

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

3:36 Rebirth

I couldn't say I wasn't nervous, as I watched Solana shriek skyward on burning wings. Fear and panic filled her heart, while Morgan watched from behind the veil, lurking in a hidden entrance to its Hidden Realm. This entire situation could go any number of ways, Morgan having manipulated Solana's arrival only up to this point and no further. It didn't want to make sure Solana succeeded. It only wanted to see if she was worthy of my forgiveness, and to take her place in my pantheon.

It was an arrogant thought. Who was Morgan to judge whether my forgiveness was misplaced? But Solana followed Morgan's voice regardless, leading herself and the Rival right here, into the trap it had set like the foolish, prideful bird she was. It was a stupid decision, especially now surrounded by eleven immortals empowered by Morgan itself, however...I could see the light in her. The little voice that urged her skyward, the defiance that *needed* to face Morgan, some echo of a memory in her soul reminding her of her previous fall.

My fingers played with Sol's memories as Solana's fires surged forth, the eleven immortals scattering beneath her terrified fury. She shot across the skies like a comet, away from the city below, leading the eleven immortals away...or, at least, the seven strongest. The remaining four remained hovering over the capital building's open roof, staring down at the Rival wordlessly as he moved the unconscious mortals' bodies about, to safety.

"Only four of you stayed for little ol' me? That hurts. Really. Wounds my pride." He sighed dramatically, winking at a particularly powerful devil cultivator still awake – a blonde Avian at the Heart Center of cultivation, who trembled beneath the might all around her. "Oh well, what's done is done. Do you suppose we could settle this over a glass of wine and a game of chess? Or go, or whatever other game you all play? Winner gets to walk away."

"You entered our domain, brat," one of the devil immortals spat, and I turned my attention away from that fight to watch what really held my attention. Those four really had no idea what they were getting themselves into with the Rival; in experience alone he would trump them, though I

figured he would tone things back a bit and genuinely try to negotiate. As much as he liked to fight, he also didn't like to fight. Weirdly paradoxical, that man.

"Stay still you stupid bird!" Terra roared, bolts of fiery green energy launching from her hands as she chased after Solana. The fiery bird dodged and weaved, wings folding against her body as she fell into a steep dive only to pull up at the last second as she shot through a forest – not bothering to weave between the dense trees, cutting straight through the trunks on wings of fire. Smoke and embers trailed after her, the golden flames searing the trees in a way they usually didn't.

Solana's flames were fire, true, but they burned away only what she despised, not everything.

Here, in this region that was truly not as bad as she believed, it burned the qi of the universe itself. Trees smoked, the foul pollution that clogged their sap burning away from the inside, the spirits that inhabited them screeching at the uncomfortable purity of her fires – not because they were holy, or good, but simply because they were pure and clean. That alone was enough to drive the spirits of this region into a frenzy, fleeing the immortal bird.

"DIE!" Solana shrieked, wheeling about, qi pumping through her as she narrowly avoided a glowing red and black chain, thrown by an opponent. It slithered through the air like a snake, chasing after her as she fled, narrowly avoiding the giant, grasping hands of another Fae who tried to snatch her out of the air. Her fires flared outward, her qi-laden voice shrieking out her technique names – solar flares, roaring maelstroms of fire, the tornadoes of ripping wind that rent the land and tore up trees – but all of it was in vain. Against seven immortals? Who was she to believe even her prodigious talents could hold up to that?

Pure flames scorched the skies, burning qi while the seven immortals pressed techniques against her. The very qi of the land itself fought against Solana, the pollution diluting her technique while empowering the devil cultivators. Great bands of green and black, ribbons, joined the snake-like chain in chasing Solana; but she was faster in the air than any Fae or other race that did not belong there, darting between the seeking treasures with natural grace.

“Foolish bird,” Terra spat, the very trees beneath her surging upward upon command of her qi, branches rising, sharp shards of wood firing like artillery shells, exploding and sending shrapnel everywhere. A frown tugged on my lips – she had advanced far, far faster than she should have in melding with the Life-Giving Tree, faster than any other so far, but I supposed that was to be expected with Morgan at the helm.

If only Morgan saw what I saw...

Solana shrieked again and shot skyward, golden flames roiling off of her as she ascended into the sky, higher and higher, shooting up toward the canopy of the Life-Giving Tree above. Terra cursed, giving chase – explosions of qi launched from the pursuing cultivators, exploding around Solana like anti-aircraft shells, buffeting her flight as she continued to ascend. Feathers fell from her wings as she flapped, bursting out of the bombardment and into the canopy of the Tree, dodging between the massive, nearly continent-sized leaves; a testament to how young the Tree truly was, and weaving around the branches. Up there, the qi was thicker, denser, but also not as corrupted; Solana spread her wings wide, soaking in the sun's rays, golden fire pouring off of her form.

But she still fought against seven, to her one. It was only a matter of time.

Solana put up a hell of a fight. She burned the immortals, seared flesh, poked out eyes, her qi and soul roaring in defiance of everything they were, lashing out at the fear that pervaded her entire form. But in the end, she was captured.

It was a simple mistake, tired from the fight as she was, burning through her immortal qi like a candle burning from both ends. The immortal that captured her distracted her with his chain, snaking her into the perfect position before spitting out a thread of spider webbing – Morgan's Binding, he called it – that wrapped around one delicate foot.

And then she was bound, all seven converging upon her, knocking her down onto one of the leaves of the Tree, where she stilled.

Her little chest rose and fell in ragged huffs, her eyes gleaming with defiance even as her fires were suppressed within her. Terra landed before her, eyes narrowed and arms crossed, her husband beside her, the karae man standing beside her protectively.

“What was your plan, here? Did you really think you could walk in through the front door and get everything you wanted?” she asked, cocking her head to the side. “I have over twenty immortals under my command. This is only part of my forces, and now your immortal qi will be consumed by us. Your friend will die, too. But only after you tell me where you came from, and what – “

A fell wind blew through the canopy of the Tree, sending a shiver down Terra’s spine. I stood, readying myself as I read the strings of karma and fate, that which even I had not been able to sever, when I stripped Sol of his divinity and had yet been too young to see them. The time was fast approaching. My heart thundered in my chest vision sharpening as I watched the events Sol had written with his own hands unfold; even Morgan dancing to this tune yet unheard, unwitting but perfectly willing if it advanced my goals.

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“This one is mine.” Morgan said, emerging from its little hidey hole. The seven immortals froze in place upon its emergence, reality splitting as its spidery limbs opened the entrance to the Hidden Realm.

“But-“ Terra began, but a sharp look from Morgan silenced her. It curled its lips in a satisfied snarl, padding forward on open air to land upon the leaf of the Tree. The Shadow stared down at Solana, the little bird’s chest pumping rapidly as fear and adrenaline raced through her system.

“Here you are again, fool.” Morgan taunted, sitting down on its haunches, licking its lips. Its eight spidery limbs tapped rapidly upon her small form, the tips probing, but not piercing. Morgan was enjoying this, the power it had over Solana, dark pleasure weaving through its soul. I frowned at it, disapproving. Just because Morgan was allowed to do its own thing, didn’t mean I had to like it. “After all this, after clawing your way back up from the bottom of the dung pile, where do you find yourself once more? At my feet, begging for my power.” It snarled.

That was a boldfaced lie. Hadn’t Morgan said earlier that it doesn’t lie, it reveals? Sol had approached Morgan for collaboration, not straight power.

But I had to admit, the effect upon Solana was profound. Her heart thundered in her chest. Her qi destabilized, the doubt that crept into her soul with every step towards power and divinity writhing like a demon, reaching out, grabbing for *something*. She misunderstood it; I could see it in her eyes, glowing from qi as they were. To her, it felt like her soul was grasping for Morgan, for the promises of power it offered, when in actuality she was grasping for divinity, for the Realm Sun, for the addictive power she had once wielded.

She had to choose neither. Morgan was not a path to true power, and her path to the Realm Sun was severed from her completely, no matter how she yearned for it.

“I am not...that,” Solana hissed, barely managing to get the words out through her destabilized qi.

“Aren’t you? You’re just another little bird flailing in the wind, and once again you will fall to the end because you couldn’t hack it. You want to see what you were before? No? Too bad,” Morgan taunted, tapping Solana’s forehead. I took a single step forward, watching everything fall into place. Morgan’s own memories flowed into her, filling her mind with every single memory of what they had done together, from Morgan’s own perspective. The brilliant, shining golden warrior, falling to the Shadow’s schemes.

I reared back, ready to throw the memories at Solana – and paused, as another shadow added itself to the mix. It was brief. It was quiet. And even Morgan did not notice as a tiny little thread of memory from someone else was slipped into Morgan’s machinations.

A shadow, fighting against Shadow.

No, more than that. I smiled and settled back down, no longer needing to intervene myself. It was a brother, caring for his sibling despite everything he had done to him.

Solana saw it all. The darkness. The pain she had caused. The fires that had scorched the land, the disappointment of her parent. Falling for schemes, and pride, and a thousand other things that made up everything she had been.

She hadn’t changed. Her pride still warred within her, driving her to foolishly attempt to take on more than she could handle. And because of that pride, she was going to get herself and her best friend, the one she called student, killed. All because she couldn’t turn away from what had once been hers, and was no longer.

If she could cry, she would be shedding tears as Morgan’s laughter echoed in her brain, darkness consuming her, sapping her will to fight, to live.

She had not changed. Those voices in her head were right. The Shadow, all consuming, all oppressive as it was, scoffed, removing its limb and turning away from her.

“Once again, you fail to comprehend even the most basic of lessons. Welcome back to the fold, Fool...is what I would say, but I no longer have need of you. Kill her, pawn, do what you wish.” It rumbled, stepping back toward its hole. The immortals, the ones Solana had been chasing, stepped forward, weapons raised. Terra met her eyes, a dagger of pure hatred forming in her grip as she prepared to plunge it into Solana’s heart.

She couldn’t move. Wouldn’t move. What would be the point? She was a failure...

Then, something happened.

A little shimmer of light slipped into her memories, a flash of what had been, stripped away from the darkness that threatened to consume her. Memories of standing in the sunlight, of a pale man in dark clothes walking beside him. Laughter and joy in finding simple things, touching her light. Love for someone close to her, brotherly and kind; a promise, to not make something unless it was together. The memories darkened, slipping slowly into more stern emotions, disappointment, stress, her light slipping away, becoming harsher...

Terra’s dagger plunged into her, the blade itself nearly as wide as her tiny body. Golden, immortal blood poured from her wound, but she felt no pain. Her soul remained still, as she listened to what that little strip of memories was trying to tell her.

She had fallen, but...

Hope remained. Not from herself, but someone else.

It was...

Her soul tore away from her body, golden light filling the air around her. The immortals did not see her, did not notice. Spirits shied away from her light as her soul slowly began to ascend, body crumbling to ash as Terra's dagger of pure, solidified hatred was wrenched free, ending the tale of Solana the bird. Was this it, then? Was this the end of everything she had worked for, now made to start all over again?

Pride swelled within her, but it felt...different this time. It felt like sunshine and warmth; pride at herself for all the good things, for everything she represented, for her own stubbornness. No. She would not go gently into this good night.

Her body's eyes snapped open, head twitching once, twice, then bursting into pure, holy flames. Power surged up, up, up into the sky, divinity descending upon Solana's soul like a familiar cloak, the devil cultivators leaping backward, away from the purifying, holy flames with yelps of shock and pain. A horrible shriek filled the air as her body turned to ash and dust, swirling upward in a vortex to hover about her soul; she screamed, and wings of fire filled the skies.

Solana's new body burned with all the might of everything she had been, everything she had done, divinity surging through her veins as she ascended, filling the skies of the region with the essence of everything she had done.

She had been reborn, not once, but a thousand times over to get here, each time growing stronger and stronger. Memories flooded into her of every past life, her body taking shape, gaze cold as she stared down at her aggressors. At those who had slain her, had freed her of her chains of fear...and most importantly, at Morgan, who had turned back to her with eyebrows raised.

"Unexpected," it allowed, voice no longer so overpowering. Solana responded the only way she knew how. With newly flexing fingers – and odd feeling, those new limbs – she reached back, grabbed a ball of fire from her wings of fire, and threw it directly into its face.

This was its fault. And she would exact her revenge.

All through the region, mortals paused to look up at the sky. Most didn't know why. Most couldn't even understand why.

Priests looked skyward and wept at the golden light, their sins and virtues laid bare in their souls.

Children giggled and pointed at clouds, finding a bit of solace in their innocence.

Office workers, day-to-day employees, the downtrodden mostly kept their heads down, but even they felt it. The burning fire. The holy golden flames of rebirth; a promise, written into the fabric of reality and proven by one whose crimes had stripped him of all power he had once wielded.

No matter how down you may have been or are, no matter how low you sink, you can find redemption. Struggle is real. Pain and fear, too. But it is never too late.

And in this little stretch of corrupted reality, pollution making qi sticky and hard to cultivate, many souls wept openly, even if they didn't understand why, or truly heard the lesson. All the sight left was a little kernel in their souls, knowledge, a spark that may one day grown into a wildfire and inspire those souls.

Even the Rival found himself smiling, and it had nothing to do with the situation he was in. Three immortals lay defeated around him, their faces puffy and bleeding from where he punched them. The fourth was currently in his grip, head held by the hair in one hand, the immortal's fist in the other.

“Stop hitting yourself, stop hitting yourself,” the Rival chanted with a little giggle, making the immortal punch himself in the face. Then he felt it, and he paused, looking skyward with a little, knowing smile. Gods above, he was sappy. More proof even the most lost of souls could be brought back to the light. “That’s my girl,” he told Solana, though she could not hear even as he basked in the light of her flames.

Just as one other did.

A man who dwelt in shadows, beaming at his long-lost brother-turned-sister.

“Welcome back,” he whispered, eyes wet with unshed tears. “Took you long enough.”

3:37 Reunion

Solana’s ascension echoed through the Four Realms, her light radiating through the cosmos in a brilliant, flaming display. It was an entirely spiritual experience; the holy light of rebirth flooding through reality as Solana ascended on flaming wings. Her body flickered between that of a giant, flaming bird of golden fire and a woman cloaked in flames, feathery arms and hair of fire, wings of gold stretching behind her back. I raised a glass to the new divine being as she shrieked, the polluted qi of the region boiling beneath her might. The seven immortals who tried to contain her scrambled as she fell upon them, their techniques shattering beneath her might.

“That’s Sol?” Kei asked, tails swishing as she sauntered up beside me, laying her arms across my shoulders. I shrugged, disturbing her slightly as I leaned back in my chair, cup of steaming hot tea in one hand as I watched the events unfold before me. “She looks weird. Why doesn’t she have a domain? I thought she was going to become a god again.”

“No. That path is closed, remember? It’s not just the Sun she is cut off from, but the traditional path to godhood.” I countered, sipping and shaking my head at Solana as she chased Terra and her husband through the skies. Morgan’s blessing protected the immortal woman from instant death, but Solana was intent on putting that protection to the test. “She is more like you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. A spirit beast that ascended to divinity, not what we would call godhood. You don’t have a true divine domain, remember? I thought, once, that you would end up that way, but by now I have seen the truth. You, Solana, and other spirit beasts who eventually ascend to divinity will be more like Alexander than the elemental gods, or Xing Wu.” I explained, watching as Solana drove a spike of purifying, regenerative flame at Terra. The immortal woman ducked and weaved, dodging behind a wall of stone and diving into the Hidden Realm – only to emerge elsewhere, trying to fight back and protect what she had built.

Is this what plot armor looked like? Morgan was actively interfering to protect the Immortals now, its personal pets. Now I understood how Morgan felt when I protected Fang Xu during his Karmic Immortal ascension trial all those years ago.

...I’m the only one who should be able to cheat like this. As the universe’s creator and inventor of the game, cheating is my right.

“What’s the difference?” Kei asked, and I willingly turned away to face her, letting the situation play out as it must. My children were rapidly proving that my direct intervention was no longer constantly necessary; Gilles had just done my job for me, after all, and in a much better way than I would have. Much more touching. I’m looking forward to their official reunion.

“Well, you already know how gods are formed. They’re nexuses of elemental power given divinity – essentially, they are spirits who achieved godhood.” I told her. “Xing Wu is what I would call an Aspect Immortal, or an Ascended God. They represent the abstract parts of reality, that do not fall under natural laws; essentially, mortal-made concepts. Swords. Law. Honor, music. Xing Wu is the peak of such and existence because he represents Paths and Dao Stars; he is the trailblazer. As for you, my dear, do you have a divine domain? No.

“Your divinity rests within you, just as it does Alexander. Your ‘domain’ is much more symbolic; trickery, freedom, and mischief. That is who you are, not what you are. In this way, you are a combination of both the elemental gods and the ascended gods; pure divinity without flavor, symbolically representing what you have lived through your life. Solana, rebirth and reincarnation. You, freedom. Does that make sense?” I asked, booping Kei’s nose. She giggled and licked my face with a tail, the fur tickling my nose and making me sneeze.

“Yeah, I guess! So that means three different kinds of gods in the Four Realms – Divine Beasts, Elemental Gods, and Ascended Gods. Huh.” Kei scratched her chin and shrugged, pointing toward where Solana now perched in the Life-Giving Tree, screeching her victory cry as Terra and the other immortals fled into the Hidden Realm, where she could not follow. As a new divinity she had little control over her powers; that was the only reason they had escaped in the first place.

That was not her most impressive achievement, however.

All the mortals that had observed her ascension in the tainted region, or even just been present, her divinity washing over them, lit a little spark within their souls that directly countered the taint. It may take generations, lifetimes to fully come to bear if it did at all, but the spark was there. What Terra had tried to kill never truly died, and the light of one being ignited it once again.

Kei chattered in my ear as I smiled down at them, content to sit back. So many wonderful things were happening now, despite my supposed oppression of the Realms. Solana’s ascension. Gilles helping his sibling. Inesa’s pregnancy...which she has yet to announce to me, the fool girl. I turned my gaze to the Realms as a whole.

My children ran things almost entirely on their own now. Alexander, Keilan, Reika, and Elvira all were sinking themselves deeper into their respective Realms, managing their affairs and running everything. The elemental gods were as productive as ever. The spirits grew, the mortals lived, and souls flowed. Even the defensive structures were being built without my direct supervision; I of course made sure everything was built properly and to specifications, but corrections were almost non-existent anymore. What had started with me guiding their steps every way, had now evolved into casual oversight.

It was reassuring, in more ways than one. Chuckling to myself, I stood, peeling Kei off of my shoulders and holding her by the scruff of her neck to meet her eyes. She grinned at me, like the mischievous little fox she was.

“Come. Let us go get some ice cream.”

Gilles had waited a long time in shadows, watching his sibling’s progress. He had waited and watched with pride as Sol became Solana, his true sibling, moving past the burning pride that prevented her from becoming what she was always meant to be – no, not moving past the pride, but no longer allowing it to consume her. Pride was just who Solana was.

And now he sat there, in the shadow of a Tree foolish devil immortals were attempting to corrupt, he saw her reach back to what had always been hers; divinity.

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“I know you’re there,” her soft voice called, singing gently along with the wind. The great bird of fire’s golden eyes swept the skies, missing him entirely. “Come out.”

Gilles chuckled, shadows pooling around him as he stepped out of his little hiding spot, appearing directly before her. He said nothing as he met her eyes, her beak clacking, golden feathers ruffling as she peered down at him – her body now much larger than before; a fitting growth for her large ego. She shook herself, embers falling from her wings and cascading to the leaves of the Tree below as her body began to shrink. Feathers transformed to flesh, wings to hands, talons to feet. Fire still cloaked her, draping itself about her nude form like a cape of golden feathers, drifting down her arms like gloves, and flickering from her hair. Her skin was the color of sunlight, not quite pure, but radiant.

“Gilles,” she said, and he bowed his head in acknowledgement.

“Sister,” he replied softly. Solana’s bottom lip quivered as she took a step back, fires dimming as she searched his eyes for any hint of a lie, any hint that his claim that she was his sibling was a lie. She would find none.

“Even after what I did?” she asked weakly. Gilles smiled at her; of course the Shadow had told her what he had done.

“Even after all you did,” he promised in a soft voice. She sniffled, wiping her nose on her arm and blinking away the tears in her eyes, trying to hide how the words affected her. Gilles beamed, blinking away his own tears and doing nothing to hide them; why would he hide his joy, or the truth behind his words? Even after all she did, he still loved her. He felt nothing but joy to see her rise up again.

“I’m sorry,” she breathed out in a shaky voice, not meeting his eyes.

“I know. I forgive you. I am just glad you are back,” he told her. She snorted and scrubbed her eyes, taking a few moments to center herself and get her breathing under control before fixing him with a mock glare.

“I hope you weren’t expecting a hug or anything,” she said gruffly, though her heart clearly wasn’t in the rebuke. Gilles laughed as the tension dissipated, his heart lighter than it had been in ages.

“I was not, but thank you for telling me. It seems your sense of humor hasn’t changed,” he told her, heart swelling with the joking, sibling-like tone she used. He had been waiting far too long for this, and though his arms ached to embrace her in a hug no matter how embarrassing, he respected her need to process. She only just got some of her memories back, after all. She chuckled through her emotions, fires flaring brightly as she shook her head.

“I didn’t have a sense of humor before I met the butthead below,” she told him with a shrug. Gilles shook his head; he’d been watching her long enough to know that was untrue – she was far more sardonic and sarcastic than she had ever been as Sol, even before she met the Rival. “Speaking of whom, I should probably introduce you two. Gods, it’s weird to remember I had a brother. I’m sorry I forgot you, Gilles.” *It’s not like you could have done anything about that.* He noted with a small shake of his head.

“Forgot who? Solana, who is this fine young gentleman you are talking to?” The new voice almost surprised Gilles, his divine senses only registering the speaker mere seconds before he actually spoke. That alone was cause for surprise, but he’d been following Solana long enough to know to expect the unexpected from the Matriarch’s visitor. He was still suspicious of the man and his purpose here, but...that could be set aside for now.

The Rival floated in the air beside them, standing on a crackling lightning bolt and enduring the twin divine energies of Gilles and Solana both with only a single bead of sweat beading his brow. His hair was slicked back, flecked with bits of blood not his own, and in one hand he held a scrap of cloth from the man he had been beating. His shirt had torn when he fled, jumping into the Hidden Realm. The Rival had not given chase, obviously.

The Rival met Gilles' eyes and wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, utterly confusing him. Wait – did he call him a 'fine young gentleman?' Was he flirting?

"Uh, this is Gilles. My...brother?" Solana tasted the word slowly, as if unsure if it still held true despite his earlier assurances.

"Yes. From another lifetime, and again in this life." Gilles agreed, meeting Solana's eyes and not denying their connection, again.

"You never told me you had a brother, Sol. You wouldn't be upset if I snagged him for my own, would you?" The Rival asked.

"I am married," Gilles said dryly while Solana spluttered in confusion and disgust.

"Boo. The good ones always are. Alas, our love was brief but never meant to be and – I was interrupting a moment, wasn't I? Shit, sorry," The Rival suddenly realized, looking between the two of them even as he slung an arm over Solana's shoulders, clearly not very sorry. "I'm not good at noticing things like that sometimes."

"Yes, you were, student," Solana snapped, shoving him off of her. "For all your gifts, you are woefully unobservant. Wait – Gilles, you're married?!"

"That is an understatement," Gilles agreed. "And yes. I married Elvira," Solana gaped at him, a bit of...something warring within her that quickly devolved to a happy, yet sad, little smile that spoke

more than words ever could. Pride and joy, and sorrow at not having been there. Gilles could only smile back – he did not blame her for that.

“You wound me! I know I broke your heart, but to change sides so quickly!” The Rival staggered, clutching his heart dramatically, immortal aura radiating from him.

“Why are you like this,” Solana deadpanned.

“Just wait until he meets the Matriarch again. Then you’ll really get to see him be a problem child.” Gilles told her with a chuckle. The air itself seemed to freeze at his statement, Solana’s expression souring, her entire body freezing.

“Right. Statera Luotian.” She said slowly. “I – He is not here, is He. And why would He be? Gods, how am I going to face Him again? Or Elvira?”

“Elvira will be more welcoming than you think,” Gilles said softly. “As for the Matriarch, that is something you will have to do on your own.”

At this, The Rival made a noise of surprise in the back of his throat. “What do you mean, Syl isn’t here? Can’t you feel it?” Solana turned his head to the Rival, and even Gilles furrowed his brows a little as he shook his head, shrugging in exasperation. “Sol, my friend, old buddy old pal, Statera never left your side. She’s always been right there.” He pointed to Solana’s chest, at her heart, and she stilled entirely.

It was a simple understanding, but a profound one, and one that Gilles hadn’t realized Solana didn’t know. She clutched her chest, feeling it briefly, a gentle wind blowing across the trees to ruffle her hair in a single moment, a single, perfect moment meant just for her. Solana’s eyes widened. Her breathing came in ragged huffs. She refused to meet either Gilles or the Rival’s eyes,

as she hid her face in her hands, the relief of carrying doubt and fear in her heart for her entire life finally, finally being lifted from her shoulders.

She had walked alone. But never had that truly been the case.

Gilles let her work through her emotions for a bit, gently gliding forward to lay a hand on his sister's shoulder. She did not look up.

“Come. Let us go to the Heaven Realm together, to introduce you to the gods once again. It is high time you took your place and, Rival, thank you for looking after my sister,” he met the immortal man's eyes. The Rival bowed his head in acknowledgement, as if to say ‘of course.’

“He's coming with me,” Solana managed out through her hands, voice surprisingly steady. Gilles patted her shoulder, and looked to the Rival to see if he was amenable – he should have been able to climb the Tree and reached Heaven ages ago, and would have, were it not for Solana. He shrugged.

“Sounds cool.”

“Then we will be off,” Gilles said, and, in a swirl of darkness, all three were teleported to the Heaven Realm.

3:38 You Are Strange

Elvira met Solana's eyes the moment she entered the Holy Palace in a swirl of black from Gilles' teleport, seated as she was upon her throne. The phoenix was in her bird form, shrunk down to her

usual palm-sized form as she perched upon the Rival's shoulder, her golden fires dimmed to a manageable level. She had been unsure what she would feel upon seeing the ex-sun-god again, if she was being honest. Sol had caused a lot of pain, and damaged the Four Realms in many, many ways. She knew Father was the forgiving type, but was uncertain if she would truly be the same when faced with someone who had tried to force himself to become her emperor despite her rejecting Sol's affections, and tried to usurp Father...even if this was a reincarnation.

Yet as she met the bird's golden eyes, she could feel nothing but relief.

Though maybe that was because she no longer had to listen to the prattling of the Sun and Lunar Star gods as they talked over her head, and now had something more interesting to focus on.

"I'm telling you, it would look better in blue!" Celene argued, crossing her arms and stomping one foot defiantly as she stood to Elvira's left. At this point, she was no longer certain *what* the two were arguing about. She wasn't even certain how it started in the first place.

"We're not talking about how it will look, we're talking about symbolism. Blue –"

"Blue is fine! You're overthinking things!"

"Solana," Elvira interrupted, resisting the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose and instead smiling warmly at the bird. That one word was enough for Fang Xu and Celene to shut up, their gazes snapping to the fire bird as she puffed up her chest – half in a pride display, half to hide the anxiety swirling about in her chest, setting her wings to twitching. Xing Wu looked up from where he sat in his chair of stars below, one arm around Inesa, who leaned against him from her own chair. The impromptu court session was effectively ended as all the few spirits and angels attending turned to Solana.

“Elvira,” she chirped cautiously, body tensing, her divine energy curling about herself as if she was preparing to be reprimanded. Silly girl. She did not realize the truth, yet. Solana was not here to be judged; Father had already done that. She was here to be reintegrated; the realization crystallized itself in Elvira’s mind, her wings twitching as she sat forward, purpose set and no longer doubting her own feelings.

The Rival’s eyes scanned the crowd, a bored expression on his face as he looked about. Despite being the weakest being present physically and spiritually, he was not cowed in the slightest.

“I truthfully expected you to take longer to rise back up,” Fang Xu remarked, stepping forward. Celene followed, the two gods towering over all the others as they approached Solana and Gilles. Her husband met her eyes, asking if he should intervene, and she shook her head gently. As much as she wanted to have blind faith, she did need to present temptation to the ex-sun god. How would she react, when faced with her replacements?

“Who are you?” Solana chirped, cocking her head to the side in genuine curiosity. Her golden fires were dim compared to Celene and Fang Xu, their gold and blue light dwarfing all other sources.

“Fang Xu, the new god of the Realm Sun. This is my wife, Celene, goddess of the Lunar Star.” He introduced. At his full nearly eight to nine feet of height, he towered over the Rival and Solana both in a way that had nothing to do with his divine presence. Solana peered up at him. The Rival had his gaze fixated firmly at eye-level, raising an eyebrow at the massively tall man’s chest.

“You’re a big man,” he said casually.

“I do not recognize you,” Solana chirped. Elvira searched her power, her aura, her very soul for any sense of her reaching out toward the Realm Sun’s power, jealousy at Celene’s presence, anger at having her old place in the sky removed...and found nothing. Even faced with the evidence of her replacement, she felt nothing. Elvira nodded to herself, and relaxed. That was encouraging in more ways than anyone beside Father probably realized. Solana had fully accepted her new role.

“That makes sense. You never did care to look at the mortals below you, not really,” Gilles said softly. Solana clacked her beak and shifted her position on the Rival’s shoulder.

“What do you mean?”

“You never really gazed at those beneath you. That was part of your pride; you never truly descended from the skies, even when you made yourself a body. Only came to my court, and those you deemed worthy.” Elvira spoke, her words echoing truth through the fabric of the Heaven Realm. Even the formation node spinning beneath the Holy Mountain resounded with her words, the defensive formations vibrating.

Solana met her gaze, genuine confusion flashing in her eyes, then realization, and finally acceptance. With a clack of her beak she leapt forward, transforming into her fae-like, and completely nude save for her fires, form. A few gasps echoed through the halls. Inesa covered Xing Wu’s eyes even as he averted his gaze. Gilles paled even further. Elvira raised an eyebrow, while Celene covered Fang Xu’s eyes, the god of the sun not even blinking, almost seeming confused that Celene even covered his eyes.

Elvira could see the red string between them hum, narrowing her eyes to practically read their quick qi messages out of the air. She was not Father, she could only casually read intents – he was confused, knowing he would never look at another woman, nude or not, the way he looks at Celene. As much as that assurance made her happy, Celene still felt the need to cover his eyes.

“I sincerely apologize, for everything I did. I know that words are not enough.” Solana said, bowing dramatically, flames licking at her sides.

“There is nothing to apologize for,” Elvira said smoothly, dismissing the apology with the wave of her hand. The spirits and angels below all looked up at her, as if waiting for her approval to join

the forgiveness, or perhaps a reason to. Many didn't remember the Sun War. Many did, and still bore the mental scars. She had to put on a show, give them all a reason to forgive Solana, beyond merely being a different person entirely now. In other words, she had to nip any potential bias from bleeding toward the once sun-god from the beings who did not know how to forgive yet. "Besides, you are a different person now, are you not? Not entirely, but almost completely. I have been watching you live in the Physical Realm for a long time, aiding mortals, freeing the oppressed, giving light where none seems to shine...you are fulfilling your purpose better than you ever did as Sol. Calling you Sol would be a disservice to who you are now, Solana. You are she who rebuked the Shadow."

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Her words echoed throughout the Heaven Realm, as firm as the Holy Mountain itself.

And it was echoed by others.

"Karma has seen you absolved of all sins. Your good deeds behoove you," Keilan said, appearing in a swirl of black to settle on his throne, right next to Elvira.

"The spirits feel your fires of redemption, and they heal the lingering burns the other one left in his wake." Alexander rumbled, emerging from the Spirit Realm in a ripple of water, curling up on his stone slab of a throne to peer down at Solana.

"The Tree is nourished by flames, from time to time, and your flames purge parasites rather than burn bark." Reika stepped out of thin air, her hair changing to a wintry white as the Physical Realm – or at least, the main Tree – slowly slipped toward the winter season. Snowflakes and autumn leaves fell from her hair as she sat in her own throne, dusted with snow as it was, her eyes roving over Solana.

The phoenix was trembling with emotion, unable to quite take the forgiveness she had already earned long ago, but clearly needed to hear from the mouths of the gods themselves.

“...though perhaps we could get her to preserve her modesty more.” Keilan said with a cough, covering his slight smile with a fist as he observed Solana’s bowing, and still nude, form. Gilles had his face in his hands, the Rival scoffing.

“Modesty?” Solana asked, as if confused about what that word meant.

“He means clothes, girl,” Alexander remarked dryly.

“Clothes? But I’m a bird. Birds don’t wear clothes.” Solana immediately complained. “They look stuffy and restricting. Alexander doesn’t wear clothes, and he’s a dragon.”

“Alexander is also not in his Draconian form. If he was, he’d be wearing clothes. Kei wears clothes. If you don’t like them, stay as a bird,” Reika said dryly. Elvira laughed a little, already knowing how this conversation was going to go. Solana was stubborn at the best of times.

“But I have thumbs like this. *Thumbs*,” Solana protested, wiggling the appendages just to prove a point. The Rival sighed and, in a move that had nearly everyone sighing in relief, made a blanket out of qi and tossed it over Solana’s head, nearly covering her entirely. It didn’t burn from her fires, and Solana squawked, flailing about until she managed to poke her head out from underneath the garment, the rest still covering her form.

She glared at the Rival.

“No. No being stubborn. I have better things to do than to listen to you complain about clothes. I’d be nude too all the time if I could, but then I’d be beating both men and women off with a stick and no one wants that. We’ve been over this,” he deadpanned. Solana glared at him while Reika chuckled to herself, hiding her smile behind her hand.

“I do like him,” she said, grinning madly. Elvira rolled her eyes. Of course the one with the worst sense of humor liked the Rival.

“Which does bring me to my next point. Solana, as a new divine being we will have duties for you, to a degree. Beings like you, Alexander, and Kei are more difficult to give distinct duties to, but this is not the time to be difficult. However, you do have a grace period to learn to control your new powers.” Elvira reasoned.

“I will aid in that. Your symbolism is closer to rebirth and reincarnation; and such things fall under my and Alexander’s jurisdiction. Me moreso, as the manager of karma,” Keilan interrupted.

“Indeed. One the other hand, we have the Rival. An immortal has entered my palace for the first time, no less one of your...situation. What shall we do about you?” Elvira asked, leaning forward. “I believe we have much to talk about.”

“Yes, we do. Maybe. I have embarrassing stories of a certain someone you know, if you’d like to hear.” The Rival said, pointing upward subtly. Elvira felt her smile widen, while the spirits below muttered in confusion.

“Oh, yes. I believe we have much, much to talk about.”

Xing Wu was a little out of his depth, if he was being honest. Inesa lay curled up beside him, head on his chest and playing with the hem of his robes as they listened to the banter of the Big Four and the immortal everyone called the Rival. They all currently sat in a little back room of the Holy Palace, a little wooden table set out while the Big Four drank, Gilles talked with Solana, and he and Inesa simply watched.

“...her hair was green for a month! Lime green! Oh, she was pissed, had to cancel all of her appointments just because of that one little mix up. I called her goth for months!” the Rival slapped his knees, the Big Four cackling openly at the emotional ammunition they were getting from the Rival, against Statera Luotian.

“Remind me what we’re doing here?” Xing Wu whispered into Inesa’s hair, planting a kiss on the crown of his pregnant wife’s head.

“The Rival asked for you,” she whispered back.

“Why? Does it have something to do with the Mad Scientist?” he asked. “Don’t think I don’t see the similarity in their names.”

“It’s because you have major protagonist energy, and I am super jealous!” The Rival suddenly shouted, head whipping toward Xing Wu. He blinked at the sudden shift in conversation, privately wondering what “major protagonist energy” meant. He knew the definition of each of those words, but not when put together in that particular order. “Think about your story, man. The first mortal to become a god. Your entire situation. The whole thing screams that you’re a main character – front and center, the kind of person stories follow. ‘Heaven defying luck, and all that jazz.’ The Mad Scientist specifically told me I needed to meet you, and I don’t need to talk with you much to

know why.” He pointed a finger dramatically at Xing Wu, the entirety of the Big Four had their attention on him now.

“That’s ridiculous,” Xing Wu scoffed. “Everyone is the hero of their own story,”

“Yes, but you misunderstand. It’s not just you, it’s a lot of you. Everyone who became a pillar, even the mortals below. They’re all following a path laid out for them, not unlike a story. One about advancement, following it because their parent did. It took me a while to see, honestly. I get why Statera and the Mad Scientist both told me to travel the Realms, and meet the Big Four.” He mused, shaking his head. “Though this is all just me rambling, honestly. Your lives aren’t a storybook, it’s merely a metaphor for a lot of parallels I see, and that your stories end in very similar ways. Building your own house.” Silence descended for a bit.

“You are strange,” Alexander told him.

“You do not know the half of it,” Solana chimed in, the Rival puffing his chest out proudly. “That was not a compliment!”

Xing Wu shook his head and settled back down, pulling Inesa tighter. His lover curled closer into his side, humming in content and placing a hand on her stomach. It hadn’t started to swell yet. Godly pregnancies clearly lasted longer than normal.

Still...Xing Wu thought back to something Statera Luotian had said to him, way back when, when he had first died as Dei. They had asked him why he had used the words “keep the bridge” while holding against the Shadow. He hadn’t thought much about it then or since, even when they said that it was an echo of a memory, but perhaps there was more to it than that. A little hint in there, somewhere, about who they actually were, and what the Rival actually meant.

He closed his eyes as the Big Four and the Rival resumed their conversations, listening to starlight as it shuddered down from the skies, singing their song for all to hear, including his own star that hung from Inesa's neck.

Maybe later he would figure it out. Maybe some other time.

All the pieces were in place. Finally. I stood above the gathering listening and watching, feeling immense pride for all below. There was little left for me to do to prepare us, now. It had all come together, with time to spare for the collision.

There was only one more meeting left between Yueya and myself, and then we would face whatever Fate we shared. I had prepared my children as best I could. Now I had to be ready for what came next.

3:39 It's Almost Like...

"It has been far too long and you have yet to come visit me, so I am visiting you," I announced as I appeared in the Heaven Realm, crossing my arms and pouting at Inesa as she moved about in her little garden. The goddess of light looked up at me from where she trimmed a tree, using focused beams of light to cut off small branches and other such things. Normally she did it with shears, but the swelling of her belly had made her a little more cautious; it was actually cute.

But also tied into to why I was here to bug her, so soon after she had returned home from meeting Solana. She hadn't come to visit me ever since she'd gotten pregnant, not even to announce it! It was very rude. I demanded justice, and to exercise my right to squeal like a child at pregnancy-related news! It was a little late for that last bit, but that was besides the point. Inesa smiled

patiently, shaking her head, a strand of brown hair falling in front of her face as she let the light die on her fingers and slowly walked over to me, weaving through her vegetable garden.

I watched her, keeping my pout going full-force and shooting my biggest sad eyes at her. Genuinely, I was a little hurt she hadn't come to visit yet, even if I knew the reason.

"You already know what my ultimatum was, until you ruined it just now. I'm wasn't going to announce it to you until you quit that silly little game between yourself and Xing Wu. You need to actually talk to the man." Inesa said, setting her hands on her hips and giving me her best approximation of a glare. All it really did was make me want to pinch her cheeks, my fingers itching at my side.

"I can't. He could walk into my palace right now and try to see me," I protested, quelling that feeling by twisting my fingers together.

"You would try to suppress him with your aura," Inesa countered, crossing her arms across her chest.

"And if he really wanted to, he would push through that to rise up and punch me, just like he claims to want to." I countered back. Inesa opened her mouth to protest, but I raised an eyebrow at her to challenge that. We both knew he was just stubborn enough to do it; at this point he and I were playing a game between Men. If he came directly to my palace, he would lose, even if he punched me. If I came directly to him, I would lose. It was indeed that simple.

"You and your silly games," Inesa complained, pressing the heel of her palm to her forehead. "Why are you insisting on doing this?" I furrowed my brows, cocking my head to the side.

“Because if I don’t, I’ll lose? And since when has it been ok to lose to my children? Most importantly, it’s because I find it amusing. There’s little better reason for someone of my power to do something like this. If I have to, I’ll just disguise myself and visit you and your kids as a rabbit or something.” I said with a dismissive wave of my hand. “Imagine that. Your kid, growing up playing with the Origin of all creation, and knowing me as a bunny rabbit.” At this Inesa giggled, one hand reaching down to place itself over her stomach protectively. Warmth bloomed in my chest as I gently moved over, wrapping her in a tight hug.

“You’ll be Grandma Bunny,” she said, hugging me back. I squeezed her a bit more, rocking back and forth.

“I am excited for you,” I told her genuinely, despite the fear that colored a corner of my heart. What if the defenses went wrong? We were coming up on the collision, I could feel it in my bones. Each day brought us closer, and though there was time yet, it felt like there truly was not much. Not to one such as I, who counted centuries as minutes, if not seconds. “It will probably be a century before the little one is born, though, and I am impatient.”

“I was starting to wonder,” she confessed, pulling out of my grip. “I have been pregnant for longer than even immortals, at this point. It is no burden on my body, but...I, too, am eager to meet her.”

“Her?”

“A mother knows,” Inesa nodded sagely. I ruffled her hair fondly, having not peeked at the gender myself. Some things were better left as surprises. “Her name will be –“

“No, don’t tell me,” I interrupted, placing a finger over her lips. “You and Xing Wu both have opinions on the matter, and I will not let you use me to settle the fact. If you tell me the little one’s name, I will end up thinking of them that way, and the universe will conspire to name them. Hush, you little manipulator, you,” I chided, pulling my finger away and wagging it at her. Inesa flushed a little, smiling as she stepped back.

“I learned from the best. But the name I want is –“

“Nope!” And I immediately teleported away before she could even think about shouting it at me. Inesa giggled, already turning to resume trimming her tree, while I watched from afar, hands clasped behind my back and a small smile on my face. It was only a few minutes longer before Xing Wu appeared in their garden again, wrapping Inesa in a hug, none the wiser I had been present. And Inesa said nothing to reveal it, content with his company.

I pivoted, letting this incarnation fade as I allowed myself to focus more intently on the one coming directly to my palace and true body; Solana. The great fire bird was hesitant, yet shot through space all the same, accompanied by Keilan and Gilles both. It had taken some time for them to convince her she needed to visit me, nervous as she was. The Rival stayed back in the Heaven Realm, talking with my other children still. My old friend's posture had relaxed even more after chatting one-on-one with Alexander, the conclusion he had come to intriguing me; he danced around the subject, never quite admitting what he was thinking while hinting that something had truly been realized.

A very large part of me wanted to try and read into his thoughts, pick out whatever realization he and the Mad Scientist shared, but Monkey Wrenches were among the few things I could not easily see through. Their very nature, and the fact they were protected in many ways by Mr. Boxes himself, denied my sight to a degree. I could certainly see through it, but the Rival seemed intent on not sharing, and if I truly believed his conclusion was imperative for me to hear I would have dug it out of him. As it were, I could let it slide. For now.

“Ma’am,” Randus said, appearing beside me, popping out of his realm of dreams to bow slightly. The butler-god waited for me to turn my attention to him before announcing our guests. “Keilan, Gilles, and Solana have arrived. I do know how you’ve been looking forward to it,” I pat him on the shoulder as I stepped past, my true body traversing the distance from my meditation room, where I had been resting, to the grand hall instantly.

The large doors to my palace were flung wide open. Solana stared at the art and walls in incomprehension, currently in her Fae-like form as she was, still wrapped in a blanket. Keilan stood just behind her and to the side, Gilles on the other side. Both men met my eyes silently.

“Statera – I mean, My Lord – er,” Solana stammered as she noticed my presence, her heart overwhelmed by all the emotions she had gone through, all the changes she was still feeling, nerves and anxiety flying through her mind like the wind itself. I did not let her finish her sentence. My other children had already said what needed to be said; there was only one thing left for me to do.

I crossed the distance between us in three great strides, giving her time to back away if she wished. She did not, watching me approach with fiery golden eyes as I pulled her into a tight hug, my heart trembling with emotion, eyes burning as I squeezed her.

“It is good to have you home, child,” I whispered into her hair. “Welcome back.” Solana shuddered once, arms reaching up slowly to return the hug.

“You never left me, did you?” she asked, squeezing.

“Never. And I cannot tell you how proud of you I am,”

And Solana cried.

And I hid my own tears.

My child had finally returned home.

If only we had more time...

The Rival looked up from where he was playing cards with a few angels and members of the Heavenly Host as Solana returned. She had been gone for a good while – at least a few months, while she caught up with Statera – and now returned with the Karmic Lord Keilan and her brother Gilles by her side. She had returned to her small, puffball of a bird form, keeping the golden feathers that marked her as a divine phoenix, and looked...put out? No, she looked excited, but sad at the same time.

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“Sorry, fellas, but it looks like my time here is up,” he said, slapping his cards on the table and sliding his winnings, a mixture of spirit stones and precious metals that truly held no value to him, into the pot.

“Come back any time if you want to keep giving us your stuff, y’hear?” one of the Heavenly Host members, a cute girl with glowing white skin and eyes of molten silver, taunted, shooting him a wink. He shot her a grin and waved as he retreated from the table, meeting Solana’s eyes questioningly.

“I will be going to the Karmic Realm with Keilan, to learn about my powers,” she said softly, chirping slightly. The Rival nodded, rubbing his shoulder.

“Sounds like it could be fun. I need to stop by the Physical Realm and talk to the Mad Scientist, then I’ll probably try to make my way down to the Karmic Realm.” He mused, scratching his chin thoughtfully. He needed to talk to the Mad Scientist to confirm his theory; he was stumped, at this point, about Statera’s past lives and figured just asking her was going to have to be his next approach, but what the Mad Scientist had realized was something he could actually confirm.

“Then we will be going our separate ways, then,” Solana asked softly. The Rival met her eyes, nodding slowly and allowing his perpetual laid-back grin to dim into something a touch more serious. They had travelled a long time together. To him, she was a friend, and a shining example that even lost souls could be redeemed, a reminder he had desperately needed. But ultimately, she was a blip, a momentary companion in his obscenely long lifespan. To her? He was probably her closest friend, someone who had travelled with her for most of her life. He had been there when she ascended to Immortality, then again when she ascended to godhood.

Which was exactly why she needed to leave, and find new friends.

“Seems like it. I’m sure we’ll meet again; you can’t get rid of me that easily,” he joked, winking at her.

“You did keep your promise. You told me you would help me find those who had killed my old friend the priest, and you did. You have been through a lot with me, because of me. For that, I thank you, student,” Solana said, bowing her head slightly. The Rival grinned at her, and shot her not just one, but two thumbs up.

“Always, my friend! And hey, if tall, dark, and handsome over there bothers you just give me a holler! I’ll sic Statera on him,” he promised, pointing to Keilan. The winged man in question shifted uncomfortably, his thick tail curling at his feet.

“I understand you are teasing when describing me, but it is very weird to be called that by someone older than Mother,” Keilan told him. The Rival cackled while Solana cocked her head to the side in confusion, clearly not understanding what they were talking about. She didn’t know about his true nature, after all, despite their time together.

He gave it ten years before she figured it out. Statera’s kids were annoyingly perceptive like that.

“Will you need help getting back to the Physical Realm?” Gilles asked, stepping forward to lay a hand on the Rival’s shoulder. He shook his head.

“Nah. Reika built those stairs between Realms, right? I’ll just take those. I still want to explore a bit more, after all,” he told the deity of shadows. The pale man nodded once, thanked him for taking good care of his sister, bid farewell to Solana, and promptly teleported away.

The rest of Solana’s farewell was relatively simple. She chirped and cried a little. He sniffled too, once or twice, not denying that he would miss the prideful little bird. Then Keilan took her away, and he was left in the Holy Palace alone, and completely unsupervised.

For once, he did not take obscene advantage of that fact. Partly because he was never completely unsupervised thanks to Statera, but partly because he did want to know the answer to his question, his humble realization. That little niggling in the back of his head that told him he had to check it out. Figure out what was happening. So he walked.

He walked through the grand marble halls, their ceilings reaching so high they might as well have been the skies. He passed by members of the Heavenly Host, that naturally immortal race who were as noble and just as Elvira herself; riding winged beasts and training in gleaming silver armor. He chatted with spirits and angels alike as he walked, and waved to the Empress of Heaven herself, the Goddess of Divinity as he left her hallowed halls, descending the long, long staircase to the base of the Holy Mountain.

The yang qi was dense here, so dense he had to hold his breath lest his lungs become saturated with the stuff. Each footstep down the stairs felt weighted by boulders, the weight conversely lifting significantly the further he descended. Clouds drifted in the skies far below, the entirety of the Heaven Realm laid out before him. The light of the Realm Sun and Lunar Star shone off of the endless landscape, canyons deeper than entire planets and mountains taller than continents ranged off into the distance. Magic beasts roamed far off into the horizon, barely visible even to his qi-enhanced eyes, cities forming of powerful, heaven-touched souls.

It was beautiful, in its own way. Almost completely self-sufficient, too. Bits of yin were floating up from the ground below, mixing with the yang, keeping it just on that teetering edge that kept it from turning to pure Yang, and therefore starting the downward journey to yin.

And Elvira's presence ranged throughout it all, her holy white light suffusing everything.

The stairs to the base of the mountain stretched on seemingly endlessly, but he took his time, greeting those who passed him and denying any offers of transportation. He could not take this the easy way, lest he miss something.

It wasn't until he reached the base and found the bridge between Realms, the relatively unused staircase that rose from the highest branch of the Life-Giving Tree to the lowest part of the Holy Mountain that he took a quick break. The staircase itself was ringed in magic, dense trees growing around the cloudy stairs, no wider than a single person, as they cut through the fabric of reality.

The Rival studied it. The link. The little line that allowed the transfer of souls between Realms in a way that the Spirit River did not. To his knowledge none had used it yet besides Xing Wu, who had sprinted up it in his search for Inesa. He walked the perimeter of the hole cut in the Realms, prodding it, testing the edges – they were stable, far too small of a hole for it to be an issue. The steps themselves were covered in moss, despite the cloudy substance that comprised them, and sang of ascension.

He knelt beside it for nearly a year, studying its structure. Only when he was satisfied did he descend.

The stuff of Heaven made up the first bit. It was the same solid, cloudy substance he was used to seeing from afar – at least, after the first few hundred miles of solid rock and ground that made up the ground itself. It sang of purity and holiness, divinity and yang, just as its master did. Just as Elvira's own aura did.

When he reached the barrier between Realms, he paused again. Here, the stairs were rickety. They had long since lost the moss that grew upon them, now made of an entirely grey material that shuddered and shook as the grey barrier that separated the Physical Realm from the Heaven Realm, a natural construction, stretched and compressed in equal measure.

He observed these movements for nearly a dozen years. Watching the flow, observing what few spirits he could see as they tried to press through, only able to slip through the cracks by riding the waves of the Spirit River. The Realms weren't fully separated. Not yet. But he could see the signs. The way energy was flowing, the way Reika's domain of change pressed against the barrier, making it more solid as it clashed against the solidity of the Heaven Realm, while Elvira's domain did the same from above if for the opposite reason. None of them quite recognized it, in his mind. The way things were lining up, to be split apart naturally.

Like cells, beginning to duplicate. The Rival spun on his heel, and resumed walking once again.

He descended to the highest branch of the Life-Giving Tree, its leaves the size of gas giants, the storms that shook the peak nearly enough to tear his own body asunder, perfect though it was. The Rival smiled, and leapt from the edge of one of said leaves, allowing gravity to do its job and hurtle him toward Pangaea below.

He did not look too hard at the galaxy swirling beyond the edges of the landmass known as Pangaea. He did not look too long at the Trees growing beyond that, creating a forest.

He focused on guiding himself toward the Celestial Palace, where he knew Alanna, the Celestial Empress, and the Mad Scientist awaited him.

He did not have to wait for them.

The Mad Scientist met him.

As he appeared over the capital city of the Celestial Empire, hundreds of floating islands chained together above a massive lake where two ley lines intersected, cities of mortals containing billions stretching around the chains that held them in place, the avian Monkey Wrench shot out of a window to greet him.

Her eyes watched him carefully as he came to a stop just before her, standing midair, desperately searching his face for some sort of answer.

“You did see it,” she told him, relief flooding her features. “I wasn’t seeing things.”

“Oh you were definitely seeing things,” The Rival shook his head slowly. “Thought I will hand it to you, if it pans out the way it’s shaping up to be, you picked a hell of a universe to be a part of. That they’re already splitting, and the universe isn’t yet a billion years old? That’s impressive, to say the least,” he allowed. The Mad Scientist shuddered, eyes gleaming.

“Exactly! I can already see a difference from the others I’ve seen; each of the Realms are starting to form their own unique systems, almost like –“

“A body,” The Rival agreed. The Mad Scientist bobbed her head excitedly.

“Who knows, it could even result in a new multiverse!”

“No,” The Rival shut that thought down immediately, shaking his head. “We’ve seen structures like this before, or at least I have, and they don’t go that far. Never. At best, this will settle into a section of universes, making Statera potentially powerful and a ruler of multiple universes, but not a new Overgod. So get that idea out of your head. If it were that easy to create a new multiverse, the Overgod would have done it years ago,” this deflated the Mad Scientist, though not for long. Her expression turned thoughtful.

“It does beg the question, however, as to why the Four Realms and the One World are colliding in the first place? This is a valuable universe, and stable, too. You would think the Overgod would break a rule or two here,” she questioned softly.

“I cannot claim to know what the Overgod thinks, but I can tell you this; whatever the reason, the two universes are colliding because of something someone in these universes did. That’s one of the rules. He doesn’t interfere with problems caused by internal decisions.” The Rival said bluntly. “That means neither you, nor I, nor the First, nor the Overgod had anything to do with it.” The Mad Scientist nodded, rubbing her forehead.

“...I suppose we will have to ask Statera Luotian about that, then,” she muttered. The Rival nodded, but did not voice his true concerns.

For he was uncertain if even she knew the true cause, or else she would have fixed it herself.

3:40 The Eye of the Beholder

Inesa and Xing Wu's child came a century after I had talked to her, just as I had predicted. Xing Wu lit up with a joy I had never seen before in his heart as he held his baby girl for the first time, expression a mixture of concern and unrelenting love. Inesa's face was slicked with sweat, but was ultimately ok as she lay in bed, one finger gently touching her daughter's cheek as Xing Wu knelt beside her, cradling their child so both could see.

She was beautiful. Hair as green as the leaves of the Life-Giving Tree, undirected divinity swirling in her chest, not yet bound to any element or concept. Her lungs were strong – her cries had nearly blown their entire house down – but now she slept peacefully in Xing Wu's arms, swaddled in a blanket Celene herself had woven for the child.

Said goddess had politely stepped out of the room, having served as the midwife, to rejoin her husband outside and to let the new parents have their moment.

"What should we name her?" Xing Wu asked softly, marveling at the little one as he gently laid her beside her mother. One finger gently brushed against the nascent goddess's face, poking one chubby cheek. Inesa rolled onto her side, her divine body already nearly completely healed of the rigors of birth, to gently brush at her daughter's green hair and cup the side of her face.

"Sequoia," she breathed softly. "Our little heart."

"That's not what that name means," Xing Wu chuckled good-naturedly, planting a kiss on his wife's forehead. Inesa narrowed her eyes at him, flicking him on the nose as her other arm curled protectively around the newly-dubbed Sequoia.

“No, but it is the tree that grew in the village where we first met, when you were just a grumpy old fisherman,” she chided. “Where you first stole my little heart.” Xing Wu laid a hand on his wife’s head, ruffling her hair fondly, yet softly.

“That was a firestruck oak,” he corrected with a small grin. “But Sequoia works, too. Certainly sounds better,” Inesa huffed at him, pulling their daughter closer and tugging Xing Wu onto the bed with her, so the three of them could lay together. I slowly turned away, allowing them their moment of privacy with their newborn, but not without leaving a little gift.

In the yard, just outside their home, I planted two tree seeds. A Sequoia, like their daughter’s namesake, and an oak.

“Randus,” I said, standing from my position above them, my true body stretching and feeling my back pop in a dozen places. The butler god of dreams appeared before me, bowing, a cup of steaming hot tea at the ready. I gratefully accepted it, sipping at the scalding liquid to enjoy the burn. “You are coming with me,”

“To where, Ma’am?” he asked, though I knew he already knew the answer. I laid a hand upon his shoulder.

“To the final meeting with Yueya before the collision, of course,” I told him, already leading him away. Randus bowed his head in acceptance, following behind as I floated toward the edge of the Four Realms, where Mr. Boxes would open the portal to the meeting room.

“Is there anything I should keep an eye on?” he asked. He knew me far too well; already knowing that I had a purpose beyond just his company in the meeting.

“I believe Yueya has figured out a way to blind me,” I told him honestly. “I hope it is untrue, but I cannot take the risk. I would like for you to keep an eye out for me, perhaps see what I cannot,”

“No one has greater sight than you, Ma’am,” Randus said honestly, in one of his rare bouts of non-sarcasm-laced praise. I met his eyes for a moment, his confusion radiating from him. Seems he has not realized yet – truth be told, I myself had not thought enough about his true existence to figure this out until Keilan brought news about Astraea, the Goddess of Stars from Yueya’s world, claiming to be an existence like Randus.

“True,” I allowed. “But you do not see with your eyes, do you? You see that which is not visible to the naked eye.” It was a fundamental thing. I had truesight, yes, and as a god and Origin Deity I could see far more than one of my power had any right to be able to. The thick, iron band of Fate that connected the Four Realms with the One World still hanging heavy in the sky was a prime example; as were the karmic strings that stretched across all of reality, the flows of energy and even potential futures revealing themselves to me. But Randus, inherently, existed in a space that was originally not meant to be seen. The mind. Dreams and ambitions. These are things one feels; you can observe the results of them, but truly see them? I wondered now if even I could not see their depths.

Or, more accurately, if they could not hide from truesight in some way.

Such was Randus’ existence. Such was my own.

“I understand,” he said slowly, even though he did not. Regardless of his own doubts, I had faith in him. Unfortunately, he was not the one I was worrying about. Without another word I led him to the portal, Mr. Boxes announcing our arrival in his usual way.

Ding!

{[The third and final meeting between Shin, Origin of the Wheel Realm; The Oshun Trio, Origin of the One World; Statera Luotian, Origin of the Four Realms; and Sehuyun, Origin of the Primeval Realms will now begin. Remaining time until collision; 1,000-5,000 years.]}

The interior of the meeting place was the same as it had ever been. Pure white walls, and a single round table in the center. Four arches containing portals to our respective realms sat directly behind the seating areas for the Origins, the chair I had been given the same dull greyish color it had been the past few times I'd been here.

For once, I was not the first to arrive. I was last.

Shin sat in his chair, the skeletal god watching with those green balls of fire that burned in his eye sockets. He had grown much since last I had seen him, his domain of the Cycle deepening to the point even I could not see through it completely. Black smoke poured from between the joints of his boney fingers, spilling out of his dark cloak to mist about his form – he inclined his head to me respectfully as I sat.

Sehuyun was the same as ever. She did not meet my eyes, the dragon resting her head upon her claws, though I could sense disappointment radiating from her. Not because of me, but because...Alexander was not here? I could see the bit of karma that connected the two, and it was the bit that was producing the disappointment. Was my son not telling me something about the time he'd spend in her realm? Was this what one might call the rebellious stage?

I chuckled a little to myself as the fiery snake I had spent so much time with poked its head out from beneath Sehuyun's wings, flicking its tongue at me.

“Behave, Boitata,” Sehuyun grumbled. The fire snake, now named, only flicked its tongue at her scales in response, earning a pleased rumble from her. It was good to see that she had finally accepted her children’s various natures for what they were, rather than demanding they all become Dragons. Such was as a dragon should be; fiercely proud and protective of all in her horde, no matter their origin or nature.

Finally, I turned my gaze to Yueya. She lounged in her chair, her red hair a deeper, more brilliant crimson color than I remembered as she smiled beatifically at me. Alala flexed, the muscular woman winking, while Curie adjusted her glasses, both of them flanking Yueya. It was a shame I hadn’t had as much time to get to know Curie as the other two; she seemed like an interesting conversationalist. So different from the others; Alala, with her casual bluntness and live-in-the-now attitude, Yueya with her eternal beauty and gentle searching of the heart.

Randus touched my back, sending me a quick message through qi, hiding in my shadow as he was. *You’re drifting.* He told me. I took a deep breath, mentally building walls before meeting Yueya’s eyes once again.

Her beauty still shone, was still brilliantly powerful, but less blinding like this. Yueya’s smile widened.

“So, how goes the preparations?” Shin asked, leaning forward and steepling his fingers together before his face. “Judging by your attitudes, it is going well,”

“Nearly everything is ready on my end,” I supplied. “The defensive formations are built, the outer regions have been fortified, and much of the excess energy has been condensed into a crystalline skeleton within the Hidden Realm. The Four Realms are as sturdy as they will get.”

“What else remains for you to do?” Shin pressed.

“Just make sure my people are prepared. I don’t have as many sacrificial regions as I would have liked, but there’s only so much I can do there,” I had originally planned to have a lot more sacrificial regions than I currently did – which was only one fourth of the original sixty four I had planned for, but building more would have taken both more time, and an expansion of the Realms themselves, which was counter to what Yueya and I had planned and would also have taken a restructuring of the entire defensive formation.

What was left was for me to directly approach the Dao Progenitors who were taking slow command of the new Trees, to inform them of what is expected and coming.

“I see. And as for the Oshun trio?” Shin pressed, turning toward the three goddesses who were actually one.

“I can almost grab fate, but it keeps slipping through my fingers. Unless I have some great breakthrough of understanding through the pressure of calamity, that is not an avenue we can explore, Statera,” Alala said firmly, shaking her head sadly. I inclined my own head to her.

“As much as I believe you will thrive under pressure, let us hope it is not necessary for you to even try, then,” I assured her. She flashed me a sparkling grin, Yueya slapping her shoulder playfully.

“No flirting, you, this is serious. I could feel you thinking about it,” she chided, more out of amusement than actual reprimand. Alala giggled and flushed a little, her intentions revealed. *Calculation*. Randus told me. I mentally frowned at the word, reviewing that interaction in my head. Calculation? That had been a genuine response, to my eyes, banter between beings of the same mind. Like how I chided myself sometimes.

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“Right, well, as for the other plan, we have made headway. Our afterlife is properly supporting the One World from the inside of the shell, now, struts acting as support to maintain the external structure. A skeleton, if you will. Even if the Four Realms does veer off-course and crash into the internals, there should be enough support to maintain structure.” Curie interrupted, adjusting her glasses in that way she did whenever she had more to say, and was organizing her thoughts.

“Close as we are to the actual collision, we are beginning to be able to predict where we’ll hit,” Yueya added, waving one hand. A golden ball appeared in the air above the table, a clear representation of the One World. Curie cleared her throat and tossed a silver marble into the air beside it, scaled to be the size of the Four Realms.

...we were so much smaller than them. It was hard to imagine my little Realms had enough power packed into it to support an increasingly growing population of very powerful gods.

“We can basically tell where the Four Realms will be approaching from, though the Void still makes actual approach vectors difficult to predict. You could come straight on, or take us on the sides. Straight collision is still unideal, mostly because we have no way to guarantee the Four Realms internals won’t explode and crack the One World,” Curie explained, the silver marble gently tapping the One World’s surface and exploding, leaving a gaping hole in the side that quickly fixed itself, the demonstration returning to its original state.

Pretty sure the explosion will be bigger than that, now. I clasped my hands before my face. The spirit stone skeleton Morgan had made in the Hidden Realm was definitely more stable, but like a bullet contained in a gun, it now became more dangerous if it did go off. The extra safety the skeleton provided was just worth the risk.

“So we have a couple options. Statera, you mentioned being able to burn negative energy like a fuel source, thereby acting like a thruster of sorts to control the Realms?” Curie asked.

“Yes,” I said, thinking of the Tree Morgan had installed its pawns on, so thick with negative energy as it was. The darkness of the Realms had needed a place to go, it just so happened to coincide with

my needs. They weren't sacrificial by any means, but the region would act as a decent focus for the "thrust" if needed.

"Good. Here's what we're proposing," Alala started, gesturing toward the 3d diagram. The Four Realms began to approach from the middle. "If it's a straight shot, easy, we just use the thrust to angle the Four Realms to harmlessly pass through the central band, where gods will be to open a hole for you to pass through, hopefully without breaking too many of the internal struts." At this, the silver ball passed straight through the One World, harmlessly.

"If it's from the sides, however, we will be using a hybrid approach," Yueya added, the mini Four Realms readjusting, lines stretching from it to the One World to show where it could hit – usually at the top or bottom, or areas where it would be awkward to adjust to aim for the central band, where more land for the One World was being made.

"Statera will activate the 'thrust' to set the Four Realms into a spin, while we grasp the karmic threads binding us together and swing you around the One World like a moon," Alala said, flexing a little. The silver ball spun rapidly, naturally curving around the One World in many different directions before shooting off into the Void, like a slingshot.

"That way, even if you do strike the surface it will either be a glancing blow, or the spin will help you dig through the surface like a bullet – less like a rock thrown at a vase. The force, if you're going fast enough, may let you burn a hole straight through the surface and emerge on the other side with minimal damage," Curie theorized.

"...and your defenses?" Shin pressed, clearly not satisfied by the answer.

"Adequate," Yueya said slowly. "We, like Statera, have some more things we could do, but at the end of the day we didn't have enough hands to make it as solid as we would have liked,"

“I see. Then you will have done all you can,” Shin said sagely. “Statera, what are your thoughts on their plan?”

“It’s not too different from what we have previously theorized,” I began slowly, tasting each word as I attempted to figure out how to phrase what I needed to. “The rotation is nice. If I harden the Primordial Chaos shell just slightly, it may even produce a bouncing effect, letting my Realms skip along the outside rather than burst through,” I reasoned, pausing slightly. Shin must have taken that as his opportunity to speak up again and get to the matter he was most interested in, as he spoke up before I could finish my thought.

“Excellent. Then the next matter is what happens after. Assuming the Four Realms and One World keep their current trajectories after the collision, one or the other may collide with either my or Sehuyun’s Realms –“

“It will be mine, you paranoid skeleton,” Sehuyun growled, rolling her eyes as she spoke for the first time. She did not meet my eyes as she stood, wings flaring, orange fire radiating from her throat and beneath her wings. “I have bound my and Statera’s Realms together. You and Yueya do not share a deep enough connection to inspire collision. It has already been decided,” Shin froze and I closed my eyes, heaving out a sigh.

“You...*what?*” Yueya hissed, gaze snapping to Sehuyun. The great dragon bared her teeth at the goddess of beauty, a deep, rumbling laugh that echoed in the room like a volcano, ready to erupt. “You overgrown lizard, how dare you –“

“ENOUGH!” Shin roared, the walls shaking, the color white itself darkening as he exerted the full extent of his power, smoke billowing across the table like grasping hands. “Yueya, Sehuyun, you will SIT DOWN!” Yueya flinched, her power flickering as Alala and Curie moved beside her, neither of them cowed, but neither of them eager to continue. Sehuyun grumbled with a little chuckle, eyeing the skeleton like she may wish to fight him.

I, for one, felt resigned.

“Thank you, Shin, but what is done is done. Sehuyun will do as she pleases, and though I do not approve,” at this I shot the dragon a glare, “there is little to be done about it.” My eyes found Yueya, reading her face as she bowed her head, seemingly ashamed. I did not need Randus to question her reaction, but that was also not what I needed to ask first.

Shin stared at me, the room still darkening beneath his might, until he relented and slowly sat back down. The walls and table returned to their usual color and, taking a deep breath, I forged ahead.

“Yueya. How are your...cracks?” I asked carefully. She smiled at me, all hints of her earlier behavior gone. That worried me in more ways than one; and it wasn’t because I feared her latching onto me. I feared it was because she had latched onto something else. *Ma’am*. Randus warned.

“They are healing faster than ever, Statera, thanks to your child’s words and deeds. Do not fear for us,” she told me, standing. I stood as well, meeting her eyes.

“Yueya,” I said softly. “If we are to survive this I need you to be transparent with me.”

“My dear Statera, for all your sight you are seeing things were there is nothing, I assure you,” Yueya insisted. *No, I fear I am seeing nothing, when there is something.* I frowned a little, crossing my arms across my chest. Sehuyun rumbled, almost gleeful, while Shin tensed to my left. They needn’t worry, I was not preparing to fight; this was a simple confrontation, nothing more.

“Yueya, your Realm was collapsing. It cannot be that simple. Share with me, so we can properly prepare for it, just in case,” I told her. “I want to help, so we both survive,” Yueya opened her mouth again, likely to wave off my concerns, but Curie silenced her with one hand.

“It’s my fault,” Curie stated bluntly, the dark-haired woman’s shoulders drooping. I blinked. Yueya whirled on her, laying a comforting hand on Curie’s arm, but the woman forged ahead all the same. “It had to come out eventually, Yueya. Our collision is my fault. The thing that binds us was my brain child; I bound our two universes together during the meeting between origins, reaching through Yueya to allow our essences to mingle. The One World was collapsing, and none of us truly knew what to do – my only hope was to bind our world to the one being who had a problem opposite our own. And it worked. Because of that connection, because of Yueya’s connection to you and therefore our worlds, the One World began to stabilize.”

“Then...” I started, brows furrowing, stunned into relatively silence. That was huge, and I had missed it! How had I missed it? Why had they hidden it?!

“All it should have done is bring our universes a little closer, inspire you and Yueya to explore each other’s feelings a bit more; nothing forced, but enough that our two universes could feed off of our imbalances and stabilize, then break apart if we were incompatible. Who was I to know a Paradox would decide to play pool with the universes? By the time I figured out what had happened, the bond had grown too strong to cut through conventional means. What was once supposed to be a stop-gap, something I could freely unbind when it was no longer needed, instead turned into a calamity for both our worlds. And was also why the Overgod did not intervene.” Curie shook her head. I bit my lip hard, tamping down the fury that swirled in my gut. They knew this whole time, and they didn’t tell me?!

“Why hide it?” Shin asked, before I could.

“Blame,” Alala answered softly. “We did not want Statera to level blame at us. We needed their full cooperation. I am sorry,” she sounded genuine, but all the same I fixed her with a glare harsh enough she withered beneath my gaze, shame-faced.

“You should have told me,” I said darkly.

“We should have,” Yueya agreed. “But we didn’t, and for that I am truly sorry. We didn’t know you the way we do now. You have been nothing but transparent with us from the beginning,” *no shit*.

“And you have been deceitful,” I interrupted with a snap, pinching the bridge of my nose and letting out a firm, slow breath. Perhaps, if I had known the true cause, we could have found a proper solution. Randus tapped my shoulder but I ignored him, reaching out as I was, feeling for the truth in my memories and connection to the Realms and...there. Hidden, just barely, by the strand of fate I had been so focused on.

“Statera, the plan will work,” Yueya said softly, hinting as if I would be the one to break our plan.

“I know it will, assuming there’s nothing else you’re not telling me,” I hissed, Randus tapping my shoulder once again. “How will the connection affect the spin? The movement of my Realms? The approach? Will we not just come right back around and strike the One World again after missing, a slingshot turned into a rubber band? This is an entire calculation we have not accounted for,”

“I accounted for it,” Curie said.

“And I am supposed to just –?!” I cut myself off, Randus laying a firm hand upon my chest. Rage simmered just beneath my skin, my breathing coming in ragged huffs, my power surging as the Dragon in my chest raised its head. *A missing piece*. Randus whispered, the words cooling my head just a little. I unclenched my hands and took a step away from the table to look at those before me, really *look* at them.

Sehuyun had bared her teeth in a feral snarl, all too happy, eyes curling into pleased crescents. Shin sat on the edge of his seat, the skeleton watching me with those expressionless fire-eyes of his. And the Oshun Trio regarded me warily, Alala looking genuinely torn between rushing forward

to reassure me and staying beside her sisters, who watched me warily. It struck me, in that moment, the truth, or at least a piece of it.

They were afraid of me. The anger I held still burned in my chest, yet I withdrew my power, forcefully tamping it down. Yueya's beauty still shone, obscuring my vision, hiding something else from me – another little distraction, another piece to the puzzle I could only suspect at, but not fully realize. *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. No wonder she could blind me so.

“There had better not be any more surprises,” I said with far more force than I intended. Yueya nodded once, Alala wringing her hands as she met my eyes, refusing to look away despite my glare. I saw genuineness there. I did not see that from the other two. *A Mother Bear protects her children with all her might, a Dragon zealously guards their horde*. Randus whispered, my eyes narrowing further. Was that where their fear came from? “I will hold up my end. Ensure you do the same.”

“Statera,” Shin called as I began to turn away, toward my portal. I glanced at him over my shoulder. “Do not do anything rash,”

The simple statement caught me completely off-guard. How did they see me? How did Shin see...see. You have to be kidding me.

“You underestimate me,” I told him firmly, glancing once at Yueya, eyes narrowing further. What was her game here? No...no. I couldn't think like that. I turned back around to fully face them. “Being a parent is not just protecting your children, and ensuring they have a good environment to grow up in, but also to set a *good example*. It is not me you should be worried about. Yueya, Curie, Alala...we need to talk about this. Privately,”

“Yes. We do,” Yueya immediately agreed, bowing her head. “With what little time we have left,”

I hardened my heart at the beautiful woman. At the beauty of Alala's sincerity. At Curie's intelligence. And for the first time in a long time, I feared for the future.