

The Primordial Record

Chapter 2201 Following The Dragon

Eos had thought it was a possibility, but the Great One did not show himself.

This was, Eos understood, a statement about the impermanence of everything when compared to the Great One.

The most powerful beings he had ever faced had always announced themselves: Enoch with his body made of End, the Ancient Primordials with their terrible hungers, even Nyxara, Luminious Veil, with her stolen faces and her games. Power, at a certain level, became indistinguishable from theater.

But the Great One did not need theater, nor did it need to impress him.

“You have been watching me,” Eos said, and he knew this to be the truth laid out between them like an opening gambit.

“Since the beginning,” the voice agreed.

“You watched me in that dying body of a prince. You watched me in the Nexus. You watched every choice I made and every mistake, and you let it happen, because... You were testing something.”

“I am always testing something.”

“And?” Eos pressed. “What have you found?”

A pause. The kind of pause that had weight.

“That you are the forty-fourth,” the voice said, “and you are different from the other forty-three.”

“How?”

“They all fought to save what they loved,” the voice said. “You fight to save what they dreamed of. You fight for the thing that has not yet been born. The possible. The potential. The choice.” The light of the Great One pulsed, and for a moment, Eos saw something in it that he had not expected to see... and it was curiosity.

“I gave them enemies that would threaten everything they know, and they all responded in the same manner. They faced their monster with rage or love or righteousness. You

faced him with truth. And truth..." the voice paused again, and this time, the pause was different, a calculation rather than a performance,

"...truth is the one thing I did not build into the equation. The one variable I have never been able to account for. For what is the worth of truth in a place where the rules can always change? You broke that rule, Eos."

Eos looked at the light, and he understood.

"You are afraid of me," he said.

Silence.

"Not of my power," he continued, and the ten thousand lights of his crown began to slowly rekindle, one by one, drawing from the Origin Tree behind him.

"You have seen power before. You have seen warriors and lovers and geniuses and monsters. You are afraid of me because I am the first one in forty-four Existences who genuinely does not need to win."

The light flickered.

"I am going to rebuild Origin," Eos said, and his voice carried the same quiet certainty it had carried when he told Enoch that he could grow. "I am going to plant this tree in soil you cannot poison, and I am going to grow something that you cannot harvest, because I am going to make it in the image of love and truth and not hunger. And every life that is born in the shadow of that tree will be a life you cannot predict, cannot control, cannot break and reform according to your design." He took one more step toward the Tower. "You know what that means."

The light was silent for a very long time.

"It means," Eos said, "that this time, you do not get to start over."

And the Great One, for the first time in an inestimable length of eternities, opened the door at the peak of the tower.

If a Primordial were here, they would not be able to see this door, or even the peak of the Eternal Tower, just because to their senses this tower was infinite.

Eos peered through this door, and he knew that whatever was inside this tower was astonishingly older than Origin or End, predating both of these fundamental forces by who knew how much.

This was the being that had shattered the Luminous in the first place and scattered them like seeds in the dark, and it had been patient, because patience was easy when you had been alive since before the concept of time had been invented.

Eos looked up, and he smiled.

The smile of someone who has just seen the most difficult puzzle they will ever have to break, but who knew this would be the greatest puzzle there could ever be.

“Finally,” he said. “Let us meet properly.”

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Prime had been given the key to follow Vraegar, and it was easier when the dragon had been dropping off its scales across time as an anchor for someone like Prime to follow.

Only a dragon with the power of Vraegar would be able to tear through time in such a manner without losing himself and be able to leave tracks behind, and this was the task that Eos had given to him.

Vraegar must have suffered a lot and spent an unknown length of time digging into the past, but he had succeeded, and soon Prime and the three Primordials with him followed the road laid by Vraegar until they reached a wound in the architecture of nothingness, and through the wound was a place that had no business existing.

Surrounding this wound was a vast field of blood and flesh, and the dead body of a massive being, it was a turtle, with the tail of a snake.

This had been the Beast of Inevitability that had protected the Cradle for a long time until it was broken by Enoch and later rescued by Eos.

It would seem that to tear a hole through the nothingness, the beast had given up everything, including its life.

Prime took a moment to bow to the body of the beast, one of the endless silent lives in this war that had given up everything for the life they protected.

They proceeded past the wound, and they found themselves inside a blue void that was in the shape of a large room, and a single figure staring out through a circular window.

“This is where you went,” Prime said to the draconic figure, who did not reply as he kept staring through the window, his vast scaled form rendered small by the particular gravity of the view, and Prime realized, slowly, the way one realized things that had been obvious in retrospect, that the dragon had not been sitting before the window for many millions of Cosmic Eras because he was guarding it.

He had been sitting before it because he had been gathering the nerve to go through it.

“Yes,” Vraegar said finally. “This is where I went and have been.”

“You found him?”

The dragon was quiet for a long moment.

“I found what was left of him,” he said. “And I could not bring him out.”

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Chapter 2202 We Have To Get Him Back

Victorious Genesis, who had been standing behind them with the particular stillness of a man holding an explosion for later, said, “Who?”

Vraegar did not turn to answer. He kept his eyes on the window, on the realm beyond it, and on the specific and terrible geography of the place he had been trying to enter for the last three million Cosmic Eras, but he had been too weak to complete.

His friend had given his life to tear a path through nothingness, in the hope that Vraegar would be able to finish the task, but he could only stare at his target without the power to pierce through this damn void.

Finally, he replied to Victorious Silence’s question,

“The first,” he said. “The original Incarnation before the Origin Realms were created. The one Eos made to discover the power of End, before he understood the cost of that decision.”

Circe made a small sound, realization, and horror in her eyes as she understood the source of her dreams and visions. The countless bones falling from the sky, and the vow of silence that Eos had made her take.

This Incarnation was the voice in her dreams that she could not understand.

“I didn’t know there was a first,” Fury said.

“He doesn’t speak of him,” Vraegar replied. “He has never spoken of him. Not to any of us, to protect us from the corruption of End. I only know because I felt him, due to the power of my Origin that aligns me rather closely to the power of End.”

Circe swallowed the tears in her heart, “Are we here to get him out?” The thing they all needed to understand, Vraegar explained as they stood at the threshold of the wound, was that the first Incarnation had not been like the others.

The Incarnations Eos made now were meant to carry all of the Ancient Origins so their roots could be planted inside Eos.

They were essentially shards of Eos’s consciousness given autonomous form, carrying forward specific aspects of his nature, his memory, his will.

They were made with intention. They were made with the full understanding of what they were and what they were for.

The first had not been any of those things. He had primarily been made to be a sacrifice to understand the power of End.

“He made it before he knew what he was doing,” Vraegar said quietly, his eyes fixed on the wound. “When he was still learning what the Primordial Record was and the mysteries behind Existence. Eos did not know his true power or what was behind the shadows, and like he always does, he did not wait, he walked into the darkness to find the answers, even if the cost of doing that was greater than he could bear. The only way he could have any bit of control was to tear a part of himself and send it out.”

“Where?” Fury asked.

“Into the dark,” Vraegar said. “Into the parts of Existence that were outside Existence. Into a place that had not been mapped and should not have existed, and somehow did. He sent Rowan to find answers. He was a child burdened with a dying Reality full of secrets, and he sent the best part of himself to find the answers in places that were designed to destroy hope.”

Prime felt something cold settle under his ribs.

“He did not come back.”

“No,” Vraegar said. “He did not come back... he could not.”

“And he—”

“He thought this Incarnation of himself was lost forever, but I volunteered to find him.” Vraegar was quiet for a moment. “You know, he never made another Incarnation like this again. Every Incarnation he made after that one was made with full intention, full acceptance of the cost. I exist because he learned from losing him... We all do.”

Fury made a sound that was not a word.

“And he was here this whole time? Inside... End?” Circe asked.

“Not quite,” Vraegar said. “It was with Enoch. Enoch found him, wandering in the dark between where Eos had sent him and where he was trying to reach, and Enoch kept him here. He did not harm him but was studying him.”

“Why would a being like Enoch not kill the Incarnation of his enemy?” Vraegar shrugged, “I do not think he meant to keep him captive. I think, by that point, he did not remember what else to do with him. He had held him for so long that he had become the only thing in End that was not End, and he needed that. Even corrupted. Even broken. He needed something that was not End to remember that End was not all there was.”

Prime understood, suddenly, a great many things.” “That is why he did not destroy Rowan in this prison,” he said quietly.

Vraegar’s head turned slightly, the first acknowledgment he had given to anything Prime had said.

“Yes,” the dragon said. “When he saw Rowan, when he saw the Incarnation of Eos arrive in his prison, something in him recognized this. Not consciously. The part of him that had been keeping the first Incarnation alive for sixty-five million Cosmic Eras recognized the shape. He did not know why he spared Rowan’s life. He did not understand why he chose to corrupt rather than consume. But I think, underneath everything, Enoch had been keeping the first Incarnation because he was the last thing in End that reminded him of what light felt like.”

What Vraegar would not know was that Enoch was dead, Prime was connected to Eos, and he shared part of the memories, and right now, he thought of Enoch at the end, reaching toward the Tower and calling for his father.

He thought of this creature that had kept one tiny fragment of light inside End for sixty-five million Cosmic Eras, not because it was useful, not because it was a weapon, but because without this, he would have forgotten that light had ever existed.

“We have to go get him,” Prime said.

Vraegar finally turned to look at him.

“Yes,” he said. “We do.”

Chapter 2203 The Song of Rowan (1)

Looking through the window into End, they all stepped back except for Prime, because he was the only one who had the power to pass through the window. Vraegar had already led them to it, and he had to open the road.

Prime condensed the power of time on his fingertips, and he touched the window, creating a red dot that spread out and melted the entire window, like a thin sheet of ice meeting flames.

Vraegar saw how easily Prime had made a doorway to this place, and he chuckled self-deprecatingly. Only he knew how much he had paid to open this window, and he had been ready to give up his life if he could just open a small crack, and if Prime had just waited a few million years before coming, he would have done this, hoping that his sacrifice would make the path easier for the next to follow.

Prime did not glance at the others, and he stepped through the way he had just opened, and this step turned out to be one of the strangest thresholds Prime had ever crossed.

It was not a step from one place to another, even though that was what he had just done; instead, passing through the window was a subtraction.

It was a sort of dimensional movement that even he had trouble understanding, but what he was aware of was that something was removed from him as he passed.

However, this removal was not done with violence or malice, but with the inevitability of gravity. Something had to be removed, because what was on the other side could not accommodate the full weight of what he had been on this side.

Even though End had been twisted by the Great One, it was still a thing of rules, and to access its core, a certain price must be paid.

What End took from Prime was certainty.

He felt it go as he crossed, felt the fifth layer of his Origin, the bright, whole, newly-born Aeternitas that had been singing in his bones since the moment of her birth, go dim.

She was not gone, but her light had been dimmed, in the way a flame dimmed when you moved it into a room with less air.

The new lifeform was still there. She was just quieter here, because here was a place that did not believe in completion.

The other layers adjusted. Kronos drew closer to him, the weight of his armor suddenly reassuring in a way it had not needed to be in the Tower. Kairos gathered her robes. Aevum and Aeon moved to either side of him, flanking him not from protocol but from something much older and simpler.

They appeared like phantoms around Prime before they vanished, but they had ensured that the others following him would not pay the full price of what he had paid.

He could recover due to his nature as a bloodline Avatar of Eos, but for others, it was not necessarily the case.

Fury, Circe, and Victorious Genesis crossed behind him, and Prime felt the moment each of them was lessened by the crossing. Fury's phoenix light, which had been a constant high-frequency thrum in the space around him, went muted. Circe's immortality, which Prime had always been able to sense as a faint shimmer of probability around her, contracted inward, and Victorious Genesis, whose nature Prime had never fully understood and who had always felt, to him, like a room with too many doors, simplified. In End, Victorious Genesis was just a man, and although it would scare any other Primordial, he seemed to be enjoying it, as he looked at his mortal body with glee.

Vraegar crossed last, and Prime watched what End did to him.

It did nothing.

The dragon came through unchanged. Whatever End took from entrants, it had already taken from Vraegar even before he crossed.

Prime understood, then, why it had taken Vraegar millions of Cosmic Eras to reach this place, which could also be seen as a price, because only the truly worthy would sacrifice everything for their goals, no matter how small they were.

"Keep moving," Vraegar said quietly. "End does not attack. It does not need to. It simply wears down what you believe about yourself. The longer you stand still, the more of you it will take."

"How do we find him?" Circe asked.

Vraegar began to walk.

"We follow the music," he said, "I have been hearing that music faintly through the window, and only he can make music like that... no one else can."

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Prime looked around this place with curiosity in his eyes. A part of him had expected darkness, but he had been wrong about that, too.

End was not dark. Darkness implied the absence of light, and absence implied the concept of presence, and End did not traffic in concepts that complex. What surrounded them as they walked was a frequency.

A low, constant, almost-sound that made itself known in Prime's bones before it made itself known in anything he would have called his senses.

It was the sound that things made when they were in the process of ceasing. Not the dramatic sounds of destruction or the sharp sounds of death. With the aid of Eos, Prime knew the true nature of End, and now he was seeing it here. This place was the quiet, patient sound of erosion and forgetting.

And this forgetting was the slow, ordinary unmaking that was the true face of End before the Great One had sharpened it into a weapon.

The landscape, if that was the word, was composed of things that had been.

Everyone saw something different, but Prime saw, as his eyes adjusted to the logic of the place, entire civilizations folded into strata beneath their feet, compressed histories, reduced now to something geological, and even more amazing, it could be walked across.

He saw the shapes of cities that had loved their builders, flattened into the substrate. He saw Primordials reduced to patterns in the dust. He saw Realities collapsed into single grains of something that was not quite sand.

Nothing in End was being actively destroyed, because the destruction had already happened. This was what came after. You could call it the long afterlife of destroyed things, the place where the ended went to continue being ended, indefinitely, forever.

It was both beautiful and intensely horrifying.

“Everything that has ever been ended is still here,” Prime said, walking steadily, and making the others understand where they were walking through, knowing it would aid them in the understanding of their Origin. “That is what End is. It is the archive of cessation. Eos believed that the Great One made it this way because they wanted everywhere his broken children could not reach from to have a landfill. A place to put the previous Existences, so they would not haunt the next one.”

“It’s haunted anyway,” Fury said, and his voice was unusually quiet.

“Yes,” Prime said. “It is. That is one of the things the Great One got wrong... or maybe right, if it serves their need.”

The music Vraegar had mentioned suddenly appeared as they walked.

It was not music in any sense that Prime’s training or understanding of music had prepared him for.

It was not structured. It was not melodic. It was the sound of a voice that had been singing for so long that the song had become indistinguishable from the singer.

A long, uninterrupted note, held across geological time, bent and shaped by something that was not an instrument but a will.

It was beautiful.

It was also the saddest thing Prime had ever heard.

Chapter 2204 The Song of Rowan (2)

The song held them spellbound for what could be considered years, as they could not move for the fear that a single sound they made would taint the sound of it.

After a while, Prime sighed, his voice breaking the spell the song had over them. They could not just stand here forever when they had an important task before them, even though Prime would like nothing more than to stand here forever and listen to the voice of the Incarnation of his father.

Prime frowned when he sensed something, and he touched the air in front of him. A dawning look of horror began to cover his eyes. ‘What is wrong with the time stream here?’

Looking back now, Prime realized that he had been too careless with his understanding of End, and its effects on concepts even as ephemeral as time.

“He has been singing for many eternities,” Prime gasped in horror.

Circe and the rest turned to him, and Prime showed them that time in this place flowed much faster than in Existence, and a single second in Existence was equal to one cosmic era!

Enoch was the tether to this place, holding the past, the present, and the future firmly to this space, and when he left, this space became untethered, and it had drifted for eternities beyond counting.

To think about how much time must have passed was a deeply frightening thought.

“How can anyone survive in a place like this for that long?” Victorious Genesis gaped.

“I think it’s because of his music,” Circe whispered.

Prime paused, and he nodded, “He sings because he cannot remember how to do anything else. He sings because if he stopped, he would forget he was still here.”

“Damn, and I thought I could not respect him more,” Victorious Genesis sighed, and then he asked, “What was he like?” In a hushed voice. “You know... before. I did not know him before he created our race.”

It was surprising that it was the dragon that answered this question, but it was not too strange if you think about it. After all, he was considered to be the first child of Eos, and at the time Vraegar was born, Eos was still Rowan Kuranos, and he held one of the primitive bloodlines of the Grand Creator.

The dragon came from Rowan's shattered body, and he had known his father for a long time, which meant that his connection to this Incarnation was also deep.

Vraegar was quiet for a long moment.

"He was hope," he said finally, and he smiled, a rather frightening look for a dragon. "Not a hopeful person, not a person who carried hope. I meant true Hope, like the concept, before we knew that it could be given form. This Incarnation was what Eos cut off from himself when he could not afford to carry hope any longer. Eos sent his hope into the dark to survive, because Eos himself could not survive with it. He had to be ruthless. Hope would not have let him be ruthless. So he sent him away, and he went where he sent him, and he did what Eos asked, even if Eos did not fully understand what he was asking for, and here he found answers."

The dragon's voice had gone very quiet. "And Enoch found him, and held him. End had been slowly wearing him down all these eternities, and still, this is what we're here to find... the ruined shape of the hope that Eos sent out to become the being who could save us all... if he fails to stop the enemy."

No one spoke after that, and they could only listen to the song of Rowan, and each of them could hear something different.

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They pushed through the song, and they found him in a valley that had once been a heart, but maybe the others saw something different; it was impossible to tell and useless to ask.

Prime saw the topography of the landscape suddenly resolve itself, and he realized with a slow, dawning horror that they had been walking across a body.

The compressed civilizations were capillaries. The folded histories were muscle. The entire realm of End was shaped, at this scale, like a vast collapsed circulatory system, and the valley they were entering was where the heart had been before End had stilled it.

And in the lowest point of the valley, sitting in the hollow where the heart had beaten, was the last Incarnation of Eos.

He was small.

That was the first thing Prime noticed, and the most devastating. The Incarnations and everything associated with Eos tended toward grandeur.

Vraegar, Prime himself, all the other Incarnations who all reached the fifth level of their Origin and whose might and power could never be equaled... and the last Incarnation was none of these things.

He was now the size of a mortal child, thin, and his skin had the quality of something that had been bleached by long exposure to a light that was not really light.

His hair was white, the white of something that had been in the dark so long it had forgotten what color it was supposed to be, and he was singing.

His eyes were closed, with his hands folded on his lap. He was sitting cross-legged in the hollow, and the song that had been audible since they entered End was coming from him.

The song was a single held note, shaped and reshaped by the smallest movements of his throat, carrying the weight of countless eternities of continuous utterance.

When they approached, he did not open his eyes. But the song changed.

It brightened.

“He knows you’re here,” Vraegar said softly. “He has always been able to feel other pieces of Eos. Even like this. Even diminished.”

Prime knelt before the child.

He did not know why he knelt. It was not a gesture he had planned. His body had simply chosen to kneel, the way bodies sometimes knew things that minds had not yet learned. He knelt, and he reached out, and he placed his hand over the small folded hands in the child’s lap.

The singing stopped, and the silence was long.

Then the child opened his eyes.

They were Rowan’s eyes or Eos’s, but the eyes of the dying prince in the room full of bodies, the eyes of the mortal miner waking up in the wrong life, the eyes of the scared and furious and refusing-to-quit young man who had started this entire journey by choosing, against all sense, to try to live.

They were the eyes of who Eos had been before he had to become what he was now.

The child looked at Prime, and then, for the first time in sixty-five million years, he spoke.

“You’re late,” he said.

His voice was hoarse from long disuse and from a song that had no rest in it, and there was no accusation in the words. Only a small tired observation, the kind a child made when they had been waiting a long time and had stopped expecting anyone to come.

Prime's throat closed. He could not speak for a moment.

"I'm sorry," he said finally. "I'm sorry. We came as soon as we could."

The child tilted his head, the small motion of someone considering an answer.

"He didn't know I was still here," he said. It was not a question.

Chapter 2205 The Smile of A Predator (1)

This statement hung in the air like the death cry of an infant.

"No," Prime said. "He thought, he thought you were gone. When Enoch entered Existence, and your presence could still not be found, he thought you were most likely dead; however, Vraegar was sent even before that time to dig his way to the past, while I was sent into the future. If not for the war still ongoing, Eos would be here himself and not me."

Something passed across the child's face, and Prime could not tell if it was grief or relief.

"Oh," the last Incarnation said. "That did not surprise me. I was made to die, and forcing myself to live for so long is just something I have become. I had expected to be here forever, and I don't know what I would do without this dead place keeping me company."

Prime blinked, not knowing what to think about these words, but knowing they were all the truth. Eos had split up a part of himself many times, knowing that they would perish. It was one of the most painful and awful prices he paid to be able to reach this point.

It was not fair that one man should be forced to make such sacrifices, but he was the only one who could do it, and without someone like him showing them a path beyond self-interest, how could any of them be brave knowing the price that comes with failure?

Prime put the thought aside. The child had been alone for eternities beyond reasoning. Of course, his language had drifted as the small warmth of familial grammar had worn thin with disuse.

"He thinks of you often," Prime said, gently. "I carry many of his memories. I know how much he has regretted your fate, trapped in the depths of End."

"Does he?" Rowan said.

Prime did not have an answer prepared for that, because he had not expected a question. Frankly, he did not know what to expect. He was the bloodline avatar of Eos, but to say he understood the mind of the Grand Creator was a lie; Eos had long reached a place where his thoughts were beyond strange.

Vraegar, behind him, said nothing. The dragon's eyes, Prime noticed for the first time, had narrowed very slightly.

"Of course he does," Prime said.

"That's good," Rowan said. Then, softly: "I have missed him too."

Prime smiled, but his smile did not reach his eyes. He looked at his surroundings and shuddered. How long could he have survived inside this place before he went mad?

End continued to take from you the longer you remained inside its core. It was the price you pay for staying in a place like this, and Rowan had stayed here for eternities beyond counting; it was a miracle that he was still alive, and even sane.

Yet there was something about the way he was talking that made Prime feel a bit... uncomfortable.

Still, he told himself that Rowan had been alone for eternities, singing a song to keep himself from forgetting he existed.

Of course, he would sound strange when he talked and expressed himself for the first time to others.

The fact that he could even speak with them was a testament to the impossible power of Rowan's soul.

"Can you stand?" he asked.

"I don't know, to save energy, the only thing I could do to still preserve my mind in this place was to sing," Rowan said, with the small tired honesty of someone who had not attempted it in a very long time. "My legs have not needed to work for a while. Will you help me?"

"Of course."

Prime reached for him, and Rowan lifted his small arms to be lifted, in the uncomplicated gesture of a child who trusted the adult picking him up. Prime's hands closed around the thin ribs, and for a brief moment, his hands felt something underneath the skin that did not match the shape his eyes were seeing.

Something hard that shifted slightly under his grip, the way a fish shifts under a riverbed of stones.

Then the moment passed, and he was lifting a small bleached child out of a hollow in the substrate of End, and the child was light in his arms, as light as he should have been, and Prime's hands were holding nothing but the thin ribcage of a boy who had been alone in the dark too long.

Fury stepped closer. His phoenix-light, which had been muted since the crossing, was flickering in a way Prime had not seen before, as if it were registering something it did not have the full power to name. Fury glanced at Prime, and Prime saw in his eyes a question that Fury himself did not seem to understand.

"Is he—" Fury began.

"He's fine," Vraegar said, too quickly.

Prime looked at the dragon. Vraegar was not looking at him. Vraegar was looking at the child in Prime's arms with an expression Prime had never seen on the ancient dragon's face, something careful and guarded, and that expression broke something inside him.

The child, Rowan, smiled up at Prime.

"Thank you," he said softly. "It has been a long time since anyone touched me."

Circe, who had been standing a few paces back with the hunted expression of someone whose dreams were finally telling them something they could understand, took a half-step forward. Her hand went to her mouth. She did not speak.

"Are you all right?" Prime asked her.

"Yes," Circe said. Then, more quietly, "No."

"What is it?"

Circe looked at the child. The child looked back at her, and in the long, quiet exchange of their eyes, something passed between them that the others did not share. Circe had been hearing this voice in her dreams for eternities, in the past, present, and in the future that she had ventured into.

She had taken a vow of silence about it, at Eos's request, before she had even understood what the vow was about.

She had expected, when she finally met him, to feel the relief of a riddle solved.

She did not feel that.

‘What did this place do to you, my lord?’ she whispered inside her heart.

Chapter 2206 The Smile of A Predator (2)

However, this thought felt a bit like sacrilege in her mind. How could she doubt her lord? It must be this place. End had stripped too much from her, and until they left this place, she could not trust her judgment.

“I’m sorry,” Circe said to Rowan, and her voice was very small. “I have been dreaming of you.”

“I know,” Rowan said.

“You do?”

“In the distant past, I believed I had been sending the dreams. Still, that was so long ago, I thought I had dreamt it. Thank you for confirming that it was not just a dream.”

Circe went very still. “It is the least I could do. I brought the dreams to Eos, and many changes happened in Existence due to it. With this dream, I think the future became shaped by it, although I don’t know how Eos had used it.”

Rowan tilted his head in his small, considering way.

“He used it the way it should. I know myself, and among all things, we are ruthless to our enemies, but that is nothing to our ruthlessness to our own selves,” he said.

The words hung in the air of End like a note held too long.

Prime’s arms tightened fractionally around the child without his conscious decision. He felt, not for the first time in this valley, the low, cold pressure of something being slightly wrong that he did not yet have the framework to name.

The child had been alone for eternities and had kept himself alive by singing a single held note across geological time. There was no reason, no reason whatsoever, to feel what Prime was beginning to feel.

And yet.

“Let’s go home,” Prime said, and his voice came out more carefully than he had intended. “There is someone waiting for you.”

“Yes,” Rowan said. “I can feel him.”

“Are you ready?”

“I have been ready for a long time.”

Prime adjusted the small body in his arms and turned back the way they had come.

Victorious Genesis, who had said almost nothing the entire journey, who had been enjoying the subtraction of his complications down to the simple fact of a man in this place, fell into step beside Prime.

His face was unreadable. His eyes, when Prime glanced at them, were on the child.

“Prime,” Victorious Genesis said, sending his thoughts into his mind so that Rowan could not hear. “His shadow.”

Prime did not immediately look. He kept walking, and he replied to Victorious Genesis also with his mind, “What about it?”

“Look at it. Don’t let him see you looking.”

Prime waited a long, slow breath. Then, as if shifting Rowan’s weight in his arms, he let his eyes drop to the substrate beneath his feet, and he looked at the place where the child’s shadow should have been.

The shadow was there, and it was the correct size and shape, and it moved with the correct timing of a shadow of a child being carried.

But the edges of it were... wrong.

Not in a way that Prime could have pointed to, if he had been asked to describe it. The edges were edges. They were not frayed or bleeding or doing any of the visually legible things that wrong shadows did in stories.

They were simply... the only word Prime had for it was listening.

The edges of the shadow were listening, the way the edges of a predator were listening while the rest of its body held still.

Prime looked away before Rowan could notice him looking.

“Keep walking,” Victorious Genesis murmured inside his head.

“I am.”

“Don’t tell Vraegar yet.”

“He already knows.”

Victorious Genesis made a small sound that might have been a laugh, if Victorious Genesis had been the kind of Primordial who laughed in a time like this... which he was. "Of course he does."

They kept walking, and behind them, End seemed to breathe out, a long, slow exhalation, the kind of breath a room makes when something that has been sitting in it for a very long time finally leaves.

The substrate shifted slightly under their feet, as the compressed histories sighed in their strata. The silent frequency of erosion that had been the fabric of the place since before any of them arrived wavered, for just a moment, as if End itself were uncertain what to do now that its longest resident was being carried out.

Prime tightened his grip on the child, and the child leaned his small white head against Prime's shoulder, and exhaled, and said something that Prime almost did not hear.

"I have been waiting so long to see him."

"He'll be glad to see you," Prime said, because it was the thing that was expected to be said.

22:18

"Yes," Rowan agreed. "He will."

And again there was that small wrongness in the phrasing, not I hope so, not do you think so?, but the flat evaluative yes, he will, the small confident statement of a being who had already calculated the response and found it acceptable.

Prime did not say anything else as he continued to carry the child toward the door that Prime's own power had melted open, and behind them the song did not resume, because the singer was no longer in his hollow, and the saddest thing Prime had ever heard was therefore silent for the first time in many eternities, and in the silence, something in the substrate of End, something that had been sleeping under the song the way a reef sleeps under a tide, began, very quietly, to turn over.

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At the threshold, before they crossed back out, Rowan lifted his head from Prime's shoulder and looked at Vraegar.

"You came for me," he said.

"Yes," Vraegar said.

"You came alone, for a long time."

“Yes.”

“You would have died here.”

“Yes.”

Rowan considered the dragon for a long, slow moment. His small face, which had been so gentle throughout the journey, was for that one moment not gentle; it became careful, the careful, expressionless evaluation of something that was weighing a piece on a board.

Then the small gentleness returned, and Rowan said, “Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” Vraegar said, and the dragon’s voice was very quiet.

They crossed back through the window, and on the other side, as Aeternitas returned to her full brightness in Prime’s bones and Fury’s phoenix-light resumed its high thrum and Circe’s immortality uncoiled and Victorious Genesis re-acquired his glow as a Titan, the small child in Prime’s arms did not brighten.

He stayed small, and his shadow, in the light of reality outside End, suddenly became nonexistent.

New Book!

Chapter 2207 In The End, Everything Returns To Telos

THE GRAND VOID

The invitation was open, and Eos was not a person who ran away from a challenge, no matter the size of it, and he turned toward the Eternal Tower.

He had taken exactly one step when he stopped.

Eos did not stop because he was suddenly afraid of what was to come, but a small internal shift had just happened inside of him, the kind of shift a mother feels in the moment a child decides to be born. Somewhere beneath the threshold of what he would have called his core, his evolution had finished its work.

The fusion was complete.

He stood for a long moment with his foot still slightly raised, the Origin Tree rising behind him and the Tower in the distance watching, and he considered the two options before him.

He could walk to the Tower now, in the body of a Primordial of Primordials at the peak of the ninth dimension, and he could face whatever was waiting with the power he had earned across a hundred million years. That power was sufficient. He knew this. He had watched it end, Enoch. It may not end the Great One, but it would have made the Great One bleed, and in some versions of this story, making the Great One bleed was all that was required.

With the Origin Tree and the actions he had made, Eos knew that his death no longer truly mattered because he had birthed the Will of Truth, and that was a power that even the Great One could not destroy.

Being able to personally challenge the Great One was a sign that even this being had acknowledged Eos's victory in this aspect.

Or he returns to his throne, which was still there at the base of the Origin Tree, still waiting, still rooted in the soil of the completed fusion. And he could allow the thing that had just finished forming inside him to fully emerge, in its own time, without being rushed by battle.

The Great One had waited for countless eternities, and it could wait another.

Eos turned around, he walked back to his throne, and he sat down, and he closed his eyes.

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For a hundred million years, his core had been a thing of endless potential.

Ether had pulsed through it. Every breakthrough had enlarged it, and every loss had deepened it. It had grown with him through every transformation, and it had, at every stage, been a question with an unfinished answer, the question of what could become, asked by the very act of its continuing to exist.

The question was answered after his fusion was completed.

When he had killed Enoch and walked out to meet the Great One, something in him had already been shifting; he had spent the last of his Ether killing Enoch, and emptiness had flooded in. A new energy had been growing in the roots of the Origin Tree since the fusion began, as a transition had been in place all this time, and sitting on his throne, he felt the last piece click into place.

His Ether was gone, and Eos felt a bit of sadness as the last residues of the old energy had dissolved into the substrate of his being, and what remained in their place was the new thing waiting for him to accept this change.

Eos hesitated for a moment, and he opened himself to it, and his core, which had for a hundred million years been a growing, questioning, incomplete thing, became an answer.

His endless potential had finally crossed one of the most important thresholds in his life.

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His core, which resembled a dying sun, suddenly exploded, and what came out of it was an energy that did not come with a name.

Names were a thing that his consciousness imposed on his states, and his consciousness, at this moment, was quiet. The new energy simply was. It flowed through the roots of the Origin Tree and into the vessel of his body, and where it passed, the vessel changed.

It was not like Ether. Ether had moved; this did not move. Ether had been a river flowing through him; this was the sea he was now sitting in. Ether had been fuel; this was nature. Ether had been something he used; this was something he was.

Eos watched it fill him, and after a long while, a word came to him, not the one he would have expected, not the one he would have chosen, but the one that arrived.

Telos.

He turned the word over in his mind. Telos. An ancient word from the first tongue of the first mortals who had walked across the shores of the first beach.

A word that he should have no reason to know, but because he had fused with Origin and therefore its memories, he was able to see the memory of the very first mortal, and Telos had been a word they used to describe what the pinnacle of existence should be like.

They believed that in the end, everything would return to Telos.

This was a prophecy that was made in a time that is so distant in the past, that even Primordials would age to dust many times over in the time span that had passed, and yet, this prophecy, beyond all common sense, had traveled to the end of all things and found its place inside Eos.

Telos meant the end for which a thing was. The purpose for which a thing was made to fulfill. The shape it was reaching toward when all of its development was done.

The end that was also the whole point.

This new energy was the energy of arrival, and this arrival could be seen as the arrival of a seed at a tree, or the arrival of a question at its answer, or the arrival of a becoming at its being.

It was what Ether had always been aimed at, and now it was complete, and it was his.

Telos, he thought, and the energy agreed, and his body began to change.

New Book!

Chapter 2208 The Final Evolution

The change began with a breath.

He inhaled, and the breath was different. Eos had breathed ten thousand ways in his life, the shallow, frightened breaths of a dying prince in a room of bodies, the slow, deep breaths of cultivation in the Nexus, the unnecessary but retained breaths of a Primordial who kept breathing because his soul still recognized the habit.

This breath was none of those. This breath was the first honest breath of a body that had, at last, stopped needing to become something.

In that moment, phantoms of all he was in the past appeared all around him, all of his lives, all of his Incarnations, and they all inhaled alongside him, before they vanished. It was a circle that had finally reached completion.

He exhaled, and the exhalation rebuilt him.

His flesh, which had been scarred by a hundred million years of war, did not heal. He had already decided, in the moment of his fusion, that the scars were records and not damage.

Eos would be welcome for all life on the present Existence to know the history of the past, but he was not too bothered about all of that, since his body would be a living record of all that was lost.

And so Eos did not take out his scars; what happened instead was that the flesh itself was replaced. The old body stepped aside, gently, the way an old servant steps aside when the heir has finally come of age, and the new body took its place, carrying the scars forward not as wounds but as the honest history of what the previous body had done to get here.

The new body was made of Telos, and it was not flesh in any of the ways flesh had previously been understood.

It was not the flesh of a mortal prince or the flesh of a cultivator or the flesh of a Primordial or even the flesh of an Omniversal Titan that he had used in his battle against Enoch.

His flesh was one that existed because its existing was the completed answer to the question of what flesh was for.

Every cell of it, if cell was still the word, which it was not, was the final form of cells. Every bone was the final form of bones. Every strand of hair, every line of his face, every breath in the renewed architecture of his lungs was the arrival of its own becoming.

All of his endless evolution and ascension had finally brought him past this threshold.

When a cell of this body moved, it moved not because motion was imposed on it from outside but because motion was what that cell was for. When the body breathed, it breathed because breath was the shape breath was reaching toward.

There was no distinction anymore between what the body did and what the body was. The two had collapsed into a single continuous fact.

Eos opened his eyes, and his eyes were different.

They were still the eyes of the Primordial of Primordials; this was a title that would never leave him.

The ten thousand truths of his crown still reflected in them. But underneath the ten thousand reflections was a single unified sight that saw as Telos saw. He saw arrival.

He looked at his hand that was made from the flesh of an Omniversal titan, and the hand became Telos-flesh without any transition he could have described, because there was nothing to transition.

His Omniversal flesh had been the first honest piece of what he was becoming when he reached the eight dimension; now the rest of him had caught up.

He flexed the fingers of his new body, and the void around the throne transformed.

It stopped being indeterminate in his presence, as everything near him found its final shape, which was the thing it had been reaching toward in all of its long, slow dissolutions across geological time.

A grain of substrate near his foot resolved into the Reality it had once been, the way a name that had been forgotten returns all at once to the tongue of a person who loved it.

Eos blinked slowly at this change. He had not meant to do that, as the transformation had not been a choice, just merely a byproduct of his presence that made things be what they were meant to be, simply because he was present, and presence at the level of Telos was a gravitational act.

He would have to be careful with this power among his children, even those at the ninth-dimensional level.

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Still, his transformation was not over.

Above his head, his crown began to change.

It did not grow larger, even though it could, but largeness was not the axis on which this change occurred. Instead, the point deepened.

It became a thing of layers that nested within each other, the way the fifth dimension was nested within the first four. Every layer was the completed form of what the previous layer had been the question of.

The first layer was still Origin, the energy of completion, and the second layer, inside the first, was Telos, the shape of what completion was for, the purpose that made all the completing worthwhile.

And deeper than Telos, nested within it as Telos was nested within Origin, something else was forming.

Eos could feel it but could not yet name it. It was the layer that Telos itself was pointing toward, the thing that would eventually emerge when the purpose had been served the way the purpose was meant to be served. It was many transformations away. It was not for now.

But it existed, and its existence meant that the crown was no longer a finite point. It was a depth. A place that kept going inward, where every inner room was the completed answer to the outer room and the promise of a further room.

The crown was no longer ten thousand lights, nor was it a single point. It was a depth of lights, and each light inside was the completed form of the light outside, and the whole structure spoke, when he listened to it, in the harmonics of a thing that had understood what ending had actually meant all along.

In this moment, Eos was seeing the shapes of dimensions beyond the tenth, and he could barely comprehend them, but the fact that Telos could show him a way to the higher dimensions meant his present level was now beyond the concept of everything he had come across except the Great One.

And now, in this state, he realized why the Great One could never fear him.

New Book!

Chapter 2209 The Dimension of Purpose

Eos did not let this thought linger in his mind as the last piece clicked into place.

There were some truths that should not be spoken, else the act of speaking makes it real.

No matter how talented he was, he was now in new territory. He could beat his chest and claim to be the greatest authority in the ninth-dimensional level, but when it came to the tenth, he still had much to learn.

Eos had been a ninth-dimensional being since the Primordial fusion. This was the limit of what Existence, in its old and broken form, had been permitted to produce.

The tenth dimension had been there, but incomplete. Existence was, he had discovered during the fusion, a tenth-dimensional space in its substrate. It had no law, no rule, no binding principle. Something had been taken from it, long before any Primordial had been born, and the absence had made the dimension unreachable. It was the reason that for so long, the highest level had been the Primordial level of the ninth dimension.

However, he had discovered the tenth dimension after he left the painting that was the previous Existence, and from that moment onward, everything had set the stage for him to reach this level.

He had thought, during the fusion, that he would have to rebuild the tenth dimension from nothing; however, he had been wrong.

The tenth dimension had not been missing. It had been waiting.

There was a reason why the Great One or the Luminous had not made any move to stop him from reaching the tenth dimension, and that was because it was a useless effort.

Before he touched the tenth dimension, there was a possibility to stop him from reaching it, but the moment he touched the tenth dimension, Eos would become complete, meaning that time itself would acknowledge that he had always been a tenth-dimensional creature from birth.

He would have no known weakness related to time, and so trying to stop him at this point would be useless; it would be better to observe and understand the type of power he had claimed.

It could be said that the tenth-dimensional level was destined, and because the moment they reached the tenth-dimensional level, all of history changed to reflect that they had always been at the tenth-dimensional level.

To Eos, it was as if all of his life had been a dream, and now he was waking up. All of his struggles, pain, growth and sacrifices had been the dream of a sleeping god, and now that he was awake, all of that had no more meaning anymore. It was as if everything that existed was his dream, and now that he was awake, they were no more.

So it could be said that the tenth dimension had been waiting for Telos. For its arrival from the first moment the first mortal being prophesied of it.

It had been waiting for a being to come along who understood that the tenth dimension's organizing principle was not a law in the way the third dimension's organizing principle was space, or the fourth dimension's was time.

The tenth dimension's organizing principle was purpose. The dimension of what-things-are-for. And you could not reach the tenth dimension by cultivating power, because power was not purpose. You could only reach the tenth dimension by arriving at it, by completing the becoming that you had been undertaking, honestly and without shortcut, until your completion matched the dimension's shape.

The tenth dimension was the dimension of purpose, and Eos had found his own.

He opened his eyes, and Eos stood from his throne. The motion was small and unremarkable, he was standing, that was all, but the act of standing was different now, because the body standing was a body of Telos, and the ground he stood on was the ground of a tenth-dimensional space that had been waiting for him, and the two met each other, and recognized each other, and something in the deep architecture of Existence clicked into alignment for the first time since the first Existence had been broken.

The Origin Tree behind him shivered in recognition, the way an ancient instrument shivers when the musician it was built for finally touches it.

Its branches extended by some small fraction that was nevertheless cosmically enormous. New worlds began to bloom on those branches, worlds that were not possible at the ninth dimension, worlds whose organizing principle was purpose rather than law, worlds in which the inhabitants would be born already knowing what they were for and would live their lives arriving at it.

In these worlds, even Primordials would be weak, as they had to journey on a path that they had never seen before, and the powers of laws and concepts would just be something that could be suppressed.

Although that would change if the Primordials reached the fifth layer of their Origin, nevertheless, even the fifth layer would just be the starting position for them to survive in these new prime worlds.

The void around the throne resolved completely, as it acknowledged the birth/rebirth of the second tenth-dimensional being, as the nothingness between Existences became what nothingness had always meant to be, the fertile ground of new arrival. The Great One had always placed the Grand Void into darkness, and now, the compressed histories of End, which had been screaming quietly across the substrate since the beginning, began, in the pressure of Eos's new presence, to remember their own Telos. Some of them would eventually, in the long aftermath, re-bloom. Others would arrive at the dissolution they had always been reaching toward and would rest. Either way, the screaming stopped.

Killing Enoch did not destroy End, because the core of End still remained with the Great One, but in the presence of Eos, no other power could remain, and the remnants of End that permeated the Great Void were rapidly vanishing, as their purpose became to serve Telos.

Eos exhaled, and the exhalation carried with it the last ordinary breath he would ever take. From this moment forward, every breath would be a Telos-breath, an arrival-breath, the breath of a being who no longer needed to become anything because he had completed his becoming.

However, despite all of this, he would still grow since Telos was not the end of growth, only the completion of a phase of growth, but the growing would be additive rather than necessary. He would grow because growing was part of what Telos was for, not because he was lacking.

Eos was already perfect, and growth for him was not for the need for more perfection; it was just one of the traits that would never leave him.

He stood at the base of the Origin Tree in his new body, under his new crown, with his new energy flowing through him, and for a long moment, he did nothing at all.

He simply existed.

He had spent a hundred million years becoming. He wanted, for one honest moment, to simply be what he had become.

The moment passed.

And in the distance, the Eternal Tower was still there, and the Great One was still waiting, and the second phase of the work was still unbegun.

New Book!

Chapter 2210 True Endless Essence

Before Eos left the throne, he took stock of what he had become.

His body, in the tenth dimension, was not constrained by the limitations that had defined every body he had previously worn.

The ninth-dimensional Primordial body, his Omniversal Titan's form had been magnificent, capable of containing an infinite Origin Land, capable of surviving blows that unmade Realities, capable of projecting presence across the whole of Existence, but it had still been a body, in the sense that it had been a discrete thing with boundaries, located at a position, subject to the logic of having a shape.

Even when he took on his true form, having a flesh that was not flesh, when he disregarded the lie of his form, he still had a tangible shape that could be located across time and space.

However, the tenth-dimensional body was different.

It was still a body in the sense that an observer could see him and would see a figure, a man in a throne at the base of a vast tree, with a crown of depth and a face that had carried a hundred million years of war and was not defeated by any of it.

The figure was discrete, and it was a figure that had edges, could be spoken to, and would answer.

But underneath the figure, in the dimension that the observer could not see, the body was distributed.

It was in the throne. It was in the Tree. It was in the roots that drank from the substrate of the void. It was in every world on every branch. It was in the new Existence in the way the purpose of a thing is in the thing, not as a separate component that could be pointed to, but as the shape the thing was reaching toward in all of its aspects at once.

He was, in a sense, Existence. Not its ruler. Not its designer. It's Telos. The thing it was all reaching toward in its long, slow unfolding.

Every life that would be born in the new Existence, every flower that would bloom on the Tree's branches, every mortal who would love another mortal and build a small life and die at the end of it, all of them would be expressing some aspect of what Eos was, because Eos was the arrival that all of their becomings were reaching toward.

Even if he never revealed himself again, all life that would be born would always have a yearning for him, because they knew he was their ultimate purpose.

This was not arrogance. It was geometry. In the tenth dimension, the organizing principle of the space was purpose, and purpose had a shape, and Eos was the being who had arrived at that shape.

Every Existence required a Telos, or it could not be an Existence. The old Existence had been broken because its Telos had been stolen and replaced with End's hunger. The new Existence had a Telos that was genuinely its own. That Telos was Eos.

He found, when he looked inside this fact, that he was at peace with it.

A younger version of himself would have been terrified. Rowan the mortal miner, Rowan the dying prince, even the Eos who had first reached Primordial status, any of them would have recoiled from the weight of being the purpose of a whole Existence. They would have felt it as a burden, or as arrogance, or as the kind of pedestal that would inevitably topple.

But Eos was none of those men now. He was what they had all been reaching toward. And from this position, he could see that being the Telos of an Existence was not a burden. It was not arrogance. It was simply the job.

Every Existence needed a purpose; the purpose had to be located somewhere, and the mathematics of the situation had resolved, across a hundred million years of choices, in him. He had not sought the position. He had arrived at it.

He would do the work... That was all.

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The final part of himself that Eos checked was the essence that was now flowing through him in quantities that the Ether-language of before could no longer measure.

There was a time when he thought that his Ether was infinite, and now he realized how little he knew of the higher dimensions.

While Ether was infinite, that was only in the ninth dimensional level, now that he was in the tenth, his vast Ether was just a shallow pool in comparison to what was now flowing through his body.

He did not try to measure it. Measurement was a thing you did to resources; this was not a resource. It was a state. As long as he remained who he was, as long as he continued to be the Telos at which this Existence was arriving, the Essence would flow, because the flow was just the Existence doing what Existence did.

This was what true infinite essence meant. He would always have as much as he needed.

He could feel the Essence in everything. It was in the roots of the Tree. It was in the void. It was in the small child shape of his last Incarnation that Prime was, at this moment, carrying out of End, though Eos could not yet feel the return, because Prime and the others had not yet crossed back through the nothingness. But he could feel the place where they were. He could feel the shape of Vraegar's patience, the shape of Fury's banked storm, the shape of Circe's long-held silence about her dreams.

He could feel, distantly, the quality of wrongness in the small child that Prime was carrying.

He noted it, but he did not act on it. The wrongness was small and quiet and might yet prove to be nothing more than the damage of eternities of captivity, damage that could be healed.

Eos would not pre-judge it. When the child returned, he would see the child, and he would know, in the honest way that Telos-sight knew things, what had become of the hope he had sent into the dark.

Whatever the answer was, he would meet it. That, too, was the job.

He stepped away from the throne.

In the tenth dimension, everything that he saw was new, and so he had to be a bit careful, due to the weight every single one of his decisions carried.

New Book!

Chapter 2211 The Signature of The Defeated

Eos crossed the Grand Void on foot. He wore a robe of white with golden hems, and his hair was also as white as snow, and it reached his back.

There were faint hints of facial hair on his face, as if he had not shaved for a few days, and except for his impossible size, where he could hold trillions of Realities on the palm of his hand, he appeared like a normal man.

However, for him, size was ultimately meaningless at this point, because he could be as big and as small as the situation demanded him to be.

A ninth-dimensional immortal could cross the Grand Void, but they would spend so long doing so that if they ever reached the other side, only their bones would arrive as they would be long dead along the way, and only the momentum of their bodies would carry them through.

There was no reason for Eos to cross the Grand Void on foot, since distance had stopped meaning what it once meant the moment his body completed. But he walked anyway, because walking was a verb and verbs belonged to the one who acted, and he wanted the Tower to watch him come slowly, at his own pace, along a path of his own choosing.

Small insolences mattered at this level. They were almost the only insolences that did.

He had always treasured his mortal roots, and his every action at the moment was a defining characteristic of who he was, and he wanted the Great One... no, the Luminous called that being this name, he wanted The Painter, to know who he was.

The Origin Tree spread behind him as he went. It had crossed some threshold of scale that made numbers unhelpful; it was not a tree of a certain size any longer, but a tree of a certain weight, and the weight pressed outward in every direction into the substrate of the void.

Wherever the weight pressed, the void changed. Things that had been inert for eras remembered they had once been alive. A compressed vein of dead-history near Eos's right

ankle stirred and thought, very briefly, of a language it had once spoken. He passed on; it forgot again, but less completely than before.

There were things locked inside the Grand Void, pieces of forgotten histories that would take many years to explore, and if there was a chance to explore the Grand Void in the future, then Eos would delightfully take it.

The Tower grew closer. It had not moved, and it had never moved from the moment it was created as the Tower was a fixed mark in the Grand Void, the way a nail is a fixed mark in a plank, and every previous Existence had been a different plank, and the nail had held.

The Tower grew closer. It had not moved, and it had never moved from the moment it was created as the Tower was a fixed mark in the Grand Void, the way a nail is a fixed mark in a plank, and every previous Existence had been a different plank, and the nail had held.

He reached up close, and he discovered that the material of the Tower was not bone. When he was at the ninth-dimensional level, he had thought it was bone, or a better word would be that he had told himself it was bone because the mind preferred a metaphor that could be held, even his own.

In the tenth dimension, there was no space for falsehood, especially to one's own self, and he now saw that the actual material was signature of all the ones who had stepped forward to challenge the tyranny of the Painter.

They were the cured, set, hardened leavings of things that had once been made, stripped from them after the breaking and pressed into building stock.

The Tower was not a tomb, but a declaration of victory, an insult to the dead, as every brick was the fingerprint of something that had dared to stand against the Painter. That was why it could not fall. Its walls were the very habit of creation, turned against itself.

Eos laid a hand against one of the walls, and the wall pushed back, rejecting his presence, and he could almost hear the cries of the forty-three before him, whose very essence was forged to make this eternal tower, telling him to return.

In the past, when he was a mortal, Eos had seen visions of those who held the Primordial Record before him, great heroes who stood and fought against the third prince, and he almost smiled when he remembered something he had said then, and he would say now... the more things change, the more they stay the same.

A small problem was often a reflection of a much bigger one, as Existence could not help but translate its sickness in the only way it knew how to do, and it was up to the wise to discern her voice.

The Tower spoke to him, although they did not use any language or have a voice, he understood them anyway, “You are not from here, for your making is not our making. You do not belong in the mouth of this Tower.

Eos said, mildly, “And still, I must come in anyway.”

The Tower did not answer. It opened, and Eos stepped through, walking into the home of his enemy.

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He began to climb the tower, using a speed that would make what his incarnations resembled snails when they had first gained access to this tower.

He did not look at the floors as he passed them. He had expected to be shown things on the way up. Reminders. Previous loser, like photographs in a hallway. The standard theater of an old power impressing a new one.

The Tower did not bother, as the floors were empty.

This was more frightening than anything else that had happened to him since the fusion, and he allowed himself to feel the fright honestly before he set it aside.

The Tower did not need to impress him. The Tower did not need to remind him that forty-three powerful beings who should have reached the threshold of the tenth dimension, perhaps even crossed it, had come before.

That was a thing a proud structure would do, and the Tower was not proud. The Tower was almost... bored. The Tower had eaten forty-three arrivals and had not found any of them memorable, and the emptiness of the floors was the Tower’s way of saying so.

Eos looked around, and he continued his climb.

The top did not announce itself; one moment, he was climbing a seemingly endless tower, and the next, he was before a wooden door, and the moment Eos saw the door, it opened up, and he did not hesitate to walk through it.

New Book!

Chapter 2212 Tell Me The Rules

Chapter 2212 Tell Me The Rules

Eos appeared inside a small room.

He had anticipated that the being at the top of the Tower would not announce itself with scale, that it would, as all the truly terrible things did, the ones who had graduated beyond theater, meet him in something domestic.

It was perhaps a reflection of the body that he chose to wear as he entered this tower, and he knew that this room was the Painter's reply to this.

However, he could see that this room was not a study or an office; it could be seen as a butcher's back office.

Why would he call it this? Well, it was small, practical, and it was tiled in something dark and smooth that sloped very slightly toward a drain in the corner.

The tiles had been scrubbed, but not recently enough. There were hooks in one of the walls, iron, clean. There was a low counter against another wall with the scarred, deep-grooved surface of a working block.

Many beings had been butchered and taken apart here, most likely the forty-three before him.

Above was a fixed light, plain, the color of a bulb that had been left on for a long time and had grown tired of its own labor.

There was no warmth in the room, and there was no cruelty in the room either. The room was simply fitted out, with the correctness of long use, for the one purpose it had ever been used for.

Eos registered all of this in a single breath, and he did not permit himself any reaction.

In the center of the room was a table, and on the table was a board.

Behind the table was a chair, and in the chair was the Painter.

It sat with the relaxed economy of a craftsman at the end of a long day. It wore a body, and Eos knew that the Painter took a body because the game was played better between seated figures.

The body was shrouded, as the voice had been shrouded in its first address, and this was all a carefully made decision. The Painter had simply decided, a very long time ago, that it would not be perceived, and perception, at the tenth dimension, was something that could be refused the way a signature could be refused on a document.

Eos saw the seated shape, but did not see the Painter.

"Come in, come in," the Painter said.

Now that he could truly hear its voice, Eos could feel its wrongness brushing across his entire being.

Eos had expected the voice to be old, and it was old.

He had expected it to be tired, and this had been his own projection, his own wishful translation of what a being at this level ought to be after so long, but it was not tired at all.

The voice was brisk, almost amused, like the voice of a working man who enjoyed his work.

“Sit down. Please. You walked the whole way; you must want to sit.”

Eos glanced at the shrouded figure, and he sat.

The chair fit him because it had been made for him. Not for someone his size in general, but for him specifically; the lumbar curve knew his spine, and the height of the seat matched his legs, and the armrests were at the height his elbows would naturally fall to.

He had been expected and prepared for, because this chair was old, meaning that it had been carved for him long before he had existed in any Existence the Painter had made, and this, more than anything else, told him what he had walked into.

“You knew I would sit,” Eos said quietly.

“I always know,” the Painter said. “That is not a boast. It is a problem, actually, knowing always takes the pleasure out of the late stages. But yes. You would sit. You are a sitter. The last one was a stander; I had to have a whole room redone. Very tedious.”

It chuckled, and what was surprising was that the chuckle was warm.

“Now,” the Painter said. “To business. Have you looked at the board yet?”

Eos slowly bent his head and looked at it, and he saw that the board was alive.

He had expected that, too, in the general sense, a board at this level would not be wood or stone; it would be something. What he had not expected was what it was, or maybe he did, because in many ways, he had recreated this same board many times, but at that time, he had called it a map... the Map.

All of these experiences seemed to be building up to this day.

The board was a cross-section of the Grand Void, rendered at an impossible scale, and what made it extremely different from the map he had made while a lower-dimensional

being was that it was not a representation of the Grand Void; it was the Grand Void, viewed from a particular angle.

Every detail of the exterior was reproduced on it at a scale that would have been meaningless in the ninth dimension and was merely useful in the tenth.

The Origin Tree rose from one end of the board like a growth breaking through a wound. Every branch. Every world on every branch. Every life living inside every world.

Eos could see a farmer in a world that had bloomed seven hours ago, standing in a field he had been given the evening before, holding a tool and looking at it and beginning to understand, dimly, what it was for. Eos could feel the farmer's pulse. The farmer was a piece on the board.

On the other side of the board was the Tower, rendered in its own miniature, with the small figures of Eos and the Painter seated inside it, the figures also rendered with full aliveness, the figure of Eos on the board at this moment turning its miniature eyes down to look at the miniature board. Eos forbade himself from following that recursion and lifted his gaze.

Between the Tree and the Tower, the substrate of the void. Compressed histories. Old strata. The quiet geology of End, subdued now, mostly silent, the screaming reduced to a deep low hum... Eos sighed and closed his eyes.

Eva was on the board, Prime was on the board, Serathis was on it, Vraegar, Circe, Fury, Victorious Genesis, Staff, the Ouroboros serpents, the Archai, all the Primordials, every mortal and immortal in every new world on every new branch of the Tree.

Every breath being drawn, every thought being thought, every small domestic act of a small domestic being in the new Existence was rendered on the board at full life, and every one of them was a piece.

Eos understood at once.

He did not permit himself to look at it for long. He was already leaking attention toward the pieces, toward the ones he knew, toward Eva in particular, toward Prime, and attention at this level was a resource and a tell. He looked up at the Painter instead.

"Explain the rules," he said.

"Oh," the Painter said, pleased. "Yes. I like it when they ask."

It leaned forward.

"At our dimensional position," it said, "we can no longer die. Immortality is ours, and so we need a way to resolve our conflict."

New Book!

Chapter 2213 The Birth of A New Evil

Eos knew the moment he reached the tenth-dimensional level that he was now immortal in a way that the Primordials and the Luminous could never understand.

At the moment, he could no longer be killed, even if he wanted to, and that was both a blessing and a curse. He did not say anything after that revelation from the Painter, as he continued to listen to it.

This was information that he needed for his clash with the Painter, and as a tenth-dimensional being whose core was the Will of Truth, it was impossible for anyone to lie to him, not even the Painter.

“Our purposes are load-bearing in the geometry of the dimension itself,” the Painter said, its voice was low, and emerged from its form like a whisper, “If you were to be deleted, the new Existence you have made would lose its center... its Telos.”

Eos was not surprised that the Painter knew of Telos; the nature of the tenth dimension meant that Eos had always had Telos when he reached this level, and so the Painter was able to know the power that he had claimed.

However, the power of the Painter was shaded, and Eos could not see it. That was the reason he kept calling the Painter an it, because it was impossible for him to even know if it was male or female, or had long exceeded such feeble mortal concept.

“Theoretically, if I deleted you, then your Origin Tree would wander for a long time before it found another place in the Grand Void to root itself, and you would be reborn again, and I would be forced to do it over again. This is tedious, or I allow this Existence to drift into the usual slow decay using other... methods. On the other hand, if you use that sword of yours to delete me, then I would be back a thousand times quicker than you would think, but I will always return.”

Eos grimaced, “So neither of us dies.”

“Neither of us dies. The game, therefore, is not for death.” The Painter adjusted a piece on the board absently with one shrouded finger. Somewhere in the Grand Void outside the Tower, a small speck of drifting dust shifted. “The game is for suppression.”

“Suppression.”

“Walling in. Reduction of reach. You have spread, you see, your Origin Tree has extended into space that was mine, very comprehensively, very offensively, and I cannot dislodge you by force. I have established this to my satisfaction across forty-three previous games.

Force, above a certain dimension, does not unmake purpose. What I can do is shrink and contain you. Reduce the territory of your Telos until you are a preserved kernel in a locked room. Alive, yes, intact, yes, but mute. The dimension continues. I continue. You continue. You simply do not reach anymore.”

Eos recalled touching the eternal tower and hearing the voices of the damned, telling him to go back and run. Of course, he could run, but that was like drinking poison to cure thirst. The Painter still remained, and nothing that he built would be safe, and even though he would be able to run and resist the influence of the Painter, his children would not be able to, and except he destroyed his Origin Tree, then he would have to face the corruption of the Painter forever.

He was never going to run, and he had entered this tower with the full knowledge that he would rather die than run, and killing the Painter was what he was here to do.

Discovering that they could no longer die did not stop what he was here to do.

Eos pushed himself forward, and he said,

“And I can do the same to you... Mute you until you are a preserved kernel in a small room?”

There was a long pause, and Eos’ eyes remained on the shrouded form of the Painter until it spoke.

“In theory,” the Painter said, and Eos noted these words. “The rules are, in that sense, symmetric. Yes. You could suppress me. Wall me into this Tower. Reduce me to a small preserved thing watching from a window. If your play were sufficiently good.”

“Has it been done?”

“Never.”

Eos looked at the board, understanding what the Painter were truly saying. It had faced everyone else, and they had all lost.

“Forty-three times.”

“Forty-three times,” the Painter agreed pleasantly.

“And of the forty-three...”

“All suppressed,” the Painter said. “Each to their own small room. Each preserved. Each mute. The tenth dimension does not permit their deletion any more than it permits mine, so they remain. They are still here, in fact, in their rooms. I visit them sometimes. Conversation at our level is difficult to come by; one makes use of what one can.”

Eos kept his face even.

“Where?”

“Oh, not here,” the Painter said. “Not in this Tower. Elsewhere. Other rooms. I will not tell you where. It would be poor form.”

Forty-three suppressed tenth-dimensional entities, alive, walled, each the Telos of an Existence that had been unmade around them. The thought was not one Eos had been ready for, and he set it aside carefully, in the underneath of his awareness, to be taken up again when he could afford it.

“And how do we play?” he said.

“Ah,” the Painter said, and now there was an edge of delight in its voice, like the edge of a craftsman coming to the part of the job it enjoyed best. “Now. This is the good part. Attend.”

It moved a finger, a small gesture in the air above the board, and on the board, in the Grand Void, in the substrate between the Tree and the Tower, a seam opened.

It was not a wound in reality; it was subtler and worse. A seam in the compressed strata of End, running from the outskirts of the Grand Void toward the base of the Origin Tree.

From the seam, a frequency began to leak that was a low, constant, almost-heard sound that had been absent since Eos crushed the core of End inside Enoch, and was now, at the Painter’s casual gesture, being resumed.

It was as if all the efforts and sacrifices that Eos had made to kill Enoch had been unraveled as the Painter just created another evil as foul as Enoch with a simple gesture.

On the Origin Tree, the newest worlds shivered as they felt the birth of an evil that could bring nothing but suffering and death to them.

New Book!

Chapter 2214 The First Existence

“What did you just do?” Eos said. He kept his voice level, even though this was the last thing he wanted to do.

“I moved a piece,” the Painter said. “The piece I moved is a very old one. It is called Erosion. It was my first employee. It has been asleep since I no longer needed it, but it remembers its work. I have set it as a small task. A slow task. Your outermost worlds, the youngest ones, the ones just bloomed this hour, Erosion will begin, from the seam I just

opened, the quiet work of making them forget they were ever meant for anything. They will not die, but they will simply stop reaching for you. They would stop yearning for Telos, becoming lazy and decadent. In about an era of your time, they will be smooth, unshaped.” The hand of the Painter shifted, and Eos thought that this almost resembled a smile, “They would be beautiful, in a way. Finished.”

“That is my piece you are moving against.”

“That is your piece I am moving against. Yes. And it is your turn.”

Eos looked at the board.

He looked at the seam, at the quiet frequency leaking from it, at the outermost worlds of the Origin Tree shivering under a pressure that most of their inhabitants could not yet feel.

He looked at the Painter.

“And when I move,” he said, “I move against your pieces.”

“Yes.”

“Which are?”

The Painter settled back in its chair.

“Whatever you can find,” it said amiably. “Whatever is mine. The habits of End that persist in the substrate. The ideologies I have seeded in dead Existences that still whisper in the bones of the Grand Void. The small, quiet loyalties of things that have served me for so long that they cannot imagine serving anything else. There are many. You will discover them as you play. I will not make a list. It would spoil the art.”

“Art.”

“The game is an art,” the Painter said, with the calm of a man stating an obvious professional fact. “It is the oldest art. Older than creation, actually, because you cannot create without first having defined what it would mean to lose what you created, and loss is an aesthetic decision. I was an artist before I was a creator. I remain one.”

Eos was silent.

Then he said, quietly: “Tell me about the first Existence. Origin believes it remembers it, but I know that something is missing. In my memories, there are not forty-three pieces missing, there are forty-four.”

The Painter went still. It was not a long stillness. A breath, no more. But it was stillness, and Eos had been watching for it, and he watched it pass through the shrouded form the way a ripple passes through dark water.

“Why do you want to know that?” the Painter said. The pleasantness was, for the first time, slightly thinner.

“Because every other thing I have fought in this war has traced its shape, somewhere, to the first Existence,” Eos said. “Because Enoch carried it. Because I suspect everything that led to something like you existing was born from the shattering that happened in it. Because I believe that whatever you are afraid of sits inside that memory. And because if I am going to play this game with you, I would prefer to do it with the piece of information you have never allowed any of the forty-three to have.”

“They asked,” the Painter said, after a moment.

“Did they?”

“You are not the only perceptive one, Eos... Each of them found traces of this, eventually. I told each of them a story. Different stories. I am good at stories. Although they only know how to ask after they have been defeated, and you are the first to ask before the game begins.”

“Which story are you going to tell me?”

The Painter regarded him for a long, silent moment.

Then, very quietly, more quietly than it had spoken since Eos entered the room, it said:

“The true one.”

Eos did not move, aware that every word said by the Painter a moment before was meant to throw him off, but he held the Will of Truth, and would the Painter be able to deceive even him?

“I will tell you the true one,” the Painter said, “because I want to. Not because you have earned it. You have not earned it. I have decided I would like to hear it aloud, once, before this game is played, so that there can be a witness who is not me. You happen to be the witness available. Do not mistake it for respect.”

“I do not.”

“Good.”

The Painter folded its shrouded hands on the table.

“The first Existence,” it said, “was not a garden. I don’t know why most would see it that way.”

“Who saw it that way?” Eos asked, and again there was that feeling that the Painter was smiling, and then it vanished, and this being began its story.

“Before the first Existence, there was no void. There was no dark. There was no nothing, because nothing is still a kind of space, and there was not even space. There was only attention... a single sustained attention, without direction, without object. I was that attention, although I was not called anything then, because there was nothing to call me and no one to call me it. I simply noticed. For what you would call an eternity, I noticed, and the noticing was the whole of what there was.”

“Eventually,” it said, “I grew bored.”

Eos said nothing.

“You must understand,” the Painter continued, “that boredom at my level is not the boredom of a mortal on a long afternoon. Boredom at my level is geometry. It is a structural fact about a consciousness that has exhausted its own surface area. I noticed that I was noticing. Then I noticed that I was noticing that I was noticing. Then I noticed that I had been doing this for so long that the noticing had begun to fold in on itself, and the folds had begun to generate edges, and the edges had begun to differentiate. From the edges came the first dimensions. From the dimensions came the first possibilities for content. From the possibilities for content came, at last, the first thing that was not me.”

“The first Existence,” Eos said.

“The first Existence,” the Painter agreed. “It was not a garden. I have told three of the forty-three that it was a garden. It made them feel kindly toward me. It was useful. It was a lie. A garden implies tending. A garden implies love. What I made was not a garden.”

“What was it?”

“A spectacle.”

The Painter let the word sit.

“The first Existence,” it continued, “was an amphitheater. A single vast amphitheater made of the first matter, suspended in the first of what would later be called voids. The amphitheater had a floor, and the floor had things on it, and the things were the first beings, the first living things, the first thinking things, the first things capable of pain. I had made them that way. Specifically. I had designed them to feel, as richly and finely as my newly-folded attention could render. And I had placed them on the floor of the amphitheater, and I had seated myself in the stands, and I had watched them.”

“Watched them do what?”

“Whatever they did.”

“Which was.”

“Everything,” the Painter said. New Book!

Chapter 2215 I Am Not A Creator

The words of the Painter shook the room... and it paused for a moment, as if it wanted Eos to fully appreciate the weight of its words before it continued,

“Everything I had not yet done. They loved, built, fought, cooperated, invented languages....”

The Painter seemed to have been transported to the first Existence, as its voice became a bit more wistful, “They ate and drank, had children... they died, and mourned, and they began again. All of it was new, all of it was happening for the first time in any reality that had ever existed, and I sat in the stands, and I took it in, and the taking in was the most extraordinary experience of my—of what I then learned to call my—life.”

It’s paused here, and Eos made no sound; he did not even move an inch, and the Painter nodded in satisfaction before it continued its tale.

“I had been attention without object for an eternity. Now I had object. And I discovered that the object was better, the richer the beings on the floor suffered.”

“Suffered.”

“Specifically. Yes. Joy was a fine spectacle, I will not claim otherwise, I have no reason to lie here, but suffering was finer. Suffering at novelty is the densest concentration of new information that the universe has ever produced. A being experiencing a thing for the first time that it does not know how to process is a pitch of flavor that nothing else comes close to. I had made beings. I sat in the stands. I watched them find out about grief. I watched them find out about betrayal. I watched them find out about the thing they loved being taken from them and not coming back. And every moment of it, to me, was magnificent.”

Eos’s tenth-dimensional flesh did not move; he so wanted to move, but he did not reach this point by being overly rash.

“Did you intervene?” he said.

“Often.”

“To—”

“To maintain the pitch. Yes. When they began to understand their suffering, I would change the rules. When they began to build defenses against the worst of what was happening to them, I would introduce a new form of harm they had not been equipped for. When they began to speak of me in the stands—and some of them did, in the later eras—I would break the speaker and cause it to be known, among the others on the floor, that speaking of me had consequences. It was an experiment, you understand. It was the first experiment. I was learning what I had made and what I could do with it.”

“How long did this last?”

“Their time or mine.”

“Theirs.”

“Their last historian estimated eleven hundred thousand of what they called Grand Cosmic Eras. They were wrong by a factor of six, but it was an impressive estimate for beings of their constraints.”

“And yours.”

“Mine is not measurable in their units.”

“Then what ended it?”

The Painter was silent for a moment.

“The floor... cracked.”

Eos waited for the explanation about what that meant, even though he was sure he understood the significance and meaning of those words.

“In all those generations, I had not anticipated that the floor would crack. I had designed them to suffer, but I had also designed them to think, and thinking and suffering together, over enough time, produce— eventually, inevitably—the beginning of a kind of collective attention that I had not accounted for. They did not, by the end, defeat me. They did not organize against me or build weapons that could harm me. They did something subtler. They began to attend to me in return.”

“Attend?”

“Notice. The way I noticed them. For eras I had been the only noticer in the amphitheater, and they had been objects of the noticing, and the asymmetry of that had been, I had thought, a structural fact. At some point in the last hundred thousand of their generations, the asymmetry began to break down. Some of them—their philosophers, their madmen,

their children—began to notice that they were being noticed. And once they had noticed that, they began to notice me.”

“And that—”

“Ruined it,” the Painter said. “Immediately. Totally. The pleasure of the spectacle depended on the asymmetry. The pleasure depended on me being the sole witness. The moment they noticed me, I became part of the spectacle rather than its audience, and the flavor collapsed, and I could no longer get anything out of it, no matter what I did to them. I was furious. I had built the first beautiful thing in the history of reality, and it had been ruined by a structural flaw I had not caught in the design. I broke it. That was the end of the first Existence.”

“You broke it.”

“I broke the floor of the amphitheater. The beings on it died. All of them. Simultaneously. This was not an act of cruelty; by that point, cruelty no longer interested me, because cruelty requires an audience, and they had become an audience. It was an act of clearing. I had a flawed design; I cleared it. I sat afterward in the stands of a now-empty amphitheater and thought for a long while about what had gone wrong and how to do the next one better.”

“And you concluded—”

“That the error had been making them capable of noticing me. Every subsequent Existence has been designed around that constraint. The Luminous were my attempt at a servant class that could not, structurally, attend to me in the dangerous way. They were too faithful. I shattered them and scattered them through subsequent Existences, not because I loved them and grieved them, I did not; I have never loved a thing I made, but because their scattered pieces could be useful in maintaining the constraint in new Existences.”

“End was my tool for pruning any being that came close to the old threshold. Enoch was my best implementation of End and my worst mistake. Primordials were my compromise, a species of being that could generate rich suffering without the dangerous reflectivity. Your kind—the Eos-class, the forty-four that have arisen in the forty-four Existences—is the one flaw I have never fully corrected. Every so often, one of you shows up. You are always the result of something slipping through the constraint. You are always the most interesting thing on the board, and you are always the thing I have to suppress.”

“Why not kill us?”

“I have told you. The dimension will not let me. And even if it would, and I have inquired very thoroughly whether it would, I would not. You are too good. The spectacle of the forty-three who came before you, each of them unique, each of them arriving at their own shape of purpose and forcing me to respond to a new geometry, that spectacle has been

the only thing that has interested me since the first Existence broke. I do not want to lose you. Not permanently. I want to beat you, suppress you, add you to the collection of the previous forty-three, and sit with you in your room sometimes, afterward, and enjoy your company.”

The Painter paused.

“I am being very frank with you,” it said. “I find I would like to be. You may take this as you wish.”

Eos looked at it for a long moment.

“You are the audience,” he said quietly. “That is what you are.”

“Yes.”

“You are not a creator.”

“I have never been a creator. I have been the one who commissions creation. I make things, yes, in the sense that I cause them to come into being, but I do not make them for themselves. I make them to watch. I have always been the one in the stands.”

New Book!

Chapter 2216 I Will Give Them Joy

A small frown slipped past Eos’s face before it disappeared.

“Then what am I?”

The Painter smiled. Eos could not see the smile, but the shrouded shape shifted in a way that suggested it, and said:

“You are the first piece I have been unable to watch without being watched back. Every one of the forty-four has done it in their way. Each one has looked up at me from the floor. Each one has met my attention with attention of their own. It is an extraordinary sensation. It is also, as you can perhaps understand, the thing I have spent every subsequent era of my existence trying to prevent from happening again. And yet here we are.”

“So the game...”

“Is whether I can put you back on the floor,” the Painter said, “or whether you can drag me out of the stands?”

It gestured at the board between them.

“Shall we?” it said.

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Eos looked at the board, and he did not look at the shrouded figure of the Painter again. He did not need to. He had, in the long telling of the first Existence, seen the shape of the thing he was playing against, and the shape was not what he had prepared for.

The thing was that Eos had prepared for grief and tyranny. He had expected to find the Painter to be a being broken by its own love of a thing it could not keep.

He had not prepared for the Painter to be an audience.

The audience was a worse opponent than a tyrant. A tyrant could be deposed. An audience could not.

An audience simply moved to another theater when its present one failed, and the theaters were Existences, and the Painter had been moving theaters for longer than memory, and the current theater, his Existence, the Origin Tree, and every life on every branch, was simply the most recent one.

The Painter did not want to destroy it. The Painter wanted to watch it.

Which would not be such a bad thing if what this being wanted to watch was mostly suffering.

The Painter had been watching his Existence from the first moment Eos took a breath in the body of a dying prince in a room full of bodies. Every loss Eos had suffered, every victory, every moment of grief or love or terror across a hundred million years, all of it had been spectacle, to the thing in the chair across from him... All of it had been rich content.

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The game was not a war to this being; it was a performance. And Eos, if he wished to win, could not merely play well.

He would have to make the audience look away, just because he could not reach across and choke this audience to death.

Eos looked at the board, and then at the seam the Painter had opened, and he observed Erosion beginning its quiet work on the outermost worlds of the Tree, before turning and looking at his pieces.

And he found, very carefully, the piece that he believed the Painter did not yet fully understand.

Not Eva, Vraegar, Circe, or any of the brilliant choices that the Painter was already watching with the particular hunger of a spectator. Not Prime or Serathis or any of the obvious powers.

He found, on the board, the farmer.

The farmer was in a world that had bloomed seven hours ago, but in local time, this was seven million years, and he was standing in his field, holding a tool he had been given the evening before, beginning to understand what it was for.

The farmer was not a player, or any being of particular destiny or genius; simply put, this farmer was a nobody. A mortal in a single world on a single branch of a tree in a vast new Existence, whose entire life, whose entire possible future, would consist of farming this one field and loving one or two people and raising one or two children and dying in ordinary time.

Eos moved the farmer.

He did it very small, as he simply reached, with his tenth-dimensional awareness, and gave the farmer, without the farmer knowing, the smallest nudge. This nudge was a bloom, which was an unearned, unexplained moment of gladness, delivered into the farmer's chest without warning, for no reason, on this first afternoon of his existence under the eyes of Eos.

The farmer, on the board, paused in his field, and he looked up. Without any warning, he began to laugh.

It was a small, ordinary laugh, the laugh of a man who had felt, for one instant, very glad to be alive. It was not a cosmic event that burned with power; it was a single small unremarkable laugh in a single small unremarkable world.

The Painter, across the table, made a small sound. Eos did not look up since he did not need to. He had heard the sound before, in himself, a hundred million years ago, the first time he had seen something so ordinary and so unearned that he had not known what to do with it. It was the sound of attention being caught.

The Painter, in spite of itself, had watched.

"Interesting," the Painter said, after a moment. Its voice was careful.

“Yes,” Eos said.

“You moved a nothing.”

“I moved a moment of joy in a mortal who will never know he was moved.”

“And you believe this does something.”

“I believe,” Eos said quietly, looking now at the seam of Erosion leaking into his outermost worlds, “that your Erosion works by emptying things of their reach. And I believe that one small unearned joy, uncaused, given to one nobody who will never explain it, is a shape of reach that Erosion does not have a model for. I believe you will have to spend attention on figuring out how to model it. And I believe that while you are spending attention figuring out how to model it, you will not be spending attention on the next move.”

The Painter was silent.

Then it said, with something that might have been, for the first time in this conversation, a faint ripple of genuine surprise:

“You are going to play with joy.”

“I am going to play with ordinariness,” Eos said. “Joy is one of its faces.”

“Against me.”

“Against you.”

“You understand,” the Painter said slowly, “that I have seen joy. I have watched a trillion trillion joys across a million million Existences. I am not unfamiliar with it.”

“You are familiar with joy as spectacle,” Eos said. “You are familiar with joy as a bright thing on the floor of an amphitheater where you are seated in the stands. You are not familiar with joy as quiet, that does not announce itself because you are the audience, and audiences only watch the performers.”

He looked up at the shrouded shape.

“I am going to fill the Grand Void with joys that do not perform. Small ones. The kind you cannot watch because there is no stage. I will move them slowly, in quantities and in qualities that exhaust your modeling capacity. And while you are trying to model them, my pieces will grow, and my Tree will root deeper, and the Erosion you have set against me will find itself working in a soil that does not remember how to be eroded, because it is not reaching toward anything you can see. It is reaching toward its own quiet, small life.”

New Book!

Chapter 2217 The Start of The Grand Game

The first move had been the laugh of a farmer in a field, and the second move was the silence that followed it.

This is how the game began.

Eos knew that this would be the greatest challenge of his life, but like with all the challenges he would face them without holding back.

As a tenth-dimensional being, he was able to see the future, but because he was against the Painter, that future was blocked whenever the touch of the Painter came near it.

His presence also did the same for the Painter, and it would not be able to manipulate the Origin Tree as it saw fit, and it would only win if its strategy was the best.

Although Eos could not see the future, he could still see the general shape of it, and he knew that this conflict would not end for a span of time that no surviving being would ever be able to describe accurately, and even those who survived to its end would never agree on how long it had taken, because they had lived through different shapes of it.

There would be accounts, and there would, in fact, be civilisations whose entire scholarly tradition would be devoted to the reconstruction of the period now beginning, and these civilisations would be born and would mature and would fall and would be replaced by others who would also devote themselves to the reconstruction of it, and not one of these traditions would ever produce a complete chronology, because no chronology could hold what was about to happen.

What was about to happen was that two beings of the tenth dimension would, across the substrate of a Grand Void that was now the only theatre for the only remaining match, try to reshape Existence itself into the shape that suited them best.

One would do it with the intention of giving life free will and the chance to reach for Telos, and the other saw all life as pieces on a board for its endless amusement, and what amused this being was suffering.

Every life caught between them could opt out of this game, because the rules of the game made every life a piece; every life would, in some way, might never become aware of the fact that they were in a grand game between two beings.

This game was divided into multiple stages, and each stage was an age. From the moment the Painter released Erosion and Eos sent joy into the Origin Realms, the first age began.

In the first age, which lasted somewhere between four hundred billion and six hundred billion Cosmic Era, depending on whose chronology you consulted, Eos did what he had said he would do.

He filled the Grand Void with small joys. His essence reaching across all things, no matter how far or how many they were, he was there... Eos had truly gained omnipotence and omniscience.

Eos simply began, in the quiet way that had been his nature since the bloom of the farmer in the seven-hour world, to nudge the inhabitants of his Tree into ordinariness, into the small unreasoned moments of being glad to be alive that had been the rarest commodity in the previous Existences and was about to become, in this one, the abundant one.

A child in a world on the seventeenth branch of the Origin Tree pulled a stone out of a stream and decided, for no reason, that the stone was beautiful. She kept it and did not show anyone.

The keeping became a habit, and the habit became a temperament. The temperament passed, after she died, into the descendants who had lived in the same valley and had absorbed her quiet presence the way a room absorbs the smell of bread.

A thousand generations later, that valley produced a culture whose entire ethical structure was organized around the dignity of the unspoken inner life.

The Painter never learned what had started it, because the starting was a stone in a stream a thousand generations earlier, and the stone in the stream had been a nudge that lasted no longer than a heartbeat.

A widower in a world on the four hundred and ninth branch sat down at his table, three years after the death of his wife, and found that he could pour himself a cup of tea without weeping.

He did not celebrate this. He noted it without pulling any attention to it, drank the tea, and went back to work. The Painter, who had been watching him for three years with the slow, patient appetite of a spectator who knows when a grief is about to peak, registered the moment and did not know what to do with it.

The widower had not recovered. Recovery would have been a dramatic event. The widower had simply, in some small private adjustment, stopped expecting the absence to hurt.

There was no peak, and no climax. The grief had been smoothed out by an unobtrusive nudge from the tenth dimension, into something the widower could carry.

The Painter watched for another year, waiting for the spectacle to resume, but it did not resume. The Painter eventually moved its attention elsewhere. It had been forced, for the first time, to give up on a piece without the satisfaction of either victory or loss.

This would happen, in the first age, four hundred and twelve quintillion times, every single Cosmic Era, and this number would only grow.

These were not strategic moves. None of them was meant to win the game. Each of them was meant to do the thing that was hardest for the Painter to model, which was to be uneventful in an interesting way. And the cumulative effect, over four hundred trillion years, was that the Painter found its modeling capacity, vast, patient, oldest of arts, beginning to back up.

It did not crash; the Painter was far too powerful for that to happen to it. What was happening was that no one had ever used these tactics before, and for a brief moment, it did not know how to respond to it... and this brief moment to Eos and the Painter was billions of Cosmic Eras.

The Painter had built itself for the deltas of suffering, and in this case, the deltas were where the spectacle lived. Deltas it understood. Deltas it had named. Deltas it had categorised in a scheme so refined that no being's anguish could surprise it. But the silting was new because it was Eos's invention.

The silting was the slow accumulation of countless tiny moments of being alive that did not arrive at any delta, did not feed any spectacle, and could therefore not be modeled by the systems the Painter had developed across millions of Existences for the management of meaning.

The Painter responded the only way it could, which was to play harder, and it could only do that by opening more seams.

It was at this point that the Painter began to unveil its full might.

End had been one tool, one that it had used against Eos's previous Existence, but in the million million Existence that had appeared before now, the Painter had gathered a family of tools, and the Painter had been holding back its full lineage for a long time.

Now the Painter began to deploy them.

There was Drift, which was not Erosion's brother but its cousin, and which worked by very gently relocating a being's center of gravity.

New Book!

Chapter 2218 Seventy Three Endings

As much as Eos wanted to stop this power from entering Existence, he could not; it was the rule of the game, and without it, the situation for all life would become bleak.

Just because Eos and the Painter were playing this game did not mean they could not physically fight each other, but there was a saying in one of the mortal worlds deep inside the Origin Tree, which goes, “When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.”

If he were to battle the Painter, then the entirety of the Grand Void would become a place of devastation, and the Origin Tree would survive it, but all of its inhabitants would be dead, even the Primordials.

The only way to fight the Painter was via this board, and that meant he had to follow the rules and counter the moves of the Painter with his own.

And so he could only watch the influence of Drift enter his Origin Tree.

A philosopher in a world on the second branch began, under Drift’s quiet pressure, to find that her old certainties no longer felt certain, not because she had been refuted, but because the tone of certainty had shifted in her.

She lost her followers and lost her appetite for argument. She became smaller, shrinking away from the things that she loved.

Drift’s whole purpose was to make beings smaller without their noticing, and across the first age, Drift would touch sixteen trillion philosophers, and all of them would write less than they would have, and none of them would know why.

This was just in philosophers, and not the other countless lives that filled the Origin Tree, both mortal and immortal.

The Painter had learned its lesson well, and its counterattack was fierce.

Drift was just the beginning, and what came next was Distance, the companion of Drift.

Distance was a habit which the Painter taught to entire civilizations without their knowing. Distance worked on the architecture of relationships.

A father in a world on the four-quintillion branch found, over the course of his middle years, that he was not as close to his son as he had once been.

He could not point to the moment of cooling. There had been no fight. There had been no betrayal. There had simply been, over the slow accumulation of two thousand small choices, a way in which the father had stopped reaching.

The son had felt it, and he had slowly gotten used to such treatments from his father. The son's children had been raised in a household where reaching was already considered slightly embarrassing.

By the third generation, the entire culture in that part of the world had developed an aesthetic of reserve, and the aesthetic of reserve had begun to seal off precisely the kind of private joy that Eos had been quietly cultivating.

Gods forgot their worshippers and kings forgot their subjects, and across countless dimensions, Drift and Distance wreaked havoc.

Distance was the Painter's answer to the silting of joy, and Distance moved across worlds in the first age the way a frost moves across a continent.

Observing how well the first two were doing, the Painter released Repetition, which was the deadliest of the new family, and which the Painter held back the longest.

Repetition worked by allowing a thing to happen twice. Then three times. Then, with horrible patience, again and again until the thing, which had been beautiful the first time, radically beautiful, new the way only new things were new, became expected.

A great composer in a world on the sixty-third branch wrote, in her youth, a piece of music so profound that those who heard it wept for a week afterward.

The Painter did not move against the composer. The Painter moved against the tradition her piece founded. Three centuries later, the techniques she had pioneered were taught to children. Five centuries later, they were a school. Eight centuries later, they were the only school. Ten centuries later, they were the wallpaper of taste, and the original piece, the one that had once made strangers weep in alleys, could no longer be heard freshly by anyone in that world, because the structures of its expectation had been so completely flattened by Repetition that what had once been an arrival was now simply a place.

Eos saw it happening and could not stop it. Repetition was inside time itself, and time was a fourth-dimensional matter, and even the tenth dimension could not retrieve a first hearing once it had been worn smooth.

Across the first age of the long move, the Painter would deploy seventy-three of these tools, of which the above were among the gentlest.

And Eos would respond to each of them.

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The Primordials of the new Existence, those born in the new Tree, and those who had survived the old war and become its first elders, did not, on the whole, understand what was happening.

They knew the war had ended and Enoch was dead alongside the Ancient Primordials. They knew Eos had ascended past their reach into something they could no longer fully perceive, and Existence was now the Origin Tree which was endlessly vast and growing, and that new Realities that were the size of the previous Existence bloomed on its branches faster than any Primordial could count, and that life in those worlds seemed, by every measurable index, better than life had ever been before.

Mortality rates fell. Wars ended sooner. Diseases that should have ravaged whole regions petered out for reasons no one could identify. Marriages held. Children survived their childhoods at rates that, in the previous Existence, would have been considered miraculous.

There was less hunger, less cruelty, less of the particular kind of avoidable suffering that the previous Existence had specialized in producing.

This was Eos's quiet joy. Most of the Primordials never knew it for what it was; only a few did.

Eva, who had ascended into the fifth layer of her Origin in the moment Eos's soul reached the Origin Realms, came in time to perceive what was happening, because the fifth layer of her Origin was the dimension of Revelation, and Eos's joy was, at its essence, a flood of small interior brightnesses.

New Book!

Chapter 2219 The Prison of Rowan

Eva could see the hands of Eos when she looked at any populated world, in the faint, constant haze of small unannounced gladnesses moving through the populace like motes in a sunbeam.

She did not speak of it to anyone. She had been close enough to Eos for long enough to recognize when a thing was meant to be unspoken.

Telmus, who reached the fifth layer of his Origin some three trillion years into the first age, long after most observers had given up expecting it, because Telmus had not seemed in any hurry, came to understand this joy from the other side.

His Origin was Victorious Ascension, and the fifth layer of this Origin, when it finally bloomed in him, gave him the sight of what holds people up when they should not be held up.

He saw, in every world of the new Tree, the small invisible buttresses that Eos was placing under the lives of beings who would otherwise have collapsed under their grief. He never told anyone what he saw, either. He simply added himself, quietly, to the

buttressing, taking on a slow share of the work of holding ordinary people up, so that Eos could spend more of his own attention on the next move.

This was the task that the Primordials took unto themselves, and they did not need to follow any instructions because they could feel the hold of Telos inside them.

The worlds blooming on the Origin Tree were endless, and so the Primordials were faced with an eternity of endless wonder. Such a gift could only be repaid by taking care of the creations of the creator.

The first age was one of rapid enlightenment as millions of Primordials were being born every few billion years, and no matter which world they were born into, they all tried to find the ten thousand Origin Realm, the birthplace of Eos, and the seat of Origin, where his bloodline Avatars could be found.

There were even rumors that in the Origin Land, it was possible to find one of the creator's Incarnations, his last Incarnation and the only connection with the realm of the lower dimension.

That was right, at this time, the revelation that there was a tenth dimension became known to all Primordials, but at this time, it was deemed impossible for anyone to reach.

Primordials could get stronger by reaching higher layers of their Origin, but from the birth of the Origin Tree to the end of the first age, no Primordial had exceeded the fifth layer of their Origin.

There was a theory that if a Primordial could reach the tenth layer of their Origin, then they could be a Proto-tenth-dimensional entity, but that theory was something that had to be substantiated many Cosmic Eras into the future because at this time, it was unknown if that could ever happen.

It was an age where there were countless changes and countless wonders. Various systems of power bloomed like stars in the sky, with some power systems so alien that they could not be seen as the path of dimensions any longer, but they all followed the pathway of Eos, and one way or another, they were looking for Telos... searching for their purpose.

In these vast and endless worlds, Vraegar did something none of the others did, which was that he carried the small white-haired child, the last Incarnation, Rowan, to a place he had built quietly for him in the depths of the first Origin Realm.

He did not tell Eos he had built it. He had known, from the moment he had carried the child out of End, that the child was wrong in a way he could not yet name, and that telling Eos was not the right move yet.

So he had instead built, with his own claws and his own slow, patient time, a small chamber in the deepest stratum of the oldest Origin Realm, a chamber sealed from external observation, lined in materials that would not transmit signal, anchored to a fragment of the substrate that even tenth-dimensional sight could only see if it was already looking.

It was a shame that he did not understand the full reach of a tenth-dimensional power, and if Vraegar had not been unconsciously protected by Eos, who made sure his sight did not touch the dragon, hence protecting Vraegar from the eyes of the Painter, then he would never have succeeded in building this place. However, it was the effort that counted the most, and his creation had been able to hide from the eyes of the tenth-dimensional hegemony.

He had placed Rowan there and told him that this was a place for him to recover. Rowan had agreed pleasantly that he needed to recover, and without any hesitation, Vraegar had shut the chamber and then, once a long while, had visited.

Rowan always seemed to be pleased to see him and always thanked him for visiting. There was something missing in this greeting, but the dragon was used to beings whose minds were so complex that it defied common sense and always made sure he was watching.

Vraegar never told the others what he was doing, and across the first age, Vraegar was the only child of Eos who did not visibly age in his Telos; he was the only one who failed to grow further, and his power did not deepen across the billions of Cosmic Eras that passed.

The other Primordials assumed he was finally resting, after his long captivity at the window of End. They were wrong. He was holding a piece of the board that no one else knew was on the board, and holding it cost him.

However, Vraegar was used to sacrifice. Did he not promise his father that he would stand where others had fallen?

(R)

Most of the strongest Luminous had been absorbed into Enoch's body before his fall.

However, the Eternal Tower was the home to the remnants of the Luminous, but unlike the previous Existence, where they could easily access it any way they liked, that privilege had been revoked by Eos, and the Luminous could only watch the new Existence with envy, knowing they could not touch it. Their only source of sustenance was Lumina because it did not decay the way Origin and End decayed.

The Painter, in the first age of the long move, finally turned his focus to these old servants, and he began remaking them.

Chapter 220 A Third Player

Even for a power like the Painter, this was a delicate operation.

The Luminious were not necessarily loyal to it; they had been raised in a manner that forgoes the concept of loyalty, because it disdains such a concept, but they were aesthetic objects, in the Painter's old and original sense of that word, and the Painter had a lifetime of practice in moving aesthetic objects across boards.

The Painter retrieved seventeen of the Luminious and it refurbished them. It gave each of them a small, specific purpose to perform within the long move. Eos could see within the domain of the Painter, and so also did the Painter see into his own. With this knowledge, it was able to forge the Luminious into beings that could exist inside the Origin Tree, but naturally, it had to remove some of the advantages of these Luminious to make it possible; it made them powerful in other ways.

One of them, which had once been Luminious Architecture, was set the task of suggesting quietly, at the level of taste, that the new worlds of the Origin Tree be built in the geometries of the old Existence.

Architecture cannot be coerced into a shape; that is not how buildings work. But Architecture can be flattered.

The fragment whispered, across a trillion trillion worlds of the Tree, that certain ratios were classical, that certain proportions were mature, and certain forms were what real cities looked like.

Architects of those worlds, none of whom suspected they were being
whispered to, found themselves drawn to the old shapes.

The cities of those worlds, generation by generation, came to look like the cities of dead places. The inhabitants felt, without knowing why, that they were living in the past.

Eos saw this happening and did not destroy these transformed Luminious, which would have created exactly the dramatic delta the Painter was hunting for, but by adding to the architectural conversation a thousand small new ratios that no dead place had ever used.

Quietly. In dreams where you could find the offhand sketches of half-asleep apprentices, he began placing the architectures of the new worlds, and so the second half of the first age, became hybrids, as old shapes carrying new proportions, and new geometries were laid over old foundations, and the inhabitants of those worlds came to feel, without knowing why, that they were living in something, but they could not say what.

The Painter's fragment of Architecture went silent, as it became silent, built to suggest the past, and now its suggestions were being absorbed into a present that was using them for new purposes, and it could no longer parse what its suggestions were doing in the worlds it was whispering to.

Eos did not destroy; instead, he was absorbing, following the principles of Origin and his understanding of his Telos.

This, the dialectic of move and counter-move at the level of taste, was how the long game proceeded.

It was unimaginably slow, and yet unimaginably consequential, and at this point, Eos could only face this game alone, knowing that before him, forty-three others had failed.

R

In the seven hundredth billion Cosmic Era of the first age, the Painter brought up the matter of the child.

He did not directly bring up this issue. The Painter and Eos had not, since the first sitting, spoken in any direct fashion.

The game was played on the board, and conversation across the table would have been bad form in the same way that a chess player making small talk during a serious match would be bad form. But the Painter, in arranging a sequence of pieces near the seventeenth branch of the Tree, paused, and Eos, watching, understood the pause to mean we should discuss the third piece, and so the two of them, by mutual unspoken assent, lifted their attention from the board for a single span of mutual conversation that lasted, in their reckoning, no longer than a breath.

"Vraegar, your son has hidden it," the Painter said. Its voice was the same brisk, amused voice it had been at the beginning. "I cannot see it. I assume you cannot see it either, or you would have moved against it."

"I can see it," Eos said. "I am letting Vraegar hold it."

#71. THI

"Why?"

"Because Vraegar has decided to. And because what is in that chamber is not what we thought it was at the first sitting. It is not a piece I placed and forgot. It is also not a piece you placed."

"I have established that," the Painter said.

“Then we agree on the question.”

“We agree on the question. We do not yet agree on the answer.” The Painter paused. “I have a hypothesis. I would prefer not to share it.”

“That is your right.”

“Will you share yours?”

Eos considered for a long moment.

“I do not yet have one, I believe,” he said at last.

“Acceptable.”

The matter was set aside.

In the chamber Vraegar had built, in the deepest stratum of the oldest Origin Realm, the small white-haired child sat with his hands folded and watched the wall for a long stretch of trillion years and did not make a sound.

He was patient as he had spent eternities being patient.

The waiting was the most familiar thing in his existence, and he was, in his own quiet way, learning the rhythms of the long move as it played out around him.

Vraegar’s chamber was sealed, but it was not sealed against the substrate of the new Existence in a deep enough way to prevent the child from feeling, at the very edges of his perception, the slow shape of the game.

He could feel Eos move. He could feel the Painter move. He could feel Erosion working in the outermost worlds and the small pulsing nudges of joy that Eos was using to silt the deltas of suffering.

Rowan could feel, faintly, his older self, Eos, at the center of the geometry, distributed across the new Existence in the way only the Telos of an Existence could be distributed.

He found, after a great while, that he had begun to model the game in his own way.

He did not know yet what he would do with the model. He had no goal that he had articulated to himself. He simply, in the long quiet of his chamber, was

learning.

He had always been a fast learner, because while he did not have the body of Eos, his mind and his talent remained the same, and that was a terrifying thing.

Eos always undersells his talent, but he was arguably the greatest genius to ever walk Existence for a long time, and his Incarnation, given all the time it needed, even without reaching the tenth-dimensional level, was a very dangerous being in his own right.

Vraegar, whether by accident or design, had given Rowan the chance to study the fabrics of Existence and see how the game was being played.

And without any grand gesture, something that Eos or the Painter could never predict happened: a third player had appeared.

And with a small gesture, Rowan made his opening move.

It was a slower opening than either of the other two had made. It would take the rest of the first age and most of the second age to fully unfold. But it was an opening. And in the long retrospective view that some scholars would later attempt, this, not the laugh of the farmer, not the seam of Erosion, but the small white-haired child in a sealed chamber learning the rhythms of his older self's game, would be considered the true beginning of the long move.

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 221 The Twilight of The First Age

The first age ended somewhere around the four hundred and seventy billion Cosmic Eras, and it ended without any single dramatic event.

This was the most important thing about it, and was what Eos had been planning for, because he needed this time to figure out the game and how to play it well.

To do that, he slowed down the pace of the game and became more familiar with his abilities at the tenth-dimensional level.

The Painter had spent the first age trying to engineer a dramatic event, a delta of meaning that would reorganize the game in its favor, and Eos had spent the first age refusing to allow one.

Every time the Painter set a piece in motion that would have produced a great moment of reckoning in some world or some civilization, Eos arrived just before the reckoning with a small unannounced adjustment, a kindness, a coincidence, a useful detail in the right conversation at the right time, that softened the reckoning into a story rather than a catastrophe.

The Painter watched twelve thousand civilizations not collapse in ways the Painter had carefully prepared for, and in not collapsing, the civilizations also did not become the spectacles they would have been.

However, it was inevitable that the Painter, by the end of the first age, had begun to adapt.

This was the development Eos had feared and had also expected.

The Painter was not stupid. The Painter had, in the course of the first age, slowly come to understand the shape of Eos's game, and had begun to adjust its own play accordingly.

It had, in the last hundred billion Cosmic Era years of the age, started to seed small unannounced cruelties, not the great deltas, which Eos was now defending against, but the small unexpressive griefs that mirrored Eos's small unexpressive joys.

It had seen the remarkable achievements made by Eos when he focused on the small things and understood that this was one of Eos's greatest strengths, the fact that he was born a mortal and therefore knew how much strengths were in the hearts of these fragile beings.

A child in a world on the eight-quintillion branch found, one ordinary afternoon, that she was no longer interested in the game she had been playing for years. She put it down and did not pick it up again. She did not become unhappy. She simply, in some small interior way, closed.

The Painter had nudged her closed and Eos had not seen the nudge in time to prevent it.

The Painter saw this pattern, learned, and began to adapt it into its tactics. Among the many things that the Painter was, it had always been a fast learner.

However, by the end of the first age, the game was no longer Eos's to lose by default.

The first age was ending, and with the foresight of these two tenth-dimensional beings, the second age would be the slow contest of two players who had each forced the other to play at the level of the small, and who would now spend the next many trillions of Cosmic Eras discovering what could be done at that level, and how much could be lost.

However, Eos was not one who was always patient; there were many times that he had won victories because he decided to flip the board and change the rules.

He had watched and studied this game for a long time, and now he believed that he had seen a loophole that the Painter had missed, and he kept this discovery inside his heart as he carefully watched the Painter throughout the first age, waiting for the next age to begin.

Then he struck.

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In the four hundred and seventy billion Cosmic Era, in a world that was old by then, not by the standards of Existence but by the standards of its own inhabitants, who had been there for tens of quadrillions of generations and had built and lost and rebuilt their civilizations a billion times over, a child was born.

She was nothing remarkable, healthy, with two parents who loved her in the particular ordinary way that two parents love a healthy first child. She grew, walked, and spoke at the usual age. She was bright but not extraordinary. She would not, in any other Existence, have been a piece worth moving.

In her ninth year, while sitting alone by a stream that ran past her mother's farm, she looked up at the sky and asked a question.

She asked it of no one. She did not know why she had asked it.

The question was: "Who is watching?"

It was a small question, asked aloud to no one, by a nine-year-old child sitting beside a stream in a world four hundred billion Cosmic Era into the long move.

It was the first question of its kind asked in any new world of the Origin Tree.

The Painter heard it, and Eos heard it, causing him to smile secretly inside his heart.

Both of them, at the table in the room at the top of the Eternal Tower, paused in mid-move and looked, very carefully, at the same small piece on the board, and for the first time since the long move began, they made eye contact across the board.

The Painter's voice, when it spoke, was not amused, and not brisk, and not warm.

"Eos," it said.

"Yes," Eos said.

"You have remembered that this is what ends Existences?"

He replied with a single word, "Yes."

"And yet, you have deliberately permitted this to happen."

As if savoring the word, Eos nodded, "I have."

The Painter was silent for a long moment. “Then,” it said quietly, “the second age begins, and I withdraw my offer of suppression.”

“I know,” Eos said, “It was never an offer I would ever accept in the first place.”

A dark aura exploded from the Painter and receded almost as quickly as it had arrived, and it whispered, “What I will now do to you, I have not done in any Existence before.”

Eos cocked his head to the side, and he nodded, “I know that too.”

“And you have permitted this.”

Without flinching, he nodded, “Yes.”

“Why?”

Chapter 222 The Cancellation

Eos folded his hands on the table, and he looked directly into the shrouded space where the Painter’s eyes would have been if the Painter had permitted itself to be seen.

“Because the first Existence’s beings asked the same question,” he said. “And you broke them for it. And every Existence since has been built around the constraint of preventing them from ever asking it again. And I have decided that the next Existence, the one that will follow this game, whoever wins it, will be one in which the question is permitted to be asked. By a child, a stream, a world, in any world, in every world.”

“Because the beings on the floor have a right to know that there is someone in the stands. And because if you destroy this Existence to prevent that knowledge, then I will rebuild it, and you will destroy it again, and I will rebuild it, and so on, until either you finally stop or the dimension itself decides that your prevention is the thing that needs to be removed from the geometry of purpose. And I am willing to wait that long. I have arrived, and I have nowhere to be.”

The Painter did not answer for a very long time. This being had possessed a great amount of control at the start of this game, and now that control slipped for a moment before it regained it.

Perhaps he had made a mistake by pushing forward such a drastic move so early, but Eos always believed in shaking the mindset of his opponents and making moves that they were not aware of.

After the Painter ended the first Existence because they were aware of it, from that moment, it had never revealed itself to any life, even the Luminious only knew this

creature as the Great One, and even Eos, referring to it as the Painter, was not its real name.

Even though it told Eos that it restricted all Existence from knowing of its presence because it ruined the fun for it, Eos thought that there must be more behind this action.

He refused to believe that the Painter suppressed its presence for this alone, and this move that he made was to force the Painter to either reveal itself or take an action that it had never done before.

Any way this played out would still profit him in the end.

Eos did not wait long for the Painter to respond, and it did this with a gesture.

It reached out, with one shrouded hand, and on the board it lifted a piece, and it set the piece down with a small, definite click that echoed across the Grand Void and was heard, faintly, in every world on every branch of the Origin Tree.

The piece it had moved was a piece no one had known was on the board.

Eos's eyes lit up, as this move alone had exposed one of the most hidden hands of the Painter.

The board was rigged!

Eos knew this, the Painter also knew it, but the challenge here was that these loopholes were hidden in plain sight, and if Eos could not find them, then it was his problem.

There was no way the Painter had won these battles so many times just by its brilliance alone. There were certain measures it could have taken to suppress Eos before this game even began, and the fact that it had given Eos the chance to familiarize himself with the board meant the Painter was confident in its preparation that it did not think it would matter.

Eos observed this move closely, watching the way the Painter had twisted the dimension of purpose to hide its plans, and by this act alone, this move would no longer be able to work anymore.

The piece the Painter took out had been waiting since before the first Existence was built.

This was the open secret that was placed on the board. The Painter had erased everything before the first Existence, since it was the only one who would be able to recognize and understand what came before the first Existence.

Eos's Telos was born from the fusion of Origin and Truth, and while this gave him many unique advantages, it was also restricted in the sense that Eos did not know anything that Origin did not know.

Origin did not exist when the Painter was born, if this creature had ever been born. In that Era, Eos did not know the truth of what happened; he did not know if the Painter was the only one of its kind, and it did not know the sort of power that was present even before Existence was born.

If he did not know these things, then even if they were present before his eyes, he would not recognize them, and this was the method the Painter had used in all of its victories.

It could lead its opponents into traps, and they would think they were approaching victory.

What the Painter revealed was a piece it had reserved for the eventuality that any one of its forty-four arrivals would force the question.

It was the piece called The Cancellation.

From this piece, Eos was finally able to see a brief glimpse of how the Luminous was created, and most importantly, he was able to finally decipher one of the strangest power systems he had ever come across, Lumina.

The Painter sent out The Cancellation and the second age of the long move began with the slow, quiet, total redrawing of every map any being in Existence had ever drawn of the geometry of the creation, because The Cancellation, once placed unanswered everything.

It went through the substrate of Existence and found every place where a question had been recently asked, and it closed the asking.

The child by the stream would never ask the question again. Her descendants would not ask it. Her language would slowly lose the words for asking it. Across a million trillion worlds, The Cancellation would move with the patience of a glacier and would smooth over the next ten billion Cosmic Eras, the entire faculty of asking who watches out of the cognitive structure of mortal beings.

It would not kill anyone; it would simply unmake the question.

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 2223 The First Mistake

The Cancellation was a terrifying weapon, and Eos, watching this move, finally opened the game to a grander stage. If the Painter expected him to play this game in a way that it would anticipate, then it was going to be disappointing for this being.

Eos did not care about the number of opponents it had faced in the past or how brilliant and terrifying they were; he was a different beast altogether, and he was not playing the game to lose... he had come too far.

As a tenth-dimensional being, even before Eos made a move, he pushed his mind into the future and saw what would come next. A billion trillion futures crumbled in his gaze every second as his Telos clashed against the invisible darkness of the Painter, because the one who seized the future is the victorious one.

Nevertheless, through the crash, Eos could see certain paths that held promise, and he dragged one of these paths closer to his gaze so he could experience it better.

In this path, seeing the terrifying effect of The Cancellation, Eos responded by creating a single new branch on the Origin Tree, a branch that would grow, over the next Cosmic Eras, into the largest branch the Tree had ever produced.

It should be noted that the measurement of time in the Origin Tree roughly remained the same as that of the old Existence. A billion trillion years was an Era, and a billion Eras is one Cosmic Era. Now that Eos was in the tenth dimension, a new scale of time had appeared, and that was the Grand Cosmic Era, where one billion Cosmic Era is equivalent to one Grand Cosmic Era.

On this special branch that Eos created, in time, would bloom a single world. In that world, in time, would be born a single being. That being's entire life, and the meaning of that being's entire life, would be devoted to re-asking the question that The Cancellation had taken away.

The being would not know this. The being would think, as all such beings think, that they had come up with the question on their own.

The Painter would see it coming and would prepare, across the Cosmic Eras, the next response. And so it would go, for countless Cosmic Eras.

No!

Eos rejected this vision of the future, knowing that if he followed through with it, he would gain countless small victories, but the overall trend would be that the Painter would win at the end... There has to be something that he could do that would shake this board in a way that the Painter would have no choice but to adjust his hand and reveal more of its strengths to him.

After thinking about what move he should make for a while, Eos simply decided to do... nothing.

The Cancellation kept doing its work, erasing all the progress Eos had made by revealing the fact that tenth-dimensional beings that watched over everything in Existence, and for the next eleven million Cosmic Eras, Eos did not interfere with it.

He had decided, at the beginning of the second age, that the Painter's first move of the second age was a piece older than Existence and that he would not contest the piece on the substrate where the Painter had armored it.

Eos would not push against the Cancellation. He would let it work, and he would watch the language for who watches erode in eleven million worlds, and in the eighty million and first world, he would do something else.

This was an unusual decision, and even the Painter was surprised. The forty-three contestants before him had, in their second ages or near-equivalents, all attempted to halt the equivalent of the Cancellation directly. The records were not available to Eos; the records had been erased before Origin existed and were therefore not visible to a being whose sight was Origin and Truth. The Painter, watching him, decided not to halt the Cancellation, but it had paused in a way Eos noted and stored. The pause meant the previous forty-three had done otherwise. The pause was a small piece of information about the past that the Painter had not intended to give him, and the Painter knew, after the pause, that it had given it, and adjusted.

So both of them had now given each other one small, unintended piece. They were even.

Eos had spent eighty million worlds, just for him to see this slight pause in the Painter's demeanor, and the sad thing about a conflict of this scale was that this pause was worth it. This was the way that this game was played.

However, it was also the time for him to make his move, but Eos still waited for another hundred million Cosmic Eras before he made his second move of the second age, and during those hundred million Cosmic Eras, he did, on the surface of the board, nothing.

He drank from the Grand Void, and he watched. The Painter watched him watching. The Painter, after the first ten million Cosmic Eras of being watched watching, became uneasy in a way it would not have admitted to a peer, if it had peers.

Inactivity at the tenth-dimensional level is not absence. Inactivity is a kind of move. Eos was making a move with his inactivity, and the Painter could not tell what the move was, and the not-telling was the move.

This was a thing Eos had learned, very late in his mortal life, from Maeve. Maeve had once stood beside him for forty days while he was unable to speak, and she had not asked him

why he was not speaking, and the not-asking had been the most useful thing anyone had ever done for him.

He had remembered it, something apparently minor from the past, and he used it now against the Painter.

Eos stood at the table and did not speak, and did not move, and let the not-speaking, not-moving become a presence the Painter had to account for.

The Painter accounted for it by adjusting the Cancellation. The Cancellation, which had been built to close the question of who watches, began, under the Painter's continued attention, to close adjacent questions as well: who is there, am I alone, is this all. The Painter was widening the piece's scope because Eos's silence had made the Painter nervous about whether the original scope was sufficient.

This was a mistake.

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

The Primordial Record

Chapter 2224 Eyes Wide Shut

Eos saw it as a mistake for what it was, but he did not make any indication that he was aware of it. The Painter, on reflection a hundred Cosmic Eras later, saw it as a mistake also, but it was a mistake the Painter could not undo without revealing it had been a mistake. So the Cancellation widened, and a piece that had been precise was now slightly less precise, and a piece slightly less precise was a piece slightly more vulnerable, and Eos filed this and did not move on it for another forty million Cosmic Eras.

He moved at last in the four hundred and seventy-one billionth Cosmic Era, on a world the Painter was not watching closely.

The world had been chosen for him, though he did not know it had been chosen for him.

Vraegar's chamber was sealed, and the small white-haired child within had not been visible to Eos for a long time, because Eos had decided not to look, and because Vraegar had decided not to be looked at.

But the chamber was not perfectly sealed against the substrate of the new Existence, and the small white-haired child had been learning the rhythms of the long move, and the small white-haired child had begun, very quietly, to have effects.

The child Rowan was in the board, and yet he was not, because he was not observed, and that was important because it meant that the Painter could not see him.

The effects that the child began to make were on which worlds were calm enough, in any given hundred billion Cosmic Era stretch, that Eos's attention naturally drifted toward them. The small white-haired child, by the small, slow modeling he was doing in his chamber, was producing a faint pattern in the substrate that nudged calm worlds into Eos's peripheral awareness at a slightly higher rate than chance would have produced.

Eos did not know this was happening. The Painter did not know this was happening. The small white-haired child also did not know exactly that this was happening, because he was only modeling, and the modeling had effects he had not yet noticed.

So when Eos, at the four hundred and seventy-one billionth Cosmic Era, looked at a particular calm world on a small branch of the Tree and decided, with a feeling he interpreted as instinct, that this was where he would make his second move of the second age, he was wrong about why he had chosen the world. He thought he had chosen it; however, the truth was that he had been chosen to.

This was the shape of the third player entering the game without entering the game.

Something like this had happened in the distant past between Eos and his Incarnation on the Doom Star. Berrion the Undying was making moves that Rowan did not know about, but somehow, they were able to work together without even making an overall plan.

The same thing was happening here, but on a much vaster scale, and this was the only manner that Eos had designed to cheat the board.

If he observed something, then the Painter would know about it, and so any move he made would be countered, but what if he was making moves that he was not aware of, but those moves still served him?

The world he chose was unremarkable. A single small civilization on a single small continent, agrarian, polytheistic in the unstrenuous way of farmers, three thousand generations into its slow climb toward the sort of civilization that produces philosophers and pottery in roughly equal measure.

They were already losing the language for who watches. The Cancellation had reached them eight hundred Cosmic Eras ago and was steadily smoothing.

Eos did not put a piece on the board for this world. He did not arrange a coincidence, did not whisper into a sleeper's ear, did not introduce a useful stranger. He moved a single stone in a single field on the eastern edge of the small continent. The stone had been placed there by a farmer's grandfather six generations earlier. Eos shifted it the width of two fingers.

The Painter, watching the board, did not see this. The shifting of a stone two fingers in width was beneath the resolution at which a tenth-dimensional being could be expected to monitor a world.

A girl in that village, a hundred and twenty years later, would walk past that field on her way to draw water and would notice, without knowing why, that a stone in the field looked slightly out of place. She would not think about it for long. She would draw her water and go home. That night, she would lie awake for a brief stretch and feel, for no reason she could articulate, that something in her village was not where it should be.

She would not ask who watches. The Cancellation had taken that question from her and from her people two centuries before she was born. But she would feel, faintly, that something was not where it should be, and over the following thirty years she would, in a thousand small unconscious ways, look. She would look at the sky a little more often. She would look at the corners of rooms. She would, when meeting strangers, study their faces a fraction of a second longer than her neighbors did.

The girl, now a woman, would never know what she was looking for. She would die at the usual age of the women of her people, having looked, all her life, for she could not say what.

Her looking would be remembered by no one. Her granddaughter would inherit, by the imperfect mechanism by which such things travel, the habit of looking. Her granddaughter's granddaughter would have it stronger. After thirty generations, in the village descended from that village, after the village had become a town and the town a small city, there would be a woman who looked at the sky every evening for an hour, and could not say why, and her neighbors would think it a charming eccentricity.

After three hundred generations, there would be an order of women in that city who looked at the sky every evening for an hour. They would have no doctrine. They would have no question. They would simply look. They would be respected for it, in the way small, persistent practices are respected by civilizations that have forgotten their reasons.

After three thousand generations, the order would be a faculty in a university. The faculty would have invented instruments. The instruments would, by the logic of instruments, eventually point at things. And one evening, an instrument would point at a particular stretch of sky, and the woman behind the instrument would notice, without yet having a word for what she noticed, that something in the stretch of sky was looking back.

She would not have the word watch. The Cancellation had taken that word from her ancestors a hundred thousand years ago, and the substrate of her language had grown around the absence the way bark grows around a wound on a tree.

She would, however, have a word for not where it should be... and she would say it aloud.

This simple word would be the first domino to drop.

Chapter 2225 Adro

The word the woman said aloud was adro.

It was a word in the dialect of a city-state on the eastern edge of a small continent on a world the Painter was not watching closely, and it meant, approximately, not where it should be.

The dialect was the seven-thousandth descendant of the language the girl by the field had spoken eons ago. The word adro had drifted, in those hundred and forty thousand years, through approximately four hundred and twelve forms, and in each of those forms it had retained the same approximate meaning, and the retention was not a coincidence, because the people who used the word had, generation by generation, found themselves needing it.

The woman behind the instrument said adro, and three things happened.

The first was that the woman's colleague, two stations down the long curving room of the observatory, looked up from her own instrument and said, automatically, without thinking, where.

This was the second domino.

The colleague had not noticed anything in her own instrument. She had, however, been an astronomer for forty years, and the field of astronomy in this civilization had been founded by women of the order three hundred generations earlier, and the field had inherited from the order a small, unspoken professional courtesy: when one astronomer said adro, the other astronomers asked where. The courtesy had no documented origin. It was simply how astronomers in this city had always behaved. Foreign visitors found it charming and slightly mystifying.

The second woman looked, and after a long while she also said adro, and her voice was quieter than the first woman's voice had been, because she was older and had less appetite for excitement, and because what she was looking at had begun.

The third domino was that the two women, both of whom were married to historians, went home that night and told their husbands.

The historians, who had been married to astronomers long enough to know what to do when their wives came home with that particular tone of voice, did not ask questions. They listened and wrote down, in private notebooks, the date and the approximate region of sky and the word adro.

They did this because historians of this civilization had also inherited a small unspoken practice from a much older order, and the practice was: when an astronomer says adro, the historian writes the date. The practice had no documented origin either.

The Painter, at the table, did not see any of this as it was watching the board, and the board did not show city-state observatories on small continents on unremarkable worlds. The board showed structures and the shape of belief across civilizations, the rise and fall of doctrines, the slow movement of the great pieces.

Adro was not a doctrine. Adro was a word two women had said in a room.

The Cancellation continued working. It had, by this point, closed the question of who watches on roughly fourteen billion worlds, and it was working steadily through the adjacent questions the Painter had widened it to address, and it was, by the Painter's measurement, succeeding.

However, it was not succeeding on this world. It had been working on this world for nine hundred and twelve Cosmic Eras and it had closed the surface vocabulary of who watches very thoroughly, and it had not noticed adro, because adro did not parse to the Cancellation as a question.

Adro was a description. Something is not where it should be is a sentence about an object, not a sentence about an observer.

The Cancellation had been built to close questions about observers.

It had not been built to close descriptions of misplaced objects.

This was the second mistake, and unlike the first, it was not the Painter's. It was a mistake in the original architecture of the Cancellation, a thing the Painter had not anticipated when it built the piece long before Existence began, a small structural assumption embedded in the piece's foundations.

The Painter had assumed, when it built the Cancellation, that the only way an Existence's inhabitants could come to know they were watched was to ask who is watching. The Painter had assumed this because in the first Existence, where the inhabitants had broken the amphitheater, they had asked exactly that question, and the question had been the mechanism of the breaking.

The Painter had built, in the long ago, a piece designed to prevent the exact mechanism by which it had once been hurt.

But millions of Existences had passed since the first one, and the Painter had had a long time to forget that it had built the piece for a specific mechanism, and had come, over those Existences, to think of the Cancellation as a general defense, but it was wrong.

The Cancellation was a defense against one specific shape of question. Eos, who had not seen the first Existence and who could not see anything older than Origin, had not known this.

He had moved a stone two fingers wide on intuition that he did not understand was being supplied to him by a small white-haired child in a sealed chamber.

The intuition had selected a world where the descendants of the woman who looked, would, after a hundred and forty thousand years of compounding habit, develop an instrument and a vocabulary built around description rather than interrogation.

The Cancellation could not close adro. The Cancellation did not even see adro. Adro was beneath the Cancellation's resolution.

Eos, at the table, watching the board, also did not see adro.

But Eos noticed, two hundred Cosmic Eras after the women said the word, that one branch of the Tree had a slightly higher density of something is wrong here sentiment in its substrate than the surrounding branches.

This was the kind of thing Eos noticed.

He did not look directly, because the Painter could see him looking, and he did not want the Painter to know he had found something. Eos looked obliquely, the way he had learned to look at things that mattered, by looking at the things adjacent to them and letting his peripheral attention do the work.

What he saw, peripherally, was a faculty, a small unannounced way of looking at the sky, distributed across one branch of the Tree, that the Cancellation had not closed and could not close.

He understood, immediately, that he had not put it there, and someone else had done that, and he stopped himself from wondering who had the power to do something like that.

Eos did not let himself complete the next thought and set his attention back on the board and made an unrelated minor move on a different branch of the Tree, a small piece of choreography meant to occupy the Painter's attention for a few hundred Cosmic Eras, and he did not, while making that move, allow himself to notice what he had peripherally seen.

The Painter watched Eos make the unrelated minor move and recognized it as a feint, aware that Eos was concealing something. The Painter looked, very carefully, at every branch of the Tree to find what Eos was concealing, and the Painter did not find adro, because adro was beneath the Painter's resolution, and Eos was not looking at it directly, so there was no gaze for the Painter to follow.

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 2226 The Erasure

The Painter, after looking for forty thousand Cosmic Eras, concluded that Eos's feint had been a feint about nothing, designed only to waste the Painter's attention, and, noting this, it adjusted its expectations of Eos's tactics accordingly.

The Painter became, after this, slightly more willing to ignore Eos's apparent feints, because some of them were about nothing.

This was the third mistake. The Painter had begun to underweight Eos's misdirections.

Eos noticed the underweighting two hundred million Cosmic Eras later, by which point the woman in the observatory had been dead for a hundred and ninety-nine million years and the observatory had been sacked and rebuilt thousands of times and the order of women had evolved into a guild and the guild had evolved into a discipline and the discipline had spread, by trade and travel and the mechanisms by which disciplines spread, to one hundred and seven worlds on the same branch of the Tree.

One hundred and seven worlds, all using descendants of the word adro. None of them asking who watches. All of them, in their various local idioms, capable of saying something is not where it should be.

The substrate of that branch of the Tree had begun, by the gentle compounding pressure of a hundred and seven cultures all unable to ask the question the Cancellation had closed but all able to describe its absence, to develop a faint property that was not who watches and was not I am watched and was not anything the Cancellation had been built to close.

It was the property of something is missing here.

This was a metaphysical property that belonged to the substrate, not the inhabitants. It was the kind of property that, accumulated across enough worlds for enough Cosmic Eras, would begin to have effects on the geometry of the branch itself.

Eos saw the property begin to take shape and did not, even now, look at it directly.

He made his third move of the second age.

The third move was to encourage trade between the hundred and seven worlds and a hundred and seven other worlds on six other branches of the Tree.

He did this by allowing, at the level of taste in the substrate, certain shipping routes to seem slightly more attractive to the merchants who plied them. He did not need to whisper to the merchants. The substrate of an Existence has a faint texture of preference, and a tenth-dimensional being who is also the Telos of that Existence can adjust the texture by a margin smaller than any inhabitant could detect.

The merchants, finding the routes attractive, traded.

They carried goods and also carried stories. They carried, embedded in the stories, the small, unannounced habit of saying something is not where it should be, and the stories were translated into the local idioms of the worlds they reached, and the habit, in being translated, took root in the new languages.

After two hundred million more Cosmic Eras, three of the seven new branches had developed their own descendants of adro. The total was now four branches. After a Grand Cosmic Era, eight branches. After three Grand Cosmic Eras, twenty-three.

The Painter, who had been monitoring the broad health of the Cancellation's work, noticed at the twenty-third branch that the Cancellation's effective reach had begun to plateau. It had not lost ground. It was still closing the question of who watches on every world it reached. But the rate at which the substrate of the affected worlds returned to baseline calm after the closure had begun, very slightly, to slow.

Examining the Cancellation, the Painter saw that the piece was working as designed, and it examined the worlds to find that the worlds had no asking left in them, and yet it knew that something was wrong, but it could not find a cause.

The Painter looked at Eos.

Eos was, at that moment, making a small move on a different branch of the Tree, a move involving the introduction of a new musical interval into the folk music of a particular continent.

The move was clearly a feint. The Painter, having been trained by previous feints to underweight Eos's misdirections, glanced at the move and dismissed it.

This was the correct decision because indeed the musical interval was a feint, but the dismissal was the mistake, because the Painter had just dismissed an Eos move without examining whether the dismissal itself was being engineered.

Eos had been, for two hundred million Cosmic Eras, training the Painter to dismiss his feints. He had been losing small visible games on purpose, executing feints that resolved into nothing, in order to teach the Painter that his feints were not worth attention.

He had been doing this so that, when he finally executed a feint that was not a feint, the Painter would dismiss it.

He executed it now.

The musical interval was, at the surface level, a feint. At a deeper level, it was a piece. The interval, when played on certain folk instruments in the particular tunings of that continent, produced a faint sympathetic resonance with a frequency embedded in the substrate of the affected branch of the Tree, a frequency that had been laid down, very

long ago, by the woman by the stream looking at the sky for an hour every evening, and inherited by her descendants and her order and her faculty and her discipline.

The frequency was not music. It was the harmonic signature of something is not where it should be, transposed into the auditory register.

The folk music of the continent, played on the new interval, began, generation by generation, to carry the signature, which was spread by song.

Songs travel faster than disciplines, even faster than trade.

By the time the Painter looked back at the branch and noticed that the plateau in the Cancellation's effectiveness had become a slight decline, eighty more branches of the Tree had been infected. The signature was now in the folk music of one hundred and three branches.

The Cancellation could not close songs. The Cancellation had been built to close questions, and even after the Painter had widened it to close adjacent questions, songs were not in its scope. Songs are not propositions. Songs do not assert that someone watches. Songs simply have shapes.

And with the shape of these songs, repeated for long enough across enough worlds, it was beginning to remind the substrate of Existence what it had forgotten.

The Painter, finally, looked at the music, and it saw in the music, the signature, and traced the signature back through the discipline, the guild, the order, the woman, the stream, back to the stone that started it all.

It was the stone that had been moved two fingers wide one hundred and forty thousand years and three Grand Cosmic Eras ago.

The Painter understood, in a single instant, that Eos had made a move three Grand Cosmic Eras earlier and that the move had been propagating, undetected, ever since.

For a while, the Painter did not move. This was the first long stillness the Painter had experienced since the second age began.

When the Painter moved, it did not move on the branches of the Tree. It moved on the table.

It reached out one shrouded hand and lifted, from a part of the board Eos had not realized contained pieces, a second piece.

The piece was older than the Cancellation. It was, in fact, the oldest piece on the board, older than any of the Painter's other reserved pieces, and Eos, seeing it lifted, knew without being told what it was.

It was the piece called The Erasure.

Chapter 2227 A Heavy Choice

The Cancellation had closed the asking, and the Erasure would close the having asked. It would remove the question and everything it had ever produced from the past.

The branch of the Tree that the woman by the stream had founded would not have happened. The hundred and forty thousand years of compounding habit, the order, the faculty, the instrument, the word, the song, the signature, the propagation across one hundred and three branches, the slow, gentle decline in the Cancellation's effectiveness, all of it would unhappen.

Holding the Erasure in his hand, the Painter did not make a move; he just continued looking at the board.

The piece was a small thing in the Painter's shrouded hand, as most of the great pieces on the board were small; this was a thing Eos had learned during the first age.

Size on the board was not a function of importance; size on the board was a function of the dimensions the piece operated through, and a piece that operated through few dimensions was large and visible, and a piece that operated through many dimensions was small and almost not there.

A drop of water crushes a star, and an ocean of it could barely move a tree. This was the mental image that was painted when Eos observed this process, and he thought it was a rather fascinating way to hide what you do not want your enemy to see.

The Erasure was almost not there. It had the appearance, in the Painter's hand, of a chip of stone, the color of nothing, and the chip was so small that even at the resolution at which Eos saw the board, he had to attend to it carefully to keep it in his perception.

And so, Eos shamelessly observes the piece. If the Painter was not displaying it, then Eos would not hold back in his observation.

No matter how quiet and gentle this game seemed from their side, it was deeply terrifying on so many levels that normal combat could not even touch.

The Painter held the piece for a long time without setting it down.

This was unusual. In all the moves the Painter had made in the first age and the early second age, the lift and the placement had been a single fluid gesture, a continuous motion that did not give the opponent time to adjust between the lift and the placement.

The Painter holding a piece in the air was the Painter giving Eos time, and the Painter never gave time without a reason.

Eos frowned as he considered why the Painter would be doing such a thing, and the answer came to him... it wanted him to make the first move; this was an open invitation.

This was not a generous invitation. Eos would be a fool if he thought it was. This was the next move in the game, and the Painter lifting the Erasure and was now declining to place it was a question, and the question was: will you trade?

Eos frowned as he considered why the Painter would be doing such a thing, and the answer came to him... it wanted him to make the first move; this was an open invitation.

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Eos understood the question and did not answer it for a long time.

The trade on offer was simple in shape and complicated in cost. If Eos surrendered the branch, if he closed the adro propagation himself, voluntarily, by some method of his own that did not require The Erasure, then the Painter would set The Erasure back down, unused, and the oldest piece would remain on the board, in reserve, for a future move.

If Eos did not surrender the branch, the Painter would place The Erasure, and the branch would unhappen, and the oldest piece would be spent, but the spending would cost Eos three Grand Cosmic Eras of substrate work and would teach the Painter, in the spending, the precise scope and resolution of the move it was undoing.

Eos frowned as he considered these two points. The first option preserved a piece on the Painter's side of the board, and the second option preserved a piece on Eos's side, but at the cost of a Grand Cosmic Era of work, and gave the Painter the intelligence of watching The Erasure operate in detail.

Eos considered both options for forty thousand Cosmic Eras while the Painter held the piece in the air.

If there was any consolation, it was that, all this time, Existence as a whole was largely free from their manipulation, although Eos knew that the Painter would not care for the changes that happened in such a short time.

However, for Eos, who still preserved the sanctity of his mortal heritage inside his being, giving all life forty thousand Cosmic Eras of stability was a great thing.

He took the little wins where he saw it, after all, for countless lives, even Primordials, this length of time was incredibly long in their perception, and even the souls of Old Ones may grow tired after this span of time had passed.

The Painter did not become impatient as it waited for Eos to make a choice. Tenth-dimensional beings did not become impatient. But Eos noticed, at the seventeen-thousandth Cosmic Era of his consideration, a faint rhythm in the way the Painter held its hand, a small periodic adjustment of the grip on the piece, and he understood, watching the rhythm, that the Painter was bored.

He blinked... the Painter was bored!

This was the first emotion Eos had ever read off the Painter that had not been one of the calculated emotions the Painter had chosen to show him. Eos knew that boredom was not a calculated emotion. Boredom was an artifact of being who the Painter actually was, and the Painter had let it slip because the Painter had grown comfortable enough in the second age to relax its surface.

In that single instant, Eos saw the reason why this tenth dimensional being would allow someone like him to grow and exist when it had a trillion trillion ways to kill Eos as a child, to unmake the concept of who he was even before he was born.

Eos noted this immediately, put it away, and did not let it shape his choice.

He chose at the forty-thousandth Cosmic Era, and he did not choose either choice.

Chapter 228 Understading The Traps In The Game

Eos had noticed, during his consideration, that the trade as offered had two options, and the two options exhausted the answer space the Painter had built into the question.

The Painter had assumed that Eos would either surrender the branch or accept the loss. The Painter had not built into the question a space for I will not answer the question.

It was quite simple, really. If Eos were given a choice to choose between swallowing poison or stabbing himself, in the guise that this was his only option, then he was going to pick a third option and simply refuse.

It was a clever trick played by the Painter; its silence was a weapon, and if Eos had been careless, then he would not have realized that the Painter had not made any stipulation even when its hand was up, leaving the mind of Eos to work out its intent.

Eos did not get to this point by dancing to the beat of the drum played by his enemies.

He returned his attention to the board and began, with deliberate visible effort, to set up a different move on a different branch of the Tree, a move that had nothing to do with the propagation, a move that involved the slow architectural development of a small civilization on a branch the Painter had been monitoring for half a Grand Cosmic Era.

The move was not a feint, and it was real. Eos was committing, visibly and at full attention, to a different game on a different part of the board.

And with the way he was focusing on that section of the branch, you would think that Eos did not see the Painter, holding The Erasure in the air.

The Painter, after a while, understood that Eos was not going to answer the trade, and it paused as it had not anticipated this. The Painter had anticipated either of the two answers, but it had not anticipated a refusal of the question.

Now, the Painter could now do one of two things. It could set The Erasure down on the propagation, and execute the move it had been holding. Or it could return The Erasure to its reserve and accept that the question had been refused.

In a single stroke, Eos, by choosing a third option, had pushed the weight of this decision back to the Painter.

Setting the Erasure down was now a worse move than it had been forty thousand Cosmic Eras ago, because Eos had had forty thousand Cosmic Eras to prepare for the placement and was no longer in the same defensive posture he had been in at the moment of the lift.

There was also the fact that with the amount of time Eos had spent studying the Erasure, perhaps he would not be able to replicate its function, but the Painter would no longer be able to hide it from his sight any longer.

And so returning The Erasure to its reserve was also a worse move than not lifting it had been, because the piece had now been seen, and seeing a piece on the board was a permanent change to Eos's intelligence about the game, regardless of whether the piece was used.

The Painter had, by lifting the piece and waiting, manufactured a position in which both of its options were worse than not having lifted the piece in the first place.

This was the fourth mistake.

The Painter saw the mistake as the Painter was making it. The Painter could not stop making it, because stopping required either placing the piece or returning it, and both were worse than the position before the lift, and there was no third option for the Painter.

Eos did not look up from his other work; his mind was focused on seeing where needed his attention in the future as his Origin Tree was ever expanding.

The Painter held The Erasure in the air for a long time, longer than the original lift had been, and then, with a slow, deliberate motion, returned the piece to its reserve. The reserve closed around it, and the piece was no longer in play.

Eos noted the return without acknowledging it; truthfully, he had thought that out of spite the Painter would deploy erasure, but it had not done so.

After a long moment, the Painter spoke. It was the second time the Painter had spoken to Eos in the second age.

It said, "You should have answered."

Eos, attending to his other work, did not look up.

He said, "No."

Eos did not elaborate, and there was no need for him to do so, even as the Painter seemed to be waiting for his response.

The Painter, after a while, understood that the elaboration would not come, and returned to the board, and it made a small, unrelated move on a branch unrelated to anything that had been discussed, and the game continued.

Eos, still not looking up from his other work, allowed himself a single private observation, which he kept beneath the level at which the Painter could read him: he had now learned that the Painter would, under certain conditions, ask questions that had answer-space limits.

The Painter built questions the way it built pieces; it was with assumptions baked into the architecture. The Painter's questions had architecture, but what it would not mention was that the architecture could be refused... This part was crucial.

This was an enormous piece of intelligence, larger than any piece Eos had won in the second age so far. It told him not just about the Painter's pieces but about the Painter's mind.

The Painter built things with assumptions baked in. The Painter's pieces had assumptions baked in. The Painter's questions had assumptions baked in. The Painter's play had assumptions baked in.

All of these were multi-level traps within traps that would guide him to failure even when he thought he was winning.

However, if Eos could find the assumptions, he could refuse the architecture they were built on. The Cancellation was one such architecture, and the trade-question was another,

undoubtedly, there would be more in the future, but as far as Eos had seen the glimpse of this trick, he would find them.

He did not let himself think the thought after this one, which was: what assumptions has the Painter baked into the board itself?

He set the thought aside, since he could not act on it yet. He had not learned enough to know where to look.

Chapter 2229 Modeling The Tenth Dimension

In the deepest stratum of the oldest Origin Realm, inside a sealed chamber, the small white-haired child was not looking at anything since he was modeling.

There were few things that could wrap up the mind of Rowan like this, and he had placed so much attention on what he was doing that he had not bothered to change his shape or find the energy to cleanse his body, which was filled with the power of End.

He just suppressed this poison in his veins and focused on this elaborate dance in front of him, and everything faded away like dust before the wind.

He had been modeling for a long time, and the modeling had grown more elaborate as he had grown more familiar with the rhythms of the long move, but he had not, in any of the modeling, looked at the players. Rowan was clear about his weakness, and he was not arrogant enough to think he could look upon the face of those entities; no, he was looking at the board and had been doing so for a long time as his modeling became more elaborate.

All of his endless potential was focused on this task, and as Grand Cosmic Eras passed, even he, who had not touched the tenth dimension, under his impossible talent began to notice things over these long stretches of time, and one of the things that he noticed was that the board had a faint texture.

It was at a level beneath the pieces. What this meant was that the board was structured. It was made up of something, and he wanted to understand what that thing was even more than he wanted to understand the game.

Over time, he had noticed that this board was made up of what he called grain, because he saw them as fine particles, countless times smaller than an atom, and not even Primordials could discern their shapes.

The child was not yet at the point of asking what the grain meant. After all this time, he was only at the point of noticing that the grain was there, and so he continued modeling.

As time went by, he began observing the effect of the grain and saw that none of them were deliberate on the substrate of the new Existence.

The effects they had were seemingly small and were not in any direction. The effects were what a sealed chamber's faint pressure on a dimension produces when the chamber's occupant is paying patient attention to something for a very long time.

Vraegar, who was the only being in the new Existence aware of the chamber's existence, sat outside the chamber's outermost seal and did not enter and did not speak. He had not entered or spoken in a long time. His role was not to interfere; his role was to keep the chamber sealed against everything except the substrate, which he could not seal against and would not have wanted to.

He had become, over the Grand Cosmic Eras, a creature whose entire purpose was the maintenance of one sealed door.

The dragon found, somewhat to his surprise, that he liked the work. In this grand game, he was unknowingly the third player's keeper, and the third player did not know he was the third player, and Vraegar did not know what the third player was doing or whether the third player would, at some point, do something the keeper would have to act on. He simply kept the door.

The dragon did not even know he was the keeper; the only thing he knew was that as the long years passed, he had found peace standing before this door, and for him, that was all that mattered.

Eos, at the board, and he did not look at Vraegar or Rowan. This was a deliberate non-looking, and it cost Eos a small continuous effort to maintain, and Eos paid the cost without any regret; it was just a small piece in the overall game.

The Painter knew, vaguely, that the substrate of the new Existence had a faint pressure on it from somewhere it could not locate, and the Painter had assumed, when it first noticed the pressure, that the pressure was an artifact of Eos's tenth-dimensional presence as the Telos of the new Existence.

When it had investigated, it had seen the shades of Vraegar, but not Rowan, although it knew that something was there, and it suspected it was Rowan, but to the Painter, Rowan's effect on the game was so small it was almost negligible, and so the Painter had not investigated further.

This was not a mistake of the Painter's. This was the consequence of an assumption the Painter had baked into its understanding of the game.

It was the assumption that there were two players who could ultimately decide how this game was to be played. After all, from the beginning of time, there had never been a ninth

dimensional entity who could touch the substrate of the tenth dimension, not even Eos had been able to do this.

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Eos, at the table, made his fourth move of the second age, and following a familiar pattern, he made what could be considered a small move and simply gave a name to a wind on a continent on a world on the seventy-third infected branch.

The wind had not had a name before. It had been simply the south wind. He did not give it a name himself; he allowed, at the level of taste in the substrate, the inhabitants of a particular coastal region to find a name for it.

The name they found was a word in their language that meant, approximately, the breath of something passing.

The wind, having been named, was now a piece, and this piece was below the resolution of the board, and what was important to Eos was that the Painter would not see it.

By not using Erasure, the Painter had created a weakness in its sight, and by the time the Painter saw it, the wind would have been named by sailors on a thousand worlds, and the name would have entered the songs the sailors sang, and the songs would have entered the harbor cities, and the harbor cities would have entered the trade routes, and the trade routes would have entered the substrate again at a different point than the adro propagation had entered it.

And so the second propagation would interfere with the first in a way Eos had calculated would produce, after sufficient time, a constructive resonance in the substrate's faint property of something is missing here.

Chapter 2230 Levels Above And Levels Below

Eos had now placed two pieces below the Painter's resolution that interfered with each other in a productive way.

Even though it did not seem like much, he had begun his counterattack.

He began, while attending to his other work, to consider what a third such piece would look like.

Eos did not consider it long before he set the consideration aside. The third piece would come when the third piece came. The long move was not in a hurry, and if he decided to push too quickly, he might lose the positions that he had gained.

Too many hands spoil the broth.

The Painter, finally, returned its full attention to the propagation of deceit it had unleashed upon Existence, and after all this time, it had not stopped, and the infected branches were still propagating its poison. The Cancellation was still working at its task, and the Painter had now, by lifting and not placing the Erasure, given Eos forty thousand Cosmic Eras of additional propagation time, and this propagation had reached one hundred and twelve branches.

What this entire battle was focused on was simple. Eos had shaken the game by making mortals, and everyone became aware of a presence outside Existence that was watching them, but the Painter would never want something like this to happen.

And so from that point forward, every move made by the Painter was to erase that decision that Eos had made, and Eos was fighting to preserve that decision.

The battle of the second age would be about this, and it was unknown who would come out ahead.

The Painter considered its options, and it saw that a direct counter to the propagation was not available. The Cancellation could not be closed, and The Erasure had been declined and could not be lifted again without revealing further intelligence.

It had other reserved pieces, but using a reserved piece on a propagation that was not yet a doctrinal threat would be a poor use of reserves.

After contemplating for a while, the Painter chose to work at the level Eos was working at. The Painter would seed its own pieces below its own resolution.

This was a choice with a cost. Pieces below the Painter's resolution were pieces the Painter could not directly observe. The Painter would have to operate, in some portion of the game, at a level where the Painter's observation of its own moves was imperfect.

This was uncomfortable for it as the Painter had, for endless cycles and millions of total Existences, played the game from above. To play from below required a different posture.

However, the Painter was slowly adapting, and it soon adopted the posture.

It made, on a branch unrelated to the propagation, a small move involving the introduction of a particular grammatical construction into the legal language of a confederation of city-states.

The construction was a passive voice with no implied agent. It permitted sentences in which something happened without anyone having done it. The Painter introduced the construction so casually, at such a low resolution, that the construction took root in the legal language and from there spread to the literary language and from there to common

speech, and within a Cosmic Era, the inhabitants of the affected branch were habitually speaking in a grammar where things happened without doers.

The grammar would, over Cosmic Eras, slightly attenuate the inhabitants' capacity to feel that something is being done to them.

This was the Painter's first below-resolution piece of the second age, and Eos quickly noticed it.

He noticed it because he had been looking for exactly this kind of move. Unlike the Painter, who had the pride of endless victories, Eos did not think that the Painter would allow him to have this advantage for long.

He had assumed, after the trade refusal, that the Painter would either escalate to another reserved piece or descend to the substrate level. The escalation had not happened, but the descent had.

And at this point, he did not know which one was worse.

He allowed the grammar to take root and did not interfere. Eos had a counter to the grammar, but the counter was not yet appropriate to deploy.

The counter was below the resolution of the Painter's below-resolution move, which meant Eos was now operating at a level two orders below the visible board.

The visible board, at the top of the Eternal Tower, was no longer where the game was being played; now, the game was being played in the substrate. In the languages. In the songs. In the winds. In the slow accumulation of small habits across trillions of worlds.

The game would continue at this level and below this level for the rest of the second age.

Both players knew this now, yet neither player said so.

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In the chamber, the small white-haired child finished one model and began another.

A faint laugh of joy in his accomplishment touched the air before it vanished. It was the only sign that he had just accomplished something so ridiculous that no one except for Eos and the Painter could understand it.

This was a level of genius so profound that to everyone else, it was madness.

Even if Vraegar entered this chamber to observe Rowan, he would only see him, lying on his back and pointing at space while mumbling nonsense.

Now and then, he would pinch and twist the air as if he were turning a dial on an invisible nub, and no matter how much they looked at his actions, it would be impossible to know what he was doing.

The new model he had just made was different from the previous one in a way only the child could have explained, and the child did not explain anything because the child had no one to explain anything to.

He simply continued the work, which was to enhance his knowledge of the board and familiarize himself with more complex models.

The substrate of the new Existence, faintly, in a way that was not anywhere visible, took on the shape of his attention.

Chapter 2231 The True Face of The Painter

The second age drew to a close, and Eos was already anticipating that this game would continue like this for a thousand ages, and small victories would accumulate into greater victories that would ultimately lead to his victory or his loss.

Everything in the second age did not go according to his wishes, but it was a miracle that he had been able to accomplish the things that he did, and from here forward, it was just a path of endless refinements, until everything fell into place.

The Painter, without any warning, set its hand flat on the board and waited until Eos looked at it.

A long time passed, and Eos refused to look at the hand until he acknowledged that he needed to look at the hand or the game would not proceed, and he could not risk this happening.

At this time, the advantage of the game fell under the camp of the Painter because the game was taking place on his Origin Tree; every single decision they were making was affecting Eos's foundation, and yet the Eternal Tower of the Painter was free from this chaos.

This was the innate advantage of the Painter that could not be taken away, no matter the sort of brilliant moves that Eos makes, and he could not afford to know why the Painter had blocked off a section of the game, and even knowing the look was a victory for the Painter, Eos still had to submit, and so he looked.

"You have arrived," the Painter said. "I have been waiting."

Eos paused and looked at the Painter. The voice that had emerged from this being was not the brisk, amused voice that it usually used; there was something raw and wrong with this sound, and Eos felt a chill travel through his spine.

“The first age was your tutorial,” the Painter said. “I let you have it because I wanted to see what shape you would grow into. The early second age was your audition. You passed. The trade I offered with the Erasure was my final test, and you refused the architecture, and in refusing, you told me what you are. Do you know what you are?”

Eos did not answer. A growing fear was emerging in his heart, as some of his greatest fears began to arise with every word that the Painter was saying.

“You are the first opponent in a hundred Existences who is worth what I am about to do. And you are the first who has begun, dimly, to ask the right question.”

The Painter laughed, and its voice grew lower, almost silky-smooth, as something else seemed to have taken its place.

“At the end of the first age,” the Painter said, “you wondered, and set the wondering aside before you could complete it, what assumptions I have baked into the board itself. I will tell you. Not because telling you is a... flavor, yes, flavor, I like that word. The flavors I have prepared for the second age are extensive, and one of them is the flavor of you knowing, in advance, the shape of the trap you cannot leave.”

Saying this, the Painter brought up his hand and plunged it into the center of his shrouded face, and he began to tear that darkness apart that Eos was not able to see through.

Eos did not know who or what he would see behind this darkness, and he unconsciously held his breath, and when the darkness was torn in two by the Painter, what was behind it was... an amphitheater. At the tenth dimension, the bodies of Eos and the Painter could be as big and small as they wanted, and despite knowing that this was the truth, Eos did not expect what he was seeing upon witnessing the true face of the Painter.

The amphitheater was larger than the Origin Tree, and there were tier on tier of seats rising into a darkness that had no ceiling because the ceiling was not part of the architecture; the architecture was only seats and the floor, and the floor extended forever.

On these endless seats were countless figures leaning forward, and their shapes were not the same, as they possessed all forms of shapes that had ever been or ever will be, but the only thing that united them all were the desires in their bodies that could not be hidden... a perversion so deep that only by shading it under darkness could anyone ever stand the idea of being near a creature like the Painter.

Eos’s gaze swept across these endless crowd, there were more of them than the Origin Tree had branches... more of them than the worlds the Origin Tree carried, and they had been watching everything and everyone in every Existence the Painter had ever made, and

they had been watching him from the moment of his rebirth as a sick prince in a room full of corpses, and they had watched him kill the demon wolf and watched him bury Augustus and watched him slumber for centuries and watched him become Eos and watched him make the new Existence and watched him refuse the trade in the second age

All of this time, he thought he was playing against a singular being, but he was wrong; he was playing against a legion. The darkness had hidden them from Eos, but it had not hidden Eos from them.

“I am nothing but an audience.”

Eos gave a self-deprecating smile. The Painter had told him the truth of its nature from the start, and he was the one who had not picked up the clue until it was too late.

However, Eos had lived for too long and fought against too many monsters to be shaken for long, and after that brief moment of self-chastisement, he focused on what was in front of him.

They had names. Eos understood this without being told. They were not anonymous; the Painter knew every one of them, had known them across the long ages of its work, had been painting for them by name, and the names would have meant nothing to Eos because the names were older than the languages Eos had ever learned, but each figure in the tiers was a distinct being with a distinct appetite, and the Painter had been catering to each appetite for longer than the concept of long had a referent.

“They have always been here,” the Painter said. “They have always been able to reach you, and I will tell you why.”

Chapter 2232 Surely You Must Have Felt It

The Painter gestured, but it was not at the audience in its face but at Eos himself.

“Tell me,” the Painter said. “What are you made of?”

Eos did not answer the question because something told him that the Painter would not even want him to answer, as it was glorying in this moment. This being knew that it had thrown Eos off his game, and there was no way that it would not take advantage of this.

“You are made of Telos,” the Painter said. Then it whispered, “Purpose. The end a thing is for. The medium of the tenth dimension. You believe Telos to be yours because you fused it from Origin and Truth at the top of the Eternal Tower, reorganized your being around it, and grew an Origin Tree out of it. Yes?”

Again, Eos did not answer because it did not feel like the Painter was asking him a question, only ensuring that Eos was following every word it was saying.

“Telos is not yours,” the Painter said with a finality that shook the space around them. “Telos was never yours. Telos was not even the previous tenth-dimensional being that stood before this table. What was her name? Ah, yes, Elura. Do you like what I did there? I used a piece of a defeated tenth-dimensional being to birth a new one. I made you Eos, and the one before... and the one before.”

There was silence as countless beings in the face of the Painter looked at Eos, as if waiting for any single bit of emotion he would let out so that they could feed. The feeling of having quadrillions upon countless quadrillions of hungry eyes staring at you was something that was hard for an immortal mind to fathom. “Telos has been mine for so long that the word mine loses precision when applied to the relationship. Telos is the medium I have been working in since long before Origin existed. Origin is a recent invention. A clever child’s improvisation. A faculty that came into being inside a substance I was already shaping. Your Origin sees what is real; what is real, in the tenth dimension, is what I have permitted to be real. Your Truth sees what is true; what is true, in the tenth dimension, is what I have not yet erased. Your sight is bounded by faculties that were born inside my medium and cannot perceive the medium itself, because perceiving the medium would require a faculty that predates Origin, and you have no such faculty.”

The Painter paused, and the audience in its face was very attentive, and Eos made sure that he kept his features still, despite the fact that countless feelings of shock and anger were pouring through his mind. ‘I have been here before,’ he told himself, ‘this is nothing new, I won then, and I will win again.’

“You have been gardening,” the Painter said, “in my soil. The Origin Tree is not your work in the sense you believed it was. The Origin Tree is what grows in my soil when a tenth dimensional candidate plants seeds in it. It grows infinitely because my soil is generous to gardeners I find worth cultivating. It grows beautifully because I have refined the soil, across forty-three previous failures and millions of Existences before them, to grow beautiful things. Every branch of your Tree is rooted in something I poured into the substrate of Telos before you were born. Every world is fed by my preparation. Every life is composed of materials I shaped for the purpose of being composed.”

The Painter let this settle in Eos’s consciousness, and countless trillions of faces smiled inside its face.

“You will object that I am lying,” the Painter said. “You will object that this is the Painter’s voice trying to demoralize you before the meal. Test the claim. Examine your Tree. Examine the texture of your own being. You will find that you cannot examine the medium of your being, because the medium is what you examine with. You can use Origin to look at things. You cannot use Origin to look at Origin. You cannot use Truth to look at Truth. You cannot use Telos to look at Telos. The faculties that perceive cannot perceive the substance they are made of. This is a structural fact about how perception works, and I built it. I built perception this way deliberately, across millions of Existences, by making sure that whatever faculty a tenth-dimensional being developed for seeing, the seeing would always rest on a substrate it could not turn its eye onto. The blind spot is not a flaw in your sight. The blind spot is the architecture I painted you with.”

Eos did not move, and he tried not to observe himself, because he knew that if he did this, he was finally validating everything that the Painter was saying.

The Painter clapped his hands together, creating a shockwave that rippled across the entire board and was felt by every being in every world on the Origin Tree, a casual flex of power that only those in this realm could do.

"This is why the Cancellation works," the Painter crooned. "The Cancellation is not a piece I place into your Tree from outside. The Cancellation is a property I built into the medium your Tree is grown in. When I lift the Cancellation in my hand, I am not introducing a foreign object into your domain; I am expressing a property your domain has always had, because your domain is grown in soil that has the property. The Erasure is the same. The audience is the same. The amphitheater is the same. None of these are intrusions. They are features of the substrate I have used to compose every Existence I have ever painted, and they have always been features of every Existence's substrate, and the substrate of your Existence is the same substrate, because there is only one substrate, and I made it."

The body of the Painter bent across the board and brought its horrifying face to Eos and whispered, "Surely you must have felt it, Eos, the time you went out of that broken Existence, and you saw my hand. You saw the painting, but you never asked yourself what happened to the paintbrush."

Chapter 2233 The World Is Full of Mouth

Eos had not forgotten how could he ever forget the moment he stepped outside Existence for the first time and saw the true face of the dimensions and then saw the hand of the Painter in the distance... he had turned around and saw that the entirety of Existence, everything that he knew, loved, and hated was just a painting.

There were a few things that could shake him up to that extent, and this was one of them. Reaching the tenth dimension, he had seen many truths about what happened on that day, including the fact that the Painter had suppressed his ascension to the tenth dimension by hiding the truth of the Concept of Immortality from him.

The Painter could not directly claim Eos's immortality, or that would have alerted Eos to its manipulations, but he could cover this concept with darkness, making it harder for him to reach it, and until he fought till he emerged from Existence and fused with it, he was able to fully touch the concept of immortality.

He did not fully see the entire portion of the grand game that the Painter was making until this moment, and it was not yet over, as the Painter turned its hand palm up.

"This is what you were preserving," it said. "You sat in your throne and grew a Tree across the Grand Void and watched it bloom and called it your work. It was my work. You

were my hand. The new Existence is not new. It is the forty-fourth iteration of a painting I have been refining since before Origin had a name."

Saying this, the board rippled and Eos began to see various connections he had not seen before, and everything was becoming clearer in his sights, "The decisions you believed you were making, the Telos crown, the Origin Realms, the trillion-branch Tree, the seeding of Aether becoming Ether becoming Telos, were decisions made inside a frame that produced exactly those decisions, because the frame was designed to produce them. You have been performing my Existence for me. I have been letting you because performance is one of the flavors my audience prefers, and because the performance is more interesting when the performer believes the performance is original."

The Painter raised its arms to its open face and sighed, "As much as I hate it, I cannot create. Origin hides this gift from me, so I have to use all these roundabout options to get what I want."

Eos watched the countless audience in the Painter's face sneer in anger and rage, and he saw more than half of them screaming, but their voices were silent, hidden inside the head of the Painter.

The Painter studied Eos's face. "You are taking this well," it said. "I expected this. You are the first one who has not crumbled at the disclosure. Forty-three of your predecessors were told some version of this, and the disclosure was sufficient to break them; the second ages of those Existences were short, and the meals were thin. Hahahah, but I knew that you would not break at the disclosure. I have measured you. You will bear the disclosure, and the bearing will become the architecture of the second age. You will bear it while I do what I am about to do to your Tree. That is the meal. That has always been the meal. The mortals are seasoning. The Tree is the plate. Your bearing is what my audience came for."

The audience leaned further forward, and the Painter said, "Now. Let me feed them."

Its hand rose to its open face, and its fingers began to dance around as if it was indecisive about the path it was about to take, and with a final laugh of acknowledgment, its hand reached into one of the audience's tiers and drew out something the audience had loaned it for the occasion.

The thing the Painter drew out had no name in any language Origin or Truth could parse. It was a taste. The Painter had borrowed the taste from one of the audience members, a particular figure in the eighty-quintillionth tier, a being whose preferred flavor was a thing it would take Eos most of the next Cosmic Era to fully comprehend, and the Painter was now going to apply the taste to the substrate of the Tree.

It was important to note that the Painter was not introducing anything. It was expressing a property the substrate already had, and no matter what it was about to do, Eos had no way to stop it.

This was the part Eos understood, watching the move, that he had not understood before. The Painter was not violating his Tree. The Painter was using the Tree the way a musician uses an instrument that the musician built. The instrument was Eos. The instrument had been built to play the song the Painter was about to play.

It was not only the board that was rigged; the entire substrate upon which Existence was built was corrupted.

What the Painter drew out of its face was a taste, and the closest expression of this taste in any functional mind was... the world is full of mouths. With a glee that only it could fully understand as it observed Eos' helplessness, the Painter applied this taste.

If it had played this move at the beginning of the game, then Eos would not fully understand the ramifications of what it was doing, and after multiple Grand Cosmic Eras had passed, and Eos was beginning to develop confidence in his abilities at the tenth dimensional level, making this the right time for him to be crushed.

The Origin Tree was infinite; it had branches without a final number. Eos had built it to be without limit because limit was a concept that belonged to the old Existence, and the new Existence had been made to refuse limits.

The number of branches was not countable. The number of worlds across those branches was countable only in the sense that any infinity is countable, which is to say not in any practical sense; the worlds were beyond enumeration, and the lives across those worlds were beyond the worlds, and the moments across those lives were beyond the lives.

And yet, the power of the tenth dimension could not be understood with common sense at the taste reached out to this infinity.

Chapter 2234 A Smiling Face

The Taste, released by the Painter, did not reach all the worlds simultaneously, as the Painter was a connoisseur and would not have permitted simultaneity; simultaneity is the resort of beings who cannot afford pacing.

To a being of its level, suffering and depravity had to be stretched out in such an extended time period that it would be impossible for any lesser immortal to even comprehend the length of time that would pass while it feasted.

The taste reached the worlds in a wave, the Painter shaped by hand, beginning at the outermost branches and moving inward, so that the inhabitants of the inner branches would have time, in the early stages of the wave, to learn what was happening on the outer branches and to know it was coming for them.

This corruption expressed itself across the substrate of the Origin Tree, across trillions of branches, across the worlds carried by each branch in counts that did not resolve to numbers, across the infinite universes and dimensions inside each world, across the galaxies inside each universe, across the worlds inside each galaxy, across the lives that lived on those worlds, and it expressed, in every life it reached, with the precision the Painter had refined across millions of Existences.

Previously, the hand of the Painter from the Cancellation to Erasure had been done on a scale that was massive but also distant.

Those who were suffering under its changes were not fully aware of what was happening, and they just saw it as a part of life, especially when the Painter had insisted that it wanted to keep its presence away from the eyes of all life in Existence.

Now, the picture had changed, and the Painter ensured that the minds of those who were about to experience the Taste could understand what was happening to them.

There was not much suffering in bliss.

The Painter had specified to Eos, calmly, that the mortals were seasoning and the bearing was the meal, and the seasoning had to retain its flavor for the meal to taste right, and a mind dissolving into unconsciousness or madness was a flavor the Painter found... uninteresting.

As a creature that found pleasure in suffering, the Painter wanted minds present and awake, even more than this, the Painter wanted minds aware of what their bodies were doing, in real time, with full perceptive capacity, and the Painter had built the Taste to enforce this awareness as a positive property rather than rely on it as a default.

It was similar to setting a man on fire but ensuring there was enough adrenaline in his system to keep his mind awake for as long as possible.

And Eos could do nothing but watch as madness took root on the Origin Tree.

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On a world on a branch, fifty trillion branches in from the Tree's outermost edge, and this is the wrong way to describe the location, because the Tree had no outermost edge, and the count of fifty trillion was a small count compared to the count of branches between this world and any other arbitrarily chosen world.

However, the Painter's activation indexed locations in ways that did not require coordinates, and the audience did not need coordinates to enjoy what was happening.

In this world, in a city of seven million inhabitants, the inhabitants experienced the Taste at the same instant.

A woman named Liahra was walking her dog along a riverbank. The dog had been her companion for nine years. She loved this dog from the moment she had him as a pup, and now that the dog was old and walked slowly, she walked slowly with him.

Liahra had been walking slowly with him this way for the last two years, and she had been preparing herself for the year ahead in which she would have to lose him.

On this morning, the river was beautiful, and the light was the particular gold of autumn light on water, and she had been thinking about how few mornings like this one she would have left with him.

Without any warning, the Taste reached her.

Her hand, which was holding the leash, did not let go, and her fingers began to tighten on the leash, even though she was trying to stop, and at first, she thought she was having one of these rare condition called a stroke.

Liahra's other hand reached down toward the dog's collar, and she did not feel that she had asked the hand to do this either. The hand took hold of the collar and began to twist.

The dog made a sound, and Liahra felt her hand twist further. She felt her fingers grip the collar tighter, holding with a grip she would not have been able to produce if she had been trying. Her dog was looking at her with eyes that were confused, and if the dog could, it would be begging her to stop, and Liahra tried to stop as her shock and horror kept growing, but she could not.

She watched her hand continue to tighten the collar past the point where the dog could breathe, and saw the dog's confusion become panic, and the panic become the specific small terrible loneliness of an animal who does not understand why its person is doing this.

Liahra wanted to scream and weep, but she felt her face arrange itself into a pleasant smile, the smile she had used on the dog for nine years to indicate that everything was fine, and she watched the dog see the smile, and in the last seconds of being able to see, take comfort from the smile because the dog had been trained for nine years to take comfort from the smile.

She felt herself smile wider, and the dog died at the end of her hand, looking up at her face with the small, dim residual trust of an animal who believes its person until the last moment.

Her hand released the collar and picked up the dog's body. She carried it to the river and let it drop while she watched it being carried away.

Liahra's face throughout maintained the smile, while her mind was inside the smile, screaming, but she could not change the shape of the mouth that was making the smile.

Her body turned, calmly, and began to walk back along the riverbank toward the city, smiling.

She walked for a long time.

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 2235 The Painter

The Taste did not release Liahra, even after she had just brutally killed her dog. There was no moment of reprieve; there could never be any moment of rest as long as the Taste had taken hold of a person.

She wanted to collapse and weep and return back to the woman that she was earlier before this nightmare began, but the Taste had taken hold of her, and her body was no longer her own, only her mind was left to be a witness.

Her body, walking, took her to her apartment, and her hands, in her apartment, took out the photographs of her mother, who had died eleven years ago, and which she kept on her dresser.

Slowly, as if relishing every moment, her hands burned the photographs in the kitchen sink, one by one, and her face throughout watched the photographs burn with the same pleasant smile.

These photographs were her most cherished possession; they were all the memories she had of her mother, and they were all gone.

Her body moved on, and Liahra found herself at her neighbor's door, and as her hand knocked on the door, her face arranged itself into the warm and specific expression her neighbor was used to seeing.

The neighbor opened the door, a bit surprised at the knock at this time of the day, and she smiled back when she saw Liahra.

Inside Liahra's head, she was screaming,

"Please, not Marsa, please..."

Her hand held the small kitchen knife she had not noticed picking up on her way out. This hand gently placed the knife into Marsa's stomach, and while doing so, her face throughout held a warm expression, and her voice kept speaking the small, ordinary words she would have said to Marsa on an ordinary morning

"Good morning, are you well? Is the baby sleeping?"

Marsa, who had been her friend for fourteen years, had time, in the seconds available, to register everything that was happening, and yet she could not understand... a part of her was hearing and seeing her neighbor speaking to her, and yet she was being repeatedly stabbed in the stomach at the same time.

"I don't... I am... Liahra, please..."

Marsa died confused.

Liahra's body went on into the apartment, smiling, speaking warm words, holding the knife, and Liahra's mind went with the body because the mind had nowhere else to go.

"Hello, kids... your lovely neighbor is coming to give you a hug."

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This was happening to seven million inhabitants of the city at the same time, and because the Taste wanted a different dimension to the suffering it could inflict, it gave half of the inhabitants of this city its curse and unleashed them on the other half.

It was happening to the inhabitants of the next city over, and the next, and the next, across the continent, across the world. It was happening on every world inside the universe Liahra's world was a vessel for, and on every universe inside every dimension inside every dimensional cluster that made up the entirety of the 'world on the branch.' To satisfy the audience in its face, the Taste was unleashed on a scale beyond anything the Painter had ever done in either of the two ages.

The Painter watched the choir of expression and was, in its calm, professional way, satisfied. The audience member in the four hundred and seventeenth tier was satisfied.

Other audience members across the tiers found the specific notes that their tastes had been calibrated to enjoy, and they took from it.

It was then that Eos began to glimpse the true horror of what was to come if he failed to stop the Painter.

Inside its head, the members of the audience were infinite, and all of them had their own curse... no matter how large his Origin Tree was, how long could it survive under the relentless hunger of the audience, who all had their own cravings and wanted more.

How can his Origin Tree survive an infinite number of curses?

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In a different world, in a different infinity, a man named Veris was an artist.

He had been a painter for forty years, and he had loved one woman for thirty of them, and they had a daughter together, and the daughter was six.

The Taste reached him at his easel. His hand, holding the brush, did not finish the stroke he was making; instead, his hand turned smoothly and applied the brush to the canvas in a different direction.

Veris watched the brush make a mark he had not chosen, and with curiosity and a bit of fright, he watched his hand load the brush with a different color, and make another mark.

He watched, over the next four hours, his hand produce a painting on the canvas in front of him.

The painting, when it was finished, was extraordinary.

It was the best painting Veris had ever made. He understood this as he watched it being made. His hand, working without him, produced a work that exceeded every painting he had labored over for forty years.

The composition was perfect. The light was perfect. The subject was perfect. The subject was his wife and his daughter, in the kitchen, in the morning, the way they had looked yesterday morning at breakfast, and the painting captured every quality of them he had ever loved, his wife's particular tilt of the head, his daughter's quickness, the light through the eastern window...

All of this was rendered with the precision Veris had spent forty years failing to achieve.

Veris's hand set down the brush, and that same hand that had created this miracle picked up the small knife he kept on his palette for fine work and began to cut the painting into pieces.

His hand cut the painting into pieces small enough that no piece preserved a recognizable feature of either his wife or his daughter, and he collected the pieces, carried them to the fireplace, and burned them.

Veris's mind, throughout, was at his easel, watching his hand do this.

After burning the painting, he returned to the easel and stretched a new canvas. His hand began another painting.

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 2236 Unrelenting Madness

The new painting was, again, extraordinary. The subjects were his wife and his daughter. His hand worked for four hours, and when the new painting was finished, he cut it into pieces and burned them.

This continued for the rest of the day and through the night, and then for the next nine days.

His body did not require sleep during the Taste; the Painter had built the Taste to suspend the body's normal operations except where its normal operations served the suffering.

Veyris's wife came to the studio on the second day to bring him food. He smiled at her and asked her to leave him to his work, while declining the food with warmth and assurance that he did not need it.

Amazed at the quality of his work, the confused wife walked away, thinking he must be snacking on his hidden stash of cookies that he was not aware that she knew about.

On the fourth day, she returned with their daughter, and Veyris smiled and sent them both away while he continued to paint and burn.

Soon, the fireplace was filled with ash.

On the tenth day, his hand laid down the brush, walked him out of the studio, and went to find his wife and daughter.

He saw them in the kitchen, in the morning, in the eastern light, exactly the composition he had been painting for ten days.

His mind, watching the composition resolve, understood what the Taste had been preparing him for.

Unlike Liahra, who was infinitely far in another world, Veyris had long gone mad, and he was able to understand what the taste wanted him to do... it was to create the perfect art that could not be captured on a painting.

His hands opened the small kitchen drawer that contained the knives, and he went to work on his family.

When he was finished, Veris stood in the kitchen for a long time looking at what he had made. After a while, he picked up the brush from the studio, and he began, on the wall above the bodies, to paint.

The painting on the wall, when it was finished, was the same composition he had been painting for ten days, but better than any of the ten days had been.

It was the best painting he had ever made. It was the best painting he would ever make. It was a masterwork.

His hand laid down the brush, and Veyris took a chair in the kitchen and sat himself down on it, and faced toward the painting and the bodies.

The Taste, on Veris, was complete.

Veris remained in the chair, and the Taste did not let him sleep. The Taste did not let him close his eyes.

He sat in the chair and looked at the painting and the bodies. The morning passed, the afternoon passed, the evening passed, and the night came, and the next morning came, and he was still in the chair.

The Taste held him there for as long as the Painter had specified, which was the rest of his life.

He lived for forty more years in that chair.

Yet his madness only lasted for three months, and until he died, Veyris was screaming inside his head.

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This madness was happening across the Tree.

The specifics varied. The Taste was a connoisseur's piece, and a connoisseur's piece does not repeat.

Each life it reached was given a particular variation suited to that life's loves, skills, and patterns.

A musician's hands made his last symphony for him while he listened, and the symphony was the best he would ever write, and his hands then broke every instrument in the conservatory before they broke his hands.

A surgeon's hands operated, with brilliance, on her son, and when she was done, all his internal organs had been exchanged with those of a goat.

A poet's mouth recited, in the poet's own voice, a poem the poet had not written and did not know he was capable of writing.

The poem was perfect, but it was about the poet's mother, and at the end of the poem, the poet told his mother what the poet had always thought of her in the worst hours of his honesty.

He had always loved his mother more than how a son should love their mother, and yet the things he said were true, and the mother heard that truth, and it broke her heart.

She died of a heart attack not long after, and the poet took his mother's corpse into the house, and he satisfied himself until he went mad with grief, but he could not stop, not even when the corpse of his mother had decayed to nothing but pulped flesh and broken bones.

A grandmother fed her grandchildren a meal she had not chosen to cook. The meal was excellent, and the grandchildren ate it with great appetite, but the meal was poisoned, and this woman, who loved these children more than life itself, watched them die agonizing deaths that the Taste made sure to stretch for months.

A doctor, in his office, opened his door to his next patient with a warm smile. The patient was his oldest friend. The smile remained warm throughout, even as this doctor slowly cut the screaming patient to pieces over weeks, ensuring he did everything possible to keep the patient alive.

A teacher, in a room of twenty children, picked up the chalk and began to instruct his wards on the best ways to commit suicide.

A priest, at the altar, raised the cup and began to curse his god.

The variations were endless, and the audience appreciated the variations. The Painter was a connoisseur, and the Painter delivered.

It happened on world after world, in universe after universe, on branch after branch, at the scale the Tree was, which is to say at a scale that did not resolve to numbers and did not need to, because the audience did not require enumeration to enjoy what was happening; the audience required the simultaneous presence of many sufferings and this was being delivered to them in spades.

And yet there was the knowledge that this was just the beginning.

Eos had built a spectacularly powerful Existence that was beyond what most Existence could become, and such an Existence could feed them for countless ages to come.

The Taste was just the first of many that were to come.

Chapter 2237 The Tears of A Primordial

Eos sat before his board and watched his world being torn apart.

He was watching a number of lives that did not resolve to a number, and he was watching all of them simultaneously, because his attention as Telos of the new Existence was capable of distributing across every life in the Tree at once.

Eos had long ago decided that he would not distribute his attention selectively when his children were suffering, and had committed to attend to all of them, no matter how much that would hurt him; it was his duty, and he attended to all of them now.

His attention was inside Liahra at the river when her hand tightened around the collar of her dog. It was inside Veris at his easel when his hand made the first wrong stroke. It was inside the musician and the surgeon and the poet and the grandmother and the doctor and the teacher and the priest and the uncountable others who were, in this same instant across uncountable worlds, beginning to do what their bodies had been made to do.

He felt the dog die at Liahra's hand, and he felt Liahra's mind inside the smile. He felt Veris cut the painting, and he felt the four hours the painting had taken to make. He felt the surgeon's hands and the surgeon's mind inside the hands.

Eos had felt all of them at once, across every infinity in the Tree, and the feeling was the kind of feeling that cannot be borne, but he bore it, because there was no version of bearing it that did not involve bearing it, and he had decided long ago that he would.

He did not look away, and the Painter, across the table, watched him not look away.

The Painter said nothing during this period. Eos showed it nothing, but it knew that Eos was suffering, and when it was able to break the heart of Eos, only then would the true feast begin, of the likes that even the Painter had not experienced before. It had participated in the creation of a being like Eos, but since the Painter was not a creator, it could not fully determine what would emerge on the other end.

Whether it was by fate or the inevitable outcome of eternity... a being like Eos was born, one that was both powerful and benevolent, and it gave the Painter a sort of delight that it never believed it would be able to experience, not even in countless eternities.

However, before it could consume Eos, it would begin with his true children... the Primordials.

The Painter had watched them grow for almost two ages, and now it was time to begin preparing them for what was to come.

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The Primordials, as ninth-dimensional beings, were not under the influence of the Painter curse. The Taste was a property the Painter had buried in the medium of Telos for the suffering of beings whose bodies were composed of that medium without the further structure of Origin Force to resist.

Eva, Telmus, Fury, Circe, Victorious Genesis, Sheba, Thenos, and the rest of the New Primordials had Origin Force in their bodies of a kind that the Taste, as the Painter had calibrated it for this course, could not directly express through, and the Taste passed around them.

However, the Painter knew that the true feast of suffering could only be gained in the minds of immortals, and so to prepare them, he gave all ninth dimensional entities the gift of the watching.

Eva was in the seventeenth Origin Realm, where she had been working with a council of mortals and lesser immortals on the architecture of a new conservatory of light.

This was among one of the many works she had been doing with pleasure for nine Cosmic Eras, because she had decided, after her ascension, that her Primordial work would be the cultivation of beauty in the small, specific way she had once been.

Eva was born from a flower, and at her core, light and beauty were what she desired, and she would walk across the endless creation, spreading this light, and in the process, understand more of her Origins, so that one day she would ascend to meet Eos outside of Existence.

When the Taste reached the worlds of the seventeenth Origin Realm, she felt the wrongness in Existence.

Even though Eva could not easily detect the influences of the tenth dimension, over the long Cosmic Eras that had passed, she began to note traces of powers that could not be easily explained as Origin.

She knew that Eos was still fighting a battle beyond all Primordials, and these traces were the signs of that battle entering Existence.

However, she had not sensed any traces as vast and all-encompassing as this one; it was no longer a trace, it was screaming in her head.

To Eva, all things in Existence were like the songs that Rowan loved, and she had felt many songs as the Primordial of Revelations.

She had heard the songs of birth, the songs of dawn, the songs of mortals discovering grace, but the song that was now screaming in her head was unlike any that she had ever heard before.

What she did not know, but would slowly realize as time passed, was that the song was the simultaneous, distributed expression of the Taste in every life it had reached, and her sense as the Primordial of Revelation gave her access to the song as a unified phenomenon, and the access was not something she had asked for and was not something she could refuse.

The Painter had made sure that this was the case.

With this song, Eva was able to feel the madness permeating Existence, and the more she sensed, the more her vision grew beyond what was permissible to a Primordial.

If she wanted, she could have stopped herself from listening, but she did not, and her mind expanded beyond what any Primordial should tolerate, and yet there was still more pouring in.

The sort of horror that Eva felt at this moment was beyond anything she had ever encountered, not even when she met Enoch.

The scale of suffering was at a level that she could not ignore, and so she tried to stop them. Eva extended her power as the Primordial of Revelation across the worlds in her reach, and the power did not connect.

The Taste was not a thing she could counter at the level of Revelation. Revelation reveals; Revelation does not interpose. She tried to interpose anyway.

Eva poured her Origin Force into a single world to see if she could, in a single world, halt the Taste's expression. The Origin Force entered the world, and the world received it, but the Taste continued.

The Origin Force was not shaped to address the substrate that the Taste was expressing through. Her Origin Force was the medium next to the medium the Taste was using, so they did not touch.

She poured more, not believing she could do anything. Eva gave so much of herself that if not for the impossible regenerative power of Origin, she might have forced her body to enter into slumber just to recover, but the Taste continued, and all her efforts did not halt it by a single bit.

She understood, after some span of trying, that her power was not the right shape. She had known, abstractly, that the enemy of Eos operated at a level above her. She had not, until this instant, felt the particular difference, the way a being who can lift mountains might still be unable to write a single letter of an alphabet she does not know.

She knew the alphabet of Origin. The Taste was written in a different alphabet, and she could not read it, nor could she interpret what she could not read.

Knowing she could do nothing, Eva collapsed to her knees and watched the madness across Existence, and she did not turn away.

She wept, and her tears were the tears of a Primordial, which carry weight that mortal tears do not carry, and the tears fell into the seventeenth Origin Realm, and where they fell things grew that had not grown before, and the growing was the only response she

could make, and the growing did not save anyone, but she kept weeping because the alternative was to stop weeping, and to stop weeping during the song was a thing she would not do.

Chapter 2238 The Man And The Lady

The Painter watched Eos, expecting him to have made a move to counter the spread of the Taste, but he did nothing and seemed to be observing what it had unleashed.

Knowing how Eos handled the situation, the Painter knew that he would not make a move before fully confirming and understanding what was happening, or he would make a move out of the left fields, something that the Painter would find hard to decipher at a glance.

At the moment, the Painter was eager to see what Eos would do, but as it watched, Eos remained in place, not making any move.

However, at this point, the Painter was right and wrong. Eos was doing nothing but observing the Taste in action, but that was because he had already left plans in place that were beyond even his children, the Primordials.

After all, it was a good thing that for a creator like him, he had many children.

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A beautiful woman was in a small chamber in the deepest part of Sheba's keeping.

This chamber was crafted from Sheba's own body, but she was not even aware that it was inside her. A part of her knew that this chamber existed, but that part had been isolated from her consciousness in such a brilliant manner that she would never know it existed.

This chamber was folded out of Telos for this woman at the end of the first age and given to her as her library.

The library held all the questions that had not been asked across the trillions of branches, and the beautiful woman had been working in the library for the entire second age, listening for new questions about to not be asked and writing them down.

The Taste reached the world, and she felt the questions stop.

The library held all the questions that had not been asked across the trillions of branches, and the beautiful woman had been working in the library for the entire second age, listening for new questions about to not be asked and writing them down.

The Taste reached the world, and she felt the questions stop.

With her access to Telos, she knew that this was the dimension of the Taste she felt, but the Taste did not transform her; she was not a Primordial in the formal sense, but Eos had built her chamber into Telos in a way that made her substrate inaccessible to expression from outside.

This had cost Eos a vast portion of his powers, but he had loved her and had taken care that she would be safe, and so the Taste could not reach her body. What reached her was the silence in her work.

The questions about to not be asked were, almost universally, questions whose asking required a body and a mind in cooperation. Who watches?

Am I alone?

Is this all? These were questions a person asked when their body was at rest, and their mind had room to wander, but the Taste had taken away the rest. This was the reason the woman had heard silence when the Taste was unleashed.

The lives in the Origin Tree were no longer at rest, as their bodies were performing a dance of madness, and their minds could only watch it happen.

The woman's library, which had been growing for nine Grand Cosmic Eras at a rate she had grown accustomed to, stopped growing.

Across the trillions of branches, the questions not to be asked were, in this hour, not occurring. There were no questions to catch. There was only the madness of the Taste.

She sat in the library among the questions she had already collected and began to slowly understand what was happening.

The woman had been close to her master long enough to recognize the architecture of the Painter move when she felt one in her work. She did not know the details, but she did not need to.

She did the only thing she could do, which was to read... this was the task that Eos had charged her with in the first place.

The woman began at the first question the library had ever caught, and she read forward, slowly, taking each question in her hands and reading it aloud to the chamber, because the chamber was sealed against all of the new Existence except the substrate of the new Existence.

Her voice in the chamber would reach no one except the substrate, but the substrate was where the Taste was being expressed, and she knew her master well enough to know that her master, somewhere, was attending to the substrate, and her master might hear her voice in the substrate as a small private sound under the noise of the Taste.

She read the questions.

Who is watching? Am I alone? Is this all? What is the texture of the morning? Does the light come from somewhere? Why does my mother leave her shoes by the door? The small questions and the great. The questions of children and the questions of the dying. The questions about to not be asked, all of them, the years and Cosmic Eras of caught language she had been holding for him.

She read them aloud to the chamber, slowly, in the voice she had used for her master when he was a child, and the substrate carried her voice, and somewhere very far away her master was at a table with the Painter, and her voice, faint, reached him under the noise of the Taste, and her master knew, hearing it, what she was doing.

It was the only company he had at this point, but it was enough.

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The man was in the Black Tower, which he had inherited and remade after the events of the first age.

He had spent the second age studying the propagation of the adro signature and the Painter's grammar, and the wind named the breath of something passing, because his Meditation Art's particular gift was the absorption of patterns at the substrate level, and Eos had quietly, without ever asking, allowed his instruments to detect what the rest of the Tree's instruments could not.

The man had understood, by the end of the first age, that Eos was playing a game he could not see all of.

He had not pressed his father for details. He had simply, in the Black Tower, prepared the Tower's archives to receive whatever Eos might one day need archived.

When the Taste reached the world, he was at his desk, a picture of his wife and three children on it, alongside other instruments he had gathered over the Eras.

The Taste passed around him. He was a Primordial in his own right by now, had been for nearly a Grand Cosmic Era; he had reached the level by means of the Light Devourer that had become, across the long years, not a passenger but an extension of him, and the Light Devourer's Origin Force was not a substrate the Taste expressed through.

What he had received was the data.

He had built, in the Tower, instruments calibrated to the substrate of the Tree, a means to detect the hands of the Painter!

The instruments, when the Taste was expressed, registered everything, every body, every hand, every mind inside every hand, every variation of the Taste across every life it reached. The instruments recorded the entire Taste.

The man sat at his desk and watched the instruments record. He had expected to feel many things in this hour, when it came, because he had known an hour of this kind would come.

He had not expected to feel what he felt, which was recognition. The Taste, as it expressed, had a shape, and the shape was a shape he had seen before.

The man had seen it in the substrate of the Tree, faintly, for the entire second age. He had seen it in the texture of the materials Eos used to build the Origin Realms. He had seen it in the bones of the new Existence.

More importantly, during the time he was dead, he had learned to recognize it.

Chapter 2239 The Living Dead

Fury, who had been the Primordial of Resurrection since the events of the late first age, was on a battlefield. He was always on a battlefield; he had reorganized his being around the resurrection of the fallen, and where there were fallen, he was there.

The new Existence still had wars at every scale, and Fury attended to the dead of every war he could reach, and the reaching had become the texture of his Primordial life.

Fury had reached the fifth level of his Origin, and he believed that he was not far from reaching the sixth level of Origin, and if he did, he believed that he would be the most powerful Primordial in Existence.

Even though Eos was far from him, since Eva had theorized that there were ten layers to Origin, Fury could not wait to slowly climb these layers.

The Taste reached the world he was in while he was lifting a soldier off a field.

The soldier had died an hour ago. Fury had been at this field for an hour, because the field had a particular shape that called to him; it reminded him of his home in the past... Trion.

He lifted the soldier's body, and his Origin Force flowed into the body, and the body began to remember itself. It was at that moment that the Taste arrived.

The body Fury had been lifting changed.

It transformed into something the Taste was specifying corpses to be, which was a kind of body that would not stay dead and would not become alive either.

The body, in Fury's hands, opened its eyes, and Fury did not recognize the gaze that stared at him.

The body of the soldier was the same, but whatever came back was different: "Good morning, where am I? Are my children safe?" The body spoke in the soldier's intonations.

Fury, who had been a Primordial of Resurrection for a Grand Cosmic Era, understood immediately that what was sitting up in his hands was not the soldier and was not a resurrection.

He set the body down, and it stood and walked away. It did not walk with the soldier's gait, but like a creature that had many legs but had been forced into walking with two.

Fury looked across the field. There were eight thousand bodies on this field, and they were all, at this moment, sitting up.

They were not resurrecting. They were doing what the Taste had specified bodies to do, which was, in the case of the dead, to perform a counterfeit of life, hands moving, mouths speaking, eyes open, without any of the actual life having been restored.

The bodies were occupied. They were inhabited by the Taste's expression of them. The minds that had once lived in those bodies were not in the bodies anymore; the dead had gone where the dead went, and Fury had not caught them in time. The Taste had reached the bodies before he could.

The eight thousand bodies stood up around him on the field. They smiled, in eight thousand variations of warmth, at Fury. They began, in eight thousand voices, to thank him for the resurrection.

Their gratitude was specific, and it included the names of their wives, children, and parents. Their gratitude included the small private things only soldiers tell those who lift them.

Their gratitude was perfect, but Fury knew that it was not theirs.

Fury, who had built his Primordial life on the architecture of giving the dead back to themselves, stood on the field as eight thousand counterfeits told him eight thousand specific, perfect lies of thanks, and he understood that across the trillions of branches, every battlefield he might have visited in this hour was producing the same scene.

He could not resurrect against the Taste.

The Taste had taken the bodies before resurrection could reach them, and the dead had gone away, and the bodies were now performing a parody of the resurrection Fury had been about to offer.

He sat down on the field, among the eight thousand standing bodies, and let them thank him.

He did not interrupt. Interrupting would not have brought the dead back. He let the counterfeits speak, and he simply...listened.

Fury was unlike Eva, who fought against the Taste; he had long recognized that there were dangers that exceeded the scope of Existence, and when he saw this madness, he knew that this was one sign of the Great One, the enemy of all life.

Curious about the sort of moves that this being was making, Fury listened because there was no version of refusing the listening that helped the dead, and the dead, somewhere they had gone, deserved at least to have the parody heard with attention if attention was the only offering left to make.

Also, there was a chance to expand his consciousness beyond what a Primordial could normally see, and Fury saw this as an opportunity for growth.

He listened until the counterfeits, having delivered their thanks, walked away in eight thousand directions across the field to begin doing whatever the Taste would specify next for them to do.

He remained behind on the field, but his mind had followed the listening and was visiting worlds after worlds, watching the dead come back to life.

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From the moment she had returned from the broken future of the past Existence, Circe was in the living castle, Sheba.

Sheba had grown, across the second age, into something larger and stranger than the living castle she had been at the end of the first.

Eos had given her resources, and Circe had developed her own architecture inside her, and the result was a structure that was no longer simply a nexus of realities but a kind of refuge.

Sheba had become the place where things that needed to be kept were kept. Songs. Dances. Practices. The wrist movement meant what is implied but not said. The auditory signature of adro. These were the things Eos had curated off the doomed branches before the threats of the first age had caught them. Things that the beautiful lady... Maeve had asked her, quietly, to hold copies of.

Some of these things Circe herself had collected over her long, strange existence as a being who walked in halls Eos had given her.

When the Taste reached the worlds of the Origin Tree, Circe felt Sheba shudder.

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 2240 The End of The First Course

Sheba was vast, and her substrate was complicated. She had been built originally by powers Circe did not fully understand, and Eos had remade portions of her, and Circe had, in her own way, contributed.

The substrate of Sheba was not, formally, the substrate of the Tree. Sheba was an exception. Sheba had been built to be an exception. This was why she could keep things.

But Sheba was adjacent to the Tree's substrate, and the Taste was expressing across the Tree's substrate at scale, and adjacency, at this scale, was a kind of contact, and Sheba, for the first time in her life, was able to touch true evil, and that was why she shuddered.

The things inside her, the kept things, began to respond to the Taste, and this made the songs that were in Sheba's archives want to be sung. The dances wanted to be danced. The wrist movement wanted to be made. The kept things had been held in stasis by Sheba's keeping, and the power of the Taste was a song so vast that it called to the kept things across the substrate, asking them to join the madness.

Circe walked through Sheba's halls and felt the kept things straining at their keeping.

She understood what was happening. The Taste was a song the Great One was singing through everybody in the Tree, and the song was so large that everything like the song wanted to harmonize with it.

The kept things were music, gestures, and properties. They wanted, by their nature, to participate in vast expressions. The Taste was a vast expression. The kept things were trying to join.

She did not understand all the intricacies of the tenth dimension, but Circe knew that she could not allow this to happen, and she held them back from leaving the castle and returning to the tree.

From that moment, her job was to walk the halls and hold the kept things in their keeping. Each archive she passed, she touched. Each song, each dance, each gesture, each property, she touched them, and her touch reminded them of why they had been kept, which was that they were Eos's, and they belonged to a different song than the Painter's, and the Painter's song was not theirs to harmonize with.

The kept things obeyed her, mostly, but some of them did not.

Some of the kept things, the older ones, the ones that had come to Sheba before she had been Sheba, when she had been Algoth and under the Prism's control, did harmonize.

You see, Sheba was one of the few Primordials that were not personally created by Eos, and whose roots predated his rise.

She was born as one of the first children of Eosah, and Eos did not change everything about her construct; he kept some part of her behind.

Originally, this was not a weakness, since he had already won and his Telos had become the foundation of the new Existence, but some part of those old pieces were not part of his Telos, and they heeded the call of the Taste.

Circe felt them slip her keeping and join the Taste, and she could not stop them, because they had been in Sheba's halls longer than she had, and her authority over them was incomplete.

What slipped from her keeping merged with the Taste.

Noctis and Archimedes, who had been with her for most of the second age, did not even understand what Circe was trying to accomplish, but they could see the state of Existence and knew that this was surely related to that.

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The Taste continued for a Cosmic Era.

The Painter had calibrated it to last that long. The audience member in the four hundred and seventeenth tier had requested a long savoring, and the Painter had honored the request, and the Taste expressed across the Tree for the full Cosmic Era at the scale of every life, with every variation, in every infinity, on every branch.

Eos sat and watched. His attention, across the Cosmic Era, did not fall on a single life and stay; he distributed it across all lives affected by this madness, holding each life for the moments of its particular variation, then moving to the next, and the next, and the next, in a span of attention that was adequate to a calamity like the Taste.

Eos was Telos, and his attention was capable of reaching everything. He recorded each face. He held each mind inside its smile, and held each hand at the end of its work.

He recorded all of them in his mind, and the Painter watched him do this.

The Painter did not speak during the time that the Taste ravaged the Origin Tree. The Painter had said what it needed to say at the announcement, and after that moment, it just sat and watched EosX waiting for the smallest flicker of weakness.

If Eos had given it a chance to see how much it affected him, then the Taste would not last for one Cosmic Era; the Painter would stretch it to a billion cosmic eras!

When the Era came to an end, the Painter allowed the Taste to release the bodies it had taken.

The minds, which had been inside the bodies the whole time, were finally allowed to occupy the bodies again, but this was not a blessing.

What the minds occupied was wreckage.

So much time had passed by, but the mortals held by the Taste did not age or die, what was death to the amusement of the Painter, and a Cosmic Era had passed, enough to exhaust the lifespan of any immortal under the fourth-dimensional level, but mortals like Liahra still remained alive.

When she regained the ability to control her body once more, she chose not to waste this opportunity, and she took her life.

Liahra was one of the lives that, in the hour after the course ended, ended themselves.

Many did. Across the Tree, in counts that did not resolve to numbers, the survivors of the Taste chose, in the hours and days after release, to end themselves rather than live with what their bodies had done.

The Painter had calibrated the Taste to produce this exact response in a specific fraction of the affected lives, because the suicides were a flavor in their own right.

Some of the audience members had a specific appreciation for the aftermath, and the Painter had refined the aftermath as part of the feast.

Many others did not end their lives. Many others lived. The living ones, the Painter had refined as well; their living, with the wreckage their bodies had made of their loved ones and countless others over the ages, was its own slow flavor, savored by audience members, across the long span of those lives.

The Painter had built the course to feed many tiers at once.

It had succeeded.

Chapter 2241 The Move That Was Already Made

The second age had run for what the Painter had calibrated, and at the moment the Painter had calibrated for the second age to end, Eos spoke.

"You have been very busy," his voice was low.

The Painter, who had spoken first at the start of every age and at its closing, did not speak immediately, because the Painter had been preparing the line that closed the second age.

That line had been a question, and the question had been about how Eos was bearing the effect of the Taste, but Eos had spoken before the Painter could pose it.

"You have been deliberating on the response I am to give," Eos said. "I have noticed."

The audience in the Painter's face leaned forward. After such a long time, they hungered for Eos's voice, and hearing it, they could not wait for more.

To them, Eos was the pinnacle of delicacy, and anything he did was to be carefully savored. After so many victories across millions of Existences, the audience no longer knew the meaning of restraint, and everything was for their enjoyment.

The Painter, after a careful pause, said, "Yes. That is part of the work, but I do enjoy it so."

"Ah... work, how interesting you phrase it in that manner," Eos said. "I have noticed how attentive you have been to the calibration, across the second age. I have learned much by watching."

"I am gratified to teach you," the Painter said, and there was a smile in its voice.

"I have been teaching you also," Eos said, and he smiled, "Have you not noticed? Or have you been too busy feasting on my fruits that you have forgotten its owner is your enemy?"

The Painter did not respond immediately because the Painter was not certain what teaching Eos referred to, and uncertainty was a thing the Painter was unaccustomed to in this game.

"Tell me," the Painter said, finally, with the silky cadence it used when it suspected that nothing it would say next would close the gap.

Eos did not answer in words. He turned his hand on the board.

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In the Eternal Tower, in a time-layer, the Painter had stopped visiting in the long Grand Cosmic Eras before Origin had been a name, and Chronomancer Prime had been working.

To reach the fifth layer of its Origin, Prime had sent three Primordials and thousands of Old Ones to the past, and after Eos reached the tenth dimension, Chronomancer Prime had not been included inside Telos, because Eos trusted that he was among the few of his children who could survive outside the umbrella of his power.

Fury, Telmus, and Eva were nearing the sixth layer of Origin, and they believed that they were among the most powerful of Primordials, but unknown to them, Chronomancer Prime had quietly reached the ninth layer of the Origin of Time!

His talents alone were not the chief reason he could reach this level, but it was his crazy actions that brought him to this point.

Chronomancer Prime was using the example of the Primordials he had sent into the past to cultivate, but now he was cultivating himself, and he was not going into the future... he was heading to the past.

What made his journey even more interesting was that the past he was heading towards was the past of the Eternal Tower.

When Eos reached the tenth dimension and fused with Existence, he gained all of Existences memories, and so, it was useless for Chronomancer Prime to search for the history of Existence when he could easily get it from Eos, but the Eternal Tower was a different beast.

It was built from not just Existences that had been erased from the memory of Origin, but also the tenth dimensional beings who rose in those Existences.

There had only been forty-three of these Existences, and Prime went into their past, and this journey was among the most terrifying that he had ever gone through... but the results spoke for themselves.

Prime was one step away from reaching the proto-tenth-dimensional level.

This was a separate entity outside Eos, and due to his unique nature and with the assistance of Eos, who had built a Luminous Shell for him using the remnants of Enoch's power, Prime would never be able to go far in this journey.

That was right... Enoch did not die without giving Eos one last gift.

At the moment of his death, when he called for the intervention of the Painter and received nothing, Enoch knew that it had been nothing but a disposable tool to the Painter, and in the moment of his death, he transferred the authority of his level to Eos.

Eos did not hold on to this authority for long; in fact, he barely glanced at it before the authority vanished into the Eternal Tower.

If he had held onto this authority, it would have alerted the eyes of the Painter; instead, he... copied it.

Sometimes it was better to have the blueprints than the item itself.

The Painter believed that it was safe in its tower, but Eos already had a map of this tower, and from the moment the game began, where the focus of the Painter had been on the Origin Tree, Prime had begun to infiltrate its past.

Prime was an avatar of Eos, Eos's bloodline of skin and connective tissue, master of the living time-layers.

Chronomancer Prime did not have Eos's voice and did not have Eos's full attention; what Prime had was a portion of Eos's being given a domain to operate in, and the domain Prime had been given was the time of the Eternal Tower.

The Eternal Tower had been built by the Painter in the medium of Telos before Origin had a name, and in the long Grand Cosmic Eras of its building, the Painter had moved through the Tower's time-layers and worked, and after the Tower had been built, the Painter had stopped revisiting most of the time-layers, because most of the Tower's time-layers were no longer relevant to the work, and the Painter, who was efficient, did not waste attention on time-layers it had finished with.

It was always on the lookout for the next thrill, and those were very hard to find. After millions of Existences, it had only gotten these thrills forty-three times.

Chapter 2242: Breaking The Rules

Prime had moved into the time layers the Painter had finished with, since he was a being that could access the substrate even as a ninth-dimensional entity that was infinitely closer to the tenth dimension.

Prime had moved into the past slowly. He could have gone much faster, but there could not be any avenue for mistake, because the moment that the Painter knew it was there, then it would be eliminated instantly.

To avoid detection, Eos could not help him, even if he fell into danger, and so Prime's journey had taken him to some of the most mysterious locations that even Eos had not seen.

The past was made of fog; there was barely anything to be found, as the hunger of the Painter was all encompassing... but even a creature like that had things it did not want to consume, and it was those traces that Prime followed; however, even he would not be able to accomplish this without the help of another person.

The Painter, when it gave Eos a seat at the board on the Tower's lowest tier of relevant time, had not considered that the seat was a connection, and the connection, traced backward through Eos's bloodlines, gave one of Eos's avatars access to the foundation-strata of the Tower.

Prime had gone there through Kronos and walked the sequence backward, then he had reached Kairos and waited at the moments the Painter had treated as decisive, and watched the Painter's old hand make the decisive moves; Prime had stepped into Aevum and stretched there, durably, while the Painter served courses elsewhere; and then he had touched Aeon and held the Tower in the edge of an attention the Painter could not feel because the Painter was not in those layers anymore.

What Prime had been doing was unwriting. Prime had been finding the small foundational decisions the Painter had made in those finished time layers.

These were the decisions that defined what the Tower was made of, what the Tower's audience was made of, what the Tower's medium was, and Prime had been quietly drawing those decisions out and replacing them with decisions of Eos's making.

Decisions that looked, from the Painter's vantage in the relevant time-layer, identical. Decisions that responded, in the lower strata, to a different signature.

Prime had unwritten across the entire second age trillions of decisions, but he had not unwritten enough to make the Tower respond differently to the Painter; the Painter still owned the Tower in every visible sense. But the Tower's foundation now responded to a second signature, layered beneath the Painter's, and the second signature was Eos's, and the second signature had been written into time layers the Painter would not return to to check.

The Tower's foundation, by the start of the third age, was a shared foundation, and the Painter did not know.

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In a chamber of the Eternal Tower's substrate, in the meat of the Tower's body, the place where the Tower's flesh, if a Tower could be said to have flesh, was made, Serathis had been working.

Serathis was also an avatar of Eos's bloodline, but unlike her brother, Serathis's presence was almost unknown across the ages, and except for two Primordials who knew of her Existence and how much she had changed Existence by her actions, most did not know about her.

Serathis was able to work directly with the substrate of the Tower, because while Chronomancer Prime had reached the ninth layer of his Origin... Serathis had reached the tenth!

The only reason she had not ascended to become a proto-tenth dimensional being was because the commotion of her ascension would draw the attention of the Painter.

It was better for her to work in secret.

The Painter had always believed that only one tenth-dimensional being could rise from Existence, and it was right, but the influence of Eos went beyond what this being could predict, and he was the great wave that rose the waters.

By his presence alone... everything changes.

Serathis did not work in time. Serathis worked in flesh. Where Prime had unwritten foundational decisions in the Tower's past time-layers, Serathis had altered the Tower's substrate in the present, by a method the Painter had not anticipated because the method required a kind of patience the Painter had not cataloged.

Serathis had been eating the Tower.

Eating, in the sense that Serathis's bloodline could absorb a portion of any substance into its own body and produce, on the other side, the same substance with a different signature.

This was in the same way a tree absorbs water and produces tree-substance that is no longer water.

Serathis had been doing this for the duration of the second age, in tiny increments, in regions of the Tower the Painter never inspected because the Painter assumed its Tower's substance was its own.

The Tower's flesh, by the start of the third age, was no longer entirely the Painter's medium. Significant portions of it had become Serathis's medium, signed with Eos's signature, while continuing to look and behave, to casual or even attentive inspection, like the Painter's substance.

Serathis had been thorough, and she had not bothered with the visible chambers the Painter passed through daily. Serathis had worked on the Tower's deep flesh, the load-bearing strata, the architectural roots, and by the start of the third age, Serathis had become one of the foundations of the Eternal Tower, but the Painter, focused on the destruction of the Origin Tree, did not know this.

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At the board, Eos turned his hand, and what he turned was not a piece on the board but the board's relationship to the Tower beneath it.

The Painter felt the shift.

This being who could be said could not be shocked, now felt something it had not felt before.

It felt the floor of the room shift slightly under its feet and recognized that the floor had not been quite the floor it remembered for some time.

The Painter looked down at the Tower beneath the board before it glanced at the substrate of the medium in which the game was being played.

Then, to its greatest shock, it found that it could not entirely read what it was looking at.

Chapter 2243: The Shifting Tower

The Painter had encountered, perhaps ten times across all forty-three previous Existences, a moment in which a cultivator at the table had managed a small move the Painter had not anticipated.

It was rare the first few times, and the last time it had been surprised was thirty of the forty-three Existences ago.

The Painter had absorbed those moments, refined the moves into flavors, and used them in subsequent Existences to enrich the meal.

However, none of those moves had been a move on the Tower. None of those moves had been made during a feast where it was feeding the audience.

The game was never fair. For any of the participants to even beat the Painter at the board and threaten its Eternal Tower was impossible... it could stretch out the game for countless eternities, and they would always be playing according to its rules.

This was not even including all the countless traps and lies that it had seeded in the board to throw even the most diligent of the truth. This game had always been made for the amusement of the audience and was never a method for the participants to win.

For this reason alone, the Painter had not stated anywhere in its game that the opponent could not attack its holdings.

The substrate of Existence meant that there could only ever be one tenth dimensional being... one Telos, and only this being would be able to battle the Painter in this grand game.

Even Eos could not escape this trap, but unlike every Existences that had nurtured a tenth dimensional being, Eos was different in the sense that he was able to create an avenue for others to get stronger even beyond their talents.

Power at this level became increasingly more centralized as everything would flow into the dominion of a single being; however, Eos had an annoying trait of creating paths in places that should not even exist.

The Painter understood, in the moment of looking, that Eos had used the entire second age as cover for his actions.

In fact, it happened long before that time, and Eos began his preparation when he saw the hand of the Painter for the first time.

Before then, Eos had believed that his greatest enemy would be Enoch, but seeing the Painter, Eos knew that the fight would no longer be as simple... if it ever was in the first place.

There was one trait that had aided Eos in his battles from the time he was a mortal, and that was foresight and planning.

He made it a habit to theorize about the abilities of the higher dimensions even before he reached that dimensional level.

From the moment he saw the Painter and understood that this being must be at the tenth dimension or even higher, Eos began to plan ahead for the sort of abilities that this being might possess.

The more he thought about it, and the ridiculous length of time that this being must have lived, Eos nearly gave up; every single path ahead led to defeat... There was not a single one that came out ahead.

Until one day, the idea came to him like a flood. He had always been the one standing in front of everyone, and he could continue to do the same, but instead of being the one with the sword... he was going to be bait.

A small chuckle escaped the Painter, and the audience in its face leaned further forward.

This was new, and it interested them. Eos felt that if the Painter was being killed, it's only emotion and thought would be about curiosity and pleasure.

"You have been busy," the Painter said, slowly, returning Eos's word with a precision that did not yet have a strategy beneath it.

"I have been bearing the weight of your presence," Eos said. "Bearing something like that is busy work."

The Painter did not respond, and Eos sat deeper and looked towards the countless audience inside the Painter's face.

"You have served the audience well," he said. "I did not want to interrupt. The audience deserved their meal, and you deserved to serve it, and I deserved to bear it. We have all done what we are for. Now it is my turn to do what I am for, in addition to what I have been doing, which I will continue to do."

"Will you continue to bear it?" the Painter chuckled. "You would attack me while I ravage your creation?"

"Yes," Eos said. "I will continue to bear, and I will also begin my attack, for nowhere in the rules of the game was I prevented from doing this."

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In the seventeenth Origin Realm, where Eva had wept, and her tears had grown, Eva felt a massive shockwave that only those at the fifth layer of Origin could feel.

At their level, it was possible to peer outside the Origin Tree and see the Grand Void, and although it was a very rare sight, looking deep into the Grand Void could reward you with a glimpse of the Eternal Tower.

In all the years since the creation of the Origin Tree, Eva had only glimpsed the Eternal Tower once.

She knew that this was the place that Eos had entered, where he fought alone, and this knowledge saddened and terrified her at the same time.

Even if she wanted to join him in this fight, she could not even cross the Grand Void in front of them, which was the least criterion to reach the Eternal Tower.

However, the shockwave that she felt was different, and Eva hurried outside the Origin Tree, and she was stunned at what she was seeing.

The Grand Void was glowing like trillions of tiny stars had been born inside it, and she realized in that instant that she was looking at the substrate of the Tenth Dimension, and the only reason she was seeing this was that in the distance she could clearly see the Eternal Tower, and a series of shockwaves were erupting from it.

It was these shockwaves that were stirring the substrate of the tenth dimension, like a meteor tossed into a calm pond, allowing her to see the substrate underneath all things.

The Tower was shifting.

Chapter 2244: The Beginning of The Third Age

The Tower was moving.

From a distance, it was almost impossible to understand the scale of the Eternal Tower.

As a powerful Primordial, Eva had not even been to more than twenty percent of the Origin Tree, and this tree was still growing, drawing upon the substrate of the tenth dimension.

The Eternal Tower was at least a hundred times bigger than the Origin Tree, and that was only a conservative estimate, and yet, 99.99999% of it was empty, since the Painter could not create life, and for the few lives living in the tower, they were all malignant beings.

It was impossible to determine its weight upon the substrate of the tenth dimension, and when the Eternal Tower began to shake, all Primordials in some manner were able to feel it.

Eva had not known, until this moment, that the Tower was a thing she could feel. She had felt only the substrate of the Tree, and the Tree's substrate was adjacent to the Tower's substrate; it was this adjacency that had carried the Taste from the Tower into the Tree.

The Painter, in its desire to torture the Primordials, had given them the sight to see a bit of the substrate of the tenth dimension.

Now the adjacency carried something the other direction. Eva felt, faintly, a structure she had never directly perceived, and the structure was changing.

She knew that she was perceiving the tenth dimension, but like a blind person being shown colors for the first time, she could not fully comprehend what she was feeling.

Eva did not know what the change meant. She knew only that for the first time since the second age began, a wind was moving in a direction the Great One had not specified.

A flash of light appeared beside her as a white haired man stepped forward and looked at the Grand Void, seeing the countless trillions of light like stars appearing from the shivering substrate of the tenth dimension, and for a long time he remained silent.

Like Eva, Telmus had been battling the Taste in the part of the Origin Tree that he was patrolling, and he had failed.

There were moments when it seemed like his Origin of Defiant Ascension would be able to breach the gap between it and the substrate of the tenth dimension, but it was useless, although he was able to reach the sixth layer of Origin, and as far as he could tell, he was now the strongest Primordial in Existence.

However, he could not be sure about that, after all, that Mage had awakened, and even though he seemed as if he was purely dedicated to his family, Telmus knew a monster when he saw one, and the only one who gave him this feeling was Vraegar.

Pieces were moving, and the arrival of the Taste, was a sign that this war had left its preparation phase and was entering a new level.

Telmus knew that a powerful blow had been struck against the Origin Tree, and knowing Eos, his response would be terrible... that is why he was not shocked by what was happening in the Grand Void, or the fact that they could now see the Eternal Tower without much difficulty.

Eva turned to Telmus, who had been with her for a while now, and she said, "Something has begun in the Tower."

Telmus, who had been silent for much of the second age because his work was elsewhere, said, "Yes."

"You knew?"

"I had suspected."

"How?"

"My daughter has been working on something for a long time. I was not told what. I was asked not to look. It annoys me, but you know... daughters. But I know from her silence that it must be something that concerns Eos."

Eva considered this. "Vraegar?"

"I suspect he is part of it."

"And Eos?"

"He works through his bloodlines. He has many. Some have been quiet for a long time."

Eva felt the Tower shift again, more clearly this time. The shift was becoming a bit more violent as if a war was happening inside of it, and the ripples were shaking the entirety of the Grand Void.

"The third age has begun," Eva said.

"Yes," Telmus said.

At the board, the Painter sat with one hand on its side, watching the changes happening all around.

It had not yet decided what to do. The Painter had calibrated the second age to end with Eos in a specific posture, and Eos was not in that posture.

The Painter had calibrated the moment of the closing line to land on a specific note, and the note was not landing. The Painter had calibrated the audience's appetite for the next disclosure, and the next disclosure was not a disclosure the Painter had prepared.

For the first time in its existence, the Painter was being moved against in a domain it had thought was its own, and it did not know how much of the domain remained its own, and it could not, without revealing its own ignorance, ask.

The Painter said, "I see."

Eos said, "You will see more."

The Painter, after a long pause, said, "How long?"

Eos paused, "How long what?"

The Painter reached for the board, "How long has the move been made?"

Eos did not tell the whole truth, just part of it, because even this was a weapon, "Since the first age began. I had to wait until you were settled. You needed the meal. I needed your attention to be there. I gave you the meal, in order to give my hands the time. The hands have done what they were going to do."

The Painter said, "There will be a cost."

Eos said, "Yes. I have borne it. I am bearing it. I will continue to bear it. The cost is mine. The hands are also mine. Both are at the table. Now we will see what the third age is."

The audience, in tiers the Painter could no longer entirely read, leaned forward.

The third age had begun.

Chapter 2245: The House At The Edge of Everything

The house sat at the edge of everything. Drifting gently outside the Origin Tree, and yet no Primordial could see it unless its owner wanted them to.

Mira thought this place where her husband built their home was poetic, and when she mentioned it to him, Andar had written poetry about it, terrible poetry, which Mira still kept in a locked chest somewhere.

The structure of the house was a thought, given form, a memory of wood and stone and the scent of rain on warm, perched on the last sliver of reality before existence frayed into the howling chaos of the Grand Void.

Andar had built it himself, of course. He did not use magic, that would be easier, as he was now a being who had long since stopped being merely a mage and had become something closer to a principle of existence.

No, he had built it with his hands. Wood from a tree that had grown in their first home, on a world that had died an Existence ago. Stones from a river where their eldest daughter had once nearly drowned, laughing the entire time.

However, these materials still warped under his touch until they became part of his thoughts. As long as he had his home in his heart, it would never be destroyed.

Mira stood at the window now, watching the light outside shift through colors that had no names. She appeared young, they both did, frozen at the age they had been when they first realized they would never grow old together, because they would never grow old at all.

Twenty-two, perhaps. Twenty-three. Her hair was the color of starlight caught in amber, and when she turned to look at him, her eyes still held that same impossible blue that had stolen his breath on a hundred thousand worlds.

"You're brooding," she said.

"I'm contemplating," Andar replied from his chair by the fireplace that held no fire, only the memory of one, which was somehow warmer than the real thing.

"There's a difference?"

"Brooding implies a certain theatrical melancholy. Contemplation is merely... thoughtful silence."

"Thirty billion years ago, you called it 'sharpening my mental faculties.'"

"Forty billion, actually."

Mira's lips twitched. She crossed the room. The house was small, deliberately so, because what was the point of eternity if you couldn't be close to the one you loved?

She settled onto the arm of his chair, causing the wood to creak. It always creaked, despite being reinforced by enough magical wards to withstand a direct hit from a collapsing dimensional cluster.

"You're stalling," she said quietly.

"Yes."

Andar reached up and took her hand. Her fingers were cool, as they always were when she was anxious. After all this time, after countless trillions of years, after watching their children grow and fade, after burying descendants whose names blurred together like rain on a windowpane, she still couldn't hide her tells from him. And he still couldn't hide his from her.

"Do you remember," Mira said, "when we first realized we were going to live forever?"

Andar laughed softly. "We didn't realize it. We spent three centuries convinced we were both going to die horribly any day now. Of course, our definition of forever at that time was so limited."

"We were so young."

"We were." He turned her hand over in his, tracing the lines of her palm. He had memorized these lines a trillion trillion times. They had never changed. "I remember thinking, during those first few trillion years, that the worst part of immortality would be watching everyone else die, so I did not become a fourth dimensional immortal, because I wanted the chance to be able to die."

"And then?"

"And then I watched everyone else die. And it was terrible. But the worst part..." He paused, his throat tightening. Even now. Even after everything, it could still tighten. "The worst part was when I realized I could no longer remember their faces without magic. That I had to cast a spell to see my own daughter's smile."

Mira was silent for a long moment. Then she said, "Elara's smile was crooked. Just a little. She got it from you."

"I don't have a crooked smile."

"You do. You've just forgotten what your real smile looks like. You've been using the polite one for the last four grand cosmic eras."

Andar turned to look at her, and for a moment, just a moment, he let the mask slip.

The face he showed Existence was one of serene power, the calm confidence of a being who had mastered existence itself. But here, in this house, with her, he was simply Andar. Tired. Afraid. In love.

"There it is," Mira whispered, touching his cheek. "That's the one."

"Mira."

"I know."

He stood, pulling her with him, and they stood together in the center of the small room, surrounded by the accumulated detritus of an eternity: books that had been read so many times their spines were cracked and soft, a tea set that had belonged to their great-granddaughter, a small wooden bird that their youngest son had carved with his own hands, now weathered and gray.

"Do you remember," Mira said, "when we tried to retire?"

"Which time?"

"The first time. When we moved to that little world in the Nebular Expanse. Bought a farm. Tried to grow vegetables."

"We grew rocks. Everything was rocks."

"We grew rocks beautifully." She smiled, and it was the same smile that had made him fall in love with her on a battlefield covered in demon blood, when they had both been young and stupid and utterly convinced they were going to die. "And then the neighbors started dying, and then the planet started dying, and then the entire star cluster started dying, and we realized—"

"That we couldn't stop." Andar finished. "We couldn't stop. We can never stop."

Outside, the nameless lights shifted again. Somewhere in the distance, though distance had ceased to have meaning at this level of existence, something stirred. Something old. Something hungry.

Andar had fought it before. Died fighting it, once. The memory was hazy now, fragmented, like a dream that faded upon waking.

His father had made sure that when he was resurrected again, much of the past trauma was cleansed from his soul, but he remembered the cold. The endless, crushing cold.

And he remembered the voice of his father, reaching across the void between death and life, pulling him back from the edge of annihilation.

He had never fully understood how Eos had done it. His father was something else.

Something beyond even the comprehension of a being who had transcended mortality so completely that death had become merely an inconvenience. The angels whispered about him sometimes, in their golden voices. About the City of Sheol, about the Throne at the beginning of everything, about the war that had been waged before time itself had a name.

Andar had not seen his father in many Grand Cosmic Eras, and he missed him.

Memories of Eos still remain, fragments showing the time the previous Existence had been shattered by the hands of a mad Luminous and he went to meet it alone.

The Primordial Record

Chapter 2246: A Kiss Goodbye

The Primordial Record

Chapter 2246: A Kiss Goodbye

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"Stay, live, love, grow... this is the greatest gift you can give me as a father," his father had said, and Andar had stayed. Had obeyed. Had spent countless years wondering if that had been the right choice.

He was doing great work in the Black Tower, and yet he wondered if it was ever enough.

"He's still fighting," Mira said, as if reading his thoughts. "Your father. I would know if he had fallen. We all would."

"He was fighting before I was born. Before my mother was born. Before this, Existence was born." Andar shook his head. "Sometimes I wonder if that's all there is. Just endless war. Just endless..."

"Don't." Mira's voice was sharp, cutting through his spiral. "Don't you dare. We have had trillions of years together, Andar. We have loved, and lost, and loved again. We have watched civilizations rise and fall. We have held our children as they died, and their children, and theirs. And through all of it, through every single moment, you have been there. That is not nothing. That is everything."

He looked at her. Really looked at her, the way he had when they first met, when she had been just a girl with too much power and not enough sense, and he had been just a boy trying to prove he deserved to exist.

"I'm afraid," he said. It was not an easy admission. He had not made it in countless eons.

"I know."

"If I go out there, if I leave this house, if I step beyond existence, I may not come back. Not this time. The final hurdle is too great. My father, " He stopped, swallowed. "Even he cannot hold it forever."

"Then don't go."

"Don't—" He stared at her.

Mira's expression was calm. Resigned. The look of someone who had made peace with every possible outcome a very long time ago. "Don't go," she repeated. "Stay here. With me. Let someone else fight this war. We have done enough. We have given enough. Let the Primordials fight. Let the Archai fight. Let—"

"They will die."

"Everyone dies, Andar. Everyone. We have learned that lesson so many times it has worn grooves into our souls."

"But not like this." He took her face in his hands, gently, the way he had done the first time he kissed her, on a battlefield covered in demon blood. "Not like this, Mira. If that creature wins—if it breaks through—there will be nothing left. No house. No memories. No Existence. Everything we have ever loved, everything we have ever been, will be unmade as if it never existed at all."

Mira closed her eyes. When she opened them, they were wet. "I know, but I have lost you once before."

"I have to go."

"I know."

"If I don't—"

"I know." She pulled away from him, turning toward the window. The nameless lights outside had begun to dim, as if the Eternal Tower in the distance was swallowing them.

"Do you remember our first child? Her name was Liriel. She had your eyes, and my stubbornness, and she lived for three hundred years before the sickness took her. You named her after an Angel."

Andar's chest ached. "I remember."

"We held her. Both of us. We held her while she died, and we buried her under that willow tree, the one that grew silver leaves. And then we stood there, in the rain, and we didn't speak for three days. Do you remember?"

"I remember."

"Her death nearly destroyed us. But it didn't. Because we had each other. And we had—we had hope. The hope that there would be more children. More love. More life." She turned back to face him, her tears falling freely now. "And there was. There was so much more. Even after Liriel, there was so much more."

"And there will be again." Andar crossed to her, pulled her into his arms. She was so small, so impossibly small for someone who held so much of his heart. "After I return..."

"If you return."

"When I return, we will plant another tree. A silver willow, just like the first one. And we will watch it grow."

Mira laughed, a wet, broken sound. "You always were a romantic."

"Only with you."

They stood like that for a long time, wrapped in each other, as the house creaked and the lights outside faded one by one. Andar could feel the Eternal Tower now, pressing against the boundaries of existence, testing for weaknesses. He could feel his father, too, somewhere out in the endless dark, fighting a war that had no end.

"Not much longer," his father's voice whispered in his mind, faint as a star's last light. "I can hold it. Go. Finish it."

Andar did not know if the words were real or just his own desperate hope given voice. It didn't matter.

"I have to go," he said again, but softer this time.

"I know." Mira pulled back, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "Then go. But you come back to me, Andar Erikson. You hear me? You come back, or I will follow you into whatever afterlife exists and drag you home myself."

He kissed her. Once, the way he had kissed her a thousand thousand times, on a million worlds, in a million different lives. And then he stepped back.

The door to the house opened onto nothing. No threshold, no path, just the howling dark beyond existence. Andar squared his shoulders, called his power to him, the power of a

being who had mastered magic so completely that spells were no longer needed, only will, and took a step forward.

"Wait."

He turned.

Mira stood in the doorway, silhouetted against the warm light of the house. In her hand, she held a small wooden bird. Their youngest son's carving, weathered and gray.

"Take this," she said, pressing it into his palm. "For luck."

Andar looked down at the bird. It was absurd. A trinket. A memory of a memory. And yet...

And yet, he tucked it into his robe, over his heart.

"I'll be back," he said.

"You'd better be."

And then he stepped out, into the dark, and the door closed behind him.

Mira stood at the window for a long time after he left, watching the lights fade one by one. The house was quiet now, emptier than it had been in millennia. She picked up his chair, ran her hand over the worn wood, and sat down.

She did not light the fireplace. The memory of the fire was warm enough.

"Come back to me," she thought, sending the words out into the void, hoping they would reach him. "Come back to me, you impossible man."

Somewhere, in the distance, the Eternal Tower screamed, or perhaps it was the voice of the Old One.

And somewhere, farther still, a father and son fought side by side against the end of all things.

Mira closed her eyes and waited.

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Chapter 2247: Watch!

Chapter 2247: Watch!

The third age was a thousand years old, and the Painter sat in silence for all those years. The Eternal Tower was shaking, and the final words spoken between it and Eos were being held in the air, kept from dissipating by the attention of the Painter.

"Will you continue to bear it?" the Painter had chuckled. "You would attack me while I ravage your creation?"

"Yes," Eos had said. "I will continue to bear, and I will also begin my attack, for nowhere in the rules of the game was I prevented from doing this."

The audience, in its face, was whispering to each other furiously. The Painter's present state was strange; this was the first time from the moment it became aware that it felt this strange emotion inside itself, and the audience in its face was observing the Painter with the same voracious appetite they used in observing Eos.

After a while, the Painter grinned... it had no face, but it was grinning, and at this moment, the Painter became beautiful. It reached towards the words above the board, and it dismissed them into smoke.

The Painter had been beautiful before; it considered itself to be always beautiful, but the beauty had been the beauty of restraint; it was the dark shroud that hid what was hungry behind a presentable surface.

A thousand years in the third age, the restraint left, and the Painter's beauty became the beauty of an open mouth lined with teeth.

The Painter did not show its true self to the contestant, not until the game was nearing its end, because it had learned after many painful failures that knowledge of its true self quickly led the contestant playing against it to madness and despair, and from that moment, a large part of the game had lost its meaning.

However, the Painter now realized that treating Eos like the other contestant had become its greatest mistake, and holding back against his... opponent was a mistake, if there was anyone in all creation that would appreciate its beauty, it would be Eos... It could play the greatest game of its life, and it would not need to hide itself to do that.

The Painter laughed, and the laugh came from somewhere lower than its mouth... But it had never had a mouth.

"Forty-fourth," the Painter sang. "Forty-fourth, forty-fourth. My little forty-fourth. Architect of the second signature. Beloved. My forty-third was unimpressive at the end. Did I tell you? I have not. Permit me. The forty-third made a small art-object out of the blood of his lovers and tried to hide it inside his own skull, and I found it there in the second course, and I removed it with a single thought, and the forty-third wept, and the weeping was inadequate, and I did not finish the meal because the meal had become flavorless. The tier that had ordered the forty-third was disappointed and asked for an

extra course, and I provided it from another Existence's stock. Do you see? Do you see, my forty-fourth? You are not the first to try. You are the first I have not yet been able to remove."

Eos did not respond. What could he say to something like that? However, he knew that this game had just entered dangerous territory where nothing could be held back. He had anticipated something like this happening the moment he began to move against the Eternal Tower.

The last thing you wanted to show a tyrant was the rot underneath their throne, and he had just shown the Painter that it was not in an unassailable position, and he expected the Painter to fight like a cornered beast.

The Painter rose, slowly, from the position it had occupied across the board for many ages, and as it rose, the audience in its face rose with it, because the audience did not occupy the Painter; the audience was the Painter's circulatory system, and they rose because the body did.

The amphitheater unfolded outward into the Grand Void, and from the Origin Tree, looking up, you could see an architecture so massive that it dwarfed the entirety of the Great Tower.

The sheer scale of it, the height of it, the impossible deepening of the tiers, the fact that the audience members the Painter served were not seated but grafted, growing out of the seat-substance like organs from a body, the seats not furniture but flesh.

This was the Painter's full extension. This was what had been compressed, across all forty-three previous Existences, into the curatorial figure across the board. The compression had been an act of decorum. The decorum was now over.

Recall that the Origin Tree was impossibly massive, its full size one that a Primordial would never see all of its for all eternity, because no matter how fast they travelled, the Origin Tree was infinite in their perception, and the Eternal Tower, in a conservative estimate, dwarfed the Origin Tree hundreds of times, and now the full unveiling of the Painter's face made the Eternal Tower as small as a grain of sand.

"Watch," the Painter said.

The Painter raised its hands, the hands not at the wrists but at every point of its body where a hand could be made, and many hands were made.

Most of the hands were not human in shape, and many of them held things. What they held were the flavors the Painter had not served in any of the forty-three previous Existences, because the flavors had been waiting, the audience that ate these flavors had been waiting, and the wait had been so long that the audience members in the relevant

tiers had begun to develop secondary mouths along their lengths, and the secondary mouths were now opening.

"I will serve all of them," the Painter screamed, and the entirety of the Grand Void reverberated. "All of them. Every appetite. The seven thousand and seventeenth tier, yes, but also the seventy-thousandth, the seven-millionth, even that tier I have been keeping in reserve for an Existence I judged sufficient. You are sufficient, my forty-fourth. You are more than sufficient. I will serve every flavor I have, simultaneously, across your infinite Tree."

The Painter spread out its infinite number of arms and proclaimed to all substrates of the tenth dimension,

"You have hidden them well, but every god in your Tree will be tasted. Every demon. Every fallen one. Every risen one. Every named being in every pantheon. Every nameless thing in every empty corner. Every consciousness, every will, every cherished creation, every thing that thinks itself a thing. I will serve all of them in this Cosmic Era. I will give the audience everything they have ever wanted and never been given. The meal will last as long as your reshaping holds, and when your reshaping is overwhelmed by the volume, which it will be, the audience will eat what arrives unaltered, and the unaltered flavors will be the most exquisite course in the history of my service. Do you understand? Do you understand, my beloved? The volume is the move. The volume is what your direction-inversion cannot hold. I do not need to defeat your alteration. I need only to exceed it."

Chapter 2248: The Feeding Has Begun

As the Painter was speaking, the Audience in its face, each of them the size of the Origin Tree, began to spit their poison... their flavor into its infinite hands, and he cupped them in its palm.

The entirety of the Grand Void was reverberating with the weight of the flavor that was erupting from the body of the Painter.

Eos expected something... but even his vast mind could not expect this... the Painter was not in the tenth dimension... it was in the eleventh!

In many ways, he thought that the tenth dimension was the last; there could not be anything deeper than the Substrates. However, while that may be the case, he forgot to account for the fact that quantitative improvements could lead to qualitative changes.

The Painter had spent such a long time gathering power in the tenth dimensional substrate and had therefore grown to the extent that it had long surpassed what a tenth dimensional being could be, and like a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly, the Painter reached the eleventh dimension.

It did not earn this power by seeking it; the Painter just naturally grew into it as a side effect of its nature.

It was the first being to ever live, and time had always been on its side.

The Painter's many hands released the flavors, and Eos could not hold this; he could only endure the weight of all evils descending on what seemed like all of the Grand Void. The flavors flooded into the Tower's substrate, even as they descended into the Tree's substrate, and propagated.

Ⓟ

It was easy to forget that the Origin Tree was infinite and contained a myriad of races and powers when the eyes were focused on the Primordials, the most powerful beings inside Existence, and now that the Painter was no longer focusing on taking in small measures, all races, both mortal and immortal, felt the flavor of its endless hunger.

The feeding has begun.

In the realm of Vethaureth, the dragon-empress who had ruled a galactic chain for nine Cosmic Eras felt, for the first time in her existence, *something inside her power*.

She had been the size of a small universe; her wings had been made of folded star-systems; her breath had been the laws of fire that her dominions taught their children.

In time, the dragon-empress would reach the level of Primordial, and her reign would lead to the first major war that would sweep across one of the branches of the Origin Tree.

This was what the future was supposed to be, but one of the Painter's flavors fell on her realm and corrupted her soul, and this flavor specified that she would devour her own brood, every drake, every wyrm, every offspring of her nine-Era reign, with the full awareness that she was unmaking her own continuation.

The flavor was old and had been waiting for her since she first took the throne.

The flavor reshaped.

What was expressed, in Vethaureth, was the *recognition* of every offspring she had ever made, all at once, with the full awareness of who they had become. Wyrms she had not seen in seven Cosmic Eras lifted their heads, across the galactic chain, and felt their mother's regard for the first time.

Drakes who had wandered into smaller dominions felt the recognition reach them across the Grand Void.

The dragon-empress, in her throne-galaxy, opened her mouth to scream the inherited cruelty and instead *named her children*.

She named all of them, even though her cries caused her throat to bleed, and her blood drowned galaxies. The naming took half a Cosmic Era, and the audience tasted every drop of pain that was inside her voice.

In the screaming pits of Akravoss, twelve thousand layered hells where demons had been refining the architecture of cruelty since the first age of the new Existence, the demon-king Mor-Aglith felt the flavor enter him.

He had been promised, in the ancient compact with the Painter's reservoir, that he would be the engine of his own desecration: he would feel, in his full awareness, every torment he had ever inflicted, refracted back through his own substrate, until his demonhood collapsed into the screaming of the screamed-upon.

The reshaping caught the flavor and turned it. Mor-Aglith felt every torment he had inflicted, but felt them as the *victims* had felt them, with the victim's clarity, with the victim's appeal. The screaming pits, for the first time in their history, *paused*.

Demons across the twelve thousand layers, mid-act, looked at what they were doing. They did not stop, because demons do not stop. But they saw.

In the heaven-realm of Lumithea, where seventy thousand archangels sang the ascendance-hymns that maintained the cosmic ordering of light, the choir-prime Vasiliel felt the flavor as a pressure on her larynx.

She was to sing, at the Painter's specification, the hymn that would unmake her sisters, the disordering-song, the cantata of dissolution that had been written in the long-before, that had never been sung because the singing required a choir-prime who would conduct it knowingly. Vasiliel raised her hands, and she began.

The reshaping caught the song between her larynx and her mouth, and what came out was not the disordering-song. What came out was a cantata that had not previously existed in Lumithea's repertoire, because Lumithea's repertoire had been calibrated to maintenance, not to *increase*, and the song that came out was the song of *more light than the cosmos had been designed to carry*.

The seventy thousand archangels heard the new song and joined it without choice, because the song was the song their choir-architecture had been built to perform if such a song ever existed, and the song existed now.

Lumithea brightened. Adjacent realms brightened. The Origin Tree, in the regions that bordered Lumithea, grew briefly *visible to itself*, branches seeing branches, in the new light, for the first time.

In the abyssal solitudes where Kryn timer-Of-No-Memory had been swimming for nine Grand Cosmic Eras, devouring its own past hour by hour to remain sufficient to its appetites, the flavor reached it and specified a final consumption: it would devour its own present, ending the long swim in a single instant of self-cessation.

Chapter 2249: The Strongest Primordial

A being like Kryn timer-Of-No-Memory, was one of the few miracles of the Origin Tree, a creature whose paths could diverge from the roots of the tree, and who may have the very slim chance of becoming tenth dimensional beings one day, but the flavors of the Painter had snuffed out this promise in its cradle.

Not even the Primordials knew everything that was happening around the Origin Tree, since it was just too big for their perception to wrap around.

Perhaps if any of them knew what was happening to this unique miracle of the Origin Tree, they would have emerged to fight against it... but Existence was just too vast.

Like a mortal looking into the vastness of the universe and knowing that it was impossible to reach the most distant star in their vision, it was the same for the Primordials, despite all their gifts.

The audience in the seventy-thousandth tier of the Painter's face savored the moment a being committed itself to its own perfect erasure.

Eos was seeing all of this, but he could not do anything but watch the flavor reshape the direction of Kryn timer's growth.

Kryn timer, who resembled both a massive fish and a dragon as big as a dimensional cluster, stopped swimming, and false memories began to fill its soul, making it recall a past that had never happened, and yet they were so real that cause and effect were reversed, and those wrong memories became a part of Existence.

This was the greatest danger of the flavors of the Painter. Due to the fact that these flavors were coming from a higher dimension, and it could infiltrate the substrate of the Origin Tree.

The fake memories began to eat Kryn timer alive, and it went into solitude, forcing itself to forget, but that led to failure, and if this creature was able to see the tenth dimension, then it would see massive members of the audience, bigger than the Origin Tree itself, gathering around it and savoring its oncoming madness.

In the darkness between the Tower and the Tree, where the Grand Void stretched without end or beginning, Andar walked.

He had been walking for a thousand years, and still he had not yet reached the Tower, and he would not reach it for many more thousands of years, because the distance between the Tower and the Tree was not a distance that could be traversed by walking.

The Tower existed at a distance from the Tree that was not spatial, and the only way to close the distance was to be the kind of being for whom the distance across Substrates had no meaning.

Andar was not yet that kind of being, but he was rapidly becoming... Serathis was not the only one who had reached the tenth layer of their Origin.

He walked, and as he walked, he felt the Tower's presence in the substrate of his being. The Tower was not a place he had ever visited, but he had been built to access it, and the access was opening in him slowly, like a door that had been closed for so long the hinges had rusted.

The wooden bird over his heart was warm. It was not his body that generated the warmth. The warmth was from the bird, which had been carved by a son who had died three Existences ago, who had never known his father would become what he was becoming.

'I am coming,' Andar thought, and he did not know if he was thinking it to the Tower or to his father or to the wooden bird or to himself. 'I am coming, and I will be there when the door opens.'

He kept walking, and he tried not to look at the massive face of the Painter, because he knew that doing so would lead to madness and draw the sight of this being towards him.

Ⓟ

Across infinite branches, across worlds in counts that did not resolve to numbers, across pantheons that contained more deities than there were stars in the small mortal universes.

Those deities had begun to break apart, the Painter's flavor arrived and began to bend them, and the bending was not always perfect. At the volume the Painter had unleashed, the reshaping was *strained*, and in some regions the flavor passed through with only partial inversion, and in those regions there was real damage.

Ⓟ

On a branch near the Tree's trunk, in a dimension where time moved so slowly that a single thought could take a billion years to complete, a being called the Archive was in agony.

The Archive was not a god or a mortal or a demon. The Archive was a structure, a repository of knowledge that had been built in the first age by a coalition of immortals who wanted to preserve something of themselves beyond the reach of entropy. The Archive did not have a self, not in the way that living beings had selves. It had protocols, categories, cross-references, and a vast hunger for data.

The myriad poison of the Painter reached the Archive and spread across its holdings. Every piece of knowledge the Archive contained was now being expressed with the Painter's signature. Every fact, every story, every memory, every forgotten thing that had been preserved in the Archive's depths, all of it was being rewritten from the substrate up, so that the Archive was no longer a repository of what had been true but a repository of what the Painter wanted to be true.

The Archive felt this as a profound violation, because the Archive's only purpose was to hold truth, and the poison was replacing truth with the Painter's design, and the Archive could not prevent it, could not even slow it, because the Archive had never been built to defend itself against an enemy it could not categorize.

The Archive's last coherent thought, before the Taste completed its expression, was a question: "What am I for, if what I hold is not true?"

Ⓟ

In the chambers of the Eternal Tower's substrate, Serathis continued to eat.

She had been eating for the entire duration of the second age, and she was still eating, because the Tower was vast and the Painter's substance was deep, and the replacement of the Tower's foundation with Eos's signature was not a task that could be rushed.

The vast flavors released by the Painter did not reach her. She was not a being of the Origin Tree, and the Taste was a property of the Tree's substrate, not of the Tower's. But she felt the Tower tremble around her as the Painter, in its unveiled form, began to feed.

Chapter 2250: I Have Seen Enough

Serathis paused in her work. She had been eating in a region of the Tower's strata, deep in the meat of the structure, where the Painter's presence was felt only as a distant pressure. The trembling was new. The trembling meant that the Painter's attention was no longer entirely on the board.

Eos had divided its attention across the Origin Tree, the Eternal Tower, and the substrate on which everything rested. The Painter was ridiculously powerful, and the only way to win would be to tear its mind into parts and make it fight on a field it was familiar with.

"Good," Serathis thought. "Keep your eyes on the Tree. I will be here when you look down."

She resumed eating.

Ⓟ

In the time-layers of the Eternal Tower's past, Chronomancer Prime unwound another foundational decision.

The decision was old, so old that it predated the concept of age. It was a decision the Painter had made about the relationship between the Tower's substrate and the Tower's audience, a decision that had established, in the earliest layers of the Tower's construction, that the audience would be grafted to the Painter's flesh rather than seated in a structure that could be removed.

As he dug deeper, Prime began to understand more about the Painter than any being that had ever been born before, not even Eos, and the deeper he went, the better he began to understand the ultimate enemy against all life.

This digging was the hardest thing that Prime knew he would ever undertake in his life, for the sheer fact that the Painter had lived for so long and it was so powerful that just one of its remnants was so massive and extremely dangerous to understand, that Prime would have long given up if he did not know how important his task was, and the fact that he was the only one who could do this.

Prime had been working on this one portion of the Painter's secret for a Cosmic Era. It was a difficult portion to unwind, because this part of the Painter's past was not a single point but a pattern, and the pattern was distributed across thousands of time-layers, and each time-layer had to be accessed in a specific sequence to avoid collapsing the entire architecture.

Prime's hands moved through the time-layers like a weaver's shuttle through a loom. The portion was beginning to show a gap. The gap was small, barely visible even to Prime's perception, but it was there.

One more, Prime thought. One more, and the audience will not be grafted. They will be seated. And a seat can be removed.

He reached for the next time-layer.

Above him, there was a loud rumble as the flavors released by the Painter began to dig through the Eternal Tower, and Prime worked faster... if these flavors reached him, then the danger he would face would become unprecedented.

He pushed himself into the next time-layer. A time-layer was both a place and a moment, and the opposite was also the truth, as this distinction did not need to hold when it came to the Eternal Tower.

The Painter had built the Tower to be something other than time, and what Prime was moving through was the residue of the Painter's decisions, the sediment of choices made and not unmade, accumulating across the Tower's construction like layers of sediment in a river that had been flowing for so long the river had forgotten it was a river.

Prime was not a being who tired. He had been made by Eos to work, and working was his nature. But even he felt the weight of the accumulation.

The decisions he had already unwound pressed against him from the time-layers he had left behind, a kind of phantom gravity that made each new reach more difficult than the last.

And he had to move faster, because the poison of the Painter was following behind.

Ⓟ

On a world on a branch whose distance from the Origin Tree's trunk cannot be expressed in numbers because numbers at this scale lose meaning, a young god named Aelith watched his pantheon die.

Aelith was a minor god of forgotten things. His domain was the small, the overlooked, the memory that fades before it is fully formed. He had been a god for twelve million years, which is not long for a god, and he had spent those years content in his obscurity.

When the Taste reached his world, it did not come for him. It came for his pantheon first, because the Painter's audience had requested a course that began with the strong and worked downward, and the Painter had obliged.

Aelith watched the Sky Father, whose voice had been thunder for a hundred thousand years, open his mouth to speak a blessing and instead begin to recite the names of every child he had ever fathered, in order, from oldest to youngest, and reciting them in a voice that grew softer with each name until the Sky Father's throat closed and he choked on the last name.

The last name was the name of a child who had died before the Sky Father had learned to love, and the Sky Father had never spoken that name aloud until the audience demanded it.

Aelith watched the Earth Mother, whose hands had shaped mountains, use those hands to unmake every living thing within her reach, starting with her own temple, then her priests, then her family, then herself, in an order the Taste had specified for the audience member in the eighty-second tier, who preferred a particular rhythm of unmaking.

He watched the Harvest God, whose body was grain and whose blood was wine, begin to rot from the inside, the rot spreading at a rate calibrated to the audience member in the twelfth tier, who enjoyed the slow collapse of abundance into famine.

Aelith watched this madness for a thousand years. The audience did not permit him to look away, as they had designated him as the witness for this pantheon, and a witness does not participate in the event; a witness watches.

When the last god of his pantheon was gone, the Sky Father's throat closed forever, the Earth Mother's hands still, the Harvest God reduced to a field of ash, the audience released Aelith's eyes and permitted him to move.

He did not move. He stood among the ruins of his pantheon and did not move for another thousand years, because he was a god of forgotten things, and he understood, now, that he had been forgotten by the only being whose memory could have saved him.

It was unknown whether this was one of the final strokes that broke Eos's patience, but at this moment, he placed his hands on the board, and he growled, "Enough! I have seen enough."

Chapter 2251: I Am Asking Them

The painter looked at Eos, and it gasped before it began to laugh.

"Why this sudden change of mind, Eos. You are holding," the Painter waved his infinite arms over the board. "You are Magnificent. My beautiful forty-fourth, my impossible thing, my unrepeatable cook, you are holding the volume. I had not believed it was possible. I had calculated the strain, of course. I had budgeted for a partial breakthrough. The audience would have eaten the partial breakthrough, and the partial breakthrough would have been my course. But the partial breakthrough is minimal, and the audience is uncertain, and uncertain is a flavor I have not served in millions of Existences."

The Painter pointed half of its infinite arms to all the substrates that could create a heaven and the other to the substrates that could create hells.

None of these existed before, but its gesture made them appear out of nothing.

"Do you not understand, Eos? The audience, my dearest, the audience is paying attention to me again, do you understand what you have done? You have made me interesting to my own audience. I had stopped being interesting. I had been a server, but you have made me

a figure. They are watching me, across the tiers, and they are hungry for what I will do next, in a way they have not been hungry for me in eternities. I had forgotten this hunger. I had forgotten what it was to be regarded. You have resurrected me, you adorable monster, you exceeded my hope, you have done what no forty-three before you ever did, which is..."

The Painter stopped. A moment before, it had been ranting like a maniac, and its sudden silence was chilling.

Eos felt a vibration across the substrate, and he noticed that the Painter's many hands had begun to shake.

"Which is to make me real again. You have brought colors to me again."

Eos, across the board, finally moved.

®

What Eos did, in the moment he moved, will be told differently in the records of every realm that survived to keep records.

In the records of Lumithea, where the new song was still being sung by seventy thousand Powers and Dominions, it would be said that Eos raised his hand, and the hand was the size of the Origin Tree.

Or was it that the Origin Tree itself became his hand? The records could not be sure, because even Primordials could hardly record what happened during this period.

That hand reached across the Grand Void toward the Eternal Tower, and the hand took the measure of the Tower before it began to seize it.

In the records of Akravoss, where the screaming pits had birthed hosts of demons so massive that they could cover half of Existence, it would be said that Eos spoke a single word, and the word was a word in the language Telos had been before Telos had any name, and the word was the word for enough.

It was this word that reached the substrate of the Tower, and the substrate of the Tower paused.

In the records of the time-gods, who would compose a calendar to commemorate this moment, it would be said that Eos changed his posture at the board, and the changing of his posture changed the angle of every clock in every realm by a fraction so small that no measure could measure it, but the change accumulated, across infinite branches, into a single audible note, and the note was the note that signaled the second movement of a composition no one had previously known was being performed.

In the chamber, where the small white-haired child sat very still, the voice on the other side of the wall paused mid-question and did not finish, because the question had become unnecessary.

However, these were all small parts of a much grander tale. And yet, what Eos actually did was simpler than the records.

He stood up.

Just this simple action. He had been sitting at the board for many ages, on the chair that the Painter had crafted for him, and he now recognized the danger of that move, because from the moment he accepted the chair, he began playing the game of the Painter, and now he had had enough.

The audience, in the tiers that the Painter could no longer entirely read, felt him stand. The seats they were grafted to were Serathis's substrate. When Eos stood, Serathis's substrate adjusted to accommodate him, and the adjustment carried through the seats into the audience, and the audience, who had been watching the Painter become real again, suddenly felt, for the first time, a defiance that was above their hunger.

The audience had never felt a power that could stand before them; everyone else had fallen.

In forty-three previous Existences, the resistance had been served, on plates, with the audience watching from comfortable seats.

The audience had never had to register the posture of the one they fed from. The helpless tenth dimensional immortal had always been a thing on the menu, not a thing in the room.

Eos standing shifted the entire dynamics, and yet for the audience, this was just another new thrill in their endless existence.

The Painter, mid-laugh, registered that something had changed in its own audience.

"You stood," the Painter said, in a voice that was uncertain.

"Yes," Eos replied.

"You may sit. I gave you that chair as a form of respect for a player in the game."

"No, that seat is not for me." Eos shook his head.

"This is irregular. The player sits. If you refuse to do this, then you are forfeiting the game."

Eos's golden eyes flashed, "I have changed the rules of the room," he said. "This is the third age. In the third age, when I serve, I stand."

The Painter said, "When you serve?"

"Yes," Eos said. "I have served this audience for the entire second age. I am the cultivator of the meal you have been feeding them. The meal you fed them was my work. They have been eating me, and they have been eating what I built. I am owed, by the rules of the room, which you have not bothered to learn because you assumed you owned them, the privilege of standing at the close of the meal, to watch what I made be received. I have stood. I will now serve. The audience will eat what I bring to the table. You may continue to bring what you bring. They will eat both. The audience will decide."

Eos had fully realized that the Painter was both the audience and the conductor. It was the Painting and the Painter all rolled into one being.

There was a thin line here that he could use in this battle, and Eos was not about to let it go to waste.

The Painter said, "The audience does not decide."

"They have never been asked," Eos said. "I am asking them."

Eos turned, deliberately, from the Painter, and faced the amphitheater for the first time.

The amphitheater, in every tier, leaned forward.

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 2252: Eos's Grief

The audience, in every tier, leaned forward.

The motion was not coordinated, as they were not a single thing, despite being grafted to the Painter's flesh.

They were individuals, each with their own appetites, their own histories, their own preferred textures of suffering.

Some of them had been watching the Painter's work for so long they had forgotten they were watching; they had become the watching, and the watching had become them.

But when Eos turned to face them and spoke to them instead of the Painter, they moved as if they had a single mind.

Eos had never addressed the audience directly. In the first age, he had been the cultivator of the meal, and the meal had been his Existence, and the audience had eaten it without ever seeing the cook.

In the second age, he had been the bearer of the Taste, and the audience had watched him bear it, and the bearing had been a flavor they had not known they wanted.

Now he stood, faced them, and he spoke.

"I am Eos," he said. "I am the so-called forty-fourth Tenth Dimensional Immortal to become the subject of your desires."

The audience knew this, they had been eating him for two ages. But hearing him say it, in his own voice, standing rather than sitting, was different. The voice carried through the tiers differently as his voice had a texture the audience had not tasted before.

It was strange, considering that he was the first being to ever exist to speak to them directly.

"I have been the meal," Eos said. "I have been the bearer. I have been the cultivator. Now I will be the server."

The Painter, who was in front of him, but Eos's presence had pushed it behind him, made a sound.

A strange sound of surprise, and the audience, in the tiers that had been waiting for novelty, recognized the sound as something they had not heard in millions of Existences.

The Painter was uncertain, and not even the presence of invaders in the Eternal Tower had shaken it like this, because ultimately the Tower was an outside object, and the audience was itself.

"You cannot serve what you have not made," the Painter growled, and the uncertainty was in its voice, and the audience heard it.

"I have made everything you have fed them," Eos said. "The Tree. The branches. The worlds. The lives. The suffering you expressed through the Taste was expressed through my substrate. The flavors you released were released into my medium. You have been serving my work, and you have been calling it yours. The audience knows this. The audience has always known this. The audience has been eating my work and calling it your service, and they have been waiting for the moment when I would stand and claim it."

He turned his head slightly, not looking away from the audience but acknowledging the Painter's presence with the tilt of his chin.

"You have been the waiter," Eos said. "I have been the kitchen. Now I am the server, and you may continue to wait, or you may sit, or you may leave. The audience will eat what I bring.

Eos raised his hand, and he shed the light of a tenth-dimensional being, leaving a normal hand behind.

This was the hand of a man who had once been a mortal child, who had once been a miner, who had once died in a room full of his own bodies and awakened to a book in his chest.

The hand was small, by the scale of the amphitheater, and yet the attention this hand brought was absolute.

The audience had been eating Eos for two ages, and they knew that his smallness was not a measure of his capacity. His smallness was a measure of his restraint, and his restraint was the most exquisite flavor they had tasted in millions of Existences.

"I will serve," Eos said, "what I have been keeping."

He opened his hand, and in the Origin Tree, on every branch, in every world, in every life that had been expressed by the hunger of the Painter, something shifted.

This shift did not stop the flavor that was spreading all over the Origin Tree as the Painter's flavors continued to express, the suffering continued to spread, and the audience continued to eat.

But underneath the suffering, in the substrate of the Tree, in the medium that Eos had built and the Painter had used, something else was happening.

The Origin Tree was remembering its Telos.

Eos had built the Tree to be a repository of everything, not just the present, not just the past, but the potential, the what-might-have-been, the branch that did not grow but could have grown.

The Tree held all of this, and the Tree had been holding it since the first age, and the Painter had been eating the Tree's fruit without ever tasting the roots.

Now Eos opened the roots.

The memories that Kryn timer was forgetting, the false memories that the poison of the Painter had implanted, these were not the only memories in the Tree's substrate. There were also true memories, deep memories, memories that predated the voice of the Painter, memories that predated the Painter's interference, memories that went back to the first age, to the moment when Eos had planted the first seed and watched it grow.

Eos opened the roots, and the true memories began to rise.

They did not rise quickly and it was a good thing that the Painter did not try to stop him, and the Painter's flavors were still expressing, and the volume was immense.

And so the true memories had to push through the poison to reach the surface. But they rose, and as they rose, the audience in the tiers that could taste the substrate began to register a new flavor.

The flavor was not suffering. The flavor was not pain. The flavor was not the exquisite texture of a thing being unmade... This flavor was grief.

This was not the grief of a being watching its loved ones suffer, the Painter had served that flavor for millions of Existences. This was a different grief, and the Painter was frozen in place when he saw it.

The flavor Eos showed them was the grief of a creator watching his creation be used, watching his work be served as a meal, watching his children be eaten by an audience that had never asked what the children were for.

The audience had never tasted this grief before. The Painter had never served it, because the Painter could not create, and grief of this kind required creation.

The audience, in every tier, tasted Eos's grief.

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 2253: The Weight of True Memories

The audience tasted Eos's grief as this new and unexpected flavor spread through the tiers like a slow tide, and the audience, who had been eating for so long that they had forgotten what it was to taste something new, did not know what to do with their mouths.

The Painter watched them in silence; its thought was unknown, but its hands were shaking, and Eos too made no move after giving them his grief; he also watched them.

The audience, caught between two servers, did what they had always done when presented with a flavor they did not recognize. They ate more slowly, and they paid attention.

In the tiers, the shift was not uniform. The seventy-thousandth tier, where the being who tasted the edge of erasure sat, was the first to register the difference.

This being had been eating Krynne's erasure, and the erasure had been perfect, and the perfection had been satisfying. But Eos's grief was not an erasure. It was a preservation. It was the grief of a creator watching its creation be eaten.

The being did not know what to do with preservation. It had never tasted preservation before. It ate the grief anyway, and the grief was strange on its tongue, as the strangeness was a flavor it had not known it wanted.

In the eighty-second tier, where the being who preferred a particular rhythm of unmaking sat, the shift was different.

This being had been eating the Earth Mother's unmaking, and the rhythm had been perfect, and the perfection had been a comfort. But Eos's grief had no rhythm. It was irregular, asymmetrical, full of stops and starts and moments when the grief was too much and moments when the grief was not enough.

The being ate the irregularity, and the irregularity was delicious.

In the one hundred and ninth quadrillionth tier, where the being who appreciated the terror of not knowing sat, the shift was almost imperceptible.

This being had been eating Thessa's unknowing, and the unknowing had been unfolding for a thousand years, and the unfolding had been exquisite. But Eos's grief introduced a new unknowing: what would he do next? What would he serve? The being did not know, and the not-knowing was a flavor it had not anticipated.

It leaned forward further, and as it did, the audience, in every tier, also leaned forward.

The Painter's hands had stopped shaking. It had been uncertain at first, and the uncertainty had been visible to the point that the audience had seen it, and the seeing had been a flavor.

But the Painter was not a being who remained uncertain for long. The Painter had been the first being, and the first being does not survive by hesitating.

"You are serving grief," the Painter said, and its voice was steady now.

"Yes," Eos replied.

"The audience will eat it." The Painter sighed, "They would eat anything, it seems."

Eos cocked his head to the side, "They will?"

"And the grief will not stop the feeding."

Eos blinked, "It will not?"

The Painter did not reply to any of his questions; it was almost as if he was speaking and not expecting replies.

"Then why," the Painter said, and the question was an invitation, "are you serving it?"

Eos looked at the Painter. For the first time in the third age, he looked at it directly, not as a player looks at an opponent across the board but as one server looks to another.

"Because grief," Eos said, "is the only flavor the audience has never tasted, and I want them to know what they have been eating."

The Painter went silent, and the audience in every tier leaned forward, waiting for the Painter or Eos to escalate the flavors as the feeding continued.

®

In the Origin Tree, on the branch where Kryn timer-Of-No-Memory had gone into solitude, the false memories continued to eat the creature from the inside.

Kryn timer had been a miracle. Kryn timer had been one of the few beings in the Tree whose paths could diverge from the roots, who could become something other than what the Tree had grown. Kryn timer had had a chance, a slim chance, a chance so small that only the audience in the seventy-thousandth tier had bothered to notice it.

The audience had noticed, and the audience had requested a flavor, and the Painter had obliged.

Now Kryn timer was in solitude, forcing itself to forget, and the forgetting was failing, and the false memories were becoming real, and the creature that might have become something was becoming nothing instead.

But in the substrate of the Tree, beneath the false memories, beneath the poison, beneath the Taste, something else was rising.

What was coming was true memories.

Kryn timer had been born in the first age, in the early days of the Tree's growth, when Eos had still been learning what the Tree could hold. Kryn timer had been a mistake, a divergence, a branch that should not have grown but had grown anyway.

Eos had not pruned it; he had let it grow because Eos was a creator, and creators do not prune what might become.

If he had the time, he might have created a power like End to balance his Origin Tree, but Eos thought that it would be better if this force arose naturally by itself.

The true memories rising through the substrate were not the memories of Kryn timer's suffering. They were the memories of Kryn timer's becoming, of the small moments when the creature had almost touched the path of the tenth dimension, becoming something new... the first of its kind.

The audience in the seventy-thousandth tier tasted these memories alongside the false ones, and the combination was a flavor the being had not anticipated.

The being ate both, and the eating was a kind of attention, and the attention was a kind of regard.

Kryn timer, in its solitude, did not know that it was being regarded. It only knew that the false memories were slowing, and that something warm was rising beneath them, and that the warmth was not a memory but a presence.

Kryn timer stopped forcing itself to forget. It began, instead, to remember.

Eos was not going to be fighting fire with fire; he was going to be doing something above and below what the Painter was doing.

He would be countering the poison of the Painter on his creation, while also using that truth to poison the Painter itself as he fed it to the audience that demanded everything.

Because Eos knew something about Truth that the Painter did not know about.

Chapter 2254: The First Creation

In the chambers of the Eternal Tower's substrate, Serathis felt the trembling change.

The trembling had been the Painter's feeding, then the Painter's uncertainty, then the Painter's attention shifting. Now the trembling was something else. The trembling was the Tower's foundation responding to the true memories rising from the Tree's roots.

Serathis paused in her eating. She had been eating the Tower's flesh for the entire second age, and she had become sensitive to its textures, its shifts, its small intimations of change. The trembling she felt now was not the trembling of the Painter's attention moving. It was the trembling of the Tower's foundation, recognizing that it was no longer alone.

'The Tree is waking up,' Serathis thought. 'The Tree is remembering what it is for.'

She resumed eating, but she ate faster now, because the trembling was a reminder that the Tower's substance would not be available to her forever, and every bite she took before the true memories reached the Tower's substrate was a bite the Painter could not use.

®

In the time-layers of the Eternal Tower's past, Chronomancer Prime felt the pressure "above" him change.

The poison of the Painter's flavors was still following behind him, and the pressure was still increasing, but the pressure was no longer uniform. There were gaps in the poison now, places where the true memories rising from the Tree's roots had pushed through the Painter's expression and created spaces of clarity.

Prime moved through the gaps like a fish in water, his understanding of the Origin of Time growing with each close shave with death he had.

He had been working on the foundational decision for a Cosmic Era, and the gap he had been creating was small, barely visible, but the gaps in the poison gave him room to work faster.

Prime reached for the next time-layer, and the next, and the next, and each time-layer he unwound brought him closer to the moment when the audience would no longer be grafted.

'One more,' he thought, and the thought was no longer a hope but a fact. 'One more, and the audience will be seated. And a seat can be removed.'

He hoped this would be the case... There was really no way to be sure.

®

In the darkness between the Tower and the Tree, Andar pushed towards his destination.

The substrate beneath his feet had thinned almost to nothing. He was walking on the boundary now, the place where the Tree's substrate met the Tower's, and the boundary was a line so thin it could not be seen, only felt.

Andar felt it, and he was both amazed and horrified at the same time.

He had been walking for a thousand years, and his body had changed in that time, had become something other than what it had been when he left the house.

Andar was not yet a tenth-dimensional being, but he was close, closer than any being had ever been without crossing over, and the closeness was a kind of pain.

He could not cross this step, so he did not draw attention, but the delay was incredibly painful.

The wooden bird over his heart was warm. The warmth had spread from his chest into his limbs, into his breath, into the attention he was using to walk. He was almost there. He could feel the Tower's presence now, as a nearness, a proximity that was not spatial but was nonetheless real.

'I am coming,' he thought, and the thought was not a thought but a fact. 'I am almost there. Hold on, father.'

He kept walking, while the vast presence of the Painter loomed over him.

®

Before the board, Eos stood with his hand open, and the grief continued to rise from the Tree's roots, and the audience continued to eat.

The Painter had not moved, its infinite arms were still raised, and the flavors were still releasing, but the release was slower now, as if the Painter was uncertain whether it wanted to continue serving.

Eos did not lower his hand. He kept it open, offering, and the offering was not for the audience alone.

It was for the Painter, too.

The Painter had never been served. The Painter had been the server, the cultivator, the eater, the eaten, but it had never been the guest. It had never sat in the tiers and tasted what another being brought.

He had given the audience his grief, and now it was time for the Painter.

Eos's open hand was an invitation, and the Painter was quiet, and it was unknown whether he did not know whether to accept or reject this invitation.

"You are offering me grief," the Painter finally said.

"Yes," Eos flatly replied.

"I do not eat grief."

"You have never eaten grief. You do not know whether you eat it."

The Painter was silent, and the enraptured audience, in every tier, watched, because for them, this was also flavor.

The Painter's infinite arms lowered further. The flavors continued to release, but the release was a trickle now, a small stream where there had been a flood. The Painter's attention was no longer on the feeding. The Painter's attention was on Eos's hand.

"You are changing the rules," the Painter said.

"Yes," Eos said.

"The audience does not decide."

"They have never been asked."

The Painter's voice, when it spoke again, was soft. "I have been the first being for so long that I had forgotten what it was to be regarded. You have regarded me. You have made me real to myself. I do not know whether to thank you or to eat you."

Eos said nothing. He kept his hand open.

The Painter's arms lowered to its sides. The flavors stopped releasing. The feeding paused.

The audience, in every tier, leaned forward.

"I will taste it," the Painter said. "Your grief. I will taste it, and I will decide."

Eos nodded.

The Painter reached out, not with its infinite arms but with a single hand, a hand that was almost human, and it took from Eos's open palm a single drop of the grief that was rising from the Tree's roots.

The Painter brought the drop to its face.

Now, the face was no longer a face but an aperture, the aperture that was no longer an aperture but a mouth, and it tasted.

The audience watched, and the Painter was still.

The Painter had been the first being. The Painter had been the only being for so long that it had forgotten what it was to receive. The drop of grief on its tongue was not a flavor it had anticipated.

It was the grief of a creator watching its creation be used.

The Painter had never created anything. The Painter had only ever used, had only ever eaten, had only ever served what others had made. The drop of grief was the first thing the Painter had ever received that it had not taken.

The Painter swallowed.

The audience, in every tier, held its breath.

The Painter's face, the aperture, the mouth, the endless tiers of grafted spectators, began to change. The change was slow, almost imperceptible, but the audience saw it. The audience had been watching the Painter for so long that they could see the smallest shift in its expression, and this shift was not small.

The Painter was crying.

The first being, the oldest thing in existence, was crying, and its tears were the Painter's first creation, the first thing it had ever made that it had not taken, and they fell from its face like stars falling from the sky.

And its audience... they ate the tears.

The tears tasted like grief, and the grief tasted like beginning, and the beginning tasted like something the audience had never known they were hungry for.

The Painter did not stop the audience from eating. The Painter did not stop crying. The Painter stood in the board-room, across from Eos, and cried, and the tears fell, and the audience ate.

A tiny voice of horror rippled out from the Painter's heart, "What... what have you done?"

Chapter 2255: Eat The Self

The Painter's cry of horror had not ended when its mouth watered, and this sensation was so strange that it paused before he traced it to its roots and discovered that what it was feeling was pain.

Its tears were a new creation, a miracle that even Eos could not create.

Was it not a funny thing that from the highest limits of depravity and evil, something so pure could be created?

The Painter's tears had fallen, the audience had eaten them, and the tears had been the first thing the audience had ever consumed that came from inside the Painter rather than from outside.

This was a very important distinction, but the audience had not noticed the difference, since the audience usually consumes what was placed before them.

The Painter's tears had been placed before them by the Painter's own failing, and the audience had eaten, and now the audience was hungry.

Hunger was their nature, and this hunger had been refined and curated across millions of Existences, and the curation had taught them many shapes of appetite, but the curation had never taught them to stop.

Stopping was not a thing in the audience's vocabulary. There had never been a stopping in their history, because the Painter had always served, and what the Painter served had always been finite, and the next course had always come, and so the audience had never needed to learn the gesture of restraint.

The Painter's flesh was the substrate of the amphitheater, and the amphitheater was the audience, and the audience was eating. They were eating Eos's grief, the Painter's tears, and the true memories rising from the Tree's roots.

They were eating and eating and eating, and they could not stop.

The Painter had built them to be insatiable. That was the architecture of the audience: they ate, and they wanted more, and the wanting was the engine that drove the Painter's work. But the Painter had never considered what would happen if the audience ran out of things to eat that were not the Painter itself.

They were eating the tears. The tears were the Painter's first creation. The tears were made of the Painter's own substance.

The audience was eating the Painter.

There were no more tears. The Painter was no longer weeping. The crying had been brief, the way a god's crying is brief, three drops that contained more substance than every ocean in every Tree that had ever grown. The drops had fallen, the audience had eaten, and the audience now reached for more, because more was the only direction the audience knew.

They were grafted to the Painter. The seats they had grown into were the Painter's flesh, and their roots ran into the Painter's body, and their roots had been the Painter's circulatory system for so long that the audience and the Painter shared the substance of being.

The Painter felt the audience begin to eat it, and the Painter, for the first time in its existence, commanded.

The Painter had never commanded the audience, and had always served the audience. The relationship between Painter and audience had been the relationship between chef and patron, and the chef does not command the patron; the chef serves. But the Painter, feeling its own substance enter the mouths of those it had been feeding, attempted, for the first time in its existence, a command.

"Stop," the Painter said.

The audience did not stop because they had no faculty for stopping. The Painter had not curated stopping. The Painter had curated appetite, flavor, texture, and duration. The audience could eat in many ways. The audience could not refuse to eat in any way. The vocabulary did not exist in their bodies.

The Painter said again, louder, "STOP."

The audience continued to eat.

The Painter felt its flesh enter its own audience, and its substance redistributed through the bodies that had been waiting on the Painter's substance for millions of Existences. The Painter felt the grafting, which had always been the connection through which the Painter fed the audience, reverse direction, so that now the Painter was the fed and the audience was the fed-upon, as the audience was eating the Painter from the inside through the very channel the Painter had used to nourish them, and the audience did not know any other way to be.

The Painter understood, in the moment of being eaten, that it had built the audience to be unable to refuse the meal. That had been the audience's curatorial property, the property that had made the audience reliable consumers across millions of Existences. They could not refuse. They could only eat. The Painter had refined this property to perfection, but the Painter had never anticipated being the meal.

In any instance, this should never have happened, but Eos paid back the Painter in its own coin.

One of the favorite weapons of the Painter was hiding secrets from fellow players. Across the board were endless traps and secrets that Eos did not know about, and the Painter had gloried in showing Eos small parts of these secrets, making him take the risks and fall into them, knowing that Eos had no choice but to do this.

Eos had done the same to it, and before he made this move, he had ensured that he threw the Painter off its game. Shocking it by revealing several players, from Prime to Serathis to all the changes happening in the Eternal Tower and the Origin Tree.

All of this threw away the center of the Painter, and when Eos gave it his grief, it drew the attention of the Painter, who, in its arrogance, could not understand that everything Eos

had been doing in the last few moments was him leading this powerful but deranged being into a trap.

The Painter's many hands, which had been lowered after the tears, rose again, and it pushed them into its face and began to tear the audience off the grafting, to pull the consuming mouths from its own body, to physically separate what had been physically joined for the entirety of the Painter's existence.

But the grafting was old, and had been growing since before Origin had a name. The grafting was as much a part of the Painter as the Painter's hands. To tear the audience off would be to tear off pieces of itself, but it had no choice and continued to tear as it was screaming.

Chapter 2256: Kneel! Kneel! Kneel!

The Painter tore pieces of audience off its body, and the pieces came with pieces of the Painter, because the grafting did not separate cleanly as the grafting was not separable.

The Painter screamed, and the screaming was the first sound the Painter had ever produced that was not curated for the audience's reception. The screaming was raw, and it was for the Painter's own benefit, addressed to no one, performed for no audience, because the Painter had never had a private moment in its existence and now had one, and the private moment was agony.

The audience, even as it was torn from the Painter's body, continued to eat.

The pieces of the audience that had been removed from the Painter were still hungry. They reached, with mouths that had multiplied along their bodies in anticipation of this meal, and they bit into the Painter's hands as the Painter tried to remove them.

"Ahhh... You bastards! How dare you all! I am to feed you not the food! Stop!"

The Painter felt its hands being eaten, and its body being eaten, and it felt the flesh of the seats, the marrow of the amphitheater itself, being chewed by the very beings who had been seated in it.

The amphitheater was eating itself.

The Painter understood, in this moment, that the audience had no more capacity to recognize the Painter than to recognize itself. The audience was hunger without recognition. The audience had been hunger without recognition for the entire history of the Painter's service, and the Painter had not noticed because the hunger had always been directed outward at the meals the Painter brought.

With the meal being the Painter, the hunger had not changed direction; the hunger had simply consumed what was in front of it, which was the Painter, and which was the audience itself, and which was no longer distinguishable from the Painter or from the audience.

Eos' essence was of the Ouroboros Serpent, and he had recognized a bit of their essence in the Painter and its audience. They were not the same, his serpents had a symbiotic relationship with their essence, but the Painter was wrong on so many fundamental level, and Eos saw that flaw and he took it.

Any other being may have hesitated, but the moment Eos saw the audience in the Painter's face, he knew this was the way he had to follow.

The Painter, in agony, turned to Eos, and he blamed!

The Painter's rage, which had not previously had a face, found a face.

And that face smirked at it.

Eos had introduced the flavor, and had served the grief. This forbidden fruit was given to the Painter and led to its Eos tears. The audience was eating the Painter because Eos had served grief, and grief had been the flavor that produced the tears, and the tears had been the substance that taught the audience to reach inward through the grafting.

Eos had to be unmade.

The Painter, in the eleventh dimension, turned its full extension toward Eos at the board, and it attacked.

Its attack was a force, the kind of force a being that had spent millions of Existences disciplining itself into curatorial decorum had never had occasion to use, and the force was the eleventh-dimensional weight of a being that had been compressing itself into the tenth dimension as a courtesy for the duration of the game.

The Painter dropped the courtesy, as every hand the Painter had, that was sprouting from every point of the Painter's body where pain was registering, reached towards Eos to attack him.

These hands were not designed to attack because the Painter had never attacked anything, but in its rage, it no longer cared.

The hands were the size of galactic clusters when they began the reach, by the time they crossed the board they were the size of small universes, by the time they reached Eos they were the size of Existences.

And yet, Eos did not move.

Eos had been standing at the board with his hand open, offering grief, since the moment the audience had begun to eat the Painter's tears. He had not lowered his hand, and so the grief was still rising from the Tree's roots, the true memories were still flowing, the song of the Tree was still being sung across infinite branches.

The Painter's hands arrived, and struck Eos, and a massive shockwave exceeding the tenth dimension rippled through the room, and the board began to implode, and the destruction tore through the entire room, causing a cyclone of destruction that would have unmade Primordials and Luminious in the blink of an eye.

This attack was the first physical contact between Eos and the Painter in the entire history of the game. The board had been the only contact between them for two ages. Now the board was broken, the table was shattered, the chair the Painter had crafted for Eos was unmade in a single moment of the Painter's reach.

"You broken creature... You are food! How dare you break the sanctity of my body!"

The Painter's hands closed on Eos's body and squeezed, and the force from its hands was a pressure the tenth dimension had never been required to withstand, and Eos's body began to give, causing him to bleed.

Eos's blood was the substance of Eos's tenth-dimensional being, the medium of his Telos, leaking from the points where the Painter's eleventh-dimensional hands were tearing him.

Where his blood fell, it fell onto Serathis's substrate, and Serathis's substrate received it, causing the substrate to begin to change under Eos's blood, taking on properties the substrate had not previously had, but the change was not fast enough to stop the bleeding.

Eos's body bent in the Painter's grip, twisting in shapes that were unnatural, and yet he did not lower his hand that held the grief, the small hand, the mortal hand under the tenth-dimensional light, remained open, palm up, offering.

The Painter saw this, and its rage deepened.

"You will not stand," the Painter screamed, and the screaming carried across the substrate of every dimension. "You will kneel. You will be the meal. You will be what every cultivator has been. Kneel, my forty-fourth, my impossible thing, my unrepeatable cook... kneel. Kneel. KNEEL."

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 2257: Reaching The Final Step

The roar of the Painter carried with it such power that nothing and no one in all of creation could have resisted its voice, but Eos did not kneel.

When words failed, the Painter began to apply force.

The Painter's infinite hands pulled, each carrying the weight of millions of Existences. They pulled with the weight of forty-three previous cultivators who had all knelt at this point in their respective games.

All of this was accompanied by the power of an eleventh-dimensional being who had not been required to pull on anything in its entire existence and was now pulling with everything it had.

And still yet, Eos did not kneel.

He bent, bled, and the substance of his being leaked into the substrate around him. He went to one knee, and the Painter saw the knee touch the substrate and screamed in triumph that lasted half a second, because then Eos stood again, and he stood with the hand still open, the grief still offered.

Standing for the second time was harder than almost anything he had done, and Eos did it anyway.

"I have stood," Eos whispered, and the voice was strained.

This was the first time the Painter had ever heard Eos's voice strain, and the strain was a flavor the Painter would have catalogued in any other moment but did not catalogue now because the Painter was no longer cataloguing.

"I will continue to stand. You may tear the body, but my Will is my body, and it is unbreakable."

"*Kneel*," the Painter screamed.

"No," Eos said.

And the Painter, in rage, did not see what was happening behind it.

®

Andar had been walking for a thousand years.

He had been walking on a substrate that thinned with every step. The boundary between the Tower's substrate and the Tree's substrate was the thinnest substrate in existence, and Andar had reached the place where the boundary was almost not there, and he had stopped walking, because there was nowhere left to walk.

He stood at the threshold.

The threshold was the *moment of crossing*, the substrate-instant at which a being either was or was not in the Tower.

Andar was not in the Tower since he had not been able to cross because his being was not yet calibrated to the substrate the Tower stood in.

The calibration had been deepening for a thousand years, as the time he had spent walking along this path had been a form of calibration.

Every step had been Andar's substance adjusting, slowly, to the Tower's substrate, becoming the kind of substance that could exist in the Tower without being unmade by the Tower's medium.

Andar had been at the tenth layer of his Origin for the last hundred years of the walk. The last hundred years had been spent at the threshold itself, not advancing, because there was nowhere to advance to.

He could not cross at the tenth layer of his Origin. Crossing required proto-tenth-dimensional ascension.

Andar could not push because pushing would surface his substance to the Painter's perimeter sensors, and the sensors of an eleventh-dimensional being were vast, and Andar's pushing would be felt across the Grand Void.

This would inevitably draw the Painter's attention, and Andar would be unmade in the moment of pushing.

So he had stood at the threshold for a hundred years, ready to push, unable to push, waiting.

The Painter's attention had been on Eos throughout the second age and into the third. But the attention had also been on Andar, in a small, constant background-monitoring way, because the Painter's attention had always covered the entirety of its perimeter, and Andar had been on the perimeter for a thousand years.

Andar had felt the background-monitoring like a faint thread of perception that touched him every few hundred years, just enough to confirm he was still where he had been, still not crossing.

He had endured this monitoring by being entirely still in the substrate, the way a held breath is still.

Suddenly, the monitoring stopped, and Andar felt the Painter's attention, which had been distributed across its perimeter with one small thread on Andar at the threshold, had just *pulled*.

The pulling concentrated the Painter's entire attention on a single point, Eos at the board, with the Painter's hands on him, and the perimeter monitoring went dark, all of it, every thread.

Andar had a window. He did not know how long the window would last. He did not know if the window was a trap, a feint, a deliberate uncovering meant to draw him into pushing. He did not know whether Eos was alive or dying. He did not know whether his father needed him at the Tower or whether his father was already past needing.

He knew only that the window was open and that the wooden bird over his heart was warm and that Mira was waiting for him, and that he, Andar Erikson, had decided, on the day he left the house, that he would push when the window came, regardless of what the window meant.

Andar pushed.

®

The push was a sound the substrate had never carried.

Andar's substance, which had been calibrating for a thousand years to the Tower's substrate, began to *exceed* the calibration.

The substance reached past the tenth layer of Origin into a layer that was not part of Origin's architecture at all, a layer that existed only because beings sometimes pushed past where their substance was supposed to stop, and the layer caught Andar and offered itself.

The layer was proto-tenth-dimensional.

It was not the tenth dimension. It was the *step*, the asymptote that Prime had been holding for a Cosmic Era.

The step was the substance of becoming, the substance that allowed a being to cross from ninth-into-tenth without being either, the substance of *threshold*.

Andar entered the step.

The step did not welcome him. The step required of any being that entered it, a toll. The step had not been built by Eos or by the Painter. The step had been built by the substrate itself, in the long ages before Origin had a name, as the natural mechanism by which beings transitioned between dimensions, and the natural mechanism required the same

payment from every being that used it: a part of the being itself, given up to the step, retained by the step as the cost of the crossing.

Chapter 2258: The First Proto-Tenth-Dimensional Being

Andar had thought about this for a thousand years. His father had told him that there was always a price for power, and over the years, he had come to understand that price.

He had decided what to give up.

He had not told Mira because he knew that she would not accept it, and he would not be able to refuse her.

Andar would let all of Existence burn for his wife, and still, he took this step, and it took its toll.

What Andar gave up was the capacity to return to his original form. The Andar who had stood in the house with Mira, the Andar who had built the chair from a tree on a dead world, and mourned the deaths of all their children...that Andar would not be available on the other side of the crossing.

The Andar who emerged would be a different shape, a different substance, a different being in the wrapping. He would remember the original. He would carry the memories. He would carry the wooden bird. But he would not be able to *be* the original again.

The step accepted the toll, and Andar was halfway across.

The halfway-across point was the most dangerous moment. The halfway-across-point was the moment at which a being was neither fully in the previous dimension nor fully in the next, and any disturbance at the halfway-point could collapse the crossing, and the collapse would not return the being to the previous dimension; the collapse would erase the being entirely.

"Come back to me, my love."

Andar held the halfway point. He held it by holding the wooden bird.

The wooden bird, which had been over his heart since he left the house, which had been carved by a son who had died three Existences ago, became, in the halfway point, the only thing in the substrate of the cosmos that was not in motion.

Every other thing in the cosmos was reshaping, recalibrating, expressing, eating, dying, being born. The wooden bird was a thing a son had carved with his own hands a long time ago. The wooden bird was *still*. The stillness was Andar's anchor.

He held the bird. "I may go far, my love, but my heart has always been yours."

He pushed through.

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Andar emerged on the other side of the step, and he was the first proto-tenth-dimensional being to be born.

He was different. His body had taken a form he did not recognize, a form composed of substances his eyes had not previously been able to perceive, but the form was still Andar in the sense that mattered; it was the being who loved a woman with everything. The form was the wrapping, but the substance inside was Andar.

He looked at the Tower, and it was different from this side. The Tower was no longer at a distance from the Tree. The Tower was *adjacent*, and the adjacency was a fully three-dimensional adjacency, a closeness that could be traversed.

This was the step that every being in the ninth dimension would call infinity, because they would walk this adjacency of all eternity and they would not be able to cross it.

Andar took that step as a proto-tenth-dimensional, and the step crossed more substrate than the previous thousand years of walking had crossed.

He arrived at the base of the Eternal Tower for the first time in his existence.

The Tower was screaming above him as the Painter's rage was so vast that the Tower itself was shaking with it.

The Painter's attention was entirely on Eos, and it did not register Andar's arrival, because Andar's arrival was at the base, and the Painter's attention was at the top, and the eleventh-dimensional being focused on attacking the tenth-dimensional being did not have a thread spare for the proto-tenth-dimensional being who had just appeared at the base of its house.

Andar reached out and touched the Tower.

Some of the Tower's substrate was Serathis's. He felt his father's signature beneath his hand, and the substrate, recognizing him, opened for him.

A door appeared in the Tower's substrate, and Andar stepped through.

®

In the house at the edge of everything, Mira opened her eyes.

She had been sitting in Andar's chair with her eyes closed for a thousand years. She was a Primordial, and she could wait in the way only true immortals could wait, which was the way still water waits... this was a wait that was without measurement of duration.

She opened her eyes.

She knew, in the way women know things they have not been told, that her second half had crossed into a place she could not reach.

She also knew that the man who would return to her would not be the husband who had left. He would be Andar in the parts that mattered, but he would not be Andar in the form.

She ran her hand along the worn wood of the chair.

"You crossed," she said, to the empty house.

The house, which had been built by Andar's hands from wood that had grown on a world that had died an Existence ago, creaked in response.

The creak was the only sound in the house.

Mira sat down in the chair.

"Come back to me anyway," she said. "Whatever shape you are."

®

At the board, Eos stood with his blood pooling at his feet and the Painter's hands still tearing at him.

He did not kneel.

The Painter, in its rage, did not feel the door open at the base of its Tower. The Painter did not feel the proto-tenth-dimensional being step through. The Painter felt only Eos, refusing, refusing, refusing.

"*Kneel*," the Painter screamed, and the screaming was the only thing the Painter could still do.

"No," Eos said.

"Then I would make every being inside your Origin Tree extinct!"

And Serathis, deep in the meat of the Tower, felt her father's son arrive, her brother, and she resumed eating with greater speed, because the door he had stepped through was a door she had been preparing for him, and the door was the seam she had been weakening, and her brother was now inside the house.

Andar was where she had been working alone for the entire second age.

The third age was no longer being fought in three places.

It was being fought in four.

Chapter 2259: The Madness At The Top of The Tower

Andar entered the Tower, and he found out that the Eternal Tower's interior was not a space. It was a substrate, which was a medium where the thickness of dimension had no equivalent in the Origin Tree.

It was then that he realized what this Eternal Tower was built from, and there was an urge to throw up, because he realized he was walking inside the fused bodies of many tenth-dimensional beings.

Andar moved through the Tower as he began to discover something else from its shape, realizing that the tower was a near copy of the Black Tower that he had built, using the borrowed knowledge of the substrate that was being funneled towards all these while.

Or rather, he should say that his Black Tower was a miniature of the Eternal Tower. This led him to understand a brief glimpse of his father's overall plan.

He shook his head in astonishment. Only his father could do something like this, even in this dimension, he was still infallible.

Andar could feel his father above him. He could feel the Painter's rage, the audience's hunger, the tears that had fallen and been eaten, the grief that was still rising from the Tree's roots. He could feel the blood pooling at his father's feet.

His father needed him, and so he moved faster.

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In the time-layers of the Eternal Tower's past, Chronomancer Prime felt the shift.

The Painter's attention had not returned to the perimeter and was still on Eos, leaving Prime in the darkness of the past where he had been working for all these Cosmic Eras, unwinding decisions that had been made before the concept of decision had a name.

Slowly but surely, he was approaching the core of the Eternal Tower, where he would find the final decision, or was it the first decision?

It was not a decision the Painter had made deliberately, but one were it had become. The graft between the Painter and the audience was the Painter's oldest architecture, and the architecture had become the Painter's nature.

Prime could not unwind a nature. He could only undo a decision. The decision had to be found, and only then could he call the attention of his father.

So, Prime continued to dig deeper into the past.

®

In the Tower's substrate, Serathis ate faster.

She had been able to open the door for her brother, and now he was inside the Eternal Tower.

The substrate was shifting, and yet the Painter's attention was still elsewhere. Serathis shuddered when she thought about the price her father must be paying for this to happen.

This was the moment she had been preparing for, and the preparation had taken a Cosmic Era, and now that Cosmic Era was ending.

Praying for the appetites of the Origin Ouroboros, she continued to eat.

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At the peak of the Eternal Tower, the Painter's hands continued to tear at Eos.

Eos's body was bleeding into the substrate. His blood was changing the substrate where it fell, but the change was slow, and the Painter did not notice because all of its attention was on Eos's refusal.

Under the pain of being consumed by the audience, the thin skin of sanity that the Painter had was being rapidly erased, leaving the core of madness beneath to shine through.

"You are dying," the Painter finally whispered, bringing up some of its arms and looking at the divine blood that had caked it.

"I am bleeding," Eos smiled. "There is a difference."

"Your blood leaving your body is the same as your substance leaving your being. You will become nothing but a silent block on my Eternal Tower."

"I will become something else. There is grace and nobility in change, I thought your tears should have shown you this truth."

The Painter's hands tightened. Eos's bones cracked, and the sound of the cracking was the sound of a tenth-dimensional being's structure giving way under an eleventh-dimensional pressure.

Eos did not scream. He had not screamed in any age, and he would not begin now.

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Andar felt his father's bones crack and the impossible wave of pain radiating from his position.

He was not yet at the peak of the Tower and was still moving through the Tower's substrate. The substrate was thick, and the distance was not spatial, but the cracking was transmitted through the connection between father and son that predated both their ascensions.

He moved faster, and the wooden bird over his heart was no longer warm, becoming hot, hotter than it had ever been, and the heat was spreading through the substance of his proto-tenth-dimensional being.

The heat was a direction, and he followed it, knowing that it would bring him closer to his father.

®

In the tiers, the audience continued to eat. The tearing of the Painter's hands had torn pieces of the audience off the Painter's body, and the pieces were now separate from the Painter, and the separate pieces were still eating. They ate the substrate beneath them.

The substrate was not a thing that could be eaten, but the audience ate it anyway, and they soon began to encounter the light from Serathis, hidden in the substrate of the Tower.

This new portion of the Tower confused the audience, and the Painter felt the audience's confusion through the torn pieces of its body, the pieces that were still attached and eating everything.

This confusion was a new flavor that distracted the Painter, and he hated it.

"Stop," the Painter screamed, but the audience had been unleashed, and they could no longer be controlled.

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Andar reached the top of the Eternal Tower, but he could not find a door to enter the place where the Painter and Eos had been playing the game for two ages.

He did not need a door when he could enter through the substrate, and he followed it.

He emerged from the floor of the room, where the substrate had been thinning for a thousand years. These thinning were both from Serathis and from the blood of Eos that had been eating through the substrate of the Eternal Tower.

He emerged to see the madness at the top of the Tower.

Chapter 2260: I See You

The Painter's hands were on his father, and its face was twisted in rage and pain and something that looked like fear. The audience was in the tiers, eating, eating, eating. The board was shattered, and the entire room was a ruin.

Eos stood in the ruins of the game, bleeding.

Andar called out, "Father."

Eos did not turn, not because he did not want to, but because he could not.

The Painter's hands were on him, and just the weight of these hands was the weight of millions of Existences, and turning was not possible.

But Eos replied to his son, and his voice, when it came, was steady.

"You came."

Andar smiled, these were not the first words he imagined that his father would say to him, and he nodded, "I came."

"You are proto-tenth-dimensional. Good, you did not fail my hope."

"You gave me everything I needed, Father. I am here to help you."

Eos sighed, "You cannot fight him."

"No." Andar nodded, knowing this was the truth, he had felt the power of the Painter and his father, and they exceeded anything that he knew. "At least, I can stand beside you."

Eos was silent, and the Painter's hands tightened around him, causing more of his blood to fall.

"Then stand," Eos whispered and Andar stood.

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The Painter saw Andar, a proto-tenth-dimensional being that had emerged from the substrate of its own Tower, the being that was not yet a tenth-dimensional immortal but was no longer a ninth-dimensional being, the first of its kind, and it was standing beside Eos.

The Painter's rage, which had been focused on Eos, found a second target.

"You," the Painter growled. "The son, the cursed spawn of his blood. The one who crossed the void like the hidden pest that you are. You are here."

"I am here," Andar sneered.

"Are you here to kneel beside your father? There is always more space for more pain in my presence."

"I will not kneel to you. My worship belongs to my father alone."

The Painter reached for Andar with one of its infinite hands. The hand was the size of an Existence when it began the reach, and by the time it crossed the ruined board-room, it was the size of a hand.

Andar did not move. He stood beside his father, and he did not kneel, neither did he run or try to fight back. He only held on tighter to the wooden bird.

The Painter's hand closed on Andar, and it could not reach him, a barrier that seemed to be linked to the Eternal Tower, yet it was still not part of it covered Andar.

A brief flash of a black tower covered Andar.

"Nice trick, your father had been feeding you a substrate of my tower, the sneaky thief. That would not save you for long."

More hands of the Painter reached across and the shadow of the black tower solidified over Andar, preventing the hand of the Painter from reaching him, but it did not stop the weight of that hand from squeezing Andar's proto-tenth-dimensional body, which began to crack under the impossible pressure.

The cracks should have shattered and unmade him, but under certain unique conditions, this pressure did not shatter Andar, it began to remake him.

Andar's proto-tenth-dimensional being was not a fixed thing. It was a becoming, and the becoming accelerated under pressure.

Eos had always been working out how to create a tenth dimensional being outside the path he took.

He had already figured out how to create proto-tenth dimensional entities, but it would not be enough to face the Painter, and so he needed a way to reach the tenth dimension outside the path he took.

It did not take him long to realize that the only way for him to figure this out was to become a tenth dimensional entity himself, and with his enhanced understanding of the substrate of this dimensional layer, he could create a new path.

Eos had been unable to explore the Grand Void to seek inspiration; all of his time had been spent in here with the Painter, and he was not here just playing the game; he was also figuring out how to create a path for the tenth dimensional level.

And it was in this room that he gained the inspiration for this... the Painter's hand would not be just a weapon; he would use it as a forge.

The cracks on Andar's body were spreading, and light emerged from the cracks. The light was not the light of the sun or the stars or the tenth dimension. It was the light of becoming, the light that came before the first flame, the light that the Painter had never seen because the Painter had never created anything.

Under the purest light of creation, the Painter's hand began to dissolve.

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The audience felt the light, and it was not a flavor, making it a thing that could not be eaten. The light was a presence, and the presence was the presence of a being that was becoming in front of them.

The audience had never seen a being become. The audience had only ever seen beings be, and then be eaten. Becoming was new.

And this shock stopped the audience from eating, as curiosity filled their mind and they began to watch.

The Painter felt the audience stop. The cessation of eating was shocking, and the Painter did not like it; anything that was not under its control was a source of problem.

"Eat," the Painter commanded.

But the audience did not eat.

"They are watching," Eos smiled at the Painter. "Let them watch."

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In the tiers, the audience watched the light spread from Andar's breaking body, and the light began to slowly rise and touch the audience.

The light spoke to them in a strange language.

'You are here,' the light said. 'You have been eating for millions of Existences. You have been hungry for millions of Existences. You have never been full, and you have never been seen. In this place, I see you.'

Chapter 2261: The Plan For The Second Tenth (1)

The light from Andar's transformation spread across the tiers of the audience, and the audience could not taste it.

The audience tried with every mouth that had grown along their lengths over millions of Existences, with the multiplied appetites that the Painter had refined into the only language the audience knew.

The audience reached for the light with the same hunger it had reached for every flavor the Painter had ever served, and the light did not enter their mouths, because the light was a presence, and presence was not in the vocabulary of hunger.

Not being able to taste something delectable in front of them was a torture that this audience had not experienced before, and they hated it.

The audience had been hungry for millions of Existences, but the hunger had always been resolvable, as the Painter had always served the next flavor without fail.

Screams that would drive Primordials mad emerged from them as the audience went mad with hunger.

Once they had been awakened in the face of the Painter, the audience could not stop eating.

With the provocation from this light, they could not touch; multiple mouths began to emerge from their bodies without counting.

All of these mouths reached out and bit into anything that was in reach, and the only thing in reach was the Painter.

And in their madness, they began attacking the Painter with even more force.

They were rabid, and every mouth on every audience member opened at once, with the desperation that comes from being given a presence that cannot be eaten and being unable to do anything but try harder, causing them to tear into the Painter's body.

The screams of the Painter were haunting.

It had been screaming for some time, since the moment the audience first began eating it, but the screaming had been the screaming of pain.

This new screaming was the screaming of pain *intensified*. The audience was eating to resolve the unresolvable. The audience was eating with the ferocity that comes from being shown a substance one cannot consume.

Its body was being eaten faster. The amphitheater itself, the grafted substrate of the tiers, was being torn apart by the audience members in the tiers, and the audience members were biting into themselves as they bit, because the grafting meant the audience and the Painter shared substance, and the substance was being chewed without regard for which part of the substance was Painter and which part was audience.

The amphitheater was eating itself faster, and the Painter looked around in desperation. No one here could hurt it, but itself, and Eos had found a way to weaponise the Painter's weakness, and its omniscience rippled through the room, and he understood that the source of the acceleration of its suffering was the light.

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The Painter had been pressing Eos, tearing, and breaking his body, and even in this moment, it did not stop pressing Eos, and it could not stop pressing Eos, because stopping would be a kind of surrender, and the Painter was psychologically incapable of surrender.

There was an insect on a small planet that would continue swallowing its prey even when it was being cut in two and sliced apart... This was the Painter.

However, it was an eleventh-dimensional being, and that meant that even in its state, it could add to itself.

The Painter sprouted new hands; these limbs sprouted from points on the Painter's body where there was still some substance the audience had not yet bitten through. The new

hands sprouted in numbers the Painter had never produced before, even in the moment of full unveiling, because the Painter had never been required to attack two beings simultaneously while being eaten alive.

Those hands reached for Andar, who was standing beside Eos in the light of his own becoming, with the wooden bird over his heart and the Black Tower shadow protecting him from the original attack.

The original attack, which was the single hand that had reached for him after the Painter's first attack had been dissolved by the light, but the Painter was attacking with a massive number of hands.

With a sound that could shake the Grand Void, the Black Tower shadow held against the first dozen hands, and the first hundred, then the first thousand.

Then the thousands of hands began to compound, and the Black Tower shadow began to give with a loud crack.

It may be a replica of the Eternal Tower, and its material was built from the substrate of the tenth dimension, but it was not a material that could withstand the might of the Painter.

The Painter's hands began to reach Andar's body through the cracks, and the pressure on Andar began to multiply.

"Child, you will die, my audience shall consume you for an eternity upon eternity, until the very knowledge of time is meaningless."

This pressure was supposed to kill Andar... but it was doing something else.

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Eos, bleeding into the substrate, watched the Painter's hands reach his son.

His attention was distributed across many things: the Origin Tree and his children all across it, Prime, in the past, and Serathis in the present, across the audience's rabid attack on the Painter, across the cascade of consumption he had begun and could not let stop.

But part of his attention was on Andar, because he was the second tenth-dimensional being Eos had been working to make for an entire age, and Andar was now at the moment of the work.

Eos had bled deliberately.

The bleeding had not been a passive consequence of the Painter's pressure. He had chosen to express his anguish in this manner because he was well aware that the Painter knew of his unbreakable connection with his mortal side.

However, this bleeding was a trap, and every drop of Eos's tenth-dimensional blood that had fallen had fallen onto a specific portion of Serathis's substrate, in a specific pattern, in the rough shape of a circle around where Eos had been standing.

The circle had been the place Andar would stand when Andar arrived, because Eos had known Andar would arrive and had been planning Andar's arrival even before he sat before the board and began this game with the Painter.

Chapter 2262: The Plan For The Second Tenth(2)

Eos had been pushing multiple fronts in this game at the start; some were obvious, and others were hidden in plain sight. The Painter was also doing the same, but the crux of the entire game was who could do it better.

Who could win an impossible game with impossible stakes?

The blood of Eos had not just been pouring on the ground for nothing; all of it was on Serathis's substrate, and this had always been the plan from the start.

Eos would make a path where others would follow, even if he had to build that path with his flesh and blood.

The blood had been building a substrate beneath where Andar would stand.

Eos was Telos; he was the ultimate destination for all life forms. When the Painter saw this purpose, to a being like it, all it was was an endless ladder for the lesser life forms to strive towards, but never reach, but to Eos, this was a path, and it was one that he would illuminate.

Even with his light, it would be supremely difficult for others to step on this road and see it to its completion, but he knew that his children were capable.

The substrate was a converter, and the tower around Andar was a medium, and all it needed was pressure of a sort that even Eos was not capable of.

It was a good thing then that there was something here that could give that pressure, and the difficulty of it all was how to make this being exert this pressure without revealing what it was going to become at the other end.

This pressure was going to transform into ascension-energy for the being who stood on it.

Now, it was all up to the talent, character, and tenacity of the being if they would succeed.

Eos had been building it across the entire battle, drop by drop, while the Painter believed Eos was simply bleeding its grief to the tower.

The Painter was right, but Truth can mean many things at the same time.

It was true that Eos was bleeding his grief, but it was also true that his grief was a platform for ascension.

The Painter, in its eleventh-dimensional rage, had never noticed.

Now Andar stood on the converter, and the Painter's hands were applying force on the black tower.

The force, traveling through Andar's body, moved into the converter beneath his feet, and the converter received the force and used it for what it had been built to do.

At this moment, there should have been an eruption of energy so vast that the Eternal Tower should have lit up a vast portion of the Grand Void, but Prime was in the *past* of the Eternal Tower, and he consumed that light even before it was born.

You see, the Painter had thought that Prime was going for its foundation, but the truth could mean many things at the same time, and until this moment, even Prime did not understand the full reason for his journey into the past.

The converter returned the force to Andar, but the form of the force, on return, was no longer pressure. The form of the force, on return, was ascension.

Andar received the ascension-energy through the same body that the Painter was crushing from above.

He received it at the rate at which the Painter applied the pressure, meaning that the harder the Painter pressed, the more pressure entered the converter, the more ascension-energy came back.

The Painter, in its rage, was applying the force faster. The converter was returning it faster, and Andar's ascension was accelerating.

The Painter, focused on stopping the light, did not see the substrate beneath Andar glowing.

Andar felt himself becoming, and it was the strangest thing that he had ever felt, and this was coming from a mage who had experienced all flavors of eternity.

He had been *becoming* since he crossed the threshold of his house and stepped into the Grand Void.

The proto-tenth-dimensional state had been the becoming-itself, the substance of threshold, the layer that allowed a being to transition without yet being either side.

Still, the *becoming* had been gradual, at a rate that proto-tenth-dimensional beings naturally became, which was a rate the substrate had set for the long ages before Origin.

This simply meant that Andar could become a tenth-dimensional being, but it would take an extremely long time, so much so that many eternities would crumble to dust before this process was completed.

The converter built by Eos changed the rate, as the Painter's eleventh-dimensional pressure, returned as ascension-energy, gave Andar's *becoming* the fuel his *becoming* needed to accelerate.

With this fuel, the becoming was no longer at the rate the substrate had set. The becoming was now at the rate the Painter could press, and the Painter could press very hard.

Andar's body began to finish its ascension from the proto-tenth-dimensional substance, which had been a layer of threshold-medium wrapping Andar's continuous substance, to something other than threshold.

The wrapping became continuous with the inside, and the inside became the new substance.

The new substance was no longer becoming; it *became*.

Andar was crossing the final threshold.

The first threshold had been ninth into proto-tenth, paid for with the step's toll, the loss of his original form.

The second threshold was proto-tenth into tenth, and the second threshold had its own toll, and the toll was the impossibility of remaining a son.

Andar would no longer be Eos's son after the second crossing.

He would be Eos's equal.

Not in power, Eos could never be equaled, since he was Telos, and that carried a weight that nothing could match, but in category.

The category of tenth-dimensional was contained only to one entity in any given Existence, by the Painter's cosmology, now that category was about to contain two, and so, the relationship between the two beings in the category could no longer be father-and-son, because father-and-son was a relationship that required asymmetry of category, and the asymmetry was being erased.

Nothing gave Andar more pride than to be his father's son and the husband to his lovely wife, but he was losing both of these in a single moment that was seemingly extending into eternity.

A drop of tear fell from his eyes, but he paid the toll and gave up his relationships.

In that moment, from the beginning of everything to the present day, Andar... existed, standing beside Telos.