

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

3:43 Horatius

Curie didn't understand how it was possible. Her one remaining hand flew across the keyboard, the mechanical arm she had attached to her stump simultaneously working on a weapon she'd been trying, and failing, to develop to combat the rot. Specifically the idea had been to burn it with a fire laced with the instinctive opposite of obsession. It hadn't been going well.

But that was secondary to what was happening to all of her labs, and all the defensive systems across the entirety of the One World. Gods and mortals were in complete disarray, powerful beings scattering and forced to consolidate themselves in bunkers and fortresses as the infected took over the defensive arrays. The strikes were surgical and unstoppable – but that wasn't what she didn't understand.

The problem was the infected were bypassing her security measures even while she overwrote the codes and passwords in real-time.

“How the hell is it doing this?” she demanded desperately, temporarily forgetting about the weapon to work exclusively on the defenses. Her systems were wound tight within everything, the core network that made it possible to communicate effectively across the massive distances the One World had; yet despite her intelligence, despite her apparent advantage in intellectual matters, keeping the attackers at bay within the system was a losing battle if she split her attention with anything else.

“Mistress Curie, your arm...” Astraea said softly.

“What about it?! I know –” Curie's words died in her throat as it suddenly hit her – she had left an entire arm, an entire part of her soul, back in Yueya's palace. What if the rot had devoured the

divinity within? Assimilated it? “It has my access codes.” She realized, immediately shifting gears. Her fingers flew, divine power radiating from her and merging into the system itself, creating antiviruses to prevent any further corruption of the system and blocking off major parts of the important defensive structures. It was still a losing battle, she had less than a third of her original divine power compared to everything the rot had managed to gain *and* it had bits of her own intelligence to back it up, but it was at least slowed.

The problem was, it had almost complete control over the offensive systems, systems originally designed to be used against void-beasts and paradoxes.

Curie focused in. What was this thing’s goal? It wasn’t just taking over systems, it was deactivating certain things, activating backup plans, powering up weapons...but it didn’t seem like it was going to try to destroy the Four Realms despite this. Curie let out a long, slow breath, closing her eyes.

It didn’t take much to figure out what it was planning, not really, she was just crossing off options and variables at this point. It was obsessive, and both Yueya and Alala had been obsessed with Statera; that obsession probably passed to the rot. Which meant it wanted Statera and the Four Realms as well. Curie wasn’t sure if it could even infect Statera, but it wasn’t a chance she felt willing to take, either. There had to be a way to save the One World...no, the One World was lost.

She could see it spiraling already, turning from what it had been to whatever foul image the rot was going to twist it into. The gods would put up as much resistance as they could, but they were not going to be able to stand against the full power of Alala and Yueya – or whatever passed for their power, after the rot consumed it. Curie bit her lip, running countless simulations and projections.

Right now, she was safe. The rot did know about this location because she’d taken great efforts to hide it; if it had, she would have been the first target. The piece that got away. Unfortunately, it also meant she could not establish contact with Statera Luotian and warn them or else the rot would take notice. Unless...

Wait.

There might actually be a way to potentially protect what remained of the One World. But it meant – doing that would – she let out a long, slow breath. This was it. This was her moment; the decision that would decide whether she faded away, rebuilt the universe on her own, or did something entirely new. And she really only had one choice. As much as she was clinging to false hope, as much as she was going against every ounce of logic and reason in her logic-aligned brain, she knew she had to take the chance that somewhere, somehow, Alala and Yueya were still alive. Even buried beneath the rot as they were.

“Astraea,” Curie said, straightening, abandoning the defenses for a brief moment. “I have a job for you.” The star goddess looked up from where she had been tending to the baby, the little one grasping at stars she made dance for it.

“Yes?” she asked softly, hiding the terror within her. Curie breathed out, preparing herself. She would have to make a nursery for the little one. Something to help raise it; what she was about to attempt to accomplish was going to be...it meant surrendering...would she even be conscious afterwards...?

Curie bit her lip hard enough to make it bleed, placing one hand over her chest and reaching her power inward, around that little thing that made her an Origin Deity. The tiny little nugget of power that connected her to her creations, that allowed her greater control over everything. Authority. Only a third of what it used to be, but perhaps that would be enough.

When she spoke, it was with far more confidence than she felt.

“You need to listen closely. The Four Realms is going to collide with the One World – when that happens, when you get a chance and you’re sure you won’t be caught by the Rot, I have something you need to give to Statera Luotian...”

I stood in the center of all creation, with all of my children around me. The formation was ready, everything was set and ready to go. I stood in what could ostensibly be called the “middle” of the formation, though it was nowhere near the center of the Four Realms. Around me, at very specific points, were arrayed the first four of my children. Alexander, Reika, Elvira, and Keilan; the Big Four, aligned with the cardinal directions. Around them were arrayed the Eight Pillars, even Xing Wu, who could not see me from his position, and around them were one hundred and twenty-eight elemental gods, each arranged into sixty four pairs, that made up the entire core of the formation. The Stars shone in the sky, ready to activate, to fill the Realm with the power of faith and boost the formation’s strength.

The other gods and powerful spiritual beings operated the rest of reality, everything locked up tight and ready for the collision. Hopefully it never happened, but...I had a bad feeling about this.

My gaze was locked skyward, hands clasped loosely behind my back, as I peered out into the depths of the Void to where I knew the One World would appear. No one spoke. No one needed to.

And then, all of a sudden, it appeared.

Because distance was a non-factor in the Void, relative only to us, it did not first appear as a small dot and slowly get closer. There was nothing, and then, suddenly, it was there. Looming large, a massive expanse of land that stretched as far as the horizon itself. I splayed my hands, my power rising up, reaching out in a quick message to the One World – to establish communication.

I received nothing for a heart stopping moment.

Then, static.

Someone was on the line, but no one was answering. My expression hardened as I kept my gaze fixated on the One World, my children waiting with baited breaths.

“C’mon, Yueya,” I whispered as the two universes hurtled toward each other at terrifying speeds. The window was closing, and it was closing fast. “Don’t let me down.” The answer was silence, and I floated skyward just a touch, not breaking the formation.

I had designed it so pieces could break, and the defense would still hold. I had designed it so the Will of the Four Realms could operate it, if I was needed elsewhere.

“...*Sta-tera...*?” the voice came through staticky and off, but was clearly Yueya’s. A brief wave of relief flowed through me – a wave that was quickly squashed as my eyes beheld the chaos that was happening on the planet’s surface. It was almost impossible to see, it was too blinding, there was too much radiating off of the surface *blinding* me, but every once in a while I would catch glimpses. Gods, panicking, running about. Defenses being primed.

“Yueya, what’s going on?” I pressed, stepping forward again. “You need to activate your formations. Where’s Alala? Curie?”

“Father, what’s happening?” Elvira asked.

I didn't immediately respond, straining my ears for a response. My jaw clenched, that feeling that had been building in my chest ever since this thing began settling as my shoulders squared and back straightened.

"Come on," I whispered, struggling to see through the blinding nature of Yueya's existence, so distracting was she with her beauty, Alala's exuberance, and Curie's intelligence. "Don't let me down." I've given them every chance. I am a very forgiving person by nature, but lines have to be drawn; if they cross it...

Wait.

There was something missing.

I could partially see through the veil Yueya had erected, as if an entire piece of it was missing; that was *why* I could see it. And what was I seeing through it, beyond the panicking gods? No, more importantly, what was being hidden?

"Alexander, initiate defenses. Prepare for collision protocols," I said, voice betraying none of my inner thoughts. Alexander stirred from his spot, energy seeping out of him to relay my orders despite his confusion even as he voiced a question to me. I sent him a quick reassurance, floating above as I was, holding the Will of the Four Realms at bay even though it was ready to take my place.

If the Oshun Trio attacked, I had to be the one defending, not manning the formation. Only an Origin Deity could stand up to an Origin Deity.

"Come on." I whispered, throat clenching as I thought of all those behind me. My children. The Rival, who looked so much better now than I had ever seen him... "Come *on*."

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

Movement. Things were shifting on the One World.

“Father,” Elvira started, but I shushed her with a simple hand gesture. I needed to focus.

It happened in less than an instant. Power surged on the surface of the One World, a mass of collected energy condensing into a tight ball and firing at truly ridiculous speeds straight towards the Four Realms. I stepped forward, distance meaningless as a golden shield appeared on my left arm, already swinging, batting the ball of energy away like a baseball. My muscles strained as its momentum was abruptly halted, teeth gritting as I pit my intent against the very fabric of this thing’s creation. It was all destruction and death and *infection*.

It was *unbalanced*. My very nature rejected it; my strike turning its own intent against itself as I batted it away and deeper into the void, where it detonated with terrifying force, creating and destroying a lesser void beast in the same instant. The shield on my arm remained as I glanced at the ball’s trajectory, analyzing everything I had learned in that brief timeframe.

The aim was perfect; it would have hit a very specific spot in the Four Realm’s formation, just before the defenses were fully manifested, that would cripple our response. It was the kind of strike that could only come through preparation and an intimate knowledge of our defensive structures.

I had been completely honest about what the Four Realms had made. There was only one variable they had not accounted for.

I was here. And there was nowhere in this multiverse that was safer than behind me.

“Morgan, begin the rotation,” I commanded, letting my power leak out, lips pulling back into a sneer. The One World shrieked, power rippling through the air as energy condensed and formed, a mishmash of intents. Some sought to destroy. Some sought to bind. I stepped forward once more, my forward momentum linked to the Four Realms, the One World drawing ever closer.

“Father, are they attacking?!” Elvira shouted. “Why – get back in here!”

“No,” I replied calmly, a spear of golden light forming in my right hand. Two quick thrusts severed gleaming green chains that arced forward, shattering the links before they could clash against the formation barrier. The backlash was immense but nothing I couldn’t handle, curses flying up from the chains to slide off of my skin like water. Behind me, I felt the formations finally fully activate, an intricate web of power arcing between formation nodes, self-sustaining, powerful, and capable of feeding off of the excess energy of the Realms itself.

Morgan moved, the negative Tree igniting in power, dark energy burning like a jet engine, setting the Four Realms to spinning.

“Let the defenses do their work!” Keilan shouted as the Primordial Chaos began to harden, forming a shell like a bouncy ball. My teeth grit together, jaw clenching as raw, unfiltered rage threatened to color my voice. This was not a decision made in anger, despite the bubbling emotions threatening to burst forth.

“You know as well as I do that the formations won’t withstand the collision and an attack from the One World’s deities,” I explained calmly, body slowly growing in size, all those fragments, all those little things I am – the poet, the father, the mother, the dragon, the artist and explorer – coming together in this moment. It was true, too. The formation was strong, but not that strong. Not

enough to deny the Oshun Trio; I knew their power, and they rivalled, if not exceeded, me in terms of raw power.

“Mother – trust us! Do not sacrifice yourself needlessly!” Reika shrieked, desperation coloring her voice.

I laughed. Truly laughed. My shield glowing bright as golden light poured from my chest, coalescing into shimmering golden armor along my chest, arms, and legs. A helmet settled on my head just in time for a lance of fire to reflect off of it, my shield raising to bat away another explosive ball of energy.

“You doubt me!” I roared in simple laughter, a cape falling from my shoulders, fluttering in an unseen wind. Thousands of attacks and chains reached forward toward the Four Realms, seeking to destroy, to guide, to claw it into the One World. My shield raised as my body expanded, the truest expression of my being rippling through reality as I reached a size hitherto unseen – like this, I was as tall as the Realms themselves, my shield deflecting thousands of the attacks; lasers, streaks of green light, bolts of lightning, chains that sought to wrap around me; the defenses of the One World that were supposed to aid in both of our survivals twisted into something foul. Fate itself twisted and pulled, stronger than ever, the thick band of metal that connected our two universes pulling taught, as if someone was reeling us in.

My teeth bared themselves in a savage grin, my raw fury at this *betrayal* surging up, no longer held back.

“All of you doubt me! I am no sacrificial pawn!” I roared, a technique forming within my chest as I planted my feet, the One World looming above us, the massive planet appearing as the sky itself. The band in the middle raged with primordial chaos, more and more land forming to continually grow the entire thing. An explosion below the Four Realms knocked us both off course, away from the band – I grit my teeth and threw my power out in a wave, the full might of the Oshun Trio, lesser than I expected, coming to bear against me, against the challenge I laid out.

But I would not be denied. The power condensed and formed into the closest thing to an actual cultivation technique I had ever used; raw power condensing into something that connected two places separated by an impassible barrier; something close to my heart for many, many reasons. A bridge.

“SUBLICIAN BRIDGE!” I roared, planting my feet, the sheer power of my voice echoing through the Void, paradox beasts rising and falling in an instant from the disturbance. Golden planks descended from my feet, the imagery of my will and memory forming a line, great railings raking through the Void to connect us and the leading planks, force us to go where we needed to go; through the Primordial Chaos. The One World shrieked, red light flaring from key points around the planet, power rippling out, focusing in on the Four Realms.

I grunted, veins bulging in my neck as the technique was strained, pouring inordinate amounts of power into the damnable thing to arrest the Four Realm’s curve and direct it toward the One World, all while defending the bridge from being shattered.

Missile-like constructs shot forward, arcing around, seeking to strike the formation shield around the Realms – I stomped my feet in defiance, my will reaching out to snag those missiles and guide them directly to my shield instead. The explosions rocked me, the attacking power of an Origin Deity echoing through my very bones, the shockwave forcing a bit of blood from my mouth.

“MOTHER!” Keilan shouted, and I turned my head just a bit to grin at them.

There was only one in the entire world who knew what this bridge was.

“The Sublician Bridge,” the Rival muttered, eyes wide. *“You were Horatius. To every man upon this earth...”*

“Death cometh soon or late,” I chanted, completing the poem, my words echoing with power. I never truly said these words, but their meaning mirrored what I had said when I’d held that bridge.

“And how can man die better

Than facing fearful odds,” what lay before me was not fearful, but the threat it represented was. The distance between the One World and the Four Realms was shrinking rapidly, my spear lancing out, cutting down attacks while more echoed against my shield, trying to tear through me to get to my children. My feet stayed planted, the bridge dragging us closer.

“For the ashes of his fathers,” a missile surged around me, striking me in the back, sending me stumbling forward. I whirled, spinning to deflect even more of the attacks, the Four Realms hurtling through space behind me, connected as we were.

“And the temples of his gods!

Those words were mine! Yet the father is me, and I am no ashes! I am death! I am the mother! And these temples are mine!” I roared out my defiance, a figure darting out in the distance, where the bridge met the primordial chaos band of the One World – I hardly recognized her. Alala met my eyes, her own a fierce, angry red color, muscles bulging obscenely as she gripped the end of the bridge and *twisted*,

seeking to shatter it. She had grown to my size as well.

My teeth grit as I struggled to hold the technique, to keep the Four Realms on course while an Origin Deity fought against me; all while the One World itself crushed down upon me, massive amounts of power trying to get through me to my children.

“As I did not die upon this bridge in life,” I planted my feet, hooking my power to the spinning Four Realms and dragging it forward, shield ready and spear levelled. Lightning crackled against my armor, spasming my muscles, my cape tattered and fluttering. “I will not die upon it in the afterlife! You know not who you betray! I am Statera Luotian, and I AM THE HEAVENS!” Alala wrenched harder, shattering half of the bridge, but it was already too late.

We were upon her. We were already there.

I dove forward, driving my spear into her chest – she dodged to the side with astounding speed, faster than even myself, expression cold and focused.

“Don’t resist,” Alala hissed, voice urgent and soft, her fist colliding with my head. My helmet tore off from the blow, a tooth flying from my mouth as the Four Realms struck us from behind, pushing us into the churning Chaos of the One World.

Almost immediately the Will of the One World was upon me, seeking to suppress me, rejecting my presence and the presence of the Four Realms. The Four Realms pushed us deeper, driving us hard, grinding against the chaos, the formation holding for now.

But this was no easy passage. The Will tried to suppress me, Alala beat upon my shield and dented my armor, even the Primordial Chaos itself crashed against my skin. Blood spurted from my mouth as I struck back, scoring lines in her skin with my spear, revealing *red* within her. And I saw it.

For the first time, I was able to see through it all.

The Shadow had taken them over.

Alala lunged and I drove the spear through her chest – but she pushed through, despite my divine power burning her from the inside, trying to cleanse her, to rebalance her – but she didn't seem to care, grabbing my head with both hands.

Her expression twisted into one of pain as my power balanced her for one agonizing moment, the redness receding.

Tears dripped down her face.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, an arm appearing between us as her power flexed. I twisted the spear, trying to wrench it free even as I recognized what it was.

Curie's arm. And the power within had reached critical mass, a curse of incredible strength pounding through its flesh.

Fuck –

An explosion of pure golden light rocked my world, and all I saw was black.

The Four Realms listed dangerously as an explosion of magnitudes rocked it, shattering parts of the shield, allowing the Primordial Chaos of the One World in to tear at its insides. The Big Four panicked, watching their parent and creator vanish in an explosion of golden light, His power wrapping not around Himself, but the Four Realms, protecting it from the worst of the damage. Damage that would have annihilated the defenses, not merely cracked it.

Alala was sent hurtling into the depths of the World's core.

And Statera Luotian, armor shattered, power curling around His broken body, His consciousness rapidly fading, drifted back toward the Four Realms, guided by strings of karma.

"BRACE!" Keilan roared, yanking his Mother back toward the Realms as it spun through the One World, crashing into and through the struts of afterlife he had designed. The weak constructs were nothing to the speed and power of the Realms, but that was not the fear.

The explosion knocked them off-course, sending it crashing into the interior of the One World, bouncing about the interior. The Hidden Realm rattled, the explosion of Curie's arm igniting bits of the condensed energy, the spirit stones, within, rattling the Realms and cracking the formation further.

Reika reached out, snagging her Mother's hand as her body shrank back to its usual size, Her eyelids fluttering.

"Hold on!" She shouted, green light flaring – but She pushed her away just once more, hand reaching up, Her mind performing one last great work as the Four Realms slammed into the interior of the One World again, stripping away layers and layers of Primordial Chaos. Xing Wu's stars flared, keeping everything together in a net – and She *heaved*.

The Four Realms lurched, momentum abruptly arrested as it spun through the interior, gently floating through space.

Her consciousness fled Her as Her power drained; the Four Realms coming to rest in the very center of the One World, the curse of an Origin Deity ravaging Statera Luotian's body; every ounce of her being going into fighting that, and keeping the Will of the One World at bay.

Not that anyone knew this.

And the Four Realms came to rest in the very center of the One World, the formation shattered, defenses flickering and explosions rocking the interior, but relatively whole.

The Rot was disappointed. It had wanted more. It had wanted to break the defenses of that delectable ball. It had wanted to assimilate the Origin. It had only partially succeeded. The Origin fought against the Will with all its prodigious might, but was otherwise incapacitated for now. The defenses were cracked. And it was ready, its pawns primed for battle.

War was coming. And it would have its prize.