

“Are you going to talk to him?”

Atreus struggled with his chiton. In hindsight, maybe he should've learned to wear clothing fit for his father's culture in preparation for this. It just never seemed important. Or he had other captivating matters that demanded all of his attention. Or maybe... Maybe he felt like he had fallen all the way into his father's culture and sacrificed his mother's side. His Norse side. His giant side. When he got here, he was welcomed by the Olympians and rejected by the Norse. It was the easy choice, and he really did want to know. He wanted to understand where his father came from. What his heritage was beyond 'god'.

Really, it was probably for the best that the Norse turned him away the first chance they could. If they found out he was another Loki, they... They might have just killed him. Atreus didn't know. He didn't know them at all to understand their temperament. But that still left him stuck on the outside of something that had been so important.

Melinoé took pity on him as he tried to fix the fastenings on his clothing for the third time. She sighed fondly as she adjusted the underclothing for him and fastened it properly.

“Thanks,” he said, a little embarrassed.

“You'll get the hang of it sooner or later.” A soft pat to his front was followed by her hands settling on his chest, her chin tilted up to stare into his eyes. At the same time, he couldn't help but stare into hers. Both of them had striking eyes the other could get lost in. Atreus' icy blue with the subtlest shimmering glow behind them. Melinoé's mismatched lively green and imposing red. Yet despite the baleful glow of her red eye, her expression softened the appearance significantly. The gentle concern she wore on her face. “I'm certain he won't be angry with you.”

“I'm not— Well, okay I'm a little worried about that,” Atreus admitted with a burble of awkward laughter that his lover shared. “But if it was just anger, I'd take that. He came so far for me, you know? Am I supposed to just walk away from that? ‘Hey, thanks for riding across Ginnungagap, becoming lord of the dead to protect me, but I'm bored so I'm gonna go.’ It feels so... Ungrateful.”

“It's not about gratitude and we both know you're not just bored,” Melinoé argued back. “Has he ever suggested you live for his sake?”

“No, but... He's always worried about me. I was sick when I was little, so I get why.” And it led to the previously mentioned daring heroics that got them all down here together.

“So you'll stay here to assuage his worries?” Melinoé asked. The question came out sharper than she intended and so she quickly backed off, both physically and verbally. “I'm sorry. I just worry you're repeating my mistakes.”

“Your mistakes?”

The goddess sighed, grabbed the next item in his ensemble and passed it to him for him to put on. “After Chronos fell, I wanted to live my life with my family, the life I was robbed of. So I stayed here, for me, and for them. Then when Mother passed, and everything fell apart, I still stayed. It felt like what I had to do, for them. But for me... I felt the same pull that you do. I still do.” Their nature as gods, it was more than being in charge of something or having power over something. It fuelled them. Fulfilled them. Made them what they were.

“I’m a goddess of spirits, yes. But also of the moon, and of magic. I turned away from both. Mistress Hecate, Artemis, even Selene, they’re right to be cross with me. I could always feel the draw toward them, but I turned away. I focused on what I wanted, and where I felt I was needed, rather than what I needed.” Shaking her head helplessly, she smiled up at him as she sat on his bed. “That time we spent together when you were travelling with Pankratios? Practicing magic under the light of the moon? It had been so long since I felt that at peace. Those are only lesser domains of mine, Atreus. I can’t imagine how you feel.”

“I’m fine,” he insisted, once again fumbling with the foreign clothing.

“Atreus.” Once again irritation crept into her tone, because she knew he was lying. “You’re the god of the sun, and you’re living in the underworld. That’s to say nothing of whatever your other domain is, but we know it’s about communicating. And you’re stuck here with the same thirty or so people, with the occasional outing to Asphodel or Elysium. You...” And once again she forced herself to calm down and plead instead of lecture. “You don’t belong down here, Atreus. I understand! I understand wanting to be there for your family, trust me, I get it! But you can feel the pull, telling you there’s something missing.”

She was right. Obviously she was. This wasn’t the first time they had talked about this. Gods were their domains as much as they were themselves. They were empowered by them, like Hades in a field of death and decay, Pankratios in a gymnasium, Artemis in a forest or formerly Apollo under sunlight. But it wasn’t just empowering to them. It was fuel for them. To not engage in their domain was to let that part of their nature atrophy. A musician who ceased playing music was no musician. A painter who didn’t paint was no painter.

And a god who didn’t embrace their domain was no god. It weakened them, stifled them. Atreus could feel it. He ached to know and learn more about the world, about its people, about culture and language and art. He felt the emptiness of a life beyond the sun’s embrace, never more so than when Skol was let loose.

But, “Father would worry.”

“Atreus—”

“And he’d be right to,” he continued before Melinoé could mount another argument. “You know what’s going on up there. The world is crazy and everyone is waiting for something to go wrong, for somebody to start something. We’ve already been kicked off of Olympus. That would make us an easy target. And what about Loki?” Once again his fingers fumbled the weird cloak thing he forgot the name of. This should’ve been the easy part! His lover didn’t move to help him this time, which he was grateful for. It would’ve been humiliating. Instead, he took a breath and made another attempt. “He’s still out there. He needs a moon god and what did you just say?”

“Who are you trying to convince, Atreus?” She had brought it up, and not in the context of her wants, but his.

At least, that was how she framed it. He felt the pull to be elsewhere but so did she. She just said as much. It felt right for her to be practicing magic under a night sky. And Artemis, it must have been strong for Artemis too even if she was too proud to admit it. She wasn’t meant to be in the underworld, in the realm of the dead. She was a huntress. Elysium would do in a pinch but...

And Melinoé... A goddess of souls was always at home around them, but like her brother she was a goddess of life as well as death. A living soul was the same as a dead one. Their mother Persephone brought life through harvest. Their father was what remained when it was over. The siblings sat at the border, bearing the domains of constituent pieces. Zagreus, the god of lifeblood, maintained life and took it when spilled. Melinoé the goddess of spirits, the pure essence of self within life, and all that was left in death. She could go anywhere and feel some satisfaction, but shone brightest under the light of the moon, just like Artemis did.

And here, down here, Atreus didn’t shine at all. Who was he trying to convince? Well... He was trying to convince her that he was convinced. And he was failing. “It doesn’t have to be now. We can wait a little until things calm down. Until Loki is handled. Until I know how to use it all right.”

“How do you plan to learn while hiding from it?” She didn’t raise her voice, only asked the question, raised the issues he should think upon. “The world is waiting for something to shift, for conflict to erupt. Everyone knows it. I imagine it won’t be calmer than this for a long time. Loki will do what he will do. Even if Odin’s charms don’t work, it won’t be me or Artemis he looks to. He needed the sun god, and he needs the moon god, or goddess. He needs Selene, or Khonsu, or Tsukuyomi, or Chandra. Not a moon god, the moon god. Or,” she continued with snort of uncertainty and disbelief, “he could go for the real moon. It’s just sitting up there. Though I imagine those I just named would take issue with the attempt.”

“So what?” Atreus asked, finally getting somewhere with his stupid outfit. “We just leave and hope for the best? Is that what I tell my father?”

“We leave and live the lives we’re meant to live,” she amended. “Kratos didn’t come here so you could hide in the underworld forever, right?” The goddess smiled as he finally got his clothing in place. “You look handsome.”

"I feel weird in it," he admitted. He felt exposed with the looser fabric. Like the whole outfit would shift wrong and fall off, even though that was ridiculous. He spent a good ten minutes (with help) fastening it properly so it wouldn't do that.

It still felt like something he wore as a costume rather than who he really was.

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Atreus tried not to look jealous as Artemis sat comfortably in her usual furs and hides, with no attempt at formality. She had manners though, unlike a certain dwarf who basically got all three ejected from the table before the meal even began. When it came to Brok, informal meals were fine and he could noisily chomp and spit as much as he wanted as long as he kept it to his placing. Meals with visiting dignitaries were not.

Atreus could hear the loud disagreements coming from the tavern even now, turned soft by the distance. Silently wishing poor Sindri the best, Atreus focused on his own food. The food, he wasn't afraid to admit, was a far bigger hit with him than the clothing. He didn't share his father's fondness for olives, but the fish dishes were something he found himself developing a taste for.

As well as the wine. That had been a bit of a journey in acquiring. With such an opportunity to revisit the history and culture he had lost, Kratos had wondered if Lemnian wine was still something that existed. And while it was... It was clear it was not the same. Thousands of years and massive changes in culture and culinary preference meant the exact taste Kratos sought was likely gone for good, near impossible to reproduce. Except, of course, for someone like the god of wine. Atreus had prayed in hopes of Dionysus answering and he had. Despite the banishment, the gods on Olympus weren't truly enemies. Not most of them, at least. Dionysus had provided a miracle and the island suddenly found itself able and pressed to cultivate a very specific type of wine.

It was profitable for them, of course. Genuine wine just as it was from the ancient age. Still, Atreus wasn't sure how to feel about how his request, how his prayer, was answered; pressing people into service even if they profited. Then again, the look on Kratos' face, the soft smile that was so rare for Atreus to see... And it was one Atreus shared. The flavour was almost just like what they shared those years ago, the first drink Atreus had. Though, this version hadn't sat in a musty vault for hundreds of years. Even if it didn't have that exact same... Ripeness, it still brought that memory back.

To the devils, and most of the other gods at the table, it was simply wine. Very good wine. Something with Dionysus' seal of approval would have to be. But still wine and nothing more.

"Lord Kratos," Sirzechs said between bites, his wife standing dutifully behind him, "I noticed you showed a particular lenience toward soldiers in your judgement."

"I showed no lenience," Kratos answered. "Only merit to those deserving."

"A particular praise for warriors then. Maybe because you recognise their valour in particular? Praise for war is much less popular in this era than the one the Olympians ruled."

"Then this is a finer era," Kratos rumbled back. "You speak as though you already have the answers to your questions."

"Educated guesses at best, I promise," the satan Lucifer answered with a disarming smile that disarmed nothing. "I assume you're aware of the book your... Ah... Extended family? Have distributed about you?"

"Some," the god of the dead answered.

"Ah've read it," Mimir joined in from his small stool fashioned for his use during meals. Both seat and, er, disposal. "Tis a fun read, fair to say! Can't speak to the parts I weren't there for, mind you!"

"Then you're aware it says you're Spartan," Sirzechs continued, accepting the contribution of Kratos' advisor but maintaining the conversation with the god himself. "I promise, that's all I base my assumptions on. That perhaps you have a fondness for soldiers, having been one yourself."

All Spartans were soldiers, Atreus thought to himself, remembering Kratos' words on them one of the few times he spoke of his origins. Like the satan said, it was an educated guess.

"Hm." A monosyllabic grunt preceded settling in to give a more meaningful answer. "I have been a soldier. I have been a commander of men. Spartan men were born soldiers, forged from birth to be as strong as the iron and bronze we wielded. That is not the way of this age. War consumes lands and it consumes men. Those who persevere, those who remain strong are worthy of pride and honour in their rest. Those who are consumed, are—"

Sirzechs blinked as the god across from him stopped speaking, seemed suddenly lost in thought.

"It's a rough job, aye," Mimir covered for him by picking up the thread. "Some don't make it out the other side wi'out change an' that's a tragic thing. O'course, there's also the ones who went in wrong and came out more wrong. None like that today, but you c'n rest assured, there's no kindness comin' to the likes o' them."

Slowly, Kratos nodded. "Indeed." Then returned to his food.

Atreus could see and feel the concern in Sirzechs. The recognition that his gentle probing that was intended to lead somewhere had accidentally tripped over a sensitive subject.

And so the other satan, Serafall, carried on for him. "War can be an awful thing. We know that well." Picking the subject up again, but for commiseration rather than probing. "After all, we were born in the dying days of war. We had to fight a war to prevent another war. Cornered like that, knowing we would lose no matter what we did, we never want to see those times return ever again. War can only take from us. All of us."

"Right," Sirzechs agreed, grateful for the save. "That's why we're grateful to you for allowing us here to speak with you. After so long with so much animosity, we're hoping to build something better. A bridge between us. Cooperation. And—"

"Did you slay Persephone?"

Atreus could feel the collective wince from almost everyone at the table. Trust his father to be that defiantly blunt against those trying to make peace. He couldn't leave that question unresolved while listening to them speak about peace. Silently, Atreus took Melinoé's hand as she had gone very, very still.

This... This was a subject for which he had to read the devils' reactions as closely as he possibly could. Opening himself up to it all, he felt every emotion at the table. Melinoé's tangled mess of raw emotion, Artemis' concern, Kratos resolve, Mimir's resignation.

And the satans' discomfort. "We weren't born yet when it happened," Sirzechs answered without any real satisfying answer.

"As for the original satans," Serafall continued to her cohort's tangible concern. "We don't know. It's not a satisfying answer, I know. But the best we have is honesty. The original satans wanted to fight their war against God. Whether they would try to drag Olympus into it with deceit... I can't say for certain that they wouldn't. I can't say whether they did or not, but I can say that desire for war and for victory at any cost was why we unseated their children to take their place. We don't want anything like that to happen again."

Kratos looked to Mimir, who looked to Atreus. Obfuscating exactly how they were coming to their conclusions just a little more.

Still feeling. Or it could be called listening. The cacophony beside him made it a little more difficult, but the devils were more open to him than a goddess. Worry. Resolve. Earnestness. He could feel the pressure of them willing his father to believe them. Because so far as Atreus could tell, they were being honest. He gave a short nod hidden by him taking another mouthful of food. Mimir conveyed that same nod to Kratos.

"If peace was truly your intent by coming here," the god of the dead rumbled.

"It is," Sirzechs confirmed. And—

... Atreus' eyes narrowed. There was something there. An oddity that he didn't quite understand. Melinoé gathered herself, squeezed his hand and offered him a weak smile of gratitude. But...

Sirzechs was planning something. Had planned something. And decided it was time to make his move.

"We only want peace, with you, and with all factions if we can manage it. It was why we fought so hard to hide the supernatural again. It was a discordant peace before, but it was still peace. Even if we can't return to those days, we still only want peace, and we're willing to prove it and pursue that peace as far as we can."

"Prove, pursue," Kratos echoed.

"Aye," Mimir agreed. "I'm sure ye don't mean to leave us all in suspense, Lord Lucifer. Sounds to me you've got a proposal on your mind."

"I do. The key to a lasting peace is trust, and it can't be from only one side. I would propose we forge bonds of trust the old fashioned way."

"From what I have seen, all of my ways are old fashioned ways. You will need to be more specific."

"No matter what we say, trust isn't born from words alone. I have a sister, well, we both have sisters," Sirzechs continued, ignoring how Serafall looked and felt absolutely livid at that moment. "They live in a small town in Japan. Still devil territory, though with permission for the Shinto practitioners to continue as they always have. Regardless, I believe there is a lot that they could learn from your son, and vice versa."

"Sirzechs, can we have a word—?" Serafall requested quietly, almost sweetly, all while a roiling rage clouded everything around her to Atreus' senses.

"Are you proposing some form of marriage arrangement?" Kratos asked, his answer fairly obvious to those who couldn't read his feelings directly.

Sirzechs shook his head. "Not at all. We couldn't arrange such a thing if we wanted to. I'm no longer a Gremory and Serafall isn't a Sitri, we have no say in the affairs of our former houses." The direct acknowledgement that they couldn't do that, it quieted Serafall's rage a little.

However. Atreus could feel the difference. The slight subterfuge. Sirzechs couldn't make arrangements, but that didn't mean he couldn't make arrangements.

"It would be a show of our trust in your intentions, and a show of trust in our intentions."

“How so?”

“I admit to bein’ a touch befuddled meself...” said Mimir, visibly considering the scenario. “Oh. Och. Ye mean these Shinto you mentioned, aye?”

Sirzechs nodded. “All of Japan is technically considered Shinto territory. However, their hold has been severely weakened by factions stronger than they are. Primarily the Buddha, and to a lesser extent the biblical factions. Us.”

“So...” The disembodied head sighed frustratedly, “That would mean if’n Atreus is there as these ladies’ guest, he’d have these Shinto actin’ a mite more careful around them. They’re protected, and at the same time, they’d be trustin’ us, well, Atreus, not to turn on them himself.” The silent acknowledgement of his accurate summary gave him another second to consider it. “Sounds a wee bit more like provocation for the Shinto to act against Olympus ta me.”

“Not at all. It’s well known Olympus have turned their back on you all. They wouldn’t overreact to Atreus’ presence thinking it to be Zeus interfering in their territory. We make it clear to the Shinto pantheon what’s happening, the arrangement can be a beneficial one for everyone involved. As the sun god for your pantheon, I’m sure he would love to have a place in the mortal realm for him to thrive in relative safety. We can provide that. And if you want to consider us having an ulterior motive, with him there I’m sure they would be more able to escape to the underworld safely.”

“You want me to be their bodyguard?” Atreus asked.

“Absolutely not,” Sirzechs’ mouth said, while his everything else said ‘yes please’. “Rias would kill me for putting it in those terms. And—”

“We have no need of such an arrangement,” Kratos interrupted. “Prove your intent for peace by maintaining peace. That is all.”

The redheaded devil raised his hands in surrender. “Fair enough. It was only a thought. If that is good enough for you then I thank you for your understanding.” He smiled.

Glanced at Atreus, with that same smile.

And returned to finishing his meal.

Atreus could feel it all. Exactly what the devil was doing. What he really wanted. He felt that by bringing it up, even if Kratos rejected it, that he had planted a seed and would get his way anyway. That presenting the option was all it would take for it all to fall into place.

It bothered the young god that despite knowing exactly that, he thought Sirzechs might be right.