

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

1.16 Dragons and Men

In the years that followed the attack, Alexander did not rage. He did not thunder his discomfort or unhappiness to the heavens above, as Elvira did. He did not thrash, or set fire to things, or vent his wrath upon the hapless, or any number of things the mortals claimed dragons did in their young, mistaken mythologies.

He stewed. Even as he set about fixing the Life-Giving Tree, mending broken branches, encouraging them to grow together once more. Even as he blew fallen leaves off of the lands of Pangea, freeing the inhabitants below from the shadows they cast. Even as he did his utmost to protect the mortals from the chaos, and guide them from their own dark desires.

Even when he noticed the way the chaos was directed. Guided by some unseen hand.

For five years he stewed, and observed.

Spirits swam about through the Spirit Realm at his command, bringing energies and powers from all over the Realms. They flooded them through the spirit river to pool in the Physical Realm, aiding its growth and attempting to counteract the growing chaos. He drained away the excess negative energy, Qi tainted by negative emotions radiating from mortal souls, burning away the negativity as best he could to leave a purer, more flexible power behind.

He coaxed mortals away from rampaging spirit beasts driven mad by the buckling of reality, and coaxed those same hordes to take other paths to avoid tribes of Fae or Avians or any of his siblings' other Peoples. It wasn't perfect, and he was not as skilled at such manipulation as Father. Freewill was an inalienable right, given to all of His children, be they dark spirits, greedy mortals, or the righteous. As such Alexander couldn't force mortal beings to listen to his coaxing, his

whispers...especially those who had shut themselves off to the spiritual, choosing instead to mire themselves in the physical. Such a decision was crippling to both sides.

He wished he could do more smaller acts, to aid the inhabitants of the physical world. But it was taking all his effort to soothe the cracks in reality as it was. And freewill, once again, made everything more complicated.

Which is why he had no choice but to sit there and watch the First City burn as only an incarnation, the technique Father so liked to employ, a sliver of his will observing its destruction while his main body continued his work.

Fae fled the walled city in droves, powerful spirit beasts breaking through the defensive structure like mindless machines, tearing through the city in a mad dash. The city lord, a man named Dei, stood at the helm of the defenders. His spear was savage and swift, his skill, in many ways, reminding Alexander of the foreign god as he struck down beast after beast.

But there were far too many of them, and they were far too powerful. Illusions fell about him like a blanket, muddling his senses and dulling his spear, and for each beast he felled two more took its place. Alexander frowned and turned his attention to one of the less powerful groups of cultivators, sending a sliver of will down to a city guard sensitive to the spiritual. The little tendril had him turn a corner rather than head straight down the street he'd been following, leading him and the three families he protected towards Dei.

Satisfied that the guard was safe, Alexander turned his attention to the aggressors.

The leaders of the spirit beast horde, three powerful spirit beasts of true sapience, had grown far too greedy far too quickly, and now sought to wipe out the City. It had been built upon a convergence of two ley lines, making it a perfect place to cultivate, and they wished to make their new den there. They'd taken advantage of the chaos; an earthquake had struck the city not too long ago and weakened the defenses. So, they had whipped the lesser beasts into a frenzy and drove them to war. This alone was not necessarily an evil act. It was how they actively killed and sought

to kill, hunting those who fled with gleeful abandon, slaughtering without remorse or purpose, that made their actions foul. They killed for the enjoyment of killing, not just to strengthen themselves or lay claim to their new demesne.

Dei and his men fell back, buying time for their people, and the city would soon be lost.

“Something drives them,” Alexander noted, peering closely at the three spirit beast Kings. Each one would be a troublesome opponent for Dei. Together, the three shadow panthers stalked him in the shadows, waiting for a moment of weakness to pounce. Together they had the strength to take him down, but their nature spurred caution. Especially after the previous city lord, an old woman slightly less powerful than Dei, detonated her cultivation in a fiery explosion in an attempt to injure the spirit beast kings. But they had proven wily, and escaped with few injuries. One peeled away from the group for a brief moment to kill a woman and child, running through an alleyway, leaving their bodies in the streets. There had been no purpose to that, that Alexander can tell. Besides, perhaps, just to kill.

Alexander squinted at them as he watched it return to its siblings, sensing some form of irregularity in the beasts’ souls. Something insidious had touched them, granting them a small burst of power for the price of a piece of their freewill. That same power urged them to do worse than what was necessary. Freewill was an inalienable right...unless it was willingly given away.

Mortals truly did not know the price of their own soul. Foolishness.

Dei shouted out orders, blood splashing his grey robes as he slew another charging spirit beast, his men falling back further, toward the eastern wall. Many of his people had fled that direction, guided by soldier and spirit alike. Elements crackled forth in a wave as the remains of his personal guard stepped forward, unleashing cultivation technique after cultivation technique. The unity of their purpose provided a bulwark the mad beasts could not break. And the city continued to burn.

“There is something driving them,” Father’s incarnation suddenly said, appearing beside Alexander and sounding just...exhausted. He dared not look at His face, ashamed as he was of his own

weakness. "In a way, controlling them. These choices are their own, made easier by a force that is not. I should have made angels first. They could've helped. Put the cart before the horse, in this case." He muttered.

"Oh?" Alexander asked, watching Dei retreat with his people. They would escape, but he was not sure the spirit beast kings would not follow. The body of a cultivator contained much qi, and would grow their power immensely. Especially one as powerful as Dei. The question was, would greed overcome their instincts that Dei was not an easy opponent? Injuries were still problematic to deal with, even for powerful spirit beasts.

"Yes. I hoped angels might be born naturally over time, but I hadn't expected this chaos. I should have erred on the side of caution and made them first. It's a mistake I intend to rectify. I – oh no, one of the two lovers died." Father suddenly cut Himself off, voice laced with sadness. Alexander rumbled something, scanning the city to see what He was talking about.

The first two Fae souls Father had ever created were in the city. The female currently sat cradling the dead body of her lover, a younger Fae with black hair, that had jumped in front of a charging flame boar to save her. He had not survived the impact, blood pooling around his broken body, but had succeeded in saving his wife.

"We must go, Celene!" Dei barked, grabbing the back of the woman's shirt and hauling her to her feet. She fought him, kicking and screaming, desperate to get back to the body of her lover, but he was in all senses of the word *stronger*. "Do not let his sacrifice be in vain, you fool! Come on!" Another flame boar – this one larger than the one that had killed the boy, came barreling through a building, only barely missing Dei and the now-named Celene as it charged through the chaos. Together they fled through a break in the walls and into the woods, chasing their people and leaving the devastation behind.

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"In the next life, my boy. Your sacrifice was not in vain, nor will it ever be." Father whispered fondly. Alexander glanced at Him to see Him cradling the male's soul with His one arm, smiling down at it. He let it go, the soul floating off to join the spirit river, flying as fast as it could to get to its next life. "Watch them, Alexander. Their struggles, their sacrifice. It is what forges their souls; selfless sacrifice, good deeds, all these mean more in times of chaos. Dei is a good, strong soul, but he needs guidance. Celene is a soft soul, adventurous yet kind, now hardened by loss. And the boy...he, too, was a soft, kind soul, but strong in the way that mattered."

"I see," Alexander mused, and he truly did. He could see the responsibility on Dei's shoulders as he fled, weighing down upon his soul and driving him forward. He had chosen to shoulder the weight of his people, and if he did it right, he would be all the stronger for it. His was not a decision that had been selfishly made, even if he had desired power. Such decisions needed to be selfless, in Alexander's opinion.

"I'm sorry, I'd truly love to stay, but I can barely keep two incarnations running as it is. I just wanted to check in with a few things real quick, see how you were holding up." Father said with a yawn. Alexander grunted.

"You should be getting some rest." He said softly.

"Ain't no rest for the wicked." Father said, patting his side. He nearly flinched away from the contact. "Be strong, Alexander, as you always are. You are a good soul." And with that, He vanished. Alexander huffed out a sigh and shook his head, turning back to his duties. Even if he couldn't intervene, he owed it to these people to at least bear witness to their struggles. This should've never happened. He should've been strong enough to protect them.

No, that wasn't right. He needed to change his thoughts.

I am strong enough. He realized, a bit numbly, recalling the foreign being's words. *I just don't have the technique or skill to control it. I need understanding. I need control. Know thyself...know thy enemy. I know neither, and if Keilan is to be believed, there is an enemy.*

I must be ready for the next storm.

Dei hated to admit it, but that green-eyed woman's words were the only thing keeping him alive.

He brought up the rear as his people fled the city, heading north, toward the great bridge that spanned the Windswept Chasm. The Lord's Guard, powerful soldiers trained to protect the city's leadership, lead the way and bolstered the sides of the pack. He trusted them implicitly; even without him at the helm they would keep what remained of the city guard standing and the independent cultivators, who now ran alongside them, filling in their ranks, from doing something too stupid. Everyone but Dei carved a path to safety through the forest, through mad spirit beasts, to a bridge whose crossing and subsequent collapse may spell safety to the few remaining Fae.

He brought up the rear.

Everyone else would just get in the way.

Another spirit beast fell to his spear, the thousand-colored snake spraying its blood across his robes as he pierced its skull. Illusions fell about him like a blanket, distorting his senses and coloring his perceptions. It drove his rage and anger insane, begging for him to stand and fight, take back what was rightfully his, avenge his fallen mentor – the old hag who drug him out of the tribes and the streets, to become who he was!

But such intense rage was not his own.

“Everything is within. Seek nothing outside of yourself.” He repeated like a mantra, and the illusions vanished like smoke in the wind. His anger cooled enough for him to keep a level head, the shadows lightening and revealing two black panthers stalking toward him. Their qi was strong, smelling of ash and hatred, constantly trying to seep into his own qi to disrupt his cultivation. Dei took a few steps back, risking a glance over his shoulder to see how far his people had gotten.

The last were just leaving the line of trees, barely two thousand of them – compared to the nearly forty thousand the city had once housed – sprinting across a few hundred yards of open plains to the bridge. Even from here he could hear the howling of the Windswept Chasm, the perpetual windstorms that plagued its interior sounding stronger than usual. The Windswept Bridge, a white-stone structure sustained by powerful formations, hung heavy over the chasm. People flooded across it, a few of his guard standing on the other side, preparing to collapse it once all his people were across.

He needed to stall for only a little longer.

“I don’t have all damn day,” Dei ground out, turning back to the panthers and scowling.

“You are a resilient one,” one of the panthers growled, speaking through qi so Dei could understand. There was only one language, when speaking through qi, and all understood it. “Maybe if you’d stayed to fight, you’d have stood a chance to keep your den. Pity.”

Dei stiffened, knowing the panther was taunting him, that he’d had no chance against all three of them and all those other spirit beasts. But he also understood something else. Had this happened before he’d met that woman, before she’d said those damnable words, he might have stood his ground and died with his city. The qi within was too rich, too powerful, to give up without a fight. And the cores of three spirit beast Kings would have spurred him to even greater heights, had he survived. Now, though...

It had only been five years since the Tree had been shaken. His cultivation had not grown in that time, ever since he stopped absorbing ambient qi. But something within him had. Something far more powerful. And it told him that his people were more important than a place.

“My brother and I will consume your flesh, Fae. You won’t be as nourishing as the Old One, but your cultivation will still feed us nicely. Perhaps even propel us into the next Realm,” the other panther growled, its voice sounding like it came from right next to him. He frowned, gripping his spear so tightly the haft creaked. Silence stretched for a long moment, the two sides waiting with baited breath.

Monkeys screeched in the trees, igniting their fists and beating their chests as the shadow panthers pounced, claws of wind hurtling through air, cutting through tree trunks as easily as a hot knife through butter. Dei batted the air blades away with ease, his own qi wrapping around his spear as he twirled, letting his instincts guide him. He lashed out with a kick to the side, his foot planting itself in the first panther’s throat as it leapt out of the shadows, intent on disemboweling him. His spear spun rapidly, the butt end slamming into the mouth of the second panther and forcing the haft down its throat – then the third finally appeared, descending from the branches above with claws bared and magic swirling from its form.

“FUCK OFF!” Dei bellowed, pushing the entirety of his cultivation into the words. A veritable explosion tore through the forest, blowing the panthers away and giving him room to retreat.

And so they danced. The panthers charged and probed, trying to get to him and slowly wearing him down, while he slowly retreated, buying time for his people.

“Dei! We’re finished crossing the bridge!” one of the guards shouted, qi carrying her voice to his ears. He risked a glance over his shoulder, seeing that, indeed, all his people had crossed. His guards stood on the far end, keeping a group of flaming-fisted monkeys from getting any further than halfway across – Dei ducked under a panther and whirled, sprinting towards the bridge.

"Collapse it!" He bellowed, willing qi to coat his feet and push him faster. To their credit, his men did not hesitate. Explosions rocked the great structure, stones and monkeys alike falling into the chasm below as Dei sprinted toward the edge of the cliff. His heart thundered in his chest. Blood poured from a wound on his forehead. Wind roared below him. The panthers yowled their dissatisfaction. And he hurled himself off the cliff with a single, mighty leap, forcing all of his qi into that one jump.

For one terrifying moment he feared he might not make it, that he was doomed to fall to the impossibly deep depths below, to be torn apart by the raging winds.

But it was those same winds that proved to be his salvation – a sudden gust caught him, forcing him higher, giving him just enough of a boost to lift him over the edge of the opposite cliffside. His feet hit the ground and he stumbled, dropping his spear as he fell face-first on the ground with a groan. Immediately his guards were upon him, helping him to his feet and patting him on the back. His gaze fixed itself on the opposite cliffside, where the three shadow panthers cursed and raged as they slunk back to the treeline.

"Seek nothing outside yourself." He muttered again, willing any illusions placed upon him to slide off. Nothing changed, and he felt himself relax slightly – but only slightly as he turned back to the ragged, scared faces of his people, elated at their escape though they were.

He felt no relief. Only the unbearable weight of responsibility.

My incarnation smiled as I watched Dei lead his people away from the cliffside. Every day he proved himself to be more than I had originally given him credit for, and I hadn't even had to intervene to help him! That gust of wind hadn't been my doing. The universe itself had reacted to his will, the power of his soul reaching down and igniting a response in the chaotic winds below to give him just enough boost to make it across.

It was a new power. One even I had a bare understanding of, but would resolve myself to explore.

There was still a long road ahead of them – I couldn’t see Dei settling down any time soon, not for anything less than the perfect spot for a new city – but...well. There was, at least, still a road.

I turned away and resumed my search, pausing only slightly to rest my hand upon a stressed point in the fabric of reality. My own energy was not what I used to soothe it. Instead I directed a bit of the energy the group of Fae produced, leaking into the world, to layer itself over the stress-point like a salve. Then I was gone, this incarnation resuming its duties as my main body stirred.

It was about time to wake up.

1.17 Here There be Angels

When I dream, I see everything.

That is both an exaggeration and not. I have seemingly little control over what, exactly, I see, but I can see anything. This time, I experienced the lives of mortals.

Every pain they went through, I experienced. The strength of their emotions flowed through me, every little pain and heartbreak. Celene’s depression and pain, that sudden unwillingness to survive after the unfortunate death of her fated lover – every inch of it tried to pierce my heart, her cries sounding like my own. Dei’s rage and desperation – watching his beloved mentor die to save as many of her people as she could, the desire he held to fight those beasts until his last breath. Yet he couldn’t, he had to tamp down on his desires, the black anger that drove him to hate, because he had a duty to his people. He couldn’t fall apart, couldn’t deal with his own emotions, because his people were depending on him to keep them together. And he would not fail them; all that, I felt like it was my own.

Even the pain of a child, having a toy taken away I could feel.

It wasn't just on Pangea that mortal souls were going through catastrophes, either. On the planets that circled their own miniature suns, separated from the land of the Life-Giving Tree, disasters struck. Earthquakes rocked continents, hurricanes battered coastlines, and volcanoes erupted. Though no one had died in the actual fight, the aftershocks had shaken the already-chaotic Physical Realm.

That wasn't even mentioning the spiritual pain people were going through, as part of living.

But it was not all bad. I had the pleasure to bear witness to a number of strong souls rise above their situations, striving to aid others and lead them to safety. There were genuine acts of greatness among the mortals, some seeming small and insignificant, some not so much. Warm hugs and praise. Kind words, crude jokes told just to get a laugh, a pleasant buzz, a warm blanket on a chill night. A great leader, inspiring their followers. Followers, inspiring their leader. A helping hand, to lift others up out of whatever hole they found themselves in; and I experienced those moments from both perspectives.

I wasn't really sure why I dreamed like this. Maybe it was my connection to the Four Realms. Maybe it was something all Origin Deities felt. Or maybe it was simply an unconscious desire of mine; part of my being, forcing me to go through this.

But I couldn't sleep long, not this time.

My eyes opened. A soft bed lay beneath me, blankets wrapped tightly about my body. To the right a fire crackled in the fireplace, less to provide heat and more for comfort. A few of my favorite paintings had been brought in; a painting of Keilan and me, boating in the sea of memories, one of the Four Realms as a whole, one of each of my first four children, and more. There was, however, a suspicious lack of Randus and his steaming pot of tea greeting me. I suspected he had been taken away to help aid the Realms.

Reika sat in the corner of the room, playing with her child. I'd only been asleep for five years, and the little one had grown slowly – appearing as if she was only two, three years old now. Her nine red-furred fox tails swished happily as Reika made a few small birds of pure, white ice dart around her head. She giggled, reaching up to snatch at them, fox-ears twitching, Reika joining in with the laughter as she kept the birds just out of reach.

I smiled at the heartwarming scene, content to just watch for a time. A part of me even wanted to slip away as quietly as I could, let them have their moments. But I couldn't bring myself to.

"Mama, He's awake," the little girl suddenly said, snapping her head in my direction. She blinked her big, grey eyes at me, and I wiggled my eyebrows at her, sticking my tongue out. She giggled even as Reika shot to her feet, rushing to my side as I struggled to sit up, feeling surprisingly weak still.

"Mother, lay back down!" she urged, putting a hand on my shoulder, just above my missing arm. I shot her a non-plussed look, easily pushing through the kind gesture. "It's only been a few years, you're still..."

"Injured? I know. Mind giving me a hand?" I asked, wiggling my stump, still glittering with gold light as the wound slowly healed. At this rate it would take eons to fully grow back my arm, unless I took some extra time to focus on healing it. Which I couldn't do yet. There were better uses for my time, and the energy that would require. Reika glared at me for the joke and I cracked a grin. An additional weight on the bed, accompanied by a cute grunt, told me the little one had clambered up onto the bed with me. "What's her name?" I asked, gesturing to the toddler as she plopped herself at the foot of the bed, watching me with curious eyes. Reika shifted from foot to foot for a second but eventually relented, moving to sit beside her child. She burrowed into her side, little arms grabbing Reika's dress, tails flicking.

"Kei." Reika said softly, putting a hand on said child's head, right between her ears.

“Kei. That’s a good name.” I told her. Kei giggled and buried her face into her mother’s side.

“s not a good name.” she muttered, voice muffled from Reika’s dress. I raised an eyebrow at her. “S my name, so it’s a great name.” Reika rolled her eyes in fond exasperation, while I chuckled, Kei peeking out to smile at me cheekily.

“You’re right. It’s a great name.” I agreed.

“Mother, you really should get some more rest. If you woke up just to talk to me and Kei...” Reika trailed off, worrying her lip between her teeth. I smiled at her and shook my head.

“I have no intentions to leave this room yet. It’ll likely end up being my new meditation chamber, all things considered, but first I have a few things to do before I start amassing power again.” I explained, boldfaced lying about not wanting to leave the room. My incarnations could only do so much; much of my capabilities resided solely within my true body. One of such things was the power of true creation; Mr. Boxes hadn’t been lying when he said that it would take a long time to reach the same level of power as I had been, when I first created the Realms. Such acts of great, casual creation were beyond me, but I could still create if I amassed the prerequisite amount of power.

As such, I had to return my consciousness here if I wanted to create what I needed to.

“Amass power? Mother, you need –“

“What I need,” I interrupted. “Is for you to go fetch Gilles for me. He should be close to the Sun, collecting Void shards. Tell him to bring those as well as the other things he’s gathered, please.” Reika frowned at me, setting her hands on her hips and glancing, hesitantly, toward Kei. The little girl just cocked her head to the side in confusion.

“But,” she started.

“I raised you four on my own. I think I can watch Kei for a little while without the entire palace catching fire.” I deadpanned. Reika hesitated for just a moment longer, then gave her kid one last squeeze.

“Be good for Grandma Statera. I’ll only be gone a moment,” she said. Kei wrinkled her nose.

“He’s a Grandpa, though,” she insisted, and I chuckled. Reika smiled softly, ruffled her hair once more, and promptly teleported out of the bedroom. Kei blinked in surprise as she vanished, glancing about rapidly. I whistled to get her attention, wiggling my stump arm. That was getting annoying. I’d have think about how to fix it – a prosthetic? No, that was dumb. “Grandpa?” she asked, and I cracked a grin, a horrible, evil thought coming to mind. Who said I was a good example for children? Not I. Certainly not for grandchildren; grandparents were supposed to be bad influences.

“Wanna set something on fire?” I asked, and Kei nodded rapidly, eyes shining.

Reika returned to my palace on fire. It wasn’t real fire, I worked together with Kei to cast illusory flames onto the roof as we stood out front, on the grey-stone landing pad leading to the front doors, cackling madly. My arm was spread wide, the flickering flames atop the domed palace casting my face in an ominous orange glow. Kei stood right next to me, hands on her hips and tails spread as wide as they could go, as she did her best to imitate me. Her cute little cackle sounded more like hiccups than actual laughter, but she had the spirit.

This little trick did two things; one, it started to teach Kei how to use her magic, even if illusions were only one facet of the nine-tailed fox's abilities. And two; the look on Reika's face was priceless.

"Mother!" she screeched, aghast as I broke down into a fit of full-bodied laughs, the panic and worry on her face truly amusing. Kei glanced at me, trying to maintain her little hiccup-cackle even through the dopey grin on her face. Clearly she was my grandchild, for how much fun she was having with this. "What are you doing?! You're supposed to be in bed, not - what are you doing?!"

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"Playing a prank, I believe, Lady Reika," Gilles droned, stepping out of the darkness of space behind her, shooting me an unimpressed look. "Those flames are not real."

"I know that. Why are you teaching Kei bad things?" Reika snapped, setting her hands on her hips and glaring at me. I did my best to control my laughter, rolling about on the ground as I was. Kei, meanwhile, ran over to her mother and looked up at her with big, sad eyes.

"Mama mad? Tryin'a be funny," she said. Reika looked down at her and her expression melted, bending down to scoop her up into her arms. Kei buried her face in her mother's shoulder, shoot a single sly look my direction with a little wink, before snuggling closer. That little brat, she just abandoned me! I'm so proud. And honestly, I do deserve it.

"I'm not mad at you, sweetie, I'm mad at Grandma." She soothed, patting Kei's back.

“Grandpa,” Kei corrected, and Reika rolled her eyes.

“I do apologize for interrupting, but I was wondering what you needed of me, Lord Patriarch?”
Gilles interrupted, immediately sobering me up. I pushed myself to my feet, dusting off my robes with my one good hand. The illusory flames on the palace vanished with a snap of my fingers, the orange glow they cast replaced in an instant with the light of the Realm Sun.

“Yes, sorry, I couldn’t help myself.” I said, ignoring the Lord Patriarch title. I’d given up long ago trying to tell people what to call me. Even my children did whatever they wanted. “I need a few of those void shards you found, please. The biggest ones.” I requested. Gilles hesitated for just a moment, then obediently stepped forward and pulled a jar of shadows out of thin air. I could sense the void within it, nothingness contained and pacified by his power.

With a quick word of thanks I took the jar, popping open the lid to stare at the interior.

“Be careful with these, Gilles. I do not disapprove of you investigating them, but...the void has the potential to drive even deities mad. That rogue god is an example of that,” I said, almost completely exhausting my knowledge of the void in the process. Gilles himself might even have a deeper understanding of the void at the moment than I did, save for maybe knowledge of paradoxes. And if that was truly the case, I’ve been neglecting my own meditations.

There was something about the void that intrigued me, tickling that little power of creation I still held and reminding me of the enormous power I once wielded, when I first created the Four Realms. There was something there. I just didn’t know what, and this may help me figure it out.

Gilles paled at my words and bobbed his head, folding his hands into the sleeves of his robe. “I understand. I will treat them with utmost caution.” He promised. I nodded and tucked away the void shards in my sleeve – or at least tried to, before realizing that I was still missing an arm. Silence fell over the group as I stared at the empty space with a frown, feeling intensely annoyed.

“That’s unacceptable,” I grumbled, looking over my shoulder at the six balls of primordial chaos that perpetually floated behind my back...except for when I was laying down. Honestly I hadn’t used them for much yet, but, if they were made of the stuff of creation...I willed one of the balls forward, the roiling mass twisting and shifting as it settled into place on my stump, forming a perfect, albeit discolored, copy of my arm. With another flash of power my robes fixed themselves, a sleeve falling over the new limb, leaving only its grey hand visible.

The chaos writhed, connecting with my intent and nerve endings so it could function as a true limb. I flexed my new fingers – they felt stiff, and unwieldy, but it was better than nothing.

“Much better.” I said, and promptly stuffed the void shards up my sleeve before returning the rest of the jar to Gilles. “And did you find any more of my blood?”

“No, Sir,” Gilles said with a shake of his head. I frowned but accepted the answer, knowing it to be the truth. “Will that be all, Lord Patriarch? I do have more searching to do – there are more void shards out there.”

“Unless you want to see the creation of an angel, that will be all.” I said distractedly, already moving on to my next project. Karmic energy swirled around me as I pressed the palms of my hands together, divine light radiating from between them. Reika stepped forward, Kei fixating her eyes on the shining light.

“Right now?” Gilles asked.

“Mother...” Reika warned. When will she learn that, just like I cannot control her, she cannot control me? I know I should be resting and not using too much power, but I need to do this.

“Now.” I said, nodding. The chaos of the Four Realms needed true guides to help the most people through it, but I couldn’t just make a legion of angels and call it a day. Not only was I not currently strong enough to do that, I just didn’t want to. Most angels I wanted to have rise up naturally; but an example could be set, in this case.

Two new souls swirled into existence between my palms, floating out to sit upon the ground before me, awaiting instruction. Power settled about me like a cloak as I considered my options for how to go about this. I doubted they would appear like the angels of my old universe, but there was certainly going to be some similarities. “In His own image,” and all that.

Karma roared as the divine energy I commanded ignited under my will, swirling down to condense around the two new souls I had made. Kei made a small noise in the back of her throat as a blinding golden light erupted from them, positive karma reaching critical mass and exploding outward in a divine, golden light.

When the light faded, two angels stood before me. Their skin was the color of silver and gold, white horns sprouting from their temples and three eyes blinking at me – two in their normal places, a third in the center of their foreheads. A plasmatic aura of pure white light erupted from the crown of their heads, circling around their bodies and creating the illusion of a halo and wings. Golden light radiated from their irises as they took in their surroundings, flexing their new, muscular limbs. And finally their gazes fixated upon me. They smiled, standing straight and squaring their shoulders.

Silver robes fell about them, the holy aura they radiated expanding outward.

“Mother...” Reika repeated.

“Fu Hao. Stilicho.” I said, naming each one in turn. They bowed their heads at the names, thumping their fists over their chests. “You know what to do.” I told the angels, who nodded.

“We do,” they chorused, levitating off the ground. “Leave it to us.” And with that they shot off into the universe, both heading in different directions. One to Pangea, the other to the Heaven Realm. Once there they would begin their work untangling some karmic threads, guiding souls into rising further up the karmic chain...hopefully creating more angels and raising mortal souls to that threshold as well.

I sighed heavily and let my shoulders slump, turning back to my palace. Once I resume my meditations, I’d better set one of my incarnations to fix the building, or Randus will give me an earful. Especially since my meditation chamber has been destroyed.

“Mother, why? I thought you wanted to wait for a soul to reach that level naturally?” Reika asked. “Those angels you created may be powerful now, but their growth will be slow, won’t it?” I nodded my head. That was true, and was the downside to creating angels in this way. Their power was initially great, but the growth of said power would be far slower than the growth of a spirit who clawed its way up there, or a mortal soul who did the same.

“I couldn’t wait any longer, and honestly, I truthfully do not know what will happen when a mortal soul reaches the level of karma necessary.” I admitted. Gilles made a curious noise, and I turned to him with a patient smile, attempting to hide my weariness. “‘Angel’ is a blanket term for spirits that reach a level of such high positive karma they begin to touch upon the divine. One could claim such souls have taken the first true step to reaching the level of a god, though the vast majority will not complete the journey. As such, many will most likely wind up in the service of more powerful divine beings. Mortal souls differ from spirits in many ways, partly due to their ability to mesh with the physical, but the matter of cultivation...complicates things.” I said slowly, furrowing my brows.

Dei, for example, didn’t have the best karma in the world, but had amassed quite a bit of power. To the point I wouldn’t be surprised if he at least reached the cultivation gate known as “immortality” in his lifetime; something I hadn’t been expecting for a while yet. On the other hand, if a soul amassed enough good karma and elevated their own personal understanding of the universe

enough, they should be able to achieve immortality as well. That was how I did it in my old universe, and was one of the only methods of doing so.

It needn't be said that was not the case here.

"I see. So karma could be considered another kind of cultivation, then." Gilles said. I blinked and thought about it for a moment. That was...huh. That was unfortunately correct. "Just as there is the matter of absorbing qi, or of cultivating the fleshly body, there is also a matter of cultivating karma. And you do not know how surpassing the threshold that would normally mean an ascent into an angel will affect mortal souls."

"That's right." I said, nodding. Even if I hadn't really understood it that way until he said it, that was the gist of it. "Now, I will be entering closed-door meditation soon. There are things I need to discover about my own powers – which these void shards should help with, thank you, Gilles – and power I need to amass."

"Power? You still intend to create the Lunar Star?" Gilles asked, no judgement in his tone, just curiosity. Reika hummed, patting Kei on the back as the little one started to nod off.

"Yes. Its creation is important to the balance of the four realms and the future of its growth. Without it...well. I won't say destruction, but things will be much harder. It'll be a slow process, amassing the power, but I do intend to take breaks and wander about a bit." I said. "If anyone has any questions, I'll have incarnations running about. Reika, dear, I would love it if you would let me spend some time with Kei. Not only would it give you a bit of a break, let you do your own thing, but I do want to get some quality grandparent-grandchild bonding time. But for now...well, I really do need to rest some." And with that, I drifted back inside the palace.

Only when I was sure there were no eyes upon me did I frown, casting my senses outward in a brief burst. Where was –

There.

It was slinking away, vanishing almost as soon as my divine sense touched it, but I still caught a glimpse. The Shadow had been watching.

I sighed and rubbed my forehead. Through most of my investigations, that had been all the Shadow had done. Things I'd found had been glimpses, the Shadow just observing from the periphery during large and small changes. Though I thought I detected a bit of anger from the being - who I had yet to see clearly - most of the time its observations seemed to be just that; observations. In fact, I daresay the first thing that it had ever really done was attract the foreign god. Its intentions, therefore, remained shrouded in mystery...though I was starting to catch glimpses of what the answer may be. Only a vague idea, however.

Still, one thing was for certain, as it always was.

There was too much to do, and too little time.

1.18 Worry

My incarnation stood beside my true body, frowning slightly. I really did look a mess, sitting cross-legged in my newly created meditation room. My hair was in disarray, be it male or female form. My face was pale, my robes tattered and stained with soot. My arm of primordial chaos looked a little weird, its grey-and-blue coloration a sharp contrast to my natural skin tone. Yet my breathing was even, expression placid and calm as power began to build in my core. Since I did not have the seemingly limitless powers of creation as granted to me by the Overgod, that meant I had to amass it on my own by storing the energy my soul created, condensing it, and transforming it into the correct flavor of energy I had in mind.

It wasn't a terribly efficient process. I estimated I had a fifty percent efficiency rate which, while not abysmal, was still unideal. That wasn't even counting that I intentionally let some of my energy through to keep nourishing the Realms, as well as pushing up into the primordial chaos to bolster its own growth. This meant I had to amass even more energy than I might need, just in case creating the Lunar Star was more costly than I expected...

And once I reached a certain point, I might be locked in my meditation chambers until said energy reached the required levels. Already my full, unrestrained presence was difficult for many beings to handle, my sheer aura threatening to collapse souls unless I took extra care to protect them. I'd gotten much better at it since the creation of the Four Realms, especially with my discovery of divine incarnations, but with all that added, extra power on top of it?

Well. I doubted even my ability to keep it all perfectly under control. Especially if something was looking to harm the Realms or my children.

"Are you sure this is wise, Marm?" Randus asked, stepping out of the shadows beside me. I looked from myself to him, raising an eyebrow. The butler was concerned, twirling his moustache nervously and gaze flitting between my true body and this incarnation. Only once did he turn to examine the meditation room, which was far different than my previous. There was no art on the walls, or luxury surrounding me.

It was simple stone, lines of a white crystal circling the stone pad my true body rested upon. There were no lights or windows, leaving the entire room in total darkness – even the door, a large, metal thing, wouldn't open unless I willed it to. The message this room sent was clear; while in here, I was to be left alone. The only reason Randus had managed to slip through the wards I was building around the place was because I let him.

"You mean continuing to amass power?" I asked.

“Would it not be wiser to pursue this...Shadow you have been chasing?” Randus asked.

“One does not chase shadows. Even I only barely noticed their presence,” I said, shaking my head and turning away. A single step carried me away from my true body and out of the chamber, to the slowly-rebuilding palace. All that remained of the old place was a few guest rooms, my workshop, and the treasure room; which was filled with countless tiny curios and such that my People and children had made. They weren’t just replicas, either. Many were the original artifacts, like the first cave drawing ever! That said, the near-total destruction gave me a lot of leeway to rebuild as I saw fit.

“But,” Randus started. A quick *look* silenced him and had him bowing his head. I scowled at the action, as there was no need to bow, but let it slide.

“This is to force their hand. I cannot claim to know the mind of whatever works against us, but I do understand this; they react the strongest to significant changes to the Four Realms’ structure.” I explained. “Every time I do something to alter the structure of things and increase the growth rate of the Realms or strengthen its internal structures – such as adding those lesser stars to the Physical Realm, or creating Fae – this thing reacts. I tested this theory with the creation of angels. The Lunar Star is a pivotal creation, its addition will add a balance that will exponentially increase the Realms’ growth rate. I get the feeling it will be forced to move when I do start to create it; I’ll need more time to confirm this, but that is the current strategy.” I preferred dealing with issues before they became a problem. The Shadow had the potential to be a very big problem.

“...so you want to force its hand.” Randus mused, a bit of understanding in his tone. “Because this being only appears when you are focused on an act of creation, or otherwise distracted.” I frowned and considered that for a moment. That was...probably correct, now that I thought about it. An incarnation had been the first to truly notice the Shadow, even if my main body had been the one to lift the veil.

Food for thought.

"I am encouraging your siblings to focus on expansion and strengthening their own Realms and people. The other gods will be doing the same – as far as I am aware, a couple of the elemental deities are working on creating their own templates of the Elementals Reika created. You are doing excellently, Randus, aiding Keilan as you are. Thank you." I praised honestly, bowing slightly to him. He flushed crimson and coughed, unsure how to take the praise.

"But still, if you remove yourself..." Randus started.

"I am not removing myself. It may seem like it, but I promise that is not the case." I said with a smile, turning back to the palace and tapping my chin thoughtfully. How did I want this to look? Chinese? Japanese? Roman forum? Why not all three, and then some? I already gave my angels Roman and Chinese names, why not keep mixing up cultures? "Just because you can't see me, doesn't mean I'm not there. Besides, my incarnations will be running about." And I meant that quite literally. There was something specific I wanted to research heavily; my most powerful incarnation was focusing heavily upon it.

I needed a contingency plan, just in case my true body was incapacitated when the climax of this coming storm came. If I, myself, couldn't fully control all that power...then who's to say I couldn't find something that could aid me? What I had said to Dei wasn't completely wrong; "seek nothing outside yourself." But that only applied to the fact that change and strengthening had to be done by yourself; you had to make and desire the change for it to actually take root. That didn't mean you couldn't seek outside help, such as aid and guidance from other things or people. You didn't have to go it alone.

My thoughts drifted as I set about rebuilding my palace, chatting casually with Randus. This whole situation felt...bad. The Shadow, all those things lurking in the back of my mind...it set me on edge. And not only because they were actively working against my children – and that was where the problem lay.

Not once did I feel like the Shadow's anger was directed at my own being. It was just a feeling. A gut instinct. But that's how I felt. And I wasn't sure I liked what that implied.

The energy of the Heaven Realm fell away, the Holy Mountain settling back into its foundations with a groan of stone-upon-stone as this incarnation finished its work. The ley lines beneath the mountain had become tangled somehow, so I fixed it. Even such a simple action brightened the aura of the Mountain, the yang-energy it produced brightening just a tad. It was funny, to me, how each of the key features of the Realms produced their own kinds of energy, like a battery. The Mountain produced Yang, the Tree made Life, the Valley Yin, and the River mixed them all together while adding its own bit of spiritual energy.

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“Father, may I have a word?” Elvira asked, suddenly appearing behind me. I dusted my hands and turned to her with a smile, raising one eyebrow at the seriousness of her expression. Her wings were flared, her loose white robes fluttering in the breeze, blonde hair tied up in a tasteful bun with bits of gold jewelry. Yet her eyes were unwavering in holding my gaze, the tension in her shoulders palpable.

The angel behind me, Stilicho, raised an eyebrow as well, taking a few steps back to give us space.

“Yes? What can I help you with?” I asked, glancing at both Sol and Gilles. The two deities stood just behind Elvira, equally serious. In the past few years they’d taken to being her advisors and such as she helped guide the other deities in their duties, calming the panic. I was incredibly proud of her for taking charge like that.

“I would like you to teach me to fight.” She said, and my thoughts came to a screeching halt.

“You want me to – what?” I stammered. This shouldn’t have come as a surprise to me. It really shouldn’t have. But I’d been more expecting this from Reika or Alexander, not the independent Elvira. Of all my children, I had expected her to try and figure things out herself.

"Please," she said, bowing her head formally. I glanced at Stilicho, who shrugged, then at Sol and Gilles, who bowed their heads as well to avoid meeting my eyes.

"Um, sure," I said slowly. To be honest that fight with the rogue deity had been the first fight I'd been in, in eons. Since before I created the Four Realms, even. Most of the dark spirits I'd "done battle with" during my time as an angel-equivalent didn't really count as a fight. They'd been little scuffles and spats, arguments with the beings for being somewhere and doing something they shouldn't. "Not sure I'm the best teacher for this, but I could teach you a little if you want."

"I have already observed the mortals for a while now. I understand that is not enough time, but I would like your advice." She said. I hummed and rubbed the back of my neck, floating forward.

"What have you done so far?" I asked, wracking my memories for where to even begin with this. There were plenty of militant mortals, but there was a difference between fighting as a god and as a mortal, something I, myself, was learning. Plus, this was just an incarnation. I highly doubted that I could do much teaching in this form; my functions were limited enough as it was to conserve power. Give it another few hundred years and that might change, but...well. Right now I only had access to about a fourth of Elvira's own power.

"I spent a few years tempering my body in the primordial chaos. Such measures will take more time to elevate my fleshly body into something worthwhile, however. Searching memories of the mortals has given me ideas on a few techniques and skills I might be able to learn, but functionally I have yet to get anything working that is worthy of my power." She explained, rambling a bit. I nodded, narrowing my eyes slightly. There was something off here...what was her game? If it was just about training to become worthy of fighting the rogue god, she was already on the right track.

...and she knew that. As independent as Elvira was, she wouldn't come to me for aid like this without first having a good grasp on martial techniques and skills. I did not doubt she had already improved, but not for one second did I believe it was up to her perfectionist standards.

"First, tell me where this is coming from." I said, folding my hands behind my back.

“My attacks did nothing to that rogue god.”

“Do not lie to me,” I interrupted. She was a terrible liar; her wings always twitched when she started to lie, or attempt to twist words. Keilan was more the manipulator. She was more straightforward. I was sure there was some truth to what she was saying, but that was beside the point. Elvira worked her mouth for a bit, then withdrew into herself slightly. Her golden eyes stared into my own green, filled with a myriad of emotions I purposefully did not read into, letting her come to me in her own time.

“I am worried.” She finally admitted.

“About?” I pressed. “Is it about the Shadow? I know Keilan told you about it,”

“About you.” She said with a shake of her head, and I pulled up short. Huh? “You haven’t been taking the loss of your arm well, and I worry about how you are reacting to the Shadow.” I frowned at her, crossing my arms across my chest. What the hell was she trying to get at here? I lost a me-damned arm, and now –

Ah. I realized, catching myself. This is what she meant. I’m irritable.

“You doubt the Creator?” Stilicho asked, stepping forward, his aura flaring outward. I placed a hand on the silver-skinned being to calm him, shaking my head slightly. Irritation still bubbled in the pit of my stomach, though, demanding Elvira explain further.

"I do not, Stilicho, and Father's angel or no you will not speak to me that way." Elvira snapped, flaring her wings and squaring her shoulders to meet Stilicho's challenge. "Father needs to understand the situation we are in." And that got me a bit riled. Anger spiked in my heart and my fists clenched, doing my utmost to restrain myself. I didn't understand the situation we were in? I knew exactly what kind of a situation we were in, and I hated it with every fiber of my being.

"He understands." Stilicho pressed. "The Creator has a plan."

"We know His Majesty does," Sol said smoothly, calmly...deceptively so. "That is not what Lady Elvira is trying to say."

"Then listen to Him, and have faith in His words." Stilicho replied.

"You are the one who needs to listen, you brat!" Sol snapped. "She has something to say, so listen!"

"Enough, brother. Stilicho is young, he needs time to understand things." Gilles soothed, laying a hand on Sol's shoulder. Stilicho bristled beside me, fuming at the two gods as he launched into a tirade, waving his hands dramatically and waving his arms wildly to illustrate his point.

I, meanwhile, met Elvira's gaze while they continued to argue, a vein throbbing in her forehead. She opened her mouth and I crossed my arms, waiting for what she had to say next, some part of me daring her to do so, to challenge me. But that was not a good part of me. That was a weak part of me. I needed to understand what she was getting at, before I said anything.

That was what had led to my question in the first place.

“Father, I want you to trust me.” Elvira said finally, softly, her annoyance fading away as she dropped her gaze from mine. The other three silenced themselves at her words.

“I do trust you.” I said.

“No, I want you to trust me with this.” She said, flying forward so she was floating just before me, well within arm’s reach. Her eyes were wet, and I softened my own expression. “The Shadow. I am weak, I know, but I want to prove to you that I – that we, your children, could handle this. I want you to be able to trust me with it. I – I don’t want you to get involved.”

“Why not?” I asked, now well and truly taken aback. Not get involved? I was already involved, and there was no way I couldn’t be involved.

“Because this is a fight between your children. Whether or not you try to deny it, the Shadow is one of your children too, I can feel it. And I fear where this conflict will lead.” She said, and there it was. The little truth that I’d been...well, not denying, but not allowing to come to fruition. The Shadow was malicious, but it was also a creation of mine, wasn’t it? Someway, somehow. The connection was there, and it was too strong. It was simultaneously why I could feel its influence, but not find its form.

“Elvira...” I said, laying a hand on her shoulder and feeling tears prickle the corners of my eyes. But it wasn’t my hand that touched her shoulder – it was a hand of primordial chaos, and a stark reminder of who I was. I was the kind of being who would give anything to protect my children. How could I...how could I pick sides here?

That was what Elvira feared. That I would pick a side, when I had to remain impartial to be who and what I am.

She leaned forward and wrapped me in a hug, burying her face in my shoulder. Tears soaked into my robes as I returned the hug, my throat tightening with emotion.

“I’m sorry. I – I would still love for you to train me a little, and I do want to spend more time together. I just don’t want you to be forced into this mess that we made – I’m afraid that whatever this being is, it is our actions that causes it to want to attack us, not yours. Keilan agrees, and so does Alexander. So please. Just trust me with this. You’ve given so much for us, and I don’t want to lose you.” She mumbled.

There was the final fear, the final puzzle piece I was missing to her request. My sacrifice had scared her, and so did my continued insistence on running myself ragged to fix the Realms. I squeezed her tighter as her wings wrapped around us, enveloping the two of us in warmth and feathers.

“Of course. I’m not going anywhere, Elvira. I love you.” I returned, closing my eyes tightly and fighting back tears, squeezing her tightly.

I just...I wish I’d gotten to know the Shadow, too, before things had gotten to this point.

If only it’d told me it was there, maybe we could’ve had moments like this as well.

1.19 The Council of Gods

“Are all of Father’s incarnations sufficiently preoccupied?” Elvira whispered to the two gods behind her. It was Sol who answered, Gilles, the one Elvira hoped would reply, remaining silent.

“Yes, my Lady. Reika just handed Kei off to the final incarnation to keep His Majesty busy. The others have been distracted or are otherwise preoccupied by their duties. I will inform you if any fall out of sight of my Sun.” he whispered back, bowing his head, golden hair held perfectly in place by a jade band. Elvira grunted her appreciation, drumming her fingertips on the side of her stone chair. One benefit of Father’s injury was His newfound reliance on divine incarnations, which were notoriously distractible and limited in their sight. Very much unlike His true body, which had a habit of just...*knowing* things.

Which meant, heavens willing, this meeting should be kept secret from Him.

Almost all the gods of the Four Realms had gathered in her palace, milling about in the white-marbled halls, waiting for the meeting to begin. They’d been filtering in over the course of the past day or two, taking some time to stop what they were doing and travel from the far reaches of the Realms in response to Elvira’s call. The goddess of wind, Aerial, hovered around the pillar Elvira had helped her mend, tracing her fingers along the lines of gold inlaid in the stone. The goddess of mountains chatted with the god of storms, water flirted with fire, and metal stood silently off to the side while the goddess of oceans talked at him.

Besides herself, Gilles, and Sol, there were a grand total of sixty-four gods present. Only her siblings and Randus, and Kei, who didn’t technically count yet, were missing.

She didn’t have to wait long for them to show up, however. The first to arrive was Reika, appearing in a flash of green just beside Elvira. The fresh scent of pine filled the air as she flashed her a smile, settling down in the high-backed wooden chair she’d set out for her sister. There was one for each of her siblings, laid out in a row, facing the grand hall. Elvira and Keilan were positioned in the middle, with Reika and Alexander on the sides. This would mark the first time all four of these “thrones” had been in use at the same time. And Reika’s appearance alone sent a ripple of murmurs through the crowd.

“Don’t like your seat?” Elvira teased, watching as Reika tapped the arms of her chair, purple and gold flowers sprouting along the sides, a bed of fresh moss growing beneath her.

“It could use a little sprucing up,” Reika replied, smirking as a miniature spruce tree sprouted from the back of the chair, rising up to make some sort of crude umbrella. Elvira snorted out a laugh.

“Of all the things to take after,” Keilan grumbled, appearing already seated in his own black-and-grey marble chair in a swirl of black. “Why did you have to inherit Mother’s humor?” He shifted on his chair, shooting Elvira a glare as he stood, conjured a red velvet cushion trimmed in gold on the seat and back, and promptly settled back down. That was a good idea. Elvira shifted on her own, hard chair – she’d do the same, but now it would look like she was copying him and that was unacceptable. And judging from his smirk, he knew it, too.

Bastard.

“Come now, brother, it wasn’t that bad of a joke,” Alexander rumbled, pulling himself from the spirit realm and curling his bulky, sinuous form onto the wide stone seat made for him. He, like Elvira, refrained from changing his chair.

Now they had all the gods’ undivided attention, a hush falling over those assembled as the First, the Big Four, settled into their seats.

“Really? It was a fairly low-hanging fruit,” Reika drawled, grapevines growing from the arms of her chair, from which she plucked only the lowest-hanging fruit. Keilan groaned dramatically, holding his face in his hands.

“I stand corrected,” Alexander sighed, shaking his head. Elvira just sighed. They were here to have a serious conversation, the first true council of the gods because that first disaster she tried all those years ago didn’t count, not whatever this was.

"You need legs to stand, brother. You more...sit," Reika said, cocking her head to the side innocently.

"Reika!" Elvira protested, wishing nothing more than to move past this.

"Is this the fate of every parent? Ever since you had Kei, your sense of humor has hit rock bottom," Keilan deadpanned. Reika chuckled but a hush still fell over the siblings. The gods felt it, the sounds of their awkward shifting and whispers filling the halls. Elvira let out a breath in the ensuing silence. They didn't have much time; they should get started.

A small nod sent Gilles and Sol, still standing behind her to join the others, Randus appearing in the back with hands clasped together. Elvira stood and flared her wings, white light radiating from her. The assembled gods all turned to her expectantly.

"Thank you for gathering here today. Please, take a seat," Elvira said, voice booming through the hall. She snapped her fingers and the floor rumbled, a large U-shaped table with enough seats for each god rising up out of the floor. Each seat was fashioned with a specific god in mind, hinting that there was assigned seating, and after a bit of muttering they sat. Randus flitted between them, helping them find their places and setting a steaming teacup before each of them before finding his own seat. Only the gods of water and fire gave them any trouble, insisting that fire sat in water's seat, and vice versa. But eventually they got settled as well, and Elvira sat back down with a nod of approval.

Eventually there would be more seats; some for angels, powerful spirits, and other gods. But for now, this would do.

She and her siblings' seats were only nominally higher than the other gods, still mostly eye-level, but still the clear "head" of the table. Only one seat rose higher than all the others – the one that

stood behind her siblings, large and imposing, yet would, in all likelihood, remain perpetually empty. That was Father's seat. A large part of her hoped He never felt the need to use it, but it would be remiss of her and her siblings to not acknowledge that He was the peak of the Four Realms.

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice. There is not much time, so I will cut right to the heart of the matter. We have gathered you all here today," Elvira began, voice still booming. "To discuss something of vital importance to the Four Realms. There is an enemy amongst us." This blunt statement caught most of the assembled gods off guard, a round of murmurs rippling through them. Gilles made a small motion with his hand, indicating that she should slow down, but that felt wrong. There was no need to drag this out.

"Something lurks among us. That being that attacked us, that injured the Tree, was drawn here through the Void by someone within the Realms. Some of you may have noticed this. We are confirming that rumor." Keilan added.

"But who?" a voice called, from the god of storms.

"We are not sure. We have taken to calling them the Shadow. Do not mistake that for meaning the deity of shadows – the Shadow is the darkness of the entirety of the Four Realms. They represent that which seeks to overthrow balance and plunge our lands into disharmony and chaos." Elvira said. *Even if Father is uncertain as to the purpose of their observation and limited actions, I am positive that is the case. Its anger is directed at us.* She thought, keeping that to herself. Father had confided such a thing to her privately, she would not betray his trust like that.

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"Is this why the Creator rushed the creation of angels?" Aerial asked, floating above her seat and playing with a leaf.

“Father created the angels to better guide the mortals during times of chaos, He did not create them to combat the Shadow.” Alexander rumbled. “That duty will fall to us.”

Murmurs rippled through the assembled gods, and Elvira sucked in a breath. They were coming in on the hard part, now, and the reason Father wasn’t to be part of this meeting. Yet she was not the one to bring the conversation full circle – that honor belonged to the god of metal, who had been silent this entire time.

“Be still, everyone. There is still information we do not know. What do you mean by the duty will fall to us, Lord Alexander?” he said, calm and collected, steepling his coppery fingers in front of his face. Alexander was silent for too long of a moment, tasting the words in his mouth. “Do you, perhaps, mean that Statera Luotian will not be aiding us in our fight?” the god continued, realization dawning on his face.

“I requested that He does not, yes,” Elvira said simply. *That* got a round of disagreement from the assembled gods, a few standing bolt upright with shouts of protest. “Quiet!” she barked, but it fell on deaf ears as many started to work themselves into a frenzy. Fear still abounded from the attack of the foreign god and Father losing an arm – Elvira had underestimated how deep that fear ran.

“SILENCE!” Sol roared, standing up so quickly his chair fell over. Bright, burning light burst from his body, vaporizing the teacup before him, the sudden burst of power curbing the brewing arguments. “Lady Elvira has not finished speaking! His Majesty will be busy with many things in the coming years! Now listen, before you panic!” Sol boomed. He turned then, back to Elvira, and gave her a soft bow as he sat back down. “The floor is once more yours, My Lady.”

“Thank you, Sol.” Elvira said, but it was Gilles, the deity of shadows, who stood up next, silently requesting to speak. “Yes, Gilles, since you asked so nicely you may ask a question.” The pale-faced man bowed his head but did not address her, instead speaking to the other gods.

“Our Matriarch will be busy with many projects in the coming years, not least of which will be the creation of the Lunar Star.” He rasped. Elvira noticed Sol’s expression darken for a split second at the mention of the future celestial object, but he quickly smoothed it out. “This will keep Her preoccupied as She builds power. Undoubtedly this means the enemy will begin to move in earnest the more She builds, as the creation of the Star means a further balancing of the Realms. But, most importantly, and what the Big Four are trying to say, is that we should not rely on the Matriarch for everything. We are Her children, and She will protect us, but we need to be able to protect Her too. You saw what one paradox did. She has bigger threats to worry about than an internal squabble.”

‘Internal squabble’ may be a bit too weak of a word for the storm that is coming, but it works well enough. Elvira mentally added, nodding to the pale man as he sat back down. *Leave it to Gilles, though, to figure things out on his own. I didn’t even really share much with him.*

“None of you remember.” Reika started, looking down at her hands and drawing all attention to herself. “What it was like in the beginning. When Mother first created us, and it was just us, Her, and the Void. But we do. I remember the power that flowed through Her, the greatness of Her being and the all-consuming love She felt for us, protecting us with Her very soul. She is but a shadow of Her former self. Creating the primordial chaos, from which we fashioned the Realms, was a sacrifice of an order of magnitudes. All to give each of us a chance to grow. To evolve. To be born anew as gods, and give safe haven to the weaker souls. She loves each of us equally, and though it may seem distant at times that is out of necessity, not of want.

“Do not make Her choose sides between Her own children. I will not ask Her to sacrifice more of Herself for us, not when She has given so much already.” She finished, glaring out at the gods, daring them to challenge her. Alexander nodded his head, and spoke next.

“Every inch of the Four Realms was crafted of Father’s own being. Each of us are His children, including that of the enemy. Though it may pain Him to punish us, to ‘play favorites’ as it were, I know for a fact that if push came to shove and the destruction of the Four Realms was imminent, He would act. We will not let it get to that point. I do not wish to hide in our Father’s shadow forever; I will stand beside Him, eventually, as an equal.” Alexander said.

"Don't you feel the same?" Keilan asked, standing and smoothing out his robes. "That is why Mother is not here, after all. Because we think it is high time we gave back to our creator. This will be a thankless task, there will be no glory or reward. It cannot even count as a repayment for all that Mother has given to us. I simply do not wish to burden Her with this. She has enough on Her plate. Call it pride and arrogance to wish to solve this ourselves, but that is the truth of it."

"Will you join us, then? Give us your all?" Elvira asked.

"Of course!" Aeriel chirped, still upbeat and chipper. Wind swirled about her, forming a ball of condensed air. "We'll need a game plan though."

"Mm. This thing has been hiding, hasn't it? We'll need to find it, figure out its plan of attack."

"Should we study mortals? They've been battling against each other, maybe we can learn some tactics from them."

"I don't want to fight, but...I agree with the Big Four."

"They're right. Patriarch Luotian is still injured, too. He needs to rest."

And more was passed around between the gods, most of whom seemed to be agreeing. The amount of positive affirmation was, frankly, better than Elvira could have imagined.

She shared a satisfied look with her siblings, pleased at the way things were going. But that only meant they needed to double down on their efforts to strengthen themselves, and counter the Shadow's own movements. It had eons on them for planning its attacks, while they might only have millennia. They needed to catch up. Only once the muttering had quieted down a bit more did Elvira speak again.

“Now that that’s decided, we’ll be meeting fairly regularly to discuss battle plans and the like. Rarely will we all meet together like this, but we still will if necessary. Thank you all for coming, but go now! Into the Realms and resume your duties. But keep an eye out.” Elvira warned. The assembled gods rose to their feet, talking rapidly to one another as she turned to her siblings.

“It is done,” Keilan said, standing from his seat. He ran a hand through his slicked-back hair, and adjusted his robes.

“Are we certain the enemy was watching?” Reika asked.

“There is no way to be certain, but I cannot imagine it would not have noticed this gathering and not taken the chance to peek. I doubt even Mother failed to notice, She likely just gave us a pass. You know how She loves surprises.” Keilan explained. Elvira nodded. This meeting was two-fold, and this was the true reason Father was not supposed to be here. This was all but a declaration of war, an ultimatum, to the enemy, who was likely watching. And Father was not to be a part of that.

“Regardless, we have put our hand on the table. We must wait and see what the response will be, if it is anything.” Alexander said. The four were silent for a moment, each in their own thoughts, until Randus, Sol, and Gilles all stepped up to join them. Among all the other gods, those three were the most powerful besides the original four themselves. Elvira was not sure why, perhaps their very nature was different from the others, but it was the truth. Perhaps in raw power Randus would lose out to the others, but none would doubt his strength.

“You did not mention much of the rogue god, or the existence of other universes,” Randus pointed out as he approached, phrasing it more like a statement than a question.

“We decided that such a topic is better suited for Mother to explain. I, personally, still have trouble with the idea that She came from another universe.” Reika said with a small shake of her head. “Did She ever fully confirm it?”

“In Her dreams, yes. She allowed me to see a few of Her past memories, lives She lived, things She’d seen, before She became Statera Luotian.” Randus explained. “I counted five mortal lifetimes, though there are likely more hidden from me. Nor do I understand how She came to be who and what She is now.”

“In the end it does not matter,” Alexander said, shaking his head. “Father is here now, and is the most powerful being in the universe. I will not pretend to understand what His plans are, or the depth of the meaning of these revelations, but until the time comes that it is important or He addresses it directly, I will focus on what is before us.”

“Agreed,” Elvira said with a nod. “Let us put it behind us and plan for the future. We have a war to fight, after all,” she shared a look with her siblings who, one by one, nodded to her and vanished to their own, respective realms. That left her to clean up the mess, and to handle the other gods who didn’t know exactly what they were doing.

She mentally sighed as she stepped forward. They had a war to prepare for.

1.20 Foxes and Men

Reika shoved Kei into my arms, and all but demanded I watch her for a time. I wasn’t complaining, of course, I loved watching the rambunctious little fox-girl, it was just surprising. I’d been shaping a new sun in the Physical Realm – the idea was to create a galaxy, with the Tree and Pangaea as the galactic center – when Reika popped by, shoved a squirming Kei at me, and promptly vanished. Which left me alone in space, a just-finished sun before me and a half-divinity that was still figuring out her powers under my care.

What was Reika thinking? As if I *wasn't* going to use this as an excuse to act like a child.

I looked at Kei. She had grown, looking nearly ten now, despite actually being closer to thirty.

She looked back at me, framed against the light of the sun as she was, and grinned. Then she vanished in a soundless teleport.

For anyone else, a teleporting child must sound like a nightmare. At times I, myself, questioned whether Reika knew what she was getting herself into when she made one of Kei's tails out of elemental space-time, giving the little rascal nominal powers over it. She had certainly complained about it enough that I didn't think so. For me, however, it just made our little game of "chase the brat" *fun*. I stepped forward and appeared right behind her as she crouched in a tree on Pangaea, giggling to herself as she tried to hide beneath a tree, well and truly convinced I had lost her.

Oh, the sweet summer child.

One shouted "boo" and a shriek of surprised glee later, and the chase was well and truly *on*.

We hurtled through the Physical Realm, Kei leading and myself always one step behind. I kept back just enough to keep things fun, as you do with kids; matching her jukes, following her teleports, pretending like I'd lost her at times and catching her when necessary – only to let her squirm and slip away, so the chase could resume.

We sprinted up mountains, Kei digging through the snow like a fish through water, creating intricate tunnel systems until I started pelting her with snowballs from a mountaintop away. She used illusions in increasingly creative ways to try and confound me, and I played along – waiting until she tried to sneak up on me to pounce on her, or until she had sufficiently hidden herself. Her mad giggles never ceased, even when I would catch her, squirming wildly before teleporting away.

The only time I really admonished her was when she tried to hide in a small village of Karae, the young people wholly unsure of what to do with her presence. Even if they couldn't see her, they could feel her, and that made them nervous.

I promptly plucked her out of the village, reaching through a portal to drag her back to the jungle we'd been playing in, giving her a stern look that had her smiling sheepishly. A being as powerful as her, especially one who only had nominal control over her powers, was no less than hazardous to a young, impressionable people like they. I was positive my small lecture about it largely went over Kei's head, but the way her ears and tails drooped made it clear she got the message. And then I promptly tossed her in a lake, to her delight, and the game resumed.

The game of chase only ended when she tried, and failed, to set a trap for me. It was during one of the times where I let her think she'd given me the slip; I'd give her a few minutes to play around, hide herself, I'd find her, and then the chase would resume. Only this time, instead of hiding right away, she set about making a trap.

I watched from a treetop, lounging on a tree branch and munching on a piece of fruit I'd picked up while Kei carefully crafted a pit of pink snow, covering it with branches arranged in a way that looked natural, but would collapse fairly easily. Then she cast her illusions around the entirety of the forest, no doubt an attempt to make me look everywhere but the innocuous pile of branches she was now standing on, perfectly balanced so that if anyone else stepped on the pit cover it would collapse, and send them hurtling into the pit of pink snow. And she, presumably, would leap away in time to avoid it – she'd gotten the hang of sensing my own teleports in the time we'd been playing.

For a brief moment I debated rewarding her ingenuity by purposefully falling for her trap.

Then I decided it would be far more amusing to make her fall in on her own.

A snap of my fingers and a rumble in the earth set the pit to collapsing and Kei to tumbling into her own trap, falling face-first into the pink snow with a yelp. My laughter rung out through the forest as I descended from the treetops, devolving into a fit of uncontrollable giggles as Kei looked up at me, face painted pink.

“Unfair, Grandpa!” she protested. I did the mature thing and stuck my tongue out at her. She wrinkled her nose, wiping her face off. “Rude! Now you have to help me get cleaned up, or else mom is gonna be mad at you!”

“That she will.” I agreed, making a grabbing motion with one hand. She floated out of the pit, the snow melting and draining away as together we flew to the shores of a large lake, easily dozens of miles across, its waters crystal clear and pure. I could sense a myriad of spiritual plants growing within the waters, keeping things clean, their thriving no doubt a result of the crossing ley lines beneath the lake proper. A water spirit rose up to greet me as I lowered Kei into the water, poking its fishlike head above the surface to see if I needed anything. I waved it off with a smile, and promptly dunked Kei in the water.

She spluttered. I cackled. And the pink came off.

Ten minutes and one water-fight later, Kei and I sat just before the sandy beach, on a bed of mossy loam. She lay sprawled across my lap, eyelids heavy as I ran a comb through the orange fur of her tails. The water spirit watched us curiously, and Kei leaned into my touch, practically purring. I’d had many furry pets in a few of my previous lives. This felt a lot like petting a cat, especially when she yawned sleepily and sprawled out on the ground, her tails fanned out over my lap to give me easier reach. I shot her an amused look, ignoring the soreness of my own soul – too much work for this little incarnation, chasing Kei and forging suns – and continued to brush.

“Someone’s coming,” Kei murmured, her ears flicking as she settled further into the soft, green, mossy ground. I nodded, setting aside the brush and admiring the scenery. It was peaceful here. The waters of the lake lapped gently at the shoreline, multicolored fish swimming in the dark waters. Birds flitted in the trees, singing happily, while bugs buzzed pleasantly, never bothering me despite their simple inquisitiveness. A snake watched us from the grass, its soul gleaming with the light of spiritual energy – it was close to awakening, and becoming something more...sapien. I smiled at it.

“Indeed they are.” I’d noticed them a little bit ago, but hadn’t expected them to come our way. Actually, now that I thought about it...I traced back mine and Kei’s path through Pangaea and hummed thoughtfully. “It’s still weird,” I muttered.

“What is?” Kei asked, rolling over to look at me better.

“Being the one who karma guides people to, rather than the other way around.” I said, watching as Dei and Celene burst through the undergrowth, looking haggard and ready for a fight. Kei popped upright, staring at Dei with narrowed eyes, while I cast my senses outward, feeling his people nearly twenty miles away. They had been nomadic ever since the city fell, travelling where they could and even absorbing a few new tribes. There were even other races among them, elementals, avians, and a few karae mixing in with the fae. Pride tickled my heart; good for Dei. Even despite the chaos, he managed to still look out for others, despite being different species.

I’d been worried about that.

Something touched my hand and I looked down, smiling at the little snake that had come up to me, its eyes blinking slowly. I scratched its chin fondly, glad for its boldness.

“Who...are you?” Dei asked, gripping his spear and eyes scanning the surroundings.

“I am as I am,” I replied, restraining my aura to the maximum amount possible. Dei and his people visibly relaxed the second I did so, though they didn’t seem to notice.

“Should we disappear?” Kei stage-whispered.

“Not this time,” I told her with a slight shake of my head, layering the words with my power so only she could hear them. “They were guided to us through strings of karma. There is a difference between that, and hiding in an unconnected village.” My appearance in that village of Karae Kei had tried to hide in would have done far more harm than good – I could practically see the religious zealots that would appear out of it, their sight of the divine twisting and warped by their own...smallness.

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The snake flicked its tongue out, distracting me from my thoughts as it curled into a ball by my leg, watching Dei warily. The man didn’t have any eyes for the spirit beast, however. He only stared at me, and Kei.

“You...” Dei said slowly, meeting my eyes. He held my gaze for a brief moment, brows furrowed as if he recognized me. In an instant his eyes grew wide and his posture relaxed, glancing up at the boughs of the Life-Giving Tree above. A scar could still be seen on the Tree’s trunk, the bark cracked and broken, though mending. “You’re one of them, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Them? Dei, you know this man?” Celene asked, the black-haired woman stepping to stand beside him. She had grown far colder ever since her lover died, her blue eyes distant and frigid, her qi as white and wintery as a snowstorm. Frost curled around her hands reflexively, and it physically pained me to see her like this. Her fated lover was scheduled to be reincarnated in the next five years – having chosen to skip much of the afterlife in favor of reuniting with her – but it would probably be nearly another twenty after that before they really met again.

She had so much growth to go through before their reunion could be a happy one...

"I met one just like him, just before the Tree was attacked. She had his eyes," Dei said, holding my gaze. Him? I glanced down at myself. Huh. I was a guy this time. Wasn't I a woman last time I met him? I should really try to stay consistent for some of these meetings, it might be less confusing for the mortals.

"His eyes?" Celene asked, meeting my gaze. She recoiled, bringing up her hands defensively, and Dei laid a hand on her shoulder.

"They're unmistakable, are they not? Sir, do you mind if we join you?" Dei asked slowly, gesturing toward us. I glanced at Kei; this was her time, not mine, but she was distracted. An illusion had fallen over her as she stalked forward, sniffing the air around the two Fae like a curious cat. Dei looked down at Kei, who appeared as little more than an orange fox to him, and frowned. *"Seek nothing outside yourself."* He chanted, qi flaring and dispelling Kei's illusion. He stiffened, clearly unsure what to make of her sudden change in appearance. She, however, just grinned at him, caught in the act of doing...whatever she was planning. Nothing good, I presumed.

"You're fun!" she chirped, dancing away.

"Yes, you can sit," I said with a chuckle, waving my hand. A fire sprung to life before me, the flames flickering merrily as it hung in the air. Another wave of my hand, and a pot of tea started warming itself over the flames.

Dei carefully approached, sitting in a respectful, kneeling position across the fire from me, laying his spear to the side. Celene was far more cautious, even as she copied Dei. Both did their best to not react to Kei, who had taken to poking Dei with a stick like he was a particularly interesting

animal. Considering these were the first mortals she had ever interacted with, that was probably not a far-off assumption.

“How can I help you?” I asked.

“We came running because there was a lot of power being thrown around. I thought someone was getting into a fight with a spirit beast and might need help. There were...a lot of illusions guarding the place.” Dei admitted. I huffed in amusement, glancing at Kei who shrugged helplessly.

“That would be her fault, I’m afraid. She’s still learning to control her power.” I accused. Kei stuck her tongue out at me. Like the mature adult I was, I stuck my tongue out in retaliation.

“...right.” Dei said. “...is the Tree alright?”

“Quite alright. A little damaged, but it’s on the mend.” I replied, taking the teapot off and pouring myself a cup. The snake at my side flicked its tongue out, and I, after a brief moment of hesitation, set the cup down in front of it before making myself another cup. Ah, the little joys of being a god. I can never run out of cups. Or tea! Or booze, but that’s beside the point.

“Good.” Dei said, nodding his head and shifting awkwardly, unsure of what to say next. I glanced at Celene, wanting to help her, but...her heart was closed off to me, and to anyone else. There was little I could actually do for her – even if I were to reincarnate her lover immediately it would likely send her into a spiral. No, she had to accept things herself, in her own time, at her own rate. I could give her little nudges, but nothing like how I wanted to. Dei, on the other hand...

“You don’t have to tiptoe around me. Unlike Kei, I won’t bite,” I said. Dei flinched at my words and Kei bared her teeth dangerously, then fell over giggling, unable to hold the expression for too long. “But I can’t help you.”

“What?” Dei asked.

“From the moment you saw me, Dei, some part of you has been hoping for advice. For me to say something like ‘Seek nothing outside yourself,’ and give you a new power or understanding into the world.” I said, shaking my head. Dei sucked in a breath, leaning back, while Celene’s eyes snapped to me. “But you don’t *need* that. Those words? They mean nothing. You gave them meaning. You gave it purpose. And your understanding of them is constantly evolving. You expect me to say something that will give you enlightenment, when those words have already been said to you. You have everything you need to succeed right there.” I said, punctuating the sentence by jabbing a finger toward his chest. “You just need to start listening to it, now.”

“Listening to it?” Dei asked as I stood. Things were starting to get a little sketchy here, Kei was getting restless and I needed to leave. My presence here would do nothing more for these two; it had introduced them to the Light, in their own ways. They need to absorb it in their own time.

“Yes. Guidance is always given to those who ask, not with their mouths, but with their heart and soul.” I said, moving over to pick up Kei. She squirmed a bit but ultimately relented, pouting at me. I quieted her complaints with the promise of ice cream.

“But...” Dei started, but I quieted him with a look and a soft smile. The angel Fu Hao, the one assigned to the physical realm, had been by to try and help Dei three times since her creation. All three times Dei had rejected her guidance. If he wanted to be the man he wanted to be, sometimes he needed to listen to people and things beyond himself and those directly around him. Ironically, seeking nothing outside yourself did not mean shutting out everyone else, after all. It meant all changes could be made by one’s self.

The true trick was figuring out which advice to follow. Sometimes the mind tricked people into thinking its advice was correct, and came from the soul, when said advice was, in fact, clouded by emotion. Sometimes the soul was quiet, and sometimes you just weren’t ready for the answer. It was a constant game, and a frustrating one at that. I would know. I’d lived through it in multiple lifetimes. But then again, who was I to talk about guidance? He had gotten this far by himself,

walking a fine line to be sure, and yes he'd made some mistakes along the way but I was still proud of him and his progress. But like a parent watching a child ride a bike, taking off the training wheels for the first time, I worried.

"Fine. I can...accept that." Dei ground out, even though I could clearly see he couldn't. Frustration swirled in his chest like a black plague, the iron wall of his heart impenetrable to all forms of guidance. "Then would you be so kind as to guide me to where I can build a new city for my people? We cannot be nomads forever." He said simply. I smiled patiently at him, but it was Kei who answered.

"Isn't here alright?" she asked innocently, cocking her head to the side. "There's a lot of energy in the middle of the lake," she pointed in that direction, across the lake.

"That's impossible. There are crossing ley lines here, but it's in the center of the lake," Celene said.

"Make a flying city. Ooh! That's a good idea! A flying island would be so cool!" Kei giggled, bouncing up and down in my grip. I chuckled fondly at her, booping her nose with a finger before turning my attention back to Dei and Celene.

"From the mouth of babes," I muttered, shaking my head. "Stand tall, Dei. You are allowed to be proud of yourself. You have gotten this far on the virtue of your own soul, but even I cannot help you with what you seek. Farewell, Dei, Celene. May we meet again soon," I said with a slight bow, and teleported away.

Only once we were back in my palace, bowls of ice cream sitting in front of me and Kei, spoons clinking merrily against the bowls, did Kei finally speak.

"You like them, huh?" she asked.

“I like all my children.” I replied. “But something does draw me to Dei and Celene. They have potential, and I would love for them to realize it. Plus...” I frowned. There was something there, in that thought train, that I was missing. I had been talking about guidance, connections, and the power of the soul for a while now, and it felt like I was missing some connection that needed to be answered...

I frowned. I needed to talk about this with someone. Now where were my children?

Dei stared at the spot the man had been, the only proof anyone had been there being the fading warmth of a fire and the lingering scent of good tea. Leaves drifted from the trees, the snake the man had been kind to flicking its tongue out at him calmly. It wasn’t just any snake. That was a Hundred-Step Viper; it was notoriously vicious, its poison deadly enough that almost any man, be they cultivator or mortal, only had time to take a hundred steps before they perished. And the man had been petting it.

Like a gods-damned *pet*.

“What in Keilan’s name just happened?” Celene asked. “What in Mother Statera’s name just happened?” she amended.

“Curse all you want, that won’t change that I have no clue.” Dei replied reflexively. The woman beside him was easily the strongest cultivator among his people besides himself – well, that was a lie. Based on qi alone, and stage of cultivation, Celene was strong. Undoubtedly. Indubitably. In fact, Dei had not advanced in cultivation since the city’s fall, and that had been nearly thirty years ago.

Yet not once had he lost a spar to her.

Not once did she deny he was *stronger*.

Whatever strength the woman's words had led him to discovering, it was...unknowable. And only recently had he thought it something different than true cultivation.

"Let's go back." He said, wondering what in the Karmic Hell that man with the woman's eyes had meant by accepting guidance. Celene nodded and spun on her heel, immediately stalking away. Dei lingered for just a moment longer. He could not be seen showing weakness. He was the leader. He was a great and powerful being, all knowing and confident to his people – even if he had no damn clue what he was doing.

For thirty years he'd kept the mask up.

For thirty years, he'd struggled under the weight of his responsibility. And he was *tired*.

And in the first time in well over thirty years, he bowed his head, and asked for help. It was a brief thing. Barely qualifying as a prayer. But its message was heartfelt, and pure in its intent. Some part of him knew that he would not like the answer to his plea. So with a quick shake of his head he started off after Celene, only glancing back once to look at the lake, Kei's suggestion rattling about in his mind unbidden.

The part of my being that was watching, paying attention, heard it all the same, just as it heard all heartfelt prayers. He was right. He would not like the answer. But since he had finally asked, help would be given all the same.