1751 Why Did the Flame Wane?

The work progressed slowly.

There was no day or night in the Sky Below, and Sunny did not particularly care for tracking time anymore. He only knew how much of it had passed because of the happy shadow, which continued to act as Rain's guardian somewhere far away.

The task of learning how to read the forbidden runes was engrossing.

Sunny was not trying to decipher the ancient script blindly. He was familiar with many variations of the runic language that had been used in the Dream Realm... or rather, in the multitude of realms that would one day become its various regions. The languages the people of the bygone eras had spoken were different, and so were the writing systems they had used.

However, they all shared a common root... Hope, who had invented the concept of writing and the original runic script. Being familiar with that script and many of its descendants, Sunny could somewhat infer the meaning of derivative runic languages, and learn how to read them.

That task was not an easy one, even for a Saint but after spending a few weeks in the Ebony Tower, doing nothing but studying Nether's writings, he was making quick progress.

Sunny studied the runes, took walks along the edge of the scorched island, slept, and lay idly on his cot, staring at the celling. His life was tranquil, easy, and entertaining.

Truly free of all burdens,

...Sometimes, he felt the desire to claw at the walls of the Obsidian Tower,

In those moments, he visited the lightless shrine and stared at the statue of the Goddess of Black Skies.

The face of the statue was obscured by a veil, but the sculpture was so exquisitely carved that the veil seemed to be made from fine silk, not cold stone. He could see a vague silhouette of a divinely beautiful face, outlined by its delicate folds and creases.

Sunny couldn't help but feel that it shared a close resemblance to the faces of the broken porcelain dolls that piled into a mountain on the lowest level of the tower... as well as Saint's inhumanly beautiful visage.

Had Nether been obsessed with Storm God, or simply too lazy to sculpt a multitude of faces when there already was a perfectly fine one for him to copy? He had been a very practical man, after all... as well as the most impractical of them. Why else would he rise in rebellion against the gods?

As Sunny made advancements in his understanding of the forbidden runes, he was able to make a rough estimate of when exactly the Demon of Destiny had resided in the Ebony Tower.

It had been in the latter half of the Golden Age, during Hope's imprisonment. Nether seemed to have already fallen out with Storm God, but was not contemplating going to war against the heavens yet.

Instead, he had turned his back on the world and dedicated himself to his misguided passion - trying to create living beings, which was an authority exclusive to the gods.

Much like Sunny had turned his back on the world and dedicated himself to studying these forbidden runes.

The Ebony Tower seemed to attract disheartened men.

Most of the runes carved into its walls were... esoteric, to say the least. Sunny slowly learned how to understand their meaning, but that did not mean that he understood what they meant. It would be the same if someone had given him a highly advanced scientific paper on quantum physics to read - knowing human language would not help him comprehend the contents.

The fact that Nether's writing had never been meant to be read by anyone except the Demon of Destiny himself did not help, either. He had left these notes for himself, so they weren't very detailed.

There were many passages like:

"Dissected. Structure, pathways, flow, Basic mechanics hide the deep complexity of process and function. Material?"

Or

"Correlation or causation? Potential hints at obsolescence. Source unknown, observation flawed."

Sunny could not really understand the meaning of these passages, but he did discern several underlying themes.

Nether's goal was to create a living being, and as such, his research had been developing in two directions - the creation of a body, and the creation of a soul. The former was purely time-consuming, but the latter seemed to vex the daemon to no end.

How did the gods will souls into existence? Why were the creatures created by the gods able to propagate, giving birth to new souls? What was the secret? There was no answer.

The Demon of Fate had created weaving, while the Demon of Desire had created runic sorcery. The Demon of Destiny, however, had not authored an original school of sorcery of his own, taking elements from wherever he felt useful and bending them to serve his purpose.

However, he had possessed the deepest understanding of soul power out of everyone Sunny had known, except for the gods themselves. Nether had been able to manipulate souls and soul essence to a frightening degree, accomplishing things that should not have been possible.

And yet, he had not been able to create a living being out of nothing, no matter how Ingenious his methods were and how great his determination was. That was one thing that the Demon of Destiny could not build.

For a time.

Sunny knew that the daemon had eventually succeeded, creating Saint and her people. His perception was influenced by knowing the end result, but back then, Nether must have been daring to the point of insanity, to pursue something that had never been done before, and was not supposed to be possible.

What had motivated him to persist in his seemingly hopeless endeavor?

Sunny did not know, and doubted that he would learn the answer in the Ebony Tower. The runes carved into its walls were Nether's research notes, not a personal diary - there was no mention of the daemon's feelings or emotions, as if he had not been capable of having them at all.

That said... not everything written on the black walls was dry and void of feeling.

After weeks of studying the runes, Sunny concentrated on three fragments, all unlike the rest of the passages he had translated.

The first one seemed like a poem or a short story that Nether had written down for some unknown reason.

It read:

[Why does the flame wane?

I asked the black skies, "What is life?"

The skies answered in a subtle voice, "A mother is watching her children die slowly of starvation. There is only enough food for one of them, but she is hungry, too. That is life."

"The war is over, and those who discarded their weapons to surrender are made slaves. They are brought to an arena and told to kill each other. A young warrior looks at a sword, his hand trembling. That is life."

"A man loves his wife, but feels lonely in her company. One day, walking the market, he sees a beautiful stranger smiling at him sweetly. He hesitates to return the smile. That is life, as well."

I pondered.

"So... life is a choice?"

The skies laughed, "Life is desire. It's a desire to be alive."

The skies were illuminated by a myriad of stars, burning in the beautiful darkness.

Like the flame of desire had burned in the hideous void, giving birth to the seven gods.

Why does the flame wane?]

Sunny thought about the strange story for a long

time, Was it a fable Nether had written down on a whim? Or the transcript of an actual conversation between him and Storm God?

In any case, it had to have meaning. The Demon of Destiny was not someone who would have carved runes into stone without a reason

He had been trying to create life, so the story could have been a contemplation on the nature of life. However... to Sunny, It seemed like there were many layers to this passage.

The Goddess of Black Skies had described three situations. One was about hunger, one was about the desire to survive, and the last one was about lust. So, had she been trying to say that life was hunger, fear, and lust?

He did not think so. It seemed that the exact situation did not matter too much... what mattered was that the character of each anecdote was faced with a choice. Nether had been the Demon of Choice, so... was that the true meaning of the story?

Somehow, Sunny felt that it was not that important, either.

The truly important part was the first and the last lines of the story.

Why did the flame wane?

The waning flame was, presumably, desire - the primordial desire that had been born in the Void, and gave birth to the gods in turn.

Sunny remembered the murals describing the origin of the daemons clearly, both those that he had seen in the drowned library of Fallen Grace, and those he had seen in the Estuary.

On one, a golden flame was burning in the

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darkness. On the next, seven figures - the gods- were surrounding the greatly diminished flame, Sitting on the edge of the Ebony Island and looking at the sea of divine flames above, he blinked.

"No, wait... but really..."

Why did the flame diminish?

The divine flames that had created the Sky Below waned slowly over thousands of years, until only this much was left. One day, they would be extinguished altogether.

But why had the primordial desire waned after giving birth to the gods?

Did it have something to do with the secret of life?

Nether had built the Ebony Tower because he wanted to use divine flame to create living beings, but he eventually abandoned that path and returned to the Underworld. Had he been trying to substitute the flame of desire with the flame of divinity?

All of it seemed too... interconnected, somehow, and encapsulated in the strange story to be a mere coincidence.

However, even if it was, Sunny could not, for the life of him, understand what it actually meant.

He summoned Saint, shared his theory with her, and asked for her opinion.

...Saint, of course, remained silent, simply staring at him with indifference.

"Thought so."

Sunny clicked his tongue, dismissed the Shadow, and returned to the tower with a sullen expression on his pale face.