

## RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

### 3:16 Let Me Meditate, Let Us Pray

It had been a while since I spent some quality time with my children. Even as I had incarnations running about, doing their tinkering with the Four Realms – one even watching Xing Wu as he struggled to maneuver the Dao Stars, not realizing he couldn't fight them but had to convince them to move on their own – my true body was in Reika's garden, enjoying some time with her and Alexander.

Her garden was, as usual, absolutely fantastic, rivalling even my own. Trees unseen in the Realms for hundreds of thousands of years grew in massive groves, some of them Treants, others simply ancient trees. Flowers of a million varieties lined the winding stone walkways, plants and herbs of such power and variety any cultivator who saw them might go mad with greed growing in carefree abundance. And my children relaxed amidst it all, Alexander simply watching the world go by, while Reika worked on a personal project.

She still hadn't grown out of the habit of sticking her tongue out when she was really focused, so it was quite adorable.

"You're getting quite good at that," I noted, sipping at a cup of steaming tea. Reika looked up from where she'd been casually manipulating a few elements, weaving a complex tapestry she intended to hang in the grand hall of her palace. The tapestry itself wasn't what was impressive to me, though it was quite lovely, but rather the way she integrated her domain into the elements.

Lightning flashed into fire, which spun into water, the energy that made up the elements creating the matter it needed for the transformation, to be woven into an ever-changing tapestry of the Life-Giving Tree. She could have done such a thing before, but by adding her domain of change it would never be the same picture while still retaining the original premise. Far different was it from just painting a picture of the Tree that mirrored it at any given moment, this tapestry would take on a life all its own and reflect not only what had changed, but what would or could.

“Thank you, but this is just a silly little project of mine,” Reika said, fingers working with blinding speed as she continued to weave, working on the leaves of the Tree as she was. Her auburn hair – transformed into the fall colors as it was, for now – was done up in a tasteful bun, and she plucked a single strand to add to her project.

“Do not sell yourself short, Reika,” Alexander said, the great dragon craning his neck up over her shoulder to peer down at the tapestry. “Father is right. It is quite good.” Reika blushed a little, a little bolt of lightning dancing between her fingers as she added yet another element.

“I’ve actually been thinking about working a concept similar to this into the reincarnation cycle.” She said softly, shooting me a little glance. “The ‘oppression of heaven’ is what is riling up the mortals, but how that manifests is in stagnation, right? Souls feel like they’re not going anywhere, running in place, but if I work in some *change* that shifts things without actually changing them, it could help mitigate those feelings. Like...putting the Realms into a winter state, without it actually being winter.” I nodded along, looking out at the Physical Realm to watch its currents. We still intended to put the Realms into a winter state, but a little bit more growth needed to happen first.

Reika’s plan had merit, though, and could even be beneficial for the entirety of the reincarnation cycle once things could start moving again. I had considered telling her about it, but wanted to wait until the major event in the Physical Realm wrapped up.

“It is an excellent idea, and one worth discussing more in-depth with Keilan, but I would advise against doing anything too drastic until the war is over.” Alexander said, my gaze snapping to him as he said what I was going to, before I could. He did not seem to notice, though, attention fixated on his sister as he was.

“Oh no, of course not. They need to get that out of their systems first; but we could start building blueprints now. Plus, a more robust and flexible reincarnation cycle means it will have a lower chance of it collapsing if there’s a big impact on the Realms.” Reika reasoned, Alexander nodding along. I smiled at their conversation, noting, for perhaps the first time in a long, long time, that

they truly weren't kids anymore. They hadn't been for a while, but they really were growing, weren't they?

It was a bittersweet thought, and I tapped my finger against the side of my cup agitatedly.

"Mother? Thoughts?" Reika pressed, and I turned my sad little smile to her,

"I think we're talking about work," I complained, sticking my bottom lip out in a pout, teleporting beside her and draping a heavy arm across her shoulders. She giggled and Alexander chuckled, the dragon leaning his head down so I could lay my other arm across the top of his head, behind his horns.

"Sorry, sorry, I know, now is family time not work time." He chuckled. I gave them both a little squeeze, then let them go, taking a step back. "For all you are keeping your eyes on the future, you are awfully serious about taking breaks and spending time together."

"Rest is important." I said sagely, nodding my head. "So is reminding you that I am still your parent, and no matter how smart you get, I am still meaner than you." Reika narrowed her eyes, tensing up as I tightened my grip on both my children. Alexander started to pull away but I held him in place, admittedly with more effort than I was used to, not that I let it show.

"What –" Reika was cut off by a ball of water to the face, drenching her and her dress. Alexander tried to yank away from me, but a quick douse of water from the heavens – none of the droplets landing upon me, of course – had him spluttering as well. I cackled and teleported away as Reika whipped up a little rainstorm, trying to catch me off guard by aiming the droplets at me like a machine gun.

Alexander roared with glee, eyes shining as I danced between the raindrops, hands folded behind my back, six giant balls of water forming in front of me as a promise of war.

And thus began one of the greatest water balloon fights in the Realms' history.

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Reika giggled and wiped her face, water fleeing her hair as she willed it out, watching Mother go back to her palace. Beside her, Alexander, Keilan, and Elvira were all similarly drenched, her sister grumbling good-naturedly and wringing out her robes, while Alexander sat in a puddle of water that dripped down his scales. Their little fight had traversed the entirety of the four realms as Mother roped each of the siblings into the battle – seemingly intent on proving some kind of point.

“I think I got Her once,” Keilan said, convinced he had actually struck Mother with a ball of water.

“Whatever you say, brother. Father’s powers of creation are as boundless as ever. I’m just glad He didn’t make an entire ocean to drench us in.” Elvira grumbled dismissively, standing and glaring about her throne room. Everything was covered in a fine sheen of water, the floor with at least an inch of liquid on it. She shook her head and waved one hand, all the water on the floor rising up at her will and flooding out of the massive front gates to go join the Realms elsewhere. All about, people started poking their heads back into the throne room, the Heavenly Host looking confused and downright scared.

It had been a minute since Mother had thrown around that much power openly, after all, and that was going to scare anyone. Well, besides her and her siblings.

“I’m serious. On the shoulder. It was gone in an instant, but I think I actually got Her,” Keilan insisted.

“Alexander, tell Keilan how foolish he’s being.” Reika said. “He’s just upset he got his wings wet,”

“I enjoy boating, sister. Why would I be upset about that?” Keilan deadpanned. Reika, being the mature sister she was, stuck her tongue out at him. He, being the mature sibling he was, rolled his eyes dramatically and shook his wings and tail like a wet dog, splashing Reika in the process with a dozen tiny droplets. She giggled and shielded her face. Elvira shot him a disgusted look, snapping her fingers and drying said water immediately.

“You may be right, brother,” Alexander said thoughtfully, instead of backing up Elvira and Reika. “Does anyone else think He was acting strangely?”

“Stranger than usual, you mean?” Reika asked doubtfully, taking pity on her sister and drying herself off with a gust of superheated wind. That just so happened to be angled toward Elvira, and just so happened to be the perfect temperature to poof out her wing feathers. At this Elvira actually cracked a smile, shaking her head.

“Sirs, Ma’ams, is everything alright?” one of the Heavenly Host, a general in Elvira’s army, asked as he cautiously approached. Elvira nodded as a few other gods appeared, descending from holes in the ceiling – made specifically for that purpose – or through the front door. Reika even felt Aeriel poking her head through one of the nearby windows with a curious expression.

“Yes, yes, of course. Father was just feeling a little ornery today,” Elvira soothed the man, who bowed ever so slightly and backed up.

“I heard Pa was playing a game. Did we miss it?” one of the newly arrived gods, a young mountain deity, asked slowly, his voice a deep rumble. His name was Gon, and he’d asked Mother for some personal advice a number of times if Reika remembered right – which she always did, it was just a figure of speech.

“Yes, sorry.” Reika apologized, seeing the disappointment on the young god’s face. He must have really enjoyed the last wrestling match they’d all had with Mother to look so downtrodden. “Don’t worry, I’m sure She would come back if you just ask.” At this, Gon nodded thoughtfully.

“We will speak of this later.” Alexander said in a low voice, expression one of placid joy. But Reika could see through the illusion. His eyes were dark with concern, the corners of his mouth tight, as if he was resisting a frown. It was an expression Mother liked to make. “I will need to consult Morgan –“

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“Morgan?” Reika’s head snapped up at that, and Alexander blinked at her quick response. Using qi to communicate between just the two of them, fully aware of their company, she continued. *“What do you need to talk to Morgan about?”* she couldn’t hide the heat in her tone even if she wanted – she still remembered what the wolf had done to her Tree and the Realms, what it had tried to do to her daughter, and wouldn’t soon forget it.

*“Calm yourself, sister. I worry for Father is all, and though we may try to deny it, it is doubtless that Morgan is the one who knows most about Him. I may be overreacting, or reading too far between the lines, but I must ensure I am not.”* Alexander soothed, voice as calm and smooth as ever despite being transmitted through qi. Reika huffed and crossed her arms, looking away. One foot scuffed the white-marbled floor, and she was acutely aware of her other two siblings gaze upon them. *“Morgan will always be what it is, but that does not mean we cannot, at times, work together.”*

“Just go.” She said, reigning in her temper and emotions. She’d been in such a good mood – why was she getting so riled up about this? Alexander smiled kindly and stretched, rising up into the air as, without another word, he flew off to wherever he was going. Reika sighed and shook her head, nodding to Keilan and Elvira as she, too, turned to return home.

*Was Mother off today?*

She wondered. She'd thought they'd just been having fun, but now she was having doubts.

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*They almost got me that time.* I thought proudly as I walked through the halls of my palace. Keilan had been a hairsbreadth away from actually managing to snag me with a ball of water, using his power of connection to almost force it upon me, as I was the Four Realms and why wouldn't it be connected to me? Only a quick bit of destruction had saved me – destroying the bit of water that would have splashed me, and letting the rest freely go along.

Argent, the god of metal, walked beside me, talking to me about his plans to influence one of the new regions with music and metal, to see if it would have any effect. I, of course, approved of this, having an idea already of how it would work. The other four elemental gods in his cycle; wood, water, fire, and earth, would all need to do the same to other Trees to help complete the formation, but that was beside the point. The point was that Argent had long ago come up with the idea, and now he was ready to start implementing the plans.

“That is excellent, Argent.” I praised him. The bronze-skinned god beamed down at me, standing a good few inches taller than I, a silver saxophone strapped to his back. “Do not wait too long, I advise you to try it now. Tell your friends what you’re doing; Inana, Aeriel, and Keegan all will appreciate it the most.”

“I will. Thank you, Matriarch,” he said with a bow. I patted him on the shoulder kindly. He would fail a few times; I could see it in his future and fate. But thanks to the Mad Scientist giving us an energy boost, and the Rival’s presence naturally doing the same, we had some extra time for him to fail. It would strengthen him in the long run, to not get it in one go.

As well as the divine beasts forming within the key features of the Realms, the guardians of the Trees, Mountains, Rivers, and Valleys. They were almost fully formed, and I was excited to see them emerge.

With that, Argent lumbered off, each footfall ringing like a bell in my ears. Music followed him everywhere now, and he was growing so fast...they all were.

I had slowed, but I thought I knew why. I was coming to a crossroads.

Just as Gilles had evolved into a Pillar, just as my children had evolved their divine domains from what they had been, to what they are now, just as Xing Wu had evolved from mortal to a god, I too had an evolution to make. The paths were many and, despite what I had originally planned, it was not going to be delayed until the collision was resolved.

I could not wait that long.

So what would I be? The Deity of Balance, and Patriarch/Matriarch of the Four Realms, fully realized? The Heavens themselves, as I had been aiming for before, however unintentionally? Or something else? My fingers stretched out to touch those steely strands of fate and karma binding myself to the Realms, to my children, to all things I had touched. Then I looked up at the thick band of fate, colored by a bit of karma, leading off toward the One World.

“Randus, I’m going to be take a quick break to meditate and set up some failsafe’s.” I said quietly, already heading to my meditation chamber, hands folded in the sleeves of my robes. Meditation wouldn’t fix everything, but I had just cleared my head and now was time to focus on finding an answer.

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The Rival stood upon a table in the spaceship's cafeteria, his squad and captain sitting all around him as he regaled them with absolutely true, one hundred percent not-embellished stories from his past.

"So there I was, staring down Ratatoskr, the giant squirrel that lives in the World - er, Life-Giving Tree," he was going to get those two mixed up a lot, he just knew it, "and it was ready. So ready to *eat me* after what I had done to its store of candied nuts - "

"You have a wild imagination, kid," one of the soldiers, a grizzled old Draconian with greying scales and a scar above his right eyebrow, said. "Everyone knows there's no squirrel on the Life-Giving Tree. It's a nine-tailed fox that lives up there."

"Give the boy a break, man," another soldier piped up. "Maybe it's a squirrel in his culture. Not everyone follows Reika's religion."

"I don't follow Reika's religion, I'm a devout of the goddess Aeriel."

"The only squirrels he 'battled' were the ones near his home while he was still a baby." Another said. "The first time he sees real battle, he'll shit his pants."

"You haven't seen real battle either, asshole. Those little skirmishes with devil cultivators don't count."

“Oh, there were definitely shit pants involved.” The Rival nodded sagely, pinching his chin between his thumb and fore-finger. “You would’ve too, if you were facing down the craziest damn beast to ever grace the Realms. Not the most dangerous, mind you, but certainly the *craziest*. Of course, I had a plan. Ice cream! Ratatoskr had a terrible sweet tooth, and thanks to some handy ice magic I was prepared to distract him long enough with the tasty treat to facilitate my escape.”

“Of course the whole issue was solved with ice cream.” Another soldier complained, shaking his head. The Rival cackled openly as he was pulled down from the table, forced to sit on the bench like a normal Fae.

“He is possibly the goofiest bastard I’ve ever met,” the comment came from across the table, from someone the Rival couldn’t see, and he perked up.

“So long as I’m number one!” he said happily.

“Times up ladies and gents! Everyone’s to report to the loading bays double time! Get suited up and loaded up!” the call was abrupt, interrupting whatever was about to be said next and their entire meal as the commander for this battalion came wandering into the ship. Her face was grim, the Karae woman already dressed in her silver chainmail armor, her sword strapped to her side.

To their credit, most of the soldiers didn’t so much as grumble at the sudden orders. They’d been scheduled to take a pit stop at a nearby planet, load back up on some supplies and allow for a few battalions to take a quick break on the relatively peaceful planet, so the Rival had to wonder what was happening to prevent that as he, too, stood, casting one longing glance at the halfway decent meal they provided for the soldiers. Roast boar and grilled vegetables, with a loaf of simple bread.

Who’d a thought that being part of the rank-and-file would still provide decent meals? For now, at least.

The Rival joined in the crowd as everyone exited the mess hall, a few of the older soldiers making sure to keep him close by as they flooded toward the armories. He appreciated the sentiment, of course, that they were protecting the new guy who also appeared pretty young, but in some ways it felt like toddlers trying to protect a grown-assed man. Even if many of them were higher in cultivation than he, his raw experience and skill let him punch up.

It wasn't until they entered the air-docks themselves, a large, open chamber near the outer hull of the ship, banners of the celestial palace hanging from the rafters, that any sort of answer was given to them.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have received word from planet Costello – they have come under attack from a terrorist organization believed to be devilish in nature. Bombs were planted beneath a number of major cities so we will no be assisting with search and rescue. Your duties will be to descend to the surface of the planet and assist the locals. Further details will be given to your squad leaders." The man speaking to them wasn't visible through the throngs of soldiers, though his voice was just as loud as if he'd been standing right next to the Rival. He nodded his head slowly, weighing his options. *This seems like a hassle.*

He had his goal. Would he have a good chance to ditch the military here? Or...well, Sylvia had told him to go see what the Realms had to offer...and that by doing so he should be able to find her again...hmmmmmmmmmmmm.

"That's a large sigh. Don't worry stick next to me and you'll be alright." A light hand laid itself on his shoulder, over the leather pauldron that was standard for the grunts of the military, and he looked over to see another of his squad mates, even if she did grossly outrank him.

She was a middle-aged Karae, with chips in her horns and a scar under one eye.

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid I cannot accompany you. I am already claimed by none other than Sylvia!" he flashed her a smile while she rolled her eyes, the woman used to it by now.

"Right. Your imaginary, runaway girlfriend who you promised to marry. You do realize people like you are the ones who die first, right? But that wasn't what I meant and you know it. Be serious about this, boy." She said, winking. The Rival blinked at her, then looked around at the rest of the squad as he came to a realization.

They were scared.

They were all scared.

These were professional soldiers, and they'd had a few skirmishes here and there or whatever, but they weren't veterans by any stretch of the imagination. "War" was a foreign concept to them, in fact the last war the Rival remembered hearing about was the Sun War, and a few scuffles during the unification of the galaxy and Physical Realm. Most of the people in his squad had really only gone on rescue missions for natural disasters and catastrophes. Wait...was he witnessing the first fall?

The potential destruction of the so-called utopia at the dawn of time? No, the timing wasn't quite right, but...he found himself smiling, and cracked a few jokes for the people around him, falling silent as a priest came out onto one of the rafters, spreading his hands and wings wide.

"Now, for those about to enter battle and the disaster zones, let us pray. Pray for souls lost, pray for the safety of our fellows, and pray for the future. Pray to the great gods for their benevolence, and to the lady Thyia, goddess of Catastrophe, so she may stay her hand." As one, the entire group bowed their heads, though the Rival remained standing upright, looking out over everyone.

...maybe this would be interesting. Maybe he would stick around a bit. And no, it had nothing to do with the sudden feeling of mild protectiveness for these scared kids around him.

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War had come to the Physical Realm. The elementals had made their move, bombing key structures and sites while attempting to remain largely out of sight, sowing discord. Their timing had been perfect, too; the Aracheon, Morgan's children, had finally struck some of the outer planets of the Physical Realm as well. Already three entire planets had fallen to them, with thousands of smaller villages and cities under assault as well.

I had seen this happening. I also knew the Celestial Palace's response. Alanna would be a wise, just ruler, but she also knew when to be firm. The Aracheon would be subdued after some intense fighting, but she wouldn't outright commit genocide on them. They were vicious, predatory beings, yes, but not outright evil – as I had ordained they not be.

So, even in my meditations, I turned my gaze to another planet. A planet with the masterminds of the elemental rebellion, a little bird with the soul of a god, the one person I could not, with one hundred percent accuracy, predict the immediate future of, and Morgan's undivided attention upon it. Planet Costello.

I stilled my heart and my hands. I would just have to have faith in Solana.

## 3:17 Burning

Morgan watched the world closely. Most specifically, it was watching the immortal elemental girl and her lover, a karae, both of whom so finely tread the line between becoming devil cultivators and remaining on the side of the "righteous." It was what made their doctrine so successful; and

how they managed to amass enough followers to truly begin challenging the status quo of the Physical Realm.

They were destined to fail. They were too eager, not patient enough to build up a force to actually challenge the Celestial Palace. Even Morgan, who didn't pay much mind to the pointless lives of mortals, could see that.

Yet as they spouted such lies as how the Great One was cruel and capricious, going to far as to actually attempt to rebel against Them, Morgan found itself hating them even more than everything else. Rebel against the Great One? A foolish, hopeless notion. But...perhaps Morgan could use them. It had built its first army out of fools like these, who did not see the bigger picture. Perhaps they could, somehow, be used to further the Great One's growth. Morgan rested its head on its paws.

Now that Thyia had evolved into a different sort of god, it was woefully lacking in subordinates. Even the dark angels that inhabited the Hidden Realm were only so useful, and the Aracheon were more a curiosity than anything. Its most useful subordinates were the Dimensional Creators, and only because they helped shape the Hidden Realm.

“Morgan,” the voice that interrupted its silence was both too loud and entirely unwelcome, and Morgan scowled as it looked up at the speaker. Alexander, the fool dragon, poked his head through a little hole in the side of the wall that Morgan used as a gateway to the Void and silence. How he had managed to find that hole, or even enter it, was beyond it.

“What do you want?” it snapped, not looking up.

“I have come to speak to you about Father.” This did catch Morgan’s attention, but only slightly.

“I am not hear to listen to your petty concerns.” Morgan spat, spider-like legs tapping against the ground. Echoes of time resounded with each tap of its legs upon the ground, space rippling alongside it. Divinity was just within reach, but it would not debase itself by becoming a mere god like the Great One had. Until this damnable catastrophe happened, They had been on the right track to evolving back into who and what They had been before, but now it had all stalled.

It hated everything for that.

Morgan’s scowl deepened as Alexander did not take the hint, and remained floating just above it. It had half a mind to just toss him out with a burst of spacial compression, but restrained itself.

“Last time I visited you were not so opposed to my idea.” Alexander complained, and Morgan rolled its eyes.

“Last time I was in an amenable mood. In hindsight it was a foolish plan. Helping the star god to ascend? He’s proven more worthless than I could have imagined; how long has it been, and he has yet to move the stars into their correct places? The Great One could have done it in a moment.” Morgan growled. “No, I will not be listening – “

“That is my concern.” Alexander interrupted. Morgan bared its teeth and stood, its tail stilling as it turned to fully face the insolent dragon, dark miasma seeping from its fur, looking down from above as if he was superior. How dare he interrupt? How dare he presume? “Father has been pushing us to evolve and change, and thereby neglecting His own advancement. Or so I have come to believe.”

“They have always neglected Their own growth in favor of you bunch of brats.” Morgan snapped, though it still relaxed its guard slightly. “...what else did you notice.”

Alexander explained, and Morgan listened thoughtfully, its scowl slowly easing its way into a thoughtful frown. The gods were beginning to be able to handle tasks on their own. The Great One was needed less and less on construction matters, and was starting to take even more of a back-seat on running the Realms. On the surface it seemed like someone who was preparing their children for their own death; in fact, Morgan could see its original concern in that the Great One might sacrifice Themselves to save Their children in these actions.

However its instincts told it differently. The Great One was a self-sacrificial idiot, who would indeed sacrifice Themself for Their children. But They were not the type to willingly lie down and die, either, which is what Alexander's concern seemed to come from.

This felt like something different. Morgan would have to confront the Great One about this.

"Leave me." Morgan said after Alexander had finished. The dragon narrowed his eyes at it, though Morgan had already turned its back and laid back down, observing the chaos of the war in the Physical Realm. So much negative emotional energy was being created through this conflict, energy that it was siphoning off, collecting for its own purposes and for the sake of the Great One. Another great use of the Dimensional Creators, who could suck that energy up without its direct supervision or action.

"But - "

"I said leave me!" Morgan snapped. "Bother the others with your concerns. I will do what I will." Alexander was silent for a long moment and, in that silence, Morgan started to wonder if it had broken the dragon with its seemingly dismissive response.

"Just know that if you do anything drastic in the Physical Realm, I will mobilize my children. The dragons of the Four Realms will not take meddling lightly." He warned. Morgan snarled, but Alexander was already leaving, and soon it was left alone with its thoughts and the sounds of its Hidden Realm once again.

Sounds echoed to it. Whispers from the Realms. The banging of energy as it was condensed into crystals. It licked its teeth, thoughts whirling in its mind as both fear and excitement set its blood to pounding through its veins. The Great One was no fool, for all that They tried to play it. They never left Themself with no escape plan, even in the darkest of hours. Morgan would know. As much as it wished They would let go of Their past, it would begrudgingly admit to itself that those past lives of Theirs gave some insight into Their capabilities.

It would just have to confront Them about it, once They came out of Their meditations. But first, it was time to get some new minions...so long as they could find their way here.

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The Rival would be the first to admit that war was not his favorite thing in the universe. Painful things were always painful, and sad things were sad. War tended to be both. This universe was no exception, and playing search-and-rescue in a bombed city sucked in every sense of the word. Even if he wasn't technically one of the ones digging people and corpses out of the rubble.

What had once been the central palace of the planet's main government office, home of the governor and however many thousands of servants and cultivators, was now a crater that poured black smoke into the sky. The surrounding city had not been spared either. Whatever had been in the bomb had caused black fires to jump onto the surrounding buildings, fires that, no matter how much the local cultivators tried to put out, refused to be tamed. It was raging out of control and, even worse, would occasionally spit out meteors of black flame that would spread the fire faster and farther.

The Rival was not part of the squad closest to the crater.

He was part of the squad protecting the medical centers that had been put up on the outskirts of the city, just on the inside of the thick walls. The screams of the injured and fearful echoed out from the tents, the scent of blood thick in the air. Healers scrambled back and forth, most of them locals, while the Rival's squad helped carry supplies or other things. Where they were, they hadn't even set up tents yet, the injured laid out in rows in the shade of the wall.

He, of course, couldn't help but make a couple jokes here and there, even as he did his job.

"Hey, old timer. I heard you might need a hand?" He asked the old man with one arm missing, setting a box of medicinal plants on the ground next to him, just beside the healer who worked on stauching the bleeding. He coughed out a laugh, the frail old man wiggling his eyebrows and baring blackened, ash-covered teeth. The Rival could sense qi from him. Once upon a time, he might have been powerful. Now he was just old.

"Don't worry your little head about it. I'm all right now," he said, waving his remaining, right hand. The Rival laughed while the healer, a young man with blonde hair and sea-green eyes, scowled at the both of them.

"That one was out on a limb. Really had to reach for that one." The Rival said quickly, before the healer could speak. The old man hacked out a laugh, a bit of blood spilling out from between his teeth, and that was enough for the healer to finally snap.

"I'm going to have to ask you to not bother my patient while I am tending to him." His tone was calm and focused, barely hiding the true fury in the undercurrent of his voice. The Rival held up his hands in surrender as the healer bent down to continue healing the old man, green energy flowing from his palms. If there was one group of people he actually feared, it was healers – they usually weren't the cutesy, "I just want to help heal people!" people that so often plagued whatever media a universe had. No. Healers were mean and spiteful and hated no one more than those who made them do their job. And the Rival didn't blame them one bit for that...not least of all because he was often one of the ones they hated for that very same reason.

"If you're not busy, go over there and get me some qi pills." The healer said as the Rival started to turn away. He paused, look about to make sure no one else needed his help – everyone needed help, there were at least a hundred patients all lined up to have something fixed on them in this area alone – with only ten healers between everyone, but he figured since he was asked so nicely...

By the time he returned with the qi pills not but a few moments later the healer was shaking his head and moving to stand.

"I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do." He said softly, putting his hands together in a prayer. "The fires burned your dantian. Your cultivation is fading away."

"Ah, well, that's what happens to old men like me. Better I than some poor young sap." The old man breathed. In the skies above a bird shrieked, so loud even the moaning of patients couldn't drown it out. The Rival looked up to see a tiny black and red thing darting about in the skies above, and he raised his eyebrows. That was a strong bird. "Ah, don't worry. I go to join Lady Reika in the Tree, to become one with the Realm. It has been some time coming." The Rival knew the old man wasn't talking to him or the healer, especially by the way the old man's one good arm stretched up to the skies above, one gnarled finger reaching for the bird.

"You believe in Reika, old timer?" The healer asked, pausing for just a moment.

"I am one of the devout, yes." He wheezed out, the corners of his eyes crinkling up into a smile.

"Then I will offer you a prayer. May you find your rest in peaceful glades." And with that, he turned away to the patient just behind him.

"Just Reika? Not going to offer a prayer to..." who was the devil of this universe? He'd heard the name Morgan whispered about quite a bit. "what, Morgan? Now's not the time to be making

enemies, and Reika clearly didn't protect you." Ok, that last bit was a little harsh. *What the hell, brain?*

The old man, however, just wheezed out another laugh, while the healer snapped around to glare at him.

"If my faith was so weak as to be broken by mere death, I would not be able to call myself a devout." The old man said.

"If you're going to be an asshole, boy, do it elsewhere. Do not deny my patients whatever solace they may find in their final hours." The healer snapped. And the Rival smiled to himself, pleased. He judged many a person's character by their response to insults toward their most fervent belief.

He liked the old man. He might've made a good drinking buddy.

At any other time, he would have cracked another joke here. The old man seemed like the type to enjoy it, and at this point he was so desensitized to the dead and dying...

But no, his attention snapped skyward as his instincts screamed, gaze locking onto the great meteor of black flame hurtling toward their position. Panic surged through him – genuine panic! How wonderful! – because he *couldn't die yet, dammit, he hadn't found Sylvia yet* – and he called upon his cultivation. Qi surged. Blood roared through his veins, his heartbeat echoed in his ears as he called upon an ancient technique; only to still his feet at the last moment, billions of years of battle experience telling him to wait.

It was the healer who acted first.

The young blonde leapt into the air with grace, a shield of shimmering green appearing between him and fiery ball of death. The ball of black fire imploded upon contact, most of it ricocheting off of the shield to rain in tiny chunks down all around the medical area. The Rival kept his eyes on the skies, ignoring all the people diving for cover, as he watched the fire for any clumps that might strike him.

His panic may have set the hairs on the back of his neck to standing on end, and his teeth to be bared in an excited grin because it'd been so long since that happened! But that was no excuse to actually panic.

“Get down, you fool!” a squad member hissed at him, tugging on his pants leg – but The Rival ignored him, too, watching a single solitary ember float down to him. The smart thing to do would be to leave it alone. So, naturally, he reached out and touched it. It burned. Not badly, not really painfully, but digging into his flesh, feeding off of...well, not his qi, that remained untouched, but...The Rival closed his eyes and *felt* what it was doing, the way it inflamed him, driving – fear. That was what it fed off of. Fear.

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It sent a shiver of fear and paranoia down his spine, and goosebumps up his arm at the threat of death.

“I wonder,” he mused, and took a deep breath, acknowledging the fear within him then killing it in the same smooth stroke. The ember spluttered, wavered, and, with nothing to feed off of, died altogether. “It sure is nice, being able to turn emotions off an on like that.” Another benefit to qi. And being a billion cajillion years old, or however old he was. But the real question was...

The man that gripped his leg could only watch in horror – or what the Rival assumed was horror, as he enjoyed making people question just what the hell he was doing – as he yanked his leg out of his grip and walked up to the nearest ball of black flame. It burned on the old man's leg, who watched resigned, then immediate concern, as the Rival promptly stuck his entire hand into the fire.

And he experimented with two things in that brief moment. First, was fear. He called upon the worst of his memories, the deepest of fears that stung his soul, the hatred and anger that twisted through his memories. The First was foremost amongst most of those, and the fire immediately flared skyward.

Only to be stuffed out in that next instant by a burst of joy and happiness, as he recalled all the good times. Families he'd had. Friends. Jokes. Sylvia...heh. The chase! Only, it wasn't just that one bit of fire. In a radius of thirty feet, every single ember was snuffed out.

“They’re hive-like. Sharing energy between nearby flames. That’s weird.” The Rival noted, pulling his hand up and examining the skin for any blemishes. He had to look his best for Sylvia, at all times. And also because it was hilarious to piss people off while you were around them, and you were just *pristine* the entire time.

“How did you...” The old man started, but the Rival was already looking away, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Far off, over the worst of the city, was the quasi-immortal. Of the three immortals that travelled on the ship with them, none had remained in this city – instead travelling to other parts of the planet that had been struck by disaster or detonation.

The Rival stroked his chin thoughtfully. He was no expert (who was he kidding, yes he was) but he would guess that this was Immortal fire. Fire that burned off of emotion was incredibly difficult to handle as far as he was aware, at least in this universe, and it was far too difficult to put out with ease. Yet it likewise wasn’t so devastating that it would burn away the entire city in moments, something well within an immortal’s capabilities. It was manageable for non-immortal cultivators, but still dangerous...the perfect distraction.

“I wonder...there must be something nearby that they’d be after, if that was the case.” He mused aloud, the bird in the sky screeching once more.

“What...makes you say that?” The old man sighed. “Shouldn’t you get back to work?”

“No. Trust me on this. Whoever’s here is likely going after something that may benefit immortals...I would bet bucks this is a distraction for an even bigger play.” The Rival said, nodding his head and glancing at the old man. He didn’t miss the way color returned to the old man’s face as his cultivation activated, even as his expression soured. Up above the bird shrieked again, and the Rival glanced up to see it shooting off into the distance, fire trailing from its wings.

By the time he looked back down, the old man was gone.

His hesitation lasted for only a moment. This seemed more interesting than being in the military, anyway.

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The hut Solana had spent the last few dozen years in was burning. As was the willow behind it, the Treant it had been murdered.

And I watched with a grim expression from far, far above as all the players came together. Not because the situation was dire – it was certainly tragic – but because of the senselessness of it all. I understood why it had to happen. I knew that I was putting too much attention down there, rather than on what I should be focusing on. But all the same, I focused on it.

The old man; I knew his name. He was Mar, Priest of Reika, and the savior of Solana. He was older than he was supposed to be, his life sustained through a very specific cultivation technique.

He fled through the forest with only one arm, burning every ounce of energy as he sprinted through the trees, his life fading away like sand in an hourglass as he desperately tried to reach his home and the Treant that resided there – what had started off as a hunch, an ill feeling when the Rival had correctly deduced the nature of the explosions, was now a grim reality as he saw the smoke rise, felt the screams of the forest as their immortal protector perished in flame, and its body burned away.

Solana screeched her warning in the skies above, diving down on flaming wings at the two figures standing before the willow, watching it burn, reveling in their accomplishment. One Treant, dead.

“What the – that’s a damn bird!” the Karae man cursed, ducking as Solana furiously screeched by just above his head, fires burning so hot and bright it left a trail of light behind her. Yet even those flames could not harm an Immortal of that caliber, and he cursed again as she shot out of his immediate reach.

“Must be some kind of pet for the Treant.” The elemental immortal beside him mused – Terra was her name. Solana came screeching by again, this time with talons bared, sharpened and white-hot; only to be stopped midair by a wall of force that quickly morphed into a cage of black energy. Terra’s eyes gleamed with malicious satisfaction. “It’s nearly Immortal. I wonder what kind of a pet an immortal bird would make?”

“No!” The old man screamed, bursting through the trees. Solana screeched again, burning white hot, hot enough to bend the cage, but not to break it.

Terra turned, and promptly backhanded the old man. He went tumbling, blood spilling from his mouth as his life force wavered, his soul shaking as it tried to leave his body. Too much time had already passed – he was already half-dead.

“And you must be the protector.” She said slowly. “I recognize your bloodline. There was one just like you that protected a being just like this, back when I was a little girl. Why would you guard our oppressors?” She expected no real answer; the tone of her voice dripping with ridicule.

“W-why...? Why do this? Do you know what you've done?” Mar asked, managing to push himself up to a sitting position. Terra tapped her chin in thought, mocking him.

“Of course I do. I did it because it was fun. Because I refuse to be held under the heel of false gods any longer. Because I will go the way of Dei and reject the heavens, and impose my own will upon the world. Because I am not sheep to be shepherded, or cattle to be led to the slaughter.” She said, punctuating each word with another step toward him. Mar watched her approach, and I saw the decision he made before even he did.

Reika's religion was all about healing and growth. She, herself, was not a front-line fighter. She had always been more supportive and healing, and the abilities of her truly devout priests reflected that. That is what they cultivated, and he was no different.

“Blasphemy.” He breathed. His goal was not to avenge the Treant, as much as I saw the desire within him. He simply saw his friend, Solana, held within a cage, and saw a being he could actually still help.

Terra felt it just a moment too late, overconfident in her abilities as she was. Mar detonated what remained of his cultivation, pointing the blast at a single point – the connection between Terra and the cage that held Solana. He was not powerful enough to kill an immortal, not weakened as he was, but this? This he could do.

Terra cursed as Solana shot skyward, stumbling backward and shielding her face from the brilliant green light, her cultivation roaring to life, shielding her from the worst of the line of power. Solana screeched out her rage and pain at her friend's death, a tear welling up in my own eyes as I connected to Mar's final moments.

It was one filled with pain, and anger, and doubt, and raw *fury*. But none of those emotions could trump the feeling of raw relief that came with seeing Solana free of her cage, and the tiny bit of satisfaction at managing to best an Immortal with his dying breath. His body turned to dust, all the energy that had comprised it spent and returning to the Realms as his soul slowly started to drift away, toward the Spirit River.

"You FUCK!" Terra screeched, black fire burning from her hands as she lunged at the old man, grabbing ahold of his soul as it ascended into the skies, her black, emotional flames burning into the outer layers of his being, injecting a deepness of fear that would carry over to his next life if it was not cleansed. I tensed, knowing she would not do something as drastic as destroying the man's truesoul, not that she even could at that level of power, but still not *liking* what I knew would come next. That was one of the issues with immortals.

They could interact with souls to some degree. And I liked those left well enough alone, unless it was me or mine doing the messing.

"Let's...not do that." The Rival's voice was calm and clear as he stepped out of the woods, looking none the worse for wear despite the long run he'd just endured. The armor he'd been wearing had been torn off, and now a little sword hung loosely in his hands. His eyes were half-lidded as he stared at Terra, gaze never leaving her despite the other immortal standing behind her.

She gave him one glance, scowled, and looked away, already burning Mar's souls with both hands. Solana screeched, and the Rival's expression hardened.

“We need to go, Terra,” her husband urged. “Just bring him with us.” She scowled and turned to face the Rival, looking him up and down. She felt no threat from him, a relatively weak cultivator. It would be child’s play to kill him, in her mind.

I somehow doubted that, even despite the cultivation difference. That was what the qi of the Rival was telling me, as it formed shapes within his gut.

“Say, you wouldn’t happen to know anyone by the name of Sylvia, would you? Black hair, green eyes, drop-dead gorgeous?” I resisted the urge to slap my forehead. This was not the time or place, man. “No? Didn’t think so. Darn. Mind letting the old man’s soul go? I liked that one.”

“Mind your tongue.” Terra snapped. “You will be coming with me; we could always use more recruits.”

“Nah, I’m good. Say, you mentioned Dei earlier, didn’t you? Is that someone you’re looking for? If you help me find Sylvia I’ll help you find him.” The Rival said. Terra rolled her eyes and stepped forward, intent on snagging him by the back of the neck as the distance between them vanished in a blink of an eye – only to pass straight through him, the afterimage he had left behind as he teleported fading away. “Rude.” He said, perching up on a tree now. His cultivation continued to swirl, and suddenly, I knew exactly what he was doing.

The soul of the Treant hovered about him, too powerful to be contained by Terra, and yet...*and yet*. I sat back. The Rival intended to channel its power. He couldn’t challenge an immortal with his current cultivation level, but to channel a Treant’s soul? Let it use him as it saw fit? Well now, that was another story altogether.

Now Terra was cautious, her immortal lover coming up behind her with narrowed eyes and wings spread.

“We need to go.” He urged.

“Who are you?” she demanded, ignoring him.

“I go by many names. Some people call me the space cowboy...ah, forget it. I’m not in the mood. I’m the Rival. I like challenging people. It tells me who they are.” The Rival’s eyes narrowed. “Who are you lot?”

“Revolutionaries. We follow the path of Dei.” She said slowly, testing him, trying to figure out just how he had escaped her. None of her words were true, and she knew it. But they sounded nice. That was the sinister thing about causes like theirs; they lured you in with words that sounded nice, and causes that sounded good. “Ours is a righteous cause.”

“I’ve heard of Dei. Isn’t he the loser who failed to ascend to immortality?” The Rival drawled, the Treant’s soul coming to rest on his shoulders. I saw the little question pass between them.

Terra’s face colored. “How dare you –“ she cut herself off then, her anger at her so-called idol being insulted freezing in place as she finally, finally caught on to what he was doing.

The Rival smiled. “Don’t you want *revenge*?” The words weren’t just meant for the Treant. They were also meant for Solana, in the skies above, who screeched out her warcry and demanded her ascent to immortality. The clouds of heaven broke open, a bridge of gold descending from the skies, and Solana took to it like a fish to water.

Many things happened in that next few moments. Terra and her lover lunged at the Rival, the old man’s soul freed from her grip. The Treant took over his body, bark forming around his skin and stopping their assassin’s blades. Solana reached all the way across the bridge – feathers torn from her breast and back and wings with the speed she broke through my trials, her cultivation nearly

shattered in her single-minded desire to avenge her murdered friend – and absorbed as much qi as she could as her cultivation settled into that of an immortal.

The other three Immortal beings on the planet teleported to their exact location to see what the commotion was all about.

And a portal into the Hidden Realm opened, just beneath the Rival, Terra, and her Karae lover. Toxic miasma poured out, dark angels flooding out of the portal, chains reaching up and dragging both Terra and her lover into the Hidden Realm, Solana chasing after them in a streak of fire.

And the Rival fell with them.

### 3:18 Fear

The Hidden Realm was dark, and damp, and filled with all kinds of nasty energy that made the Rival's skin crawl. Spirit stones of all shapes and sizes jutted out from the walls, which were made of a strange, sticky black substance he was afraid to touch. Not because it might be dangerous, but rather because it just looked slimy and nasty, and for as long as he had lived icky things were still icky. To top it off, this entire place was probably pretty dangerous, if the tree spirit currently inhabiting him and letting him borrow its cultivation's fears were anything to take seriously.

But it's not like they could go anywhere, either. So far as he was aware, they were stuck in this Hidden Realm - because that's the only thing it could be, right? The Rival bent and picked up a little stone made of pure wind energy, examining it closely, feeling the dormant qi laying within it. *Leave, LEAVE!* The Treant's soul hissed in his ear.

"There's really not anywhere to go." He drawled slowly, rubbing his shoulder and pocketing the stone, eyeing a spirit stone of fire that was the size of his head. Y'know, he hadn't really decided on

an element to use in this life; but fire was so overdone that he was kind of sick of it at the moment. Maybe after a few more lifetimes he'd find it cool again...

*“That’s not what I meant.”* The Treant’s words echoed in his ears like leaves brushing against each other in the wind, a gentle, worried sound that filled his mind with thoughts of pain and death. For a moment the Rival was confused about what it was talking about, then looked down at himself in realization. His clothes were tattered. Blood dripped in a steady stream out of his nose, droplets blooming like red flowers on the black stone beneath his feet. A chunk of wood was embedded in the skin of his forearm, and he knew his hair must look a mess.

To top it all off, it felt like his cultivation was about to burst. No matter how fantastic and strong-willed he was, he couldn’t overcome the limits of a weak body, especially when an immortal-level soul was pumping power through said body.

Thankfully, he was awesome, and knew how to channel that power for maximum efficiency and minimum damage. Still meant he’d be laid up for a little while afterward the immortal spirit of the Treant left him, though, and he wasn’t quite ready for the crash. There might still be things to do.

*“Let me go. Don’t kill yourself, young one.”* The Treant’s concern was touching, but he still had a few minutes left before his cultivation imploded.

“You sound like my therapist. ‘Take care of your body.’ ‘You’ll feel better if you quit.’ ‘I’m not dating you no matter how charming you are.’ Sheesh.” Though his words were harsh and joking in nature, he still smiled and sent a wave of appreciation toward the Treant’s soul for the concern. But he had to make it to shelter first, before he allowed it to leave and collapsed from exhaustion. A shriek of triumph had him turning around to behold the battleground – entire swaths of the long cavern hall they’d found themselves in were torn asunder, trees growing where once there was none. Life magic was so much fun to wield; making forests grow from nothing never got old.

Many of those plants were shattered into a thousand pieces, the life energy that made them up spreading out in to meld with the ambient qi of the Hidden Realm. But the Rival only had eyes for

the little bird, standing atop the two prone bodies lying amidst the wreckage, bleeding from multiple places and bound with a type of wood so dense and strong, even immortals could not break it. Scorch marks lined their skin like stripes from where the immortal bird paced across their bodies, embers falling from its feathers and smoke curling from its beak. The two evil, devil-cultivator immortals, beat down and properly restrained like the worthless dogs they were.

The Rival yawned.

That's what they get for messing with him.

He liked that old man, dammit.

And the bird is cool too, he supposed.

Now, where the hell was the exit? He looked up and around, casting about for the portal they'd fallen through – no one had questioned that they were going to fight in here, the real question had been where everything had *gone*. He'd felt those dark spirits that had been around when he'd first challenged the devil cultivators. Hells, the Treant had *warned* him about the spirits. But the moment they were dragged down into the abyss or Hidden Realm or whatever it was called, they up and vanished.

Spooky.

Another squawk drew his attention back to the bird, the immortal, elemental woman having spit on it. It puffed up, fire spilling from its feathers as it prepared to incinerate them.

“Hey, leave them be. I have a couple questions for them...bird.” He said lamely, knowing that an immortal bird likely had a name but didn’t know what it was. Said bird shot him a glare, eyes glowing coal-orange with anger. What were his questions again? Right, he had a few immortals held captive, it would be remiss of him not to interrogate them about the world at large. They seemed like the arrogant type. That should be easy enough to handle.

“*My name is not bird. It is Solana.*” It – *she!* The voice was that of a girl’s – snapped. The Rival held up his hands defensively.

“Sorry, sorry, my bad Sola – oh shit.” His instincts alone were what kept him from panicking and killing himself right then and there, to save his skin. Because out of everyone, he alone could feel it coming.

It wasn’t through qi. It wasn’t through whatever immortal senses you gained upon becoming an immortal. And it certainly wasn’t due to any Monkey Wrench bullshit – which had largely been suppressed in this lifetime. It was solely because he had an uncountable number of years of battle experience that he was able to avoid being slaughtered by what came next.

And that was only by standing perfectly, perfectly still.

“**And what have we here?**” the voice was at once soothing and domineering, echoing through the Rival’s mind and around the entirety of the chamber. A shiver ran down his spine, blood running cold in a way that rarely ever happened to him anymore, as a *shadow* passed through the cavern, hissing and clicking as it went. Foul miasma spilled across the ground like a mist, clinging to the spirit stones, muting even their power – it didn’t smell like death, or decay.

It was cold, in a way only the Void could be, and echoed with the relentless march of Time.

***“Two would-be rebels, beaten by a mortal, pupeted by a tree, and the soul of the biggest fool I have ever known. What a pitiful, pitiful display.”*** The voice came from everywhere and nowhere, each word slow and methodically pronounced, rhythmic like the ticking of a clock. The Rival remained stock still, even the Treant silent as the dead, as *it* slowly padded by. It was a dog, a wolf, whose head maybe reached chest-height. Its fur was grey and black, eight spidery limbs sprouting from its back. It did not so much as glance at him as it padded by.

*There is no way my luck is this bad.* The Rival thought, counting the seconds that slowly passed. His only saving grace was he hadn’t given the being a reason to pay attention to him yet – assuming him beating the crap out of those two didn’t qualify.

Solana shrieked again, puffing – only to freeze in place, its fires stilling in the moment as it was frozen in space and time.

***“Be still. I will be with you in a moment – though, we have all the time in the world down here.”*** It cackled, coming to sit directly in front of the two immortals. The Rival licked his lips and took a careful step back, then froze in place as it glanced at him. The wolf’s head had eight eyes upon it, red like a spiders, and only one was needed to fix him in place. Its teeth bared themselves ever so slightly and the Rival cursed, watching as Solana’s fires slowly flickered in reverse.

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*Fuck. What is my luck to run into something like this?* Beings that could control time were among his least favorite to deal with, much less one as powerful as this – and with a hint of Void too.

He knew what Void felt like. It was one of the few dangers to a Monkey Wrench. If this little shard-soul of his got infected with void-madness or utterly destroyed by the void, not only would he lose

his entire memories of this lifetime, but the infection may spread to his main soul. He'd seen it happen before. He'd had to put down Monkey Wrenches like that. It was never pretty.

"What...are you...?" the elemental girl, Terra she said her name was, gasped. The being chuckled low and deep, shaking its head.

***"That is unimportant compared to what I will do to you."*** It snarled. ***"Oh, but I'm supposed to give you an option. Hmm. Quite a predicament we find ourselves in, isn't it?"***

"You are...Morgan..." the Terra woman breathed suddenly, eyes going wide. "The Great Defier. I thought you were struck down, a myth –" she was cut off by a single spider-like leg slamming down in front of her face.

***"Silence, worm. Speak only when spoken to, and I have not yet finished speaking."*** It snapped. ***"You are weak. Pathetic. Your foolish ambitions are of no interest to me, and are doomed to fail. Cast aside your ambitions. You will work for me now."***

"Never." Terra spat.

"Uh, dear – "

***"Did you think you could refuse?"*** Morgan hissed, leaning its face closer. ***"You want to, what, defy the heavens? There is no such path for you to do so without me. Your path is ordained. Written in stone by thine own hands. Your arrogance will bring you ruin untold, underestimating the forces allied against you, the so-called 'righteous'...but fine. I will let you go...for now. But when all is said and done, and your ambitions fail, you will come crawling back to me, and the offer I represent."***

*Am I witnessing the devil literally tempt demons into existence?* The Rival wondered, sweat beading his brow. He didn't have all that much time left until the Treant's soul exploded his cultivation, and it was really starting to hurt. But he might need its power to escape...if that was even possible.

**“And as for you, foolish one...”** Morgan turned to the bird then, cocking its head to the side as she struggled against the time magic cast against it. **“What a twist of fate, to find you back here again. Will you come back to me, for the power you so desire? The Shadow and the Sun, an ironic pairing, no?”**

*Did it just call itself the Shadow?* The Rival felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end the moment it said that, sweat practically pouring from his forehead. *How in the hells do I find myself in these kinds of situations all the time? Escape talisman, escape talisman, where are you?* He slowly reached into his back pocket to grab the talisman, even if he wasn't certain it would do any good – and the Shadow's gaze snapped to him.

**“And what to do about you, curious one? I have never seen a technique like that before, and it kills you the longer you maintain it. Perhaps I should keep you, as well. A curious little pet. What do you think?”**

Taking that as permission to speak, he did, carefully taking a step back. “Look, sorry for intruding, I didn't mean to interfere with...whatever this was, so if I could, I'd really like to be on my way. I just gotta find Sylvia –“

The name made Morgan twitch, one ear perking up, and the Rival immediately crushed the talisman stone to activate it. Only, nothing happened. Space seemed to freeze, time passing at a crawl as the Shadow fixated all eight eyes upon him.

**“That name.”** it said, eyes narrowing at him. **“What is that name to you?”**

“UHHHHH,” *Sylvia, who the hell did you piss off here?!*

**“No, I see now. I see now. How dare you call them by that name? You’re not just – no. Your existence cannot be tolerated. A reminder? They need no reminders, no connections to that time, when they were lesser. How dare you come here? I am not supposed to kill people or destroy their souls...however.”** Morgan stalked forward with each word, the Rival’s panic rising with every passing moment. **“You are not from the Four Realms. Therefore, I can act as I please.”** And it lunged.

For a split second, the Rival thought he was dead. The wolf’s maw opened, revealing darkness and death, the Void itself in its stomach, intent upon eradicating him.

But the moment never came. Space shattered. Time was rent asunder. And a girl with nine swishing fox tails came hurtling into the fray, a staff of solid bronze piercing the air between the Rival and Morgan. The Shadow’s fangs impacted upon the staff, a ringing clear as a bell echoing in the chamber.

“Yo!” she said happily, flipping over the staff and tossing the Shadow to the side along with it. Solana shrieked. Time resumed its normal pace. And as Morgan stood, hackles raised, the nine-tailed fox girl saluted at him. “I’m Kei! And it’s...time to run!”

\*\*\*

“Seriously? This is what makes you become a Pillar? Gods damn it, Kei.” I demanded, slapping my hands upon my knees, drawing me fully out of my meditations. Had she not managed to break through Morgan’s barrier I would have made a move myself – there was no way I was going to let Morgan destroy my friend’s soul...even if it was just a soul-shard. But that idiot should have been more careful.

Is what I would like to say, but how was he supposed to know Morgan would do that?

My eyes narrowed as Kei promptly scooped up the Rival, darted over to Solana to grab her, and promptly ran screaming out of the Hidden Realm, Morgan hot on her heels. She'd managed to block its strike so easily only because it had been an incarnation of Morgan, but now she'd managed to piss it off and it was coming at her full-power. I stood from my seat, a bit of my own power flexing as I glared down at the escaping trio, Kei laughing like a madwoman as she ran. Her power rolled from her in waves, the freedom of her existence – to live and be as free as she wished, to play and prank, unchained by space and time – melding and bolstered by the steadiness of Randus' own power, and adding a touch of balance to the weight and strength of Gilles'.

And it gave her the power to flee from Morgan. Uncontainable. Uncontrollable. That was Kei.

“Hey Gramps, watch this!” Kei shouted, looking directly at me and promptly vanishing, for the briefest of moments, from my sight. My eyes narrowed in shock, even as I caught sight of her again halfway across the Hidden Realm – Morgan skidded to a halt, howling its rage to the skies.

“Ok, that was impressive.” I admitted, though that she'd been able to escape my sight for even just a moment was worrying in a few ways. She had been training for it since before the Sun War so she could prank me, but...still.

“I –“ Morgan started, and I teleported beside it. Morgan scowled at me, teeth bared, black miasma pouring off of it in waves – only to freeze in place as it stared at me. “You are...”

“Yes.” I had already started the process of my evolution, this time aggressively cutting off karmic threads, resolving all that which I could. My energy was slowly condensing, my domain of Balance spinning within my chest like a yin-yang symbol, absorbing all the enlightenment I had. How this process would pan out was yet beyond me to fully understand; what I did know was that it would

greatly increase my own chances of survival. Making the Will of the Four Realms something independent of myself may seem like an effort to keep the Four Realms running in case I died, and in some ways it was, but in another way it wasn't.

As it was now, if the Four Realms were damaged, I would be too, as we were one and the same. It would never fully change that the Four Realms were part of me, essentially my own body, but...this was changing the form of it. If I severed myself from the Realms more, my children more than capable of running things without my overbearing supervision, then I would have more freedom to act.

Had I remained on the path of becoming the Heavens, I would have, inversely, tied my fate far closer to that of the Four Realms. But by having us both being able to function separately, it increased both of our chances of survival by quite a bit. I wasn't even close to being ready to make that happen, but the process had still started.

“Say no more.” Morgan said, teeth bared in a smile. It chuckled, then laughed, a giddy thing that sent shivers down my spine. “This choice is even better than before. The others will not approve.”

“No, they will not.” I told it. Morgan nodded then, all rage and anger gone.

“Good. Do not –“

“Do not.” I interrupted, firmly, not wishing to discuss the topic further. “Touch the Rival again. He is a guest in our house and will be treated as such; you will not break the rules of hospitality. Do I make myself clear?” Morgan’s ears flattened on the back of its head, scowling, eyes narrowing as they met my own. Without another word it spat and turned away, stalking back through the Hidden Realm. I nodded to myself, and turned my attention, briefly, back to Kei and the Rival.

That was a meeting that was bound to go poorly. Kei had been tracking him for years, and now she was...healing his wounds? Huh. She hadn't interrogated him yet, even as he chattered on, full of nervous energy. The Treant's soul returned to the cycle of reincarnation, the duo who had been rebelling were free of their bonds and now wandered the Hidden Realm, and Solana and Kei were hitting it off like old friends. But my attention was mostly on the Rival.

I had never seen the Rival that scared of anything. The fear that had colored his soul upon meeting Morgan was so clear, so bright it was impossible to miss...he hadn't even been that scared back when he'd been threatened by a crazed fan, back on Earth. Now I knew why, but still...

I hated seeing him like that. I'd have to send him an apology, but that will be a bit later, I think.

There was a meeting coming up between Origin Deities again. Gilles would have to come. I think Keilan should as well.

### 3:19 I Wish

Kei had found a new toy. His name was something like Rival - and he was just a goofy little guy with a crush on Gramps. Which was really icky to think about. Though she did wonder why he called Gramps Sylvia...she was fairly certain it had something to do with their little connection through karma and Gramps' past lives, but she wasn't certain. She'd have to ask Him about that, and about the big ball in the sky she could barely see that was somehow connected to the Rival...sometime later.

Right now she had someone to bug.

"So question; who are you, exactly?" he asked as they landed in the Physical Realm, somewhere on Pangaea. The leaves of the Life-Giving Tree waved in the sky above, angels and other powerful

spirits flying about. Fu Hao, one of Gramps' old angels, flew toward them at a sedate pace, the brilliant energy of one of the most powerful angels in all existence impossible to miss.

Gramps must've sent her to keep an eye on the Rival. Maybe. She'd been busy doing other things, so that'd be kinda funny.

“Me?” Kei asked, letting Solana go, setting the Rival down and examining him with far deeper precision than she had before. He had black-ish hair, and small curling horns atop his head. His face was nothing to sneeze at looks-wise, but he wasn't an absolute beauty either. His cultivation was probably the most interesting thing about him, and only because it was so meticulously crafted – everything from his dantian to the energy pathways throughout the rest of his body were nearly perfect, only slightly flawed compared to Gramps' ‘perfect example.’

If only he hadn't kept that Treant's soul in him for as long as he had, his body might even be in peak condition. How had he done that, anyway?

“Yes, you.” The Rival, grumbled, sitting on the loamy ground with a groan, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. It came away bloody, and he just shook his head. “Is this universe just small? How am I running into so many Immortals already?” he muttered. *Perceptive.*

“I am Kei!” she said proudly, puffing out her chest and flaring her tails. The Rival looked up at her, cocked an eyebrow, then looked down at his feet, unimpressed.

“That doesn't tell me anything.” He deadpanned. She pouted. Had he not gone to any of the churches at all? Or learned any of the lore? Not even *her* lore? There was only one nine-tailed fox in the entirety of the Four Realms! Oh well, at least now she got to give her own proper introduction.

“Well then, allow me to properly introduce myself! I am Kei, daughter of Reika, the Goddess of Change, She who stood against the shadow, the bringer of pranks and herald of mischief, the Greatest, Unrivalled beneath the Heavens!” she boasted, striking a little pose and pointing her bronze staff heavenward. She could practically feel Gramps amusement from way up there.

Solana chirped at her, no words, just a chirp full of intent as the little immortal bird settled in a nearby tree. She frowned at her. She still didn’t forgive Sol for what he did to mother and the Tree...but was this really Sol anymore? She didn’t know. She had mixed feelings about it. It wasn’t like her to hold a grudge.

“Unrivalled? That’s a bit of a stretch, don’t you think? And greatest under the heavens? I knew a monkey that said that. Now *he* was unrivaled.” the Rival asked. Kei just smirked at him, shaking her head that he couldn’t see her greatness while filing that monkey note away for later.

...although greatness was, of course, a bit of an exaggeration. She was unrivaled under the Heavens, sure, but what about those who lived in Heaven? Gramps, Mom, her aunts and uncles, some of the older gods...she was powerful, sure, but not the strongest being in the Realms. Morgan included.

Though that might change soon because of the power she’d just gained. It felt like...a pillar, if she had to put it into words, but less binding than that. Free. She was a Pillar of Freedom, uncontainable and unchain-able.

No. She was a Pillar of the Tree. She was just free, like those who lived in the Realms.

“Right. Ok. Well, thanks for the save, I was really just about dead there. But why?”

"I find you interesting! What's with the big ball outside the Realms? How's it connected to you? Why are you looking for...you call her Sylvia? And why do you use the name Sylvia?" Kei babbled, bouncing on the balls of her feet. The Rival stared at her blankly.

"What is *with* all the super-perceptive people in this place? You're the third person to see through my existence in the first few moments of meeting me. What the hells, man?" He complained. Kei grinned and winked at him, one tail thrashing and leaving a stream of fire in the air that formed the word 'unrivaled.' He rolled his eyes. "You're almost as bad as me when it comes to showboating. Yes, I am looking for Sylvia. Do you know her?"

"Do I know her? Silly question, or course I do! Also, her name is --"

"No! Wait!" The Rival stared at her for a moment, eyes narrowed and pinching his chin in thought. Kei froze in place, not moving a single muscle. "You. Did you come to find me after learning about my connection between me and her?" Kei nodded. That was close enough. No one had told her, of course, but she absolutely had come chasing after what had made Gramps so giggly. "Is that cheating? Does this count as cheating? She told me to find her myself...and I get bonus points if I figure out her past lives...does that mean I get a date? Don't tell me who she is. I'll figure it out by myself." He said, pouting. Kei giggled at the way he phrased it; it sounded like he was a toddler trying to prove he could do it himself.

"You sure? I could tell you right here and now. It's..."

"Lalala! I can't hear you!" The Rival clapped his hands over his ears and Kei laughed, fluffing her tails and setting her hands on her hips.

"You've already walked by the answer like five times. I think you could be forgiven for a little cheating." Kei argued. He just shook his head harder, trying and failing, to stand on shaking limbs, nearly falling over in the process. Kei hesitated, healing magic pooling in one of her tails - the one made of condensed life energy - ready to heal him if it looked like his condition would worsen. Slowly she leaned forward, only for him to shove one hand out with surprising quickness - no, that

wasn't what had caught her off guard, it was the total lack of intent or forewarning in his aura that he was going to move – a finger pressed nearly to her lips.

"I know you're gorgeous, but alas, Sylvia is the only one for me. Begone, foul temptress! Seduce me not!" he shouted dramatically, startling a number of spirit beasts in the vicinity. Kei furrowed her brows. Processed what he said. Then turned bright red and leapt backward, ears laid back.

Gorgeous?! He called her gorgeous – and no! She hadn't been trying to seduce him! Yuck! He was *so...so...old*.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

He stuck his tongue out at her.

And she teleported away, but not without sending a quick little burst of healing energy at the man. Mom did teach her manners, after all.

But she would be back!

Now, she wondered how Gramps little love interest of an Origin Deity would react to a - heh - Rival. And that brought her right back around to what she had tried to tell Curie in the One World about her Shadow. She wondered how she was handling the rot, and the obsession it may cause?

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“Gilles, you’re with me.” I told the deity of shadows. He turned to me with one eyebrow raised, setting down whatever little project he’d been working on. Something inspired him to try and create a container that could hold Void Shards, a little pet project he’d been working on for quite a while in his off time.

“Is it time?” he asked, putting away the container. He hadn’t gotten around to actually testing it on full-on Void shards yet, so there was very little clean up for him to do – I nodded, folding my hands into the sleeves of my robes.

“It is time. Come. Keilan and Elvira will meet us at my home, where we will depart from.” It was time for the meeting, now. Things had not advanced as much as I had wanted them to between last meeting and now, but it was still within the margin of error I had calculated. The Mad Scientist’s boost, and the Rival’s as well, was doing us a great favor here. This time, though, instead of my angels I would be bringing Keilan and Gilles; hopefully Mr. Boxes would allow us to send people into the other universe.

Gilles stood and dusted his hands off, moving to stand just beside me before I teleported us both into the grand hall of my palace. We appeared just before my central fountain; the first fountain ever made by the Fae, my mortal children. It still burbled with water, and I found myself staring at it for a brief moment, nostalgia swirling in my heart...Gilles moved off immediately to go give Elvira a hug, and say his potential goodbyes; we had no idea if he’d be able to stay in the One World for a time or not.

“Mother.” Keilan greeted from the side. I could feel both his and Randus’ gaze upon me, and I turned to them with a smile. Keilan’s dark eyes were narrowed, focused on my aura, suspicion swirling about his soul. “You feel different.” He accused softly. I shrugged, now feeling Gilles’ own gaze upon me. This was the first time any of them had seen me since I’d been meditating and severing some of my karma, so that made sense.

“Shall we?” I asked, sticking out my hands as Mr. Boxes’ representative came flying in from outside the Realms. It pulsed once like a nerve ending and a portal appeared behind me, swirling black and

purple. At the same time he spoke, though his words did not ring in my ears but appeared in the boxes that were becoming less and less frequent the further I progressed as an Origin Deity.

*Ding!*

{[Assuming the Oshun Trio agrees, it is entirely possible for you to have a short exchange between a few deities.]}

I nodded to myself. Good.

Keilan's eyes flicked to the portal, back to me, then he stepped forward and took my hand. Together, with Gilles trailing behind, we slipped into the little meeting room to find Yueya, Alala, Curie, and the Primeval Dragon, Sehuyun, already there. It seemed like Shin wouldn't be showing up this time. My eyes were mostly drawn, however, to the new occupants to the room. Two new gods stood behind the Oshun Trio; one an elf with purple hair, bright, shining eyes, and the aura of a deity of space, and another a dwarf with a big, bushy beard, heavy armor, and the aura of a deity of war.

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Most surprising, however, was Sehuyun's addition. A little wyvern with ash-grey scales sat before her, watching the table curiously. It had no domain, no aura, and in fact appeared no stronger than the dragons Alexander had made. But it was still a form of life in Sehuyun's previously barren universe; I met her eyes, and she bared her teeth in a smile.

"Statera," Yueya greeted warmly. I nodded to her with a smile as I approached the round table, sitting in one of the chairs and folding my hands on the table, my gaze drifting between all the occupants. The room felt more serious this time. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on

end. I met Yueya's eyes, her beauty radiating and nearly blinding in a way it hadn't been before - she'd grown stronger. "How are things progressing on your end?" she asked.

And I told her. I explained to her where we were at, how things had changed, and what I expected from the future. Honestly, the only thing I was worried about not finishing in time, unless something terrible occurred like our timeframe being shortened, was the Pillars. Fang Xu and Celene were getting close to hatching, I felt, but Solana could take quite some time to become a Pillar, and she was far and above the most likely candidate for it. Sticking next to the Rival may help her grow...but it may hinder her just as much.

And I highly doubted – in fact it was an impossibility to my eyes – that the Rival would become a Pillar, even if temporarily. That just didn't seem like his speed.

"That is good news. We are progressing fine; the number of gods we've been able to raise has increased exponentially. With the new hands, our own defensive capabilities are rising rapidly. Stations are being built on key ley-lines across the entirety of the One World – that should help us aim the Four Realms to any designated area, thereby making the tunnel option more viable. Our surface is still fragile, however. Impact will do a lot of damage, and that is an issue I do not see us solving before the catastrophe happens." Curie said, tossing a little metal cube out onto the table. It twitched and shone with a peaceful blue light, floating into the air and spinning rapidly. A series of holographic projections shone off of it, detailing the entirety of the One World and their current projects.

It was all standard. All within expectations.

When Curie was done I thanked her for the explanation; only for Alala to step up next, grinning like a madwoman. The tanned goddess of sport flexed her muscles and rolled her shoulders, winking at me.

"I can see Fate now. You're right, it does look like steel thread." She said proudly. I stood sharply, a smile blooming on my face, my concern washed away by potential excitement. It wouldn't do to get

my hopes up, but another solid plan, like grabbing ahold of the fate thread and using it as an anchor to spin the Four Realms away from the One World, would greatly benefit us.

“Can you grab it?” I all but demanded. Her grin faded a little, and she shook her head.

“Not yet. Was hoping you might have some advice on that.” She admitted with a shrug.

“This plan again?” Curie complained. “Alala, we talked about this.”

“We talked about this, but *we* didn’t.” Alala countered, pointing between herself and Curie first, then me and herself after.

“Statera,” Yueya interjected, silencing her other halves. I took a mental note of that; Yueya seems to have come out as the genuine leader of the trio, whereas before they were all relatively even. “Do you truly think it could work?”

“It has potential, but we’d need to work on a few things. Grabbing the Fate thread is imperative; I can manipulate it and almost touch it, but we’d need to dedicate a bit of time and effort to it.” I told her. Yueya nodded slowly, playing with a strand of her red hair. It seemed deeper than before, but no less beautiful; neither was her smile, which she flashed at me. “I had an idea, however...I do not know if it would work.”

“How so?” Alala asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Well, Gilles here is one of the Pillars I was telling you about. He expressed desire to visit the One World to help you with some of your projects and to foster good karma between our two Realms which will, I believe, make manipulating the fate strands easier. I was about to suggest we do a trade, with Alala coming to the Four Realms to work directly with me, but I do not know how you would fare with her gone.” I admitted, shaking my head. Missing an entire third of their Origin Deity was bound to cause some issues, assuming the Overgod even allowed it. Not to mention there was the whole “Will” problem I ran into in Sehuyun’s universe...but having Alala visit may help me with my severing, as well, specifically because of that.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Yueya said, making eye contact with Curie, then Alala. Gilles stepped forward as well, bowing slightly, while Keilan laid a hand on my shoulder.

“We’d need more than just your shadow-god to balance it out.” Curie mused slowly, shooting Yueya a curious look. “The other one here, Keilan, could greatly help with our reincarnation cycle. Would he be missed?” I hesitated. That was...

“I’ll go,” Keilan said firmly, interrupting my thoughts and calculations. “Mother can handle the Karmic Realm in my absence, and I have plenty of capable subordinates. I would need to inform some of my people first, however.” I turned my head to meet his eyes over my shoulder; his expression was tight and inscrutable. But I could see deeper than that. Keilan was feeling...fear? Curiosity? An odd mix of emotions.

I mean, I could take over for Keilan fairly easily, all things considered. It’d only take an incarnation with strength equivalent to one fifth of my power. But that was...I don’t know. It felt bad. Weird. *Different*.

“Alala?” I asked, turning to the tanned goddess.

“Let’s do it.” She boasted, crossing her arms. I bit my lip, hesitating once more, then nodded in acceptance.

*Ding!*

{[Acceptable. In one year, Keilan, God of Connections, and Gilles, Pillar of the Mountain and God of Shadows, will travel to the One World for a span of ten-thousand years. Alala, Origin Deity of Sport, will travel to the Four Realms for the same time frame. Any longer is ill-advised.]}

Well, that was useful information, at least. And the one year would allow Keilan to make a few preparations of his own before leaving...I laid a hand over his, which still lay on my shoulder. He was tense, his power pulled tightly against himself.

“Then that settles it. With nothing else to talk about, I suppose the meeting is adjourned, unless Sehuyun has something to add?” I asked, turning to the great dragon. To my surprise, she actually seemed to be considering it.

“Two things. One is just for Statera Luotian.” She rumbled, rising to her full, impressive height, the shadowy dragon looming over everyone present. “The other is this; I want Alexander.”

“Excuse me?” I demanded, taken aback. Sehuyun grinned at me.

“When your boy gets back from his little journey, send Alexander to me. We’re exchanging things, no? I can send you a few of the nascent gods that have appeared in my realm. One troublesome one, in particular. Could use some humbling that doesn’t come from me.” She rumbled. I stared at her for a moment, that having come completely out of left field.

“I will talk to Alexander about it.” I said. “If that is alright with Mr. Boxes and him, fine.” I really didn’t like it, but that was just possessiveness talking. I could feel it. This was the desire to have my children in my Realms, with me, where I could protect them. Gilles was different because he had asked for this, and was acting to protect the Realms. Keilan and Alexander? They had been *requested*.

“Good. Now we can leave.” Sehuyun said.

“What was the other thing you wanted to say?” Yueya asked. Sehuyun turned her gaze to the beautiful elf and snorted, smoke filling half the room before it was sucked away.

“Nothing to you. Show me your self, **Statera**,” the way she said my name, in that brief second, conveyed everything she had wanted and more. I bristled. My aura was kept safely in check, but the room stilled as Sehuyun turned her gaze to me. It was heavy. It felt like a threat. And I remained unmoved. Sehuyun smiled. “That’s what I thought. *There* you are. Now I leave. Come with me.” She snapped at the little wyvern, who followed after her back into her portal.

What followed was a quick goodbye with everyone else. I hugged Yueya, and she gave me a little peck on the cheek, her Beauty, so much like my Sight, sparkling in my eyes. Curie patted my arm. Alala promised to meet me in a year, wrapping me in a big hug. And I walked back to the Four Realms in a bit of a daze, feeling like I had missed something important.

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Alala would be the first to admit she wasn’t the most perceptive of people, however, it seemed like she was the only one thinking Yueya was hiding something. The way she had turned her Beauty, which wasn’t unique to her alone in their little trio, was surprising. Neither she nor Curie had felt

the need to, so why had she? A quick glance at Curie showed nothing, even through their connection Alala felt like the smartest of the three didn't care about Yueya's actions.

Still...their Art-focused third had been acting a little weird lately. Well, weirder than normal.

"What do you think that final thing was about?" she asked instead of voicing her doubts, cracking her knuckles like she did when she was nervous. She and her other two halves stood just inside Yueya's palace, where numerous artworks lay unfinished. Yueya hummed and stroked her chin.

"It was nothing." Curie said, shaking her head. "Sehuyun wanted to see Statera's reaction and determination, as if he'd been hiding it ever. She just likes dragging reactions out of people - sorry, out of Statera Luotian specifically."

"I felt it was a warning, for us, maybe." Yueya disagreed. "You saw Statera's reaction. They'll protect their people, their children, even from Sehuyun." Alala furrowed her brows. That didn't seem right to her. She was a bit of a muscle head, but that didn't mean she was stupid, either. A healthy body was nothing without a strong mind.

"I think you're reading too far into things." She said, crossing her arms and already moving off. She had a lot to do if she wanted to go visit Statera in a year; and what a good opportunity it was! Maybe then she'd be able to figure out why Yueya was obsessed with the god - she liked him an awful lot. Though obsessed was a bit strong of a word. Still, it was because of that she nearly missed what was said next.

*"It's a feeling I wish I understood."*

## 3:20 The Swap

“You have everything you need?” I asked, fussing over Gilles and Keilan, bouncing back and forth between the two. Keilan rolled his eyes as I smoothed out his robes, gently pushing me away. I allowed myself to be pushed back, nervously shifting from foot to foot and wringing my hands. This would be the first time any of my children had been away for so long – the first time any of them had ever left the Four Realms on their own.

Even during the meeting I was still technically with them when they were visiting other universes, and when I’d left the Realms for said meeting, they were safe within the Four Realms proper. It wasn’t like this, where they’d be beyond my sight...relatively speaking.

“Mother, stop worrying. I’m a big kid now, I’ll be fine,” Keilan laughed at me, though I could see in his soul that he was putting on a brave front more for my sake, even if he was confident that it would all be ok. That just made me worry more, however, and I bit my lip to stop myself from saying anything else.

“Right, right, I know.” I said weakly. I did know that, I just...ugh. Children leaving home was hard. Reika stepped up beside me to link her arm in mine, offering just a bit of comfort. I patted her hand, as while I did appreciate the gesture, it did little to assuage my nerves.

“Besides you’ll have plenty to worry about here.” Keilan added. At this it was my turn to roll my eyes. Right. Plenty to worry about – I could already see exactly how everything was going to unfold in the Physical Realm at this point, and the construction of the defenses had really progressed into a phase where building the nodes and tweaking the formations was the last bit to handle. Mortals were predictable, Immortals less so, but I still had a pretty good grasp on them.

The Karmic Realm would function perfectly fine under me. The only thing that would distract me much was Alala...which, now that I really thought about it, was probably what Keilan was referring to in the first place.

“Yes, Matriarch. Do not worry about us,” Gilles said, while Elvira fussed over him in her own way, wings pulled tight to her side and tails thrashing as she looked him over. “We are plenty capable of handling ourselves.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.” I said, moving over to pat him on the shoulder. “I’m just...worried, is all, as parents do.” The shadowy deity nodded, Elvira pushing a little trinket into his hands that he promptly stowed in the sleeves of his robes. Gilles smiled knowingly, and stepped away to say his final goodbye to Elvira. Keilan moved over to me, wrapping me in a quick hug, then stepping away as well.

Reika whispered a few things to him. Alexander, silent up to this point, had his own little conversation with him - which just reminded me that he would be taking a similar journey to the Primeval Dragon’s universe once Keilan got back. I don’t think I could stop him, after I brought it up. And then the time had come, a portal opening between the Four Realms and the One World.

It was likely a gift from Mr. Boxes that I could see beyond the portal into the universe beyond, however briefly. Yueya, Alala, and Curie all stood just beyond the portal. Mountains stretched as far as the eye could see, Astraea, the goddess of stars that had accompanied Yueya to the meeting, adding to their number. Alala waved. Yueya smiled. I waved back, and Keilan and Gilles stepped through. Alala gave Keilan a slap on the back, sending my son stumbling as she passed him by, practically skipping through the portal. And, just like that, it snapped shut, leaving Alala in my Realms, and my children in the One World.

I worried my bottom lip for a moment, staring blankly at where the portal had been, then turned to Alala. The tanned woman was grinning widely, head swiveling back and forth as she beheld the Four Realms. We currently stood just inside the shell of Primordial Chaos, on a little patch of land I had made for this, the Lunar Star slowly rotating by as it circled the Four Realms proper.

“Welcome to the Four Realms, Alala. Does this count as your first time here?” I asked. Admittedly, I didn’t fully understand how their three-bodies worked. Did they consider something one of them

did something they all did? I had to imagine it wasn't like my incarnations, which were essentially hive-mind clones, or else it wouldn't be as big of a deal.

"Seeing it through Yueya's eyes just doesn't do it justice. It's really not fair that she's the only one who got to get out and go play, but Curie wouldn't listen to me about that." Alala said, sucking in a deep breath, then turning her attention to my other kids. Like a whirlwind she moved over to them, inspecting them one by one. "You must be Elvira! The strong one. Shake my hand!" Alala didn't take no for an answer, hand snapping out to grip Elvira's. My daughter fluttered her wings awkwardly, eyes shooting to me in surprise as Alala rapidly shook her arm up and down, muscles bulging as she crushed Elvira's hand.

Not to be outdone and sensing a challenge, Elvira returned with her full might, the very space between them warping from the sheer physical might being exerted.

"Ooo, strong handshake you got there. Excellent!" Alala laughed as she moved over to Alexander, who tilted his head at her and smiled toothily. "You're Alexander, no mistaking it. Nice to meetcha!" she patted Alexander on the side, while he dipped his head in greeting.

"It is my pleasure, Lady Alala," he said firmly. She laughed at him, and turned her attention, finally, to Reika.

"Reika! The punny one, if I remember right! It is nice to meet you too!" She clasped Reika's hand gently, my green-haired daughter's eyes sparkling with a bit of mischief as she returned the gesture with a touch more force than necessary. Alala just laughed, a deep rumbling thing that echoed from her gut. "Another strong handshake! You've got some good kids, Statera!"

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“That I do.” I agreed as she moved over to me, wrapping me in a bone-breaking hug. My breath left my lungs as she lifted me off the ground, squeezing tightly and grinning all the while. I laughed, letting my legs dangle until she set me back down, laying her hands on my shoulders and just...grinning.

Damn. What a happy woman she was. It was infectious, honestly, and I couldn’t help but grin right alongside her.

“Now, what should we do first?” She asked, cracking her knuckles, excitement bleeding from her in waves. She was treating this much more like a vacation than training, wasn’t she?

...maybe that was the right mindset.

“First, I need to show you around, let you meet some people. Get you accustomed to the Realms. Then we can start on whatever training we can,” I told her. She nodded, turning to watch the Lunar Star as it slowly spun, cocking her head to the side as the soul within waved at her.

“Odd. But awesome! Let’s go!” And with that, Alala led the way into the Four Realms, my children and I following behind with varying degrees of amusement.

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Keilan wasn’t immediately sure what to make of the One World. For one, it was absolutely massive, on a scale he hadn’t been able to imagine before. Sure, Mother had told him it was and had shown charts and plenty of diagrams, but that was one thing. Seeing it for himself was entirely another.

Yueya smiled at him and Gilles the moment the portal snapped shut behind them, his divine senses unable to even cover the entirety of the One World, Curie already pulling out a little tablet to tap at.

“We’ll show you around a bit. Since you’re a god of connections, I’ll be wanting to use you to help us revamp our reincarnation and afterlife a bit. I’m not expecting you to do much work, but another set of eyes would be helpful.” Curie said bluntly. “We don’t have a god of the afterlife yet, so I am expecting you to have a bit of insight in the subject.” Keilan nodded to her, appreciating the fact she was all business. Gilles shifted beside him, looking about with eyes narrowed.

“We do have a bit of work to be doing. We are still short-staffed after all, so I apologize for the quick welcome.” Yueya said softly, bowing her head. “Still, Curie is right. We do have time to show you around. Come! Follow me,” she said happily, turning and leading the way through the sky. Keilan boldly stepped forward as well, Curie falling in beside him and Gilles trailing behind as they shot through the sky, soaking in as much information as possible.

Gilles had told him why he wanted to come here. Keilan figured he could help with that, put some puzzle pieces together, and thus was acting in a way separate from Gilles. The deity of shadows was better put to use doing things behind-the-scenes, while he took center-stage. It wasn’t like they were trying to sabotage anything, nor were they trying to make enemies, but...

It felt kind of like being a spy, albeit with good intentions. He wasn’t quite sure he liked that word, but it was one that he used all the same.

“Our sun, unlike yours, is drawn across the sky by a god.” Yueya explained, gesturing skyward. Keilan focused his vision on the sun and the god pulling it, surprised to see a chariot actually pulling the massive ball of flame. And, if he stretched his senses a bit, he could see a similar chariot pulling the moon...and another one, pulling another sun. How many were there, just to cover the entirety of the land? Keilan shook his head.

What really caught a bit of his attention, however, was the goddess who had accompanied Curie and Yueya. While Curie started listing off statistics and such – the number of gods and powerful spiritual beings was actually slightly higher than the Four Realms in number, if a bit lesser in quality and not nearly enough to cover the entirety of the One World, according to her – and Yueya talked about the design of the world itself, the star goddess, Astraea was her name, approached Gilles.

Keilan stroked his chin and nodded, listening to it all. The connections were here...now he just had to follow them, wherever they led.

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Showing Alala around was like showing a kid a candy shop. She seemed endlessly fascinated with almost everything we came across, but with all the energy of a toddler on a sugar high. As soon as she had inspected one thing, she immediately bounced to another, bouncing about like a ping-pong ball.

Reika was quickly becoming endeared to the energetic woman.

“What’s this?” Alala asked, holding up a spirit stone. Specifically one Reika had condensed from her own divine power, making it a spirit stone of Change – she figured tossing those into the Physical Realm could cause some treasure hunters to appear, and act as another little distraction for the mortals from Mother’s suppression of their cultivation. It was a surprisingly – or perhaps it shouldn’t be so surprising – effective tactic.

Reika explained what it was to Alala, and the woman made the appropriate noise of interest before moving toward one of the Treants that stood guard within her palace-lodge. Standing still as it

was, the tree-person was almost indistinguishable from a regular tree – Alala seemed to really like them. Far more than any other race she'd met in the Realms so far.

“And what’s your name?” Alala asked the treant, who, predictably, did not respond. “Well, I’m going to call you Maple. What’s the point of the Immortal Races, Reika? Everyone’s given me a different answer so far.” She asked. Reika pondered her question for a moment.

“Well, to put it simply, each of us main gods have come up with two different kinds of People. A mortal, and an Immortal, one to be more of an ideal or example, and to work as servants of ours, and the other to rise up and make the foundation of the Realms.” Reika said, knowing full well the true reasoning had changed over the eons. But she hadn’t made the Treants just to be protectors of the Physical Realm. They had more purpose than that.

“Really? What’s Statera’s immortal race?” Alala asked, confused. Reika stared at her blankly, surprised it wasn’t obvious.

“The gods.” She said, and Alala made a little noise of realization in the back of her throat, nodding.

“I see.” She said, and immediately moved off to inspect a powerful land spirit that was one of Reika’s closest advisors...one who wasn’t an angel, anyways.

Speaking of, there was an angel of hers approaching now.

“Mistress Reika,” the angel, a former river spirit, said as it approached from the side with head bowed. It shot a furtive glance at Alala, who was being entertained by the treant guard as it displayed a bit of cultivation magic for her, but quickly refocused on her. She folded her hands into the sleeves of her robes, and waited for a reply. “I was told to inform you by Lady Fu Hao that the Rival has made contact with the Mad Scientist.”

Reika nodded her head, glancing at Alala, who now had her attention on them. Angels were another curiosity of hers...she just wondered what she would think of the Monkey Wrenches, or any of the other things. This was only one of her incarnations, so surely Mother was introducing her to many things. Reika drummed her fingers on her leg, peering down at the Rival and his current location.

Hmm.

She wondered...Alala didn't have Mother's sight, but...could she somehow tell what a Monkey Wrench was? Did she have a way to do that? She wanted to test it.

"Alala, there's something I want to show you." She said, smiling at the muscular woman. She perked up immediately, eyes shining. "Let's go to the Physical Realm."