

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

3:2 Faith and Stars

I walked around the little formation of elements, studying everything from the way it was constructed to the fundamental layout. Five nodes made up the formation proper, each building upon the other and canceling out negative effects. A node of fire was fed by a growth of wood, which was nourished by earth, which was strengthened by metal, which supported water....and so on, in a simple yet effective cycle. This was a small-scale elemental formation, similar to the barriers the elemental gods had put up between the new regions to prevent immortals from messing with their growth too much, but more focused on defense than acting as a perception filter.

“Good. This is the kind of work I expect from you all – it is well balanced, and maintaining its form and function exceedingly well.” I praised with a small smile, looking up at the five elemental gods. The god of fire, goddess of water, god of wood, god of metal, and goddess of earth all beamed happily at the praise. “However, watch closely. If I do this...” I reached down and dipped a finger in the energy of the formation, letting my divine domain flood into it and balance it out. Almost immediately a few lines were corrected, extraneous factors removed and the formation itself simplified, the small barrier firming up even more. “Simplification is important – the more factors are involved, the more you are likely to miss a step. Take a look at this one to see what’s changed, and let’s try again.”

The gods hummed as they gathered around the formation, noting the differences and poking at the elements. This small-scale formation had been close enough to perfect that there wasn’t much I needed to change, in truth. It was a difference of maybe a single percentage point from their original design. But! We were going for perfection here.

That aside, I smiled as the gods continued to chatter to themselves, a bit of competitiveness mixing with their natural affinity with each other. It felt good to spend time with the kids, even if I was treating this as a teaching moment, and I was reminded of simpler times.

There had been a time when these five were young that I had played with them on a beach in the Heaven Realm, building sandcastles and playing catch with balls of elemental power. That image in my mind overlapped with the picture before me - five baby gods, now fully grown. Pride swelled my heart, but it was tempered with steely determination that made my smile grow sad.

“Ma’am,” Randus said, the deity of dreams appearing in a swirl of shadow as he bowed to me. Grateful for the distraction, I turned to him, blinking away any evidence of my sudden bout of emotion. The stress of the future must be getting to me - this was unlike me, and needed watching. “You requested my presence?”

“I did. There was something I wanted to ask you, for a second opinion. There was a twitch in the Realms when I returned from the Void – a growth within the key features of the regions that has begun to truly solidify recently. Tell me...is the Life-Giving Tree dreaming?” I asked, gently stepping forward and correcting a line the goddess of water was drawing. She smiled sheepishly at me, as she had only gotten it wrong because she was getting distracted, and I smiled fondly at her. I wonder how long it would take for her and the god of fire to get married? There was a precedent for it now with Elvira’s wedding, and I’d half expected them to be the first of the gods to get married, considering how often they were together.

“Is it...?” Randus trailed off, closing his eyes as he concentrated. I let him, standing back and watching the gods work, a small part of my mind drifting to go see the key features. Baby consciousnesses dwelt within them, growing steadily, like little balls of light and soul. “It is. They all are. The Mountain, Valley, and even the River itself are dreaming. So that is what I have been sensing...” Randus muttered, eyes opening wide. “What does this mean?”

“Nothing, really. It was something I had been expecting to some degree, but this is still beyond my initial expectations – the Will of the Four Realms is my will, but that doesn’t mean it won’t sometimes act of its own accord.” Or, more accurately, it was responding to things I said and did, or desired on a more subconscious level. This was proof of that.

“I do not understand.”

“The new regions needed guardians to oversee them before Immortals rise up to take direct control over them, much as how the Big Four do now. Though the growth of the Four Realms is slowed, this process will continue to proceed until it reaches its natural conclusion, as it had already started. This is the result of it; new species, each one designed specifically for the regions they inhabit.” I explained. “There will only be one per region, I might add. Thank you for confirming it though, for me.” Really, I had just wanted to point it out to him, as the only other gods who had noticed were Reika and Alexander. Keilan and Elvira were too busy.

“I...see.” Randus said, rubbing his chin in thought. “Their dreams are fitful. Like they sense the coming calamity.”

“Yes, they do. Part of that is my fault. My inherent connection with the Four Realms has put everyone on edge, because of how seriously I am taking this. They may not know or understand that this is the case, but it is. Which is why I will be leaning on you heavily for the coming years.” I said simply, nodding supportively at the god of wood as he rebuilt one of the little formation’s nodes. A baby tree, no taller than a foot, sprouted from the spot, roots twisting and growing in perfect harmony with the formation lines.

“To help smooth out the dreams.”

“To help smooth out the dreams.” I agreed. “I am certain you know, but it is not a matter of giving everyone pleasant dreams. They know that danger is approaching, and it will not necessarily be well-received. But hopeful ones? Ones that brighten what might otherwise be a nightmare? Those will be the ones to truly lift people.”

“Assuming they accept my dreams.” Randus said. I agreed with him, but that always had been the case. Even if they were dreams, people still had to accept what was being given to them, or else it wouldn’t have an effect at all. But Randus should have an experienced hand at this by now, and I trusted his judgement implicitly.

Much like Alexander and Keilan, he was one of the most reliable of my kids.

“Have you figured out where the power of faith is going?” the god of fire interrupted, surprising me. I blinked at the god, his fiery hair flickering in the wind as he met my gaze. His coal-orange eyes held my own, filled with nothing but innocent curiosity. “I heard you were interested in it, so I was just curious. To me it doesn’t look like it’s going to us gods, save for the energy from those who directly worship us.” I nodded along with his assessment, rubbing my chin and fixing my gaze upon the power of faith that flowed up from the mortals of the Four Realms. It was a misty, greyish substance to my eyes, almost impossible to see...yet most of it flowed away from the gods themselves, only tiny trickles flowing into their divine domains, empowering them.

There was no excess like in Rising Wind, Crashing Wave’s realm. Nothing that mixed together with the gods, boosting their power and abilities when channeled, or drifted about them like mist. At least, not in the same way as the stag god’s Cosmic Realm. I smiled to myself. It really only had taken a bit of looking for me to figure out where it was going, and how to use it. In fact, I daresay it already was in use, to great effect, really.

“I did find it. Do you know where it goes?” I asked rhetorically. The god of fire shook his head, the other elemental gods pausing in their building of the formation to listen expectantly. Of the five of them, only one had managed to create a Dao Star; Argent, god of metal, had made a Dao Star of music in the past ten years. And I pointed at the star itself. “There. Right there. In the stars.”

Everyone, Randus included, looked up at the stars that gleamed in the canvas of primordial chaos that surrounded the Realms, of which Xing Wu and Inesa’s burned the brightest. That was where the power of belief was held. In the Dao, in the self, in cultivation and in one’s path in life. The excess I had talked about? It blended in with my own Dao, empowering it and melding with my Will – but my will was far, far stronger than the beliefs that blended with it. It gave the Will of the Realms more power and leeway, even if it was still my Will.

“What does that mean?” the god of fire asked, while Argent’s eyes grew wide in realization.

It meant a lot of things. It meant that the Dao Stars, the Dao Progenitors, and the gods who made their own stars would be incredibly useful in protecting the Four Realms. It meant the power of

faith and belief was being used in a way I had not...well, I had noticed it, but not recognized it as such simply because it had not been a prominent change until now, with more Dao Stars appearing. It meant that the Dao Stars themselves were funneling power down to those who had made them, helping them grow not only because it was a part of their own soul, but because other people tapped into that Dao and added their own insights into it. Insights that could be changed and challenged.

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But, most importantly, it meant one simple thing. "It means that our lovely, resident spear-wielding village guard-dog Xing Wu is being held back by one thing and one thing only." I said, raising one finger. "Himself."

Xing Wu had talked a big game about going to see what Heaven wanted, but he had no idea where to start. Not even Inesa had been helpful, his lover seeming anxious and worried about something – which immediately made him want to hunt down whatever was riling her up to demand answers – and unable to aid him in where to go or what to do.

"That's a lie and you know it." His paladin friend, a draconian under the employ of the Celestial Palace of Manu Ti, said as he aired his complaints. "You've known you needed to climb the Life-Giving Tree and reach the Heaven Realm for centuries now. There's nothing stopping you as far as I'm aware; and if you cannot reach the top of the Tree, then I fear no one can."

Xing Wu frowned at that, drumming his fingers against his scar-riddled arms as he looked out over the floating city of Manu Ti. But he didn't see it for its brilliant landscape, the energy and formations maintaining it that usually reminded him of darker times falling upon blind eyes. His friend was right, of course. He could just climb the Life-Giving Tree as he was now. However, it felt...wrong. If he was going to do this, it was going to be the right way.

The way that applied to his code of life, for whatever that was worth.

A gentle hand tried to reach down from the heavens – not to be mistaken with the Heaven Realm, he reminded himself, which was a distinction he really needed to make with a new word – but he quietly brushed it aside. Statera Luotian was pushing him hard to become what he knew he could be, but his way could never be the simple or easy way, could it?

Xing Wu stood and, with a farewell to his friend and a single step, he teleported above the Celestial Palace, to watch the day-to-day of the court unfold. There were nearly two hundred immortals in the palace itself, including his heir Alanna, and among them were only three Dao Progenitors. The others had long since wandered off to follow their own path, but these three? They had written Daos in the sky that spoke of swords, spears, and bows. Paths of warriorship and conflict – Daos that he, himself, could tap into. A little string of power connected most Dao Progenitors to their Dao Star, to Xing Wu's eyes.

With one hand he reached out and touched one of said strings, letting its contents wash over him. While his own path in life was one more all-encompassing of the Warrior's lifestyle, favoring the mentality and spirituality of it as a whole over focusing upon a singular weapon, this man's path through the way of the sword was far more single minded. The man's skill and connection to the path of the sword complete eclipsed his own, yet, through the connection forged between Xing Wu's Dao and this one, he could channel its power and skill...

Xing Wu held out one hand, imagining he was holding a sword as he flowed through a series of strikes the Sword Dao Progenitor had come up with. He'd never seen it done. He'd never even really wielded a sword in this life.

None of the others knew how to do this, or even if it were possible. They couldn't see the power that Xing Wu could, as sad as that was, connected to other people's Daos as they were. After all, a Dao in the sword, spear, or bow could be considered a subset of the Warrior's Dao. He ceased his movements and closed his eyes, the Dao Progenitor's knowledge of sword skills flowing through his mind's eye like water in a river.

...he had guided this person here. He could see it, in the movements of the man's favorite techniques, in the meaning behind each word he spoke, in the depths of his soul. The man had learned a thousand different sword styles and incorporated them into his own, something Xing Wu could neither do, or had the patience for, yet the basic core had been one of the warrior's code. Of Xing Wu's Dao. His path, his "star," forged over lifetimes, had lit the way.

He hummed and floated skyward, taking another single step as his eyes flew open. Inesa was who greeted him when he reappeared at the little cottage he and her had built together. A fire crackled in the stone fireplace, the wooden beams above covered in various drying herbs and vegetables. Inesa herself looked like a dream, in his eyes.

She was no Jade Beauty, as the youngsters had begun to call gorgeous women, but she was undeniably pretty. And perfect in his eyes, with her hair pulled into a ponytail, strands sticking up off of her head, catching the fading light of the Realm Sun; her eyes, gleaming with kindness and warmth. They were the kind of eyes songs were written about, as they were true windows into her soul. Even her clothing was plain; a simple shirt and loose pants, nothing fancy or showy, but fit her perfectly.

"You seem stressed," she said, wrapping him in a hug. He chuckled and returned it, rubbing her back gently.

"Listen to the pot, calling the kettle black." He teased back, though it was no lie. Her shoulders were far too stiff. She snorted and put her face in his shoulder, gently swaying back and forth. "Is everything alright?" He shelved his own doubts and worries and confusion to speak with her. Her sigh was long, and heavy, and weighed upon his heart.

"It's just...no, never mind, it's nothing. I cannot say anything." She shook her head, starting to gently pull away, but he kept his arms wrapped around her, pulling her in tighter.

“I don’t think I ever told you thank you.” He said softly, kissing the top of her head. “Not really, for everything you’ve done for me.”

“I haven’t done anything besides be here.” She complained, giving him a squeeze. He chuckled, a deep, rumbling thing that had Inesa looking up at him with a strange look in her eyes, a small smile dancing on her lips. He gave her a quick peck and let go with one arm, keeping the other wrapped around her shoulders as he looked about the interior of the cottage, then back out the door. They had settled in a little valley, pine trees growing on the hillside, greenery filling the river valley below. Spirit beasts meandered through the valley floor, calm and without any of the aggression he had been used to when he was Dei – when the Shadow had been manipulating them.

“No,” he said, after a long moment. “You’ve done far more than that.” She showed him the way, more than anyone else. Even more than Thyia, Inesa introduced him to something he had been missing...he took a deep breath, feeling the little nascent paths of each of the spirit beasts before him using a connection that was uniquely his...

And it quietly slipped out of reach, like trying to grasp the wind itself. Xing Wu sighed heavily. He’d really thought he had it that time, but it still eluded him.

“I will be away for a while.” Inesa said softly, after a moment of comfortable silence. “My presence is needed in the Heaven Realm.”

“I see.” Xing Wu said, that little statement only confirming what he already knew – something big was happening in the Four Realms. He gave Inesa’s shoulder a little squeeze and let her go, beaming at her as she moved to start packing a few things up. Sure, using her divinity to take what she wanted would be quicker and easier, but she liked to do things the regular way. It was something Xing Wu appreciated the most about her. “I’ll meet you there, then.”

The look Inesa shot him was one of complete seriousness, colored with a touch of excitement. He grinned.

If this hadn't worked, maybe there was one other thing he could try, one last loose end to tie up.

He wanted it to be perfect. As he watched Inesa, his resolve firmed a bit more. She deserved the best he could offer.

Alexander loved mortals as much as Father did, but sometimes he swore he was working with idiots. Xing Wu had everything lined up right there to ascend to godhood, he'd touched it with his fingertips, only to pull away at the last second like a blind man grasping for something just out of reach. He may not be mortal, but he was hopelessly stubborn and hard-headed, which made his stupidity even worse. The great dragon rumbled in discontent as he peered through the currents of spirits the waters of the spirit realm.

Xing Wu's current trajectory showed where he would be heading next. That was...well then. Alexander raised his head and narrowed his eyes a little, the strings of fate that bound the first Dao Progenitor, the paragon soul, leading him onward.

That could work. A thousand different scenarios flew through Alexander's mind's eye, each one discarded in a moment in favor of one.

"Maybe my wayward sibling would be willing to help this time." Alexander mused aloud, startling the baby spirit that had wandered too close. The little earth spirit jumped as if it hadn't even noticed he was there, and he flashed it a kind smile even as it shot off, fleeing his presence. There was no helping it - even if a giant was kind and smiled, sometimes things that were too little would still be afraid. "Morgan does love terrifying things." Loathe as he was to ask his sibling for help, it was time to extend another olive branch to the Shadow.

If everything went as he foresaw, it might even do more than just have Xing Wu ascend to godhood.