

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

3:4 Who You Were, Who You Are

Four beings stood before an incarnation of the Shadow. And, just as expected, the only one to resist its influence fully was Xing Wu.

Though that was, perhaps, a bit of an exaggeration. Morgan's technique was complex, yet entirely simple, and truthfully impossible to resist unless you were someone like myself. It called upon echoes of one's past, pulling them to the forefront of the victim's mind and body so these vestiges were layered upon the current self – essentially giving the soul in question multiple distinct echoes of its personality to contend with. The other Dao Progenitors struggled against their past selves, mistakes, rights, wrongs, all warring against each other. Poor Thyia was frozen in place, the manic, crazed version of herself playing tug-of-war with her current self's psyche. I wanted to reach down and help her, but she had to make it through this herself.

I had given her the tools to do so, and she was close enough as it was.

Xing Wu, on the other hand, was frozen for all of a fraction of an instant before he started to move, slinging his spear over one shoulder and casually walking toward Morgan's incarnation.

He hadn't thrown off the technique. I could still see his past selves layering themselves atop him, their memories and emotions bouncing about in his mind's eye and in his movements – yet still he moved, stepping between the Shadow's incarnation and Thyia herself. I could not help but chuckle.

Funny thing about Xing Wu. No matter when or where he was in his lives, put a big scary monster in front of him and he'd try to get in its way. But more importantly; he'd never had any illusions about who and what he was. Such a trick as this would not work on him because, in this instance, every single bit of himself past and present understood what needed to be done.

“You,” Morgan started, raising its hackles, its eight spidery legs fanning out menacingly. Xing Wu frowned at it.

“Thank you,” he said slowly, carefully, the voices of all of his other lives echoing his words. “This had put a few things in perspective for me. Your aid has been...helpful.”

“I am not here –“

“You have not directed any true ill-intent towards us at all.” Xing Wu deadpanned, rudely interrupting Morgan. His sheer audacity gave the Shadow pause, as Morgan was far more used to beings being cautious, terrified, or equal in power to it. He was none of those things. “Had you, this would be a very different conversation, I am sure. Scary as you try to be, your intentions are clear as day. Subtlety is not your strong suit.” Morgan growled at Xing Wu, who narrowed his eyes as the Shadow’s incarnation threatened to strike, energy flaring. I shifted ever so softly, preparing myself for a few eventualities to this conversation. “You are...different than last time we met. Still a foul being, but now you have some goal that aligns with the rest of ours...I cannot see it, from here.” Xing Wu mused, scratching his chin and eyes flashing as he once again tapped into his divinity, channeling that technique of his that mimicked my eyes.

“You know nothing. I am still the Shadow.” Morgan growled. “Your insolence –“

Xing Wu grabbed his divinity in both hands.

It wasn’t a threat. It wasn’t posturing. It was a statement. He held it in his hands, this misty, wispy thing that swirled about him like a shroud, condensing into a staff that sharpened itself to his intent. He was prepared to become a god in this moment. He was prepared to throw everything he had at the Shadow, even if he didn’t want to. Morgan stilled, not out of fear or respect or any such

silly notion as that, but simply because it had not expected it. I could see the yellow surprise coloring its heart and soul, a sharp contrast to the usually black emotions that plagued it.

“Who you were, you will never be again. Ever.” Xing Wu said firmly. The words *resonated* in the chamber, carrying the full weight of his Dao and truesoul behind it. Thyia shuddered where she stood, her very essence stilling as it felt the weight behind his words – even the other Dao Progenitors blinked, rising from their stupor to behold that which lay before them. Yet Xing Wu never took his eyes off of Morgan. “You are not the Shadow I met, and I am not the mortal who stood in your way. Thyia is not the soul who was twisted by you, and we will not be subjected to your will.”

“You think you can stand against me as a mere, what do they even call you? An immortal? A Dao Progenitor?” Morgan spat those last three words, distasteful as they were to even comprehend for a being like it.

“No.” Xing Wu denied immediately. “But you are undeserving of my divinity. When I am to ascend, I want it to be perfect – however, I will do so here and now if I must.” The words struck a chord in Morgan. It constantly pursued perfection, after all; it was just my perfection it chased, no one else’s. And that, more than anything, infuriated it more, that a mere immortal spoke of perfection.

“Arrogance,” Morgan spat, mild irritation sparking into true fury. Its limbs lashed out, spearing into the air and ground, space shuddering beneath its might as its true body rose from its position, ready to replace the incarnation.

“If you lash out because of mere words, Morgan, I will be very cross.” I said, rising from my seat. Morgan did not hear me, of course. I did not project my voice to it. But it did *feel* me, and it froze, glancing heavenward with a scowl. The rage did not abate, but nevertheless Morgan retreated, taking a step back.

“...fine. Fine! I will abide by the rules, disgusting though they are. Quit fucking around, then, arrogant, egotistical brat. May I never see your face again.” Morgan barked, willing its incarnation

to fade into shadow and dust. Xing Wu let out a tense breath, shaking his head as he turned back to Thyia. She was still blinking away her thoughts and memories, and I smiled at how far she had come.

Fear tinged Thyia's heart, coloring it a sickly yellow as she stood there, recalling everything the Shadow had done, who she had been force to become. Tears prickled the corners of her eyes as her whips faded away, some of her old rage and old chaotic tendencies beginning to return to her. Her old self raged against her new, and -

I felt her turn to me, fear coloring her soul, fear of becoming who she had once been. For the first time in her long life she turned to me for help as the distance between her new and old self was made clear as day - and I reached down to her with a gentle hand, my Will doing nothing more than making Xing Wu's words echo in her mind. "Who you were, you will never be again." It was a gentle nudge, not even needed on my part. But since she had asked so sincerely...

Thyia blinked away the tears, not quite feeling my touch, not quite feeling my influence, but sounding out the words all the same, silencing the fear within her. She stared up at the ceiling of her once-cell, eyes tracing the movement of energy and, for a brief moment, catching my eye.

She smiled, even though she did not know she had met my gaze.

The change was instantaneous. Her soul ignited, truth clicking within her as her domain and dao were both finally realized. She already had been there; she simply hadn't accepted it. Lightning crackled and boomed as Morgan's magic was thrown off of her, wind whipping about her in a veritable hurricane. Xing Wu had to shield himself from the force, the other two Dao Progenitors bracing as her feet lifted off the ground, hair whipping about her head as a miniature tornado descended from the ceiling.

"What a *calamitous* encounter. But it turned fortuitous, did it not?" She mused happily, clenching and unclenching her fists. I smiled down at her, pulling back a little to let things play out on their own from here. Her mistake, the one thing that had been holding her back, had been her thought

that I wanted her to not be dark. To be...“pure.” She was dark. That was simply a part of her – and she did not want to let go of it. But she did not want to embody the chaotic catastrophe that Morgan had once attempted to force upon her, either.

Good could come from bad, and bad good. Disaster was just an event. What it ended up becoming came from the actions and sacrifices one was willing to make post-disaster.

“Did you really just gain the domain of Disaster?” Xing Wu deadpanned, running a hand through his hair and narrowing his eyes as the goddess. She turned her attention to him, grinning madly.

“That’s not all.” She said, cackling as a new Dao Star was born in the sky, one that settled its claws in Xing Wu’s soul the moment I pinned it there. He connected with it too much to not understand its significance, to not feel the way it connected to him, and his own, future domain. She was Thyia, goddess of Disaster and Sacrifice. Or, in her own words – “I’m the goddess of calamity, the raging bitch you seem so intent on annoying. And I am neither the Shadow’s tool, nor your friend. It is high time you put some Heaven’s-damned respect upon my name.” Lightning cracked like a whip as Thyia cackled, rejoicing in her newfound domain, letting it suffuse her.

“Uh, guys, I think we’ve overstayed our welcome.” Xing Wu said, backing up slowly.

“You *think*!?” The Bow Dao Progenitor asked, already at the back of the room with bow halfway drawn. An arrow of fire rested upon the string of his weapon, the light of the Realm Sun suffusing his bow as he prepared one of his favorite techniques – the Sun Slaying Arrow, modelled after Fang Xu himself. “We’ve been here less than an hour and already met a dark goddess and the devil itself!”

Xing Wu kept his expression panicked as he fled with his fellow progenitors, the trio casting all kinds of techniques to block Thyia’s random spikes of power, but inwardly he cackled with glee. My attention was not on him fully, however, as I was really just waiting for him to satisfy my romantic side.

Thyia watched the Dao Progenitor's flee, only really chasing them with bolts of lighting more because it felt in-character than for any other reason. I could already see the decision settle within her, to head to Heaven and the top of the Life-Giving Tree, and gain approval for her domain and Dao from those who were not myself.

Still...she looked heavenward once again, once Xing Wu and the others had vanished from her sight, still pursued by erupting magma but only casually so.

"You...I suppose you aren't the worst Mother a child could ask for." She said softly, feeling my approval in her Dao Star.

Immediately an incarnation of mine appeared before her, the black-clad goddess jumping in surprise as I struggled not to blubber.

"What?! What is - why are you crying?!" she demanded, taking a defensive stance as I hurled myself forward, wrapping her in a hug that she could not escape from. Lightning lashed against my skin, disasters trying to form about us and tear us apart, but I was bigger than such trivialities and held on tight.

"That was the first time you called me Mom!" I wailed, picking her up off the ground and swinging her back and forth.

"Let go of me!" Thyia snapped, struggling to get free even as a laugh fought its way forth in her soul. But I felt it. And I knew she knew I felt it. So I held tight, spinning her around in a circle as I ensured she knew how proud of her I was. I wanted beautiful, wonderous things for all of my children. And sometimes, a lot of times, beauty could come from Disaster and Sacrifice.

Xing Wu paid his respects to those in the Physical Realm, unsure of when he would return. He visited his old protégé, Alanna, the Celestial Empress, and bid her farewell for a time. He visited the other Dao Progenitors, he visited his friend the paladin, and then he visited the Mad Scientist.

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She listened to him. Heard him. Understood him. And then he left, to the base of the Life-Giving Tree, to talk to Kei, she who was Unequalled Beneath the Heavens. And the Mad Scientist felt jealous of his connections, of his ascension.

But Xing Wu? He only looked ahead. And with Kei by his side, he ascended to Heaven with only one thing on his mind.

Inesa.

Inesa, goddess of Light, Hearth, and Home, felt overworked. Light twisted to her will, making wonders of statues and barriers. Her light was comprised of everything that illuminated the Four Realms, from the cool light of the Lunar Star to the brilliant light of the Realm Sun, and constantly worked to illuminate the Realms. Mixed in was the warmth of a fire, the feeling of coming home if

not to a loving family than a place where one could at least get *warm*, shake off the cold of life, shed the burden of the frigid winter for a brief moment.

It was ironic to her, in her own mind, that here she was, in the Heaven Realm, working to further the Creator's great plans to protect the Realms while her warrior lover spent time in the Physical Realm, making their home a home for *her* to come back to.

Sometimes a shepherd had to defend their flock, but still. She didn't like it. She wanted to explore the homes and hearths, and feel their warmth.

"That should just about do it," Inesa muttered, wiping her brow as she took a step backwards. Gilles, Deity of Shadows, took a step back as well to admire their work. The barrier of light and shadow crackled with surprising stability considering the dual, and therefore incompatible, nature of their respective elemental domains. They'd been working on improving the efficiency for near on a decade now, and only just had gotten it above ninety-eight percent efficiency. While it was still far from perfect, that at least meant they could start introducing new elements, thereby strengthening the barrier.

"It does boggle the mind to think such a force as this would be ineffective against the calamity we face. It is currently the most powerful barrier we know of, this light and shadow wall." Gilles said sagely. Inesa hummed in agreement, drumming her fingers together as she glanced at the necklace that marked Gilles as Elvira's husband. A twang of jealousy ran through her, and she looked away, biting her bottom lip. She'd agree to marry Xing Wu if he proposed in the kitchen with a random pebble he found on the beach on a string of cobwebs. Why hadn't he committed yet?

"It's just about time to return to court. Elvira is making do with the explanations, but the gods are beginning to get suspicious, what with the Lady returning and putting so much focus into the Four Realms and all. I imagine it won't be long until we have to tell them the truth, at the very least." Gilles mused. Inesa hummed her agreement, distracted with dreams of marriage though she was as she followed Gilles back to the Heavenly Palace, where Lady Elvira held her court. So distracted was she that she hardly even thought about it as she took her place amongst the assembled gods as one of the few who knew why everyone was demanding the gods work overtime to devise and construct defensive measures, Elvira's speeches and words of encouragement and praise falling on deaf ears as she looked up at the ceiling, observing out the murals.

Fang Xu and Celene, the star-crossed lovers turned the Sun and Lunar Star, dancing in the midst of war was despicted up there. So was Sol's betrayal, and Elvira crying over Gilles' burnt and nearly destroyed body; so was Reika, shielding a baby Kei from a foreign god's assault.

Her heart throbbed. She had her white knight, her lover. She would not trade him for anything, but their meeting and story was not nearly as romantic as that.

It was while she was thinking that, and recalling all the good times she'd had with Xing Wu – what he meant to her, and she to him, in a way that surpassed the superficial gestures that typically plagued romance stories – that the roof caved in.

Kei descended from the ruined ceiling, chunks of white marble caught mid-air by Elvira's will as she fell to the ground, the nine-tailed fox-girl giggling as she clutched numerous glitter bombs. Lady Elvira's eyes grew wide, each and every one of the gods standing in a panic; Kei's glitter bombs were notorious for being impossible to clean even with divine power, and no one wanted a part of that.

A hand gripped Inesa's arm and her head whipped to the side, divine power flaring to push whoever grabbed her away – only to freeze as she beheld the grinning, flushed face of Xing Wu winking at her as he pulled her toward the door. A thousand thoughts flooded her mind; *when had he gotten here? How? Why? He wasn't a god yet? When did he climb the Tree? What happened to –*

“Quick, while they’re distracted let’s make a break for it!” he urged with a light laugh, the sound filling her heart with butterflies. Inesa looked back at the assembled gods that were fleeing in good-natured glee, only weakly resisting as Xing Wu dragged her away from the chaos. Elvira chased Kei around the throne room on wings of white light, having stolen a glitter bomb from the fox-girl at one point as she darted about the room, shouting about how Elvira had gone mad with power!

“What –”

“Less talking, more running!” Xing Wu said, scooping her up in a princess carry – much to her immediate embarrassment – and launching them out the front doors of the Holy Palace. The Heavenly Host, Elvira’s Immortal People and the guards of her palace, rushed to see what all the fuss was about, but Xing Wu just leapt over their heads. Inesa recognized one of the captains as one of the men who he played poker with as he shouted good-natured insults their way, but Xing Wu just laughed, a deep rumbling thing that sent another round of butterflies fluttering through her chest.

Inesa buried her face in her hands as the wind whipped her hair about her head. What she thought about marrying Xing Wu no matter what he did? She was beginning to rethink that.

“What are you doing?” She asked, face still buried in her hands as Xing Wu rushed through the Heaven Realm, his qi strained to the limit as he hurtled across the land, teleporting in quick succession.

“Rescuing you from work, of course!” he replied all too happily. The roar of a dragon echoed in the air as one of the great serpents rose from its cave, responding to Xing Wu’s aura – he just blurred past it, ignoring the threat and challenge from a being far smaller than himself. They moved faster than Inesa had ever seen Xing Wu move before, practically as fast as her light itself, and after a few more moments she found the courage to speak again.

“Xing Wu,”

“Look,” he said softly, coming to a sudden halt. Inesa removed her face from her hands, and sucked in a deep breath at the view that presented itself before her. They were standing atop a mountain at the very edge of the Heaven Realm. Pure white snow, untouched by any mortal or immortal save for them lay at their feet, a gentle wind blowing drifts off the mountain’s peak. Before them, the Realm Sun and Lunar Star set on the horizon, on of the rare chances for the celestial objects to cross paths. The cloudy substance of the Heaven Realm’s unsolid mass caught the fading rays of the

light, igniting in rays of orange and blue, shining in a sunset so brilliant she swore it was painted just for them.

Stars glittered in the skies above as Xing Wu set her down, their light streaming down to the Physical Realm below, just visible through the white clouds. She could see the solar systems swirling about the stars, her divine senses piercing through the natural barrier that separated Heaven from the Physical.

“I,” her words wouldn’t come. She’d seen scenes like this a thousand times before, but never *like this*. This felt like hers, for once. Hers, and Xing Wu’s.

A gust of wind caught a little bit of snow, blowing it up in her face so each individual snowflake caught a ray of light, igniting like the stars in the sky. Xing Wu raised one hand, his qi wrapping about the individual snowflakes to send them scattering skyward, to mix with the Dao Stars above.

“Inesa, I cannot promise you the moon and stars.” Xing Wu said softly, the arm that had wrapped itself about her shoulders freeing her as he took a step back, grinning at her like the goofy buffoon he was. She narrowed her eyes at him, huffing and opening her mouth to retort – only to freeze as he let his divinity descend.

His soul ignited, transforming from a bonfire to a nuclear reaction that shot streams of pure, holy energy into the skies. Starlight flooded the area about them, glinting off of the snow as a new star was born – yet his eyes were fixated only upon her.

Soft silver light suffused him as he knelt, the raggedy furs he usually wore gleaming as they transformed into flowing silver robes. His black hair absorbed some of the light, little sparks of silver glinting in the black locks, his horns shining a brilliant white color. And one hand reached up to the skies above, his power reaching out to snag his Dao Star and pull it from the skies. Inesa sucked in a deep breath, laying a hand over her heart as he very carefully pulled the Star into the palm of his hands, condensing it with a serious expression.

“But I can offer you *my* Star. My entire existence has been about finding and forging my own path; be it the path of the warrior or something else, it hasn’t mattered so long as it was my own. Until I met you, I never considered that I could walk this path with another. Now, Inesa, I ask you this,” he extended his hands, a silver necklace laid gently in his cupped palms, his Dao Star gleaming and glinting like a diamond in the center of a silver clasp. Inesa met Xing Wu’s eyes, shining with surety and clarity as he offered it to her; a ceremonial marriage necklace. “Will you bind your path with mine, for all eternity?”

Tears prickled the corners of Inesa’s eyes as she nodded rapidly. As if they hadn’t already bound their paths together – but to offer her his very own Dao Star? The evidence of his path, everything he had suffered through and fought for? She choked back tears as Xing Wu stood and gently hung it about her neck, giving her a soft kiss.

“This is the part where you say yes,” he teased.

“You’re ruining the moment, you oaf,” she sobbed, wrapping him in a tight hug and burying her face in his shoulder. He laughed, strong arms squeezing her back as he swayed back and forth, resting his chin atop her head. He smelled like starlight, now.

“It’s impossible to ruin the moment when you’re involved.” He whispered back. A wet, sobbing laugh forced its way out of her throat as she squeezed her tighter, all the stress, all the fear she’d been feeling for the past however many years since Statera Luotian’s revelation, fleeing her body.

A catastrophe was coming, but here, like this, she felt reassured. This was how they would survive. Together, with love.

I dabbed my eyes at the tender scene, unable to keep the joy from my heart and mind as Inesa and Xing Wu embraced, enjoying the sunset I had painted for them. I had work for Xing Wu to do now, as the Warrior God of Stars, the Patron of Pathways and Conflict. But I let them have their moment.

...and I'd let them have their honeymoon, too.