

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

3:31 It Would Be a Tragedy

Morgan watched the star-god teleport away with a smirk. It was absolutely hilarious to watch the elemental girl and her budding cult crumble beneath the weight of their failure; desperation swirling about those who truly followed her coloring their hearts with inky grey mist, utter shock filling the souls of those who truly believed her blatant lies.

“How pitiful.” Morgan growled, standing. The first syllable alone drew the attention of all the worshippers. They turned slowly, having never noticed its presence despite it being here the entire time. Every footfall sent their blood draining from their faces, realization dawning upon the fools that it had never once lost sight of them despite their pathetic attempts of hiding their ritual, of trying to deny its influence. They had given themselves willingly to the Shadow. They could not back out now, not without severe consequences. “I told you this would happen, did I not? Call me all the names you like, but never call me a deceiver. *I reveal.*” Morgan stepped forward again, the cultists parting before it like water. It scowled at them, at their timidness.

A tool should not fear the one who wields it. Only obey.

“Y-you...” the elemental fool, Terra, started. Morgan whirled upon her, a snarl half-formed.

“Xing Wu, at least, I begrudgingly respect. He had the will to stand before me. He has the strength to have earned his arrogance. I would still slay him in a moment were it not for the Great One’s will. You? You cling to his mantel like insects, begging for scraps and believing it just. He, blasphemous though it is, earned the respect of the Heavens. Earned his place in the stars. What have you done?” The words spilled from Morgan’s mouth like poison, meant to be lies it told itself, yet ringing with an unfortunate amount of truth. Morgan did somewhat respect Xing Wu, because it had come to understand what he was.

He was a sliver of Statera Luotian, of the Heavens. The Warrior, in a different name and form, just as Inesa was the Mother, in a different body and mind. Not all of the pillars had a direct mirror to the Great One's past, but those two did. And that, at least, the Shadow could begrudgingly respect; even if they were pale echoes of true greatness.

"I will answer your question for you. Nothing. All the lies you have spouted, all the lies you have come to believe, they have fallen flat because they lacked true conviction. All good lies have slivers of truth to them. And what will you do now? Go skulking back to your caves, hiding away, trying desperately to build up strength?" It sat before them, spider legs still, eight eyes remaining perfectly calm as it watched them all. Waiting. Letting its words sink in.

"We will never bow to you. Our one true lord is Dei!" one man countered weakly. The Shadow scoffed. Then promptly incinerated the man, a cloud of miasma melting his bones in an instant, his soul drifting up to reenter the Spirit River.

"When you came to me, I made it clear that you are not to speak back to me, without express permission. Anyone else?" The Shadow explained calmly, lifting one paw to lick with mundane casualness. No one stirred and Morgan bared its teeth, pleased. "That was a direct question. Speak."

"You are not giving us a choice." One said.

"You came to me. I will do with my tools as I wish, but I have not use for tools that do not listen. You may run, or flee, but my Realm is not such a kind place. You will not get far." Morgan drawled. "Unless, of course, you are Xing Wu. Which..." it trailed off, looking at them pointedly.

"What...what do you want from us?"

“Everything.” It let the word hang there for a moment, savoring the looks on their faces. “In exchange for power. You came to me, yes. I gave you sanctuary, yes. I gave you a taste of power, yes. But you have yet to fully commit yourselves. Your eyes have lost the path. I will not show it to you. You will walk it, all the same.”

“Power...to resist Heaven?” The elemental girl asked.

“Resist? You fool, no! The Heavenly Dao is the only reason I fight. It is the only good and true thing in this damnable world. The rest, the physical touch, your fleeting so-called immortality, your paltry power, is naught but falsities. The Heavenly Dao is too damn kind to shatter your illusions. I am not.” Morgan laughed pointedly, drawing it out so they could feel exactly how it felt about that notion, down to their very bones. “No, you will be working to save the Heavens. There is a Tree I have set aside, specifically for you. You will take it over. You will rule it. But your entire soul will be mine.”

“You’re giving us a Tree?”

“Was anything I said a question?” Morgan drawled slowly, spidery limbs raising threateningly. It would not kill the speaker, but a point had to be made, and it did get a bit of satisfaction from their reaction to its threat. The woman in question backed off immediately, which was kind of disappointing. Morgan still had the desire to do *something* to them. Maybe not stab. That was...unsatisfying. “But no. I am not giving you anything. I am using you to take a Tree.” Morgan bared its teeth as it stood. “You may do as you wish to it, but it will be mine. Grow your little sects. Plant your roots. But know that I control you, and it.”

Morgan watched as the seeds of doubt bloom within them. And it grinned as wide as possible, knowing that all of its manipulation efforts were paying off, as the first one stepped forward and offer it his soul.

Every inch.

They were now the Shadows, down to every inch.

Now, it could truly help the Great One on Their journey once again, after far too long stuck without a purpose.

“Morgan is plotting something.” I complained, laying down tracts of formation between regions. It went far faster when I personally did it, but moving it along too fast was also a no-no. It meant putting undue stress upon the region itself, not letting the space develop and heal around the formation. Inesa looked up from where she’d been helping me, the brown-haired goddess tilting her head to the side cutely as she processed my words.

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“Only you could say that like it was a minor inconvenience, not something completely terrifying.” She told me. I smiled serenely at her, putting my hands on my hips and giving her my best ‘chiding mother’ look.

“Oh, Morgan’s just a puppy with an overgrown sense of aggression. Its really kind of endearing once you get past all the snarling and huffing and puffing. Like a teenager, perpetually stuck in their rebellious phase. That somehow manages to still want to help me?” I cocked my head to the side as I tried to reconcile my metaphor. Morgan was a far simpler creature than I made it seem, at least from my position. Inesa giggled at me and shook her head again, hair tossing about her head in waves.

“You’re such a dork.” She said. I puffed my chest up proudly. I did try.

On my arm, the destruction snake hissed, clearly distressed at having been ignored for too long. I scratched its chin, smiling at it. It was certainly starting to become a better child now, wasn’t it? Far more well behaved. It didn’t even scare Randus anymore! We were making such good progress.

“The real question is how Solana is going to react to what Morgan is plotting. How its treated the target of her revenge. I suspect that will finally push her over the edge to become a god, and reclaim her spot as a Pillar.” I continued, absently pulling at a bit of the snake’s destructive fire, playing with it like it couldn’t just destroy creation. Inesa said nothing at that, head bowed as she continued her work, but I could see the little bit of doubt and fear swirling within her like a grey mist.

It was understandable. Though most beings considered her the Goddess of Hearth and Home, as that was the state of mind she most closely lived, she was primarily the Goddess of Light. Someone born from Sol’s original death, when he betrayed the Realms and tried to kill Gilles. The idea of Sol rising again surely worried her some – I didn’t have to peer through her to be able to tell that. I dusted my hands on my robes and strode over to her, kneeling and laying a hand on her shoulder.

Her questioning gaze met mine. It wasn’t just doubt there, it was fear. Of something else entirely; but that fear was hers.

“What troubles you so?” I asked softly.

She worked her mouth a little, trying to come up with an answer. But Inesa, bless her heart, had never been a good liar.

“I – Sol is – what if he, she now, hasn’t changed? What if she tries to take, I mean...” she trailed off, light spilling from her fingers as she fretted. The light of the Realm Sun and Lunar Star shone down upon us, the godly forms within stirring. The destruction snake, wrapped around my arm as it was, snapped at the rays of light, destroying a few in curiosity.

“She has changed. What she was, she can never be again. Such is true of all of us.” I told her firmly. Perhaps a powerful god of time could make it so, but not me. That went against every fiber of my being. “You are not in any danger from her, nor will she be able to take any place of yours. Her pride will not allow her to become the goddess of something that already has another. She must be the first of her kind.” Inesa smiled a wobbly, shaky smile at me, and leaned forward for a hug. “Besides, I will protect you.” I said, hugging her back, squeezing her tightly.

“Thank you.” She said, relaxing in my embrace. Something clicked within her as she pulled away, a decision made manifest, and she immediately went back to laying the inter-regional formation lines, eager to get it done. I couldn’t lie, I was as well.

“Always.” I told her. “Always.”

Alexander had no idea how Sehuyun’s universe ran, nor even the purpose of the gods within it. Everything was scattered to the wind, nothing made sense, but he supposed that was the nature of true chaos. Everything changed and shifted constantly; there was no telling how long anything would last. The only thing that really hung onto his attention – besides the Primeval Dragon herself – was a single little god that did not take the form of a reptile, or ball of flame, or bundle of scales that Sehuyun had tried to force into becoming a dragon.

This god took the form of a man.

Not a Fae, but a three-eyed man. He wore silver robes and had green hair. His eyes were dark, black as the night sky. Purple dragon scales dotted his pale skin. He walked with surety of purpose and pride, skin as pales as moonlight and soul as strong as the sun. He was nothing Sehuyun could have ever intentionally made.

“He was an aftershock of my fight with your Parent.” Sehuyun said as they lay on her nest, observing the world as it flowed by. The godling strode through the skies freely, never looking Sehuyun in the eyes to avoid provoking her, and always absorbing all that was around him. He had suspected as much. While Father’s power did not exist within the being, he could see the influence. Whatever the fight between them had left, it had created something new. He could see the balanced approach the godling took to absorbing energy, twisted though it was by Sehuyun’s own personality - but not necessarily in a bad way. Merely different. Alexander rumbled in acknowledgement.

“He is going to rise up to kill you, if you do not change your tactics on raising these children.” Alexander whispered. He could already see it, though it was only a shadow of an image. The man had been made a warrior, for he was born of a battle between the Heavens and a true Dragon. The godling was neither of those things. He was probably the closest thing to a Shadow this world ever had – with Sehuyun being the true Shadow. This would be the consequences of her own actions.

“I cannot change what I am, any more than you can, or he can.” Sehuyun rumbled. “But make no mistake, my fate has a far sooner turning point than when that fool gains enough power to challenge me.” Alexander turned to her, eyebrows raised. Sehuyun bared her teeth, excitement flashing in those coal orange eyes of hers. He didn’t need to ask the question. “My fight with your father will determine everything.”

Alexander closed his eyes and breathed out, his heart panging at the idea. Having spent some time with Sehuyun, he knew of what she spoke.

“When the Four Realms survives your clash with the One World, that godling there will be what draws my realm and yours together, connected as he is to Statera Luotian. It is already in motion,

and cannot be stopped. I do not wish it to stop. And when we collide, we will fight.” She declared. There was no worry or fear in her voice, only excitement.

“Why?” Alexander asked, though he already knew the answer.

“Because a dragon cannot bear to live under a sky in which it is not its own sovereign.” Sehuyun bared her teeth. “Statera Luotian and I will fight, and it will be glorious. And whoever comes out on top will be lord of all creation.”

“Father will not want it.”

“I do not care. He will fight when I give him no other choice. We understand each other like that.”

Alexander heaved a sigh and turned his gaze back out at the swirling primordial chaos, and the godlings Sehuyun was trying so hard to raise. But, inevitably, his gaze drifted back to her, watching her closely. For all her flaws, for all her brashness and violence...she was beautiful. It was nothing but a shame for the multiverse to lose a being like her. Beings who were so unapologetically themselves were far, far too rare in Alexander’s opinion. Even those who claimed to be so were often not, hiding behind that façade. It made Alexander envious.

He didn’t even know what his own breath was.

But, more importantly, it made him consider the future. There was time left still. And Father may yet find a way to solve Sehuyun’s perceived problem...no.

He, himself, had time to figure it out. *Is this love?* He wondered, an odd feeling constricting his chest, just above his heart, when he thought of Father and Sehuyun clashing. With a self-deprecating chuckle he rose to his full height.

“Come.” He told her. “We have much to discuss before I have to leave. Our time is not yet short, but I do wish to spend it productively.” Sehuyun grumbled and rose, primordial chaos falling from her scales like water.

“Then show me.” She said, eyes locking on to his, challenging him. He bared his own teeth. And he did.

3:32 Dragon, Sun, and Star

Time passed so quickly for one of my station. One year was less than the blink of an eye; ten was less than heartbeat, it felt. Things happened on a larger timescale the bigger you got, and that was as true of immortals as it was mortals. Even a simple business owner understood this; a five-year plan to them was nothing, while to a child it was almost their entire life.

The time it took the Rival and Solana to traverse the regions was not little; thousands of years just to travel between each one. That did include cultivation breaks, where Solana would stop to absorb sunlight in a spot of false void, or the Rival would sit in a meadow to watch the Sun and Lunar Star cross the sky, listening to Aeriel on the wind. It shouldn’t have surprised me that the Rival could listen to the wind better than any other in the entirety of the Realms – he parsed secrets from the gentlest of breezes, and truths from roaring gales. Twice more did he contact me, speaking through distant messages we exchanged. His flirtness was toned back a bit, as it had been ever since he met Alala, no longer quite so...forthcoming.

It was not a bad change. Just different. He was quieter, too, after the Immortality bridge. Sometimes I would catch him staring off into the distance, eyes fixed upon something even I could not see. In moments like those, I would sit with him. Not physically, but spiritually, sitting beside him and watching the world turn.

I think he appreciated it. I think he knew I was there.

Just as I was there for all people in the Realms. It may not always have been shown, and most the time not in ways people recognized. I was present for the gentle kisses between parents and their children. I was there to hold them when they cried, to celebrate their joy, and listen to their anger. Most people, almost all people, didn't notice my presence. Only a rare few who could open their eyes and listen to the world, allowing the Heavenly Dao to flow through them rather than fight against it or demand lessons from it – but even they sometimes shut their eyes.

The Rival was the only non-god and non-angel who could sense me all the time. And for that, I thanked him.

Morgan spread its roots. It built its minions up, letting its People, the Arachaeons, meld into the larger Four Realms without a care in the world. The Devil Cultivators and their Demonic Sects grew in the Hidden Realm. Slowly at first; and they would always remain smaller. It was only when they were ready that Morgan would let them sneak out of the Hidden Realm, and take over one of the new Regions.

I don't think Morgan genuinely cared what they did, only that they provided a new kind of balance, a place for negative energy to gather rather than spreading freely across the Realms. Morgan itself had taken what would be known as the Original Sin, and twisted it to its own ends. The Mad Scientist hadn't even allowed the gods to get involved; but it was all for the better, in my opinion. The Celestial Empire would never be able to cover the entirety of the Four Realms, once it started really growing. Eventually, it would have had to fracture, just as the Original Sin had originally designed. Morgan simply expedited the process of creating more than one nation, and focused the budding Demonic Sects into a different direction.

Ironic, how the Shadow was actively working to help me...had I not shared my intentions with Morgan, how I was separating myself from the Realms as much as I could, I could have seen this going a very different way.

Then there was the destruction snake. I scratched under its chin as it clung to my arm, the fires that comprised it burning away my robe so it lay against my bare skin, like some sort of crazy tattoo. It flicked its tongue out at me in retaliation, then turned its gaze to the portal that was slowly opening.

It had grown, during its time here. Not once had it spoken, but through this little being alone, I grasped Sehuyun's realm and how it would take shape. This was the closest thing to a child Sehuyun had ever made, and would likely ever make. All it had taken was a bit of firm guidance for it to start to understand manners and kindness – Sehuyun was many things, but tactful was not one of them.

Something else would have to give the rest of the realm shape, if it every happened at all.

“Are you ready to return home?” I asked the snake. It looked up at me, then at the portal with obvious interest. “Go on then.” I extended my arm, and the snake slithered off, floating through the sky to reach the portal. Alexander's white head poked through just as the snake reached it. The two eyed each other for a brief moment, before the snake bowed its head and slithered to the side, allowing Alexander through first then slithering through itself, returning home.

On the other side, I only briefly caught a glimpse of Sehuyun watching Alexander leave, orange eyes gleaming, before the portal snapped shut.

A breath I hadn't known I'd been holding escaped me as Alexander curled up on himself, lifting his head to peer down at the gods who had assembled to welcome him back, his siblings greeting him formally. A certain fire and water deity duo were the first to his side, climbing up his serpentine form like they had when they were far, far younger. I, for one, watched the entire exchange from afar, smiling to myself the whole time. Reika told him his scales looked brighter. Elvira made him promise to show her his Dragon's Breath, after he claimed Sehuyun helped him refine it more. Keilan told him he looked more relaxed. Even Randus was there, offering him a cup of tea fit for a dragon.

Only when he had properly regaled those gathered with his adventures in Sehuyun's Realm, mostly telling them about the numerous battles they had fought against each other, and the scant few godlings forming within, did he find my eyes.

He gently disengaged from the group, even dropping his two favorites from his horns to swim over to me, serpentine body twisting this way and that as he flew. He wanted a private conversation, then.

"Welcome home, son," I told him, wrapping him in a hug. Big as he was right now my arms couldn't reach all the way around his thick torso, but all the same he bent his head and rest his chin upon my back, returning the gesture. We stayed like that for a moment, then I pulled away, beaming up at him. His expression was fond, but...strained. Something weighed upon him and, in traditional Alexander fashion, he was likely to hold it in until he was absolutely certain of what he wanted to say, or would never say it at all. This was not the time for such foolishness. Sometimes you had to let it go, and speak from the heart. I laid a hand up on his cheek, patting him fondly as I began to move. "Walk with me."

We wandered a short ways away, out of earshot of the dispersing gods, circling around the Realm Sun as it rotated.

"Speak, Alexander." I urged him, sensing his stiffness. For a brief moment I was afraid he would not answer, tensing beside me as he stared into the fiery depths of the Sun.

"What is a Dragon?" he asked softly.

"If you are worried that a Dragon is simply being what Sehuyun is, all that anger, arrogance, and pride, then you needn't worry at all." I said dryly, picking at my fingernail. "A Dragon is simply the

mastery of the self. It is your purest expression; Sehuyun is beautiful because she is everything, pain and rage and protectiveness all wrapped into one. You are something else entirely.”

Alexander rumbled, shaking his head in disagreement – something that surprised me, truly. He never questioned my wisdom. Is this...pride, I feel? I think it is! He was starting to come to his own conclusions - I'm so proud! “No, it is more than that, I fear.” He said slowly. “I have not come to the conclusion of what a Dragon is. But I do know this; Sehuyun is going to be destroyed by it if she does not learn to control herself. Her rage and anger will get her killed one day...and I fear – well.” Alexander trailed off, shaking his great head again as he looked at me sadly. My brows furrowed, but I didn't read further into his words; they were clearly meant for something only he knew, and had not wished to share with me. “Her own creations will rise up and kill her. That is the fate I read in her universe. They will gather power and slay her, if she does not surrender pieces of herself.”

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Ah, now I understood part of where this was coming from. Alexander was not only worried about himself – which he needn't be, he was my child and more than just a Dragon – but also Sehuyun. But he was still wrong.

“You misunderstand her.” I told him, pressing my hands together, feeling the power of Balance swirl between my palms. Within it, I felt my own Dragon, the truest expression of my inner self, beyond my divine domain, rear its head. Had I let this part of myself rule me, I do not think I would have survived my Shadow, either. “Sehuyun will not die because of her rage or anger. She will not be slain because she arrogantly believes herself to be stronger than those who rise against her; there is no force in her universe that will be able to match her strength once she exerts herself. Even I am weaker than her. No mere godling will be able to match her.”

“Then how?” Alexander pressed, meeting my eyes, his rainbow irises thick with desperation.

“Because she is a Dragon. And a Dragon will not harm her own treasure.” Those simple words stunned my son, his brows furrowing in confusion first, then understanding dawning across his features. “You see it now. Everything within that realm is hers, including the godlings. She has hoarded everything she has found in her home. What do you see as your treasure, Alexander? Your horde? Is it not the souls beneath you that you protect? For myself, is it not the entirety of the Realms? Her shadow is herself because she will not be able to bring herself to fully confront those who came from within. And she will not torch her own treasure.” Alexander’s silence was deafening, and he slowly closed his eyes.

“Then that is why she is seeking a death from without.” He said slowly. I cocked my head to the side curiously, but Alexander, predictably, did not explain. Instead he merely dipped his head and bumped one horn against my chest fondly, making me stumble and chuckle from the light impact. “Thank you, Father, for making me speak. It has cleared up some things. Now, if you will excuse me, I wish to return to the Spirit Realm and see how it developed during my absence.”

“I’m glad?” I said, as he turned away, swimming around the Sun to head back to the Realms proper. “That was cryptic. Wait. Is this how it feels when I do that to people? Huh.” I scratched my chin.

Y’know what, fair.

Now, I turned my gaze elsewhere, content for the moment to let Alexander keep his secrets. There was something else interesting happening in the Realms that I wanted to keep an eye on.

The Sun stirred.

I smiled at him and waved.

It's about time for them to wake up, huh?

Xing Wu held a bottle of whiskey as he wandered up to the Lunar Star, the great celestial object slowly rotating as he watched. He came here, occasionally, to talk to Celene, his oldest friend. He wasn't sure whether or not she could actually hear him, but it helped ground him and she had earned at least this much from him. Especially after not having been able to talk to her until after he'd ascended to godhood.

He still teased the Star about him making it official first. She beat him to immortality. He beat her to official divinity. Being stuck in a cocoon didn't count.

"It's been a bit, huh?" he asked, pouring himself a glass of the whiskey, smelling it and sighing contentedly. This was the good stuff, left over from his and Inesa's...elopement? They never did have a traditional wedding ceremony, neither of them feeling the need to formalize it. Their bonds were their own. Either way, the whiskey had been a direct gift from the Creator God themselves, and despite his personal misgivings with the being, he had to admit They had good taste. "Lots has happened, as I'm sure you know. I finally finished moving around the stars. I gave those stupid immortals who were giving me a headache a stern talking-to and left them in the clutches of the Shadow. I know, I know, weird for me, usually I'd crack some heads. I think I've calmed down some. It's concerning." He chuckled, taking a long draught from his glass, feeling the liquid fire burn down his throat.

"...I have news. Bigger news, I mean. I told you about Inesa already, but...well. We made things official a while ago, but there's something else, too. I'm really not sure how to feel about it yet." He admitted, taking another sip, eyes growing distant as he watched the surface of the Lunar Star, its blue light rippling like dancing snowflakes. He thought he could feel Celene's attention upon him, but with how his stomach was twisting, nerves running up and down his spine like little spiders, he couldn't be sure if it was his imagination or not. "Karmic Realm below, I wasn't this nervous when I jumped into a fight ever. I've raised nations, climbed the Life-Giving Tree, told the creator god that I was going to punch Them next time we met. Yet this is what's making me nervous. Not even the Shadow gave me the heebie jeebies like this."

Xing Wu shuddered a little, recalling that foul wolf spider's gaze. Ok, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration. Morgan was terrifying. He sighed, letting go of his whiskey bottle to run a hand along his horns, the bottle itself floating beside him.

"There's no real easy way to say it. I'm worried I won't be any good at the job, but Inesa just confirmed it a little while ago." He said slowly, tasting each word as they came out. He raised his glass in a toast and downed the entire thing, smacking his lips. "It's official. I'm going to be a dad. I think...I'm excited."

The Lunar Star rumbled.

Truly rumbled, ripples echoing across its surface in a way that had Xing Wu shooting to his feet, eyes wide and concern spiking through him. The surface rippled and cracked, the being within not just stirring, but truly swimming forward, knocking against the shell that contained it. Power surged, great flares of icy cold energy shrieking off of the Star, chilling his robes, turning the glass in his hand frosty.

And Celene pulled herself from the Lunar Star.

She had changed quite a bit. Her hair was a frosty blue, her eyelashes covered in snow that made them seem impossibly full and lush. They fluttered as she opened her glowing white eyes, a dress of pure snow draped around her form. Xing Wu felt his jaw drop, but couldn't move from the shock. She – she had...!

"Bullshit." She accused, shattering the image of the frosty goddess of the Lunar Star she had conjured with her emergence, despite snowflakes drifting about her. Behind her, the Lunar Star stilled, the chaos that came with her fading away as if it had never existed.

“What?”

“Bullshit. Bull. Shit! Fang Xu! Did you hear that?! Dei not only got a wife, he’s having a damn kid!” Celene shouted, cupping her hands around her mouth. Xing Wu was frozen in place, mouth agape, thoughts grinding to a complete halt.

“I know!” Came the echoing reply, the Sun going through the same process as the Lunar Star as Fang Xu himself emerged on the opposite side of the Realms. “Dude! It’s about damn time! Come on, you have to introduce us! Who’s the unfortunate lady that got saddled with you?!” His voice was as loud and obnoxious as ever, his hair literal flames, a beard of fire on his chin. He remained as broad and muscular as Xing Wu remembered, visible even from this great distance, and was draped in fiery red and gold robes.

Xing Wu looked at him. Then at Celene as she clapped her hands together, fixing him with another icy glare.

“And you never brought her here to see me! I mean, I know who she is, but I expected you to at least bring her here during one of your talks. For shame, Xing Wu. For shame!”

“Seriously? This is what wakes you up?!” He demanded, throwing his whiskey glass at Celene. She caught it with a cackle and he grabbed the whiskey bottle, cocking it back like he was going to throw that too. She flinched and danced away, mocking him with cries of “oh nooooo.” “If this is how you’re going to be, you should’ve just stayed sleeping!” He snapped, deciding she wasn’t worth the whiskey and taking a long, deep swig.

Fang Xu whistled at him, and he threw a spear of starlight at him, the man cackling as he ducked out of the way.

"You simply have to introduce me to the woman that finally let you into her bed! Poor thing, she must have the biggest heart in the world! I bet it was pity. Was it pity?" he teased, shooting to his side in a flash of yellow light. Xing Wu shoved him away, stalking away while they followed, throwing his hands up into the air.

"Shut up! I don't want to hear it!" he shouted.

But despite his grumbling, he couldn't keep the smile off of his face as he led the way to the Heaven Realm, where Inesa waited.

Family.

He was finally, truly starting a family, and his friends were here to celebrate with him, troublesome though they were, and as much as they deserved a good punch in the face.

He couldn't ask for more.

3:33 Seven Down, One to Go

"This is her?" Celene asked, circling Inesa and looking her up and down with a critical eye. Despite her inner strength the light goddess wilted beneath her gaze, fidgeting and placing her hands over her stomach protectively. Celene's heart warmed a little at her innocent response, Xing Wu practically buzzing with protective intent not too far away. She could feel his gaze on her, sharp as his spear, as if demanding her to back off and give the poor girl some breathing room.

She reached forward and grabbed Inesa's hands, the girl's gaze snapping up to look into her eyes in surprise. She searched them for something, anything that might give away her reasoning for this...this...inexplicable *thing* that has happened here!

"He's not forcing you, right? Like, he doesn't have blackmail? There's no way he could pull someone as cute as you. I mean, look at him!" She pulled Inesa into her chest protectively, pointing dramatically as she whipped her head to glare at Xing Wu. He spluttered, pointing back at her with a hand still holding the whiskey bottle, mouth working in an attempted, failed, retort. Fang Xu, her beloved husband, strode forward past her oldest friend to approach her and Inesa, laying one huge hand on Celene's shoulder. She had to crane her neck to look up at him.

He had always been big, but now? He towered a solid two heads over her, his hand warm and massive, dwarfing her shoulder and filling her insides with warmth. Celene bit her lip to control herself – all these years, and her feelings for him had only intensified. And when he spoke? The deep, bassy rumble sent shudders down her spine.

"My lovely wife is right. Inesa, if you're in trouble, just tell us. We'll beat up Xing Wu for you." He said, each syllable as warm and gentle as the Realm Sun's rays itself. Celene nodded seriously, Inesa giggling as she pried herself out of her grip, eyes shining with joy. It was very, very hard to keep a straight face at this point, Celene's entire face twitching with unspoken mirth as Inesa shot them a mock glare, even her 'disappointed parent' face looking more adorable than intimidating.

Celene had to resist the urge to pinch her cheeks. She really, really did.

"If anything, he's stuck with me." Inesa insisted, sliding over to Xing Wu and slipping her arm into his. The man in question nodded rapidly and firmly, shooting them a look that clearly said "ha! See?!"

And Celene couldn't take it anymore.

She broke down cackling once again, leaning against Fang Xu for support, his own laugh rumbling through his chest as he squeezed her tight, massive arm wrapping around her shoulders. She flushed, beaming up at her husband, his fire-red hair flickering with flames and orange eyes glowing with warmth.

“Get a room, stars above.” Xing Wu’s voice was colored with nothing less than absolute disgust, despite the way his arm snaked around Inesa’s shoulder. Celene laughed at him, turning her gaze back to her old friend. And for the first time in a long time, she really looked at him.

His body was different now, of course, no longer the stern-looking Dei, but a far kinder, softer man with delicate features. His soul burned bright with silver light, lighter in color than she had ever felt. She’d known he had been burdened by building the foundation of the Celestial Empire, by leading, but hadn’t realized how much it had weighed upon him until now.

He was freer than she had ever seen him.

“We have a lot of catching up to do.” Celene said, catching Xing Wu’s gaze to examine his eyes. They shone with a simple light that was filled with nothing but quiet determination and joy – a far cry from the heavy, death seeking look she was used to, so filled with pain and rage at the world, yet defiantly refusing it all the same. “I heard some of it, but not all.” Inesa squeezed Xing Wu’s arm, looking up at him with a small smile, then pulling away.

“Come. This is no place for a conversation,” she gestured broadly, and Celene actually took a moment to look around. She had already known what surrounded her, the light of the Lunar Star touched all, but seeing it again with her real eyes was different. For the first time in a long, long time, she looked out over the Four Realms. The Heaven Realm stretched before her, all light and bright and fluffy. Mountains rose and fell. Valleys and canyons stretched endlessly. A playful breeze ruffled her hair – she turned and raised an admonishing eyebrow at the wind goddess, Aeriel, for disturbing this peaceful moment.

She couldn't see the goddess, of course, but she could certainly *feel* her.

"Are we heading to your home?" Fang Xu asked. Inesa smiled brilliantly, Xing Wu taking another swig of alcohol as if anticipating another round of teasing from Celene.

"Yes. Follow me." She urged. In a flash of light, Inesa vanished, arcing across the horizon. Xing Wu followed a heartbeat later; Celene waited a bit longer, and only for one reason.

She whirled, grabbed Fang Xu's robes, and pulled him down into a deep, loving kiss.

"I missed you, you oaf." She whispered as their lips separated, their foreheads resting together. Orange light radiated from him as he wrapped his strong arms around her, pulling her tighter, possessive in their intensity.

"I missed you more. Now come. We have a Star God to harass. Then we can rebuild our homes." He whispered back. Celene giggled, a girlish sound only he was allowed to hear, and together the two vanished in twin rays of gold and blue light.

Fang Xu watched Celene squeal in delight as they entered Xing Wu and Inesa's home. It was very...homey. Small. A little two-room cottage filled with the scent of herbs and various other knick-knacks the two had picked up in their travels. A fireplace crackled in one corner, filled with a

fire that never dimmed and always felt comfortable. The main room was covered with cabinets and pictures, while the small second room was the bedroom.

Celene rushed forward the moment they entered, picking up paintings of the two, including one of that fateful night Xing Wu had presented his Dao Star to Inesa in the form of a necklace and overall being overly excited to examine their cozy living quarters. Inesa moved about with purpose, setting out tea and preparing some food the old-fashioned way – actually cooking it, instead of making it with divine power. Fang Xu crossed his arms over his chest, feeling the thrumming power surging beneath his skin as he watched it all.

Stolen from its rightful author, this tale is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Even here in the Heaven Realm he felt he couldn't stay for too long. He was a god now. To top it off, he was still coming to terms with his power, despite having spent so much time forming his divinity – the burning, raging might of the Realm Sun was at his fingertips, and the last thing he wanted to do was accidentally burn anyone or the surroundings. Least of all the couple who were now expecting their first child.

“Relax.” Xing Wu said, slapping him on the shoulder as the man slipped past, into the cottage. “Inesa and I are here. You won’t hurt anyone.” Fang Xu grumbled a little at having been seen through so clearly, but that much was to be expected from the man in question.

“You have a lovely place.” He said instead, gesturing broadly not only to the cottage, but the tract of land the two had picked out. Cities of mortals rose far off in the distance, gleaming with power and fine metals, but they were far, far away. The Heavenly Host maintained those places. Wide, golden plains stretched all around, tall mountains looming like stone giants to the west, while a little stream babbled in the front yard. Herbs grew in a tiny herb garden, while a small orchard had been planted out back. It was peaceful. Quiet. Away from everyone in all the ways that mattered, if not proximity.

"It will need some expanding, when the little one comes." Xing Wu said, glancing about, satisfaction written all over his face. Fang Xu laid a hand on the man's shoulder, marveling briefly at the sheer strength he exuded despite Fang Xu's hand dwarfing his frame.

Dei had always been strong. Xing Wu was a whole other level, and that wasn't purely due to power, either.

"I am happy for you. Truly." Xing Wu beamed at the words, but quickly hid his expression in favor of elbowing Fang Xu with a wink.

"Now you'll have to find a place to make your own." He said. "Think about that, building another home with Celene."

Fang Xu grunted in agreement, eyes already alight with all the formations he could put in place – but there was so much to do already. He wanted to go see how his children were doing in the Physical Realm. Or at least their descendants; none of his direct children had managed to rise to immortality, but as far as he could tell from his limited perspective as a nascent god, the Xu clan had risen to prominence and produced nearly a dozen full-fledged immortals.

He also got the nagging feeling that the Creator wanted to talk to them. That was highly likely, but he wasn't quite certain he was ready for that yet. The last thing he remembered seeing before he became the Sun was Statera Luotian's furious, scared face, her green eye seeing right through him, sword raised to sever parts of his soul.

He shuddered in remembrance, phantom pain echoing through his limbs, radiating outward from the core of his being in pulsing, echoing waves. That pain had long since passed, but the memory would forever remain. There was no pain like having part of his soul cut away – it was equal only to the fear of losing Celene eternally, which was essentially the same thing. She was his other half, after all.

Xing Wu offered him some whiskey silently, clearly noticing his distraction. He drank deeply and gratefully.

“So how have you been?” he asked. From there, the conversation drifted. Celene and Inesa bonded over making socks for children, using actual needles instead of just creating the socks. Xing Wu and Fang Xu indulged their impromptu competition, Xing Wu losing horribly and Fang Xu showing everyone up with perfectly made baby socks. They talked about their lives, about how the process of becoming a god felt, and at which point they actually started being able to remember and notice things.

It was a good time. Relaxing. Comfortable. But it couldn’t last forever. Already Fang Xu could feel his power surging, desperate to be released some and threatening this part of the Heaven Realm. Celene was much the same, little flares of blue Star Fire popping up on her forearms, only to be snuffed out a moment later. It was time to leave, and they had an appointment with the Heavens themselves. Statera Luotian would want to greet them again.

“Honey, it’s time to go,” Fang Xu urged, bending down and gently touching his wife’s shoulder, enjoying the way she flushed a little at his proximity. They had been apart for far too long. Celene bit her bottom lips with snow-white teeth, glancing at Inesa and Xing Wu, the former of whom waved them off.

“You are welcome here anytime. I know you have other duties to discover, as a newly ascended divinity.” She told them. Fang Xu bowed, thanking her, and grabbed Celene’s hand, gently pulling her away from their two friends and out of the cottage, to ascend into the sky.

“We’ll have plenty of time to visit later.” He whispered. She made a noise of acknowledgement in the back of her throat as they flew skyward on rays of light, arcing toward the One who was waiting for them, forever patient. Distance truly meant nothing to them; wherever their respective light touched, their physical forms could appear, but they chose to take it slower, enjoying each other’s close company and the relative silence.

Then the Palace came into view. It was a massive, sprawling structure that all the same seemed too small. Two long wings stretched out from a central domed structure, a marble entryway and front garden marking the main entrance. Behind the palace lay a truly massive expanse of greenery, impossibly long for how much space it actually took up. Fang Xu's light bent and twisted around the structure, dancing not quite out of his control but clearly responding to the being within.

The power he so struggled to keep contained shrunk into naught but a whisper in the presence of the palace, an easy flow making control laughable.

"It looks different." Celene whispered as they descended, entering the open main doors and examining the interior. Paintings, tapestries, and a million other artworks lined the walls and decorated the floors of the great hall, stories told in all corners of the universe catalogued and preserved here for all eternity. It *felt* ancient. Even older than the Sun. But nothing, and he truly meant nothing, could compare to the presence of the Creator.

He had felt it before, as a mortal. At least, he thought he had.

He hadn't realized how much he missed back then, until now.

Statera Luotian approached them with soft footsteps, cloth-covered feet marking no sound against the marble floor. She – He – was relatively short, all things considered. She was shorter than even Celene by a few good inches, her black horns long and sweeping, her hair the color of the midnight sky. Purple robes dusted the floor as She walked, elegant and fine, its silver trim shining in the dim lights that filled the palace itself. Then there were Her eyes. To merely call them green and piercing would be to hold such concepts to an unfair standard.

Eternity was held in those eyes, deep and boundless, filled with a loving care that was so thick it was nearly tangible. It floored Fang Xu, his feet rooting themselves to the ground as the Heavens

themselves approached, his breath catching in his throat, Celene stiffening beside him, her hand squeezing his so tight her knuckles turned white –

“It is so good to see you well.” She said, Her voice cutting through the tension like butter. It was soft and gentle, echoing in his ears not because it was loud or powerful, but simply because reality itself wanted to hear Her words. “I have work for you two to do, now that you are awake, but first, I wanted to welcome you back and congratulate you on your successful ascension.” She said, spreading her arms and wrapping the two of them in a hug.

Fang Xu remained stiff, despite knowing all the way to his bones that She would never harm them. He was nearly two and a half heads taller than Her, yet next to Her he felt like naught but a baby. Statera Luotian pulled away, patting both of their shoulders with a small, gentle smile that had his lungs working again, relieving some of the pressure.

“Thank you,” Fang Xu managed to get out, thought whether he was thanking Her for Her words or for relieving some of the pressure, he wasn’t certain.

“It is my genuine pleasure, my dear. Now come, we have a lot to talk about and I am eager to get started. And allow me to be the second – or third, I suppose – to welcome you back into the Realms as our two newest Pillars. Fang Xu. Celene. My children. You have done well, and I am proud of you.” The beaming smile She sent them was blinding, and filled Fang Xu’s chest with warm pride.

That’s right. He’d somehow almost forgotten. The Creator was not someone to fear.

It was hard to, in the face of such blatant love.

3:34 I've Never Been Good at That

I watched Fang Xu and Celene as they left, their divine essences fully settled from waking up, and their duties revealed. Now that they had awoken and had a nice little chat with me, they were ready to take over some of the more power-heavy logistics I needed done. Even freshly hatched, they were already among the most powerful gods in the Realms - such was the power of the Sun and Star.

I drummed my fingers on my thighs as I watched them go hand-in-hand, blue and red light shining from them, mixing together softly.

Now I only needed one more pillar to appear.

We had Inesa, Kei, Randus, Gilles, and now Fang Xu and Celene. Almost all of them, with one slot almost ready to be filled and the eighth well on its way. Gods above, I had been waiting for this since before the Shadow and the Sun War – it was about damn time the Eight Pillars finally reached completion.

Xing Wu was almost there – technically he didn't count yet, but I knew that in the next few thousand years he'd officially take up the mantle. The real problem was Solana, but even that wasn't a problem per-se. She was nearly ready to ascend into godhood, and from there it'd be a short jaunt. Not because of her cultivation power, but because what had once been a god naturally wants to return to that space. I folded my hands together, interlacing my fingers as I looked out over the Four Realms, admiring their beauty.

Energy of all kinds, from pure, almost translucent streams to the dark, crackling energy of negativity ran through the spherical structure in a brilliant rainbow. A symphony of sounds, the echoes of life and creation, rang in my ears with a pleasing hum, setting one foot to tapping. The Sun and Lunar Star rotated around each other and the Realms, my children happily going about their business while I watched

There was Elvira, in court, listening to the woes of spirits and gods alike, giving just verdicts and issuing edicts to her...well, not her kingdom, but yes, her kingdom. Keilan, signing documents and going over particularly troublesome karmic cases, reviewing plans and final documents as he effectively greased the wheels of the reincarnation cycle, his business and those below him running as smoothly as he could make it. Reika, in her tree, humming as she tended to her garden, content to let the natural chaos of the Physical Realm unfold, only occasionally requiring her guidance. Alexander, swimming the length of the River, soothing souls and spirits, helping maintain the flow of energy to the Realms and funneling the excess into the Hidden to be stored as spirit crystals.

And Morgan, ever the troublesome one, working its machinations with unerring accuracy.

I could not help but be proud of them. All of them. And I felt the Warrior in me stir as I looked skyward, right beside the Dragon – my purest expression, not tied to a life. They were tempered by others, sure; the Emperor, the Mother, the Artist, the Craftsman, the Healer, the Trailblazer, the Priest...

But they were still there. Waiting for me to invoke them. Praying I did not have to.

I prayed for such as well, but...who was I to pray to? Mr. Boxes? He would not answer. I did not blame him.

I would not answer a prayer like that either. Such things were a matter of personal decision alone.

Solana shrieked as the Rival slowly rowed his boat, staring at the new region that appeared out of the barrier that separated the new regions like an island through fog. Reality rolled away to show splendor – sunlight streaming down from above, gleaming against the marble-white peak of the Holy Mountain. The clouds of the Heaven Realm – which he had never truly visited yet, something he endeavored to fix once Solana had her fill of violence – shone orange in the Sun’s light as they hovered over the canopy of the Life-Giving Tree. Below the Physical was the Karmic Realm – the black ocean of memories splashing against an invisible barrier that contained it, the karmic valley gleaming with lights from the local Karmic Palace.

It looked just like a painting. A landscape. And through it all, he could still see hints of Statera. Even trying to separate herself from the Realms as she was, she still couldn’t help but leave little notes, little hints that she had been there. That it was all hers, even if she taught others to paint the picture. Like an artist’s mark.

He could see her smile in the sunlight. Her hand in the way the tree’s leaves rustled. Her laughter in the symphony of sound that echoed from the Ocean of Memories.

It was something Solana completely missed entirely, shrieking in glee as she circled the skies above; clearly sensing the foul energy that radiated from the Tree itself. But it was lost on the Rival in the moment, the darkness that claimed the tree merely mixing with what he already saw as beauty. It was different from the others, but not in a bad way. Not in a way that felt...unbalanced.

“I admit it, Statera. You’ve got me stumped. Been looking around for a long time and I still don’t know who else you were. The Mad Scientist was right. I need to meet the rest of the Big Four.” He muttered, shaking his head. Solana screeched once more from above and he picked up the pace, his qi settling in his chest as he rowed. Reality bent beneath the prow of his vessel, distance shortening from a century of travel time – such was the vastness of the region, that he could see it from so far away – to merely a decade.

A decade of watching as the devilish power waxed and waned with the movements of the Sun and Lunar Star. A decade of blissful silence.

It was with a grunt of effort that the boat broke into the Physical Realm's galaxy, stardust roaring past him as it rotated. Planets and asteroids hurtled through the depths of space, the Heaven and Karmic Realms vanishing from sight entirely. His oar bit into reality as he continued to row, stars floating by him – not Dao Stars, but true suns – their solar systems rotating merrily about them. Most systems were completely uninhabitable, holding planets that would require terraforming to live in, were too close or too far from the sun, or even contained only gas giants. The Celestial Empress had a system for some of those such solar systems, even going so far as manually dragging planets into the correct orbit before beginning the terraforming process.

This book was originally published on NovelBin. Check it out there for the real experience.

It was an intensive project, each time they did it, requiring many, many resources and some of the strongest immortals to live in order to get the planets to be in the right place for life to flourish. So expensive was it that the Rival knew for a fact it was a net loss, and would be for hundreds of thousands of years until said planet started being able to produce cultivation resources capable of making up for those that were used. But he respected the dedication.

Sometimes you didn't do things because they were necessary. Sometimes, you did things just because you could. Moving a planet to make it inhabitable? Talk about a flex.

If he wasn't certain the Mad Scientist would rip his head off for even considering it, he probably would have flirted with the Empress plenty by now. *Those two need to hurry up and get together.*

"Student, hurry! To the central island, the false Pangaea!" Solana screeched, circling his little canoe. The Rival grunted and looked up at her with a glare. Her wings flared with heat, embers trailing off of her body – honestly, he was getting pretty annoyed with her. Not because she was dragging him around the Realms in search of evil, that he didn't mind much, but because for some reason he *couldn't catch up to her cultivation.*

Sure, he had ways to make sure he eclipsed her in strength. Hells, he could even use rituals to speed up his own cultivation growth. But he shouldn't need to. He was the Rival; he had a perfect foundation, the likes of which had never been seen before. He had traversed an Immortal Bridge longer than any other. He had lived a trillion goddamn lifetimes – give or take a few hundred billion, which absolutely was still an exaggeration. So why couldn't he naturally catch up to the little shit?!

“I’m going as fast as I can.” He grumbled, keeping his thoughts to himself. Solana chirped and swooped down, perching on the prow of the little craft and preening her feathers. For a while longer they were silent, the Rival playing around a bit – surfing in the trail of a comet with his boat, driving through nebulas just to see the interior and whatever hidden realms they might hide – in one case, an actual entrance to the Hidden Realm, even – and soaring past miniature suns that spat fire at them, the spirits within waving as they passed.

A few planets even had life on them, little sects of demonic cultivators setting up shop.

“Student,” Solana said softly, breaking the Rival’s distraction. Her tone, for once, was calm. Settled, even, her bird-like form glowing with a soft golden light, pulsating like a heartbeat. It immediately made him nervous. “I envy you, you know.”

“Oh? How so?” he asked, genuinely curious as he dipped his oar to the left, tapping away a chunk of ice the size of a small country to keep it from crashing into them. The formations on the oar flared, keeping the wood from shattering as he redirected the icy behemoth. Within, he knew, was a frozen heart that would greatly boost ice cultivation – but he had no need of such treasures.

“You always seem so sure of the path you walk, each step just another in a long line.” She said softly, not turning her head back to look at him.

“Not always.” He mused. “I have a terrible time deciding some things.”

“You have a terrible time deciding small things. Like which flavor ice cream to get.” She pointed out, voice colored with amusement. He chuckled, unable to refute that one. It was hard to decide when they were all so good. “But never the serious things.” The seriousness in Solana’s voice was telling, and the Rival paused his rowing, laying the oar across his lap. Their boat sailed smoothly through space, no longer propelled by the oar as they aimed directly toward the Tree.

“Not really,” he said softly.

“How do you know? When you jumped in to save the old man, when we first met, you acted without thought. Even watching you now, in the long time we’ve spent together, you always seem to know. How to calm the children. How to soothe the conflict. Who to strike and kill.” Solana continued, feathers flaring up. “I have been chasing these people for a long time. We come here, to find them. Even if they are not here my decision after this will remain the same; I will be done with the chase. But...how do I know what to do with them? How am I supposed to know the right choice? I feel myself standing on a knife’s edge, with no way to know what is at the end of the path. And some part of me, some weak, terrified part, both fears falling and wants to fall.”

The Rival stared at his friend for a long, quiet moment.

“Inside you is the answer.” He said told her. Solana puffed up in outrage, wings spreading as she hop-skipped once to whirl upon him at the philosophical answer – but froze when she saw his expression. The burning orange in her feathers dimmed, ever so slightly. “Inside everyone in the universe is a simple truth; the difference between right and wrong. Light and Dark. Good, and Evil. It’s beautiful, actually. Now, I call it good and evil, but it’s really closer to light and dark. The path that leads you closer to the Heavenly Dao, and the path that leads you further away.”

The Rival looked heavenward, eyes going distant as he looked to where he hoped Statera would be. A gentle hand laid itself on his shoulder, comforting and immaterial – the Heavenly Dao saying hello. But it wasn’t within him, and it never would be. He had no such luxury. His learning of such concepts of what was good and what is evil had come through a long, long life, through far too

much bloodshed and an uncountable number of mistakes. All in the service of trying to stop one from damning their own existence, for all the good they could do.

“The trick is to listen to that little voice that tells you, the one that echoes in your heart and vibrates your being. You can see it in some of the priests, in warriors who experience a surge of strength with righteous *duty*, in healers who push their bodies to the limits during disaster to save one more, just one more. You, Solana, can hear it too. You are just afraid to listen.” He whispered that last part sadly, pressing his thumbs together and expecting the little bird to explode on him for such a talk.

“You speak as if you are not one of us. As if you cannot hear it.” Solana said instead. The Rival met her beady little eyes, hiding his internal surprise at her insight. He really shouldn’t be surprised. This was Statera’s realm, and it was filled with annoyingly perceptive bastards.

“No. I cannot.” He agreed. Solana hummed and tweeted out a little song, turning back around to face front.

“You must tell me, sometime, about who you once were.” She whispered.

“Maybe.”

“And I will tell you who I was. I can feel it, you know, the stronger I get. The hole within me, waiting to be filled. Memories, echoes of things I should not remember...echoes that terrify me. I – I fear I will fall to darkness. It is not a rational fear. It is the kind of fear that tells me I have fallen once before.” She breathed.

“Then I will be there with you. And at least one person will not judge you for it, if you do.” The Rival told her, picking up his oar and getting to rowing again. Orange light pulsed from Solana again, soft like the sun’s rays.

“That was supposed to be the part where you tell me you’ll pick me up when I fall.” She told him.

“I’ve never been good at that.” The Rival admitted cheerfully. “Besides, it’s far more fun to trip people, then point and laugh.” At this Solana chirped out a laugh, spreading her wings.

“You are a terrible friend, student,” she chirped, soaring into the skies. The Rival laughed and flipped her off, digging in with his oars once again. Only when he was certain she was not watching did his smile dim, heart echoing with that same pain, that same duty he had felt since the Bridge. *If only you knew how bad of a friend I am.*

A sad smile danced upon his lips as he looked to his left, the ghost of Statera sitting beside him, as if to tell him he was not alone. *Pity. I truly do not deserve a friend like her.*

And so he rowed, not toward his own destiny, but to see the result of another’s.

He had to see it himself. To show himself once again that those who had fallen could indeed be redeemed – even if he was unaware of how far Solana had fallen before.

3:35 Fragments

Solana could feel the weight of her past life pressing down upon her, like dirt smothering fire, as she and the Rival approached the end of her long, long road. It never came to her as coherent

memories, only glimpses; pain and rage, the emotions themselves so familiar, yet whatever drove them so different than what drove her now. She didn't remember what made her mad before, in those fragmented echoes. Only that her pride felt sore every time she thought about it, or discovered one of those little fragments of her old self floating about in her soul. They were almost always filled with dark emotions. She remembered the burning fire, lashing out, wounded pride...so different from what she felt now. Or was it?

The old man who had protected her, had raised her and helped her come to terms with her newfound intelligence, back before she had ever been immortal and still had been but a bird, had been slain by two Immortals who had nothing to do with the righteousness they spouted, and everything to do with the anger and hatred within them. She chased them now out of anger and hate and the desire for revenge – was the path she was on really so different from whatever she had done before?

The thought terrified her down to her core. Not for fear of what she had done, but that she knew she had caused her own fall.

The fragmented feelings that had been echoing in her soul ever since she became an immortal firebird constantly echoed in her mind, taunting her, leaving her wondering at her own self, who she was, and who she had been. Pride surged within her at her strength, at her flames, at the way all looked up to gaze upon her as she streaked across the sky wreathed in golden flames. Pride bloomed in her breast when mortals and immortals alike pressed closer upon her, eager to bask in the rays and warmth of her flames. And there was a little voice in the back of her head that told her *yes. This is where you are supposed to be.*

That same voice told her to push further and further, to take back what was hers.

It was a voice that scared her, setting her feathers to puffing up, her wings to flaring, her heart to racing. That pride felt different. It felt...suffocating and restricting. If she was a silly Fae like her student, she was certain she would have woken up many times during the night in a cold sweat from those dreams and feelings, like she had seen the Rival do when he thought she wasn't watching. She shuddered a little, the cool, foul wind that blew across the treetops adding to the chill that ran down her spine. She was proud of who she was. She was proud of her power, and how she had helped people. So why did that pride make her afraid?

Why did that small voice tell her that she walked a razor's edge?

Why did she look at shadows sometimes, like she was expecting someone to come out of it?

Why did her fear urge her to fall, calling her a fool?

Solana turned her attention outward, desperate to move her mind onto different topics, away from nerves and anxiety. She chirped, singing to herself and listening as the echoing song was distorted by the breeze, that which should have taken her song to all corners of the Physical Realm. But this region was different.

Everything about it felt disconnected, the energy the devil cultivators that were so pervasive here produced far, far worse than any pollution she had ever felt. It clung to her feathers like tar and soiled her qi – she dared not cultivate, lest the tar-like substance pollute her dantian. Even breathing became hard, the air, even in the most wild regions, tasting of staleness and bitterness. Not even spirit beasts were spared; they were aggressive, and wild, and unhinged, attacking without reason as if their minds had been separated from their senses.

Her head twisted to the side as she looked toward the little mortal village that grew not too far away, on the edge of this...lesser Pangaea.

They moved about in their little huts, the strongest among them merely a Solar Plexus level cultivator, the middle-aged elemental stocky and almost perpetually angry, the red emotion rolling off of him in waves. In another part of the universe, he may have even been considered talented, to have gotten as far as he had while effectively crippled.

The mortals didn't even know what they were ingesting as they cultivated. To them, this was how the world was – qi was an oppressive, cloying substance that fought and clawed against them, refusing to be bent to their will. They had to burn off the impurities of the qi within their own bodies just to make it useful, and could never get it fully clean. It polluted their souls and bodies, coloring their actions with foul emotion; a far cry from the typical purer, cleaner qi that pervaded the other regions.

Here, like this, Solana could understand why mortals believed the heavens were oppressing them maliciously. Because the qi of the land itself fought back, and the energy their souls produced burned with sticky darkness. The heavens were certainly still suppressing growth, but here...growth was fought for tooth and claw, regardless of Heaven's will. Whoever controlled this region wanted no rivals.

“Solana, we need to get moving!” The Rival called from below, waving up at her. Solana tilted her head to observe him for a moment, embers falling from her wings. He had changed much since their journey began, physically at least, but she still saw him as the foolish, self-sacrificial boy who channeled an immortal Treant’s soul just to help avenge her fallen friend. Slowly she descended toward him, chirping as she landed upon his shoulder.

He walked through the foul qi like it didn’t bother him, like it was nothing at all, letting his fingers brush gently against the golden wheat that grew in the meadow he had rested in. She didn’t understand how he could be so dismissive of it.

“So how are we going to go about this? Start a forest fire, see who answers?” the Rival mused, scratching his chin thoughtfully as he started to walk, that casual little saunter that belied his ever-readiness to react. Solana ruffled her feathers.

“No. We will head straight for the Tree.” She declared, settling down on his shoulder. “The ringleaders are there, at the base. They are not hiding; this region is theirs.”

“So walk right in the front door. That kind of planning always ends well.”

“I cannot hide from this.” Solana said seriously, beak clicking together as she snapped at a fly that buzzed by. Good thing about talking through qi most of the time, she could talk with her mouth full. Her beak didn’t really let her form words, anyways. “I am the light, student. I have to face this, this way.”

“I am the light is a pretty arrogant statement, Sol,” he said cheerfully, the little nickname sending a shiver of fear through her core. Solana pecked him hard, on the cheek, the man flinching away dramatically and shooting her a scandalized look as she hopped off his shoulder, flapping once to hover just before him.

“This is something I must do. You do not have to come.” She didn’t know why she was so insistent on doing it this way. She wasn’t sure she could articulate it if she was asked. All she knew was that something within her demanded she go here, do this, and face the choir and whatever darkness consumed them head-on. It was arrogant, she knew. She may even die; she was not ignorant enough of the forces arrayed against them to believe otherwise.

When you walk into the tiger’s den, one must be ready to face their claws.

“I promised to help,” the Rival said with a yawn. “I never go back on promises.” It was such a simple statement, yet the way he said it carried such finality that Solana found she could not argue. Instead, she faced forward, spread her wings, and flew toward the darkness growing like a fungus from the city at the base of the Tree.

The devil cultivator's city was a testament to hatred and pain. Not literally, no society could function for long on a solely hatred-filled and fear-focused system, but the seat of power itself tried damn hard to toe the line as closely as possible. Slaves who were not technically slaves filled the condensed, nearly featureless buildings, living in carefully managed homes that were little more than small, blank squares that provided only hints of comfort and necessity. They were tiny things, too, stacked all up on top of each other – facsimiles to what Solana knew some people called "apartments." These were homes designed not for those who desired to live in the city, who enjoyed the fast-paced nature of that life and could live in smaller spaces, perhaps even make it their own, but to contain people. To strip away all that they were, all that could make them individuals, and force them to live the exact same way as everyone else all while maintaining the illusion of comfort and individuality.

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They had food. They had water. But they were controlled by a society that said everyone had to be the exact same as everyone else without actually saying it. That wanting for more was bad. That even if you were higher on the totem pole, you were not worth anything. Except, of course, for those at the very top.

They, supposedly, knew better than everyone else. And the people beneath them just...accepted it, moving about their dull, boring lives, with no prospect of rising up through any conventional means beyond behaving exactly as their "masters" deemed and maybe, *maybe* being allowed to advance in society and their lives. Solana had seen societies of mortals like this before; it was not an isolated thing. But never on so large a scale. And never corruption of this style, where it went all the way to the absolute top of the line; the true movers and shakers of the region, not those who merely thought they were at the top.

The Rival pulled up his hood as he walked amongst them, Solana perched on his shoulder doing her best to look completely inconspicuous despite being an immortal bird. Thank Mother Statera the Rival knew techniques to hide their auras...at least until it was time to reveal themselves.

"Can't even blame the people for not resisting more. It's not like they know better, and it's pretty rare to find a society like this so far along in their complete dissolution of culture and society. It's almost impressive." The Rival noted, weaving between crowds that moved with urgency down the street. They all wore the same sort of thing, dark clothes with white undershirts, their hair styled the same way even if they were of different species. Solana watched an elemental woman walk by, her head down as she ate something fried that smelled far too greasy and unhealthy for her tastes, her mind wrapped up in thousands of small worries that kept her occupied from the true threats.

That greasy food was probably one of the only pleasures that woman got out of life. Solana clacked her beak, and wondered if any of them had ever seen the Light.

"Their culture has been all but stripped away," Solana noted, using qi to peel back what little layers of time she could. She could see echoes of what had once been a budding culture, built before even the Celestial Empire had the opportunity to arrive, the natives of the land dedicating their lives to a warrior culture.

Now the remains of said culture was plastered on walls, made a decoration and desecrated in every way that mattered. They had their temples, their schools, their colors and traditions...but they had been so diluted, everything that had made them sacred in the first place stripped nearly to the bone, leaving only the shell behind. The temples were desecrated in a way that maintained the illusion of proper respect, the holy men and women who had once lived there reduced to echoes, preaching to masses who could not hear them for their own voices were tainted. The entire thing was an illusion. It was a camouflage, a hidden thing to show what they had been and sell the lie that they still maintained that warrior's pride, while simultaneously stripping them of it.

Pride in who they were, turned against them because they believed they still had it. Only the oldest remembered the truth, but even they fell victim to what had befallen the region, and who had come into power.

"They sacrificed their free will for comfort and so-called safety," the Rival noted, not a single ounce of judgement in his tone. "That is what the ones who took power promised. That is what they offered in exchange for everything they were. Look, see? They used the same terrorism tactics they tried to use in the central region to make these people afraid, then swooped in offering safety from that fear."

“They are doomed to fail eventually.” Solana scoffed. “Such things degrade far faster than purer creations.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Cultivation makes everything weird. This nation could survive for tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of years – all it does is prove that this concept can be built and maintained.” The Rival shrugged, disturbing Solana from her spot. She fluttered her wings and shot him a glare as she settled back onto his shoulder. An old Fae man – she called him old, but that was only physically, he had merely a few centuries of life under his belt – said something to the Rival about the pretty bird on his shoulder, taking obvious pleasure in her presence, as he walked past.

“You are saying this will last for eternity, just as the Celestial Empire will?”

“It hasn’t been eternity yet for the Empire,” the Rival noted mildly, crossing a cobblestone street and rounding a corner. The thought was humbling, but Solana found herself unable to focus on the meaning as the object of her obsession finally, finally came into view.

The crowded, narrow, blocky buildings that made up the rest of the city gave way to an open square, with a statue of a Karae man and a marble fountain. A large, brutish-looking government building rose high above all the rest, taller than the second tallest building in the city by half. It was a visual testament to power, but not in a gaudy way – there was no gold or gems, to show off excess wealth on the exterior. Those who ran the entire place knew better than to make it immediately apparent they lived in luxury, while the rest of those in the cities were forced to live like this.

Columns supported the greyish stone walls, a domed roof lined with some sort of silver metal gleaming in the light of the Realm Sun. Qi radiated off of the thing in waves, foul and sticky, colorful red and white flags flapping in the wind. Solana clacked her beak as her gaze rose skyward, following the qi the building produced – no, guided.

This entire city, much like the Celestial Empire's capital, was one giant formation, broadcasting a certain flavor of qi to the entire continent of Pangaea. But whereas the Celestial Empire tried to produce positive or benign qi, this building guided and flavored only negative; be it depressive, anxious, or any other such blinding, binding emotion. The ones who ran this government had yet to fully conquer this entire region, they simply did not have the manpower yet, but the results were already written in stone; they were the ones to flavor the qi, and soon the region would fall in line. There was no power that could oppose them.

Except for Solana and the Rival, but...

"This is it. I can feel them inside." The Rival said casually, sticking his hands in his pockets. "They're trying to corrupt the Tree, assume absolute control. I imagine they'll succeed, at this rate. Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

"No." Solana said, blinking her eyes and cocking her head to the side at the blocky building. For once, now that she actually was here, she was not certain. The people around them had been taken advantage of by those who had killed her friend, and were not to blame. A fight here would kill millions of people...all to satisfy her own revenge. She would create millions of versions of herself, yet Terra could not be allowed to roam free, either. "But we are here, so let us enter."

The Rival said nothing more as he crossed the street, avoiding a strange metal carriage that rumbled down the road under the power of qi and the formations that kept it together, as he walked straight up to the large, bronze front doors of the government building. Solana puffed up, the technique the Rival had used to temporarily hide their Immortal Qi failing the moment they crossed the threshold.

No, not failing.

Solana declared her presence.

A boom echoed out from the interior, radiating through the long entryway. A red carpet stretched from the front doors to a desk manned by root-level cultivators, their gazes snapping up to stare at the two who had just entered. The Rival kept his hands in his pockets. Solana burned as bright as the sun as she lifted off from his shoulder, wings spread, immortal qi roiling as her voice echoed through the halls.

“TERRA OF PANGAEA, MAURADER OF THE CELESTIAL EMPIRE. I CALL YOU OUT!” She roared, voice echoing with all the pain and rage of every life the terrorist woman had taken, all the families shattered in her quest for power.

Mortals crumbled beneath the weight of her qi, unable to bear the sight of her radiance – and she was not truly going all out. If she did, all the clerks, all the mortals, everyone below would burst into flame and turn to naught but ash; an undesirable result. Even still, the walls trembled. Formations flared, cracking and failing beneath the weight of her existence. The building rattled. And the roof of the building was torn from the walls through a power not her own.

From the skies above descended eleven immortals, each more foul in qi and purpose than the last. Among them were the two she had sought, Terra the elemental, and her Karae husband. But they alone were not the focus of Solana’s attention. Her breath caught in her throat, her qi faltering ever so slightly as recognition echoed through her soul, a sharp pang of fear setting even her eternal flames to wavering.

Their souls were twisted and tainted, pieces of their beings removed to allow *something else* in. Power rippled through them, each nearly as strong as she was alone, yet it was the familiarity of their gazes that made Solana tremble so.

Fragmented memories echoed in her mind, from a past long forgotten, expunged from her soul.

She didn't know how she knew, or why, but she did understand this; these people had made their choice. And she had made the same, or a similar, choice in the past.

Solana shrieked, fire rippling from her feathers as fear gave way to terror, and transformed into pure rage. She shot skyward to meet her foes, intent on dragging them away from the city, to prevent damage from befalling the mortals...and a little voice echoed in her mind.

Little fool, come to me once again. Welcome back.