt her eyes well up with tears.

"I... I just felt like needed to come here." Nyx struggled to think of words to express the pull coming from her core that had prompted her. "And I wasn't very welcome in my village, so I really had nothing to lose."

The elf inclined her head and gestured to the ground next to her. Nyx took the invitation and quickly plopped down to the ground with little grace, sitting with her legs crossed and leaning forward, like a small child eager to hear a story. A small blush rose on her cheeks at her own behavior, but she found that she couldn't shake the feeling of being spellbound by the gorgeous elf.

"You seek to become a priestess of Creation." The elf spoke with certainty and somehow, Nyx felt that that was exactly right. That was exactly what she came here to do. She nodded aggressively, a determined cast coming over her face.

"I do. I think... I think that's what I am meant to do." Her voice was firm and calm as she was filled with a sense of confidence, a clarity the likes of which she hadn't felt before.

The elf hummed gently. "I would be inclined to agree. However, I must warn you that your path will not be an easy one. Some elves have a distaste for their mortal cousins. Many look down on humans and more so on fey, saying that the mortal blood dilutes the glory of the elves."

Nyx frowned. "But humans were made by Creation and Destruction, weren't they? If anything, they are more suited than elves to serve those goddesses." She said, trying to not let her bitterness bleed into her words.

Instead of being insulted, the elf smiled fondly. "Indeed, you are very correct. If you are determined not to let that stop you, then I'll grant you my blessing."

She reached forward and took Nyx's hand in her own. The elf's skin was smooth and soft, but Nyx felt the power pulsate off of her in almost palpable vibration. A swirl of purple energy suddenly twirled down the elf's hand and flowed across Nyx's, twining

around her wrist and becoming more concentrated until a slim silver-toned band remained in its place. The simple bracelet tingled against her skin with barely suppressed power and was very reminiscent of the leaves of the tree they were sat under.

“There are many in my service who have become complacent and egotistic. Perhaps it is time for some new blood to put them in their place, hmm?”

A wicked smirk crossed her face for a moment before she gently cleared her throat and schooled her expression back into a neutral look, though her smugness was still apparent. The elf’s eyes gleamed, the purple shifting to a lighter, brighter shade as if to reflect her mood.

Realization hit Nyx like a bucket of cold water, and she felt the blood drain from her face. She gaped, her mouth opening and closing like a fish, her mind a blank mixture of awe, shock, and fear and she stared at the figure in front of her.

Before her was no mere elf.

The goddess smiled widely and laughed, clearly enjoying the shocked reaction and understanding what brought it about. “My child, go to the cloister,” She motioned behind me, to the main body of the temple. “There you will begin your training. With my favor, they won’t dare turn you away.”

Creation winked at Nyx, a mischievous expression across her face. She rose, a fluid motion that contained more grace than should be possible and pulled a glittering staff out of the ground next to her. Nyx did a double take at it, wondering how she had managed to not see it before. It was made entirely of a rainbow-colored prismatic material, the same that made up the leaves of the Onyxwood, that wove in and around itself in complex spirals and shapes.

Creation's voice drew her attention back to the goddess. "This won't be the last time that we meet. In fact, I will always be with you. I will always come to your aid when you beckon, even if you cannot see me. That being said, you must develop your own powers and grow stronger in your own right." Creation brushed her fingers across Nyx's cheek and swept her hair behind her ear, her lavender eyes falling out of focus and shifting into a brilliant red. "Your name will become one known throughout the ages and you will do me and my legacy proud."

Nyx stared dumbfounded as the goddess gave her cheek a gentle pat then turned away, walking towards the Whitewood, where a perfect replica of her stood amongst the elves learning to fight, watching keenly and yelling out chipped bits of advice. Unlike Creation, her hair was short, cut roughly at the nape of her neck and her eyes gleamed like fresh blood. The colors of the tree she stood under were a perfect mimic of her, bone white limbs and blood red leaves with sharp, clean cut edges. Nyx's head spun and she felt faint. She was seeing not one, but two goddesses with her own eyes!

In the corner of her vision, she saw a dark movement of shadows and glanced over to see that the lone elf mourning next to the thick black pool under the Greywood was no longer alone. A woman sat next to him with a hand gently brushing tears from his face. Everything about the woman was somehow slow and soft. Her brilliant, rainbow hued cloak was shot through with swirls of black. It spilled from her shoulders like a silky waterfall and melded with murky depths of the pool, blending seamlessly. Her face, though stunningly beautiful, was long and drawn, her lips and eyes holding a sorrowful tilt. The incredibly soft smile and her gentle motions towards the elf exuded warmth and

kindness. Everything about her being invited one to come and sit with her, to confide all their sorrows and be comforted.

Nyx snapped her vision away from her, terror causing a thick lump to form in her throat. Somehow, she knew the woman was Death. A feeling in her gut told her that Death had not just appeared but had been there since the beginning. Her eyes darted around the rest of the courtyard, wondering how many of the goddesses were there. No more? Maybe all of them? Was she supposed to notice them? No one else seemed to pay them any attention. Her wrist tingled aggressively where the silver bracelet touched her skin.

Her gaze was drawn back around to where Creation and Destruction still stood. Destruction's eyes were on her sister, lips turned up in slight amusement, but Creation was looking directly at her, the mischievous smirk from earlier even wider. Her lips moved, and Nyx shouldn't have been able to hear her words so clearly from so far away, but it was as if the goddess was whispering into her ear.

“Make me proud.”

Desperation

Every time her blood hits the wood, which has been drained and left near death, the only reason that it hasn't interfered before, she hears the tree.

Lend me your power, and I will ensure they can't ever touch you again.

Lend me your power, and I will ensure you stay safe for eternity.

The brute hit her across the face and she fell crashing to the floor. She clenched her fists and fought back tears, a drop of blood dripping from her lips onto the wood floor. For the first time in a long time, she heard the voice, soothing and low, weaker than it had ever been.

Lend me your power, and I will save you both.

And for the first time, with her twin's screams for help in her ears, she says yes.

And the world turns to crystal.

Misfortune

Ragnarok worked the spell over the seam between the two realms. It was no longer able to travel through the Abyss to explore random realms as it had grown accustomed to doing, but even before the odd realm had been created, Ragnarok had been exemplary at travel between realms. As one of the few creatures that could claim this, Ragnarok took it upon itself to pave the way for others to follow.

When it discovered a realm that was hospitable, it used fragments of its horn and the Onyxwood to create a permanent portal linking the realm back to the Grand Temple so that refugees whose homes had been destroyed could move across the realms and settle somewhere new. Ragnarok disliked working with the elitist elves and their goddesses, but its need to care for the living beings in the realms overrode its grudge against the primordial beings that it once regarded as its family. It still took great care to not to cross paths with the goddesses or set foot anywhere near the realm that the Grand Temple resided in.

After a moment, the spell took hold and opened a rift in the dimension the unicorn was in so it could step into the neighboring one. The moment that Ragnarok did, however, it was assaulted with an onslaught of Crystalwood. A glittering root cracked upwards from the ground underneath Ragnarok and moved to surround it, ensnaring the unicorn like a snake capturing its prey. Tendrils of the crystalwood sprouted off of the main root and dug their way into Ragnarok's flesh. Instantly, it was able to connect with the consciousness of the great crystalwood tree.

Ragnarok could feel the alarm that its sudden appearance had evoked in the tree and the confusion at what Ragnarok was.

When Ragnarok finally lifted its eyes to survey the landscape, it gaped in a mixture of awe and horror. As far as its eye could see, everything glittered like crystalline gemstones. All of the vegetation had been taken over and externally fixed in beautiful, elaborate arrays. Covering the ground like soft holographic snow were countless flecks of crystal that stirred into the air easily with Ragnarok's movements before tinkling back down gently. What wasn't covered by the crystal snow, tall boulders and a sheer cliff face that towered over Ragnarok, was woven through with veins of crystalwood, creating another intricate tapestry.

The way the light was reflected and cast from the profuse crystal was nearly blinding, but Ragnarok could still see the perfectly still forms of what looked to be humans, their faces contorted in fear and pain. One was on his feet, frozen in a running pose, the other had a vine protruding from his chest and was curled in on himself on the ground. They both glittered the same as their environment, their entire bodies taken over and turned to crystal. Ragnarok could see clearly through them, though when it looked closer, it could make out small variations in the glass-like crystal that showed where they once had bones and organs.

The crystalwood tree had taken over everything.

"How far have you spread?" Ragnarok murmured weakly, hand moving to stroke gently at the root that tangled around it.

The crystal swayed for a moment, then unwound from Ragnarok's form and settled back into its position in the ground. The tree pushed a general impression into his

head, a quick series of images showing the vast lands that had now become part of it. Ragnarok winced when it saw the extent of the coverage and the millions of souls bound to the crystalwood. The vast majority of them were fully entombed and preserved with no chance to ever escape, likely having met the same fate as the two crystalized fleeing humans that were still in the corner of its vision.

“What atrocity drove you to reach out so far?” Ragnarok asked the tree gently.

Before he could get an answer from it, a movement in the forest caught its eye. Its eye focused in on two forms that were peaking out from behind a tree. It was two young elves with mirrored faces and eyes that shone like bright crystals.

Amalgamation

In all the various realms, the world went on. Mortals and immortals alike lived and died. Order and Chaos joined together and from their union, a child was born. One who would have all the makings of a demon, a being that could shift forms as easily as breathing air, but who had a brilliant, powerful soul that she inherited from her mother. This creature was Valentine, the first of a new species of greater demons, the one who would later come to be known as the Great Mother of Demons. Their daughter was taught everything Order and Chaos could think to pass on. Order taught her how to weave together her magic that threaded throughout all dimensions of the universe and bend anything to her will. Chaos taught her how to break the rules her mother imposed and told her tales and prophecies of things to come. Valentine absorbed their knowledge and took it, eager to explore the realms. She possessed the ability to split herself and her consciousness into many different parts and be in millions of places at once, and she used this to go forth and meet all sorts of creatures and see all sorts of sights. Valentine bore no small number of children in her various forms. Her children took after her in terms of power and became known as Bloodline demons, those who could trace their blood back to the great Order and Chaos themselves.

After Valentine was born, Order and Chaos were delighted at the possibility of crafting a race of their own together. They never again had a child from their own flesh like Valentine had been. Instead, they weaved their powers to form one demon after another. Thus, the final immortal race was born. These demons, despite sharing a name with the previous creations of Chaos, were nothing alike. They all possessed souls and

they did not seek to lay waste to the worlds around them in a mad grab for power, for the beings already had power in droves. Due to this difference in both power and temperament, they became known as greater demons. The previous incarnations that prowled the Abyss and wreaked havoc on various realms when they escaped became known as lesser demons.

Determination

Eris and Syra lounged by the pond. Eris was splayed back against a large rock, drinking in the warmth of the sun. Her twin sat on the bank, dipping her feet into the water and kicking around in it. Syra enjoyed the way that the water made her vaguely visible crystalline veins glitter more than usual. After having spent so long within a realm made entirely of crystal, the two were always happy to go out and explore forest filled with multi-colored flowers and greenery. This pond and its gray-green fish had quickly become one of their favorite retreats.

The two had adapted to life around others easily enough, both having dedicated themselves to the goddesses and quickly rising through the ranks to become high priestesses. Eris had become one of the strongest disciples of Destruction, while Syra had chosen to enter the service of Creation. She was known across many realms for her kindness and generosity to those in need. However, the twins still often found themselves slipping away from their duties and taking moments for themselves in the solitude of the forest. Hundreds of years spent with only each other for company were hard to shake off.

Syra gave a particularly strong kick in Eris' direction, flicking water at her twin with her foot. Eris lazily twitched her fingers, casting a simple spell, and the water hissed harmlessly into steam before it could even get close to her.

“You can just say what’s on your mind instead of trying to soak me.” Eris drawled sleepily.

Syra smiled widely, tipping her head back and watching tree branches wave in the gentle wind. “I really love him, you know.”

Eris didn’t need to ask who she was talking about. Since her sister had met Baldur, the two had been utterly smitten with one another. Their bond was truly undeniable and Eris was happy for her sister, however, a feeling of unease lingered in her gut. “I know. But Baldur’s human. He’ll die one day, and you won’t. Don’t put yourself through that.”

“It’s possible to make him immortal though. I’ve been considering ways to go about it, to make sure that he doesn’t die.”

“There are many ways, but Syra, when have those ever worked out well for anyone? Ragnarok has granted eleven humans immortality. How many of them are still alive?” Eris spoke gently, but Syra didn’t respond. She only stared down at the water, her jaw clenched. “How many killed themselves, in the end?” Eris pressed, her tone firmer now. “Say it.”

“All but one.”

“Exactly. All but one. Human souls aren’t meant for immortality. It never ends well.” Eris spoke mournfully. She was quite fond of Baldur herself. His company was very pleasant, and she loved the way he made her sister light up.

“Crystalwood would work.” Syra murmured.

Despite the warm day, Eris felt her blood run cold. She pushed herself upright, turning to face her sister fully and stared at her profile intently. Syra refused to meet her eyes, but continued to speak, more loudly this time.

“It’s made of pure life energy, after all. It alters even the soul, so that wouldn’t be an issue anymore. He’d be like us.”

Eris scoffed. “We both know you aren’t actually willing to gamble on that. If the crystalwood doesn’t recognize him as worthy, then he’ll be forever entombed in crystal. His soul won’t ever be able to pass on. It’ll just be suffering for eternity.”

Syra grit her teeth. “So you just want him to die, then?”

“Of course not, he’s like a brother to me! I don’t feel what you do for him, but I’ll do everything I can to protect him, just like I’d protect you.”

“You always talk about protecting everyone, but why do we even need to be protected? Why does anyone even have to suffer? Mortals die all the time from the most ridiculous things, like starvation or freezing and they hurt one another so often. I’m not strong enough to stop it, not yet, but so many are! Ragnarok is, the goddesses are, but no one does anything! What the hell is wrong with everyone?” Syra ranted, finally looking up to meet her twin’s gaze.

Eris looked calm and unperturbed, even though Syra could feel her emotions roiling through their bond. When she spoke, Eris’ voice was as serene as her affect appeared to be.

“You’re too gentle. You can’t fix everything. Pain is a part of living. We can’t ever be without it. I chose to be an emissary of Destruction so that I could do the dirty work, so good people like you don’t have to. We destroy purposefully, in a way that is controlled. That way we make sure that the majority suffers less. With Creation, you bring good into the world. You make it so much less shitty for all those mortals who

suffer. Balance is necessary in all things. One cannot feel true peace in death unless they suffered in life.”

“Stop mindlessly reciting those damn tenets! Can’t you think for yourself?” Syra snapped at her sister.

Eris’s calm mask cracked, and her voice rose with anger. “I recite them because they’re true!”

“Really? You don’t think there is anything odd at all in the teachings? How Chaos managed to kill the great goddess Time and how Order sacrificed herself to make Time into the Onyxwood?” Even though Syra’s doubts were true, it felt strange and dangerous to question the teachings of the grand temple out loud and she resisted the small urge to take her words back.

“No, I don’t. You know why? Because I’ve seen the proof of the tenets. We *lived* the proof. Lesser demons broke the balance. Chaos, cursed be his name, tipped it too far to his side. Our mother lost everything then. That’s what drove her to become warped like she did, to constantly seek more power. Her balance was disturbed, and we paid the price. Our entire *planet* paid that price! She couldn’t accept that her suffering was a part of life, so we had to suffer in her stead! Don’t repeat her mistake, Syra.” Eris’ calm demeanor slid away as she pleaded with her sister. She let her see all of the conviction that she held, and the fear Eris felt at the thought of the past repeating itself.

The two had discussed this before, Eris’s argument one that Syra was used to hearing, but this time, she did not let herself be swayed. “If anything, you’re the one repeating her mistake! You talk about balance, and yet you are dead set on the ridiculous

crusade to exterminate the lesser demons! Won't that break your precious balance?" Syra pressed, trying to get her twin to see the fallacy in her reasoning

"The balance was tipped a long time ago and it won't be fixed until the scourge is gone!" Eris glowered, and dark look passing over her face. It was in moments like these that Syra hardly recognized her sister, the feral, bloodthirsty gleam in her eyes sending a shiver down her spine. "I will do anything in my power to ensure those things are killed off once and for all." Eris' voice was deadly and calm.

In that moment, Syra understood why some humans ran away terrified from her twin, but she refused to back down. She could be just as ferocious. "And I refuse to let Baldur die. I'll prove to you that I can end the suffering of everyone. Both the mortals and all the souls caught in crystalwood. I will fix our mistake."

Contentment

“Why did I let you talk me into this?” Order growled, glaring at Chaos and clutching her rounded stomach, pain throbbing in her lower back even as she leaned back in the chair.

“Actually, my dear, you were the one to talk me into this. I would have happily never created another creature, but you *insisted* that we make one together.”

Chaos rubbed at Order’s foot, strong hands working out the soreness. Order let out a small moan at the feeling and sighed.

“Alright, I suppose that’s true. But the actual *pregnancy*, the way that mortals do it—”

“Was also your idea.” Chaos rubbed his hands higher up her leg, extending the massage to her ankles and calves. “You were curious to see what it was like.”

“I didn’t realize it would be this miserable! Everything aches, I haven’t been able to switch forms or teleport for seven months, and the worst part of all; the ridiculous cravings! I’m a deity! I’m the personification of one of the most powerful forces in the universe! I don’t even need to eat!” Order pursed her lips and huffed indignantly, her expression what Chaos would call a pout if he wasn’t sure she’d hit him for it.

“It hasn’t been that bad dear.” Chaos’s voice was soothing and calm, but Order could hear the hint of a smile in his tone.

“Not that bad? Remember last week? I was eating dirt. Literal. Dirt. The indignity!” She huffed and crossed her arms, lifting her other leg to prompt Chaos to

switch the side he was massaging. "Creation is a sadist, making humankind have to go through all of this trouble!"

Chaos hummed in agreement. "I suppose. Though I think you were crueler when you made the elves." Order merely narrowed her eyes at him and waited for the deity to continue. "When females go into heat, if they aren't treated either by their mate or a priestess to help release all the energy their souls put off, they burn up from the inside and die." Chaos deadpanned, finally looking up to make eye contact with Order.

She pursed her lips in consideration. "I suppose that is a bit extreme, so I apologize, but that much energy is usually needed. A pair of mates has to be able to generate enough energy to create a new soul entirely in pure-blooded elves. To other creatures Life supplies a reincarnated soul, which is why we were able to do away with that. I did make it so heats only happened once every thousand years or so. Creation, however, has no excuse for the amount of discomfort that humans have to endure!" Order ran a hand through her hair and rolled her neck to crack it. "At least the whole ordeal is almost over."

Chaos hesitated before he spoke. The hormones had Order much more temperamental than usual, and he could never know if his comments would set her off and make her start crying. The first time it had happened, Chaos had panicked. The sight of her tears had caused a sharp pain in his chest that was infinitely worse than the time Order had lost her temper and given him a knife in the stomach. He eventually settled on a response he hoped would irritate her, namely insinuating she was weak.

"You do have another two months before you deliver, love. Are you sure that you don't want to just call it quits?"

Order's expression immediately dropped into a calm façade, but Chaos knew her well enough to read the promise of violence in her eyes. Before she opened her mouth to voice a threat, her expression shifted to one of surprise and a small grunt escaped her lips.

"She kicked." Instantly Chaos's hands were gently stroking her belly, a huge smile on his face. Order chuckled and took his hand, guiding it to the correct spot to feel the movement.

Chaos beamed impossibly wider when he felt the shifting under his palm.

"Hello there, little Valentine. You're already saving me from your mother's wrath. Between you and me, I have a feeling it won't be the last time." There was another kick against his palm, almost as if in agreement.

Chaos leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to the swell of Order's stomach, before leaning his cheek against it gently.

Order looked down at him with a fond smile. She reached forward to run her fingers through his hair. "You're going to be a great father, you know."

Chaos' eyes flickered up to hers. The gentle smile gracing his face was one that he reserved for her alone. "You'll be an even better mother."

Death

The realms would not remain tranquil for long. From the ashes of a world that had been ravaged by lesser demons, rose an elf who hungered greatly for power. She had not suffered the demons themselves but had been raised in the broken society that came in their wake, twisting her thinking. She was a rare child, gifted or cursed with the weight of Crystalwood, which gave her more power than most. The child had a twin which exponentially increased both her strength and her sister's. It was not enough. She began to turn to forbidden magic. To bring forth more power, she began to chip away at her soul itself, to unwind the very thing that made her everything she was. When her soul wrenched, untold power came forth, a power that could almost rival the gods.

Her sister, who knew of the dangers this kind of magic could bring, warned her and did her best to heal the damage that had been done to her soul. Elven twins are a rare few that can not only feed their power to one another but even soothe and mend one another's souls. Her sister forbade her from ever attempting to perform an act such as that, but the lure of power was addictive, and her twin did not listen.

She did not listen, and the strain to her soul led to it tearing itself apart. What rose from her ruin was a creature far more wretched, vicious, and powerful than any that had come before. Gone was her empathy, gone was all emotion, the only thing that remained was her single-minded hunger and cruelty. She slaughtered one world after another, devouring the souls of all those that dwelled within, and warping them to become just like she was, an unstoppable monster. When the scourge of lesser demons had swept across the lands, they ravaged the weak and innocent, but the warriors among the elves

had been able to fight them back. None save the gods could stand in the face of these terrible creatures that had been created, and even the gods could not defeat them. They tore through realm after realm, ripping them apart and killing all who dwelled there. In the face of the destruction and ruin they brought, the ravaging done by the lesser demons seemed trivial. For it was one thing to see loved ones torn apart and devoured, but it was another to see a creature rise with the face of those loved ones and then turn to devour and torture those they once would have given everything to protect.

Chaos, who held the gift of foresight, knew what needed to be done. He led Order forth from their exile and approached the other deities with his plan, wary of their ire, but knowing that there was no other choice. To his surprise, the goddesses accepted easily, each having faced the horror of the calamity that had been unleashed upon the realms and knowing that they did not have the power to stop it. The deities chose a champion to defeat the first and strongest of the creatures, her twin, that the deities could not stand against. Only when the first had been slayed, could the deities contain the calamity.

For the final time, the twelve deities gathered together. Order reached out with her power and for the first and only time, broke her careful rules in the structure of the realms, warping the very planes of existence to suck each and every one of the creatures into the heart of the abyss. There, the deities poured all of their power into a large portion of Realmwood, given by the first and strongest unicorn, Ragnarok. With his horn, they crafted a cage that could never be broken and would never fade and consumed every last iota of their power to seal the creatures within. The shockwave from slamming the final gate and sealing the cage savaged the realms. Some were simply shaken and upturned, but some melded with another and provoked a furious explosion that ripped them down

to nothing but dust once again. The calamity had been ended and the nameless horror put to rest.

But so too, were the deities no more.

Betrayal

Two crystal elves stood across from each other. Once they had been perfect mirrors of one another, but no longer.

One was soaked in blood, brilliant crimson splattered across her face and dripping from her mouth, evidence of her ripping apart and devouring the corpse at her feet.

Baldur's corpse.

Her twin felt her heart break in her chest as she surveyed the scene. The other flicked out a long black serpentine tongue, the first obvious sign of the physical change that had befallen her and spoke.

"Hello sister. It's been a while." Her voice was unchanged, the same soothing tone it had always been, but her crystal eyes were flat, only madness was seen in their depths.

"What... How could... Baldur was..." She couldn't think, couldn't even process what she was seeing in front of her. A pain that was nearly crippling throbbed in her chest. "You swore to protect him!" She finally bit out.

"I did. You swore to never betray me. What happened to us against the world?" The monster smiled cruelly, a perversion of the one she was used to seeing on her twin's face. "Instead, you lead them right to me. How could you?" She mocked before laughing madly. A second later, she stopped as if a switch was flipped and her face went completely blank. She was staring past her twin at the two goddesses that appeared. "I don't want to play with you two yet."

She waved a hand, thick runes rippling across the flesh of her arm, seemingly glowing under the blood. Creation let out a cry and her form broke apart and scattered to dust as she was banished from the realm.

Destruction let out an enraged roar, lunging at her with her scythe extended. Another lazy wave and her form crumbled to dust as well. The impressive realmwood scythe hit the ground and the blade slid into the earth like a hot knife in butter. The land beneath them quaked viciously at the impact.

“Ooh, that’ll be a fun toy to play with later!” The monster smiled jaggedly at it before zeroing crystal eyes on her twin once again.

“Tell me one thing. Did you attack Baldur to turn him?” She murmured out weakly. She had heard the news of what her twin had become. She had felt the blinding pain of her twin’s soul ripping itself apart, but still she had not truly believed it. Now it was like the ground was slipping out from under her feet.

The monster only cackled again. “Of course not. I killed him because I wanted to. Elves turn, fey turn, greater demons are *really* fun to turn, but humans never have. Baldur came to me to talk some ‘sense’ into me. He said he didn’t want you to ‘*see me like this.*’” She said the words in a thick mocking drawl, her voice pitched high to feign innocence.

Her twin just felt like she was going to throw up.

“But you see, I wanted to know why lesser demons always tear apart and eat humans. Wondered if it was worth the hype. I’ll tell you, it was fun at first, hearing him scream, but humans are so *fragile*. He died far too quickly.”

Tears welled up in crystal eyes and overflowed for the first time since she was a child.

“I see now why you chose your path. I never understood why you’d want to fight and kill when you could create. But I really get it now! It’s so exhilarating! It’s *addictive!*” Syra smiled cruelly.

Eris didn’t try to stop the tears streaming down her face. “Thank you.” She spoke evenly now. The creature cocked her head in confusion, mouth pursed as if confused why her twin wasn’t near hysteria anymore. “Thank you for letting me know that my sister is well and truly dead.”

Eris lunged forward grasping the handle of the Scythe of Destruction and wrenching it from the ground. Just that movement sent a shockwave of force in the creature’s direction. The earth was ripped up and exploded outwards, cleaving a great rift in the ground.

Eris grit her teeth and tried not to scream in agony. The worst physical pain she had ever felt radiated up her arms from where she grasped the scythe. It felt as if every cell was trying to violently rip itself apart. The crystalwood running through her veins kept the weapon from actually killing her, so she embraced the pain, letting the destructive energy wash over her and draw strength from it.

The creature hissed angrily at her, the skin on her face reddened as if burned but otherwise unharmed. She vaulted forward to attack, talons extended.

Eris stepped forward, then fainted out of the way, digging the base of the scythe in the ground to push herself into a low slide underneath the reach of the talons. She twisted the handle of the great weapon and used the jar of the blade digging into the earth

again as momentum to elegantly flip herself back onto her feet. Eris rode the motion and spun, swinging the scythe in a wide arc around her to push back her opponent. As she spun, Eris called forward energy and poured it into the scythe until it was humming with power. The instant her turn was completed and the abomination was in her sight, she lunged forward again. The weapon cut a vicious arc towards her target.

Instead of trying to dodge, her replica merely brought up a hand to stop the blade. Blood coated talons scraped against realmwood with the screech of diamond against tempered metal. The scythe shuddered to a halt, but the destructive energy Eris charged it with flowed forward and exploded around them.

The power of the scythe rebounded through Eris, knitting her body back together even as the backlash from the blow ripped her apart, but the creature similarly healed itself. Once the shockwave from the attack subsided, Syra stood holding the blade in place over her head and smirked, flexing her free hand. Before she could attack, however, Eris reached within herself to her soul and the connection that had always been there, tying her to her other half.

It was frayed and tenuous, but still there. She followed the link across to find a roiling mass of hatred and anguish where before her sister's soul had shined. Nevertheless, Eris latched onto that power and ripped it across the bond and into herself before directing it into the scythe in her hands. Instantly, the weapon began to glow a seething black with the influx of the new energy.

Eris pushed with all her strength against Syra's claw and only thousands of years of battle experience allowed her to keep her balance as the weapon swung forward easily. It melted through Syra's form and cleaved her in half.

The weapon slipped from her hands as Eris watched, stunned. Crystal eyes locked together for the last time before Syra seemed to erode into dust before imploding back into herself. She was gone as if she had never been there at all.

The thick, revolting mass of power that was connected to Eris's soul blinked out of existence and Eris felt an aching nothingness fill its place. For the first time in her life, Eris felt truly alone. Her soul was no longer tethered to anything.

Syra was dead.

Eris sank to her knees and screamed.

Hopeless

Ragnarok stared down at the thick black sap that filled the bowl in its hand. It was entirely pitch, but the unicorn could almost see shadows and forms shifting in its depths. Ragnarok could definitely hear the voices that echoed up from the liquid. Dulcet tones layered one over another, each one the voice of a loved one lost. In the fray he could clearly hear Order's light laughter and Chaos' rumbling voice singing slightly off key, as always.

Many an elf had ended their life with greywood sap. It was a very peaceful way to go. If touched or ingested the sap caused the soul to painlessly separate from the body and pass into Death's hands.

Not anymore, however. Now, if it was drank, the soul would leave the body, but linger until one of Death's priestesses arrived to guide it into the afterlife. They were usually wailing and crying themselves over the death of their beloved goddess, whose voice now joined those singing within the Greywood.

Ragnarok knew the voices were just an illusion. Creation had told it so, her exact words echoing up from the sap once again.

"I made it to mimic those who once lived based on the memories of the listener. That way, people in mourning can hear and talk to their loved ones even after they're gone. Since the soul of that person doesn't need to be present, anyone can listen to the voices of the past. Even if the deceased soul has already been reborn. Clever, right?"

Ragnarok sighed, then brought the bowl to its lips and tipped it back, taking several large gulps of the liquid. It tasted light and sweet. A lovely warmth slowly trickled down its throat and into its core before radiating out into its whole body. For a moment, Ragnarok swore it felt Order's arm wrap around its shoulders and Chaos' hand thread through its hair.

Then the feeling was gone and Ragnarok was cold again. It eased its eyes open. Everything was unchanged, except for the woman now standing in front of it. She was stunningly beautiful and voluptuous. Her thin black dress clung tightly to her curves, leaving little to the imagination. It was somewhat ironic that Valentine had appeared, almost as if summoned by the thought of her parents.

Valentine reached out, her obsidian painted nails catching the light as she took the bowl from Ragnarok. She lifted it to her face and inhaled deeply. Bottomless black eyes opened and looked at Ragnarok through a curtain of shadowy curls.

"It smells just like them. Like home. Creation's a bitch, but I have to hand it to her, she can make some good quality stuff." Valentine drawled, eyeing the remnants of the greywood sap.

"It's rude to speak ill of the dead." Ragnarok scolded.

Valentine rolled her eyes and handed Ragnarok back the bowl. Even her skin had a gray cast to it.

"What's with all the black?" Ragnarok asked.

Usually Valentine was a riot of colors. She found amusement in shifting her eyes, nails, hair, and clothes in to every color of the rainbow. Something was always different

each time Ragnarok saw her. It was unnerving to see her completely decked out in a monochromatic shade.

“Black is the color of mourning. In case you’ve forgotten, my parents died not long ago.” Her voice was thick with biting sarcasm. “Though, considering you’re trying to kill yourself again, I’d wager you remember.”

Ragnarok sighed. “I’ve lost track over the years how many times I’ve drank from the greywood. It never works, so I was feeling reasonably sure it wouldn’t this time either.”

Valentine hummed. “If it’s not enough to kill you, why keep at it?”

“Feels nice. I suppose I always hope it’ll work, just a little bit.” Ragnarok shrugged. It casually tossed the bowl away and mumbled a quick spell under its breath that caused the bowl to explode in a shower of sparks. That trick had amused Valentine endlessly, back when she had been a little girl.

“Humans really have it easy.” Ragnarok murmured.

“Oh?”

“If they trip and fall wrong, it’s lights out. So fragile. Your greater demons are a little hardier. They never grow old and can really take a beating, but it’s usually not that difficult to kill one. Elves are a menace though, you have to hurt their souls before they die.” Ragnarok lamented.

“Indeed. I cut the head off an elf that killed a kid of mine once and took it home as a souvenir. That was a mistake, the thing didn’t stop yapping for a week.” Valentine sneered at the memory.

“The elf lived that long?”

“Mhmm, would’ve been longer, but I got irritated and ate it.”

The corner of Ragnarok’s lips turned up in a half smile before it fell off its face. Valentine’s morbid humor usually cheered it up, but not this time.

“As much as I want to, I highly doubt I’ll die anytime soon. I’m similar to elves, but even hardier. No object exists that could really damage my soul except the Scythe of Destruction. Eris refused to kill me, though. The only other being strong enough to kill me is you.” Ragnarok paused, casting its eyes over to Valentine and raising an eyebrow in question.

Valentine returned its look with a deadpan stare and didn’t even grace it with a response.

Ragnarok sighed, its shoulder slumping again. “Figures,” it mumbled.

“Order, Chaos, and all the others died sealing the calamity in a cage made of your flesh and bone. If you die, it crumbles into dust, the calamity is released, and all the realms come to ruin. They’ll have died for nothing. If for nothing else, please just live so they didn’t die for nothing. Please, ‘Narie?’”

The nickname made something clench in Ragnarok’s chest. It nodded, weak as always to Valentine’s demands. She smiled and stepped closer, leaning so that her forehead was pressed against its temple and leaning against its horn. It could feel the warm comfort of her soul soothing its own through the connection that occurred from the contact.

“Some cultures view white as the color of mourning.” Ragnarok spoke softly, suddenly hating the way black loomed in his vision.

It didn't have to see her eyes to know that she was rolling them, but in an instant Valentine shifted and suddenly she was clad in white. The two leaned against each other for a while longer, until Valentine spoke again.

"You know, I should introduce you to my son, Varik."

Ragnarok groaned in annoyance. It pulled away, turning on its heels and stomped off. "Stop trying to set me up with your kids!" It huffed out angrily.

Valentine only smirked and chased after the unicorn. "But he's tall, handsome, and very powerful! Just your type."

"Hell no."

"Okay, then Inanna is a real beauty, she almost puts me to shame! She's got this whole village of humans that worship her, but she's still quite humble and sweet. For now at least."

Ragnarok grumbled unintelligibly and Valentine laughed.

"Did you just neigh, you old horse?"

"For the love of—"

Rebirth

“It’s hard to believe that you’re truly gone.” Nyx leaned her head back against the Silverwood tree, eyeing the elegant realmwood staff. It glittered from the place it was sunk into the ground. The silver branches and roots of the tree wound around it, keeping the Staff of Creation protected and protecting people from the dangerous artifact. The sacred item of every goddess had been left in the grand temple when the goddesses had left for the final time.

“It doesn’t surprise me that Eris was the one chosen to bear Destruction’s scythe. It doesn’t surprise me and yet... I wish it didn’t have to be her. She’s suffered enough. No one would blame her for wanting to rest, least of all Destruction, if she were still here.”

Nyx sighed, her mind lost in reminiscence for a moment before she spoke again.

“She’s so different now. It’s to be expected, but I hardly recognize her anymore. She used to work so hard, hunted down every whisper of a lesser demon that escaped the Abyss. Now she only intercedes when she must to prevent catastrophe... Creation, the look in her eyes is so cold now, so empty. She won’t ever heal either, not while she has that damn scythe. Though, I don’t think she could get rid of it if she tried now.” One of the silverwood vines snaked up across her palm and stroked it gently, the tree doing its best to try to comfort her. Nyx gave the vine a squeeze in thanks.

“The damn artifacts you all left us are a curse. Eris isn’t the only one to use one. Neva has taken up the Belt of Void. Aure claimed the Bow of Air. There’s talk that Gaia plans to wield the Hammer of Earth soon, too.”

The memory of Nylathria trying to claim the Orb of Energy rose unbidden to Nyx’s mind. Nyx had been sitting here, underneath the Silverwood, as seemed to be the norm these days. Nylathria had walked up to the Sunwood and grabbed the orb with no hesitation. She was a handmaiden of Energy, the highest rank a disciple of a goddess could hold, the same rank as the others that had claimed the sacred artifacts.

The second her hand had touched the multicolored material of the orb, a pure beam of light arced up into her palm. It flashed a white-gold and spread further up her arm in an instant. The light filled her veins, illuminating her from the inside, shining as strong as the sun itself from her eyes. To call the sound she had made a scream could do it no justice.

Nyx had heard the crunch of children’s bones being devoured, the bloodcurdling howls of people being tortured, a hundred thousand other terrible things, yet nothing compared to the sound of pure agony that Nylathria made when she touched the orb. It was a mercy when the energy she had taken in burned her up from the inside out. Nothing was even left of her soul, as it too had been overwhelmed and burned away.

“Those artifacts are a death sentence. Even if they don’t kill you right away, I know they will eventually. How could I not be afraid? I know it’s my duty, as the last remaining handmaiden of Creation. I know, but I’m terrified.” Nyx stared down at the staff that glitter innocuously in the light. Despite the fear that was pounding through her, she felt a strange yearning, a pull toward to object. The same pull that she felt when she

had first come to the grand temple. Nyx cursed under her breath and stood, knowing what she had to do. She could faintly feel the realms that were ruined, blank slates that needed to be rebuilt. Worlds that needed Creation back.

“You once told me that you would be with me, always. You also told me that my name would be known throughout the ages. I guess, what I’m trying to say is that I don’t want those words to be a lie.” The silverwood branches parted easily for her, giving her access to the staff. She murmured to herself, “Please don’t be a lie.”

Nyx reached out and grasped the realmwood staff firmly.

The sudden rush of energy was staggering. She had wielded magic the likes of which could level an entire galaxy and that sensation wasn’t even close to the mad rush of power that pulsed through her. For a moment, she tried to contain it, to push it back, but she could feel the pain that resulted from that carving fissures into her soul. Nyx tried to breathe and did the same thing she had always done in times of stress.

Nyx let go, let the energy consume her and put all her faith in Creation.

You know I would never lie to you.

The violent rush of energy slowed, filtering through her soul and then returning to its place within the staff. However, it almost felt like it had taken a piece of herself with it. Nyx could feel a strong connection, a tie from her soul to the Staff of Creation. To a presence that she thought she would never feel again.

A slew of thoughts and memories hummed in her mind, just below her conscious surface. When Nyx peered deeper into them, it became clear whom they belonged to. The memories were from far before she was born, from billions of years ago, a time when the great Onyxwood was only a tree and not yet a temple. Even clearer than that was a

slideshow of places, barren and empty. Blank canvases ready to be filled. These were all the realms that she had only been able to get a hint of before, now clear as day.

Nyx opened her eyes, the once bright azure shade now a gleaming lavender. A mischievous smirk spread across her lips, invoked from within her by someone who wasn't her. Across the courtyard, an elf gaped. The girl was Isis, a new initiate to the disciples of Death. Nyx wagged her brows at her and another impulse that wasn't hers made her wink at the girl.

In the next blink of an eye, she was gone.

Continuity

Life, after the deities had passed, was difficult. The living creatures could no longer rely on the steady presence of them to mediate their affairs and intervene to end their suffering. The creatures of order were more valued than ever, their wise skills and guiding hands imperative to rebuilding fractured societies.

The deities were not wholly gone, however. Echoes of their souls remained bound in the weapons and items of realmwood that they had held. The sword of Order, the amulet of Chaos, the scythe of Destruction, the staff of Creation, the crown of Life, the cloak of Death, the orb of Energy, the belt of Void, the bow of Air, the whip of Water, the spear of Fire, and the hammer of Earth could all grant their wielder the power that the deities possessed, if the sheer power of them did not kill whoever touched them outright. Those who would come to be able to bear these items became known as the Incarnates, powerful beings that fulfilled the role of deities until the power inevitably killed them. These incarnates became central to Elven society and enabled it to continue to function much the way it had previously.

The only deities that never came to have incarnates were Order and Chaos, whose items had been hidden away and lost to time. The greater demons which they had created evolved into various distinct species that had different ways of life as guided by powerful demonic leaders that arose. Valentine oversaw them, holding the demons to a strict code

that ensured they would live in relative peace with the denizens of the realms around them.

Humans continued to flourish and grow across the realms, populating world after world. In some, they lived in harmony with the immortal races. In others, humans were constantly at war with them. There even existed realms where humans lived with no knowledge that immortal races even existed.

Thus, life carried on for billions of years after the death of the deities and would continue to do so until the day that the seal on the calamity's cage is broken and ruin would once again descend.

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