

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

2.31 Of Skeletons and Beggars

Shin was having the time of his life. For the first time since he'd become an origin deity, he actually *wanted* to ask questions. The reticent god was practically vibrating as he moved through the Karmic Realm, this incarnation free of any guidance from the other gods of the realm. That didn't mean that he was alone – far from it, in fact. The size of Statera's Four Realms meant that Shin was almost never alone; he was always in the range of someone of power.

In this case, the someone of power was an Asura, one of the god Keilan's immortal People. She was also a being Shin had an interest in. The psychic being – for that was what it was, all othering things forgotten – pushed a boat through the sea of memories with the power of her mind, white hair flowing in the wind and grey eyes glowing. Her four arms worked on four different projects each; the hands themselves not doing the physical action, but more acting as a focus for her psychic powers to complete.

What she was working on was also of interest to Shin, but his primary focus was on the purpose of its journey. Her eyes traced the ocean below, a fishing rod in one hand sinking beneath the waters to pull out memories disguised as silver fish – memories the Asura would examine, then toss back into the ocean.

She was hunting. Hunting another soul, and delving through memories to do so. Shin observed for a while as the young Asura moved about across the ocean, choosing not to delve into the archive of memories that lay beneath Keilan's palace. Such a thing would be far easier...but this immortal, young even for her kind, elected to do this the hard way. Which meant it was not an officially approved action.

Why give souls immortality, like Asuras? Beyond that, why give those immortals such freedom? Power came with a cost, and from most worlds Shin had seen – from his own, to the other Origin Deities' universes – the cost of great power was limitation. Dedicating one's self to the Origin Deity or some other such thing; gods, in service to another god. There were clear limitations. Not so

here. Here, even angels, said to be the right arm of the gods they chose to serve, were far more *free* than Shin had ever seen.

Was this the kindness of Statera Luotian? The desire to not control their children, but to see them thrive? Was that why they left open a path to immortality for the mortals? Was this the secret to the power surging through every inch of their Realms?

Shin was not sure, but the very concept of Statera's own universe was so against his own realm he *had* to know why. Immortality was only his in the Wheel Realm. Eternity was not possible.

"This is an interesting task you are undertaking," Shin said, appearing before the asura in a swirl of black mist. His appearance had changed, disguised as one of the many Karmic Kings that inhabited the Karmic Palace. But his features were still obscured despite this, hidden behind the black mist that poured from his bones – black mist that defied perception, twisting reality so only those he wished would even notice him.

The only ones who would remember Shin was even here, disguised as he was, was the Asura and Statera Luotian themselves. And only Statera would know the truth of the action.

"My lord!" The Asura jumped, eyes flying wide with surprise, the sword that she was making with one hand jumping upward threateningly, only to lower upon seeing who he was. The power propelling the boat ceased, the simple craft drifting to a gentle stop just before where Shin floated, the black waves of the karmic ocean lapping at his feet. "I – I was just, um,"

"Searching for someone." Shin clarified, voice raspy. "Who gave you permission to do so? Is not the karmic palace's purpose to manage the karma of the entire Realms? Let them come to us. Try as they might to escape the cycle of reincarnation, only a scant few ever manage to do so. Death comes for all, and the cycle continues," The asura's expression stiffened, and she bowed her head.

“My lord, it would be wise for you to return to the palace. I apologize for forcing you to follow me out here, but it is not safe for one of your station to be wandering out here alone.” She said.

“But I am not alone. You are here, are you not?” Shin pressed. “I can sense the discontent within you. Speak the truth.”

“...it is of my own volition I am out here. I ask no others to help me.” She said simply, meeting Shin’s eyes. There was a fire there, a burning desire and firmness of action that defied any assumed judgement of Shin’s – except, he was not out here to judge her. “The Karmic Palace has its duties. My brethren have their purposes, many of whom stay to protect the Palace. I cannot stay there all the time. There are souls who accrue misdeeds like they are badges of honor, and I cannot sit idly by and watch that happen. Not knowing what they do to others. Not knowing what such actions do to their own souls. Death may come for most, but I will ensure no unworthy soul is able to defy it.”

Shin listened to her speak, but his mind was working on two other things. One was the Asura’s emotional state. The other was retracing her steps, following her aura and reading the memories she had dug up. The soul she was hunting was a powerful cultivator that had hidden herself away in the Hidden Realm, and experimented on children to lengthen her own failing lifetime. Irredeemable for many, however...

“Is that your place to judge them?” he asked. “There are others far older and wiser than you. Who are you to deny another soul the right to their own path? Their own free will?”

“Just because you have freewill doesn’t mean your actions will go unpunished.” The Asura snapped, crossing her arms defiantly. “I am no punisher. I will simply stop them.” Shin shivered at the firm declaration, a power radiating from her that reminded Shin of the other immortals, the Dao Progenitors, as Statera Luotian called them, that created their own rules beneath Statera’s own. It was small and unfocused, but the intent was there.

“Do not fear, young one. I cannot judge you. Such is not my place, for the Heavens granted everyone the right to choose their own path.” He told her, form fading. “I would wish you good fortune, but you and I both know what that will mean. So I will simply bid you farewell, and you will never see me again.” With that, Shin vanished from sight, but remained hovering over the Asura as she looked about, then resumed her self-made task with a grim expression.

He couldn't imagine his enforcers going against Ze's, and by extension, his own, will...though perhaps, in time, a few would begin to disobey orders, or act of their own volition. He had given his own creations freewill after all. That said, he was no closer the answer of his original question, despite the interesting nature of that conversation. Shin took a step back. Perhaps his self in the Physical Realm was having more luck...

A drunk beggar walked into church.

The priest turned, sweeping the marble floor in front of the golden altar as he had been, and smiled at the filthy man who stumbled through the aisle, bumping into the dark wooden pews as he went. His aura screamed of desperation and pain, the very air about him stunk of alcohol – even as he drunk deeply from a gourd, hands brushing against the worn wood of the pews. The priest paused as he watched the man approach, recognizing the depressed air of one weighed down far too much by life and all its troubles. He was no serious cultivator, dabbling in the qi side of things at best, but even he could tell that the drunkard was heavy with the troubles of life.

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His stomach twisted, not in pity, but in empathy and sympathy. A proud man rejected pity. Only a stupid man rejected empathy. He didn't know this man's story – he was dressed in absolutely filthy rags, his features smeared with dirt and grim, and while his features may have been Fae-esque, he had no horns to speak of – but his heart still reached out to the man as he set down his broom.

“Can I help you?” he asked. “The service is not for another three nights, but we welcome all who are troubled.” Mother Gi would not come to this temple to provide a sermon until the end of the week, but, even as a young priest, he could at least try to provide some comfort to this troubled soul.

“I,” the drunkard asked, tripping over his own feet and bracing himself against the frontmost pew. He took another swig of spirits from his gourd, gasping for air as he put it back down. “Am lookin’ fer somethin’ ta feel,” he mumbled. The priest frowned and put aside his broom, stepping away from the large marble altar to stand before the drunkard. He looked at him with half-lidded eyes, wrinkling his nose as he swayed back and forth before the priest.

“That’s an odd way of putting it. Sit down, friend, and speak with me. What do you seek?” The priest asked. The drunkard sighed heavily and slipped into the nearest pew, sitting with a thud as he settled in. The priest knelt before him, furrowing his brows in concern.

“Wha’s...what’s Morgan’s story, eh? Why do ‘e try’n fight Statera? Huh? Why fight the creator? Why rage against heaven, er what’ve ya calls it.” the drunkard slurred.

“Morgan...? You mean Father Luotian and Mother Statera’s Shadow?” the priest asked. The beggar nodded, taking a swig from his gourd as he considered the question. “...how much do you know of the two? This is a church dedicated to Lady Elvira, Goddess of Heaven and all that is Holy.” The priest gestured behind himself at the stained glass window that loomed above the altar, depicting the winged Goddess Elvira, flying above her Holy Mountain with light radiating off of her.

“I dunno,” the beggar drawled.

“I see. I will start from the beginning then. You know the story of Mother Statera and Father Luotian? In the beginning, they were one. Then, to create the universe, they split. Father Luotian

created the heavens and Dao, a set of overseeing guidances and laws meant to guide and protect the lesser souls of the Four Realms. Mother Statera created the earth and the cycle of reincarnation, to protect the souls from the dangers of the greater universe. But these things needed management, and so our creators made their four children.

“Father Luotian created Lady Elvira, goddess of Heaven, and Lord Alexander, the Dragon of Spirits. Two mighty protector gods, warriors and kings, to guide the children of the Physical Realm. Mother Statera birthed Lady Reika, goddess of Life, and Lord Keilan, the Karmic Judge, to guide life to greener pastures. But unbeknownst to them, a fifth child was born of the two’s energies. Morgan, the child of Mother and Father both, He who stole parts of Statera and Luotian to make himself powerful.

“Morgan was a powerful god. One who desired to devour the sun, and return all to darkness. Our Mother and Father, the Earth and Heavens, let us make our own world. They let their children create and destroy of their own desires, and live as they saw fit. Morgan detested this. They desired destruction, and to enforce the perfect vision of what Mother and Father both saw. What Morgan did not understand is that such a vision of perfection is pointless.”

“Pointless?” the beggar echoed. The priest laid a hand upon his knee, meeting the poor man’s eyes without an ounce of pity. Only what he hoped was seen as kindness, and empathy.

“Pointless. Perfection is pointless unless we, ourselves choose it. Some say that good does not exist without evil – I disagree. Good only exists because we, the Fae, and the children of the other Gods, have the capacity for evil. Every day we must choose to be good, knowing we are capable of evils. Some are not capable of such. Morgan was one of those.” He said. “I do not know why you have come here, son. I do not even know if you are older or more powerful than myself. Cultivators are such beings, and I may be just an ignorant mortal, speaking of topics I know nothing about. But I choose to believe it. I choose to believe that my goodness had meaning and purpose. That is why I follow Lady Elvira, in her church here in the Physical Realm. Because she represents the greatest good – Father Luotian’s ideal goodness. The good that is chosen over evil.”

The beggar was quiet for a long moment.

“I see.” He said, suddenly sounding sober, expression clear and the haze of alcohol vanishing from his eyes. The priest pretended not to notice, keeping his expression calm even as his heart hammered in his chest. Only a cultivator could banish alcohol from their system like that, and they were whimsical beings at best. As powerful as Mother Gi, matriarch of this church, was, she was not the most powerful cultivator around. “Morgan was a counter to Statera Luotian. Goodness forced, perfection pushed upon souls, rather than the more profound goodness chosen, and perfection strived for.”

“That is one way to put it, yes.”

“Then why worship Elvira, and not the creator?”

“There are some who do worship Father Luotian and Mother Statera. They are two halves to a single whole, after all, and the greatest being in all existence. But I cannot connect to one such as that. How can one worship the heavens? How can one give praise to a monument? Lady Elvira, Empress of Heaven and a true goddess is one I can understand and connect to.” The priest said, standing. “Unlike lord Keilan, who tries to interpret the Mother and Father’s rights and wrongs, guiding people through the effects of their actions through karma, Lady Elvira struggles to embody the best in all of us. She fights through anger and pain, in her scriptures. That is a being I can understand.” The priest said.

“You have given me much to think about.” The beggar said, standing and taking another long draught from his gourd. “Thank you.”

“You are most welcome,” the priest said, dusting off his robes and turning. By the time he reached the altar once again, picking up his broom to continue sweeping, the beggar was gone. And he smiled, content with the idea that he had helped a powerful being with their inner turmoil. Or that he had, perhaps, passed some test laid before him. Or, even lesser, had simply had a pleasant conversation about his beliefs.

And the beggar smiled to himself, having learned a thing or two about Shadows.

2.32 Of Dragons and Spears

Xing Wu, the first Dao Progenitor, the Greatest Immortal, formerly known as Dei, the founder of Manu Ti and the Celestial Empire, He Who Stood Against the Shadow, Cheifest and Greatest of Warriors, the one who Defies Heaven, was having brunch in the middle of an idyllic garden. A sandwich in one hand, dripping with juices from the succulent meat held between the bun, a cold glass filled with iced tea in the other, Xing Wu's laughter filled the garden, birds chirping and flitting about through the trees in response to his joy. So infectious was it that the very world itself bent to his laughter, the servants that called the Celestial Palace home joining in with mere smiles as they drifted away from the meeting between powerful beings.

They loved it when the man returned, only occasionally though it was. The power of the first dao progenitor, the first to have his dao recognized by the very heavens themselves as worthy, was one that influenced the world in a way similar to that of the gods. His laughter echoed in the wind. The plants brightened as the energy of his soul nourished their very roots. Food tasted better. Drink was more refreshing. People enjoyed his presence, even if they denied it. The energy he exuded attracted souls and spirits alike, for it was so pure and bright that others wanted to be around it. To absorb it as their own.

And a Dragon took notice.

"Easy now, Wu," Inesa, Goddess of Light, Dao Progenitor of Hearth and Home, said softly, raising an eyebrow at the fur-clad man. He grinned at her, mischief twinkling in his eyes as he took a massive bite of his sandwich, juices spilling down his chin to drip into his lap.

"No," he replied around a mouthful of meat, intentionally smacking his lips in the way he knew it would annoy her. Juices fell into his lap alongside the pickled veggies crammed into the oversized

sandwich, all but staining the furs that hung from his body. Inesa frowned at him while his old friend, Alanna, chuckled, hiding her mouth behind the sleeve of her snow-white robes. Her own sandwich lay on a plate before her as they lounged in a circle of flowers, cut daintily into bite-sized pieces.

“Idiot,” Inesa muttered, not unkindly, and Xing Wu’s grin widened as he swallowed. She took a sip of her own tea, holding Xing Wu’s gaze while Alanna watched them with a small smirk.

“You two are sickeningly sweet together.” She said, and Xing Wu flashed her a wink to hide his embarrassment, no longer meeting Inesa’s eyes. “Tell me, when is the wedding?”

At this, Inesa turned crimson and Xing Wu laughed awkwardly, shifting in his seat. Inesa’s gaze was an intense one, despite her own embarrassment. He could feel her eyes boring into him, asking him that exact same question. They had been officially dating for a long, long while now. Practically ever since he had darkened her doorstep, after regaining his memories as Dei. But how could he tell her? How could he tell her that he wasn’t ready yet to marry her – not because he was afraid of such a thing, he was certain that marrying Inesa would be the happiest day of his life – but for another, far stupider reason.

How could he describe to her that he felt inadequate? He was a powerful being...in the Physical Realm. But he couldn’t climb the Life-Giving Tree. He couldn’t reach the Heaven Realm. He couldn’t descend to the Karmic Realm, and he couldn’t swim the Spirit River. Not like her. She was a god, and he was just starting to understand what that meant.

Maybe it was insecurities talking. He didn’t think it was. There was a rage within him that roared against the idea of marrying Inesa without being worthy of her – his own definition of worthy. He would not be the one to drag her down. And by the Heavens, by the weight of his own Dao, he could not allow himself to be drug up to the top by her, for all that she would be willing to. He loved her for that, but...he would not demand she sacrifice herself in such a way.

Some small part of him understood why he felt this way, but it was a part of himself he could not recognize, lest all the power said piece held be wasted. If he did not feel this way, he may never reach his greatest height. Inesa was what drove him now.

Oh, if Fang Xu and Celene could see me now. He realized, turning his attention away from her and taking a long draught of his iced tea. Part of him wished it was booze, but Inesa frowned upon the substance, so he resisted the urge whenever he could. *The things I do for love. And they thought I would never find someone.*

“Xing Wu, you need to listen to me.” Inesa said with a shake of her head. “It’s what I’ve been trying to tell you and Empress Alanna for the past few years. Statera Luotian brought guests –“

He sensed it, in that next half a moment. Before Inesa did, before Alanna did. The heavens stiffened prior to even the energy moving – he noticed when Statera Luotian had returned, for the world felt more...*directed*, with them present – skies darkening as fire streamed from above –

“FUCK OFF!” he bellowed, a spear of raw intent springing to life in his hands as he leapt skyward, attempting to bat away the fiery ball of death that hurtled toward the garden. Only, his spear met air. The flames he had felt were non-existent, the darkening of the skies a figment of his imagination.

“Xing,” Inesa started from where she stood below, and he flinched, gaze flicking back and forth, teeth bared, spear held in one hand. The raw energy it was comprised of crackled and wavered unstably as his mind doubted his actions – but his instincts did not. His gut twisted and churned, promising him that there was something looming above him. Something powerful. Something dangerous. An existence to not only defy that which was the peak of this universe, but challenge it.

“All he did was sense me, and his first reaction was to attack?” a voice boomed, darkness swirling around every word. Each letter, each intonation, was wreathed in power, hatred, and a derision that only came from a giant looking down upon an ant that attempted to bite through its iron-hard skin. Xing Wu whirled, levelling his spear at the speaker, and froze in place.

Orange eyes glowed in a black mist, darkness heralding the coming wrath of a volcano.

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“You were right, I do like this one.” The blackness stated. “Let us see what happens when I...”

A claw struck. It was the size of a mountain and twice its weight, yet nonetheless Xing Wu’s battle intent soared into the heavens as he swung his spear, muscles bulging as he struck with all his might – and found himself wanting. His spear shattered as he was sent hurtling toward the earth, his fall cushioned by Inesa’s magic and the grace of something else. The skies themselves rumbled, divine power condensing in the skies above as Xing Wu surged to his feet spitting blood, his Dao Star shining brilliantly as he called upon its power. A thousand spears bloomed around him, ready for his use, his soul made manifest.

He had landed in a meadow, far away from the garden he had been in, sent hurtling miles through the sky from the mighty blow. Manu Ti was on the very edge of his senses, having suffered nothing from the clashing of powers. Such was the disparity between their levels. It could send him flying with even Alanna being none the wiser – save for his sudden disappearance.

“Xing Wu, calm.” Inesa said, laying a hand upon his shoulder. His entire body remained tense and at the ready, his energies coiled tightly around himself and Inesa, daring anything to come closer. Despite her words, despite her attempts to comfort him, he did not calm. He could feel the being’s interest. Its...*rage*. “This is what I –”

“Is this what they meant, when they said ‘dragon amongst men?’ He does not have the body, but he has the spirit of a dragon.” The being mused, and even Inesa stiffened this time as the light of the Realm Sun began to fade. Xing Wu could feel his friend’s rage at the concept – that something could

blot out even Fang Xu's light, before its time to fade had come – even as the world vanished. The land itself disappeared into darkness and fire, a great dragon, very much unlike those he knew, letting its shape be known in the darkness. Its teeth gleamed like swords. Its scales were as dense and large as shields. Leathery wings loomed and four great limbs crushed the ground beneath its feet. Very much not the serpentine dragons he knew. And it towered over Xing Wu and Inesa both.

Xing Wu breathed. He could smell it. *Shadow*. But also *strength*. This dragon was everything he strived to overcome.

“Enough.” Inesa's voice was gentle and calm as she stepped forward, holding up one hand to the skies above. Soft white light spilled from her outstretched palm, driving back the darkness and setting even the Dragon to wincing. Its gaze, fixated upon Xing Wu as it had been, shifted to Inesa – and Xing Wu could not allow that.

“No.” He spoke, stepping forward to stand beside her, each step bringing down the weight of the world upon his shoulders. The Dragon's attention once more shifted to him, and Inesa frowned, her hair flaring out behind her head like a halo.

“Xing Wu, please, stop. This is not a fight.” She said softly, then turned to the dragon. “And you, cease as well.”

“Come with me.” The Dragon rumbled, glaring at Inesa. Xing Wu's heart skipped a beat, his spear haft creaking beneath the strength of his grip. Lightning crackled about him as he stepped forward once again, as if to move in front of Inesa, but a gentle hand on his chest stopped him.

“Fine.” Inesa said, turning to face him. Her expression was one of calm, and kindness, as she placed a soft kiss against his lips. “Breathe, my dear. I will be back soon. These are guests of Statera Luotian. They will do no harm, here.”

And, just like that, she was gone with the darkness and the dragon. Xing Wu's breath released from his chest as birds began to chirp once again, bugs buzzing in his ears, none the wiser for how close they had come to death. How near to destruction they had been, from that dragon's mere presence. Xing Wu grit his teeth and turned his gaze heavenward.

He didn't inherently trust Statera Luotian, but he did trust Inesa. That didn't mean it didn't gall him to once again be reminded of his relative powerlessness. Sure, he was the greatest cultivator in the entirety of the Four Realms, but what was that to the gods? He pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a shaky breath, attempting to force some of his tension to flee his body.

...nope. His adrenaline was still spiking through his system. He needed to do something about this. Where was Fu Hao when he actually needed her?

"That was not very nice. You could have just come to fetch me." Inesa complained, riding atop Alexander as she was as they flew to the Heaven Realm, where Statera Luotian was waiting. Sehuyun snorted in amusement, glancing back at where the *dragon amongst men* shouted his defiance to the sky. There was such anger in him. Such *resolve*. She adored every inch of it, but she was starting to understand Statera Luotian's point of view as well.

The idyllic picture of him in the garden was what gave the warrior such power. The peace gave him the drive to end war. His so-called dao was one of the Warrior, and when battle called, he had to answer. So she called him, as was her nature.

"And miss the opportunity to antagonize him?" She rumbled, teeth bared in amusement. "You should thank me. What do you think he'll do? And when you reunite, it will be oh so sweet, will it not?"

“I only agreed to this because he was stagnating.” Alexander muttered beneath his breath. Sehuyun snorted out a laugh, knowing the dragon knew exactly of what she spoke. His own transformation was not complete – he had swallowed his divinity, returning to the Truth that was the essence of a dragon, but had not yet fully assimilated it.

“I don’t care. You should let me go clear this up. It’s unfair to him to keep creating these misunderstandings. He was on such a good streak, too, having calmed down so much...” Inesa complained, hiding her face in her hands.

Sehuyun did not reply, though Alexander did. Instead, she turned her attention to the young goddess of light, whose personal domain was quiet and understanding, yet stronger than any bedrock. Originally she had been after Xing Wu, the great warrior Alexander had claimed to exist within the Realms. But Inesa intrigued her. The strength within her was no lesser than any dragon’s.

She was beginning to understand what Statera Luotian’s obsession with their children was.

Alexander and his creations were the only true Dragons in the entirety of the Four Realms. Everything else only had pieces of it. Moments where they ascended to become the ultimate being, more than Fae, more than mortal, more than god. Just like Statera Luotian had done.

But that was the point. That was the *point*. Every person in these Realms, be they the direct children of Statera Luotian or grandchildren, had that little shard within them. Even Alexander had shards of the other beings within him – he was not *just* a dragon, just as the mortals were not *just* Fae.

But they had the capacity to become that.

“I have to wonder,” she mused, teeth bared in a feral grin of excitement as they breached the barrier between the Physical and Heaven Realms, holy power washing over her scales even as her wings darkened the ground below. Immediately her shadow was countered by the entirety of the Four Realms – Inesa, illuminating, the Realm Sun, burning, the Lunar Star, guiding, and even the individuals themselves rejecting her darkness. It pleased her to no end. Statera Luotian had made a world of warriors and poets, a world of mice and dragons – where dragons could become mice, and mice, dragons.

“Wonder what?” Alexander asked.

“If this is what Statera Luotian can create, if this is what the children of the highest Heaven can do,” she elaborated, a possibility occurring within her that had never occurred before. Her power shifted with the realization. “What could my own children be?”

2.33 Void and Divinity

“She didn’t do anything too bad, did she Inesa?” I asked, hovering over the goddess of light while Sehuyun sulked off to the side. Yueya giggled at me as I fretted, the Dragon grumbling as I circled Inesa, inspecting her aura. “Quiet, you. I said not to antagonize anyone too much.” Xing Wu was none the worse for wear, and in fact I daresay he benefited from the encounter, but that was beside the point. She should know better than to mess with another dragon’s treasure.

My treasure, in this case, just happened to be my children, which just so happened to hit my parental instincts as well. Of *course* I was going to get upset.

“Oh hush, she’s fine. Worrywort.” Sehuyun grouched, sulking in the corner of my palace. I narrowed my eyes at her, fully prepared to launch into another lecture but biting my tongue nonetheless. Fu Hao had already flown off to Xing Wu to explain the situation better and ensure he knew Inesa was, in fact, alright and had not, in fact, been kidnapped by an evil dragon. I had personally seen to it, and though he had calmed down once Fu Hao arrived he was still very upset. I couldn’t really blame him. His senses weren’t powerful enough to see through Sehuyun’s Shadow, so all he’d seen was Inesa willingly leave with what appeared to be another kind of Morgan.

Which brought us to here. To the instant after I had chewed Sehuyun out and called all the rest of the Origin Deities back to my palace.

“I do worry more than is healthy, you are correct, but this is not your demesne. This is not a domain in which you can do as you please – nor can I.” I chided, shaking my head and setting a hand on Inesa’s shoulder. The young goddess patted my hand comfortingly. “That is the point. Next time, please refrain from causing such a scene. Look at Shin and Reilly; they were doing much the same, but keeping things calm and civil and not making any true waves. Xing Wu is going to be a bear to deal with, with all the questions he is sure to ask.” Not that I was going to answer them, he wasn’t ready for such things, but I didn’t want to be asked them in the first place.

“You cannot do whatever you wish in your own world? Ridiculous.” Sehuyun scoffed, and I scowled at her, though my next words were cut off by the arrival of the other origin deities. The Emperor strode in front, golden skin gleaming as he spoke with Elvira about potential trade deals and other such things. MR-10 spoke in low tones with Gilles, the god of shadows, the machine god trading various veiled hints of information with my child. Nyxteria spoke with Argent, the god of metal, about crystals and other such things, while each of the others had discovered their own god to have a conversation with. Only Yueya’s main body had remained with me as we discussed various topics and artworks within my palace.

She was most interested in my philosophy towards my own people’s growth...which made sense, considering the problem her One World had. That, and talking with her was relaxing.

“Welcome back,” I greeted instead of snapping at Sehuyun again. “I trust you all had a decent time here?”

“Indeed, I, did,” the Progenitor said, the ball of light that was his body pulsing. “Your Four Realms are not unlike my Garden, in that you cultivate your people, to a desired outcome.”

“Just without the whole destruction process. You are far more focused on eternity. Even if it was accidental, leaning into it was the wisest option.” Rising Wind, Crashing Waves agreed, the great stag nodding his head. “And I hope you appreciate our efforts to aide you.”

“Indeed I do.” I nodded, glancing at my workshop. My gaze passed through the walls of my palace to observe a few of my incarnations hard at work there, setting up a few last minute, minor blueprints and changes before everyone left. There had been plenty of good ideas for how to get the Realms to grow faster, including adding “fertilizer” to the mix for the growing Trees and Mountains. Fertilizer that was, in this case, assigning Immortals, gods, or Dao Progenitors as the sub-guardians of each individual Realm.

Not unlike the Emperor’s domain, which had barons and dukes managing territories, this would have people and gods managing entire Trees, or Mountains, with myself and my children overseeing major events. That had easily been the most interesting point of discussion.

“It is about time for us to all return, however.” Shin noted, the skeletal god stepping forward with a slight bow. “As I am sure you are as well, we are anxious to get back to our realms and begin our own changes.”

“Of course.” I agreed, stepping forward and into the crowd, leading the way through them to the front doors. “Unless there is anything else you require of me, I will lead you to the portal.”

“I just have one question.” MR-10 intoned. I paused my walk to turn to the inverted pyramid, clasping my hands before me. “You acted as if Morgan was some great revelation for the rest of us, yet we have not seen the spider-wolf nor have you truly made a big deal of it. Why the cryptic responses?” I considered the question for a moment, mulling over what and how to describe this.

“You should all be able to see the aftermath of Morgan’s actions, still. Morgan was no mere rebel, or casual influence. I will not explain what they are to me, as that is personal; but, through the hints I have given you, you should be able to look within and see for yourselves what the answer is. That is all I can say on the matter; personal discovery is important on this one.” I advised, casting

my senses outward. Morgan was still there, hiding in its Hidden Realm. In fact, I could even feel the wolf peering through the veil to listen to our conversation, though none of the others seemed to notice.

Or if they did, they were very good at hiding it. Morgan had to hide from my eyes since the dawn of creation, so it wouldn't surprise me if they truly had not noticed.

"So be it." Rising Wind said with a nod. "Lead the way, then."

Chatter filled the air as I waved my hand, opening the roof of my palace to reveal the portal back to the meeting room. It was mostly small comments, discussions about what they were going to change and small things about what they discovered in my Realm – usual stuff. It wasn't until we reached the portal, however, that we all paused.

"I suppose this will be farewell, then?" Yueya asked softly, her plus one, Astraea, standing close beside.

"For now," I said, gesturing toward the portal. "This is only the first meeting – I am certain we will all meet again soon." Everyone moved forward as one, myself not intending to enter, when said portal snapped shut with barely a sound. I stared at the spot it had been, mouth agape.

Ding!

{[Meeting Concluded!]}

[With the first meeting between origin deities nearing its end, I will soon teleport you all back to your collective Realms to continue your goals. [Stage 3] will begin shortly after. First, however, there is a final test for the Origin Deities, and the Origin Deities alone. Your respective plus-ones will be returned to their home universes post-haste, before you are transported to the testing grounds.]

[Teleporting in three seconds.]}

“Uh,” was the only sound I managed to get out as, one-by-one, the plus ones were whisked away back to their home universes. The other origins and I exchanged confused looks.

“Nyxteria is confused,” Nyxteria started – and then, suddenly, we were standing in the middle of the Void. A shiver ran down my spine at the abruptness of it all; the Overgod consistently surprised me with how absurdly powerful they were. There had been no indication of the coming teleport, and for me and my eyes to not notice anything, nor to even feel the teleport itself, spoke volumes. “...Nyxteria is even more confused now.” The bird complained.

“Patience. I am sure, the Great One, will explain it all soon.” The Progenitor said.

I spread my arms a little, shuddering at the tenseness I felt. The Void felt...disturbed, here. It was not quiet and silent like I was used to. It almost felt like the nothing was becoming something...oh shit.

Ding!

Why can't I sense the coming announcements right now? Is Mr. Boxes doing this on purpose?

{[The testing will now begin. You have exactly thirty minutes to prepare yourselves before I summon the test. Together, you all must defeat or repel a Void Beast. Its power will be enough to equal all eleven of you.]}

Silence reigned, and I heaved a sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. Thirty minutes to figure out a battle plan. Great.

It would have been nice to know this was coming beforehand, but that may be the point. We will, eventually, need to learn to react to Void-related threats on our own, without any prior warning. I still feel like I spoke for everyone though, when I said;

"You have got to be kidding me."

Xing Wu felt Statera Luotian leave. Not many beings could, only the angels and gods of the Four Realms, but he was starting to become attuned enough to things that he could feel it. To him, it felt like the entire world exuded the nervous energy of a child, anxious that their parent has left them alone, yet ready to explore things on their own. Where or why the creator god was leaving the universe again he wasn't sure, but what he'd been able to glean since Inesa's faux kidnapping said that He was exploring the vastness beyond reality....whatever that meant. He gripped his spear and shook his head, standing from where he'd been crouched, preparing himself for his own coming journey.

He hadn't been planning on the creator god leaving the universe once again, but the timing was impeccable. This wouldn't be a secret, but, well. He preferred to act on his own, and didn't want to answer a million questions.

“Are you ready?” Stilicho, one of Statera Luotian’s two angels, asked. The silver-skinned being was waiting patiently for him, standing beside a tree with arms crossed, and he shook his head.

“One moment. I have one last thing to try,” and he closed his eyes, focusing his energies and qi. He knew these techniques were possible, all the gods used them, but he had yet to hear of a cultivator that had completed a cloning technique. His qi surged beneath his skin, the shape of his soul as clear as day. All he had to do was separate a piece of himself...

A sliver of his soul separated from his main body, followed by a mass of elemental qi. It was a delicate process, sweat beading Xing Wu’s brow as he willed the energies to congeal, to form a body and dantian, his soul giving it a perfect frame to form around.

After what seemed like far too long Xing Wu opened his eyes, breathing heavily and meeting his own eyes. A perfect copy of himself stood opposite, watching blank-faced as Xing Wu regained control of his faculties. Their connection was odd. Like he was looking at himself from both sets of eyes – his pale complexion, messy black hair, sharp eyes, the raggedy furs that were his constant clothing identical on both – yet neither at the same time. Two sets of thoughts echoed in his mind, each their own and connected, but neither in control over the other's.

He was him, and him was he. It was nothing short of disorienting. Inesa could make a dozen copies of herself, how did she deal with it?

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“Now I’m ready. You have enough power to get to where you need to, right?” Xing Wu asked.

“Assuming no one bars my path, yes,” his copy replied, clenching his hand experimentally. Xing Wu nodded as he turned to Stilicho, the angel watching with furrowed brows as he walked forward, his incarnation simply watching.

“Impressive. What is he going to do?” Stilicho asked.

“Hopefully not get himself killed.” Xing Wu grumbled, giving only a half-truth as he rolled his shoulders in preparation for the journey. “Thanks for doing this. Wasn’t sure how to get past the barrier without causing a fuss.”

“Think nothing of it. I must confess to my own curiosity as to how your meeting with her will go. She is an intelligent one, but I do not know what to make of her.” Stilicho replied, rising into the air. Xing Wu followed, his cultivation fueling his flight as he followed behind the angel, the lands of Pangaea blurring past as they shot through the air. Xing Wu smiled to himself as he observed the landscape below blurring by, mountains and deserts transforming to tundras and plains then back again. The Life-Giving Tree slowly shrank behind them as they left it behind, heading to the very edge of the universe.

He remembered a time when Pangaea felt small, right after his ascension to an Immortal. Now, it had grown so much it was hardly recognizable.

“We don’t get to talk much, do we?” Xing Wu asked after a few more minutes of silence. “Usually it’s Fu Hao who’s dealing with me.”

“My sister is the more aggressive of the two of us. Her temperament is preferred for handling one such as yourself. Currently, however, she is helping train some of the Heavenly Host.” Stilicho replied succinctly. “Do not misunderstand, I have the extent of your measure, and would not do this if I did not think highly of you. Recognizing when one has reached the end of their rope is an

important quality; I am glad you overcame your initial burst of defiance. Too much rejection of the Heavenly Dao can be just as harmful as over reliance; it is a guide, nothing more.”

Xing Wu laughed, flushing a little. That was fair enough – he had been a little aggressive about his so-called rejection of the heavenly dao. But he’d calmed down quite a bit since then. It’d been, what, nearly a hundred thousand years or something? Time like that changed a man.

“It’s not like I accept it either, though,” he argued back. Stilicho hummed and fell silent once again. *Far more taciturn than Fu Hao*. He noted, but nonetheless did not break the silence.

Their journey was a long one. It took only a few days to reach the edge of Pangaea, which was fast for Xing Wu but relatively slow for Stilicho he was sure, and he couldn’t help the smile the came over his face as he watched the land give way to space.

Pangaea fell away as the duo hurtled into the dark vastness of space, toward the miniature suns around which small planets circled. Xing Wu had explored out here a little before, of course, and he still found the formations fascinating. Nebulas and asteroids, comets with tails of ice that occasionally held curious cultivation materials, planets made entirely of gas, and planets that held life. Though at his stage of cultivation he had no need to eat or sleep, Xing Wu still made a point to drag Stilicho down to one or two of these small planets to eat the local delicacies.

Enjoying the mortal world was something Inesa had instilled into him, and it had its merits.

One month into the journey, his incarnation met up with Inesa again. She assured him everything was alright, but that she had to be away for a while to perform some of her duties as the goddess of light. This, Xing Wu was ok with. Getting apparently kidnapped by a literal fucking shadow dragon? Not so much. But in truth he was just glad to hear that she was ok from her own mouth, and let it slide.

And as soon as she left, his incarnation moved to chase after his own, semi-secret goal. There was only so much he could really hide from the gods and spirits.

Xing Wu's main body, and this journey, while important, was but a distraction, to help draw most of the attention.

It took another three months to reach the edge of the Physical Realm, and the make-shift barrier the gods had created. Light combined with shadow and lightning to form a curtain that blocked any further passage for anyone below Xing Wu's level of strength. Which was every single mortal and immortal still in the physical realm. Even he would struggle to pass through it, and forcing his way through would likely cause more problems than it was worth.

Stilicho pressed his hand upon the barrier, and it split for him like a curtain, revealing the great beyond. Power was thin out here, the energy discordant and weak. Yet there was a hint of it growing stronger and, more importantly, Xing Wu laid his eyes upon the true purpose of this journey. A baby Life-Giving Tree grew in the middle of the nothingness, smaller even than the one from when he was a boy as Dei.

A part of him was certain that there was a Heaven above the tree, and a Valley below, but all he could see for now was the Tree, and a little stream of spirits circling it. Gasses circled the tree, swirling and slowly trying to condense into one of the miniature suns that circled the original Tree. Would this be the center of an entirely new area?

"So it is true. You're expanding the Realms." He mused, stepping through the barrier.

"Might you have an interest in taking command over one of them?" Stilicho asked, letting the curtain fall shut behind them. Xing Wu's steps faltered as he glanced over his shoulder at the angel, who waited patiently for an answer.

“Maybe someday. As I am now, though, I am lacking to lead an entirely new Tree.” He said, shaking his head. Maybe Alanna, his successor for the Celestial Palace, would be willing. But not him. Not now. Xing Wu turned his gaze forward, to the base of the baby Tree where a little Pangaea was forming. “Where is she?”

“There, at the base. Guiding spirits in making a formation to aid in growth.” Stilicho pointed. Xing Wu nodded and shot forward, crossing the remaining distance as swiftly as possible. His passing did not so much as disturb the various gasses of creation, gaze locking onto the young avian girl that tended to the base the moment she came into view.

She was...frumpy looking, in his opinion. Not outrageously beautiful like most cultivators tended to be, especially ones on the cusp of immortality like her, and certainly not tidy. Her hair was pulled back into a hasty bun, dirt and various elemental essences staining her face and clothes. The feathers of her wings were matted and covered in twigs and leaves, twitching occasionally as she muttered to herself. Xing Wu came to a hover above her, hesitating for just a moment as she continued to work. Then, without a word, he descended to her side.

“Do you need help?” He asked. The woman identified as the Mad Scientist lifted her head to look at him, eyes dull and lifeless behind her thick, round glasses.

“Another one, come to check up on me? This time an immortal. Fine. Do your thing, then begone.” She muttered, turning back to her work. Xing Wu frowned. He’d come here to seek some answers from someone all the spirits and powerful beings had been in a tizzy over. He didn’t expect to find someone so...defeated looking.

His Dao throbbed, the Dao Star that hung in the sky above shining down upon him for a brief moment to allow him to see. And see he did. Her soul shone with fear and desperation, hands gripping strands of energy that no mere mortal should be able to grasp, tying them together with a surprising deftness. But, most importantly, he saw her rejection. Of all that is, of all that was, almost as if she existed separate from the Heavenly Dao itself. It was different than him, who denied the Heavenly Dao not out of fear, but out of desire to walk his own path.

She was just disconnected. Disjointed. *Separate*, despite the power gently trying to wrap itself around her. Not even he felt this...off.

The moment passed, and Xing Wu let out a breath, kneeling beside the woman and grasping one of the strands of energy she was struggling with.

“Allow me. Just tell me what to do, I am uncertain.” He said softly. She glanced at him, eyebrows furrowed, and he smiled a little. He didn’t have the words to describe to her what he felt just a moment ago. He wasn’t a god, who could find such a lecture and make it compelling. He was just a simple man. “My name is Xing Wu. I came here seeking to pick your brain a little, but I think some gardening would do me good. Forgive me, though, for I am but a simple warrior and do not understand the intricacies at work here. It might be high time I learned.”

The woman was quiet for a moment longer. “I am called the Mad Scientist. I have another name, but it is forgotten. And I suppose I could use another pair of hands. Tie that here, and we’ll move on to the next spot.” Xing Wu did as he was told, following along the simple instructions. And a warrior learned to garden.

Xing Wu’s incarnation hauled itself hand-over-hand through the narrow stone passageway, being extra careful not to use too much power so as not to draw unwanted attention. With all eyes on his main body and the meeting with the so-called Mad Scientist, and after getting Inesa’s blessing for this matter, it should be a simple task to reach his goal.

It wasn’t imperative that he keep this meeting secret, but it was preferred. She still had a stigma on her name, even if Statera Luotian had set her free. Even amongst the gods. *Just please keep your mouth shut, Aerial*. He prayed, certain the wind goddess of secrets already knew.

With a grunt Xing Wu hauled himself through the last little opening, tumbling forward into a little field of flowers hidden in a deep cave. The roots of the Life-Giving Tree stretched through the place, great golden chains, once used to bind her, now hanging uselessly midair. Yet despite that, She still sat in her same spot, reading a little book laid out on her lap.

“You are not welcome here,” Thyia, the once-goddess of suicide, said stiffly as he pushed himself to his feet, dusting off his furs. “Especially not an incarnation. Disrespectful.”

“Sorry, it’s the only way I could do this without an escort.”

“You did it before, as a mere soul.” Thyia accused.

“Was I really alone then?” he countered, and at this the dark haired goddess paused, looking up at him with furious, dark eyes. The book in her lap snapped shut and she stood, a chaotic, dangerous aura flaring out from her.

“What do you want.” She snapped, and he smiled to himself. What he wanted was the same thing he had been searching for the past two times he’d visited the goddess, though he hadn’t been aware of what he’d been looking for those times. Even if the second had only been because she guided him to her. He walked a path no one else did – seeking divinity as a mortal. The other gods had practically cultivated their godhood, like Fang Xu and Celene now did. They were unlike him.

Even Thyia was unlike him, but from what he understood, she was the closest to his current situation.

He bowed.

“Thyia, I come seeking guidance. I hope you can help me on my path to divinity.”

2.34 Versus the Void

The battle timer had already restarted twice due to us being unable to come up with a coherent battle plan. It shouldn't have been unexpected. This many big personalities in one place, with gods who were used to taking eons for plans to come to full fruition, was certain to produce its own issues. It was a miracle we had come this far in the time we had; which I wasn't sure hadn't been the point.

We would need to react quickly to Void Beasts in order to minimize damage. The Paradox that had attacked the Four Realms had popped up in an instant; the rogue god attacking had given me something of a warning and because of that I had been prepared to fight, but the Paradox itself had been instantaneous. It was unbelievably kind of Mr. Boxes to give us this much warning when thought of this way. Thankfully, though, we were almost ready. Barring a few last minute complaints from the others, which I attributed to the heightened tensions between us.

“Why not let us fight a juvenile first?” the Emperor asked.

“At your power levels, juveniles would not present enough of a challenge or a proper warning for the dangers of the Void. The lesson would be missed.” Mr. Boxes responded, kind enough to let me see through his favored status windows. I nodded in agreement with him – I had grown much since my first encounter with a Paradox. Would I call it easy to defeat one now? I wasn't sure, especially injured as I still was, and would trust Mr. Boxes' judgement on the matter. But with eleven of us together? That should make a juvenile relatively trivial.

“Do you have any final tips for how to defeat these beasts?” Shin questioned.

“The Void consumes. One method of calming a Void Beast involves feed it enough power that it returned to the Void, sated. You must not use this method. It is a last-ditch effort that will leave you drained or crippled; such as what happened to Statera. In their case, not even losing an arm was enough to put it down for good.” Mr. Boxes replied.

“...will we be in mortal danger?” Sylphina asked, the butterfly once more confirming the answer we all already knew.

“I will protect you from death. But only once. When you are ‘killed’ I will teleport you away to observe the rest of the battle. If all of you perish this will be counted as failure. The Void is not to be trifled with, and it is important that you understand this.” Mr. Boxes said. Oh, good. We had a safety net. *That also means we can be a little more reckless and experimental in our strategies.* I mused. I'd already defeated a juvenile before, of course, but at the cost of an arm and some of my power. If there was ever a time to try out new things and try to find a way around sacrificing pieces of myself to stop the Void, it would be here and now.

Suddenly, I was feeling much better about this.

“I am at a severe disadvantage here.” Yueya complained. “Without my other two halves, I am far weaker than I should be.”

“This is acceptable. Yueya and Rising Wind, Crashing Waves' disadvantages at being away from their home universes has been take into consideration. Are you prepared?” Mr. Boxes pressed.

I, for one, was. My role had been decided upon at the very beginning of the discussion, and had not changed since, just as Sehuyun's role had never been in doubt. At least, to the others my role had been clear. Sehuyun and I would be the among the most offensively dedicated Origin Deities, the claws and spear of this collection of beings. While I had initially wanted to argue with this, as my

abilities were not solely geared toward attacking, I eventually had to concede when Yueya pointed out my injury. I was a soldier without his shield-arm. Attacking would be no problem, but defending would be far more difficult.

Yet another reason for me to resolve my injury as soon as possible once this was all said and done.

The others were far more argumentative about their positions, but we had eventually come to a conclusion.

MR-10, Sylphina, and Reilly would function as supporters, effectively switching between whatever role was needed, bolstering allies or defending them as needed. Shin, the Progenitor, and Nyxteria would act as defensive units, primarily redirecting attacks and such, while the Emperor would join Sehuyun and I on offense. The other two; Rising Wind, Crashing Waves, and Yueya would be acting as tacticians. Their primary goal was to figure out a way to put down the Paradox then act upon that information, assuming none of us figured it out first. They would, of course, be aiding the rest of us in any capacity necessary; even swapping in if we were starting to grow tired and needed a break. Or in the event that anyone 'died,' they would jump in and fill that deity's role.

It was an imperfect setup, especially considering we had no way of knowing if the Void would have anything resembling an 'attack,' but one we would have to rely on. *Why am I not part of the reserves?* A small part of myself wondered, knowing that my eyes would be invaluable in figuring out the Paradox's weakness. But I knew the answer to that, as well. I was the only one here with combat experience regarding Paradoxes. Of course I was put on the front lines.

"Just get on with it," Sehuyun growled, shifted beside me with wings flared. Fire burned in the depths of her chest, glowing with a fierce orange light. I took a deep breath in the silence that followed her declaration, my own power surging forth. A spear of golden light formed in my right hand, my prosthetic arm conjuring a shield.

The others settled in around me, the Emperor standing to my left side wielding a gleaming golden, gem-encrusted great sword, while Sehuyun crawled up on my right, still growling. I leveled my

spear and lifted my shield, the construct feeling indescribably heavy to my false arm, my injury throbbing in anticipation of the fight to come.

Sweat beaded my brow as the seconds ticked by, time itself countable only due to my own power and those beside me. Nothingness lay before me, and –

“BRACE!” I shouted, leaping forward and bashing with my shield to meet the incoming blow.

Next thing I knew, I was hurtling backward, golden blood leaking from between my lips and shield shattered as I crashed through the ranks of the Origin Deities, sending them scattering. My power flared, fracturing slightly at the destructive nature of the Paradox as I skidded to a halt.

“Statera!” Yueya shouted, concern laced through her voice.

“FOCUS!” Golden blood sprayed from my mouth at my bellow, digging my feet in and righting myself as I simultaneously hurled my spear forward, lacing it with all the power of creation I could muster. Sehuyun roared and the Emperor bellowed as my spear crashed into the invisible, nigh incomprehensible beast, exploding with raw power as it stalled its movements momentarily.

And in that split second, I got a good look at the being. Though look was the wrong word; it had no form. Not really. As far as I could tell the entirety of the Void before me had come alive, a massive blob of raw destructive intent. We were in the Void. And it took issue with that.

“CLEAVE!” The Emperor bellowed, swinging his massive great sword. The Void itself split, stars and nebulous gasses radiating out from where he had cut it open – only for the cut to be consumed in its entirety, a hexagonal shield of green protecting the Emperor from the Void’s retaliation. The shield shattered almost immediately, but it gave the Emperor enough time to carve another slice into the Void and give himself some breathing room.

Meanwhile, Sehuyun breathed fire. The destructive orange flame howled as it streamed forth, destroying and creating in equal measure, whittling away at the Void's intent – and that was all the time for analysis I had, as I hurled myself forward with another spear in hand.

A sphere of white and black appeared before me as I touched the Void's intent, my divine definition of Balance colliding with the Void's destructive nature – only to come up short, the sphere destroyed in an instant. There was nothing to balance here. The intent of the Void was simplistic to the utmost degree, and to even call it intent was a bold-faced lie. This was what the Void did. There was no fighting it. Only accepting the inevitability of destruction.

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“Begone!” I shouted, hurling my spear once more before settling on a different tactic. MR-10's drones shot through the Void above me, bombarding the beast with missiles that detonated with the force of a supernova, rattling the beast. My hands reached out, physically grabbing the Void, my power crackling as my energy was consumed by it. Lines of golden light radiated out from me, splitting apart the Void, trying to separate out its destructive impulses –

A glittering shield of silver light formed above me in a dome, giving me just enough warning to leap away from a cascading wave that threatened to consume me. A shiver ran down my spine at the close encounter, nodding my thanks to Reilly who nodded back in turn.

“Creation is its counter!” the Progenitor commanded, forgoing his usual halting speech pattern considering the urgency of the situation. “We must transform it into something physical!”

“Elemental energies are the easiest to transform it into!” Rising Wind, Crashing Waves commanded, stepping up to take the place of Sylphina, who fell back, the chaos butterfly practically

spent. She had been protecting Sehyun this entire time, but the Dragon knew no word for retreat. Protecting her had spent the butterfly. “But more complex things are more effective!”

“Easier said than done!” The Emperor bellowed, leaping backward and slashing again with his sword.

“Watch out!” Shin barked, raising his skeletal hands. I, too, stepped forward to intervene, but was too late. The Emperor vanished in an instant, his sword cleaving one final line through the Void Being before vanishing entirely. I cursed as I darted forward again, willing power to surge through me. How in the world was one supposed to fight against Nothing? Even if I'd done it before, Mr. Boxes had specifically said not to use that method.

“Focus on calming the Void!” Yueya commanded. “Creation is only eating away at its power, it will take too much out of us! We need to still its instincts!”

I hesitated, the power I was calling forth switching from offensive to defensive in a moment, shielding Sehyun from another blow from the Void Beast – and space warped around me, Nyxteria teleporting me to the side to avoid a death blow. I swallowed as I expanded my senses as best I could, lashing out every which way, trying to disrupt the Void's instincts, throw it in disarray. Suns burst to life only to be consumed, calm waters flowed, and even lightning crackled as I bid the Void to calm, transforming bits and pieces of itself into small creations. They were only drops in the bucket, however. Momentary injuries the Void Beast largely ignored.

Another tendril of the Beast lashed out, and I countered with a massive blast of divine power. Intricate technique were of no use here, I had to just throw power at the thing in a hope to counter it.

Stars bloomed around me as Nyxteria spread its wings, time rippling in a wave around the great bird. Space folded and stretched, bending in impossible angles as it created another new universe about itself – the Void Beast screeched, an impossible sound, as an entire chunk of its being was carved away – only for it all to vanish in an instant as its entire attention focused on the Bird.

And Nyxteria was gone in the blink of an eye.

Soft music played, radiating calmness as Yueya sung soothing words, while I wracked my brain for anything that might help.

“[SILENCE!]” The Progenitor and I called in the language of the Overgod at the same time, stillness rippling out from the two of us. Yet silence was not nothingness. Silence indicated the absence of noise, not the total lack of it – and it was shattered in a moment.

“[Void].” Sylphina was the next to speak up, the butterfly flaring its wings, chaos swirling about, transforming nothingness into everything from popcorn to nebulas – only to vanish in an instant as the Void turned against it, devouring her in her entirety. Yet I still saw something. An instant where the Void hesitated, stilling for a brief moment.

“Group up!” MR-10 commanded. “Sehuyun, we have need of your power! Come!”

I latched onto the command, using a series of quick teleports to appear beside the machine god alongside the others. The Void Beast writhed as Sehuyun clawed her way through it, missing multiple scales as she fought her way back to the growing huddle of origin deities.

“What now?” Shin asked, standing beside me.

“Guard myself and Yueya. Send power to us, we will twist it into the desired shape.” MR-10 said. Sehuyun growled, blood seeping out from between her teeth, but even she did as was asked, bits of

smoke and flame slowly flowing toward MR-10. I focused half of my power toward Yueya and MR-10, the two humming as they began to vibrate, the sheer amount of power within them setting the Void to shuddering. The rest I directed outward, twining together with Shin's power to create a dome-like shield.

It shuddered and groaned beneath the weight of the Void's blows, Shin linking his skeletal fingers together, eyes glowing.

"I think I know what they're doing." He whispered, gesturing to Yueya and MR-10. I grit my teeth as the others began adding their own energy to the shield, only Sehuyun opting to breath out fire, the flames arcing through the dome to burn into the Void.

"What are they doing?"

"Brace yourself. The shield will not last." He warned instead of answering, cracks already forming.

It shattered an instant later, and my instincts screamed at me to dodge, to move, to run. But my heart yelled at me to rise up, to protect, to shield.

And I always followed my heart.

I leapt directly in front of the wave of Void that threatened to crash down upon MR-10 and Yueya, the former losing an entire half of its mechanical body to the attacking Void. My hands gripped the Void, blood seeping down my palms as it ate away at my skin, struggling to keep things under control for just a few more moments. Reilly rose up behind me, the god of luck placing his hands upon my back and channeling even more power into me, to keep me from falling.

“I’ve got you, Statera. You keep fighting.” He promised. Rising Wind, Crashing Waves struggled to my right, bellowing as he was consumed by the Void entirely – followed quickly by the Progenitor, who winked out of existence.

Even I could feel myself fading, moments away from death despite Reilly’s aid; and then, with a scream from Yueya and a burst of electricity from MR-10, there was light.

And I vanished into Mr. Boxes’ embrace.

The Overgod of the Multiverse was satisfied as it teleported Statera Luotian to safety, placing the young god of balance beside the other Origin Deities who had ‘died’ in the test, simultaneously healing the wounds of all combatants. MR-10's machine body was fixed in an instant, all of its power returned to the machine god.

Of the eleven gods, only Shin, Yueya, Reilly, and MR-10 survived; which had been a better showing than expected. Projections had initially estimated either an entirely catastrophic first run, in which case the test would be retaken until satisfactory results were achieved, or only a single survivor was most likely. For that to have been proven wrong was a pleasant surprise.

As was Yueya and MR-10 figuring out one of the more esoteric ways to counter a Void Beast.

It was no accident that “Let There Be Light” was required of all origin deities to say, after all.

An enormous ball of light burned in the Void below the Overgod's incarnation, Shin and Reilly both caught in the very center. A single burst of power dismantled the chaotic creation; the power of nearly a dozen Origin Gods fighting each other while struggling to maintain the banishing light.

Creation was the direct opposite to the Void, but the Light of Creation was what truly banished it. And such a concept was not to be confused with mere *light*.

"Congratulations," the Overgod's incarnation said, teleporting the deities back together again. The Emperor sulked, pinching the bridge of his nose as Nyxteria comforted the God-King, patting him on the back with a wing. All eyes focused on the Envoys of the Overgod's message despite their varying moods, however, the message boxes appearing before their eyes. "You have completed the test. Though many of you died, that is within acceptable parameters. More importantly, you collectively learned various methods in countering the Void – be it raw power, the Light of Creation, or stillness of heart and mind – as well as that invoking the Void itself is dangerous, as Sylphina discovered."

The chaos butterfly twitched her antennae, embarrassment setting her wings to fluttering. It was a foolish emotion to feel, in the Overgod's experience. Babies should not feel embarrassed for their actions.

"In the following moments, I will teleport you all back to the meeting room. From there, bid each other farewell and return to your respective universes. Some time will be given to discuss what you learned here, but please note that the meeting room will close in a single year. [Stage 3] will begin shortly thereafter.

Experimentation with the Void is encouraged in this stage. Find out what works and what doesn't work, and the best way for your universes to make larger expansions into the Void without triggering apocalyptic Void events. In this [Stage], your Realms should be growing large enough to cause disturbances. Certain protections will be rolled back as well, to give you more experience in handling the Void.

Good luck!”

And with that, all the origin deities were promptly teleported back to the meeting room. That finalized, the Overgod turned its attention to the diagrams and data that perpetually surrounded it, checking the probability of a void-related disaster once again.

If anything, that percentage had gone up. However, the damage amount probability had gone down, indicating that even if the catastrophe did come to pass, it would likely not be as bad as it once might have. The Overgod nodded to itself. There were still other countermeasures to attempt, but for now this would have to do.

With the meeting over, now it could turn its attention to other matters.

2.35 Farewells

“I fully expected you to survive until the end,” Shin said the moment we all got back to the meeting room. I laughed and rubbed the back of my neck, shrugging helplessly.

“Yes, well, we were in a controlled environment struggling against a far more powerful beast than I had ever encountered. If there was ever a time to make mistakes or try something new, it was then. I almost made it, but my desperation to win got the better of me, and I put more power into protecting those who were ensuring victory over myself. One of my self-sacrificial tendencies, I assume.” I folded my hands into the sleeves of my robe, bowing to him ever so slightly. Of the things I had learned in this meeting, it was that while amongst peers of equal power, my own deficiencies became even more apparent. “It is just pleasing that we still managed to pass the test, despite losing so many of us.”

“That is true, I would hate to fight another one of those.” Reilly agreed, taking a big swig of his alcohol. “That said, I will be off, my fellows. It was a pleasure getting to know you all over the past century, and I look forward to our next meeting. However, it is now time to get back to work.” I waved to the beggar god as he vanished into his portal, followed swiftly by a few of the others, who muttered their own farewells.

“I can’t say I share his sentiment when it comes to the Void. I would like to redeem myself,” The Emperor grumbled with a shake of his head. “But he is correct in that it is time to bid you all farewell. I hope our next encounter can be a fruitful one, this time as a meeting between nations.” And he, too, vanished into his own portal. Sehuyun growled out a goodbye as she slid back to her own domain, flashing me a savage grin as she vanished – leaving only myself, Shin, and Yueya for the moment. Shin linked his boney fingers together, shaking his head.

“This is the most direct guidance from the Great One we have ever received.” He muttered. “I wonder what caused them to make us fight the Void? I get the feeling it is not standard, and was tacked on at the end.”

“That is a question for a later date.” Yueya adjusted her dress as she spoke, her hair fixing itself into a different style completely. “Though it is something to consider. Perhaps it was its way of warning us not to play too much in the Void, despite encouraging us to experiment? It seems contradictory.”

“Indeed.” I agreed, bobbing my head. Shin sighed, drifting back toward his own portal.

“I will miss our conversations, I do admit. Though I know myself to be taciturn at best, it was a pleasure to have discussions with equals. Goodbye for now.” He said, and stepped through his own portal. Yueya and I shared a look, now only the two of us left in the meeting room. She quirked an eyebrow, a playful smile dancing on her lips.

I smiled back, but made no move. She pouted a little and huffed, stalking over to me to plant a little kiss on my lips – one I gently returned.

“Make a lady do all the work. How dull,” she complained, patting my arm. I chuckled and winked at her, giving her a quick, warm hug.

“Don’t be a stranger, Yueya. I am certain we will see each other again soon enough.” I promised. Our meeting had been fun and, honestly? I truly hoped our relationship could deepen. She laughed and nodded, giving my arm another quick squeeze before she danced back over to her own portal. I watched her go, the red-haired goddess giving me one last look before she, too, disappeared.

Silence echoed in my ears now that the room was empty. Blissful silence. Ironical that I had been the first to arrive, and last to leave. Somberly I looked around the room, its walls already starting to vanish, dissolving into nothingness as it was returned to the Void. Mr. Boxes was working quickly, it seemed.

Ding!

{[Void Beast Repelled!]

[Attached is a memory containing an outside observer’s viewpoint of the fight. Peruse at your leisure.]}

I blinked, once again having missed Mr. Boxes’ announcement coming. That was interesting, of course, and I would be taking a look at it. But I would save the video for while I meditated. Not now. Instead I stepped through my own portal, reappearing in the Four Realms with a smile and a sigh of...stress, I suppose.

The Realms welcomed me with open arms. The very energies of the universe itself embraced my return, wrapping around me in an almost playful manner. Karmic strings bound and unbound themselves from my fate, many simply fading away, only to return as others continually tapped into my Dao for guidance. That was something I would never be able to avoid. Not here, not now.

And I swept my gaze over everything.

It all appeared to be running smoothly. My children were doing an excellent job of keeping things going despite my absence and despite the changes they themselves were undergoing. It was reassuring, and meant that I could truly leave the Realms for a time and focus on healing myself in the very near future. With the Shadow dealt with and reparations well in hand, as well as the growth of the Realms picking up steam, I finally had time to focus on myself a bit. There was just a bit of housekeeping to do, first, a few final blueprints to make and guidance to give before I could leave.

A short few years later, I gathered my children in my palace. Alexander, Keilan, Elvira, and Reika all stood before me as I talked, putting away a few things and generally just keeping my own nervous energy busy. They were relatively quiet as I worked and chattered, listening intently.

“...and as such I will truly be leaving the Four Realms for some time. I feel confident that you all can handle things in my absence.” I finalized, finishing my mutterings.

“Why must you leave the Four Realms entirely? Why not just meditate in your chambers, as you usually do?” Reika asked. I smiled at my daughter, adjusting the sleeves of my robes as I tried to find a satisfactory answer her question.

“Because it was not merely during my absence that you evolved into a goddess of change, Reika, but due to it.” I said softly. Reika stiffened, pulling at a lock of green hair nervously as she looked at her siblings. Elvira had her eyes closed, arms crossed and tails still, while Alexander rumbled in discontent. Only Keilan held my gaze, nodding gently to show he understood what I was getting at.

“It is due to me that you are leaving?” She asked.

“No, sister.” Keilan said. “It is because of all of us. We are not young gods anymore, and Mother understands that we need to grow of our own accord. This may be Her universe, but She lets us shape it. For us to grow, and to help our growth, She feels She must leave for a time. You are not the only one changing, sister. The rest of us may be slower, but we are undergoing our own growth as well.”

I nodded in agreement, meeting Reika’s eyes in an attempt to show her that I truly did think that.

“You all are not the only ones who benefitted from my brief absence, of course. Even the Realm Sun and Lunar Star grew thrice as fast without my direct supervision – this is not something that can continue indefinitely, but for now, my absence is beneficial. Plus, it is high time I took care of this,” I said, letting my prosthetic arm fade so I could wave my stump at them.

“As much as I wish for you to focus on healing yourself, for once, Father, I question your wisdom in this matter.” Alexander rumbled. “Without you here, who will guide the mortals?” At this, I laughed. Well and truly laughed, because I had not realized that Alexander of all beings did not understand the full truth.

“My son, I am the Dao itself. Even if I tried, I could never fully leave the Four Realms. We are too closely intertwined, our fates bound for eternity. Such was one of the prices I paid to make this world as it is, to help you all become what you have. Even if I sever myself from all the karma I

can, that connection will never fade. No, it would be wrong to say I will not be here – my Will shall remain, even if my body does not. If ever you need guidance or aid, you merely need to ask, and I will still be there. Just not in such a...heavy capacity.” I explained. Plus, I wouldn’t be venturing too far away. I had to meditate in the Void itself, but I wanted to remain close enough to come running in case there were any problems.

“It is wise, Brother.” Elvira opened her eyes as she spoke, gesturing to one corner of the room, where darkness refused to fade as the light of the Lunar Star peeked through one of the windows. “That is why Father called Morgan here. You will be taking the Shadow with you, will you not?”

I nodded and gently waved Morgan forward, though the unruly spider-wolf refused to budge from its spot, remaining half-hidden in the shadows. Well, that was its decision, and I pressed a hand against my chest.

“I will. And I will not return until either my meditations are complete, or I am fully healed.”

“Meditations?”

“On the Void.” Right now, that felt like the biggest threat. The Four Realms were growing steadily, and for most of the plans I wanted to implement – many of which I had drafted during the meeting – the Realms needed to grow in size. Which meant a lot of waiting, which was time better spent healing than twiddling my thumbs. And, frankly, the Void was once again intriguing me. There was something I was missing about it, and whatever that was, was instrumental in my own personal power growth.

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My children glanced at each other nervously when I did not elaborate, eventually settling on cautious optimism.

“We will eagerly await your return, then.” Keilan said with a bow.

“And to show you how far we can grow.” Alexander rumbled, the great dragon bowing his mighty head. I stepped forward, enveloping each of them in a hug that lasted simultaneously for far too long, and far too short a time. Only once I was satisfied did I pull away, rising into the air as I prepared to leave.

“Goodbye. I will see you soon. Come along, Morgan,” I said, gesturing to the wolf. This time it did obey, slinking out of the shadows to follow me into the skies of the Four Realms, the ceiling of my palace opening to allow us passage. Only once we were almost to the shell of primordial chaos that protected the Realms from the Void did I stop.

“What?” Morgan all but snapped, eyes narrowed. Its tails twitched eagerly, legs tapping against the air in anticipation. Try as they might to hide it, Morgan was clearly excited to visit the Void, to spend some time in the silence it so craved with me and me alone.

“Just going to deal with our little follower.” I said absently, turning my gaze to the god that dared to try and follow. No...not follow. He had something to ask of me. Anticipation swelled within me as Gilles approached, the deity of shadows appearing before me in a swirl of darkness. The pale god bowed as Morgan growled, and I stared him down.

“Lord,” he greeted.

“Gilles.”

“I have come to ask your permission for something.” Gilles kept his head bowed as he knelt, practically prostrating himself before me.

“Ask away.” I commanded. This time, Gilles looked up. He remained in a kneeling posture but his dark eyes found mine, meeting my gaze without a hint of the hesitation and fear that had once held him back. One of his hands stayed over the burn scar his brother had given him, just over his heart.

“I ask your permission to court your daughter, Elvira.” He said. I hummed and held his gaze, keeping my expression neutral.

“Granted. Make her happy, Gilles,” I said finally, once I was certain his resolve was well and truly there. Gilles beamed up a smile at me, a true smile, one that I had not seen since Sol betrayed the Four Realms and tried to kill him. And he stood, and vanished with a happy thank you. My heart swelled with pride, content that I was making the right choice to leave. Gilles was finally finding his courage again. “Let’s go, Morgan.” I said, and together, we stepped through the primordial chaos and into the Void.

Inesa felt the moment Statera Luotian left the Four Realms. It was hard for her to explain it, but it felt like a sigh of relief. Pressure had been pushing down too hard in the home of Statera Luotian, too many people filling it, and something was bound to snap sooner or later no matter how happy the home was. At least, that was the analogy she was trying to use. In practice it was more complex than that, and her heart went out to their creator.

Leaving children home alone was never easy. But a bit of trust went a long way.

“Xing Wu, look, another star.” She said absently, pointing skyward. There, in the skies above the Life-Giving Tree, another Dao Star flickered to life. This one followed the Dao of the Sword, radiating a battle-intent that towered over even Xing Wu’s. It was a Dao that made Inesa nervous, desiring to avoid conflict as she was.

“I know. I could feel it. They’re piggybacking off my Dao to find their own.” Xing Wu replied without looking up, sweat pouring down his shirtless body, muscles gleaming in the light of the Lunar Star, as he moved through spear form after spear form, each strike filled with every ounce of his attention. Inesa watched him appreciatively, eyes roving over every little scar, every ripple of muscles as he moved. “I would like nothing more than for Alanna to be the next Dao Progenitor, but it is unlikely.”

“Why not?” the voice that spoke this time caused Inesa to jump, a blush racing across her cheeks as she realized she had just been caught ogling her own boyfriend. The Mad Scientist had moved up beside her now, and rested in a little chair. Immortality still eluded the poor girl, and she watched Xing Wu without a hint of lust or interest to what he was doing. Only mild curiosity.

“She wants her Dao to hold as much weight as my own. She will accept little else, and that will delay her ascension.” Xing Wu supplied after a moment, pausing his strikes to turn toward them. His breathing was steady, his hair slicked back from sweat as he met first the Mad Scientist’s eyes, then Inesa’s, and shot her a wink that set her to blushing all over again. “Though with the Dao’s eyes gone, who knows what she will do.” Inesa stiffened at the statement, eyes widening. How had Xing Wu known...?

“The Dao’s eyes...you mean Statera Luotian is gone again?” the Mad Scientist asked, the little avian girl panicking slightly. Xing Wu smiled.

“The body left, yes, but the will remains. It’s just...quieter, now. It will no longer actively seek you out; you must reach out and touch it on your own.” He said softly, returning to his strikes. The Mad Scientist fell silent and Inesa laid a hand upon the woman’s back, pity welling up inside her. But, before that, came surprise.

Xing Wu had noticed the Mad Scientist's problem, and the absence of the Creator. Yet instead of barraging her with questions, he was accepting the situation and even trying to help the Mad Scientist in his own way. Just what kind of a person was he trying to become?

It doesn't matter, I suppose. Inesa figured after a moment, smiling warmly. *I love him for him. And will support him in his goals, just as he will support me in mine.* With that thought, she stood and summoned a few glasses of iced tea, intent on getting Xing Wu to relax a bit more.

She was finally getting a break from making the barriers between the new Trees. What better way than to spend it with the one she loved?

Alexander held a meeting with his siblings. The great dragon knew what it was he wished to say, so the primary reason for this was to discover what their plans were for their...free-time.

"I will be reimagining the Karmic Realm and the cycle of reincarnation. More importantly, I want to restructure the afterlife. I feel like we could do more in conjunction with the Spirit Realm than what is currently happening. To do this, however, means drawing manpower from the other Realms as reconstruction is under way." Keilan reasoned, spreading out a blueprint on a desk he had brought with him. They were currently inside Alexander's cave, having chosen this place as a middle ground.

"My Peoples will be of little help, besides perhaps the Treants acting as a spiritual conduit for mortals to talk to souls and spirits." Reika immediately replied.

“My spirits are underworked and are growing lax. Put them to you, I will draw from where they can be spared.” Alexander agreed.

“My Heavenly Host is doing little besides training and developing their own cities below the Holy Mountain. I will send a few squads to aid you. They could use some exercise.” Elvira agreed. “So long as you can spare a few of your Asura and Karmic Kings. It is high time Heaven had its own set of laws drawn up, beyond what Father deigns to handle. Gilles has been aiding me with that, but I could use some more help. We will gain no favors for it, but as our population continues to increase we will have to have a better set of laws.”

“I will personally aid with that.” Keilan agreed.

“We cannot forget about the growth of the trees. We need to find souls to act as protectors for each of the new Mountains, Valleys, Trees, and Rivers.” Alexander interjected. That brought his siblings up short, and he rose to his full height to say his next piece. “It is not time yet, but I foresee a future in which we do not preside over a single River, Mountain, Tree, or Valley each, but encompass the entirety of our Realms. In which case, Elvira has the right idea in electing delegates to handle these new areas.”

“Which means finding and grooming new souls to take over the positions.” Reika finished for him, earning herself a little nod from Alexander.

“Father left to aid our growth. I, for one, wish to prove that His trust and wisdom is not misplaced, doubtful though I am. Let us prove it.” He said with finality. His siblings shuddered at his words, smiling each in their own way. Alexander nodded, power surging beneath his scales. Sehuyun had driven something into him, in their fight, and he would realize it.

He was a Dragon, and Dragons guarded their treasure zealously. His treasure was this world, and his family. *Let it be known.*