

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

2.16 A Good Child

Reika was fascinated by all around her. A whole new world! Her initial annoyance at Mother dragging her out of her meditations had long since faded into the background in the face of the wonder of an entirely new universe. She watched in fascination as life and death swirled together in a mixture of white and black, blended by the rotation of the Realm, yet wholly distinct. She beheld that which could be considered the Realm Sun – what Lord Shin called the Guiding Light, sitting in the very center of the realm, and observed the passage of souls, pushed along by the currents. And the size; by Mother, the size of the realm!

It was at least thrice the size of the Four Realms. She had to push her divine sense to the absolute limit to reach the edges! Reika sighed happily as she let her power relax within her chest, no longer feeling like the pressure of a thousand worlds was keeping her boxed up. Mother had been right. She did enjoy this, and the Four Realms needed more space.

And while she doubted she would ever tell Mother that, the smug glances her parent kept shooting her way spoke volumes. Reika puffed out her cheeks in a quasi-pout.

Ok, so maybe she had been sulking that she had been passed over to go with Mother for a *mortal*. But that was beside the point!

“This is the retrieval corps,” Ze explained, gesturing to a collection of people – souls, Reika knew, as they were currently in the afterlife – all dressed in similar black clothing to Ze. They were congregated in a series of buildings near to the eye of the storm, on a solid stretch of land surrounded by tall walls and hidden by the churning winds of the afterlife itself. Some people trained with various spiritual weapons – from bows to scythes to daggers and guns – while others prepared spirit food or even stared into the universe using telescope-like apparatuses. Parts of the compound were still under construction; what seemed to be a workshop was being dug into the land beneath.

The fact that even the afterlife felt so physical, almost directly mirroring the life realm in design, if not in construction, was fascinating. It was very different from the Spirit Realm, which layered itself over the top of the other Realms, in that it functioned more like another world. Life was material, the afterlife was immaterial...hence they could both be distinct and layered on top of each other, without interfering with each other. And then there were the retrieval corps.

There were nearly two thousand of them in total; not a lot, considering the size of the Wheel Realm, but the Wheel Realm was also far...emptier than the Four Realms. There just weren't as many people. That said, there was a certain quality of the souls that separated these from the standard souls of the Wheel Realm. Perhaps they had an innate talent, of sorts? Though it was odd to see that even these special souls, too, could fade away into the next life as opposed to gaining immortality. But she supposed that was more of a quirk of the Four Realms than anything else.

Mother had certainly complained about it enough back in the beginning for her to realize it wasn't normal.

"As the realm of life is by its nature transient, we don't have to worry about forcing the living to die. Instead it is getting those souls to move on that becomes the issue – keeping the rotation going, as it were. Hence, the retrieval corps. Sometimes souls try to stick in the life realm as ghosts, and their duty is to exorcise them. Despite life and death seeming close, if a soul remains in the life realm for too long they can cause damage to themselves and their surroundings." Ze continued, gesturing at the compound below. "Of course, not all souls are willing to let go, and sometimes fight back. Hence, the training. I do wish there were easier ways to handle it."

Reika frowned a little as she watched the retrieval corps; most specifically, observed their habit and the decorations of their compound. There was a central castle, and while she tried her best not to pry too deeply into the personal lives of the souls, she could at least sense a distinct lack of...Lord Shin.

“Why do they revere Lady Ze, and not Lord Shin?” she couldn’t help but ask herself. There were paintings in the main hall, but they were all of Lady Ze, with nothing that she could see representing Lord Shin.

“Most beings are not even aware of Shin’s existence,” the one who answered was neither Ze nor Shin, but Rising Wind, Crashing Waves, the great stag-like god coming to stand beside her. The elemental gems in his antlers glittered in the light of the Guiding Light, his eyes, full of a deep, profound wisdom, watching the souls below train. “As far as I can tell, anyways. He prefers to let Ze take the credit for his actions, though he and he alone is responsible for most of the movement of the realm.”

That was a shame, in Reika’s opinion. She looked back at Mother. She couldn’t imagine the Four Realms not knowing of Mother’s existence.

“Tell me now, can you see it?” Rising Wind, Crashing Waves asked, folding his legs beneath him to lay down. Even in such a position, he towered over Reika, his head rising a good two feet above her own, his antlers taller than even that. Elemental power crackled through his fur as he turned his gaze heavenward. “The swirling of the world.”

Reika turned her gaze away from those below to focus on the Wheel Realm at large. White and black mixed together in a swirling maelstrom, elegant yet chaotic, souls traversing life and death together as one. There were no endings here, only beginnings, even as some souls faded away into nothingness, returning to mere energy before being reborn anew as something else. There was a beauty here that the Four Realms lacked. A binding that blended all of existence into one, rather than a series of stages. And through it all, woven invisibly like little strings, was Lord Shin’s power.

Ever present, yet unseen. However, it was missing something.

“Where are the elements?” she asked, reaching out and feeling a distinct...lack of such things. The wind felt dead to her ears. Fire mere heat. Water just wet. She reached out one hand and gently

grasped a strand of life energy – white in color, as opposed to her green, so different yet so similar to what she knew.

“Good eye.” Rising Wind, Crashing Waves said. “They are present, but dormant, waiting for a soul to call upon them. Fascinating stuff, really. So much different from what I’ve seen so far. But it just goes to show there are as many paths to tread as grains of sand on a beach.” Reika nodded in agreement, clasping her hands before her. She sucked in a deep breath. This was how wide the skies were, it seemed...if only she could show Kei something like this.

“I believe that is the end of our tour,” Lady Ze said suddenly, loudly. Reika glanced her direction to see her and Lord Shin standing side-by-side, slowly flying down to Lord Shin’s sanctum. Reika cast one more glance down at the compound, bowed to Rising Wind, Crashing Waves, and started off after them. There was much more to see, but she had gained a lot from this outing.

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The sound of hooves clopping against the ground alerted Reika, and she turned to see Rising Wind, Crashing Wave’s partner, a strange half-man half-horse god of the hunt named Arche, come riding up through the chaos of Shin’s realm. He bounded across the afterlife, landing upon stretches of ground that gave way to nothingness and leaping to the next until he came to walk beside her and his Origin God, who had stood and now followed.

“They have many mighty warriors here,” Arche said to Rising Wind, holding his bow in one hand. “Their training is impressive. None can best my skill with the bow, of course, but I do commend them.” The centaur puffed out his chest, strutting confidently and tail swishing. Reika giggled and shook her head, mischief swelling in her breast. He had been very...vocal about his skill during this whole trip. She could think of one person she knew, however, who might have him beat...if only in feats.

“You’re good with the bow?” she asked. He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Is this going to be another pun? If so, I will not listen,” he accused her. Reika stuck out her bottom lip in a mock pout. She wasn’t going to pun at him this time. Clearly her jokes had grown a little old.

“Nonsense, I do enjoy a good pun.” Rising Wind, Crashing Waves said, shaking his head. Each twist of his antlers sent energy to swirling and swaying, making eddies of power that went against the current of the Wheel Realm – the casual display of power reminded Reika very much of Mother.

“I wasn’t going to say a pun this time. I was just going to say I know someone who might be better with a bow.” She said. “But if you don’t want to hear about it, I guess that’s fine too.”

“Who?!” Arche demanded, stomping one foot. Reika giggled. *So easy.* “I am the greatest in the universe – nay, in all universes! I slew –“

“But have you stopped the incarnation of the Sun in its tracks with your arrows?” Reika interrupted, cocking her head to the side innocently as they descended into Shin’s inner sanctum, the portal that brought them here swirling with a myriad of colors. Arche spluttered, and Reika hid her smile behind one hand. “Sorry, that was a strange thing to say. I must go to Mother’s side now, it was a pleasure to meet you both.” She bowed to them and promptly skipped over to Mother’s side, who watched her with an amused smile. Beside Her stood Shin, the skeletal deity unreadable as he listened, and Yueya, the beautiful red-haired goddess, laughing at something Mother had said.

Reika suppressed her suspicious frown. Those three were spending a lot of time together.

“Did you have fun?” Mother asked, wrapping her in a hug as they stepped through the portal and entered into the Quiet Room. The dead silence of the white-walled room unnerved her in many

ways, but also reminded her of the time before creation. When it was just her, her siblings, and Mother.

“Yes. Thank you.” She said, sneaking quick glances at the other deities. The Dragon, in particular, caught her eye for some reason, even if it was only sleeping. “Is it time for me to return?”

“Yes. I have a guess as to whose we will be visiting next, and your other siblings need turns as well.” Mother said, ruffling her hair. Reika leaned into the touch, then wrapped Her in a hug. No more words were spoken as she turned to the portal, pausing only once when the great bird of space and time hop-skipped over to her, cocking its head to the side.

“Nyxteria was wondering if Nyxteria could have a flower,” it cawed, talons clicking against the floor. Reika smiled kindly and pulled a single flower from her hair – it held the essence of lightning, though it was purple in color, and flashed with iridescent light. Nyxteria took it in its beak and, with a happy caw, promptly stepped away. Reika bowed once more, nodded to Mother, glanced at Shin who watched her closely, and vanished into the portal home.

Familiarity surrounded her. But change churned in her soul, and her mask slowly fell away. Reika closed her eyes before her surroundings could chase away that feeling, immediately sitting cross-legged and letting the sensations of her memories wash through her. And all around her, her home began to change.

I watched Reika go with a proud smile, even if I was feeling nervous. I did not know what changes she was about to go through, as I had purposefully hidden such information from my eyes. My hands clenched and unclenched as I chewed my bottom lip. This was very much like sending a child away from home for the first time – Reika had experienced something new, free of my hand, even if I had been there, and that experience would shape her. My children needed to “leave the nest,” as it were...as much as possible...and I was having trouble letting go.

Such was part of the karma that bound me to the Four Realms. I considered them all my children – and children needed to get out from under their parent eventually. But where did that leave me? I

had dedicated everything to the Realms for so long now...*Fear is holding you back.* My mind whispered to me.

“She’ll be fine. She is a good child.” Shin said, startling me as he came to stand beside me.

“I know she will be. I have faith in my child.” I said without a hint of falsehood. I did have faith in her, I told myself. It was in my nature to worry though.

“...what did you see, in my Realm?” Shin asked quietly, low enough that no one else could overhear. I did not look at him as I pondered his question, knowing the root cause of it. He had hinted once or twice that he knew I had seen something in Reilly’s realm with Steward, but to be honest, Shin’s Shadow confused me. It was no being, after all.

“Watch the storm. That is all I can say.” I advised, the words heavy upon my tongue. Something about the churning of the Wheel Realm felt off, the storm-like qualities at odds with the stability an image of a wheel conveyed. Was that too much? No, it felt a little on the nose, but not too much. Shin nodded his acceptance, linking his boney fingers together. “That said, which Realm are we entering next?”

“That will be mine,” The Emperor said, standing slowly. He stretched his six arms one by one, like a muscle-man preparing to lift weights. That made picking the next child to come with me easy, at least. “Assuming no one else has any objections.” There were none, and the gold-skinned god-king crossed his arms. “Then who will be coming with?”

Sylphina was the first to rise, the chaos butterfly fluttering its wings as it lifted into the air. Followed by Nyxteria, MR-10, Reilly, myself, Shin, and Yueya. It was quite a group that wished to travel to the Emperor’s Realm, lacking the Progenitor, Rising Wind, Crashing Waves, and the Primeval Dragon. The Emperor met each of our eyes and nodded respectfully in turn, gesturing behind himself, where a glowing golden portal appeared.

I, for one, glanced at it and, assured that my next choice of child was the correct one, stepped back to my own archway. The portal to my realm opened once again and I reached my hand inside, purposefully refraining from pushing too much of myself back into the Four Realms.

“Elvira,” I called, and immediately heard a sigh. Followed by a wave of annoyance that was transmitted to me the moment she grasped my hand. I led her through the portal, mentally thanking Mr. Boxes for making the transition easier. Elvira stepped out dressed in the same fine white and gold robes she always wore, meeting the eyes of the assembled gods with careful neutrality, her wings flaring slightly and tails twitching.

“First Reika, and now myself?” she asked. “You interrupted something good. Gilles was about to work up his courage, you know.”

“You and I both know that isn’t true,” I said, though in truth he very well might have. I was just guessing, though judging by the scowl that briefly flashed across my daughter’s face, it was not far off the mark. “Elvira, meet everyone. Everyone, this is another of my children, Elvira.”

“Another one, Statera? This one is just as powerful as the last, if not slightly moreso,” Reilly drawled, taking a long draught of some wine. The Emperor met my eyes with a raised eyebrow, and I shrugged helplessly. The great golden-skinned god chuckled softly. *Looking for a good influence?* He mouthed. I smiled sheepishly. I was looking for an influence for Elvira, beyond myself. Good or bad would be up to her.

“She’s cute, too!” Yueya praised, earning a small blush from Elvira; an expression I had rarely seen on my usually brash daughter.

“Nyxteria wants a feather,” Nyxteria said, nodding his head sagely as if that was a completely normal thing to ask. Elvira furrowed her brows at the bird, her wings flaring a little at the odd

request. "Nyxteria can wait though. Nyxteria will ask later, after Nyxteria has gotten to know you. Now we can go,"

The Emperor laughed, gesturing for his Jester to lead the way.

"Come then," he said. "I formally welcome you into my Kingdom." And with that, he vanished into his portal.

2.17 Welcome to Heaven and Earth

The Emperor was a proud being. He led the way into his Realm with head held high and chest puffed out, six arms spread wide as he welcomed the familiar embrace of his Kingdom. The light of heaven kissed his golden skin, a cool breeze ruffling his hair and setting his cape to fluttering. Before him lay golden fields and green hills, purple mountains rising in the distance. Clouds touched the mountaintops like halos, glowing red and gold from the ever-present light.

"Welcome to the Kingdom of Heaven," he said, turning to face his esteemed guests. He knew that in the light and background that he cut an impressive figure; but far more impressive should be Heaven itself. And he was pleased to find that appeared to be the case; as almost all eyes were fixated on the surroundings, not himself. Only Statera Luotian's daughter, the winged girl named Elvira, kept her golden gaze fixated upon him, her white robes ruffling in the breeze, wings spread as if she wanted to take to the air.

"Beautiful," Yueya Oshun breathed, smiling and sucking in a deep breath. His grin grew wider, and he gestured for them to turn around. As one the group turned, and beheld the true Kingdom of Heaven.

Tall towers gleamed white in the light, flying vehicles weaving in-between the tall, glass-covered buildings of the city proper. Beautiful villas dotted the hillsides, vineyards fed by aqueducts filled

with clear, pure water, growing in neat patches around many of the red-roofed houses. A river wound its way down from the mountains that ringed Heaven's Caldera, flowing through the city, streams of it lifting off into the sky like flying snakes to wind between the buildings, the water glittering like gemstones in the sapphire sky.

"That is the first Holy City, and my seat of power." he said, beginning the slow walk to the city. Smooth cobblestone roads wound lazily through the hills and orchards, the few people who lived this far out waving as they passed by. "There are dozens of cities like this all across Heaven, with countless villages and towns filling in the gaps between."

"There's lots of energy pouring from the city," MR-10 noted.

"We will get to that in a moment. First, these are my people," he said as a Storm Bird hurtled by above, each flap of its wings crackling with lightning and thunder. From here they could see a large number of the souls that inhabited Heaven. All were humanoid in nature, as they were made in his image, though their skin colors and body structure varied. Some had skin of silver or bronze, while others were more gem-like in appearance with sapphire, ruby, emerald, or diamond-like skin. A few had two heads, some had four arms, with others having only three or two. Others still were covered in fur or scales – but all had one thing in common besides being humanoid.

"They have powerful souls," Reilly noted, sipping a rich red wine from a crystal chalice that he must have stolen from one of the nearby vineyards. The Emperor raised an eyebrow at the beggar, catching his eye. "What? I paid for it. You use crystallized power as currency, right?" The Emperor just sighed and let it slide, making a mental note to check and make sure Reilly had, in fact, paid, before continuing his explanation.

"Such is one of the requirements to enter Heaven." The Emperor said. "Mortals in my world live in the mortal plane, otherwise known as Earth, where they grow and change. Once their contributions to our collective kingdom reach a certain point their souls undergo a metamorphosis, turning them into what you see here." He gestured to a man with four arms pulling a cart filled with golden wheat, the plants filled to the brim with the holy energy of the divine, who waved back happily. Though there were plenty of methods to transport such grain with far greater ease, the Emperor knew he just liked pulling his cart.

Far more important, though, was the amount of energy the man himself gave off. The wheat was a curious thing, but the man's soul burned like the sun, golden light spilling from him in waves, soaking into the ground and flying high into the sky. And his was not the only one; all souls in Heaven gave off this holy, pure energy.

"So the souls act like a fusion reactor." MR-10 droned, lights flashing on its side. "Once they reach a critical mass and fusion begins, they ascend here."

"Indeed. The weight of one's contributions, or karma, I suppose would be another word, helps ignite the soul." Emperor said.

"What do you mean by contributions?" Statera's plus one, Elvira, asked. "It sounds worryingly like it would lead to elitism, that those 'in charge,' as it were, would be raised up to Heaven faster. Kings and the like." The Emperor laughed at the accusation, even if the spirit of the question had been far less damning.

"Excellent question! The answer is simple –"

"What defines a contribution?" Jester drawled, speaking up for the first time since the meeting began. Emperor beamed at his fancily-dressed companion as he spoke, refusing to meet his King's eyes. "I was a comedian before coming here. Made people laugh. Apparently was so good at it and touched enough people's lives with humor that I ascended here after death. Emperor liked me so much he made me the court Jester, the bastard." Emperor laughed at the insult, shaking his head fondly at his long-time friend.

"He's not the example I would have used. He wrote a few books and plays and such that endured for a long, long while and helped many, many people. No, I would use...well, that one, right there," he said, pointing to a man with dull grey skin standing just outside his villa, inspecting a brick wall

he was putting together. “He was just a brick-layer in life. Made roads and built homes. But his actions both in his job and in his personal life affected enough that he rose to Heaven. It doesn’t matter what you do, but the quality in which you do it.”

Elvira did not respond after this, and Emperor continued to lead the way, marching down the streets. The closer they got to the city, the louder and more intricate their surroundings became. Cobblestone streets transformed to solid, white and red granite. Villas turned to mansions, then skyscrapers. A few scattered souls became a dozen, then a few hundred, then thousands. People waved to him or cheered as he passed, welcoming him with open arms. Soldier and guards, clad in metal armor and wielding swords and shields, flooded the streets to clear the way, ensuring Emperor and his entourage – foreign diplomats, in essence – had an easy path through the city and to his palace.

The cheers were loud and Emperor soaked it all in, knowing he had not made anyone do this. He was a beloved King here in Heaven, and though it was not perfect, that fact alone made his heart swell with pride.

“Gaudy,” Reilly drawled, draining the rest of his wine as they reached the palace. A hundred stone steps carved of pure white marble rose up to a truly massive domed building, its roof gleaming with gold and silver. A statue of him, forged of precious metals, stood just outside the front entrance, overlooking the square. A massive great sword was planted in the ground before it, his six hands resting on the hilt, guard, and pommel. It was a little embarrassing to have such an ostentatious representation of himself, true, but he was a God-King, and visitors must know his worth as they enter the palace.

“Come inside, I will have Butler and Gerard attend to us as we discuss,” Emperor boomed over the roar of the crowd. A quick glance back showed Reilly covering his ears, scowling, while Nyxteria pecked curiously at the road. Elvira was staring back at the crowd while Statera had her gaze fixed skyward as she rubbed her chin. A flower crown had been placed atop her head at some point, resting on her impressive-looking horns. “After all, I am hoping that this will be more than just a tour.”

“What do you mean?” Yueya asked, voice impossibly melodious even through the roaring crowd. Emperor set two of his hands on his hips and smiled at them all.

“This is a meeting between sovereigns, of course. My hope is that in the following stages of our [Trials] trade will be allowed between universes, and what better time to start developing good relations and fostering trade than now?” He said, and bowed his head slightly. “I am sure we have much to offer each other.”

With that he turned and led the way into his palace, squaring his shoulders. Now came the interesting part.

Only, he hadn’t participated in any trade deals in eons. *I hope I’m not too rusty. Normally I leave this kind of thing to my Dukes...but it would be disrespectful to not at least attempt a non-formal agreement and discussion with gods of equal standing.*

Elvira had to admit, the Emperor’s Heaven was fascinating. Certain things were eerily reminiscent of the Four Realms, but still clearly different. Not all souls, for example, were capable of producing energy for the Realm itself to use. In addition, only Heaven’s denizens and certain mortals in the lower Realm produced usable energy, as opposed to the Four Realms where all souls created usable energy, even if said energy was flavored by their actions and some flavors were more beneficial than others.

“...and where does all this energy go? How is it used?” Lord Shin asked, the skeleton leaning forward and linking his boney hands together. For such an ominous-looking being he was certainly very calm.

“We mostly distribute it as needed throughout the physical plane, as you have come to call it. Whether that energy is used to bolster the shell of primordial chaos that protects Heaven and Earth

from the Void, to fuel the expansion of the universe, or to nourish land in Earth is changed based on need.” Emperor explained from where he sat on his throne. The other Origin Deities had been sat around a U-shaped table before him, various foodstuffs and valuable items of Heaven and Earth brought out before them. Elvira, for one, stood behind Father to listen to the conversation. “But a lot of energy is sunk into Heaven as well. The divine energy produced here nourishes everything, be it food or mineral, vastly increasing its quality. We do ship quite a bit of it to the Earth, as there is far more than we could ever eat or use, but there are far more people in the Earth Realm than supplies we have.”

“It’s a carrot to get souls to try to rise to Heaven,” Elvira whispered. “Because his most valuable asset is the people who create this energy, he tries to entice them to contribute to the Kingdom by sending rewards down to Earth.” Father nodded, though He had a complicated expression on His face.

“That is a very clinical way of looking at it, but that is what I gathered as well. It’s very well organized.” He agreed.

“And what happens in the reincarnation cycle?” Shin continued. “I notice there is something set up there, but it appears underwhelming compared to the others we have seen.”

“It is. I am already having my Architect drawing up plans to revamp the entire process to make things more efficient.” Emperor agreed. “Most mortal souls do, however, tend to stagnate after a point. Up until we’ve been having to recycle them after every fourth lifetime or so, wiping everything clean if they don’t show any movement. Souls are made up of energy, after all, and before they come to Heaven most are a drain on our energy reserves. Divine energy is powerful and goes a long way, but we cannot continually invest in a losing scheme. If it’s a net loss for too long, with no hope for improvement, eventually we have to cut ties.” Emperor said.

“And what about souls that go the opposite direction of Heaven?” Yueya asked. Emperor sighed and shook his head, an expression of pure frustration plastering itself on his face. Elvira knew the look. She’d seen Father make it plenty of times, and therefore expected what was coming next.

"If they reach a certain point they become Demons. They too produce energy, but we cannot use it. It is destructive, poisonous, meant solely to degrade and undo all of creation. It is the purest form of evil, as are they; they prey upon the mortal and immortal alike, only able to grow through the consumption of others." He explained, fists clenching. "They are what my soldiers are for. By law it is illegal to destroy a soul for its potential to turn into a Demon, as they can turn themselves around with the right influence. Only when they actually are turned into Demons do my men march upon them."

"Are they like our dark spirits?" Elvira asked, wings fluttering as she looked skyward, straining her eyes to see through the dense energy of Heaven to spot Earth, and hopefully any demons.

"No," Father whispered back. "As far as I can tell, they are more like Morgan's spirits. They are predators to the mortal soul, and meant to destroy and degrade creation." Elvira felt herself heat up, the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end at the mention of the Shadow.

"So..."

"Yes. They are a part of Emperor's Shadow, though the conflict has yet to truly begin. I can hardly even call the storm brewing yet, honestly. I do not think he knows exactly what they are, but he is aware enough that I do not need to mention it." Father continued. Elvira crossed her arms and accepted that, tails flicking angrily as she took a few steps back.

There was plenty to focus on here, and her attention was being drawn every which way. One of her incarnations had accompanied Father and a few others into the lower realm incognito, and it was...odd.

Earth was a mirror of Heaven, just lesser. The land was very similar, be it desert or forest, though Earth tended to form planets that circled the light of Heaven, as opposed to being a single landmass. Things were harder there, as people weren't as rich in body or soul; and most energy that was used by souls or planets either came from Heaven, or were produced by the planets themselves, funneling out of the cores like heat from an oven.

Some planets were more well-off than others, and though Emperor tried to raise as many people up as he could, there were points where he had to call it quits. Usually he didn't directly involve himself in the minutiae of running a universe and kingdom; instead, he left that to the dukes and earls and barons, as he called them. Essentially, they were powerful souls that he trusted enough to give power beneath his. This planet, however, was one of the few under direct management of the Emperor.

Her incarnation cringed as she saw a soul that had given up trying was funneled down into the core of the planet, where its energy was recycled and remade. Did they not have truesouls here? Elvira shuddered, glancing at Father who watched on with a stone-like expression. The other gods watched impassively, most seeming to accept this as a matter of course. Lord Shin was the most dismissive of it.

“Souls in my realm are occasionally remade as well,” he said to Emperor. “Though not with a purpose, as is here. Sometimes they just fade away.”

“You are the leader of your Realm, are you not? You remind me of my Empress,” a voice suddenly said, breaking Elvira’s true body out of her trance, watching the Earth Realm through her incarnation as she had been. The being that had snuck up beside her was all shadow, and radiated an aura of destruction. But beneficial destruction, not one of raw hatred like the demons Emperor talked about. Elvira fluttered her wings as she turned to face it, meeting its red eyes. This was...Steward, right? The Origin God Reilly’s companion.

“I am the ruler of Heaven in my own universe, yes. I lead the gods.” She allowed. He nodded his head, black skin trembling as a bit of dark mist seeped from his body.

“I have noticed many beings push the duties of ruling onto their creations. My own creator, Reilly, did the same. Emperor is different, acting as creator and ruler both. Why the difference, do you think?” he asked. Elvira clicked her tongue as she considered her answer.

“I cannot speak for the others,” she said slowly. “But Father is our parent. He is the Patriarch of our family, and it does not always fall to the eldest to lay down the law. And children must grow. He will always be there for moments of indecision and sources of wisdom, but we must come into our own. Father’s role is more complex than a mere guide, but that is the general idea.” Steward matched her gaze for a long moment, nodding slowly.

“I can accept this. Thank you for indulging my curiosity. If I may, would you like to visit the palace library with me? The other Plus-Ones will be joining us. I admit to wishing to know how this universe was made, and Scholar, who is Emperor’s record keeper, has promised to show me around.” Steward said. Elvira stopped herself from shaking her head, convinced as she was that she needed to listen to Emperor speak and act...but already she knew she was a different kind of ruler than he.

He was brilliant, and a just king from what she’d heard. But she was already different than he, and her path was slightly different. The things she needed to learn were not being discussed, anyways.

“Yes, I will. Thank you,” she said, following after him as he turned to go. As she left, their group following a grey-haired, sapphire-skinned man dressed in a simple brown monk habit, she glanced back once to meet Father’s eyes.

His gaze was soft, His smile encouraging, and she nodded her thanks to Him. Though Steward’s words stuck in her mind, even as she walked away.

Why was there such a difference, when even Father had once been an emperor?

2.18 [Silence]

Towards the end of the trip the Emperor held a little ball, and introduced us to a few of his upper echelons. Three Dukes and Duchesses, a few Counts, and the more prominent Barons all stood before us as the Emperor introduced each to us; then proceeded to introduce a few of his staff members. These ones did not have proper names. They were like Jester. Their names were titles. There was Scholar, General, Treasurer, and so forth...it was honestly impressively well organized.

Then came the party itself. Even more food was served, gentle, soothing music was played, liquor was provided, and we were set free to roam about the ballroom as we pleased, mingling with the nobles. I, for one, stood off to the side with Yueya and MR-10, sipping on a fine wine and simply watching everything go down. MR-10 was likewise content to observe, while Yueya chattered away with one of the Duchesses, a beautiful woman with silver skin.

Elvira was in her element, here. One of the Dukes and various other nobles hung on to her every word, nodding along as she explained the fundamentals of her own Heaven, and what riches she could offer. *Something* here had caught her eye, inspiring her desire to trade with Emperor, and she was now talking about the talismans and other magical items that were made in the Four Realms. More specifically, that which her Heavenly Host created. Even Steward, Reilly's Shadow, stood nearby, listening intently and occasionally shooting glances my way. If I strained my ears I could probably make out what they were saying, but...

I had promised myself to keep a hands-off approach here, for all my children. It wouldn't do to break that promise.

“Elvira,” Yueya said, and I turned to her. She smirked. “You really love your creations, don’t you? I called your name three times, and you only looked at me when I said her name.”

“They’re not my creations, they’re my children.” I countered immediately, blushing at my inattention. Yueya giggled at me, shaking her head. “And yes, I do. I am incredibly proud of them.”

“Do you not create your children? I ask because your emphasis on ‘children’ is interesting. I was never a parent in any of my past existences, and the meaning of the word might be lost on me.”

MR-10 droned. I looked up at the floating, inverted pyramid that was its body, and shrugged helplessly.

“They were birthed out of fragments of my own soul, and gained consciousness and power. They are literally a part of me, but definitively separate. Not just a birth of power, but of a true piece of myself.” I explained, looking back at Elvira. Her wings were flared to just the right degree to make her look regal, without looking imposing. And her expression...though she was serious in her conversation, she was more relaxed than I’d seen her since the sun war. My heart swelled with pride, and I found myself smiling. “I was a parent in many of my previous existences, as you put it. I once...well. I once was forced to put my newborn son into a basket on a river, to spare him from execution. Love inspires crazy decisions, but can lead to miracles. My children are both. Crazy decisions, and miracles.” That had been a hard life. In more ways than one. But it did hold a special place in my heart, knowing how far a parent could go for their child.

Yueya reached over and linked her arm in mine, and I looked down at her. She wasn’t looking at me. Instead she watched her plus-one, Astraea, as she maneuvered through the hall, speaking with multiple people. Did she feel the same love for her creations? I did not know.

“Such is an interesting discussion topic. Illogical actions can lead to logical, efficient results, after all.” MR-10 said simply. I laughed.

“Indeed they can, my friend, indeed they can.” Without a doubt, they could.

“They say that Emperor’s first creation was his own body, and he used a sword to cleave open the Void to create Heaven and Earth.” Elvira said as we walked back to the portal. I waved back to a few of the denizens of the realm, smiling kindly at the little girl with onyx skin that had placed a flower crown upon my head. She giggled at me and ran off, away from the city to the hill covered in wildflowers.

“That is literally the opposite of me,” I said, amused and shooting the Emperor a glance. The golden-skinned god was clearly listening, talking loudly enough so Elvira could clearly hear his

words, but paying attention to me. I could not express how much I appreciated the kindness he had shown Elvira, by allowing her to listen in on conversations clearly meant for us Origin Deities. It was not a kindness that would be forgotten.

Yueya, though, was nodding along to his words, enraptured by his description of certain heavenly metals that were produced in his Heaven.

“Supposedly the sword is still somewhere in the palace, and Emperor breaks it out sometimes to cut open the Void and create more land. Though he hasn’t done that in a while. Do you think you could do something similar? You have the Sword That Does Not Cut, after all.” Elvira asked, head bobbing back and forth as she considered the question.

“Maybe,” I said with a shrug, more amused at my daughter’s chattiness than anything else. She was rarely the one to come to me with gossip, after all.

“Oh, and I had a spar with Shin’s follower, Ze. It was a tough fight.” Elvira said.

“How’d it go?” I asked, having not actually known that little tidbit.

“I don’t know if I’d be able to always win. I’d say...seven out of ten times, I’d beat her if we were going all out.”

“That is generous. We would tie.” Ze said from the side, interjecting into our conversation. I smiled and fell to the side a little as Elvira puffed up, feathers ruffling and tails twitching.

“Hardly!” She protested. “My fists are stronger than your sword, we already tested this!”

“And we agreed that it doesn’t matter if your fists can block my sword if you cannot hit me.” Ze countered calmly, the dark-haired girl nodding sagely. Elvira huffed, tails thrashing, and I had to hide a laugh lest I incur my daughter’s wrath.

“They’re getting along rather well, aren’t they?” Reilly asked, coming up beside me. I nodded, pleased that Elvira had made a new friend. Though this outing wasn’t as good for her as it had been for Reika, her aura was far calmer now, and seeing her chatting with Ze, joking around and play-fighting like good friends...it made my heart ache in a good way.

“They are.” I agreed.

“What do you think of the souls here?” Reilly asked suddenly, nodding to a two-headed woman as we passed by her villa.

“I would like to know this as well. Their ability to produce energy is prodigious.” MR-10 said, floating above us and spinning slowly. A bronze-skinned woman with three arms floated beside him, flying through the power of her soul and energy she gave off, as she carved a little statue of MR-10 out of stone.

“I...am unsure.” I said with a frown. “They are different, yet exceedingly similar to what I have in my own universe. However that only applies to these ascended beings.” The difference was, in fact, the truesoul, as far as I could tell. I held up my hand and focused my power a little, watching as a truesoul came into existence right before my eyes. I could feel Reilly and MR-10’s attention focus on it, though my attention was almost solely on the truesoul and the souls of those around me.

In Emperor's realm, the only beings that had truesouls – the immortal soul that prevented true death and contained the core of a person's being – were those in Heaven. Almost as if ascending to Heaven created the truesoul in the first place.

"What is that? Nyxteria wants one," Nyxteria said, poking its great head over my own to peer at the truesoul. One of Elvira's feathers was already stuck in its beak, held there by some magic. When had he gotten that? Still, I laughed and put the truesoul in a pocket in my robe, to be released into the Four Realms later.

"That would be a little harsh, don't you think? It's a soul. It needs a chance to grow." I told it gently.

"Hmm. Nyxteria understands. But can you make one just for Nyxteria?" it asked. I laughed again and shook my head.

"Maybe later." I told it, which I believe everyone understood as a firm 'no.' Honestly though, the amount of energy produced by the Emperor's chosen souls was nothing to sneeze at. And it was pure, rich energy too, worthy of the name 'divine.' Useful in almost all situations, and capable of producing far better stuff than your average energy; a single drop of divine energy was worth more than non-divine energy by at least twentyfold, if not moreso.

"This could be the way I start raising up my own people," Reilly mused. "My Seven Heavens produces some powerful souls, but they're not as beneficial as these folks."

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"I believe we all have things to consider in that regard." MR-10 stated. "Though I do not believe it would fit my realm. I fear these energy-producing souls would be turned into power batteries by

certain subordinates of mine, instead of being rewarded.” I shuddered at the idea, nodding to MR-10. It would certainly be more efficient to tie up these souls and direct all their energy to where it needed to go, rather than letting them pursue their own crafts and leisure. But it would also be monstrous to do so.

“Such things would not be fitting for my Chaos Universe,” Sylphina said. I glanced at the chaos butterfly, its form having shrunk to the size of my palm as it fluttered along beside us. Honestly I hadn’t had much chance to talk to her, which was a shame. Perhaps soon I’d be able to get to know her better? But before I could engage her in conversation, we reached the portal.

“Thank you all for coming to my Realm,” Emperor said as we came to a stop. “It was a pleasure to host you all, and I hope we can continue to have such amicable relations from here on.” With that he bowed his head slightly, cape flaring out behind him, and crown catching the light of Heaven. Instinctively I bowed back, as if I was greeting an equal. Which I was, of course, but it was a bow I had not used in a long, long time.

Straightening back up, Emperor laughed and set his hands on his hips. “That said, unfortunately we will be parting ways with Jester here. Instead, General will accompany me back to the meeting hall.” He gestured to the man standing beside him, a four-armed, two-headed, ruby-skinned man dressed in a neat military uniform. He bowed only slightly, but did not say anything, watching us with critical brown eyes.

One by one we all filed back into the meeting room, where the others were all waiting. Elvira stuck by my side, honestly surprising me with how she remained there throughout our travels, despite me letting her go do her own thing. The others all crowded around the table as well, each of us pondering over what we had learned and seen so far.

“So how, did it, go?” the Progenitor asked, its great beast snoring behind it.

"It seems there might be interest in some trade deals once such an opportunity becomes available. Nyxteria, of course, wishes to have some curios and trinkets, which I would be willing to trade for Timeless Crystals. Overgod, when will that time be?" Emperor said.

Mr. Boxes' incarnation pulsed once.

"Not until at least [Stage 5], unless I am given a sufficient reason otherwise. Trade between universes is not frowned upon, but is rarely seen outside of Origin Deities and their immediate underlings." He explained. Emperor nodded, meeting Nyxteria's eyes as the bird ruffled its feathers.

"Nyxteria agrees to this trade. But Nyxteria is annoyed that Nyxteria has to wait. You are clever for this scheme, Emperor." He cawed, clacking his beak.

"That sounds, at the least, encouraging." The Progenitor said. "Though I do, not see myself, engaging in much trade."

"Trade away some of my treasures? Unlikely." The Dragon said with a yawn, shaking her head. "I do not part with what is mine." I met the Dragon's eyes and it bared its teeth in a smile, sending a shiver down my spine. "You keep looking at me like you want to fight." She accused. Her accusation caught me off guard and I did not immediately respond, sorting through my own feelings about her as I was.

"Father does not pick fights." Elvira said, stepping in front of me and folding her arms across her chest. "It is you who comes across as aggressive and unapproachable. It is your aura that encourages others to see you as arrogant and dismissive." While none of that was untrue, it also probably wasn't the smartest thing to say directly to someone as proud as the Dragon likely was. I resisted the urge to put a hand on Elvira's shoulder to hold her back, watching the Dragon closely.

“The little bird wants to protect daddy, hmm?” the Dragon taunted, clearly not caring about Elvira’s insults. She rose to her full height, flaring her wings as dark miasma fell from between her scales, an orange glow radiating from her throat as she growled – but never truly becoming threatening. My jaw clenched, protective instincts flaring as my domain started to surge upwards; but I caught myself. No. I couldn’t lash out at the Dragon for a little intimidation display like this. Even if it was directed at Elvira...I crossed my arms to keep myself from clenching my fists. “What can a little sparrow do against a dragon?” Elvira huffed out a laugh, shaking her head and turning back to me.

“She is almost comically aggressive,” she drawled. “Nothing like Alexander.”

“Indeed she is not,” I agreed. “I think we both know who the better dragon is.”

“Indeed.” Elvira nodded sagely.

“Ignoring me now?” The Dragon hissed.

“That is enough, you. Quit antagonizing them.” Yueya pleaded.

“Its words bore me. I think I wish to return, Father.” Elvira said with a shake of her head. “There is much I must think on. I thank you for this opportunity.”

“Do not interrupt, wench.” The Dragon snapped. “This is between me and them.”

“Your reaction is illogical.” MR-10 droned. “Are you seeking a specific reaction?”

“What does a mere machine know?”

“Thank you for coming, Elvira. I will call the next soon.” I promised. My daughter nodded, giving me a quick hug before stepping toward the portal. Only once did she look back at me, smiling.

“I love you, Father,” she said, and vanished into the portal. My throat tightened, bottom lip wobbling at the heartfelt words. And the Dragon had to ruin it with its boasting.

“The little bird is fleeing? How cute. Hiding behind daddy. Just as well, or I would have eaten her alive.” She taunted, and I turned. Her aura was loud. Her words abrasive. Everything about her screamed at me that she was an enemy, a problem - and everyone else only compounded upon it. Tensions rose and so did auras, power rippling through the air as the other origin deities bristled at her intentionally angry words. She wanted me to rise to the bait. Her eyes met my own and I could feel the taunt there, the roar of a dragon echoing in my ears.

I bit back hard on my rising anger. I wanted the quiet of the room back, like it had been when it was just I, and the Mad Scientist. I couldn't think with all this damnable *noise*.

“[Silence.]” I said, in the language of the Overgod. Absolute silence descended upon the room, every single person falling into quiet under my unexpected spell. Everyone save for myself. “I understand that I have been at odds with you on a fundamental level. That is my fault, and I have been trying to reign that in. But threaten my children again and we will have more than mere words.” My voice was steady, calm, even, as I spoke, the words echoing in the silence I had conjured.

Then, all at once the spell was broken. I blinked in surprise, the feeling of raw power and whole understanding of [Silence] fading away as the slight trance I had been in was undone. And the Dragon did something I did not expect.

She laughed. It was a roaring, rumbling sound, like volcano ready to explode. Her wings folded at her sides, the fire in her throat dying as she sat back on her haunches, puffing out her chest and craning her neck to look down at me, smiling.

“Good, good! That is how you should be! You were holding yourself back. I could see it. Do not deny your instincts!” She claimed, baring her fangs in a smile as she glared about the room. “Only one of you bastards has the gall to challenge me. Only one of you bastards has the right to enter my Realm; if only for one reason.” She growled out. I looked at her then. Not just glanced at her, refusing to look to deep as I had been, subconsciously avoiding the Dragon’s very being, but truly looked at her.

In a savage way she was beautiful. But she made my blood boil, my mind threatening to go blank with anger and rage.

My fists clenched. There was no reason for me to be acting this way, the Dragon being a Shadow or no. I had not reacted to any of the other Shadows in this way. So what was it about her? I let out a breath.

“Maybe, but not yet.” I said through gritted teeth, meeting the Dragon’s eyes. “There is someone I would bring to your Realm, if you permit, but not yet.” The Dragon huffed.

“I will not be next.” She said, with a hint of...disappointment.

“[Then, I, shall,]” The Progenitor said, speaking in the language of the Overgod. The words ran through me, rattling my very bones and leaving no doubt that its Realm would be next on our visitation list. And its attention turned to me. “[It is pleasing to know, that I am not the only one, capable of learning the True Language. And now that you, all know what it is, my universe shall be next. Statera, has her, [Vision.] Yueya, her, [Beauty.] Shin, his, [Insight.] And I, my, [Understanding.] I welcome you, to my Garden, all save for the Dragon.]”

2.19 Welcome To the Garden

The Progenitor watched his world from afar, as he always had and always would. His home was located at the very center of his Garden, in the heart of the massive ball of light that shone on all of creation. Worlds spun around the light, hundreds of thousands of them, each with their own unique characteristics. Some were barren and empty. Some were frozen balls of ice, others flaming spheres or giants made of gas. A few still were inhabited by life forms, beings that naturally grew from seeds of his own making. Those could be intelligent or not – sometimes, letting random evolution grow in those life forms was more entertaining than micro managing it.

Up this close to his greenhouse and home, everything was planted in neatly ordered rows. Like items were placed together in tasteful arrangements, be they swirling circles or perfect cubes.

Further away, the worlds and systems grew differently than the carefully manufactured planets up close. There was everything from flat stretches of land, one side holding life, the other barren, held together through magic, to nebulas and other such curious features. Sometimes it was fun to look at the simplicity of a lifeless stretch of space. Sometimes it was fun to watch life, with all of its chaotic moving parts. And through it all his immortal helpers could be seen wandering through the depths of his garden, tending to planets and other such things. Most were very similar to the being he had brought to the meeting with him; feathered, six-legged beasts without a face.

They aided in his tending of the garden, helping to ensure no unwanted pests got in, or weeds grew.

The Progenitor turned his attention back to those who had come with him; nearly everyone, save for the Dragon. Most attention was locked onto him, undoubtedly, he knew, to speak about what he had done in the meeting room. That would come in a moment. When the time was right.

“This, is my, Garden,” he said, floating upward a bit to allow everyone a better view. His position there allowed him a perfect view of his entire garden; like watching through the window of a mansion. “Winter is coming right now, so silence is starting to fall, but it is still a beautiful scene. If you wish, you may explore, my greenhouse as well.” A beam of white light shot off from his form, arcing through an open archway behind and to the right of the assembled deities. His entire home was the central light of the Garden, and within it, it held his laboratory and greenhouse, where seeds were stored to be replanted when winter wiped out the rest of his garden.

Sylphina immediately fluttered in that direction, MR-10 going opposite of the butterfly to investigate the Progenitor’s laboratory, where he experimented with elements of creation to make new features for his garden. Most of the rest split off to join those two, only Statera Luotian, the Emperor, and Yueya approaching his spot, looking out at his garden.

“How beautiful. You have created a true work of art here, Progenitor,” Yueya breathed, placing a hand over her chest, eyes sparkling as she soaked in the sights.

“I, thank, you.” the Progenitor said. “It is, my, sanctuary.”

“I do not understand,” the Emperor admitted, shaking his head with a frown. “This is a baffling universe, and I cannot understand why you built it this way.” The Progenitor pulsed once, confused.

“What part of it, do you not, understand?” he asked. It was a fairly straightforward universe, not too far different from his old one, where he’d been one of the personal aides of his own Origin Deity.

“You let the Void destroy your garden.” Statera said, brows furrowed and hands folded into the sleeves of her robe. The Progenitor could sense frustration swirling about her heart and soul, her green eyes narrowing. The emotions were swiftly curbed by a gentleman appearing beside her, dressed in a fine black suit as he stepped out of her dreams. His salt-and-pepper hair neatly combed, and he handed her a steaming cup of tea. “Thank you, Randus.” She muttered. The butler bowed once and stepped away, gaze flicking only once to the garden.

How respectful. What was he to Statera?

“I do. That, is, winter.” The Progenitor agreed. “Such is how, my Garden, grows. Winter comes, and all is returned to the fundamental matter of creation, flowing back into my greenhouse. When the Void reaches the Central Light, I ignite the created Primordial Chaos, causing a massive explosion of growth and rebirth. For a time, everything is allowed, to grow. Then fall comes, and the decay begins, and it all starts over once again.”

“You willingly allow your territory to be destroyed.” The Emperor said, shaking his head.

“I, do allow, that. But with each cycle of destruction, the size of my creation becomes larger, and larger. This process also eliminates, the most dangerous aspects of the Void, to my own being. By the time it reaches my greenhouse, the destructive impulses of the Void are largely, sated.” The Progenitor reasoned. The Void reacted to the size and power of that which was disrupting it, after all. Plus, this process allowed him to rebuild the garden in many different ways. This was already the fifth iteration of his garden, and also the longest lasting. How long had it been around? A while, now, when his first garden had barely lasted a hundred thousand years.

His old universe had lasted trillions of years between cycles, supposedly.

“There is beauty in impermanence, just as there is beauty in eternity.” Yueya said.

“Not all, of it is, destroyed.” The Progenitor argued. “My greenhouse, contains, [Eternity.]” the word echoed through his home, and the other origin deities shuddered. It was not as poignant a word here in the depths of his home. It had already been mired in [Eternity], after all.

“There it is again,” Yueya said, perking up. “The way you said that word. What is it?”

“The language, of the, Overgod. One of the reasons, we are chosen as Origin Deities, is our instinctive understanding of it. We have a connection, to the Overgod that, transcends normal reasoning. Did you not think it odd, we were able to borrow a sliver of the greatest, being in existence’s power without ill-effect?” he pressed.

“The language is power, then?” The Emperor asked.

“No. The language, is mere, words. But the only being in existence, who fluently speaks it, is the Overgod. When we speak it, we are borrowing the Overgod’s understanding of reality, and making it part of our own.” The Progenitor said. The other origin deities were slowly filtering back into the room, his voice having spread out to reach all of them. This was important for each of them to know, and...huh. Hadn’t he just said he would do this speech later? Ah, well, it slipped out. Such is life.

“Your first, word, is your [Enlightenment.] It is something, that will affect your growth throughout, the rest of your time as an origin deity. My first, word, was [Light.]” As soon as he said the word, brightness filled the world in an intentional display of power. Warmth spread through the assembled gods, all save for Shin and Statera shuddering, smiling at the kind, soft, nurturing light he projected.

“What does it say about Statera, then, that their word was ‘shut up?’” Sylphina teased, the chaos butterfly flying in the air on unmoving wings. The Progenitor appreciated the gesture. A single flap

of its wings here, in this place, could send waves of chaos throughout his Realm – if, of course, the Overgod had not been protecting this place while all were gathered.

“I do, not, know. It could be related, to some aspect of themselves, or something they admire. What I can say, Statera, is do not turn away from it. Whatever possessed you, to say what you did when you did, had a purpose. Perhaps it connects, to a piece of yourself you have forgotten, or gave away. Sight is most limited, when turned towards, the self after all.” Statera flinched back as if struck as the words came out of the Progenitor, expression morphing from shock to sudden anger – but was swiftly smoothed over to a more neutral expression. Her butler, Randus, appeared behind her and laid a hand on her shoulder. She nodded to him once and took a slow sip of her tea, Randus silently handing Reilly a cup when he asked for one.

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“How do you know this?” MR-10 was the one who asked this question, which was immediately echoed by Rising Wind, Crashing Waves. To be expected of the most logical of the assembled origin deities; those two were the slowest to accept information without knowing where it came from, or without having any information to back it up.

“Because I was, once an aide to, an Origin Deity. My understanding of my own world, and the greater multiverse is far deeper than any of yours, by nature of my past. This is however, one of those lessons that must be learned, not taught. Understand that, your first word will come, when it is time. Now come, we have much more to see and I would be remiss, to allow you all to traverse my Garden without a guide.” The Progenitor started to float away from his spot, talking the entire way.

Who should he introduce them to first? One of his gardeners? Or perhaps someone else? His attention turned briefly to the being he had made specifically for the meeting, the Nameless Guardian. It had spent all this time sampling the other gods auras, and still had yet to decide upon its own. Ah, well. It was an experiment, anyways. There was little need to swap out its plus one, especially since no one else had the desire to go with him. They were busy enough tending to the garden, and preparing for winter.

The Progenitor let out a little hum.

Let us start in the greenhouse. That should be best.

Randus had been confused as to why the Mistress had chosen him to accompany Her for this journey at first. But now he understood a bit better. She was agitated. She hid it well, but he was better than even the Big Four at picking out Her emotions. He would hedge his bets that it had something to do with the ball of light and the pitiful dragon he'd seen in the meeting room. That was where he came in; no one was better than he at finding ways to distract or soothe Her. She said it Herself on occasion, and he was happy to oblige.

That wasn't to say the Garden wasn't fascinating. Even if the Progenitor's take on its creations was far, far different from the Mistress' own, they had truly made some incredible things. Incredible enough that, once the Progenitor began explaining some of its creations, the entire group of origin deities were properly enthralled. Leaving him with little to do.

So he wandered a bit through the building the Progenitor called the greenhouse, always prepared to go back to visit the Mistress, yet still taking the time to observe. It was the size of a largish continent, extraordinarily small compared to the rest of the Progenitor's realm, but big enough. And big enough for what was contained within.

Eternal things resided here.

Trees that grew golden fruit, fruit that radiated immortality. Birds of fire that hurtled through the ever-shifting white skies. Mountains of strange, immutable metal, and even souls that had echoes of dreams contained within. Each and every one had the memory of a hero, of a paragon of their time...and though none were as impressive as their Paragon Soul, Xing Wu, was, they were acceptable for what they were. Given immortality through their deeds...he could see echoes of their

actions throughout all of the dreams of the Progenitor's creations, fuzzy though they were to him, being a foreigner.

What truly drew his attention, however, was what grew in the very center of the greenhouse. Immortal things were a common enough occurrence in the Four Realms, but this? This was new. A ball, perhaps twice as tall as he, of condensed primordial chaos. Streams of chaos flowed into it like dust from all corners of the garden, constantly adding to the ball yet never once increasing it in size. It reminded Randus of an egg, or a seed, ready to explode into life once the right conditions were met.

"It is fascinating, is it not?" a new voice asked. He turned to the speaker, a pointy-eared maiden with pitch-black hair that glittered with stars. Her eyes were silver, and her expression was blank as she circled around from the other side of the ball of primordial chaos.

"Indeed it is." He agreed. "Fascinating concept, this...creation through destruction. The condensed primordial chaos is truly beautiful. Though I pity the lack of known permanence in this world; the mortals seem to live hopeless existences, destined to fade into obscurity, their dreams gone, unless they achieve the impossible." Even if most did not make it to immortality in the Four Realms, their souls were at least immortal. They had the chance to try again and revisit their memories in the Spirit Realm. Here, he wasn't sure. It seemed all so impermanent.

"It is not as hopeless as it seems." The woman said. "There is beauty in impermanence, yet the cores of their beings remain. Memories may fade, but the truesouls return to the source of creation in the end." Randus closed his eyes for a moment, feeling out the world around him.

It was true, he found. Though their shapes were different, the souls of the Progenitor's realm did, in fact, have a truesoul. Relief flooded through him - though their shape and color might be different than the truesouls of the Four Realms, which was likely why he missed it at first, it was encouraging. That they might have not had been unthinkable.

“Ah, forgive me. I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Astraea, goddess of the stars. And you are?” The self-identified Astraea said, coming to stand before him.

“I am called Randus. I serve the Mistress.” He said, placing one hand to his chest and bowing slightly. Astraea continued to watch him, expressionless, as he straightened back up and clasped his hands behind his back.

“You are like me, I believe. Born of our creator’s...well, never mind. I know not enough to truly speak of the subject.” She said slowly, turning to face the ball of chaos. Randus puzzled over what she had been about to say, watching the strange woman closely. “Can you sense it? The danger.” The hair on the back of his neck stood on end breath catching slightly as he turned his gaze to the ball of chaos.

...yes. He could see it. Not only through his connection to the Mistress’ dreams, but through his own power as well. The dreams here were not blind to the danger posed to them, some subconscious force of this world’s creator paying minor attention to it.

“Disease,” he said with a shake of his head. The potential for it was there.

“I can barely see it. But the danger here is obvious.” Astraea agreed. Randus opened his mouth to speak again, but was interrupted by the sudden arrival of a new person.

“Interesting conversation you’re having here.” Reilly said, the beggar-like god slinging an arm across Randus’ shoulders, leaning on him heavily. Randus wrinkled his nose – the smell of alcohol was only barely covered by the scent of the tea he’d given him. *And he’d have to clean his suit after this, the rags Reilly wore were *filthy*.* “Statera was being all mysterious ‘bout it when they mentioned it. But I think I can see a little what you’re talking about – don’t let a disease run through the garden and ruin the seeds, eh?”

“I believe I said too much,” Astraea said softly.

“Nonsense. Statera may be a freak of nature when it comes to seeing through things, but the rest of us aren’t slouches about it either. Even I can feel the luck wavering here, somewhat. Statera may have pointed it out to us all, but, well...ah, I’m annoying you. Sorry. My luck is exceptionally bad today, so it seems I won’t be making any friends.” Reilly apologized, pulling off of Randus and stumbling away, swigging from a flask he’d hidden in his sleeves. Randus frowned at him and dusted off his suit, looking up to see Astraea had vanished.

Randus straightened out his suit and looked at Reilly, who shrugged helplessly, cheeks red from alcohol.

“Sorry. Seems I scared her off. Wonder what her deal is, though, huh? Quiet, she is,” Reilly muttered, stumbling away and tripping over a rock, falling face-first onto the ground. Randus bit back a smirk of amusement, shaking his head at the drunkard god.

But Astraea’s words echoed through him all the same. What did she mean by he was like her?

What had the Mistress really called him here for? He wasn’t sure she even had a plan for it and that, more than anything, made him worried.

2.20 I Must Find Out Why

The Overgod of the Multiverse drummed its metaphorical fingers on its metaphorical desk as it watched the nascent Origin Deities wander about through each other’s realms. Data and charts were presented before it, constantly fluctuating as the deities learned and observed new information, but its attention was fixed solely on the gods themselves. None of the presented data was outside projections, of course, save for one glaring detail.

The probability of there being a void-related disaster in the near future was rising. The probability of it being caused by one of the Origin Deities was high as well.

It had hoped the revelation of Statera's injury would help curb the disaster. It had even broadcasted the moment Statera revealed the loss of their arm to those who hadn't been present just for the occasion. When that hadn't worked nearly as well as hoped, it had manipulated events so the Progenitor's realm would be shown to as many possible.

It had worked, but not nearly well enough. The possibility was still increasing.

The Overgod sighed and pulsed its power once, requesting additional aid from a few of its larger shards. Limited as this incarnation was in both power and sight, for more drastic preventative measures it did have to seek approval with itself.

Even though in the next [Stage] allowed for more influence from the Void, going so far as to let the origin deities communicate a bit, it was still in charge of curbing the worst of the Void's influence. Letting a baby hurt itself from ignorance, even if they were gods, would be negligent. A mere three seconds later it got a ping back, along with additional information. Specific powers were allocated to this incarnation, a touch of true power returning to it that told the Overgod nearly everything it needed to know about how to handle the situation.

If they couldn't stop the disaster, it would be best to teach the young gods how to fight a Paradox to prepare them for it. Statera already knew, but could they work in concert with everyone else, to fight a Paradox far more powerful than any of them? The answer was clearly yes, but first Statera and the Dragon needed to work out the little instinctual aggression they were feeling towards each other. And MR-10 and Sylphina had to have a little heart-to-heart to clear the air.

Thankfully, both of those seemed like they might work themselves out in the next little bit.

Contingencies need to be put in place in case the root cause of the disaster spreads to other universes. It mused. A flash of annoyance spiked through it that it quickly curbed as it began to pull up a few old plans and barrier types from [Trials] past. No. Do not get agitated. This is the task I put upon myself. See it through diligently. But even still, it could not help its minor emotions.

Why did they have to make things more difficult for it? They were doing so well.

Watching the Void constantly destroy bits and pieces of the Progenitor's universe was a humbling experience. I knew basically how the Void destroyed things. The Abyss, where the shell of primordial chaos around the Four Realms met the Void, was a prime example of endless creation and destruction. This wasn't like that. Watching the Abyss was like watching dust drift through a sunbeam – it was pretty and entertaining, but ultimately felt...natural. Here, entire worlds crumbled from existence. Even concepts like distance, space, and time vanished like a snowflake in the palm of the hand. What little dust remained after the Void ate it up flew back to the Progenitor alongside whatever truesouls were unfortunate enough to get caught up in the process, and what little else was protected by the origin deity's power.

The Emperor's takeaway from it had been to nod and declare he needed to create truesouls for the Earth realm, as opposed to just having them in Heaven.

Nyxteria observed for a bit, then flew off in search of more interesting things.

Even MR-10 drifted off after declaring it had collected as much data as needed from the sight, sending out drones to examine other parts of the Progenitor's Garden.

Only myself, Rising Wind, Crashing Waves, Yueya, and Shin stayed to watch the Void slowly devour a universe. It was humbling, a reminder of how much danger the Void presented to our realms...but it felt so distant, so far away. It would be billions of years before we genuinely had to

deal with Paradoxes and the like. At least this reminded me that the Void was not safe, and I would eventually have to overcome it.

Eventually we wandered our way back to the Progenitor's laboratory, as they called our main bodies back to finish a few more explanations. Unlike the other universes that felt like tours, the Progenitor largely gave us free reign to do as we pleased so long as we adhered to the 'no touching' rule.

Yueya linked her arm in mine as we returned to the laboratory, where the Progenitor was explaining a few of the finer details of the processes of maintaining the Garden to a few of our incarnations, which faded upon our return. How it could survive without a protective shell or barrier, without being immediately consumed by the Void, was fascinating; I actually had no idea that the devouring process wasn't instantaneous. However, one of the biggest things I noticed was how expressive the Progenitor was while talking.

It was never happier than when it was describing its creations, or simply strolling through the Garden itself. Never was it content to micromanage things, and it seemed to have accepted the process of gradual destruction as inevitable, and even ideal. But that was likely to be expected from a God of Creation; even if its exterior garden was destroyed by the Void, it could simply create a new one.

I dared to say that its power of limitless creation, creating something from nothing, was stronger than mine had been even when I created the Four Realms. Meaning it had surpassed the sliver of power originally afforded to us from Mr. Boxes, even if only in matters of creation.

That was how such a small amount of primordial chaos could once again become a massive universe, every time the original was destroyed. Even now, watching the Progenitor as it talked, I could see bits and pieces of things flying off of it to join the universe at large. Primordial chaos, truesouls, pure energy...it was usually small things, but the constant creation was simply astonishing.

“These are a few of my gardeners,” The Progenitor said, bobbing happily next to three feathered beasts. They were different than its plus-one, but only slightly. They had four legs and two arm-like appendages tipped with ten fingers stretching from their shoulders, wings sprouting from their backs and muzzles filled with sharp teeth. Their three eyes blinked at us, a rumbling sound echoing from their chests as Yueya let go of me and approached to inspect them. “They are a few of the only truly immortal beings in my Garden, and my closest attendants. They tend to the Garden where I don’t, or while I am busy with creating new things. Now, over here...” The Progenitor rambled on, drifting over to the next part of its laboratory.

The laboratory was a simple thing, really. There were not glass beakers or complex machinery like what I would envision from my previous lives – or anything like my own workshop, filled with jars of elemental essences, blueprints, and failed or successful experiments. The Progenitor’s laboratory was largely blank. White walls surrounded us, windows showing the greater parts of the Garden, while bits and pieces of half-made creations floated about aimlessly.

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“Just because I can, create anything I want doesn’t, mean I know everything I can make. Your universes have, given me plenty of ideas, and for that I thank you.” It had said when I’d pointed that out.

“I sense that we will reach that level of skill in creation eventually,” Shin said, appearing beside me. The Progenitor pulsed once, creating a scale-model of its universe that mimicked the birth and death of its repeated universe, each iteration expanding larger, as it continued its explanation. “But as a god of creation the Progenitor will always have a leg up on us.”

“I am honestly jealous,” I admitted. “It took me eons to build up enough energy just to create a star – and admittedly big, immortal, and important star, but a star just the same – and the Progenitor would be able to do it in a fraction of that time.”

"It will take me eons to make new grey areas as well, whereas it would be trivial for them." Shin agreed, smoke pouring from his mouth as he spoke.

"But, just the same, I am sure he is lacking in other areas as compared to us. If anything this outing is highlighting the pros and cons of each of our domains, and what we sacrificed to become origin deities." I mused, shaking my head as the Emperor began to talk up the Progenitor's achievements.

"Nyxteria agrees. If Nyxteria had such abilities, Nyxteria's nest would not be such a mess. But if Nyxteria wasn't a time god, there would be no collection!" Nyxteria agreed, poking its head over my shoulder to peer at the Progenitor, blinking its eyes and cocking its head to the side.

Surprisingly, it had not asked for anything to keep yet...at least that I'd noticed. Randus had nothing to offer the bird besides dreams, which Nyxteria seemed uninterested in. For a moment longer we stood there, listening to the Progenitor wax poetic about its creations.

My thoughts refused to remain on topic for too long, however. They kept drifting back to the Progenitor's words to me, about not turning away from myself. And how sight was often most limited when directed at the self.

I found that to be...untrue. I knew myself, didn't I? My first act in the Void had been to examine the depths of my soul for an unknown period of time. Or perhaps it was simpler than that. Perhaps I was turning a blind eye to a part of myself because I either was not ready to accept it, or not willing to see it.

"Don't try so hard," Shin advised. "You're struggling too hard to figure it out, whatever it is. Let it come to you of its own accord." I nodded absently, knowing his words to be wise. Knowing was different than understanding, though, and I could be incredibly stubborn.

"That would be, the end, of our tour." The Progenitor announced, startling me. "Let us return to the meeting room, and decide the next, universe to visit."

I blinked at the ball of light, not quite comprehending what it had said, then rubbed my face, groaning into my hands. Getting distracted like that was no good, I really needed to pay closer attention to things.

I spent the walk back to the meeting room in silence, hands folded in the sleeves of my robes and staring at the floor. Randus, of course, seemed to notice my mood right away as he appeared beside me, handing me a cup of tea to try and help smooth things over – but I didn't need things to be smoothed over. I worried my bottom lip as I walked, burdened by thoughts.

“Are you alright?” Yueya asked suddenly, sidling up beside me. “You’ve been awfully quiet.”

“Just thinking about some things.” I said.

“Is it about what the Progenitor said?” she asked.

“Yes.” That was a bit of an understatement, however. It wasn’t just that, that had rattled me. There was something else stirring that I wasn’t quite sure how to handle...I think it was high time I visited the Dragon’s Realm. There was no point in beating around the bush anymore.

Yueya linked her arm in mine and my thoughts mercifully ground to a halt. She winked at me as we stepped through the portal to the meeting room and I shook my head in amusement, glancing about as everyone once again meandered through the white room. I, for one, fixated my gaze on the Dragon.

I met her glowing orange eyes, filled with all the intense emotions that came with her existence. She was power and pain, death and life, destruction and creation. Her emotions flowed freely through her – I could see them, and she did nothing to hide it. Her teeth bared themselves in a snarl, wings stretching out as she lifted her head. No anger flooded through me this time. Though seeing her still rankled me, I was coming to understand the problem. It lay in me, and my emotions.

“Statera,” Shin said suddenly, breaking my concentration. I looked over at him, to see all the others had gathered in front of Sylphina’s universe, apparently having decided to visit there while I was...preoccupied. Yueya still stood beside me, looking torn, and MR-10 floated above its stand. “You are not coming?”

“No.” I said, shaking my head and shooting Sylphina an apologetic smile. The butterfly flapped its wings once, seeming unaffected.

“That is wise.” Rising Wind, Crashing Waves agreed, the great stag nodding its head. “Your ‘Balance’ would be more sinister to Sylphina’s Chaos than even pure order would be. Subtle subversion is what it would cause which, at this stage, I cannot advise.” We were on the same page, then.

“How much you wanna bet the place is trashed by the time we come back?” Reilly asked, gaze flicking between me and the Dragon, stroking his chin as he moved over to the Emperor. Said man just snorted and shook his head, returning to discussing something in low tones with his plus one. Reilly clicked his tongue and met my eyes, shrugging helplessly before pulling out yet another gourd of alcohol from thin air.

“Let us go.” Sylphina said, leading the way into her portal. Yueya hesitated for just a moment, glancing at me, then at the Dragon, then back at me. I made a shooing motion and she huffed, rolling her eyes as she marched over to the portal, hesitating for only a moment before vanishing into it.

“Randus, thank you for your assistance.” I said, turning to my faithful butler. He stood behind me, eyes closed and head bowed ever so slightly, though I could feel his hesitation. He looked...good, though. Calmer. He tapped into my dreams too much; he needed to go out and think of his own sometimes. This trip may have helped him do that; certainly, he had something new to think about even if he didn’t really know what that was.

“Is there anything else, Mistress?” he asked. I shook my head, walking him over to the portal to the Four Realms. “Then who should I prepare to bring for the next one?”

“I will call him. It won’t take as much time as you think,” I told him. Randus toyed with one of the buttons on his coat hesitantly, looking like he had something he wanted to ask or say but didn’t have the courage to say it. “Then I will retire. Thank you for the opportunity,” he said instead, bowing slightly before slipping into the portal. I remained still for a moment longer, watching my portal and feeling my karma begin to unwind a bit further. The countless different threads that connected me to the Four Realms and my children were slowly solidifying, simplifying into thick ropes rather than a dense web, while other strands were completely resolved.

My extended absence from the Realms was also helping, in a way, threads naturally dying out without me there to maintain them. The weight lifting itself from my shoulders would have been relaxing, were I not in the presence of the Dragon.

“Did you mean what you said, earlier?” I asked, turning back to the Dragon but never stepping away from my portal. It sneered at me, having risen up to a sitting position while I sent Randus away. “That I am the only one you would allow into your realm.”

“That is an exaggeration. I believe few of us would gain from seeing the Primeval Dragon’s universe.” MR-10 interjected, lights flashing as it spoke. “Her process is painfully apparent, even from this distance.”

“Silence, machine. I will let no one but those I approve of into my Realm.” She growled, snapping her teeth at MR-10 before turning back to me. “Why?”

“You piss me off. I need to see why.”

“I know why you anger me; it the same reason you alone, of all our so-called fellows, are allowed to come. That thing I sense from you is the same you sense in me, you are just stupid enough to deny it.” She said, rising to her feet and stretching out her wings. Smoke drifted down from the membranous limbs, an orange glow radiating from her chest, her tail thrashing. Mr. Boxes’ incarnation pulsed once, hanging in the air above the table still as it was. “Not going to bring a shard of yourself this time?” The Dragon sneered, turning her back to me to head to her portal.

My eyes widened, then narrowed, lips pulling into a thin line. A shard of myself? True, my children had been born of shards of my own soul...which meant that I was part of them, just as they had been part of me.

However, no. I would not go alone. I needed someone to come with me. He – he might even need this even more than I did. My son was suffering in silence from the weight of his fate, bearing it with all the stoic faith he could muster. And I could see it even now that this meeting here would give him an answer. An answer to the same level of Reika’s change, whatever she had gained from Shin’s Wheel Realm.

“No.” I said, shaking my head and laying a hand on my own portal, reaching within to call my child to me. “There was a saying among spirits, back before I became an Origin Deity, that nothing can win against a dragon.”

“I like this saying,” the Dragon growled out. I chuckled a little, narrowing my eyes at her. I hadn’t been finished.

“Nothing can fight against a dragon. Nothing, save for another dragon.”

