

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

3:41 How Proud I Am

The talk itself did very little to calm my nerves. I walked away from it even more uncertain of myself and the Oshun Trio, despite their vivid and emphatic reassurances. I believed they were telling me the whole truth now. I believed that the plan would work, and I would do everything in my power to ensure it did. But as I left the meeting hall, patting Alala's arm as she grabbed my own, I could not help but feel I was still missing a piece of the puzzle.

It terrified me that now, I was uncertain if the Trio even knew what the missing piece was. Things could have been so much simpler if I could definitively point at them, or if they truly had given me all the information they knew. Could it be their Shadow? Something Void related that was dulling my senses? I was uncertain, and that was enough to prompt my fear.

The Four Realms stretched before me as the portal snapped shut, my power curling in my chest like the sleeping dragon it was.

"Summon my children," I told Randus.

He did not argue with me. I did not bother to elaborate as I teleported to Elvira's throne room, empty as it was at the moment. My children's four thrones sat in front of an increasingly large number of godly thrones: all elemental, alongside nominal thrones for the most powerful and important angels. Fu Hao and Stilicho, ever loyal, appeared by my side in a flash of golden light. I paid them very little mind, staring up at the real object of my attention as I was. The throne Elvira had built for me.

It was tall and black, rising above the equidistant thrones of my children. A clear indicator that I was the one above them all, even if I had never sat in it. The seat itself was white despite

everything else being made of dark stone, yet, despite all the care that went into it, it radiated no power. Elvira's white throne shone with a soft holy light, Keilan's dark throne echoed connections, Reika's thrummed with life and change, and Alexanders...well, the point was, each of them had claimed their throne to be theirs. Even the elemental gods thrones, their seats, radiated their power and Daos. All while mine was simple and unadorned in the spiritual sense, despite looming over all the others.

A wry smile crossed my face as I looked back at my angels. The idea of me sitting on a throne was amusing. To the Four Realms, I was the Heavens themselves. That was not the position of a ruler, but the ground upon which they walked, the air they breathed. Try as I might to separate myself from the will, that simple fact would never change. A god could rule in heaven, but they were not the Heavens, just as a king may rule a kingdom, but they were not the ground that made up the country.

My shoulders squared as I waited, feeling each of the gods as they began to filter into Elvira's palace. The god of fire, Vesuvius, and the goddess of water, Inana, appeared together, sitting in each other's thrones. Aerial arrived on a gust of wind. Argent sat in his chair, strumming a stringed guitar and watching me carefully. The Eight Pillars – Inesa, Kei, Fang Xu, Celene, Randus, Gilles, Solana – save for Xing Wu, who stayed home with the little one, appeared in a simultaneous flash of light. The Elemental Gods appeared one by one, angels flashing into existence, powerful spirits filing in to fill the rafters. And the Big Four appeared, settling on their thrones behind me while I tasted the words I had to say in my mouth.

Even Morgan was watching, from the Hidden Realm, hidden though it was.

"The time has come," I said firmly, once everyone was settled. "The gods and most of the angels know this, but for the few spirits who have yet to be informed, we are experiencing a calamity the likes of which we have never known before. A collision between universes that could spell annihilation. The suppression of the mortals, the building of all the defenses, the restrained growth; it was all in preparation for this. We have maybe two thousand years until that time arrives. We will make final preparations. Start battening down the hatches, take our positions along the walls and brace the metaphorical gates. What endangers us is not demons, not some great enemy we can fight; it is fate, the culmination of choices even I have no control over. But tonight...let us celebrate,"

The command caused a ripple of confusion that cut through the tension that had been building like a hot knife through butter, but I just smiled and spread my arms.

“We face unprecedented danger, but you all have performed admirably. I could not have asked for better children, a better family, to have graced my life than you all. I would celebrate that in the face of this danger. Not to hide our fear, but to celebrate all we have done. To shake the walls, the very fabric of reality with our joy as we shout to the cosmos, to the greater universe, about our existence. Let us rattle that good night – find joy in the simple pleasure of life.” I touched one hand to my chest, just above my heart. “For I love you all, and could not be prouder of all you are and the choices you have made.”

For a moment, silent stretched in the air as I opened my heart to my children, the boundless pride and love I felt for all of them flowing out of me like a river – relentless, loud, and unstoppable. The air distorted. Reality warped beneath the sheer presence I had; eyes in the assembled gods began to wet from the sheer strength of the emotions. I stepped forward, descending into the gathered gods and spiritual beings, tossing one hand gaily into the air, streamers erupting from my fingertips to drape the halls in color.

“Let us celebrate the birth of our family. Today is the Four Realms’ birthday, after all,” I insisted, beaming. The gods erupted.

And a party unlike any the Four Realms had ever seen shook the universe.

My four children cornered me at the height of the celebration. I had a tie tied around my forehead, a glass of whiskey in my hand, and hadn’t laughed this much in a long, long time. Kei had somehow managed to paint Ariel’s wind, and the wind goddess had decided that being able to paint moustaches on people with the wind was the greatest thing ever. I still had one drawn on my upper lip. I think it was pink.

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“Father, we need to talk,” Alexander insisted, the great dragon subtly pushing me down a side-hall. I huffed and sipped my whiskey, enjoying the burn. This was no ordinary whiskey, either; it was some of the stuff Mr. Boxes had given me way back when I had first resolved the Shadow business. This was stuff that could get even me a little tipsy.

“What’s up?” I slurred, intentionally acting more inebriated than I truly was as I slung an arm around Alexander. He did not answer as he pushed me into a side-room I was certain had not been there before – had it been created just for this? That was...I bit my lip, shaking my head a little as I saw all three of the others in there. Reika, Elvira, Keilan, and Alexander now.

They didn’t have to speak. I knew what they were about to say. But speak they did regardless.

“Mother,” Keilan began, and I let them lay out their fears. They did not fear for the Realms. They had complete faith. They did not fear the calamity, or anything else; it was a fear that had been building ever since this entire thing started, and I’d felt the need to begin cutting myself off from the Realms. I knew they would misunderstand, no matter how much I reassured them. Just like I knew that this party I had insisted we throw would only worsen their fears.

They were afraid I was going to sacrifice myself for the Realms. It was a reasonable fear, truth be told, and would be completely in-character for me, but neither did that mean I was going to just let myself die. I would rather live for my children than die for them. They underestimated me.

I wrapped them all in a tight hug, knowing no words would be able to comfort them. Instead, I merely told them how proud I was of them. They were wonderful gods but, more importantly, they were wonderful people. Nothing would change that.

As I urged them to rejoin the party, I shed what little fear I had left. There was very little I could do from here besides finish preparing, and do my best to predict the future which, even to one such as me, was difficult.

There was only one more group of people to visit before it all went down. For now though, I could simply spend time with my children, and shed my worries over everyone surviving in the chaos.

The Celestial Empress was nervous. Beside and behind her stood two of the most powerful beings she knew – the Rival and the Mad Scientist – both of whom looked equally bored. All around her were seated the Dao Progenitors and various other immortals and important, powerful beings. Even ones whom she had never met before had answered the call; people who had successfully hid from the eyes of the Celestial Empire.

Those few who had managed to claim sovereignty of the Trees radiated a different kind of power, stronger than most, more...real, to her senses.

But all of that paled in comparison to what came.

It was merely a voice, an echo of a far greater being that appeared in a flash of light above the round table she had prepared. She caught glimpses – purple robes, black hair, eyes that glowed green and peered through her very soul. The sheer weight of their presence kept her in her seat, forehead beading with sweat, qi, every ounce of her power – which she had once believed was formidable – stalled completely.

“I,” the voice boomed, coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. **“Am Statera Luotian. The Creator. Your divine parent.”** The Celestial Empress’ voice caught in her throat as the being spoke, describing what was needed from them, telling of the calamity the Four Realms faced. No one doubted the words. Not one. Something in Their voice echoed truth and honesty, even despite the love they radiated. Divine love.

Such a thing...she had thought she had never felt it before. She was wrong. It was all around her, had always been around her. She could feel it in the qi she cultivated, in the air she breathed. Statera Luotian truly had crafted the Realms for them.

“We will not let you down,” the words she spoke sounded distant to her ears, stronger than she believed was possible in the face of such overwhelming might. Statera Luotian’s full attention shifted to her, however briefly, and her heart stilled in her chest. This was a being who predated creation. She was one of the oldest immortals in existence, but there was no doubt she was but a babe in swaddling clothes compared to Them.

“You never have,” They promised, those three simple words filling the Empress’ heart with profound joy, tears prickling the corners of her eyes as her path was validated by the *lord of all creation*

. She could feel it. Even when she doubted herself, They never had. That kind of trust was...hard to put into words. **“The angels will help guide you, but rest assured; I will protect you.”** And with that, the meeting was over. The Celestial Empress wiped her eyes. Everyone did.

“She’s riled up,” The Rival noted. “I’ll have to ask her about it,”

“She’s far more powerful than before,” The Mad Scientist whispered back.

“No, she was just being considerate,” he dismissed.

The Celestial Empress stood, laying her hands on the table as she ignored those two behind her. For what little it was worth compared to the preparations of a being like that, she would assemble everyone and build her own defenses. Let this be the greatest undertaking of all time; a step forward with the Creator’s guidance.

“Here is what we will do...”

Xing Wu played with his daughter, having not needed to attend the meeting to know what was being said. He laughed as she tackled him, the little green-haired girl beating her chubby little fists into his chest while she laughed that tiny little ringing laughter of an innocent child. Above them the oak and sequoia tree waved, their branches catching sunlight and casting shadows across his face.

“Oh, you got me!” he cried dramatically as he rolled onto his back, Sequoia giggling like a child possessed, swinging her chubby little limbs about as he grabbed her sides and lifted her skyward. She was such a sweet child, despite being a little hellion that drove him mad. The little one grew so slowly, too. That was fine. They had eternity to grow.

He would make sure of that.

A flash of light, and suddenly Inesa was back in the yard with them, her expression serene but eyes filled with worry. Xing Wu grinned at her fearlessly, popping up while Sequoia wriggled and reached for her mother with grasping fingers. She scooped her into her arms, squeezing tightly, as if she was afraid to let go.

She probably was.

Xing Wu stepped forward and wrapped both of them in a hug, burying his face into Inesa's shoulder while little Sequoia wriggled between them happily.

He understood Statera Luotian a bit better now. This feeling of family was...he had no words to describe it. He wanted the world for Sequoia. He wanted her to experience it all, and never be sad. But he knew she would be, sometimes, or else she'd be nothing but a doll. And all of that might be cut short in an instant.

Xing Wu squeezed tighter, then released his wife and child, immediately setting about tickling his daughter, setting her to squirming and laughing so hard Inesa nearly dropped her. His wife was not spared either, fingers dancing along her ribs until her laughter danced among the trees and gardens of their tiny home like the light she embodied.

Not one moment of this would be lost. He swore it on everything he was. If the world crumbled, he would hold it up. If the skies fell, he would patch them back together. And he knew, now, that Statera Luotian would be right there with him.

His smile was genuine, but hid his deepest fears. Fear that would drive him forward like the warrior he was, because Sequoia deserved the chance.

And if They needed a spear to help prop Themselves' up, he would be right there beside Them.