

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

2.21 Dragon

Alexander was woken from his sleep by Father's hand resting itself upon his head, silently calling him to...wherever it was He had been. He could feel changes happening in the Four Realms, his siblings already making waves from whatever insights Father had to show them. Slowly, Alexander raised his head to look at the strange, swirling portal that had appeared before him, purples mixing with whites and blues and reds in an almost psychedelic display not but a few feet from his face. Father's hand had reached through it, beckoning him forth.

He rose and flew forward, slipping through the portal like breaking the surface of a river, to behold a stark-white room. Pillars rose around twelve arches, each with a flag depicting various symbols hanging over them, while Father stood directly in front. He looked slightly annoyed, eyebrows scrunched together, though he still smiled happily at Alexander as he pulled his massive body into the relatively empty room.

"Father," he greeted, raising his head to scan the room. There was a strange, inverted floating pyramid along one side of the wall, a perfect orb floating behind it, and -

A growl echoed up from his chest the moment he laid eyes upon the other dragon in the room. His own rainbow irises locked onto the other dragon's glowing orange, her teeth baring into a feral snarl. Rays of light shot off of him as his aura flared, circling around himself and Father as the Dragon began to laugh, a deep, echoing sound that sent shivers down his spine and set fire to building up in his throat.

"Alexander, meet the Primeval Dragon. Dragon, meet my son Alexander. Let's go." Father introduced, voice eerily calm. Alexander dared not take his eyes off of the Dragon for a second, twitching as it broke eye contact to glare at Father.

“What is this, a dragon playing as a god?” She sneered, turning away from Alexander in a clearly dismissive manner. “Pitiful. Weak! Disgraceful!”

“Better those things than whatever *you* are.” Alexander ground out, lifting his head to his full height. Tall as he was, the Primeval Dragon had to crane her neck to look up at him – but he was under no illusion that he was in a position of superiority here. Father silently walked past him, gliding across the ground on silent footsteps as He circled the table to stand beside the Dragon, shooting her a nonplussed look.

“Enough of this. Lead on.” He said firmly.

Alexander hesitated, claws tapping against each other and teeth gnashing as the Dragon turned with a huff, vanishing into her portal. Father followed after, shooting one glance back at him that clearly said *well? Come on.*

Rage boiled in his gut as he flew forward, fury he tamped down upon with sheer force of will. He was better than that. He was no animal of base instinct that reacted like he just had – he tried to hide his frustration beneath the shame of acting so childish, but the anger burned too hot. It boiled and bubbled even as he flew through the portal – yet was still momentarily forgotten as he beheld an entirely new world.

It was one of destruction. A Domain entirely made of primordial chaos, almost eerily similar to the Four Realms prior to he and his siblings creating their Realms. The essences of creation flew every which way, souls drifting about through the aether collecting whatever they could. The echoes of the Void clashing against pure primordial chaos rattling the entirety of the universe like a house in a thunderstorm. Nothing was in order. It was all simply piled together haphazardly; though, even at first glance, Alexander did notice a few souls going through a similar process of absorbing energy to become gods, just as they had in the Four Realms.

Yet nothing compared to the burning power of the Dragon, brighter than the Realm Sun and Lunar Star combined.

Fire spilled from the Dragon's maw as it turned back to him and Father, settling down in a cave made of primordial chaos. Treasures of many sorts lay behind her, half-hidden behind a veritable wall of Chaos. Gold glittered and souls shifted, gems gleamed and elemental crystals lay in piles, curios of a million different types gathered in the center of her cave.

"My fires burn, and the Void burns with it." she proclaimed, words echoing through the entirety of her realm. A shudder ran down Alexander's spine as he recognized the true ruler of this creation – all else lay beneath her, and this was her territory. *Hers.* Alexander's lips pulled back over his teeth, spine cracking in a thousand places as he stretched himself out.

The Dragon's Domain was so *big*. For the first time in his life, Alexander let out a long, slow breath that didn't feel weighed down upon by hundreds of thousands of pounds of spiritual pressure. The skies were empty, save for the raw essences of creation. The grounds were clear of any who might obstruct his passage – spirits were nothing but nascent souls, barely even a whisper of consciousness between any of them, even those who attempted to gain divinity.

It might have been big, but it was also *empty*. Alexander found himself missing those powerful souls who inhabited the Four Realms, even if their presence could be oppressive. His eyes once again found the Dragon.

"I burn the Void, the Void retreats, and my Domain expands. This is my world, *mine*, and none are allowed to infringe upon it. Especially not something as mindless as the *Void*." She snarled, claws digging into the chaos at her feet. Her eyes narrowed at Alexander and Father, who crossed his arms silently, observing all around him. Alexander tried to remain silent. He tried to. But the Dragon kept talking. "You disgust me. Freely giving pieces of yourself to others, letting them twist what is *yours*. No self-respecting being would do this. You are a god, lesser though you are for it, and what do you do? Play pretend with false children. Have you no pride?" the words were directed at Father, and Alexander found his voice burst forth from his chest unbidden.

"Do not speak that way to Father." He snapped. "He is wiser and kinder than you could ever imagine to be. He has earned the title of Father, fought His own children to teach, not to destroy

and subjugate. You and your domain of emptiness are nothing compared to Him.” The Dragon laughed. She *laughed*.

“A father? A parent? *That* is nothing. What is a parent to a calamity? My wings are a maelstrom, my breath the inferno of creation and destruction. What is a father to a Dragon? What –“

“Mine.” Alexander cut her off with a roar, power flaring, his body coiling up upon himself like a snake ready to strike – only he was no mere lizard. The Dragon froze upon his word, but only momentarily. “He is *mine*. *My* Father. *My* parent. He is more than you will ever *be*, creator and parent to something you do not *realize*. And I am a *Dragon*.”

“A dragon, playing god. Nothing more than a mere lizard that can breathe harmless flames.” The Dragon taunted. Alexander felt his hackles rise – but he caught himself. His fires died in his throat. His emotions escaped from his head and heart like the smoke from his lungs, pushed out of his body alongside his sigh. He was better than this. He was the wise dragon of spirits – “You are little more than an overgrown lizard playing at being a god, a lesser being, with a self-sacrificial idiot as a so-called parent. You are a pair of *imbeciles*, worth less than the mud between my toes, and –“

Alexander roared.

The primordial chaos around him shattered, shard of glass-like reality floating through the air, golden flames shooting from between his teeth as he bellowed his defiance to the immaterial skies. The primordial chaos churned, howling against his spiritual pressure – and freezing in place as the Primeval Dragon spread her wings, asserting her dominance over reality with a mere thought, and hurled herself at Alexander.

No, I didn't mean – he thought, suddenly realizing what he was doing, shooting backward with all his might to escape the seeking claws of the Dragon.

“What kind of a Dragon runs?” She growled, cleaving through space and time itself with a single swipe of her claws. Alexander shuddered, but he could not deny the rage and anger that burned within him even as he retreated, the Dragon turning to him with a furious snarl. “What kind of Dragon hides behind their so-called parent?”

Alexander turned his gaze to Father for a brief second, only to find Him watching with a blank expression, hands folded into the sleeves of his robes as if to say *you made your bed, now sleep in it.*

“I am a guest in your house. I apologize for my actions.” Alexander hissed out between his teeth, doing his damndest to make it sound believable and sincere. “I –“

“SILENCE!” The Dragon roared, shattering what Alexander had to say as she hurled herself forward, maw agape, orange fire spewing forth in a scale-melting wave of heat and death. Alexander shot downward, tail thrashing as he swam through the primordial chaos, fire and earth and energy splitting before him like water before a pike. He narrowly avoided a swipe of the Dragon’s claws rending reality, but failed to dodge a swipe of its tail, crashing into the top of his head like a hammer.

His teeth snapped shut, blood oozing from the cracked scales on his forehead as he fell, slamming into a solid stretch of primordial chaos that cratered beneath his form. Time slowed as he looked up at the form of the Dragon – and he found it beautiful.

Her wings were illuminated by the orange glow in her chest. Shadows swirled about her, the raw heat emanating from her blackened scales distorting reality. Her very presence inspired creation, every flap of her membranous wings sending swirls of souls and elements hurtling through her domain to join the chaotic forces that comprised it. And then she breathed out.

Orange fire hurled faster than he could blink toward him, destroying all that was in its path, returning even Chaos to the raw energy that made up its creation. Alexander was frozen in place, unable to move as fire that would incinerate his very soul threatened to disintegrate him –

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And then Father was there, a shield of white and black whirling into existence, splitting the inferno from the Dragon like a wall against the wind. And shame filled his chest. Once again, Father had come to the rescue. Once again, he had failed to – no. He couldn't think this way. There was no shame in...

“Is that it?” Father asked, breaking through the silence that came with lying to himself. His purple robes billowed in the faux wind created by the Dragon’s breath, his expression obscured by shadow and the fierce orange glow of the Dragon’s breath as he turned back to look at Alexander. “Is this all you are?”

“What – “

“Do not deny yourself. Do not. You can lie to everyone else, even me, but do not lie to yourself. Is this all you are, Alexander?” the roar of the Dragon’s breath threatened to drown out Father’s words, but Alexander understood them all the same. Even as the heat threatened to sear his scales, even as it threatened to melt his horns and burn away his soul. Fire rose in his stomach. Anger. “There is no reason to fear, here. Deny yourself no longer – deny your emotions no longer. To deny is to rage against, and the most dangerous type of anger is built within the heart of one who is good. Is that who you are?”

Alexander grit his teeth, his shame reaching a fever pitch. But beneath it burned raw, all-consuming anger. Is this the extent of who he was? This strange Dragon meant nothing to him, and everything. She was the opposite of all of Father’s ideals, all of his ideals – NO! NO! NO.

“no.” His head lifted, anger burning away. He would not deny it. He could not deny it. But he should not accept it as his truth, either. Something clicked within him in that moment, a peaceful silence falling about him that sent the fire within roaring to greater heights than ever before – but never once overcoming his mind, nor threatening to burn down his rationality and reason.

“This is not the Four Realms. There is nothing to protect here. Free yourself of that which suppresses you – and do not show me who you are. Show yourself *who I know you are.*”

Alexander’s roar pierced the very heavens themselves as he shot skyward, through the Dragon’s flames, bursting through the all-consuming heat to the skies above. The Dragon ceased its breath to glare at him, mouth open, maw smoldering, reality bending to its destructive whims. *How wasteful. All that power, for nothing.* He thought, in that split second where he rose above the Dragon. *Yet beautiful all the same.* He could not deny the beauty of it. But it was not his Truth. He was not that kind of Dragon.

“I AM ALEXANDER!” He roared. “AND YOU DO NOT KNOW HOW HIGH THE HEAVENS ARE!”

“Yes!” The Primeval Dragon roared in delight as Alexander descended upon her, eyes burning with righteous fury, aura soaring to new heights. She let him come, crashing into her body like a missile as they tumbled claw over tail through her Domain. His teeth bit into her neck, cracking scales, yet not with enough force to choke. He was not strong enough for that yet. “YES!” She turned her maw to the white-scaled dragon, biting his back and ripping him from her own neck, hurling him across her Domain, writhing and thrashing his sinuous form.

Fire billowed from her maw, and this time he met it with a burst of golden flame.

It was weaker than her own, and for a moment she was disappointed as he vanished beneath the roaring orange explosion of her breath. Did she accidentally kill him with her full might? Or did the *other fucker* get in the way again?

And then – heat.

It burned her chest, more of a tickle than anything, that slowly grew in intensity until claws buried themselves in-between her scales, Alexander bursting through her flames wreathed in golden light. Power rippled behind him, pushing through her flames with all the constant force of a river, driving his claws deeper into her flesh. She shuddered in delight as her breath was forced from her lungs in a burst of smoke and flame.

“Good, good!” she laughed, lifting her foreclaws to bat him aside, blood dribbling from between her scales as his claws were torn free. Blood. Her blood. She lifted one claw to her chest to examine a droplet, dripping down her scales. It burned with all her power, evaporating into mist to merge with her Domain. He had drawn her blood. Finally! “This is more like it! Come, false god! Show me more!” she crowed, shooting forward, wingbeats stirring up an elemental maelstrom that hurled itself at the white dragon. He roared his defiance, not dodging, not avoiding, but barreling right through her condensed power in his arrogance – only to emerge the other side with battered scales and a broken horn, but no less fierce for it. Good! A true Dragon was arrogant because they had earned the right to be!

She laughed as they clashed, fighting tooth and claw, putting all her effort into putting him down.

But he did not yield. Not for a moment, not for an inch. He had maybe twenty percent of her own power, if she were to put it into mere numbers, but his warrior’s spirit made up part of the difference. Every time she batted him away, or bit into his flesh, he fought back with twenty times the savage determination. For each insult she hurled at his scales or at his so-called *father*, he returned two-fold in the form of dents in her scales or tears in her wings.

And she watched with glee as he finally gave in to his Truth, devouring his own divinity, aura skyrocketing as he allowed himself to become what he truly was meant to be. A dragon was not a god. It was a Dragon – an existence to challenge the heavens themselves! And no true Dragon could fly under a sky in which it was not its own sovereign.

She bellowed her joy to the sky, and Alexander shouted his challenge.

She roared her dominance to her challenger as they clashed again, and again.

And not once did he give in. Not even bleeding and broken, aura shaking and shattered, power all but spent – he breathed in one last time and shouted his truth at her, all he was spent in a single burst of golden flame.

I AM ALEXANDER! It said. *AND I DENY YOU!*

She basked in the heat of his flames, letting it sink into her scales and ignite the passion of her heart. This was what a dragon was meant to be. It was passion. It was fury. It was protection of *what was theirs*. Nothing could challenge a dragon. *Nothing*.

But she was still *the Dragon*.

She burst through Alexander's flames, foreclaws grabbing his head and slamming it downward, into the roof of her cave. Chaos shattered beneath the force, and Alexander growled weakly, still snapping her at her toes. She sighed happily but was not satisfied. Conflict was how she rose and grew. It was how her Domain grew. And good as this fight had been, it was not enough to satisfy her. Maybe in few million years he would have the power, but...no, she needed *more*.

“You have earned this.” She declared. “The right to know my true name. Not given to me by another, but decided for myself. Sehuyun. My name is Sehuyun, the Primeval Dragon.” Alexander’s rainbow eyes flicked upward briefly to meet her own, still filled with the light of defiance, but the moment was short-lived.

Alexander’s consciousness dimmed, his eyes falling shut, and any hope for the continuation of the fight faded away.

That is, until clapping echoed through the following silence like thunder.

“Thank you. Though he lost, he needed that.” Statera Luotian said, stepping calmly through the aftermath of their battle. His hair was immaculate, for a god, robes as pristine as ever. “Now, *get off my son.*”

Sehuyun grinned savagely, sensing the opportunity for another fight as she pressed Alexander’s head deeper into the chaos.

“And what if I don’t?”

Statera’s expression never changed, and that was the most impressive piece of what happened next. He simply raised his hands and snapped his fingers, raw power exploding outward and sending her tumbling back, head over tail, claws free of Alexander. She righted herself, tail digging a trench through the chaos to halt her momentum, gaze snapping immediately to the newest threat to her Domain – only to find him kneeling over his son, a kind smile on his face, healing light washing over the white dragon’s body. Scales mended. Blood flowed back within Alexander. And a green shield layered itself over his body as he stood to face her.

His expression was calm.

His aura was not.

Sehuyun licked her lips.

"I have not tried this yet. I know now of its possibility, but...I never considered to use it until this moment. Perhaps that is because I have not felt the need to truly defend my children, even against my own child." Statera said thoughtfully, his entire aura shifting.

"Tried what yet?" She asked, anticipation setting her tail to thrashing and smoke to billowing from her wings.

"You said it yourself. I gave pieces of myself to make the strongest of my children – shards that have evolved into splendid beings of their own will. And one of them chose to be a Dragon." The word dragon echoed through Sehuyun's bones as Statera cracked his knuckles, the energy within him as still as a pond. His green eyes flashed dangerously, and Sehuyun's breath caught in her throat, glee filling her once again. "Who do you think he got that from?"

Statera's body began to grow. His aura shifted, purple lightning cracking through the air as he elongated, purple robes transforming into purple scales. His sinuous body thrashed, horns as black as the night glittering against the light of his lightning. His teeth bared in a feral snarl, whiskers twitching and green eyes burning with protective rage. But he was incomplete. Golden light sparked from within his chest, symbolizing the injury he had sustained.

A dragon, without its breath. Statera did nothing to hide that fact, proclaiming that even as he was now, it was enough.

Sehuyun shuddered in joy.

“I am Statera Luotian. I am the Heavens. Now you know their height.”

Thunder boomed.

Fire roared.

And with a bellow of pure emotion, two more Dragons clashed.

2.22 I Am the Heavens

When two gods of equal power fought, it was a battle of philosophy. The one with the greatest understanding of their own self, their enemy, and the universe around them typically won. In the Four Realms, such a thing could be considered a matter of pitting one’s Dao above another’s. I had seen it many times, and understood the mechanics of such a fight to a fine degree.

A fight between dragons was different. Dragons were pure in intent and purpose. There was nothing to argue or doubt, just a war to be waged. In such a situation, at our power level, it became a matter of Will.

The very Primordial Chaos itself cracked with our every clash, claws sparking against each other, scales shattering beneath mighty blows. Elements pooled beneath Sehuyun's wings, rocketing toward me with twenty times the might she had used against Alexander – I surged upwards, above the maelstrom of power, each flick of my long tail churning up a rising tidal wave of elemental energy that came crashing down upon Sehuyun.

She did not dodge, laughing as water and ice thundered against her, digging in her claws as he held herself against the tide, unfazed by the power – I clicked my tongue in annoyance, an odd sound in my draconic form, eyes narrowing.

I felt powerful like this. Strength surged through my limbs, power crackled beneath my scales, erupting from my sinuous body in bolts of screaming lightning. The Primeval Dragon roared her laughter as she charged, aura meeting mine before our claws ever touched. Through it, I could feel her argument. The root of her will.

REPEL. FIGHT. It was simple. I was an invader. I was in her territory where she was supreme. I was a rival. And she would show her dominance.

My argument was simple as well.

MY SON. REJECT. I DO NOT BOW. Our clashes were brief, but explosive. Reality bent when claw met scale, only to be fused back together from the heat of Sehuyun's flames. Our roars trembled the realm, and for the first time in a long time I was allowed to truly let loose, no fear of harming reality holding me back as I charged forth, tail thrashing, space and time shattering before my might. The Primeval Dragon's laughter was met by my own as we clashed once again, an explosion of primordial chaos sparking through our clash.

We were sent flying away from each other, my very bones rattling from the force of the explosion. I righted myself and snarled, finding Sehuyun as she, too, dug her claws into the fabric of her own reality to arrest her momentum. She was powerful. More powerful than I, for certain, though the distance between us was not insurmountable, even with my injury.

Yet I was not just fighting her. The entirety of the Dragon's Domain fought against me. Every inch was an inch I had to fight through, pushing my aura and will outward to combat that which pressed down upon me from every direction. My eyes narrowed, a growl rumbling out through my chest, white and black light spilling from me. The Will of the Dragon's Domain was fighting against me, recognizing me as a foreign threat.

"You are a million years too early to be challenging me," I growled to it, pressing my aura outward. How dare this mere will try to hold me back? I am the very heavens themselves, I am the [HEAV - and I was stopped. Never had I been so easily shut down before, my intent pushed back into my body and suppressed with hardly a blink.

"No trying to subvert another Origin's control, Statera. Even if accidentally." Mr. Boxes chided, voice echoing in my ears. Sehuyun growled, eyes fixated on what I assumed to be the boxes.

"Do not interfere." She demanded.

"Then learn to control your Will better. It's attacking Statera because you are." Boxes said. Sehuyun blinked, then scowled, wings flaring as her power shot through the entirety of her realm, a roar echoing through all of creation. And the will of her realm was cowed, pressed into subservience through sheer might. I bared my teeth.

Savage. Brutal. I -

I coughed up blood, the golden liquid seeping from between my jagged teeth. My form flickered, purple lighting crackling even as my transformation began to fail.

“Seems this form is a bit too much to maintain right now,” I grumbled, swallowing my blood, pain lancing through my chest where my lungs should be. “A dragon without lungs...my injury is more severe than I realized.” That would not stand for any longer.

“No!” Sehuyun shouted, wings flaring and teeth bared, even as my body began to shrink, returning to my Fae form. “Not yet! This cannot be all you have!” I let out a breath, more a sigh of relief as I fell back into my more familiar body, my power relaxing as the strain of holding that form was lessened. My soul ached, having forcibly maintained that form longer than I should have with the injuries it had sustained. With a sigh I reached up to run a hand through my hair with an arm that wasn’t there – I frowned, and glared at the stump. “Bah! Useless! Worthless!” Sehuyun continued to rage. Only, I wasn’t done. Rage still bubbled within me, urging me to clash once again.

I was part dragon. I recognized that now – to be a dragon meant a certain quality of soul. But that wasn’t all I was.

“Have you ever heard the saying ‘dragon amongst men?’” I idly mused, clenching and unclenching my one good fist. Sehuyun stilled in her tantrum, fixating me with a disappointed glare. I knew how gods fought gods. I knew how dragons fought dragons. Now, how did a god fight a dragon?

...no. How did *I* fight a dragon?

Sehuyun lashed out, in her anger. Fire roared towards me in a stream of all-consuming heat, boiling the primordial chaos itself. It was far stronger than it ever had been while fighting Alexander – she’d been holding back, to enjoy the fight more. Even while fighting my dragon form, she had been holding back due to my injury. Now she was annoyed and no longer playing games. I could see it in her head, the disappointment, the annoyance. And Mr. Boxes would do nothing to stop the fire from burning me to a crisp.

I smiled, in the split seconds before it struck.

The fire was too much of one thing. Destruction. It was too...unbalanced. The moment the heat touched me the scales were tipped, cooling down the flames to a more pleasant heat that mended and destroyed the primordial chaos in equal measure. Black and white swirled beneath my feet as I stood in the middle of the fiery maelstrom, untouched and unharmed.

I closed my eyes. [Silence.] That had been my first word. Why that...? No – I didn't have the time to delve into the philosophy. Instead I let the word fill me, quieting my surroundings so I could only hear my soul. What was the other word I had almost said, before Mr. Boxes interrupted me? No – I couldn't use that either. It felt cheap. I was more than Mr. Boxes understanding of the Heavens. Not greater. But different. I would not debase myself by using Mr. Boxes understanding as a crutch.

Like Xing Wu was to me, I was to Mr. Boxes.

“I am the heavens.” Golden light exploded from me, expelling the dragon’s breath as I stepped forward. Bronze armor fell over my chest, a helmet appearing atop my head. A spear of bronze light found itself grasped in my hand, a shield of brilliant purple hovering where my left arm should have been. The Dragon’s Domain split as my very being expanded, calling upon echoes of my past to power this symbol.

It flickered and shook, the situation not quite right, but close enough that I could at least manifest it, nascent though the technique was.

Sehuyun roared, hurling herself forward with manic glee, eyes gleaming as my own battle-intent rocketed skyward. I hurled my spear, the golden light slamming into her shoulder and cracking scales, her blood pouring from the wound.

Her claws swiped and I blocked with the shield and was sent skidding backward from the force. I raised my head, white and black sparking into existence to form a bridge between myself and Sehuyun. She growled, claws digging into the planks, confusion on her face.

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And my body grew, rising in height and size to match her form – so we were not fighting as an ant versus an elephant, but two titans. This, at least, was easier to maintain than the dragon.

I roared out a laugh, ripping a short sword from where it appeared at my side to clash with Sehuyun once more. The blade bit into her scales and flesh, drawing blood, and she tore into my side with her claws, wings battering at my helmeted head. Our wounds mended themselves in seconds, only to be torn open again moments later by our continued battle.

“A mere god fighting a dragon?!” Sehuyun laughed as I forced her back with a shove from my shield, wings flared. She tried once to lift off, to attack me from the skies, but the magic of my summoned bridge kept her in place, forcing her feet to the ground. I would keep the bridge now, as I had in the past. “How dare a mere god try to keep a dragon from their very own skies!”

“I am no mere god! I am the heavens – there is no sky above my own!” I roared back, laughing in equal measure. The joy of battle set my heart to thundering in my chest, the roar of my blood in my veins echoed in the bellow from my chest.

“I am an existence to defy the heavens!” Her declaration was punctuated by a charge – her claws shattered against my armor, and my sword broke against her horns.

“I do not care for your obedience!” I punched her in the face, a tooth breaking off in her maw as she tore my shield from my control, the construct fading away.

“I AM A DRAGON! I DARE YOU TO CHALLENGE ME!”

“I AM THE HEAVENS! I DARE YOUR FANGS TO REACH MY HEIGHTS!”

Armor was shredded, scales were shattered, and blood was spilt as we raged against each other, laughter echoing through the Dragon’s Domain. Our very souls were laid bare, philosophies and wills battering against the other just as our flesh did.

And neither was found wanting.

Reilly fully expected to find the meeting room absolutely trashed when they got back from Sylphina’s Chaos Universe. Or at least, barring that, to find Statera and the Dragon in timeout because the Overgod got annoyed at their antics. As such, he was wholly unprepared to be met with uproarious laughter the moment he stepped through Sylphina’s portal and into the meeting room.

Statera, calm, cool, wise, all-seeing Statera Luotian was laughing like a drunk soldier in a tavern. He was dressed in a light purple toga draped loosely about his tall, muscular body – the god now easily rose ten feet tall, even sitting down as he was – his one good arm draped leisurely over the Dragon’s neck. His other hand, this one a prosthetic made of golden energy, gripped a steel tankard of beer, the foamy liquid sloshing as he wheezed out his joy. The Dragon herself had a barrel of wine gripped in her claws as she, too, died of laughter at some joke Reilly had missed.

Both looked like they’d been put through the wringer. Statera had a black eye, bruises slowly fading as his body sought to mend itself. The Dragon had a few cracked scales and some swelling in her face, though nothing too serious either.

The sight was so odd, and so at odds with the glares he'd seen the two shooting each other prior to leaving for Sylphina's realm, that he almost missed the fact that MR-10 was still there, as well as the great white dragon on the Primeval Dragon's other side, nursing a small barrel of his own liquor.

His energy was clearly similar to Statera's own, marking him as one of the god's "children," and he looked relatively hale and hearty compared to the other two. Most importantly, however, was that he was well and truly stronger than pretty much any other resident of a universe that he'd met so far, save for the origin deities themselves.

Just how many powerful beings did Statera have in his universe?! This already made three who would match his own strongest subordinate!

"Oh hey! Welcome back!" Statera cried, raising his tankard to the newly arrived group with a dopey grin. "How was the trip?"

"I...am at a loss for words," the Emperor admitted as he appeared, crossing his arms across his chest. "I thought Statera was one of the rational ones."

"Hey, Reilly. Didn't you say they'd be at each other's throats when we got back? Maybe, a trashed room? In timeout? And didn't we make a bet on it? I believe it's time to pay up." Yueya taunted. Reilly didn't have to look at her to know she was smirking, the tone of her voice said it all. He was too baffled by the situation before him to be annoyed at her, even, and quietly handed Yueya the promised wager - a particularly potent gin he'd been saving for a special occasion, made of bad luck and bad decisions - while Statera muttered something low enough that only the Dragon could hear.

The two devolved into another round of laughter, the white-scaled dragon shaking his great head.

“Apologies for these two. I have never seen Father like this before.” The white dragon admitted, rainbow eyes meeting each of the origin deity’s own in turn without flinching. It spoke volumes of his composure. “It is shameful to admit, but I was unable to keep up with their battle and am thus unsure what made them like this.”

“Oh come now, Alexander, you were great! Yeah, you were knocked out for a bit, but you tangled with an origin god! No more sulking from you.” Statera chided, not unkindly, as he craned his neck to look over the Primeval Dragon at the now-identified Alexander.

“Indeed. He’s a fine dragon! In another few eons he’ll be worthy of being a true challenger! He’ll be even better than you.” The Primeval Dragon growled out, pulling away from Statera’s arm to smile a toothy, almost menacing smile at Alexander. Said dragon huffed, and avoided her gaze.

“Well that’s fine. I might make a decent dragon, but even more than that, I am the heavens themselves!”

“And I defy the heavens.” The Dragon laughed, earning another roar of laughter from Statera, even as he tossed back the tankard to take another long draught.

“What, exactly, happened here?” Reilly asked, throwing his hands into the air helplessly.

“Statera did something completely unexpected. She befriended the Dragon.” Yueya said smugly. “Even if I didn’t expect that, I knew it wouldn’t be what you said.”

“They had a fight.” MR-10 piped up, light flashing. “The pent-up aggression both were feeling was worked out in the process, and I believe the battle made them respect each other. The Dragon seems to have taken a liking to Alexander as well. Hence, their attitudes now. I recorded the entire thing; I suspect there is something deeper than a mere battle involved with how our powers may evolve.”

“I want to see it!” Yueya said. Reilly nodded his head in agreement, stepping eagerly toward the inverted pyramid.

“For a price.” MR-10 beeped once. Reilly narrowed his eyes at it, glancing over at where Statera was still drinking gaily from his tankard, then back at the machine. “A diagram of your systemized Luck will be a sufficient price for you, Reilly.” It said. He scowled and crossed his arms, tapping his fingers against his arm.

“...damn it, fine. I want to know what the hells happened,” he snapped, clasping his hands together to focus his power and create the diagram for MR-10. The other origin gods were told their own prices, and most hesitantly agreed to the terms. MR-10 seemed to have figured out the line not to cross when asking for a price, and Reilly could honestly respect the hustle. Besides, the prize was too enticing.

Sylphina’s universe had been fascinating. The Chaos Butterfly and its butterfly effect made Reilly want to implement a few of its chaotic features into his own universe immediately; the way a single step could ripple through all of reality, creating massive changes far down the line was both terrifying and thrilling.

But this? A battle between origin deities? Well, that was a whole other side to the coin. Just how many chances would he get to see something like this?

2.23 Welcome to the Cosmic Planes

Rising Wind, Crashing Waves listened to Nyxteria whine, half annoyed and half amused at its pouting.

“Nyxteria is upset that Alexander did not give Nyxteria a scale. Is Nyxteria that untrustworthy?” the great bird asked, clacking its beak and blinking its starry eyes in a way he was sure it thought was meant to be pitiful. Rising Wind felt no pity for the bird. Having a hobby was one thing, asking foreign beings for body parts to be preserved in Timeless Crystal was quite another.

“You shouldn’t ask such a stupid question in the first place.” The Primeval Dragon growled, narrowing her eyes at the bird. Nyxteria clacked its beak once, seeming uncomprehending of the Dragon’s meaning. Rising Wind sighed and turned his head to Statera, who was currently swapping out her dragon-child for another one altogether – hence the reason for Nyxteria’s small tantrum.

A few of the other gods had taken the opportunity to swap out their own plus-ones, Reilly putting his one away and going it alone, but they were mostly expected changes. MR-10 produced another drone. Sylphina swapped her rose out for another butterfly. Yueya kept her plus one the same. But Rising Wind was most interested in who Statera was going to choose for his realm.

After all, from what he’d been able to glean from his conversations with the Progenitor, it was most likely rare for a universe as young as theirs to have so many impressive souls within.

“But Nyxteria –“

“You’ll have another chance to meet him when you come to my realm. If you do.” Statera said, pulling away from her portal. Beside her emerged a dark-skinned, black-robed young man with bat-like wings and a thick, leathery tail. His eyes had bags under them, and Rising Wind felt the all-too-familiar aura of karma radiating from him. It was young and underdeveloped, but still Karma. What an impressive domain. “Keilan, meet everyone. Everyone, meet Keilan.” She introduced. The young man bowed his head slightly, folding his hands into the sleeves of his robes.

Once or twice he shot a quick glance at Statera, still in her muscular, toga-clad form as she was. Even if she was feminine now, Keilan seemed at a loss for words looking at his creator – though that might have in part been due to the presence of so many origin deities keeping him silent. Rising Wind did not, and felt no need to, read his mind to find out the truth.

Statera and his eyes met as he rose to his feet. Hers still sparkled with mischief as she hugged her ‘son,’ the young man stiffly returning the gesture before pulling away, smoothing out his robes. Clearly she was feeling much better about herself, but it did beg a question about her choice of plus one.

Bringing a god of karma into the god of wisdom’s domain? What could Keilan possibly require from such a meeting? *And how can I benefit from it?*

“Are we ready, then?” Rising Wind said more than asked. A chorus of agreements rippled out through those present – fewer than he had expected were going to join them, but he supposed that was alright. Many of the origin deities present felt the need to digest what they were learning, and his was not for everyone.

That left only Statera, Shin, Yueya, Sylphina and Nyxteria to enter his Realm. A solid group. And, truthfully, guiding many more sounded like a hassle to deal with. He preferred small groups, to give time for more and deeper questions to be asked.

With a quick stomp of his hooves his portal opened, Arche, his centaur plus one, leading the way into his Realm. The other gods filtered through first, Shin speaking to Statera in hushed tones as they passed him by.

As soon as Statera entered the portal, the Dragon stirred. She lifted her great head with a rumbling growl, gaze fixated upon MR-10. The inverted pyramid flashed its lights twice in what Rising Wind read as sudden panic, and calculated calm. *It's playing to the Dragon's emotions.*

"Now that the other dragons are gone, little robot, it is time you pay up for trespassing upon my domain." The Dragon growled. MR-10 beeped, but the Dragon interrupted with a sinister chuckle. "Oh, I am sure you are going to share part of whatever treasure you got from the foolish gods. But first, you are going to pay for your transgression." She snarled. Rising Wind considered watching what was about to happen for all of half a second. Then, with a shake of his head, he followed the last of the visiting origin deities into his Realm.

MR-10 would pay his due, and it was not wise to get involved. Now it was time to start a tour.

Keilan was not entirely sure what he was looking at, if he was being honest. He knew intellectually that there were other universes besides the Four Realms, but knowing and seeing were two entirely different things. This world, this Realm, was laid out...differently, even if bits and pieces were similar.

There was a protective shell of Primordial Chaos surrounding the Realm, for example, and he could feel the chaotic churning of the Abyss, where Chaos met Void, even from his current position above the central realm itself. He could also sense the flow of karma, though it somehow had a different flavor than what he was used to. But that was about it for similarities.

For one, the Realm itself was larger than the Four Realms. If he stretched his divine sense to the very limit he could encompass the entire universe, but it took all his concentration to do so – unlike the Four Realms, which he could cover completely with his divine senses without too much trouble. It was also structurally different.

Roots grew outward from a central bramble at the very center of the realm, twisting and turning into five distinct lines that grew outward like grasping limbs. Between the five central roots was contained pure, concentrated essences. One realm contained holy energy, pure and timeless, while

another held an aura of evil and hatred. Another could only be described as elemental chaos, all different kinds of elements swirling and mixing together in a mass of constant change. The fourth realm held life within it while still feeling timeless, while the fifth was one of death, and stagnant. Each of them were bound together by the roots, yet simultaneously held separate. The entire realm was surrounded by two opposing forces that kept it all from flying away from the roots, as well; one positive, one negative, like a magnet.

It was in the positive realm that he and the others had appeared, standing over the central root ball and looking down on the oddly-shaped universe.

“Welcome to my Realm. The Cosmic Planes. It is one of the rarer variants of universes, I have been told, due to it combining two different universal structures. The Outer Planes and the Cosmic Tree. Feel free to explore as you wish. I will guide you all as necessary, but will not presume to know everything you might wish to see, especially in our limited time here. My incarnations can accompany you to answer your questions.” The great stag, whom Mother had identified as Rising Wind, Crashing Waves, said, stepping forth from the portal to gaze down upon its creations.

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Keilan looked at it, glanced at Mother – her transformation was more than just physical, he could see the karmic strings that bound her becoming clearer and less tangled, which confused him as to why the change? – then looked back at the Realms themselves. Through it all, one thing in particular caught his attention. There was a force out there, encompassing the entire universe, that set his divine power to shaking, wishing to reach out and touch it.

What was this strange...connection, he felt to this force? To his eyes it looked like little wisps of white smoke, drifting up from the inhabitants of the Cosmic Planes up to both Rising Wind, Crashing Waves and his godly companion, the centaur Arche.

Keilan frowned and reached out to touch one of those strands, the mist dancing between his fingers as it flowed to the two deities.

It felt...godly, in nature. Not as in it was holy, but in that it was *of the gods*. Keilan hesitated for just a moment, his desire to chase these threads rising rapidly, and looked back at Mother once again. She was riveted to conversation with the true body of Rising Wind, Crashing Waves, the great stag patiently explaining something to the strange butterfly that had asked a question. Sensing his gaze, however, She turned Her attention to him for but a moment, flashing him an encouraging smile before returning to Her conversation.

He hesitated for only a moment, looking down at the rising mist, then did something he considered sensible. He turned to the nearest incarnation of Rising Wind, Crashing Waves, who was talking with this godly companion, Arche, and approached him.

“Lord Rising Wind, Crashing Waves,” he said, bowing to the great stag.

“Don’t stroke his ego by calling him Lord, I beg of you,” Arche said, the centaur stomping his hooves and plucking the string of a relatively impressive bow. It was made of some kind of horn, and from the divine aura it radiated, Keilan was doubtful that he would be able to pull it back. Not that it should have been surprising, he was not a physical brute like his sister.

“Plenty of people call me Lord or God, Arche. I hardly believe another will inflate my ego.” Rising Wind, Crashing Waves turned his attention to Keilan, blinking his eyes. White mist swirled about the great stag, sinking into his flesh and soul – as far as Keilan could tell at least, as he was not Mother and could not see everything – seeming to...enhance his might by a great degree. His divine aura was bolder. Stronger. More pronounced. Arche was similar in that regard, though the white mist was less concentrated about him. “Now, Keilan, correct? I must insist that you call me Rising Wind, or even Crashing Waves. I am not a Lord to you.”

“Then Rising Wind,” Keilan adjusted, bowing formally. “I would ask your permission to roam your Realm. I will not interfere with your designs, I merely wish to observe. On this I swear.” His words bound him, strings of karma reaching out hesitantly to touch Rising Wind, asking for permission to bind Keilan to this temporary oath. A brief silence met his request, though Keilan did not dare to raise his head until Rising Wind accepted the karmic strings.

“So there are some polite ones.” Rising Wind mused, moving to loom over Keilan. “You are free to roam as you please, but would it not be more prudent to simply ask the one who knows the answer to your question, since he is here? Observing and figuring it out on your own is admirable, but stubbornness will do you no favors when such resources are available to you.” Keilan raised his head as he considered the question, his wings pulling tight against his back and tail curling about his leg. Slowly he folded his hands into the sleeves of his robes, and met Rising Wind’s eyes.

It was...hard, to read his emotions from his expression alone.

“What is the white mist about you?” he asked finally.

“Prayers.” Arche answered for Rising Wind, rolling his eyes. “For one descended of Statera, you are not as observant, are you?”

“Arche,” Rising Wind snapped, glaring at the centaur. Keilan merely raised an eyebrow at the god of the hunt, not taking the bait.

“Prayers and worship alone do not do what I am seeing. This is divine in nature, and nourishes both you and Rising Wind. I can see that it comes from some sort of prayer, but the specifics are lost on me.” Keilan clarified. It seemed to function differently from prayer and worship in the Four Realms – at home, he too grew in power from those worshiping him. It was mere drops of water in a vast ocean compared to what he could do on his own, however, and not nearly as intense as what was happening here.

Rising Wind and Arche were not just slowly absorbing the energy about them, but actively being strengthened by that which they could not absorb, floating about them like an extension of their very being.

“Good. Excellent observation. And both of you are correct. The gods in my Realm do gain power based on the worship of their followers. As I am the creator god, much of what I gain from them is also taken from worship towards other gods. Excess flows to me. But it is not just prayer, as you have noticed.” Rising Wind paused. “What is Karma, to you?”

“I’m sorry?” Keilan asked, startled by the sudden change in topic. This power, this force, didn’t feel like karma to him, though?

“Allow me to elaborate. Am I wrong in saying that karma, at its most basic level, is a connection? You do something to someone or something and thereby forge or break a connection with it – whether the nature of this is negative or positive is circumstantial.”

“That sounds correct,” Keilan said, nodding. He had never quite thought of it in those terms, but that was more accurate than many other metaphors and such he’d thought up. Maybe if he explained it to Randus that way, the younger god would finally begin to understand the workings of Karma.

“This is much the same. We are connected to our creations, and the power that bolsters us is granted not through a thread of *karma*, but of *belief*. The power of belief is a real thing, and that, combined with mental energy, allows us to freely grow in strength and be bolstered by those who worship us – so long as they continually do so.” Rising Wind stomped his hoof once, pawing into the air beneath his feet. The white mist moved alongside him, cleaving a great hole in the fabric of reality far bigger than his simple motion would have implied, that quickly mended itself, powered by the same white mist. Keilan interlaced his fingers, mind racing as he observed the simplicity of it all. “Unfortunately, this means our natures can be influenced by this power. Such is why Arche tries to hunt me. This is only true, however, if you are not powerful enough or are uncertain of who you are. I, for example, remain largely untouched by the more unsavory aspects of this process.”

“I am not influenced by my worshippers.” Arche protested. Rising Wind did not dignify this with a response, instead simply watching Keilan.

“I believe you had an inkling about this already, did you not?” Rising Wind sounded satisfied as he said this and Keilan nodded slowly, turning his attention back to the greater Cosmic Planes in search of a being he had noticed but not paid much heed to. His Karmic Realm was tied to mental energy and psychic power as much as it was tied to the notion of karma; and especially since he’d started really paying attention to it had he noticed that it was not as...inflexible as he had believed.

Now where was...there!

A young god. A nascent soul. Floating above the realm of death, absorbing power from all across the Cosmic Planes. It was a god, but unlike any he had ever seen – its entire existence was created and sustained by the power of belief in death. Its entire soul seemed formed of the greater collective imaginations of what death is like; and therefore appeared as a swirling mass of blackness and rotted flesh. Keilan shuddered. He could not imagine what an existence like that would be like.

“Thank you.” Keilan said, bowing once again to the stag god. “You have given me much to think about and observe. It truly is a fascinating realm you have made.” The god snorted, nostrils flaring as he held his head up pridefully.

“It is, is it not? Now go. Explore. And be free of your mother’s influence for a while; if need be, I will run interference for you.” He said. Keilan cracked a rare smile at his words, taking them as a joke even as he floated down to the Realm below.

He would start with the gods born of belief.

They scared and fascinated him in equal measure.

Rising Wind, Crashing Waves watched Keilan go, satisfied with his work.

“Why did you help him?” Arche asked, and he shook his head at his oldest friend.

“Never underestimate the value of sowing good karma. Especially when it costs me nothing.” He told him. Arche let the matter drop, plucking at his bowstring silently. And Rising Wind, Crashing Waves allowed this incarnation of his to simply rest and watch the turning of his universe.

And he wondered how much further his roots would grow, before the tree began to bloom.

2.24 For This, I Am Thankful

Rising Wind, Crashing Wave’s power was fueled by faith. He called it the power of belief, but I preferred faith; it just had a nicer ring to it, in my opinion. That said, I was wholly disappointed that I had failed to notice the potential of such power. I’d noticed it once, back when I had first created the Fae, and promptly discarded the thought of using it for more than it first appeared.

More importantly the use of faith as a power source also explained why Rising Wind had such a dramatic leap in power in the personal power rankings from basic, to including boosts from one’s universe. Outside his universe, he was ninth most powerful. Inside, he jumped all the way to fourth; and I wouldn’t consider him that much weaker than the Primeval Dragon.

Even if she had been holding back while fighting me, comparing Rising Wind now to what I had seen of her...

Well, there was still a part of me that would like to fight him, but a bigger part of me that reasoned Rising Wind wasn't that type. There would be no fighting for enjoyment with him.

"The obvious answer to your growth is growing the tree," Yueya explained, rubbing her chin as she stared down at the Cosmic Planes. "But I think there's a different answer you can reach, as well. The roots separating the planes, why not encourage them to grow as well? There are more concepts than what you've gathered here, are there not? Link them together, encourage the separation of Realms and let the roots grow deep and wide."

"Indeed. Your roots are your primary feature. Let them be the focus; I, personally, cannot envision your universe growing into a Tree-like structure. Perhaps something more like a bush." Shin mused, linking his boney fingers together as he peered down at the central structures. I rubbed my chin, envisioning what they were saying.

"I agree with them both, truthfully. The central bramble – see in the center there, where a few minor worlds have come into being?" I asked, pointing to the little ball of roots that formed the center of the universe. It looked to me like it was trying to grow upward, but couldn't yet. More importantly, however, was the fact that what I would consider to be the mortal worlds were starting to blossom and bloom in the safety of the tangled mass of central roots. There, they were protected from the worst of the raw essences of the more concentrated conceptual realms, while still allowing small streams to influence them.

It was a beautiful balance. There was not enough concentrated energy to really make a difference to the mortal realm, while just enough to cause fundamental changes to the few minor worlds that grew there, circling their own little suns.

"Of course I see them," Rising Wind deadpanned. I flushed a little. Right. Stupid question to ask.

“Right. Of course. Well, my point was that when you allow the roots to grow outward and the bush to grow upward, those worlds will expand. More will be born. It would be good to encourage this, because the majority of your faith power comes from there.” I reasoned. Rising Wind cocked an eyebrow at me.

“How so? The other Realms and the mortal souls within produce ninety percent of the power you talk about.”

“Quality over quantity. Those few worlds may only produce ten percent of the faith-power you wield, but how much bigger are the other Realms compared to them? Once they are allowed to fully bloom, and so long as they remain properly protected, of course, they will begin producing far, far more energy.” I said. The mortal races in Rising Wind’s universe were more varied than even my own – yet the mortal realms still produced the most faith for him to utilize. Rising Wind stared at me for a moment, then lowered his head and sighed heavily.

“I cannot believe that I did not put two and two together there. This must be a case of being too close to the problem, so I cannot see the solution. You are correct, of course. It is a relatively new development, those worlds in the center, and while I had been paying attention to them, I clearly had not been paying as much attention as I should have.” Rising Wind said. “Yueya and Shin are correct as well. These are very good suggestions and notes, and I thank you for all of them. But I do have one more question for you all before we continue my lecture.” At this the great stag looked directly into my eyes, his antlers gleaming with power. “What is the danger here? That which Statera advised Shin and the others about.” All eyes turned to me at this, though I did my utmost to keep my attention upon him alone.

I could not help but feel their gazes, regardless.

I bit my lip, watching Rising Wind closely, resisting the urge to wring my hands as I analyzed what I knew about him and his Realm. Even an action as seemingly innocuous as wringing my hands could prove detrimental here; signs of nervousness were not permitted. And, very slowly, I told him the truth.

"I do not believe it wise to give you that answer." I told him, voice as even as I could possibly make it, aura still. And the wording of my next statement had to be precise. "I have faith you will find the answer in your own time." Rising Wind held my gaze for a tense moment, nothing seeming to happen to my eyes.

Then – there!

A little shift in the current of his faith-energy. A strengthening of resolve that was so slight it was almost imperceptible. Almost like a puzzle piece had been only slightly popped out, and now, with a gentle application of pressure, things were back in alignment. Solving Rising Wind's crisis was not going to be so easy, and even my sight couldn't see through the whole truth of what it was going to be, but at the very least something had changed.

This was the limit of what I could do. Rising Wind, Crashing waves was a god of *wisdom*. Unlike the others, he had to see most of this through himself, without me giving direct advice. If he saw things and came to his own conclusion was one thing, but direct advice? No. There were sages and gurus who could take the teachings of others and reword them, take that advice and reach enlightenment, then pass it on to others reworded and reworked. Rising Wind was not that kind of guru.

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He was the rising wind. He was the crashing of waves. He was older than the skies themselves, a fundamental force that was greater than anything a mortal could imagine. He had to be that way. He was the trailblazer and the guide – and, by the nature of his universe, he had to be that way lest he, and those who followed him, became lost.

"I see." Rising Wind said, nodding his head. "Thank you for your advice. I will take it into consideration." With that, he turned away, back to one of the other gods that inhabited his Realm. It did not see us as it floated over the realm of life, watching a happy marriage between two young lovers. Its form was indistinct, clouded by the faith energy Rising Wind so easily manipulated, yet

was obviously a being of light and joy. "...see this god here? It was born of kindness and love between two people. Lovers. It watched over and guided them to a happy end, and in turn, began to be worshipped by more and more people as a being who blesses happy marriages..."

I listened for a long while to Rising Wind's explanation, Shin standing beside me with his boney fingers linked together. Yueya linked her arm in mine, giving me a quick smile as she turned back to Rising Wind's explanation.

"It is kind, what you do," Shin said finally. "Helping others with issues we do not ourselves notice."

"I am merely..." I stopped myself from whatever nonsense I was about to say. There was nothing *merely* about what I was doing, pointing out Shadows to the other Origin Deities. Mr. Boxes himself had told me that the Shadow was something every god had to overcome at some point; he'd even implied that it was an open secret. Was what I was doing here right? Wrong? I don't think it mattered.

I was doing it because that was who I was. And I was receiving help from them, in more ways than they knew, simply by being allowed to see their realms and selves.

"You are being kind." Yueya finished for me. "It is adorable, the way you dote on your children, and show concern for all us other gods. We are not powerless, but it does feel nice to be the ones being doted on for a change. We are usually too busy being the ones controlling things after, all."

I flushed while Shin nodded, clacking his jaw together in what I took as a chuckle.

"I don't mean to..." I said slowly.

“She meant it as a compliment, Statera. Take it for the spirit in which it was given, not the words in which it was said.” Shin said simply. My embarrassment deepened and Yueya laughed, shaking her head at me.

“That’s more the Statera I’m used to. Don’t get me wrong, the warrior is wonderful, but there is great charm to this version of you as well.” She teased. This sobered me up and both Yueya and Shin noticed it if the way they fell silent, staring out over the Cosmic Planes was any indication. Yueya was right. This was a *version* of me. Just as the Warrior was. Just as the Dragon was. Just as the Emperor was, and the Mother was. How many other versions...

I cut that thought off, relaxing slightly. I knew who I was. Asking myself a silly question like that was nothing but doubting what I already knew.

However, there was one of my children who didn’t know who *they*

were. My first children may be confused right now and in need of perspective, but there was one who needed to find out who they *were*. And their time was coming soon.

“Come,” I said, pulling Yueya forward, Shin falling in step beside me as Rising Wind began to move away, taking as much time as he could to continue his tour. “We don’t have much time left, and I am quite enjoying our time here.”

The tension in the meeting room was palpable, the moment we emerged from the Cosmic Planes, as a result of some carnage. A hundred of MR-10’s drones lay in a smoking heap piled in the corner of the room. MR-10 itself floated above its little stand, not even rotating as it floated silently in place. The Dragon, in turn, was napping happily upon a similar pile of drones, the metal digging into her scales uselessly, their smoke curling about her massive form.

The other gods were sitting in their spots, either chatting in hushed tones or meditating, uncaring of the apparent destruction. Only Reilly looked up as we entered, taking a deep draught of the gourd he held as he met my eyes.

“Yo,” he greeted, raising one hand.

“I expected worse, if I am to be honest. The Dragon does not strike me as a being of moderation.” Rising Wind, Crashing Waves admitted as he stepped through the portal, accompanied by a new god. This was one of the ones made completely of thought and faith; and this, I assumed, was an experiment to see if said god could find a way to sustain itself outside of said power.

“Yes, well, I would say the Dragon made out better than MR-10 with the price she extracted from him. I have a thing or two to learn about negotiations compared to her.” The Emperor deadpanned.

“A Dragon takes what is theirs.” Sehuyun grunted, not bothering to lift her head. I just shook my head at the dragon, placing a hand on Keilan’s shoulder as he came to stand beside me.

For once, he did not pull away. The others began their conversations, MR-10 quietly inquiring as to the nature of Rising Wind’s universe, while I walked my son to the portal and home. He stopped me just before the portal, looking up to meet my eyes.

“I approve of what you are doing with your karma,” he said, and I beamed at him. “Thank you for giving us the opportunity to grow, as you have, as you always have. I know what you need to do next – who you need to bring next. You do too. Don’t worry, I’ve been keeping an eye on Morgan. We’ve even had a few talks since you’ve been gone. Morgan’s not as...volatile as you fear.”

“Thank you, Keilan.” I said, laying my other hand atop his head to ruffle his hair, as I had when he was little. This time he did pull away, scowling, though it held no actual heat or anger. I chuckled.

“You have always been the most thoughtful of my children, even if you do not show it in the most overt of ways. For this, I am truly thankful.”

Keilan blushed at my praise, his shoulders relaxing and wings spreading slightly. “Well then. This had been an enlightening experience, Mother, but I must return. The Karmic Realm calls...as do my own meditations.” And with that, my son disappeared back into my portal and the Four Realms. I let out a breath, and glanced over my shoulder at the others.

They all were bickering with each other good-naturedly, even Sehuyun. She traded barbs with Sylphina, having calmed down significantly after our bout, the chaos butterfly matching her tit-for-tat.

“Which universe are we going to next?” I called over my shoulder, loud enough to be heard over the rising noise of conversation.

“Nyxteria’s!” Nyxteria crowed happily, claws doing little pitter-patters against the marble floors as it shifted from foot to foot, a pile of timeless crystal at its feet. As I watched it dropped another crystal in the pile - a sample of Rising Wind’s roots. “Nyxteria wants to show everyone Nyxteria’s nest!” I nodded to myself, firming my resolve. Nyxteria was the one I wanted Morgan to meet the most, even over the Dragon. And, just as importantly, I felt the others were ready to meet a fully developed Shadow, even if they didn’t know what that meant at the moment.

Taking a deep breath I thrust my hand into the portal before me, and waited for Mr. Boxes to rebuke me.

None came. I smiled.

“Morgan. It’s time to say hi.”

2.25 Welcome to Nyxteria's Nest!

Nyxteria clacked its beak in anticipation, waiting patiently as Statera stood before her portal, expression slowly souring. Despite her dramatic declaration of “Morgan, come say hi,” no one had yet emerged from the portal. Nyxteria hoped it would be a bird. That would be nice.

“Having trouble, there?” The Emperor asked, visibly amused as he tapped his fingers against the table. Nyxteria had once considered asking the golden-skinned god for a gem from his crown, but it had enough gems for the moment. Maybe when the time flowing through said gems was worth freezing, but for the moment they were still developing. Maybe in a few more million years – Nyxteria wasn’t sure why the Emperor didn’t just forcibly advance their development. They would be beautiful once they were finished growing.

“Sorry, this one’s the rebellious one.” Statera apologized, before sticking her entire head through the portal. What followed were the muffled sounds of conversation, Statera’s voice easy to make out, while the other was indistinct and indecipherable. “Yes, now come on. No...no! No, I am not giving you a choice. Quit sulking! We are going. I don’t care if you don’t like it, now come on!” With a small burst of power Statera pulled her head back through her portal, hair slightly disarrayed, tugging a grey-furred wolf with eight spider legs sprouting from its back through behind her.

“There is no reason why I should have to play at siblings with those other...fools...” the wolf trailed off as it finally noticed the other beings in the room were clearly not its siblings, eight red eyes narrowing, a frown tugging at the corners of its mouth. “What is this.” It deadpanned.

“This is a meeting between gods.” Reilly helpfully supplied, slurring his words slightly as the effects of all the alcohol he’d been drinking finally took its full toll. Nyxteria cocked its head to the side as it examined this...Morgan, watching it closely. “Is this one like Steward?”

“He’s my Steward,” Statera supplied, whatever that meant.

“I am no one’s steward.” Morgan growled.

“You’ve been hiding things from me, Statera. How could you keep such an interesting being hidden?” The Dragon rumbled, lifting herself off her pile of drones, slowly degrading as they were beneath the sheer power she radiated, to peer at Morgan curiously. Then, with a smoke-filled snort, she laid back down. “Not a god yet, which is good. Not a Dragon either though. Pity.” Morgan bared its teeth at the Dragon, and Statera rapped the wolf on the head with her knuckles, giving it an admonishing look.

“If you pick a fight with Sehuyun, I won’t protect you.” Nyxteria knew that was a lie, everyone in the room knew it was a lie, including Morgan if the way it cocked its head to the side was any indication. But clearly Statera had made her point, as the spider-wolf lowered its head and tail in a half-sulk, sneering at the assembled gods.

Sensing a chance, Nyxteria hopped forward, space distorting around it, time flowing in twenty directions so each little step, each flex of its wings, each cock of its head and clack of its beak was all but unnoticeable, leaving the very air around it undisturbed and untouched. Statera was one of the few who could see through the nuances of Nyxteria’s power, her attention immediately snapping to it as it hop-skipped over to the horned god and her wolf.

Morgan was not so lucky as to notice.

Nyxteria took its time examining Morgan, sensing the flow of time about each individual part of it, the space it took up, both in the metaphorical and physical sense. Its limbs were longer than they looked. Its jaw wider. Its power deeper, and still shaking, still looking for something to latch onto...the spidery limbs sprouting from Morgan’s back rustled slightly, even in the slowed down time Nyxteria was using to observe the wolf. Their carapace was black and shiny, scratches marring the surface...and the one it had its eye on felt older than the others, with more history behind it.

“Nyxteria wants a leg.” Nyxteria proudly announced, puffing up its chest feathers and startling Morgan, the wolf whirling with a snarl. “Will you give Nyxteria one of your legs? The spidery ones.”

“A leg?” Statera asked, raising an eyebrow. “That’s a bit gruesome, isn’t it? Morgan, don’t worry about the big bird.” Morgan kept its eyes narrowed at Nyxteria, glancing only once at Statera. All eight eyes blinked, its scowl turned into something more sinister, and with a flash of movement it twisted its head around, gripped the spider leg Nyxteria had been eyeing in its maw, and promptly ripped it out of its back. Black blood splattered everywhere, a few droplets landing on Statera’s face as she watched her child rip its own leg off without an inch of hesitation.

“Here.” It spat the leg at Nyxteria’s feet, black blood pouring out of the wound and down its side, matting its fur. It was an utter waste. That was perfectly good blood that could have been preserved!

“That is not what Nyxteria meant. Let Nyxteria fix that for you.” Nyxteria clacked its beak once, time twisting...but it couldn’t go about this the usual way, reverting the injury to its previous state. The presence of so many origin deities, fixtures in time and space, limited the amount Nyxteria could temporally manipulate things – but it could still duplicate a limb, and urge the wound to heal by accelerating time.

In the blink of an eye, the limb Morgan had torn off duplicated, a temporally exact replica of the limb appearing in the place it had been. Blood flowed backward, wanting to return to within Morgan’s body, the wound sealing shut as the replicated leg was placed back upon its bleeding stump and promptly fused back together. Morgan blinked its eight eyes uncomprehendingly, while Nyxteria examined its work with a satisfied nod.

“There, all fixed! Now,” one clawed foot reached down and grabbed the leg it had been given, sealing it in a chunk of timeless crystal. Another priceless artifact, to add to the collection! This one would go right beside MR-10’s drones. And Reilly’s dice. “Let’s go to Nyxteria’s ocean of stars!” With a happy skip Nyxteria led the way, the living sun that was its plus one, Sol, floating along

silently behind it. No one had noticed when Nyxteria had switched it out for another sun, not even Statera. Nor when it had switched it out three other times, and eventually came back to Sol.

Nyxteria was proud of that, but more importantly, it was proud of its collection. It couldn't wait to show everyone, and place its newest additions in the pile!

Stolen novel; please report.

Morgan was at a loss. The limb it had torn off was perfect in every way, exactly the same as the old limb had been down to the tiniest of molecular and energetic differences. Normal healing did not do that, it knew. Cells would be different, energies would twist in flavor due to time flowing through it...this limb was the *exact same in every way*. Even the phantom pain that should have been present from tearing off one's own limb was gone, the nerve endings soothed and calmed.

Morgan looked up at the Great One, eyes narrowed.

“What just happened?”

“That is Nyxteria, an origin deity like me. It is a god of Space and Time.” They said firmly, gaze drifting over the remade limb. Their hand twitched, looking as if They might reach out to touch Morgan’s no-longer existing wound...but the Great One did not, instead turning to the other so-called Origin Deities. Morgan, satisfied with the reaction it had gotten out of the Great One, let its gaze rove over the collected group.

They did not seem like much.

A machine. A bird. An overgrown lizard. An ostentatious fool clad in gold. A beggar.

The Great One was more than all of them. And yet, as they walked toward the portal the bird led them towards, through the blissfully silent room that reminded Morgan so much of the Void, of the time before the Four Realms, Morgan couldn't help but wiggle its new-old limb. A quick glance at the Great One showed them to be utterly at peace, slowly pulling karmic threads off of Their body or twining them together, expression serene and calm.

Morgan wiggled its leg again, and recalled what the Great One had once told it. *Time is my great limiter.* Its gaze returned forward as the portal before it loomed. What great secrets, then did a god of space and time hold? *What great secrets does the Great One wish to show me, here?*

Morgan breathed out and followed the Great One through the swirling black and silver portal, only to be struck by the vastness of space that appeared on the other side.

Stars gleamed in a great black void, a million tiny suns glittering amidst the sea of darkness. But there was something wrong with it. Some stars aged faster than others, some aged backwards, and space was distorted every which way Morgan looked, almost as if the universe was viewed through a lens. Streams of light twisted and turned, weaving together in strings that blended and melded together before separating completely...it was disorganized, yet somehow wholly complete. Nothing felt out of place, even if some dimensions were layered below others, or slipped between fractured space, and time was as strange as it could get.

"I knew Nyxteria was large," the Great One breathed in awe, eyes wide as They stared up at the skies above. "But not this big." Morgan looked skyward and saw nothing but more stars, nebulas, and comets hurtling through space between them.

“I could feel the distortion in space,” the chaos butterfly, Sylphina, started. “But the extent to which it had shrunk itself was...beyond my expectations.”

“This exceeds my understanding.” The skeleton, Shin, admitted. Morgan turned to the foul, unnatural creature, beside whom the bird Nyxteria had just been standing. Only it was gone, leaving behind a cloud of purple gasses that had taken a shape reminiscent of its own.

“What is going on?” Morgan demanded, claws digging into the space beneath it and finding no purchase. The Great One laid a hand upon its head, stilling the panic that threatened to well up inside of it at the lack of ability, and pointed skyward with Their prosthetic hand.

“The skies move.” They said, and Morgan took a deep breath, looking heavenward once more. Morgan narrowed its eyes and poured all of its focus into sight, peeling back layers of reality like it knew the Great One could do simply by breathing, only to find –

The skies moved.

Energy rushed past Morgan as a great eye blinked, peering down at all those collected with a curious look. The eye alone was easily the size of the Realm Sun itself, if not exceeding that size. Space was folded about the bird’s feathers, entire dimensions contained within the creases.

Morgan’s eyes grew wide, taking an involuntary step back as the reality of the situation dawned upon it. Nyxteria, the great bird of Space and Time, was looking down upon its universe like a child might look down upon a particularly shiny rock. Anything Morgan had ever seen was dwarfed in size by the great bird, streams of time and space flowing around its feet.

And yet, despite its size, Morgan did not feel it was the greatest thing here. It glanced at the Great One, staring up at the giant bird with such interest gleaming in those green eyes of Theirs. They had changed. They were *changing*. Back to what They were in the before, growing closer to the grandness that had been Them. Morgan felt itself relax a little, stepping closer to the Great One.

Elvira may have created the heaven realm, but no heaven compared to Them. And certainly no stupid bird.

“Nyxteria,” when the bird spoke, space was twisted and time was turned to sound like it was standing just beside them. It was so subtle Morgan wouldn’t have noticed it were the Great One not standing beside it, guiding its ears and eyes with Their power. “will grow you too, so you can see my stars as Nyxteria does.”

Space warped for a moment, and suddenly the universe seemed much...smaller. Morgan had not grown in size, it found, as it appeared beside the newly-enlarged Great One beside the bird Nyxteria, merely that space around it had been warped to make it seem larger. Suns were like grains of sand on the beach, distance but an afterthought. It felt empowering, but Nyxteria’s power tainted the feeling, and Morgan fought the urge to reject such unholy power.

It knew no god than the Great One, but...it could at least play along, for Their sake.

So Morgan turned. A sea of stars lay before it, dimensions and time streams flowing and rippling endlessly, mimicking waves. Morgan could see the edge of the universe, where a shimmering wall of frozen time held back the relentless Void, and pushed back against what was made by it. And below its feet lay a nest. Time streams warped and churned, dimensional layers pushed up against each other and folded an endless number of times to form a crude nest, green crystals of frozen time piled up amongst the walls.

“This is Nyxteria’s nest!” The bird proudly crowed, ruffling its feathers.

“And you are still not full size. Amazing.” the Great One said softly, clutching Their stomach, face contorted. They looked down at Morgan, meeting its eyes though it quickly looked away. “Sorry, this layered time is making my stomach churn. I will do my best not to interfere.”

“The time is disorienting, but this is...fascinating. Do you carry entire dimensions beneath your wings?” one of the gods asked, though the answer was lost to Morgan’s ears as it focused its attention upon the Great One.

Their face was indeed green, appearing sick to Their stomach as They listened to whatever explanation was given. Morgan looked back at the universe before it, stretching its senses to the absolute limit. Physically, it may not encompass as much space as the Four Realms. But because of how time was stretched here, because of how space was distorted, its true mass was far, far greater. Morgan was having trouble understanding it, so it focused on what it did understand.

Time was the Great One’s great limiter. Nyxteria was a god of time. And the Great One was growing closer to what They had been, as opposed to constantly surrendering pieces of Themselves. Even as Morgan watched, They continuously bound karmic strings together, forming a cohesive whole instead of the mess that entangled Them before; the strength that had been once so pervasive now slowly returning, a confidence reentering Their posture.

Even despite looking sick, Morgan noticed this.

Morgan licked its lips, forcing down a grin. The Great One was overcoming its limitations. Now it knew how it could force Them to overcome one more, to become the being it knew They truly were. To become what They thought They were not.

And this was the perfect place to discover just how to do that.