

## RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

3:7 Bird

I sent an incarnation to the Physical Realm. The four main nodes of the universal formation were working beautifully, with the supportive nexuses well on their way to completion. Once those were done I'd be able to rearrange the lesser regions to act as a boost to the entire array, with the four original regions in the center, supported by four middle and eight outer regions. These would make up the core of the entire defensive structure, where all life and souls would be protected – outside of that, I needed to make number of other regions for the secondary and tertiary buffer.

But I had to wait for all that to be completed. There were a couple other things that needed to be done, and it would be awful nice if I could get a few more Dao Progenitors to rise up. Not too many; just enough to fill out the remaining new regions with proper...guides. Rulers? Whatever they wanted to call themselves. Installing Dao Progenitors as heads of the new Trees would connect their Dao Stars to the regions themselves, allowing the power of faith and belief to flow through them properly. We had eleven Dao Progenitors currently, not including the gods who had formed their own Daos. That left two more needed.

It was reasonable to think that in the time we had two more Dao Progenitors would appear in the Physical Realm, even with me suppressing things. Some souls were far enough along in their journey that no amount of suppression could stop them; I was counting on that, actually. That, however, was not why I was in the Physical Realm.

Xing Wu was handling part of that task, much to his chagrin at having been forced into a bunch of new duties immediately after his ascension, but I desperately needed him and a few others to grow stronger. My task was to ensure that they did, which was part of the reason I was here, sitting on a bench in the Physical Realm, watching birds wing through the air and feeling the flow of energy.

The Eight Pillars had to be completed sooner rather than later, and we were missing two members. Xing Wu had yet to fully assume the role but it was just a matter of time with him. His personality would accept nothing less than excellence. Kei, as well, was growing into her position nicely; I didn't need her to be a warrior or leader, that role would be filled out by others. The Mad Scientist's decision to stay had greatly accelerated Fang Xu and Celene's hatching; which meant I didn't have to allocate any resources to accelerate their growth. Randus was Randus, and he, whether he knew it or not, was already functioning as a Pillar. Then there was Inesa, sweet little Inesa, who was waiting on a few others to get there before she took that step.

Not that she wanted the role, but her position was just too perfect and she had no idea what she meant to the Physical Realm and mortals, even if they didn't show it through worship or song. If Xing Wu represented the earth reaching up to touch the skies, Inesa was the sky, reaching down to touch the earth. It was adorable how their relationship had progressed; I was looking forward to the wedding, whenever they announced it.

Xing Wu wanting to punch me or not, I would be there for that.

A bird chirped above me and I whistled back, smiling to myself as it squawked in indignation and flitted away, fire and smoke trailing from her tail feathers as she winged away into the clear blue sky, circling above.

“What a prideful little thing you are,” I told her.

The cool, crisp air felt refreshing upon my skin as I reclined on the little bench I had appeared on, drumming my fingers on the stone back as I watched my target flit about the little village. This was the fifth life Sol had lived as a bird, and the fifth time he – or she, as she had reincarnated as a female bird this time – had chosen to become this kind of bird. The locals called it a Scarlet Flycatcher, due to its brilliant red and black plumage and diet of insects. Not the grandest of birds, but...fitting, for Sol. Fire still coursed through her soul,

empowering her even now, karmic threads from all she had done in this life and previous ones stretching every which way.

“Should I call you Solana, now? Since you’re a girl.” I mused to myself, the bird not responding or listening to my words as she settled in a nearby tree, watching me with beady black eyes.

Much of what she had done in the Sun War was resolved, karmically speaking at least. That was at least one benefit of me stripping her of her title and much of her power – that, in and of itself, combined with being forced to claw her way back up to the realm of the mortal and living over the course of hundreds of thousands of years, was enough to burn off quite a bit of her karma; be it negative, benign, or positive. She had a relatively clean slate, now.

Karmic strings appeared to me as wispy strands, almost like cotton but stronger, that bound and connected things. Keilan’s influence ran through all of it as the god of connections, helping to guide the connective strings of karma so it wasn’t so freeform. But I was not looking at Solana’s karma. However, my attention was not on the karmic threads that bound her. My gaze lay solely on the strands of fate she was building with her own talons.

These appeared to me more like strong steel wire, leading souls on like tracks. Much like karma, fate was something that was, typically, built with your

own hands. Desire that stemmed from the depths of one's soul compounded upon actions and willpower, which compounded with the energy the soul produced. Spirits responded to said energy and desire, karma wrapping around the fate "cables" and tugging them into place, the very universe and Dao itself pushing the soul to follow the path of fate it, itself, had laid out. Once the soul or the fate became powerful enough, its path snowballed until there was no derailing it; and that kind of thing usually had stories written about it later, for good or ill.

That, in essence, was the phenomenon known as fate; sometimes it clashed with others, sometimes it was solely upon the one person, and very rarely was it actually forced upon a soul by someone else. Solana's fate was ten silver threads, reaching up to the miniature sun above. We were currently on one of the outer planets of the first Region, and she flitted from branch to branch of a silver-leaved tree, occasionally glancing up at the sun as it made its lazy way across the sky. Longing touched the bird's soul, the threads of fate stretching up and up toward the flaming ball.

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Here she was, trying to reach out to the sun once again. I stroked my chin, gaze growing distant as I looked heavenward, keeping my sight fixated on the brilliant, sapphire-blue sky rather than piercing through it. If fate was

something you built with your own hands...what was this, then? What was the fate of the Four Realms to be colliding with the One World? Was it something I built, something my children had, or something the collective Four Realms had created? Or, and this made my stomach squirm uncomfortably, was this a thread that was being forced in a new direction?

That one didn't feel right to me, but I couldn't ignore the possibility that I was intentionally blinding myself. Self-doubt wasn't something I usually did, but...stress did things to people, even gods such as I.

I was searching for the link that bound it all together, but it was frustratingly elusive, even with my new sub-domain of fate. That was the trouble with this concept. I could see other people's fates, but when peering at one's own fate? It was far, far harder to decipher the truth.

I sighed, and looked again at Solana.

"Would you stop that? Desperation does not suit you." I flicked her with a small ball of energy that trembled her soul, her steel threads jerking to the side and flying every which way, away from the miniature sun. The bird shrieked her displeasure, fire flaring from its wings as it took to the skies once again, circling around me and screeching furiously. "Oh hush, I am doing you a favor. There is little else I can do for you; you do have to crawl up on your

own, but this, at least, I can do. Do not empower yourself on something you do not truly wish for.” I chastised her, rolling my eyes. She cawed at me once more before settling back down in her tree, glaring about.

She wasn’t mentally aware of what I had done, but her soul knew. The soul always knew.

“Now I’ll have to dedicate a little bit of time to your brother, too.” I mused, scratching my chin thoughtfully, enjoying the breeze as it ruffled its way through the little clearing. If Solana was to, potentially, be one of the final pillars, that left Gilles as the other.

A fountain burbled excitedly in the middle of the park, the trees that surrounded it swaying in the breeze, a small temple atop a hill to my left. Aerial was listening in, I knew, as she always did. The wind knew all that was spoken into it – with a wave of my hand a barrier was formed around me, silencing that wind, separating myself from the world. Here it was just me, and one of my wayward children.

Solana chirped.

“Well, I can’t do much more for you. This much is a bit too much, even – you haven’t even considered asking for help yet. But you have worked hard so far, and I figure a little reward is in order. You desire to reach for greater things, do not be tempted by the easy path.” I chided. Solana cocked her head to the side, then stuck her beak beneath her wing to scratch an itch. With a chuckle I shook my head, mind returning to my own fate for a brief moment. “You know, it’s funny. If I squint my eyes and tilt my head, I almost feel like I can sense where this is going. Almost. Ah, I’m probably overthinking it. I am just an incarnation, after all – one of the weaker ones, too. My processing power is limited.”

I looked around the park again, standing. Reika’s power was flooding the place as the Sun rose high above, invisible to the mortal eye, yet its power filling the world with light and warmth all the same. Spiritual energy is what it provided, as opposed to the more physical of the miniature suns. Change had come, winter was coming, even as the day continued on.

“My dear,” I said, raising one hand, extending a finger. Solana hesitated for just a moment before flitting over to me, landing upon my finger. “Good girl. Thank you for listening, but even though you will forget what I say, I do hope your soul remembers. I am proud of you. You were always meant to be great, I just hope you do not trip and fall this time around; you had been the Sun once, but I had hoped you would become more than *just* that.” I planted a little kiss atop her head, then pushed the bird away, watching her flit off into the skies, her strings of fate trailing after her, searching for something to grasp.

And I let the incarnation fade away, its power returning to another incarnation that was in charge of ensuring the formation lines would be properly made.

“Easy now, easy!” I shouted as a few of the angels in charge carefully laid the spiritual foundation for it in the depths of space. They were Elvira and Keilan’s angels, though they did, of course, still listen to me.

At least this whole Original Sin nonsense would turn into an unexpected boon, to help solidify the Pillars. I’d have to monitor the situation closely and potentially provide more support than I probably should, if things were going poorly, but I couldn’t allow too many mistakes.

Ah, but at this point I was just thinking in circles.

Soon it would be time for a little meeting with Yueya. I worried my bottom lip, folding my hands into the sleeves of my robes as my two angels, Stilicho and Fu Hao, appeared beside me. They would accompany me to the meeting, once the time had come, and I turned my gaze to the skies, where the thread of fate that bound the Four Realms and the One World together hung ominously.

Karma and Fate were intertwined things; they could effect the other greatly. Maybe, if we worked in enough positive karma to the connection, we would be able to lessen the dangers of this calamity. It was worth a shot, at least, and I would take any advantage we could get.

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The bird flew through the air, fire trailing from her feathers as she flapped her way across the sky. She was not the biggest thing in the world, this she knew. She had to hide from the greater birds with sharper talons, whose wings were silent in the night. She had to pick her nesting spots carefully, in case the cats who crept in shadow attempted to snatch her up.

She had to fear the two-leggeds, who could change the world so drastically, though maybe not the one who had just spoke to her. That one was kind.

But she dreamt of a day where she was the largest thing in the sky. Where she could fly freely, as far and fast as she could, unafraid and unchained by the tethers of fear. She folded her wings to her sides, diving down, into the forest, where she dove and wove through the dense trees, shooting through

gaps in branches and leaves with expert skill. Her beak snapped open, catching a bug as she shot by, her fires instantly roasting it of any poisonous qi that coursed through it before she devoured it whole.

Then she shot skyward, through the leaves, up into the air, the power that fueled through her expanding, slowly, ever so slowly, but fast enough that she had long since outgrown any others of her kind. A thermal wind caught her wings, yanking her further skyward, toward the puffy white clouds above.

These skies were not hers. *But they could be.* A part of her soul whispered.

*No.* They were no one's sky.

But she dreamt of the day all the same, where none could force her to land.

Where none could doubt who, and what, she was. Where all could marvel at her fire.

It was a compelling thought for such a little bird, but qi had the habit of making even the simplest of things complicated.

## 3:8 Positive Relations

“...so as you can see, overall preparations are going well.” I explained, laying out the changes we were implementing and plans I had devised to Yueya and the others. This time around it was just those three, one of their advisors, Shin, myself, and the two I had chosen to bring along; my first and only angels, Fu Hao and Stilicho. Sehuyun had not attended this meeting, for one reason or another. The meeting room itself was as plain as it had been last time – a little round table in the center, with dark, shadowy walls that were constantly shifting, like water behind a glass pane. “I would say we’ve risen from a zero percent chance of survival to half a percent; and that number is only increasing. I expect a twenty percent chance of survival, once the initial defenses are set up.”

Curie and Alala, Yueya’s other selves, muttered as they went over a few of the documents and reports I had brought, Yueya herself seeming to simply be listening.

“That is good news.” Shin agreed, the skeleton’s hands steepled before his face. “It would be best for everyone if neither of your worlds were overly damaged, as it would make the next bit easier to avoid or survive. Now, miss Curie, would you please explain what the One World has been doing in preparation?” I nodded to Shin, grateful once again that he was taking command of the meeting, as Curie stepped up, the dark-haired goddess fiddling with a little mechanical contraption as she started to explain things.

“Expansion of the One World continues at a steady pace.” Curie said monotone, the item she’d been messing with floating out of her hands and projecting a 3d image of the One World in the air. “We’ve determined that the easiest place for the Four Realms to strike would be the band in the middle, where more land is being created. This central ring here,” at this she pointed to the middle band around the One World, a red line similar to the equator of a planet, where Primordial Chaos clashed against itself and bits of Void to create more land, so the One World can keep expanding. “Is highly mobile and volatile, and because of that making a hole for the Four Realms to pass through is easiest there. Assuming that is still a viable plan, and we can aim the Four Realms. And the bigger we are, the easier it will be to aim there.”

“It’s also the most fragile piece of our universe.” Yueya interrupted, earning herself a glance from Curie. I furrowed my brows at the interaction as the red-headed elf leaned forward, expression serious. “It will be more difficult for the Four Realms to pass through if it misses the hole because

it is volatile, and if the Four Realms were to detonate I fear the entirety of the One World would collapse.”

“...yes. It is a design flaw I am working on mitigating.” Curie allowed slowly, gaze lingering on Yueya for just a moment before turning back to us. “It should help that we’re raising plenty of new gods and divinely-powered beings. The additional aid will prove incredibly useful in creating the failsafes. As it is, we’ve had to put other projects on hold so we can start building the defenses and fortifications; it’s quite the laborious process, and as always we need more hands. Any suggestions you might have to boost the appearance of godly beings would be greatly appreciated.”

“Of course,” I said. “Just show me what you’ve done, and I’ll give you any advice I may have.”

“That said,” This time it was Alala’s turn to interject, crossing her muscular arms and frowning. “I did have an idea for how to avoid a collision all together. What if we just slingshot the Four Realms around the One World? Like the sun around the One World – so you either fall into orbit, or get shot off in another direction, bleeding off momentum the whole way.”

“We talked about this, Alala, it’s a crazy idea. We’d need anchors, we’d need something more tangible to actively bind the two universes together, and we’d need a way to actually slingshot the Four Realms.” Yueya said gently, shaking her head. Alala huffed and rolled her eyes while I sat back, considering the idea. It had some merit – I’d used the concept back when I was a starship captain to slingshot around a sun a few times. But gravity didn’t work right in the Void, not to mention the One World, which, as a singular massive world, should have collapsed under its own weight if we went by the rules of gravity from said old universe.

But the concept should still be the same. And if we needed engines to direct the Four Realms, we were already starting to build up an excess of negative energy. Waste though it may be, actively venting and burning said energy may be able to act as “thrusters”...I’d have to play with the idea, to ensure that one was viable. But as for the binding agent and the anchor, we may already have that.

“Alala, how strong are you?” I asked, interrupting the brewing argument as Alala snapped back at Yueya. The tanned, muscular woman snapped her gaze to me, eyes narrowed at the question.

“Very. I am physically stronger than you.” She said, and I detected no lie in her words. Nor did I doubt it – as Alala represented extreme physicality, just as Curie represented extreme mentality, she likely was stronger than me in body alone.

“Statera,” Yueya started.

“No, no, listen. That’s not a bad idea, because we might have an actual anchor point. Or, in this case, a rope.” I said, leaning forward and placing my hands on the table. Yueya narrowed her eyes, while Curie’s expression lit up in understanding. She snapped her fingers and pulled out another device, a holographic screen appearing before her that I was fairly certain was supposed to only visible to her – but me being me, of course I could see it – as she started running simulations.

“What rope?” Alala asked, uncrossing her arms to set her hands on her hips. I snapped my fingers, an untethered thread of fate appearing between them.

“This is what is binding our universes together. Or, well, a scale model of it. There’s a massive steel cable of fate that’s guiding our worlds to collide and is growing stronger by the second.” I started.

“Why don’t we just cut it then?” Alala grunted, shaking her head. I frowned at the interruption, frustration blossoming in my chest that set my fists to clenching – but a quick breath and slight effort of will shut that down quickly. That was stress talking, nothing more. “Problem solved.” If I had the full two million years to attack the cord of fate, even using the Sword That Does Not Cut, which was specifically designed to sever fate, I doubt I could cut the damnable cord. But before I could say as much, Curie interjected.

"I doubt we can. Even if we did, the backlash would be damning. And even if we survived that, we would then be facing an unpredictable end – the One World hurtling uncontrollably through the Void. We don't know what else it would connect to guide it, and the Overgod may not be so kind as to give us a new timeframe next time." She shot down the idea. Alala huffed.

"So my ideas are all just stupid, I get it,"

"Better the devil we know," I started.

"Devil? I do not understand the reference," Shin cut in, and I clapped my hands, annoyance flaring once again.

"Ok! We're getting off track. Back on topic, Alala, we may not be able to sever the fate but we may be able to manipulate it. And, if you can learn to grab it and are strong enough, we may have our anchor to go with your slingshot idea." I clarified. Alala's eyes lit up at the idea, a grin stretching across her face.

"I get it! I'd just be swinging the Four Realms around like a sling!"

"Can she grab the cord of fate?" Yueya asked.

"I don't know, given the time we have. I am certain it is possible, the question is if Alala can manage it in time. Even with a sub-domain of Fate all I can do is manipulate the stuff, as well as see it clearer. Physically grabbing it is a whole other issue; but we do have some time and, in addition, it is well known that Karma can effect Fate." I reasoned.

“Now, that is an interesting suggestion.” Shin added, leaning forward. The fires in his eyes flared, jaw clacking as he considered my idea. Now validated that the idea held water besides my own excitement, I stood, fully dedicating all my mental capacity to it. Curie was done with her calculations first, but she looked at me before replying, folding her hands in her lap.

“Building positive karma between our Realms could let us build a better, stronger Fate, one that may allow for a slingshot. And karma is easier to manipulate than what we call fate, as far as I am aware.” I explained, folding my hands into the sleeves of my robes. “Which should make the idea of the slingshot more feasible, and give us better anchor points.”

“There is one issue with this. Is the route of the two universes not immutable and immovable?” Shin asked rhetorically.

“An immovable object is only immovable because it has not met a sufficiently unstoppable force, and vice versa.” I said, nodding my head sagely. That was a little exaggerated, because we still wouldn’t be able to plan for it until we knew where and when our universes would collide, but having multiple plans wasn’t a bad idea. We couldn’t put all of our eggs into one basket, so to speak.

“And a foolproof plan simply hasn’t encountered a sufficiently talented fool,” Yueya countered, as if I had even used the term “foolproof.” I raised an eyebrow at her, but nonetheless spread my hands to the side, nodding in acceptance.

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“The Creator never said it was foolproof.” Stilicho said, speaking up for the first time since the meeting started. The angel narrowed his eyes, his sister Fu Hao stepping forward and rolling her shoulders. “They are merely exploring options.”

“She is not wrong.” I said, making a little hand motion that had both of my angels standing down. I’d have to talk with them about that later. Yueya wasn’t being malicious, simply playing devil’s advocate, the way I saw it. It was the other two’s duty to be accommodating, and hers to challenge our ideas, make us think about it so we didn’t turn this meeting into an echo chamber. “Which is why we need backup plans. We don’t know what will or won’t work.” I glanced at Curie then, the dark-haired woman shifting in her chair uncomfortably.

“This has, based on our limited information, an equal if slightly greater chance of success when compared to our initial plans. That is with limited calculation time of course, and I’ll need to run more simulations, but it very well may be possible.” Curie said, nodding to Yueya, who leaned back in her chair with a little smile. “That is assuming, of course, that Alala can grab Fate.”

“I’ll work on it.” Alala said, flexing her muscles and grinning. “I’m good at heavy lifting; I just need to know when and where to lift.”

“Good. That’s two things down, then. If you would like, Alala, I can instruct you a bit on Fate, and we can run through your programs for godly ascension while we’re at it.” I offered.

“Curie can look through your formations while we do that.” Yueya said, standing from her chair and smoothing out her dress, flashing me a little smile that had my heart clenching. What would our relationship have been, had this not happened? What was it going to become now? “I am in charge of godly ascension, of course, so I and Alala will speak directly with you.”

“I would greatly appreciate it if Curie could look into what I’ve done. A logical mind like hers might pick out things I did not.” Much as Alala was physically stronger than me, Curie was more mentally aligned, I was certain. I was more balanced than any individual one of them, a jack of all trades if you will, but in their areas of expertise they eclipsed me. So I would defer to the experts on this. “Shin?” I asked then, turning to the skeleton.

"I am a mere observer. But I will provide advice where needed; and, if you do not mind, I would like a one-on-one with each of you when it is over." He said slowly. We all nodded in acceptance, and I let out a breath I'd been holding. It was ok. This was ok. Things were...looking up, and we had more than one plan now. We just had to continue closing the gap.

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"Someday, I hope to see your Four Realms. Before it's horribly mangled in this crash, I mean." Alala said with a laugh as we parted. I grinned at the woman, shaking my head in fond exasperation. Her sense of humor was a little warped, but I could appreciate it and gave her a little wave as she and Yueya head back over to Curie. The incarnation that had been speaking with the Goddess of Science faded, its purpose served. There were some minor changes to do to the formations I was setting up, but they were so fiddly I'd have to do it all myself. My children wouldn't notice, and didn't yet have the control to pull off the fixes.

"And someday I hope to show it to you. Assuming your world isn't horribly mangled, either." I teased back. She laughed, a rumbling thing that echoed from deep within her chest, emotions of raw joy and enjoyment filling the room. Such was her gift. Pleasures of the moment; when it is time to laugh, laugh, and when it is time to cry, cry. She embodied that to the highest degree.

Perhaps soon we should do a little exchange of people, assuming Mr. Boxes would allow it. It might be helpful, especially in building positive karma between our Realms to help manipulate the fate cord.

"We have enough to do for the moment." Yueya said with a shake of her head, red hair rolling in waves about her shoulders. "It is time for this meeting to end. Shin? You said you wished to speak with us?" The skeleton stood from where he'd been silently listening to the conversation, his true body heading over to Yueya, while an incarnation headed my way.

“Indeed. The Overgod has been kind enough to allow me to set up a little sub-space here. If you would follow me.” Shin gestured to the side, where a little black portal had opened up in the shifting black walls of the room.

“Wait here.” I told my angels, who silently nodded, accepting my orders. With a little shrug I stepped inside, glancing about the little sub-space Shin had created.

It was plain. A square room with beige walls, and a simple stone floor. Likely took but a simple thought for Shin to make, but served its purpose.

“Well? What are your thoughts?” I asked, meeting the green-fire that burned in Shin’s eye sockets. The dark-robed skeleton said nothing for a time, observing me with those eyes of his while I stood silently, waiting for him to speak his mind. I was a patient being – I’d been a single parent my entire life as an origin deity, this was nothing compared to the patience I had at my disposal.

“You are surprisingly trusting.” Shin said slowly.

“How so?”

“Not many gods would so freely share information like you have been, let alone to what might be considered a rival – or, worse, one who might spell the end of your home and children.” Shin explained slowly. I considered his words, accepting them for what they were, and shook my head.

“Playing hostile will only increase our chances of mutual destruction. We must stand united.” It was completely logical and plain as day to me. What was Shin trying to get at here? The skeleton shook his head slowly.

“I understand, and I admire that thought process. I was simply concerned that you would be more...emotional, considering this involves the lives of your children. My fears have been alleviated.” Shin chose his words carefully, slowly, as if testing me for what I might say or how I would react. I had nothing to say to that, though. Shin nodded as if he had found an answer he had been looking for, tapping his jawbone with one thoughtful finger. “In that case, I have something else to share with you. I have made contact with some of the other Origin Deities, specifically the Progenitor.”

“You did? How?” I all but demanded, a jolt of excitement shooting through me. More advice could prove immensely beneficial, and I would take all the help I could get.

“Through trial, error, and great personal strain. It’s something I have been working on since before we met for the first time; that is beside the point. The technique is...difficult to maintain, and I cannot do it for long, but I did manage to gather some information that might interest you. Involving failed universes.” Shin tapped his fingers together, fiery eyes flickering. “According to the Progenitor, when a universe fails and faces total annihilation from the Void, its collapse imminent, the surrounding universes tend not to just sit by. Refugees are taken in but, more importantly, they spoke of another process.”

I raised my eyebrows at him as he paused again, choosing his words.

“The universe itself is absorbed by its neighbors, the energy and matter it produced mixing in with the other universes – at least, what isn’t annihilated by the Void first. The Progenitor said that was a very easy way to feed power into another universe, and, like pollinating flowers, tended to boost the growth of said universe.” Shin paused then while I nodded along, seeing a little of what he was getting at.

That made sense, especially after what I’d seen what the Monkey Wrench’s effects could be. We were still boosted from her energy.

“What I’m getting at is that the collapse of a universe may not be a catastrophic part of the multiverse, but an actual fundamental piece of it. A natural process that strengthens the surviving universes.” Shin explained.

“I see. We must be careful, then, to avoid that.” I said, as if we weren’t already. Shin just sighed, shaking his head.

“My point is that, if your world collapses, I will offer you and your children refuge, assuming the One World cannot. It is not a completely selfless offer – the Eternity your Realms possess may appear a counter to my more transient nature, but it may just provide an extra boost as well. I simply do not know how having two Origin Deities will affect the universe.” My gaze sharpened at that one as I studied Shin closely, reading his aura and coming up with nothing but sincerity. A smile spread across my face, a tear prickling the corner of my eyes at the kind gesture.

“Thank you, Shin.” I said softly. “I have faith that, together, we can all get through this. But, if the worst comes to pass, I will take you up on that offer.” Even if that meant I would be forced to enter the Void alone, as two Origin Deities may cause conflict, having an offer of shelter for my children was more comforting than I thought it would be.

“It is in the cards.” Shin agreed. “Now, for a few more suggestions for you...” And just like that the conversation continued, just two gods, alone in a room, discussing how to save our Realms if the worst came to pass.

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Shin felt like the conversation with Statera had gone fairly well. His warning had not gone unheeded, even if the God of Balance hadn’t had an actual reaction to the information as far as

Shin could tell, and they'd discussed quite a bit in the interim. His conversation with the others had been just as informative, if a bit more tense.

Alala and Curie were talkative and animated, as their roles dictated they be, while Yueya sat back and mostly observed and listened, throwing out the odd counter argument just to spice things up. His warning had not been lost on them, either, though Curie had already figured it out. None of them wished for the destruction of the other universe, of course, but the possibility had to be taken into account, and he offered safe refuge for their people as well.

Maybe not both at the same time, assuming the absolute worst, but he was confident other deities would be amenable to the idea. Perhaps the Emperor?

It was only once they were truly leaving the meeting room, everyone heading back to their native universes after a quick goodbye from Statera – giving Yueya a little wink and kiss on the cheek as they left, a few more threads of positive karma binding the origin deities together – did Yueya pause and speak her concerns. Statera may have missed it, but Shin hadn't; the goddess of art hadn't been silent just because she was playing the “no-girl,” but for concern as well.

“Shin, I have a question for you.” Yueya said, as her other two selves vanished into the portal. She turned back to him, one hand through the portal to the One World. “How far would you go to protect your children?” Shin froze at the question, his very aura stilling for the first time in eons. His very nature meant that things had to constantly be moving in a Cycle, but this one question had brought him to a halt.

“I have never had something I consider my true child, even in my previous existence, so I cannot say for certain.” Shin explained. “But if you are wondering and worried about Statera, I would not. They have been incredibly open about everything, as far as I can tell, and my insight into people has been praised by the Overgod itself.”

“I agree. That is what I am worried about, however. Ah, I am likely overthinking it.” Yueya shook her head and started pushing through the portal. “After all, Statera doesn't just want to protect

their kids, but be a good example, right? I wonder what that feeling is like, to become that kind of being for love."

Shin nodded in agreement, but before he could verbally respond Yueya had vanished through the portal. He stood still for a moment longer, assessing what had just happened before stepping through his own portal and back to the Wheel Realm.

It would be best not to see monsters, where there were none.

### 3:9 A Bit of Progress

Keilan watched his sister practice with the Sword That Does Not Cut, the blade practically screaming as it cleaved through the air. Great rifts of nothingness were left in the wake of its tip, Aeriel darting about above as she struggled to mend the damage the unsheathed blade caused. Sweat poured down Elvira's face, limbs trembling as she fought her way through the basic steps of a forgotten sword-form. Keilan's mind drifted for a moment as he followed that connection, fingers twitching as his eyes traced the karmic threads that bound her to her People.

The form had originated from a reclusive set of Avian monks specializing in wind magic and the sword, though their order had been extinct for nearly two hundred thousand years. As the creator of the Avians, of course Elvira had access to their cultural knowledge; it was ingrained in her, just as he was connected to his own People, and how Mother was connected to everyone in the Four Realms.

Keilan shook that thought off to refocus on the now – he put up a good front, but his new domain was still a struggle to handle, sometimes. Karma was one thing, the knowledge and power that can with Connections was entirely another. Navigating the different layers was...trying, at times.

The training ground Elvira had chosen was a little place on the very edge of the Heaven Realm, where she could do the least amount of damage to her surroundings. The only stretch of physical land for a thousand miles lay directly beneath their feet, the small rock transformed into a flat arena through Elvira's power. The white, cloudy substance of Yang that made up the Realm of Heaven drifted by beside them, the Lunar Star shining down from directly overhead.

She grit her teeth, wings flaring as she forced her way through the rest of the forms, tails thrashing and power shuddering as the Sword itself vibrated in her grip. Her arms trembled as she quickly sheathed it, the paintbrush that hung from the pommel waving in the wind, her chest heaving.

“You’re getting better with that.” Keilan commented honestly. He wasn’t certain why she struggled to actually wield the Sword, only that it was incredibly dangerous when she did so. Unlike when Mother wielded it, where it would, and in fact could, only cut Fate, the Sword seemed to almost gleefully try and cut away everything in Elvira’s grasp.

“Did you notice anything this time around?” Elvira panted, wiping the sweat from her brow and frowning down at the sheathed sword. Keilan shook his head in the negative, striding forward and extending one hand. Strings flew out from his fingertips, binding shut a few of the rifts Elvira had caused in her practice like stitches, giving poor Aeriel a breather. The green-haired wind goddess sighed in relief as she floated down to the ground barefoot, dusting off her simple green dress.

“Only the same thing as last time. Your intent is all over the place.” He said with a shake of his head.

“What does that even mean?” Elvira complained.

“You don’t know what you’re trying to cut.” Keilan almost jumped at the soft voice, airy and breathless, like a gentle breeze drifting through a meadow. He whirled on Aeriel, who blinked at him and his sister innocently, as if this wasn’t the first time he’d heard her talk in Mother knew how long.

“...how do you know that?” Elvira asked, tapping the shield that was the Sword’s hilt. Aerial cocked her head to the side and pointed to the Sword.

“It was a secret. But it told me to tell you.” She said, rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet. Then she looked at Keilan, meeting his eyes with her own, vibrant green. “Most the time, the wind talks for me.” As if that answered anything, and was relevant to anything besides his own inner monologue. He narrowed his eyes at her while she smiled a secret smile. Had she known what he was thinking...?

“It was nice to hear your voice again.” He tested, though she just giggled and said nothing more, spinning up a little tornado in her hand and playing with it as it whirled about on her palm.

“I see.” Elvira said after a moment, clipping the Sword to her hip and smoothing out her white robes. “I am unsure if I understand, but thank you, Aerial. Now, Keilan, I believe there is something you wished to speak with me about?”

“Must I have a reason for wishing to come see my sister?” He countered, raising an eyebrow at her, his thick tail lazily brushing against the ground. Elvira smiled weakly, then paused, narrowing her eyes at him. He could practically hear the confusion rolling about in her mind.

“You’re serious?”

“Of course I am serious. I know I am a bit more reclusive than the rest of our siblings, but that does not mean I do not desire to spend time with you all.” He frowned at Elvira, wondering just what she thought of him to say that.

“I know, I am sorry.” She immediately apologized, bowing her head. “It is important to take some time to rest and unwind, despite everything.” Keilan nodded sagely, stroking his chin and wishing, for a moment, he had a beard. Maybe he should grow one?

“We can make as many formations, and protections, and defenses as we want, but it will not matter if the bonds between us are frayed in the process.” He said. Elvira stared at him, silent for long enough that he started to fidget. Aeriel giggled as she shot up into the air, the wind goddess vanishing in a burst of wind.

“Are you feeling ok? That was an oddly...emotional, thing for you to say.” Elvira said, reaching out and touching his shoulder. He jerked away from her, scowling, and an evil grin stretched across her face. “Do you want a hug, too?”

“Don’t touch me.” He deadpanned, squaring his shoulders and spreading his wings just a bit, enough to either fight or flee – probably flee, all things considered. Elvira made a grabbing motion with her hands and Keilan tensed to run, but with a smirk, she backed down. A shiver ran down his spine as he readjusted his robes, giving her a cautious side eyed look and clearing his throat. “I was thinking we could play go for a bit, or something. At least until duty calls me back.” NEW novel chapters are published on novellire.net

“That sounds good to me.” Elvira grinned. “Gilles and I play that quite often. I’ve gotten much better since the last time we played.”

“I will be the judge of that.” With a wave of Keilan’s hand space warped around them, the two reappearing in his office. The various knick-knacks he kept stored on the shelves lining the walls of the massive chamber were safely kept behind freshly-cleaned panes of glass, his dark desk manned by a singular incarnation that slowly and meticulously went through the necessary paperwork. It didn’t even look up as Elvira and he appeared, a go board resting atop a beautifully carved oak stand between them. Here, they would not be disturbed. The Karmic Kings knew better than to bug him while paperwork was being done, even if it was an incarnation.

“You prefer to play as black, correct?” he sat cross-legged at his side of the table.

“And you, white,” Elvira said, sitting down in front of him, clasping her hands in her lap. He nodded, and the two began to play. The first few rounds were played in silence, each round only taking two minutes to get through. For a mortal, such speed of play was practically unimaginable – but for them? This sort of game was so overly simple it was a cakewalk; unless, of course, they were playing each other, testing their strategic minds. And Keilan had to admit that his sister had gotten better at the tactical portions of the game. He only won seven out of ten matches, as opposed to the nine out of ten it used to be.

“What is bothering you so?” Keilan asked after another decisive victory, the pieces rearranging themselves to document his win. Elvira was scowling at the board, tapping her chin, her tails thrashing in impatience as the board cleared of all pieces. “You have been tense this entire time, occasionally flinching. What is it?”

“Xing Wu is bugging me.” She admitted. “His new divinity is vexing, and my own domain of divinity makes it hard to ignore. God of the Stars? If I am the goddess of gods, that makes him the god of *becoming* a god. And he’s been *insufferable*. Won’t listen to my orders. Won’t follow commands. I just...he gets the duties I assign to him done, but it is sloppy and – even now, he actively goes out of his way to vex me. Without it being intentional, which is the most frustrating part.”

“Then do not try to command him. You and I both know that he does not follow orders well.” Keilan’s hands were a blur as he and she started the next match, pieces clicking down in rapid succession on the board as calculations and predictions were made at godly speed – and they were playing *slow*. Perhaps it was time for a new game, but, this was one Mother had shown them so it held a certain amount of nostalgia and required little true thought.

“I am learning that. You forget that I was never in charge of the man, only you and Alexander truly have any experience in handling him.” Elvira complained, shaking her head. “When I leave him alone, he makes the right choices. When I try to give him a command, he messes it up, or does a

half-assed job. It's actually amusingly predictable, when I'm not actively fixing things." Keilan chuckled as he looked up in the sky, toward the domed ceiling of his office. He peered through the dark stone that comprised it, past the multitude strings of karma that led all souls to his palace to be reincarnated, and the thick, dense energy that came with such a massive number of spirits and souls passing through the Karmic Realm.

"Huh. You know, you might actually try to give him an order here. Reverse psychology could do well." He commented, pausing play for a brief moment as he observed the newly made god as he struggled to rearrange the stars. The usage of divine power did not come naturally to the man; the purity and raw power of divinity was so much more than even a Dao Progenitor's natural qi that it was taking all his control just to keep from exploding when he exerted himself. Not literally, but it was a close enough comparison.

"How so?" Elvira asked, sneakily changing a few pieces as Keilan stared heavenward. Silly girl. Like that would help. This match was already over. Had she gotten worse since they started playing?

"I see a potential for a connection with one of the new Trees. More specifically, the soul within the Tree that Randus has been watching." He explained, looking back down at the board. Elvira's poker face was beautiful, but even she knew that he knew she cheated. "Could be interesting. Inesa has been a good influence on him, why not one more?"

"I see. I will take that into consideration. I do believe he's going to try to install a few Dao Progenitors in those Trees soon; their preparations are pretty much done." She said, nodding sagely. Keilan smiled thinly at her as he continued to play, still seeing a path to victory despite her cheating. "And you? Something is bugging you; I was wondering if it had anything to do with Sol? Or, I suppose, Father has been calling her Solana now." At this Keilan paused, narrowing his eyes at her.

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“Sol? He’s back?”

“As a little bird, yes. Surprised you didn’t notice, but I suppose that is more my domain than yours. She’s a fire bird now, a spirit beast, and I’ve been feeling her for a while. Keeps reaching for her old divinity. Even Father made a move; He tried to hide it, but His attention on her did not go unnoticed. The Realms moved, and I have not felt something like this since Father paid so much attention to Fang Xu and Celene.” Elvira explained, scowling as Keilan won once again. “I hate playing this game with you.”

“I know. You can’t match me even when while cheating.” Keilan said smugly, clearing the board. “Solana...I will look into that deeper. Fate and destiny is a connection I struggle with, while Mother seems content to tamper with it unintentionally. Another round?” Elvira shook her head but stayed seated all the same, the two playing go and making small talk all through the day. Both knew the importance of working hard, but just the same, one had to take time to rest.

...if only Mother knew that, too. He frowned, looking up at his sister. He was worried about Mother. She wasn't acting oddly, or, well, odder than usual, however...there was something off about Her. He wasn't quite sure how to put it into words. Mayhaps it was time to voice his concerns to his siblings, away from Mother's prying eyes, and see if they felt the same.

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Xing Wu scowled and crossed his arms as he glared at the Dao Stars before him, none of them wanting to behave. How in the Karmic *fuck* did Statera Luotian pin these things in skies and the primordial chaos? With a damn spear? Divine power churned within him like an ocean in a storm, the Primordial Chaos raging before him with all the might of creation. When he'd been but a mere cultivator, the idea of visiting the Primordial Chaos and the other Realms had been but a dream. Now, though?

He'd barely even had the chance to explore the other Realms! The moment he became a god and proposed to Inesa, Elvira, Goddess of Heaven and *apparently* literal Divinity, had demanded he go

and train the Dao Progenitors to begin taking over the new Trees! Statera Luotian hadn't come to say hi, he'd spent most of his time back in the Physical Realm – he'd barely even had a tour of Heaven, been given but a glance at the Karmic, and was still pretty much unacquainted with the Spirit Realm! Shouldn't that have been the first priority, to get him accustomed to divine power and everything else in the Four Realms?

Not to mention he could now hear any and all prayers directed to him. He'd known a religion had cropped up around him and Dei, but now he could actually hear it! And see the power of faith that flowed up from the believers to the Dao Stars! It was like having constant buzzing in his ears; he'd wanted some help to figure out how to deal with it, but all the other gods he'd met had said were "just get used to it!"

And now he's moving these Stars! The one Star before him in particular was one of those that he was relatively unconnected to – a Dao of Secrets. He was fairly certain it was a god's Dao; the silvery ball of light and faith, encompassing everything the progenitor of said Dao understood of Secrets, had a hint of gold and white to it, the colors of the gods, and the power of Faith that comprised it was not just a singular being's. He could feel the worship of millions of mortals slowly trickling into the Dao, strengthening it, while it, itself, kept everything that was secret separate from him.

Such was the nature of Secrets. They didn't always want to be told, and this was the one Dao that he could not actively tap into, not even slightly. It was another kind of infuriating, because he couldn't even control when he tapped into other Dao's! At least, not when they were unattached to his own martial way, like this one was.

"Having fun?" Inesa's voice was music to his ears, her warm arms wrapping around his waist as she appeared behind him.

But despite her appearance, annoyance was still foremost on his mind, even as she laid her chin on his shoulder and hummed in his ear, the scent of woodsmoke and the warmth of a hearth radiating from her. Her hands clasped around his middle, and he laid one of his own over hers.

“Oh, so much fun. If you count beating my head against a brick wall and wishing Morgan would come try to eat me just so I could have something to punch as *fun*.” He ground out, glaring at the Dao Star. It still had quite a ways to go until it was in the “proper position.” Where was the danger he was sensing? He wanted *that*.

“Mmm. Maybe you should take a break.” She mused. Xing Wu spun around in her grip to face her, wrapping his own arms around her back. His eyebrows wiggled and she giggled, shaking her head rapidly at his look. “No, no, no. Not like that. Not yet.” *Not yet. Which means soon.* Xing Wu grinned lecherously at her, a blush *covering* Inesa’s face as she rapidly pulled away. Ah, she was so fun to tease. “I mean, you should go explore a little. The new regions. Go. Visit them, I mean.” She stammered a little and Xing Wu cackled out a laugh. How long had they been together, and he could still make her blush and stammer like this?

Adorable. What had he done to earn the love of an adorable creature like this?

“And what would your boss think about me skipping work?” He mused, scratching his chin and summoning his spear so he could lean against it lazily, in the way he knew she appreciated. Inesa shook her head rapidly, refusing to look him up and down, brown hair flying about every which way, soft rays of light radiating off of her. He was immensely pleased to see his own Dao Star hanging from her neck in a necklace, softly gleaming.

Inesa, not to be outdone, had pulled her own Star out of the sky to give to him. Almost absently one hand reached up to touch where it hung around his neck, hidden beneath his robes and encased in a locket of silver and wind. Two gods had apparently helped her make the necklace, but it was the Star that really meant something. Inesa’s eyes traced his hand as he moved, expression softening.

“Elvira says you should need to stay here and work on the Stars. They need to be adjusted more.” She said. Xing Wu nodded thoughtfully. “And I have work to do, so I can’t help.”

“I see. Break time it is!” he announced loudly. Inesa giggled, light swirling about her as her body began to shimmer, transforming into her titular element.

“I knew you would say that. I love you, Xing Wu, and try not to work too hard.” She teased.

“Never. Love you too.” He winked at her as she shot off in a streak of light, his own divine power swirling about him. There was a certain teleport technique he’d been working on; just teleporting was one thing, but using his Domain and divine power was another...

Starlight swirled around him as he focused, connecting to the Dao, tracing it back to its source -

Swords filled his mind for a split second, space warping around him as suddenly he appeared beside the Sword Dao Progenitor, stumbling and nearly tripping into a weapon rack. Said Dao Progenitor leapt into the air as Xing Wu appeared, whipping his sword out of its sheath to point menacingly at him – only to pause, and immediately fall into a bow.

“Lord Xing Wu, I was not expecting you. How can I be of service?” the Dao Progenitor was shockingly deferential considering Xing Wu just *appeared* in the poor man’s private meditation chamber – he put a hand to his forehead, glancing about the silk-laded chamber and deciding he didn’t want to be here. Not that he’d intended to appear in front of him either way – he could see the way his divine presence weighed upon the man, practically forcing him into a bow. He quickly reigned in his power, desperately putting it on a leash, the Dao Progenitor breathing far easier once he had done so.

“I’m sorry, I’m getting used to a new technique. Just going sightseeing. I’ll...uh, see you later.” And with that, he teleported away, chasing another Dao, and trying to keep a lower profile this time.

It did not work. Instead of quietly teleporting above Manu Ti, he appeared in the throne room of the Celestial Palace, where long ago, when he was still Dei, he used to hold court. Alanna sat in her throne, head whipping up to stare at him, shocked, as he hovered above those present. Mortals at

the peak of cultivation to immortals themselves were assembled in neat rows, Alanna's Queen's Guard levelling their spears and halberds at Xing Wu despite knowing who he was.

“That’s,”

“Xing Wu!”

“A God...”

The people gasped and muttered in collective shock, reminding him that he was fairly reclusive as a Dao Progenitor, and even more so when it came to other Immortals now that he was a god. Their prayers echoed in his ears, filling his mind with all sorts of words and noises and –

“Xing Wu!” Alanna stood from her throne in a smooth motion, and Xing Wu shot her an uneasy smile, the awe and respect directed toward him from the mortals filling his mind and heart will all sorts of uncomfortable emotions. But, in truth, it was the woman standing beside Alanna that surprised him the most.

The Mad Scientist stood beside her, smiling and pleasant, with far more power swirling about her than should be possible. It was enough to, temporarily, halt the whispering prayers that echoed in his ears.

*“Your duty to the mortals is over, your story here finished. Let us weave our tales. Go back to performing your godly tasks.”* She whispered, wings fluttering. Xing Wu narrowed his eyes at her, but felt his power wrap around him all the same, teleporting him once again. This time, he appeared in one of the new regions; one of two that did not have a designated Dao Progenitor yet. He frowned, floating above the baby Holy Mountain of this new section of the Heaven Realm, watching mortal life as it moved about on the areas below.

...well. This was going to piss him off if he didn't get a handle on it. With a frown Xing Wu sat cross-legged in the air, his divine power roaring through his veins, so much heavier than he was used to, and closed his eyes in meditation, fighting to push away the echoes of prayers.

Only one stood out, above the others. *Xing Wu*. A voice said. *The God who defies the heavens, whose Dao Star was stripped from the sky. Watch over me, as I strive to finish what you started, and avenge Dei.* Xing Wu frowned harder, and pushed it all away entirely.

Stupid mortals.

He stripped his own star out of the sky. Why did they have to misinterpret things?

### 3:10 Limitations?

Alexander was amused. The great dragon lay curled up in his cave, many of his incarnations swimming through the Spirit Realm directing various spirits and aiding the construction of the formation pathways that were nearly completed. But that was all he needed to do at the moment; his main body lay curled up in his favorite cave, smiling as the newest god to the Four Realms stood before him, ready to rant and rave but unsure how to. The emotions swirled about him in grey waves, his hands clenching and unclenching, eyes, sparkling with the light of the stars themselves.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.” Xing Wu said, twitching in agitation as he clasped his hands before him and bowed. A deep rumble of amusement echoed in Alexander’s throat as he bent his head to be eye-level with the new god of stars.

"It is my pleasure, Xing Wu. I always make time for young gods; it is an adjustment, suddenly having the responsibilities, power, and connection of a divinity. Now, how can I help you?" he asked.

"Young god?" I may not be one of the originals, but I'm far from young, Alexander." Xing Wu raised an eyebrow at Alexander, who chuckled to himself. That was what the man had latched onto, that he called him young? "I was there when the Shadow was cast down. 'Young' is just not true."

"Indeed you were, but you were not a god then. Your time as a god has been short is all I was implying, and the instincts and duties of divinity are a difficult adjustment even for them. I imagine the differences to be even more apparent to you." Alexander pointed out. Xing Wu grumbled something unintelligible beneath his breath, then rubbed his forehead, just beneath his horns.

"The power thing will just take time and practice. Divine power is denser than anything else I've ever dealt with, but I've been ascending the cultivation ladder for a long, long time. Sudden power spikes and denser energy is not something new to me. It's the prayers I'm getting used to." He complained.

"The prayers? Are you not already used to such things?" Alexander cocked his head to the side curiously, a little spirit that had been clambering over his horns scrambling to keep from falling. Though he called it a little spirit, it would qualify as one of the stronger ones on the scale of averages. Perhaps it would qualify to be the overall guardian of an entire continent-sized piece of land. The truly little ones could rarely stand his presence anymore, and he gently reached one claw up to push it back onto his horns. The spirit burbled happily at him, a remnant of its time as a river spirit, before it pushed past that limitation.

"It was different when it was just a Dao. I could somewhat tell when someone was tapping into my personal path, and there were some things I could do to reconnect with the other Daos that branched off of my own, but not to the extent this is. I can actively feel and hear those who are praying to me, tapping into my Dao, or even just thinking about me." Xing Wu shook his head. "It's driving me insane. And the stronger they are, the louder their voices."

“So you are just in the beginning stages, then.” Alexander noted, tapping one claw against the cave floor, the rhythmic sound echoing in the cave. “At my level, I can hear and connect with almost every being in the Spirit Realm, and with many more who connect with the spirits. It is a task to start to disconnect with them, so it is not all-consuming. I believe some of the other gods may be a wiser choice to ask for help in this matter; Aeriel, in particular, is excellent at being able to disconnect. I admit to being a bit of a natural in this regard as the Spirit Dragon. Explaining how to disconnect has never come easily to me.”

“This is only the beginning? Great. Just wonderful.” Xing Wu grumbled, straightening up and fixing his robes.

“If you think that’s wonderful, just wait until you get the zealots.” Alexander chuckled, shaking his head. “There is an order of knights in the Physical Realm who commit atrocities in my name; they are closer to devil cultivators than anything else. Of course I condemn their actions, and they completely and intentionally misinterpret my teachings, but they’re annoyingly persistent. Nearly wiped themselves out when they tried to gain the favor of one of my children, a true dragon, but somehow they survived. I think my eldest child took pity on them, and allowed them another chance to repent their ways. They did not learn their lesson.” He peered through the layers of the Spirit Realm at said order of knights, the few who remained huddled together in a small castle. They were mostly Draconians, his mortal race, and lorded over a small collection of villages.

Dragon supremacists is what they were. Much like the Primeval Dragon, Sehuyun, had been. He wondered how she was doing?

“That’s who’s bugging me the most; the zealots.” Xing Wu complained. “There’s an immortal, and Elemental – two of them, actually, a wife and husband. Been praying to me for a while and, for some gods-damned reason, trying to summon *Dei*. They think I will help them rebel against Heaven or something. I have half a mind to go down there and knock some sense into them just to get them to shut up; but what’s really bugging me is how they’ve misunderstood everything that’s ever happened to me.”

Alexander mused, shifting his gaze from that group of zealots to the ones Xing Wu was talking about. It took a bit of searching, as they had obfuscated themselves behind layers and layers of formations and karma enough that it took even a token effort for Alexander to pierce through. Even calling what they did praying was a bit much; they were reaching out, trying to connect with Xing Wu without actually believing he was a god, only an incredibly powerful cultivator, and asking for his aid without any promise or dedication to anything but themselves and desperation. In fact, he dared to say that they were not even actually trying to call out to him, merely using his words and the stories of the past to advance their own agenda.

Xing Wu did not suit desperation, and he doubted the man would answer to it.

Despite that though, their take on Xing Wu's entire life, as well as Dei's, was incredibly funny, and Alexander snorted in amusement.

"Is this funny?" Xing Wu asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Of course it is. Do you know what one of the biggest differences between a higher being and a mortal is? Besides power." It was a rhetorical question, but Alexander paused for dramatic effect all the same, Xing Wu just staring up at him nonplussed. "Perspective. We can see more, understand more, can feel more than they; many mortals believe gods to be unfeeling, uncaring beings. It could not be farther from the truth. It is because we feel more, feel deeper, and understand why we feel that way that we are able to keep our thoughts and actions in check. And we also see farther. Mortals, typically, only see life in the here and now, forgetting what was yesterday and ignoring what might come. Immortals may be a bit better, but they still have the same sort of issue, if on a longer scale. Hence facts, myths, emotions; everything is twisted in the mind of a mortal to fit that viewpoint. They ignore what is truth, and make it fit their truth. To become a god, one must discard certain limitations; and the expansion of perspective is what allows us to see how to do that." Alexander nodded to himself as he spoke. This was something he had mused on quite a bit in his long lifetime.

Yet a limited perspective had its place as well. Xing Wu had limited his own perspective to the here and now prior to becoming an immortal and Dao Progenitor, solely to keep himself from falling into the same trap as when he'd been Dei. Gods experienced this as well, of course, but on a far grander scale.

“That’s why they twist my story? Why they make it seem like Statera Luotian tore my Dao Star out of the sky instead of myself, or that They forced me to reincarnate as Dei in fear of my so-called power. Is that why they see Statera Luotian as two different people instead of one as well? That’s just stupid.” Xing Wu shook his head.

“Indeed it is.” Alexander agreed. “Mortals have a habit of not listening to those who know better. But they have to be free to make their own mistakes and choices, or else there is no point to it at all. You are the perfect example of why; the greatest mortal of all history, and you need not deny it. I recommend not giving them any of your attention. They may not know it, but they will feed off of it; your attention is part of what drives divine power itself, but by putting too much thought into them you may inadvertently empower their ambition and purpose.”

“I think Statera Luotian said something like that to me once. Something about Them putting too much attention on Celene and Fang Xu caused them to become the Sun and Star.” Xing Wu said, recognition lighting up in his expression.

“I recommend finding something to distract yourself with, and when I see Aeriel again I’ll send her your way. I would recommend you trying to make your own People, but I doubt that much is wise.” Alexander shook his head. Xing Wu wouldn’t be ready to create his own People for a long while yet, and he wondered if the man would ever have any interest in it regardless.

“That reminds me, why is Statera putting so much pressure on the Physical Realm?” Xing Wu asked. Alexander smiled at the man, knowing where the question was really coming from. He could sense the impending danger – such had been what drove him to finally take the step into godhood in the first place. This was just a segue into that.

“We are not supposed to be actively spreading this information so as to avoid a panic, but if someone asks, we are free to provide the answer. I would say about half of the greater gods know the truth, and while the others suspect something, they are content not knowing for now.” Alexander started. And he told Xing Wu the truth, of what was coming and what was already being

done. Xing Wu accepted the information silently, his aura stilling, his divine power solidifying; it was amazing to Alexander how giving him a clear goal and enemy made him focus so.

"I see. And moving the Dao Stars is part of the defensive structure, then?" He asked. Alexander nodded, lifting his head as Xing Wu began throwing off his connections to those praying to him and annoying him – specifically the zealots – to focus all of his energy on tasks ahead. "Thank you, Alexander. I appreciate the advice. I'll be going now."

"Don't force it. Let your control come naturally; do what you've been itching to do. Go explore some of the other Realms, see the new regions. This is the task we need you to aim to complete, not accomplish right away. Elvira knows this, she is simply...blunt." Alexander advised. Xing Wu waved as he turned his back, starlight glittering around him as he vanished in a teleport – not quite appearing where he intended, Alexander was certain, but close enough. The great dragon smiled to himself as he settled back down, curling up to continue watching the Spirit River as it flowed by. He let out a long, slow breath.

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It was a pity that, eventually, he may become too powerful to greet the new gods with his main body, just as Father nearly was. Perhaps incarnations would handle the task eventually, but it wouldn't feel the same as greeting them in person. But that was a long time coming, and Alexander could content himself with that fact.

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"Let's start this nice and slow. Inesa, if you would do the honors." I said, gesturing to the brown-haired goddess as she floated beside me above the Four Realms. Keilan, Alexander, Elvira, and Reika all stood beside me, watching silently as Inesa shot down to the very center of everything; the Life-Giving Tree of the Physical Realm. There she would ignite the core of the defensive formation, and we ensure everything was working properly.

“Xing Wu will get the Stars into position soon.” Alexander said conversationally, side-eyeing his sister. Elvira huffed in annoyance, crossing her arms.

“Wasn’t reverse psychology supposed to be the way to get him to figure things out? That’s what you all told me, and what does he do? He goes to Alexander and just asks a few questions.” She complained.

“Manipulation is not always the key. He always responded better to danger than anything else...except for maybe Mother’s hand.” Keilan explained with a shrug, my dark-haired son flaring his leathery wings despite knowing he had personally advised Elvira to use reverse psychology on Xing Wu. I bit my tongue and watched Inesa place her hand upon the control station, funneling her power of light into the intricately carved runic stone slab.

“What does it say about you that the Goddess of Divinity and the ruler of the gods and Heaven Realm cannot manipulate a single new god?” Reika teased.

“Not everything is about manipulation. And honesty is a virtue. Elvira’s strengths may not be in subterfuge, but she is a just and noble ruler.” Alexander said. “And Gilles makes up the brains in their relationship anyways.”

“Hey!”

“She is a bit of a meathead.” Keilan agreed, earning himself another cry of protest from his sister. Reika giggled and I shook my head fondly, then focused as the formation was ignited.

Power surged through the formation lines, igniting in a beautiful display of spiritual and elemental energies. The four key structures of the Realms, the Tree, the Mountain, the Valley, and the River, shone like beacons, cheers going up from the assembled gods as the energies began to flow. I immediately shifted my gaze upward, through the shell of primordial chaos to the spherical barrier, made up of trillions of hexagonal pieces, as it formed around the Four Realms. It stood strong, lightning crackling through the lines, light mixing with shadow, not a single flicker of weakness showing in the connections.

It was a design the Mad Scientist had helped me finalize. If one hexagon shattered it would regenerate or be replaced by other parts of the barrier. And rather than having one singular shield that would shatter, the many different parts meant that other pieces could be moved or adjusted so power could be moved to the right spot. But it wasn't yet enough, even if we were nearly fifty thousand years ahead of schedule thanks to the Mad Scientist's energy.

"Excellent. Shut it down. We can now move the Dao Progenitors to the new regions they'll be taking over, and begin construction on the other formation lines." I said, turning to my children. They were smiling at the barrier, and merely nodded at my command as they started to move off, chatting freely. My eyes drifted to the Sword that Does Not Cut, hanging at Elvira's side as it was. It was about time I made some artifacts for my other children, maybe even something for the Pillars when they finally appeared.

I had an idea for Keilan. He was a God of Connections, but had yet to fully grasp the nature of fate. Perhaps a book of sorts, a Book of Fate...but the others? Alexander and Reika? I was struggling a bit with them. Ah, well. I'd find my inspiration eventually.

My mind drifted slightly, latching onto a conversation happening in the Physical Realm, between two immortals. An Elemental girl, and a Karae man.

*"...that is the problem. Despite the oppression of the Heavenly Dao, the Celestial Empress has ensured the people are content. We cannot allow them to be content if our rebellion is to work."* The Karae man said, annoyance flashing through his veins at his opponent's competence. I had to agree. Alanna, the current Empress of Manu Ti and the mortal ruler of almost the entirety of the Physical Realm, was an excellent ruler. No one was perfect, but she did a wonderful job of keeping people satisfied enough to not engage in open protest...most the time.

*“What are you suggesting?”*

The woman asked. She was the weaker of the two, but her drive was far stronger. I daresay she was nearly a devil cultivator, but her path was not one of outright evil – it was far more dangerous than that, for it was rooted in what could be called “good,” if put to the right task. That was how chaos and evil got to people; it masqueraded as virtue and righteousness.

*“We need to undermine her authority. We need to ensure the people are not content – start in the outer planets and move in toward Pangaea.”* The man said. Terrorism. They were talking about hidden terrorism, guerilla tactics, and I could see their plan. They would set up formations that were meant to disrupt qi, to start. Qi carried emotion, just as much as it did spiritual energy. By disrupting qi they could influence people’s emotions. Add to that their plan to recruit devil cultivators and mercenaries, just to cause chaos, and their plan held a little bit of weight.

But the woman was smarter than just that. *“We need to influence the upper echelons too. Get people inside the governments and religions, to start undoing them from the inside. Then we can build a better world, one free from the control of the Heavens.”* She said. It was funny, in my opinion, how they no longer referred to me as a God, but as the Heavens themselves.

Because that was what I had been about to become, what I had been headed towards before this calamity changed the course of my life. I would have ascended to no be just a god, but the Heavens. Sehuyun had given me a glimpse of what I could be, by showing me what one could do above even Divinity; my answer had been “I am the Heavens.” It had been true, then.

I took a deep breath and let the vision fade, refocusing on the now.

It seemed like it was someone else’s story that was playing here, but it wasn’t. It was still mine. I could see how almost everything flowed together, connecting and guiding people down a certain path. Sol, flying in the skies above Cradle, a little bird struggling to reach immortality and certain to draw the attention of those two. Xing Wu, who was the virtuous example of them, a direct

contrast to their methods and intentions. And once upon a time, I would have played the role of pushing them all together, guiding them to the end result.

That was when I had been severing myself from Karma. Such a fate had changed. The collision course we had with the One World, the Mad Scientist accelerating our growth process, the Original Sin (if it could even be called that), the Pillars growing...the timing was suspicious. More than suspicious. Sometimes things were coincidence, that was the truth. Sometimes coincidence was the result of something greater pulling strings. And I could feel Mr. Boxes pulling strings, obscuring my vision; not maliciously, but enough to annoy me. What was the goal, here? What was the game? I could see all that was beneath me, but not my own path.

I paused for a moment, almost hoping that Mr. Boxes would chime in; but there was no information forthcoming, and I turned my attention elsewhere.

My gaze focused on Morgan, who was circling a pillar of crystallized energy in its Hidden Realm. The glowing crystal of raw energy was as solid as physically possible, the internals filled to the brim with powerful, pure energy that remained uncorrupted by the miasma that plagued the Hidden Realm; a result of Morgan's initial bout with me. This was only the first of many pillars. By the time of the collision, I hoped the entire Hidden Realm would be filled with them.

"Morgan. It is time to release your People into the Realms." I told it. Morgan's ears perked up at my words, but otherwise it did not respond to my command. The Aracheon would provide a necessary element of chaos to the Four Realms that might distract people from the greater danger. But most importantly, they were beginning to stagnate in the Hidden Realm, and releasing them would let them grow and prosper to the necessary levels *before* the collision. I had no desire to see them go extinct, after all. "And also, you may let our guest in."

*That* got Morgan's attention, the spider-wolf lifting its head and fixating its eight eyes on the ceiling...opposite where I truly was. Was I truly projecting my intent so much as to fool even Morgan?

“Are you sure that is a good idea? They’re awful big.” The one to answer wasn’t Morgan. It was Kei, who was standing just beside me, having snuck up on me with a balloon of glitter and water. I, of course, would never had let her throw the thing at me, but it was impressive enough that she got within throwing distance. I smiled at my granddaughter, her fox tails swishing in the dark of space, framed against the blue light of the Lunar Star.

“The Four Realms need another little push. The Mad Scientist sped up our growth by tens of thousands of years, and we’re still riding that high. I had once believed myself capable of fueling that growth, through my relative absence and the severing of my karma. *They* might be able to provide that...X-factor.” I explained, folding my hands into the sleeves of my robes as I turned my attention to the guest I had spoken of. Their soul was frozen in time, their descent halted by Morgan, who kept them at bay long enough for the Four Realms to be ready for their arrival.

The soul that resided outside the Four Realms was massive. Easily the size of the Realm Sun or Lunar Star, and so eerily familiar I *knew* I knew them from somewhere. But their memories, that connection, was momentarily hidden from me. I couldn’t quite see it.

I did not know if they were the First or the Rival. It didn’t matter. It didn’t even matter if they chose to stay in my Four Realms. All that mattered was that their very presence and the energy they spread because of it would fuel the growth of the Four Realms – growth I could direct in a way that would boost our chances of survival.

“Come on, then. What are you waiting for? Welcome to the Four Realms.”

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