

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

3:3 Of Daos and Domains

“Father is planning on putting a lot of pressure on the Dao Progenitors. He’s been content to let them do things at their own pace until now, but as you are aware, things are changing.” Alexander said, head resting on a boulder overlooking Morgan’s favorite spot. Said spider-wolf scowled as it weaved its web, the Hidden Realm continuing to change in accordance with what was needed. Already the Four Realms felt more stable as the structure was made to be more supportive, but Alexander knew this was only the beginning.

“And where do I come into this in your so-called plan.” Morgan drawled, eight eyes rolling in its head as it continually refused to look at Alexander. It was amusing, how obvious Morgan made its dislike of Alexander known, in his opinion. “You want me to, what, coddle them? Hold their hands and walk them through life? That is a job for lesser beings.”

“If it were that simple I would have done so myself.” Alexander rumbled, ignoring the slight. Morgan’s attitude reminded him more like a cat than a dog – all bristly and standoffish. Ironical that the Shadow had chosen the form of a pack animal, a wolf, yet refused to join the “family.” “No, I will be dealing with the rest of the Dao Progenitors. Or, more accurately, the spirits beneath me will be, and Father will be handing down visions to directly influence them.”

“...that is far more direct than They have ever done, besides maybe saving the fool who became the Sun, back when he ascended to a Karmic Immortal.” Morgan said, frowning and stilling its legs. It turned all eight of its eyes to him, gleaming with interest as they were. Alexander mentally smirked, puffing up a bit at having successfully intrigued the Shadow – which was surprisingly easy, if you knew what buttons to push. “What then, oh foolish so-called sibling, would you have me do?”

“Take a look at who Xing Wu is going to visit.” Alexander said. Morgan narrowed its eyes and bared its teeth, bristling at the command – only to still, fur smoothing out as it adopted a more contemplative expression. Alexander bared his teeth in a grin, snaking his head down from the

little tunnel he'd carved through the Hidden Realm to get here, so he and Morgan were eye level. "Doesn't that seem interesting, when we add you to the mix? Subtlety is not your strong suit, but what they need is not subtlety."

"...for once, you make a valid point." Morgan mused, eyes narrowing as they met Alexander's. A variety of emotions flashed across the canine's face, starting with a scowl, rotating through anger, then flashing straight to disappointment and a forlorn look that reminded Alexander of acceptance. The spider-wolf spat as it rose to its feet, rolling its eyes. "Understand that I only do this to aid the Great One."

"As we all do," Alexander agreed sagely, taking a moment to look out over Morgan's creation. The Hidden Realm was growing nicely, its savage mortal People making a quiet life for themselves isolated from all else, despite their initially chaotic nature... "Would you –" Alexander cut himself off as Morgan vanished without a trace, completely evading his senses as it shot off to go do what they had agreed. Even knowing where Morgan was going didn't help Alexander find them, save for – there! A little glimmer of movement, way off in the distance, hidden behind layer upon layer of shadow and hate, moving quicker than expected as time and space bent around it.

Alexander chuckled to himself, puffing up with pride at having seen through Morgan's shroud. He was getting better! Just as he had seen through the Shadow's Hidden Realm so long ago, now he could peer through the rest of Morgan's protections.

Though he was still a far cry from Father's skill. That thought made him frown, and he let this incarnation of his begin to fade. He...needed to work harder, from now on.

What was the difference between a Divine Domain and a Dao? This was a question Xing Wu had asked himself a thousand times over the years, usually to little effect. Inesa had helped him narrow down his view. The other Dao Progenitors had helped him figure out what a Dao was. And Thyia

had helped him to discern why gods could have a divine domain and a dao, as she, truthfully, had neither.

Once she'd had something resembling a domain and a dao in the form of suicide. But it had been something forced upon her, pressured upon her like his ruler status had been when he had been Dei, and she had given it up of her own accord – yet still she remained a god, even if she had neither domain nor Dao. Divinity was not so fragile as to be shattered without those, apparently.

Xing Wu hummed to himself as he strolled through the Hidden Realm on the way to Thyia's abode, letting his mind wander while the Sword Dao Progenitor and Bow Dao Progenitor followed behind, cataloguing the changes to the Realm. Few people ever found their way in here, but with him able to enter and exit as he pleases and the other Dao Progenitors viewing it as a place for rare and unique resources, despite the danger the extreme environments within posed, exploring the interior was typically a massively important undertaking.

For others, anyways. Xing Wu just enjoyed it for what it was – cultivation resources had never been a focus of his. His mind was elsewhere currently, anyways.

“Lord Xing Wu,” the Sword Dao Progenitor asked, drawing his attention with a frown. He wasn't sure how he liked the sound of ‘Lord’ anymore. The Karae man, one of Keilan's people, had his hands clasped behind his back as he stood on a flying sword – Xing Wu found it silly that he still used such a treasure, especially considering the large, bat-like wings on his back. “We have finished analyzing the immediate surroundings and are prepared to move on. However, I do wish to know where you are leading us.”

“I didn't tell you?” Xing Wu mused, coming to a halt to watch the two Dao Progenitors closely. The other, an elemental man with skin like polished oak and grassy green hair, circled the skies on a storm cloud, a bow of pure silver strapped across his back.

“No, sir,” the Bow Dao Progenitor said firmly and respectfully. The deference the man projected made Xing Wu's stomach twist in uncomfortable knots. He hadn't done anything in this life worthy

of being respected so, besides being the first Dao Progenitor. Ah, well. What could he expect from one of Alanna's people? She still had that holdover from when he was Dei, even after he passed the torch to her.

"I'm certain I did. I mentioned we'd be going to visit an...well, I hesitate to call her a friend, but an acquaintance of mine. When I ascend to the Heaven Realm she'll need someone to come visit her from time to time, keep her from being a complete shut-in. Besides, I think being around her will be beneficial for you two – it was for me, and I can confidently say that you two are the strongest Dao Progenitors besides myself." Xing Wu explained, scratching his chin in thought. His fur clothing rustled in an odd wind, carrying the scent of fire and brimstone.

They were nearing the entrance, then. It was located in a little buffer-zone between a place of pure fire and pure earth; the Hidden Realm had a habit of making zones of pure elemental energy, but even they had places where they mixed and mingled.

"Who?" The Bow Dao Progenitor asked.

"A fallen god. Have you ever met a goddess, one of the divine?" Both men shook their heads, glancing at each other. Xing Wu chuckled to himself – yes they had. Inesa had met the both before, not that they'd understood her nature at the time. She'd gotten too good at hiding her divine presence. "She's a little prickly, but she was imprisoned down here after the Sun War. She's since been released, but likes to keep to her old cell for whatever reason; she is...unique, and the closest being to a mortal soul turned god than I've ever met."

"You cannot be talking about Thyia, the Dark Goddess, the Coming Calamity, right hand of the Shadow of the Four Realms, and She Who Burnt the Tree." The Sword Dao Progenitor deadpanned.

"Honestly, I forgot she even had those monikers." He admitted with a chuckle. "But yes, I'm talking about Thyia. Like I said, she's a bit prickly, but overall harmless." And you two might notice the little thing I'm missing to become a god. Sometimes all it took was a different perspective to fix things, and these two, despite having Dao's rooted in his own, might be able to solve it for him.

The two glanced at each other nervously but ultimately said nothing else, following after Xing Wu as he led the way through the ever-shifting hallways of the Hidden Realm. It honestly was changing quite a bit more than he'd expected – gone were the uselessly winding side-paths that used to plague the main branches, and gone were the pools of eddying energy, swirling uselessly in place instead of flowing freely through the Realm. Now the long halls, and even the grand caverns, of the Hidden Realm were far straighter and simpler, though not more linear. And the energy that flowed through it, like water to his eyes? It was far denser than before, and only increasing in strength.

It was enough to start to give Xing Wu a headache, so dense and pure the energy was becoming. He didn't know what was causing it, but it was, quite frankly, alarming and annoying in equal measure.

Thankfully it didn't take them that long to get to Thyia's front door. The smell of sulfur burned his nose, fire flickering along the brimstone walls. The door itself was located in a little corner, tucked between an outcropping of rocks that hid it from most creatures. No ordinary being could open it, but Xing Wu and the others were at the known peak of cultivation, thus no mere door stood any real obstacle to them.

The red metal door swung open on silent hinges, a gust of stale air rushing up from below ominously. The other Dao Progenitors shifted uncomfortably as they descended the slick, burning slope, the narrow corridor seeming to shift from the heatwaves.

And the question once again rang in Xing Wu's mind. What was the difference between a Dao and a Domain? What was the difference between what he was now, and a god? He felt he knew the former, at least. His Dao had yet to manifest itself into something physical. There was no element like "Warrior Spirit." There was no manifest law containing that. Karma? Fire? Light? Those things were tangible. Justice? The Way of the Warrior? Hope? Following one's own path? They weren't...physical, real things. They could be felt to some degree, sure, and followed, but they were dreams upon dreams. Lies, almost, whereas fire was real and tangible. Was that the simple solution? Was that the truth behind it; his Dao had yet to become a physical part of the Realms? Was that why Thyia had been so...broken, her own false domain so easily cast aside?

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So enraptured with his own thoughts he was, toying with the misty substance of “faith” that surrounded him like a mist, that he barely even noticed when he stepped out of the dank, hot, annoyingly cramped hallway and into the refreshing cavern that was Thyia’s old cell. It was only the reactions of the other Dao Progenitors that broke him out of his light stupor.

“Do you think if we followed the roots of the Tree, we’d be able to get to the Karmic Realm?” the Bow Dao Progenitor asked. Xing Wu hummed as he looked where the man was pointing, at the giant root of the Tree erupting from the back wall and piercing through the middle of the floor. A multitude of multicolored flowers waved in a gentle breeze that flowed through the cavern, a faux sun hanging in the sky above, shining its gentle light down.

Xing Wu reached out and touched one of the beams of light, his qi coating his fingers as he gripped the golden ray. It twisted beneath his grasp, flowing like water between his fingers.

This was old light. Older than Inesa. None of her essence flowed through this beam, even if it did still remind him of her. The weight of it felt heavier, too, as if it had come from the Creator rather than her. With a sigh he let it drop, and turned his attention to the only true denizen of the chamber.

Thyia, the dark goddess, was glaring at him. Her black hair was a frizzled mess as always, a frown on her pale face, arms crossed over her chest. Whips of crackling black energy fell from her hands, lacking any of the all-consuming depression that had once coated them.

A crack split the air, a wave of sheer force blowing Xing Wu’s hair back, the tip of a whip nearly catching the tip of his nose.

“Thyia, long time no see!” he greeted merrily, raising one hand.

“I don’t think she’s happy to see you,” The Sword Dao Progenitor commented nervously.

“I told you I never wanted to see you again.” Thyia snapped, each word carrying with it the weight of her existence. Xing Wu stumbled backwards but remained standing all the same, the other Dao Progenitors bracing themselves against the wall just to remain upright. “And this time you bring others? How much must you disrespect me?”

“Come now, all you’ve been doing is holing up in here for millennia. I hardly ever see you go out, so you can’t tell me you don’t enjoy my – and maybe, occasionally, Inesa’s – visits.” He teased, taking a single step forward, down toward her, and forcing his posture to remain relaxed. Losing his balance was practically impossible for him, but he made a show of watching his step either way. Much like approaching a wild animal, he preferred to approach Thyia cautiously, to gauge what kind of a mood she was in.

“I am warning you,” Thyia growled dangerously, voice low. “This is not a time for discussion nor your so-called sparring.” Black lightning crackled around her, a strange, leathery armor appearing on her body. Her hands clenched around the handles of her whips, dark miasma spilling out from around her – though it was weak, far weaker than it ever had been.

Something was wrong. She could be a mean bitch, sure, but she had never greeted him openly hostilely like this. He hadn’t even ever seen her wield whips before.

“Yes, yes, warn me. I’m actually coming to say bye for a while anyways, and to introduce you to my friends here,” Xing Wu hid his frown and continued to chatter, pushing his qi into motion. The energy swirled in his chest and pushed up to pool behind his eyes as a swirling warmth. The technique was yet incomplete, a mere flicker of a thought that prompted him to try and make this

thing. The side-effects were awful too, he couldn't figure out how to get the burning to go away. Well, nothing like some stress-testing, and his senses were screaming at him that something was coming – no, it was here.

“Eyes of Heaven.” He muttered under his breath, the technique snapping into place. His very mind burned as the whole of reality was laid bare before him – or at least, as much as he could see. It nearly stumbled him to lay eyes upon what could only be a fraction of what the Creator God saw, his slow walk stalling for a split second. Something pulsed in Thyia's form, her divine essence, pouring out untainted energy that was very nearly condensing into a new form of elemental energy, twitching once as a message of qi was sent directly to Xing Wu.

“Leave! They are coming!” But it was too late for that.

The Shadow was already here. Xing Wu's technique cut off in that split second he met the Shadow's eyes, the spider-hound glaring hatefully at them all as it watched from some dark corner of reality.

Yet he also saw something else, a little hint of something that made his teeth grit and anger surge within his breast.

The claws of a dragon held some strings.

A spear of pure force launched itself from his hand, screaming with power as it impacted a point in space not but thirty feet from Thyia herself, the tip piercing straight through the thin veil that separated Morgan from the land of the living. Space shattered like glass, pieces of reality falling away from a cave-like entrance floating in the air; black miasma poured out of the hole, spilling onto the floor. Eight hateful red eyes shone in the blackness, a maw filled with too many teeth shining in the light.

“Hello again,” he said icily, any and all hint of merriment or relaxation vanished from his posture and tone. His heart thundered in his breast, a thousand thoughts tearing their way through his mind as he beheld the Shadow in all its foulness for the first time since it had nearly killed him.

“The Shadow,” Thyia breathed, taking a step back. Her whips writhed like snakes in her hands, black lightning crackling off of them as she raised her guard. “I didn’t think you’d come here yourself.”

“Those are some nice eyes you have there.” Every word the Shadow spoke was one of hatred and malice, obliteration running its electric fingers down Xing Wu’s spine. Its full attention was upon him, pressuring him with all the weight of a thousand suns. It paced forward, completely relaxed as it stepped out of its little hole and into the room. The light above dimmed. Reality bent and twisted, seeming fragile in its presence. And the eight razor-sharp spider legs that sprouted from the mangy wolf’s back tapped rhythmically against the air, strumming a tune that promised a fate worse than death. “You believe you can mimic the Great One’s power? Their sight? I’d call it cute, if it wasn’t disgustingly arrogant of you.”

“This is just an incarnation.” He said firmly, confidently, bringing the Shadow up short as all eyes turned to him. The other two Dao Progenitors, who stood behind him, shifted their weapons, bravely standing tall even as their qi whispered terror. Incarnation or no, this was the Shadow they were talking about. Surely it was stronger...no. Xing Wu smiled to himself as he stepped forward, summoning a spear of pure force to his hand. He was not the same man who had struggled to keep the Shadow at bay. And this was not the same situation, either.

“As entertaining as it would be to humble you,” the Shadow said, eyes narrowed. “I am not here for you. You.” All of the Shadow’s attention turned to Thyia as she stood there, scowling. “I have come for you.”

“I will not return to your side.” Thyia spat, even though her hands trembled in fear. “I see through your illusions now. I am no longer the weak spirit you twisted to your foul design.” A cackle echoed through the cavern, space twisting against itself as the Shadow expressed its power. Xing Wu stepped forward, and stepped forward, and stepped forward, and forward, and –

He sucked in a breath, stilling his qi and forcing it outward, the immediate space about him returning to relative normality.

Seems the Shadow had new tricks up its sleeve. What in the Karmic Hell was that?

“Are you?” the Shadow asked, vanishing in a cloud of darkness only to instantaneously reappear beside Thyia. “Because I can smell your fear. Your panic. That you are still that little lost soul so eager to please and bend to my will. I smell it on all of you – fear, panic, doubt.” The Shadow scowled then, pausing and twisting its head to the side. “But I must abide by the rules, now, and let you make your choice. Show me then, how free of me you are. Because I fear something, too, and I will stop at nothing to avoid its arrival. And tools are meant to be used, not waste away in solitude and mediocrity.” The Shadow bared its teeth in a foul grin and suddenly – Time shifted. Thyia screamed in defiance as she cracked her whips, Xing Wu lunging, spear at the ready, while the other Progenitors readied their own techniques. But it was too late – he felt the Shadow’s magic wash over him, not illusory in nature, but time.

And Xing Wu felt the weight of a crown lay itself upon his head, memories of Dei plaguing him. And his own fear, once forgotten, laid itself upon his brow once more.

He stood in his old office, in front of a mirror, a million billion people at his command. His face was a mixture of people – all his lives, blended together as he stared at himself in full regalia. A crown of stars gleamed atop his forehead, the pressure of leadership weighing down his shoulders.

...it was not as heavy as he remembered.

“It’s nice to see Morgan and Alexander working together.” I noted, peering through reality to watch what the two were up to. “Though I know Alexander just earned himself a smack from Xing Wu once he gets to the Heaven Realm.”

Keilan didn’t even bother looking up from where he was messing with one of the first toys I’d ever given him – a little wooden boat, that usually sat on the shelf of his office. With a flick of his fingers it took off into the air, flying through the sky on a wind of its own making. “He should know better than to try and manipulate him like that. Still...it might just give him that final push to achieve divinity.” Keilan dusted off his robes as he spoke, picking up another nostalgic item – this time a flower encased in glass.

“It won’t.” I shook my head, curiously observing Morgan’s technique. Time was bent around all those in the chamber, trying to merge the past with the present; emotions as fresh as the day they had happened flooding through those present. Xing Wu...well, it would be a decent experience for him, but he was already past that. His “hero’s journey,” at least as a non-god, was practically over; all that was left was the final little step. “I can see where and when he’ll ascend; won’t be long, a few days from now at the latest. It’s actually pretty cute, what he’s planning. No, this is more about Thyia than anything else.”

“Thyia? Ah, I see. Wait – is that what Xing Wu was waiting for?” Keilan asked, perking up a little as he, too, moved to stand beside me, casting a quick little technique to observe the battle.

“Yes, though I have a different perspective of it than he does. Mortals are not elemental gods – their souls are different. The elemental gods are nexuses of power, channeling and producing energy of that type, the very laws of the universe tying that element to them and their soul. Mortal souls – even once-mortal souls, like the Immortals – will never be that. They can, however, create new kinds of energy. Energy that is tied into the realm of Belief – using Dao Stars as a sort of...egg, to condense and mold the energy into something Divine in nature.” I started to explain. Keilan snapped his fingers.

“Ah, I noticed this earlier. You once said there will never be a god born of justice in the Four Realms, right? But you never said gods of justice will never exist. That is what mortal-turned-gods will become, right? Gods of the...abstract concepts, that only work because people believe in them. So the elemental gods will be primarily elemental with a sub-dao, or conceptual, domain. Like Aerial being Wind and Secrets. Whereas someone like the God of Justice would be the opposite, with the elemental domain being subservient to the abstract domain. That must mean there could be many gods of justice, but far fewer gods of fire or wind.” Keilan said. I blinked at him, my explanation cut off midway through. There was actually nothing to really correct there. He’d gotten it in one. Pride tickled my heart as I put a hand on his shoulder, beaming proudly as I turned my attention back to Xing Wu.

His domain would be very much unique, as a pillar and the first mortal to achieve godhood.

But my pride was short-lived, replaced quickly with that same sense of urgency that always colored my emotions nowadays. Thyia and Xing Wu needed to hurry up. We had things to do, and stars to rearrange. But, more importantly, I had a son to harass.

“Back to our conversation, Keilan, when will you find a girlfriend? Or boyfriend, I don’t really care which.” I asked. Keilan groaned and buried his face in his hands, refusing to answer. I had pointedly refrained from these questions for a long time with my kids, but if they could harass me over my love life, then I could do so to them.

And as a parent – and a shameless parent, too – I had the high ground when it came to embarrassing my kids.