

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

3:21 Rivals in Love

The Mad Scientist was panicking, and Alanna didn't know why. She lounged on her favorite sofa, a red-velvet thing imported from the outer rims, made from a plant that grew there and only there, drinking a glass of fine red wine. It was a rare opportunity she got the chance to relax...even if the Mad Scientist was making it difficult to really do so with her pacing.

"You don't understand, Alanna," she rambled, chewing on her fingernails and tapping her glasses, activating some sight function that allowed her to peer through the fabric of reality in ways even an Immortal could not. "He's here. In the city. He's *here*, and I can't find the other one!" Alanna sighed and shook her head. She wouldn't be able to relax at all with her like this. Which meant she would have to do something, and solve yet another problem herself. At least the Mad Scientist had earned a bit of help from her.

Glancing down at herself, she frowned. Her current attire, her favorite silk robes, were completely inappropriate for the Empress to be wearing, especially in public, so with a wave of her hand they were replaced with something more...modest.

And she stood smoothly, downing the rest of her wine and stalking past the Mad Scientist, crossing the room to the veranda, a cool breeze flowing in from the open glass door. Red silk curtains blew gently in the wind, the vastness of Manu Ti stretching into the distance. At least thirty islands floated in the air above the great lake below, connected by the great formation chains that were long since outdated. More powerful formations fueled the flight of the flying cities, but they were traditional, and immortals were nothing if not a bit traditional and nostalgic.

"Hey – where are you going?" the Mad Scientist asked, broken out of whatever worried trance she'd been in until now by her movement.

"I am going to meet the one you're so worried about." Alanna deadpanned, one foot out the door and staring back at the avian woman with an eyebrow raised. She tapped her foot impatiently as she watched the Mad Scientist's expression rapidly morph to one of panic. A glare was all it took to stop her protest in its tracks. She didn't have the *patience* for this.

For all the Mad Scientist's gifts, she was still the Empress, and still of higher cultivation than her. But, and this was perhaps the most important, she was the only one besides the gods themselves the woman would actually listen to. "You're being silly. Now, are you going to come with me to make sure I get the right person, or are you just going to stand there gawking?"

That got the Mad Scientist moving, practically scrambling as she darted toward her.

"But – but!" she protested, but Alanna was already flying out over the city, her guards scrambling as they took notice of her movements. Bah. She didn't need their protection. Who did they think she was? She may not be a Dao Progenitor yet, nor the most powerful combatant, but she was still among the most powerful cultivators in all the Four Realms.

And none commanded more respect than her, a title she wore with pride. She was the Empress because she was a *good ruler*, not for any other reason. Dei and Xing Wu had instilled the kind of dedication necessary for that in her, and, if she could brag for once instead of playing false humility before the self-important fools who needed their egos pandered to that dominated the courts, she was better at it than he ever was.

She wondered, at times, if that was not why he'd chosen her as his successor.

Cultivators flew freely across the skies of Manu Ti, directed by formations and traffic officers to keep there from being a tangled mess of people in the sky, yet none flew over the royal palace and original island. Such an act was forbidden – unless the cultivator in question was the Empress, and anyone she gave express permission to. So it was of no surprise when many of the powerful attentions upon the island turned to her, hundreds of immortals looking toward her curiously – she

didn't care overmuch, flying through the air as she headed to the northern chain, where the Mad Scientist had previously said her...*person of interest* had arrived.

"I don't think this is a good idea." Said woman complained as she caught up, flying alongside the Empress. Alanna noted her opinion, then promptly threw it away. She was tired of walking on eggshells; the mess with the acts of terrorism in the outer regions of the galaxy was making her angry enough, she didn't need the Mad Scientist's concerns piled on top of it. Thankfully said acts of terrorism had died down in the past few months, many of the perpetrators being routinely caught – but it did reveal an underlying rot amongst certain high-value positions that was worrying. She'd have to double down on her efforts to rooting out the worst of it. A few greedy and corrupt magistrates or other government officials were inevitable. The amount that they'd found now?

Unacceptable. And because of that, the woman she was today would personally handle any true threats to her Empire, so long as they were within direct reach.

"Let us see what this one you speak of is all about." She said firmly, commandingly. The Mad Scientist sighed, shook her head and, with extreme reluctance, flew in front of her to lead the way.

From there, it only took another ten seconds to find the black-haired man in question. He was walking in the main street of the district around the Northern chain, eating a piece of fried dough covered in powdered sugar – feeding bits to a little, palm-sized red and black bird that sat upon his shoulder, all the while chattering and yammering on about one thing or another.

His cultivation was nothing to sneeze at, but nor was it overly powerful. Alanna gauged it to be around the heart-center level, perhaps a little higher, with a few curious techniques fueling his growth in odd ways. No elements colored his qi, leaving it shockingly pure, and he had yet to really embark upon the fleshly body style of cultivation...Alanna pursed her lips, her wings flaring as she hovered over the man. His karma was surprisingly unstained as well, neither too positive nor too negative. It was the mark of a young soul.

Alanna would have called him curious but unremarkable had it not been for the way her close friend chewed on her bottom lip as she stared down at him.

"Shall we go say hello?" she said more than asked, already teleporting down to stand in front of him, her qi pressing outward in an intimidation display.

He looked young, but it was hard to tell his actual age, even up close. The stillness of his qi even when she appeared before him, not in her full regalia, but still unmistakable for who she was, suggested someone with far more experience. He did not flinch even as a hush ran through the surrounding people, the noise of the city falling into almost complete silence. The lines on his face suggested youth, but the casual way he looked at her, eating his fried dough, made her think of someone far, far older.

The bird upon his shoulder squawked at her...and with a start, she realized it was an Immortal. This boy could keep an Immortal bird as a companion? How had she missed that? Immediately she revised her opinion of the boy, her shoulders squaring and qi readying itself for trouble.

Anyone who could mask the aura of an immortal until she was within arm's reach of it was someone to handle with extreme caution. She'd never even heard of such a technique before.

"Hush, you," the man said, shushing the bird, then turned his attention back to the Empress. The Mad Scientist teleported beside her, eyes narrowed. "I must be famous, for so many people to be coming to find me. Fried dough?" he offered the treat to her, eyes flicking to the Mad Scientist once, then back to her. She shook her head, deciding the best way to go about this.

"No. But you will be coming with me back to the Celestial Palace. I have a few questions for you." She said firmly, deciding the direct approach was best. Typically those who hid in the shadows or were good at concealment techniques struggled against sufficiently powerful brute force. Technically it was the Mad Scientist who had questions for him, but as she was the Empress she had to take responsibility for her actions, and the actions of those below her. Something that caused her no end of headaches.

The man chewed for a moment, looking contemplative.

Then, with a shrug, he popped the rest of his food in his mouth and muttered a ‘sure.’

If the Empress was supposed to feel slighted by the casual response, she didn’t. She did, however, ready a teleport spell, being certain he could see exactly what she was doing before activating it.

They appeared in the throne room of her palace, the grand, white-marble hall empty save for the four of them, bird included. The guards outside stirred, sensing the suddenness of her arrival, but with a quick burst of qi the formations carved into the stones of the throne room activated, keeping everyone out and everyone else in.

The bird squawked awkwardly, ruffling her feathers and puffing a bit of smoke out of her beak. Alanna raised an eyebrow at the little thing, judging its weight and finding it...more than adequate. It was a relatively new immortal, was it not? She hadn’t seen any new immortals rise in quite a while; they were still happening, she knew, just not nearly at the rate as they had been.

“Which one are you?” The Mad Scientist said, breaking the tense silence.

“Hmm? Which...wait, I know you.” The man perked up from where he’d been looking about the throne room curiously, a spark of interest flying across his expression. “Hold on...you set your roots down here, didn’t you? You’re – you’re the Mad Scientist! Wait, what happened to you to actually settle down here?! I thought you were like me, a wandering type!”

Alanna focused all her attention on the man now; he was like the Mad Scientist? She'd told her a little bit about her past before, but hearing another person confirm it was another thing entirely. Other universes...the thought was staggering.

"I found something worth staying for." She said firmly, crossing her arms. "I know you are one of the two. Which are you? And where's the other one?"

"Well obviously I'm the Rival. The First would have tried to become Emperor by now and impose his own rule." The self-identified Rival said with a roll of his eyes. Alanna furrowed her brows at the way his mention of someone becoming Emperor made her emotions spike negatively, but made no comment on it, content as she was to listen for now. "Now spill the beans! Was it love? I bet it was love. For a scientist, I remember you being the romantic type. C'mon, tell me! I really thought you and I had the same sort of mindset."

"Where. Is. The First." The Mad Scientist demanded, power rising through her. Lightning crackled against her skin, wings flaring and qi rising to only a fraction of its full height – yet it was still enough to make the Rival sweat, even if his expression never changed. Alanna immediately readied her own qi, ready to back up her friend no matter what happened next.

If she said this man was a threat worth eliminating, then she would believe her.

"Do NOT!" the bird shrieked through qi, fire rising up its breast – only to fall short as Alanna snapped her fingers, her own impressive qi snuffing out the fires with ease. She met the bird's eyes and smirked, clicking her tongue in a disapproving manner. The bird shrieked its fury at her, puffing up angrily, furious at the gap between their power.

Alanna preened at the rage in its eyes. It was rare she got to really put an upstart in their place, and there were quite a few running about right now that needed a good ego-check. The Rival, in that brief moment, hesitated, recognition flashing through his eyes.

“God...you damn kids, always taking everything so seriously. I haven’t done anything yet, just wandered about. Good god. The First isn’t with me this time. We went to separate universes, I think it was part of the deal we made so we could actually come to a universe this young. I swear on my true name and the name of the Overgod that’s the truth. Happy?” That simple statement took the wind out of the Mad Scientist’s sails, the qi she had been summoning dying almost immediately. “Gods above. I’m just here trying to find someone – there’s another person like us here, but she’s not really like us, and I knew her before and dammit it’s been a long time since I’ve been able to relax for longer than a few damn years at a time but there’s constantly people trying to fight, I got caught up in terrorism, you’re interrogating me, and gods keep trying to mess with me. That one fox girl in particular.” He whined, shoulders slumping like a petulant child.

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Alanna might have even believed it he sold it so well, were it not for his unflappable act in the face of two overwhelmingly more powerful cultivators.

“...who are you looking for? I haven’t sensed anyone else like us.” The Mad Scientist asked.

“I dunno her name now, but she’s an old flame. Tried and failed to woo her. She’s...well shit, actually, that’s her right there.” The Rival gestured with his chin at the wall behind Alanna, who furrowed her brows and looked up.

There, practically hidden behind a marble pillar and situated between two windows, was a painting. It was something Dei had an artist make up for him, all those years ago, and had remained in the palace ever since. Originally it had been in his office, but Alanna had moved it to the throne room as a reminder to herself.

Mother Statera in all her glory stared back at them, a soft smile on her lips and green eyes soft with maternal affection. Beside her, a portrait of Father Luotian sat, face stern yet not unkind, eyes glittering with mischief. Only those as old as she remembered that Father and Mother were both one; the religion itself was falling out of favor with the younger crowd, though those like her knew that the true power of the Four Realms lay solely within Them.

“You...knew Statera Luotian?” The Mad Scientist asked in a way that had Alanna’s head snapping back to her. She didn’t like the curious tone there. That usually spelled new research and funds going down the drain.

“Yeah, who is she? Did she found the Empire? I thought that was Dei.”

“It was Dei. You’re telling me that you know the creator god, personally.” Alanna deadpanned, meeting the Rival’s eyes. “This is getting ridiculous. Even for things the Mad Scientist says or does, that’s ludicrous. I –” Alanna paused as a spiritual presence was brought to her attention, suddenly appearing despite the formations being active. It had been hiding itself up until this point, but there was no mistaking it. She looked up to see Fu Hao, one of the angels of Statera Luotian, sitting in the skies above, lazily twirling a bit of energy about one finger. She winked at Alanna when she met her eyes, and when she looked back down, the Mad Scientist was looking at her guiltily.

...no. There was no way. Had the Mad Scientist met the creator as well?

“Creator god? No. She’s not that powerful I don’t think. I mean, she’d gorgeous, yeah, with great hair and green eyes that –”

“Look like they can pierce the soul, that no secret is kept before them.” Alanna finished, the poem of the Creator echoing off her tongue. Gods, how long had it been since she’d heard that recited in the church of the Creator?

“No, it can’t be. That’s insane. Right, Solana? Tell them that’s just silly. She’s got to be just some sort of powerful cultivator.” The Rival scoffed, shaking his head and looking at his pet bird, then glancing about for confirmation. Alanna, for the first time in a long time, did not have anything to say. She’d had some interaction with the gods and powerful spiritual beings, but to say she knew everything would be wildly arrogant, even for her. “...no way. Uh-uh. That’s ludicrous. I just – an origin deity?” he was silent for a long time, expression quickly souring.

“That is a painting of Her,” the Mad Scientist said slowly. “I have met Them before. They are the Origin Deity. How do you know Them?” The Rival met her eyes with a glare, crossing his arms in defiance.

“I can’t even...are you kidding me?! Uh uh. Nope. I don’t believe it. Origin Deity? Pfft.” He was silent for a second, tapping his foot against the tiled floor in rapid impatience. “Aw, hell. STATERA MOTHERFUCKING LUOTIAN!” He shouted and, in a flash of white light, vanished.

Solana shrieked as she was suddenly midair, looking about wildly for her companion – only for Fu Hao to descend from the ceiling, lazily rolling her shoulders and addressing her directly.

“Don’t worry, Solana, he’ll be back in a bit. The Creator is merely keeping Their promise to him. As for you two, I have something else to tell you.” Fu Hao yawned, and smiled. Alanna frowned at the angel. Was this a direct communication between her and the Creator God? She...well, that sounded terrifying. “You’re doing well, Alanna, and the Heavans are proud of you. Unfortunately, there is still more work to be done. The barrier between the new regions and here are coming down. It is time to expand the influence of the Dao Progenitors.”

...yep. There was definitely another headache coming on now. Alanna groaned and rubbed her forehead. As good news as that was, couldn’t she just get a little break?

Alala was *dying* as I teleported the Rival into my palace in response to him calling my name, and for no good reason in my opinion. His reaction had been funny, yes, but not rolling-on-the-ground laughing style funny. Still, her full belly laugh, head tossed back and roaring laughter echoing through the entirety of my palace was infectious, and I found myself chuckling right alongside her as the Rival appeared before us, all red-faced and furious.

We were in my library, going over some of the history of the Realms, our two true bodies getting to know each other a bit better while her incarnations interacted with my children, and my incarnations helped oversee the Karmic Realm. It was important for us to get to know each other better, before we dove into the nitty-gritty of Fate enlightenment.

“You’re the gods-damned Origin Deity?!” The Rival demanded, pointing dramatically. I tapped my chin thoughtfully, his glare falling uselessly against my thick skin.

“Am I?” I mused, enjoying his reaction far more than I had any right to. Took him long enough to figure it out, anyways.

“Is that why you had that smug little look when I said I had never met an origin deity before?! Oh my God, *Sylvia!*” he whined, slumping his shoulders and pouting. I smirked at him and he groaned, gaze inevitably drifting to Alala, who was quickly getting control of herself. “And who, pray tell, is this muscular beauty beside you? You didn’t tell me you had company.”

“I’m an origin deity too. Well, part of one anyway. Name’s Alala,” she said, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye as she straightened. “What’s your name, kiddo?” The Rival stared at her for a long, tense moment, and I just *knew* what kind of thoughts were flowing through his shameless mind.

“My name is the Rival, but you can call me whatever you want,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows. “Two origin deities in one life, Sylvia? You’re spoiling me! But worry not! Beautifully muscular you might be, and by the gods you are gorgeous Alala, but my heart will always belong to *Sylvia!*” he declared, spreading his arms in my direction. Alala raised an eyebrow while I flushed with embarrassment, pinching the bridge of my nose. Why, why did he always have to act like this?

“Sylvia? Your heart belongs to her? Boy, Statera is *my* partner,” Alala declared firmly, and promptly slid up beside me, grabbed me by the shoulders and kissed me so hard and passionately it left me breathless and flushed for a whole different reason. The Rival’s jaw dropped as Alala pulled away, smirking. *My* jaw dropped, left speechless by her boldness. “You may call yourself a Rival, but you won’t make a good one.”

I slapped Alala on the shoulder while I composed myself, straightening my robes and controlling my blush. She just grinned at me, completely unfazed, puffing her chest out with pride. That should not have caught me as off-guard as it had.

“Be still my heart.” The Rival finally said, pressing a hand to his chest and stumbling backward, leaning against a bookshelf and swooning. “Two beauties fighting for affection? Challenging me, however indirectly, for affection worthy of satisfying them? Don’t threaten me with a good time, girls.” Alala barked out a laugh while I sighed heavily, slumping my shoulders in defeat. Introducing these two had been a bad idea.

A very, very bad idea.

“You can’t threaten *me* with a good time. *I’m* the one with three bodies.”

“Shameless. The both of you. Absolutely shameless.” I complained, shaking my head and desperate to get the conversation back under control. The Rival and Alala both cackled, and I soon joined in, swept up in the moment. A moment that quickly sobered as the Rival turned his eyes back to me, expression firming up.

“Sylvia...no, Statera Luotian.” I straightened my shoulders, sensing his seriousness. There was no emotion rolling off of him, none of the playfulness, nor curiosity. For the first time since becoming an Origin Deity, I was looking at a completely blank slate. There was nothing within him, and I hated how that made me curious. “How did you become an Origin Deity?”

I smiled. It was a sad smile, full of all the emotion I could not convey with words.

Wouldn’t I like to know?

“That sounds like a topic for a far longer talk.” I told him softly. He nodded, seeming to accept this even as I summoned an incarnation, one to lead him away and speak on all he wished. This would be private, between me and him.

“Then answer me this. Why did the Mad Scientist put her roots here? How did you convince her? You did not see her before. She was like me. A wanderer. Content with that. Happy to continue to explore and discover new worlds. Mere trauma would not do that to her.” he demanded.

“That is what I asked you to look into.” I admitted, my incarnation moving up to him and gently laying a hand on his shoulder to lead him away. But not once did he break eye contact with my true body, despite the truth I told him. Monkey Wrenches were, in some ways, still beyond my eyesight. I didn’t know why the Mad Scientist had decided to put her roots here. I could see them. I could pick them apart, and see their emotions, but they were still...I couldn’t force them to do anything. I couldn’t grab or mess with their memories or the foreign energies.

Some part of me knew that learning how to do that would be another step in my evolution. But that was a topic for a far longer talk.

The Rival nodded to me once, then turned and followed after my incarnation, relaxing and letting pieces of his emotions show, sauntering behind me.

I turned to Alala, who was watching curiously.

“I know Reika was trying to see whether you noticed anything about him. Did you?”

“Yes, but it’s not what you’re thinking of. I just don’t care that much.” She said with a shrug, patting my shoulder and winking. “Unlike Curie, I don’t look that hard at things. That’s my gift. I see what’s in front of me and accept it for what it is – it’s a balance to Yueya, who sees potential, and Curie, who seeks truth. You see all of those at once and, to be honest, that sounds exhausting.”

I laughed. It was a deep, freeing thing that had Alala chuckling right alongside me as I nodded, silently agreeing with her. My truesight was indeed exhausting...but I couldn’t complain. It had led me to where I was now.

“Then I will simply explain it to you. After that, do you want to get to work?” I asked, and she cracked her knuckles.

“Gladly.”

3:22 Story Time

It was a simple thing, to talk to The Rival. He was a simple enough person to figure out and handle, but the rapt attention he paid to everything I said was a noticeable change. The aloof, carefree attitude he usually displayed was still present, just noticeably in the background as I walked him through what I remembered of becoming an Origin Deity, what it was like, and what I had learned of the process.

Rarely did he interrupt, only occasionally asking a pointed question before once more falling into silence as I continued my story.

It took a long time to tell, actually. An entire week, and that was the abbreviated version. The Rival was an excellent listener and, as I should have expected, knew exactly what questions to ask to get me rambling on one topic or another; not that he minded listening to me. We chatted over tea. We talked over food Randus so graciously provided. We even drank a little, though not much. His mortal body was too weak to handle any of the alcohol I typically drank.

And at the end of it all, after telling him of the Shadow and what that meant, and describing the meeting, he sat silently across from me, staring into his teacup.

I casually sipped at my own, waiting for his next response.

“So you’re telling me that all Origin Deities were once denizens of another universe?” he asked slowly.

“As far as I am aware.” It would be a boldfaced lie to tell him that was the absolute case. I was certain that Mr. Boxes had, at one point, created beings for the sole purpose of expanding the multiverse. The Origin of the twelfth universe in this [Trial] iteration was a likely example of this; its entire existence had been to create a stable universe with the entirety of its being, and then die, leaving the universe to grow on its own.

"It makes sense. Take people from successful universes and give them power to create their own universe; thereby updating the models for when something needs replacing." He mused, scratching his chin. "I wonder what the criteria are? You'd think I or the First would be good candidates for that. But also, on second thought...that'd be a terrible idea."

I sat back in my chair a little to observe him. Memories filtered down from above, examined and tossed away just as quickly as the Rival began to truly assimilate my story. He'd been sort of doing this the entire time I'd been talking, but now it was going full-swing – I could barely keep track of his swinging emotions as he relived his old memories, and I certainly couldn't see what said memories were. Not that I wanted to...well, that was a lie. I wanted to see what he'd been through, but I respected his privacy too much to do that.

"What are you looking for?" I asked, deciding that being direct with him was a far better approach than trying to puzzle it all together myself.

"Well, one, if I'd met any other potential Origin Deities. Unfortunately I don't have enough information to know whether I did or didn't, and there are a lot of memories to go through. Mostly I'm wondering why Origin Deities are similar to Monkey Wrenches in that they originate from different universes. I'm also considering my own situation." He leaned back in his chair as he spoke, tilting his head up and kicking his feet up on the table.

"That's a lot to be considering."

"It is. And that's only half of it. Damnation, Syl – I mean, Statera. An origin deity? I know I wanted to experience new things by coming to a baby universe, but this is beyond my wildest expectations." He shook his head at me, and I leaned forward, clasping my hands on the little wooden table between us. He watched me through half-lidded eyes, and for a brief moment I set aside my Vision – literally cutting it off at the source – to look at the man.

He looked young. But at the same time, he looked very, very old.

This was someone who had outlived universes. His act was not one of aloofness, it was the act of a person who had seen it all and done it all, from the highest highs to the lowest lows, and still kept going. What drove him? I wanted to know, and he did owe me some answers after our long talk...

“Why did you come here?” I asked, genuinely curious about this. Why had someone as old as him, as powerful as him, come to my Four Realms? The more I learned about him, the more curious, and the more worried I became. What else was out there in the greater multiverse?

“I imagine it’s because we met before. Most of the time, new universes that I can travel to are either adjacent to the one I was just in, a Monkey Wrench was requested by the origin deity or the deity in charge, or I have some inherent connection to it. Perhaps a fellow Monkey Wrench I met before had been there; perhaps a god had travelled between dimensions, or perhaps it was similar enough to a universe I’d been in previously that I was given the option. For the record, I typically go with first option. The First is a pain to babysit sometimes.” He shrugged, taking a quick shot of tea, downing it in one gulp. His expression was carefully neutral, but I didn’t need truesight to see the black emotions swirling about his heart right now.

Why was the First a sore topic?

“Thinking about it like that, it makes sense I wouldn’t have been able to come to a new universe before, especially considering they’re so isolated from the rest of the multiverse.” He continued, not missing a beat.

“It’s not because Mr. Boxes – er, the Overgod – sent you here?” I asked. That had been one of my initial guesses. He’d sent the Mad Scientist here, so why wouldn’t he have sent the Rival, too? And what benefit was that supposed to bring?

“What? No. I highly doubt that. Let me be clear; other monkey wrenches have been offered the chance to visit baby universes before, it is simply because the First and I are as powerful as we are that we have not been allowed to do so. We’re what you might call first generation Monkey Wrenches. Now we’re on, what, model four? Five? Something like that.” He waved his hand dismissively. Ok, now that was a lot to digest. I narrowed my eyes at him, reactivating my vision, which hurt too long to keep shut down anyways, and tapping into my domain of Fate. Clear as day, three steel threads of fate bound me and him together, two new, one old but still present, strengthened by our new proximity.

Damn. It’s entirely possible he followed that fate thread.

“I’m guessing each new generation is a refined design of the process.” I prompted, urging him to continue. To me, at least, this was fascinating stuff.

“Each new generation of MW’s, our purposes change a little more. The current batch are essentially porters; they traded an increase of personal power for a greater ability to carry energy between universes. The First and I are the last of the first gen; we were, by trade and contract, warriors.” He picked at a fingernail, refusing to meet my eyes.

“Warriors? How so?” I asked, leaning forward. I had been a warrior, once. Still was in some cases, but only one life had been dedicated to the pursuit of the warrior.

“Eh. It was a long time ago, but we were specifically designed to combat...well, viruses, as I like to call them, that functioned the same as us. Y’know, reincarnating all the time, but they were detrimental. Pretty sure we were modelled after those things. Killing them once wouldn’t do anything, they’d just travel to a new universe, but kill them a dozen times? That will wipe them out. For some reason they had trouble replenishing their energy, so you had to kill ‘em quick and fast. We were the opposite. We grew stronger the more lives we lived. Once they were taken out, well, most of us found a universe to settle down in. Not the First and I, though.” He said, gaze growing distant. The corners of his mouth tightened a little and, with a quick shake of his head, he flashed me another smile.

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I didn't like that look.

"All that said, we definitely weren't sent here by anyone. That would mean an official deployment of military assets, and something terribly wrong happening. Believe me, your collision of universes is interesting, but not by any means unique; the multiverse is full of universes butting up against each other. Sometimes they even declare all-out war on each other, just to see who has the biggest dick." The Rival shook his head helplessly. I frowned a little, not liking the sound of that, but also feeling he was perhaps a bit cynical.

I was certain there were some who had good reasons to go to war. The evil realm the Mad Scientist talked about, for example, I could not imagine letting spread beyond its own borders. On the flip side, what if the Emperor declared war, or Sehuyun? I can't imagine them doing so...no, wait, Sehuyun absolutely would just for shits and giggles. Such was the prerogative of a Dragon.

"What will you do now?" I asked, surprised to find myself hoping he would stay up here, with me, a bit longer. He was an interesting conversationalist to say the least, and I genuinely did enjoy his company, even if I didn't return his romantic affections. He reminded me a lot of the other origin deities; a friend, and someone who could, potentially, stand shoulder-to-shoulder with me.

My first creation as an origin deity was companionship, after all. My kids were great, but I was a functioning single parent and I did crave social interaction with...well, peers.

"Now? I still have half of your challenge to figure out, right? I've got a few of your past lives down, but not all of them. Sylvia I know, and of course the spaceship captain, and I did figure out the Yellow Emperor before we parted...and I have some guesses on a few of the others. Were you, by chance, Moses?" He asked, leaning forward a little. I scoffed.

“Moses? Don’t be ridiculous. I was his mother.” I told him with an exasperated sigh. He’d been close enough that I gave him the benefit of the doubt here.

“Aaah! So close!” he cried, throwing his hands up in the air dramatically, nearly tipping himself over in his seat. I laughed at him as he flailed, righting himself and flashing me a winning smile. A winning smile that quickly sobered up as blood dripped from his nose. “That said, I think it’s about time for me to call it quits here. I don’t think my body can take much more than this.”

I leapt to my feet, noticing, for the first time, how his mortal shell was beginning to unravel. He’d hidden it so well, and I’d been so preoccupied, that I hadn’t even noticed. *Stupid, stupid Statera!* “You stupid idiot! You should’ve told me – I should’ve noticed! Christ, what were you thinking?!” I yelled, reeling in my aura as much as godly possible, even siphoning off this incarnation’s power to all the others, what little I could spare without unravelling.

“Got too wrapped up in our conversation. Can’t say I expected this either; Origin Deities, even young ones, are on a whole different level, huh? Your aura is just that much more potent than others...and to think, you’ll only get stronger. I’ll have to put some serious effort into catching up if I want to win your heart!” he joked, even as he wiped away a bit of blood from the corner of his eyes. I scowled at him, wasting no time in teleporting him back to the Celestial Palace, even as I continued to yell at him.

“Moron! I keep telling you to take better care of yourself; I don’t care if you’ll just get a new body if you die, that’s no way to treat yourself! We’ll continue this conversation later!” I snapped, sending tiny slivers of my power to him in the form of mental communication.

I could still hear his laughter echoing, even in the dead of the night in an empty room of the Celestial Palace.

That fool. I looked down at my hand grimly.

I'd grown lax with him, and let my control slip because of it. I couldn't let myself get distracted like that. It had been a long time since I'd done so.

The Rival chuckled to himself as he read Statera's incoming messages, appearing to him in a format so similar to that of the Overgod's, yet distinctly different.

"Chill, chill, I got it. I'll be more careful. I'm a big boy, I know what my limits are. That's why I brought it up." he complained, sitting down in the cupboard he'd been teleported into and cycling his cultivation to begin the healing process. It wasn't entirely her fault he became like this, blood seeping from his tear ducts. Curiosity had gotten the best of him, and he'd let the technique that guarded his mortal shell from the brunt of divine influence – which could be so strong it could unravel physical substances if left unchecked – down to see what being near an Origin Deity was like.

It had taken not long at all for his body to begin crumbling. In hindsight, it was a stupid idea. Even if she was restraining herself, to do that in the middle of her domain of power? Her Palace? The height of stupidity; the place was saturated with divine energy to the point it was no surprise he'd started to unravel.

Ding!

{[I am revoking your visitation privileges until you at least become an Immortal. I'll send Randus with something you can use to travel between my palace and whatever Realm you're in once you reach that height.]}

“Such a worrywart,” he told her, tasting blood. Still...he’d half expected her to ask him for help with overcoming the tribulation she was facing. *And I feel relieved about that fact.* He mused. *Why do I feel relieved?*

Alala and I stared at each other blankly.

“So...how do we go about grabbing these fate threads?” She asked, scratching the back of her head. Our true bodies currently hovered over a planet in the Physical Realm, so far untouched by the terrorist war being waged. Even the Arachaeons, Morgan’s children, hadn’t found this place yet.

“The more you understand what they are comprised of, the easier it is to manipulate.” I told her, pointing to a pair of mortals below us. The two were close to forming a red string of fate, but had yet to truly do so. Vowing to share each other’s karma was a serious commitment, and neither soul was quite ready to make that vow yet – I honestly figured they’d back out, even if they did remain close throughout the following few lifetimes, but that was beside the point.

The two Karae had thick strands of fate binding them together, and that was enough for our purposes here.

“The more you understand where the fate originated from and where it leads, the easier it will be to grasp.” I told her.

“So we’re starting from the basics, got it.” She said, cracking her knuckles. Then, again, she paused and shot me a blank look. “So...how do I grab it?”

“Beats me. I can toy with it, but it’s beyond touching.” I deadpanned. She huffed and looked down at the mortals again.

“Then let’s start with something other than fate-love. I’m much better with things that coincide with competition and such.” She whined. I narrowed my eyes at her, crossing my arms defiantly and planting my feet.

“I’m sorry, which of us here has the amazing eyesight and a fate sub-domain? I do believe this is a good place to start.” I told her, mostly joking. She stuck her tongue out at me and I rolled my eyes, cracking a small smile. It was all in good fun. Still...she probably had a point, and I slid up to stand so our shoulders were almost touching. “What do you think of the Realms so far?”

“I can understand why Yueya is jealous of your family.” I was taken aback by the swift response. That was the first thing that came to mind? “Your Realms are very stable, and you’ve got all hands on deck at all times. Your kids love you and your people worship you; despite the little spat going on down there right now. I can’t spread out my aura too much without clashing with your Will, but from what I can see? It’s beautiful and healthy. And your kids are a riot. Reika’s hilarious, Alexander is a solid dude, and Elvira is just the kind of competitive I want.” She nodded her head, brushing one strand of black hair behind an ear.

“Thank you,” I said, because what else could you say to genuine praise like that? I bit my lip, not quite certain how to respond...so I changed the subject. “That said, you mentioned the Will and clashing against it. I noticed something similar in the Primeval Dragon’s universe, when I fought her.”

“Mm. It’s oppressive. Constantly reminding me I’m not in my domain; takes a lot of effort to not fight against it.” She grumbled. I stroked my chin thoughtfully. The Fate thing needed some more

time to sit, clearly. But perhaps we could test something else out in the meantime; I'd been trying to separate myself from the Will of the Four Realms more, after all.

"Then what say you we try something else. If the Will is oppressing you, we should probably start with managing that." I told her seriously. She nodded her head. "And there, at least, I generally know where to begin."

3:23 Developments

Thyia had taken a shine to the Karmic Realm, finding her feet carrying her there whenever she deigned to leave her room and grace the Four Realms with her presence. Terrorizing mortals with catastrophes – not unduly, only where necessary – was fun and all, but she did need to start getting out more. And the Karmic Realm felt oddly comforting most of the time. Today, though, she found herself wandering the Karmic Palace rather than just the realm itself, drifting through the expansive rooms and relatively empty halls.

More specifically, this was not *the* Karmic Palace, but a Karmic Palace, one of the new ones recently constructed in the outer regions. She didn't want to run into any of the bigwigs right now, even if Keilan was out and about. Besides, seeing a Karmic Palace like this under construction had been an enlightening experience, like a snapshot of the beginning of the universe. Now that it was complete, beings were beginning to inhabit it.

Karmic Kings waved at her as she passed, the karmic spirits nodding to her as they continued their work. Relatively few souls passed through the palace to head toward reincarnation; for the most part, civilizations were still getting established here. Very much unlike the flourishing central region, and she would bet it was going to stay that way until this catastrophe was over.

A little soul wandered past her, catching her attention. It walked hand in hand with an older soul as they headed toward reincarnation, foul energy radiating from them, full of regret and pain as they were. Thyia frowned, looking into their past with hazy eyes and finding that they both had been killed by Morgan's children, the Arachaeon. The spider-people claimed their river village as a home now, its previous inhabitants slaughtered and...feasted upon. However, they had damaged the infrastructure in the massacre. The supports and formations that helped the village survive

floods were no longer functional, meaning the next great rain would destroy the village, and anyone living in it, completely.

Thyia's fingers twitched as her mood soured, her expression darkening like the horizon in a storm, a little bolt of power giving the incoming disaster a little nudge. Catastrophes were callous, and didn't care who they struck or who was in the way. But they were unforgiving of ignorance and stupidity. These Arachaeon, ignorant and cruel as they were, had the coming flood coming. Smiling to herself she turned away from the souls and continued her walk.

Still...she greeted another Karmic King, the dark-colored spirit bowing to her before returning to its clerical duties, pushing a cart of memories, storied in the forms of glowing blue pages, toward the archive of memories stored below the palace proper. She followed him on a whim, happy he didn't seem to mind her presence, discomforting though it could be.

Unlike the other realms, the spirits here treated her like just another visitor. They, of all beings, understood the place of Sacrifice and Catastrophe. Reika was...overbearing, but nice in her own way, she supposed. Her spirits didn't like her very much. Alexander she avoided, and Elvira too. Keilan was like his spirits; ambivalent to her presence, but kind enough when she showed up. Her feet stopped as she turned to look at one of the archival rows, lines and lines of books, each the collected memories of a mortal's soul, glowing on the shelves. Karmic strings hung from the tall rafters like streamers, constantly drifting and moving, ready to be strung together not yet fully formed.

Unfortunately, she noticed *their* presence far too late.

"Thyia!" Statera Luotian – *Dad's* – voice rang through the archives with an annoyingly happy trill to it, the god in question coming around the corner of one of the bookshelves with His guest, Alala, trailing just behind. She made a face, immediately recoiling a little. She had not come out here just to talk to people, let alone *Him*. "Good to see you out and about! What brings you way out here?" He asked.

“Nothing,” she groused, crossing her arms defensively. Alala peered at her and she scowled at the tanned woman.

“She’s prickly. I like her,” Alala decided, nodding her head and grinning. *Is that why you like me, or just an observation?* Thyia wondered, carefully trying to smooth out her facial features to give her less things to talk about.

“You say that about everyone you meet.” Statera said.

“There’s something to like about everyone.” Alala shrugged. “Is her domain Catastrophe? With a sub-domain – or a Dao, that’s what you call it here – of Sacrifice? Weird. Cool, but weird. Everything takes a little sacrifice,”

“What are you doing here?” Thyia interrupted, desperate to get the topic off of her.

“Oh, well, while our main bodies are practicing with the Will of the Realms these incarnations are looking into manipulating Fate. We’re trying to teach her to grab it and, honestly, we’re running into a bit of a roadblock.” Statera admitted freely, and Thyia was being honest if she admitted that that particular combination of words in that particular order made her head spin.

But what else could she expect from the creator of all things? He saw things differently than the rest of them.

“Statera is insisting that we start with red strings of fate, like love, but I think we should go after more complicated stuff, like competitions. I mean, winning a race can be considered fate, if you put in the effort and everything involved to win, right? You’re literally building a destiny there.” Alala tried to argue.

“Right, but the red string is simpler to follow. I told you understanding is important, and red strings are only built between two people. Far easier to understand the cause and effect there.” Statera argued back. Thyia frowned as the two continued to argue, neither side making any better points than the other.

Neither of those sounded right, did it? They were thinking too small.

“You have something to say, Thyia?” Statera suddenly asked, interrupting her thoughts. She blinked at her Dad, frowning, then scowling even deeper at Him. She hated when He did that, noticing her thoughts before she had even decided whether or not to voice them.

“You’re forgetting collective fate, and collective karma.” She snapped, huffing through her nostrils. Lightning crackled in her voice as she spoke, tapping into her domain to help make her point. “One person can be affected by a greater force, so nothing is ever so simple. Sometimes a hurricane is just a hurricane. Sometimes bad weather, striking at the right time, is fate.” Like a volcano erupting over a village, to teach not only an entire nation, but people all across the world of its dangers. Was that not part of a collective fate for the entire planet?

Statera blinked. “From the mouth of babes.” He said, amused and looking at Alala, who shook her head and shrugged. Did He just call her a child? She was not a *child*.

“This is still going over my head, I’m not going to lie. And I don’t think I’m stupid.” She complained.

“It is a complex, sensitive topic. And you’re not stupid. Thyia here is just telling use to look at a bigger picture instead of a smaller one.” Statera said, crossing the distance between them in a single step and rubbing the top of her head, messing up her already frizzy hair. Thyia ducked out of

His reach and He chuckled, eyes glinting playfully. "Well, since I can see you clearly want to be left alone, I'll leave you to it. Thank you, Thyia. And for the record, I am

proud of you." The compliment was unwarranted. Unwanted.

And she hated the way her cheeks burned because of it. She turned away with a huff, earning a little laugh from Alala as the duo vanished from the archives.

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"Shut up," she grumbled, and rubbed her face, glaring at the archives.

...maybe it wouldn't harm anything if she tried to visit His palace every once in a while.

Keilan was being run ragged. Absolutely ragged. The One World's reincarnation cycle wasn't a total mess, as he had somewhat expected by the way Curie and Yueya spoke about it, but it was so understaffed that it was becoming a greater issue. The worst part wasn't that the process was inefficient; say what you will about them, but Curie had developed a terribly efficient reincarnation system, they were just horribly understaffed.

And there was no heart to it. He didn't know how else to explain it. Souls, when they died, would flood down into the center of the One World. There, they would spend a little bit of time in the cold dark before being ferried back up to the surface or one of the underground races. There was little to no downtime in-between lives, and little to no duties for the souls to perform during that time

besides wait to be reborn. In other words, the afterlife was nothing but waiting for your number to be called.

It was an utter waste, in Keilan's expert opinion. Especially because right there, doing nothing, were a large number of hands that could help them with their personnel problem. Now just saying that and actually implementing it was another thing entirely. Curie had some designs planned out. Yueya did too, for an afterlife. And the blueprints were already there, some foundations in place...it just hadn't been implemented yet in favor of doing some other things that, admittedly, did need handling.

Which meant Keilan had been immediately made a consultant in the construction of the afterlife system, under the direct supervision of Astraea, the Goddess of Stars. His first mission? Training some souls to actually be able to help, which was easier said than done in many ways. Mostly because of the sheer number of souls. He'd heard Mother say that the One World was bigger and less dense energetically than the Four Realms, but that didn't mean they had fewer souls or gods. Quite the opposite. They had a higher number of gods, and more strong souls, but there was just so much space that they were all spread too thin.

Keilan shook his head a little to clear his thoughts. He was getting a little distracted.

"That should do it," he said, patting a soul as it slowly wandered away, back to a group of others. That one was decently powerful, and should be able to issue commands to...well, he didn't want to say lesser souls, but for all intents and purposes, they were *lesser* souls. The key here was delegation. Even if the small souls couldn't do much, what they could do was still *something*. And that little *something* meant things would slowly, but faster than before, get done.

They couldn't worry about quality. Quantity was what they were going for first.

"You are good at this. Teaching." Astraea noted from where she was gently crafting lines of starlight in the darkness of the One World's interior. It was only the framework of the afterlife, but a much better start than it had been when Keilan got here.

“I’ve had a lifetime of raising siblings.” He said back, smiling and shaking his head. “Children like this are nothing to me. The right nudges, the right connections made, and everything comes clicking together. They’re cute, simple, and straightforward with their desires. Working with them is endlessly more pleasing to me than working with some of the grown gods; a sentiment not all my siblings share.” He said with a chuckle. For all that his siblings – and even Mother – complained about ‘mortals being mortals,’ it had always been more complaining about the actions of children.

“I see. Connections.” Astraea muttered to herself, her power drifting about her hands. She was silent for a long moment and Keilan turned away, refocusing on his next task...but also taking a peek at what some of his incarnations were doing. One was with Curie, performing some scientific experiments – it was fascinating to watch her work, but her brain was far more logical than even his – another incarnation was with Yueya, watching her train some new gods, and yet another was with Gilles’ main body as he explored the World itself. “Have you noticed the connection here, yet?”

The question was so subtle, so quiet, that Keilan almost didn’t register it. And when he did, it took a few moments longer for him to even realize she had been talking to him.

“Me?” he asked dumbly, gut twisting as he resisted the urge to glance up, at the streams of connections he’d been grasping at ever since he’d arrived here. He was close to grasping it. So close to finding its end source, but it consistently eluded him, almost as if something was blinding him.

“I can’t see it,” she admitted, the tone of her voice forcing him to turn around. She had stopped working, starlight drifting about her fingertips. She was such a different kind of goddess than Xing Wu, even though both ostensibly held the same domain of Stars. What could cause such differences, he wondered. “I’m sorry, that was a weird question to ask. Forget I said anything.” Well now he definitely wasn’t going to forget it.

“I don’t think so. Spill it. No being mysterious and cryptic, that’s the domain of my Mother and She earned that right.” Keilan challenged, turning to fully face her. Astraea met his eyes and immediately looked away, the starry goddess fidgeting with the hem of her robes, mouth working

silently as she processed that. *You don't get confronted like this much, do you?* Keilan hid his smile as best he could; again, dealing with children, and his siblings, had prepared him well for things like this.

Sometimes the only way to get Elvira to admit anything was to confront her directly.

"I – I don't like it down here. I'm a goddess of stars, I'm supposed to be up above, in the skies, shining down upon the world, but...but here, I can feel it better." Astraea started, shaking her head rapidly. "I'm sorry, I genuinely don't know how to put it into words. I remember meeting someone from your universe who was like me, but opposite. Randus, I believe his name was. A god of dreams. I tried to figure it out through him, but I couldn't quite grasp it beyond this; I oppose something that's growing in the universe; not through strength, but through subtlety. But it feels like it's cracked before me, shattered glass, an unfinished painting. Sometimes it mends a little. Sometimes it breaks more. I was hoping something you said would spark the insight I need by being mysterious."

Talkative once you get her going. Keilan thought, even as he smiled at her. "I am sorry, I do not know what you're talking about. Perhaps in time I will, but for now I do not." Did it have something to do with the Shadow, maybe? Kei said something about it before he'd left, as had Mother...had Randus been born to counter Morgan? In a way, yes; he was a dream of the future, rather than a nightmare of the past. So how was Astraea the same?

He pondered the question for a time, working slowly, until he realized something else was sticking out to him. One of the words Astraea had used; "shattered." He looked skyward, through the dark to the crust of the One World, and slowly started to fit the puzzle pieces together. It took him a while. Far longer than he would like to admit. By the time he realized it, he had already moved away from Astraea, moving on to different things at the request of Yueya.

And the moment it struck him, the incarnation that accompanied Gilles froze. The Shadow deity paused from where he'd been helping a deity of justice build a relay tower, something to help with the potential aiming of the Four Realms to pass harmlessly through the One World, and narrowed his eyes at Keilan.

“You’re acting weird.” He accused, and Keilan nodded, keeping his expression carefully neutral as his mind raced, going over the possibilities a thousand times. There was...there was no way. It couldn’t be possible, could it? It wasn’t a direct answer to why this was happening, to what connection was truly drawing the One World and the Four Realms together, but it was a much larger piece of the puzzle than he anticipated.

“We need some privacy. Do you mind...?” Keilan asked the justice god politely, the tanned dwarf, as Yueya called him, grunting as he hammered a pin into place with a glowing hammer. Immediately Keilan waved his hand, using his power to create a little bubble for the two to discuss in. “Gilles, tell me you feel it.”

“Feel what?” Gilles asked, now truly concerned. Keilan swallowed thickly, let out a breath, and steeled his nerves.

“The One World. The problem it’s facing isn’t a Shadow, as you feared. I mean, I’m sure that’s part of it, but...” Keilan shook his head while Gilles’ expression quickly soured, becoming more and more concerned with each second he drug it out. “I need you to confirm something for me. The One World. What does its structure feel like to you? Stable?”

“...what?” Gilles all but demanded.

“I just noticed it, but look, you can see the fractures already starting to appear. I don’t understand why yet, which is why I need you to take a look as well. It’s not a quick process, but that’s what it looks like. The One World’s collapsing. It’s a failing universe.” Keilan rambled, prepared to start rattling off everything he’d noticed, and things he hoped –

“*I’m going to save you the trouble.*” The voice that interrupted his thoughts came not from this incarnation, but from another one completely. The body of his, the sliver of his power that was

helping Curie in her lab froze as the goddess of science stared directly at him, Gilles' own incarnation freezing. "Since you finally figured it out, I suppose I should come relatively clean. Yes. The One World was on the brink of collapse, though I cannot say the same anymore. That is why we are so concerned about the fragility of our universe. Now," at this, Curie's eyes narrowed, and she adjusted her glasses a little. "I do believe we finally have something important to talk about."

3:24 Flashes

"You should not have let them notice." Yueya chided, far sterner than Curie had ever heard her speak to herself. Her main body currently discussed things with the foreign gods, showing them some more internals to the One World. Keilan was proving invaluable in his words of support; he had already redesigned the afterlife structure so it would fix any structural issues that may pop up from the One World's massive size. The fractures that had formed were healing, but with additional supports? They would heal thrice as fast.

"Why?" Curie asked, the incarnation cocking her head to the side at the red-haired version of herself. The question was more rhetorical than anything; they did share the same soul, after all, even if each of them had developed unique personalities. She already knew the answer.

"It would be simple to have blinded them to the truth. Keeping it hidden from the other origin deities and Statera was difficult enough, but still possible. Why confirm it to them now? It reveals an unnecessary weakness." She ground out, folding her arms across her chest. Curie narrowed her eyes at her other self, crossing her own arms.

"I think you're getting too into playing the role of the doubter. Luotian has been above-board and honest about everything with us so far, even letting Alala into their Realms. The mutual disclosure of information is vital, and I truthfully do not understand your reasonings for keeping it hidden." Yueya flinched as if struck by the accusation, Curie shaking her head. "You must relax some. I understand we gave you that role, but do not take it as a role you must embody at all times."

"I know." Yueya hissed. Curie narrowed her eyes at herself – challenging her to say that again. Yueya deflated, sighing heavily. "I apologize. You are correct, of course. This was inevitably going

to come out; it was simply a matter of time. It is just...embarrassing that we came that close to self-destruction, and having to start over all again.”

It wasn’t as embarrassing as Yueya made it out to be, but such an emotion were the realms of the heart and body, not Curie’s logic. There was nothing to apologize for, either; she had made stupid decisions before, only for Yueya to drag her away from it. Such was the nature of their existence; the triple attentions allowed each body to make different decisions, and proper council when necessary. They were one mind with three different perspectives, a very powerful weapon.

“Now, let us continue.” Curie said, letting her incarnation fade. “I want to be ready for when Alala gets back.” And, truthfully, Alala would finally having something to do with that strength of hers. Construction was back-breaking work, after all.

“So you’re not going to do anything? Truly?” The Mad Scientist asked suspiciously, the avian woman’s wings fluttering in agitation. Solana chirped from atop her head, glaring down at the The Rival as he sat in the midst of a scattered pile of books, scrolls, and jades. His cultivation hung on a thread – it was nearly ready to take the next step, but he was taking it slow, perfecting his cultivation base with a terrifying efficiency.

“Nope.” The Rival popped the P of the word, winking at the Mad Scientist flirtatiously, cackling as she recoiled in disgust. “Don’t get me wrong, I won’t be doing *nothing*. But I’m not going to intervene with anything. Swore an oath to not, y’know. An oath of neutrality, with the Overgod himself. I will, however, be scouring history for hints as to what Statera Luotian’s origins might be. Think I have a few promising leads already.”

The Mad Scientist’s natural curiosity warred with her suspicion of the Rival. Part of her wanted to ask him what he was doing here, how he made an oath with the Overgod, and demand he tell her his true plans. She refused to believe that he was going to be neutral. On the other side,

she also wanted to ask what he meant by Statera Luotian's past lives, and who They had been before.

"I think I got a few things narrowed down. Check here, right? For one, there's something to do with bridges. Maybe she was a bridge builder or something, but the Immortality Ascension Trial mentions lots of bridges being used, and the Dei myths have a few phrases about them. Then there's all the art and things she collects – it could be a coincidence, but I highly doubt it. And then..."

The Mad Scientist listened intently, fascinated not only by the Rival's deductive skills but also by the weird lines he was drawing. Lines she, herself, a famed scientist, never would have thought to draw. Lines she was convinced were absolutely bullshit. How did spiritual pits and civilizations living in the side of cliffs appearing on exactly eight planets in the central region connect to civilizations the Earth planet he claimed to have met Statera Luotian on pre-Origin Deity days?

How did any of this make sense?

The Mad Scientist shook her head, only partially convinced, for the first time, that the Rival was well and truly mad.

"How is it going down here?" The Empress of the Celestial Palace's voice echoed through the library, the Rival's eyes lighting up as Alanna stepped around one of the bookshelves.

"Well hello there, beautiful! Come to see me?" he teased, wiggling his eyebrows flirtatiously. The Mad Scientist stepped between him and her, hating the way that comment made her stomach twist, and hating the idea of him hitting on Alanna even more. That, however, turned out to be a mistake. The Rival's eyebrows shot up in surprise, even Solana squawking and ruffling her feathers from where she sat perched on the Mad Scientist's head. "Oho? What's this? MS, is there something you're not telling me?" He asked, gaze flicking pointedly between her and the Empress. She scowled at him, and he cackled, the scrolls he had been pouring over momentarily forgotten. "I knew it was love that kept you here. Sweetheart, you must tell me *everything*."

Inesa hummed to herself as she plucked at her garden, occasionally glancing up at the night sky to watch as the stars were realigned. Everything was nearly done; Xing Wu had only to...ah, there it went. As she watched from her little home in the Heaven Realm, the final Dao Star was put into place, a network of power flowing throughout the entirety of the sky in a criss-crossing lattice.

The power of faith, belief, and the Dao filtered down from the skies to meld into the land, merging with the formation network and bolstering its power. All this and more Inesa could feel, and for one simple reason in her mind.

The final piece of the puzzle, the final Dao Star, hung around her neck in a silver necklace as a symbol of Xing Wu's love. It glinted, shimmering and shining...connected, however loosely, to all the Daos in the sky through the simple fact that Xing Wu's was the first. She ran her thumb over the jewel his Dao Star had become.

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The Mistress had told her about this. She'd been incredibly forthcoming about what it was. If all the stars in the sky would align in yet another protective formation, then there had to be a central node. Before Xing Wu had taken his out of the sky to give to her, She had been planning to use a proxy, a false star, or even a representation of her own Dao.

Now, she was giving that honor to Xing Wu's. The chain suddenly felt heavy around her neck, recalling how she had told Her, her doubts. The way She had just smiled at her, and not answered them. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and, for the first time in a long time, dared to imagine if she chose to be...more. At first there was nothing. She couldn't imagine it. So she tried to connect to her own divine domain and dao, but it came up blank. Then, she tried a more drastic

measure, delving into the heavenly dao however briefly to try and envision what Statera Luotian had planned for her.

The answer came to her surprisingly quickly. Nothing. Not a thing about her needed to change. She alone had been entrusted with this, not because of her power, but because of her heart. If Xing Wu was the warrior, the relentless advance, hers was the steady march home, the desire to return or build something good that made the advance possible.

She had known this. She had known it for a long time. She simply had not accepted it yet.

With a little pop and a flash of starlight, her lover appeared beside her, grinning like the lovable oaf he was. He gave her a quick peck on the cheek, and she smiled at him, wrapping him in a strong hug. A wing blew through the area, rustling the plants she grew, almost ready for harvest. And in the silence that followed, enjoying each others company, she finally accepted the role she herself had chosen to take.

Earth.

She let out a long, slow breath, reveling in the changes that slowly washed through her. Her connection to the world seemed...deeper. Stronger. Yet simplified. She was just to be who she was, and ground all those ambitious, thoughtful people that surrounded her. She smiled and pushed her face into Xing Wu's chest, another desire, one that hadn't truly blossomed yet for fear of disappointment, blossoming within her.

She wanted children.

Morgan prowled about in its little den, glaring at the two who had dared to grace its domain, dared to come crawling back, just as predicted. The two little elementals. So-called Immortals. *Urchins*. They groveled at its feet, blood seeping from wounds across their bodies, yet to heal.

Those few dark angels that still pledged allegiance to Morgan hovered around them, snickering and flexing their auras, pressing down upon the two foul souls who dare claimed rebellion. Morgan stood, and the angels immediately retracted their auras as it stalked toward the two, feet padding gently against cold stone.

“Please, give us power.” The man begged. “We can help you, to overthrow the Heavenly Dao, free us all from oppression.”

The woman grit her teeth, the mere act of bowing grating against every fiber of her being. Morgan bared its teeth, spidery limbs tapping against the ground. No answer spilled forth, Morgan enjoying watching them squirm as it played at contemplation.

It had visions for them. Oh, yes. Time was beginning to pass too quickly, the timeframe narrowing. They would need to give the others a little...*push*.

Particularly the Fool’s soul. They sought to turn Morgan into a tool, to manipulate the *Shadow*, direct mirror of the greatest manipulator in the Four Realms. Their hubris was laughable.

Above, in the Physical Realm, the last of their foolish rebellion raged, weeded out and methodically eliminated.

“You cannot help me.” Morgan spat, pressing the tips of its spidery limbs against the back of their necks, showing them just how easily their deaths could come. “But you may still have use. Take them.” Morgan turned away, the dark angels flooding forth to snap them up, whisking them off to a deeper part of the Hidden Realm. The woman, Terra, screamed her defiance for only a moment as Morgan lay back down, observing the changes to its Realm.

Pillars of power now filled the interior. Crystallized and condensed into physical form, the excess energy of the Realms made into something the Great One was calling Spirit Stones. It sneered. This power, at least, could be repurposed to its will, as well.

Perhaps it should lure a few more souls to its domain. More fuel to the fire.

The Dao Progenitor of Poetry, a Draconian woman by the name of Palin, hovered over one of the new Regions. The Life-Giving Tree here was tiny, so minuscule that even she could hover over the very top of it and nearly reach the Heaven Realm. She dared to say that it was only an eighth of the size of the original Tree, with a fraction of the power.

She still could not reach the peak of the original Life-Giving Tree. She did not believe anyone had besides the legendary Xing Wu, whom she had never met.

What she did know, however, was that she was in charge of the few colonies of cultivators to be settled here. She was trusted. She was faithful and kind. But, most importantly, she had heard the calling of the god she worshipped; Argent, the god of metal, the musical deity. So she had come.

And what a region it was. Music drifted on the wind, audible to no one but her. The beasts that had evolved here had taken on a noisy nature, using sound and metal as the basis of their cultivation.

She took a deep breath, the whiskers on her chin twitching. Yes. This would make a wonderful place.

She did not know how well she would be able to guide those living here, the outcasts and adventurers who had chosen to leave their homes, or had none, for a new, untamed land. Land that had yet to be discovered or explored. Yet with the aid of her god and the power of the Life-Giving Tree, she knew.

She knew it would be ok.

I watched all this and more as I lay in bed, pride filling my heart at Inesa's ascension, and joy at Palin finding the new region acceptable. A sharp tug to my hair brought my mind back to the present, however, and I turned my gaze to Alala, who curled up with me in bed, her finger running through my hair as my fingers ran through hers.

A part of me marveled at the chain of events that led us here.

Another part of me understood that I'd always had a soft spot for people like Alala; genuine, always laughing, living in the moment. I envied them in some ways, because I was always looking toward the future.

"You're thinking too much," Alala accused, stretching a little, giving me a little wink that made my cheeks heat up. "We made good headway, it was time to celebrate a bit. And honestly, you are easy on the eyes." She wiggled her eyebrows at me and I chuckled.

“I keep my old assessment of you. You are shameless.” She, like Yueya, had been the one to initiate. Was this how all parts of herself were? Somehow I couldn’t imagine having this problem with Curie - not that it was really a problem, either.

“You haven’t seen me shameless yet.” Alala laughed, sitting up. “Besides, there’s not too much time left together.” I nodded, stretching out languidly. She was right, of course. There wasn’t much time left together. But we had made good headway, thanks to Thyia. It was yet another plan, almost ready to be enacted.

3:25 The Sword Maker

The Rival took a deep breath, and walked into church.

No one paid him any mind, as if they had no idea how monumental a moment this was for him. He hadn’t willingly been to church in *years*, yet now here he was, standing in the largest temple in the entirety of Manu Ti. His cultivation surged beneath his skin, roaring like the tidal wave he had turned it into in response to the raw power that permeated the thick, marble walls. Millennia of immortals frequenting the place tended to have that effect on the world, their qi seeping into the stones. Solana chirped as she sat on his shoulder, radiating heat, looking about imperiously despite being a tiny, little bird, Immortal or not.

There were pitifully few people inside.

Most were Immortals, and old, sitting on wooden pews and looking up at the large, stained-glass windows that depicted the dawn of creation. Statera, in her flowing purple robes, creating souls and the Big Four...four of her children he had yet to meet. Two ten-foot tall statues stood on either side of the altar, holding out their hands in a benevolent fashion, one depicting the female form, one depicting the male form. And wasn’t that a bit of a trip to have realized – half of the time, the woman he’d been chasing was a man!

Not that he cared much. In all his many reincarnations, he'd been just about everything. Including that one time he'd been a sentient sword. Maybe he should try that again sometime, it'd been really weird, but maybe the second time would be better...?

His feet carried him forward slowly, to the very front of the church where he sat in one of the pews. Soft music drifted through the air from some unseen source, an Immortal, an Avian man with brilliant, parrot-like plumage, giving him a quick look before going back to praying.

The Rival cleared his throat, and bent his head. Gods, how long had it been since the last time he'd legitimately prayed? He clasped his hands together, held his intent in his heart, and began.

Yo, Statera, what's up? How's it going? Had a question for you. Did that count as a prayer? He hoped so.

Ding!

{[You do realize you don't have to pray to contact me, right?]}

The box flashed before the Rival's eyes, closed as they were, and he mentally gasped in mock outrage.

This is a big moment for me! I'm actually praying here, while you're off playing with your girlfriend!

He could practically *hear* Statera's sigh, and he chuckled to himself.

Ding!

{[I just...what do you want?]}

No denial. His smirk was insufferable, he knew from experience, but he hesitated upon teasing her about it more. Chasing after her when they were both mere mortals was one thing, especially since he'd known she wouldn't actually fall for him. Chasing after her when she was going to remain immortal and eternal, and he was bound to leave her was entirely another. She was fun. He did like her, and he was a natural flirt. But that was...cruel, especially if she did end up falling for him romantically. Alala represented a far more stable relationship. He bit back his retort, saving it for another day, and asked his actual question.

I wanted to know if you were a blacksmith in a past life.

{[Guessing now?]}

Confirming some theories and narrowing down time frames for your lives. The creation myth of the - what, Sword That Does Not Cut? - is a minor myth but a fairly important detail. It implies a certain approach to the warrior mentality and the creation of weapons; more importantly, it implies a certain style of creation, which I imagine is important for an Origin Deity.

The silence that followed was deafening.

{[Yes, I was a blacksmith.]}

The Rival smiled and reached into his pocket, pulling out a little slip of paper. On it, it listed what he knew.

1. The Yellow Emperor (Male, 26-2700's BCE, Emperor, China)

2. Jochebed (Female, 1300's BCE, Slave/Mother of Moses, Egypt)

3. ??

4. ??

5. ??

6. ??

7. Sylvia MacCleod (Female, Psychologist, 2000's AD, Britain)

8. Catherine (Female, Starship Captain, 2200's AD, USA – Greater Allied Nations)

Clues: Approach to creation – virtue, calm, serene, humble, beauty?, balance, gentleness, kindness – a surprising lack of discord between gods. Hints at managing a lot of greater groups of people before, and quite often, soothing clashing personalities.

Blacksmith. Cave dwellings? Religion. Bridges! Art?

The Rival tapped his chin, reviewing what he could remember of Earth's history. He hadn't paid much attention to history books back then, having not been very interested, but he'd learned a lot in the afterlife. He also had a timeframe for her lives; about five thousand years. They probably weren't all evenly spaced, but if he did the math right...

"Ok, got it, thanks." He pocketed the page and stood, stretching, feeling his back pop. He had a few more deductions to make before he was ready to truly start making guesses, but that narrowed it down. Sylvia had a knack for being part of things that were fairly important; even as a psychologist, she'd tended to many, many valuable minds in the early half of the twenty first century. He was pretty sure the First had been one of them, even. And there were only so many famous blacksmiths he could think of off the top of his head. If he had to guess, that life was going to be her fourth or fifth, somewhere in the early 1000-1500's.

Ding!

{[Now what are you going to do?]}

“Thanks for the help, Statera. Now, I think I’m going to take one of your heavenly tribulations.” He slapped his knees as he stood, groaning like the old man he was despite his young body feeling full of vitality, and nodded to one of the priests, who merely raised an eyebrow at him before turning back to their duties, purple robes swaying with each movement. The Rival studied him for a moment; the man was a Karmic Immortal, a corona of golden light radiating from him. Maybe he could ask him for advice...?

Solana pecked the side of his head. “Ow! Hey! Don’t be rude.”

“Don’t take Heavenly Tribulations lightly, young apprentice.” Solana chided, speaking through her qi. The Rival rolled his eyes; she loved calling herself his master, and constantly gave him cultivation advice...not all of which was bad.

Taking the full brunt of a heavenly tribulation just because she could was pretty metal, after all. But he had a theory to try out, which meant he would be doing the same.

The Rival stood in the middle of a meadow, far outside of Manu Ti. There were a few people around – apparently the Mad Scientist’s caution of him had inspired the Celestial Empress to regard him as a person of interest, and had therefore assigned him guards – but ultimately they didn’t matter. They wouldn’t get anything out of this breakthrough of his, while he might learn just a bit more about Statera Luotian.

He breathed out, letting his cultivation surge forward, breaking through to the next stage. The thin barrier that separated the lower realms shattered like glass, and the process began, his qi condensing and improving in quality exponentially.

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Power flowed through him, raw and primal, coursing through his limbs like white-hot venom. His perfect cultivation spurred his growth to impossible heights – and suddenly there was pain.

Fire, red, burning flames that stank of karma, leapt from his very bones, and agony followed.

A scream tore from his mouth as fire roared into the skies, those watching scrambling in a panic. Solana screeched, yet the Rival barely registered her. The pain was unbearable, searing him from inside out and yet – the memories...those were the worst part.

{[Shitshitshit – I didn't expect it to - hold on, I'll stop -]}

“DoN’t YOu dAre.” The Rival screamed out, voice cracking, throat raw from heat and his own screams. The coppery tang of blood was burned away almost as soon as it hit his tongue, a billion images from past lives flashing before his eyes even as flames filled his vision. Another bloodcurdling scream tore its way from his mouth, legs collapsing as he crashed to the ground, curling into a fetal position. Everything he had ever done wrong was being paraded before him while his body burned. Every. Single. Thing.

But he knew what he was.

He knew exactly who he fucking was. And that did not necessarily mean a nice person. He had no illusions of that. When you live as long as he had as a mortal, you tend to make some mistakes, and he had to live with that permanently. No refunds, no reincarnations, no convenient memory wipes, just an eidetic memory and eternity to remember.

“This is MINE.” He growled out, forcibly regaining control of his limbs and pushing himself to a sitting position. Solana hovered above him like a protective mother, screaming something through qi, Statera Luotian’s gaze upon him like a heavy blanket. His breathing slowed as his body burned away, his mind and soul determined to see this through to the end.

The flames pulsed, increasing in intensity for a brief moment, burning away his fingers. He grit his teeth as he watched himself kill in war – bombing villages just to eliminate one Virus, hundreds of civilians dead on his order, their glassy eyes staring at him accusingly; more recently, the use of chemical weaponry just to stop one of the First’s stupid plans; stealing, looting, doing drugs; his callous approach to his own body...

An echo of his own face appeared in his mind. A younger him. A more idealistic him. A him who had borne a name different than the Rival. Its lips moved, but he didn’t have to read lips to know what he was telling himself. His back straightened. Another pulse of flame came, burning away his arms and half of his legs, his posture teetering.

Petty people with petty little thoughts. That is how he saw most people. Most wars. Sylvia had been one of the few to defy that belief, mortal though she had been. The elemental woman he’d met, the one who had killed Solana’s friend, flashed into his mind. He had left her to her fate, in the clutches of an evil being. Perhaps he could have saved her. Maybe he should have, maybe that action would have made her rethink her life...his expression soured as another pulse of flame rocked him, Solana screeching in warning as she dive-bombed his burning body.

“No,” his qi told her, radiating up out of his body in firm defiance, even as it was burned away.
“This is mine.” *My penance.*

The elementals called this operation of theirs a war? This weight Statera was applying oppression? He had seen a real war, the horrors of which would drive her insane. Real oppression, the likes of which would break a weak being like her. His eyes snapped open, his memories continuing to play even as he looked past them, through them. The flames pulsed again, and this time he heard it.

Clanging. An echo of a hammer on an anvil. The *forge*.

The Rival did not resist it. He let himself be taken by the flames, but presented a counter argument to all the bad he had done.

The village had been a mercy kill. Corrupted as they had been, their deaths would have been far slower, far more agonizing, and ended in total annihilation of the soul. Nobility. Honor. Sacrifice. He had made mistakes. But first and foremost was always the same for him. He would honor his oath; to put the good of the multiverse above his own. The flames paused as his good deeds were brought to light. It wasn't enough to fix what he had done. What he had done would never change, and he would spend his whole life atoning for them, and the mistakes he would make in the future.

But here and now, he was not going to be told he was unworthy by mere flames.

The heat returned with a vengeance, and his body turned to ash.

Solana screamed out in fear as the Rival's entire body was reduced to ash, shouting his name, shouting at her 'apprentice,' and I stood, wonder coursing through me. Everyone resisted the flames of the Throat Stage, just as they resisted the lighting that struck at the next stage. Everyone. Either by promoting their good deeds or by just resisting it, it was an ingrained reaction for people to resist the burning of the flames, thereby tempering their bodies, allowing toxins and imperfections to be burned off. The Rival had not. He had accepted it, put his own argument forth not as a shield but as a statement, to earn his right to pass the trial. And now...

I watched as his body began to reform, cell-by-cell, the karmic flames fulfilling their intended purpose and restructuring that which had been burned away as something better, purified and new. From destruction comes creation, a birth from the ashes. Solana watched from the air, shock radiating from her tiny body as the flames that burned away her friend turned golden, tapping into my power to fuel the Rival's divine transformation.

A perfect body, reforged through fire. The moment his body was fully rebuilt, laying on his back, his breath finding him, Solana landed on his chest with a concerned shriek.

"Karmic flames, Statera? Really? How the hell did you even get them to touch upon my true memories?" he complained through wheezing gasps, sweat beading his brow. "That's not normal. Not for a deity as young as you. Not even for most universes." His guard rushed forward to inspect him, shouting words of concern, and I shook my head at him.

That damn fool. Even I hadn't seen this coming. He sat up slowly, scratching the back of his head, Solana flying off of his body. I could see the spark of inspiration ignite in her; something even the Sun hadn't been able to do. Even my children stirred at his little example, watching closely as he stood and flexed his muscles. Every fiber, every cell, was now as close to perfect as it could get at his stage of cultivation, imbued with power far beyond mortal ken. Yet he treated it as nothing. Another day in the life, nothing to be concerned about as he summoned another set of clothes and slipped them on.

"Oh, by the way," he said, ignoring the questions being shot at him from all sides. "Masamune the sword-maker. That was one of your lives. Perfection, honor, serenity. Those are the things your trials promote; the forging of a perfect blade." I smiled, genuinely impressed. I hadn't thought he'd paid enough attention to the hints I'd given him in our old universe, much less put it all together here.

At one point in time, I had been the sword-maker. I no longer made weapons, really, but that dedication I had learned during that time did translate to my creations. I wanted to pursue perfection and beauty in a sense that was different than Yueya; perhaps that is why the Four

Realms were so small compared to others. I wanted it to be perfect, and slow and steady wins the race.

The Rival smirked up at me and stuck his hands in his pockets as he sauntered away.

And I turned my attention back to Alala, who was playing with a fate strand with her thumb and forefinger.

We still had a long way to go, but we were making progress.

The time with Alala flew by at record pace. She and I worked on the fate strands, we practiced with the Will of the Realms together, we fought and played and just got to know each other. And I started to truly see how she, Yueya, and Curie were all the same person.

Alala was Yueya, just bolder, more brash, more in the moment. She had her same laugh, her same smile, her same thought processes...even if they focused more on the physical, and were less farsighted than her artistic self. Alala was Yueya if she had focused on sports and the physical, rather than art and the soul, and vice-versa. She was just as beautiful, just in a different, less radiant way. A more grounded, physical way.

But the time we had together was just too short.

We walked arm-in-arm to the portal, conversing in low tones as her time here drew to a close.

“It’s impossible for me to be jealous of myself.” Alala said. “You’re still looking at it wrong. Yueya and I are the same person; we already know what the other feels and sees. Acting like different people is more for others’ sake, and to help keep us from becoming an echo chamber. Us talking to each other is me talking to myself.” I nodded, patting Alala’s arm as we approached the portal. Through it, I could see the One World, feeling the power radiating from it, sense its impossible vastness...and feel both Gilles and Keilan as they were brought to the portal by Yueya.

Alala patted my arm back.

“Your kids are safe. Honestly, I envy how wonderful your kids are. Maybe someday I can have some, hmm?” she teased, wiggling her eyebrows at me. I rolled my eyes and pulled my arm free of her grip, much to her cackling amusement.

“I think we are still a little too early to be talking about children, Alala,” I told her. She chuckled again and waved to Yueya as she appeared, who waved back. Keilan and Gilles looked worn-out and tired, like they had been worked to the bone – I didn’t doubt they had been, from what Alala had told me.

“Come here, Luo,” Yueya said, waving me toward the portal as my kids stepped forward. Alala passed through the portal as they did, and I pushed up beside it, Yueya giving me a quick hug and a peck on the cheek. “There. Now I’m happy. Alala tells me you had a fruitful time?”

“I hope so.” I said, nodding, my eyes flicking to Alala. She saluted me with a smirk, and I felt a little flush burn my cheeks, to which Yueya slapped my arm playfully.

“Looking at another woman, while I’m right here? Shameless,” she reprimanded, wagging one admonishing finger at me. I pouted.

“Don’t tease me. I was genuinely worried about that.” I whined. She laughed, a tittering sound that rang like bells, and pushed me away from the portal.

“I know. It’s very cute of you. Now git, go talk to your kids. We have more to do.” She said, and the portal snapped shut. Keilan and Gilles glanced at each other.

“Um, Mother,” Keilan started, but I held up a hand, wrapping both of them in a hug.

“Welcome back.” I told them. Keilan stiffly returned the hug while Gilles shifted uncomfortably.

“Thanks, mom,” Keilan whispered, pulling me in tighter while I suppressed tears of relief. Relief that would be short-lived. I could already feel what was going to happen next.

“We have something important to share,” Gilles said slowly, gently prying himself out of my hug. I wiped my eyes and nodded, hearing the roar of a dragon echo in my ears as Sehuyun turned her gaze to me, Mr. Boxes slowly linking our two universes.

“I am sure you do. However, we have something else to do first; it won’t take long, and then you can make your reports. Your brother, Alexander. We need to see him off as he heads to Sehuyun’s universe.”