

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

Amazon Release Annoucement!

Hello everyone! The day has finally arrived. Book 1 of RE: Deity – The Breath of Creation has officially released on Amazon! The ebook is available now and is included in Kindle Unlimited for those who use it; I even have a paperback version in the works, though that is, admittedly, mostly for my own sake because I like physical copies. NovelBin doesn't let me click the link here, so check it out above!

Nothing about the posting schedule here is changing—I'll continue updating according to plan. If you've been enjoying the series and want to support it, checking out the Amazon version or leaving a review would mean the world.

Thank you all for reading, commenting, and sticking with this story. This community has been incredible, and your feedback helped shape the final version of the book. Which brings up another point - this isn't exactly a 1-to-1 copy-paste. I made a lot of minor tweaks to the story to make it flow and (hopefully) hit even better than before.

Here's the (incomplete) changelog:

- Added more emotion. This is very similar to the theoretical 1.1 chapter I posted a while back, but dialed back a bit. Mostly it's changing a lot of nodding or shifting of feet or blinking in surprise to genuine reactions.

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- Made the Shadow more intimidating. It should be clearer now that Statera had to genuinely struggle a bit to beat the Shadow - especially holding the weight of the Shadow's fate, which should have been far more difficult.

- Thyia. I changed Thyia a bit, to better fit the themes I was portraying with her. Nothing over major, I just went back to the original design that I had planned for her, pre-posting to NovelBin. While posting there I ended up changing it and...was never quite happy with the result.

- Many minor tweaks. Things like the God of Fire having a name that I revealed in Book 1 (Vesuvius) but completely forgot about, I now spread through the rest of the book. There are honestly too many to list, but they're mostly minor consistency things.

- Grammatical edits. Lots of these. LOOOOTS of these.

So yeah! Did a lot. Will probably make some changes to book 2, too; that one might get extra scenes and chapters...we'll see how it goes. That said, thank you all so much for reading and supporting so far! Chapter releases won't change moving forward unless something insane happens, I still intend to get two out a week for y'all. Thanks, and hope you continue to enjoy!

3:26 Blinding

The assembly of the Big Four plus Gilles and Father was hidden away in a separate space. Alexander specifically had requested for it before he left for Sehuyun's realm, as he could sense Keilan's discomfort. Father had, at first, insisted that every come to see him off, but Keilan's insistence that the information he held couldn't wait won Alexander over. Originally his brother had been too tired from the journey to really function properly, and had fallen prey to Father's nervous energy. Some gentle nudges from Alexander had given him the push he needed.

Besides, Alexander wanted to hear news about the One World. How were they handling the impending collision on their end? Was everything proceeding according to plans?

He had not expected the answer to that question, even if it was no answer.

“The One World was failing.” Gilles said bluntly, folding his hands into the sleeves of his robes, shadows dancing about his face. Everyone in the small conference room stared at him blankly.

“Come again?” Father said, leaning forward, resting his elbows on the table.

“The One World was failing. I fear its weak internal structure has compromised the One World’s abilities to construct proper defensive measures.” Gilles explained again, going deeper this time. Alexander shifted slightly in his seat, attention fully upon the Deity of Shadows. He sensed no lie in the man’s words...which bode ill.

“I do not recall seeing any evidence of that during my visit to the One World, and I was there for ten years.” Father argued, crossing his arms as he reclined in his chair, meeting Gilles’ eyes.

“We are not doubting your powers of observation, Father,” Keilan said, his large, bat-like wings fluttering on his back, betraying his discomfort. Alexander’s frown deepened. Keilan’s reaction only made the information more unsettling. “We can only tell you what we saw. Curie confirmed it for us; they intentionally hid the cracks from all the other Origin Deities during that time.”

“Is that still the case?” Elvira asked, voice tight. Alexander nodded his agreement to the question, and the spirit in which it was given. Undoubtedly, if the One World was still crumbling and they had not willingly volunteered that information until now it complicated things.

“As far as we were able to see, I am uncertain. Curie claims it is on the mend and has been since the original meeting of the Origin Deities. The information they gathered there supposedly helped them to stabilize their World.” Keilan said, the corners of his eyes tightening in the way they always did when he was thinking too hard about something. Alexander rumbled, drawing attention to himself.

“The question, then, becomes twofold. One, does that fragility endanger the One World even more and how does that effect our current plans. And two,” he glanced at Father, whose expression was grim, a variety of emotions flickering behind those piercing green eyes of His. Alexander was not yet adept enough to read Father’s emotions like He could read his own, but he could imagine the confusion, and perhaps, maybe, the sense of betrayal lurking there. He was close to Yueya and the others. Why would they hide that from Him? “How did they manage to hide this from Father? Is there anything else they are hiding?” This set his siblings to nervously shifting in their seats, his own gut twisting with unease at the very idea.

“I’m not saying I don’t believe you.” Father said slowly, rubbing His chin. “But this is a lot to assume, and is coming completely out of left field for me. We sowed good karma on this trip; your actions in the One World has given us an extra rope to grab on to – and even now, I see that karma growing in strength, as whatever changes you helped cause compound. I just...”

“We’ve been able to hide things from you before.” Reika said softly.

“Only because I willingly blinded myself. Even the Shadow was less like you hiding things from me, and me hiding from myself.” Father said bluntly, meeting Reika’s eyes. “I believe you children should have some of your own autonomy, which is why I restrict my vision...oh.” Alexander perked up at Father’s expression, something akin to realization flashing across His face that quickly morphed into something more thoughtful.

“Oh?” Alexander pressed, urging Father to continue.

“Do not worry about it. Gilles, Keilan, please continue. What caused the fracturing in the first place? Was it because it’s too big?” Father asked, dismissing Alexander’s question off-hand. He frowned at Him, but did not press the matter, allowing his attention to shift fully back onto Keilan and Gilles.

“It was not just a matter of them not having enough energy to sustain the One World, or enough hands to man it, and that is something I can say for certain. I am firmly of the belief that is part of the nature of the universe, though I would need more time to examine it more to confirm that theory. The One World is an ever-expanding singular stretch of land, a land of endless new horizons. One endless artwork. The reason for the cracks was something else.” Keilan shook his head, tail thrashing against the floor. He chewed his lip and Alexander waited patiently for his brother to continue. But as the silence stretched, he began to realize his brother had no intention to expand upon his words.

“Well? Don’t keep us in suspense. What is the cause?” Elvira urged, meeting her husband’s eyes. Alexander closed his own eyes, already guessing the response that came next.

“We don’t know. The greatest hint we received was from a goddess named Astraea, and even she didn’t know what the truth was. She mentioned she was an existence much like Randus; what that means, I am uncertain. She was no deity of dreams, but a goddess of the stars.” Gilles said. Alexander opened his eyes again. Their lack of knowledge had been expected, else they would have shared the cause right away, but what did they mean by an existence like Randus? Perhaps a Pillar, in their own right? Or, perhaps, the Right Hand of the Origin Deity. Alexander met Father’s eyes, seeing the same realization reflected in His own face. There was no other god who knew Father better than Randus, besides Morgan itself. Randus was constantly by His side, inhabited His dreams...the right hand of god.

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An existence like that had warned Keilan.

He had much to think about, on his journey.

The meeting continued for a while longer, Keilan and Gilles going into specifics about their time in the One World, how Keilan helped them begin construction on a true afterlife for them, how Gilles explored the inner shadows of their world, and gave some guidance to a few of the younger gods. But the weight of their initial statement left Alexander with a heavy feeling in his heart and a somber tone in the room itself.

Only when Father stood did the meeting end, even though the conversation had been circling the same few topics for some time now. He met his eyes, and Alexander knew that he could put it off no longer. It was time for him to begin his own journey.

“The portal is ready.” Father told him. Alexander nodded and rose from his seat, floating in the air as Father waved one hand. The same kind of portal that had taken Keilan to the One World appeared in a flash of blue light, a power of...*something* zapping it into existence.

For a brief moment, the power hesitated, and seemed to look at him. Alexander’s breath caught in his throat, the overpowering pressure of that *thing’s* attention bringing his entire body to a standstill, his power freezing, his heart stopping in his chest –

Father pressed a hand against his snout, His power wrapping itself around him, shielding him from the weight of that existence. A gasp left his mouth, time resuming.

“Come on.” He said softly, meeting Alexander’s eyes. He held Father’s gaze, fully aware of the strange looks his other siblings were giving him, searching for an answer to the question that now presented itself to him. Was that...had that been...the being Father communicated with? “Let’s get

you to Sehuyun before you see something else before you're ready. I swear, you all take after me far too much." He chided, his words only confirming his question, despite it not being a direct answer. That had been...but it was...so *big*.

Father gently guided him forward, whispering words of encouragement as they neared the portal. Only when they paused before it, dark, looming chaos barely visible on the other side, did Father pause once more.

"If you get into trouble, just holler. I'll be only a skip, hop, and a jump away." He promised. Alexander lowered his head to nuzzle Father once more, then looked at the portal, casting aside the strange feeling that plagued his chest in favor of steel-like determination. Whatever was on the other side of this portal, he knew, would allow for none of his usual perfectionism. He would have to adapt quickly, if Sehuyun gave him a chance to at all.

He sucked in a deep breath.

Then he dove into the portal.

I watched Alexander slip through the portal, disappearing like a fish beneath the surface of a stream. For a moment all was still, and I was left with nothing but my heavy heart, which was weighing me down for more than one reason. Alexander was brave, and the wisest of all my children, but I was still going to worry about him like I did Keilan and Gilles. I trusted him to do the right thing. The question was what Sehuyun wanted him for. She, I only trusted as far as I could throw her...with my children, at least. She herself was a predictable beast.

And then there was the elephant in the room.

How did Yueya hide the fracturing of the One World from *me*? It was no boast for me to say my eyesight was fantastic – it had been praised by the Overgod himself, after all. I had seen through the barriers of the Overgod when I wasn’t supposed to, and peered through the text boxes he loved so much to behold the true form of the avatar he chose. My vision could pierce through the disguises of all my fellow Origin Deities, to behold their true domains even when they tried to hide it from me. So how had I missed this?

I feared I already knew the answer, and it came from one simple word. “Blinding.” I had thought it before, about Yueya’s beauty. Before, it had been mentioned that her Beauty was the same sort of intrinsic power as my Sight; I hadn’t fully understood how that would work, and in many ways I still did not understand it, but now I could sense a part of it.

Her beauty had literally blinded me. And I feared she was hiding something else; such was why she had cranked up her beauty during the last meeting, to the point I had actively avoided staring too long at her.

“Isn’t there supposed to be someone coming through to our end?” Reika asked softly, seconds ticking by as we waited for Sehuyun to send her own creation through. Seconds turned to minutes, and I began to fidget. Maybe –

It burst through the portal in a flash of light, a swirling mass of flame and destruction. Eyes burned within the smoke and ash that attempted to conceal its form, a curling tail of fire lashing at the ground. It hissed at me, long tongue snaking out to flick the air, lifting its head up.

“A being, made of Sehuyun’s fire? That’s insane,” I admitted freely, circling the little beast. It was no stronger than one of the high deities of the Four Realms, but considering the nest of the Primeval Dragon had been almost completely devoid of life the last time I visited, that was quite the impressive improvement. The snake-like being hissed at me again, little gouts of flame shooting out of its nostrils, the fire and smoke that swirled about it condensing against its coal-orange scales, slit-pupiled eyes keeping themselves trained on me.

I brushed off the fire it breathed at me with ease, revising my earlier assessment of it. A better example of this things power would be more akin to Alexander, when he was first born. So still around the level of a high deity or older elemental god, like Aeriel, but with deeper applications.

“Teach that one some manners for me. It’s being obnoxious.” Sehuyun’s voice, deep and rumbling with the fire that burned in her chest, echoed through the portal. I turned to ask her what exactly she meant by that, only to have it snap shut in my place. The snake hissed at me, no spoken language, just hissed with the intent to bite me if I tried to touch or move toward it.

“Did she just dump a child into our laps?” Reika demanded, her disbelief coloring her tone. I nodded slowly, smiling genially and gently at the snake, which hissed at my calm approach and spit a little bit more fire at me.

“I believe she did. We’re now playing babysitter, apparently. Hello, little one. What’s your name?” I asked, kneeling to make myself less threatening.

The snake responded by striking, fangs pressing uselessly against the skin on my forearm and spraying the fires of destruction all over me. I sighed heavily, standing and holding up my arm, the snake dangling and refusing to let go.

Elvira and Reika met my eyes, my two daughters frowning at the snake’s blatant disrespect. Did it even understand what that meant? Had Sehuyun taught it anything? I pondered that question, but only for a moment. I could imagine what her teaching methods were like, and it made me pity the poor snake.

Didn’t make it less aggravating to have it biting my arm like this.

I would have my work cut out for me, with this one. Especially since Alexander was gone, and I was now assuming direct control over the Spirit Realm. Ah, well. What was one more child to teach?

3:27 D R A G O N

Alexander had wondered what Sehuyun wanted when he had first been extended the invitation to come to her universe. He'd heard she had made an intelligent being to accompany her from Father, something called a Wyvern, a lesser dragon, and had therefore been wondering if she wanted help raising that child. Or needed advice of some sort, and was too proud to ask Father. He even considered if she had gotten stuck on trying to make a true Dragon, as he had. It wasn't just a matter of giving them a form like a dragon, they had to have the proper souls behind them as well; which was easier said than done.

That was why there were still so few dragons in the Four Realms, tucked away in hidden, forgotten corners, or guarding the new regions. There just weren't enough souls, willing and able to inhabit a dragon's form and hold its power. Surely, Sehuyun hadn't been able to get it on the first try, right? Not after waiting for so long to begin creating life.

The answer was, in some ways, all of those.

It was also none of them.

A roar ripped through the Primeval Dragon's realm, destructive fire lancing through the primordial chaos, expanding and destroying it in equal measure. Alexander swam out of the way, curling around the stream of flame, golden flames billowing from between his teeth as he shot upward, Sehuyun laughing like the maniac she was.

He roared, and flames travelled with it. Rays of holy, golden light streaked through the primordial chaos, shining like the sun as his fire roared down to her, splashing uselessly against Sehuyun's scales. She laughed, orange eyes glowing brighter than even the heat and fire Alexander wielded. His jaws snapped shut, his breath attack ending, eyes narrowed and raw anger burning his chest as Sehuyun rolled her head, neck cracking audibly.

He'd grown stronger. He knew he had. He had swallowed his divinity, becoming the Spirit Dragon, not just the Dragon God of Spirits, and in the time since he'd last seen her, had continually honed his abilities. So why was he still so useless against Sehuyun? It couldn't be just because she was an Origin Deity – what was he missing?!

"It feels *good* to fight another Dragon!" she roared happily, splashing through the remainders of his flames like a dog in a muddy puddle. The spines along her back rustled, her tail thrashing, sending waves through the Primordial Chaos. The few souls that lived here, including the wyvern, were huddled along the very edge of the realm, near the Void, watching the fight carefully as she had instructed. She assumed that the kids watching two dragons fight would inspire something in them. Alexander knew it would, but wasn't going to tell her that yet. She needed to see it for herself, and also figure out other ways to teach that didn't involve violence. "But you're still not good enough. Your breath is too weak!"

Alexander's scowl deepened, his teeth baring as he curled and twisted through the air, planning his next avenue of attack. Sehuyun watched, eyes glinting with excitement as she stood in the middle of her Realm, wings spread wide, smoke billowing from beneath the membranes, black scales glowing from the heat she exuded.

"A Dragon's fire is not just mere flame! It is the purest expression of yourself. Feel my fire! Do not flee it!" She roared, breathing in with a sound like a hurricane. Orange burned in her chest, built up through her throat, and rocketed out of her maw like an orange lance. Panic surged through Alexander, death flashing before his eyes, but he couldn't have dodged even if he wanted to – the flames crashed against him, searing his scales, washing over his form...and bringing with it an argument. It was only one word. One, simple word, carrying with it everything she had put into it. Everything she understood.

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Alexander was sent reeling, hissing as pain echoed into his bones, the destructiveness of Sehuyun's breath burning his scales. The wound had been immediately cauterized, thank the heavens, but his scales still cracked beneath the heat, sending waves of thrumming pain through his side. And yet. And *yet*. He could feel it, Sehuyun's being boiled down to a single word, echoing against his soul. She was the ultimate dragon. The *pinnacle*, and she demanded subjugation and submission. No others could match her, and those that could, she would personally subdue. Kingdoms would burn beneath her, the heavens would tremble, gods would fall, and titans would be slain.

Alexander rejected that idea, to his very core. He was not someone to be *subjugated*. But Sehuyun wasn't done, either, and he was not yet strong enough to fight back as much as he wanted, as much as he *burned* to.

“I am *the* Dragon. As I live, I rage, as I breathe, I fight! Our breath is our very way of life, distilled! Focus on it; live it! Statera Luotian knew this, and his lungs were missing last we fought!” She snapped, teeth baring, wings flapping once and launching her toward him. Alexander ducked and dove, narrowly avoiding her claws, the tips drawing a scoring line in his scales, but not cracking any more. He roared at her, diving down to make some distance. “Next time we fight, I will drag it out of him if I have to. Do you truly believe his essence is mere Balance? No! But first, you must find yours!” Her tail whipped through the air, stretching impossibly long to smash into Alexander’s forehead, sending him tumbling back down through the primordial chaos, seeing stars.

Golden fire burned in the back of his throat, but Sehuyun was just getting started. He dodged out of the way of another fire blast, calling upon his own energies to swirl about him like the spirit river itself, protecting him from the heat.

“You don’t get it yet, do you?” she demanded as Alexander steadied himself. She paused her assault to glare at him with those coal-orange eyes of hers. “Why you’re still behind. Swallowing your divinity isn’t enough. You have to become *more*. A dragon cannot bear to exist under skies that are not their own!” She growled, advancing, claws digging into the primordial chaos. Alexander braced himself for another attack, for another dodge, watching her as closely as he could.

But the fight fled her before he had to do anything. Her wings drooped, her eyes narrowing as she sat back on her haunches, considering.

“What?” Alexander asked, wary for another attack. Sneak attacks weren’t her style, those were beneath her, but he still wouldn’t trust her. Her desire to win may just win out over her pride about not, as she would say, “cheating.”

“That’s enough for now. Now, I talk, and you listen.” Sehuyun breathed out, showing a rare moment of introspection. Alexander froze in place, simultaneously curious and scared. He had only been in the realm for a few years now, and she never stopped to just...talk. Was she feeling ok? Was she sick? Should he be worried? “Statera Luotian understands this...thing. I, apparently do not.”

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“Father understands what?” Alexander asked.

“How to make dragons.” The statement was blunt, so blunt, in fact, that it took Alexander a moment to process it. Sehuyun’s eyes bored into him, filled with all the rage, anger, and pride that dominated her being. “All of their children are dragons. All four of you first ones, and many of the lesser as well. Reika is a dragon. Keilan and Elvira are dragons. Randus is a dragon. Xing Wu is a dragon. Morgan is a...dumbass.” The way she spit out ‘dumbass’ made Alexander snort out a laugh, his protective technique, the spiritual energy that swirled about him like armor, failing as he let it drop.

She hadn’t even met Morgan for that long, yet she had the wolf pegged so perfectly.

“You all have that essence inside of you and *more*. Statera Luotian has it, and is also *more*. They gave this essence to you all, by sacrificing pieces of themselves; and now they are growing ever stronger. I am the greatest dragon, yet I cannot bring myself to part with my power. So how? How is it that you are able to inspire souls to grow into dragons? How is Statera Luotian able to do so, and still maintain strength?” Alexander could sense the question was rhetorical, and held his tongue despite desiring to respond. “I know how power works. I know how to grow in strength, even if you do not, but I cannot figure out *this*?”

Alexander bristled at the accusation, but a sharp look had him quieting once again, despite his discontent. There was wisdom in knowing when and where to speak, and right now he needed to let Sehuyun talk, to get through her thoughts and figure out what she needed to say.

“For beings like us, we grow by removing limitations. Why do you think you grew so much by swallowing your divinity? Becoming more than just a god?” She asked sharply. Her eyes roved over him, searching for something, and she sneered. “That is what your father is doing; he is removing his limitations by severing himself from his realms.” She said, shaking his head. Alexander stiffened, gnashing his teeth together. As he’d thought. Father was separating himself from the Realms. How...worrying. The reaction didn’t go unnoticed by Sehuyun. “You’re afraid of this? You fool.”

Alexander blanched, rising up to his full height at the accusation. How did she – what did she – he couldn’t even deny it, damn it! Father had been cutting Himself off from the Realms routinely for the past while now, it was why he had sought out Morgan in the first place! The wolf had been completely dismissive of the issue, while Alexander only continued to fret and worry – and Sehuyun, battle hungry *Sehuyun* had seen through him at a glance!

He growled, deep and low, a warning for her to drop it.

“Shut up.” Sehuyun snapped, teeth clacking together as she glared at him. “Be quiet and listen. This is not weakness, nor is it fear. It is strength. Just because the Dragon leaves the den, does not mean that which is there is not still his. And he understands the truth of what he must do better than any of you.”

“What do you know?” Alexander hissed. “Father is –“

“Did I not say it earlier? Dragons cannot bear to exist beneath skies that are not their own. You, and all your siblings, are *dragons*. And he is aiming to become the very Heavens themselves.” The words she spoke bore down upon Alexander like a physical weight this time, his breath catching in his throat, his entire body stilling as another possibility was presented to him. “So quit fighting it, and become what you were always meant to be already. Fool.” He narrowed his eyes at her, but...

He couldn’t deny her words.

That didn't mean he accepted them, either.

Sehuyun shook her head and stood. "We've wasted enough time on this. Come on. Let me introduce you to the...*kids*, properly." The way she said "kids" clearly showed her inexperience in raising children, and Alexander huffed. His heart still hung heavy in his chest with unshed emotion, unresolved conflict. But that, at least, could wait a bit longer. Sehuyun may have earned his ire with her preaching, correct though he may come to find it once he's calmed himself, but her children did not.

Besides, she so very clearly needed help it was almost pitiful. This was probably the most vulnerable he had ever seen her, and who was he to deny her aid?

I wasn't sure if the biting snake deserved to be treated as a true threat, or a kid who had never been disciplined in its entire life. The destructive fires that surrounded it burned away everything but my own skin and energy as I held it at arm's length, giving it an admonishing look. The snake flicked its tongue out at me, watching me with a cautious expression – well, as cautious as a snake that burned with the flames of literal destruction could look – while I gestured at what had once been my garden.

It was now less than dust, returned fully to primordial chaos, with Randus standing in the wreckage. The butler-god of dream's expression was nothing short of thunderous, tinged with a bit of fear.

"That thing is a menace." He complained.

"Oh hush, it's just a little nervous. You would be too, in its situation. Give it time." I admonished, though I, personally, did agree with his assessment. The destruction-snake did, indeed, act like a menace. Already it had burned down three different sections of my palace, all on relative accident. It was just too young, and couldn't control its powers properly. I sighed, recalling my own childrens' bumbling through learning to control their own powers...Alexander, once, burned an entire section of his river when he first learned to breathe fire. Ah, how I missed those days.

The snake hissed and I scratched its chin with my other hand, cooing at it.

Yep. This little one was a menace. An adorable, destructive menace. I didn't blame Sehuyun for struggling with it; it was difficult on its own, and parenting didn't come with an instruction booklet. I pulled the little snake closer, allowing it to wrap around one of my arms, its fires tingling against my skin. Randus eyed it cautiously as he edged closer, flinching when it flicked its tongue out at him.

"Don't be scared. It's fine." I told him.

"It burns dreams, Ma'am. I wasn't even aware dreams could be burnt." Randus complained.

"Dragons can burn anything they want." I told him absently. "Just because it doesn't look like a dragon, doesn't mean it isn't. Besides, do you really think I won't protect you from accidents?" I asked, meeting his eyes. Randus bowed his head and took a step back, none of his caution disappearing despite a bit of tension leaving his shoulders. I sighed at him and shook my head. "Well, that's enough of that, I suppose. I should probably..." I trailed off, looking out over my Realms. More karmic threads had attached themselves to me while I hadn't been paying attention, and with a quick burst of power and a frown I resolved nearly all of the new ones. How was I supposed to separate myself from the Realms, when they were trying so hard to stick next to me? It wasn't like I was abandoning them...though maybe it felt like it.

I scratched the destruction snake's chin once again, feeling it bite my hand – not hard enough to indicate it was trying to hurt me, just putting its fangs on me to get me to stop.

The Four Realms themselves were growing at exactly the pace I required. The new regions were put in place, the defensive formation was coming together nicely as well. The central regions glowed with power, new regions forming up around it in ever-increasing rings. One in the middle. Four lesser regions in a ring outside it. Eight lesser regions in a ring outside those. Then, sixty four region "seeds" that were steadily growing, cut off from the rest of the Four Realms to be used as a buffer, in case the formation failed. Those would not be inhabited until this crisis was averted.

I focused in on the new regions. Dao Progenitors were beginning to take control of them, gods coloring them to their tune...every little thing that happened only added to our chances of survival, strengthening the defenses.

The Hidden Realm was filling up with energy, crystallizing into massive pillars.

The Original Sin was proceeding just as I had predicted, save for Morgan's interference. But it was not something for me to worry about.

My eyes turned to the Dao Stars, put in specific spots around the Primordial Chaos, acting as additional nodes for defensive formations, and power sources to fuel them. The power of belief would not be so easily destroyed; hence, they were on the outside of the main defenses. The Realm Sun and Lunar Star rotated slowly around all of creation; I could sense the gods within, nearly ready to hatch, now.

Xing Wu would ascend to becoming a pillar soon, as well, nearly completing the next stage of the pantheon.

Only Solana remained, as one who needed to take the next few steps.

But it all felt good. It felt like, finally, we had a handle on the situation. Even the good karma Alala and I had built up was a good sign. But...but. We couldn't do much else. I couldn't do much else than finish my preparations, and take the next step in my journey of power.

The rest would be all up to Yueya. The idea made me more nervous than it had before.

3:28 What it Takes to Be Immortal

The Rival stood at a crossroads, both literally and figuratively. His cultivation pounded within his skull, demanding to be unleashed, to be let off the chain like the barking dog it was, and start the Immortality Ascension Trial. He could do that. Or he could wait another few thousand years, to further perfect his cultivation base. An idea that Solana seemed to hate with a burning passion.

“No need to wait! Start it now, student!” she chirped in his ear, fluttering around him. *“You more than ready! Do not wait!”*

The Rival scratched his chin, feeling the beard there he hadn't shaved off. He didn't understand why she was so insistent he advance, it wasn't like he was dying of old age or anything. With the rituals he could cast, the abilities he could forge, the treasures he could create, he could easily live another few hundred thousand years if he so wanted. In fact, he was still, appearance wise, fairly young. Fae bodies were remarkably resilient like that; their passive energy collection was the clear work of an origin deity.

It was a wonder he hadn't noticed it earlier, actually. Fae weren't just the dominant race of the Four Realms. He doubted they would remain the most populous either, especially when a race like humanity started to appear. But they were the first race. The first Ancient Peoples, the kind that stories and myths were written about, with their technological marvels and advanced civilizations

compared to the lesser beings. Older universes always had them. Sometimes they died out, despite being biologically superior, truly hand-crafted by the Origin Deity. Sometimes not. Sometimes they were the ones who inhabited paradise, having earned their spot there, the lower regions no longer needing their direct guidance and example to rise to eternity.

The Rival yawned and stretched, his spine popping in a dozen places as he looked out over the little world he was on. Ever since the Celestial Empress had set her eyes upon him, he'd been unable to move alone – well, he probably could have escaped the guards sicced upon him, but just hadn't felt like it. The little ship he had commandeered bobbed gently in the wind, floating over the village below. Dozens of cultivators ringed the village, none of whom were below the fourth realm of cultivation, making a veritable wall around the inhabitants.

It wasn't overkill.

The village itself was filled with Arachaeon, the strange, highly aggressive race of beings who, he was told, were native to the Hidden Realm before being chased out. The Celestial Empress and the Mad Scientist both were trying to rehabilitate the more amenable tribes of the naturally aggressive race, and the Rival was interested in them. Though not for the same reasons.

The Arachaeon had the Shadow's signature written all over them. He wanted to ask what Statera was thinking by letting the Shadow make a People, but he already knew the answer. She wanted to encourage growth and change, accept the Shadow as part of the world, blah, blah, blah. It was all very like her, and he hated that he could see it working. It was probably just a quirk of this universe. Yeah, there were some issues with it and mortals would be mortals, and there was probably going to be an emergence of sects of demonic cultivators soon, but that was still in line with what he knew of her philosophy.

"Stop stalling and getting distracted!" Solana protested, pecking him on the side of the head. He flinched and frowned at her, the little bird flitting about his head like an annoying fly. *"Let us go somewhere to begin your ascension!"*

"I am right where I want to be, Solana," he chided, rolling his eyes and looking back down at the Arachaeon, leaning over the railing of his flying ship to observe. The guards beside him shifted nervously – and he understood why. They were crazy looking things, for sure. For one, their mandibles were razor sharp, with blade-like protrusions lining their arms and legs. Spikes lined their joints, a carapace-like armor coating their entire bodies that only became more difficult to get through the higher their cultivation. Even a Fae with a cultivation stage one level higher would struggle to get through that natural armor, making them inherently able to punch up.

The Rival liked them. He wanted to meet one. He also wasn't sure he'd ever seen a Shadow's race be generally accepted into the universe at large, despite the atrocities they'd committed. The Arachaeon were adapting to society, at least the ones who weren't madly bloodlusted, through gently teaching from the Celestial Empire. They would never be the nice, kind people, or as varied as the Fae, but...they might actually have their place beyond being mere demons, stories told to children at night to keep them from misbehaving.

"SL, my friend, you are challenging everything I thought I'd known about the multiverse. Well, not everything. But certainly the nature of Origin Deities and their Shadows. Is Morgan really helping you?" he muttered, mostly to himself but knowing that Statera was listening. Predictably, she did not answer. She didn't always answer him, for no other reason than because she probably didn't think the question was worth answering. He recalled his time in the Hidden Realm, going over what the Shadow had said to him... "they do not need to remember." Plus some other, similar stuff. Implying her lives before made her lesser?

Odd. Very odd. Most Shadows were antagonistic in some way, and while Morgan certainly was, it was still, somehow, positive?

Tsundere! That's the word he was looking for. Morgan was a tsundere, or a yandere? Uh...where a person was actually in love, but acted aggressive or dangerous because of it...yeah. That.

"Quit worrying about things above your head! And the small things! Your mind is too scattered!" Solana shrieked, landing on his head and stomping her feet, the heat of her toes radiating through his skull. He flinched and waved her off of her head, much to her shrieking annoyance.

“But the little, minor things are where the hands of gods are usually found. Especially gods like Statera.” The Rival muttered, listening to the wind. Most the people here were great, but Statera didn’t control them. They all had the option to consult the Heavenly Dao that permeated the world, but could both choose to connect and choose to ignore it. No, Statera’s will ran through the world itself. In the breeze, in the qi, in the vibrating sounds. Her will was for all things to have a place, no matter what they were, from the lowest of amoeba to the Aracheon themselves. It all functioned in a stable balance, the universe churning, those who lived within it, like all mortals, believing their experiences to be the pinnacle of reality.

He let out a breath, his cultivation stilling. He had left it intentionally blank. Despite the karmic fires that burned him away. Despite everything, he had kept his qi unflavored of elemental or any other energy. He hadn’t even touched upon the Dao, let alone his own. At his level of experience, such a thing was trivial to him.

He wanted to feel this universe at its purest.

But he’d spend enough time as a mortal, he could admit. He’d only stalled this long because annoying Solana was amusing. It was time to see how he could watch the grass grow with immortal eyes. Plus, the Arachaeon might make a worthy audience!

A sound like a bell rang through the air, the ship he was on immediately surging skyward. Solana shrieked and squawked in glee, the other cultivators aboard shouting warnings as the Rival’s cultivation surged. He stepped up onto the railing, and felt Statera’s eyes turn to him, the full weight of the Heavenly Dao pressing down upon him, suppressing his ascension. It was not a malicious feeling, though he could tell how it might be considered as such.

It felt more like a “stay there, for your safety,” than “you defy my will!” He’d been in a few xianxia worlds where that had been the case. This was not that. It was funny how easily the two feelings could be mixed up.

Everything slowed to a crawl as he stepped off of the boat, the air rippling like water beneath his feet as he stalked forward, planks of clear glass appearing. Something touched his soul, and he looked inward.

It was a gentle thing, feeling his qi. Each step forward created a new plank. Each hesitation added another yard of railing. The Rival watched in horrified fascination as miles upon miles of bridge was built before him, his own qi fueling it, his own soul designing it. He raised an eyebrow at the sky, stuffing his hands in his pockets and slouching.

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“I’ve never seen an Immortality Bridge so large.” Solana breathed, flying overhead. The Rival smirked in a way he knew was infuriating – he’d designed it to be infuriating over eons, after all, and he’d known his bridge would be special. It always was.

“Watch me cross it faster than anyone else ever has. Easy peasy.” He drawled, taking a step forward.

Except he didn’t.

The Rival frowned and looked down, finding himself standing perfectly still on the first plank. He stepped forward again. Except he didn’t. His frown deepened as he glared at his feet that refused to move, kneeling, placing a hand upon the clear bridge-plank to feel what it was doing.

Nothing. It was doing nothing. He furrowed his brows and tapped his chin, recalling everything he knew about the Immortality Bridge. All he'd heard was that the Karmic Bridge ran you through the gamut of emotions, chaining you in place with those. That would have been easy enough to deal with. The Physical Bridge chained you physically, testing will. The Qi Bridge...well, that one, the one he now tried, varied, but following the usual patterns, it was all about chains. Having to cross the bridge.

He stood and stepped forward again, forcing himself to move, for the space before him to bend to his will, this time advancing one, single plank. One plank of however many tens of thousands.

It hurt.

Not physically. His cultivation was fine, too. It was his soul that hurt. Strained it like he overextended a muscle, the connection between himself and that great, big, floating ball of energy outside the Four Realms twisting and writhing in agony. The Rival stumbled backwards, rebuffed from advancing for the first time in eons by something that was not his own will.

Worst of all, he felt it within himself. Flashes of emotion and feeling, his life not playing before his eyes, but reminding him of everything he was and everything he had been. It demanded he face it, demanded he acknowledge himself. If it were just that, he'd have been able to do so. He knew what he was, and was unashamed of it. Well, not unashamed, but he at least acknowledged himself. No, this made him face things he'd stuffed away since - well, since -

The hair on the back of his neck stood up, his breaths coming rapid and short, fists clenching at his side.

“Oh, Sylvia.” He breathed, touching his nose and feeling a dampness there. He wiped away the blood. “This is cruel, even for you.” This wasn’t just a bridge. It was all about advancing across it. But, to do so, he had to face himself. Every inch of himself, and that was a lot of fucking ground to cover. This was his bridge to cross. He had to make the choice.

It will kill every bit of you. All but an inch, and force you to advance. Solana's words echoed in his ears, his heart hammering in his chest as he realized the weight of what lay before him.

He'd had trillions of years to avoid such a decision. Yet, Statera, in all her wisdom, had left him a path out. All he had to do was take one step back, and it would be over. No judgement. No shame. Just a simple acknowledgement that he wasn't ready to cross this bridge yet. To her, this was what it meant to be Immortal. This was what it took to achieve immortality, for good or ill.

In another universe, he probably would have turned away. Written it off as not worth his time, rolled his eyes and let rituals and false ceremonies boost his power to the necessary level and his life to the needed length. But he couldn't do that here, could he?

He smiled wryly, sensing the challenge. His pride wouldn't allow him to back down. His ego wouldn't allow him to fail, not in front of Statera mother-fudging Luotian. For the first time in a long, long time, he felt he might actually be grateful for that fact. The Rival breathed out a shaky breath, feeling Statera's hand reach down to gently squeeze his arm, a quiet acknowledgement of his fear, and a reassurance that she was still here. That she would always be here, even when he thought he didn't need her.

"Don't watch this, please." He whispered, surprised at how desperate his voice sounded. This was his burden to bear, and –

I am here. But I will let you walk alone.

He felt it. The gentle reassurance. The gentle pressure on his back, and the eyes that saw through him like he was made of fucking glass. Him, the eternal Rival, the oldest Monkey Wrench, someone so complex, yet feeling so transparent in front of a bridge of all things. It reminded him of one of

their first sessions together, back on Earth. It had been a dark room. A quiet room. She had a glass of red wine in one hand, and the stench of cigarettes had filled the air.

He had talked to her. She had listened, even through all the outlandish stories, the things that must have sounded like the fever dream of a druggy, acknowledged them, and never outright dismissed them. She'd let him take himself apart piece by piece, not treating him as something broken, but as a real...thing, turning his own gaze inward, rather than dissecting him like a lab rat. He didn't need to be fixed, because he wasn't broken. And she had...she had...asked him a question that cut deeper than any blade. "You have worn so many faces. Which one is your own?"

And worst of all, her follow up. "You have been running in place all your life. When will you step forward?" He'd stopped talking to her for a year, after that.

That had been what had made him fall in love with her, he realized.

The Rival took another deep breath. This was for him alone, and no one else.

He couldn't disappoint now, could he?

And he walked.

Reika watched as the Rival crossed the threshold of the immortality bridge, his soul stepping through a little portal to arrive in her garden. She pretended not to notice, snipping leaves from a bush that was growing oddly, her daughter, Kei, hanging upside down in a tree above her, her bushy fox tails tickling her nose.

She pretended not to notice the redness around his eyes, the first hint of true emotion she'd ever seen the man make, not that blank, happy thing he'd had going on.

She pretended not to notice him take a moment to collect himself.

She pretended not to notice the shakiness of his voice as he spoke.

"I suppose that's why the Mad Scientist chose to stay, huh?" he asked. Reika looked up and cocked her head to the side innocently as he dusted off his already immaculate clothes, opening her mouth once, and finding the words inadequate. He had changed.

The aura of an immortal radiated off of him, now, but it was gentle. Gentler than his previous cultivation base by far, and now with a depth that even she struggled to see through. But his physical appearance had changed as well. His hair was as black as the night. His Fae horns were gone completely. His eyes gleamed a brilliant emerald green, his body lithe and fit. His face was calm and gentle looking; quite fetching Reika had to admit, though she would never tell Mother that she found Her ex attractive.

He touched his face, and looked at his feet, where a pool of water lay perfectly still. Kei and Reika watched in silent anticipation as he studied his reflection, smiling wryly.

“Of all my faces, I chose this one.” He said softly, then snapped his attention up, to her, meeting her eyes with calm acceptance. “You must be Reika.” He said. “I’ve heard a lot about you from Solana.”

“Welcome to my garden. It’s not often an Immortal is found worthy enough to appear before me. Most of the time Keilan greets those who ascend. Sometimes Elvira, but she really wants to wait for the Immortals to reach the Heaven Realm. It is a pleasure to meet you.” Reika said, standing and dusting off the smock she wore, approaching the Rival with an extended hand. He regarded it with a blank expression, and, instead, stepped forward to wrap her in a tight hug.

Reika froze. He had a good inch of height on her, and smelled like lightning and fire.

“Come now, did you really think I’d greet the child of Statera with anything other than a hug?” he asked, pulling away and winking at her. She flushed and pulled out of his reach, only for him to immediately turn his attention to Kei, grinning like a madman. “And you! It is good to see you again! How have you been?!”

“Ever wonder why your spicy granola bars went missing mysteriously?” Kei asked innocently. The Rival gasped in mock horror.

“That was you?! Oh, you little jerk!” he cried, clutching a hand to his chest. “That you save me, then betray me so! This offense shall never be forgotten!” Kei giggled and swung back and forth on the tree. Reika cleared her throat, but the Rival seemed to ignore her, already marching over to Kei with exaggerated, stomping steps.

This was not how meeting the goddess of change was supposed to go! He was controlling the pace!

“What did you mean, by this must be why the Mad Scientist chose to stay?” She interjected, interrupting whatever the Rival was about to say next. The man stilled, and turned to look at her, his eyes growing...quiet, even if his expression stayed the same. He could not hide his feelings from her, not completely.

“The bridge.” He said softly. “It makes you look inward. Examine yourself. For people like us, the Monkey Wrenches, who live many, many lives, it is a delicious trap. It forces us to look inward at parts of ourselves long since hidden away – this one is especially thorough, and therefore a thousand times more dangerous. I doubt many Monkey Wrenches would be able to resist the lure of stability after feeling something like this. It’s not the only thing, but...it is the lid on the coffin, and the nails.” He said.

Reika fidgeted under his intense gaze, realizing, suddenly, that this being truly was older than even Mother. He may have even wielded more power than Her at some point.

“Is that you?” she asked, quietly. He was silent for a long, long moment, then shook his head sadly.

“No. I still have a duty to attend to.” He admitted.

“A duty?”

“Yes. I am...the only one able to do it.” he admitted, and Reika was struck by the weight of his tone, the severity of his voice. He smiled softly. Reika clasped her hands before her, and came to a little decision.

“Would you like some tea?”

3:29 The Perfect Opportunity

The Rival didn't want to return to the Celestial Palace, which was required by law by the Celestial Empress upon ascending to immortality. Naturally, they couldn't force him. He was just too powerful to be forced like that. Especially the way he was feeling after the bridge and meeting Reika – sweet kid. Made a lot of puns, which she had to inherit from Statera Luotian herself. Not really what he was used to from one of the most powerful beings in existence, but that seemed to be the running theme here in the Four Realms, and it wasn't like it was a bad thing.

Unfortunately, the Mad Scientist seemed to anticipate this, because they came to find him.

He glared at the two avian women before him, two of the most influential cultivators this realm had ever seen – save for the heroes who fought and died in the Sun War and the mythical Xing Wu. Alanna, the Celestial Empress, had her arms crossed as she stared at the Rival, expression completely unreadable even to him as she assessed his immortal aura. The Mad Scientist, on the other hand, was circling him like she was eying a specimen to dissect.

“What?” He finally asked, back up against a tree – metaphorically speaking – as it was. The issue was that this wasn't a problem he was willing to solve in his usual style; with extreme amounts of violence, or relentless flirting that led to him either being let go, or said extreme amounts of violence. Which left him at a bit of a loss.

An annoying feeling, especially considering the massive amounts of soul searching he had just done. He was still feeling a bit raw about that, emotionally speaking. Everything hurt to think about, even happiness; leaving only that churning undercurrent of determination that drove him across the multiverse. *Silence that thought.* He hissed at himself, shoulders drooping as the weight of his existence draped itself across his shoulders. He was *tired*, but...his duty was not yet done, either.

“You are perhaps the most powerful immediately-ascended immortal I have ever seen, save for Xing Wu himself.” Alanna said with a sharp nod of her head. The Rival scoffed. He was many things, but he most certainly was *not* behind some young upstart’s cultivation. He had crafted it practically perfectly; not even Statera could do better, he bet. “Your Dao is weaker.” And *that* stung. The Rival stiffened, narrowing his eyes at the Empress. She watched him with a clarity of sight that he was starting to become accustomed to in this universe; and he let out a long, hissing breath between his teeth to bleed out some of the indignation. His Dao was weaker? How dare she. His posture relaxed. His hands found his pockets. Solana chirped on his head, puffing up with pride at the perceived praise directed at her perceived student.

“That’s because it’s not aimed at you.” He said softly, breaking eye contact.

“Perhaps.” The Empress allowed graciously, dipping her head. The dismissive way she said it, though, had him taking another deep, steady breath. None of them knew, and that was ok. He didn’t follow his path for fame, or recognition. If he did...if he did...he didn’t know.

“Did you see it, then?” The Mad Scientist spoke up for the first time since arriving in a flash of light. The Rival met her eyes as she circled back around, standing close to the Empress, her wings fluttering and eyes gleaming with scientific curiosity behind those thick glasses of hers. He ran his tongue over his teeth as he thought, trying to parse out what the cryptic woman could possibly mean.

“Yes. I know why you chose to stay. Devious trick, that bridge,” The Rival said. His soul *stung* at some of the memories, his emotions churning, and he forced it all down with malicious force. Now was not the time to feel emotions. The Mad Scientist’s eyes narrowed, her expression hardening slightly.

“The bridge was excellently built, yes. But that is not what truly made me stay. You met Lady Reika, yes?” she questioned, pressing further.

“Yeah, why?”

“What did you think of her?” she asked.

“Good kid. I can see the resemblance to Statera. Interesting domain; I think it was change? Pretty powerful stuff.” He said with a little shrug. “Why? Was I supposed to see something?”

“So you missed it, then.” She said slowly, considering, adjusting her glasses. The Rival frowned while the Celestial Empress shot her a questioning look, her wings pulled tightly against her back.

“I tend to miss a lot of things, in case that wasn’t obvious.” The Rival drawled. He did walk by temples to Statera at least a dozen times, after all. The obvious liked to smack him in the face sometimes. “Can I go now, or is this conversation going to continue ad infinitum? I’m really not in the mood to be playing nice-nice.”

“I forget you haven’t met as many of the gods here...nor did you attend the meeting between origins. I suggest you try and meet the other three of the Big Four. Xing Wu, too, though he may be more difficult to get ahold of. I’d like to see if you can confirm my theory.” The Mad Scientist drawled, rising into the air, clearly taking the not-so-subtle hints the Rival had been directly her way.

He couldn’t have been clearer about his desires if he held a neon sign that said LEAVE ME ALONE above his head.

Solana was the only exception to that. She was just a little birb, after all.

“Are we done? I have questions.” The Celestial Empress asked, watching the Mad Scientist float skyward. She stopped mid-motion, glaring down at the Rival, gaze flicking to the Empress.

“I don’t trust him around you alone, and he tends to be infuriating when he doesn’t want to answer things. Look, he’s got that look in his eyes.” The Mad Scientist protested, descending to grab the Empress by the arm and drag her skyward. She let herself be pulled away, very clearly amused, and very clearly still wanting to question the Rival. He waved goodbye, hand flopping about lazily.

“We will speak again.” The Empress promised as they floated away. The Rival didn’t bother watching them leave, already turning on his heel to stomp off toward where he hoped the flying ship he’d borrowed had landed. Just because he was immortal now and could fly around, didn’t mean he wanted to. It was far more fun to laze about on the ship while it flew, and he needed to get his head back in order.

“What do you want to do, Solana?” he asked the bird atop his head, though he was already wondering how he would go about meeting the other gods. Climbing down to the Karmic Realm, and up to the Heaven Realm seemed like it would be a start, but what about the dragon? What about Xing Wu? He had no idea how to contact them.

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This world was a break for him, and he’d be damned if he didn’t make the most of it, newly restored confidence – or dedication, more accurately – to his path be damned.

“*The outer regions.*” Solana said with such decisiveness that it gave the Rival pause, the little bird puffing up her feathers and ruffling her wings. “*I still need to hunt down the ones who killed the old man. They’re still out there, I know it.*” The Rival coughed into his fist.

Right. The two fiends who had caught the interest of the Shadow. That seemed like a brilliant goddamn idea.

...he was going to follow her there, wasn't he? That sounded like just the thing to do to meet more gods, and he was feeling inordinately ornery. His jaw clenched as he agreed with her plan, already calculating a dozen other things. Techniques he could now use, talismans they would need, various other upgrades he could give himself. There was nothing that would stop a fully enraged Shadow, but, at the same time, Statera had told him she would hold Morgan back from interfering with him.

Which made this a perfect opportunity to meet the other gods and crack some skulls that desperately needed cracking.

The Mad Scientist was in a bit of a pickle. She had revealed more about herself now, and hadn't even meant to. Especially not in front of the Celestial Empress – she was just so easy to be around, sometimes she forgot to watch her tongue. It happened more often than she liked to admit, especially when she got caught up in experiments and stuff.

"You have met the true gods." The Celestial Empress deadpanned as they flew, hurtling through space faster than any of her ships, away from the little planet the Rival had ascended on. "You. And I have yet to personally meet any of them." The Mad Scientist cleared her throat awkwardly, wings flapping as they wove through an asteroid belt.

"The Heavenly Dao is already in you." She said lamely. The Celestial Empress scoffed, slapping away a meteorite that threatened to strike her face.

"Don't spit sophistry at me."

The Mad Scientist winced a little, sensing her frustration. The Empress hadn't advanced her cultivation in centuries; a result of Statera Luotian's suppression of the Physical Realm, and the frustration at the lack of progress was starting to show. She frowned. Maybe diverting the Original Sin like she had, had backfired a little. She was certain that, originally, the two rebels who had popped up, trying to tear apart the Empire, would have offered a sufficient distraction if she hadn't played them like a flute.

Their rebellion had been snuffed out like a candle in the wind. The gods hadn't even had to get involved, thanks to her predictions; and the Original Sin hadn't even fully manifested. *Maybe I should have let them build up their forces a bit more, before showing the necessary weakness.* She'd been waiting for a sect of Devil Cultivators to pop up for a long time now. There was a suspicious lack of them, as if they were hiding somewhere.

At least the new regions were providing a proper distraction for the other Dao Progenitors. It was only the Celestial Empress who was struggling, saddled with reparations for the terrorist strikes as she was. No matter the universe, politics sucked.

"You met Xing Wu. Even he, ascended as he is, hasn't met Statera Luotian. You've also met his wife, Inesa, goddess of light." The Mad Scientist pointed out, recalling that Xing Wu had told her about that little issue last time they met, oh, far too long ago. She was also pretty certain that the Empress had met Thyia and other elemental gods, and just hadn't noticed their divine nature.

"They don't count. They're too normal." She complained, turning her head away. The Mad Scientist let it drop, flying in silence as they shot back toward Pangaea and the center of the Physical Realm. "You hinted at something back there. What was it?" At this, the Mad Scientist slowed to a stop, giving the Celestial Empress a long look as she stopped beside her. She couldn't reveal everything; shouldn't reveal everything. But this was also something the Empress couldn't do much about, and likely wouldn't even get. It was too far above her head, the perspective too wide.

"There's a lot going on in the universe right now. The expansion of the Physical Realm is just one part of it, but...you know what Reika's domain is, right? Change?" she asked.

“Yes. And Elvira’s is Divinity, Keilan’s is Connections, and so on. What of it?” she asked. The Mad Scientist chewed her lip, the theory she’d been formulating swirling in the back of her mind. No, not formulating; all it was waiting on was confirmation from someone else. She recalled the meeting between origin deities, and all their domains.

“And Statera Luotian’s, the one who created the entire universe, is Balance. After they evolved, the domains of His children are not...lesser, now, when compared to His own, even if their power and understanding lag behind.” She said. Predictably, the Empress did not so much as flinch at the revelation, crossing her arms.

“So? Mother Statera and Father Luotian are all about progression. Of course they want their children to reach their level of power.” She said. The Mad Scientist nodded, allowing that. But that was the exact reason why she needed confirmation from someone outside of the Four Realms. Because those inside were biased; this was all they knew.

“Just keep in mind that you said that.” She said cryptically, clapping the Empress on the shoulder. “Come on, let’s head home.”

I played with the snake of destruction, dodging blasts of fire, snagging them out of the air, and flinging them back at the snake while Reika watched from the sidelines. The fire serpent was growing increasingly agitated that it couldn’t do anything to me, spitting flames and hissing menacingly. Reika, on the other hand, found the entire situation entirely amusing, and was giggling to herself while she ate a bowl of ice cream I had made for her.

We were currently in one of the rooms of my palace, a little study with bookshelves lining the walls, thick velvet carpeting, a crackling fireplace, and a few little armchairs scattered about. This was my private study; very few people could actually find it, let alone enter it.

“This reminds me of the old days,” she admitted as I sidestepped a lunge from the snake, fangs bared and destructive poison at the ready. I waggled a finger at it as it curled up around the base of a chair, hissing and flicking a tongue out at me.

“How so?” I asked, catching the snake as it lunged again. This time it spat a bit of fire in my face, which I blocked with my other hand. Expression stern, I glared at the little thing, not too harshly, but enough to cow it. “That was rude. No spitting. I don’t care how frustrated you’re getting.” I chided. The snake, surprisingly, only flicked its tongue at me and relaxed a bit in my grip, appearing properly chastised. I scratched the underside of its chin, earning myself a little hiss of pleasure.

“You’re dealing with children again. We were never really children, but it was always fun to watch you interact with some of the younger gods who did.” Reika said. I laughed a little as I let the snake wrap itself around my arm, over my robes, like some kind of weird tattoo. It flicked its tongue out at Reika. “What do you think Sehuyun’s purpose is, sending the little one to us?”

“I am certain we will find out when Alexander gets back.” I admitted, stretching and feeling my back pop in multiple places. The movements of the Rival caught my eye, even far away as I was, and I turned my gaze to him. Solana’s growth was accelerating drastically, thanks to proximity to the Rival. Yet another thing to be thankful for, in the Monkey Wrenches’ presence. “I doubt it will be anything too serious. Sehuyun doesn’t do ‘games.’”

Reika hummed as my gaze drifted a bit further. Solana...she was going to confront the two who had killed the old man that protected her. They were still alive, she was correct; Morgan had planted them somewhere, given them power, and was currently trying to get them to take over one of the new regions before any of the other Dao Progenitors got there.

I shook my head a little.

This was not my issue, truthfully. I would still watch it, of course, but, as always, things had to develop without my direct intervention. So I turned back to Reika and the little snake, content to take this moment to breathe and relax.

3:30 Let's See Where it Goes

There was only so much the Rival could do when it came to satisfying Solana's thirst for revenge. He wasn't even sure the two were alive, and even if they were, he was convinced they wouldn't be anything but hollow shells of their former selves after being submitted to the Shadow's influence. That's what happened when you made deals with something that wanted nothing less than to consume your soul - and despite remembering that they had tried to resist the Shadow, he was under no illusion that they would go running back to them.

Some people were easy to read like that. Evil was simple, when you knew what it was. So was good, too, but that was beside the point.

"This place feels like a song. I don't understand." The Rival whined, looking up at the baby Life-Giving Tree. Where the first region had been perfectly balanced, everything working in harmony, this Tree was more singular. The trees sang, the grasses hummed in a rich baritone, and an undercurrent of metal ran through the very ground itself. The new regions version of Pangaea, only a fraction of the size, was sparsely populated with a variety of Peoples - mostly people who didn't have anywhere else to go, refugees and the like.

The Rival scratched his chin.

"They are not here. We will feel their presence as oil upon water." Solana declared firmly, perched as she was on his shoulder.

“What makes you so sure?” he asked.

“...*I do not know.*” She admitted softly. “*But the Shadow is not one to throw away fools, as even they can find their use as tools.*” The Rival glanced at her, raising an eyebrow, because that sounded suspiciously like experience. Not real experience, that she had gone through in this lifetime, but something else. Something deeper. When you got to his age, you started to be able to recognize trauma that reflected the soul, and trauma that reflected the mind. This was not the latter. His eyes narrowed as he tried to do a few mental calculations.

It really was too bad he sucked at math.

“I’ll take your word for it. We really shouldn’t be messing with that spider-wolf, though. It wants to eat me, remember?” he said, moving forward, the air parting before him as his immortal power responded to his will. The closer he got to the small Life-Giving Tree, the louder the song played, until it echoed in his ears and rang in his soul.

Slowly he descended, a tundra stretching around him, one of the many impossible landscapes of Pangaea. The snow swirled, dusting against the ground as it tumbled over rolling hills and through tall grasses that poked up out of the snowscape, singing that same damnable tune – a tune someone sang, as if they were just learning the notes.

He bent, and dug his fingers into the frigid stuff.

“*Student,*” Solana insisted.

“Just...hold on a second. I think we need to talk to someone here, first.” He said, looking up at the Life-Giving Tree. There, a Dao Progenitor sat, presumably in control of the Tree, merging her Dao with the region itself. But he didn’t think her Dao had been music alone...

Power flooded his legs as he shot skyward, Solana shrieking in glee as she shot into the air as well, fluttering about him happily, seeming eager to get on the road again, and try to fly to another new region. The Rival still had unanswered questions, however. The wind whistled past him as he flew; choosing not to teleport, as that would be rude, and not alert the Dao Progenitor to his presence in time.

This, at least, let her know that two Immortals were coming to visit.

He found her atop the Tree itself, basking in the winds that sang their tune, rustling the massive, continent-sized leaves on their branches. She had built a little hut over the peak of the tree, nestled between two branches and planted firmly into the bark.

She looked like an old woman. Her hair was grey, her face round and kindly looking, her fingers gnarled and wobbly. But beneath that appearance lay power; the kind of power that only came from knowing yourself inside and out. It also helped that life energy from the Tree was constantly flowing into her, filling her body and aura with power far beyond her ken, as she slowly took control of this part of the Physical Realm.

The Rival read her aura. Studied her Dao. And came to the conclusion that the people living below could do worse than her as their watcher. But her Dao wasn’t music – so where the hells was that coming from?

“I do not believe we’ve met before,” The old woman said. “This one’s name is Cira. It is a pleasure to meet such promising new immortals.”

“The pleasure is mine,” The Rival said, feet finding purchase on the thick bark of the baby Tree as he floated down to her level. She made no moves against him; someone assured of their presence and power, dark eyes narrowing slightly as she studied him. Something akin to joy flashed across her features for just a moment, before she leaned closer, conspiratorially.

“You...can you hear the music?” she asked softly, and the Rival nodded, thankful she didn’t beat around the bush. “Oh, wonderful! Another, touched by the gods. That is the song of our lord Argent – God of Metal and Music. It is pleasant, isn’t it?”

“It could use another tune, I’ve been listening to the same song over and over for –” The Rival caught himself before he could complete that thought, his natural dismissive nature leaking out a little. Thankfully, the old woman didn’t seem mad about it; in fact, she tossed her head back and laughed.

“Oh, that is true! It does get old. But that is because the Tree is young, and has not yet learned another tune. Nor has anyone risen to begin their songs in the other parts of the region; have you come to see them? The Mountain, perhaps? I would, but my place is here, in the mortal realm, with these people. They came so far to make a new life.” Her tone turned wistful as she looked down upon the lands of Pangaea, watching the people below build their lives, cultivators creating sects and cities, carving a life for themselves arguably outside of the Celestial Palace’s reach, even if they were still formally part of the Empire.

“No, I’m good on that. Just stopped by to see if you knew what the song was. I think I’d like to meet Argent someday – but, hey, do you know how to meet Xing Wu?” he asked, rambling a little. The Mad Scientist mentioned him, right?

The old woman blinked at him, and shook her head.

“No, I apologize. We are all connected through the Dao, but I fear that even I cannot contact him.” She said softly, shaking her head. The Rival clicked his tongue, falling silent for a few moments as he listened to the song of the world again.

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...Statera was letting her children do what they wanted, and it came in layers. She made the universe. Her first four made the Realms. Now the lesser, elemental gods are influencing the smaller parts of the Realms, the regions. And Dao Progenitors are looking at the individual, key features. Why did that niggle something in the back of his head? It wasn't that strange of a concept; he'd seen it happen before. Admittedly, it was far rarer in a Xianxia world, but hey, that was why he was here, new experiences.

“Come inside, child, I can see you have a lot on your mind. Would you like tea?” The woman asked. The Rival shook his head, and Solana shrieked, hurtling back down to him with annoyance in her tone. She was ready to go, wasn't she? There was no rush though, the Realms weren't going anywhere, anytime soon.

“No, sorry. It's high time for us to go.” The Rival said with an apologetic smile. “Thank you though.” And with that, he shot into the sky, vanishing, his mind lingering on the region behind him. It wasn't the freedom that bugged him. It wasn't the moving parts; it was the overall picture. What was it that the Mad Scientist had been implying?

Xing Wu was having a bad day. For one, his headache kept getting stronger. For two, even though he had finished moving all the stars into place, he still was being kept inordinately busy. Thankfully he'd had plenty of time to go visit the Karmic Realm, explore the Heaven Realm, and swim the Spirit River. Those things were all things all the other gods had insisted he go do, after completing his official task.

Hell, he'd even had time to send some omens and dreams to the mortals who were worshipping him, correcting some of those foolish mistakes they'd made about him. He also was beginning to understand, truly, why the gods stayed in the Heaven, Spirit, and Karmic Realms. The Physical Realm reacted negatively to his presence, in places that weren't already saturated with qi. Like the main regions, and the Celestial Palace. In the outer regions, if he wasn't careful his presence could unmake entire planets.

Xing Wu grit his teeth as another spike of pain was sent into his skull, dragging his attention away from the molding of matter, as Inesa was showing him, toward some secluded part of the Hidden Realm. His wife glanced at him, concern etched on her features.

"Go." She said. "Deal with it, it's fine." Normally he wouldn't have. Normally he would have stuck out the pain and stayed by her side, this being one of the few moments they'd had together recently, kept busy by their respective duties. During these times, he wouldn't split himself. The incarnations he'd so painstakingly learned were killed off, so he could give his full attention to the woman he had chosen to spend the rest of his life with, he one he had chosen to share his Dao with.

But it was starting to get ridiculous.

"I'll just send an incarnation." He said, immediately splitting one off and having it teleport away.

The moment he reappeared, talismans, chains, and a dozen other restrictive treasures leapt to wrap themselves around him, attempting to bind him in place. He flexed once. Twice. The chains rattled but didn't break under casual pressure – though he could clearly tell these things wouldn't keep him in place if he really wanted out. So he cast his attention outward, to his surroundings.

This part of the Hidden Realm was a small chamber, lit by close to ten thousand candles dripping wax onto the black stone, and arranged in concentric circles. Thousands of spirit stones – condensed energy given physical form – were embedded in the walls in an intricate design, glowing with power. But what really caught his attention was the two dozen or so powerful cultivators, dressed in black robes and led by two Immortals, that had circled around him.

“Lord Xing Wu,” one of them said, kneeling before him. She was an elemental, and radiated the aura of an immortal walking a fine line between being a devil, and being a righteous one. He could see it in her budding Dao. *Wonderful. Zealots. What the hell did I appear in front of?* “I apologize for the chains, but I hope you realize their necessity. We...have something to show you.”

Xing Wu raised his eyebrows, and expanded his divine sense to cover the entirety of the room. What he found...surprised him. Morgan lounged on the back wall, watching the entire thing with thinly veiled interest. It was enough his main body took note, stilling and turning his attention to the incarnation, its power growing slightly.

Second most surprising was the reason he'd been getting a headache.

The fools had been trying to summon him. A shard of one of his spears, from when he'd first fallen into the Hidden Realm as a mortal, all that time ago, lay in a little circle hidden behind two cultists. The formation that surrounded it tapped into the spear part, then the circle, then karma, and therefore reached him eventually.

Third most surprising was -

“Wait, go back to that last bit. What did you just say?” Xing Wu's snapped his attention to the woman speaking, narrowing his eyes and not quite believing what she just said to him. He'd been listening to her monologue, sure, but he just...had to be sure, just in case.

“I – uh. Yes, my lord. Through the grace of the Shadow, we have discovered your true nature. Your true form. You were once the mighty Dei, cast down from the heavens by the gods, who feared your power, and now given this form. A servant to heaven. We have a way to restore your memories, and bring you back to your true self.” She said, bowing. Xing Wu blinked at her. He looked at Morgan, who, bafflingly, seemed to be smiling at the entire situation.

For a split second, he considered breaking free and slapping the shit out of everyone here. He couldn't kill them, unfortunately, not with the Shadow here, but he could practically taste the evil radiating off of them, particularly the elemental woman. How in the Karmic Realm had she even managed to become Immortal? He knew the bridge really only judged personal worthiness, not weighing good versus evil unless it was karma, but still.

The moment passed, however, and he sat back. *Let's see where this goes.*

The woman waved her hand dramatically, and the cultists brought forth another spear shard, this one from a long time ago. Power surged through the formations as energy began to build up, a scrap of his clothing from his time as Dei being brought forth. The cultists weaved together strings of karma, binding them to him, trying to put something that was already inside of him, in.

“Wait, I think I feel something.” He deadpanned. *That sounded completely unrealistic. You're definitely no actor.* He chided himself, as the ritual continued. The wind picked up. Power roared. Light flashed.

“Let your memories return!” The woman cried, and Xing Wu shouted.

“Oh! I think I got it now!” The ritual died down at his words, sweat dripping from the cultist’s faces. He nodded. “Yes, yes, I see, I see!”

“You see now?” she asked, hopefully, greed and ambition coloring her heart. She didn’t care about him, but others in the group did, twisted by her words.

"I do. I see...how stupid you are." He deadpanned, flexing his power and shattering his bonds. They disintegrated into starlight, his power far, far greater now than it had ever been. Shouts of alarm rang out from the cultists, and he cast a hand forward, calling upon his connection to the Dao, the weight of it falling down upon them to ensure to all he was speaking nothing but truth. "I declare thus; I was Dei, yes! But I have known this for a long damn time! I was not cast down, I willingly chose to reincarnate! Do you believe the gods are suppressing me? *Me?!* I stood before the Shadow before I was even Immortal - what in my own damn name makes you think they'd be able to stop me? Where the hell do you even get these ideas - oh wait! I know! My story was twisted for your own damn agenda."

The silence that echoed was damning. The elemental woman gaped. The cultists were frozen, and Xing Wu cast his gaze about, meeting their eyes. "You are all blinded by greed and hatred and self-righteousness. For those of you who truly wish to follow me, repent, and find your own damn feet! Don't ask me to lay the path down for you, that goes against everything I stand for! For the rest of you, looking for an ally to help you climb to power – no! Leave. Me. Alone. Try this shit again, and I won't be merciful enough to let you go without a slap." And with that, let his incarnation fade.

He main body shook its head, the pain gone. Merciful. He was leaving them in the hands of the Shadow. No, he was far from merciful here.

Now where was he? Oh, right. Gardening by shaping matter. He glanced at Inesa, who smiled at him serenely.

His stomach twisted in a pleasant way.

And trying to start a family.

He wondered what Fang Xu and Celene would have to say about that?

