

Author's Note: The following borrows concepts from Greek mythology, and as such might contain ideas that are very similar or modified versions thereof. Please enjoy without thinking too hard on it!

Warning: This story contains transformation, growth, curve expansion and giant battles.

The Tale for everyone's Dream and Desire, by DragonMasterX.

The lion was mere inches away from pouncing on its prey. A terrified young woman dressed in ragged and torn loincloth and a makeshift cover for her bosom. The fearsome beast roared as if staking its claim and bared its fangs before going for the decisive strike.

"Oh dear, better jump in quick!" a disembodied voice preceded the appearance of a burly man in gladiatorial armor, both with shield and sword at the ready. With a bash of his shield, he repelled the lion before it could sink its fangs on the poor girl. The creature rolled away and growled at the intruder; its prey was now hiding behind her protector. "Just in time!" the voice seemed ecstatic; it came neither from the woman nor the gladiator; they seemed unaware of it. "Oh yes. Show that oversized kitten who's boss!"

The spectator watched with their presence undetected as the gladiator and the composed lion engaged in battle. The fight was frenetic and fraught with life-wagering moves. The excitement was palpable. "Yessss!" the on-looker cheered as the gladiator delivered a powerful stab through the beast's mouth in counter-attack. The deed was done, and the lion defeated. "Oooh, looking good, handsome."

As the gladiator approached the relieved female, he removed his helmet to reveal a flowing mane of hair and a rugged but masculine visage. He helped the victim up and as they looked into each other's eyes, it was clear that the dashing rescue had simply brought the two together in heart.

"Kiss her, kiss her! KISS HER ALREADY!" the spectator demanded, the unheard voice trailing off as the romantic scene seemed to suddenly come to a halt. "Huh?" the image of the two lovers was frozen in place, color from them and their surroundings fading as if a sudden absence of light had consumed everything. "What the? Again? This is so irregular!" the frustration in the spectator's voice was followed by a gasp of surprise as, superimposed to the once-still, now warping image, an insect-like creature began to fly off. The little bug looked like a bloated mosquito with the head of a five-eyed spider. "You again! I was watching that you know...! Come here!"

A chase did not have a place. The peculiar creature soon disappeared through a ripple in the alternate plane where the spectator resided. "Ugh. Seriously? Wait, it's coming back on!" the spectator forgot about the insect and went back to watch the moment of truth in the dramatic conclusion, but the expectative was met with a different outcome. "Say... what?"

Where there was supposed to be a lovely backdrop to a heart-warming finale was suddenly replaced with a new battle between man and beast, but the protagonists were different. The woman was nowhere to be seen, and the lion was three times its former size, its tail a serpent and its back covered in thick wings, with an additional deer head next to it; a manticore. The hero had lost his armor, and no longer was he a finely sculpted specimen of a man, but a cowering, lanky young man shaking behind a dinky spear made out of a stick with a crudely roped, presumably dull rock at its tip.

“What a nightmare! How did this happen...? Ugh, this isn’t fun.” The spectator couldn’t bear to look at the gruesome spectacle that followed, so the image ahead of their prying eyes vanished. “I have to inform brother about this and... oh dear! Look at the time. I’m going to be late...! Work later. Fun now!”

Mount Olympus loomed imposingly as ever. Beyond the scope of the mortal realm, divinities ruled above the heavens. Parties both indulging and celebrating debauchery were commonplace rituals of the pantheon led by lightning god Zeus. Food and drink were in bounty for all, for the worshipped rulers of the universe were never left wanting. The guests were all having a great time.

Zeus didn’t particularly require any sort of major effort to please the crowds. He had assured his popularity as a host by providing no end of entertainment either with flashy shows of his power or with wild tales borne out of his peerless promiscuity. Most of the time, Zeus was the life of every party simply by virtue of his brothers telling the tales themselves to get a good laugh out of everyone. But be it by causing pretty fireworks in the endless void surrounding Olympus or spewing monologues about his ridiculous sexual escapades, it was hard to beat his resourcefulness in deriving fun from their worshippers.

“ey boss-man!” the gruff but jolly voice of Dionysius, local party animal, boomed with an equally potent alcohol-laden burp at the end of his call. “My friends here want to know when the main event’s coming!”

The god of lightning had been sprawled on his throne, enjoying the company of especially lascivious nymphs. With delicate, feminine fingers dancing on his chiseled form while grapes were deposited in his mouth, the ruler of Olympus was in very little rush for the main event. “It’s all set,” he said with a smirk, not even opening his eyes as he chewed on grapes. The amorous nymphs let out girlish giggles as juice splattered out on them; it was a delight in and of itself to watch and hear them clean each other. “But I suppose I’ve made you all wait long enough. It’s not a party until we’ve had our fun with the cattle below,” his smile grew as he thrust one of his muscular arms up and his eyes both opened to complete the look of the confidence he radiated. “IS it?” he shouted. Chalice and mugs of wine were all raised to the tone of a unanimous cheer of adulation.

For several days and nights, a number equal to the time the heavenly party had lasted so far, a grand overcast had blackened the skies in the lands below. The inhabitants of the mortal world were divided, as usual. There were those that dreaded the inevitable storm, while those in the more faithful cities celebrated the purging of heretics. To the latter, it was impossible for the god object of their worship to mix them up with the deservers of punishment, and as a result were celebrating instead of being fearful.

To Zeus, that was perfect. Mortals were the best to tease while they were convinced of something to the point of arrogance. Punishment was blind in his eyes. Plus, his guests deserved entertainment. “Come now, my friends. Observe!” Zeus was joined by the crowds of gods and deities as he stood up, summoning a lightning bolt to his hands which he shaped into a spear.

The cumulous floor below them became transparent to reveal the enormous expanse of thunder clouds under them. Those cackling, menacing clouds soon became transparent as well, allowing the expectant deities to witness another of their host’s storms about to take place. “This monsoon will be the best yet.” Zeus announced, taking careful aim as he prepared to trigger the event.

“Waaaaaait!” a loud, high-pitched voice interrupted the build-up with rather anti-climatic impudence. “I can’t see! Come on, let me see too!” almost desperately, a small female swam through the crowd. She nudged, spanked and groped her way through, if not by force then by indecency. “Oh sorry. My bad, was that your...? Eh-heheh, excuse me, coming through... whoa!” the apologetic deity was finally able to get through the masses, but in her haste stumbled forwards, crashing into the party’s host himself. She fell down on her backside with a thud.

Zeus had barely budged, but he turned to look at the brusque rascal. His narrowed eyes and look of disappointment indicated this was not the first time to be met with this kind of particular annoyance by this particular person. “Epithymas. What are you doing here? Why are you not with your brother?” he glared while pointing his lightning spear at the one called Epithymas. She wasn’t very different to the other goddesses, wearing a silky toga and wearing her long red hair straight.

“Hello!” Epithymas waved, “I heard you were hosting a party! Didn’t get the invite; probably Hermes’ fault. Um, my brother didn’t want to come with me, I suppose.” The young deity grabbed the lightning spear to help herself up. “You know what a workaholic he is! So, what were you about to do? Is it going to be a storm?” she asked with excitement.

“Yes, and you’re interrupting it.” Zeus smacked his face with an open palm, as he didn’t like this particular guest. Epithymas was infamous in Olympus for her relative youth as a deity, as well as her twisted sense of place and humor. And that was why he had told Hermes not to deliver an invitation.

“Oh... Oh!” Epithymas clapped her hands and grinned sheepishly, starting to back away from the angry ruler, “Right right. Of course. My bad! Let’s uh... let’s watch it!” the red-head seemed to shrink as she noticed the shaming stares of her peers and realized nobody seemed particularly pleased to see her. She gulped. “I hope this will break the ice at least...” she told herself while rubbing an arm nervously.

“Hah! Always getting in trouble with the boss man, aren’t you, kiddo?” the heavy hand of Dionysius fell atop Epithymas’ head, making the female groan. “Did you do it?”

Epithymas pushed the drunkard’s hand off and fixed her hair before nodding quickly as Zeus spoke an irony to regain the audience. “It’s gonna be great!” she whispered to her friend, winking up at the thick, booze-gulping god.

With everyone’s attention and focus, Zeus assumed position again. He liked to strike the very same heroic pose depicted during one of their biggest battles before hurling lightning. For a moment, he hesitated, feeling something amiss with his spear; probably a lapse in focus thanks to the annoying interloper, was his thought; he’d deal with her later. The spear cackled and resonated with Zeus’ power before he launched it down at the black clouds. On contact, a thunderous roar resonated from the clouds, followed by a meow.

Zeus, who until the sonorous anomaly had been expecting the violent rainfall to start with his hands at his waist, felt himself deflate. “Meow?” he repeated in disbelief as a second meow followed, and a third accompanied it. Barks, as if from newborn pups, soon manifested as well. No longer were the clouds emitting fearsome thunder, but a collection of canine and feline sounds as if instead of water, the rainclouds were stuffed with anything but water. “Cats... and dogs?” the confused deities sans chuckling Dionysius and Epithymas looked on in bewilderment as all of a sudden the barking and meowing multiplied almost exponentially.

Through the transparency, everyone watched as the mortal realm began to be graced by falling pups

and kittens, safely landing into the hands of waiting land dwellers, or into refuge.

Epithymas couldn't hold it in any longer. "We're making it rain cats and dogs!" she laughed as she threw her arms up in celebration. Dionysius boomed with laughter as he nudged one of his drinking buddies who soon caught on the abundant ludicrousness and joined in the jolly. The laughter became contagious, and soon everybody had forgotten about divine punishment in favor of a dumb play of words.

Zeus was not happy about it. "What is the meaning of this?!" the god shouted while pointing his finger at the storm of adorableness happening before his eyes.

"What?" the god of the Netherworld, Hades, finished taking a sip of wine as he answered Zeus with an ironic tone, "You mean you didn't want to give mortals kitties and puppies to play with, brother? And here I thought you had discovered your feminine side," he smirked, getting a laugh from his friends. Zeus was beside himself with humiliation and anger.

"Hades, if you had a claw in this..." Zeus approached his brother while pointing at him menacingly. The host of the underworld put his clawed hands up in defense and wore an arrogant smirk.

"You know cutesy isn't my style. Those kinds of pranks are more HER specialty," Hades shrugged, pointing over at Dionysius' group. Zeus' eyes appeared to become storms themselves as they cackled with energy.

"Oh dear. I do hope I didn't just stoke some flames," Hades smiled, absent-mindedly fist-bumping a friend as he watched Zeus storming off towards the red-haired goddess.

"Hah! That was incredible. Good job, kiddo." Dionysius was a merry-maker; he loved a good practical prank. They made booze taste that much better. "How'd you come up with that one anyway?"

"Oh! I saw it in this one dream. Let me tell you, those guys down there can really..."

"EPITHYMAS!" Zeus' thunderous voice made the young goddess almost jump out of her silky-smooth skin.

"Oh hi!" Epithymas turned with a little wave at Zeus. She dropped her hand and took a step back when she saw the furious god's eyes. "Eheh... pretty good, right?" she stammered with a giggle, trying to avert her gaze. One by one, her "friends" dispersed, leaving her alone with Dionysius and the angry Zeus.

"So you don't even deny it? Come by uninvited, ruin my party like this?" Zeus didn't like being upstaged, he didn't like being questioned or put in a situation out of his control either. Epithymas just had done two of those in one act. His hand was balled into a fist.

"Come now, boss man," interjected Dionysius, who put the bulk of his round body between Zeus and the shaking Epithymas. "The party was stagnant. Bit of the weird and unexpected helps, right?"

"Right!" Epithymas chirped from behind the jolly drunk, but quickly hid behind the god of wine at the sound of Zeus growling.

"You were in on it, Dionysius? You were the one to invite her, weren't you?" Zeus accused, making the thick god shrug.

“Hey, it’s an Olympian party. Can’t be excluding our friends, can we? You have to... hic! Lighten up.”

“Get her out of Olympus before I unmake her in a weird and unexpected way.”

Dionysius sighed, following with a hiccup as Zeus turned his back and went to fix what Epithymas had altered. Epithymas folded her arms and stood by her large friend, her cheeks puffed out as she frowned. “He’s a grump.”

“No kidding. Perhaps you did go a bit overboard this time, haha!” Dionysius laughed heartily, patting his bloated stomach, “The mortals down there won’t forget about this. They’ll remember when it rained cat and dogs for a while. Even if it doesn’t literally happen again, I bet it’ll become a big thing with them.”

“No it won’t!” came Zeus’ voice as he wrested all the animals Epithymas had put in his thunderclouds.

“Hmm, don’t think this one will get you in his good side either, kiddo,” Dionysius sighed, giving a disappointed Epithymas an encouraging nudge. “There’s always next time.”

“No there isn’t!”

“You missed that spot, brother.”

“Shut up, Hades!”

Epithymas sighed. “Well, thanks for letting me know about the party anyway. I have to go back to work. I’ll see you later, big guy,” she reached up to give Dionysius a pat on the shoulder before he stopped her by grabbing her arm.

“ey. I’m about to retire to my place with some of the others after Zeus goes sour over this. Don’t suppose you want to join us for some mature fun?”

“Maybe in your dreams,” the redhead winked, giving Dionysius a bright smile and wave before she disappeared in a pillar of green light.

“Dang. Had to try,” the drunkard laughed, “Another round!” he roared out cheerfully. The party was livened up for a while longer.

Swirls of psychedelic purple and green filled the dreamscape. Like an abstract painting showing several intertwining realities coming together, a mesh of radiant yet spectral iridescence defined the mystic plane. It was said that the guardian of the emerald dream had the job of preserving and ordaining the living chaos that is the dreamscape. Overlooking the location where dream and reality are said to edge the closest, dream god Morpheus meditated over the myriad of mortal egos visiting the dreamscape.

Every dream needs a space to occur in, and thus the dreamscape. One after another, both big and small dreams passed by the deity’s all-seeing eye, who nurtured himself with energy carried by the conjurations of the subconscious. Morpheus’ duty was not an arbiter’s nor a judge’s, but merely an

observer. His will gave shape to the dreamscape and allowed each dream its own space without needlessly interfering with another. He was the one that made it possible for sleeping mortals to have dreams.

“What do mortals dream of?” was a question Morpheus did not concern himself with. However, he was not the only resident of the dreamscape. His often forgotten sister, Epithymas, was the one who allowed dreams to be boundless and explore the ego’s most profound wishes. She was the goddess of desire and want. Epithymas did not have enough with merely sampling dreams for sustenance; her curiosity led her eyes to peek over countless different dreams. The goddess examined and appraised, looking for excitement in an otherwise uneventful life.

Siblings sharing the dreamscape they might have been, but Epithymas and Morpheus did not see each other. As a result, Epithymas, the curious one, spent her immortal life yearning for her own dream. “What makes mortals tick? What does it take for a god to dream?” Epithymas wondered and pondered for what seemed like an eternity. Morpheus was concerned with management, but she wanted to be involved.

Every time a mortal dreamt, she gained a little more insight, but it seemed like no amount of knowledge could give the goddess a definitive answer. “A god needs not sleep, for prayers and worship strengthens and sustains us. Does Zeus dream? Does Poseidon yearn for anything more? Could Hades be concerned with anything else other than the underworld?”

Countless ages passed, but Epithymas was never closer to her answer. One day, a voice reached out to her. “Come hither, child,” the coarse, warped voice beckoned outside of the dreamscape. Epithymas was confined to the dreamscape.

She could not leave; Zeus had forbidden it. Epithymas was a known prankster, one who, influenced by mortal comedy and practicality, had humiliated the higher order of Mount Olympus’ rulers more than once. A stark contrast to her otherwise stoic and quiet brother, Epithymas had earned Zeus’ scorn thanks to her obsession with mortals.

“Come now, child,” the voice growled like a chaotic storm. Epithymas had never seen anyone but her brother and herself exist in the dreamscape. But the disembodied voice treating her as a youngling was technically not there. It was calling from the material world. Epithymas pondered the ancient one’s invitation and wondered who it might be. No other god, not even mighty Zeus had ever ventured to the dreamscape. Who was knocking at the door to her home? “Come and receive your purpose, child.”

Epithymas was beyond herself with wonder. Who it was did not matter now as much as what they were offering to her. Was there anyone else out there who had the answer to her questions? Curiosity was gripping at her from every angle, prey of her own ironic desire.

The goddess followed the stranger’s voice out of the dreamscape and into the material world. A white sky welcomed Epithymas along with a barren land, and a massive mountain spanning miles of rock and moss.

“What is this place?” Epithymas wasn’t entirely familiar with the mortal realm, but she had never seen such a breath-taking landscape before. She approached the gargantuan mountain, placing a hand upon its surface. “It almost feels alive...”

“I am alive, child,” there was no person next to Epithymas, who warily became frightened and stepped away from the mountain. The coarse voice was coming from within the rock.

“First, that’s freakish, and I’ve seen Echidna bare it all at the lakes,” Epithymas looked up and down as if trying to locate anything out of place with the talking mountain. Something that could let her better communicate with whatever spirit was reaching out to her. “Second, quit calling me a child; you’re not my father. And third…” she paused, giving up on finding a face, mouth or eyes. She folded her arms in a demanding gesture, “…why does a talking mountain want to tell me what my purpose is?”

“Goddess Epithymas,” the voice resounded like a quake, “Your talents are squandered in the Dreamscape. Allow me a moment of your time and I shall explain.”

For the first time in her immortal life, Epithymas was receiving whole worthy praise that she didn’t know what she had done to warrant. Her reaction was little more than a shrinking of the shoulders followed by a bashful scratching of her arm. “Uh… go on?”

“Your work alongside God Morpheus allows mortals to have access to dreams and hope. It is your existence that allows the Dreamscape to exist, but a terrible disaster threatens the plane’s very foundations.”

Taken aback, Epithymas narrowed her eyes, composed all of a sudden. She didn’t like how the mountain had phrased the last sentence; it was her home it was talking about after all. “Elaborate.”

“Surely you must have noticed. As an appraiser and guide to the dreams of mortal kind, the danger is spreading even now. It is the Dream Eaters I speak of.”

Confusion initially gripped the goddess. The beings the mountain referred to were not in any of her memories, much less in any entry of bestiaries known to the pantheon. But then it hit her. “Maybe I’ve seen them. What do they look like?”

“Thick, winged insects approximately the size of a cat’s eye, with razor sharp leg tips and the appearance of a spider. Yes, the Dream Eaters. They’re the ones responsible for siphoning a mortal’s psyche and motivation while their subconscious is manifesting their ego.”

“…and they turn their dreams to nightmares! I’ve seen them!” Epithymas was suddenly furious, “So that’s what they’re called. And you’re saying I can take them out? How do I do it? They are ruining my action flicks; and they are too fast for me to catch.”

“You have the power, Goddess Epithymas. You have the talent to see them, so the only thing that remains is utilizing the energies of the Dreamscape to capture them.”

“Utilizing the energies…?” Epithymas repeated while furrowing her brow. She brought a finger to her lips and rolled her eyes up, then snapped her fingers in realization. “My problem is reach. I can’t catch them fast enough because they’re too far away from me when they come out of hiding. I’ll catch them this time and give them what’s coming!”

“You must not destroy Dream Eaters,” the mountain intercepted, “Their bloated stomachs will destroy the drained dream energy if it senses fatal danger.”

“Then how do I stop them, know-it-all?” Epithymas frowned and tapped her foot impatiently. The mountain quickly dispelled her doubts.

“Capture them and bring them to me. I shall purify the Dream Eaters so that the dream energy does

not disperse.”

“So you’re saying to team up, are you?” Epithymas folded her arms and turned around, pacing while in the deep thought. “You’re not part of the Dreamscape. What’s in it for you?”

“Mortals used to be far more powerful.”

“Huh?” Epithymas was caught with her guard down as the mountain seemed to switch subjects.

“You might be too young to remember, but mortal kind used to be on par with gods and deities. With their two heads and eight limbs, they were perfect in every way. God Zeus was afraid of their power,” as the mountain narrated, Epithymas felt herself entrapped by the story. She had never heard of this particular fable before. “The Olympian God of lightning decided he would split mortal kind in two, separating the whole, perfect beings they used to be into incomplete, imperfect halves. This is why they now seek one another, in hopes of reuniting with their other half. It is said dreams exist as a means to channel their hope for coexistence and mutual benefit. Nightmares detract hope from them by spurning their feelings of earnest. I simply cannot bear the unfairness piling on them.”

Epithymas felt something in her chest as she listened. Her heart was beating in tandem with a sensation which she could relate to the dramatic dreams she had sampled during work. Compassion for the creatures that worshipped her pantheon filled her being. She had questioned why mortals dreamed, and now she had her answer. They were, in a way, like her, searching for what they did not have. What Zeus had done to them could have been wrong or right; she did not ponder. The goddess knew that it was her job to take care of the Dreamscape, and Dream Eaters had no place in it. “I will capture these Dream Eaters for you, then, spirit. With my brother and my efforts, there will be no threat to the Dreamscape...”

“I advise against that,” the mountain interrupted, “God Morpheus, even in his diligence, has never once contacted you to let you know of the Dream Eaters. It is clear to me that he cannot sense them like we can. It is why I contacted only you, after all. It is your purpose, and yours alone, Goddess Epithymas.”

The prankster felt a new kind of weight, one that made her stand straighter than usual. She felt pride. “Don’t worry. I’ve got this!”

“Please make haste. Nightmares are disruptive to the Dreamscape in great quantities, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“I’m not letting those little bugs fly around ruining my favorite shows,” she smiled and put a hand on her arm, gazing at the sky confidently. “I’ll bring a whole load for you, so get ready!” she said, and immediately whisked herself away back to the Dreamscape.

“I wish you a good hunt, Goddess Epithymas.”

Epithymas arrived at the vast Dreamscape. Myriad of dreams represented by countless transparent displays lay before her. The windows to the mortal ego, Epithymas would visit the dream to appraise and take nourishment. Dream energy was what sustained her for the most part, since she wasn’t a prevalent figure of mortal worship like Zeus was. By becoming one with a dream, Epithymas was able to make the energy freely flow in and out of her being without disrupting the host’s experience, taking only a minimal fraction of the energy necessary to maintain the host’s ego

strong.

“But these bugs take too much and leave the mortals empty, draining their willpower until they have none left. Nightmares should be a natural occurrence, not forced. The spirit was right...” Epithymas mused as she walked along the hallway of dreams, glancing at every levitating display that she passed by. Some displays were darker, signifying an unpleasant dream or nightmare. Others had fuzzy images, representing the anomalies Epithymas had been concerned with for a while. “In an environment where the mortal ego freely expands and contracts, the balance of weak and strong willpower ensures stability. If the Dream Eaters force nightmares upon every dreaming mortal, this could upset the Dreamscape’s very foundation,” she sighed and found her hand at her chest, as if trying to grip her courage. “This isn’t an ecosystem you can trifle with, dumb crawlers!” Epithymas cried out loud to psyche herself up. It was her home she was protecting after all.

“I said that...” she paused, “But I still have no idea how to catch them. They’re so fast!” her right wrist poised to the side of her forehead, Epithymas tried to squeeze a helpful thought out of her mind. “And there’s the matter of where all the ones that have escaped have gone...! Argh! I’ll worry about the details later. I have to think about how to catch them. Whatever! I just need to fashion myself a good Dream Eater catching tool,” she stopped and placed a finger to her cheek in deep thought, “What a mouthful. A Dream Snatcher! Heehee, that’s a lot catchier.”

The goddess fell into quiet meditation as she joined her hands together. She closed her eyes as her palms began to separate from each other, maintaining a connection between her fingertips. She summoned the otherworldly energies of the Dreamscape, putting the name in her thoughts into quasi-reality. The space of the psychedelic plane shifted and warped in front of Epithymas, who held out a hand to grab the conjured object; the shape of which resembled a bug-catching net made of gold. “Well...” she frowned in disappointment as she eyed the almost painfully mundane tool, “...I’ll need to work on my imagination later.” Through the same but shortened ritual, Epithymas summoned a pouched belt that hugged her silky toga at the waist; she needed a way to store her quarry after all. “This should be enough.”

With the buzzing sound coming from noise-infested dreams, Epithymas knew where to go. She decided to hunt her first Dream Eater by doing the usual. “Alright, here goes nothing!” she bounded herself from the invisible platform on the hallway of dreams and jumped into the nearest static-ridden display, entering a mortal’s dream.

When Epithymas manifested in a dream, she was completely invisible and silent to the protagonists within. They could not see nor hear her. The goddess ensured to get fed by tuning herself to the dream energy emanating from the whole dream, “Might as well keep myself strong while I’m trying to get the drop on these little guys.”

The dream she had visited featured a drama in which a couple was lynched by the masses for their differing beliefs and found comfort in each other’s arms. Any other time, Epithymas would’ve liked to sit down to observe, as she was a sucker for romance, which most dreams supplied her with, but she was on the hunt. “I can’t afford get distracted. If I can surprise it before it dashes into a ripple, I can keep it from fleeing...” Epithymas remained hidden, but anxiety got the best of her, “Oh come on! You’re a room by yourselves. MAKE OUT ALREADY!” she yelled at the unaware lovers.

It didn’t take long after Epithymas’ shouting that she realized why the couple wasn’t kissing. The frame was frozen in place. The goddess almost dropped her Dream Snatcher but managed to regain her composure soon enough to witness the appearance of a new Dream Eater. She gasped, “There you are!”

The large insect emerged from a tall wall torch. Its abdomen was swollen and looked ready to burst. "Hey!" Epithymas yelled, figuring that she had given out her position by shouting at the dreamers earlier anyway, "Stop in the name of my shiny bug net!" The Dream Eater reacted by zipping away, but Epithymas had expected this. She was focused this time, which enabled her to use the full extent of her abilities. The goddess' body blinked out and back in above the insect, which she slammed down with the net. "Got'cha! The wild Dream Eater has been caught!" she jumped up and down cheerfully, stopping herself before she let her quarry escape. "Ugh, that sounded so kiddy. Anyway, yay!" the ecstatic red-haired deity clutched the net close so the Dream Eater couldn't escape. She looked over the squirming, buzzing insect. "Huh, no more than a brainless predator, are you? Ugly too, yuck."

As Epithymas stored the Dream Eater safely into the pouch, she instantly became gladdened. "Just like the spirit said. Since I didn't kill it, it didn't burst. ...Oh?" the goddess was caught off guard as with the capture of the Dream Eater, the dream she was in started to shift and warp until it became colorless. "What the?!" she exclaimed. The scenery had changed to a burning home with a lonely woman holding the lifeless body of her lover. An enraged mob outside seemed to have been the culprit of the arson. "No! It turned into a nightmare! But... but I caught it!" she looked down at her hips, touching the belt pouch to ensure the Dream Eater was still there. "Ahhh!" In a sudden omni-directional spasm, Epithymas felt herself being pushed out. Everything became black.

"Ouch!" the goddess landed back in the hallway of dreams. "It rejected me... They must have woken up. This is terrible..." Epithymas tossed her hair back and rose to her feet. "I have to get the spirit to answer some questions. He said to bring the Dream Eaters to him, after all."

Epithymas had the location of the talking mountain in memory. A pillar of green energy descended upon the barren land in front of the towering mountain and Epithymas walked out of it. In her hands was the pouch with her captured target, her Dream Snatcher suspended over her back. "Spirit! I have come back with a Dream Eater."

"Only one, Goddess Epithymas?" the mountain reverberated with a tremor, as if displaying disappointment.

"I'll compete for a high-score after I know I'm playing the game right. Now listen to me, I have questions," Epithymas spoke loudly, holding the pouch out in a hand. "I thought we'd save dreams if I caught a Dream Eater. Instead, nothing changed! The dream turned into a terrible nightmare."

"Of course it did. What was your question?"

"Huh?" the goddess blinked.

"You seem confused. Capturing Dream Eaters who have feasted upon a mortal's dream energy does not mean the dream energy goes back to the host. Incidentally, have you ever received the rabbit an eagle feeds on after the bird has been caught?"

"I don't like the amount of sense you're making with that," Epithymas pointed at the mountain accusingly and with the angry dismay of a child proven wrong.

"I never said we would save a dream by catching the Dream Eaters that have fed on a dream already."

“Fair enough. What if I found them and caught them before they fed in a dream?” Epithymas shrugged. The mountain’s voice seemed to grunt.

“Have you ever seen an unfed Dream Eater?”

Epithymas ended shaking her head negative. “Let me guess. It’s the dream energy they carry that let me detect them in the first place. That’s why Morpheus can’t do that; he doesn’t meld with dreams or feed on dream energy like I do.”

“Very astute, Goddess Epithymas. Regrettably, there is no easy way to predict a Dream Eater’s hiding place before they’re ready to be hunted by you. However, it is far better to capture them.”

“And why is that? The Dreamscape ends up suffering because of them.” Epithymas looked down at the pouch in her hands with fury. She wanted to snuff the beast on the spot.

“If the mortal’s ego is dispersed by the Dream Eater’s sac detonating, the mortal may not get their sapped willpower back. However, if you allow me to purify the Dream Eater, the energy released will eventually be replaced.”

Epithymas found herself thinking about the mountain’s reasoning. She didn’t want her home to be plagued by nightmares. The Dreamscape’s integrity depended on dreams after all. “Fine,” she finally said, “So let me get this straight. You purify the Dream Eater, and the mortal it fed on will eventually be able to dream again.”

“That is precisely what I’m saying, Goddess Epithymas. Now if you’ll allow me.” The mountain fell silent as Epithymas approached it. She pressed the golden pouch against the rocky surface. She was briefly taken aback when the pouch began to sink into the rock, but not her hand. The Dream Eater had been pulled into the mountain. As she looked on, Epithymas’ eyes widened with surprise as the outline of the mountain became a bright yet short-lived sky-blue glow. “It is done. This foul beast in no more.”

“And the mortal?” Epithymas hurried to ask.

“The mortal will know nothing of this, of course. However, it will take time for their sapped willpower to come back.”

“But you said...!”

“...the energy released will eventually be replaced,” the mountain interjected, cutting Epithymas’ complaint off.

The goddess wasn’t very pleased without immediate results, but she couldn’t exactly blame the mountain. If what it was saying was true, the Dream Eaters were better off purified than dead. While she could easily play the role of exterminator now that she had solid information on her quarry, Epithymas didn’t dare to test the opposite hypothesis. A Dreamscape of nightmares was less than desirable. “Sorry. I know you’re trying.”

“Your frustration is understandable, Goddess Epithymas. I too wish a better, more expedite alternative was possible. But think of the good you will be doing for the Dreamscape and all future dreams. You are the only one who can do this. I implore you to not lose heart daughter of Nyx, for the balance of the cosmos is at stake.”

“Was that a pep talk?” Epithymas ended up chuckling. She hated when the goddess of the night was brought up in conversation. Saying that her mother Nyx and Epithymas did not converse was a major understatement of their broken relationship. Epithymas chased those ill thoughts away and toned her sarcasm down. “Thanks. I didn’t think there as a personality under those billions of tons of stone.”

“You must make haste and rid the Dreamscape of the other Dream Eaters, Goddess Epithymas.”

“...aaaand the magic’s gone. I’ll do it. My Dream Snatcher and I have some bug-hunting to do,” Epithymas nodded to herself. “Take care of yourself, spirit. Say, do you have a name?”

“You may call me Stala, if you wish.”

“Weird name, if you ask me.”

“I am fortunate I did not.”

“Alright, Stala. Never change, hunk-a-rock,” she snickered to herself, whisking herself away back to the Dreamscape.

The mountain seemed pensive for a while. It had not the courage to ask the goddess. “Was that a bug net at her back?”

From that point on and with the interest of safe-keeping the Dreamscape on her own power, Epithymas dedicated her time to capture Dream Eaters. It took her many tries to accomplish it flawlessly, but she started refining her technique with every success, and learned much of the eventual failures. With the help of Stala, she became the guardian of the Dreamscape.

Epithymas spent more days and nights hunting than she could remember, and came to enjoy it as sport. She still enjoyed watching normal dreams and the occasional prank, but the goddess’ priority remained hunting and catching Dream Eaters with her trusty Dream Snatcher. With every bundle of multiple Dream Eaters she delivered to Stala, she felt like a job was well done as the mountain glowed brighter and brighter. She seemed to have found her calling.

During one of her many hunts, Epithymas made the mistake of almost destroying one of her quarries. The especially agile Dream Eater had forced her to be more aggressive with the Dream Snatcher, and she ended hitting it with the blunt part of her net. Her reaction was that akin to somebody watching crystal-ware about to fall off a table they had knocked onto.

The goddess became worried, “Did I kill it? I used too much strength. That was so bad!” Epithymas was angry at herself, but with the wounded monster in the net, she was able to look over its body. “Alright, let’s not panic. Ugh, this ugly guy’s sac is oozing. Is that what dream energy looks like when it’s inside of...” she slowly lost that train of thought as her eyes focused on the insect’s bleeding abdomen. It was quite a revolting sight, there was no question about that, but Epithymas seemed to have arrived to a particular conclusion. “It’s still dream energy! It hasn’t been completely absorbed. If I focus hard enough then maybe...”

With her eyes closed, Epithymas began to channel her energies through the Dream Snatcher, bathing the Dream Eater with her powers. Bit by bit, she managed to drain the creature’s sac by transferring the dream energy into her being. “This is... this feels so warm. It’s like when I eat but

multiplied by a factor of a thousand! It's so densely packed. No wonder mortals lose their dreams and they become nightmares instead. These creatures are insatiable!" She made sure to continue the process until she had managed to establish a proper link between the dream that she and the Dream Eater were currently in and the stolen dream energy. Epithymas was surprised when her plan came to be fruitful. The wounded Dream Eater, once fully deprived of its food source, shriveled up like a raisin and turned to ash. Meanwhile, the energy that Epithymas had channeled through her body was returned to its rightful place within the dream, enabling it to continue.

"I can't believe it..." Epithymas gasped as she looked on at the host, a middle-aged man selling potteries and being able to feed his children with delicacies that he earned. The goddess had never once felt a victory this large over the invaders of the Dreamscape. "I have to tell Stala!"

"You arrive empty-handed," Stala rumbled deeply as Epithymas appeared before him. "Is something amiss, Goddess Epithymas?"

The red-head was beaming with confidence as she pumped a fist in the air. "Stala, I've done it! I've found a way to deal with the Dream Eaters without compromising dreams!" she announced with pride. "After so many months of hunting that weren't taking us anywhere, I finally got it!" The mountain appeared silent as Epithymas continued to gab. "The Dream Eaters can be purified from within the dream. I found a way to do it! You should've been there, Stala! I made that dumb bug give back everything it'd taken away! Now I don't have to bother with capturing them anymore or coming back here. I can finally protect the Dreamscape properly! I can... why aren't you being loud and merry with me?"

"It seems I'm no longer useful to you. It's simply disheartening," the mountain replied. Epithymas lowered her raised arms and frowned, suddenly feeling really bad. She had been so ecstatic about her evolution as a guardian that she never stopped to consider what a purifier spirit like Stala might feel.

"I didn't mean it like that..." Epithymas tried, feeling her ego deflate as she went over all she had said without thinking. She had spent so much time with Stala thanks to her new job that Epithymas had come to not only rely on him, but also take him for granted. Stala didn't let her continue talking.

"I understand that it's impractical for an earth-bound spirit to aid in the purification of dream energy. It seems we don't have any further business together." The words stung Epithymas' heart, whose guard had been broken. She was very experienced at dishing out the awkward, but she couldn't take it as well.

"Look," Epithymas started again, trying to calm her voice. "Forget what I said," she couldn't believe what she was saying; she had finally found a way to protect and prevent the corruption of dreams. "But at what cost?" Epithymas bit her lips as she averted her gaze into the sky, then sighed. "Stala, it's because of you that I have my purpose. You knew about what was happening and told me, and even offered your help. You also have a purpose. I couldn't bear to take that away from you!"

"Even if this means your method is far more efficient without me, Goddess Epithymas?" the mountain rumbled out. The red-head smiled, shrugged and tossed her long hair back.

"You heard me. It's not like I can do this guardian thing without a trusty side-kick, right?"

There was a booming, deeper rumble. It seemed Stala was laughing. "Side-kick, is it? An assistant? Very well. You have my gratitude, goddess Epithymas. I shall continue to assist in your endeavor."

"It's our endeavor," Epithymas said, putting emphasis on the middle word. "And speaking of which, I got to get back to it. I don't want you going lazy, so I'll get you more Dream Eaters to purify!" she quickly added, suddenly whisking away. The mountain appeared to remain serene, although he seemed to still be amused.

And everything seemed to be in proper place for a long time, until one fateful day.

Epithymas warped into the barren land as usual, "Oh man, Stala," she began, eyes focused on the dozen pouches she had gathered in her arms as she laughed, "I know I shouldn't have this much fun about a nightmare, but this one guy's pants... Oh." The redhead stopped in her tracks as she noticed a rather sizable party of familiar faces between her and the glowing mountain.

"So it WAS you!" Zeus's finger accused with a booming voice as he and the other gods turned to look at the confused Epithymas.

"Yes! It was me all along! Haha..." Epithymas cried dramatically, stopping herself mid-declaration, "...ha. Say, want to tell me what this is all about this time?"

"Ever the fool, Epithymas. You never learn! Do you have any idea what you have been doing?" Zeus' eyes were staring daggers at her. The goddess realized that this wasn't any sort of revenge joke and took a step back.

"Wait, so if this isn't about the two headed crabs in your toga then..." Epithymas appeared flabbergasted. She had seen Zeus angry before, but he seemed ready to burst a vein at the side of his head.

"I knew I should have had Morpheus forbid your exit from the Dreamscape! When Hermes told me he had seen you coming here regularly, I had expected foul play. But this...!"

"Can you at least explain why you're so mad at me?" Epithymas almost squeaked as all twelve pouches of Dream Eaters left her arms. Floating towards Zeus they were zapped with lightning, destroying both container and contents. "No!" the goddess of dreams fell to her knees as she watched the dust disperse into the air. With every destroyed pouch, those many dreamers would never be able to escape their nightmares anymore! She couldn't bear the shock. "Don't do it!" she cried out, "Stop this! You have no idea..."

"You have defied, humiliated me even, Epithymas," Zeus intercepted with a growl, "I pardoned each and all of your transgressions, but you've taken your liberties too far this time. You have been trying to release the seal of a Titan under all of our backs. You're a traitor to the Olympians!"

The goddess felt herself grow weak as she looked past Zeus' growls and finally noticed the gods Poseidon and Hades orbiting the gigantic mountain to create a barrier around them all; a container dome. "But Stala said..."

"Is that what he said his name is? This foul creature is none other than Atlas! And you've given him the power to escape the prison I put him in!" The name sounded familiar to Epithymas. For a

goddess who had not been present during the Titanomachia, the mythos escaped her memories, but none in the pantheon dared to make light of the word Titan; fearsome enemies of the Olympians.

“He’s a Titan...” Epithymas’ eyes became frozen in place as the mountain quaked. A noisy rock slide preceded two giant arms made of craggy stone tearing out of the mountain, followed by a roar. “No...! I believed him! I did all he asked...! I thought I had found my... we were partners...” she couldn’t believe the turnabout. “Atlas... Stala!” she screamed as she dashed forwards with tears running down her pretty face. But the mountain monster didn’t seem to care other than guttural sounds as the tip of the mountain shaped into a malformed head.

“Detain her!” Zeus barked the order out; the burly centurions at Zeus’ commands were quick to apprehend Epithymas, who struggled to escape their blessed strength.

“...too soon...” the gods turned their attention back at the mountain that was Atlas. “You interfere with me yet again, damned Zeus!” his voice was full of pain as he bashed his gigantic fists against the barrier the gods had shut him down into. He was truly gargantuan, a beast of unfathomable proportions. “I was close... so close! I could feel my powers returning...!”

“You lost when you sided against me back in the war, Atlas,” the lightning God admonished as he stepped into the barrier. “You lost the worship and prayer of mortals, and by stealing their dream energy you thought you’d survive your fate as I decreed. Foolish Titan!”

“Zeus...!” Atlas groaned out. His transformation from mountain to creature seemed to be highly incomplete, and was causing him to lash out incompetently, “You...! How can you say that when you...?!”

“Stala!” Epithymas screamed at the top of her lungs, interrupting the rocky giant.

“You...” the gurgling, growling Titan trailed off, “You took so long. I knew I should’ve pressed you on harder.”

“No... Stala, what are you saying! Quit talking like that! We were saving the Dreamscape, you and I...!”

“Hah... hahaha!” the Titan suddenly burst out into laughter, startling Epithymas. “You’re beyond any hope. A poor excuse for an incomplete deity! Not even as a pawn were you worthy! Bahahaha... But it doesn’t matter. Nothing matters anymore. I am doomed. But you, Zeus...” the crumbling giant began talking in a distorted, paused, laborious manner. “You’re not so different than the father you imprisoned in Tartarus. Your family is doomed to the same outcome time and time again. First Uranus, then Cronus! And now you... hahahaha!” his voice boomed louder and louder as Zeus cringed from the beast’s almost unintelligible babble, “As long as your legacy persists... so shall its treachery!”

A roar of anger marked Zeus’ rage as he attacked. He struck the malformed Atlas again and again, blasting him with lightning bolts that exploded in his incomplete form, further withering the agonizing Titan down. The flurry of attacks stopped only when Atlas’ wailing died down. The beast was no more. Zeus panted, not from a lack of stamina, but the intense hatred for his heritage. He turned to look at the crying Epithymas, who had given up her pointless struggle.

The goddess did not care for the squabble between Gods and Titans. She simply could not bear the thought of having been used and lied to, especially while putting the Dreamscape in danger. Had Atlas simply done this to get a rise out of Zeus? An earth-bound spirit, cursed to be the mountain

holding the heavens aloft for all eternity did not sound like an appetizing fate. Like many of the defeated Titans, Atlas surely held resentment towards the commander in chief of the Olympians. If ironic punishment towards Zeus that was the reason to use her, then the humiliation she was suffering only became exacerbated. Epithymas only wanted to know if she had been helping by capturing the Dream Eaters, but with Stala gone... with Atlas gone, she would never know. She shut down, simply hanging limp and unable to look anyone in the eye.

“What to do with her, sir?” one of the centurions holding the depressed Epithymas asked the lightning god.

“Pity she turned traitor,” Hades commented while dusting his robes off, “I liked how she drove you crazy. She sounded like she was just being used.”

“Silence, Hades.” Zeus cupped Epithymas’ chin and pulled her face up. Atlas’ mockery didn’t have to make sense to anyone, but to the one who had survived and thwarted his father’s reign, the leader of the Olympians knew he could not afford to take chances with anybody; especially family. “A traitor is a traitor. I will take responsibility for her.”

“Might as well,” the Netherworld God groaned in disdain, giving a wave to the silent redhead, “See you around, niece.”

A collective gasp escaped from those uninformed. Hades’ arm was grabbed by Poseidon, who yanked him impatiently. “You were supposed to keep it a secret to the end.”

“Newsflash, meathead,” Hades shrugged and turned around after pushing Poseidon away, “It is the end for her.”

Zeus let Epithymas’ head hang. He didn’t seem to care about the revelation as much as what he had to do. He lifted his hand holding a lightning spear. Most of the Gods looked away from the impending punishment.

“Wait! Hold on, don’t do this, boss man!” Dionysius, who had been recovering from the shock of learning the truth, tried to persuade Zeus to stop. “She’s your daughter. Plus she had no idea. You can’t...!”

“Out of the way. You reek of horrid wine,” Zeus shoved Dionysius off, never taking his eyes off the goddess he was about to punish. “Rrrraaaaaah!” he roared and staked Epithymas down with the lightning spear. There was a flash of white for a moment. The centurions were holding no one anymore after the next.

The traitor had been dealt with.

Some time later...

Thick fumes spewed out of the wetlands’ marsh. It was a hostile environment where the strong thrived by preying on the weak. It was also the proving grounds for males of a certain tribe that put their lives on the line to complete their rite of passage.

Young Agathias wished he had chosen a scavenging hunt for something less potentially lethal than a monster’s fang. The youth had been away from his village for only three hours on his quest, yet the

experience felt like a lifetime of constant peril. From the toxic frogs to the vicious snakes inhabiting the marshlands, it was enough to break any man's spirits. But Agathias had a dream. He steeled through in order to see it come true.

The boy was equipped with handcrafted weapons and tools, all of it through the clever on-site crafting using local resources. He counted with a small bow and arrows made with wood and rocks, and fastened with sturdy vines. A small dagger made by sharpening stone and tying it to a makeshift handle hung at his belt. He had both long-range and close-combat options, but he wasn't taking any chances, so he had made a light spear in a similar fashion to the dagger to deal with danger while being able to keep it at a reasonable distance. Agathias' village taught self-sufficiency in the form of smart analysis and situational awareness. He owed his life to those lessons. Despite his preparations, he was very cautious and preferred to avoid needless conflict with the denizens of the marsh; he had only one target after all.

The monster in question was a particularly large alligator situated at the heart of the marshlands. It had appeared from seemingly nowhere, according to the village elders. There had been no records of these creatures in their particular area of the wetlands until now. Perhaps the northern villages had seen crocodiles, a close cousin of the large predator. But for Agathias' village, this was a first. What was most baffling of all was that the creature was on its own.

As Agathias waddled through the murky marsh, he remained alert for any impending threats. He made sure he was as quiet and calm as he could. Some of the more dangerous beasts in the marsh were said to be able to tell a person's position off their breathing. The boy wondered whether the huge alligator was capable of this feat; perhaps stealth wasn't going to be an option. He regretted the bad relations between his village and the one up north, or else they would've been able to capitalize on their knowledge. This was one of the things Agathias' adventure set out to fix.

Elders had decided the mysterious beast's appearance was a test from the spirits of the astral plane. The monster was the largest, most dangerous looking creature in the marshlands right now; and he who would slay the beast and claim its fang would not just prove himself a man, but also favored by their gods. Agathias was looking forwards to righting wrongs and securing peace for the land.

The young hunter hid behind one of the moss-covered trees as he suddenly found a large shape in his field of view. He only prayed the creature whose shape it belonged to had not seen him. Agathias calmed himself, sighing deeply. Once he was in full control of his breathing, the boy stole a glance by peeking out for a brief moment. There was no mistake; his mark lay ahead.

Resting atop a mound of dirt surrounded by dark waters, the creature appeared to be asleep. Agathias composed himself and glanced again in an effort to measure its outlook and hid back once again. He was terrified. Looking at his modest, hand-crafted weapons, he thought they could never be enough to harm something so big. If the creature opened its maw it would surely be able to devour him in one bite, a fate he did not look forwards to. He weighed his options as he looked around.

The tree he had chosen to hide behind gave Agathias an idea. If he couldn't start with a serious advantage, perhaps he could fabricate an opportunity to reveal a weakness. The young man climbed the tree, careful not to scratch on the bark too loudly. The moss made the climb a slippery one, but by carefully digging patches out with his dagger, he finally secured a way up to a large branch.

Being high up on the tree enabled Agathias to blend in with the marsh's natural darkness. He began an observation routine. At first, he didn't get much out of watching the alligator sleep. It was when the creature woke that Agathias began to carefully pay attention. He spent a couple of hours

between waiting for it to abandon its sleep and observing the creature's movements. There wasn't anything worth of note, other than the fact its eyes were exposed and its mouth, when open, could be a good insertion point for the toxin he had fashioned out of poisonous glands he had gathered at the start of his quest. Agathias bit on his right thumb's nails as he cursed how difficult approaching the creature for that strategy to work would be. His short bow didn't have the potency to cause any lasting damage, if he even managed to hit its eyes. The boy eventually gave up when the creature returned from its idle swimming. He decided further observation was necessary.

As the hours went by, Agathias thanked his foresight. He had decided to collect food in case he had the need to camp. This was hardly a proper camping spot, but it was the best way to research his prey. As he snacked on berries, he watched the creature merely exist. The marsh's inhabitants surrounded its turf, never getting too close, but the alligator itself didn't appear interested in hunting them. In fact, Agathias found it curious how for such a big predator it was not actively seeking for sustenance. He questioned that fact again when, after he fell asleep against the tree on top of the branch and woke up, he saw the alligator simply floating on the water. He had to eat every few hours, and he understood not all creatures worked the same way, but this beast wasn't eating whatsoever. Agathias became increasingly concerned.

"It's not trying to attack anything. Not even the birds that come to drink from its waters. Even frogs snap their tongues at the insects that get too close to their Lilly pads," the young boy wondered what kind of animal would behave in such strange way. Agathias was an inquisitive individual by nature, so the urgency of figuring a way to mercilessly assassinate the alligator started being replaced by a strange feeling of empathy. "It's almost like it's trying to starve to death. Is it because it's alone?" the thought came to sadden the trained hunter. He couldn't bear the thought of kicking someone when they were down, beast or not.

"They were right. I AM just a crazy boy," Agathias said to himself as he began to slide down the tree, recalling the words the elders described him with after he said he would be the one to hunt for the monster when none of the bravest warriors would. He didn't care if he woke up the huge alligator this time. Agathias waddled through the water to approach him, having left all three of his weapons back at the foot of the tree while holding his bag of belongings over his head to avoid contact with water. "I'm crazy," he repeated in his head, feeling his teeth clattering inside his closed mouth, every nerve in his body shooting signals of life-preservation that his heart was ignoring. The alligator's eyes opened once he set foot on its island.

Its large, thick tail swished to the side as it cranked its bulky neck to the side. Both of the creature's lizard-like eyes landed on Agathias. It was then that the boy finally noticed two very decisive things. One: The creature looked even bigger up close. He felt like his legs were about to give up. Two: The tiredness in that creature's eyes was evident. It hadn't been sleeping at all throughout all that time. It had been crying.

"G-greetings..." Agathias almost bit his tongue talking, his words coming out in stutters. He had no idea why he was trying to communicate with an animal, but he had never seen an animal cry before either. There was nothing usual about this encounter. "I'm Agathias," he introduced himself to the motionless beast, setting down his bag. He decided to cut out the pleasantries and opened his bag, revealing a portion of his rations which he took out and laid down on top of a clean leaf. It wasn't meat, but it beat the whole amount of nothing the alligator had been putting in its mouth for the past day. "Please eat. There's no poison in it," he said as he stood a few cautionary steps back. He wanted to make sure the alligator found nothing threatening about the offering. "What am I doing?" he shuddered as thoughts invaded his mind, "It SHOULD be poisoned. I already ruined all of my chances, and if this monster thinks I'm a threat, then I might as well have served myself on a plate...!"

Against the pessimistic thoughts of the young boy, however, the alligator merely turned itself around, facing away. Agathias found the gesture unexpected, and his legs finally gave. He fell down on his butt, letting out a gasp of relief. "I'm still alive...!" he told himself, "But..." he paused as he observed the creature, "...if it lives here, it probably knows what poison is like. It should know the food isn't poisoned. Is it really trying to starve itself? Why is it so sad?" More and more questions popped up in Agathias' mind as he simply sat there, mere yards away from the creature who until a day before he had been too wary to even be twenty feet away from. He looked on and on, as if trying to discern the beast's intentions, or lack thereof. Hours went by, and neither boy nor alligator moved an inch.

Agathias woke up the next morning, realizing he had fallen asleep again. For whatever reason, he felt safe with the alligator around, but his relief became obfuscated by disappointment when he saw that the alligator still hadn't seemed to move. Despair filled Agathias' eyes when he looked down to notice the food he had left for the alligator was being attacked by flies and ants. "Out! Away! Shoo!" he yelled in an effort to protect the offering from being ruined.

The racket seemed to have an effect on the alligator, which turned around to look at the commotion. The creature saw the young man fanning the insects away from the food and began to approach. Agathias, who had been preoccupied with protecting the offering, noticed too late that the huge beast had stalked its way to him faster than he could notice. The boy finally reacted once he was loomed on by the giant alligator. Its impressive maw opened, showing Agathias rows of sharp fangs, one of which he had been supposed to be pooling his efforts into acquiring. "I stood no chance..." the terrified boy told himself as he shut his eyes, expecting his end.

"HE SAID SHOO!" a sudden shout followed by a blast of air hit Agathias in the face like a smack, blowing his hair back like a gust of strong wind. When he next opened his eyes, the insects were gone. The alligator was still in front of him, maw closed this time. There was a brief exchange of stares as Agathias, knocked on his back, tried to sit up and process what had just occurred. "Why are you doing this?" the alligator's maw slowly shifted and moved as the same voice that had yelled; only much more calm now, posed the question.

Agathias' mind was blown. He could only babble at that point. "You can talk?!"

"No, Agathias, this is all in your mind and I'm just a figment of your imagination. Way to waste thirty hours, brain. Shouldn't a youngling like you be home?"

Agathias was left speechless at the sheer amount of talkativeness, and sarcasm, the purported beast was able to conjure up. He shook his head, trying to hold his inner curios at bay and only focus on the important matters right now. "L-listen, I... I'm... I don't know how to say this."

"Start at the beginning, then. It doesn't look like you're about to leave anyway," the alligator's feminine tone came out with disdain, as if she was bored.

"Right..." Agathias took a small breath; there was no way his technique to achieve focus could not serve to help him through conversation after all. "I'm a hunter from the southern marshlands village. I'm here to complete my rite of passage. The elders at my village said you were a monster..."

The alligator interrupted, "Tell them to forgive me next time you see them. It's been so hard to find makeup ever since I arrived here."

“...ahh... sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you.” Agathias waved his hands in a defensively nervous gesture, “Hold on. So it’s true. You aren’t from here!”

“Correct.” The alligator responded.

“And you can talk....” Agathias continued.

“We already established this, but for the sake of amusement, you’re on a roll!”

“Eh-heh... s-sorry...” Agathias blushed in embarrassment, finding it odd that he was being teased by the creature he was supposed to be fighting to the death with. “What I meant to say is: You’re a very special creature.”

“I’ve heard that one before. You’re going to have to try a bit harder than that to erase that blunder from those mean old guys.”

Agathias couldn’t help but chuckle a little. He felt his initial nerves melting away as he made conversation with the talking alligator. The boy told her about his mission, and how he had been looking forwards to hunting an evil monster to prove himself. He also told her how he had been preparing to hunt her with the weapons he had left behind, and then told her that before he came here with the food she had agreed to eat, he had been watching her sleep from atop a tree branch.

“...there’s absolutely no way not to make that last one not sound creepy, Agathias. You have to learn how to...” she paused as Agathias hung his head low. The boy seemed down on himself all of a sudden.

“...but I couldn’t do what I was thinking of,” Agathias continued as if the alligator hadn’t been smacking back at his narration. “I was considering using poison on my arrows, maybe hit a weak point. I was considering your eyes. But then I noticed you weren’t eating. You were just pacing around, aimlessly, as if you had nowhere to go.” There was silence in the once lively marsh. Agathias continued, “And when I got close, I saw it. I mean your eyes. You were sad.” More silence. The alligator wasn’t talking back. “I don’t know how it works with all animals, but I know sad eyes when I see them,” the boy looked away as the alligator simply stared at him without uttering a word. “I’ve seen it many times before. In my reflection, too.”

“Agathias,” the alligator made the attempt to call out at the boy, but she had nothing witty to remark on this time. She allowed him to speak instead.

“Back in my village, I’m just an orphan. I’m not trying to say my life is bad or anything. The people there take really good care of me. But ever since I lost my parents to a war between my people and the northern village, I thought of how painful it must be...” his voice began to break up, “... how terrible it must be to be alone.” The reptile’s eyes started to widen as she saw tears rolling down the boy’s cheeks. He wasn’t stopping. “I was lucky to have a home to go back to, but ever since that day I realized I could never really tell my folks how much I appreciated them. Then I thought how many others like me are suffering like I did back then. All because of disputes and silly fights that go nowhere; the truth is I hate violence. But...” he trailed off for a second, rubbing his arm on his wet eyes, “...but strength is all they listen to. I think that if we talked and understood each other better, then perhaps we wouldn’t need strength that much. Maybe that way war wouldn’t need to happen.”

The alligator thought back to Agathias’ actions. He had confessed it all to her after all. How he had extracted poison glands from poison frogs to create a toxin, but had made sure to hunt the bigger,

older specimens at the end of their lifespan. He had harvested the food he and the alligator had eaten from local flora, sparing anymore animals by ignoring needless confrontations as well. The boy was seeking strength, but he did not want to sacrifice others ruthlessly like most of his kind would be ready to. "You understand the basis for coexistence, Agathias, but the truth is, not even wild animals... not even gods are capable of perfect coexistence. What makes you think you can stop war on your own power, even if you were strong enough for it?"

"I don't know," Agathias responded, sniffing as his crying stopped, "I don't even know why I'm telling you all of this to begin with. I'm just someone with ideas that nobody listens to. Maybe it's because deep down I know it's pointless, but..."

"But?"

Agathias appeared exhausted. Between the long chat and the emotional exertion, the young hunter started to feel drowsiness take hold until he eventually conked out. The alligator looked at the sleeping hunter, putting one of her claws atop his unconscious form. There was a brief still moment before both the alligator and Agathias started glowing with a green sheen.

"Please stop!" Agathias' cries of despair disappeared into the roaring flames of his village burning. Warriors fought, families being destroyed one member after another. The laughter, the joy, the carnage, all of it unsightly. Everybody the boy tried to cling to simply pushed him away, "This can't be the solution! If we don't stop fighting, there won't be anything left to fight for!" he cried out, but like before, the sound of weapons clashing and blood gushing was all that orchestrated the area.

Agathias dropped to his knees, trying to block out the screams of innocents as life was taken from them. It was useless. All of it had lost meaning. He couldn't think of any good reason to defend the northern village, let alone his own. Then, at the peak of monstrous violence, a light descended upon the gruesome scene. The cottages and bridges stopped burning, and weapons were dropped. Agathias opened his eyes to see the shadows of two men dropping their axes to shake hands and then follow with a brotherly embrace. Amidst the rage, understanding and compromise had been born.

There still was sadness borne out of the mistakes of the past, but those still alive, overcome by grief and reconstituted by empathy, had resolved to hope for a better future. Agathias finally remembered as he stood up and was washed by light. "Deep down I know it's pointless to try since I'm so weak but... together we can hope."

In the backline of the nightmare turned dream, the silhouette of a woman with a hand on her hips and a palm carrying the flying dust from a withered Dream Eater started to walk away. Agathias turned around, but saw no one. He started to smile as he saw the bright sun blessing him and all of the villagers in his dream. In a few moments, everything flashed white before the boy...

"H-huh...?" Agathias groaned a little as he sat up. He felt a bit light-headed, but surprisingly well-rested. "What was thaaaaaaaah!" he screamed in terror as he noticed a huge detached fang in his lap.

"Honestly. How did you survive this long being such a big crybaby, Agathias?" the alligator's voice came from behind as she slowly crawled out of the water.

“Y-you...” Agathias held up the fang in his hands in disbelief. “How did you...?”

“Don’t worry. It didn’t hurt. If I eat well, it’ll even grow back,” the alligator said. “Just take it.”

“B-but I... I can’t...”

“Oh yes you can. Listen to me,” the alligator said as she crawled around the young man, “Earlier I asked a question and you didn’t know how to answer it. But now I know that you have your own answer. And that is enough for me.”

“How did you...?” Agathias stood up holding the heavy, large fang in both hands. He couldn’t follow what the reptile was talking about, but it all surmised to him having completed his quest without the need for bloodshed. “No. It doesn’t matter.” A smile appeared on Agathias’ face as he gripped the fang with conviction, “I know what I have to do. Thank you, Lo-Lah!”

“Lo-Lah?” the alligator replied.

“It’s uhh... w-well, I don’t know if you have a name. You never told me,” Agathias gave the alligator an awkward smile, “In my tongue, we call men that open our eyes to truth with the Ro-Lah title. For women, it’s Lo-Lah.”

The reptile seemed a bit humbled, even for a giant beast that liked to gab so much, “I see. I don’t mind the name.”

“Lo-Lah, I’m not just grateful for this,” Agathias held the fang up demonstratively, “When I was sleeping, I thought about your question. I thought about what true strength is, and... I think I really do know what to do now.”

Lo-Lah seemed pleased with the answer, so she lied down and nodded. Agathias frowned, seeming down in the dumps all of a sudden. “You seem disappointed, Agathias.”

“It’s just that...” he paused, trying to hold back his tears of joy. “In this short time we’ve known each other, you’ve helped me so much. I don’t know if I deserve it all. Is there anything I could do to help you?”

“What makes you think I need your help, Agathias?” Lo-Lah asked in return. Agathias deflated a little. He had been trying to avoid bringing the subject back. Without Agathias saying anything and with Lo-Lah for the first time showing that she could form a smile, she added: “You’ve managed to remind me of my purpose. And that... that is something even I will be unable to repay for as long as I live.”

Agathias remained silent. He figured that they didn’t need to discuss matters any longer. “Lo-Lah, I shall never forget you. When next I visit, I will have gained the strength I need to guide my people. I swear upon this!” he said as he held the giant fang up in both hands.

“That’s one of my teeth you’re holding up so proudly, kid. Please don’t embarrass us,” the alligator put a claw in front of her eyes as she murmured. She seemed flustered. Agathias couldn’t help but laugh heartily. Lo-Lah ended laughing with the young boy. They felt a connection with each other.

It was true friendship.

Once she was alone after Agathias departed, Lo-Lah remembered her purpose. She was the goddess of dreams and desire. The creature she had hunted inside the realm within Agathias' dream was a Dream Eater gorged with the boy's willpower. By extracting the insect sac's contents and purifying the energy using her own aura, Agathias' ego had been restored to a healthy state. She had dispelled the cloud of a nightmare gripping his heart, and thus saved him from his own fears and insecurities.

Lo-Lah remembered she was the one supposed to guard the Dreamscape, the place where she was strong in. She looked at her own reflection on the murky waters. Lo-Lah could barely make out her own snout and reptilian body. "I'm not that person anymore," she said, referring to her previous identity. As she looked at her claw, she pounded it against the sandy surface of her little island. "I can't even visit the Dreamscape on my own. I felt drawn to it when Agathias fell asleep..." she tried making sense of the events in her mind. "Is this my punishment?" she looked herself in the water again, slapping her own visage on the water's surface, "Transformed into a beast, stripped of most of my powers... exiled from home." She sighed.

The alligator turned away and crawled to the other side of the island, looking up at the shiny outlines on the thick foliage. Moonlight barely filtered in. As the Olympian Epithymas, she had been betrayed, used and discarded. Her efforts, while noble, had been punished for the danger she had blindly put the world into. She looked away from the moon, turning again, this time looking at the sand below her. "I'm standing here," she told herself, "I'm not that person anymore," she repeated in her head. "Whatever the gods and titans do now, I know my purpose better than anyone else. I'll protect the Dreamscape, my home, and the home of every dream. I am Lo-Lah. This is my new identity."

As time passed, Lo-Lah's determination to reach the Dreamscape on her own ability was tested to its limits. With the generous contribution of dream energy she had borrowed from Agathias, she felt spry and strong, allowing her to focus without distraction. However, she was still far too weak to teleport, let alone warping to the Dreamscape. She didn't give up, and used the concern for Dream Eaters running rampant as fuel for her motivation.

Despite the lack of definitive results, Lo-Lah was pleasantly surprised when one day, her friend Agathias showed up again. They talked. Agathias told Lo-Lah about the elders' confusion but eventual understanding when he showed that he had acquired proof of his completed quest without slaying her.

"They say I'm still too young to assume the mantle of village chief," Agathias explained, hope never leaving his eyes, "They say I'm to take the torch in two years. I'll have to train and do my part until then."

"You will make a good chief, Agathias," Lo-Lah said without looking too impressed; for an alligator's expression anyway. She was happy for her friend, but her own concerns were starting to make it hard to enjoy the boy's success.

It didn't take long for Agathias to notice. "Lo-Lah," he said, scooting closer, "Is everything alright? I know I didn't come visit right away, but I promise I'll be back tomorrow."

The alligator nodded. "I'd like that." She didn't know if she'd be in any shape to greet him with a sunny disposition. Agathias smiled to her.

"Actually, if you don't mind, there are some people in the village that want to meet you. Most of

them don't believe I got a fang out of you without killing you, heh," the boy gave Lo-Lah an awkward grin, scratching his cheek nervously.

"I hope they don't have any funny ideas. I don't feel too hot about the idea of gator season, Agathias."

He waved his hands in defense. "No, no. I... something great happened when I showed them. They knew I wasn't lying, since they had a scout monitor me from a distance to make sure I wasn't cheating. See, during the rite of passage, we must only use what the marsh provides in order to accomplish our goals. Weapons and tools have to be procured on-site, and that includes food too."

"That explains all the trouble you went to protect that food. This marsh isn't the most hospitable one," Lo-Lah acknowledged. "And this scout saw us converse, is that it?"

Agathias nodded. "They know I did not kill to get your fang. In fact, I told them you're Lo-Lah, the lady of the marsh."

"Now I'm a lady of the marsh? Ugh, what else did I expect from a bunch of swampland bumpkins." She put a claw to her snout, chuckling to hide her embarrassment. "According to what you told me, the name you gave me is for those that offer guidance, isn't it?"

"That's right! There are those that want to talk with you. Just that. I told them how you let me reach clarity in a moment where I wasn't sure where to move next," Agathias explained, "And I thought that you could maybe appreciate the company. Nobody should be alone."

Lo-Lah looked away, starting to pity herself. "This kid is unbelievable," she thought, making Agathias raise an eyebrow. She finally giggled. "Oh fine. But Agathias, listen. I need you to answer a question."

"What is it, Lo-Lah?"

"Are these friends of yours, the ones seeking guidance, also having trouble sleeping?"

"I would need to ask, Lo-Lah," Agathias responded, unsure. "Is that important?"

"Very. Bring me those that suffer from nightmares. It's better if they come at night, when they're tired, so I'll be able to help them during their sleep." The more she explained to Agathias, the more she became convinced that this idea was better than she initially thought. If she had managed a connection with the Dreamscape by diving into Agathias' dream, more people afflicted by Dream Eaters would allow her to train herself to reuse her abilities. It was her best bet.

And so, without further debate, Agathias left for his village. On the following night, Agathias showed up just as promised, and this time brought with him two people. One was a young friend of his, while the other was an old man well into age. According to Agathias, the old man was one of the village elders. Like Agathias, his young friend was an orphan, having lost her father to war and mother to illness. Despite the difference in age and gender, as well as situation, both villagers were having the same problem; they couldn't tell what their problem was, they were anxious and they could not sleep at night.

"Big or small, strong or weak, young or old... all mortals dream," Lo-Lah reviewed in her mind.

“This is where all creatures fall into the same category. It doesn’t matter whether they live in opposite ends of the globe, or if their beliefs put them at odds with each other. They all have their dreams and hopes, and suffer from nightmares and Dream Eaters that sap their wills to live.” The alligator mused, watching as Agathias directed the two tired individuals to rest on the soft sand of Lo-Lah’s island. “Mortals deserve both the good and the bad without interference from gods or monsters. The Dreamscape is a place of balance and harmony where dreams and nightmares coexist. Dream Eaters that eschew the balance are not welcome!”

She was like a streak of pure light within the nightmares. Although her powers weren’t completely restored, all that experience she had gained while working for Atlas gave Lo-Lah the advantage. She was able to move in the form of an incorporeal shade, allowing her use of a more humanoid, familiar shape in order to hunt. From one dream to the other, she captured, lightly gashed and then purified each Dream Eater. The released energy on both dreams allowed Lo-Lah to nurture her while Agathias’ friends’ egos were normalized. Back in the waking world, the mortals were surprised when they woke up feeling less encumbered, as if a weight had been lifted off their souls. Lo-Lah was initially surprised when she was so thoroughly thanked by all three villagers, Agathias included.

It felt odd. The feeling of gratitude gliding along their words and landing in her internal ears brought certain elation to the alligator’s heart. The sensation was warm, making the large bodied reptile tingle with anticipation. It felt extremely similar to the feeling of fulfillment she gained while sampling a dream, yet it was significantly more powerful. Lo-Lah decided that this had been a good idea, and told the mortals they could come anytime they were in need of help.

Over the course of the following two years, Lo-Lah began to gain more and more visitors. She helped each and all of them by diving into their afflicted dreams and, as she suspected, purified the Dream Eaters chewing on their willpower. Lo-Lah felt herself growing stronger after every week of work. But what she truly came to appreciate was the villager’s content smiles once they had been rid of the darned creatures. Their words of gratitude, sometimes even actually offerings in the form of fruit or other delicacies, made Lo-Lah feel better.

Soon enough, it wasn’t just people from Agathias’ village coming for her counsel and guidance. The rumors of the lady of the marsh began to spread out, and those curious and afflicted by nightmares came to the dangerous marsh to partake in the miracles. It wasn’t long before Lo-Lah came to be seen as a divine creature, and worshipped as a messenger of the spirit world sent to protect the faithful. Lo-Lah tended to them all: no matter what their background or appearance, even the skeptics were proved wrong with the tender treatment.

With every new day, Lo-Lah felt her strength return by leaps and bounds. She couldn’t even recall how weak she used to feel before she met Agathias. She was really glad she and the boy had met. Although by now he wasn’t a boy any longer, but the proper chief of his village. His every day visits became less and less frequent as he became engrossed in the caretaking and unification of the southern and northern villages. They had all decided to set aside their differences in favor of peace and harmony, just as Agathias had dreamed for so long. The outcome made sense to Lo-Lah, since it was Agathias who introduced both villages to her, and thus helped so many together.

Five years later, the marshlands’ murkiness had dissipated. Her presence, overflowing with positive energy channeled by all of her worshippers, had transformed her surroundings. The marshlands became bright, and the toxic creatures relocated safely, allowing peaceful animals to move in and rearrange the ecosystem. Slowly but steadily, the marshlands were transformed into a beautiful clearing where in the center resided Lo-Lah.

She still did not have the power to access the Dreamscape on her own terms, but the prayers and worships had created an unexpected link with her and the faithful. Lo-Lah could tell if Dream Eaters were feeding on those dreamers, and she could instantly move into their dreams before the insects forced them to have unnatural nightmares.

She came up with a way to help even those that hadn't the courage or belief to visit her for help. By infusing special charms in the shape of her Dream Snatcher's hoop, Lo-Lah had managed to secure herself entrance to the dreams of those that wished to be protected. In honor of the tool she used to hunt, Lo-Lah wanted them to be called that way. A reluctant Agathias suggested they call them Nightmare Catchers instead.

"Everybody's a critic," were Lo-Lah's words of sarcasm; even though she couldn't deny how the simple charms had gained popularity. She felt fulfilled. Instead of feeling sadness due to the loss of connection with her home, Lo-Lah knew she was improving day by day, bit by bit, turning her back into the powerful goddess she had once been.

Eventually, Lo-Lah decided that her appearance did not quite fit with the gorgeous lake she resided in. She was also ready to experiment with her newly found powers. Lo-Lah came to realize how much she owed each and all of her countless followers whose prayers and worship, and even their tasty offerings empowered her. She had never felt like this before. Lo-Lah decided she owed it to them to greet them with a friendlier looking form rather than a huge alligator. But what, she wondered.

Lo-Lah considered her options. She knew that changing into something radically different would simply confuse her worshippers, maybe even scare them. She had to pick something that would be the same while being different; something similar. It then occurred to her. "I always thought I'd show them what I used to look before I was turned into an alligator... but I think I can show them both what they're used to and still give them a familiar appearance."

With that thought at the forefront of her mind, Lo-Lah began to focus on her mystical energies. "They consider me a "lady", and that is what they should get." As the alligator closed her eyes, her bulky, scaled form started to gradually change. First, her limbs began to stretch out and elongate, going from stout and thick to long and slender. The two paws at her back turned into long legs with clawed feet while those at her front transformed into arms with five claw-tipped fingers. With her new extremities done, Lo-Lah wasted no time in experimentation and pushed her hands down palm-first. That familiar tact under each individual finger was almost delicious. She felt her knees scrape along the sand as she tried to balance her enormous alligator body with those misfit extremities. It was only the start.

As Lo-Lah focused more, she redistributed the weight of her bulk to different sections of her body. She needed a humanoid shape after all. Lo-Lah reached into her memories of her previous life as Epithymas. She used to be quite a looker even if she wasn't quite as irresistible as Aphrodite. Lo-Lah wanted that body-shape for her new form.

The thought carried over to reality as the alligator's tough hide became smoother to the touch. Still scaly, but matted down like some sort of soft leather. The huge torso became separated in two noticeably different segments. At the base of her legs and tail, Lo-Lah gained a pelvic structure that accommodated shapely hips and a thick, attractive rump. Separated by a curvaceous waist, her upper body became slim and compact, arranging space for her arms, shoulders and neck. The humanoid alligator moaned out as she felt her chest tingle with a familiar warmth.

Lo-Lah instinctively brought a claw up to her chest, feeling it push out as two lumps of flesh began to poke out on the reptile's bosom. A pair of scaly mounds began to take shape and steadily grow; pushing Lo-Lah's hand away as they quickly overtook their rightful place. From mountain-like lumps the breasts grew larger and their shape turned noticeably spherical, expanding bigger and bigger until they each became more than a hand-full. From that point on, Lo-Lah moaned in absolute pleasure as they continued to enlarge until doubling their size, becoming part of a prominent and feminine bust. The female gator couldn't help herself and grabbed her new, huge breasts to squeeze them. Their size endowed them with a great deal of sensitiveness. Despite the smooth scales covering them, Lo-Lah could feel how soft they were to the touch; the flesh beneath felt nearly malleable with how her fingers sank onto it. She could even feel the newly grown nipples beneath the scales where they were protected.

Kneeling, the anthropomorphic alligator was beyond herself as her transformation occurred. As Lo-Lah played with herself, she threw her head back in absolute pleasure. The same process that had given her such a voluptuous, curvaceous body began to reconstruct her head. Her enormous snout decreased in girth and size, adjusting its geometry to more human-like proportions. She still had the head of an alligator, but her maw was adjusted so she could easily move it to speak and express emotion. Her snout became more rounded out as a result. Lo-Lah felt hair growing above her eyes, covering two subtle but noticeable brows. The rest of it grew on her new, round, green scalp; a mane of long, flowing, crimson-red hair.

"Ahh!" Lo-Lah arched backwards, feeling a rush of sensations she didn't know she missed. Her body was awash with bliss, her every nerve firing all at once, overflowing her brain with a hormonal storm. Orgasmic jolts ran through her spine as her reptilian tongue lolled out, hanging limp out of her fang-filled mouth. She had long-since restored the fang Agathias had taken as his prize.

The red-haired lady of the marsh had felt the bliss of womanly release for the first time in her new body. Her tail smacked the sand under as she collapsed snout-first, feeling like she had just gone off like an explosion. "This... this felt amazing. Ugh, I went overboard, too...!" she giggled a little as she opened her vertically slit eyes, still feeling the weight of her voluminous chest. "Mmmm... worth it," she concluded, bringing her hands to her sensual bosom. She wasn't going to be bored during Dream Hunts anymore now.

After the swell of power had calmed down, Lo-Lah felt herself gain the strength to stand. She found it strange to be on two legs once more. Tossing her luscious red hair back over the shoulder, she rested her hands on her wide hips, standing before her reaction on the clear water. The gator girl turned and spun a little, shaking her hips and bouncing her breasts on her palms, checking every last inch of her lascivious body to make sure the transformation was complete. It also didn't hurt her eyes one bit. "Oh, eat your heart out love nymphs. Now this is why green is my new favorite color!" she giggled, striking a sexy pose: Lo-Lah threw her arms back and pushed her hair back while squeezing her breasts together with her elbows. She winked and smiled to herself as she swayed her hips and tail to the side, putting her long, curvy legs on display. "Mmm, this works. I'm sure they'll like this. I'm not some lady of the marsh anymore, after all." As lady of the lake, Lo-Lah felt strongly about her new appearance.

As a result of her previous body having been rather sizable to begin with, Lo-Lah's anthropomorphic form had been left on the tall side after the transformation. She stood quite a healthy six foot, not counting the tail, and her buxom shape made her look larger still.

"Hmm..." she frowned a little, tapping her snout with two fingers as she kept judging her reflection on the water. "Perhaps I'm not tall enough. They're used to seeing a big gator. I need to show them

a big gator girl!” she grinned to herself, snapping her fingers. Lo-Lah focused on her powers again, starting to feel the energy course through her being.

The gator’s body glowed as a bright light enveloped her. Lo-Lah reached into her stores of energy, where all the prayers had conferred power upon her being. She drew on that strength, releasing it to physically magnify what she had become. From one moment to the next, her body started to shudder. In the wake of her swelling power, Lo-Lah felt pleasure without limit. Every fiber in her being screamed out in bliss as inch upon inch was added to her body.

It took maybe ten seconds for her to breach eight feet tall. Lo-Lah felt the sand being pushed off her expanding soles as her increasingly bigger form sank from the additional weight. She stretched her arms out in a T-shape and widely smiled as she embraced the feeling. Lo-Lah came to understand that more than her huge new breasts, the feeling of expansion was what dominated her joy like no other thing.

For a being whose immortal life had been all about a fantastic existence without want, Lo-Lah was awash with sensations that mirrored both greed and lust. Even after expanding past ten foot tall, she didn’t want the process to end. To the Lo-Lah moments before, that should have been enough. Gripped by the unending, enjoyable tickling of growth, she commanded her body to stretch out in every direction. The sound of her bones and muscles popping as she outgrew her size with even greater height was akin to a sonorous symphony to the gator’s internal ears. She was like hungry dragon feasting upon a mountain of ambrosia, satisfied yet with a tickled palate. “More,” she moaned, drawing additional power to exacerbate the process.

It didn’t help that her awareness of her rising perspective made Lo-Lah shiver in delight. She was consumed with the desire to see everything before her dwindle. The trees that for such a long time had shaded her little island were becoming easier and easier to reach up to. With loud creaking the busty alligator passed 15ft. tall and went on her way to breaking 20. The growing reptile was like a towering shiny pillar of femininity that simply continued to rise. Lo-Lah wanted to forget all about her troubles and simply bask in the never-ending euphoria wrought by the feeling of her ascending self. She was already planning on accelerating her expansion again, feeling the constant need for a refreshing, potent spurt every few moments. However, by the 30ft. mark, her clawed feet had become so big that they covered more space on her small, sinking island than it could hold. Lo-Lah was interrupted when she felt wetness at her feet. She looked down and saw how she somehow was balancing her growing form on what to her eyes looked like a patch of dirt. “Ahh! Curses!”

With her focus disrupted, the giant Lo-Lah stopped growing, but the rude awakening had a terrible effect on her perspective, and thus her balance became askew. In trying to correct her posture, Lo-Lah clumsily stepped on her own feet, adding extra weight to her under-water claws. She slipped to one side and began flailing her arms. “Going down going down, ahhhh!” the out-of-control gator squealed as she fell forwards, slamming chest-first into the water. Due to the massive size of her incorporated and improvised flotation devices, the violent submersion knocked up a wave of equally massive proportions. Lo-Lah felt like a klutz of aptly enormous proportions.

The lake was a shallow pond to the giantess now. Lo-Lah needed only to kneel down and push her hands down to emerge back out. She threw her head back to toss her wet hair out of the way of her face and sighed. “Well, that was certainly something!” she ended laughing, happy that she hadn’t damaged her own natural sanctuary.

“Lo-Lah...?” a sudden yet familiar voice made the 30ft. lady of the lake snap her eyes to attention. She looked ahead and found the source of the caller. It was none other than Agathias. He looked really different after so much time. The young man was now a fully grown adult, and he looked to

be healthy and strong. He wore the tribal painting of his village's leader, being its chief. Hanging from his neck was the still pristine fang that Lo-Lah had imparted upon Agathias all those years ago, now proudly resting at his bosom with a thin string going through. To Agathias, the fang was both the symbol of understanding and physical proof of his friendship with the lady of the lake.

At the side of Agathias was his lovely wife, a young woman by the name of Selene. She was the young friend who Agathias had first brought to Lo-Lah in order to help her with her nightmares. Agathias and Selene's feelings for each other developed into love, and eventually they when they reached the appropriate age, they married. Lo-Lah had never been as excited when she witnessed the dramatic union between two soul-mates outside of a dream.

"Agathias! Selene!" exclaimed Lo-Lah as she sat up, her mountainous breasts bouncing atop her chest. With the excess of power dissipated, her mind wasn't clouded by pleasure. She soon realized she was a 30ft. tall naked woman in front of two poor confused mortals. This was exactly the opposite of what she had been trying to achieve! "Oh! Sorry!" Lo-Lah made a quick attempt at decency and brought her arms up to cover what she could of her huge mammaries while her tail circled around to cover her below. "One moment..." she gave the couple an awkward smile before she started to change herself again. Lo-Lah shut her eyes to avoid the judgmental look on Selene's eyes and began undoing most of her expansion. Unlike growth, shrinking took away nothing in particular other than size, but it at the same time it did nothing to excite her. Good, she thought, as she didn't need to make a scene in front of her friend and his wife.

In a few moments, Lo-Lah was down to a much more relatable height, although she was still extremely tall. The alligator estimated to be at around seven foot tall, having chosen an Amazonian height which with to interact with mortals. Lo-Lah saved herself another embarrassment and conjured clothes for her voluptuous body. White silk robes materialized on her person, covering Lo-Lah in cloth. The outfit wasn't very different to how she used to clothe herself when she used to be a goddess of Olympus. The top part of the silken cloth crossed her bust from her right shoulder and tied itself around at the hips, exposing a generous amount of cleavage, her nude back and arms. At the bottom, the silk had fashioned itself into a loin-cloth of sorts which was cut down the middle, giving a great view of her long legs. Lo-Lah figured to wear no sandals since her clawed feet would tear through them, and deciding to remain simple she tied her long mane of red hair into a tail that she wore over her nude shoulder. With her height and nudity issues fixed, Lo-Lah dried herself and floated towards her friends, landing next to them with a smile. "Forgive me for that, I should install have a door installed, I know. I'm glad you two could visit!"

Selene was the one to speak up first, since Agathias was too overtaken by the incredible creature standing before him. "Are you quite alright, my lady?" she asked out of concern as she walked past Agathias while holding a wrapped object in her hands. Lo-Lah figured it was an offering, but without wanting to be rude she immediately responded while looking at Selene in the eye.

"I'm fine. We've been over this, Selene, leave those honorifics for the shmucks that keep mistaking me for a crocodile," Lo-Lah giggled to make light of the situation. "You caught me in the middle of an experiment, uhh... a big one."

"I could tell!" Agathias finally snapped back to reality, walking next to his wife, "What did you do to yourself? You look so... so..."

"Different?" Selene finished for his husband, smirking as she nudged the village chief on the arm. "Honey, you're drooling."

“Hah!” Lo-Lah laughed heartily as Agathias caught himself, “Knew it would be a hit with the guys.”

“S-sorry,” Agathias bowed down to Lo-Lah and then to his wife, “To you too, Selene. I... I wasn’t expecting this. But I will not lie. You look stunning, Lo-Lah.”

“Thanks!” the lady of the lake twirled a little, making the silk at the bottom flutter along with her swishing tail. Lo-Lah smiled as she rested her claws on her wide hips. “I actually did it for all of you.”

“You did it for us?” Selene and Agathias asked in unison.

“Mmhm,” Lo-Lah nodded, “Selene, you and I both know that your husband’s a bit on the crazy side, I mean, who goes to offer food to a huge gator, right?” Agathias blushed to the recounting as Selene and Lo-Lah giggled like old friends gossiping. “But it was thanks to him looking past appearances that we’re all here and this place’s as beautiful as it is!” she opened her arms out demonstratively, talking about the clearing she inhabited and shared with everybody. Agathias recovered his smile. “Even though it’s always worked out in the end, everybody else is always uneasy to meet me at first. I can’t blame them. I looked like a beast... I thought I was one for a while. But now I want to be something more. I want to be the good that everybody can count on, and I want them to be able to look at me without thinking I’m about to bite their heads off!”

“Well, you definitely look more approachable,” Selene agreed, walking around Lo-Lah to inspect her. “Not so much when you’re six times my size, however,” she grinned. Lo-Lah laughed, happy with the satisfied woman. Unbeknownst to Selene, Lo-Lah had also examined her back. Something bothered the deity. In the past few visits, Selene used to be a lot stouter looking due to the infant she was carrying.

“Oh dear me, Selene!” Lo-Lah widened her eyes as big as saucers and smacked her cheeks with both palms in sudden realization. Her eyes moved from the mortal’s waist to the wrapped item carefully being held in Selene’s arms. “Is that...?”

“I was wondering when you’d notice,” Agathias laughed as Selene carefully unfolded the wraps protecting her baby, “I know we haven’t been visiting much, Lo-Lah, but I didn’t want you to miss seeing her.”

“I... Oh my! I’ve never seen a mortal baby before!” from one moment to the next, Lo-Lah found herself squealing in high-pitch and bouncing in place as if instead of a seven foot tall amazon she was a young little girl. “She’s so adorable...! I’m so happy for you two!” Lo-Lah cooed at the little creature, waving her claw at the infant in greeting. The baby seemed to be as cheerful as her mother and brave as her father; she seemed happy to be receiving a wave and began to move her little hand back at the towering alligator with an amused sunny smile in return. “She knows how to communicate already? I didn’t know mortal babies grew up this fast!”

“Ahh, I think she’s just imitating you, my lady,” Selene smiled and held the baby out, “She seems to take well to you. Would you like to hold her?”

“I... I can?” Lo-Lah was beyond herself with elation. Obviously she was extra careful as she took the baby off Selene’s hands. Lo-Lah held the infant next to her prominent bosom, wagging one of her fingers above the easily amused child, squealing in response to every reaction the little mortal gave her. “She’s so small and fragile, but so full of life. I’m so happy you came all the way here just to show her to me, Agathias, Selene.”

As Selene received the baby back from Lo-Lah, Agathias put an arm around his wife's shoulder. "That's one of the reasons we came here, Lo-Lah; there's more. I've never been as honored to be chief of the villages, to have united once warring brethren, and to have wife and child as my reasons for helping maintain the peace. But all of this would not have been possible without you, my friend." Lo-Lah silently contemplated Agathias, who seemed to be building up towards something. The gator girl decided not to interrupt. "It was in no small part your involvement that she is here with us, and will be able to hope for an even better future. As such, Lo-Lah, as the lady of the lake, the spiritual guide of every lost soul who..."

"Honey, you're stretching it out too much."

"Thanks, Selene," Lo-Lah winked to the mortal, who bowed her head to hide a giggle. "Are all your speeches at the village these long-winded?"

"You two always gang up on me," Agathias laughed in defeat as he scratched his head. He took a small, deep breath and talked again. "It would be an honor, to us, if you would be the one to bless our child with a name."

"Oh, wow..." Lo-Lah had expected gratitude, but this was on a scope of different magnitude, "Now I feel kind of bad having ruined your moment."

"Don't worry, he only worked on that speech for less than a day. He would've gone off longer if I hadn't told him to come show you already," Selene explained. "Will you do this for us?"

"Of course!" Lo-Lah looked down at the baby in Selene's arms and smiled tenderly at her. "I have the perfect name for her. It will be... Sybil. So that knowledge will favor her and, in the future, be able to help others much like you have, Agathias."

Selene and Agathias looked at each other for a few seconds. They smiled, nodded at each other and then directed their vision down at their baby, Sybil. "She'll be a guide, much like you, my lady," Selene smiled, softly rubbing the back of her hand against her child's cheeks.

Sybil cooed in return, displaying energetic excitement. Agathias, on the verge of tears borne of joy, managed to calm himself enough to say: "She seems to like it. My daughter... Sybil. Thank you, my friend." He looked at Lo-Lah with fondness, who returned the smile and was unable to help herself. The tall amazon threw her arms around her friends and squeezed them into a tight bear hug. The one not being suffocated by Lo-Lah's enormous breasts was a cheering Sybil, held above in front of the gator's eyes.

"No, Agathias," Lo-Lah loosened the hug, still holding both mortals off the ground, "Thank you; all three of you. You've taught me a very important lesson just now. And this... this is why I must say something painful." Lo-Lah gently put the confused couple with their baby back on the floor.

"Lo-Lah?" Agathias looked up at the reptilian maiden in silk, unable to decipher the cryptic words.

"I've decided to leave this place," Lo-Lah explained, walking away towards the lake.

"But why?" Selene was the first to intercept, "My lady... Lo-Lah, we need you!"

Lo-Lah balled her claws into fists and looked ahead with a smile. "I know. And you aren't the only ones, unfortunately. I have to help everyone."

“We will build additional charms, we will make more shrines honoring you,” Selene said, starting to lose out on the different offerings in her mind. But Lo-Lah appeared set.

“I know what I’ve been doing is the right thing, but so far, I haven’t been able to find the root of the problem,” Lo-Lah had never tried to explain to mortals what a Dream Eater was, and she wouldn’t start now. Especially when she, herself did not have enough information. “I want Sybil and every young mortal to have the chance to grow up in a world where their dreams and nightmares belong to them alone. To do that, I have to start searching for the cause of the illness.”

“But... my lady... Lo-Lah, lady of the lake...” Selene didn’t know what to do or say. They owed their prosperity to the blessings conferred by the deity they worshipped. If she left, what would happen to them? Despair began to grip Selene’s heart when suddenly the gentle palm of her beloved came to rest atop hers. “Agathias...?”

“Lo-Lah, I don’t claim to understand how you work,” Agathias began, watching Lo-Lah crank her neck as she seemed to be directing her vision to the foliage above them, “But I can’t say I ever found reason or logic behind you. Nothing that happened to me because of you is something that can be understood by normal folks like us. I don’t pretend to think our friendship enables me to criticize or demand anything of you, especially after all you have done,” the man paused as he moved his hand to gently pet Sybil. “However... What I do know is that you’re a compassionate spirit. You understand both selfish and selfless, and you don’t abandon anyone. Right now, it would be selfish of us to ask you to stay, but we... I...!”

“I won’t forget you.”

Agathias paused, looking from his daughter to the tall deity. Tears were rolling down the sides of Lo-Lah’s green snout.

The red-head turned around with a smile, her voice cracking a little. “This is why I can’t let you have your moments, dummy. You make everything so sappy!” she cried out accusingly, but her smile never vanished. Selene and Agathias couldn’t help themselves and started laughing. Lo-Lah joined in, and so did Sybil.

“We will pray every day, Lo-Lah,” Agathias said. Selene huddled up to her husband without taking her eyes off Lo-Lah, nodding in her direction.

“And I’ll be sure to remain connected, even if I won’t be around,” the alligator said, giving both Selene and Agathias a big, toothy grin. In any other moment, that could have looked like a menacing, fang-bearing, predatory expression. But right at that moment, no other gesture from the deity had looked as natural and humane.

It was time for departure.

The journey was daunting. Not only was Lo-Lah completely disconnected from the Dreamscape’s hallway of dreams, but she depended a hundred percent on sleeping mortals in order to visit their isolated place in her home. With the vast amount of power she had gained, levitating and teleporting through the mortal realm became child’s play. Movement wasn’t an issue.

At first, all Lo-Lah did was spend time zooming through different mortal settlements. She was

surprised to find their level of technological advancement had surpassed all she had ever known from Agathias' culture. "Most of them don't live in tribes anymore..." she admired from a high vantage point at a mountain's summit as she looked over a large kingdom and its glorious castle. Lo-Lah was caught off guard by the opulence.

"Where are the statues of gods and demons?" the female gator asked herself, unable to find the blessed temples where her ex-pantheon would be worshipped in the past. It was like from one day to another, everything had changed. Visiting more and more lands, the goddess was absolutely stunned to witness the same phenomena repeating over different cultures. The Greek pantheon did not register any longer. A concerned Lo-Lah stopped atop a grand cathedral and peered inside. The decorations and ornamentation suggested that the Olympians had been forgotten. "How long was I trapped in that mindless form before Agathias' coaxed my memories out?" the questions started piling up. Where were the gods she used to know? Were they alright? She had always subsisted thanks to borrowing tiny amounts of dream energy from the dreams she appraised and protected, but the other Gods depended on worship and prayer to fuel their existence and powers.

Morpheus, her half-brother, came to mind. "If he's gone, the Dreamscape must be a mess! He's the one that keeps everything in it working. The dreams and nightmares must be in disarray. Is this why I can't go back? Oh no..." Lo-Lah lied down on her back, looking straight up at the sky, as if begging for a solution. "Alright, stop this!" she clapped her claws on her cheeks and rubbed them together, "I've only been traveling for a few days. I can't give up just because things are looking bad. Maybe they're having a party! That's it..." Lo-Lah frowned and put a finger to her forehead, "A... really long-lasting... really big party. Ugh!"

The goddess took a deep breath and focused on her task. It wasn't like the Dreamscape was completely doomed. Even if something grave had happened, the Dreamscape was still there, as evidenced by the mortals still being able to have dreams, nightmares, and have Dream Eaters leech off them. "That's right!" she smacked a fist into her open palm, "I don't have time to worry about what-ifs. There's one very big fact before me, and that is the Dream Eaters are still out there. I never really asked myself where they come from; I just always thought they were another type of monster that likes to wreck things up. Hmm..."

Lo-Lah didn't have any special abilities to look into the future or the true nature of any creature, so she could only rely on the information she had on hand. She had to review what she knew about them. "They target mortals with low self-esteem and those that are having it really rough. I don't know where they come from, but once inside the dream, they burrow in to hide." Lo-Lah paused, folding her arms and closing her eyes as she thought of every time she had seen a Dream Eater materialize before her. She focused on the first few that she hadn't yet learned how to deal with. "Once they have their fill, they zoom into a ripple in the Dreamscape to get away. That's it! They're escaping. Even if I don't know where they're coming from, they have to get back somewhere...! That has to be it. Woohoo, I'm so smart!" she giggled as she threw her arms up in victory. "Wait. How am I going to chase them? I wonder if I'll fit through the ripple... Nngh, I'll worry about that once I get to it. For now, it's time to hunt!"

The motivated deity immediately got to work. She visited every sleeping mortal's dream that showed anomalies. As she suspected, Dream Eaters were present outside of her Greek territory as well. At first, Lo-Lah was reluctant about her idea. If she went ahead with her plan, mortals and an already at-risk Dreamscape would suffer. "If I let even one of those eat and then flee... I'll be failing in my role as guardian." The thought was discouraging. To Lo-Lah, who had found the pleasure of cooperation via protecting and being worshipped by mortals, failing just one of them was inconceivable. She had to find a different option.

As a result, she decided to wait and study her enemy. Lo-Lah put her god-like abilities to the test as, day by day and without rest she dove in from dream to dream, waiting until the last possible second before hunting her prey. While doing her usual work, she ensured to pay attention to their movements, the places in-dream they chose to hide as they ate, where the ripples usually were located. Every bit of behavioral data that she could get, Lo-Lah grew smarter from.

Days became weeks, which became months, and eventually years. There were far too many mortals in the world, and not enough time for her to stop and gather her thoughts when she detected anomalies in dreams every few seconds after purification. A lot of good came from the long, multiple decades that she spent honing her increasing power and knowledge.

Thanks to the efforts of her followers that spread along the lands, the goddess was never left wanting for sustenance, and she was able to cover more and more ground along every existing continent. Thanks to tireless repetition, her hunting skills became so developed that she didn't need any tools or special aid; her senses became extremely sharp until she was able to stop a Dream Eater mid-teleport and purified them right before the ripple took them.

"Tch! Still not fast enough..." Lo-Lah lamented as she grabbed at empty air where a ripple a Dream Eater almost got through had been. She wasted no time and jumped to the next dream.

Several centuries came and went. Empires rose and fell. No sign of the old gods. Yet she remained steadfast. Lo-Lah's mortal friends had passed along to the great beyond, yet she still held them dear in her heart; she was also doing this for their descendants after all. With her mortal followers present in every culture, offering Nightmare Catchers and helping those in need, the goddess became an unstoppable wave of justice that crashed upon the equally inexhaustible brood of insects. Her hunting efficiency had peaked at over a million dreams per day. She never tired, and never looked back on her decision to do everything in her power to set the Dreamscape's balance straight in her own way.

"Ahh!" the goddess exclaimed during another successful hunt, when this time she felt a clamp on her fingers. Lo-Lah always tried to grip the ripple and keep it stable using her own powers. This time, she had felt it squeeze down on her claw. "I'm getting close! I can feel it..." the red-head was confident that it wouldn't be too long before she could tear the ripple open and see what was on the other side. In the next hunt, however, she noticed something different.

Looking at her hand, she could still feel the strange energy from the ripple from before wrapped around her fingers. By focusing on it, she was able to replicate the same kind of mystic waves it emanated, which made the dream around her change color. Everything in Lo-Lah's field of view became tinted black except for a single blot of white. The blot was small and squirmy. Her eyes widened once she realized she was staring at a feasting Dream Eater. "I can see it...! Of course; I had it all wrong! They don't head to the ripples to flee. The ripples go to them to extract them!" Her body zapped towards the concealed Dream Eater, seizing it and purifying it. Only a little dream energy was recovered, which Lo-Lah confirmed as the insect's feeding having been interrupted. "I can purge them before they feed now. Now I don't have to wait for them to feed anymore!" It was at that moment that Lo-Lah had an idea.

She had never felt as powerful as she was. Not even as Epithymas had she reached such a level of understanding of her own abilities. The goddess knew that she didn't have to visit dreams individually now. "If my brother isn't here to prevent dreams and nightmares from clashing with one another, then most of them should be close enough for me to establish a brief link between them. If I can channel my new ability, I should be able to find and wipe out every Dream Eater before they start eating. No, before they can even find a hiding spot!" All she had to do was

summon every last bit of her power. In the world of dreams, she was now the absolute will that held everything together. Lo-Lah simply had to let her consciousness ascend and let her powerful aura overwhelm the sheer numbers. The deity could feel her thoughts giving form to her ultimate hunting weapon...

“ENOUGH!” a loud voice shattered through the dream Lo-Lah was in. The gator’s focus was interrupted as she flinched from the booming yell.

“What was that? The dream...?” Lo-Lah held by her head, wincing a little as she felt a bit nauseous thanks to having her channeling stopped. The links she had been trying to establish had merely been inundated with the filter she had used to find the Dream Eaters, painting the targets, but she had been unable to purge them as a result. “I was so close! I can’t let anything distract me. I can do this...!”

“I won’t let you!” the same voice shouted. Lo-Lah gasped and took an uneasy step back, almost losing her balance.

“What the...?!” the goddess shrieked as all of a sudden the dream she was in shattered like a mirror. From the center of the crack in space, a gust of wind followed by a thick veil of purple miasma threatened to blow Lo-Lah away. The gator braced her arms to stand her ground, looking into the hole that began to reverse its pressure and started to draw her in. “It’s... so... strong...! I’m getting pulled in!”

And so she was. Even with all of her divine strength, the goddess had exhausted a large portion of her power. Unable to resist the suction, she was completely devoured by the hole, which closed behind her, restoring the dream to its previous state before cracking.

“Ugh... my tushie hurts,” Lo-Lah groaned as she rubbed her sore behind. She brushed some of her hair locks out of the way to see ahead. The goddess found herself in some sort of dark grotto.

“Where am I?” she asked herself as she stood up. From the lack of malleability and dream energy, she knew she wasn’t in the Dreamscape any longer, so she had been transported somewhere in the waking world. “Can’t see a thing...” she grumbled, summoning a simple ball of light in her palm. She threw the orb up into the air to illuminate her surroundings, but what the light revealed made Lo-Lah gasp in horror.

Countless statues constituted several concentric circles within the grotto. The sight was benign enough. What truly flabbergasted Lo-Lah was that she knew the faces of each and every subject depicted on every statue. How could she not, when there was a life-like statue for each god, goddess, minor deity and fantastical creature in her ex-pantheon? She rushed over to them to confirm her suspicions. “Dionysius! And Hades, Hera, Poseidon...” with every name she recited, related memories began to resurface as Lo-Lah saw them in their days of glory in Olympus. “Brother...” she said as she looked at the statue of a tall, bald male. This was the first time Lo-Lah had seen Morpheus, yet she could somehow tell who the statue represented. “What is this?!” she demanded, stomping her clawed feet on the ground. “Whoever brought me here... you’re the one responsible for this... this sick art exhibit, aren’t you? Show yourself!”

“I’m right here, in the center, where I’ve always been.”

Lo-Lah felt her scaly skin crawl as the familiar voice resounded in her internal ears. The goddess turned around, hurrying past the shrinking circles of statues to reach the center. Her fears were

confirmed when she placed her eyes upon the one God she had yet to name. “It’s you...”

“I thought that irritable voice was familiar. You have changed, yet remain largely the same and impertinent as ever. How many millennia has it been...” the person sitting at the center stood up to face her, “...Epithymas?”

“Zeus.” Lo-Lah looked up at the bearded god. She was Amazonian in size, but her father towered over her by three whole feet. She looked at him intently, confused by his appearance. While he looked as strong and masculine as ever, his skin had become greyish, almost glossy and dark. His hair and beard were also a darker tone of grey. “What is the meaning of this? What is all of this? Why did you pull me out of the Dreamscape? And... Where is everyone else...?”

“Silence!” the god of lightning roared like thunder. Lo-Lah flinched at the impact of his voice, having to steel herself just to avoid falling down from the pressure. Zeus approached her with a frown of disapproval. “You’re not in any position to demand answers. You have meddled in my affairs long enough!”

“So it *was* you,” Lo-Lah glared up at the Olympian, balling her claws into fists. “The Dream Eaters... you sensed I was about to wipe them all out at once, and you interrupted me! Why?!”

“Because, you foolish ingrate, they’re our only chance!” Zeus growled and threw an arm back to direct his daughter’s attention at all of the statues. To acknowledge the gator girl’s confusion, Zeus addressed: “Husks! Empty shells! All that remains of Zeus’ glorious allies and family! My pantheon!”

Lo-Lah gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. “You can’t be serious. These... *these* are the gods of Olympus?!”

“Indeed,” Zeus nodded, “Their souls all have been claimed by your mother. They have all returned to Nyx. Over the centuries, something changed. The mortals, no longer seeing it fit to worship me and the others, began to turn to different idols and figures. We had grown content, never once expecting a big change from such fickle, boorish creatures. That is what doomed us. Olympus lost its power, and it instead was given to divinities of other religions, eventually depriving us of our life-blood. We were starving, Epithymas!” Zeus shouted, his eyes clouded with rage. “I had to make sacrifices.”

“No...” Lo-Lah took a step back for every step Zeus took towards her.

“They entrusted their lives to me. As our resources dwindled, I raced to find a way to recover our strength, but one by one, they all succumbed. We were finished. Even after taking all of their remaining life for myself, here I am, as you see before you. I can barely alter the weather above us!”

“You ate them all!”

“And I would do it again a thousand times over, child!” Zeus snapped back at the goddess, “For time has allowed me to harness the energy of these...” Lo-Lah looked up as Zeus pointed and was shocked by the sight. A gargantuan, buzzing hive hung above them. “Dream Eaters, I believe you like to call them.”

“Inconceivable! You... you’ve been behind the Dream Eaters all along? You’re the reason for their prolonged existence?!” Lo-Lah gasped, holding by her head as she was rattled by the news. Memories flashed back to the death throes of Atlas. Before he went mad over his own life ending,

he had been accusing Zeus of something. That poignant moment made her head pound.

“Of course, I was not their originator. You can blame Echidna for their being, just as all other grotesque beasts in this world,” Zeus grunted at the mere mention of the queen of monsters. “I decided to research them once Hermes told me that Atlas’ resurgence was due to the mortal willpower he had consumed from the beasts you brought him. I decided to pour my power into their hive to aid their multiplication. It turns out that once it is duly processed...” Zeus paused as space rippled and a bloated Dream Eater flew in. He caught the insect out of the air and sank his teeth down on it. The creature squealed as its life was snuffed, Zeus’ eyes flashing as he consumed the monster. Lo-Lah averted her gaze from the act, unable to believe her eyes. “...the substance in their sacs becomes more powerful than ambrosia.”

“You’re planning on using Dream Eaters to bring everyone back? Is that it?!” Lo-Lah accused as she thought about it. Her voice cracked at the end because after learning all of the other gods had died, part of her wanted to see them returned. She just couldn’t abide the destruction of the Dreamscape.

“Bring them back?” Zeus repeated, suddenly laughing. “You just don’t get it, do you, Epithymas? Foolish child. It is not the resurgence of the old Olympus that I seek. I have honored their past lives in this sanctuary,” he said, opening his arms to draw attention to the lifeless statues, “But that’s all they are, or were I should say. Now, with their blood coursing through my veins, I am Olympus!”

“No...” Lo-Lah put a hand to her chest and shouted, “You’ve gone mad!”

“Madness has nothing to do with it, child!” the god of lightning patronized, “I had to be careful about it. I knew that we would run out of time, and I knew the only way to survive would be to feed on mortal egos. It is similar as to how prayer and worship transforms into energy for us. But by refining that energy with the Dream Eaters, I can increase its potency by a factor of a thousand. Hmph... you not only fed on the unrefined energy, you’re even bathed in a major amount of worship.”

“That is because I’ve been accepted as a guardian by the mortals!” Lo-Lah proudly declared, “They pray for my protection from *your* abominations! You threaten their spirits and damage the home to their dreams and hopes for the future!”

“Balderdash!” Zeus retorted angrily, “Mortals have no right to a future that we have not given permission for! They should be content just serving us for all eternity!”

“You’re wrong!” Lo-Lah shouted back, “I’ve seen what they are capable of. Even when you severed their connections so long ago, they’re capable of feeling for each other, seeking out and eventually finding their soul-mates, repairing their bond and living as one!”

“A pitiful discourse that defends cattle as they blunder about aimlessly. What is their use if not to fuel us greater beings?!”

“That is for them to decide, not us!” Lo-Lah growled, stomping her foot down impatiently. Zeus let out a monstrous roar that made the hive above him rattle.

“No...” the god grunted, his hands trembling as he curled his toes against the rocky floor of the grotto, “I’ve planned this for so long. I shall have no more interference from you, Epithymas. You’ve grown far more powerful than I gave you credit for.”

“H-huh...?” Lo-Lah began to feel the entire grotto shake and quake. “What are you doing? Answer me, Zeus!”

“This is the second time since you saw me that you’ve called me by that name,” the statuesque man was breathing heavily, drool escaping his mouth as he stared daggers at the goddess. “That is the name of a forgotten deity! Nothing more than a relic of the past! A defeated son of titans! I am Olympus! And I shall devour!”

Lo-Lah was caught by surprise when the hive suddenly began to contract. She looked at it spasm and expand, then contract again. It was beating wildly like a human heart going through a stroke. “Something’s wrong!” she deduced and quickly leapt away from the newly baptized Olympian god, sensing danger.

“Come to me! This is the hunter! There will be no better chance to destroy her!” the voice of Zeus devolved into a series of barely intelligible grunts and growls, the tone of his voice warping as his dark skin started steaming. “Return with all the energy you have collected! We must be whole again!”

Lo-Lah watched as multiple ripples began to pop up in the grotto one after another. The anthropomorphic alligator held her hair back as the air in the grotto became aggravated and violent like a whirlwind. From each ripple a Dream Eater flew out, heading towards the beating, organ-like hive. Lo-Lah was absolutely freaked out at the sheer amount of insects that continued to appear. Even with all of her concentrated efforts, the monsters numbered in the thousands of billions. Even after all those centuries of hard work, she had barely whittled their numbers. Even with all the dreams she had linked together earlier, she wouldn’t even be able to make a dent in the overwhelming brood!

And Olympus was gathering them all together in one site. The hive was growing thicker, inflating like a balloon. Every few seconds it swelled that much more impressive. Lo-Lah couldn’t even fathom the amount of power it would take to purify them all; especially since they were outside of the Dreamscape. She stood no chance!

“Now... Epithymas, the eternal thorn in our side,” Olympus’ pupils were gone. The sclera in his blood-shot eyes was all that remained in the sockets, “You fancy yourself a guardian of mortal hope. How will you fare when that hope is turned against you? Will despair be what ends you first, or will you submit to your better and willingly become a part of us?”

Lo-Lah couldn’t talk back. She was paralyzed with fear. The only time she had felt this powerless was when Atlas revealed his betrayal to her. She could only watch as Olympus roared and the hive, now expanded to ludicrous proportions, finally exploded with a guttural, blood-curling squish. Olympus threw his arms up and opened his mouth wide as all the dark liquid once contained within the hive began to pour down his throat.

The god began to bloat, his body growing even thicker and more muscular. Taller and taller he grew, very quickly doubling in size. His old toga was shredded by his muscle-bound form, his hair growing longer as his teeth became sharp like fangs. A second row of fangs developed in front of the first like an additional, overlapping layer. Olympus’ face began to contort and dehumanize, transforming into an arachnid shape with scissor-like pedipalps on the outside as additional eyes began to grow on the face. The god produced a second pair of arms just as muscular as the ones above them, his four hands and feet all turning into three-digit claws. The swelling monstrosity became hunched once his neck was swallowed by his burly shoulders which also sprouted massive bat-like wings; a second and third, smaller set of wings protruding from his back. Behind the

spider/insect amalgamation, a stout and thick appendage formed, heaving like a container for fluid, much like the Dream Eater's sac.

Lo-Lah was only able to watch as Olympus grew more and more with every physical change. His malevolent aura expanding with him, the abomination soon ran out of vertical space. He had cleared fifty feet in mere seconds, and it looked like he had only just begun to grow. The monster emitted a loud roar as he demanded: "More! More power! More! We need more!" in successive chants as his body swelled larger and larger. The top of the grotto could not resist the ascent and simply began to crumble as the giant creature outgrew the space within.

"L-Legs...! Come on, respond!" Lo-Lah couldn't even summon her powers to teleport away from danger. She had to rely on her body. She was running out of time, however. The falling boulders from Olympus' massive growth spurt were soon going to start raining her away. The alligator had to get away! 100ft. tall and Olympus' gargantuan feet threatened to smother and crush her underneath, if the falling rocks from above didn't do it first. They had already crushed many statues as they were.

Drawing on whatever courage she had left, Lo-Lah was finally able to move. She was just in time to dive out of the way of a boulder which instead crushed itself against Olympus' growing feet like a comparatively tiny pebble doing absolutely nothing to stop the enlarging dark god. Lo-Lah made use of the agility and speed she had gained from hunting and, with the will to survive fueling her, managed to use the falling rocks as platforms to kick her way up. "I can't believe it! He must've fused with every Dream Eater in the world. Hundreds of millions of dreamers will be unable to find a reason to go on with their lives if I don't find a way to purify Olympus!" she looked at the beast as she approached the exit to the grotto, jumping off onto the outer part of the mountain it was situated in. "I have to stop him somehow!"

In the time it took to escape, Olympus had already doubled in size yet again, standing at over 200ft. tall and still nowhere near close the peak. "Epithymas...!" the monster growled out, "Where are you hiding, Epithymas?! Come hither, child! Come and receive your purpose as I rend and devour your flesh!"

The final hunt was closing in.

The situation was dire. With Olympus' power and size swelling in conjunction, Lo-Lah's foe appeared to have every advantage over her. She had never had to engage such a formidable foe in the past. The monster was turning to be as big as a mountain! "Think, think..." Lo-Lah pounded her head for an answer as she did her best to stay out of sight. The one trick she could rely on was to avoid being spotted, thus preventing a direct engagement. "He's got the power of countless Dream Eaters, most of them which were full. I don't think I can purify what was so thoroughly corrupted and absorbed already. Even if I tried, he's far too large!"

"Show yourself, hunter!" demanded Olympus as he stomped his monstrous feet down, causing the ground below to crack and fissure from the impact. "It is your time! I'll let you reunite with your pantheon, in my stomach!" The booming laughter wasn't making it any easier on Lo-Lah, but she at least had time to think strategy. Or at least that's what she thought. Olympus disengaged from the mountain and began to stomp towards a nearby metropolis, leaving gargantuan footprints in his wake. "Don't even think of escaping, Epithymas. It would be a pity if something were to happen to the puny mortals living here!"

The gator girl's eyes froze with shock as she peered over the rock wall she had been using as makeshift cover. Lo-Lah gasped as she saw Olympus closing in on the advanced, but vulnerable mortal settlement. As deities, they could choose to be invisible to mortals, and given the lack of resistance or panic from the mortal city, Lo-Lah's fear was confirmed. The mortals would not see him coming; they had no chance against him. The goddess had run out of time.

"No strategy then," Lo-Lah gulped nervously. She could not deny her fear but she couldn't let it stop her. Her purpose was to be the guardian of the Dreamscape and by extension, mortals' dreams and desires. They did not deserve to be caught up in any war between gods. After managing to calm herself enough, she quickly began gathering power and energy. The gator girl started shining with a green glow as she closed her eyes, "Just some good old fashioned bug-swatting." Her body engaged in rapid expansion. The growth didn't spare her clothes, the beautiful maiden silks covering her gorgeously curvy form stretching until they started to bust at the seams. With relatively loud rips, the godly robes were torn apart by the wearer's own body, which exploded with height. She wasn't planning on merely catching up. Lo-Lah planned on outgrowing the massive insect.

Olympus stopped his advance to the mortal city when he noticed the ground beneath him shake, even when he wasn't moving. He turned around too late to see an equally naked, gargantuan alligator woman running at him. He didn't even get to verbally protest before the much bafflingly big creature suddenly tackled him down. They fell with a thunderous slam, although fortunately Lo-Lah being invisible too in addition to stopping Olympus before he got too close to the city spared it a lot of grief and damage.

Lo-Lah, who had managed to put her growth into overdrive, managed to overtake Olympus's monstrous 300ft. tall stature by an additional hundred. With that significant size advantage, the gigantic gator managed to put all of her weight in the pounce, not only knocking her opponent down but also smothering his head under her gargantuan chest. "Get smooshed, ugly!" she shouted, wasting no time in arm-locking Olympus. "Got your arms! What are you going to do now?"

"Use our additional two," the spider spoke, his words muffled by Lo-Lah's breasts. The alligator perked up, suddenly cursing her blunder. Olympus shot up his lower arms, none the weaker, and proceeded to thrust his palms forwards. Lo-Lah grunted as she found herself flying through the air before she crashed against the mountain behind the destroyed grotto Zeus had been hiding in.

"Oww, oww... ouch. I'll give you that one," Lo-Lah said as she rubbed her sore arm. She had managed to soften the landing in the split second she had to react, but at the cost of hurting her arm. She would soon heal, but she couldn't afford to make another mistake like that. "And I don't have the element of surprise anymore, good going," she sarcastically insulted herself in her mind.

"Arise, hunter!" Olympus demanded as he got up to his feet, flexing his buff form to strike a blow in his enemy's morale. "You have had the advantage for the past millennia. The time for retribution is now!"

"Still bigger than you, dummy," Lo-Lah groaned as she stood back up.

"Only for a spell. We are harnessing our combined power as we speak," Olympus explained as he began to clench all four of his fists, "Behold!" he exploded with power. The sheer amount of unleashed energy caused a tempest around them. Lo-Lah desperately gazed left and right, stunned by the imposing aura the monstrous spider-headed insect could project. Before she could tell, her opponent had swelled to over twice her own size! Olympus absolutely loomed over the goddess at a 1,000ft. tall. He was so large that his feet dwarfed hills and small mountains. The transparent sac hanging from his back hovering dangerously above the mortal city behind him, only one misstep

and it was all over.

“When am I going to learn to shut up?” Lo-Lah nervously backed away from the beast. Even with all the strength she had in reserve, she had no easy way to up the creature’s ante. But at least she knew she had to lure him away into an unpopulated area.

“What is the matter, hunter? Or should we start calling you *prey*?” the monolithic creature caused tremors all over with every step he took forwards. Drool cascaded off his foul mouth, making Lo-Lah turn her face away. At the same time, the goddess used the moment to look behind and ensure she was backing away into a different land.

The place in question was an abandoned wasteland; the barren, cracked soil was easy to recognize. “This is where I met Stala... no. Atlas,” Lo-Lah murmured as she looked down at the shattered mountain spanning miles to either side. At the moment, its peak was shorter than Olympus.

“Enough stalling, Epithymas!” the monster’s wings began to beat at ludicrous speeds, whipping up a storm both in terms of wind and sound. Lo-Lah stood her ground, confident that she could now fight without putting anyone in danger. “You’re ours!” the giant dove forwards, propelled by his wings. He lunged at Lo-Lah, making the comparatively smaller gator shriek as she was easily caught by the high-speed attack.

Punched by both of Olympus’ right fists, she was unable to put up an effective guard in time. While she managed to deflect the one aimed at her face, the one aimed at her kidney found its mark. Lo-Lah got the wind knocked out of her, sent flying towards the shattered mountain and toppled what remained of its once proud peak. “Ugh... he hits harder than Ares,” Lo-Lah coughed, a bit of her blood trickling down the rim of her maw. She stood up with wobbly legs, still shaken up by the attack. The goddess held an arm at her sore sides, having taken a significant amount of damage. “And that was just one blow. I’d be done for if he connected both! This isn’t a fight I can win as things stand. But I can’t afford to escape and regroup either, or he’ll destroy everything!”

Lo-Lah was frightened. Olympus was already preparing to attack again. She looked at him rear back and his wings summon another tempest as he got ready to charge. She didn’t have the strength to parry him! In the end, when Olympus lunged at her once more, Lo-Lah narrowly managed to roll under him. She managed to land her weight on one knee, enabling her to remain poised for a follow-up. “Fight us, Epithymas!” Olympus roared into the heavens as he stomped the wasteland with his immense weight. The behemoth of size and power turned to her. Instead of rushing her, he quickly closed the distance between them. His fists began to rain down upon the evasive goddess.

She had to rely on fancy footwork to survive the onslaught. The only thing she had going for her was her agility and speed. At least by buying time with playing defensive and anticipating Olympus’ blows, she gave her body time to recover.

“You cannot dodge every blow. We can see it in your eyes! This is the extent of mortal-kind’s guardian!” Olympus laughed, preparing to deliver a finishing blow before Lo-Lah collapsed on her own. The dark god laughed as he inched down and closer to the falling goddess, “You fall before our mighhhhkt...!” Olympus buzzed in pain as a foot kicked his head backwards.

Lo-Lah had counted on the aggressive monster to become pompous once she showed gradual decay in her defense. By feigning a faint, she was able to get past his lowered guard and use the strength in her legs. Wasting no time, the gator kicked herself back up and bounded. She turned around in mid-air, delivering a powerful round-house kick to follow-up.

Olympus' bruised ego screamed for him to counter-attack, but as soon as he prepared to deliver a decisive blow, his numerous eyes were stunned to see the smaller gator's legs coming for him again. Without preparation, the massive creature took the full brunt of that kick and fell with a thunderous slam.

"Whew! The bigger they are, the dumber they fall!" Lo-Lah landed and pumped a fist up, panting. She felt tired due to her injuries, but she felt like she could continue, and this was her first real comeback in the fight. Due to their difference in size, she had to play it smart and bait his actions. However, she thought about it again. "That was effective, but... Every time I do something like this, I carry the risk of being knocked out in one clean blow," she frowned, starting to focus, "I have to outpace him! If I do this quickly and get enough blows in, he'll be finished!" she sprinted forwards. Thankfully, the time spent evading attacks had given her body a chance to regenerate its wounds, so she was able to make use of her full physical strength.

Lo-Lah was working to come up with a good plan, but before she was able to approach the giant's head, her target, his lower arms shot up from below and ensnared her. "No!" Lo-Lah exclaimed as she was caught in Olympus' trap.

"Commendations, Epithymas," Olympus growled from below, his dislocated jaws snapping back into place, "But you're not the only one with the ability to fake injury."

Lo-Lah gasped, instantly lamenting her choice. "I should've stayed back! Thought up a better plan!" she thought, "He was faking it! But he doesn't know I wasn't...! Does he have no weakness?!" she squirmed in the monster's hold, struggling to escape as the dark god stood back up.

"We tire of this engagement. We expected a proper fight from our hunter," Olympus grunted.

"Says the guy over twice my size!" grunted a frustrated Lo-Lah as she kicked him and smacked him with her tail. Olympus was hardly affected, since Lo-Lah was only able to hit his ripped abdominal wall.

Olympus laughed at her plight, "Were you not many sizes larger than us every time you destroyed one of us, hunter? Hypocrisy! Ludicrousness! The strong will always prevail over the weak. But there will always be a stronger one. That one is *us* now, Epithymas."

"One of us...?" Lo-Lah repeated in her mind. She had been referring to Olympus as such to humor her opponent, but it had only occurred to her how strange his behavior had been ever since she met him as Zeus. She didn't have the time to really think about it, however, as she was yanked to the side by Olympus' two right arms. His other two arms arched up, biceps flexing even with his hands open.

"Lo, guardian of the Dreamscape!" Lo-Lah widened her eyes as Olympus declared. There was a massive ripple in the space above them. She couldn't talk back as she was in an inescapable choke hold. Her helpless staring turned into a terror-filled gaze as she saw Olympus tearing open a gash, forcing the mortal realm to link up with the Dreamscape.

"Home..." the goddess hiccupped, stopping to struggle as she contemplated the ripple of titanic proportions.

"Our power grows, Epithymas, and so does our command of the dream realm!" Olympus announced as the ripple grew at least as large as his own spider head. "Hmph. It still will not avail

us. But that will soon not be the case. As individuals, our hive called us back, allowed us to travel back and forth as we hunted for mortals' life force. Now that we are as one with it, fueled by so much of the power we have gathered across the ages, nothing stops us from claiming every dream at once!"

This snapped Lo-Lah back to reality. She ignored the psychedelic colors of the Dreamscape that she had been waiting for so long.

"Now watch as our power grows even stronger!" announced Olympus as his mouth opened. Instead of a tongue, a long, thin proboscis like that on a mosquito or butterfly shot out into the ripple. Like a straw drawing in egregious amounts of liquid, the spider-headed abomination began to feed on the very energies swirling about the Dreamscape. Olympus' back sac was filled with purple liquid, bloating the appended abdomen which turned the contained energy black before it was absorbed, making it a part of his vastness.

Lo-Lah could only stare as Olympus' body began to bulge out, contracting and expanding rapidly. His whole form was shuddering, beating like a heart. His muscles expanded, growing even more crowded in his already bulky body. Additional eyes began to appear in his already grotesque face, more wings sprouting as the ones there became larger still, forming a wingspan many times his own body's girth. He was growing overwhelmingly huge, already past double his size before the first few gulps. Lo-Lah estimated him at over half a mile tall. How was she going to stop him now?!

"Yes...! Yessss!" Olympus growled out in ecstasy as every last inch of his being was endowed with the god-like energies of the Dreamscape. Nothing, however, gave him greater pleasure than the goddess he could by now hold in a single hand squirming helplessly. He stopped his feeding but kept the portal to the Dreamscape open as he looked down at his prisoner. "That's it! That's what we wanted to see!" the gargantuan monster boomed, "That look of despair! It is ever so delicious! Your very home falls before you, devoured by Olympus!" he roared, bringing the defeated Lo-Lah up towards his giant eyes, "But before we indulge on more, Epithymas, we shall devour you. It is our last act of mercy. Know that we have defeated the pantheon, and your death will have sealed our absolute victory!"

"I hope you choke on me." Lo-Lah growled out, even though she couldn't do much else, wholly overpowered by the expanding monstrosity.

"Defiant to the very end, even in the face of a magnanimous winner," Olympus drooled, "We shall remember your taste, worthy hunter." With that, Olympus wasted no more time and opened his gaping maw. He dropped the comparatively tiny morsel and snapped his mouth shut.

The victor had swallowed the loser.

Everything was dark and slimy. Lo-Lah gasped and covered her nose as she rolled in the bile and drool. She used what little power she had left to conjure an orb of light to see around her. First, she looked down at her body. Every limb was still attached, even her tail. She could feel everything, so that was a good start. Lo-Lah had been fortunate enough to twist herself reactively to avoid being impaled on Olympus' fangs. "Ew ew ew..." the alligator grunted as she stood up, "It's going to take an eternity to get this stuff out of my hair!" she whimpered.

"This is my worst plan yet," Lo-Lah criticized herself as she looked ahead. The beast's insides were still growing, indicating that he was still gorging himself. Lo-Lah no idea how long she had before

Olympus managed to completely absorb the Dreamscape, so she had to hurry and find what she was looking for. “But he has no weakness outside. It has to be inside!”

The search took Lo-Lah several places she was less than keen on visiting, but she left no proverbial stone unturned. The alligator felt strong enough to move and levitate, and if she focused with the right amount of energy, she was able to protect herself from the creature’s digestive juices. However, the larger he became, the harder searching turned. His vital organs were all protected by a strange sort of tough tissue, so she couldn’t hit or blast them with energy. Lo-Lah thought she was on a pointless mission. Her only grace was that as long as Olympus was busy feeding on the Dreamscape, he would avoid destroying any mortals. But she was still on a limited time schedule. If he became too powerful, he would truly turn unstoppable and forget the planet, all of creation was doomed.

“It’s useless!” Lo-Lah stopped at Olympus’ chest cavity near his gigantic heart. Lola looked like a tiny pebble next to the huge blood pumper. The goddess had no way of defeating Olympus. “He really has won... I let everyone down!” she bowed down, buckling with her claws atop her knees. She was about to break down and cry, when a sudden voice boomed out.

“No... not everyone, Epithymas.”

The voice was unmistakable. Lo-Lah stopped. She looked towards the oily black heart and approached it. A spot directly in front of her suddenly became transparent, like mirror sheen, and the sight in front of her was not her reflection. “What...?” she asked as the image in front of her became that of Zeus right before he had punished her. His skin was not black, and his beard and hair were white. “Olympus?” she tentatively asked.

“That is... what he calls himself,” the image of Zeus spoke.

“You’re... not *him*?” Lo-Lah asked, unaware of whom she really was talking to. The Zeus standing before her shook his head.

“I am, but I am not,” Zeus’ gaze was soft and gentle.

“You definitely don’t look anything like the Zeus I knew,” Lo-Lah chuckled sadly as she remembered her past. “The Zeus I knew was always looking down on me, trying to shut me away from the others. I know I don’t have the greatest sense of humor, but people seemed to like it. I guess...”

“You were just trying to make him see things differently,” the Zeus on the heart finished for Lo-Lah, who looked up at him silently. “I see that *now*, Epithymas.”

“...who are you?” the goddess asked.

“I am your father.”

“No, that can’t be right. You’re out there, like two miles high and trying to destroy the Dreamscape.”

“That is not me. This is me.”

“Stop being so confusing, ugh! Look, what are you trying to tell me, Zeus, or whoever you are?” Lo-Lah groaned, at the end of her wits. The image of Zeus seemed depressed, but still firm as he

talked.

"I deserved that. Epithymas, I need you to pay attention to what I'm about to say, because it's important," Zeus put a hand on the "mirror", "You have been talking to an impostor. Much like Atlas before me, our despair allowed a malicious creature to burrow deep within us. Festering for untold amounts of time, the Dream Devourer engineered all of this."

"Dream Devourer? Are you talking about...?" Lo-Lah paused, "No. Is this Echidna's doing?!"

Zeus shook his head, "The Dream Devourer was commissioned by your mother, Nyx. Echidna was merely trying to please her. She's also a victim."

"Mother... she had the Dream Devourer created? But why? What for?!"

"To return everything to chaos; it's her nature. Her first plan failed, so she planted this abomination in order to let it feast upon our despair. A task the first Dream Devourer I took from her was not able to do any longer."

"The first...?" Lo-Lah held by the side of her head as she averted her gaze from Zeus, looking at the reddish floor she was standing on. "Wait, what are you saying?"

"My daughter," Zeus paused, his digits sinking against the transparent wall he was speaking through, "I intended to forever shield you from this truth. This is why I distanced myself from you, and why your mother hates you. The resulting union between Nyx and me gave birth to you. Her plan was very similar to what the self-proclaimed Olympus is doing with my body right now."

"No... I'm a Dream Devourer too? But I don't...! Oh no. Because of me... What have I been doing?!"

"Epithymas!" Zeus broke Epithymas' sentence before she could break down, "You mustn't misunderstand. You're nothing like this monster. You were intended as a catalyst for the unmaking of the universe, and would have succeeded had I not sealed you away in the Dreamscape with Morpheus, who also rejected the notion of absolute chaos." Zeus looked pained as he watched his daughter process all of what he was saying. "You did not deserve the pain and suffering I inflicted upon you. Your mother came to hate you because of me. I corrupted her design by denying your intended nature. I wanted you to live like one of us, to help preserve the balance. It was my own arrogance... and my fear, which led up to this. You have no blame for any of this!"

Lo-Lah looked up at her father, still holding her hands within her cleavage, palms hard-pressed against her chest proper. Everything inside was hurting. She was sobbing, unable to control the wide range of emotion surging within. Zeus continued.

"Listen. The Dream Devourer lacks what you have, a body to call your own," the god of lightning explained, "He was going to use Atlas before me, but we stopped him. My own weakness led him to nest inside of me as I tried to use the individual Dream Eaters for the benefit of our pantheon. However, if you sever our connection..."

"Stop!" Lo-Lah screamed.

"Epithymas..."

"No! I know what you're going to say! I can't!" the goddess cried, "I just learned that this monster

isn't you who have gone mad. It's worse than that, he's using you! He used you to kill everybody! And he's still using you to destroy everything! How can I...?"

"You must listen," Zeus paused, enduring his own emotional pain as he stared directly into his daughter's eyes. "Epithymas, this is no longer my body. What you're talking about is what remains of my bound soul. I learned too late about Nyx's plan, but you still have a chance at stopping it."

"H-how...?" Lo-Lah said with a cracked-up, reluctant tone.

"I still own at least five percent of this body, and as such can give you an opening to attack the beast's heart," Zeus explained, "You must destroy it so you can give yourself a chance."

"W-won't this kill him... you?" asked the tearing girl.

"Unfortunately, he has grown far too powerful by combining all of the life energy he has stolen. However, he has opened a portal to the Dreamscape, where you are the strongest at."

"The Dreamscape..." Lo-Lah repeated, "But what do I do? If I go in, it will just reject me. I've been trying to get back for thousands of years!"

"You are the reason you cannot return, Epithymas," Zeus responded as Lo-Lah froze. He answered her inquisitive stare promptly, "Your own fear of acceptance, for our legitimation after your punishment, was what was subconsciously keeping you from returning to the home I gave you. My biggest mistake was to impose such a harsh punishment on you, hoping you would never be manipulated by Nyx, but it is now I realize you would have been the biggest asset against both her destructive plans and our eventual decay as gods."

"What are you trying to say...?" Lo-Lah asked, confused by Zeus' smile. He was displaying pride instead of sadness now.

"I could feel it even before you stood before me in this form, Epithymas," Zeus said, "As a goddess, you're blessed by the prayers and worships of those you've sworn to serve and protect. None of us understood the value of coexistence with the mortals. I was afraid of them, which is why I separated them. But you, you came to understand them. And now you're a far better guardian than anyone else could be. I couldn't be prouder of you."

Lo-Lah had never received such words of esteem before. Her heart became aflutter, not just from the words of encouragement, but as all the memories of the mortals she had helped in the past came rushing, healing her wounds and empowering her. The goddess finally stood up, looking back at Zeus directly in the eye.

"And now you look like a proud goddess," Zeus gave his daughter a little grin. He became surprised when Lo-Lah put her palm against his.

"I think I have an idea. It might not work, but I can use your plan for it," Lo-Lah said, pausing. "But even if I get rid of Olympus, what of mother?"

"All will eventually return to Nyx, my daughter," Zeus smiled, "And as soon as I do, I promise to you that she will not be giving you anymore troubles."

"Father..." Lo-Lah gripped the heart with her claws, regretting she could not take his hand.

“The age of gods is long past overdue, Epithymas. It is up to the legacy of mortal-kind to decide whether new gods or goddesses are needed, and whether chaos, order, or something else entirely is what the cosmos deserves. You are both primordial and god-like, but without the limitations of either. Now is the time to prove it to this monster.”

“Right!” Lo-Lah responded, getting ready to execute their plan. “I’m ready.”

“So am I,” Zeus stood there. He addressed Lo-Lah’s confusion with a smile, “Give your old man a good one-two.”

“I hate your sense of humor,” Lo-Lah cracked up, laughing and crying at the same time. Zeus nodded.

“So did I. But I’m starting to get the hang of yours,” he winked. In order to give Lo-Lah peace of mind, the image of Zeus vanished to reveal a glowing white spot on the black heart. Lo-Lah began to charge energy in her right arm.

“Good talk, dad...” Lo-Lah knew this was the definitive good-bye, but also cherished the short-lived memories she had just created. With a step forwards, she delivered an incredibly powerful blow to the creature’s heart, causing it to begin convulsing. Lo-Lah struck it again with her other fist and finished with a round-house and upper-cut combination. The heart, unable to withstand so much damage, began to bloat out with the blood being blocked until it burst. “Say hi to mom from me!” were her parting words as she was washed out. On the way up to the creature’s lungs, Lo-Lah propelled herself up and exited through the very same cavity and orifice she had been brought inside from.

It was time to bring the fight to even levels.

Olympus had been further enhancing himself. His enormity had reached ludicrously high levels, his upper body already above the heavens. The monster’s form had further developed, mutating into an even more disgusting form, with additional legs, and tentacles sprouting out of his hunching back.

The creature’s gorging was rudely interrupted by a sharp pain in his chest. He doubled over in agony, “What is this ghakk... blaaaargh!” he hacked and coughed, eventually his gaping maw opening to regurgitate almost biblical quantities of tainted blood. Unbeknownst to the now kneeling, panting abomination, an unscathed Lo-Lah had also escaped his gut.

“Now, while he’s impaired...!” Lo-Lah wasted no time, flying towards the enormous ripple in space. She was truly impressed by how far Olympus, the Dream Devourer, had come. She instantly regretted the creature’s fate, but was relieved that she had been spared that outcome. Just as Zeus had said, Lo-Lah had no problems re-entering the Dreamscape.

Once inside, Lo-Lah was able to reach the hallway of dreams in an instant. Everything was a mess. Nightmares and dreams colliding with each other, creating mayhem and destruction; the manager, Morpheus, and herself, had been gone for so long. Olympus had drained a large amount of the Dreamscape’s life-force, but there was a grand amount left. Fortunately, there was still time.

Sighing in relief, Lo-Lah situated herself at the relative central point of the alternate plane. She sat down cross-legged, closing her eyes. “This is what he was scared of. This is what he stopped me for,” Lo-Lah remembered when she was about to link every dream together and purge Dream Eaters

all together. She began to focus to reenact the same spell. However, this time she made sure every link passed through her being as well. "Please, everyone!" she called out to every dream and nightmare as she repaired and linked them with others. Lo-Lah was sure that in dream form, the mortals would be unable to recognize her, but she had to bank in their feelings and wishes to survive. "I need just a tiny portion of your energy. Give me control so that I can put you all to safety! Please!"

As she called out, Lo-Lah was surrounded by swirls of purple and green. Pleasant or otherwise, dreams all shared the common denominator of the soul. Lo-Lah did not intend to take those souls for herself, but to adjust their frequency to her own. In doing so, she was able to expand her consciousness to every last corner of the Dreamscape. The goddess' body began to glow and disperse into particles, joining the flow of pure dream energy that made up the alternate plane. Lo-Lah's consciousness came to fuse with the Dreamscape, giving her access to everything within, enabling her to relocate wherever she wanted with a mere thought.

"I've done it...! The sheer amount of power... it's overflowing!" the goddess of dreams and desire was being overwhelmed. She instantly let go of every dream, letting the mortals rest; they were under her protection now. To prevent them being damaged by her lack of control, she ensured they were relocated in a remote place of the Dreamscape while she focused as hard as she could.

Lo-Lah could feel everything. The Dreamscape was not like Mount Olympus where the gods used to reside. It was definitely not like the mortal realm. The Dreamscape was an alternate plane of existence with access to everything and everywhere at once. She could see it all, and as a result the intake of information was starting to drive her into insanity. Alternate dimensions and timelines became available to her, if only she could force herself to control all of her newfound abilities, she could make it all hers! There would be no longer any reason to struggle; she could make the entirety of creation bend to her every whim!

"No!" she cried out into the void, "Stop! This is not how it should end!" the goddess' mind screamed. "I have all this power now, and it is not for that purpose! I can't let the power control me!" Lo-Lah's voice yelled. "I'm the one in control!"

Part of her wanted her to give in, to let the power run rampant, to remake the cosmos and become its ruler. The sweet taste of omnipotence and omnipresence were like nectar and Lo-Lah was but a confused bee. Was it the right choice to put it all under her watchful eye and destroy every dissident element, wiping out resistance throughout the infinity of universes? The gods were gone, the titans were gone, and she was the only one left. A chaotic creature by nature, her very purpose lay upon her birth! Was fate an absolute, written down into an unalterable slate not even an almighty goddess could modify?

"I refuse!" Lo-Lah defiantly shouted, "I am *not* like him! I'm not a Dream Devourer!" her voice growled full of conviction. "I choose to be the Dream Guardian!"

And those words did finally bring the chaos down to a serene calm. She had always believed in the balance. Light and Dark; Dreams and Nightmares; Order and Chaos. The Dreamscape, Lo-Lah's new form, began to adapt to her wishes.

Back in the mortal realm, a groaning Olympus was beginning to recover from his near-fatal wound. His immortality would not be contested, much less with his god-like power after consuming so much. The four miles tall giant let out a primal roar as he generated earthquakes to mimic his fury

by stomping with all four of clawed feet. "This should not be happening...!" he growled, "We are supposed to be perfect. Betrayal by our own body is inconceivable!"

"It was never your body, Dream Devourer!" Lo-Lah's voice rang out from the ripple in space, which began to morph into a sphere of multi-colored light. Olympus looked up with a fearful gasp as he began to take steps back.

"No... no! Impossible! You're supposed to be a part of us!" the creature cried, staring at the Dreamscape with a multitude of eyes. "We can't... We can't get near you...!" he groaned, repelled by the radiant light. "What have you done? Answer us, Epithymas!" he hissed.

The giant sphere of light began to bathe the once dark world in its radiance. Gradually but steadily, the orb began to change, growing into a body twice as large as Olympus'. Lo-Lah was back, her voluptuous, anthropomorphic alligator body looming over the relatively small creature. "I have made it impossible for you to access the Dreamscape or its energies, Olympus. It rejects you because I reject you."

"What is this nonsense you speak of, woman?! You're but a dreg, a mere insect meant to grovel at our feet...!"

"Funny you mention that," Lo-Lah smiled as she slammed her foot down, knocking Olympus off his multiple feet. She instantly pinned him down underfoot. "For a number of reasons I won't go into detail."

"You're nothing but a fake! A sham! Epithymas...!" Olympus growled as he squirmed like a trapped animal, using all four of his claws to scratch at her ankles and legs for little next to no effect. The goddess contemplated her enemy, a creature of pure hatred and selfishness. She knew that with her insurmountable power, it was only a matter of focusing a strong enough energy blast to rid the universe of the beast and send him back to Nyx. However, an alternative solution occurred to the gargantuan female. Lo-Lah removed her foot from Olympus, who instantly got up to his feet and began to fly up to her for a blow. She intercepted him out of the air and caught him in her arms with a smile. "You taunt us still! Fight us, Epithymas! We don't mind being destroyed; we shall come back even stronger. No matter how overpowered you have become, the cosmos will descend to chaos as long as we live! It is our fate to battle!"

"I know." Lo-Lah sighed, shaking her radiant red hair at her back. She smiled down at the eager monster, but instead of head-butting him, she simply pressed him against her bosom. "But that is not my choice."

"You speak in circles, Epithymas! Stop this humiliation right this mmmpphh...!" the gigantic beast struggled, becoming muffled as the much stronger and bigger goddess smothered him into her soft breasts. Lo-Lah accommodated him so that he wouldn't be asphyxiated, but could still feel the warmth of her body. "DIE!" he roared, reshaping the tentacles at his nape into deadly spears that he thrust upwards.

"No more death." Lo-Lah responded as the spears bounced away before she was even close to being hit. She hugged her opponent. "No more loneliness. No more cold. You don't deserve any of it."

"Why...?! Why can't we kill you?" the insect grabbed at what he could of the giant alligator's huge breasts and arms, squeezing with the half-intent to damage her, but she truly had become invulnerable. Instead of giving him that stare of defiance and hatred, which fueled him, Olympus was being defeated on pure compassion. "Why do you do this...? We're your enemy. You hunt us!"

We...”

“Didn’t deserve it,” Lo-Lah intercepted, putting a hand under the abomination’s head. She stroked him gently. “And I regret never taking the time to understand why you did what you did. You never had a choice. You never had someone to show you a different way.” The goddess smiled, “But that’s alright. Not even gods know what is best for everyone. What I do know is that what you’re doing will result in a lot of sadness and loss for many, many people, and I can’t allow that.” Lo-Lah shook her head.

“You regret hunting us?! That makes no sense. Your lie angers us, Epithymas! No hunter can ever hope to apologize to the beast they hunt! If you truly feel responsible, then do away with your own life!”

“I can’t do that, you numbskull.” Lo-Lah responded, rolling her eyes and smiling again, “I mean, dearie.”

“Hah! Your act is exposed. You cannot trick us.”

“I know I have a lot to do before I can say I’m good at this, Olympus,” Lo-Lah admitted, “But that is what I have. Time. I have time to make sure I do things with as few mistakes as possible, because when someone as big as me makes mistakes, a lot of people get hurt over it. This way, I can let those smaller than me make mistakes so that if they get as big, they’ll know how to be better people when the right time comes.”

Olympus snarled up at the huge alligator, snapping his jaws menacingly at her. Lo-Lah’s stare of compassion did not stop. “Stop looking at us with those eyes! We don’t need your pity!”

“It’s not pity,” Lo-Lah hugged the beast tighter, cuddling him as if he was a puppy. She embraced him alongside herself by using her tail. “I just realized we are much closer than I thought. You are almost like a brother, if not directly a brother, to me.”

“S-stop...” Olympus gripped Lo-Lah harder, but still he could not hurt her, or even pry himself off her grip. “You have no right...” his body was shaking. Epithymas couldn’t see the tears coming out of his eyes. The warmth, the words, the feelings were starting to tear him apart from the inside. Every Dream Eater that composed the gargantuan monster was beginning to be purified at once. “Epithymas... Epithymas...!” the massive abomination cried out. His dark body began to emit white light in the form of pillars shooting out of his skin. Bit by bit, the crying animal was brought down to a soothing calm, the darkness dissipating as his hatred became tolerance, and eventually, love.

Lo-Lah ended up with her arms and tail cuddling herself. She fell to her knees, finally alone. Her enemy had vanished, having come apart and the dream energy it had stolen returning to her body, where it would find a home. Lo-Lah looked at her open palms and began to pout, her eyes tearing up. “I’m... I’m sorry,” she apologized to the air, “I couldn’t save you.”

“Th-thank you... for this freedom...” Lo-Lah heard a squeaky little voice above of her. She looked up only to see the void of space above. Her heart jumped with joy, evidenced by the smile growing in her snout as she realized that at the end of the battle for everyone’s dreams and desires, she had been able to turn her enemy into a friend.

Lo-Lah’s arms fell to the sides. She was absolutely exhausted, and there was a lot to do. The land below her needed to be healed and repaired after such unbridled growth and violence, and the

Dreamscape within her had to be reorganized. All she wanted to do now, however, was just sleep and dream.

The End.

[Post-ending scene, take #49]

It was summer time in a coast-side, remote city. A bustling restaurant resort was having a particularly crowded day. At the cashier, the burly, anthropomorphic blue dragon in charge of printing out receipts and managing the waiters and waitresses orders was swamped with work. He liked the challenge of keeping everything organized and as fluid as possible for his co-workers. It also made him look competent and certainly didn't harm his reputation with the ladies.

The dragon was quick with his key strokes at the computer, despite his huge size. He kept alternating between work and alt-tabbing out to a document he was writing. "What'cha writing about, stud?" came the voice of one of the waitresses.

Mar, the dragon, turned around to look at the waitress, a cute, very shapely red-headed alligator woman. He smirked to her, "Never get tired of asking, huh Lola? Just some stuff for my gallery. Need something, hot stuff?" he had already tabbed out to the management program, looking as agile with the keyboard as usual.

"Can't I hang around during down-time?" the bubbly gator stuck her tongue out at the dragon, "Now c'mon, show me what you're writing!"

"On one condition," Mar lifted his index, smirking.

"Uh oh. You're not robbing a bank, are you?" she joked with a grin.

"Maybe later," Mar joked back, "But it's simpler. Go on a date with me. We both got the day off later this week, right?"

Lola laughed, "Martin Phane, that's a move older than dirt, and you should feel bad about it! What kind of bribe is that?"

The dragon shrugged, "You're the curious one, sweet cheeks."

"Hmph!" the redhead smirked, "Fine, you got it! No fist pumping, you dragon man-child," she caught Mar's fist and pushed it back down.

"Spoilsport. Okay then, but don't make faces if you think it's weird," Mar turned the display a bit closer to Lola so she could read. "Got time though? We're damn busy as it is."

"Don't worry," Lola said with a smile as she brushed her hair back and over her shoulder, "I took care of things. I got all the time in the world now."