

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

3:11 Birds and Wrenches

The skies were dark above Cradle, but they wouldn't be for long. A little bird sat in the branches of a tree, fire flickering about her feathers, her beak opening and closing slowly. This was it. This was the day she had waited for, for so long. With dramatic slowness her wings spread, embers falling from beneath them to dust the branch below. Storm clouds gathered above in anticipation of her ascension; the trial this time was bigger, and stronger now than ever. Already her qi was nearly to the Immortal stage – a name she had learned by listening to the Fae – and with it, her mind had risen as well.

Now was not the time to ascend to immortality, however. It was merely another trial, this time of the flesh. She couldn't just be the most powerful thing in the sky, she had to be the strongest as well. Her pride would allow nothing less.

Thunder boomed, lightning crackling in the skies above, and Solana screeched out her challenge.

That was the name she had chosen for herself. She didn't remember when she'd heard the word, but it felt familiar and right. So she'd stuck with it.

And the Heavenly Tribulation descended.

The tree she rested upon was immediately reduced to naught but kindling, a horrifically white light searing her eyes. She dared not use qi to protect herself, the searing heat and pain of Heaven's Lightning coursing through her blood and hollow bones. She let it. Pain spasmed her limbs, trying to keep her from taking off, to fall to the earth with the remains of her tree.

Solana spread her wings, keeping her qi tight in her breast, forcing through the pain as she shot into the sky on wings of fire. Lightning struck again, its roar drowning out her agonized shriek even as her wings refused to stop flapping, raw stubbornness keeping her airborne. Her beak clacked in defiance, claws curling against themselves as she rose into the sky, struck again and again and again by the tribulation lightning, the raw fury of the Heavens unleashed.

She did not try to evade – who was she, to believe she could outrun lightning? But neither did she try to flee. Who was she to believe she could escape the will of the Heavens? Besides, though she still ran off of a lot of instinct, she did know one thing. If she could not handle this, she could never fly freely in the skies above.

Each flap of her wings took her higher and higher, straight into the heart of the storm, where air was so thick with electricity it scrambled her mind and made every inch of movement a hard-won battle. Once again the Heavens roared, dozens of bolts streaking through her flesh and feathers, seeking to burn her to a crisp – and yet.

And *yet*.

She was born of fire. Heat and flame and searing pain were nothing new to her. Her shriek echoed in the darkening clouds, light spilling from her wings, fire roaring from her feathers, tearing the very clouds themselves asunder. But the clouds were not to be denied. They scraped themselves together, whatever will that bound them, made them strike those seeking to improve their fleshly bodies, forcing them back into place above her. Lightning flashed in the dark clouds. First blue, then white, then a brilliant gold, rumbling and crackling as they readied themselves for one last strike.

Solana spread her wings, bracing herself for it, fire rippling from her, daring it to try and strike her down.

The skies burned golden for one glorious second.

And Solana fell from the sky.

Smoke curled from her feathers as she tumbled, the storm clouds fading away, her tribulation over. Her consciousness faded in and out, darkness creeping through her vision, coming to bear just long enough for her to see the ground, rapidly approaching. Instinct took over and she flared her wings, pain shooting through her as she was sent hurtling through the trees, crashing through branches and trailing smoke before slamming into the ground, digging a furrow behind her small body.

A weak cry rang up from her.

She had done it. She had survived. Now all she had to do was find a place to rest.

An old man had witnessed the birth of a new kind of beast, and stroked his long, flowing beard, once green as was typical for an Elemental, and now was as brown as dead grass. He stood hunched over, leaning heavily upon a cane, his long robes falling down to his feet as he glided over the ground, moving far easier than any man his age had any right to.

“Well now, little one. You’ve found yourself in quite the situation, haven’t you?” He asked rhetorically as he approached the downed bird. It was small. Tiny, even, barely the size of his palm, breathing labored as it rested in the small, smoking crater it had made. “I have never seen a tribulation that intense, even for an Immortal, much less any being survive it without any talismans or protective charms.” He knelt next to the bird, humming softly to himself as he examined its wounds.

“Any beast or being that found you could eat you, you know. Your flesh and qi would make quite the prize for anyone; a significant boost to their cultivation. Karmic Hell, it may even push me into the realm of Immortality!” he exclaimed, shaking his head. “It would be the law of nature for me to feast upon you here. Not even Lady Reika would judge me for taking advantage of this opportunity.” He was silent for a moment as he knelt next to the bird, joints creaking and popping, a groan escaping him. He frowned, narrowing his eyes at the little bird, admiring its red plumage, charred though it was from the tribulation. It looked so small, there, even as it opened one beady black eye to watch him, crying out weakly as it tried to get up, wings flapping weakly.

“But I would judge me. It would be a shame for one so old to take away the talent of one so young. Come now, entrust yourself to me. On my faith to Lady Reika, no harm shall befall you while you are under my care.” He said the words softly, yet with as much power as he could muster. The very forest stilled as he invoked the Lady of Change’s name, laying a hand filled with healing qi on the little bird. New novel chapters are published on [novel•fire.net](http://novel.fire.net)

And it cried out no longer, falling into unconsciousness.

Alanna, for the first time in a long time, had been given a reprieve from her duties. She had been given a very competent advisor in the woman who called herself the Mad Scientist, and while she had her quirks, she had to admit the Mad Scientist was terribly efficient.

But what she made up for in efficiency, she likewise detracted in...wasteful spending.

Alanna sighed as she looked up from where she’d been enjoying a scroll – a silly little romance that had her smiling with every other paragraph. While she doubted she would ever find a romance like

that, that would endure lifetimes, she did not for a second disbelieve their existence. The Sun and Star were one such example, but she was distracting herself from the real issue.

A veritable explosion of qi radiated out from underneath the palace proper, rattling the chains that bound the floating city of Manu Ti above the lake below, then, just as quickly, fading away.

“She’s causing problems again.” She complained, rolling up the scroll. Whatever secret project the Mad Scientist had been working on had been rattling the entirety of Manu Ti for some time now. The people hadn’t notice only due to extensive warding in place, and her own power masking the worst of the effects. This one, however, was sure to cause questions to be asked.

The worst part about it all? The project wasn’t a secret. It was just that no one understood what it was, not even her master formations experts and immortals who have lived nearly as long as she. Not even the Dao Progenitors fully understood what she was making – only that, at times, wondrous creations would appear. Wondrous creations she called defects, or side-projects. Techniques that allowed for cultivators beneath the Nascent Soul stage to fly, rings that could contain hundreds of pounds of stuff, which was a vast improvement on other spacial manipulations, and cultivation talismans that would purify the ambient qi. By far the most interesting to Alanna, however, were the flying ships that did not require Immortals to pilot, and could traverse the rigors of space beyond Pangaea. Prior, they’d had to send Immortals to the distant planets surrounding Pangaea, Immortals protecting whatever personnel were necessary to pacify and establish contact with the often primitive civilizations of the outer planets. With those ships? It was far easier to send trade missions out there, and even to harvest some of the cultivations resources that were common on lifeless planets. It was opening up all sorts of interesting opportunities, including spreading quality

Stolen story; please report.

“Do you want me to go handle it?” Bob, her Immortal, illusionist spymaster, asked, appearing beside her in a swirl of shadow. He was a completely unassuming man, with a bald head, the typical horns of a Fae, and a pudgy body. He was, quite frankly, not uneasy on the eyes but certainly nothing to write home about. He was undyingly loyal, though, and appearing fairly normal was one of his greatest assets in his line of work. She thought about it for a moment, then shook her head.

“No. You deserve some rest. I will unfortunately need you to keep investigating the disturbances on the outer rims. I will go see what she is doing.” She tossed the scroll aside as she stood, sighing quietly to herself. There was a lot going on. The disturbances and talks of discontent – beyond the usual discontent that went around, as in the prevalent anger at life – were alarming but ultimately not as important as whatever Xing Wu was warning her about, and whatever the Mad Scientist was doing. She drummed her fingers against her thigh as she walked through the long halls of the Celestial Palace, letting her pondering flee her mind.

It was only when she got to the Mad Scientist’s laboratory, the large stone doors looming imposingly above her, that she paused to think about what she was doing.

Perhaps it wasn’t such a good idea to enter here. But...with all the qi waves she was making...

Alanna sighed heavily. She already would have to do PR work to calm people down about the qi explosions; she didn’t need more work to do, no matter how much she didn’t want to go in there.

Steeling herself she pushed forward, opening the huge stone doors with ease, the formations recognizing her qi and letting her in, to reveal the interior of the laboratory. What had once been a dungeon was now a mess of different alchemical, formation, and scientific equipment. The Mad Scientist, on the other hand, was an absolute mess. Her wings were charred. Her outfit was covered in grease and was still burning. Her hair was a mess, and her glasses hung lopsided on her face, even as she turned to flash Alanna a massive grin.

“Empress! Hello! I have something crazy to tell you – it involves, well, I won’t get into specifics, but did you know that energy gets more rigid as it ages?! I’ve never worked with so much young energy, it’s so moldable! And the energy that comes from the soul – that stuff is so versatile! Look, see, I hooked myself up to this formation...” she rambled on, most of the words she used going over Alanna’s head – not because she didn’t know them, but because she truly didn’t understand the context in which they were said, and sighed again as the woman pulled out a metal rod, positioning it over her chest so she could stab herself and, quote, “get as close to the soul as physically possible.”

Alanna sighed again, then moved to stop her.

Hadn't she just been thinking she was getting more time to herself with the woman around? She took it back.

Now she was babysitting an overpowered academic, with a penchant for self-harm. As if ruling a country wasn't enough like babysitting.

There was a soul floating in the Void, waiting in silent anticipation for what was to come, practically vibrating in place while one of the gods of the young universe held it back. But it was patient. And it had already gotten permission to enter. Now it just needed to wait for the gods of the universe to actually let it in.

Silently, it went over what it knew about this universe in its head.

First; it was the youngest universe it had ever seen. By a large margin. As someone who had been to thousands, if not tens of thousands of universes by this point, the thought of something *new* had it all but salivating. But that wasn't the only thing.

The new universe was facing an impending crisis! Two universes on a collision course – talk about something new and exciting! It didn't even mind that it was having to strike a deal with the Overgod in order to get in; this was just...it shuddered again in anticipation. The Four Realms. That

alone was a rare enough variant; it had actually only ever been in something similar in structure once.

Ding!

{[Your request has been approved. You will be entering the Four Realms on an observational basis only; abusing the rules too much will result in a severe penalty and the removal of certain privileges and powers.]} The being scanned the message, then waved it away as well as it could as a bubble of soul-stuff. It didn't need a reminder of what it already knew.

"Yes, yes, I know. Don't worry! I have no intention of messing this up; it's alright even if I just have to watch!" it said happily. "Though the other guy may not agree...you know how he is about screwing with my stuff. Ah, you're probably offering the same sort of deal." Though it knew from experience that the punishment for abusing the Overgod's trust wouldn't be too severe, nor were the revocation of aforementioned privileges. It just meant the next few lifetimes would be absolutely god-awful, something it wasn't ready to do again yet.

Then, all at once, it was time. The block was removed, and its soul started to create the carbon-copy that would be sent down into the Realms proper. Most of its kind were unable to sense or understand themselves while in the Nexus State, as it called it, but it was not *most*.

It even had the ability to somewhat choose and modify its own body; but for the most part it left the settings on random.

Being fiddly with character creation didn't fit its style. The only thing it demanded was, if it was going to be born into a loving family, it wanted to be born a twin. It had been a parent enough times to know how unfair it would be to have a child, especially an only child, that was not truly their own.

Ding!

[[That is logic I can get behind. Request granted.]]

The being blinked in surprise at the message, even as its incarnation-like soul-shard was pushed through the wall of Primordial Chaos that protected the Four Realms from the Void. That was...not the Overgod.

Ding!

[[Wait, is this how you see me? The same messages as Mr. Boxes? Huh. It's really odd being on the other end of this, for once. Welcome to the Four Realms. What should I call you?]]

“I go by many names.” The being said, taking it in stride. “But you may call me the Rival. A challenger whose abilities know no bounds! May I know who you are?”

Ding!

[[I am the Origin Deity. You may call me Statera Luotian.]]

The Rival shuddered again in glee as its incarnation was pushed through the chaos and into the Realms, its vision obscured as its body was chosen and formed, already sending it hurtling down to the lands below. That was fine by it, though. It didn't want any spoilers.

It wanted to enjoy the Four Realms and this young universe naturally.

And maybe play around a little bit – it'd never actually met an Origin Deity before!

I frowned to myself as the Rival descended into the Physical Realm, the body I had picked out for it already prepared, and twinned just like it had asked. I'd be keeping an eye on that one, but only half an eye – we still had a lot to do.

"I swear I know that one, though," I muttered, turning back to my work. Ah, well, it wasn't high on the priority list, and I'd figure it out eventually. For now, it was time to focus.

3:12 The Rival

If I was being honest, I wasn't quite sure what to make of The Rival. But if I was similarly being honest, for the first eight years I didn't pay too much mind to him. There was a small part of my being that was wholly focused on the one the Mad Scientist had warned me about, but it was only dedicated to keeping an eye on him, and ensuring that he didn't cause any problems. Which he didn't, for now.

He started off as a young boy, a Fae, born with a twin sister on a small planet in what was considered the "middle class" of the first region. The planet was neither overly important, nor unimportant. Not to mention, the little village he'd been born into was weak in cultivation and in power, but they lived peacefully. I hadn't put him there on purpose; in fact, The Rival's soul had gone through much of the reincarnation process on his own. I took it as a chance to see what he would do, while, at least, adhering to his request of being a twin.

And also to watch how Monkey Wrenches moved through the cycle of reincarnation. It was actually fascinating. Karmic threads and power that they had accumulated from other universes colored the life they chose; in the Rival's case that was mostly null and void, because their will and desire was strong enough to override certain limiting aspects of karma. They still allowed for some karmic aspects to be in place – no one could escape karma completely, not even me, though I could cut off large portions of the multiversal force if I focused, as I had been – which colored where and how they were placed in the Four Realms, but otherwise it appeared mostly random. I knew better than to judge it based on appearances, though.

The reincarnation process followed the Rival's wishes and inner desires than most mortals. It would be like if a god actually decided to reincarnate. The Four Realms would go out of its way to bend to the god's inner wishes, simply because the weight of their soul was that much more. The Rival had apparently wished for something of a quiet life, and in those first eight years, he'd mostly lived peacefully.

He ran and played with his sister. He listened to his parents, acting out a role he was expected to perform. He sometimes guided his tribe away from powerful spirit beasts, and occasionally found cultivation resourced that he freely gave to others; solely because he didn't need it. I had watched him readjust his dantian and cultivation pathways to make things easier on him; something that no one in the entire Four Realms besides myself and the other gods were capable of doing. This adjustment would make the process of cultivation extremely easy for him, at least in the lower stages. Most interestingly, to me at least, was how the Rival investigated the Realms.

He could touch and feel energy, and was constantly checking it out. Occasionally he would cast a little spell – usually a modified version of something that already existed within his home village – or try something new, but he had to build himself back up from the basics, from essentially nothing, to actually start tapping into the higher-tier stuff.

That was what I assumed to be the curse of the Monkey Wrenches. They had to start over from scratch every time; they had their memories and knowledge, but the massive amount of power that covered their soul? That remained untouched. Even the Mad Scientist hadn't really utilized that energy until she merged it with the Four Realms.

Now, the Rival I assumed could tap into the higher powers of the Four Realms if he wished, but I guessed that he didn't for one reason or another. Perhaps to keep a low profile. Perhaps because he was excited to be here in the Four Realms, and wanted to take things slow and enjoy it. I wasn't actually sure. Which was entirely novel to the being I was now.

It was a simple technique that the Rival employed, but no less effective for it; likely it was a countermeasure developed specifically for someone with my kind of sight. He wrapped karma and a thousand past events around himself like a shield – it wasn't that I couldn't see anything when I looked at him, it was that there was just so much going on that I couldn't parse through it all to get what I wanted.

Hence, why I hadn't been able to figure out who he was to me yet.

Still, I turned my attention away from his for the moment, going back to watching Morgan as it cut a few holes in its Hidden Realm to let its People through. The Aracheons were a reclusive people, kept away from all the others not by choice, but by Morgan's design.

It would take some time for them to naturally leave the Hidden Realm, but – Ah, there we go.

Morgan appeared in one village of Aracheon, snarling and tapping its spidery limbs on the rock walls of the cave the spider-like people called home. Black miasma spilled from its mangy fur, its deep growl echoing through the chamber and the Arachaeon, wisely, fled...right through the new rifts in the Hidden Realm Morgan had created. I chuckled and shook my head as Morgan repeated the process a dozen times, with various groups of Arachaeon. One even tried to fight back, jumping at Morgan with scythe-like claws bared, only to be devoured whole by the wolf.

That I did not chuckle at, frowning at my child, but ultimately leaving it to its own devices. The soul of that brave spider-person was already rejoining the reincarnation cycle, and I would

personally see to it that it got something out of the whole mess. Jumping at Morgan had been unnecessary, of course, as Morgan wasn't actually going to hurt them, but Morgan's methods were similarly unnecessary.

It was just a jerk at the best of times.

With a sigh I rubbed my forehead and stepped away from my spot on the veranda of my palace, where I could look down upon the entire Four Realms and observe all that was happening. I'd need to start moving the new regions into position soon. That would actually take a while – move them too fast, and they might rupture the fabric of reality. So slow and steady it was.

I glanced one last time at the Rival, giving the little part of my mind that was set to observe a bit more power, so it could start picking through the shield he had made for what I really wanted to know. Soon enough I might go down and introduce myself, but if he was content to sit around and do nothing, then I was content to let him.

His presence alone was beneficial; the energy he had accumulated through his travels naturally seeped out of him, gently spreading into the energetic flows of the Four Realms like little seeds on the wind. *But there's so much up there that, if he decided to stay, it might actually make the Realms explode.* I mused, glancing up at the sky to the Rival's soul.

"But that's a moot point. If he hasn't decided to stay anywhere, he won't decide to stay here." And with that, I re-centered myself on tinkering with the new regions, tugging on energetic strings to clear the path for the Trees, Mountains, Rivers, and Valleys to move through the void of space.

I'd seek out the Rival eventually. Maybe once I was certain Solana was doing alright; she'd grown awfully attached to that old man that had rescued her.

I didn't expect him to find me, not but a few years later.

The Rival whistled as he walked through the city, taking in the sights and sounds. It was a simple thing, with red-painted wooden walls ringed with archer towers and lined with formations. None of them were overly powerful, in his professional opinion, but neither did they need to be. The level of spirit beasts on this planet were woefully low – or, at least, this part of the world. Nor were they outright hostile like many Xianxia settings he'd been too...

This struck him much more like an actual world than a Xianxia world, just with people that lived a long time and had horns. With a bit of cultivation mixed in.

Even the oppression of the Heavens felt...soft. Not that he'd gone through any Heavenly Trials or whatever they were called here.

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“Ri, where are we going?” his twin sister asked. He turned and smiled at the girl, walking backwards down the cobblestone street, skillfully avoiding anyone coming at him without even looking. She was very similar to him, appearance wise. Delicate features, soft, pale skin, and hair as dark as midnight with the tiniest flecks of red dotting it; a residual effect of they being descended of some very powerful fire cultivator so many years ago. The fire element apparently stained the bodies of the Fae, coloring them...which was how he could tell when one person was more attuned to lightning, or earth, or wood, or what-have-you at a glance.

“To the future, dear sister! The FUUUUTURE!” He cackled as he pointed skyward, earning an eye-roll from her.

“You’re being stupid again. Sometimes I wonder if you’re actually my twin.” She said, absently reaching up to touch the fur decorations that hung around her horns – a habit of hers, whenever she was nervous. The Rival slumped over and pouted dramatically, arms hanging limply toward the ground.

“You wound me.” He whined, and she rolled her eyes again, pulling a little slip of parchment out of her pocket. “C’mon, sis, it’s a new planet! Dad got that contract and all, and it’s a brand new world! We should explore a little, live a little!”

“Mom and Dad asked us to get a few things. I’ll go get the Lin berries from the market. You go get the tea supplies Dad wants.” She said, narrowing her eyes at him. He straightened up and saluted her, smiling beatifically. “And don’t get distracted this time!”

“I’m sorry, what?” he asked, eyes following a butterfly with a curious mix of elements coursing through the wings. With the right push, it’d make an excellent familiar...especially for when the First got here and he inevitably had to challenge whatever foolish plans his eternal rival had. But no! He was here to have fun for now, and annoying his sister was icing on the cake. “Meet back at the front gates at sundown? I can do that!”

“Just do what I said. I’ll get the rest.” She groused, stomping off through the crowds. The Rival’s smile softened a little bit.

“Sorry, sis.” And he genuinely was sorry, for making her be the responsible one. Not that she wasn’t naturally that way, but...he was here to have a good time and explore something *new*. As refreshing as another lifetime of relaxation was after his few previous ones – travelling through Yggdrasil, destroyed as it had been, had worn down his sense of adventure quite a bit. Legends speak of apocalypse, but never what comes after. – he wanted to start to see what this universe was all about.

So he'd get the tea, like he'd been asked. All he needed was another few years before he was considered an adult and could wander on his own – the age of adulthood being twenty amongst Fae, so that made two more years – but curiosity was getting the better of him. What harm would a little bit of exploring do?

With a spring in his step he turned back around and practically skipped down the streets, grabbing the coin pouch that hung at his side and swinging it around one finger. Let's see...what to do with the time he had?

One hand reached down and touched a stone in his pant's pocket, the thick fur that made up his clothes almost completely obscuring the wind talisman. It had two uses; one, to take him somewhere new, and two; to bring him back. But he never got the chance to activate it, as he felt something happen before that.

It was a subtle shift in reality, the kind that happened when Immortals came to visit, and the entire planet reacted to their presence. But this was...stronger, yet subtler. The sun shone brighter, the wind softened, the fire burning in the paper lanterns hung above the street ceased their flickering. It felt like...a breath of air, blowing through the entire city, cleansing the pollution and driving away the chaotic spirits that sought to muddle the mind.

The Rival sucked in a deep breath, air hissing through his teeth. No one else seemed to have noticed. Follow current NOVELS on NoveIfire.net

Clearly, someone important had arrived. Someone *powerful*. Did he risk it all to contact them?

...yes. Yes he did. This xianxia world was disturbingly peaceful, and he had to know why. Especially because Heaven was still oppressing things, forcefully stilling the flow of energy.

He tilted his head up, and took a deep breath, then began to run. Qi pumped through his legs, building up into a movement technique he should not have been able to pull off at this level of cultivation even if he were a prodigal genius. But, alas, he was far more than a genius or a prodigy and did so anyway, his muscles straining as he shot through the city, only disturbing a few higher-level cultivators. One man shouted at him but he ignored him, coming to stop above on one of the roofs of an archer tower on the Eastern wall.

The scent led away from the city...quite a distance away.

“Alright, wind, take me to where I want to go, not just random.” He muttered, pulling the talisman out of his pocket and pleading with the damnable thing. Predictably, as it was just a stone with a few runes inscribed upon it, it did not answer.

But nonetheless, it still listened. For when he pushed a touch of qi into it – instantly draining nearly all of his qi in a split second – he was transformed into the wind and shot across the land, practically teleporting to a small village way outside of the city.

And there, sitting in a little tea shop enjoying a fresh brew, was perhaps one of the most beautiful women he’d ever seen in his entire life; or, at least, in the past few lifetimes. She wasn’t drop-dead gorgeous, with tons of makeup on. But her complexion was flawless, her hair a glossy black that gleamed in the sun, her purple robes immaculate and fine. And, more importantly, she was the source of the disturbance.

“Even the wind wants to lead to you.” His eyebrows raised at the realization, glancing down at the talisman. “How powerful are you?” He paused for a moment, unsure of how to proceed...then deciding fuck it, he might as well ask her himself.

“Hello there, beautiful, is this seat taken?” he used his movement technique to appear before her in a flash, certain it would impress her to see one so young use such a technique, and winking.

Her head snapped up from a book she’d been reading, piercing green eyes locking onto him in a mixture of surprise and bafflement. And what *eyes* they were. He was momentarily stunned, locked into place by the sheer clarity held within their emerald depths. There was nothing mysterious about them; they showed her emotion as clearly as a neon sign, yet felt like they could pierce through his own shell with but a glance.

“Um,” she said eloquently, eyes darting about the shop. There were very few other patrons, and none seemed to notice either of them. “I didn’t – how are you here?”

“Are you talking about the perception filter you put up? I admit, it was so subtle that I didn’t even notice you had it up until you said something, but such things are trivial to one such as I.” The Rival boasted, assuming she was giving permission and taking a seat across from her. She watched him carefully, curiously, eyes darting about him like she was trying to pick him apart. He smirked and crossed his arms. Let her try.

“I didn’t put up a filter.” She said slowly, taking a sip of her tea. The Rival wiggled his eyebrows at her. “I did not wish to be seen by anyone, and the world adhered to my wish. This is meant to be a bit of a relaxing moment for me.”

“Casual reality manipulation? You must be powerful. What stage of cultivation are you at? Obviously you’re beyond mere Immortality.” He said, and she seemed to actually pause and consider the question.

“Stage? I suppose you could say I’m at the very top.” She mused. “How did you find me? Wait – I see it now. You rode the wind, and because of my presence it naturally descend toward me – even from two planets away. Fascinating that your desire to get to where you wanted to go overrode my desire to be left alone.” This time it was the Rival’s turn to pause.

“Two planets away?” He parroted.

“You didn’t notice? Yes. The wind touches all, so why wouldn’t it be capable of interstellar travel? It helps that you were pushed along *someone* playing games.” The woman said, setting down her teacup and folding her hands on the table, shooting a quick, playful glare at the ceiling.

“I – “

“I’m sorry, but I swear I know you from somewhere.” She interrupted suddenly, bringing him up short.

“I get that a lot.” The Rival said, though internally his mind was racing. She knew him? Wait, was she like him? Was that the weird flavors of energy he’d been noticing every once in a while? Had she settled down here, deciding to call this place home? That was kind of disappointing, but also exciting. He’d never imagined he wouldn’t be first to a universe this new!

“Have you ever been to a planet called Earth?” She asked. “Human-dominated.”

“You’re going to have to be more specific. There are like, a billion Earths, and humans are not as uncommon as you think.” He deadpanned. “So you’re like me, then?”

“In a way. Wait, hold on, I think I got it...” she frowned a little, eyes narrowing as she began to mutter to herself. And the Rival let her, smile growing as he watched a true genius in action. He knew the kind of barrier he set up around himself, to block truesight; she was picking it apart bit

by bit. “Earth...you were...singer...yeah, there was...yeah I *do* know you! We used to work together! Holy shit, I never expected to run into anyone from my old universe again!” she cried, slapping the table and standing up, a fire of excitement igniting in her eyes. “But wait, you followed me into the afterlife – I thought Monkey Wrenches left the universe when they died?”

“Weak ones do, ones that have been around for a while can stick around a bit after death. Now, this is more exciting than I first thought even, but you have me on the back foot! I don’t know who you are.” He said, leaning forward.

“You knew me in life as Sylvia MacCleod. I was your psychiatrist.” She said, and he sat bolt upright. He did remember that name, even if it was a little fuzzy...it was so long ago, and he had so many memories to sort through, but he did remember her. She'd been a blonde woman then, and an absolute hoot of a conversationist - too bad she'd been married when he'd met her. Realization dawned upon his face, and she grinned happily. “I think we have much to talk about, no?”

3:13 The Challenge

The Rival and I sat across from each other, he assessing me, and me vibrating with unspoken questions. But I let him speak first, seeing the gears turning in his mind and soul as he looked me up and down. Smoke was practically pouring out of his ears as he rifled memories from his soul in the sky, sorting through them as recognition increasingly dawned upon his face.

“You *were* Sylvia, right?” he asked slowly. I nodded happily, shifting my body momentarily into the form he was more familiar with; a Scottish woman with blonde hair, severe features, yet kind eyes. Even my clothes changed to the tight suit I used to wear. I winked at him, he grinned, and I shifted back. “Damnation. I never thought I’d see you again; didn’t think you had the Monkey Wrench mark on your soul. It is good to see you; and I can see you’ve grown even more beautiful since our parting. It is true what they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder.” He winked at me and I snorted, leaning back in my chair.

“And I can see you’re still the same flirt you always were.” I accused. He shrugged and smiled at me shamelessly, running a hand through his black hair like he was the rockstar I remembered him being, setting one foot up on the table as he leaned back in his chair.

“Gotta do what you gotta do.” He said with a little laugh, wiggling his eyebrows.

“I was your psychologist.” I deadpanned, and his grin just widened.

“The taboo made it more fun. That, and that you never fell for me. I consider myself quite charming, y’know? Do you know how damaged my confidence was, realizing I had whiffed on you? I had to go redeem myself.” He teased.

“Spare me the details.” I rolled my eyes while he openly cackled. “You even chased me into the afterlife. Imagine my surprise when you come sauntering up to me as a spirit, all ready to try and woo me all over again.”

“Love knows no bounds, not even in death.” The Rival shot back, though it sounded far more teasing than serious. I shook my head at him. He’d been a damn rockstar in that lifetime. One of the greatest musicians of our age; or he could have been, had his ambition been higher. Never would I have expected him to have accrued enough good karma to follow me around in the afterlife. Not that I fell for him during that time, as I’d been too focused on making it to angel status.

He'd even acted as a spirit guide for me in my last lifetime as a starship captain. We'd butted heads more than once then, even if I hadn't really known who or what I was butting heads with at the time. I couldn't see spirits, though I knew they were there. The source of this content is `NOVEL_Fire(.)net`

“How have you been since we parted? You were still in that universe when I left, right? I...admit to the time being a little fuzzy for me. You were still my underling, helping me run messages back and forth. I think last I saw you, you were getting into a fistfight with an archangel. Or was it a demon?” There was a blank space from when I’d left my old universe to when I arrived here. It

wasn't quite a void, but it was a lot of things that were out of focus and unclear. My gut told me it was the transition period, and was blurred on purpose so I didn't realize parts of my soul were being shorn off to make room for the Origin Deity stuff.

"Eh, I didn't last much longer there. Nexus worlds are hard for monkey wrenches to stay in. Jesus, Gotama, Mohammed, they were all a little miffed when you vanished – the higher ups told us you were transferred. Word was, the order came straight from the Origin God himself." The Rival shook his head and I frowned. "Transferred" technically wasn't a lie. "Kind of odd to hear it from the OG, though. I've never met an origin deity to my knowledge, so I didn't think Monkey Wrenches were a big deal to them."

He'd never met a origin deity? But...one was sitting right in front of him. He didn't recognize that? I smiled a secret little smile and shook my head, resting my elbows on the table. Tea filled my cup at but a thought and I took a sip, deciding to shelve that information for now and pick the Rival's brain for more information on the multiverse.

"You said 'nexus world.' What is that? I've figured out there might be something special about earth, but the details are hazy." I asked. Something shifted in the Rival's aura as he pondered the question, the karmic strings he used to shield himself gently unwinding, revealing hints of memory. Images flashed across my vision, showing a dozen worlds all eerily similar to my Earth.

"The earth you remember is a bit special, but that's partly because of its place in the greater multiverse. Imagine the spread of energy and ideas as blood, pumping through a body; the body being the larger multiverse. Earth is called a nexus world because it doesn't just exist in the bloodstream, but in the Heart of the entire multiverse. There, almost all information and ideas come together in a massive, swirling conglomeration. That's why you can find myths that actually happened, and echoes of greater events portrayed in the history and myths of the planet itself. Hell, even fiction can be real. I've lived in worlds your people thought were fictional before. And as for myths...well, Jesus, for example, might have been exactly who he said he was. And he probably was! But his creation and story might also have been an echo of the true Jesus, someone who existed long before him and whose actions and words had a greatly profound effect upon the multiverse. Thereby creating echoes, especially in heart universes." The Rival explained. "I'm not actually sure of the accuracy on that one. Had no way to confirm it. I do know that universes like Yggdrasil existed before though. We monkey wrenches serve a similar function as Heart Universes by carrying energy throughout the main body. Kind of like bloodcells, I guess. But Earth was even more unique in that it was a specific planet set aside in the stream; at least four major Gods or otherwise powerful beings had claim over the planet and nearby solar systems, as far as I know."

“I see.” I said, nodding. That made some sense, actually, from what I’d been learning. “And you were suppressed in power there because it was such a unique universe?”

“Yep! Me and my buddy – though he would never call me the same – use those places as resets. We get to relax some because we simply cannot interfere too much, even though his ambition drives him to try to change the world regardless. That said, I can see the Four Realms becoming a heart universe too. Lots of inspiration from other things, here, and that typically means the origin deity created it from the heart, in their own image.” The Rival drawled.

“You think so?” I smiled at the words. The Four Realms were made from the heart? That was a statement I could get behind.

“Yep. This is me just guessing, though. I’m not super privy to all the juicy secrets of the multiverse. Just most of them. Either way, it seems you’ve been doing good for yourself. This powerful from, what, only a few lifetimes as a Monkey Wrench?” The Rival continued, picking at the sleeve of his shirt. He seemed a little...bored, almost, a teenager lounging in his chair speaking with an adult.

Only I was fairly certain he was far older than me, chronologically speaking.

“This would technically only count as my ninth lifetime. But I think you’re misunderstanding something.” I said, taking a slow sip of my tea. “I’m not a monkey wrench.” At that, the Rival froze.

“You aren't?” The Rival sat bolt upright, staring at me with renewed interest in his eyes. “No, wait, you aren't. I knew it! Monkey Wrenches can’t reincarnate within the same universe, we get one life then one afterlife! I just assumed that you...I mean, I even acted as your spirit guide...wait, then what the hell is going on here?” I took another sip of my tea, slurping on the hot liquid noisily. His eye twitched in annoyance as he glared at me, mind working furiously.

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“Why don’t you tell me?” I asked, slowly standing. The Rival sat forward, clasping his hands before his face and narrowing his eyes at me. Unlike him, I did not hide myself. I bared it all, spreading my aura out and letting it blend with the entirety of the Four Realms, soothing its aches and pains with my presence. Yes, I was suppressing them. But I was here to help, as well. To protect. To guide. And the greater universe understood that, even if mortals misunderstood. Birds sang a little louder, the wind whistled softer, and firelight from lanterns and torches burned brighter.

“This is a xianxia universe,” the Rival muttered. “So you have to be some sort of powerful cultivator...a god, maybe? I heard those might be around, but I figured that was just local myth. Cultivators and gods don’t mix well.” I chuckled a little, shaking my head.

He hadn’t spent a lot of time here, yet. Over a dozen years now, but mostly in a backwater village, away from all major religions, mythologies, and other such things. His people worshipped a minor mountain god that was fairly active in the area, having taken a shine to the local mountain ranges. I don’t think my name, or any variation thereof, had ever reached the village.

“I wonder how long it will take you?” I mused aloud, folding my hands behind my back.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“No. I’m challenging you. Come find me. Tell me who I am. Just call my name, and I’ll come to you.” This little challenge would do a lot, actually. I’d love to hear about the Four Realms from an outsider’s perspective, and someone who knew me before I became who I am. “I trust it won’t take you too long.”

“...I don’t think you understand what you just asked me to do.” The Rival said slowly, a challenging gleam sparking in his aura. I leaned over the table, until we were eye level and our noses were inches away. My smile had to be nothing short of giddy as I stared into his eyes. This? This could be fun.

“The challenge has been laid all the same. As I recall you couldn’t even figure out who all my past lives were, before. This time there are plenty of hints. I’ll be waiting.” And with that, I promptly vanished. I didn’t merely let the incarnation fade, but wiped it away entirely, letting only the memories return to me and its energy sink into the land and, in that same motion, returned the Rival to the street he had been standing in before deciding to use the talisman, back on his home planet. The sun was starting to go down, and no one noticed the young, teenaged boy’s sudden appearance among them.

I giggled to myself as my true body rolled its shoulders, looking away from playing with Kei toward the Physical Realm.

“You suddenly seem happy. That’s suspicious.” My granddaughter accused, rolling over from where she’d been playing in the mud of my garden, a victim of her own prank. She’d tried to dump a mudball on me, and now she had it all over her face and hair.

“I met an old friend. Today was a good day.” I said, then immediately regretted my words as the nine-tailed fox girl perked up, ears twitching at the nugget of information I had let slip, a sinister smile stretching across her face.

"A friend?" she asked, sing-song.

...she was going to cause problems, wasn’t she.

The Rival stared slack-jawed at his surroundings; at where the tavern and Sylvia had once been. Just a moment ago he'd been sitting there. Now he was standing, surrounded by a relatively familiar city, street vendors hawking their meat skewers and cultivators running about on the walls. Had she just – she had! Again! Given him a cryptic message and gone running off to who-knows where just because she knew it would annoy him enough to do what she asked!

Not only that, but that was high tier spacial manipulation! He hadn't even felt anything when he was teleported here; which wasn't saying a lot considering his cultivation level was piss-poor, but was saying quite a bit considering his experience in the subject. That was...that was just cheating! She couldn't give him a puzzle like this! He sucked at puzzles!

...but he loved a good challenge.

Shit.

“She doesn't seem to understand.” He accused the air. “I am not the one who is challenged. I am the one who challenges. That is why I am the Rival.” Predictably, the wind did not answer. But the challenge had been laid all the same, and he sighed dramatically, slumping over and letting his arms hang dramatically toward the ground. “Shit.” And he straightened, his soul-fragment reaching up into the great power that floated outside of the Four Realms, the power that he had collected through the course of his uncountably long lifespan, to call upon something he rarely used.

A little screen appeared in front of him, green, almost like the chat room screen of an old video game, his username blinking at him. This was a little skill only the oldest of Monkey Wrenches

could use, the ability to connect with others of their kind, no matter the distance. It took something like twenty five hundred lifetimes and meeting dozens of others to actually form.

{{[contender69: yo, old buddy old pal, long time no annoy, got a sec?]}}

A few heartbeats passed before he got a reply, which was honestly much quicker than he expected.

{{[numba1: what do you want?]}}

The Rival hesitated for just a split second, then cracked a grin and continued to type.

{{[contender69: i ran into an old flame and imma go chase her. mind calling a truce? you don't do any crazy plans, i don't annoy you, how does that sound?]}}

[number1: your reincarnated? I didnt see u coming in. Where did u reincarnate?]

[contender69: the four realms???)

[number1: Im not there.]

[contender69: nice, nice we havent been split up in a while. Truce then?]

[number1: pretty sure we have to, since we aren't near each other. which is nice. might actually get to plan some things.]

[contender69: siiiiick. so i wont see u even if i wanted to. dont do anything too crazy without me. see ya!]]

And with that, he logged off and cracked his fingers one by one, looking up at the sky and pointing dramatically, heedless of the weird stares he got because of it.

“Just you wait, realms! I’m about to hit you!” then he paused, remembering his deal with the Overgod about being mostly an observer. Considering his goal now... “Well, maybe not hit you, but at least you will be graced with my presence! The game is officially on!”

“What are you doing?!” he flinched the moment his sister’s yell pierced his ears, slumping over and fearfully looking over his shoulder at her, storming toward him with hair whipping about her head as a result of her furious qi. “I told you to get tea!”

“Uh...I did, but I met a beautiful girl and she drank it?” he tried weakly. Predictably it had little effect on his sister as she stormed towards him. He fled, cackling the whole way, a spring in his step and a song in his heart as he scrambled away.

3:14 The First Pillar

Kei was on a mission. And no, it wasn’t avoiding work like her mother accused her of, though she wouldn’t lie to herself and claim that wasn’t part of it, it was to figure out what and why Grandpa was so giddy now. He was always a bit of a goober, but this was unnatural - though it was nice to

see Him feeling better, with all the stress He'd been feeling about the upcoming crash. Initially she had tried to enlist Randus into joining her crusade, but the grumpy butler had brushed her off, instead running off to go do whatever it was he was doing with the dream-world. She didn't keep track of it very much, that was, as the mortals said, beyond her pay-grade. The girl still frowned as she teleported through the physical realm, trying to track the scent that had been lingering around Gramps.

It wasn't much of a scent though, more like an energetic tingle that set her nose to twitching like she had to sneeze and her eyes to burning. Her feet found purchase on a tree, the bark digging into her skin and the trunk swaying beneath her weight and sudden appearance. Her tails twitched as she sniffed the air, the wind curling around her in a bubble to keep it from spreading any pesky secrets – this was her secret to keep, not Aerial's – and looked down.

She was not at her original goal. But this was somewhere Gramps had been putting a lot of focus into; and as such, His energetic scent was left all over the place.

A little shack lay beneath her, a tall willow standing on a bare hill behind it. What remained of what had once been a town was nestled in a valley not too far away, maybe two hundred feet from the shack proper. Silently, Kei drifted down to the willow, laying a hand on its trunk to say hello to one of Mother's children.

“No need to get up,” she whispered to the consciousness that stirred within the Treant. The immortal being settled back down at her words, the qi that had been stirring within stilling entirely. Then she turned her attention to the little shack, and the tiny ball of fire that burned within, right next to the gentle flame of a soul that was sticking to this plane of existence through sheer force of will alone. He was here, solely because he'd found a companion to spend the rest of his days with, and had not yet had his fill of that.

It was both sad and amazing, to her, the lengths mortals would go through, the pain they would endure just to keep one thing going.

With but a step, Kei bypassed the formations that protected the shack and slipped inside.

A bird sat on the windowsill opposite her, maybe the size of the palm of her hand, all puffy and round and cute. Its plumage was a brilliant shade of red and sleek black, its tiny beak pecking at a small pile of seeds. Kei could see the remains of wounds from its last heavenly trial, almost fully healed, even while its qi surging within it, demanding to break forth into the immortal realm. Yet it held itself back, both knowing that it was not yet time to become an immortal, and simultaneously plucking at the karma woven between her and the other occupant.

An old man stood hunched over the fireplace, stirring a cauldron, his once-tight robes falling loosely about his frail form. Kei cocked her head to the side curiously; he had one foot in the grave, but his karma was helping to keep him alive. It was hard to tell whether that was good or bad karma – at this age, despite his relatively powerful cultivation, it was tantamount to prolonging his own suffering – but it was powerful enough to help make death more of a choice, than an actual binding force.

“Well, little one,” the old man spoke slowly as he turned to the bird, carrying a bowl of soup with him. “What shall we do today? There’s an auspicious wind blowing, I believe.” Kei’s ears twitched as she allowed the wind to touch her ears, trickling down into her mind to see if what he said was true.

It wasn’t, to her mind.

But maybe it was because, somehow, he was sensing her?

With but a thought she allowed herself to be seen, not quite unleashing the full might of her aura, but just enough to let the old man and little bird know who and what she was. After all, its not like there were any other nine-tailed foxes running around, and she could see a little book on her exploits sitting above the fireplace. Maybe that should be her People, when she gets around to it. Nine-tailed foxes. It felt like a simple, lazy answer, but sometimes simpler was better.

At once the two whirled to her, the old man showing surprising grace in not spilling a drop of his soup even as he landed his gaze upon her and immediately fell to his knees in a kowtow, bowl finding a perfect balancing place upon a nearby table. The bird, on the other hand, shrieked out a challenging warning, fire puffing up in its chest as it spread its wings.

“Lady Kei!” the old man cried, tears welling up in his eyes. Kei cleared her throat awkwardly at the veneration, the old man practically trembling. “I never, in my life, expected to truly meet you. To what does this humble soul owe the pleasure?”

No demands, no cries of ‘I will be rewarded,’ not even any inner greed flashed through the old man’s soul. He soaked up the divine energy that radiated from Kei like a sponge, but never really allowed it to go any further. He was here, she was here, and his offer was genuine; did she need anything? Kei’s opinion of the man ticked up a few notches as she giggled, hiding her mouth behind her hand as her gaze flicked to the bird.

“No, no. Just coming in to check on something. Thought you were interesting. You can stand, by the way, I don’t really do the whole worship thing. Do you worship Mom?” she asked, recognizing the bird’s truesoul. That was Sol – Solana, as Gramps now called her. She flitted about on the windowsill, beady eyes glancing at the old man, then to Kei, worry for the old man overcoming her immediate, visceral response to challenge the being who was so powerful standing before her.

A bit of bitterness welled up within Kei as she stared at Solana. She still held a grudge for what he did to her mother. But...that was also a long time ago, and Sol was now a different person entirely.

“I follow Lady Reika’s teachings, yes,” the old man said, rising to his feet with deliberate slowness as he pulled a small symbol of a Tree out from his underneath his robes. It was hand carved, and filled with Mother’s divine power – power the man himself had tapped into, and poured into the necklace. “Is there anything I can do for you?” he asked, and she shook her head.

“No. I’m just wandering, searching for something. I was following Gramps’ scent, and it led me here...now I know why. You’re a good guy, aren’t you?” she asked rhetorically.

“This old Mar just a humble old man. But yes.” The old man’s eyes twinkled with a bit of mischief as he said that, and Kei giggled again, skipping forward to walk around him. Solana squawked at her again, and she skipped over to her, tapping her on the beak before she could even react. That earned her another annoyed chirp.

“That’s just the kind of answer a good guy would give.” She said, skipping back away from Solana. She really wanted to leave, but...well, now that she’d sated her curiosity, she needed to resolve the karma that brought her here. Gramps didn’t want to mess around with mortals directly too much, but Mom had always taught her to pay her debts when you did. She turned her gaze to the old man, though her words were meant for both him and Solana. “...don’t worry about death too much.” Yeah, she didn’t have Gramp’s cryptic nature, or his subtlety. She was more a blunt hammer, like Aunt Elvira, or even Mom in some ways.

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But she did have Gramp’s eyes, at least a little, so she could see how what she said would affect others.

“I know it is coming. I have made my peace with it; defying the heavens is not in my nature.” He said slowly, and Kei shook her head. "Shame I could not make Immortal."

“Just because you are not to be immortal in this life, does not mean you won’t reach it in the next. After all, you’ve made some good friends.” At this, she glance out the window at the willow tree, who stirred a little at her attention, and the old man’s eyes narrowed.

“Are you saying I’ll become one of the Holy Trees?” he asked suspiciously.

“You might. You might become a bumblebee. The choice, by design, is yours. What I’m saying is don’t be afraid to ask for what you want; so many souls forget that option. Uncle Keilan isn’t as heartless as he looks.” She said bluntly. The old man nodded thoughtfully. “Now, I really must be off.” And with that, she teleported away – but kept one ear open for how the old man and Solana would respond.

“...bah. She’s as wild and free as the wind, according to legend. Pay her no mind, little one. Come, let us resume our morning.” The old man groused, playing like Kei’s presence hadn’t rattled the poor old man. She giggled, tracing her fingers along the thread of karma she’d forged with the man and Solana, watching it fade away as it resolved itself.

Something else clicked within her. Something...divine, in nature. It felt just as carefree as her, just as playful and mischievous, yet had a core that sent a shiver of fear down her spine. She didn’t like it. She didn’t like whatever lay beneath all the fun and play. And she knew Mom and Gramps would tell her she was being silly to fear that little thing within her, but – she did what she did best with her problems. She turned away. It would resolve itself in time.

Now where was she again? Right, searching.

Gilles, like many people, believed that he would never fully understand Statera Luotian, nor that he would ever reach the Matriarch’s level of power. That would require a level of arrogance that was only reserved for mortals, or supremely proud beings such as his one-time brother. Yet as he paced through the halls of the Holy Palace, his wife’s hand intertwined in his own in this rare moment of peace, he thought he might finally understand a fraction of the Matriarch’s being.

“I can hear the gears turning, Gilles,” Elvira said, wrapping one wing around him to pull him closer. He flushed a little as he was pulled in, a kiss planted on his cheek that had him blushing even more. Maybe it was because they were alone that this was more embarrassing...a strange thought for the Deity of Shadows, and he let go of her hand to wrap his arm around her shoulders. “What is going on up there?”

“Lots of things, as usual.” He said, as a way to delay the conversation so he could sort his thoughts out. Elvira frowned at him and he panicked, knowing that she hated such statements. “I think the Matriarch found an old friend in a Monkey Wrench.” Google search novelfire.net

“...what?” she said, pausing. The long hall of her palace they were in shone brilliantly in the light of the Realms, white marble gleaming and polished. At the very far end of the hall, where it turned into a T-junction, a few soldiers of the Heavenly Host marched by.

“And it’s, surprisingly, given me some insight. Maybe you don’t know this, but I have been investigating the Matriarch’s past.” He told her. At her sharp look, he hastily continued. “Listen before you berate me. The Matriarch Herself has admitted that this entire catastrophe debacle is suspicious. Maybe She hasn’t said it in so many words, but there’s something odd going on here that is guiding our two universes to collide. I thought, perhaps, we might find some answers there.” He suspected he was right, but he had not been privy to the Matriarch’s conversation with the seemingly simple boy.

Nor had he wanted to try his luck by attempting to pierce through Her barrier to listen in. But deductive reasoning was a specialty of his, and Aerial had been suspiciously giggly when he’d asked about it, saying not even her wind had heard the truth. Which was suspiciously specific; and meant she probably did know the answer.

“And?”

“I think I’m right, but that will need more time before I’m ready to procure my results before others. And, if possible, I would likely need to travel to the One World; which, judging by the

Matriarch's words, will not be unideal. She said something about forging good karma between the two Realms." He continued to ramble.

"Get to the point, Gilles." Elvira said.

"Right. Well, as I said, I think she found an old friend from Her universe. He seems...competitive. Calls himself the Rival; I've heard the Mad Scientist talk about him and the First, or whatever they call themselves, before. You can find him in the Physical Realm on one of the planets there if you want to take a look." Gilles said even as Elvira's eyes took on a distant look. He knew she was peering between Realms now, having likely already found the boy. Or perhaps not, considering his considerable ability to blend in. He'd only discovered it by accident, and only because the Matriarch tried to hide it from Aerial.

What was kept secret from the wind, almost universally was wreathed in shadows.

"And this leads you to your second point."

"This cannot be a coincidence." He said bluntly. "What we know of the Shadow indicates that the Matriarch's own self can cause events in the Four Realms. The Original Sin event She spoke of so dismissively is an echo of the Shadow. What we know of the Sun and Lunar Star show that Her very attention can cause the universe to conspire to Her will – that is why many of the gods have begun calling Her the Heavens; Her will is the will of the Heavens, and we mere gods simply live here." Elvira stopped walking, pulling him in tighter with one wing.

"I found him. He looks goofy."

"I am certain he does. It is a cleverly crafted disguise, in my opinion. Now, to continue on, it cannot be a coincidence that a person from the Matriarch's past so conveniently showed up around this

time. The Mad Scientist was the perfect first encounter of these kinds; she did not do much, and gave the Matriarch an idea of what her kind can do to the Realms. Now we get a much bigger one. Add that into the timing around *us*; right when we are about to expand, we must be shut down. Right when all of our people are about to slow their personal growth to focus on expanding the Realms, we must do the opposite – and you know as well as I do that while the growth of the mortals have slowed, we gods are accelerating our growth. Quality of power over quantity, control over brute force. The Pillars are an example of that.” Gilles continued, now on a roll. Shadows swirled about him as he stood there, power responding to his will.

There was something within him, about to connect...

“It is your duty to guide the gods to a better future, to become an ideal. It is mine to try and divine the future.” And the moment he accepted his duty, he felt it. It felt like a stone, settling in his gut, a greater will that he connected to and had it place a seed within him. A weight, upon his shoulders, that let him see more than he ever had before.

A new realm of power and understanding.

“Congratulations.” Elvira said, snaking an arm around his waist. “It seems you are the first to become a Pillar. Reika had bet Randus would be, but I won.” The way she said it made him turn his head towards her, to see her eyes shining with pride as she stared at him, saw right through him.

“You knew this was about to happen.” He accused, marveling in the way he could feel new things. The consciousness in the Mountain below stirred, and he *felt* it, when he hadn’t been able to before. Just what had he become? “Did you know what I was about to say, too?”

“No.” She said. “That will take some looking into. I’ll bring it up to Father as well, if He didn’t already hear our conversation. But I knew you would be a Pillar, even if Father wouldn’t admit it to Himself.”

“It feels anticlimactic.” He admitted, flexing his power a little.

“The climax isn’t yours. It will be others, who have yet to realize their full potential. Now come, we have some time before I have duties to attend to, and we need to celebrate your ascension.” Elvira said, already leading him away, down the hall, walking instead of teleporting.

Gilles shook his head at her as they continued their stroll. Well, at least his so-called new role didn’t include any duties he wasn’t performing, even if he didn’t know exactly what this new position would entail. It would require exploring.

3:15 New Duties

I threw a little party for Gilles. It was a small thing, with a few of the gods he considered friends, and a few angels. His ascension was worthy of celebration, even if he, himself, did not want much of a party.

Very much like Randus had been, when he ascended to become a Pillar. He hadn’t wanted anyone to know about it, though, so Gilles remained the First Pillar in everyone’s mind but mine and Randus’, the Deity of Dreams allowing his little sibling to have the spotlight while he, predictably, remained my close attendant. What would I do with him? It’d do him some good to take some pride in his own abilities from time to time.

Said butler must have sensed my thoughts, as he appeared right beside me, handing me a cup of steaming black tea. Meeting the Rival had given me cravings for it again, bringing up old memories as he had. I took an appreciative sip, reclined back in my plush armchair, and nodded my thanks.

“What are my new duties?” Gilles asked me as the party dwindled, the god of fire, Keegan, and the goddess of water, Inana, waving to those few who remained as they left my palace hand-in-hand. I raised an eyebrow at him as a chess piece on the board before me moved, an annoyed groan echoing from Inesa as she buried her face in her hands. Checkmate once again! Even if I did have to cheat to win this time – something she didn’t notice.

I couldn’t let my own kid beat me at chess. That would be absurd.

“New duties? You tell me.” I said, giving him a hard look. I’d already described the inspiration for the eight pillars numerous times, he should be able to figure that out by himself. And, to be completely, bluntly honest, when I looked at him I saw something different than I had before. His aura had not only solidified, it had deepened, blending with the surrounding Four Realms to such a degree it was only second to myself and my first four children. His very divinity had undergone a qualitative change, the energy his soul produced still and stable, as steady and deep as the shadows he was born of, while being exponentially more beneficial to the Realms.

The truth was he had no new duties save for those he took on himself. His presence alone did what it needed to do. I just wanted to hear what he had to say about it.

“I...I can feel the Will of the Realms much clearer now.” He said slowly, and I nodded, urging him to continue. “But what I feel about myself is more...complicated. There’s only so much I can say about it, but if I had to say anything, it would be the one who waits, watches, listens, and learns while the world passes me by. I am not Aerial who holds all the secrets the wind hears, but the mysteries I know are hidden even to her.”

“You were already like that.” Inesa pointed out, putting the chess pieces back in place.

“Yes, in a way. But now I feel even more like myself, if that makes sense. Like the prayers, and effects of the Realms that once plagued my soul and mind carry less weight.” Gilles explained, stuffing his hands into the sleeves of his robes. Inesa nodded thoughtfully, a little spark of

understanding going off in her chest, the fear she kept her from taking that step to becoming a Pillar lessening.

“Oh, so it’s like cultivation for mortals. The more they ascend the cultivation realms, the more they shed from their souls and selves; all the toxins and whatnot that comes from living being purified, leaving only their true self behind.” She reasoned. Gilles thought about that for a moment, then nodded with a small smile. It was like that. I would know, I’d experienced the process enough times through the eyes of mortals.

“Good, but that didn’t answer your question.” I said.

“It did.” Gilles denied, shaking his head. I raised an eyebrow at him, a smirk threatening to twist my lips upward as I watched him make his decision. “Matriarch, I have another question for you, if you’ll allow it.” I nodded to him, anticipating his next question. It would be about the Rival. Honestly, Gilles’ ascension had tripped me up a little bit there; I hadn’t expected him to be able to see past the protective barriers I’d put up. What did it say about my children’s growth that they were beginning to be able to surprise me like that? I was still far above most of them, of course, but it left me feeling a little bittersweet...ah, where had the time gone? It seemed only yesterday he was terrified about asking me if he could court Elvira.

“Who is the Rival to you?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” I said honestly. “He’s an old colleague, a terrible flirt, and absolutely shameless. A friend, I would say. A wildcard, I would assume.” I glanced down at the Physical Realm, where he was gathering materials and supplies for some sort of ritual and to leave in secret from his family. It’d already been some time since our chat, so I was surprised he hadn’t already left. But then again, time was weird for beings who had lived for such a long time. What was a few years, when we’d already been around for millions? Trillions, in the Rival’s case?

“I – do you know of my suspicions about your past?” Gilles asked, and I nodded.

“I share them.” It was a relatively new development, but I was starting to get a clearer picture. Earth being a nexus realm, my own role in raising that planet, the choice to make me an Origin Deity... at first I had written it off as mere coincidence; my soul must have had the spark to be an Origin Deity, and I had been chosen because of that. But what if it wasn’t? What if there was something more? All the other Origin Deities had been far more powerful than I, at the time of them being chosen, as far as I was aware. I hadn't really noticed it until recently.

What piece of the puzzle was I missing?

It lay just out of sight, hidden behind some sort of fog that even I could not see through. As far as I could tell Mr. Boxes had nothing to do with hiding the information from me; it was simply because I was not ready to understand it. Which was something that would have to change.

“You have not come up with an answer yet, then,” Gilles said, deflating. I shook my head sadly at him. “Then I have a request. If possible, I wish to see the One World.”

“I will bring you to the next meeting. It will not be for a little bit, but, while I cannot promise you anything, I can at least try. It will be good to build up some better relations between ourselves and the One World – using karma as an anchor point to help spin us out of the way might be our safest option.” I explained, nodding to myself. Gilles drummed his fingers together, then nodded. I stood and laid a hand on his shoulder, patting it comfortingly. I knew he wanted to ask about my past lives, but that was not something I would share unless he actually asked.

Inesa huffed, swiping the chess pieces off the board and into a silken bag, apparently deciding she didn’t want to play anymore. Judging by the way she shot me a little glare, she must have figured out I’d been cheating.

“Thank you for indulging me.” He said, and I felt a pang of disappointment at his response.

The Rival had stirred something in me. I *wanted* to talk about my past with someone...

“Of course, Gilles. You are welcome to bug me anytime. Now, enjoy your party. I will leave an incarnation here, but the new regions are nearly in place, and my true self must go oversee their positioning.” I told him, then paused, taking a deep breath. Threads of karma spread all about me, the silver strings of fate piercing into Gilles like spears, reaching out to try and bind to someone else; his counterpart. “If you would just do me a favor?”

“Yes?”

“Be watchful of Solana for me. I cannot be the one to answer her call if she asks for help, but...maybe you can.” And with that, I replaced my true body with an incarnation, appearing above the new regions, watching as they were drug into their final positions.

It was almost time to drop the barriers between them, and let life truly flourish inside. At least that should help keep the mortals occupied for a while...at least, once they get over the brewing conflict in the Physical Realm.

The Rival sat in his little home late at night, his parents sleeping downstairs and his twin sister sound asleep in a room next to his. Honestly, the size of housing in this world was much nicer compared to some of the other places he'd been; partly it was because longer-lived people tended to build bigger, more comfortable things to accommodate their longer lifespans, and partly because said people tended to not have as many kids, so space was readily available.

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This was why he liked young civilizations, especially young space-faring civilizations. *Cultivator* space-faring civilizations were even more rare; typically the universes which housed cultivators or other Xianxia-esque systems were huge worlds, generally singular and utterly massive. If they did have what could be akin to space, it was usually so rigorous that only those of the Immortal tier and up could venture out into it, effectively nullifying any chance for entire civilizations to become space-faring.

That was part of what made the Four Realms different than most others. The Rival hummed to himself happily as he finished his ritual, putting his hands together in a ritualistic pose to help force the qi within his body to obey. His meridians were weak and malnourished, not because his body lacked talent, but simply because he had neglected them. That was what made the ritual necessary, and the hand sign helpful. No matter how much experience he had, difficult things were difficult, and impossible things were still impossible. Rituals made the normally impossible, possible.

That didn't make them less painful. But pain, he could endure.

He grit his teeth, sheer will holding in the pained whimpers that threatened to escape, his blood boiling and bones aching. The candles that surrounded his little ritual circle flared as they absorbed what little qi he could offer – then flared brighter as he started sacrificing his life-force. This chapter is updated by novelfire.net

Good thing about using life-force in a cultivation world, he thought through gritted teeth, blood seeping from his nose and eyes, flowing down his face to pool below his crossed legs. *Is that it can easily be replenished.* That was literally the point of cultivation, after all – to make one's life a perpetually-regenerating resource.

The Rival grimaced as his bones began to quake, flakes falling off and joining the blood flowing out of his body. His pores ripped open, sending quakes of pain shivering through his entire body. His teeth ground together so hard they might crack, his organs screaming out at him to stop whatever it was he was doing – but he powered through, never making a peep so as not to wake the others in the house.

Energy poured into him from outside the ritual circle, the natural, ambient qi of the universe helping to fuel this ritual. And slowly, under his watchful gaze and through the sweat of his blood, another body began to form.

The blood that pooled beneath him trickled forward, slowly condensing and coalescing, absorbing the fragments of organ and bone that he willingly sacrificed to form exact replicas of said internal structures. He grit his teeth, willing the ritual to continue, his consciousness fading ever so slightly – and then it was over. Darkness tinged the corners of his vision as an exact, nude, replica of himself sat before him.

“It’s a good thing Fae are tough bastards, huh?” he muttered to himself, spitting out a glob of blood and snagging a potion that sat just beside him, downing it in an instant. The relief wasn’t immediate, but a cool, soothing sensation radiated outward from his throat all the way through his chest all the same. He found that slow-acting potions always tended to make things better in the long run, at the cost of having to endure more pain for longer. Now can the really hard part, though.

Slowly he reached inside of himself, touching on that little thing he called a soul. His qi was slowly replenishing and, as he examined the little thing resting in his chest, about where his heart would be, he fashioned what little remained into a crude sort of knife. It wasn’t his real soul, of course, but a tiny fragment of his true being that, with a *crack* and sharp lance of pain that drew a whimper from his mouth, he cut a chunk off of.

And without any further prompting, he shoved it into his clone, using his qi as a mediator between the soulless body and himself. It was momentarily disorienting, to suddenly have consciousness in two different bodies, but it was something he quickly reoriented himself to.

It would be weird until he cultivated high enough to split his mind in two, until that point he would just have to deal with it if he wanted to have the freedom to search for Sylvia without any unnecessary interference. He'd already sensed some eyes upon him, after all.

And if it were anyone other than him, this sort of method to avoid detection would be impossible. Cloning was a very advanced technique, after all.

The next morning one of the Rival's bodies slipped away, having healed enough from the previous night's ritual to be able to warrant moving, though any sane doctor would advise him to spend more time resting. He chuckled to himself as he slipped away, his other, freshly-made body, incapable of cultivating, sat down for breakfast with his sister and parents.

Sylvia had actually chastised him about this quite often. Methods of self-harm and all that. What the hell did he care what he did to his body, if next life he'd just get a new one? He could be cruel to himself every once in a while, even if he did admit that having a healthy body felt so much nicer than one amped up on drugs.

Ah, that'd been a fun life. Sex, drugs, rock and roll, and a hot psychologist who not only played hard to get, but actually was hard to get. Ah, the fun they'd had together! Him bragging about his successful music career and skill, her digging into his mental state like a ruthless surgeon and actually finding something, him telling her he actually remembered his past lives as a joke and her not only taking it seriously but dig some truth out of him, her actually convincing him to take better care of himself, and then that one time he managed to get her drunk and she still didn't sleep with him...

Right, that's why he'd been smitten with her. Wonder how she'd changed?

It'd been long enough he'd actually had to try to remember bits of that lifetime. She had to have changed a lot, too, all things considered. Even with an eidetic memory, things got lost when there was so much to sift through.

The Rival hummed as he practically skipped through the forest surrounding his once-home, gazing up through the trees and, for the first time in a while, feeling no pressure to relax as much as he could before he had to meddle with someone else's plan. This was going to be his life, and a long life it would be if he had his way.

His first order of business had to be increasing his lifespan and cultivation because of it, though.

That little ritual had used up almost the entirety of his remaining lifespan, after all. He only had a year left.

"Whoever the origin god is of this place knew what they were doing." The Rival admired as he sat cross-legged in a peaceful glade. Tall trees with huge, palm-shaped leaves swayed about him in the wind, a gentle stream trickling through the center of the golden-grassed meadow. Birds chirped. Somewhere off to his left an herbivore of some kind moved through the trees, a spirit beast of no real consequence. He let out a breath, the ambient qi around him left almost wholly untouched.

His soul made all the qi he could ever need to cultivate.

It was a fascinating process, and something he only ever really saw in high-tier beings. Gods were integral to many universes simply because they produced so much energy, energy that the universe needed to run on. But here? Even a little soul like his generated a clean, pure energy that could not only be used to cultivate, but would actively leak out into the environs, fueling the growth of the entire universe.

For a cultivation world, where usually people sucked up the energy like leeches and the universe could only sustain so many people, it was clever, innovative innovation. Fortunately, it was also fast enough to sustain him for now, so he didn't have to waste too much time cultivating. With a groan he stood, dust and dead leaves falling from his shoulders and head and bones popping as he stretched. It'd take a bit of time to reach the Sacral Chakra level of cultivation – an entire two realms above where he'd been at the Root – but now he was ready to start his search. There was no rush either, though, and with a small smile he started off toward where he knew a town was, and his ticket off this planet.

First thing's first, though; he had to go investigate the local religion. A world this young? The religion might not only be real, but fairly accurate. Mortals had a tendency to intentionally misinterpret things so it better fit their own ambitions and feelings, but with cultivators living so long, the Immortal population might even remember the age of creation.

I wonder if this place has learned of their Shadow yet. He mused, scratching his chin. ...*nah, I doubt it. Some of the older universes had yet to even handle those.* The demon lord was a popular trope in fiction; some Shadows could never truly die, and this realm was still very young. He had to keep reminding himself of that.

The walk to town was a relatively short one, all things considered. Two days of constant walking, manageable in large part due to his newly-enhanced cultivation, but when he got there it was nothing like he remembered.

People ran about inside the tall walls, twice the number of guards he was used to manned the walls, while cultivators hurtled through the skies above. Most notably, however, was the giant fucking airship floating above the city center, easily a mile long and half as wide. Power radiated from the wooden craft, stone formation circles fixed to the hull, while giant solar sails were furled up on the masts. The symbol of the Celestial Palace, an inverted mountain floating above a lake, flew on numerous flags, the towering power of at least three Immortals blasting from the thing.

This might work out for me. If anyone will know something about Sylvia, it's going to be the Celestial Empire. Maybe she'd even be the Empress herself? She did say it shouldn't take me too long to figure out. Then The Rival's brow furrowed. He recognized this design. Where had he seen it last...? He wracked his memories, standing atop the hill long enough it started to become awkward, when suddenly it came to him.

He'd been feeling something familiar here for a long time, he just hadn't been able to put his finger on it. A signature. An *acquaintance*.

"What the hell is the Mad Scientist doing here?!"

I slapped my forehead with the palm of my hand as the Rival skipped past one of my temples, one with a painting of me in both my male and female forms that was close enough to my actual likeness it couldn't be mistaken for anyone else, in favor of boarding a *military vessel* bound for the outer edges of the galaxy. He'd even enlisted, just so he could get aboard, and planned to desert as soon as he got the opportunity!

"This moron," I grumbled. "He hasn't changed one bit." Still as scatter-brained and flighty as ever. Well, at least that was part of what made him fun.

