

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

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.

2.26 Time and Space

The constantly shifting flows of time was nauseating. There was absolutely a rhythm to what Nyxteria created; time flowed like a current through the vast, starry ocean that was its universe, twisting this way and that in a clear symphony of creation. But, just like in an ocean, this current varied. Sometimes something stood in the way of the flow, forcing time to flow around it, creating new streams. Timestreams, a million billion of them, all of the same universe. Sometimes it swirled into eddies, time flowing backwards in places for a brief moment before righting itself...

And none of that was even to mention the layering of space, and how time interacted with various dimensions.

The way Nyxteria had layered space upon itself was like having a sea fit inside of a pond, that moved along through a river, that connected to an ocean that inevitably fed back into the pond. I could see the strings tying everything together, but the way time interacted with it made it incredibly disorienting. Time should not flow like that, and it took every ounce of my willpower to keep my aura restrained, to not, as Mr. Boxes had put it, attempt to subvert another origin deity's authority within their own universe.

I just could not fathom who would make a universe like this, or why.

"I did not think your domain had any relation to time, Statera," Yueya said, laying a gentle hand upon my back. The red-haired elf's eyes were full of concern as she looked me up and down. I smiled weakly at her, only half paying attention to Nyxteria's poor attempt at an explanation.

"Time goes 'whoosh!' and Nyxteria doesn't like it so with a flap of Nyxteria's wings it is put back into place! Or put somewhere else!" The great bird cawed, flapping its wings for emphasis. Shin

met my eyes from across the small group of origin deities that had assembled in this Realm, exasperation clear on the skeleton's normally expressionless face. How a skeleton could even *look* exasperated was...telling of Nyxteria's descriptive skills.

...yeah, seeing for myself would be better than listening to whatever that is.

"You are correct, I don't have a relation to time in my domain." I agreed with Yueya, taking a moment to look away from the churning currents of time and sucking in a deep breath. "That is why Mr. Bo – I mean, the Overgod, allowed me to come here in the first place. Otherwise I would not have been able to come, lest I disturb Nyxteria's universe. It is just...the currents of time here are aggravating to my personal Dao. I'll get over it."

"Nyxteria does not understand. Time cannot effect origin deities, so how does it aggravate you?" Nyxteria suddenly interjected, poking its head up over the other origin deities and cocking its head to the side curiously. I opened my mouth to reply, but found the words felt cheap upon my tongue. I simply did not like the concept of time flowing backwards, for anyone, including myself. And I would, honestly, refer to the god of time itself for any sort of expertise involving time shenanigans.

"Time does not affect us? How so? I can quite clearly feel the flow of time about and through us." Yueya asked. Nyxteria clacked its beak once, cocking its head the other way and doing a little hop-skip over to the side of its nest, to look down upon a part of its collection. Dozens of timeless crystals lay together haphazardly, one containing an entire space-ship filled to the brim with sentient machines – or they would be, were they not frozen in time.

"We are fixtures in time and space." Nyxteria began, bending down and plucking a crystal out of the pile with its beak. "If Nyxteria were able to rewind time for the entire ocean of stars, Nyxteria would still be as Nyxteria is now, even back in the beginning. If you were to travel back through time to the moment of Nyxteria's birth, you would meet Nyxteria, as Nyxteria is now. Origin Deities do not regress. We exist in our own time." To illustrate the point, Nyxteria twisted time with a cock of its head, space folding around it like a kaleidoscope as the dawn of time was revealed in a localized spot around the great bird.

Even to my eyes time appeared fresh and new, a clock just beginning, in a hazy area just around Nyxteria. But the bird itself was unchanged – wait, had it been trying to rewind its own time?

“See?” Nyxteria asked, letting time snap back to normal with a shudder. In a matter of seconds the space around Nyxteria re-aged back to what it had been, like a rubber band that had pulled taut, then released. I blinked and shuddered, imagining what it would be like to live through that, as a mortal. “Even Nyxteria struggles to rewind time for so long. Time, like a river, has to flow. It doesn’t even matter if it is backward, so long as it flows.”

“...but how does time flow backwards?” MR-10 asked, directing the conversation back to itself. Nyxteria squawked and started its impossibly difficult explanation once again, leading me to shake my head and turn my attention back to the world about us. Ignoring my issues with Nyxteria’s manipulations of time, its usage of space was truly fascinating. The shifting, twisting, turning dimensions were chaotically beautiful. However, there was something off with it...

Yueya moved her hand from my back to squeezed my arm comfortingly.

“Morgan is right, you worry too much about others. That’s where your aversion to time is coming from. It is adorable, but focus on yourself a little, too.” She said softly. I raised an eyebrow at her.

“You’ve been talking with Morgan?” I resisted the urge to peer at where my child had run off to, letting the rebellious wolf have a little bit of freedom here. Of course, a part of me did keep watch on Morgan just to ensure they didn’t cause any problems, but that was all they were doing. I got no other information besides that.

“Astraea and I have,” Yueya nodded, linking her arm in mine. “It’s quite cute how she tries to hide her concern for you behind that rebellious attitude. Morgan may be a bit prickly, but she’s got an eye for detail.”

“Morgan is a troublemaker, is what they are,” I grumbled, relaxing my shoulders and fixating my gaze on a comet as it hurtled through Nyxteria’s ocean of stars. Unlike many other features, this one passed through the flows of time and borders between dimensions without pause, freely passing through space.

In this folded space, Nyxteria’s ocean looked no larger than the Four Realms. But if I laid it all out, smoothing out the creases and adding on the spaces layered atop each other, it easily dwarfed my Realms. Was there a way I could use this to bolster the Four Realms? Morgan’s hidden realm reminded me of Nyxteria’s universe in many ways...

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“What do you see, when you look out there?” Yueya asked, cutting off my thoughts. I furrowed my brows as she pointed toward a particular flow of time that swirled in a whirlpool, asteroids stuck within the motion wavering back and forth between regressing and progressing.

“Stagnation? Chaos. Pointless time. But maybe I could use the folded space in the Four Realms. And a Shadow...space, too much space in too little area, time...I can’t make heads or tails of it.” I admitted with a shrug. Yueya hummed, a low, melodious thing that sent a shiver down my spine from the attention it drew from me. Forced from me.

“I’ll tell you what I see. I see a whirlpool. Ice freezing and melting in moments, just like Chaos, glittering in the light of a thousand stars. I see time wobbling back and forth in a way I never considered, space folded against itself and painted in a thousand different colors, like a stained-glass window. I see the same point in space mirrored right beside itself in time, one older, one younger; a before-and-after photo memorialized forever, or until the whirling ends. There is beauty here.” The word beauty struck a chord in my soul, and for a moment my vision cleared, my nausea stilling. “Your insistence on helping others is admirable. Your focus on the ideal outcome is funny and silly. But take a step back with me, Statera, and let us simply enjoy the day for what it is. Is that not what you’ve been trying to do, by removing yourself from karma?”

I let out a breath, shaking my head even as my shoulders relaxed, the tension in my neck and head slowly fading. Nyxteria's cawing explanations washed over me like the tide, adding to the simple nature of its universe, while Yueya continued to softly explain the little works of art she saw, beautiful moments and gorgeous eternities, all contained within this universe.

I let my thoughts leave me. I let my breathing even out, and a small smile dance across my lips. I would never create a universe like this. But...I supposed, I could at least appreciate it for what it was. It needn't grate against me so; this was not like Sehuyun, who challenged me. This was me just not liking something.

But at least here, for a moment, in welcome company, I could let time just slip away.

It was rare for Astraea to feel smug, but smile smugly at the obnoxiously hostile Morgan she did. The mangy wolf scowled at her, all eight eyes narrowing in irritation, spider-like legs bristling.

"See?" Yueya's incarnation asked from where she sat cross-legged beside a living sun, one hand placed upon its surface. Astraea knew she was holding another, separate conversation with the being, though her face gave away none of the fact that she was. "Sometimes all it takes is a gentle touch, to correct a misunderstanding." Morgan's scowl deepened, a frustrated growl rumbling in the back of her throat, but even she couldn't deny the results.

Astraea looked up at where Yueya's true body was talking with Statera, standing on the edge of Nyxteria's nest to gaze out over creation. The purple-robed god had been tensing up with both Morgan's presence and the temporal anomalies that were so pervasive in Nyxteria's Realm. But now he was relaxing a little - at least, to Astraea's eyes. His aura was no longer so carefully controlled, freely spreading out to explore and feel the nearby universe. And once again his stature was muscular and filled with vitality, even if he switched between male and female at random.

Knowing Yueya, she was likely convincing him to view the temporal anomalies as mere curiosities rather than...whatever he had been seeing them as. Astraea admitted they were odd, but enough to make her nauseous? Not quite.

“I do not do *gentle*.” Morgan spat. “Subtlety has its place, but gentle is beneath me. Enough power fixes whatever problems you claim gentleness can.”

Astraea adopted one of Yueya’s favorite expressions; tapping her chin thoughtfully with one finger, lips pursed and brows furrowed in mock confusion. “Oho? But is not the time you have been so enamored with not gentle?” she asked.

“What?” Morgan demanded, and Astraea smiled her own favorite, mysterious, knowing smile, and began slowly advancing toward the wolf spider.

“The relentless march of time, slow and gentle.” Each word was punctuated by a small step forward, yet space was twisted here, and each step closed the distance between the two with surprising swiftness. “It moves so slowly, acts so gently, that no one can feel it or notice its passing. Its movements are so gentle you do not realize it has arrived until its hands are on you shoulders; and by then it is already too late. Your time has come, and you did not even see its approach.” Astraea ended her statement with a flash of silver light, appearing just before Morgan to loom over her. To Morgan’s credit she did not flinch, merely leaning away suspiciously and deepening her scowl.

But there was a flash of understanding in her expression and, point made, Astraea stepped away. Morgan sat back as well, spider legs tapping together as the wolf thought, eyeing them. For a moment the wolf’s power wavered as if she had been enlightened to some truth, but then it stilled and settled back to the aggressive thing it had been.

“Why are you helping me?” She demanded, eyes flicking between Astraea and Yueya.

“Your parent is frustratingly stubborn, and has resisted most all of our efforts to aid him. Not that I believe he even noticed our attempts. So, those of us who feel the need to repay Statera for her insights have set our eyes to his children.” Yueya explained, twirling a lock of hair with her free hand. “It seems the most effective action, as we have yet to see her universe, and he seems grateful for our guidance. To the children, at least.”

“The Great One does not need your help. They are no mere godling like yourself, or dragon, or filthy machine, or stupid bird. They are *all and everything*. That Which is Above.” Morgan snapped, baring her teeth.

“Great One? You do not call Statera parent, like your siblings?” Yueya asked. Morgan spluttered and Astraea sighed. The conversation was now utterly derailed – a pity, too, as Astraea wanted to understand more about this Morgan character.

“I have no need to play pretend with the others! They do not understand, and refuse to even try!” Morgan hissed, hackles raised. Yueya smiled, placing her one free hand on her cheek.

“Oh, are you in your rebellious phase? Is that why Statera is so cautious with you? That’s so cute! Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll come around eventually, dear.” Yueya’s smile sweetened as Morgan huffed and spluttered more, puffing up indignantly, grey fur puffing up. Then, with a derisive snort, she leapt to her feet, turned, and stalked off through the depths of space.

“I do not have to sit here and take this. I am not...bah!” she grumbled as she fled, tail metaphorically tucked between her legs. Astraea hid her mouth behind her hand as she smiled, shaking her head.

What a silly puppy.

“I will follow,” she said, letting her amusement show clearly to her creator, moving to follow the wolf.

“No,” Yueya stopped her with a quick shake of her head. “Let Morgan be bothered by the other Origins for a time. I know Reilly has been dying to get some one-on-one time with the wolf, for whatever reason. You go explore this space for yourself until it is time to leave. Our One World is next, and you know I will be relying on you for aid.” Astraea bowed her head in acceptance, backing away from the fleeing wolf – who now had a tail in the form of Reilly, the drunkard god flying above her and peering down at her in interest.

“As you wish.” She said, and teleported away in a flash of starlight, letting her expression, of which she usually had total control over, fall back to its normal impassiveness.

It might have been difficult to navigate this space for another, but she was the stars themselves, and these stars were no different. Even if they did serve as nexuses for Time itself to flow into, reorganize itself, and flow back out again. They were her guides, and she was never lost as she drifted between the depths of space and time.

But her mind drifted back to Morgan again, and again.

Yueya had not noticed, it seemed. Or she was simply playing coy. But Morgan was the opposite of Astraea.

She, like Randus, had been born involuntarily to aid their Parent – though she dare not call Yueya her true parent. So then, what was Morgan to her?

...more importantly, she got the inkling she knew what Yueya's Morgan was.

And in many ways, she feared it.

2.27 Welcome to the One World

"You are alright going back by yourself?" I asked Morgan, the wolf walking beside me as we left Nyxteria's realm. Morgan's ever-present scowl lessened slightly as it looked up at me, eyes narrowed in concentration.

"Am I not to go straight back to my cell?" It asked.

"No. I will only be gone for another ten, fifteen years or so. You behaved well here, so I will give you and Thyia a bit of freedom. Think if it like parole." I said. A part of me wished I got the chance to bring Thyia out here, spend some quality one-on-one time with the dark goddess, but there wasn't really an opportunity for one. This would have to be good enough for now. Besides, I think Morgan and Thyia are ready for a bit of freedom – they've adjusted enough.

"I see. Don't expect me to greet the others. I will go straight to my hidden realm." Morgan grumbled. I chuckled and reached down to scratch Morgan's head, the wolf snarling and leaping away from my touch, nearly running into Reilly in the process. The beggar god shot Morgan an amused smile and sauntered forward, still drinking from his flask as he stepped through Nyxteria's portal and into the meeting room.

"I would expect nothing less, Morgan," I said with a small shake of my head, urging the wolf to enter first, then following after. The few deities who had remained in the meeting room for this

trip were already exchanging greetings with those who had returned, chatting about various things. We could all feel that this little meet-and-greet slash field trip session was nearing its end, with only two more universes left to visit, and were winding down accordingly.

Well, except for me. I still had to show off some. They had met the leaders of my Realms, but not all the most interesting characters.

“You will be bringing them with you, won’t you?” Morgan asked as I walked it to the portal to the Four Realms, circling around the central table.

“Hm? Oh, yes. Whoever wants to come, which I imagine will be most people.” I shrugged. “Should be eventful. I admit to being worried about fitting all these origin deities in the Realms, but it shouldn’t be too big a problem. Mr. Boxes is pulling some shenanigans to make this work, I suspect.” Morgan furrowed its brows at me and I paused for a moment, realizing that this was likely the first time I’d brought up Mr. Boxes to it. “Mr. Boxes is the Overgod of the multiverse, Morgan. Whether he truly created the multiverse or is the supreme ruler of it, I do not know. What I do know is that the amount of power in a single shard of its existence is enough to dwarf the entirety of the Four Realms. We are but atoms to his existence. Myself included.”

Morgan narrowed its eyes further but didn’t respond, gnashing its teeth a little and spider-legs tapping against the ground as it walked. Only once did I catch it glancing about the room, eyeing the walls and ears twitching to listen to the relative quiet, before coming to stand before my portal. I clasped my hands before myself, and simply watched Morgan’s reaction. Morgan waited for a brief moment, glancing back at me, then at the other origin deities, a strange gleam in its eyes. I wasn’t sure what to make of it, even when turned to stare at me pointedly before leaping into the portal.

“Will you be bringing someone else to Yueya’s Realm?” Shin asked, the skeletal god appearing behind me. I nodded, cracking my neck and stretching a little.

"Yes. Though she's a little troublemaker too, in a completely different way than Morgan is." I said, and Shin hummed, clacking his jaws together in thought, the green fire that filled his eye sockets flaring.

"I believe I speak for everyone here when I say that I am looking forward to discovering your Realm. To have produced so many interesting individuals, while supposedly being so small...I can only imagine what you had to put them through to create it." Shin shook his head, turning on his heel. "I will join you in Yueya's Realm. It shall only be myself, you, Reilly, the Emperor, and Sylphina. The others wish to meditate on their gains a bit more before we truly start wrapping things up."

That was understandable. I needed to go to Yueya's universe if only for one reason; hers was the absolute biggest out of any of ours, and I might be able to gain something even more by going there. That wasn't even to consider the fact that I'd grown fairly close with Yueya over the past few years...I'd say her, Shin and, surprisingly, the Dragon Sehuyun were my closest friends at the moment.

...friends. I frowned at myself at the way that word made my heart giddy. Was I really so lonely, even surrounded by my children, that such a simple word would elicit such a strong reaction from me? I sighed and put my hand in my portal, calling my final plus one to me and simultaneously sending an incarnation to release Thyia from her prison. What was I, some schoolkid getting their first friend in kindergarten? And then – my final plus one arrived.

"GRAMPS!" Kei cut my thoughts off by hurling herself through the portal, using my hand as a brace to launch herself into a giant hug about my middle, her arms and legs wrapping themselves best they could about my torso. Her nine tails flicked as I stumbled backward, pouting up at me. "You grew taller." She accused.

"I did, a little," I agreed, realizing I still was ten feet tall, rather than my normal six or so. Kei scowled, fox-ears flicking in annoyance.

“Lots of things are changing. What have you been doing? Mom’s been acting weird ever since she came back, and now –“

“Don’t,” I cut her off, turning, with her still attached, to those heading to Yueya’s realm. “I want to be surprised.” There were surely many changes my children were going through – and I had promised myself to keep my distance for the moment. It was proving a more difficult task than I realized. Yueya giggled at me as I met her eyes and marched forward, Kei flopping her head backwards so she could see everyone. Her eyes narrowed.

“Pretty. Scary. Bird? Strange. Scaly. Shiny. Drunk? Who are all these people?” Kei asked, rolling her head side-to-side. Sehuyun huffed at the fox-girl, blowing a bit of smoke our way as she rolled her eyes and laid back down, resting her forehead on her front feet. Apparently, she didn’t agree with Kei’s aura.

“Friends. People like me,” I told her, coming to stand beside Sylphina. The chaos butterfly twitched her antennas at me, then turned her attention back to Yueya.

“There’s no one like you, you’re too weird.” Kei stated, letting go with her arms so she was hanging upside down, clinging to me more like a monkey than a fox.

“Creator gods, Kei. They’re origin deities,” I said, exasperated. Kei hummed and completely let me go, falling into a handstand that rolled into a flip that brought her to stand beside Reilly, who hiccupped and squinted at her, cheeks flushed.

“Statera, your grandkid is being weird.” Reilly complained as Kei peered at his filthy clothes.

"It runs in the family," Kei told him without missing a beat, turning her attention to Shin next. The skeletal god did not flinch as she peered at him, not even deigning to look at her as she circled him. I left her to it and turned my attention to Yueya, who was just smiling and shaking her head.

"Definitely the most curious of all your children. Or, in this case, descendants," She said. "Come on. It's time for you all to meet the others, and greet the One World. Astraea, if you would lead the way please." The goddess of stars bowed and stepped through the portal gracefully. Kei, noticing this, immediately left Shin alone and darted back to my side, bouncing on her heels as we followed first the Emperor, then Sylphina, into the One World.

As soon as I crossed the threshold I was immediately struck by how *vast* it was. Even compared to the largest of the other universes.

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My divine senses couldn't even reach the edge of the universe, the single, massive stretch of land that made up the entirety of the world rising and falling in a truly gorgeous arc off into the distance. Mountains taller than Elvira's Holy Mountain scraped the sky, while valleys deeper than Keilan's Karmic Valley fell deep into the crust of the planet. There were continents the size of Pangaea and rivers wider than Alexander's spirit river – veritable oceans, in their own right. My gaze pierced the earth, diving deep through the thousands of miles of crust to behold a hollow center.

Mortal souls drifted about within the center of the planet, glittering like a billion fireflies as they headed toward their next lives. One World – it was a literal name. Yueya's entire universe was One massive World.

The sun was dragged through the sky above by a chariot of fire led by a team of seven golden-furred elk, and driven by an orange-haired, six-armed god. And directly beneath us stood a city; floating in the skies above a frigid mountaintop, and shining like the artistic masterpiece it was.

A kaleidoscope of colors reflected the sun's light from the swirling, twirling buildings; tastefully arranged roads snaking through the buildings to create a mosaic. Hundreds of thousands of people went about their day in the streets, various flying vehicles and flying beasts ferrying some to and from the land below.

Yet despite all the activity, and the vastness of the world arrayed like a giant painting, there were *so few people*. For the size I should have easily sensed twenty times the number of souls I did, trillions upon trillions more; and the number of gods or god-like beings! There were *so few*. In the city below I only counted three, all of whom seemed frayed out and stressed. But, more importantly...

“Welcome to the One World!” Yueya cried happily, spreading her arms wide. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

“It is beautiful,” I admitted, nodding and furrowing my brows. “But why do I sense three of you?” Yueya grinned, clapping her hands together as the two other beings I was sensing, all of whom equal to power of Yueya and all of whom appearing to my divine senses as different flavors of the same person, hurtled towards us.

“Three of her? I do not – oh.” Shin stopped himself from speaking, freezing in place as they reached the edge of his divine senses. He looked about as confused as a skeleton possibly could.

“Three of her?” Kei asked, cocking her head to the side. “Gramps, can I go play? This place is so big!”

“Yes, indeed!” Yueya said happily. Astraea bowed beside her.

“Honored guests, I present to you the whole of our Creator; the three facets of one being. Yueya Oshun, of the Arts,” Astraea pointed at Yueya, who struck a pose. “Curie Oshun of the Sciences,” at this another person appeared. She, too, was beautiful, but was dressed in simple blue robes and wore round glasses. Her hair was a deep navy blue, and expression cold and severe. An entirely different beauty than Yueya was. “And Alala Oshun, of the Sports.” This one who appeared was a tanned goddess, clad in revealing robes that showcased her glistening muscles and fierce expression. A mischievous smile danced upon her lips, her short brown hair messy and slicked back, a javelin held in one hand as her eyes locked with mine.

“Yueya! You brought guests!” Alala cried happily.

“I hope you’ve brought a solution to the problems we’ve been facing.” Curie deadpanned.

“Of course I did! I have it all ready for you to peruse. But first, introductions! We have a lot of ground to cover, and oh so little time to do it in.” Yueya said. I just shook my head.

The Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost. No...The Mind, Body, and Soul. Three things that seemed separate, but were inextricably intertwined. All fed into the others. All fed and bolstered each other.

...how wonderful.

Curie observed their guests closely, listening to their conversations as Yueya, the most outgoing and charismatic of the three, happily chattered with them about inane things. Astraea, the young goddess of stars Yueya had, for some unknown reason, insisted accompany her to the meeting, watched on with the same unreadable expression as she always did.

And Alala, predictably, walked up to the most muscular looking one, the one Yueya had identified as the Emperor, and promptly demanded a competition of sorts.

Curie shook her head at her sister-selves, feeling their intentions through their connection but respectfully leaving them to their own devices. They might be herself, but they were each distinct, and filled their own roles perfectly. Or perhaps not perfectly, considering the severe shortage of manpower they were experiencing.

“Astraea,” Curie called the young goddess over. She turned, silver eyes wary as she approached with slow steps, walking through the air with the ease of a god thrice her age. “Did you gather the information I requested?”

“As much as possible. If you want to inquire more specifically, I suggest either talking to Statera, whose eyes see all, or Shin, who has insight that, while he not understand it himself, applies directly to the problem you face.” Astraea said with her head bowed, hood pulled up over her head and hiding her eyes. Curie analyzed her, calculating her words and coming up with the conclusion that further discussion would be pointless – turning instead to the other gods that had arrived.

Of them, Statera and Shin scared her the most. The Emperor was a himbo, full of bluster and hot air, a King that could be manipulated with precise, logical reasoning. Sylphina was...unpredictable, but therefore predictable because of it. Treated with care, instability could be managed. Reilly was...well, he was also, likewise, easy to handle. The drunkard god was a gambler, and could be entertained with games or problems that held his attention.

But not Shin or Statera. Shin was quiet, withdrawn. Always watching and listening, absorbing information while giving away none. Like her. She hated people like her.

And Statera?

The purple robed god cast his/her eyes in Curie's direction and she shuddered involuntarily. Statera could see right through her. Even now –

“Rot,” Statera mouthed with a sad smile, and Curie paled.

Even now, she knew Statera could see through all of her carefully hidden secrets. No, a man or woman like that was dangerous. Far too dangerous. And she could not trust her sister-selves to see through it.

“Careful, Curie. Statera is not the only dangerous one,” Astraea advised. Curie snorted, pushing her glasses up her nose to glare at the young goddess. To her surprise, she did not flinch away this time.

“I –“ Whatever Curie had been about to say was lost in the next moment, when an unexpected weight landed upon her shoulders, and a far-too-mischiefous face popped into her vision. Fox-ears twithed atop the fox girl's head, her eyes glittering with the desire for fun and play. But, more importantly, the desire for mischief, and a calculated cunning that sent shivers down Curie's spine.

“My name's Kei! And keep this a secret from Gramps,” Kei gestured to Statera, who had now been drug into conversation with both Yueya and Alala, the former of whom shot Curie a wink before turning back to the conversation. Traitors. “But I want to see your Rot.”

Curie's heart stopped in her chest.

But in that moment, she also saw opportunity. Perhaps...just maybe...they'd be able to solve this problem after all...

"Fine." Curie said after a moment, grabbing the nine-tailed fox girl's legs and shoving her off her shoulders. She landed with a giggle, skidding across the air, all nine tails thrashing excitedly behind her. "If you want to see so bad, follow me. I'll show you this so-called *rot*."

2.28 Rot and Tension

Kei could now understand why her mother was undergoing such drastic changes after Gramps took her on her trip. Everything was so crazy and different in another universe, even if they were supposed to be the same! The elements themselves tasted funny, and while they responded to her power and the elements bound within her tails, they resisted it altogether. And that wasn't even to mention the creatures! She'd been struggling for so long to create her own people like Mother had and Gramps had shown, and this was giving her so many ideas! Who said her people had to be like Gramps? They could be intelligent beasts! Those were so much easier, and she connected to them better anyways.

"Hey, what's that?!" Kei cried, ears flicking and tails swishing as she descended from the skies above, where she'd been flying beside Curie and Astraea, to hurtle to the vast plains below.

"Hey – wait!" Curie cried, but Kei paid her no heed, landing softly in a field of ten-foot-tall golden grasses. Her feet weightlessly touched the tops of the plants, keeping her above them as she studied the object of her attention.

It was a cow.

But not just any cow! It had horns the size of Uncle Alexander's fangs when he got *reaaaal* big and mean, and fur the color of solid gold. It blinked its eyes lazily at her as it peered down, standing easily thirty feet tall with muscles as dense as any stone. Kei whistled and paced around the giant cow, being very careful to avoid the lesser beings – smaller golden cows without the spark of intelligence and power that radiated from the big guy – as she looked him up and down. It mooed once at her.

“Thanks! But I’m a fox,” Kei said proudly, narrowing her eyes at the inner workings of the cow’s internal energies, gaze alighting on a little core of power that sent lines of nourishing power through the entirety of the cow’s body. Was that what made it grow so much bigger and more intelligent than the other cows? It reminded her a little of the dantians that cultivators made, but was fundamentally different.

It made sense for a cow in another universe to be different from the Fae.

“Would you focus!” Curie snapped, appearing next to her in a flash of electric light and scaring off the cows. The big one bellowed in panic while the lesser ones fled, plowing trails through the grass, waiting just long enough for them to escape before following after. Kei beamed at it. What a good cow, to wait for its herd mates to flee!

“It’s interesting though,” Kei pouted dramatically, leaning on Astraea’s shoulder as the star goddess softly appeared beside her, starlight radiating from her dress. “You can’t expect to bring me by so many cool things and not get distracted. You even scared off that lighting bird earlier, and the elemental god of wind! He’s different.” Kei noted. The wind god was so much different than the elemental goddess of wind she knew – all talkative and bubbly, rather than the silent, secretive goddess of the Four Realms.

“You have the attention span of a bacterium!” Curie snapped, smoothing out her hair and straightening her robes as she glared lightning bolts at Kei. “And the curiosity of a child! I expected better from the plus one of one Yueya so highly praised, yet here you are acting a fool!” Kei set her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest proudly, flaring her tails dramatically. “That was not a

compliment! We need to fly fast to get to the so-called rot and get back again before the others notice, and I – why are you looking at me like that?”

Kei hid a smile, keeping her innocent look plastered on her face. Had she finally noticed? It was about time. It wasn't like she'd truly stopped for nothing all those times. “Oh, I was just wondering why we need to go all the way to where you're leading me when there's some of the rot right here? Did you want to show me something different?” Curie's expression darkened for a split second, followed by a widening of her eyes as she looked downward, panic flashing through her expression.

“How did it get this far?” She demanded, raising one hand high into the air. A metal rod appeared in her palm with a flash of blue that she brought downward to strike the earth with a mighty blow, cracking it open effortlessly. A three hundred yard-long split falling multiple hundreds of miles into the One World's crust stretched beneath Kei's feet, a whoosh of air rising upward to whip her hair all about her head. For a brief moment Kei felt respect for Curie – she had barely felt any fluctuations of power at all! That was nearly on Gramps' level; the strike itself hadn't even been necessary, just a show for Curie's sake. But more importantly, her attention was directed downward. Far, far below she could sense the so-called rot slowly pulsing...and Curie teleported away, down into the depths.

Kei shared a look with Astraea; the star-goddess had her brows furrowed, biting her bottom lip in worry, and Kei smiled warmly at her.

“I don't see what all the fuss is about, it's just a baby Shadow.” She said, and dropped. The wind whistled past her, ruffling her hair and fur as she hurtled into the depths, speed assisted by her magic. There was no need to rush – besides, she wanted to see what Curie would do when they got to the bottom. Even still, it only took fifteen minutes to reach the bottom of the cave, falling into a wide cavern that was illuminated by false blue light.

Bulbs of false blue light illuminated the cavern as Kei touched down gently, smoothing out her robes, as Curie scrambled about, setting up strange equipment and what looked like alchemical supplies as the goddess of science struggled to identify what they had landed before. She muttered constantly under her breath, asking questions such as ‘what is this doing here?’ and ‘how did it get so far without my notice?’ Kei sighed. It wasn't *that* interesting, was it? It'd barely formed.

As of now, the baby shadow was little more than a blob of red fungi. Or slime? Kei was truthfully unsure – what she was sure of was that it was uglier than sin, and smelled just as bad. She wrinkled her nose at it. The blob was nearly twenty feet tall and half as wide, strange humanoid shapes sticking out of it – like people, screaming and reaching out to try and escape the blob's grasp. Were they actually people? Or was it just trying to imitate them?

Kei cocked her head to the side curiously as she examined it, stepping forward, heedless of Astraea's cry of warning as she circled the growth. Magic washed over her, drawing her attention, attempting to lure her closer.

"Don't get too close," Curie warned, hurling a silver spike into the blob from thirty feet away, a mask covering her face now. "It will charm you and suck you in, devouring your body and soul. I already warned you about this, but you seem to have forgotten, having gotten so close."

Kei shot a look at Curie and Astraea from her position not but ten feet away from the pulsating mass. Curie's gaze was only half-fixated upon her, the fungus drawing most of her attention. Kei didn't get it. Sure, the thing was novel in a world that was mostly beautiful, but even supposed ugliness could draw out beauty. Such a thing might manifest as humor, or some other talent – beauty was not confined to the physical. So why all the attention to this...thing, that appeared to represent pure ugliness, in all its forms?

"Kei, step away please." Astraea begged, gaze flicking once to Curie, then back to Kei worriedly. She purposefully did not look at the blob, silver eyes darting everywhere but the rot.

Kei pursed her lips. That would not do. That would not do at all. Who did these gods think she was? She had divine blood running through her veins.

Kei's hands twitched once as she looked back toward the blob. What would Mom do? What would gramps do?

“Bah. I’m not mom or gramps,” Kei grumbled, and, in one smooth motion, touched the red blob. Immediately it surged forward, the fungi launching itself at her, crawling up her arm like a snake prepared to strike. Curie and Astraea cried out in alarm while Kei shuddered, the feeling of the fungus crawling up her skin like a spider dancing up her arm. Only, a spider was at least purposeful, and not truly malicious. The fagus felt...*hungry*. It clashed against her power and soul, trying to eat away at her very being, to gnaw at her connection to Gramps and the Heavens. But such a thing was not something a mere mushroom could sever, not without her permission.

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Astraea screamed. Curie cursed rapidly, power building up within her. And Kei just giggled, making everyone, including the fagus, freeze. She’d figured it out, in that little moment. That tiny, infinitesimal second in which her own essence had allowed the rot to touch her soul and been wholly rejected.

She knew what this baby shadow was. And she wasn’t subtle like gramps, or quiet like Mother. She was Kei. She would tell them exactly how she felt. So, with the fungus all the way up to her shoulder, threatening to keep climbing and try to consume her, she admitted the one thing that had frozen it in place. The one thing that was antithesis to all the rot represented.

“I’m bored of you.”

And the rot screamed, foxfire leaping from Kei’s fingers to burn it from within. Kei leapt backward, yanking her arm blissfully free from the foul substance, a mad grin dancing upon her lips as it burned with blue fire.

“Who do you think I am, to try and corrupt me? I am Kei! Unrivalled beneath the heavens! Subservient to no one! Where I go the wind follows, and play comes to greet me – until I run off again, to find a new curiosity! An obsession such as you does not suit one such as me!” The rot screeched its rage, pulsating and growing, bulging obscenely in a hundred different places, power building up within it. Curie cursed, thunder radiating from her as she prepared to annihilate the rot, and Kei withdrew her fire, watching closely. Curie hesitated.

Astraea did not.

The goddess of stars raised her hands, a ball of purifying silver light forming between her fingers that flashed out in a beam and *burned* the mass. Kei forced a giggle from her lips as the rot was burned away, shrieking painfully, while Curie began shouting obscenities, power lashing out to finish it off. Astraea turned her attention to Kei, expression serious, while Kei playfully dodged Curie’s words that struck like lightning bolts from the cavern ceiling.

There. She wasn’t subtle like Gramps. That, at least, should get it through Curie’s thick skull. She couldn’t be more direct if she tried. After all, what was the bane and boon of art and science, but limiting obsession?

“Are you sure Kei is going to be alright with Curie?” Yueya asked me as I walked beside her, looking down upon a village of elves. A young god of the earth watched over them – barely a god, more like an angel to me – and I shrugged.

“The real question is if Curie is going to be alright with Kei. That girl has untapped potential, but only because her attention span is so limited. She’s a bloody genius; and like many geniuses, she suffers from a severe lack of focus. Some things might catch her attention but it’s rare for her to obsess over anything once she thinks she’s mastered it.” I said, squeezing Yueya’s hand comfortingly. The poor goddess had been so tense ever since we’d come to her Realm – and it wasn’t just because she’d been informed of all the work she’d missed.

They were woefully understaffed, the sheer size of the world vastly outstripping the number of high-powered spiritual beings that worked within. Alala, the tanned tomboy of Yueya's three selves, had gleefully informed her of all the duties she'd missed while she'd been away – duties Yueya had promptly handed off to an incarnation while she, herself, guided us through the main functions of her Realm.

"She was very bubbly," Yueya agreed, squeezing my hand back. Before us, her incarnation and Alala chattered away with the group at large.

Honestly what they were showing us greatly interested me, even if I couldn't directly use the processes. As a matter of fact, the process of expansion was vastly different from what I had expected. Instead of constantly exploding into the Void like I had been lead to believe, Yueya's universe was constantly creating landmass. As this planet was one massive, spherical structure surrounded by a protective shell of primordial chaos – which I was beginning to suspect was far more common than I realized, as very few of the universes went without said protective shell – it couldn't just create land into the Void.

Instead, it functioned much like continents.

There was an edge to the One World. It was a band, a ring around the middle that ran beneath the surface of the planet. There, primordial chaos clashed with itself and a thin band of Void, creating more chaos that, in the process, was transformed into energy and landmass that surged upward, pushing more land into the crust of the planet like magma bubbling up from below, thereby expanding the sphere. It was a source of endless creation, that didn't need any management. Only people to fill the space it created.

Good lord, just how big would the One World get?

"I already have plenty of ideas on how to increase the number of gods we have, or high level beings." Yueya whispered. "Have you gotten what you needed out of this?"

"I have," I said, and truthfully, I had. Her comments up until this point through the rest of the universes had given me plenty of ideas – but none that I would actually implement. The seeds I had planted would grow fast enough as it was, and I did want my children to figure some things out themselves. I might make some minor adjustments, but...the wheel turns, and it was time for me to take a step back from the Four Realms. I got the feeling that my overbearing presence was part of what was stifling its growth.

For now, at least. There would come a time for me to step in again.

"Then follow me. I want to show you my art collection." She whispered, tugging me along. I let myself be led, half amused and half curious as we sped through the skies, away from the others. Alala shot us one glance as we went, even though I left behind an incarnation, then resumed talking to the others and boasting of her and her sister-selves' accomplishments.

It took no time at all to vanish from view, even my divine senses unable to reach the others as the land blurred by beneath us. Gone went the holy coliseum Alala used, her seat of power that sat at a key point across the globe from Yueya's city, and the lab Curie supposedly used. Gone went cities and badlands, wastelands vanishing by just as massive kingdoms of mortals and sprawling empires, only to fade away to forests and mountains the likes of which dwarfed any territory said empires could ever hope to hold.

The only being who spotted us was a lone wizard, the old, greying elf watching us fly by overhead from where he contemplated the nature of a pond – he was nearing Yueya's threshold of Divinity, about to become a god himself, but not quite there yet.

And all too soon we were back above Yueya's city, the god of justice that governed it glancing up at us as we descended into Yueya's palace, then turned his attention away entirely. The domed roof of Yueya's palace split open to allow us entry, revealing gilded halls and glittering gemstones.

Everything within was a work of art, from lifelike paintings of landscapes to more abstract art, from sculptures of stone so realistic it seemed as if they would jump to life, to crudely constructed statues of unrealistic size and proportion.

And those were the least interesting things.

My gaze wandered as she led the way through her palace, and even if she had been talking I doubted I would have been able to hear her. Thousands of things pulled my attention every which way, and I let them, basking in the awe of laying eyes upon such brilliant works of art. This was so much unlike my own home – true, I had art there as well. But they were creations of my children, even if they were good or bad I was obligated to love them. This? This was simply something for me to admire, be it swords or beautifully drawn maps, or even food.

And then we reached Yueya's workshop. Paintings and woven tapestries hanging from the walls. A loom stood tall in one corner, golden thread half woven, while painting supplies stood in another; a block of stone, rubble strewn about around it alongside various sculpting tools scattered about.

"I'm in my visual art phase. Sorry for the mess." Yueya apologized. But I wasn't really listening. My eyes had found the thing sitting in the center of the room; a bed, with red velvet drapes hanging from the posts, adorned with plush pillows and soft covers. The door to the room slammed shut behind me, startling me into turning, meeting Yueya's half-lidded eyes.

"It is no trouble. I find it endearing," I said, an easy smile gracing my lips despite the tension forming in my gut. Yueya smiled, and oh gods was it a pretty smile. Both my male and female selves could agree on that. She sauntered forward, stride confident and full of purpose as she came to stop just before me, nose so close they were almost touching. I still towered over her, having not shrunk my form in the slightest in the past few years; her red hair shone in the light of the room, a light blush dusting her cheeks.

One hand touched my arm, and my mouth went dry.

I was no blushing maiden, but it *had* been eons since my last...well. I silenced that little voice in my head and cleared my throat.

Yueya giggled, a fierce gleam appearing in her eye as she leaned even closer.

“I cannot have been the only one to have been lonely in these past few eons. Being surrounded by your creations is one thing, finding a kindred soul is quite another.” She breathed out, other hand reaching up to rest upon my shoulder. “This doesn’t have to be anything but fun, so let’s just -”

“Yueya,” I said, cutting her off with a teasing smile. “Don’t ruin the moment.”

She laughed then and, in a moment that blurred my mind, planted a kiss upon my lips.

It was the first of many.

2.29 Welcome to the Four Realms

Yueya and I sat together on her veranda overlooking her city, a steaming cup of tea held between us as we watched the sun rise over the horizon. A billion different shades of red and gold arced across the sky in sharp lines, racing like arrows shot from a bow in their chase to catch up with the sun god himself. The mountain range below caught the light on their snow-capped peaks, white shining brilliantly as the sun continued its steady climb.

“Alala made that one,” Yueya said softly, sipping at her tea as I leaned up against her, her red hair spilling over her back in waves. I hadn’t noticed before, but flecks of gold were interwoven in the strands, giving it a lustrous hue. “She said the spears of light should chase after the chariot, a race to see who could reach across the sky first. I used to not like it, but it’s grown on me. Curie’s is far more utilitarian.” I hummed, gaze tracing the tell-tale signs of Yueya’s sporty self having a hand in making this sunrise, looking without really seeing.

“It is pretty,” I admitted. “But you painting a sunrise yourself would have been more romantic.” Yueya giggled and shook her head, adjusting her loose, red nightwear as she settled back into her chair, disturbing me a little.

“In a way I did.” She mused, and I snorted out a laugh. The connection between Yueya and her other selves was one even I didn’t fully understand – they were each a part of one being, yet wholly distinct, each with their own unique personalities and goals. It was...fascinating that they could be one person, yet so different from each other. We fell into a comfortable silence for a time, watching the world turn from the center of all art on the One World. Everything here was a work of art, in one way or another. Everything was worth looking at, Yueya most of all. I turned my head a little from where I was leaning up against her, looking up to meet her soft eyes. She worried her bottom lip, concern sparking in her expression for a brief moment. “What...was this?” Yueya finally asked, one hand reaching up to run along one of my horns.

I raised an eyebrow at her. “As I recall, you were the one who dragged me to your bedroom. Why are you asking me?”

“Dolt,” she said with a light chuckle, the sound like tinkling bells and soothing violins. “You know why.”

“...it will be what it will be.” I said finally, closing my eyes, hands wringing themselves in my lap. We were origin gods. Baby origin gods, at that. After this meeting it could be millions, if not billions of years before we met again – and we had responsibilities tying us to our own universes on top of that. Over the past century and a half we’d gotten to know each other quite well, but...time and distance was a funny thing. I would love nothing more than to have something serious, but I was too old to claim to know exactly what the future would hold.

This could just be something fun, an unbinding attraction between the two of us. It could be a hint of something more. Only time would tell, and I could only hope.

“Now who’s being unromantic? This was the perfect opportunity for honeyed words.” Yueya teased, shifting in her seat once again. Now well and truly disturbed from my spot I sat up, flashing her a quick smile as I straightened out my own purple robes, settling in beside her on the wide red couch-like cushion we rested upon, shoulders touching.

“I am a little out of practice.” I admitted, reaching up to smooth back my hair. “Watching my children run about having their little romances is one thing; actually doing it myself is another.” *Especially with an equal.* I had almost forgotten what it was like to be on equal standing with another, prior to coming to the meeting. “But if there is one thing I truly know, it is that clear communication is an important foundation to any relationship. I like you, Yueya. Quite a bit, in case that wasn’t clear. But I do have children.” Yueya grabbed my hand, intertwining our fingers and sipping at her teacup, nodding along with my words.

“I am jealous of you.” She said. I arched an eyebrow at her, urging her to continue. The red-haired woman beamed at me, setting her teacup to the side and gesturing out to the world. “Your relationship with your creations is so close and binding – that you consider them your children is, I hope you know, adorable and endearing. In some ways I wish I had that kind of a relationship with my own world. Art is different from having a child. You have to know when to cut your losses, when something isn’t working, when it is time to smash your current project and start anew or jump to a new thing. You cannot get too close to these projects, even if they are passion projects, lest you become obsessive over it and it blinds you to the truth. Lest it blinds you from your true goal.”

I squeezed Yueya’s hand comfortingly as she shook her head, leaning further into my side. “Do not misunderstand, I love my creations. I love my sister-selves. But our relationship is far more distant than what you have. It makes me a little jealous, is all.”

“There is nothing wrong with your current standing.” I said softly. I loved my children, of course, but I had sacrificed certain freedoms of my own in creating them as such, rather than creations. Freedoms I would never truly regain, so long as I thought of them as such.

“I know. But even we gods cannot help how we feel sometimes.” At this I had nothing to say, for it was the truth. Emotion was emotion, no matter if you were a god or a mortal. And the same could be said for passion. Yueya stirred beside me, unfolding her legs from where she had them curled up beneath her to stand and stretch, letting go of my hand in the process. With a snap of her fingers her red nightwear transformed into a modest green dress, tastefully embroidered with golden thread. “But! I do believe we’ve delayed long enough. Our incarnations are starting to wrap up their explanations, everyone’s starting to get ready to go back to the meeting room, Alala is getting bored of talking, and Curie...”

Yueya paused, eyes narrowing. I stretched and stood beside her, looking in the same direction as her. There, far in the distance, at the very edge of my divine sense I could feel Yueya’s other self running through a vast golden plain. And leading her along was my rambunctious grandchild, her tails thrashing as she ran, cackling madly as she rode a bolt of lightning like a skateboard.

“...is Curie playing tag with your granddaughter?” Yueya asked. I nodded, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and smiling to myself as I watched Kei play with the goddess of science. Yueya twisted her body to look at me, expression one of pure exasperation. “I have never seen Curie play tag before. Or any games, really. Ever. What the hell have you been doing to your children, to make them as remarkable as they are?” she all but demanded. I set my hands on my hips and grinned at her, winking.

“I do believe the answer to that is next on the docket. But it would be far better to show you, than just tell you.”

Reilly was satisfied with the result of their trip to the One World. It was immensely interesting to see a world that focused primarily on physical growth rather than anything else, and finding out Yueya was actually three people? Fascinating stuff.

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He took a swig of his drink, a rum-like beverage brewed by a small fishing village at the very edge of what Alala called a “small pond,” that was, in fact, larger than any of Reilly’s own oceans. The people there were amphibious, almost frog-like, with brightly colored skin and jewelry of shells and colorful stones that spoke a croaking language that took Reilly a full second to decipher. Thankfully they had graciously accepted his payment of a chunk of gold in return for a few barrels of rum, all of which he’d stored away in a little pocket dimension he kept with him. Specifically for occasions like that.

But, more importantly, he focused his attention on the quiet arrival of Statera and Yueya’s true bodies, the incarnations they had left behind fading away with barely a whisper. Were this anything less than a gathering of origin deities and Reilly doubted anyone would have noticed their leaving and quiet arrival...but he did. The slight blush on Statera’s cheeks. The closeness of the two. The slight dishevelment of their clothes...ok, he may have been imagining that last part, but he still noticed those barely imperceptible changes.

And, judging by the way Shin tilted his head to the side, the green fire in the skeleton’s eye sockets flickering and boney fingers linking themselves together was any indication, he was not the only one.

“I thank you all for your time and contributions,” Curie, the science goddess, said as her own true body appeared beside Alala, who crossed her muscular arms and smirked. Kei, Statera’s fox-like granddaughter, snuck around the outside of the group to regroup with Statera...the same as Reilly, who casually moved around to get behind Statera and Yueya. “Shin, I greatly appreciate your efforts in helping us to streamline the reincarnation process. Using the center of the world as a true afterlife instead of a highway of souls was an idea that we had, but were unsure of how to implement until you provided your insights.”

“It was nothing of consequence.” Shin said, sounding, dare Reilly say, *shy*.

“Emperor, we will discuss any further trade between our universes once such an option becomes available to us. As of now, it is time to wrap this tour up. Yueya will guide you back to the meeting room.” Alala said formally, nodding her head. On cue, Yueya stepped forward, gracefully sliding up to the front of the group and clapping her hands together. Reilly pouted as she began leading the way to the meeting room, having missed his opportunity to tease both of them.

Ah, well. One would do.

“So,” Reilly drawled, sauntering up beside Statera and slinging an arm over the god’s shoulders. They arched one eyebrow at him, green eyes boring into his as they began to move, lips drawing into a thin line as they beheld his expression. “How’d the private meeting between you two go? Did you enjoy yourselves? Have a bit of fun?” That was about as delicately as he cared to put it, and he wiggled his eyebrows for emphasis. Statera rolled their eyes, fixing their gaze forward.

“A lady never kisses and tells, and a gentleman does not discuss such things.” They sniffed, tilting their head upward. Reilly cackled at the confirmation, shaking Statera with his arm.

“Whatcha laughin’ at?” Kei asked, jumping in front of them and walking backwards, ears twitching curiously and head cocked to the side. Reilly’s grin grew wider.

“Oh nothing much, just that Statera and Yueya there snuck off together –“ Statera cut him off by shoving a hand in his face, a frown tugging at their lips.

“That is quite enough of that, Reilly. You don’t need to be saying that in front of my granddaughter, thank you very much.” Reilly just laughed, watching Kei’s expression shift from one thing to another as she rapidly put two and two together. The poor girl wore her thoughts on her sleeve, and he could name each and every instance and moment of realization as her gaze flicked from Statera to Yueya. First there was surprise, followed by mischief at the idea of teasing Statera, and then, finally, she seemed to remember their relation to each other and switched to full blown disgust.

“Ew! Gross!” she cried, clamping her hands over her ears and shooting forward, practically leaping through the portal to the meeting room ahead of Yueya. Curie watched her go, brows furrowed, and Reilly’s grin widened further as he took another swig of rum.

“Was that really necessary?” Statera sighed.

“Yes. That’s what you get for leaving us all behind to have your own fun.” Reilly teased. Statera groaned, pressing their forefinger and thumb against the bridge of their nose as they reached the portal. And Reilly, for a moment, hesitated. They were grown adults, and could make their own decisions. He had no right to comment on Statera and Yueya, not that he even wanted to or had any thoughts on the matter, however, he did feel the need to say something about Kei. “Kei is a brilliant girl.” He said.

“She is.” Statera agreed.

“Nearly as perceptive as you, though in a different way.” Reilly added. “More chaotic. I assume you were watching during the rot incident?”

“No, but Curie made sure to tell me about it.” Statera said with a frown. “I intend to have a talk with her about her recklessness.”

"If so, you're not hearing me." Reilly said. "I was there, and I was watching. She is *nearly as perceptive as you*. There was no recklessness involved." This, finally, gave Statera true pause as they turned to fully face Reilly, brows furrowed and hands folded into the sleeves of their robe. Reilly patted them on the shoulder and took another drink, watching Statera's expression closely. There was no change there, and, disappointed, he turned away. "Well, I'm sure you'll figure it out eventually. It's your turn now, yeah?" And with that, he stepped through the portal and into the meeting room.

Nearly everyone was getting up and stretching, chatter filling the room while Kei bounded from deity to deity in an attempt to distract herself. Reilly stepped to the side to allow Statera entry, sauntering over to his own chair.

"I believe," Statera's voice boomed through the meeting room, effectively silencing all conversation as they gracefully walked around the table. "That we will be visiting my Four Realms next. Who wishes to go?"

Reilly's hand shot up. So did Yueya's, Shins, the Emperor's...

And nearly everyone else who had hands. Even the Dragon rose from her seat, wings stretching. Statera's eyebrows rose, though in Reilly's opinion it shouldn't have been surprising that everyone wanted to go. The god of luck craned his neck to look at MR-10 and Sylphina, both of whom had risen from their seats as if to go. Reilly pulled a pair of dice from his pocket, toying with them and waiting for Statera to tell the two they couldn't go, that it wouldn't be beneficial, and was surprised when they didn't.

"Fitting all of you should be easy enough," Statera muttered, rubbing their chin. Reilly looked down at his dice, frowning. Was it really just bad luck that was keeping him from guessing right, right now? "Right, let's get on with it then! Follow me!" And with that, they jumped into their portal, followed immediately after by Kei.

Excitement thrummed through Reilly's veins as he followed the others through the portal, juggling his dice in one hand. He hoped he wouldn't be let down, but what kind of a world was capable of producing so many high-powered beings? Statera had shown them, what, seven or so of their children? And none were slouches – in fact, he dared to say that each one, individually, was equal in power if not stronger than the most powerful being in his own universe below himself!

He opened his eyes wide and stretched his senses to the limit, eager to absorb as much information as possible in the brief time they had here.

The second thing he noticed was how small it was, especially when compared to the One World.

The first thing he registered was pain.

“My eyes!” he cried, shielding his face from the raw power and light that radiated throughout every inch of Statera’s realm. It dwarfed anything he’d ever seen by sheer concentration, and sent him stumbling backward, senses withdrawing so he could better adjust to what he was seeing.

It was like having a sun shoved directly into his face, after knowing a lifetime of darkness.

“Damnation, Statera. What in the Overgod’s name is with your Realms?” The Emperor cursed as Reilly shook himself, muttering curses under his breath and peeking out from between his fingers, squinting at Statera Luotian as they floated before them. Framed in the light of a Sun burning with more raw energy than any normal sun had any right to, the God of Balance spread their arms wide, features shadowed by the light.

“I welcome you, friends, to the Four Realms.”

2.30 Changes

Ding!

{[Evolution!]}

[Free of your personal influence, the Four Realms and your children alike have begun to evolve. Changes of all kinds have begun taking root, for better or worse. Growth rate of the Four Realms exponentially increased.]

[Creation!]

[A dozen new mortal races, based on the Elemental template, have appeared in the Four Realms. Congratulations! The Four Realms is currently the most diverse universe in this iteration of the [Deity Trials.]}

I barely even registered Mr. Boxes' notifications, gawking at the Four Realms as I was. Things felt *different*, and while I'd been gone for over a century there was no reason the changes should have been this big.

Why were the seeds I'd planted budding? Eight little baby Trees, Mountains, Valleys, and Rivers orbited around the central structure of the Realms, expanding its size by a fairly decent amount. They hadn't been supposed to bloom for another thousand years though, let alone grow to the size they already had. I could even sense the Mad Scientist down there, tending to one of the Trees with an aura that was borderline immortal. Had she rushed her cultivation to immortality? Was the blooming her fault?

Also, why did it feel like spring? Not just in a planetary sense, but the entirety of the Four Realms felt like spring had come, a freshness in the energy that indicated a time of growth and change. The Four Realms didn't have seasons, so what was going on?

And *also*, was that twenty new Dao Stars I saw hanging in the sky? A quick count confirmed that there were twenty new Daos approved and hung in the sky beside the others, eight of whom were created by Immortals. Now there were nine total Dao Progenitors.

Seems my absence was more beneficial to the Realms than I could have ever predicted. As if to prove my point, thirty seven thousand strands of karma binding me to parts of the Four Realms instantly resolved themselves, the energy that comprised them sinking into the base energy of the Realms.

Then there was what I was sensing from my children themselves. Such massive changes, in such a short amount of time...

“Statera,” Rising Wind, Crashing Waves said, the great stag staring at the Sun and Lunar Star as the two celestial objects orbited around us. We weren’t that close to them, but the sheer power they radiated was more than any of the other gods’ celestial bodies. Save for maybe Shin’s Guiding Light, and the Progenitor’s Greenhouse, but those were fundamentally different than a true Realm Sun. “Is that a soul I sense, in the center of the sun? Its shape is odd.”

“Yes, it is. That is Fang Xu, a mortal...or, well, ex-mortal who, in essence, managed to take the place of the Sun.” I said.

“Is that a red string of fate binding the Sun and the blue one...the Moon? Together?” Yueya asked.

"The Lunar Star, and yes!" I corrected, beaming at her. "That is Fang Xu's lover, Celene. The first two souls to have been bound by a red string of fate in the entire Four Realms. She chased him into the skies above, to be reunited in eternity."

"How romantic," Yueya said genuinely, smiling fondly at the two bodies. "I would try that in my One World, but forcing romance never works."

"You're going to have to start explaining things quick, because this is going to be a lot, I can tell." Reilly deadpanned.

"The cyclical nature of the seasons seems new," Shin added softly, tugging his hood up higher over his head, casting his skeletal features further into shadow. "Though I could be wrong. The concentrated energy here makes things blurry." That prompted everyone else to start spouting their own opinions and questions, a thousand different comments thrown at me in rapid succession. I held my hands up, effectively silencing them all, and spread my arms. Below I could sense my children gathering, the gods and goddesses of the Realms coming together to greet the guests.

All of them. Every single one. Excluding Morgan, of course, who I could sense was hiding away in the Hidden Realm. More importantly, however, was *what*

I was sensing from my children.

"I will get to answering your questions, but thankfully there are plenty of others capable of guiding you through the Realms. My children, many of whom you have met before." I introduced, gesturing around. Taking the movement as their cue, the entirety of my deific children, as well as the angels and holy beasts, appeared around us in a spherical circle. My first four children appeared beside me, their changed auras making me want to demand answers from them, but I held myself back for the sake of the tour.

They could bet on an intense grilling session sooner than later though.

"We greet the guests of our Father and Mother," they said, a sentiment that was echoed by all the other gods and goddesses at once. Fu Hao and Stilicho, my two angels, appeared beside me in a flash of light, their hands clasped before them as they cast critical gazes out across the assembled origin deities.

"This is quite the change for your plus ones. Even the so-called mortal, the...Mad Scientist? I can't even tell what she is, my senses are telling me she's trying to be an immortal mortal? Also, that's a lot of gods. Also, a lot of angels. It's just a lot, and I have so many questions," Reilly deadpanned, not even bothering to pretend to drink from his gourd.

"It is true that Statera Luotian's realm is small, but I believe that it dwarfs all of ours in terms of raw energetic output, and number of high-tier beings." The Progenitor intoned. "Which, is truly, impressive."

"What the hell did you do to your mortals?" The Emperor demanded, and I grinned at him.

"That is a story for later. Right now, I want everyone to make incarnations. Your true bodies will be accompanying me to my palace, while the rest of your incarnations will be split up to accompany my children to their respective Realms. I do encourage you to explore on your own as well, if you can manage it. Just avoid Morgan's Hidden Realm unless you have me to accompany you." I warned. They immediately began doing so, multiple incarnations splitting off from each god to group up with my children and also run off into the Four Realms on their own.

Sehuyun, predictably, did no such thing. The great dragon stretched and leapt her true body over to Alexander's side, my child watching her with cool, confident eyes. She did not make any incarnations – such an action was beneath her, I assumed, but she did sneer at the two gods

clinging to Alexander's back. The God of Fire and goddess of water were stuck on Alexander's back and glanced at each other as Sehuyun approached, shrugged, then went back to flirting, scrabbling all over Alexander's back.

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

"That said, I, too will be accompanying you all through my Realms. After all, they need to tell me exactly what all has changed." I said, meeting Reika's eyes. My green-haired daughter smiled demurely at me, eyes shining with that same mischief I was so used to her having, but had been missing ever since the Sun War.

Reika had evolved, just like her other siblings. No longer was she the Goddess of Life and the Elements. Now, I could only describe her as the Goddess of Change.

Reika proudly led the way to the original Life-Giving Tree, providing an explanation to the Physical Realm's inner workings as she went. It was a great way to solidify the recent change in her own deific domain, as speaking out loud some of the things she was sensing and doing was doing wonders for her understanding. She spoke about how the Tree was once perpetually in bloom, but now would go through seasonal cycles. She talked about the ever-changing nature of the Physical Realm, and how that effected the mortals within.

And wasn't that a hot topic of conversation, the mortals. Or, more accurately, what they could do. The concept of cultivation seemed to be completely foreign to the origin deities, once again cementing how weird Mother was in how She had made the Realms and mortal life.

“As you can see below, cultivation is a process of absorbing energy to bolster one’s own soul and abilities. This energy can be taken from the outside world, but in recent years more and more are beginning to utilize the energy their own soul produces; as it is purer. The Fae, Mother’s creations, are best at this. Our peoples are catching up, however.” Reika gestured down to the planet below as she spoke, the first planet Cradle slowly rotating around its miniature sun alongside seven other uninhabitable planets. This one was almost exclusively populated by her own Elemental Race, a few of the immortal Treants living in the forests.

“That, is very, odd.” The Progenitor intoned. “Normally souls with truesouls, exclusively give energy to the world about them, not take away from it as well.”

“It does explain the power level here. The Emperor’s heaven was filled with power because his souls developed truesouls; Statera’s here has truesouls throughout all of their creations, thereby creating a massive influx of power. Even if they take some of that energy back there is still leakage, as well as the fact that the stronger the soul the more energy is produced.” MR-10 drawled, the drone it had sent on the expedition flashing its light once. Reika pouted at the robot. Couldn’t she be the one to provide explanations for now?

“What’s the end goal of it all?” Shin asked, meeting Reika’s eyes. She smiled and clasped her hands before herself, taking a little step backward to give the group a better view of Pangaea, at the base of the Tree. Surely they had already sensed the immortals and Dao Progenitors living there, though she could not blame them for the confusion. “I will get by just fine without any true gods in my own realm. Is it like that, were the mortals build up power, only to die and do it again?”

“No. The point of cultivation is summed up in two words; chasing immortality. Mother left a path open for mortals to become immortal, and not just in soul.” Reika said, nodding firmly.

“How did that come about?” Sylphina asked, the great butterfly’s antennas twitching.

“It was an accident, if I am being bluntly honest. When naming the realms I forgot to dictate that this one should have mortals in it – thereby accidentally leaving a path open to immortality. Mr.

Boxes told me I couldn't fix it, so I have to just live with it." Mother explained, folding her hands into the sleeves of Her robes.

"...so you're telling me all of this was an accident." Reilly deadpanned. Mother nodded, shrugging helplessly. Reika had known this, but seeing the others' perspectives was quite entertaining.

"That is absolutely ludicrous." The Emperor said, four arms crossed as Reilly threw his hands into the air, acting for all the world like he was just giving up. Yueya giggled, elbowing Mother gently and earning a little smirk at the beautiful woman. Reika raised an eyebrow at that little interaction, but didn't press the issue further. She had a job to do right now.

"I agree. Having gods is one thing, but there being actual mortals that ascend to something other than divinity is insane." Sylphina complained.

"Nyxteria wants a dantian!" the great bird crowed.

"It is not as bad as it seems. Take a look at Manu Ti, the floating city of cultivators beneath the boughs of my Tree." Reika said, taking a single step back and appearing over said city. Court was currently in session, the Celestial Empress having summoned the entirety of her immortal court to discuss the blooming Trees. Millions of other cultivators moved through the city and lesser floating islands as well, the great chains that held it in place since remodeled into a staircase to allow easier entry into the city. "The process of immortality comes in stages, and can effectively be broken down into different types. The energetic style of cultivation is commonly called Qi cultivation, the improvement of the fleshly body Body Cultivation, karma Karmic Cultivation, and so on. That is why Mother set up a series of Heavenly Trials for each stage and type of ascension. They effectively act as part of the divinity process – to become a god, you must throw away unfitting pieces. The Trials help mitigate or remove said pieces." Xing Wu was down there as well, somewhere. Reika was kind of disappointed, she wanted to introduce the man to the collected gods.

Ah well. She'd find him eventually, or he would find trouble himself.

Silence met her explanation, each and every one of them trying to absorb this information.

“While the process of gaining power is inherently incompatible with some of our universes, it nonetheless paints a very specific picture. My only complaint so far would be the relative size of the Four Realms; but that is resolving itself with the additional ‘seeds.’” Shin explained, unblinking eye sockets staring her direction. Reika hid her mouth behind her sleeve and giggled a little.

“You don’t know the half of it.” She said. “I hope to get another eight seeds planted before the start of the next seasonal cycle. We need to expand greatly.”

“I can be of assistance with that aspect. Your daughter Kei can tell you, but I have expertise when it comes to making extremely large universes.” Yueya offered, linking one arm in Mother’s. They smiled at each other secretly and Reika’s eyes narrowed further, her words caught in her throat for just a moment.

...their closeness would require keeping an eye on, for now.