

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

2.36 Interlude: Mortals

Universe: Ocean of Stars (Nyxteria's Nest)

Location: 1.2.3332.56 Quadrant 3, Spacefold 7. Near Time Anomaly XXI.

Time: Stardate 45433 – 45432 – 45434

Vessel: The Interstellar

The Commander of the Interstellar, perhaps one of the finest space vessels ever created by the interstellar Empire, watched as his crew celebrated their successful analysis of the local time anomaly. It wasn't anything strong, nothing like the swirling currents of the Vortex, but any new data that might help them traverse the treacherous depths of space without being torn apart by spacial fractures or time vortexes was worth its bytes in Timeless Crystal. And that was where the most unusual member of the crew, a Yeeshu, came into the equation.

Their fangs were long and sharp, their instincts predatory, but most importantly they had the unique ability to detect time anomalies through the whiskers on their furred faces. Perhaps they had evolved this sense due to their home planet being in the middle of a massive time anomaly, or that their preferred prey enjoyed hiding in reverse-flowing time streams. Either way, this ability made them indispensable to more advanced species, like those in the Empire, and research vessels, like the Interstellar.

Their instincts were more accurate than even their most advanced scientific instruments, after all.

The commander sat in his captain's chair, watching as the cat-like Yeeshu sat in its chair, whiskers twitching as it sniffed the air, waiting for its own food. This was his first mission with one of the Yeeshu, and even after a few months aboard this ship he had yet to fully come to terms with the species' peculiar habits. Particularly, their eating habits.

Unlike the rest of the crew, who were mostly species of herbivores, the Yeeshu needed meat, lightly cooked, with only a slight char to it.

That was not what came out of the kitchen.

The cook trundled forward on its cloven hooves, a veritable chunk of charcoal resting on a silver platter, with a side of what looked like rocks. The commander leaned forward, gripping the armrests with his talons as the cook presented his finest meal to the Yeeshu. The cat twitched its whiskers and made a face, orange fur twisting and green eyes narrowing as it glared at its food. The commander stood from his chair, stalking forward to their most valuable asset – the Yeeshu had been indispensable, after all – with a frown plastered on his face.

“It’s a little...overdone,” the Yeeshu muttered to the chef, stroking his whiskers and auto translator transforming its scratchy, growling language into the commander’s ears. A small smile then came over the cat’s face as it stood, taking the plate from the chef. “But I have just the thing to fix it. Come, come!” With that, the cat stood scurried to the other end of the meal hall, sniffing the air.

The commander paused, sharing a look with the chef and the other crewmates who had noticed the commotion, as the Yeeshu held the plate up toward the ceiling, in the very corner of the room.

"The flow of time here is not strong enough to effect the ship – too sturdy. Too much energy! But to fix a meal, something long dead and untouched, is easy!" The commander's eyebrows furrowed as, before his very eyes, the steak began to uncook. The edges filled out and, after a few minutes, what was left on the plate was a bloody, barely cooked hunk of meat with fresh spuds as a side. The Yeeshu grinned and turned back to the chef, licking its lips with a forked tongue. "We used to do this all the time at home, when catching fish. When we hooked an incredibly strong one, we'd give it its energy back by dragging it through a reversing stream! Makes the good hunts last longer – as the Great Bird states, that which you should treasure, should last eternally."

The commander said nothing as the Yeeshu happily plodded over to its seat, tearing into the meal with gusto, even licking up the blood on the plate. And, very slowly, he turned to head back to his own chair.

...it would be best to stay on the Yeeshu's good side, fanatics as they were.

Universe: Heaven Above, Earth Below (The Empreror's Realm)

Location: Heaven.

The wine maker stared at the dice in his hands, jade in color and make, with golden dots indicating which side was which. They were a sharp contrast to his ruby colored skin, complimenting him greatly, and had become something of a lucky charm in the past few dozen years. Whenever he had them in his pocket it seemed lucky things happened. More people noticed his shop, his vineyard was free of pests, and his grapes grew larger and fuller. The wine finished faster, and the taste was better, too.

He'd really thought nothing of it besides thanking his good fortune, the dice themselves a mere consolation prize at best for losing one of his best barrels of wine and his favorite crystal glass.

At least until the Emperor himself had appeared at his doorstep, exasperated and tired looking, and had all but demanded to see the objects.

"That fool. I should smash those damnable things." The Emperor swore, staring at the dice. The wine maker shuddered at the sheer vitriol in his King and God's voice, the power radiating from him far greater than anything the simple wine maker could hope to muster.

"I will give them to you gladly," he promised, pushing the dice forward.

The Emperor sighed heavily, pushing the palm of one hand against his crown-laded forehead. "No," he decided finally. "It would not do to besmirch Reilly's gift like that. I apologize for my outburst, but they should stay with you. They have bonded to your truesoul now." The wine maker shuddered, wondering what foul treasure had fallen into his hands. "Worry not, they are fortunate items. But if you feel like they are affecting you or you simply wish to rid yourself of them, please, by all means, bring them to my palace."

With that, the Emperor stood, dusting himself off and cape flaring behind him.

"But...what are they?" the wine maker asked. He rarely ever even saw the Emperor, much less had the legendary being come into his own home.

"Do not worry about it too much. They are fortunate; one might even call them lucky. I apologize for disturbing you, but I had to ensure you were properly paid for the services you provided. Truly, do not let it weigh upon your mind too much." He said, and, with a swish of his cape, turned to storm out of the shop. The wine maker swallowed thickly.

That was a sure way to get him to worry about it.

“...they say that Reika lives atop the Life-Giving Tree, in the center of the galaxy. The place where all life stems from, where the Spirit River flows to take our souls through the cycle of reincarnation.” The old priest said, his firelike hair flickering weakly as a sign of his age. The elemental’s eyes, however, still crackled with lightning, his earth-like skin harder and more durable than any stone. “It is there that she builds a staircase to reach Heaven, and rejoin her sister Elvira in the skies above. And so we, too, can go and join them in paradise, once our souls reach eternity.”

“That’s ridiculous,” a young girl complained, the elemental crossing her arms. “We already have a map of the world – it’s round. There’s no way a stretch of flat land could exist at the center of the universe, much less a huge tree.”

“We can fly, girl.” The priest deadpanned. “Our lifespans lengthen the longer we cultivate, and we can make flying cities. Anything is possible.”

“That’s cuz we made it under our own power. We did that, not the gods!” The girl complained. A few of the youngsters gathered nodded in agreement, though the youngest and oldest of the group all seemed to be on the priest’s side, leaving part of the middle as part of the girl’s posse. He frowned. He didn’t like the girl’s tone. It wasn’t a necessity to worship Reika, he doubted a being as great as her minded much, but her teachings were what helped keep their home planet, Cradle, safe and healthy despite the high number of cultivators. “If we should be worshiping anyone, it’s Dei!”

“Dei?!” The priest spluttered. “Dei!? He was a man!”

“Who became immortal!” the girl protested. “And he did it all on his own! If anything, there are no real gods, but immortals! We can actually *do* that. And his successor, the mighty warrior Xing Wu, hung a star in the sky so we can follow him.”

A chorus of agreements rang up through the “gang” the girl had created around her, and the priest just rolled his eyes.

“Enough of this. If you are going to make a mockery of my sermon, take yourselves elsewhere. Believe as you wish – such is the teachings of *my* god – and do not disturb us any further. Reika is kind to all, so go in peace.” The priest grumbled. The girl sneered.

“You all should come with me! Leave this old man to his ramblings. The gods were the ones who struck down Dei, killed him because they were jealous and afraid of his power. I follow the truly *righteous* path.” And with that, the girl turned on her heel and stalked away. To the old priests dismay, a fairly large number of elementals followed, cutting those listening to his sermon down by a quarter. Had they come just to disrupt him and cause trouble? The old man shook his head.

He had the power in his body to force them to see, to call upon the spirits and shake the earth itself with the might he had been given. The might he had cultivated, through following Lady Reika’s will and the essence of the great Lotus Willow – his Lady’s will, here on Cradle. Slowly, the old priest turned to the dormant Treant, Lotus, that stood behind him, appearing as little more than an ancient willow ringed with sacred stones he himself had carved millennia ago.

The young ones didn’t see. They weren’t wise enough yet. They couldn’t feel the strength of the immortal Treant, the being his great-great-great-grandmother had fought alongside when the Sun had turned to ash, in the time of the Sun War. Even if the immortal tree slumbered, its strength remained.

"Reika does not blame those who have yet to see the truth, to understand wisdom. Such is life - so long as we continue to change for the better, we will all have our place in the future. In Eternity. Now come, join me in prayer and pay no heed to the naysayers. We have our faith, and they are allowed theirs." The priest said, bowing his head. His fellows bowed their heads with him, and together, they began to pray.

Not all believed as strongly as he. He knew that. Nor did all believe others deserved the right to their own faith. That mattered not.

The only thing he could control was himself and his own faith, and attempt to guide others to a better path. So he prayed, for that was all he knew he could do.

Manu Ti was a lovely city, in Alanna's opinion. She walked the streets of her city, wings dyed a different color and dressed in plain clothes in an attempt to hide her true status as the Celestial Empress. Perhaps it was a bit cliché for an immortal to hide herself and walk amongst the mortals, but she found it relaxing in many ways.

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The flying city had a myriad of beautiful gardens, tall statues, and a thousand other things created by the formation experts of the city that she would have thought impossible when she was but a girl. Even down here, at the base of the Eastern Chain where mortals had built their own city, it was no less than gorgeous and wonderous.

Yes, Manu Ti was a lovely city.

When people weren't being stupid, that is.

"Get outta the way!" the cultivator shouted, clutching a box of jade slips to her chest as she rocketed down the street on a flying sword. She was too powerful for this area – nearly Heart Level, whereas the average here was no more than two stages lower – and thus burst through the throng of guards who had started to form about her. Her black robes flicked in the wind as she shot through the streets, unable to fly too high lest she activate the anti-flight formations in the city, weaving between mortals who barely saw her pass, clearly uncaring if she hurt anyone.

Alanna prepared herself to step in, seeing the disaster about to happen; an old man with a cane, too slow to get out of the way, would be cut apart by the woman's flying sword.

Someone else beat her to the punch.

A bestial-looking man covered in golden scales, wearing gleaming silver plate armor and a massive war hammer strapped to his back, stepped out of the crowd in front of the cultivator. His muscles rippled with strength, his muzzle pulled back in a snarl that showed gleaming white fangs. Whiskers hung from his snout, twitching as the woman barreled toward him – he was too weak to withstand the sword, not nearly high enough cultivation level –

He sidestepped quickly, reaching out and snagging the hilt of the sword with grace defying his hulking form. The cultivator was sent flying, tumbling from her ride head-over-heels. By the time she stopped rolling, the Draconian male was upon her, war hammer pressed against her chest and a growl rumbling in his throat.

"Stay down, girl, and this will not hurt any more than it has to."

“Stay out of –“ Golden light lashed out from the warrior, binding her in place with runic seals, the Fae woman struggling fruitlessly against her bonds.

“I am a paladin of Alexander. You have endangered innocents. That gives me the right to act. Stay. Down.” The Draconian rumbled. Alanna hummed, wings flaring a little behind her as she stroked her chin. That was impressive. She knew the young Draconian race was powerful, but for a warrior to completely subdue a cultivator at least two stages stronger than him? That was more than impressive.

“Bob.” She said, knowing her shadow was close. The illusion master made no hint that he’d heard her. “Recruit him if you can. Noble and powerful? He would be a fine addition to our guard. Respect him if he does not wish to, however.” A gust of wind told Alanna that her spymaster had heard her, and, satisfied, she turned away from the scene.

There had once been a meat skewer stall down this way she’d come to once or twice when she was but a girl, back before even Dei had taken her in. She wondered if it was still there...?

The Temple of Father Luotian and Mother Statera was a lonely place nowadays. Most worshippers had moved on to newer, fresher religions, such as those of the Big Four or the lesser elemental gods. The young saintess who tended the massive temple had even heard tell of people beginning to worship the unruly Xing Wu, the fierce Dei, and even the mischievous Kei. Try as she might to understand these young religions, she could not.

She wasn’t even a Fae, instead being a Karae, one of Lord Keilan’s people, yet even she could understand that the Father and Mother were superior. Were holier. Were more...*perfect*, when

compared even to the other gods, to say nothing of the mortal and immortals who were now being worshiped.

Why worship those who did not even possess divinity? Was it their flaws that drew people toward them? Why would people not chase perfection, or at least bask in the light of it?

The Saintess sighed, stopping her sweeping to look up at the massive, thirty foot statues that depicted the Mother and Father. The Father, tall and regal, the grey stone adding to his imposing visage. In one hand he held his sword, used to cut down the Traitor, while the other was held out, as if asking to join him in the skies above. It was he who left open a path for people to become immortal. Then there was the Mother, elegant and kind, her smile promising warmth and compassion, hands cupped with the Lunar Star held within them. It was She who offers guidance at all times, aide to even the most unfortunate. The healer, to the Father's warrior.

They were the kindest, oldest, and most powerful of the gods. Why could others not see that?

The doors to her temple burst open, and in walked one of the banes of her existence. A Fae boy who was older than she, yet far less wise and understanding. Yet something was wrong. There were no taunts, no scoffs, no smelly food or abuse of her hospitality. No foul cultivation, spells designed and meant to drive people away from the temple carved into the lawn. Instead, there was the smell of blood, and a desperate gasping for breath.

The Saintess immediately began rushing forward, purple robes flapping behind her as she moved to the boy's side, blood dribbling out of the corner of his mouth.

"What happened?!" She demanded, kneeling before him. His black hair was matted with blood, one of his horns broken, bruises marring his face and hands.

“Hide me,” he demanded, eyes flashing and qi roiling beneath his skin. When he spoke, she could see teeth missing. What had done this to a cultivator of his caliber?! “Sister, you have to help those in need, right? I need you to hide me.”

“What-“ the saintess started, but cut herself off when she felt it. An ominous presence. One stained with blood. Not quite a devil cultivator, but close, approaching the temple. “What have you done?”

“You have to!” the boy gasped – but it was too late. A shadow crossed the threshold of her temple, and the Saintess looked up to behold the single scariest person she had ever seen in her entire life. She was a little girl, with small Fae horns, black hair pulled back in twin tails, and an expression that could only be described as cold. Blood had been splattered across the bridge of her nose. Her eyes were filled with bloodlust, and in one bloody hand she held a broken horn.

“It is too late for that.” She said sweetly, and the Saintess hesitated when their eyes met. “You, girl. Step away from him. He has committed a grave sin and fatally injured three of my comrades. They will not last the night. His foolishness will cost him his life.”

“No,” the Saintess hadn’t even realized she had said the word before it came out of her mouth, but it was a firm statement all the same. The little girl’s eyes narrowed, head cocking to the side as she gripped the horn tighter.

“No?” she all but snarled. “Are you aware of the situation? I could crush you with a blink of my eye. I only warn you out of respect for your temple.”

“This is a sacred place. There will be no violence spread here.” The Saintess continued, pulling away from the boy’s clutches to stand before the girl. Her hands did not tremble. Her breathing was even, even as she adjusted her robes. She followed the light of the truest god. This girl could not harm her in any way that mattered, even if she was terrifying.

“Violence implies that this will be anything resembling a fight.” The girl spat.

“No.”

“Truly? You protect this wretch? I know what he’s done to you and your temple, yet still you protect him?” She asked.

“Yes. There will be no blood spilled here.” The saintess said firmly. For one tense moment she thought the girl might consider walking away; then her hand clenched, fury etching itself across her face, and the Saintess raised one hand, calling upon the power that made her a Saintess. The light of the Heavenly Dao spilt down from the heavens, drawn upon by her very will, illuminating even the darkened temple. “I said *no*.”

And all the tension fled. Fury and anger faded from the girl’s face, panic and pain faded from the boy’s. And the Saintess stood tall behind it all, never giving an inch. This was the grace of the heavenly dao. This was the grace of the Mother, and the path of the Father. This was why she would follow none else.

“I am sorry for what he did, but he will not be harmed here. Such is the will of the Dao.” She said. “If your fellows are injured, however, you may bring them here and I will tend to them. I cannot promise you their lives, only the best of my abilities.” The girl frowned at her, all hatred gone from her face. Instead, it was filled with curiosity.

“You would aid even me?”

“Yes.” She said without hesitation. “We are all children of the same Parent.”

“I do not worship the same god you do.” The girl said slowly. “But yours might be the only other religion I respect. Fine. He may keep his life for now. Bye.” And with that, she vanished. The saintess let out a sigh of relief, a small part of her hoping that she did not return with her fellows, despite her promise to heal them. She was far too scary. Far too dark. But she would still provide aid. She turned slowly back to the Fae boy, frowning at him.

“You...” he started, staring at his hands in confusion. She understood. She had felt the same way upon first touching the light of the Heavenly Dao. She knelt beside him, smiling kindly.

“Come. Let us get you cleaned up and healed, and then we can discuss what you just felt.”

The girl watched from a nearby hilltop, considering what she had just felt and witnessed. She hadn't lied; three of her companions had been fatally injured. She just didn't really care if they lived or died – it had been more important to put the fear of the Shadow into the fool who tried to cross her. His blood still dried on her face and hands, and she smiled to herself.

“I did not expect to find a true Child of the Great One here.” She muttered to herself, crouching as she watched the temple. Even during her time as one of the Heavenly Host, those who could touch upon the Heavenly Dao were a rare find. Too bad she had never gotten along with her fellows, and had come here instead.

After the Sun War she had come to a realization. Morgan had been, in some ways, right.

“You may be the light, and a kind soul, but as a follower of Morgan it is my job to ensure your kindness is not abused. Forgive me for my methods, but not all are easily dissuaded.” The words were no mere words. They were a promise, etched in blood. And the girl would see them through.

2.37 The Void and Me

“This is better, is it not?” Morgan asked as we sat in the Void. I hummed in response, eyes closed as I allowed myself to drift in the silence. The Four Realms were just barely on the edge of my senses; I could do little more than feel their general location in relation to me. Other than that it was just my own self and Morgan in the endless, empty Void.

“It is pleasant.” I allowed, tracing the edges of my wound with my mind. I was pumping the energy I created through my very existence into the smooth edges of my removed arm, promoting regrowth and rebuilding the limb cell by cell. But a small part of my mind told me that this was not the way; this was merely redirecting energy, not the process of true creation. I had plenty of hints about what that meant both from observing the Progenitor and experiencing Mr. Boxes’ language, and the prideful part of myself told me that if I was going to do something, I should do it right. Morgan lay down beside me, sighing in relief.

“So much better,” they muttered. I hummed absently, reaching out with my one good hand to scratch it between the ears. Surprisingly, Morgan leaned into my touch, as if it took comfort in my presences. The thought brought a smile to my face, even as I drifted deeper into my meditative state.

Time continued to pass. I could feel it ticking away within me, swirling in my soul, marching forward relentlessly...and I could feel Morgan playing with it, twisting time around its spidery legs like string and folding space within its stomach. A small smile twitched on my lips. What a silly puppy. It really had been influenced by Nyxteria’s realm, hadn’t it?

Every once in a while we would converse. Morgan would ask questions. I would answer them. I would ask questions, and Morgan would dance and snarl about the topic. But as time continued to pass, thousands of years turning in to tens of thousands and I continued to fall deeper into my

mediations, Morgan started to become more and more restless. It began with a bit of shifting about, which graduated quickly to the wolf padding about through the Void, sniffing and searching.

Then the stillness apparently became too much, and it pulled out the chunk of primordial chaos I had gifted it so long ago to play with. One small part of my mind observed the way it twisted and turned the chaos, pulling it into shapes and objects that gradually become more and more complex. After another few thousand years later, and I was pulled out of my musings to peer at that which Morgan had made.

There were two different beings. One was clearly mortal, its body protected from the destructive Void by my and Morgan's presence, while the other radiated an aura of immortality. The mortal looked humanoid, yet distinctly...arachnid. Eight eyes rolled in its head, dripping fangs filled with venom sprouted from its mandible-covered mouth, and eight spidery limbs stretched from its back. Dark black chitin covered most of its body, its hands tipped with sharp claws that would make dexterous work...difficult. Physically it was something to be admired, but the energetic pathways within left much to be desired.

"Make it less evil," I said softly, startling Morgan enough that it jumped, fur bristling. "And it will be wonderful."

"I will not." It snarled. I shook my head.

"You misunderstand my words. You are making its internal energy networks too focused on chaos and hatred – they will burn themselves out in a short time frame if you do not lighten the load. I am not saying to not make them predatory; simply cut back on the outright viciousness. Choice must be involved, the body cannot impose too much purpose onto souls. Too little purpose and they are left aimless, too much and they will either die out or fight you with all their might." I advised. Morgan narrowed its eyes and glanced at its mortal creation as I turned my attention to the next one, the Immortal.

It was little more than a clear ball. Yet from it, I could feel the rippling waves of time and space. Even now, without a soul to guide it, I could sense its power reaching out, trying to warp whatever reality it could find, folding the little space around itself and unfolding it in the same motion. Their nature was clear; they would be expanding the Hidden Realm. Yet their intent and purpose was far purer than the mortal arachnids, as Morgan had no desire to oversee the actual Realm itself. Merely to observe it.

“Wonderful. Truly wonderful. An excellent first creation, Morgan.” I praised. Pride flashed across the wolf’s face at my words for the briefest of seconds, only to quickly be replaced by a scowl as it huffed. “When we get back to the Realms, we will introduce your People.” My promise went unanswered as I closed my eyes again, settling in my meditative pose to merely observe.

It was a few more years when Morgan finally responded.

“I find myself missing substance.” It said, defeated. I cracked open one eye to look at my child, the wolf staring out in the Void with a bored expression. One spidery limb toyed with the mortal body it had created, rearranging energy lines so their chaotic nature was less forced. “Why do I miss the Four Realms?” It was my turn not to answer, turning my full attention to Morgan. Something had changed within it, during our time here. I, respectfully, did not peer through that change. It felt far too personal for that. Morgan sighed heavily and stood, refusing to look me in the eyes. “Arachion. Arachion and Dimensional Creators. Those will be the names of my Peoples.”

“So be it. May they enter the Four Realms and prosper.” Morgan’s tail thrashed as I spoke, its spidery limbs tapping against each other.

“I wish to return to the Four Realms.” It said slowly, reluctantly, grimacing as if admitting that it was bored and wished to return to the Realms physically pained it.

“Do you know the way?”

“No.”

“Then here.” I tossed out a small ball of light that would lead the way. Morgan glared at it as the concept of light and shadow was introduced into this part of the Void. “When you are ready, simply tap the ball and it will guide you home. It was a pleasure spending some quality time with you, Morgan. Perhaps we can do more when I return. Maybe see what we can do about your Hidden Realm, or simply take a walk, hmm? It is up to you.”

“I know it is. That is always your point.” Morgan sighed and shook its head, one limb reaching out to tap the ball of light. Without another word it raced off through the void, a dog chasing a ball as it led the way home.

“Make sure to put your People someplace safe to start! They need help to get their feet on the ground!” I shouted after it, a part of my mind keeping track of the wolf as it ran all the way back to the Four Realms.

Who would have thought that Morgan, of all beings, would become bored of the nothingness?

Only once I was certain Morgan was safely back within the Four Realms did I push those thoughts out of my head and settle back down, lifting one hand to test a few of my theories about the Void. It was true nothingness, and I was, seemingly, the opposite. I was creation...or was I? Sehuyun had been a Shadow and an Origin; her breath destroyed and created in equal measure. What made an Origin Deity different from a regular god; was it the power of creation? Simple power? My gut told me it was not the latter at the very least.

I willed a bit of dust into existence, expending some of my divine power to do so, and watched it be immediately destroyed by the Void; and the tiny shred of power I had used to create the dust went with it. A frown tugged at the corner of my lips. That wasn’t right. My power shouldn’t vanish

when the Void ate it away like that; yes, I had created matter out of my own energy, but that hadn't been the case when I first created my universe.

That had been creating *something* out of *nothing*; like what the Progenitor did, but to an even finer degree. It had been using energy not to create, but to induce a reaction in the Void that spawned creation. Truth be told, I didn't want to just heal my arm. Mr. Boxes had said, when I first lost it, that this would be a great opportunity for me to learn; or at least something to that effect. His teaching methods may be incredibly...hands off, but at least he had the decency to hand out a few hints here and there.

My arm needed to be *recreated*, not just healed.

I expanded my senses to the utmost degree, observing all of the Void I could. Now that I had an idea of what to look for, my meditations could truly begin.

Time flowed ever onward. Not in the Void of course but in the depths of my own soul such a thing continued to flow. And my conscious mind flew far afield.

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True enlightenment eluded me as my body was behind, left to slowly mend what it could while my consciousness tried to understand what could never truly be understood. As my mind expanded I spotted the Four Realms, and the ball of memories and energy that was the Mad Scientist's existence floating just outside of it. It appeared as a blue...balloon, for lack of a better word, tied to her body through a thin string – such was the truth of her existence; the soul and body in the Four

Realms were a mere copy, made by the existence floating outside of it. I brushed the little ball as I passed it by, sending through a wave of comfort, and continued on.

The multiverse expanded before me. Other parts of the Twelve I passed by, unable to get close enough to really see what they were doing, only notice them. The Emperor's Heaven and Earth, the One World...even the mysterious twelfth universe I detected on the very edge of my senses – within it, too, was one of the Monkey Wrench's floating memory balls, though that was all I could sense. Other universes had Monkey Wrenches as well, but I paid them little heed, my astral projection continuing to expand the horizons through which I saw.

I backed up, and up, and up, stretching my sight as far as I could see, pushing against the veil that threatened to contain my vision until, with a pop, the Universe was plain for my eyes to see.

It hurt my mind to look at.

Universes trillions of times larger than even the One World blended together in a symphony of color, impossible for me to discern which was which. A giant hole filled one of the spaces where a universe had been destroyed, the echoes of its collapse still rippling through the rest of nearby reality. My breath caught in my throat, eyes burning just from looking at the sheer amount of power rippling through those universes.

Gods existed there, not even Origins, who were powerful enough to wipe out the Four Realms with barely a thought. We were but babies compared to those ancient, comparatively omnipotent beings; my initial attempt at discovering the Void was stalled by this massive revelation. Everywhere before me, universes stretched endlessly, the Void clashing with creation in massive, soul-churning waves, waves that found themselves wanting against the might of the universes. Yet my gaze fixated on a single point in an attempt to make sense of it all, one of the few things that was truly immovable in the Void itself.

A ball of memories, far larger than the one connected to the Four Realms, that stretched a line down into one of those universes. The Void left it untouched. Immobile and immovable. My fingers

reached out as if to touch it despite the distance between us and, to my utter shock, I accidentally did. Images flashed through my mind's eye, of a being with blue skin and a snake-like lower body fishing in a river. It was peaceful. It was pleasant. And then it was over as my mind was gently pushed away, the multiverse blurring behind whatever veil I had pushed through.

“That is enough, little one.” A voice boomed, coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. **“Go back to your body; you have seen enough for now.”**

My eyes snapped open as my mind was gently pushed back into my body, inhaling sharply as all that I had seen echoed like waves against cliffs in my mind. Constant, rhythmic thunder echoed in my ears as my one good hand reached out to grip part of the Void, enlightenment spurring my movements. Sehuyun's breath, the Emperor's slash, the feeling of Void eating away at my body as I struggled to keep it back during our fight, the Progenitor's creation process, the Monkey Wrench's seeming invulnerability to the Void, the baby Paradox I had fought...

It all swirled within me as my power reached out, my stump arm lifting as the Void was incited.

“[Let there be light.]” I said, and a single, small, pure beam of white light rocked the Void. It churned and screamed at the sudden reaction and I acted swiftly, condensing the beam of light and churning Void, shaping it with my powers while the metaphorical iron was still hot. First came the shape, then the muscles, then the bones and ligaments and passageways for energy to spread, then finally the nerve endings to cap it all off as my new arm was fused to my stump.

And the Void was still once more.

I let out a long, slow breath, clenching and unclenching my freshly remade hand. It was different than before. Not just divine power flowed through my flesh and nerves, but the Void, too. Flecks of it drifted in my bloodstream, contained solely within the power of my left arm.

I chuckled at myself as I stood.

“With the power sealed in my left arm,” I intoned dramatically, striking a pose and lifting my fist in the air. *Good thing no one was around to see that.* I smiled to myself and relaxed, stretching and feeling my bones pop in multiple places. How long had I been meditating? I lost track of time, but it was about time to return to the Four Realms, see what had happened and changed. I could still sense it there, though it was clearer than before, the range of my senses far larger. “Should be able to replicate that trick,” I muttered, reaching my hand out and inciting the Void once more. Instead of my power vanishing in an act of creation it lashed out and created a small explosion, no larger than a fingernail, that created a chunk of rock that was immediately consumed by the Void.

It doesn't require me to sacrifice my power, but this method does agitate the Void itself. No wonder Mr. Boxes starts us small with the creation process; this must be one of the primary ways Void Beasts are made.

The reaction I caused made the Void practically *writhe* with discontent, which made me understand something I had fundamentally misunderstood. The Void was nothing. Until we disturbed it. Even by giving the Void a name, that caused it to suddenly become something; and it was suddenly getting too philosophical. I had spent who knows how long meditating, it was time for something else.

Ding!

{[Enlightenment!]}

[Through your actions, you have gained two [Sub-Domains.] Sub-Domains are lesser enlightenment pieces that bolsters a full-domain and, after their power has grown, will blend into your main Domain to lessen the restrictions that come with it. Enough Sub-Domains merging may even lead to an evolution of your main [Domain.]]

[[Sub-Domains] gained! Domain of [Creation] and [Destruction].]

[Alert! [Sub-Domains] of [Creation] and [Destruction] are equal in strength and power. Therefore, they are being combined into your main domain of [Balance.] Limitations of the [Balance] domain decreased by [3%].]

[Notable Sub-Domains in progress; [Fate], 92.9%. [Valor], 85.1%. [Love], 73.6%. [Elements], 13.3%. [Draconian], 25%. [Guidance], 33.33%]}

I blinked, feeling the truth behind the words Mr. Boxes had supplied in the power that flowed through my veins. Three percent may not seem like a lot at first glance, but at my power level, that was a massive increase. Not only that, but it wasn't a straight power-up. I could build up my own energy on my own – no, this was a decrease in the limitations that bound me.

I flexed my energy, feeling the way it pressed and flowed within me, reaching out in a bubble of safety and protection against the Void...

This was more like it.

Ding!

{[Public Service Announcement!]}

[Please avoid trying to peek through the barrier set up around the Trial Grounds. This is for your own safety. Thank you for your cooperation.]

[Personal Note: Congratulations on your success, Statera, but do not attempt to see through the barrier again until you are more powerful. Truesight is powerful, but not without its risks, especially for someone of your caliber. You are bleeding from your eyes.]}

Absently I reached up and touched my face, my fingers coming away wet and sticky with golden, glowing blood. I blinked a few times, feeling the cells in my eyes regenerating from the burn they experienced, and shook my head a little. Now that I was paying attention, I was feeling a little foggy in the head...

For a few moments I stood there, letting myself get accustomed to the changes I had just undergone.

But, in truth, they needed a test run.

And I wanted to see how much my children had grown in the time I'd been away.

2.38 I Want You to Grow

The skies trembled as I returned to the Four Realms, the very Primordial Chaos itself welcoming my return with a feeling not unlike an embrace. It had been a little over six hundred thousand years – a good chunk of change for how old the Realms really were – and they had missed me.

“Yes, yes, hello to you too!” I laughed, fingers dusting through the Chaos as it moved to encircle me. A small smile danced upon my lips as I pushed my aura outward, reconnecting with the Realms and cataloguing its changes. Randus immediately appeared by my side, the butler god of dreams bowing to me as he presented a small cup of tea – one I took gratefully, savoring the taste and thanking him for his diligence. Randus simply bowed and vanished as I left the Chaos, beholding the Realms in all their glory.

Fall had come.

The original Life-Giving Tree sat in the center of what now amounted to a small grove, nearly thirty of the little Trees growing in a circle around it. Their leaves had turned orange and red, heralding the coming of winter, as life energy was stored beneath the roots to promote another wave of growth when spring came. The Holy Mountain was now surrounded by foothills, the lesser Mountains themselves growing steadily, and little streams fed into the Spirit River, spirits buzzing as they worked to explore and expand the area in which they could work.

That wasn’t even to mention the Karmic Valley. Much like the Life-Giving Tree, it had undergone intense changes. Visually it was much the same as before, a dark-walled valley with mountainous edges holding back the black waters of the ocean of memories – the lesser Valleys mimicking the original’s appearance even if the number of souls flowing through them was far, far fewer. But energetically it represented something...different.

Connections were being made with the other Realms, souls flowing in and out of the Valley not only as a central hub of reincarnation, but as a directory for souls to experience the afterlife that was the Spirit Realm. That bit was still being worked on, I could tell, and I would likely step in to help smooth out the edges, but it was a wonderful first attempt.

Then the Realm Sun rotated in front of me, momentarily blocking my view. I blinked as the soul within, Fang Xu, waved at me, kicking and squirming in activity, before rotating away to reveal the Lunar Star opposite it. The blue Star flashed, a solar flare shooting from the surface as Celene

waved at me as well. They weren't ready to emerge yet, but clearly the souls within were growing stronger.

"Father!" Elvira's shout was loud and clear as my daughter rocketed up from the peak of her original Mountain, hurtling toward me with wings flapping madly, trailing the cloudy-white substance of the Heaven Realm's edges. I stepped forward to meet her, arms spread wide to catch her as she crashed into my middle in a giant bear-hug. My breath escaped me and I stumbled back a step, chuckling as I spun her around, examining her aura.

"I missed you too, kid." I told her. "Now, you need to step back and let me have a look at you. That is quite the change you're flaunting!" Elvira grinned as she pulled away, setting her hands on her hips as her aura flared, golden light radiating from her. She had changed, in more ways than one. I wouldn't call her domain more profound now, but it was certainly far, far stronger.

"My Domain changed." She announced proudly.

"The Goddess of Heaven and Divinity itself. A goddess of Gods." I set my hand on her shoulder. She still had quite a bit of yang-aligned energy, and could be considered a goddess of yang as well, but I considered that more of part of who she was rather than a godly domain. "You should be proud of yourself, Elvira."

"I'm just happy you approve. The others will want to meet you soon as well," she said, feathers ruffling as she took pride in my words. As if they had been waiting for that very moment, my other children all shot up from their respective domains, flying toward me with varying degrees of urgency. Keilan and Reika were more sedate in their approach, while Alexander came crashing out of the Spirit River with a roar of glee. My eyebrows raised as my son rocketed toward me, scales gleaming, the goddess of water and god of fire clinging to his horns like they loved to do.

He was...no longer what could be defined as a god. I had sensed this coming for some time now, ever since he'd "swallowed his divinity" back when fighting Sehuyun, but it was a fascinating

change – that wasn't to say Alexander was no longer divine in nature, simply that he had assimilated whatever made him a god to become a true Dragon.

The Spirit Dragon, a being stronger than almost all the gods. There would be benefits and drawbacks to this change, just as there was to all things. In truth there was very little difference between gods and a true dragon, only a difference in limitations.

Alexander did not crash into me as Elvira did, surprisingly, instead coming to a halt just before me and rising up to his full, impressive height, smiling like a mad dragon as he met my eyes. His rainbow eyes flashed a million different colors as he floated before me, radiating a holy light.

“Got inspired by Sehuyun, did you?” I asked, amused, and Alexander rumbled out a chuckle, the gods on his horns waving happily to me. I waved back, pleased to see they were growing well, as well – having nearly completed their own individual Daos.

“Indeed I did, but this feels right. I feel more complete now.” He said, shaking his body slightly. The power that radiated from him was deep and strong, as relentless and forceful as a river.

“I thought you said that the consumption of Morgan’s fate would take millions of years, Father?” Reika said as she neared, the goddess of change smiling sweetly. “We evolved our domains in less than one million.” Her godly domain was deeper now, better understood, and I could see that she was the reason for the changing seasons in the Realms. Her hair had changed from green to a reddish-yellow color, the flowers in her hair dimming as winter approached. Her dress appeared made of fall leaves rather than the deep green I was used to seeing – it looked good on her.

“Until you develop your personal Dao and hang it in the skies with all the others, the process of assimilating that fate will never be complete.” I told her seriously, then shrugged. “But this is a good first step, and far quicker than I originally thought. You all have done well.”

“Travelling to other universes and the lack of your pressure on our souls was a great aid to our...evolutions. Call it good fortune if you must.” Keilan said, the dark god shaking his head and folding his hands into the sleeves of his robes. My gaze shifted to him, and my smile widened. Karma twisted about him in waves and strings, connections flowing to and from everything he had touched – but his godly domain was more than just karma now.

Fate danced along his fingertips, not quite at his beck and call, but in a manner that displayed a mastery of the ephemeral force second only to me. Yet his domain was not just fate, either.

“The God of Connections, Keilan? You have broadened your domain greatly.” My eyebrows raised as he nodded his head, dark, bat like wings twitching. It was truly an impressive change; while Karma sounded more profound, connection was the base of the force. If I recalled, from what I had accidentally overheard, hadn’t Rising Wind, Crashing Waves directly mentioned this fact to Keilan while in his universe? I’d have to find a gift or something for the great stag as a thank you, next time we met.

“It seemed a natural evolution.” Keilan said.

“Natural, indeed. I am proud of you all. Now show me what great works you have wrought in the Realms.”

While everyone was gathering, I sent an incarnation down to the Physical Realm to visit someone I had half expected to be dead and gone. The Mad Scientist lived alone in a small cottage beneath one of the new Life-Giving Trees, tending to a little herb garden on her lonesome. She was starting to look old, wrinkles showing on her face and grey in her hair and feathers. When I’d left she had been struggling to cross the threshold of immortality. Now that I was back I could see she had crossed that bridge, literally in this case, but the march of time still affected her.

No matter what foreign methods she had used to extend her lifespan, she was beginning to fade away, immortality be damned.

“You’ve returned.” She said softly as I appeared behind her, making sure to announce my presence by making the plants grow just a little taller. She hardly even flinched, pruning a few dying leaves with small scissors. “I was starting to think you wouldn’t return before I passed.”

“I was afraid of that, too.” I admitted, looking closer at the Avian Monkey Wrench. I’d had plenty of time to analyze what I knew of the strange reincarnators, as well as observe more of them during my trip to the Void from afar. And I had figured out what their purpose was, what they could do to realms and universes they visited beyond just causing massive, sweeping changes if they chose to. Said purpose started, and ended, with the ball of memories and energy that floated outside the Realms right now.

“I achieved immortality, as you can see. Xing Wu assured me that it would fix my problem, that I would be able to stay here, but as you can see that is not the case. Such is the curse of being a Monkey Wrench; even immortality is not truly immortality. Our disconnect from the universes we inhabit continuously erodes no matter how long we extend our lifespans, and no matter how deeply we delve into that universe’s mysteries. Eventually we die and continue on with the relentless cycle. I have been to a few universes where immortality is achievable...and the end result is always the same.” She stated this information as if it was a clear fact, as if that was the undeniable truth. I severely doubted it, mostly because I could physically see evidence to the contrary.

I hadn’t understood what I was looking at before. Now I did.

“Do you want to stay here?” I asked, crouching beside her to touch at the little plant she tended. It was magical in nature, a cross-breed of some kind of fire-aligned bell pepper and a water-aligned jalapeno she herself had bred. Its leaves were the color of ice and coals, mixing together in a delicate harmony. The Mad Scientist sighed as the plant grew beneath my touch, trying her best to hide her true feelings. But I saw it. The longing. The desire. The *loneliness*.

“It does not matter what I want.” She said.

“Untrue. I do believe I have you lot figured out.” I said simply, and the Mad Scientist stiffened, narrowing her eyes as she glanced at me. Her wrinkled face was pulled into a frown, the yellow curiosity that burned her soul surging forth out of the black apathy. My smile grew kind as I met her eyes. “You are not destined to wander forever – I saw younger and older, though mostly the former, of your kind in my meditations, and I am confident in my assessment. You are honeybees, collecting pollen from flowers and spreading it across the multiverse, each life adding more and spreading more. The pollen just so happens to be your memories, and the energy you collect in living a new life. You are free to distribute it as you wish.” I pointed skyward, to the collection of energy and memories outside the Realms.

“The you that stands before me is but a projection. The memories that exist outside my Realms is your true self. Fear and doubt hold you back from realizing what must be done. I am not the one who rejects you; I would be more than happy if you chose to stay in my home. But you must make the choice to bring your soul into the universe, not the cheap copy you have here, and properly join the Realms.” I stood as I spoke, putting a hand on her shoulder comfortingly. I could see in her eyes she knew what I was talking about, the realization dawning on her face like the rising sun itself. “Whether you choose to stay here or not is your choice. Just know that you are welcome.” And with that, I let this incarnation slowly fade away, leaving the Mad Scientist alone with her thoughts.

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Yet I already knew what she would choose, even if she herself did not.

“Who are you putting in charge of the new regions?” I asked, leaning over the plans Keilan had laid out in his palace. My children had reached the same conclusion I had in that the new minor Trees were in need of people and things looking over them – yet no one had come to any conclusions as to who that should be. Mostly because only recently had the newest regions become fully operational; life was only just starting to spread there, and civilization was not nearly as advanced without me actively pushing it along.

Natural growth was far slower, but in the end, far more beneficial than artificially accelerating things. It was still happening faster than my initial projections.

Reika had likewise intentionally restrained herself from spreading life to the new planets and Pangaeas, letting it happen more naturally. Elvira had not, opting to help the spread of plants and other lifeforms to the new Heaven regions to promote the idea that it was a paradise. I believed that neither of them realized, however, the crucial role Morgan’s Hidden Realm has played in spreading life into the new regions; my wayward child had connected new tunnels to those areas to allow life through...or, more accurately, Morgan’s immortal People had.

Even now the Dimensional Creators were hard at work expanding bits and pieces of the Hidden Realm, connecting new portals to planets and life-filled areas as much out of curiosity as it was part of their nature. This led to a better energetic flow and a natural exchange of the stuff of life between far reaches of the Realms. Meanwhile Morgan’s other People, the Arachion, stayed hidden in the Hidden Realm for now, for the most part.

They had a neat little civilization starting, with Morgan watching over them dispassionately.

“Currently, we’re trying to figure out a few gods that would be willing to take up the roles. It’s proving...difficult.” Elvira said with a shake of her head. “The only truly qualified god to run a Heaven is Gilles, but I need him by my side as an advisor. Aerial and Inesa were both options, but they’ve vehemently denied the idea that they could host their own courts.” I pointedly didn’t press Elvira about how her relationship with Gilles had progressed in my absence. Now was not the time...even if curiosity was eating me alive.

“Even if you impress upon them that they wouldn’t have to actually have a court?” I asked instead. Elvira furrowed her brows while Alexander lifted his head, frowning at me. “And who says that they have to be only one god ruling Heaven? Let them hold a democratized election if they must. Or let two rule; like your god of fire and goddess of water companions, Alex.”

“We were thinking of delegating them into groups of four to rule over each signature feature of the new regions,” Keilan said slowly. “So the god of fire and the goddess of water would be the rulers of a Holy Mountain and Karmic Valley, or something like that.”

“Close, but not unless you want to actively tear them apart. Too different of positions for them. It is a big role, to take on the duties of a leader, and should not be forced upon anyone.” *Though some of the greatest leaders do emerge in times of crisis.* I mentally amended. That obviously didn’t fit the current situation, though. “Instead, you should look toward some of the Immortals and Angels, perhaps even your own immortal Peoples.”

“How so?” Reika asked, brows furrowed. I hummed and tapped my chin in thought, looking skyward as I sought the words to explain my reasonings. I shouldn’t have to, honestly, as it was fairly self explanatory – what we needed wasn’t rulers of regions to take over that were bad at the job, what we needed were interim rulers and stewards to keep the areas stable until someone was ready to take over...I could almost envision it now; Dao Progenitors and Immortals rising up to take over entire Mountains. Climbing Trees to do so...

Something...shifted, as I spoke about stewards for the regions, something so small and almost insignificant that I nearly missed it. Energy began to flow in a different direction than usual, small streams heading towards the greater icons of each region to pool in the depths...but that was it. Nothing else was there to transform it, and I frowned. This would require some investigating.

“Why not gods?” Alexander pressed. “They are the greatest amongst the beings of the Realms, would they not be the proper choices?”

“No, I see the issue with that now.” Keilan said slowly, eyes shining as he started to catch my meaning. “Gods are fundamentally part of the natural laws of the Realms, nexuses through which those powers are produced and flow through. They need to remain larger overseers. We touched on the concept Mother brings us ourselves before, of potentially leaving our palaces and current places of residence to keep watch over the entirety of the Valleys or Trees, rather than a single one. Our reach, as divinities, should be greater than singular regions.”

“I see. But it is not yet time for that, because we are too small.” Reika argued.

“We are,” I interjected, “but we need to design the plans for growth and inspire the idea in the correct places. The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago, the second best time is now. Ambition spurs growth and change, for good or ill; and, as far as I am aware, the Celestial Empress has already made plans to go explore the outer regions alongside her troupe of Immortals and Dao Progenitors. She will likely come to the same conclusion, but giving her a bit of a push in the right direction won’t be bad. And the Heavenly Host could start to inspect the Holy Mountains, perhaps even elect leaders for it under the guidance of gods. Karmic Kings could inspect the Karmic Valley, and so forth.” My children muttered in agreement, glancing at each other as I straightened up.

“That said, I do believe we have spent enough time discussing this. Keilan and Alexander! Would you mind showing me what you’ve done to the afterlife?” My two sons stood at my question, Keilan immediately launching into an explanation of what they did and what they were going for. I simply nodded along as they walked me through what I had already seen, pointing out that where the new flows of souls went and how they worked.

The framework that I had helped Keilan design for a much larger universe was beginning to fill in nicely, the structures for the outer regions adding to the complexity and beauty of it all.

Alexander explained the new duties souls had while not experiencing a lifetime, or how they might even choose to stay as spiritual beings and help out in the Realms to a greater degree. Keilan showed off the new flows of souls through the Karmic Valley, now at least twice as efficient as before. Reika told me how more and more mediums and spiritually sensitive people were beginning to show up in the Four Realms as a result, and how the Immortals were beginning to grow more powerful now that they had room to. Fewer were appearing now, instead allowing them to deepen their already existing powers. And Elvira simply reported on how the courts of the

gods were doing, the divine beings fixing energy flows to keep the new regions growing, and keeping barriers up to prevent anyone from messing with the new regions.

It was all very informative, and I was quite pleased with the results. The plans that I had developed during the meeting were now just about ready to be implemented, now that the Realms had grown to a sufficient size to start accommodating them.

I clapped my hands together once the discussion was finished.

“Excellent! I am very proud of you all. You have exceeded my expectations, and now I have two questions for you. First; can anyone tell me why I did what I did, and what, exactly, the point of me leaving was? Besides allowing room for growth.” My children blinked at me in surprise, brows furrowed as they considered the question. Seems they hadn’t really thought about it. “The answer is simple, and is something I figured out after the Sun War. If something were to happen to me, I want to be content in the knowledge that you all are able to stand on your own two feet.”

The fight against the Void Beast had only highlighted this for me. I was a powerful origin deity, though not as great as some of the beings I had seen in my meditations. But I was likewise far from all-powerful. The Four Realms were too young to really fear imminent collapse, but...well. I had already survived enough crazy things that a freak accident should not be ruled out.

“If something were to...” Alexander trailed off, not finishing the sentence.

“A parent needs to prepare their children for their own passing. I have expressed this to you before. Immortal I may be, but nothing is for certain.” I explained for them. The silence that filled the room following that statement was as thick as honey, and tense. A chuckle escaped me as I smoothed out my robes, cracking my neck. “But! Enough heavy talk. Now that brings me to my second point; I have been sitting still for far too long and wish to trade pointers with you all.”

I flexed my new arm, rolling my wrist and feeling the muscles within stretch in anticipation. A bit of dragon's blood still flowed through my veins, demanding action.

"Trade pointers?" They echoed.

"Indeed. Trade pointers. Discuss the Dao. Pit your souls against mine. We have established how powerful I am, it is time to establish how strong you are now." This wouldn't be just a fight though, not really. I had no intention of actually fighting my children – it was going to be a discussion between souls, in a way, and they needed another little push to see just how high they were reaching. The sky was starting to fill up more, with more and more divinities creating their own Dao paths worthy of my personal recognition; probably every divinity who had created a Dao path, at least, yet none of my first four children had created their own Dao.

And, of course, Morgan couldn't be left out. The wolf-spider had been hiding its own changes from its siblings, but I could see right through it. At least it would be easy to get into the mix; it'd been listening the whole time from its Hidden Realm, and I could see curiosity burning in its eyes.

Honestly though, with how much the Realms were growing I should probably go ahead and rename the Four Realms as the Five, but that would defeat the purpose of the fifth realm being *hidden*.

My children glanced at each other. Then looked at me. Alexander grinned eagerly, Elvira cracked her knuckles, and Reika clasped her hands together with a small frown, trying to hide her own eagerness. Only Keilan held his composure, studying me with those taciturn eyes of his.

"We would be happy to show you just how much we've grown."

And I was eager to find out just how much I had grown.

2.39 You Want to Wrassle?

“You’re still telegraphing your attacks a little,” Father said, stroking His chin in thought. Elvira panted, resting her hands on her knees as she stood before Him, sweat matting her brow. Once again, He was showing that He was far above the others – even now, His incarnations continued to individually assess and spar with each of her siblings, matching them in skill if not power. Alexander swam in circles around Father as He spoke to him, while Keilan and Reika took a little break, discussing strategy in low tones while shooting glances at the incarnations Father had assigned to them.

No one was truly trying here, not like they had against the Shadow, but it would be nice to see how they stacked up against Father.

“Only you would be able to see through my attacks,” Elvira breathed, straightening up and brushing a strand of hair out of her face.

“There’s a little delay between when you decide to attack and when you actually do. Your internal energies react before you physically do; to anyone below your power level, it is so slight that it wouldn’t make a difference in any meaningful confrontation. But to beings at or above your strength it is something that could be exploited.” Father continued, heedless of her complaints. “That said, you have improved on that quite a bit from last time we’ve trained. Good job.” Elvira huffed and shook her head, annoyed that despite her improving quite a bit, she still stood beneath Father in terms of skill and power. At least in a one-on-one, direct confrontation. Maybe if they all ganged up on Him, they’d stand a chance.

With a little sigh she looked around at the space they currently occupied. Gods filled the skies above her Holy Palace, elemental deities and angels alike crowding around to watch. Her eyes met Gilles’ and she grinned at the pale-skinned god, who waved back.

“Cute.” Father said, and Elvira blushed.

“Are we almost ready to begin the actual fight?” Elvira asked in an attempt to redirect the conversation away from her relationship with Gilles. She was eager to move past this sparring session; they knew she was weaker in a one-on-one. All His children were. He was simply too quick, too powerful, and could see through all of her attacks like they were told to Him beforehand. *But if I’m honest, the gap between us isn’t as wide as it once was.*

“Almost. There’s more of a crowd here than I imagined there would be.” Father mused, turning to look at the other gods. Aeriel drifted in the skies above, the goddess of wind giggling as she met His eyes.

“You underestimate the draw of this spar. It is a chance to see the peak of power in all the Realms clash against one another in a friendly, competitive environment. The mortals, I believe, even have a few sports like this. Of course the other gods would be intrigued.” Elvira explained, meeting Reika’s eyes from across the flat training grounds. An entire conversation passed between them in an instant, Qi carrying words so the wind didn’t have to as they traded insights into Father’s fighting style and His habits.

“I think that’s everyone who’s coming, so might as well get started. This was really supposed to be something silly and fun, not serious like they’re expecting.” Father said with a sigh, lifting one hand to snap his fingers. Space warped around her, Father’s power pressing against her skin. She felt like she could resist, and experimentally pressed against the power, but in the end willingly let it warp her to a new location in the depths of the Primordial Chaos. The stuff of creation was pushed back even further as Father waved his hand, a protective barrier springing up around the assembled gods, seats and chairs not unlike those of an auditorium popping up all around them.

Elvira shuddered a little at the casual display of power – Father may claim that she and her siblings had the potential to create just as He did, but none of them came close to how He could so easily manipulate the building blocks of creation.

“That’s better. This way we won’t accidentally make a mess of your palace, Elvira,” Father said, His other incarnations fading. Elvira rolled her shoulders a little as the chattering of the other gods grew louder, the anticipation palpable while Father looked on with a smile. “We’re just waiting for your other sibling to come out to play.”

“Our other sibling?” Alexander rumbled, a shiver running down Elvira’s spine as she began to realize Father had not, in fact, been kidding when He mentioned Morgan.

“Father, surely –“

“Yes, I am talking to you, now get out here.” Father interrupted Reika, clearly not paying attention as He stared off into space. Silence stretched for a moment. “I don’t care. You need to learn to get along, and you didn’t even say hello when I got back. Yes, now. No, you cannot. I said – good lord, Morgan, just come *on*.” With that Father reached out into space, the very air itself shattering like broken glass as he punched through the veil and into the Hidden Realm of Morgan, promptly hauling out the scruffy spider-wolf while it spluttered and snarled, spidery limbs thrashing.

“I will not –“

“This is family bonding time. Yes you will. Get out of your room and stop sulking – I’ve given you plenty of time to settle and hide away, now it’s time to socialize. *Then* you can go back to hiding in your cave.” Father chastised, wagging a finger at Morgan. The Shadow’s very voice set Elvira on edge, her wings flaring and feathers puffing up as she narrowed her eyes, knuckles cracking as her fists clenched. A quick glance at her other siblings told her they probably felt very much the same way, with Reika glaring, arms crossed, Alexander growling, and Keilan adopting a guarded stance.

The surrounding gods shuffled and murmured, their voices carrying their doubts to Elvira. Her frown deepened as emotions warred with each other inside her, her natural aversion to her so-called sibling, the one who had tried to burn down their home, clashing against her so-called duty. Father put Morgan down, whispering words that were meant for it and Him alone, and she sighed heavily, shoulders drooping.

She'd have to play the bigger person here, wouldn't she?

"Now, Morgan, let's play nice." Father said. "After all, you're going to have to work together if you want to match me." Morgan scowled and stretched out its spidery limbs, then scowled deeper as whatever it tried to do did not work. Reluctantly, it turned toward Elvira and the others, baring its teeth as it slowly approached. Reika sniffed derisively, nose scrunching as she tilted her chin up.

"Do not expect me to -"

"Sister!" Elvira snapped, cutting off whatever Reika was about to say. Her now orange-haired sister jerked in surprise, gaze snapping to Elvira, while Morgan paused mid-step. "Do not start." The small shake of her head had Reika blinking in surprise, withdrawing a little while the two boys watched silently. "Morgan, you are welcome to join us."

"I do not need your permission. The Great One commanded, and so it shall be." Morgan snapped back, resuming its walk but adjusting its course so it stood even with Elvira and the others, yet still slightly away. Elvira mentally sighed. *Way to slap the olive branch out of my hand, Morgan.*

"Ok, enough dawdling. I'm getting antsy, so let's start!" Father said, clapping his hands together. Elvira flinched a little as a loud pop resounded through the arena, and suddenly Father was standing before her, lifting her into the air with both hands. His grin was playful. His posture was relaxed. His eyes glittered with mischief – the kind of mischief Kei had learned from Him. And as Elvira was tossed through the air, tumbling head over heels, she suddenly realized what this spar really was about.

A little laugh burbled forth from her chest as her wings flared, catching the air while her siblings charged forward. He'd even just said it.

They'd been taking this too seriously, and Father was going to play games with them until they realized it. Elvira's grin grew wider as she shot down toward Father, who yelped in mock fear as he dodged out of the way of Reika's flying tackle, vines ineffectually lashing out from her dress to try to catch him.

White light flared out of Elvira as she hurtled forward, intent on blinding Father – only for him to snag her hands as she attempted to tackle him, rolling backward and planting a gentle foot in her gut to send her hurtling through the air once more. A laugh well and truly escaped her this time as her tails thrashed, righting herself and feeling time slow about her.

Father and her own eyebrows rose as the distance between them shrank, space itself folding like a slip of paper. Yet she was the first to react, clapping her hands and sending out a shockwave of force that blew Father right back into a net of karma Keilan had woven.

"Oh no!" Father cried, his hands swiftly bound together with the strings. "I've been captured! Alexander, save me!" Alexander bellowed as he shot a stream of golden flames at Father – fire that all of those gathered knew would do little more than tickle Him. Father sucked in a deep breath all the same, the fire flowing into His mouth, turning his throat golden from the light, and down into His belly. "Tasty, but not what I wanted!" He cackled, ripping free of the karmic strings and sprinting toward Keilan. Time and distance stretched, Father's footsteps slowing, covering none of the distance He should.

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It gave Reika and Elvira both just enough time to get there, Reika blowing a stream of frost to freeze His legs while Elvira swung at His face with half of her might. Father twisted His head to the side at the last second, avoiding the blow and promptly headbutting her in the stomach. Her breath left her lungs with a whoosh as she was once more sent flying backward, landing on her back none the worse for wear, giggling to herself. Morgan sat beside her, eight eyes narrowed as it watched the conflict.

“Thanks for the help!” she wheezed, sitting up. Morgan grunted and side-eyed her, eight legs twitching rapidly as it manipulated the fabric of space around the fight. Father laughed as he punched through the folded space Morgan created, moving faster than Morgan could slow the surrounding time. “I didn’t know you’d gotten so good at that.”

“A lot can be achieved when you’re not playing house with fools.” Morgan scoffed, and Elvira stood, dusting off her robes like she dusted off Morgan’s mean comment. Morgan’s scowl deepened as Father springboarded off of a small black hole Morgan punched in space, using its suction to swing around Alexander before flicking his fingers and closing the singularity.

“Maybe, but I think you’d benefit from getting in on the action.” Elvira said.

“No, and do not care about what is ‘beneficial. I still do not like you, nor do I approve of what you have done with the Great One’s creation.” Morgan scoffed. Elvira’s eyebrows rose as she turned to her sibling, hands on her hips. “I will not –“

“Suit yourself. But you know...when Father gets into a mood like this, He keeps going until He is satisfied. And I don’t think He’ll be satisfied with just you hanging around the edges; He’ll either drag you in, or come bug you another time. And I guarantee it won’t be as fun as this.” She told it, shrugging as she prepared to dart off back into the fray. Alexander was promptly tossed to the side, his body thrashing as Father danced about the other two, narrowly avoiding their attacks. For once, He actually looked distraught, like He was focusing on dodging rather than just playing around.

Elvira laughed to herself. If it was a game He wanted, it was a game He would get.

Inesa had been worried for a moment that the Mistress had changed in Her time away from the Realms. Randus sat beside her as they watched the fight – though to call it a fight was generous. Neither Statera Luotian nor the Big Four were going all-out, and strategy had been thrown to the wayside as they wrestled and played. There was still plenty to be learned from the mock-fight, of course, as the casual manipulation of power being thrown about could be...enlightening, for those who knew to look. Many of the elemental gods had thoughtful looks on their faces as the most powerful beings in the universe went at it, Kei in the very front row, bouncing in her seat like she wanted to join.

Inesa had come into this worrying the Creator wanted to actually fight Her children. What she saw instead was a father play-wrestling with his children. It was nothing short of adorable – even as She tossed Alexander away like a toy, the great dragon writhing as he was sent flying through the air.

“This is not what I expected.” Randus noted, pouring a cup of steaming hot tea for herself, himself, and Gilles, who sat on his other side. The shadow deity nodded, taking a sip.

“Nor I, but I am noticing a few curiosities. The Patriarch has gained some insights into the Void – see how easily He cuts through the karmic strings Keilan binds Him with? His regrown arm flashed with power when He does, and it is the power of the Void.” Gilles noted, leaning forward with interest.

“I’m just happy they’re having fun.” Inesa said, a small smile dancing on her lips as she took a sip of her tea. Elvira flashed forward, engaging in swift and brutal close-combat with Statera, who blocked all of her blows with seeming casual ease – but Reika snuck up from behind, and hit Him over the head with a giant bat of wood, the weapon shattering under the blow.

“You got me! Nice!” Statera cried happily, kicking Elvira’s legs out from under her and grabbing Reika in the same motion, tossing them away together. *What Xing Wu wouldn’t give to be here.* Inesa mentally lamented, but knew her beloved would rather get here of his own power than bring him. Stubborn and prideful to a fault, he was.

“As am I. It has been a bit since I’ve seen Elvira this happy. I, unfortunately, am not a good sparring partner for her.” Gilles said, leaning back in his seat – a chair made of pure primordial chaos, manipulated to a degree Inesa could not ever possibly imagine attaining. It was hard enough for goddesses like her to even venture into the Chaos, let alone manipulate the building blocks of creation.

“It is concerning that the Shadow has advanced its manipulation of space and time so.” Randus said, twirling his moustache. “But it is nothing outside of the Mistress’s predictions. She did share them with me prior to leaving; I only hope it is used for the good of the Realms this time, rather than obliteration.”

“I agree, though –“

“What are you all waiting for?!” Statera suddenly shouted, panicking as She dodged around the Big Four, Morgan’s manipulation of space making it increasingly more difficult. “Help me! I’m being attacked!”

Silence reigned for a brief moment, even the Big Four stilling in their motions. The three baby gods that had been born in Statera’s absence shifted uncomfortably, glancing at each other in confusion. Even a few of the older ones seemed hesitant, unsure what was happening.

Kei was the first to act, bless her heart. The nine-tailed fox-girl shot forward like an arrow from a bow, staff in hand as she brought it down upon the Creator’s head – only for it to be blocked with a staff of primordial chaos, created in that instant. The Creator laughed.

“No, not me, them! Help me!”

“No, get Him!” Elvira shouted back, pointing dramatically. “Gang up on Father!”

And the dam was broken. With a whooping shout the elemental gods surged forward, even Gilles fading into shadows as he launched himself into the fray. A grand melee devolved in the arena, elemental energy being thrown every which way as Statera weaved through the assaulting gods, cackling madly as He was forced to dodge, unable to go on the offensive. Inesa giggled, hiding her face behind her sleeve, eyes shining as she watched.

Yes, this was more like Statera. Something serious sounding, devolving into something incredibly silly.

Bubbles floated through the air, capturing elemental gods and depositing them in the most unfortunate places, butterflies of elemental energy drifting by as enormous amounts of power was thrown about. Inesa just smiled as she watched, Aeriel whipping up a giant maelstrom that had all the gods flung about in the winds, the Creator’s power blanketing itself over the arena like a safety net, ensuring it was all in good fun.

Even if He Himself flew in the middle of the storm, cackling madly.

Only two other souls beside herself stayed out of the fight. Randus, who observed everything with his usual calm, and Morgan, the wolf sitting at the edge of the arena scowling. Inesa sobered up a bit, hesitating only briefly before descending the steps to approach the Shadow.

“Have you come to lecture me, too?” the Shadow snarled when she neared, not even deigning to glance her direction.

“No. I simply wished to see if you wanted company.”

“I do not.” It snapped, and Inesa shrugged helplessly.

“Then I will leave you be. Don’t feel pressured to join if you don’t want to – not everyone is –“

“Spare me your sympathy. It is wasted.” Morgan snarled, the foul sound sending a shiver down Inesa’s spine. She lifted her hands and calmly stepped away, a little disappointed but not surprised by the response. This was a being who shied away from the light. Who was she to try and bring a little bit into it’s...life? Home? She wasn’t sure.

She’d just have to be content with the fact that she tried, even if it had been misplaced.

Morgan watched the goddess of light leave with one eye, the rest focusing on analyzing the Great One as They fought and played with the others. As wasteful as this entire thing was, there was at least one good outcome. It was able to analyze the Great One further, so it could better shape itself in forcing Them to overcome Their own self-made limitations.

Yet...it’s scowl deepened as it turned its gaze once back to Inesa.

Of all the foolish gods of the Four Realms, it hated her the least. At least she understood it had no desire to play nice.

Morgan turned back to the fight, shaking its head, and recalling the words the Great One had whispered in its ear.

"I am the Heavens. Reach me. Come stand beside me. Prove you are worthy." They had meant to be a challenge, yet Morgan had sensed something...more. A worry, hidden behind the veil of playfulness. It knew the Great One, and from its perspective, even They did not seem to notice the way Their shoulders tensed as They looked out toward the Void. *What did you see, out there in the Void? What fate has you so wound up?* For it could be nothing but fate. Nothing else wrapped around Statera so tightly, not even karma.

Morgan settled down, content to observe, only occasionally twisting space and time to hamper the gods. Whatever it was, it would be ready for it. And maybe, through it, the Great One would reach Their true potential.

2.40 Of Shadows and Science

Gilles stood beside Elvira, listening to the woes of the world. Gods milled about in the throne room, the tall white-marble pillars lining the grand room glittering in the twin lights of the Realm Sun and Lunar Star as they shone eternally from above. Eons of wear and tear from the presence and bickering of gods had shattered many of the pillars at one point or another, those that had been broken mended with lines of gold. Aeriel often came to aid with such endeavors, the quiet wind goddess seeming to find some sort of solace in the act of mending stone. She had been far less quiet back then, far more open to conversation even if he would never consider her to be talkative.

Gods above, that had been back when he was freshly born, hadn't it? She fell quiet soon after that.

What had changed, to make her so silent now?

"I can practically hear the gears turning, Gilles," Elvira said, not looking up from where she read through a scroll Argent, the god of metal, had given her. Said copper skinned god was smiling as he toyed with the brass trumpet he had grown fond of as of late. It made Gilles wonder when he would create a Dao of Music, he was so into the instruments. "Focus. What is on your mind?" Elvira's words grounded Gilles in the present, and he took a moment to forcefully banish any wandering thoughts from his head. Then he sighed, because what he had to say she already knew, but on principle alone he could not say directly to her yet.

"I am contemplating the changes happening to people and the realms," he admitted, which was not entirely untrue. That was likely why Elvira merely hummed, nodding her head as she finished reading the scroll.

"This, Argent, is a splendid idea, and bears further investigating. You have my permission to begin drawing up a more detailed plan; let us see how music affects the growth of some of the budding regions. We already know that they can be affected by various energies, but the real question is how far they can be influenced. Music should be a relatively safe, neutral first experiment." Elvira handed the scroll back to Argent, who took it with a grin.

"Thank you, Lady Elvira." He said in a deep, melodic voice that reminded Gilles of ringing bells, before turning away and trundling off down the steps to Elvira's throne. Before the next could approach, this time a familiar, senior member of the Heavenly Host likely requesting permission to hunt down a renegade member of their order again, Elvira held up a hand and turned her attention to Gilles.

She met his eyes unblinking, raising one eyebrow at him.

"Don't give me that look." He said, frowning at her.

“Gilles, it is rare for me to be able to feel your nerves. You’re practically vibrating in place, and it’s distracting me. Either tell me what is going on, or go deal with it. I can handle things here,” Elvira stated, holding Gilles’ gaze. He shifted from foot to foot – they’d been together for a long, long time now, but he was no less afraid of her now than he was before. Just for different reasons.

“I will take my leave, then.” He bowed as shadows swirled up around him, Elvira snorting in amusement as she turned away, waving the Heavenly Host sergeant forward.

“Go on.” She said. The last thing Gilles saw before he teleported away was the grey-haired, marble-skinned Heavenly Host immortal kneeling before Elvira while clad in his military adornments.

Gilles went looking for the Matriarch, Statera Luotian, and found Her in Her garden with another god. He was a young god of mountains, and though he was physically taller than the Matriarch Herself, towering a good thirty feet in the air, Gilles could only see him as a baby compared to Her. She spoke to him softly, in gentle tones, like one might speak to a particularly scared rabbit. It was understandable. Even as one of the older gods Gilles found Her presence hard to bear at times, let alone if this was your first time meeting Her.

So he stood silently off to the side, respectfully not listening in on the conversation as the two continued to chat, the earthen-skinned god nodding along eagerly to whatever the Matriarch had to say. Thankfully, though, he did not have to wait long for everything to wrap up, and for the god of mountains to be sent on his way. It was mildly amusing to watch the large-bodied god lumber through the garden, taking extra care not to step on any of the flowers or shrubs or trees that made up the beautiful space. And a beautiful space it was, full of life and wonder, all the foliage and plants the Matriarch of all creation deemed worthy of being in Her sacred garden –

"It is nothing so grand as that. If I had my way, one of every species would be in here; but alas, there is not enough space for it. Maybe I should have Morgan help me create a sub-dimension just for that. I already have the blueprints for all species stored away, it would be a simple matter to spread them." Gilles jumped as the Matriarch appeared beside him, hands folded into the sleeves of Her purple robes, expression neutral. "I saw you admiring Keilan's first plant. A Karmic Peony, I call it. Sadly extinct from the rest of the Realms, but I keep a few specimens growing here for nostalgia's sake." Gilles looked back at where had been staring, but not seeing, to find a gorgeous black flower gently waving at him. The petals were thin and delicate, the stalks nearly translucent and slender, as if they were made up of strands of karma, and he immediately understood why they were extinct everywhere else.

They were too delicate.

"It is beautiful." Gilles said, the words he knew he had to say stuck in his throat. His fists clenched, stomach twisting awkwardly, almost as if it was trying to press up into his diaphragm.

"I noticed something, upon my return. Many of the elemental gods have created their own People; fire elementals, water elementals, wind elementals, most using Reika's greater Elemental template. Yet you have not. You, who were so intrigued by the process of destructive Void and how it relates to creation. Why not?" The Matriarch pressed. Gilles' mouth suddenly felt dry, and he shifted from foot to foot.

"Lady Kei has not either -"

"She is easily distracted, but will find her muse soon. Besides, we are not talking about her. We are talking about you." The Matriarch's tone brooked no argument, Gilles' heart dropping in his chest, cornered as he was by the conversation. There would be no escaping this. Discussing this hadn't been why he'd come here, he'd come here to work up the courage to ask something else entirely. But...

"Sol and I were working on a People together, before the Sun War made us stop." Gilles admitted, voice coming out stronger than he'd expected for talking about his brother. He tried to avoid it, whenever possible. "Afterwards I thought about continuing, but I just...couldn't. Every time I think about picking up where we left off, I find myself stalling. I've even thought about contacting Inesa, see if she would help me, or waiting for Fang Xu to wake up to enlist him, but the thought of completing it with someone else, someone besides Sol is...it feels wrong. I know it's silly. He's gone, but..." Gilles trailed off, avoiding the Matriarch's eyes as he stared at the Karmic Peony and waited for Her judgement. Would She offer sympathy? Condolences? Tell him he was being silly?

He didn't think he liked the sound of any of those. They would feel like ash in his heart.

"Gilles, look at me." The Matriarch commanded. Gilles grimaced as he turned, meeting Her green eyes, the eyes that locked him in place with their intensity, seeing right through him as they did. Her expression was soft, understanding, a bit of sadness in Her eyes that made him uncomfortable to think about. "I'm going to take you somewhere, ok?" She did not wait for his answer, space warping around them, the garden vanishing, only to be replaced with the familiar sight of the physical realm. They were above Cradle, the first planet to hold life, standing in the air above a small temple dedicated to Fang Xu, the Sun God. If Gilles remembered right this village had nearly been destroyed by the fires of the Sun, Fang Xu's actions saving it from total annihilation.

His burn scar throbbed, and Gilles put a hand over it absently.

"Watch for it." the Matriarch said, eyes narrowed. The Realm Sun was setting, the Lunar Star beginning its ascent even while the planet circled its own, miniature sun. Natural shadows wrapped around Gilles, but their reaction to him was muted as it always was whenever the Matriarch was around. Shadow might be his divinity, but all energy in the Realms preferred the Matriarch's presence. "Do not get distracted. Look, look!" She pointed suddenly, jerking Gilles' arm forward as Her other hand found his shoulder, his gaze snapping to whatever got Her so excited.

Five birds alighted into the sky, fire trialing from their wings, an orange glow burning in their chests. Their feathers were red in color, glowing brilliantly as they made arcs of embers in the skies, chirping and cawing happily. They were neat, but Gilles did not see their significance.

“Look closer. The middle bird.” The Matriarch insisted, Her power gently wrapping around him, guiding his vision closer. His eyes narrowed as he focused on the bird, stripping away the outer layers of power and qi and life with his eyes. It was a prideful bird, leading its little flock, full of fire and vigor. He opened his mouth to say something, but the words died in his throat as a wave of nostalgia hit him, his eyes growing wide as the thin layers of soul were stripped away to reveal the depths of what lay beneath.

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The bird's truesoul lay bare before him, and he realized who it was. Pride radiated from the soul, with a hint of humility, but mostly pride. Pride in what it had done, what it was doing, in itself, in who it was; just like his brother. *And it still held the flames.* They were but embers compared to before, but fire was still kindled there.

“Sol?”

“I've been watching him for a long time, but I didn't expect him to get this far in the time I was gone.” The Matriarch admitted. Gilles worried his lip, emotions warring within him as he looked at the long-lost soul of his brother. No, not lost. He'd known Sol had been out there but hadn't gone looking for him, as if he'd been afraid of what he would do if he found what had once been his brother.

The wave of relief that washed through him that, despite all his sins, his brother was slowly growing left him was almost surprising.

“He's too prideful still,” Gilles noted, a hint of disappointment marring his otherwise positive emotions.

“Pride, by itself, is not an inherently bad thing. That pride is what drove him to come this far this quickly, after all. The problem lies when it becomes blinding, as with all things. Pride, anger, fear, *love*, joy, they all pose their own problems. Some act as chains of gold. Others as leaden weights. Overcoming their nature to not be blinded by them is one of a soul’s greatest challenges. But you must be able to feel these emotions, for they are some of life’s greatest motivators. Without them, far too many souls would stagnate.” The Matriarch explained. Gilles knew this already, of course, having spent far too long associating with Elvira’s angels and mortals alike to not understand the inner workings of enlightenment. Yet for some reason it hit him harder today.

No, not some reason. It felt like She was talking more to him, than about Sol.

“But he’s not Sol anymore. Not really.” Gilles said lamely, in a weak effort to deflect. The sharp glare from the Matriarch told him She saw right through the lie, not that he’d expected it to go over well.

“He is too powerful of a soul to never not be Sol, even if I stripped away his memories, power, and the outer layers of his being. The bigger you are, the greater your truesoul becomes. Some souls are born great, while some are made. Sol is one of the former, and that is where his pride rightfully comes from.” The Matriarch declared.

“Except for when it blinds him.”

“...except for that, yes.” The Matriarch allowed. Gilles floated down, not quite approaching the bird, just getting closer. And he smiled to himself, all the fear that plagued him gone.

“Matriarch.” Gilles said, turning to the Creator God. She looked down at him impassively, but he could still see the kindness in those piercing green eyes. The love. Yet he also saw the worry, the firmness a few of those layers She kept so hidden away from Her children. The firmness that had

led to such a harsh punishment for Sol. Gilles knew it had been the correct choice; Sol had done too much to get off scot free. His own scar was testament to that. It just made him wonder what the Creator's truesoul was like, what secrets it held... "I would ask two things of you."

"Ask, then." She said, smiling broadly, definitely knowing what he was about to say.

"First; would you train me in the ways of the Void? How to escape its corruption, how to manipulate it? I wish to become more than I am now." Gilles admitted. The Matriarch's grin widened as She nodded, flashing Her pearly white teeth. Taking the acceptance for what it was, he next made his true request. The one he'd been putting off ever since Her return, even though he'd told himself he wouldn't be a coward about it. "Can we go somewhere else for the next question?"

Still, asking in front of his brother, who had wanted the same woman, felt wrong in many ways.

Space warped and suddenly the two were back in the garden, standing amongst the roses.

Gilles fell to his knees and pressed his forehead into the soil, kowtowing before the Creator of All. The one who had given life to all the Realms, and was Parent to the woman he loved, but one he himself had never seen as a parental figure.

"I, Gilles, God of Shadows, humbly ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."

The squeal of excitement – a noise he'd *never* have imagined the Creator making – was all the answer he needed.

The Mad Scientist had a bad feeling. She'd had a bad feeling for a long while now, even before she'd taken the immortality trial that had shown her things it should not have. (Such was the problem with trials that used your own soul against you; they tended to reveal things best left untouched.) But the feeling was growing stronger with every passing minute, now, to the point she had no other option than to rely on foreign methods to get real answers.

"Are you sure this will work?" Xing Wu asked from where he lounged off to the side, watching dispassionately as the Mad Scientist worked. She scoffed at the notion that this could possibly fail, setting the last stone obelisk in place and stepping back to survey her work.

"Please. This is an ancient technique designed by someone far older and far more powerful than even Statera Luotian. He was an evil god, in a universe filled with evil gods, but he did know how to make a good divining ritual." The Mad Scientist shuddered just remembering her past life, the one she'd lived just before coming to the Four Realms. The life that had nearly broken her. The prick who had taught her this ritual was all about corruption and evil, hell-bent on remaking the universe in his own image.

She'd done her best to cull his influence in the world, but who the hell knew if it'd actually worked? It wasn't like she could go back.

"An evil god? Sure, the gods can be jerks, but evil? I don't buy it." Xing Wu scoffed, kicking his leg and setting his hammock to swinging. The Mad Scientist glared at him. As much as she hated him, it was people like him that had convinced her that this universe was worth anchoring herself to. Had Statera Luotian kept her by Her side, she probably would not have come to this conclusion. But after seeing the universe for all it had to offer, small though it was, and seeing its trajectory with her own eyes? Yes, this was a project worth investing in. She hadn't felt this way in...gods, *lifetimes*.

Anchoring herself here would still take some time, though; she hadn't quite figured out how to manipulate her own self to the necessary degree.

"What about your Shadow?" She countered after recollecting her thoughts. That was a bad habit of hers, running off on tangents when she got excited about something even if those tangents were mental.

"Bit of a delayed response, but I'll forgive you." Xing Wu drawled. Leave it to him to let nothing slide. "And that thing isn't a god. It's a mockery of everything that is holy and just."

"Last I heard it was well on its way to becoming a god of time and space." That information may or may not have come from Statera Luotian Themselves, after one of Their little visits, but that was beside the point. Regardless, it had the intended effect. Xing Wu sat bolt upright, glaring at her.

"I'll be damned before I let that mangy mutt reach godhood before I do." He declared.

"Not like you have a choice. There's quite a bit of time left before you become a god. Even with the help of Inesa and...what was her name? Thyia?" The Mad Scientist taunted, circling the hexagonal ritual structure she had made of solid salt, the blood of a hundred children – easily collected from a nearby hospital, from willing donors – and her own internal energies. Marble obelisks ringed the structure at eight points, and she readjusted one to ensure it was in the correct place.

"You'd be surprised." Xing Wu said lightly, leaning back into his hammock and smiling at her. She hummed.

"What is your obsession with becoming a god, anyways?"

"I want to punch Statera Luotian in the face. For no real reason, if I'm being honest. At this point it's just for the principle of the matter." Xing Wu admitted. The Mad Scientist shook her head, wings fluttering as she stepped into the ritual circle. Using this thing again made her nervous, but if it was for the Four Realms' sake...well, she was willing to. That was just another facet of who she was, she supposed.

"Stand back. This could get weird." She said, sitting cross-legged in the center of the salt-and-blood circle. And she Spoke, in the one true language. "[CONNECT.]" Her power channeled through it, pulsing like blood through her veins. Her nerves twitched her tails and wings, and, unbidden, something connected to her.

Her eyes flew wide as power surged through her, the ritual circle connecting to something far greater and more powerful than anything she could have ever conceived, as it always did. Visions flashed before her eyes of universes far, far away, big enough that if she looked too closely her mind would melt out of her ears...but, more connected to her, she felt *their* approach. Something large. Something untamed. Someone who had been traversing the multiverse for far, far longer than anyone else.

There were two of them. There was always two of them.

The Mad Scientist gasped as her eyes flew open, Xing Wu cursing as he hauled her out of the ritual circle. Blood flowed freely from his eyes and nose, his hair scorched from the foul hellfire the ritual channeled, but his expression was one of concern as he shouted at her, his qi and power flowing into her to try and stabilize her existence. Even now she could feel her skin stitching itself back together, her internal energies preserving her life force while her body healed.

They were coming.

No, worse, one of them was *already here*. Not in the Realms, but too close for comfort.

And that meant the other one was coming, too.

The Mad Scientist worked her mouth, trying to move, trying to speak, but found herself unable, the vision itself slipping from her mind like sand in an hourglass. They were coming. They were coming *coming coming COMinG COMING* –

She sat bolt upright as her nerves reconnected with her body, a wordless, soundless scream forcing its way from her lungs until she managed to regain control of herself. It took a few moments. Just a few, because she had endured far worse pain in her long, long life.

Her expression was serious as she looked at Xing Wu, the man who had so bravely jumped into hell to pull her out. He wiped the blood from his face, never looking away. She couldn't be an alarmist here. She had to make sure. She had to be one-hundred percent certain, and then she could warn them.

Calamity was coming. And she had to be certain.

My attention returned from the Mad Scientist, and the panic she was now feeling. Her ritual had been intriguing, and what she had seen - what I had snuck a peek at by piggybacking off of the ritual itself, foul though the foreign magic had been - was some of what I had seen during my time in the Void. She'd glimpsed part of the greater multiverse, something too difficult for her mind to handle as of now. The approaching monkey wrench was intriguing as well, but...

My attention turned back to that which had been placed before me. The box floated in the corner of my vision, taunting me, as I took a long, slow sip of the iced tea I held in one hand. Mr. Boxes had left it hanging there like the jerk he was, ensuring that the looming feeling that was rolling in the back of my mind was not just my imagination.

Which really sucked, because Elvira and Gilles' wedding was tomorrow, and I wanted to be excited for it.

{[Sub-Domain Nearing Completion: Fate; 99.99%.]}

The tension in the air was palpable. It was making me twitch. My frown deepened, Fate tugging at the corners of my mind, urging me to look closer.

But this was not something I could see. It eluded my vision, ever so slightly. And that frightened me more than anything else.