

Atlas Terra Rise

Octavia took me to the Dragon-Beard Forest to try and find anything interesting. I'd always be too scared to go at night, but she took me for the fun of it anyways. We found an ancient, hidden cave with old paintings on the walls, and it reminded us of the stories of the old gods that used to walk these lands. The cave was our last secret. I wanted to leave, but Octavia wanted to stay all night. I knew I couldn't stay too long though, or I'd worry my grandparents. She was staying with her uncle who was the general in charge of the fort we lived in; he'd rarely see her, so she could have stayed all night. Her parents were gone exploring new islands to the west. She had been waiting for almost a year this time. They were always late.

“You think they'll come back?”

“Who?” I asked.

“The gods.”

“They never left,” I replied.

Octavia's face didn't like my answer. She looked at one bizarre piece in the corner. It showed a gigantic man underneath a mountain holding its hand out for tiny people. I preferred the art of Apollo wielding his fiery arrows with his long bow. Octavia stared at the giant under the mountain painting trying to figure out which god it was. She stared for a long time before finally heading back to Fort Rorius with me.

The morning was the same as all the others: cool with salty sea air blowing everywhere. The sun was bright reflecting off the crystal-blue water that surrounded our little peninsula. I

found Octavia sneaking into the armory just to be escorted out by one of her uncle's soldiers a few minutes later. She loved weapons and combat, but the closest she'd be allowed to it all would be the words in books. She had memorized every battle and strategy in the past hundred years hoping her uncle would let her pick up a sword, but he never did. She wanted to learn so badly, but girls aren't meant to be warriors, not in The Empire. I read of women to the far east being fighters, but I doubt The Empire will change, not without reason.

Our fort at the end of The Empire was peaceful and had been quiet for the past decade. I was only a toddler when an army of raiders attempted to take over the fort eleven years ago and ended up in our prisons. The prison had been executing the raiders one by one every month, but there's still plenty; it kept the soldiers busy and the raiders away though. The Empire had been at peace for too long and long peace always led to chaotic times.

Octavia and I spent most of our days the same: meet at the market to eat fish with bread, swim in the sea, play in the forest, and go read at the fort's library or go exploring. She wanted to play in the field instead that day. The wind was pushing the wheat field hard making it look like sea waves. I loved the water, but hated the sand. The field gave the illusion of water without the annoying sand. We would always play Warriors and Raiders in the field. Most of the other kids hated that game as a lot of their family died to the raiders. However, Octavia came after the raids, and I couldn't remember my dead parents no matter how hard I tried. We played for hours only leaving to eat, but we could immediately come back.

The day was coming to an end. The people in the fort were running around getting things ready for the coming harvest festival. The field was still being pushed back and forth with smooth, cool wind. Dragon-Beard Mountain was letting down a shadow over its forest and part of the fort. The town's bards and their children began playing and singing for the workers. We

agreed to a final round. I was pretending to be a hiding raider while Octavia was a warrior hunting me down. Usually, the boys were warriors, but this game was the only time she could be the warrior she always wanted to be. I was staring at the orange and purple tint dropping on the world when she leaped onto my back. It's on the ground that the raider has to do their best to roll free, but Octavia always beats me. We laughed as we rolled around as I tried to free myself and she tried to pin me down. Everything was at peace. All the wind stopped as she twisted my arm. We stopped laughing as everything went silent. We knew something was wrong. She let go, and we looked around.

A red glare stained the sky before coming to a single spot: The Red Star. A loud, strange horn could be heard from the mountain. The Red Star was getting closer. I was beginning to shake; I was scared. I couldn't stop thinking that we were going to die. I couldn't see, not with my tears. Why was I crying; why was I so scared? Octavia grabbed my arms. I wiped my eyes, but when I saw her, she wasn't scared. She looked concerned.

"It's okay, Julius; we're going to be okay," she assured me. Her hazel eyes never looked so serious before. I believed her, but my fear tightened around my heart as the world began to shake worse than I was shaking. The clouds parted as the force was heading towards us. I let out a cry, but the sound was silent against the scream following the star. It was not alone.

The mountain erupted. Giant boulders rolled down the sides into the forest. A great terror rose up my spine. The legend of the titan who held our world rose from the destruction: Atlas. Red, hot lava flowed off his naked, muscular body with his full-red eyes glaring at the world that seemed to summon him out of nothing. I thought he was going to eat us all with how he flashed his teeth at us. But soon, his eyes calmed to purple eyes softly gazing on us as if we were hurt

children. He fully stepped out of the mountain and stood at least a hundred and fifty meters tall, taller than the highest building in The Empire.

Every step he took shook the ground greatly. He stepped into the Juniper Sea looking up at the Red Star. I was ready to drop to my knees, but Octavia pulled me forward.

“Come on!” She yelled. I saw the hope in her eyes and knew she wanted me to follow. We ran towards the Atlas until we got to the edge of the field where a small cliff overlooked the sea. I wasn’t sure what she was going to do or what Atlas would do either. He let out a mighty roar that I imagined the other side of The Empire could hear. He bent his knees and leaped up into the air in one smooth motion; I was surprised to see how agile he was for his size. The Red Star was coming straight towards him. It was about his size, and I thought it’d crush him. He caught it though in his massive hands and quickly brought it to his broad shoulders. When he landed back in the water, the world bounced. We were lifted off its surface in an instance. Water came at us, and it took me a moment to realize that Octavia and I had been pulled into the sea.

When the water settled, we saw Atlas next to us with the Red Star on his back still. The top was starting to open like a flower dripping blue lava. Atlas grinded his teeth as the lava burned his hands and arms. His muscles tightened, and he tried pushing the top closed. Octavia pulled on me to swim, but I was stuck floating and watching it all. The star’s crimson, rubbery surface was being pushed from the inside like whatever was inside was trying to push itself free. Atlas noticed and roared again. He lifted the star up into his hands. He plunged into the sea with the entire star. The waves pushed us closer to shore, but the returning water quickly pulled us right back in.

Out of water, we heard a beautiful voice singing a melody. It was so peaceful and calm. I didn't understand why Octavia looked so tense. Out of the water levitated a woman, a giant woman. She was gradually smaller than Atlas, but she still looked about twenty-five meters tall. She was standing on the water as her melody twisted the waves to her rhythm. She had this beautiful face with these violet eyes that made me feel warm inside. She brushed her wet, red hair aside, so we could all see her gorgeous face clearly. She was fully naked making me embarrass; I'd had only seen Octavia naked from behind once after swimming, but other than that she was the first woman I'd ever seen fully nude. Her chest was swollen and glistening with water droplets; her bright nipples contrasted against her soft, pale skin. Her hips were wide with her womanhood hidden behind a bush of red curls. Grandma had told me of one goddess who ruled water: Aphrodite. She looked at us and grew this long, ugly grin. Fangs grew over her teeth, and her eyes turned demonic.

Some of the nearby fishermen in boats threw rope for me and Octavia to grab on to. The melody grew harsh. A wave of sharp water sliced the fisherman's boat in half. Soon, random waves of fast water struck the fort tearing it apart. A stream of water started pulling anyone in the water towards her. She ate one person after another. We tried to swim, but we were weak against the current. We were almost in her grasp when Atlas' head sprung out and got a hold of Aphrodite's arm with his teeth. I could see glowing chains trying to pull him back down, but he wouldn't let go. Aphrodite pulled herself free tearing the arm off. She returned her attention towards us. Atlas forced himself up. I saw multiple arms and limbs trying to pull him back down by the legs. He quickly kicked Aphrodite away far past the shattered mountain and sank with more arms and even fangs of a terrifying creature pulling him back down.

We quickly swam ashore and went to find anyone. When we got to the market, it was in panic. People were running in all directions like lost sheep. I didn't know what to do. We heard more, louder yelling. Octavia grabbed me trying to get me to focus, but I was lost too. I followed her without thinking, and we ended up running to her uncle's quarters. We found him quickly packing a bag. I was scared that he was going to leave us, but he handed the bag to her. He was saying something to her, but I was too focused on his drawn sword. It's a rare sword made of an unknown metal with a unique blade. The sword is where they got their last name from: Witch-Hunter. I just wanted to think about the sword and not the gods or fear in my stomach and the fear in my head or the fear I held in my hands twisting and pulling my mind into nothing. I couldn't focus at all. I wished my dead parents were alive. I wanted to feel safe by the legendary sword, but I was too afraid to feel anything else. Octavia was speaking back to him, but I wasn't listening. Her uncle grabbed my shoulders, and I was focused again.

"Take care of my niece, boy. Make sure you get her to the next town over, stay off the roads, understand?" I was too scared to speak. "Hey! You are a son of The Empire! All sons! All warriors!" The Empire's famous saying. "Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," I somehow managed to get out after a moment of silence.

He began running, and it was then that I realized why there was so much more panic and yelling. The raiders had escaped. They were loose and attacking. My grandparent's house was right by the prison, so I was sure they got caught. Octavia and I watched her uncle run to join the men fighting the raiders. We might have stayed, but another giant emerged from the sea. This giant about thirty meters tall maybe taller if it wasn't hunched over. It was slim and naked with wings on its tired face. I had read of god with a face like that: god of sleep Hypnos. It looked tired and let out a yawn. The raiders and soldiers didn't know what to do. I still didn't understand

why the gods were attacking but was hoping this would be a good god. Hypnos stretched his arms and wings. It saw a soldier and quickly stomped on him. He continued stomping on any soldier that came near.

“Warriors! On line!” General Witch-Hunter called out. The raiders ran, but the brave soldiers prepared to face the real monster. I wish I could be brave, but fear made my legs heavy. I was surprised when Octavia managed to pull me into a run. We ran towards the forest. The world was spinning and I didn’t collapse until we were well into the woods. She rubbed my back as I tried catching my breath. *What’s happening?* kept running through my head. Nothing made sense anymore. I wanted to stay right there and never move again. I finally got up.

I looked around and found Octavia. She was shivering on a log resting her arms on her leg. She only had on her thin, wet tunic and the night was getting cold. I noticed her stiff nipples pressed against her tunic and tried not to stare. In all honesty, I didn’t care for anyone in the fort except my grandparents and her. I do love her, but I doubt she’ll ever love a regular boy like me. No, I imagine her marrying some brave hero like those soldiers or an explorer like her parents. Regardless of who she’ll be with in the future, she needed me then. I came up next to her and wrapped my arm around her. I couldn’t imagine what was going through her head. Her thoughts were always complex thinking about the larger picture. I didn’t realize until the cold gust of wind hit that I was still wet too.

The sun was almost gone, and I feared Apollo would never bring it back. The red stain was still in the sky, but the night’s blue tint was making the red a bright purple. I could hear the melody in the far distance, but what were worse were the roaring footsteps that shook the ground. My arms stiffened. It was getting close. Octavia and I held each other. I wanted to run. We could see a giant woman through the top of the trees. She had three heads, so I knew it was

Hecate. I was always afraid of her being the goddess of witchcraft. I was worried Octavia would take her own last name too seriously and try attacking her. The giant woman was about fifteen meters tall with each face distinct: one was of a young beautiful woman, another of an ugly old hag, and the last was a wolf-like monster. The only reason I could see her black-skin in the darkening night was because of the two balls of fire following her armored shoulders. Octavia held my mouth shut, and Hecate went on not noticing or caring about us. We held still for a long moment before finally moving.

“What is happening?” I asked.

“Come on.”

We found the creek knowing it'd lead us to the Zora River, and from there we'd find one of the towns. It was getting late, colder, and we were exhausted from everything. We sat down by the water to rest for a moment. Octavia dug through the bag and found a clean tunic for herself. She signaled for me to turn around. I did, but peaked over my shoulder anyways; I figured we were all going to die anyways so might as well look at the girl I love naked one last time. She was beautiful, more beautiful than Aphrodite. I wish I could have seen her in full sunlight, but the moonlight was all the unforgiving gods would give me. She was finish and came to sit by me. The night hid my blushing face. Soon, the cold wind cooled me down slapping us with wet, muddy leaves. I wanted to cry, but I didn't want to worry Octavia anymore than I already had. She had been taking care of me because she's two years older, even though it's the duty of sons of The Empire to care for the women no matter what age. I thought it was time for me to take care of her at least this once.

We were both sleepy, but we couldn't stay there. We heard cracking leaves. My blood jumped. The sound of snapping twigs were just as scary as giant footsteps. My legs locked. I looked around frantically not knowing what to expect: an animal, a smaller monster, anything. On the other side of the creek was an olive-skinned man with brown hair only the left side of his head, a pointed chin, and large black eyes: a raider. I knew he was a raider and not a wandering southerner because the raiders of the south islands gave themselves scars under their eyes. The moonlight showed he had two straight lines running from the bottom of his eyes to his jaw meaning he had seen little battle, yet I was petrified. His yellow smile showed how happy he was to see us. I hated that ugly smile he gave.

“Children of The Empire, all alone in the woods? That can't be right.”

We didn't say anything back. I had no idea what to say.

“I should do the right thing; I! I should bring you to safety. But, but, there's no where safe to go anymore, now is there? There are more of those things; saw them crawl out of the ocean. So, nowhere is safe, really.”

I stepped in front of Octavia. I hoped she believed in me because I didn't. An empty gesture was all I had to give.

“Oh, strong boy, protecting the daughter of The Empire. How The Empire would be so proud of you! What's the old saying? All sons! All warriors!” His smile disappeared. “Proud like the day they took my freedom? Proud right? I was just a young boy, younger than you when my uncle took me for the raiders.” The man stepped into the creek water. The water must have been freezing, but he didn't look fazed. I was trembling.

“When our leader surrendered the army, I was made a prisoner too. Making slaves prisoners is understandable, right? Wouldn’t be the first time The Empire has done it,” the man chuckled. “But, I know what The Empire loves! Justice!” He stepped closer. “I believe that we all deserve justice. See, I was one of the youngest. They saw me as whatever they wanted and justice says I can look at you, boy, the same way.” I didn’t like the way he was looking at me, only me, as he licked his broken teeth.

“Oh, they looked at me all the time as something soft, tender, not yet a hard man, just like you, and they didn’t even call me a boy for those first three years. No, they called me Jujela, a common southern name for girls. They made sure I grew out my hair and styled it too, so I would resembled a southern girl, and they forced me to do things no boy should do. Worse was when my uncle was executed and there was no one to keep the men from being too rough with me.” He took another step. “But, do you know who were the worse? The guards! The Empire’s sons laughing as a southern raider boy was fucked and fucked and forced to choke on men!”

The man had stepped onto our side of the creek. I stumbled falling onto Octavia. The raider grabbed my ankle and dragged me into the creek. The freezing water covered my skin in goose pimples. Octavia tried to pull him off of me, but he batted her away with a hard arm to her face. The blood on her face made my stomach twist. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to fight back, but he put a heavy hand on my throat and forced me under the water. I tried to resurface for air, but I’m not strong. I’m not. Octavia got up and tried again, but he punched her hard in the jaw. She stumbled onto the creek bed. I didn’t care about me anymore and worried only about her. I kicked and punched as best I could. The raider was yelling, but I could only faintly hear his yelling under the water.

“Justice- this is- deserve it- for all the times I!”

I was terrified and confused as he pulled my tunic up. He tried to spread my legs as I desperately tried to keep them closed. He punched my left leg hard making it limp and knelt on my other leg. I was helpless. I could hear Octavia scream and fall back down. I gulped a big mouthful of dirty water as he forced himself inside of me. The pain ran up my spine as the water simultaneously ran down my lungs. The pain in my chest was nothing I'd ever experience. More water flooded inside me with every thrust. I wanted to scream and cry...I wanted to die. I wanted to die so bad. It, no, he was hurting me so bad, and I couldn't take it anymore. The pain wouldn't stop. I wanted it to stop, but it wouldn't. I was scared, and it was getting worse. The pain was getting so intense, and I just wanted to die quickly. I could hear Octavia screaming, and I wanted to say it would be okay, but I couldn't lie to her. I wanted Octavia to be safe, but I wanted death first. I wanted it all to stop. The pain, the pain kept coming, and I couldn't take it. I was dying, dying so quick but not quick enough. I wanted it be over, but every second felt eternal. The pain was keeping me conscious, and I just wanted for it all to be over, but, but...

The man stopped as the world began to shake again. It was too late. The raider spat out blood and fell on top of me. The last thing I saw was Hecate's in the tree lining. My vision went. The last thing I heard was a foreign woman yelling, Octavia screaming, and the roar of a Hecate before it was all gone. I was lost. I'm sorry Octavia. I was dead and hoping that'd I'd never have to see another god. I hope she never has to see another god. I wish that if she dies, she dies a quick death. I'm sorry Octavia that I couldn't be the warrior you needed me to be. I'm sorry that I left you to die. I hope it's quick.