

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

1.21 What is a Dao?

“What is a dao?” I asked no one in particular. Kei glanced up at me from where she’d been playing with a toy boat I’d made for her out of wood and shrugged, then promptly went back to pushing it along in the little creek she knelt at. We were sitting in my garden, her enjoying playing with the plants and little spirit beasts I kept – there was a monkey swinging through the trees Kei liked to laugh at – while I fretted over the idea that had been teasing me for the past few hours.

“I dunno,” she said, returning to making boat noises. I looked down at the chunk of wood I had in my own hands, thumbs pressing into it and molding it like clay. A boat was slowly forming, a rudder and mast forming as I pressed it into shape. Sure, I could easily make it take the form of a boat with the wave of my hand, but there was something cathartic about doing it this way.

“Is it some *thing* that sits out there, in the aether, a law of creation?” I continued, twisting the wood to make a little propeller grow from the top of the boat. A little flick set the propeller to spinning, my wooden galleon floating into the air on a current of wind I controlled. It circled around Kei, her ears flicking in annoyance as she shot me, and it, a little glare.

“Hey! Ships don’t fly!” she protested.

“Airships do,” I replied absently, drumming my fingers on the soft soil. Kei pouted and I shot her a small smile – but my mind was far afield, feeling out my own powers and thoughts. This incarnation didn’t have enough presence of mind for this – a small request went out to my other incarnations, who I was only tenuously aware of. One of them was even somewhere in the gardens, arranging plants and things or rebuilding the palace proper.

One quick argument with myself later and my request was granted, a bit of power siphoned off of the other incarnations to fuel this one and increase its awareness. Immediately the world brightened, individual rays of light reacting to my very thought, the grass beneath me becoming softer, the song their little plant-souls sang a little louder.

I felt Reika before she appeared, a breath on the wind slowly drifting toward me. Kei perked up just a few seconds later, staring at the space Reika would appear at with ears twitching – and promptly leapt upon her mother the moment she appeared in a swirl of leaves.

“Mom, Grandpa’s being weird!” She complained, wrapping her arms and legs around Reika and clinging to her like a monkey. Reika stumbled a little at the sudden impact, smiling fondly and patting Kei’s head.

“When is She not being weird?” she asked, shooting me an amused look. I shrugged, having nothing to say to that.

“Yeah, but He’s being, like extra weird.” Kei whined. I cut off whatever Reika was about to say with my own question.

“What is a domain?” I mused, Reika arching an eyebrow at me while Kei gave her a look that screamed *see?!* “A divine domain, I mean. Is it like a Dao? Something else? Am I just the Deity of Balance?”

“Are you...having an existential crisis?” Reika asked, no small amount of panic in her tone. I shook my head and smiled softly as I stood, clasping my hands behind my back and pacing.

“No, I’m trying to work something out. I need...” I cast my senses outward, searching for someone who could help me explain my thoughts. The closest was Argent, the elemental god of metal, as he

flew through space away from Elvira's palace. I had to borrow the senses of my true body to do it – this incarnation didn't have the power to sense all that far away from me. Actually, now that I looked, there were quite a few gods flying away from Elvira's palace...thoughts for later, enlightenment now. "Argent, would you be a dear and come to my garden, please?" I sent telepathically, clearly catching the god by surprise if the way he jolted and looked about frantically for a brief moment was any indication.

It was only a moment, however, and soon he was hurtling through space toward me. A few other gods seemed to follow, but I refocused on what was in front of me.

"He was asking what a Dao was, too," Kei whispered.

"My question is; is a Dao some mysterious force in the universe – and what do you understand about it?" I asked, meeting Reika's eyes. She gently peeled Kei off of herself, taking a few wary steps toward me. I scowled at her in annoyance, sensing her concern and knowing it was misplaced. "No, enough of that. Silence your thoughts and answer the question."

"I don't understand it." Reika confessed. "Nor where it is coming from." In that moment, Argent arrived, landing softly beside me. His skin was a copper tone today, each individual strand of hair a different alloy or color of metal. I laid a hand on his shoulder before he could even speak.

"Take Argent here, the god of metal. Is that all he is?" I asked.

"...yes?" Argent said slowly, voice deep and rumbling. "Though I am a divinity, so saying that is all I am is a bit hurtful."

"A soul that focuses too much on one thing is destined for failure, and refuses growth." I denied, the longer I talked the more ideas came to me. "If you only took the Dao of metal to the realms of

divinity, you would not have become a god. No, although metal is the strongest aspect of your being, it is not the only aspect. I see in you the divine paths of all five elements in your...cluster. Metal, wood, fire, water, and earth, each swirling around each other, supporting one another, and allowing your focus on metal to grow stronger.” I reasoned.

Argent furrowed his brows, working his jaw in confusion, but Reika’s eyes seemed to light up in understanding.

“Just as the concept of metal does not solely mean the physical aspect of metal, but the metaphorical as well.” She said slowly. “You’ve talked about this before. How certain elements – almost all elements – can be metaphorical, standing for more than just what the name claims. Argent is also determined, steadfast, a fair teacher, all traits we assign symbolically with ‘metal’...but none of those qualities can stand alone without the passion of fire, the growth of wood, the flexible wisdom of water, or the stable foundation of earth.”

“Oh,” Argent said, blinking. His eyes grew wide as he looked at me, realizing something about himself in that moment he hadn’t ever considered before. That was the enlightenment I was chasing now – I knew whatever I was thinking of, at a fundamental level, but a simple change in words could alter my entire perspective on my being. I needed more power for this.

Another request for power was sent out, and I didn’t bother to wait for an answer to continue.

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“And yet, did you follow some inherent path that exists? Is there a great Dao of Metal that sits somewhere out there, in the Primordial Chaos, in the depths of the Four Realms, sitting there that you followed to the point of divinity?” I asked, vaguely aware that a larger crowd had started to form. Gods and spirits now surrounded me, listening intently to my ramblings.

“...I always thought it was you who guided me,” Argent said slowly. I paused, mouth open and statement half-thought, his words utterly blindsiding me. Guidance. Was it really so simple? Had I truly been missing something so...simple?

“It was,” I admitted, understanding dawning. I turned around, golden light flowing from my finger as I began to write in the air, drawing first the symbolic chart of the Chinese five elements, the path that Argent followed, then everything else I had said so far in the air, the words hanging there as motes of golden light. “You followed my understanding of it at first, that was what put you on the path when you were a young soul. Somehow you tapped into my own energy, intent, and understanding of the universe – you listened to it, absorbed it, and let it grow within you, following the path until you became a divinity. A god.”

“Through You, all things are possible,” the angel Stilicho said, appearing in a flash of light. I pointed at him dramatically.

“Ah HA! That is not where I was going with this! Because Argent diverged at a certain point – the Dao, the path he follows has been internalized. No longer does he rely on me to teach him, he is now forging his own path into the beyond. I have my Dao to follow, and he his. He had to become his own – the Dao he follows is still part of mine nominally, however, because mine was the base.” I explained, nodding my head. Part of the nature of my own domain was that it encompassed quite a bit – metal is far more specific than something like balance.

Was that the difference between power-levels between gods? Specificity of divine daos and domains? I didn’t understand enough to answer that question.

“Why do you keep using the word Dao?” Alexander asked. “You rarely used it before.” I glanced at him, sitting in my garden surrounded by a dozen other spirits and deities. When did he get here? I tapped my chin thoughtfully, chasing that question. The answer came easily enough.

“Mortals,” I said. Specifically Dei. Whatever he was doing with his soul, internalizing his energy like he was, was sparking this entire conversation because it felt like he was starting to touch upon

the Dao – correction, his own Dao. “A Dao is a path, like I said earlier, but slightly different than the domain of a deity. Domains are divine, touching upon those higher realms of understanding and consciousness; a Dao doesn’t necessarily have to be. It is intricately linked to understanding the world around you of course, as well as knowledge of the self, but that doesn’t make it *divine*. It can become divine, but isn’t inherently.

“But they both function the same. Both divinity and the Dao are a way for a soul to bring forth changes into the universe; but what the Dao, the path, itself is, is unimportant. Be it an artist, or metal, or balance, what our souls have chosen to focus on is but a vessel, a ‘focus,’ if you will, to guide our intent into creating changes.” I explained, extending my hand outward. My entire being was not “Balance.” I was more than that. However, when I focused my power into creating a sun, I utilized my understanding of balance to invoke changes. Light swirled in the palm of my hand, exploding into a miniaturized sun the size of my head.

Just like when Dei had leapt over the chasm, his soul had pushed intent down in the chasm to create a gust of wind to give him the needed boost to make it across. This was no different fundamentally, just...more. A deeper understanding. The nuclear fission happening within the sun, atoms spitting and combining at massive rates in a furious balance of chaos and creation. *Metal and fire.*

“Hold this,” I said, turning and handing the sun to Argent and Vesuvius, the god of fire who had been standing close to him. Argent panicked for a moment as the sun came to rest in the palms of his hands, his metallic skin heating up, threatening to turn cherry-red. “Fire does not destroy metal. It only allows it to change,” I advised, turning away and scrawling the entire process in the air, next to all the other words I had written. A picture of a sun along with the inner-workings of it appeared beside it all, making me frown as I stared at it.

“Just as we are two sides of the same coin,” Elvira said, standing beside Keilan. They were flanked by Sol and Gilles, respectively, and were all listening with interest. Once again I marveled at the number of beings who kept appearing the longer I talked, but I was on a roll now. There was something so simple, so stupidly blatant I was missing...

“There’s one thing I don’t understand,” the angel Fu Hao said, appearing beside Stilicho.

“Yes?” I asked.

“You mentioned the Dao and mortals, and implied there was something to do with guidance there. It is a path, is it not? Do You not make the paths?” she asked. I hummed and closed my eyes for a brief moment.

“How do mortals know what path to take?” Stilicho added, and suddenly it hit me.

“Oh,” I said, eyes opening and smiling. How could I have been so stupid? It went right back to my initial few questions – what was a Dao? Was a Dao some inherent law of the universe, like karma, sitting out there? If karma was the spiritual law of ‘every action has an equal and opposite reaction,’ then was the Dao something similar? The answer was no. But also yes.

The Heavenly Daos existed because I did, and my children did. There was something out there in the primordial chaos that represented balance, or yin, or yang, or the elements and spirits, but we were what gave it direction and purpose, and developed them into greater, more meaningful things. Without Argent to continuously forge the Dao of Metal, it would remain metal. In many ways the gods defined and directed these...things, giving them wills and a purpose. The Four Realms might even have something akin to a consciousness, but because of who I am and what I do, it could, in many ways, also be considered my own will.

My will is the will of the heavens. Not because we are in agreement, but because they are me. And even now, now that I was paying attention, I could feel all the other little wills across creation connecting to me. Seeking power, passion, guidance, mortals trying to find meaning in their lives...and the Dao was there, waiting for them to set their feet on the path, a path they eventually will take themselves if they so desire it – for not all souls desire to continue walking – and make their own.

Yet I was missing something. Not mentally, but personally. It felt like there was a hole within me, I was just beginning to notice, and could do nothing about yet.

My thoughts continued to spiral from there, descending down, down, then up again as I chattered away, giving voice to my realizations and thoughts, answering questions as they came my way, and writing it all in the air. I wasn't sure how long I talked, only that when I finally broke out of it and turned around, almost all major beings of the Four Realms sat before me. Karmic kings, high-ranking spirits, the angels Fu Hao and Stilicho, and all the gods lay scattered before me, absorbed in my talk. Only Kei wasn't paying attention – I could sense her elsewhere in the garden, riding one of my horses.

With a clap of my hands the golden words I had written in the air condensed, collapsing in on themselves to form a black-bound book with golden letters titling it. *A Dissertation on the Heavenly Dao, Volume 1*. With a wave of my hand it was sent away, a few copies landing in the hands of those gods who wanted it, while I swayed where I stood.

“I am going to need to disappear for a time.” I said softly. Was this the enlightenment so many people loved to talk about? I’d never experienced it to such a degree – it felt like I was about to fall into a deep sleep, without sleeping. Yet I understood why this was the case. In many ways I had still been thinking like an angelic being, not an origin deity. My outlook was changing, and I needed to internalize these changes. It was impossible for me to “take a step back” as I had been thinking, for my very presence influenced the Realms. And everything within had an equal opportunity to connect to my will and power, and seek guidance and aid. “If you need anything just ask. I’ll be there.” I said softly, and my incarnation promptly vanished.

Elsewhere, my true body shifted in its meditations, my mind sinking into the Four Realms to observe, feeling out the budding Will that was forming there. And I saw. And I understood.

And the Shadow stirred.

1.22 Heavenly Tribulations

Part of the nature of my enlightenment was that, when I fell into deep meditation, I did not truly disappear from the Four Realms – not that I ever could. I was the Heavenly Will, and the Heavenly Will was me. And the moment I touched upon it, allowing it to merge with me once again, filling a piece of that hole I felt within me, something was triggered. It felt like finding the last piece of a puzzle you hadn't known was missing; and suddenly tables and charts and information flashed in my mind's eye. But not once did it interrupt the process, only providing additional insights.

None of these things were knowledge I didn't know, or couldn't feel. But in the table, they were presented in such a way that it was easier for me to consolidate.

Ding!

Enlightenment!

You have entered a state of enlightenment. Efficiency of power usage increased by 200%. Growth rate increased by 400%. Healing rate increased by 150%.

Creation Progress: 5%. You have amassed only 5% of the necessary power to create the Lunar Star. Estimated completion time: 10,000 years.

Populations:

Greater Deities: 4

High Deities: 6

Deities: 58

Angels: 2

Mortal Races: 4 (In Progress: 12)

Spirit Beast Species: 1,205,343

Animals...

Show more

Yet that was not all I saw. For the first time I noticed a glaring hole in the systems of cultivation; a hole caused by both my own uncertainty of action, while also rushing other things. Such as the creation of life and the Fae. There were no Heavenly Tribulations set up to challenge cultivators, see if they were truly ready to set their feet upon the paths of immortality – and that oversight was bottlenecking many souls who might otherwise advance. Dei was one of them. So were many spirit beasts, as well as other souls from other walks of cultivation or life.

There were even a few souls whose karma were good enough to trigger an ascension into...whatever they would be, upon reaching the threshold of karma that might be called “reaching nirvana.” Yet because of my unspoken fear of the Xianxia, as well as the unknown of what they

would become, I was subconsciously suppressing them from advancing despite my attempts to lean into it, and curb my own hesitation. That would not do.

Hells, even Kei was among those souls. I observed her as she played in my garden, riding a bolt of lightning like a skateboard. A storm horse, one of the immortal horses Randus kept to pull my carriage, thundered along behind her, nostrils flaring and storm clouds roiling about its feet as it hurtled after her. She giggled the entire way, enjoying the chase, until her ears flicked and she whipped her head around, looking for something. The inattention cost her and she took a tumble, flipping head-over-tails as the bolt of lightning shot into the distance, splintering a tree as it went, the storm horse chasing after it.

She sat up, spitting out tufts of grass, dusting off her robes and glancing about curiously. A pout tugged at her lips, and she looked heavenward.

“No fair, Grandpa. You can’t be everywhere at once. How will I hide from you? Or prank you?” she whined. I hummed in amusement, the sound turning into a gentle breeze that ruffled her hair and whispered to her an unspoken challenge. *I dare you to try.* It said, and she grinned, baring her teeth. “Just you wait. Imma get you.”

And then my attention was gone, my duty complete, the Will urging me to finish what I should have before I let cultivation flourish. There were seven mortal realms of cultivation, each following the seven chakras in the mortal body, starting with the Root and ending with the Crown. Only once one’s Qi reached the crown chakra could true immortality be gained, and they could set foot upon the immortal realms of cultivation...the only issue was rising through each of those realms. Each new chakra point represented a bottleneck, a qualitative change in one’s energy and consciousness. The mind and soul became stronger, able to handle more information and power, to see more...and right now, traversing those bottlenecks was becoming increasingly difficult.

Reincarnation and karma helped ease these bottlenecks by cleansing impurities and circumventing certain natural limitations, but ultimately ignored the larger issue – beings could become immortal without those aids. That process could absolutely still be used as intended, it is just limited in scope and vision.

That is where a Heavenly Tribulation would come in. It would not only ensure that a soul, be they spirit beast or sentient race, was ready for ascension into the next realm of cultivation, both mentally, in terms of qi and otherwise, it would help cleanse the body and spirit of impurities that have no right to be present in the next stage of existence.

My intent set, I watched the Will of the Four Realms work, slowly weaving new functions and laws into the very core of its being alongside the inner workings of karma, freewill, and other inalienable laws. And once the structure was made, I set about filling in the blanks, realization setting into my being.

There wouldn't be only seven Tribulations. There would be eight. Just as I had lived eight lives, there would be eight trials for those cultivating to immortality; seven Heavenly Tribulations, followed by Immortal Ascension, which would be...different from the others. The tribulations would be cleansers, each a divine representation of a different aspect of life. Maybe there would be karmic flames, burning things depending upon the weight of their karma; or perhaps something to do with illusion and emotions, to temper the mind; or tribulation lightning? That's pretty standard, right? The trials also needed to differ based on the various kinds of cultivation, and the different people.

There was standard Qi cultivation, cultivation of the fleshly body, cultivation of karma and soul, of the Dao, of the mind...and a smattering of others. Different trials for each. It was a complex system, but necessary.

But the final one, in which one path of cultivation reached the realm of immortality...well. I needed something personal. All eight of my past lives flashed in my mind's eye, reliving each and every moment in the span of a few hours, the weight of each pressing themselves upon my soul. I had walked many paths in life on many different continents and in many different cultures; but there was one concept that stood out to me from each. Something that could describe my path, my whole mantra. Progressing; even if progression meant taking a few steps back to rebuild parts of the foundation, or to the side to navigate the maze of life, it was important to keep moving, or searching for that next step. And there was one symbol that meant the most to me that fit such a concept.

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The bridge.

Something shifted in the Realms in reaction to my thoughts, a weight settling upon them for the briefest of moments as the Will moved to adjust itself to my vision.

My gaze shifted as it worked, observing the Realms with a sort of detachment I was unused to. It was logical and clinical, bypassing emotions almost entirely, seeing the universe through the lens of cause and effect. Matter twisted in the Physical Realm as gods worked to create new suns and solar systems around the Tree and Pangea. Yin flowed through the Karmic Realm, souls travelling through the River to reenter the cycle or reincarnation...or not, if they were strong enough. None had reached what I called nirvana yet, that precipice of mortal enlightenment, but that wasn't necessary to exit the cycle.

A soul, at a certain point in its growth, could opt to exit the cycle and work in the Spirit Realm. Many chose to, and the option to return to the Physical to continue to strengthen themselves remained open, but...there was nothing wrong with being content.

Some moved up to the Heaven Realm, where Elvira worked on strengthening her fleshly body, enduring the entire weight of her Holy Mountain to condense her flesh while Gilles and Sol looked on.

“She is quite the woman,” Sol said, desire in his heart, and pride at all of the Realms.

“Yes, she is,” Gilles agreed, respect and awe in his, a little string of fate binding himself to her.

Yet I did not follow or look into that string. Instead my gaze directed itself to a little red string flowing through the Physical Realm, tying two souls together that had yet to truly reunite. As I watched those two, the first two Fae, separated for the first time by lifetimes, something revealed itself to me. A sample of the structure of the Realms, as it neared foundational completion. My mind's eye zoomed out to behold the Four Realms as a whole, like an outsider looking in. Its shape was spherical, the heaven and karmic realms rotating around each other and the physical realm like teardrops - domed in shape, two halves of the whole with their respective key features prominent. Landmasses, like islands, floated in the cloudy white substance of heaven, most uninhabitable save for the largest - that which the Mountain rose from. In the karmic ocean, shapes were beginning to form, echoes of memories creating...something, but not quite old enough yet to finish its work. The karmic valley gleamed like a beacon in the midst of the dark ocean, all while twinkling stars and brilliant stardust swirled in-between the two, the Tree peeking a few leaves out from between the realms. All while the Spirit Realm bound it all together.

And I saw it coming together.

One source.

Four fundamentals.

Eight pillars.

Sixty-four pairs, to round out existence.

All swirling together in an intricate balance, encompassing chaos and change and order and stability – all of creation, spinning like a wheel, ever progressing yet never forgetting where it came from.

The moment passed, and I shifted my gaze once again, the Will finishing its work. Many souls would be undergoing tribulations soon. Including...well now. Including the male half of the red string, whose karma was close, so close to being able to reach karmic ascension but just not quite good enough. Yet it had potential. And I saw, briefly, a chance. An opportunity. One that pained me, but would ultimately make him more powerful, reunite the two lovers, and unveil the Shadow in one fell swoop. But the path would be painful, and hard, and keep the two apart for even longer.

To get him to the required point, sacrifices had to be made, even if that sacrifice was time. And I wouldn't be able to help them in the way I wanted.

Emotionally, I wished to aid him, to break out of enlightenment and be there to watch the first soul ascend to karmic immortality, to reunite the lovers right then and there.

Logically, I knew I must stay distant. Because the Shadow was moving in my apparent dormancy. And the young man was too tempting a target to ignore; seen as a favored soul, and a powerful one to boot. Symbolic, in more ways than one.

The Shadow poked and prodded, just barely tickling the edges of my awareness with its maliciousness. Carefully it stepped out of its hiding place – still obnoxiously hidden, even to my current state of being – only to leap right back in. It was testing me, seeing if I would react. I did not. Instead, I posed a question to the young man through the Dao. If he would aid me in this, freshly reborn though he was, and drive himself to greater heights.

It was not a physical question, but more of a feeling. A feeling of purpose and pride, of walking a path no matter how difficult because the end of the rainbow was worth it – for at it resided his other half. Part of me had not expected him to accept, even though he did without hesitation.

Young though he was, he sensed the importance of my request, and settled into his new life as his soul forgot who he had been.

But not completely. Never completely.

The end would be worth it for him, painful though the path might be. So long as he walks the straight and narrow.

And so I watched, and waited, for years, decades, biding my time until the Shadow started to move, its dark claws dipping into the Realms, confident that I would not counter it, unknowing that my reach was far beyond the physical. And the game was afoot.

Alexander was the only one of his siblings to feel it, the moment the Shadow started to move. Not only because he was one of the only ones who was actively watching, but because he was one of the few who knew what to look for. The Shadow's hiding place, he figured, was not too unlike his own. His great body unwound itself from the depths of the River, brushing past a few souls as he yawned and gazed in the direction of the Shadow.

"I would not do that if I were you," he rumbled softly, transmitting his voice through Qi so the Shadow could properly hear him. Its presence stilled, attention focusing entirely upon him. A shadow of a feeling ran across Alexander's form, the feeling of jaws closing around his neck, of his scales shattering beneath teeth seeking his godly blood, pressing itself so firmly into his mind that, if he didn't know better, he would say he was about to die. But he was a dragon, and such things would not phase him.

"And what will you do about it, little dragon, now that That One is well and truly asleep?" It hissed, voice deep and resonate and foreboding, echoing from all different directions at once. *"You alone do not have the power to defeat me."*

“I am never alone. Even in sleep, Father is always with us,” Alexander drawled with an exaggerated yawn, showing off his gleaming white teeth. Though he did not know the exact location the Shadow watched from, he knew its gaze was upon him. In a flash his expression shifted, from lazy and relaxed to fierce and firm, a growl bubbling in the back of his throat. “But you doubt my resolve in this matter. I may not be able to win, but it is not about me winning. It is ensuring you will lose.” Golden fire licked through his teeth as he spoke, the divine flames of promised retribution distorting the spirit river.

It was only a heartbeat later that the Shadow replied, though the time ticked by like an eternity.

“That is hardly fair.” It hissed, not sounding disappointed. *“But I suppose it is a bit early in this war for the big players to brawl. Let us remain at ease, then, and let our pawns scuffle and skirmish.”*

“So be it.” Alexander agreed. “Though you will not find our so-called ‘pawns’ easy to defeat.”

“I should hope not.” It replied, and settled back down, its presence not moving but not hiding away either. Alexander killed the fire in his throat, settling back down on the riverbed and laying his head upon a boulder, his attention turning to the man the Shadow was undoubtedly watching; the mortal, about to achieve Karmic Immortality. Spirits and souls swirled about him, taking comfort in his holy presence. As for himself, he let none of his inner doubts or nervousness.

This was war, after all. Shows of weakness had to be deliberate. And mistakes on his end would cost the futures of millions of souls.

1.23 Fang Xu

The man’s name was Fang Xu, and he was damn tired. He sat in his little home, a log-and-plaster house situated at the edge of town, staring out the window at the dense green forest. Grey skies loomed overhead, the sun just starting to rise, and he suppressed a jaw-popping yawn.

“I swear to Father Luotian and Mother Statera,” he cursed, rubbing his stomach absently. “I must have been tricked. There’s no way a sane, well-informed person would have agreed to a life like this. I don’t care what’s at the end of the road; this is miserable.” To the casual observer, or even most powerful cultivators, it would appear he was talking to himself. There were no other souls within the confines of his one-room hut, the dying light of last night’s fire flickering from the fireplace and onto the bare walls as a bitter reminder of his lack of sleep.

Fang Xu scowled and rubbed his face, a headache throbbing in the back of his skull. To say last night had been rough would be an understatement, and it had only been compounded by the fact that the earth spirits wouldn’t shut up. As a high-consciousness Fae, he could interact and even see most spirits – especially low-level ones. That, in and of itself, wasn’t rare. But when combined with his positive spiritual energy – which had been purified and scoured of all deformities over the course of the past fifty years by his so-called “good” karma – that meant most benign or positive-aligned spirits fucking *loved* him.

He doubted any one else on Pangaea could see spirits the way he did, except for maybe the gods themselves. As such, he was fully aware that what he said did not go unheard and he was, in fact, talking to someone. He couldn’t see her; she didn’t like to show herself to him. But he could nonetheless feel the angel Fu Hao as she floated above his humble abode. Her aura was unmistakable, as bright as the Realm Sun itself.

“Relax,” she urged. “Go for a walk, it’ll be good for you.” Fang Xu grumbled to himself as he stood, a wave of vertigo striking him as his fatigue caught up to him, and slipped out of his little hut. Only once he was outside, closing the reed door behind him, breathing in the cool air and tasting the fresh scent of rain on the wind, did he pause.

“What if I don’t want to go for a walk?” he grumbled, and wow, wasn’t he feeling ornery this morning?

“Then don’t.” came Fu Hao’s reply. Fang Xu sighed and stuffed his hands in the pockets of his fur-lined pants, taking a moment to re-center himself. She was right, of course. A walk to clear his

head was a common habit of his, he just didn't want to admit that she was right about something. A storm was brewing on the horizon, chasing the one that had just passed. The trees were wet with rain and glistened in the early-morning light, while birds flitted about merrily in the trees, chasing a meal before the rain came once again to drive them back to bed.

His herb garden was fine, upon brief inspection, the few medicinal plants he grew not having taken any damage from the storm, shielded as they were beneath the overhang of his roof. It hadn't rained hard enough for that last night, anyways. He took two steps forward and paused, thin cloth shoes sliding a little in the mud as his heart directed him in a different direction than he was used to. Normally he wandered the forest a bit on his walks, observing the animals and lesser spirit beasts that made their home around the village but...today he wanted to do something different.

He spun on his heel and wandered into town, already wincing at the headache it might cause. Dark spirits flitted about the town, visible to him as little blurs of negativity darting between houses, as they loved to congregate around large groups of people. The concentrated emotions attracted them, feeding and empowering them. Something was different today, however. The red-tiled rooftops of the little town glistened in the light of the sun, smoke curling from chimneys, and people were already getting up.

Karae and Elementals, as well as a few Avians, dominated the population of the town. Fae like Fang Xu were rare, and he stood out even among them because of his fire-red hair and muscular form. Most people around here were thin and lithe...not broad-shouldered and large-bodied like him.

Everyone expected him to be a soldier, too, because of it. Fang Xu scowled as he noticed his thoughts drifting away from the difference he sensed in town – whatever it was, it felt like there was something blocking his perception of it. An annoyed glance at the sky where he knew Fu Hao was flying said everything he felt about that, even if he wasn't sure she was the one suppressing him. Part of whatever deal he foolishly made with whatever malicious being now had control over his life – not really, but sometimes it truly felt like it – meant that Fu Hao had a greater control over what he could normally feel and see.

Sometimes he felt like she made things happen to him just because it amused her.

Grumbling to himself he wound his way into town, nodding to the few people he met along the way.

It was a beautiful day, in all honesty. The sun was bright, peeking through the clouds as it was, the air was clean, and the chill morning air was perfect. If only the chattering of the spirits could get quieter. The noise rang in his ears like a gong, echoing about in his skull in their excitement and dragging down his own mood. The qi of the land was raging and powerful, driving through the center of town like a wildfire – to his enhanced senses, it felt like he was stepping into a bonfire. It was too much for one with a qi cultivation as low as his.

Yet his feet never stopped moving forward, leading him to where, even he didn't know. With his karma, with his spiritual strength, he should have been a bigger person than he was. Stronger in qi, at a better place in life, doing *more*. But no, his entire damn life he'd been suppressed, put through spiritual torture and back again, healing others when he himself felt like half of his entire damn being was missing. And kept in this little town, where no one would listen to him, expected more from him, loved and hated him all in equal measure. His scowl deepened, then gave way to deep longing, his head hanging.

Missing half my being. He thought sourly. *What an apt description.* It always felt like he was missing something, when almost everything more he tried to do with his life failed, when everyone he met never filled that hole of understanding...

His heart longed for love. Yet he had never found it, in the eyes of any of the girls he'd met or in their hearts, either. When he was young, he'd had a few sweethearts. Even over the years he'd met some he might have been able to love. But they loved him for who they imagined him to be, not who he was.

In that moment, he looked up and found himself in the town square. Chatter filled it as people gathered around the relatively large number of strangers that had appeared there. The village elder, a crotchety old man who was more wrinkle than man at this point, stood in the very center

of the town square, atop the stone podium that had been erected there, and was speaking in an exaggerated manner to the man before him.

Fang Xu sucked in a deep breath at the sight of the regal Fae. Physically, he was impressive. His shoulders were set and squared, his face hardened by time and trials, the horns that curled from his head sweeping and impressive. In his hand he held a spear, its haft worn in places by constant use. He was every inch a leader...yet to Fang Xu, his spiritual presence was that much greater. The man's energy was like an iron wall, imposing and massive; qi had nothing to do with it. Half of the people in town had a stronger cultivation base than him, to say nothing of the monstrous cultivators in the man's cohort, standing around the podium. Yet Fang Xu had no doubt this man was more powerful than any here.

But then, he met the eyes of the woman next to him. They were blue. She was beautiful, face hidden by a black veil, and spirits of ice swirling around her. *I want to marry her.* He thought calmly, softly, a statement of fact. Then he furrowed his brows. *That thought came from left field.*

“I told you, we don’t need any random cultivator,” the man on the podium said calmly, voice demanding it be paid attention to despite never harshening his tone. “We need a formations expert. Now, everyone within thirty Li of here says the man Fang Xu is the one you want to see about that. All I’m asking is where he is, nothing more.”

“Lord Dei,” the elder started. “Master Wu –“

“Is useless to me.” The now-identified Dei said bluntly. Fang Xu sighed and shook his head. The elder could be uselessly stubborn at times, and if this man was looking for him for formations help, he was loathe to turn down more business. It was the only thing he seemed to be good at, after all, besides being a punching bag for his karma.

“I am Fang Xu,” he said, stepping forward. All eyes snapped to him, but Fang Xu found himself meeting the woman’s eyes despite his best intentions. Warmth bloomed in his chest, kind and firm, warm and welcome, and he found himself smiling. With no small effort of will he looked away,

meeting Dei's eyes, who was frowning suspiciously. Dark spirits swirled about him, trying and failing to sink their claws into his iron-clad aura. His fellows were not so lucky, dark spirits enflaming their emotions.

"You are he? You don't look like much," the woman said bluntly. His smile just broadened at the accusation.

"Calm, Celene. If his reputation holds true his skills were be invaluable." Dei soothed, stepping off the stone stage. His people parted before him, the woman Celene moving to walk just behind him. Her hair glittered in the sunlight.

"How can I help you?" Fang Xu asked as Dei neared, eyes flicking to Celene, the dark spirits flitting about them both, then back to the man in question.

"We need assistance and advice regarding formations. There is a truly large project we will be undertaking, and require the assistance of a formation's expert." Dei explained. "Is there somewhere we can talk privately?"

"Don't trust him, Fang Xu. They're *nomads*." The elder spat. Fang Xu shot the crotchety man a look over Dei's shoulder, whose expression tightened at the accusation, but that was little compared to the cold fury that radiated from Celene, blue eyes flashing dangerously behind her veil. The dark spirits around her greedily latched on, enflaming her emotions and feeding off of the negativity that radiated from her. *There's a lot of those today*, Fang Xu noted, flicking a finger absently, sending a jolt of spiritual energy at the dark spirits and blowing them away.

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“Business is business, Elder.” Fang Xu replied with a shrug. *And if you can’t tell that this man is stronger than you despite his lower cultivation, then I question your qualities as a leader.* He added mentally. “Come with me to my home, we can talk there.” Dei nodded and Fang Xu led the way, walking the group of ten or so cultivators through town toward his little home. The walk was mostly quiet, a number of townsfolk poking their heads out of their homes to stare at the strangers as they passed. “So, where are you from?” Fang Xu asked as they walked.

“Our home was destroyed in the time of chaos,” Celene snapped.

“We have been wandering ever since, seeking a new place to call home.” Dei finished, glancing over his shoulder at Celene. “That is the reason we come to you. We may have found a place to settle, and could use your...guidance. None of my people are great with formations – we have not had the luxury of sitting down to study the craft.”

“I see. My condolences,” Fang Xu said. The times of chaos were before his time, but the elders who had lived through parts of it all spoke of them in hushed whispers and grave tones. “I hope I can be of assistance.” But he wouldn’t be sure if he would even want to until he heard the problem. Would he even be allowed to move? Fu Hao had been insistent he stay here, in this village, despite many opportunities to the contrary.

“I do too,” Dei muttered, and the conversation lapsed until they reached his home. To the casual observer, it was a simple place. Only the spiritually attuned could tell the amount of work Fang Xu had put into the thing to try and make his life a bit more comfortable. Stones were strewn haphazardly about the yard, thrown seemingly hither-and-thither, but in truth had a very particular placement to them. And because he was so sensitive to energy – be it qi or spiritual or otherwise – he could tell when even one was out of place. Positive energy practically poured through the center of his home, all light and goodness and positivity, designed to cleanse him of the negativity and darkness that many people so willingly carried within themselves, and forcefully pressed onto him.

Misery loved company, after all.

It still didn't help him sleep, though.

Of the entire group, however, only Celene reacted, staring at the stones with a furrowed brow. Dei watched her closely, which told Fang Xu these people meant actual business, not casual dabbling in formations like most of the people who had hired him before.

Fang Xu invited them all inside, which the group politely declined. Pleasantries out of the way, he launched straight to business, folding his arms across his broad chest as he asked for details. Unsurprisingly it was not Dei who answered, as he seemed unfamiliar with the topic.

"We want to build a city," Celene said softly. "And need the help of a formation's expert to make it feasible. Dei here is paranoid that something like the times of chaos will happen again - a reasonable thing, all things considered, so he wants to line the city with powerful formations that not only make life within easier, but attacking it harder. We will be willing to pay for your services, including for just a consultation. But ideally, if your skills are up to snuff, we would hire you on full-time."

"I see," Fang Xu said, eyebrows raising. "That is...ambitious, to say the least." But it hinged upon him actually wanting to take the job - this was a project that would require years of his life to complete, if it wasn't a lifelong job. Did he want to commit to such a thing? Silence answered that thought, and he glanced at the little house he lived in, then the town that he called home. "Home." Had he ever really considered this place home since his late parents had brought him here forty years ago? The answer was easy. "Let's discuss details."

"Celene will speak with you," Dei admitted. "She is the one most familiar among all my followers with formations." Fang Xu turned his attention to said woman, fully expecting a test of sorts to prove his knowledge of formations. It was a common enough occurrence, due to his low cultivation base and relatively young age many people wanted to test his knowledge. In fact he was expecting it to some degree. Yet what happened defied his expectations to some degree.

Celene grilled him, but it was more of a conversation than a test. And it came quick and easy, often wandering away from their original topic. They discussed life and cultivation, travel – which he had done little save for the villages nearby – and the gods, even. Yet when she did ask questions regarding formation, or Dei chimed in to ask if something was possible, he found the answers coming quick and easy. There were very few who could do what he did, see what he did, and understand how everything worked in conjunction with one another. So even if he hadn't worked on a particular problem that was presented to him, or worked at quite so grand a scale, he found he could still piecemeal an answer together.

The whole thing was sparking something within him, creativity coming in waves and compounded by the warmth he felt while talking with Celene. It felt...natural. Right, in a way that had nothing to do with enjoyment or mere lust for the beautiful woman across from him.

“...the spot we found is on two intersecting ley lines, so power shouldn’t be an issue.”

“Doesn’t matter how much power you have access to if it’s not the right flavor. You’ll need cleansing formations...”

“You ever had Dragonfire Brandy? Dangerous stuff.”

“I’ve been to the depths of the jungle of mourn. Foul place, but not without its beauty.”

“Well what about warding off spirit beasts?”

“You don’t want to ward off all spirit beasts. What you want is this...”

And so it went for hours, until the two before Fang Xu seemed satisfied. Dei shot a glance at Celene when the conversation lapsed into silence, the woman herself staring at Fang Xu intensely. It actually made him a bit uncomfortable, such was the intensity of her stare. Dei cleared his throat.

“Celene,” he said gently. “Go check on the others while I discuss payment with our new friend.” Celene shot him a brief glare, but nonetheless turned on her heel and stalked off, careful to avoid the stones that were part of Fang Xu’s formations. He watched her go.

“You have a beautiful wife,” he guessed, turning his full attention back to Dei.

“Wife? Gods no. She would sooner fillet me alive than even think of me that way. No, she never moved past her late husband. This is the most alive I’ve seen her in...well, a long time.” Dei said with a shake of his head. “But that is besides the point. Back to business. Fang Xu.” At the tone in Dei’s voice he straightened, squaring his shoulders and meeting the man’s eyes. This was a cultivator who could sweep his entire village with ease, no doubt, and he sounded downright accusatory. “How do you know what you know? No one with your cultivation base should have the knowledge you do. I do not doubt your skill, mind you, only your honesty.”

“Qi is not the only method of cultivation. I cultivated my spirit,” Fang Xu replied, smiling at Dei. “It’s a miserable path, but it lets me do what I do. You should understand this better than most; you do not cultivate qi, either.” Dei stared at Fang Xu for a long moment, then nodded sharply.

“As you say.” He agreed. “I will admit, you are an easy man to talk to, to admit things to.”

“I get that a lot,” Fang Xu laughed. It caused him more trouble than it was worth most times, however.

“Good, then allow me to admit something else to you. This is not just a job offer.” Dei said bluntly. “This village will be in range of my people’s influence once we settle, and I intend to unite all peoples within our range under one banner. I have travelled quite a bit. Crossed quite a bit of country in this past century, and seen more than my fair share of...everything. The Fae, the Karae, the Elementals and Avians...we are not united. If something like the times of chaos happen again, it will be just as bad as before, if not worse. I will give them something to rally around – this city is more than just a home to us.” Dei explained. Fang Xu raised his eyebrows.

“The sects –“

“Are disjointed. My people are nearly five thousand strong now, a force greater than anything this part of Pangaea has ever seen. The sects will retain their autonomy, as they have proven bastions of strength, but we will provide the banner. But we need a headquarters. A capital. And it would be best if one of the architects of these places was someone from the local area. You more than fit the criteria needed.” Dei stated. “Your payment will be in the form of spirit stones, as well as potential prestige and nobility. Whatever you wish, so long as you deliver on the promises. If you just want to help make it and have your name remain anonymous, that will be fine as well. If you do not wish to aid us, that is acceptable. But let me be clear; once you start on this path, I will not allow you to back out of it.”

Fang Xu leaned back a bit, considering his options. He was already on a path that he could not back out of.

“I will need time to think about it.” he admitted.

“You have three days.” Dei said. “Thank you for your time. I will leave you to the rest of yours.” And, with a slight bow, the man walked off. Fang Xu let Dei’s statement hang over his head for a moment, considering everything. He was still feeling a little heady from all the information that had been crammed into him, not to mention the feelings of creativity that pounded in his soul.

So he wandered back into his house, sat down, and stared at the wall. And considered his life. And, to his mounting horror, something occurred to him. He was in the perfect position to take this job.

His skills in formations were unique and strong, if he did say so himself. The job itself aligned perfectly with his passion and ambitions – it killed him to stay in these small little towns, but was this truly the answer to all his suffering? He knew nothing of Dei. He knew nothing of the man's plans or ambitions. What he said...Fang Xu could see the potential for Light in it, but also great Dark. And to make things worse, he had no connections to this town, this area. Nothing to keep him here. Again, he was perfect for this job.

“Is this what you’ve been waiting for?” he mused, looking up at Fu Hao, still flying above him. Her answer was simple.

“Follow your heart.” She said. “But remember that only a fool claims to know what he was born for.” Fang Xu nodded to himself, and mused, and debated, and thought of the woman Celene.

He had his answer by morning.

Celene cornered Dei the moment he escaped Fang Xu’s range of hearing – and to be honest, Dei could only pray the man joined their group. Little as he knew of formations, the man clearly knew what he was doing, and he didn’t know what they would do without someone of that caliber to aid them. Kei had been right, the area over the lake was perfect; but to create a city there required making formations his people had no clue how to forge. They needed someone skilled, and creative, and willing to help for more reasons than just their own power. But those thoughts were crushed when Celene cornered him, veil removed, revealing a scowl on her lips and an intensity in her eyes he had not seen in ages.

“Did you know?” she demanded.

"Know what?" Dei asked carefully. This was a rare mood for her, and he always had to be careful around her when she got like this.

"That's *him*." She pressed.

"Who?"

"Leo. I mean – Fang Xu isn't, he's not *my* Leo," she said, naming her dead husband. Dei's eyebrows could only go so high, so he let her continue. "You don't believe me. But I know. I spent hours feeling the shape of his soul – that's *him*. Mother Statera...that's actually *him*."

"Celene," Dei started.

"I know it sounds insane." She said, silencing him with a look. The temperature around her was not cold, however, not like he was used to from the frigid woman. It was...hopeful, almost. Her expression had a looseness to it that he had not seen in far too long, a smile dancing on her lips that was almost genuine. It was enough to almost make him believe her. "But I know it. I *know* it. But he doesn't remember me. I'll have to make him remember."

"Celene, with tact. Even if he is who you say, a lot of time has passed. If reincarnation is real, then...he may not be who you remember." Dei urged, trying to be the voice of reason. Celene nodded sharply, pulling away and looking heavenward. She was silent for a long moment before moving off, heading to do what Dei had originally asked her to do – and he sighed heavily, rubbing the back of his neck. "For your sake, I hope he is who you think. And I hope things go well." More importantly, he hoped Fang Xu could do what he said he could. He could only deal with one insane person at a time; Celene was more than enough.

But he wasn't sure. The nature of god was still lost to him, as was large thoughts like reincarnation and the like. All he knew was that he had to find his people a true home, finally, after far too long. And Fang Xu seemed to be the answer to the worst of their problems. *You told me to seek guidance. To listen to things, and I'm trying to listen to my heart like everyone says.* He thought to himself, thinking back on that fateful encounter he'd had with the green eyed man so long ago. *So why is it telling me not to trust Fang Xu?*

With a shake of his head Dei rubbed his face and headed after Celene, fully unaware of the dark forces attempting to manipulate him.

1.24 The First Clash

Patience was not one of my many virtues, hence why it may have been a blessing that I was largely in deep meditation when Fang Xu was working on reaching his karmic tribulation. Fifty years is not an especially long time to someone like me, but the wait would still have been agonizing – especially because I'd been looking forward to the reuniting of the two lovers for quite some time now.

And that moment had finally arrived. My consciousness pulled itself awake just enough that I could observe with a sliver of my waking mind. And in the dark of night, on the third day after Dei had sought to employ Fang Xu, the Shadow began to move.

You are not the only one to have set plans. It whispered, speaking to me though it could not see or sense me. *See how your allies, your favored children turn against each other. See how they run. See what you refuse to see.*

But I remained still. For I was waiting for it. And I trusted my children.

As an angel, as one of the first angels, Fu Hao had an instinctual connection to the Heavenly Dao in a way that even the Children did not. So she had felt *them* coming long before anyone else did, and jolted Fang Xu awake with a burst of energy. He twitched in his bed, eyes snapping open as the light that had been building within him for the past three days reached a crescendo, his divine spark roaring to life and setting him to moving before he was even fully awake.

"Fang Xu, awaken," she intoned, standing beside him in all her glory. For the second time in this life she let him see her, pulling away the veil of the spirit realm so only he could sense her presence. His eyes fixated on her and widened, mouth hanging open – it was a far cry from when they had first met, and he had been unable to look at her directly. Now he could look at her, unbowed. She smiled. "It is time."

"For what?" he asked, though in his heart she knew he knew.

"Grab your bow. Your tribulation awaits." She said, nodding sagely. Fang Xu scowled as he rolled out of the pile of furs he called a bed, slipping into his too-tight robes, finding robes that fit his broad stature was difficult in this part of the world, grabbed his yew bow from where it stood in the corner, and followed her out of his house.

"Now? I can't get one night's rest before I have to leave?" Fang Xu complained quietly, rubbing his face. Fu Hao felt a twinge of sympathy for the man – he hadn't slept well in decades because of the spiritual training his karma had put him through and the following spiritual sensitivity that came with it, but ultimately it was for the best. All this was, of course, made worse by the fact he had removed most of the formations around his house in preparation for leaving at dawn. The energy that flowed through his home pried open his senses, laying his soul bare for the entire world to see – a necessary thing, for the tribulation to come.

She led the way, spirits of all kinds stirring as she brought Fang Xu deeper into the forest, the tall, dark trees hiding innumerable souls. Most shied away from her light, but a few danced closer – a single glance sent them scurrying away, for their own safety. The die had been cast, and the future

hinged upon this one moment. She would not fail her duty. But she had to prioritize Fang Xu's safety until the tribulation began.

His silence was telling. The closer she brought him to the top of the nearby hill, the further his mind drifted, spiritual energy and karma dancing together, his qi raging as it begged to be unchained, released so it could rise up to the heights it needed to be. She kept it suppressed, a weight pressing down upon Fang Xu's shoulders like a dam holding back the tide. Once it was released, it would surge forth greater than ever; but not yet.

He still had one last trial to overcome. They both did.

"I will be with you, but this is a path you must walk yourself." Fu Hao said, emerging from the trees to stand atop the hill. Before them lay the vastness of the forest, both in the Physical Realm and Spiritual. The sky was crisp and clear in the Physical realm, dark from the Realm Sun setting upon this half of creation, yet still light enough one could almost make out the leaves of the Life-Giving Tree overhead, hanging in the sky like celestial objects. In the spirit realm, however, storm clouds were brewing.

"The Dao can only be lived," Fang Xu breathed, stalking about the hilltop. Four rocks had been set here ten years ago by the man himself, as this had been, at one point, his favorite meditation spot. He adjusted each one briefly and the formation he had set activated, qi humming as it was calmed and cooled, no longer running so hot beneath the land itself, while spiritual energy, the stuff of the spirit realm, ignited in passion, connecting him to the greater world.

Fu Hao levitated skyward, gaze fixated upon the horizon. Darkness gazed back at her, and Fang Xu's soul ignited. Spiritual light spilled forth from him in uncontrolled waves before he had even settled cross-legged on the ground.

"And what," Dei's gruff voice called from behind. Fu Hao did not look away from the storm, having known he had been following since Fang Xu first woke up. "Are you doing way out here, this late at night?" Suspicion swirled in the man's chest, and Fu Hao rolled her eyes. Now he starts listening to

spiritual guidance, and what does he listen to? The dark spirits that have been circling him whenever she or her brother Stilicho aren't checking in.

"Dei, calm." Came Celene's melodic voice. Much of the ice that had clouded her soul had cracked away now, revealing the purest of frozen crystals lying beneath – yet Fang Xu continued to be wary of her, uncertain as he was by how fast and hard he was falling for the woman. It was fated to be so, though, as the red string dictated. He had no reason to fear. "Fang Xu has his reasons."

Fu Hao raised one hand as the storm clouds surged, revealing itself to be a mass of dark spirits intent on swarming the area with sheer numbers. Among them she could sense the presence of a few dark spirit kings – those spirits who had yet to ascend to a higher level, like an angel or god – as well as something...else. Darker. More sinister.

"What is the purpose of this formation? The spirit beasts are acting up," Dei snapped, staring out over the forest. This caught Fu Hao off guard, and she looked down at the forest to find that, indeed, the spirit beasts were starting to become more agitated. Was this their plan? Attack Fang Xu with spirits and a spirit beast horde? No...Fu Hao's eyes narrowed as she looked toward the horizon, sensing something off. There was something else moving out there...her eyes widened the moment she spotted them, though there was little she could do at the moment. Fae, with intentions as dark as their thoughts, moved about in the distance, setting up a formation. Foul energy surged as four pillars were erected in each of the cardinal directions, directing the energy of the leyline they sat upon and filling it with hateful thoughts, driving the beasts to madness.

Fu Hao cursed, but there was little she could do to stop it - ease its power, perhaps, but not stop it - but even she could feel the effects of this devilish formation, driving anger into her. What would the effects be like for a mortal, if someone like her were effected?

"Look North, Fang Xu. Enemies surround us," she said, steeling her nerves and attempting to cast off the madness that tried to blind her, turning her attention back to the approaching mass of spirits, hurtling towards them like a tidal wave.

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"This formation will protect me during my ascension. My spirit must leave my body to complete it; it was designed to keep things away, not agitate them." Fang Xu said, brows furrowed as he plucked the string of his bow, looking about nervously. "Someone else is agitating the beasts. I...don't know who, or why, but I think they're setting up a formation around me."

Power surged through Fu Hao as she slammed her fists together, forced to focus her attention on her aggressors. A golden aegis sprang to life before her, spreading out to encompass the entirety of the hilltop. Dark energy hissed and steamed as it came into contact with her holy power, the dark spirits crashing against her shield like waves upon a cliff.

"If this is all you can muster, it is woefully inadequate," she declared as the dark spirits sought to shatter the protective field, yet found themselves wanting. They hissed and screeched, a spirit king striking the shield with all its might only to be sent reeling away by the pure, positive energy that comprised it. And she spared a glance at those beneath her.

Dei flinched at the sudden burst of her power, somehow sensing a disturbance, while Celene remained calm, nearly blind to the spirit realm as she was. Only Fang Xu looked up at her, eyes glowing with light, the moment fast approaching. Slowly he sat down, crossing his legs and breathing even, body swaying slightly. Celene stood beside him, intention clear. Dei whipped his head back and forth between the two, his brows furrowed and thoughts muddled. Even in the protection of her shield, she could see the darkness of the enemy formation trying to seep into him and Celene, the latter of whom was firm in her standing, while Dei cocked his head, his emotions inflaming, memories of the last spirit beast horde surfacing.

"Good thing it is not all we can muster," a new voice said from far too close, and Fu Hao whirled. Two beings of nearly equal power to her floated just inside the golden shield, features largely obscured by the evil that clouded them. Their auras were dark and sinister, plasmatic much like her own, giving the spiritual beings the illusion of wings. Their mere presence was anathema to her very being. But just as they were hers, she was theirs, smoke curling from their forms as their close proximity to her harmed them.

She scowled at them. They made no effort to hide the nature of their beings. They were beings of chaos and hatred and evil, standing against the very balance Statera Luotian represented - some chaos was to be expected, but there were limits. Dark angels. The Enemy had created dark angels.

“Look below you, little angel.” One of them hissed. “See what changes we have wrought.”

Fu Hao glanced down, frowning as a third dark angel that emerged from the ground, just behind Dei. The man was arguing with Fang Xu and Celene now, emotions impassioned by the presence of evil and her own power – he hated the presence of anything bigger than him, more for his own weakness than any rejection of the truly powerful.

Fang Xu’s eyes widened as he observed the dark angel attempting to enter Dei’s heart, to taint him and steer his spear.

“Dei, no!” he shouted, and the man scowled at him as he looked up at Fu Hao, wordlessly begging for her to aid Dei against the dark angel. She just raised an eyebrow at him, and turned her attention back to the other angels. What in Keilan’s name did these fools think they were doing? That wasn’t even how manipulation worked. They were too heavy handed.

“Dei will be a great instrument, as he already rejects the divine.” The dark angel whispered, cackling to itself. “After he -“

“FUCK OFF!” Dei boomed, whirling upon the dark angel, his aura flaring and Dao solidifying. He could not truly see the spiritual being, but he could sense it. And pure, raw anger filtered off of him in waves as he glared at where the dark angel had been tossed, rejected wholly by his entire being, passion enflamed by the enemy’s formation and directed at its creators..

“What?!” the dark angel bellowed, shocked. Fu Hao scoffed.

“Arrogance. You do not understand what kind of man that is. He resists all guidance, even the spiritual hand of Statera Luotian, seeking only the guidance of his own soul and Dao. How foolish are you to think you could manipulate a man like that? You truly do not know how high the heavens are.” Fu Hao said with a shake of her head. Not like she could really talk, having been rebuked by Dei multiple times in the past. But that is beside the point, and she fixed her steely gaze upon the dark angels once more, cracking her knuckles. “Now that you know such, allow me to educate you on who *I* am.”

With a furious cry she launched herself forward, striking with all the power and might she had using naught but her bare fists. Angel clashed with angel, the two before her matching her ferocity with their own desperate struggle. Teeth bared they raged against her, blocking strikes and returning them with blasts of unholy power. Her aura flared as she ducked and weaved, spinning between the duo and unleashing an unrestrained blast of spiritual energy. They went spinning away and she snapped her head around, searching for the third, only to find it too late.

Celene stood beside Fang Xu, fending off spirit beasts as they surged through the forest toward him, driven mad by dark spirits and completely bypassing Fu Hao’s spiritual barrier. The man himself was sitting cross-legged, eyes closed, his spirit having completely left his body to complete his Ascension. Where it walked Fu Hao did not know, but she did know that his body had to be protected, lest spirits attempt to inhabit it. Meanwhile Dei struggled against the third dark angel, unable to see it as he was, as it worked to undo her shield, cracks already forming in the golden dome.

“No!” She shouted, hurtling at the dark angel – but her distraction cost her, and a blow to the back sent her crashing into the wall of her own shield, the two she had been fighting converging upon her once more. Panic swelled within her at her own mistake, her shield cracking and crumbling as she watched, the dark angels laughing at her. Spirits from outside battered against the wall, the enemy worked from within...it was too much, and the golden shield shattered.

Dark spirits surged forward, clawing at Fu Hao and hurtling to Fang Xu's body in a desperate race – only to be momentarily rebuked by the formation he had set up. It would not last, she knew, even as she was drug down to the earth by the weight of the spirits assaulting her. Her aura surged, limbs flashing out to knock them away, but there was strength in numbers. If any of the spirits reached Fang Xu, they could inhabit his body while his spirit underwent the tribulation. That could not happen.

“Your gods have abandoned you, little angel!” the dark angels laughed, igniting a surge of anger within her. “You stand alone!”

“Alone?” She whispered, drawing upon every ounce of her power. The heavenly Dao responded to the weight of her will, strength she did not know she had touching her limbs. As she watched two of the angels rushed forward, Dei leaping toward one of them with spear at the ready – the metal passed through the being, though his soul’s power coated the weapon, piercing the being in a vicious display. It howled and backhanded him, rattling his unguarded soul and making him spit blood – but there was still one more.

Fu Hao burst forward, light trailing from her as she flew faster than she ever had, tackling the angel away from Fang Xu’s barrier. Ice rushed past her, freezing a spirit beast as Celene continued to guard Fang Xu’s body, the woman herself calling for aid.

“Alone?! I am Fu Hao, angel of Statera Luotian!” she bellowed, fist finding the dark angel’s face. It was sent flying and she whirled, slapping a palm strike into the closest spirit hard enough it sent a shockwave of divine energy radiating through the skies. Her feet found purchase upon the ground as she stood before Fang Xu’s barrier, blood dribbling from one corner of her mouth. “The will of the heavens is my will! The gods need not be here for I am! Because I am here, the gods are as well!” Each word, each statement was punctuated with another strike, another blow, another burst of power that sent spirits and angels alike flying.

Each statement was backed by weight unknown. Such was the nature of a battle between spirits – it was as much a battle of wills, as it was power. They would find their will lacking compared to hers, for she carried within her a spark of the divine soul. Her purpose was great, her will greater, and though she was vastly outnumbered she would not give an inch.

“Let it be known! You know not the height of the heavens! And you will not pass!” She roared.

And it came to be so.

For three hours, she battled dark spirits and three dark angels, keeping them at bay. For three hours, Celene and Dei raged against the spirit beast horde swarming the hill, devilish cultivators maintaining the formation that enflamed them, seeking to kill them and the village – only once were they reinforced, by Dei’s own people. For three hours, the Shadow attempted to snuff out a light, while the gods watched on with bated breaths.

And only once the sun cracked over the horizon did Fang Xu open his eyes, and the world came to know the first Immortal Mortal. And with him came the light of the heavenly Dao.

1.25 The Karmic Immortal

Fang Xu met god.

He wasn’t sure how he knew it, but know it he did. Perhaps that was the point of the ascension trial. Each step across the golden bridge that formed before his soul when the trial began – the waters of the karmic ocean lapping against the gilded posts holding it up – brought him closer and closer to that divine soul, the creator and parent of all.

Each section of the bridge, of which there were seven, presented with it a new challenge. Yet chains held him back.

First they were red and hateful, filling him with righteous indignation. Had he not already done everything asked of him? Had he not done his time? But he walked through it, the anger fueling him. Next came depression, sinister chains that curled around him and weighed him down, seeking to drag him to the ocean below with gentle whispers. Why keep going, if the future would be more of the same? He had done nothing but suffer, both physically and spiritually. What was it worth? What was he worth? Each step became leaden and despondent, but still he walked. Then the chains fell away, only to be replaced by an all-consuming apathy attempting to eat at his core.

Though his movements became stiff and mechanical, still he walked.

Finally he reached the halfway point, and was immediately swarmed with emotion. Desire and want and worry and fear and even happiness latched onto him as little green chains, pulling him every which way, tugging on his heartstrings. It took time to fight through this, to silence the chattering of his heart. Sometimes he had to take a step back, or move sideways, navigating through the invisible maze that led to his deepest desire – and, in the end, the myriad chains were cast off, a singular wordless purpose in his soul and a little red chain leading him on. He neared the end now, and joy swelled within him, stalling his feet for the first time with their gilded shackles.

He looked out over the karmic ocean, sunlight glittering off the waves, and felt satisfied and joyous. From here it felt like he could see all of creation, as if he could glimpse the whole of eternity...

It was his heart, so misguided before, that urged him on because this was not *it*. This was not the end he sought. He found his feet once more, but kept that appreciation and joy in his being. Learning to walk with it felt like placing a boulder upon his back, much as depression but in a different way, but each step made it lighter and lighter. This was the sixth – to learn to walk, with joy in your heart and all the rest of your emotions still within you. And finally, he reached the final section.

This was the most difficult for him, for it was love.

And love was painful.

There were no chains that leapt up to bind him as he crossed the final section. He was free to run, the longer he stayed the more it hurt to be there. Love filled his being, urging him to run ahead, rush to the finish, it was *right there!* His mind agreed, knowing the pain to come; it was his heart, clutching that little red string that stretched from his chest and into the distance, that kept him from running. *You can't rush it.* It told him. *Or it will not be what you need, or what you want.* He listened, and it killed him. Each moment that passed upon the bridge, walking as slowly as he could, presented with it a new pain.

He saw loved ones, from this life and lives past, destroying themselves both physically and spiritually. He once again experienced the pain of knowing what they were doing to themselves, but unable to help for they wouldn't *listen*.

He felt the greatest of heartbreaks, his heart shattering as he heard the scream of his other half – not in pain, but in heartbreak upon his death, and allowing her soul to become encased in ice. All of this and more, he felt.

Yet he would never have surrendered the ability to feel love to not feel the pain. The pain was part of love, and it was worth it. And it killed him. Inch by inch parts of him died, stripped away until only an inch remained. One inch, a single bit of himself that crossed the threshold, and was born anew.

Light spilled from him in waves as his soul expanded, energy rushing in to rebuild his soul – scrubbed clean and fresh, pure as freshly fallen snow and rays of golden sunlight. The power at his fingertips was immense, the waves of the karmic ocean lapping at his feet as he stood atop the waters, and he marveled in the sensations.

“You did well,” a voice said, and he turned to greet the newcomer. He was a dark man, with large, leathery wings and a thick, muscular tail. Fine black robes embroidered in gold draped over his

form, and he watched Fang Xu with eyes that were neither judgmental nor calculating, but still saw him for what he was. He knew who this was, for there was a power radiating from him that was...indescribable.

It felt like an ocean on a windless day. Calm on the surface, but raging power beneath.

“Keilan, the Righteous Judge,” Fang Xu said, bowing his head. He had not expected to meet the ruler of the Karmic Realm, but...a part of him was disappointed to not meet the other. But such was a foolish notion. Even now he could feel it, that otherworldly presence, the divine soul – its gaze was upon him, shining down like a warm smile, filling him completely yet never overtaking his being.

“Righteous Judge? Odd title. Not sure I like it.” Keilan mused, stepping forward. In his hand he held a book, glowing with all the colors of the rainbow. “There is one final thing needed to complete your transformation. One last thing to fill in the circle. I doubt I will be able to greet all who choose your path in the future, but as you are the first...well. I can make an exception. Here.” He said, presenting the book to Fang Xu. He hesitated in taking it.

“My lord...” he started.

“Do not fear it. And do not be disappointed by Mother’s apparent absence; you will know why the moment you take this.” Keilan mused, pressing the book into Fang Xu’s hands. It instantly melded into his very being, a wave of information surging into his brain. He felt the warmth of Mother Statera’s love as She encouraged him, the strength of Father Luotian’s pride as He urged him forward, he remembered Their smiles, overlapping as if they were one and the same being, and Their face as They created him...and one other. The other first.

And more. Fang Xu remembered, and the red string his heart still clutched bid him return to *her*.

"Go now. Return to your loved one," Keilan said with a smile, touching him on the forehead. The world swirled in his gaze, and Fang Xu awoke.

A buddha. I should have guessed. The path of karmic ascension turned Fang Xu into something akin to a buddha – not in the common stereotype of the term, but someone who reached enlightenment on their own, not following someone else's teachings. Besides my own. But, even with his newfound power, the battle was not yet over. Still, the impact of his awakening should not be understated.

It was a galvanizing moment, when Fang Xu awoke, though no one noticed at first. Dei knelt to his left, blood dribbling from his mouth as he wrestled with spirit and beast alike, while Celene stood before him, a dome of transparent ice surrounding his body. The bodies of dozens of slain spirit beasts lay scattered around the hilltop – and though I wept for their passing, for the wanton slaughter that had happened tonight between all my children, I still saw it for what it was. Protection. And the beasts could not be blamed, either, for they had been manipulated. Yet I saw that the worst trial was yet to come, even for Fu Hao, my loyal angel, standing guard in the skies.

Her plasmatic aura wavered weakly, eight spirit kings and three dark angels floating before her warily. Blood dripped from a dozen wounds, her golden skin stained with bruises and various other injuries. Yet stand she still did. Not once did she give an inch, lest they take a mile. Pride swelled within me for her actions – it had been her choice to be so fierce and protective.

There were no more words exchanged between the parties. The spirits surged forward, intent on breaking Fu Hao this time as they knew their window of opportunity to take over Fang Xu's body was closing, and she readied herself. The spirit beasts on the ground surged forward as well, instinctually following the will of the darkness that guided them, the defenders readying themselves for a final assault.

Fang Xu stood in one smooth motion, breaking through the ice dome and qi cultivation surging upward, breaking through multiple realms in a single second as he smoothly drew his bow. The formations he had carved into the wood flared to life, an arrow of pure golden light, drawn from his soul, appearing upon the string. The light of the sun seemed dim in comparison, runes etching themselves into the ground around him in an intricate formation, and all beings froze at the sight.

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Then the arrow was loosed, and it struck a dark angel like a thunderbolt from the blue sky. Golden chains leapt from where the arrow struck the angel, wrapping around it and encasing it in a golden cage of pure spiritual energy – each chain comprised of a dozen formations, each designed to suppress and contain. Fang Xu smiled as the spirits screeched in surprise, Fu Hao shouting out in triumph as she willingly threw herself into the oncoming horde, now unchained by Fang Xu's meditations.

“Sorry it took so long,” Fang Xu said, smiling at Celene, who stared at him in shock. Such was his spiritual presence that his karmic aura overflowed into the Physical Realm, appearing as an aura of golden light radiating from him. The formation beneath his feet finished and two more arms sprouted from his back, spiritual in nature and made of golden light, gripping an equally golden bow. “But I remember now. I remember you. Hello, Celene. I love you.”

Celene's face lit up at once, hopeful and pleased, almost ready to jump into his arms. The roar of a spirit beast drug her attention back to the fight and she resisted the urge, swords of ice sprouting everywhere as she stepped forth, ready to defend once again.

“Hurry up and get to shooting, or there won't be any left for you when I'm done,” Dei snapped, rising to a standing position and readying his spear, blood still dripping from numerous wounds. Three Greater Spirit Beasts – not quite sapient, as they were harder to manipulate, yet no less powerful for it – circled the group, unwilling to jump in unless they saw a clear avenue of attack.

Fang Xu snorted and levitated off the ground, four arms drawing and firing in conjunction. His physical bow was a marvel, each arrow striking true; the first four shots landed upon the enemy formation markers, miles away, disrupting their dark design. The gathered cultivators, many of whom were merely opportunists, trying to thwart a rival as opposed to true devil cultivators, scattered, scrambling away as the arrows exploded, rendering their work moot. Even the shots he “missed” had a purpose, each arrow acting as a marker for a formation – he sought to end the fight by trapping all the hostile beasts within a defensive formation of his own design. As for his

spiritual bow, it struck proud and true. Spirits fled the golden bolts, leaving streaks of light in the air as they passed, dark angels forced to dodge lest they, too, become sealed. Fu Hao fought like a mad beast, harassing all the spirit kings and dark angels with a ferocity very much unlike the normally composed angel. But her work was necessary – she was protecting Fang Xu, distracting their enemies from the formation he was building.

There was only so much one angel could do, and she was doing the absolute maximum.

For the moment, it seemed the tide had turned, though I wished for it to end soon. It brought me neither joy nor satisfaction to see my children kill each other, even if Fang Xu and Dei's company fought in self-defense; even if Fu Hao fought to protect and guard. But those present constantly rebuffed my hand, willing, as it always was, to aid in the only way I could. Fu Hao was lost in her emotions, allowing my influence through but not in any way that would immediately end the conflict. And disaster was fast approaching.

Fang Xu had galvanized the defenders with his aura, his very presence healing wounds and bolstering the *qi* of his allies, helping to banish the rapidly fading, maddening effects of the devilish formation. But they were overextending. Celene was lost in her joy – her fated one had finally returned, she wasn't crazy, it had been real! – her icy heart still warding me off, tentatively happy though it was. And she had pushed too far into the beast horde, confident in her own power.

Even Fang Xu resisted my hand reaching through the Dao, grim and determined, rebuffing me for the same reason Elvira had – it was to prevent me from dealing with a fight between my children, to see it through himself. He had a sword in his heart and memories to deal with; Keilan's gift, ironically, new as it was, was preventing him from fully accepting my Hand. His painful death, and the sound of Celene's screams of pain and grief, still rung in his ears and mind.

Only Dei seemed receptive, but just barely. He heard the warning I tried to give him, a feeling of danger touching his mind, and took a few steps back from the advancing horde to glance around. Three dark Spirit Kings fell, bound by Fang Xu's arrows, and while he could sense them he could not see them. That was not the danger. The danger came from...

His eyes latched onto Celene, too deep in the spirit beast horde, and the three leaders of said horde slowly closing in on her. His own people were too scattered to help, she too far to hear...

“Celene!” he bellowed, leaping forward spear at the ready. Only Fang Xu heard, his eyes snapping to Dei, then his fated lover. The greater beasts were closing in; Dei dodged around the lesser beasts, leaping into the air to tackle one, a four-armed gorilla, with his spear. But there were still two more. Fang Xu saw the danger, and once more I tried to reach to him. But fear clouded his heart as he saw the same situation that had killed him in his past life, not fear for himself, but fear for Celene, and I was rebuffed.

His arrows thundered, striking true, even as he flew as fast as he could to her side.

The frigid woman turned and met the outstretched talons of one of the greater beasts with a sword of ice.

The great hawk was repelled with a tremendous screech, an arrow striking it in the side but not killing it as it flapped back upwards, fear throwing off Fang Xu’s aim.

The third charged, a boar with tusks the size of trees and flames spewing from its nostrils, and Celene turned.

An arrow pierced its side, but its armor was too thick. Ice tried to coat its legs, but its charge was too great. And Fang Xu once again threw himself in the beast’s path to save his lover.

He tackled her aside, the boar’s tusk spearing his gut and tearing a hole in him that would have instantly killed a lesser man. Flame seared his flesh, and Celene scrambled out from under him, eyes wide and panicked. The dark angels screeched in triumph, Fu Hao roaring in rage and

desperation as she tried to get to Fang Xu; but she was waylaid by the very forces she sought to keep back.

“No, no, no, not again. I just found you,” Celene breathed, staring into Fang Xu’s eyes. The man smiled up at her, not dead yet, but grievously injured. In the middle of battle, surrounded by enemies, it was a death sentence. And he would not reenter the reincarnation cycle if his body died here; no, he would ascend to another role, another realm of existence. Celene would have to meet him there.

“It’s ok,” Fang Xu whispered, putting a hand on her face, bloody though it was, his golden aura dimming. Powerful though he was, his qi cultivation had yet to catch up. A wound like this was slow to heal, and almost fatal. “It’s ok. I go now to the Mother’s embrace. I’ll always be with you.”

Celene sobbed as the flame boar turned once again, ready to charge, the hawk descending from above with talons outstretched.

“I’ll come with you.” She cried. “I won’t be separated from you again,” Fang Xu’s expression twisted, tears beading the corners of his eyes. He knew better. She would have to be reincarnated again, and perhaps again before she reached his level and they could be together. It was enough time that there was no guarantee the red string would hold.

Salvation came from neither of them. It came not from the angel, nor from the lover, nor from the newly-created buddha. It came from the man who watched, who understood his own powerlessness. The one who rebuffed all guidance and aid to walk his own path, who doubted all.

Dei’s wish, his prayer, was selfless and quick.

"Please," he said, seeing Celene's face filled with grief and hearing Fang Xu's words, his admission that he was Celene's long-lost lover. "Don't let them be separated again." And he surrendered himself fully to the Dao, as one might surrender themselves to a river.

My power flowed through him gently but instantly, spreading out to encompass all in a blinding wave. My divine love filled the battlefield, spirit beasts stopping in their tracks and lying down, men laying down their weapons, spirits losing all the rage and pain they felt alongside their connection to the Dark. Even as far away as the village, suffering from the horde all the same, the conflict ended, the hidden devil cultivators fleeing or falling to the same fate as all the others - setting down their weapons, the sword in their hearts gently taken from them as they ambled away from it all.

Fu Hao stood in the midst of it all, basking in my light and watching with a proud smile as an invisible ray extended from Dei's chest, touching Fang Xu, his lifeforce stabilizing, the pain easing even as he lapsed into unconsciousness. The dark angels around her tried to flee, but they found their movements sluggish and tired, as if all that had fueled their actions was not but dust in the wind.

Fu Hao beamed up at the heavens, at me, disappointed in herself but proud of those she guided.

"The seeds bloom this day," she breathed. "And the trees will grow."

I am proud of you. I told her. *Be proud of yourself, who I am proud of.* And so it was.

Alexander rumbled in content. "Once again we are reminded that Father will never truly leave us." He said to the spirits still assembling around him. None had seen the great battle that had just commenced, for they did not have his sight, but the words still pounded through them.

He watched as the battle wrapped up, spirit beasts wandering back into the forest while cultivators crowded together around Dei, Celene, and Fang Xu, the former of which was still in shock by what had just happened, and began licking their wounds. Many still basked in the lingering touch of Father's presence, the feeling of the divine soul leaving a lasting impression upon many of them. The angel Fu Hao suppressed the remaining dark angels – only one managing to flee back to its master – and dark spirit kings. Rain fell from the skies, washing away the blood, while the souls of the fallen were gently swept into my river to be returned to the cycle of reincarnation.

Love. Profound, boundless love touched each and every one of them, many dark spirits choosing to repent then and there; Father's touch gently guiding them into the spirit river to return to Keilan, to be born anew. Even the foul cultivators, who bloomed demons in their hearts, found themselves questioning their motives as they slunk away from the battlefield.

"*That's cheating.*" The Shadow complained, and Alexander smiled to himself.

"There you are," he said, watching as the last remaining dark angel fled into the distance, vanishing with a ripple, revealing where the Shadow was. For the first time he met the Shadow's eyes, all eight of them, gleaming with hatred and rage, as they widened in shock. Alexander rose to his full height and bared his fangs. "Found you."

The Shadow cursed loudly. "*Cheating!*" it accused the heavens, pulling itself back into its little hole and closing the door. Alexander did not have a way to open it, but now he knew where they hid. And that meant countermeasures could be made.

"Be ready," he promised. "For my siblings and I will be ready for you."

1.26 Report

I meditated for over a thousand years. One thousand and fifty seven, to be exact, and the moment I returned to full awareness the Shadow's forces fled. A haunting, echoing call rang out through the Four Realms, and the dark angels and dark spirits that had been harassing the Realms dropped whatever they were doing and fled. Not all of them escaped into the rifts in space the Shadow created, quite a few were caught by various other beings and spirits. Most caught were sealed away, cultivators and spiritual beings alike using talismans or other such things to keep them restrained – a relatively new creation, I noted, that certainly hadn't existed before the Shadow began to move.

Not that this was even close to the full conflict. It was mostly minor skirmishes that had occurred; none of the gods or other greater spiritual beings had gotten involved in the battles – only angels and the like, and even those battles were rare. Though, to my slight disappointment, few beings had risen to the status of angel or, in the case of mortals, karmic immortals while I was sleeping.

Fu Hao and Stilicho had managed to raise three other spirits up to the status of angels, making five, while the number of karmic immortals only reached two. Fang Xu, and a woman on the opposite side of Pangaea. Speaking of Fang Xu, the work he had done with Dei was quite exciting and about as fantastical as I could think of, so I was very excited to check out what they had done personally. First, however, I needed to check up on my kids, see what they had learned.

My eyes opened, and I was treated to a sight that I, while I had been expecting it, still found highly amusing. Kei was held by the scruff of the neck by Randus, a lump of coal in hand and a sheepish look on the nine-tailed fox's face. She had grown quite a bit in the past millennium, now looking to be a girl in her late teens. That just made the picture of Randus holding Kei up like a misbehaving puppy, her black hair in disarray and orange tails drooping sadly, quite comical.

Which, now that I thought about it, wasn't too inaccurate of a comparison.

"What do you say?" Randus chided, giving her a little shake. Kei pouted at him and shrugged, tails flaring out behind her.

“Sorry for trying to draw on your face while you were asleep, Grandpa,” Kei said, sounding not at all sorry. Randus glared at her, twirling his moustache with his free hand, and she pouted harder. I resisted the urge to laugh. “And for trying to paint the walls of your house. Pink. And with glitter.”

Randus nodded as if satisfied and let the girl go, dropping to her feet and straightening her robes, then promptly made a little bow in my direction. “My apologies, Ma’am. She has been trying to get to you for the past century, and despite the little game you are playing I thought it prudent to not allow her to just do as she pleases.” I nodded sagely.

“A wise choice, Randus. If she can’t even get past you, what hope does she have of getting to me?” I mused, scratching my chin. It wasn’t like she would have even been able to enter my meditation chambers either way; they were locked down tight while I meditated, and I wasn’t as unaware as she assumed, either. It was still a fun little challenge for her though. Kei’s mouth dropped open in mock outrage.

“Cheater!” she whined, pointing an accusing finger at me. “You’re not allowed to let Randus in on our game!”

“What makes you think I wouldn’t cheat?” I asked, cocking my head to the side in confusion. She gaped at me and I laughed. “Cheating is the name of the game, sweetheart! Now, as much as I want to catch up, I do have some things to take care of now that I’m awake. Care to show me the way to Elvira’s palace?”

Kei huffed and crossed her arms over her chest, tails puffing up in agitation. Randus watching in amusement as she shook her head, pouting even harder than she had before.

“No. I’m going to go play in the Physical Realm.” She said. I frowned at her.

“Be careful, Kei. Just because I’m awake doesn’t mean the Shadow has stopped what it’s doing.” I warned, and she gave me an odd look.

“Haven’t you been watching?” she asked. “Playing tag with dark angels is a favorite pastime of mine. Now I’m going to go play in the physical realm. Go be lame by yourself!” And with that she poked her tongue out at me and promptly teleported away.

“She is notoriously difficult to catch.” Randus said, but a quick glance from me told him all he needed to know about what I thought of that. He bowed slightly. “I will ensure her safety, do not worry.” And he, too, vanished, turning around and stepped into the land of dreams, leaving me alone in my meditation chambers once more. I sat there for a moment longer, staring at the grey-stone walls. The stone slab beneath me was changing; lines of blue and white crystal marred the once-pristine surface, the raw power I exuded warping the dense stone into something else entirely.

Even now I could feel energy leaking from me, the power I was storing for the creation of the Lunar Star not completely contained any more. I kept it suppressed in a little core next to my heart as best I could, constantly feeding a little bit of the power I naturally generated into it. With a groan I stood, feeling stiff and sore all over from keeping that power contained – the time would come, perhaps in the next few thousand years, where my true body would be unlikely to leave my meditation chambers for all the power I had built up.

But not yet. I had to give my kids the tools to succeed against the Shadow first.

I took a single step forward and the world shifted, distance meaningless as I appeared over the domed roof of Keilan’s Karmic Palace. The black-and-gold building stood proudly at the end of the karmic valley, lines of souls shuffling in through the large main doors and flying out through the rear, heading to their new lives scrubbed clean of their memories. Multiple karmic beings of great power resided within this building, and the moment he sensed me, Keilan came shooting out of the window of his office, wings flapping.

“Mother,” he greeted with a warm smile. “Congratulations on your enlightenment. I sense you have grown in many ways.”

“I have.” I agreed, not saying exactly how I had grown. My divine domain had expanded slightly, my own understanding of balance and what it meant to be the Origin Deity of a universe deepening significantly. “I am more impressed with your own growth. Is that...fate, I sense?” I asked, peering at my son’s soul. His divine domain, which used to be solely the powers of karma and yin, had taken on a new tint. It wasn’t enough to call it a new addition to his domain, but rather tying something else onto it. Fate and karma were very closely intertwined, so it wasn’t that much of a stretch.

“As usual, it seems I cannot hide anything from you. Yes. Your angel, Stilicho, helped me quite a bit in that regard. Speaking of, there is someone I wish for you to meet,” Keilan pulsed his aura once and a figure came shooting out of the palace, the aura of an angel flaring brightly as it came to stand beside Keilan.

She did not have the shape of a human, as the angels I had created did. The six-foot long snake bowed at me, tongue flicking out and wings of light folding in around its scaly form – I recognized it. Wasn’t this the soul of the snake spirit beast that had been with me last time I met Dei? Interesting. So not all mortal souls turned into buddhas, then? I knew spirit beasts were different, their souls were different than both that of spirits and the Fae, after all, so what would this make them?

“This one’s name is Manasa,” the snake greeted, voice melodic and peaceful as she curled upon herself, keeping her head low in a formal bow.

“She is my first angel,” Keilan said proudly, puffing up his chest. “She pledged herself to the Karmic Palace, and has been a great help in organizing the lines of souls. Quite a few more are on the cusp of this evolution; I even have a few Karae I expect to become Karmic Immortals soon.” I blinked at him, then focused closer upon the being, realization dawning in my mind. As she was the same kind of being as a buddha or angel I could still sense her connection to me, however, it was dulled. And I had unconsciously categorized her as an angel despite being...different.

“I see,” I mused, circling around the being. “You are still karmically and spiritually ascended, but pledged your allegiance to Keilan. Unlike Fu Hao and Stilicho, who are bound to me.” I said, nodding appreciatively. Did that mean that all the gods could have their own angels or other such powerful spiritual beings? Fang Xu was loosely tied to me with his ascension, but none of the others were tied to myself as Fu Hao and Stilicho were.

Ding!

Ascension!

Multiple beings in the Four Realms have ascended into a higher plain of existence, following the paths of Karma and Spirituality; this is a common method of ascension among all the universes. This is one of the first steps on the road to what is commonly known as godhood, though few will ever complete the journey.

Congratulations!

Types of Ascended Beings:

1. Angels; spirits given great power through allying themselves with a divine entity and empowering themselves through karma. This can be done in a positive or negative manner, though the negative typically can be referred to as demons, or dark angels.

2. Karmic Immortals; these are mortal souls who have achieved enlightenment, thus ascending to a plain of greater spiritual understanding. Their physical and spiritual bodies become one, capable of existing within both the physical and spiritual realms. They are also known as Buddhas, Arhats, certain kinds of Saints...there are many titles, but for the Four Realms, karmic immortals fits best.

3. Holy Beasts; animal or plant souls and spirits that have achieved the same immortality through enlightenment and karma as mortal souls. As the nature of their existence is different, however, they ascend into a technically different being.

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Numbers:

Angels: 4

Karmic Immortals/Buddhas: 2

Holy Beasts: 1

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You know, I kind of prefer buddhas over karmic immortals, but it's not like I can change it now. People will call it what they will. Wait – now's not the time for this, Boxes! Shut up!

“You should go see what Elvira has been doing,” Keilan said, smiling and thankfully not noticing my momentary distraction. “Since you are awake I will come with you; I am sure you want to be filled in on many things.”

“I do,” I agreed. “Manasa, it was good to meet you.”

“You as well, Lady Statera. May the Realms always favor you,” Manasa said just before Keilan and I teleported away, this time appearing above Elvira’s palace. Immediately beings began clamoring, looking up and shouting, pointing at me while I frowned. Dozens of spirit kings close to ascending manned the palace halls, the other two angels who were not aligned with myself hovering near Elvira, who was in the very center of the palace. Other gods waved at me, some shielding their eyes as they looked up.

“How is everyone noticing me right away?” I asked rhetorically.

“It is hard not to,” Keilan admitted, adjusting his robes as he floated down to the palace below. “Your aura is quite strong, and far more pronounced than before.” I huffed and suppressed my power further, the discomfort it caused increasing as I, too, descended into the palace, phasing through the domed roof.

White marble and gold fixtures greeted me, the same beautiful mosaic floor as ever staring up at me from below. Elvira stood before her throne, looking up at me with a beaming smile, while other gods huddled together, watching me from afar. I nodded to each of them, smiling warmly, as I descended to give my daughter a hug. She wrapped her arms and wings around me in return before pulling away and looking me up and down.

“Don’t you say I changed too,” I complained. “I came here to talk, we can discuss other such things later. Please. While my thoughts are still fresh.”

“As you wish.” Elvira said. “Keilan, go tell Alexander and Reika Father is awake, please?”

“What am I, your manservant? Get Gilles or Sol to do it, they’re always tripping over themselves to serve you,” Keilan complained, rolling his eyes even as he turned and teleported away in a flash of black. I patted Elvira’s shoulder and observed the changes to her palace.

It was clear she was gearing up for war. A training grounds had been constructed, and the two angels I had sensed, both of whom were aligned with Elvira herself, were instructing other spirits in a very...martial manner, distracted though they were by my presence. The gods themselves had a tenseness about them, and Elvira had a dusting of scars along her knuckles that came from training her body. The building itself had changed, as well, with the appearance of the thrones.

I’d seen them before, but this would be the first time I really *looked* at them. Specifically the throne that was intended for me, raised up behind the four chairs for my first children, and made of a swirling marble of black, white, and a dozen other colors. For a long moment I stared at it, then turned away, pretending not to notice the quiet sigh of relief that came from my daughter. I wasn’t really the ruler of the Realms at the moment, more of a guiding hand. Now wasn’t the time to be the *ruler*, and I’d be lying if I didn’t admit I hoped that day never came. I much preferred being the parent of these foolish children.

A single parent, doing all the work of a god.

That thought lingered until the other two arrived, Reika and Alexander appearing alongside Keilan. We exchanged pleasantries for a brief moment; then I changed the mood entirely by firming my expression, folding my hands into the sleeves of my robes, and pressing for a report.

“Tell me everything you’ve learned.” I said, wanting to cross-reference it with what I was able to glean during my meditations. The visions I’d had...

Elvira and Keilan both straightened their backs, squaring their shoulders as they looked in my eyes.

"We think the Shadow is hiding in some kind of sub-space, separated from the Four Realms. Gilles has taken to calling it a pocket dimension, or hidden realm." Elvira started. "He's better at explaining it, but we believe that it is somehow using the Void to keep itself hidden – as the Void is nothing, it is technically invisible."

"Though we are able to sense whenever the Shadow opens a gate into the Four Realms, we cannot tell when that will happen beforehand. Where, however, is another matter entirely; with the help of various elemental gods and spirit kings, I've been able to narrow down areas where the Shadow's forces emerge from. Each time a gate into these pocket dimensions opens, that area shrinks." Alexander continued with a rumble. "The more it makes its movements visible, the more we are able to track where they are coming from."

"Speaking of the Shadow's forces," Keilan continued. "The dark angels and dark spirits are annoyingly resistant to redemption. They seem to mistakenly believe that the Shadow is the scarier of the options. A few have even spouted some such nonsense as "they've come too far" or "dedicated too much" or something to the Shadow's cause – though none seem clear on what, exactly, that is."

"Mm. The sunk cost fallacy. It's an annoying thing to deal with, but not insurmountable." I noted, running a hand through my hair.

"The question has come up of what do to with them, however." Reika said with a shake of her head. "It hasn't become an issue yet – we've only sealed away a total of three dark angels, but the question remains on what to do with them, especially if they continue to refuse to seek forgiveness and redemption. On this, I do request your advice." Reika bowed formally. I nodded my assent, rubbing my chin in thought. It was a conundrum, but not as much as my children believed it to be. They just thought I was against the idea of a jail.

The issue was not with the dark angels themselves. Just like dark spirits, they were a natural part of the Four Realms – within reason. Too many, and it became a problem. However, the real issue stemmed almost entirely from the Shadow, who tainted their purpose even further – I would daresay even twisted their purpose to be my anathema. Chaos exists within the Balance that is me; what the Shadow represents is not mere *chaos*. It's more like...it's more...

“We'll have to seal away the dark angels, until either they choose to redeem themselves, or there comes a time a more drastic measure must be taken.” I said, instead of finishing that thought. Mostly because I didn't have the word.

“What kind of drastic measure?” Reika asked, narrowing her eyes. “You don't mean...total destruction, do you?”

“What? No! Who gave you that idea?” I said, aghast. “The total destruction of a soul is one of the greatest taboos. It is one of the few things I absolutely condemn.”

“It was brought up during one of our meetings.” Elvira said bluntly. “And was summarily rejected. Sealing them away is our best option right now, in any case. I have cleared out a space beneath the Holy Mountain for them, and Reika intends to seal a few beneath the Life-Giving Tree as well. What did you have in mind though, Father, as a drastic measure?”

“A reset,” I said bluntly. “Completely and utterly. Stripping away everything there is to a soul and letting the energy it has built up over its lifetime rejoin the rest of the Realm, while the Truesoul will be thrown back into the Realms to start over.”

“How is that any different from destruction? That's destroying everything a soul *is*.” Sol objected from behind. Elvira scowled momentarily at his interjection but quickly wiped the expression from her face, the feathers on her wings ruffling slightly. *If this was supposed to be a private conversation, I would have held it privately.* I thought, giving Elvira a look before turning to smile at Sol. The mighty god of the sun had bedecked himself in armor of gold, a sword hanging at his hip

and a feather-adorned helmet stuffed beneath the crook of one arm. Beside him stood his brother Gilles, the shadow god looking sheepish as he laid one pale hand on his brother's arm.

"Excellent question." I said, much to Sol's surprise. "But it is also wrong. It is not destroying everything. This is a truesoul." I said, holding up my hand and willing a truesoul into existence. It appeared as a tiny mote of light, gently floating between my index finger and thumb. "It is nothing, yet everything. Every being has one – be they spirit, god, or mortal, this is the core of existence. It is the very fundamental of who you are, the very last inch of a being. Do you truly believe it coincidence that for a Karmic Immortal, the last trial is for every inch but one to die? No. This is everything that is important in a soul, the *most* important thing. And within it lies a being's connection to me. To the Dao." I explained, letting the freshly-born soul go. It drifted gently in the wind; it was Elvira who caught it, staring at the soul with a complex expression.

"To erase everything but that would be to erase all personality, all ego, all experiences; every inch but that which is most important to it, then to let it go back into the stream and build itself anew. Some may even ask for this kind of a reset; such is the weight of living, at times. The weight can be too much to bear." I said softly, sadly. In those cases, such an act as this could even be considered merciful, loathe as I was to admit it. Such a soul had to be severely depressed, or just *tired*, to agree to such a thing, however. I had nearly taken that option in my old universe, once.

Once.

"But I don't see most of these dark angels opting for this. They haven't cut themselves off from me, yet." I continued, shaking off my sudden bout of melancholy. "I give it a few millennia, maybe, before they accept the offer of redemption. Theirs will be a hard path, and their karma will undoubtedly be hard to deal with, but the end will be worth it. To exist in such a state as they is to exist in constant misery. Joy is almost painful for them; but it is all they know, and as such, the Light scares them. And like I said; the reset is a last resort option. A truly drastic measure, not to be taken lightly, and reserved for very specific things."

"I see." Sol answered, though I could tell he did not. I smiled softly at him.

“Thank you for answering.” Gilles added. “And pardon our intrusion.”

“Nonsense. Stay, stay! You are more than welcome. I believe we have almost finished, however,” I replied, glancing at my children to make sure that was correct. They nodded in unison, Alexander flicking his head to the side distractedly.

“There is not much else to say.” He muttered.

“I see. Then I regret to inform you that I will not be much help in this coming storm.” I admitted softly. They all snapped their attention to me, almost expecting what I was to say next. “This is a battle between my children, yes, but the truth is something besides that. The battle with the Shadow will be a deciding factor for the future of the Four Realms, and I must push forward with stabilizing them. The basic foundation is there, but I *must* do more. The Lunar Star has to be made. The Pillars must be nurtured. And others, as well. I fear collapse if not.” I reasoned, only being ninety percent truthful. I would absolutely step in to this battle. The cost of me doing so, however, would be high...though it would be higher if I continued to wait and let the Shadow grow stronger.

“As you will it. Leave the care of the Four Realms to us, Father, while you complete your works,” Elvira said with a slight bow.

“...yes.” Reika said, giving her sister a condescending glance at her formality. She shot a glare back in response, one that said ‘I’m putting on a show for the present gods,’ much to my amusement. “That. Don’t work yourself too hard, Mother. I worry for you.” I chuckled as Reika walked up and wrapped me in a hug, returning the gesture fondly.

“It is my pleasure to work as hard as I must for you.” I whispered back. She squeezed me harder in response before pulling away.

“I must go now. Some things require my attention. I love you, Mother,” she said.

“And I love you,” I replied as she vanished. Keilan and Alexander both muttered their own “loves” and “farewells,” Alexander leaning forward for a hug while Keilan just vanished, touch-averse as he was, leaving me with Elvira, Gilles, and Sol. Plus the other assembled gods, who had yet to interject.

There were other things I had to be doing, visions to meditate on, power to amass, and people to visit. Kei and Dei were foremost on my mind at the moment, but Elvira was shifting her feet awkwardly, smiling at me like she had something to ask but knew I needed to go, so had decided her question was less important than my time. A, quite frankly, stupid idea. But I loved her for it.

But I didn’t have the patience for her hesitation, either.

“Well? Are you going to ask me your question, or not?” I pressed. She smiled thinly, chuckling to herself.

“Sorry, sorry. I wanted your permission for something. But...it’s something you had best see, lest I explain it poorly.” She said. I hummed in the back of my throat, now well and truly curious.

“Show me.”

1.27 An Immortal Army

Elvira led me deeper into her palace, holding the new soul I had made the entire time. And she presented before me a problem.

“We need an army.” She said bluntly, leading me through the winding halls. Artworks lined them, from multicolored tapestries to stone busts of various gods, spirits, and angels. For a moment she stopped at a window overlooking a large courtyard, spirits playing amongst the garden therein. A bouquet of lightflowers grew in the windowsill, their petals emitting a soft yellow light that danced along the smooth marble sill and reflected on the clear glass window. I said nothing for a time, drumming my fingers upon my thigh as I watched the courtyard below.

Behind me Elvira’s two right-hands, Sol and Gilles, pulled up behind us, a respectful distance away but still within earshot. They were the only ones to have followed. We were the only ones in this entire wing.

Her palace struck me as unfortunately empty. The Heaven Realm truly had yet to fill up, especially when compared to the other Realms.

“An army?” I pressed, when Elvira remained silent for a touch too long.

“A force to fight against the Shadow. We have angels and powerful spirits, but the mortal races are as of yet too weak to really contend. In perhaps ten thousand years we will start to see more of them rise up to the required level, but we need something *now*. I am unsure if my siblings are aware, but besides the number of gods we have we are hilariously outnumbered. I counted at least twenty different dark angels – and that’s not to mention the devil cultivators popping up in the Physical Realm, and even here, in the Heaven Realm. Sparsely populated though it is.” Elvira said with a shake of her head, moving away from the window to lead the way once more. I followed, trailing behind with my hands clasped behind my back and a frown on my face.

I understood what she was saying, but I didn’t see the urgency she clearly felt.

“The Shadow will not be ready to make a move any time in the next few millennia.” I said. “You have time to work with the mortals, bring them up to the necessary levels. Immortals of all kinds will likely make up the brunt of your forces – alongside angels, holy beasts, and other such beings.”

“I know,” Elvira grumbled, wings flaring. “But who wants to come to heaven if it is empty?”

And at that, I had no answer. It would be hypocritical of me to reply, after all, as my first act as a god had been to create companions.

“What of the avians?” I asked.

“What of them? They are perfect, and beautiful, and I love them with all my soul. But they are meant to be companions to your Fae. They are mortals, and when they become cultivators they become more than just mortals. But what I want to create is more than that. Different than angels, different from mortals, different from gods...a celestial race. Immortal in body and spirit and directly tied to Heaven. If we are meant to embody an ideal, then these people would as well.” Elvira explained slowly, as if unsure what words to use. I nodded along, twisting my hands together behind my back.

Was this a result of my rushing to create mortals? Was this something she should have created first, before they came into being? An immortal race? I looked back upon my creations and frowned. Just because I pretend to know what I’m doing doesn’t mean I do...but no. In this case, I do not regret my actions, and think that it might even have been more ideal. As Elvira said; who wants to come to a world that is empty? We have gods and spirits, mortals were a logical next step. Elvira is only feeling this way because of pressure from the Shadow.

That doesn’t make her incorrect, however.

"I cannot tell you what to do," I said with a shake of my head. Elvira paused and looked back at me, brows furrowed. I moved to stand beside her, laying a hand upon her shoulder and smiling softly. "You are the ruler of the Heaven Realm. The gods look to you for guidance and leadership, new angels pledge themselves to you, and mortals look to the heavens as a place of beauty and peace because of you. This decision is yours."

"But..." Elvira started. "I just...I don't know what the outcome will be. I have the people designed, the idea for it all laid out, and souls who may be willing to fulfill this purpose, but for all my supposed power I do not know what the ramifications of this will be. What will it say that I created an army? War is not an ideal. It is painful and hateful, it is no ideal." I was silent for a long moment, watching my daughter as she shifted in place, looking at me with a mixture of apprehension and hope. Doubt welled within her chest, visible to me as shades of grey clouding her otherwise brilliantly bright heart.

"I feel I must apologize," I admitted with a shake of my head. "For putting too much pressure upon you with the word 'ideal.'"

"Father?" Elvira said.

"Courage, honor, duty, nobility, are these not all ideals? To be courageous, and brave, but not seek a fight. To be noble and peaceful, but willing and able to defend what is yours, and those beneath you. It is better to be a soldier in a garden, then a gardener on the battlefield. And when war comes knocking, is it not noble to be prepared for it?" I said softly. "Do not worry about how I may judge you. You have done well, and I am proud of you. I will always be proud of you, dear. But heavy is the head that wears the crown, and you must be willing to make decisions that will not be liked by all. This may earn you no favors, it may be good, or bad. I can see it going both ways; what matters is you. You are the deciding factor for what it will be."

"Father, I..." Elvira started.

"Did you know, I was once an emperor?" I asked suddenly. Elvira blinked and furrowed her brows.

“Huh?”

“Don’t be so surprised. I know Randus told you that I had past lives, the chatty gossip.” I told her, amused.

“No, I...but an emperor?” she asked.

“Yes. It was my first life, actually. In that time the word didn’t mean much to a mortal – though I do wonder if I ever was truly a mortal soul, or something more, trained to be who I am now.” I mused, voicing a little inner doubt I had. Then, with a shake of my head, I continued. “In my time, I was forced to unite a number of tribes. Some joined me willingly. Some resisted, but eventually caved. And a few fought against me despite me never outright seeking war. In my time I was hated, loved, feared, and respected, yet the works I did lasted far beyond that life’s time.

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“Now I can look back and see that. My character was idealized by future generations; to the point I became more myth than person, some of my deeds forgotten or misconstrued. But nonetheless, my actions ended up being seen as *defining*, even if I became largely mythical. Now, you do not have the luxury of a mortal soul, able to escape duty through death. And I cannot guarantee that your decisions will eventually be seen as righteous or whatnot. But I will know the truth, and that they were made to be righteous. And you will know the same. And if you ever need advice and support, I will be there for you.” I promised, laying a kiss on her forehead, my heart swelling with pride for her. “You did not come to me for advice. You came to me for permission, though you do not need it. Thank you for that.”

Elvira wrapped me in a tight hug, shoulders shuddering for a brief moment before pulling away, expression soft yet determined.

“Thank you, Father. I won’t keep you any longer.” She said.

“It is my pleasure, dear,” I said, ruffling her hair. “No matter how big you get, my little empress, you will always be my little girl. Now you go. I won’t bore you with my stories any longer.” Elvira giggled, caught herself, glanced at Gilles and Sol, then cleared her throat and started to turn away.

“Someday,” she said, pausing. “Would you tell me about your past lives?”

“Of course,” I agreed. She nodded then promptly started marching off, likely to go complete her army. Gilles and Sol followed after her, both nodding to me respectfully as they passed, and I turned my attention once more to my duties.

Only I held myself back from leaping right into work. There were others I had to visit, first. My children needed guidance, and as much as I truly needed to get back to work they were more important. With a heavy sigh I closed my eyes and forced myself to relax a bit.

Heavy is the head that wears the crown. Except I don’t wear the crown.

I hold up the skies.

I found Keilan in his palace, working with a karmic king to further organize the influx of souls. His holy beast companion was elsewhere, likely at the mouth of the Valley, setting up an entryway, which left him largely alone.

He sat at his desk, a large dark-wood thing covered in stacks of paper and scrolls. Bookshelves of the same dark material lined the walls, covered in personal effects and various other knick-knacks. A flint knife sat on one of the shelves – I recognized it as the first one the Karae, his mortal race, had ever created. He was sentimental that way, like me; though I also saw a chunk of stone with a crude cave-drawing of him as well, which gave me a little chuckle. He looked far too evil there, with fangs and great-big horns.

“Mother,” Keilan said suddenly, breaking me out of my observations of his workspace. He looked genuinely surprised to see me, and framed against the large windows behind his desk, cut the image of a properly intimidating businessman. The Realm Sun was setting, orange and red light reflecting off of the waters of the karmic ocean and giving him a red backdrop. The light from a chandelier glinted off his horns, giving them a yellowish glow, and his dark robes were tight and well-fitted.

“Hello, son,” I greeted, drifting over to him, feet gliding across the dark-marble floors. Flecks of yellows and lines of white cut through the dark stone, giving it a stark contrast. “I came to see how you were doing. What troubles you and such,”

“Nothing.” Keilan denied. “We are doing quite well.” I raised an eyebrow at him, waiting patiently. He matched my gaze with a confident look, smiling politely as he waited for me to give in. I did not. He did. “Fine, fine. I’m just a little troubled by the Shadow, that’s all.”

“It is no shame to ask for help, Keilan,” I said gently.

“I know.” He nearly snapped, a little irritated. Good. That should make him more willing to loosen his tongue. “It’s just...I do not wish to bug you. I of all people know that you are busy with the Four Realms.”

“Despite meditating and/or sleeping for such great lengths of time?” I teased.

“Especially because of that. The works you create after exiting your restful sleep or enlightening meditations are always defining, and work to stabilize the Four Realms.” Keilan said firmly. “I would not deny you that. Not for some silly questions.”

“Thank you, Keilan,” I said genuinely, throat closing up a little at his praise. But I pressed through it. “That means a lot to me. But that doesn’t mean I can’t spend time with my children, or help them out with their troubles. In fact, I am more than happy to spend time with you.” Keilan nodded, looking away and biting his lip for a moment.

“The karmic realm is woefully undefended.” He said bluntly. “Thankfully there seems to be little here that the Shadow wishes to assault, but I still fear an attack of some kind, and there isn’t anything to ward such a thing off. I have been considering creating beings specifically for that purpose; defenders, beyond the purposes of the angels or holy beasts who may or may not pledge their allegiance to me.”

“The karmic kings are not enough?” I asked. Those karmically aligned spirits – which were, somehow, different than angels and the like as they were more focused upon the workings of karma and being judges – were fairly plentiful in the Karmic Realm.

“They are excellent at what they do, but you do not ask an accountant to fight a war.” Keilan said bluntly.

“An excellent point, but it sounds like you have the idea mostly decided. What do you need help with?” I asked.

“The form, and purpose. Imposing a singular task upon a soul is a terrible idea; even my karmic kings do more than just judge souls, and I would fear for their ability to be judges if they didn’t. I need something that is both guard and...something else.” Keilan mused. “Do I go for fear, for the shock and awe aspect? Mortals already fear me as some sort of judgement king, do I lean into that? Or do I focus my attentions elsewhere?”

“Show me what you have,” I said, because, knowing Keilan, he already had a few ideas planned out. True to my expectations he waved his hand in the air, a number of sketches appearing in a swirl of black shadow. I snatched the first one out of the air and examined it, raising my eyebrows. This was the shape of a soul, using one of my truesouls as the base, of course, and guiding it in multiple directions with karmic strings. I frowned and switched to the next one, finding another variation of the same thing.

My frown deepened.

“I don’t think you should focus so heavily upon karma,” I admitted after looking through all the sketches. Keilan waited patiently for me to continue, his fingers steepled in front of his mouth. “You already have the Karrae, karmic kings, and even your holy snake beast is karmically aligned. But despite your realm being the Karmic Realm, that is not all it is, is it? There are also memories stored here; psionic energy radiates from the ocean in waves. I would experiment a bit more with that.” I told him.

“Focusing too much on one thing is detrimental,” Keilan agreed, realization dawning in his eyes. “No wonder I couldn’t make any headway in the designs. I was too focused on the karmic aspects. But if I add mental energy...” he trailed off, eyes glazing over, and I smiled.

“Sometimes it just takes another pair of eyes,” I said. “As for the physical form, I leave that up to you. Fear, nobility, strength, shadows...the choice is wholly yours.” He nodded in agreement, standing and straightening his robes.

“Thank you, Mother,” he said. “That helps quite a bit, actually. I will get right on it.”

“Glad I could be of help,” I said, hesitating a bit. A large part of me wanted to stay longer, converse with my son a bit more, but...well, he clearly wanted to get back to work, and to chase this thread of creativity he was holding.

“Before you go,” Keilan said, just as I started to step forward for my goodbye hug. “I was wondering...after all this is over, would you like to go boating with me? Like we used to, out on the karmic ocean.” I nodded happily, giving him a big hug that he briefly returned before forcibly pulling away.

“I would love to. And don’t think for a moment I won’t hold you to that!” I exclaimed, stepping away and preparing to teleport. “Goodbye, Keilan. Don’t ever be afraid to ask for help, or even if you just want to chat.” But, knowing my son, he rarely wanted to just chat. It just wasn’t his personality.

He bowed exaggeratedly as I teleported away, forcing out a quick chuckle. Now, where was Reika...?

1.28 Kei is a Problem Child (Lovingly So)

Reika found me at the roots of the Life-Giving Tree, smoothing out a stress fracture I had found in the fabric of reality. It wasn’t dangerous yet, but certain imbalances in the Realms’ structure would cause such things to continually worsen. Namely, size, and the lack of the Lunar Star. For the amount of energy and powerful beings in the Four Realms, the amount of physical space the Four Realms took up was...woefully inadequate. This much power in this little space was putting pressure onto the fabric of reality, threatening to pop it like a balloon filled with too much air. The creation of the Lunar Star was the first step in solving this issue. Most of the physical realm was stardust, the distance between the few solar systems that had been made and the size of Pangaea not actually taking up much space, relatively speaking. The Heaven Realm and Karmic Realms were much the same, being relatively empty, and just...small in size.

This was one of the things my visions had revealed to me during my meditations, as well as observing the movements of gods and mortals alike. For regular, non-cultivator mortals, the size of the Realms was inconceivable. Their perspective was much smaller. For someone like Fang Xu it was different. Immediately after his ascension Pangaea probably seemed more planet-sized; still big, but manageable. He had only grown in power since, and that relative size had shrunk; I bet, if he put his mind to it, he could traverse all of Pangaea in a week. In the next few thousand years that timeframe was likely to shrink considerably. Shoot, the only reason he hadn't travelled to the Karmic or Heaven realms yet was, probably, because the technique to bypass the barrier between realms hadn't been invented yet. Otherwise I very much believed he would have gone to visit Keilan or Elvira in their palaces.

Even worse were the gods. Many could travel across the entirety of the Realms in a fraction of the time. They didn't even realize how small everything was; it was like a fish, swimming in a fishbowl. This was all they knew! My old universe was far more spacious, and I hadn't paid much mind to it all until now, busy as I was creating mortals, dealing with the Shadow...soon it would be time to focus on this.

“Mother, what are you doing?” Reika asked as I smoothed out the now-healed fracture, dusting my hands of literal stardust and pushing those thoughts out of my head. If I didn't start acting upon them soon the problems would only get worse, but I had some time to spend with my daughter.

“Just fixing something I found on my way to see you,” I replied, turning around to smile at her. Kei stood beside her, tails flicking curiously as she peeked out from around her mother. She had a distinctly mischievous air about her, with paint smeared on her hands and arms, and she stuck her tongue out at me. “What are you doing way down here?”

“Kei wanted to show me something,” Reika said in fond exasperation, ruffling her child's hair, right between the ears. Kei giggled and ducked her head, dancing away with a little grin.

“Ominous,” I said, earning myself another giggle from the mother-daughter pair. “Can I come see, too?”

“Yeah!” Kei cheered. “Enough serious stuff! Let’s play!” Reika nodded, gazing at her daughter fondly as she leapt through the trees, bounding from treetop to treetop as she led the way across Pangaea, apparently deciding she didn’t want to teleport around. Reika opted for the much more dignified approach of flying through the skies, walking through the air as the ground distorted beneath us. Spirit beasts of all kinds darted about in the forest below, from monkeys and birds to snakes and larger creatures, such as deer or big cats. None seemed bothered by the presence of Kei or Reika, though quite a few glanced nervously in my direction – for no other reason than because I was still having trouble suppressing my power to the correct degree.

It was decidedly peaceful here, despite all the talks of war and other such things. The air was fresh, there was a storm brewing to the right, bringing with it the scent of rain, and the sun was shining above. A wind rustled the leaves of the great Tree, creating a discordant melody that took years to hear the first few tunes of – such was the enormity of said leaves. It was nothing less than a glorious sight.

“She’s a mess,” Reika said with a smile, watching as Kei swooped down from the trees to run across a stretch of open land, racing a few lightning-clad antelope as they thundered across the plains.

“There is no denying that.” I agreed. “About as carefree as you can get, that one.”

“I guess I am next on the docket for your wisdom?” Reika continued casually, forcing a snort of laughter out of me.

“Out of all my children, Reika, you are easily the most self-assured.” I told her. “If you need my ‘wisdom,’ I am content in the knowledge that you will come to me for it – or the opposite, to knock some sense into me, if needed. No, I just wanted to come check up on you and Kei.”

“Even over Alexander?” Reika asked doubtfully. I nodded.

“Even over Alexander. You know how long he takes to do things; he is a perfectionist to the highest degree. Love him to death, I do, but he is not without his doubts; such is his blessing, however. He will not make a move until he is quite certain about it.” I explained. The perfect example of this was how he had yet to create his people - he wanted to be certain they were done right, and introduced at the right time. Reika flushed a little at the praise, giving me a quick little side-hug that I returned. The flowers in her hair sparkled happily as she pulled away, refocusing on Kei.

“...I think it still best to tell you,” she said slowly. “That I am of the same mind of my siblings. The Physical Realm needs protectors beyond what we have currently, though I do not intend to make them fighters. More of a...supporting force, if you will. The mortals actually gave me the idea for it – there’s a myth going about of a race of people who live atop the Tree; that it is a paradise up there, a place for gods and immortals. I will likely do something like that; the climate of the Tree’s canopy is too harsh for a standard race, and need something sturdier.”

“Well if you would ever like my input, feel free to ask. But I know how much you love your secret projects,” I said, pointedly looking at Kei, who was now standing atop a mountain with snow coating her tails. Reika lightly slapped my shoulder, huffing in amusement; I laughed, and the conversation continued as we sped across Pangaea. We spoke of little things, of big things, and laughed at each other’s puns, right up until I realized where Kei was leading us.

“Oh that sly little fox,” I grumbled, shaking my head and teleporting the rest of the way. Reika followed, appearing beside me above Dei’s city; Manu Ti, the city of cultivators.

It was no ordinary city. Fang Xu’s formation expertise had helped them create something truly awe-inspiring; a flying island. The buildings of Manu Ti were clean and gleamed in the sun, wet from a recent rainstorm, people milling about on the large island that floated above a massive lake. Four great chains, covered in moss and shining with the light of formations, stretched in the cardinal directions to the shores of the lake, where they sunk into the earth and kept the city bound.

Mortal towns and cities had already started to pop up around the bases of the chains, both for the protection they provided and to keep said chains safe from tampering. Cultivators themselves flew about through the air, the technique for flying having been recently discovered, or dashed up the sides of the miles-long chains, each link a mile thick. Thousands of people had gathered together to build this. Tens of millions and counting, now called it home, and be they Avian, Karae, Elemental, or Fae, all had a place here. Dei made sure of that, and Fang Xu kept the peace as the first Karmic Immortal.

Sects from all over this quarter of Pangaea pledged their allegiance to Manu Ti; Dei had successfully created the first true nation, his reach extending far beyond his capability to travel thanks to Fang Xu and the rapidly expanding network of communication and teleportation formations. Those few warlords who claimed tiny pieces of land did not hold a candle compared to this.

“I think I know what Kei is doing,” I said, watching her as she ran across the waters of the lake, completely invisible, and leapt up onto the flying island in a single great bound. “She’s going to make Dei jealous.” Said man was sitting in his office in the center of town, still the elected city lord despite not being the most powerful qi cultivator, sipping on a glass of whiskey and reading a report about shipping materials.

“How?” Reika asked.

“Dei hasn’t ascended to immortality yet. Come to think of it, neither has Celene. It’s only a matter of time for her, though, especially with Fang Xu’s help.” I replied. A cultivator of her caliber, having reached the throat chakra level of qi cultivation – I forget what the local term for that is, Soul Formation or something? I dunno – could live for thousands of years already...but that was not immortality.

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"Isn't Kei already immortal? She's my child." Reika asked. Kei sprinted through the city, snagging a golden apple from a street stall that was never noticed to have gone missing, aiming for Dei's office. "She's not going to go through a trial of ascension, is she?"

"There's a trial for every type of immortal ascension, and technically speaking, while Kei is immortal, she isn't a god." I said simply. "Qi, fleshly body, mind, karmic, Dao...every kind. The exact number escapes me, but it only continues to increase. I suspect Kei is going to go through as many as possible, just to piss him off. And would you look at that? There she goes now."

Kei leapt through Dei's open window, skidding across his desk and sending papers flying; the man spluttered, whiskey spilling all over his robes and lightning crackling about him as he reacted to what he saw as a sudden attack. He leapt to his feet, fists raised, then froze at seeing Kei, his expression morphing into one of annoyance.

"Kei!" He barked. "You little shit, look at what you made me do! That was hundred-year-old fire whiskey!"

"Hey, Dei," Kei said, winking at him. "Watch this."

And with that she promptly leapt out of the window again, light radiating off of her as she activated her qi immortal ascension trial. Clouds formed overhead, dark and ominous, the people of Manu Ti looking up worriedly as they felt the massive amounts of qi gathering there. For a brief moment light cracked through the clouds, shining down to form a golden bridge that stretched a mile across the empty sky, like a rainbow. The qi of the world shifted, swirling about it in a maelstrom as the trial attempted to make something difficult for Kei to complete. Lightning crackled from the gilded railings, fire descended from the skies to coat itself over Kei's skin, and ice slicked the bridge itself, seeking to freeze one's feet at every step.

She just giggled at the sensations, skipping her way across the bridge while enduring roaring thunderbolts from heaven and the burning flames, ice doing little to cause her pause. Reika gripped my arm tightly in that first little bit, worry for her child overcoming her knowledge that Kei would

be more than fine, but quickly relaxed when it became clear that was the case. Dei watched on with gritted teeth, seemingly more annoyed that she'd chosen to do this here, rather than her finishing the immortality trial.

Kei hummed a little song to herself as she went, absorbing the qi of heaven and earth into her body as she reached the end of the bridge, her personal power only incrementally increasing. The bridge started to fade away and she looked down sadly, almost disappointed it was over...

Then a new one appeared, as Kei activated her fleshly body ascension trial.

The chains of Manu Ti rattled this time, winds howling in the skies and threatening to tear things apart – Fang Xu, accompanied by his wife, Celene, shot into the skies from their home, flying directly toward Kei. Gravity assaulted her this time, trying to weigh her down onto the bridge, pressing into her from all sides. A great wind blew against her, trying to force her back; she took this bridge with the same ease as the previous.

“Kei!” Fang Xu shouted over the winds. She turned to look at the karmic immortal, smirking and hands on her hips. Fang Xu attempted to reach her, pushing himself through the winds, but the laws of the heavenly Dao rebuffed him – only Kei could completely this trial. “Stop! You’re disrupting the formations!” That gave Kei pause and she blinked, turning to look at the great chains of Manu Ti. True to Fang Xu’s words, the sheer amount of power being thrown about and absorbed by Kei in the Ascension Trial was causing the formations to flicker, threatening to plunge the city into the lake below.

“Stupid girl,” Dei grumbled, turning away, even as I chuckled to myself.

I wouldn’t have allowed that to happen, but it was good to let Kei see the consequences of her own actions sometimes.

With a yelp Kei sprinted the rest of the way across the bridge, forcing the trial to end before leaping up into the sky, away from the city so she didn't accidentally absorb too much of the ambient qi. Black pus leaked from a few of her pores, toxins and impurities that she had built up within herself thoroughly expunged then promptly burned away; her bones condensed, her blood ran purer...

In a regular mortal, the effects would be more pronounced. Kei was absolutely cheating here, and the improvement was incremental at best. Slowly she fell back to the earth, aiming for Manu Ti while waving happily at myself and Reika. We waved back, invisible as we were to the mortals below, while I furrowed my brows.

“Did she just want us to come watch her ascend?” Reika asked.

“Must have.” I reasoned.

“Why here though?” she pressed, shaking her head. “She could have done it atop the Tree. Why did she even have to go through immortal ascension?”

“Those weren't designed for her,” I said with a shrug. “Qi and fleshly body? Neither are a problem for Kei. The only reason she has not achieved what one might call godhood is because of this right here,” I laid a hand over my heart as I said this, for emphasis. “She needs to figure out her own Dao, her own divine domain, before she can properly ‘ascend.’ As for why here? I assume it has something to do with Celene and Dei. She's grown quite fond of them over the past few centuries.” I said.

She'd often come bug Dei while I had been meditating. I wasn't sure why, but I figured it might be because he can see through her illusions.

“You are awfully interested in this mortal,” Reika noted, not accusingly. I smiled as I turned away, Kei chattering away happily at Celene, Dei, and Fang Xu below – she’d wanted Reika to watch, but apparently didn’t want to talk about it afterwards. Kids.

“He has potential.” I allowed. “Especially Fang Xu and Celene. Dei...I worry about him. There’s a fifty-fifty chance he won’t make it to Immortality. His chosen path is much more difficult than most, after all.”

“Which path is that? I haven’t honestly been paying much attention to him in particular,” Reika asked, stretching a bit.

“Kei’s path, of course. The path of the Dao,” I said. “Goodbye, Reika. I’ll be going to visit Alexander, now, so I’ll tell him you said hi. And remember to ask for help if you need it.” And with that, I teleported away.

Even after a thousand years, Dei still wasn’t sure what to think of Kei. The mischievous fox-girl was different than any other being he’d know, but both Fang Xu and Celene seemed fond of her, so he tolerated her presence. Still, as he watched her play in the meadow with Fang Xu and Celene’s children, he couldn’t help but find her...endearing. Despite nearly sending Manu Ti crashing into the lake below with her stupid antics.

Yet despite all her faults she had the Light about her. Her antics largely brought smiles, playing the clown and the fool because she enjoyed seeing people laugh, just as she loved to laugh. Many times said fooling around came when someone (himself, mostly) was grumpy, and enough prodding brought them out of their funk and into a smile, her enthusiasm relentless. There was nothing to be wary about personality wise. Dei wasn’t sure what to think about her because she was so different from him. And she knew the green-eyed Man and Woman, whom he had not seen in too long.

“Tell me, Dei,” Fang Xu said from beside him. He had his wife, Celene, wrapped up in a hug, his chin resting atop her head, as they leaned back against one of the many poplar trees that lined the

park. The joyful screeches of their children rang through the air and Dei found himself thankful that Immortals like Fang Xu, and soon to be Celene, had trouble conceiving. Five children was enough – even if they were spread out over the course of the past thousand years. “Have you...found anyone yet?” Fang Xu finished his thought and Dei furrowed his brows.

“What my idiot husband means to say is if you’ve managed to get yourself a date.” Celene clarified, and Dei groaned.

“Not you too,” he grumbled, folding his hands into the sleeves of his robe. “This is one of the few times I get a break. Don’t ruin it with talk of heirs.” Fang Xu and Celene chuckled and fell silent, the trio watching Kei play with the kids for a long, long time. Finally, unable to bear the silence, Celene spoke once more.

“Have you thought about trying your ascension trial yet?” she asked. Dei scowled and shook his head, glancing over at the couple. Neither were watching him, gazes fixated on their kids and Kei. Never before had he seen Celene look so happy, tucked up close to her husband – who was a true gentle giant. Despite his broad shoulders, flaming red hair, and relatively stern features, the man hardly ever raised his voice in anger, let alone fought.

That fight against what Fang Xu called dark angels was the only time Dei had seen him raise his weapon, actually. His hands were meant for creating, not destroying, and he’d become an immortal for it, dim golden light radiating from him as proof of his ascension.

Dei looked down at his own hands, and couldn’t help but feel them stained in blood. He’d built a legacy for his people. Guided them through rough and troubled times, built this city, and continued to do his best to rule them fairly. But he’d had to kill, and fight, and struggle to get here – he was the leader, a great and powerful being who had to always know what he was doing, even when he didn’t. And he couldn’t stop. Not yet.

There was still something out there, building in the distance. He could feel it in his bones. The worst was yet to come. All he wanted to do was rest, but he had to stand tall, and firm, and proud, and pretend to be something great and mighty...

He'd had these self-doubts ever since he'd touched the divine soul. It had killed his ego, the arrogance that led him as far as it had, even if he didn't show it outwardly. Yes, he had done all this, but was it enough? Would it be enough?

"Dei?" Celene asked, and he blinked, realizing he'd been silent for far too long. She and Fang Xu looked at him worriedly and he flashed them a small smile.

"Sorry, got lost in thought there," he said, pushing himself off of the tree he'd been leaning against. "I've got to get back to work, though. The city won't run itself." Fang Xu said something but he ignored him, turning and working his way through the trees. This little park was beautiful, if he would stop and look at it. Flowers from all over Pangaea grew in ordered rows, trees of different kinds growing strong and tall, mosses and ferns coating the floor to give everything a lush, green look.

He hadn't talked to the divine soul in a long time, he realized. But he found he didn't need to. Despite it killing his arrogance and ego, he still had everything he was. He still had the experience of over a thousand years of putting one foot in front of the other, always moving forward. And as he looked inward at his own soul, he realized he knew what this feeling was. He knew what was coming, this tension in the air.

War.

Dei let out a breath, vaguely aware of Kei following him, attempting to trick him with illusions. They had never worked, and they never would. And though what he thought next was a little bit too serious a thought for something as innocuous as Kei's pranks, it was still one he had. She would not dissuade him from his path. Nothing would.

And he would prepare for war if he must. To protect those that stand behind him. To protect those who stand below him. To aid those who look down from above.

That is who he was.

1.29 Floating the River

Alexander and I went swimming in the Spirit River. Energy and souls alike drifted by as we floated along, watching the turning of the Realms and traversing the entirety of the river. We started in the Heaven Realm.

Much of the time we spent in comfortable silence. We watched as spirits of all kinds manipulated the energy already existing in the land itself or was produced by souls – many of whom didn’t even notice our presence – twisting it and putting it to work, following tributaries and creeks splitting off from the main River. We observed dark spirits, small things, not in service to the Shadow, as they milled about a village of elementals, feeding off of the negative emotions they produced, even as other spirits redirected or fed off of the more benign energies.

Alexander pointed out a herd of spirit beasts as we drifted by, nearing the edge of the Heaven Realm and the barrier between realms. I drifted over to watch them with him. It was a herd of magical elk – moss hung from their fur and antlers, earth-attuned qi coursing through their veins. The leader was a majestic creature, with large, fourteen point antlers that had multicolored gems embedded into the bone. It glanced up at us as we passed, Alexander flashing his aura once to make himself known, and nodded his respect even if he couldn’t see us. He was an old, wise beast. A King amongst his kind, in spirit alone.

“The spirit beasts could use a better guiding force.” Alexander said. “Actually, let me rephrase that – they could use a more suitable guiding hand. They are too easily manipulated.”

I nodded my agreement. "That is an oversight on my part. I expected more souls like that one to have appeared amongst the beasts by now, or at least, quicker than they have been." I indicated the bull elk as I said this; for its soul was wise and strong, indeed. There had been nothing that could twist and incentivize a beast to attack in great hordes the way the spirit beasts did, back in my old universe. I had not been expecting many of them to be so easily manipulated here...though part of the problem, I felt, was also the sapient spirit beasts and their ability to fairly easily direct the less intelligent ones.

"I would not call it an oversight, simply unexpected." Alexander reasoned. "I have considered asking Kei to aid me in this, however. It might do her some good to have some responsibility."

"You should tell her that." I told him. "I know she would love to spend more time with her Uncle Alexander."

And we drifted along, simply enjoying the sights and life. Of all my children, Alexander was the easiest to do this with. Elvira and Keilan were too busy in their minds, Reika too busy in her heart. Only Alexander could consistently still himself enough to appreciate the Realms in a quiet, thoughtful way. It was an important thing to do, in my opinion. There was a beauty in stillness of body and soul, of simply letting the noise of creation wash over you.

Spirits began to truly circle us as I stopped hiding the entirety of my presence, my comfortable aura drawing them toward us as they danced about in the river like little faeries. Alexander collected a little water spirit, an amused rumble echoing through him as it danced and played, only to flit away as we neared the barrier between realms. Most of the spirits stayed behind as we flowed through the greyish barrier of energy, a few souls entering the cycle of reincarnation, or spirits pushing energy along the river sticking through it.

I hardly noticed the barrier anymore, in fact it couldn't even be called a barrier at all to me, but weaker beings had trouble crossing the chaotic meeting place of the Realms. Nothing grew in this dense, energetic space, and though spirits and souls could fairly easily cross it with the aid of the river, in other places or for physical material it was...difficult, to say the least.

Once in the physical realm, we drifted away from Pangaea. Individual streams in the spirit realm, tributaries and creeks, flowed to and from the myriad planets outside of the main hub of activity in the realm. Light flowed to and from the nigh-on a hundred suns in the Realm, circling Pangaea, and into each of the individual planets therein. Gas giants spun happily, nebulas swirled, and asteroids and comets hurtled through space. Mortals pranced about on habitable planets, some even containing only Avians, Fae, Elementals, or Karae, while darker spirits congregated on the non-habitable planets. Positive energy was more uncomfortable for them, so they tended to come together on darker, less energetically powerful planets, like Venus would have been.

It was here we paused for a bit, and I showed Alexander how to make a sun. Stardust swirled together to ignite in my palm as I explained the process in detail, urging Alexander to do the same – he did not, of course, but that was to be expected. He would practice the method in his own time, in his own way, and would only show me once he had perfected it. We did, however, spend some time creating a few planets; I even caused a meteor filled with the stuff of life to crash onto one of the barren rocks, to jumpstart a more natural, non-enhanced evolution of life. There would have to be a more casual method of spreading life than me taking time out of my day to spread it to every sustainable planet, eventually.

“The Realms are cramped,” Alexander murmured, staring at the stardust that pervaded the edges of the Physical Realm. “I can feel it in my bones. There are too many powerful beings, in too small a space. What else do you plan to do, besides create the Star?” I smiled and clasped my hands behind my back, watching the accelerated process of a solar system forming come into being before me.

With my aid, it went far faster than it had any right to. Millions of years were condensed down into a fraction of the time – but it took power I should be saving to create the Star. I just needed to show Alexander this, for whatever reason.

“You tell me,” I said softly, turning to my son. The great white dragon adopted a thoughtful look on his face, curling his great body up as he pondered the question. All at once it seemed to come to him, and he smiled at me.

“Seeds.” He muttered. “You mentioned seeds, before. Could it be, perhaps, that you intend to spread the seeds of the Life-Giving Tree?” I nodded, making a motion with my hand that urged him to continue, to unravel what I knew he already suspected. He was the most observant of my children, after all. “Not just the Tree. You intend to spread seeds of the Mountain, the Valley, even the River.”

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“Yes,” I said with a beaming smile. “Excellent as always, Alexander. The key features of the Realms are not as inanimate as their names may appear – each represents more than just a simple fixture, and each can be spread. The first ones will remain the biggest, the most eternal...but others will spread out, creating new Mountains and Valleys, Rivers and Trees, spreading outward and creating more space for all beings. A mountain range, a forest, the valleys between mountains, and the river connecting it all.” Though the addition of the karmic ocean, also known as the Sea of Memories, did put a bit of a twist on the imagery I had conjured, it still fit in my opinion.

“And all will still be connected, though they may seem separate.” Alexander reasoned. I nodded my head. “Good. That is good. I cannot wait to see it, Father.”

“See it? My dear boy, you and your siblings will be helping me with it,” I said. “It’s time you all started to take on some of the duties of creation, too. In fact, I believe it is overdue that you all explore that facet of your power. It is the next stage of your growth.” I told him, drifting along the River, heading to the Karmic Realm.

“And the expansion of the Realms will give us all more room, for that growth.” He added.

“For the amount of energy within the Realms now, it should be easily eight times bigger than it is. Such a small size is cramping and stunting all of our growths, and it cannot last. I get the feeling, though, that it will not be too much of an issue for too much longer...it will only take time to deal with.” I reasoned, scratching my chin and speeding up a bit. We’d spent less than a month of real-

time doing this, but I was getting the itch to move, to do things. I could only put off what was coming for so long, and that time was fast approaching.

Alexander followed me, though on our way, we passed by the land of Pangaea. In many ways it was still an odd thing to see, floating in the depths of space. A great chunk of land teeming with life, a massive tree growing from the center, with nothing but space and stars beyond. The Tree cast its shade over the land itself, but paradoxically did not block the light it needed from the Sun, reaching high up into the air as if to touch the Heaven Realm above while its roots stretched down, dangling as if to touch the Karmic.

And we drifted on.

Only once we reached the Karmic Realm did we break free from the River, diving into the Sea of Memories to take a look at that which was contained within. He showed me a number of his favorite memories, ones he'd stumbled upon in his time here in the Karmic Realm, deep beneath the surface of the ocean. There, in the black waters of the past, lay echoes of memories given momentary, physical form. A hut here, dilapidated and empty. A stone there, drifting down to the bottom...one that had long since been ground into dust by a flowing river.

Alexander showed me a sunrise, flickering beneath the waves. The bright oranges and reds caught clouds in the sky of the planet Cradle, before any life had been brought there. No spirit, no life had born witness to it; but Alexander had. And he cherished that fleeting moment. I showed him the journey of a stone – it had tumbled all the way from the top of a mountain to the bottom of an ocean over the course of a millennium...the things that little pebble had seen.

And so we explored, until, eventually, we pulled ourselves out of the past to sit upon a little sandy island, poking out of the Ocean. It would likely be washed away soon, time obliterating the memory it represented, only for it to resurface at another time and place. I built a fire, and made a pie. It was only then, in the comfortable silence that followed, that Alexander spoke about what troubled him.

“I will not be introducing my People into the Four Realms until after this little spat of ours is over.” He rumbled. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye, taking a bite of the fluffy pastry I had conjured. It was delicious, and sweet, the cherries within perfectly cooked, but just making one out of thin air didn’t have the satisfaction of making a pie from scratch. Perhaps I should do that soon, too.

“Continue,” I urged him, through a mouthful of food. Alexander swallowed his own slice in one big gulp, too distracted to enjoy the sweet. Which, considering his sweet-tooth, said a lot.

“I have mulled it over quite a bit. Perhaps it is selfish of me, but I cannot, in good conscience, introduce my People into a Realms assailed by discord. I will not create them in a time of war, for the sole purpose of containing that war.” He grumbled. “Elvira and Keilan have had this idea of an immortal people for some time, and while their intentions are noble, I will not follow that same path. I fear rushing my creations.”

“There is wisdom in your words, Alexander.” I replied. “And I am sure your siblings will understand.”

“Is it right, though?” he asked me, sounding well and truly worried. I sat back a bit, setting my pie to the side – it floated in the air beside me, so as not to get any sand from the island on it – and looked heavenward. “Am I being selfish? Should I create a People now, to aid my siblings in our cause? It is a fool question to ask you, after telling you to stay out of our fight, but I need advice, Father.”

“Right is an insufficient word, for there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in this case.” I said, slowly. “And what is wrong with being a little selfish? Even we gods have to look out for ourselves sometimes. Both extreme ends of the spectrum – complete selfishness and complete selflessness – are harmful in their own ways. Your decision, Alexander, is made from the heart, out of care for your People’s future. I have faith that you will do what is best for yourself and your soon-to-be People – your doubt is a fleeting thing. Do not dwell upon it.” He hummed, tilting his head to gaze heavenward alongside me.

"Thank you," he said, after a moment. He settled into the sand after that, his doubts not gone, but eased by my words.

"It is my pleasure, son." I told him. We were silent for a moment longer before I stood, dusting off my robes and running a hand through my still-wet hair. The pie I had been eating vanished with a wave of my hand, and I stretched and yawned. Had it really only been a month or two since we started drifting through the Realms? We really had been going slow, but I had things to do. Most importantly, one thing. I could no longer put off amassing power for the Lunar Star.

"I will take you to your mediation chambers," Alexander said, rising to his full height, shaking droplets of water from his scales. I furrowed my brows and opened my mouth to ask how he knew that was where I was headed, but he quieted me with an amused look. "In many ways, you are predictable, Father. Your true body visited each of us in turn, giving us individual time with you. That usually means you are going to have to go into secluded meditation for a time, or have some work you need to focus your full attention on that will take a while." I chuckled and scratched the back of my head awkwardly. Was I really now, so predictable?

"One of these days," I said, instead of confirming his accusation. "I would like to share with you some of my memories, of my past. Not now, but soon."

"I would like that very much, Father," Alexander said with a bow of his head. I took the opportunity to lean forward and rub the base of his horns, where he liked it, and together we shot off into the sky, toward my palace.

1.30 Fate

Alexander floated beside me as I walked through the art-adorned halls of my palace, the god of fire and goddess of water clinging to his back like little monkeys. They had found him the moment we returned to my palace, having been doing something in my garden, and immediately latched onto him with happy cries. I could see the urge to chatter at him tugging at the two gods, but they respectfully remained quiet, letting Alexander and I finish our conversation.

“Are you sure about what you must do next, Father?” Alexander asked.

“Yes.” I said. “I must enter deep seclusion. Divine incarnations will be out and about as long as possible, but the Lunar Star must be created. They will likely be forced to disappear after a few thousand years once the power amassed becomes too great, and my full attention required. Much of their time, I suspect, will be spent creating more suns in the Physical Realm or guiding other gods on how to do so.”

“I see...” he trailed off, the two little gods on his back listening intently. I smiled at the couple – funny how two seemingly opposite beings found love in one another. “We will take care of the Realms while you are away. Do not fear.”

“I trust you all, even if I won’t truly be ‘away.’” I told him with a smile, then grew more serious. “The Shadow will make its move while I am secluded. Be careful with it. Sorry to jump right back into meditations right after I just came out, but...well. It must be done. Too much is driving me back into my meditations – I must see what my visions held, I must empower myself further...”

“I know. The Enemy will not gain a single foothold in the Four Realms if I have anything to say about it.” Alexander rumbled firmly. I smiled at him, but did not correct him on his use of the word “enemy.” Part of me still struggled to believe the Shadow was an ‘enemy’ in the truest sense of the word; whose only goal was our total annihilation. Something about it felt...different. It surely had ill intentions, however there was something strange about what I could feel from said intentions. More than that, from its connection to me. Something I needed to clarify. Something tied to fate, and the word ‘Shadow.’

Either way, though, it was causing problems and had to be stopped. Understanding its motives was important, but so was putting a stop to it.

"I believe you," I told him instead of voicing my doubts. "Now! Did your spirit friend find Gilles for me?" I'd asked him to find Gilles for me just before we returned to the palace together, and he'd promptly send one of the few spirits that hung around him running off in search of the shadow god.

"Yes. He and Randus should be waiting for you in your meditation chambers." Alexander said.
"Will you be wanting me to soothe the stress fractures in the Realms, while you are busy?"

"That would be a great help," I said, nodding. It was Alexander who was being stunted the most by the Four Realm's lack of size. He needed more room to swim. "As I have said, it won't be for a while yet that those fractures start to really cause problems, but as the saying goes, the best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The second best time is now. I will plant the seeds of expansion now, so that when the Lunar Star is born the Realms will be more ready for the next stage. Until then I will mitigate things by creating more suns in the Physical Realm, and promoting the growth of the primordial chaos." I said.

"Then you had best get to it. Enjoy your nap, Father," he said with a knowing smile. I slapped his side playfully, both knowing that my 'naps' were anything but, and he promptly raced off, back to his own 'secret projects.' The god of fire and goddess of water waved happily as they were carted off by Alexander, a gesture which I returned. Only when they were gone did I frown and speed up my pace to the meditation chamber, not quite willing to teleport as of yet.

I had only told part of the truth to Alexander. In fact, none of my children, save Randus, were aware that one of the reasons I was going into secluded mediation was to force the Shadow's hand. If anything had been revealed to me as of late, it was that the creation of the Lunar Star was a key event in the Shadow's plans; the moment I created it, I would 'win.' It would take me another nine thousand or so years to amass the amount of power necessary, assuming I did little more than focus on just that. And while that might seem like a long time, the Four Realms was already millions of years old.

Nine thousand years wasn't much in comparison. The Shadow wasn't ready for all-out war, which meant it would be forced to attack at a suboptimal time, and I was done playing games. It was time for the Shadow to step into the light and let me see it, whether it liked it or not.

“Let’s get to it, then,” I muttered as the doors to my meditation chamber came into view. The great, grey stone doors were plain, lacking any adornment, and as they swung open they revealed a room that was much the same. Gilles stood within, the pale god of darkness and shadows studying where I sat, the grey stone transformed into a brilliant, shining shade of blue. “Gilles.” I said, startling the young man.

He jumped and leapt away from the dais as if he had been doing something wrong.

“Lady Matriarch,” Gilles said with a bow. Was that how he usually called me? I get called so many things I get confused. Father or Mother works best for me, but Matriarch or Patriarch, I suppose, does work. At least it’s better than Your Majesty.

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“Did you bring what I asked?” I asked, stepping into the chamber.

“I did. Here,” he said, holding out his hand. Contained in a small glass vial imbued with his divine power was a million tiny void shards, sitting together like grains of black sand. I made a grasping motion with my hand, the vial flying over to land in my palm where I could observe it closer.

Yes. This should do nicely.

“Thank you, Gilles. What have you done with the rest of the shards?” I asked.

“I’ve been researching them.” He said, avoiding meeting my eyes, once again as if he was hiding something. I raised an eyebrow at him, waiting for him to continue. After a moment he cleared his throat, slicking his greasy black hair back with one hand and shifting from foot to foot nervously. “I’ve been studying their interaction with the material and immaterial world. That the Enemy is using the Void as a method to hide itself suggests there is more to its existence than simply to be an anathema to creation. The Void can be used in different ways, the specifics onto how, however, elude me for the moment.”

“Very astute, and in line with what I have been able to discover,” I praised. “But be careful. The Void can be corruptive. The rogue spirit that attacked, for example, was twisted by the solitude of the Void; it can drive one mad. You should talk with others about this occasionally. Perhaps Keilan. Or Elvira, or even your brother, Sol.” I mused, scratching my chin.

“I, uh, I will. Be careful, I mean,” Gilles said with another soft bow. “If I may ask, what are you going to do with those?” he gestured to the shards in my hand, and I smiled, popping open the lid.

“This.” And I promptly downed the entire bottle, bits and pieces of Void swirling about within my stomach. My power wrapped itself around each individual piece, keeping them separated and preventing them from doing any harm to my internals. As my body was also my soul, flesh and soul merged into one cohesive being, I had finer control over the shards when they were within my body than without. It would be necessary for what I had in mind. Gilles gaped, and I smirked. “That will be all, Gilles. Thank you,”

“Yes, Honored Matriarch,” he said, and promptly teleported away. I stood in silence for a moment, waiting for my silent observer to reveal himself, but impatience won out.

“Randus.” The butler-god of Dreams appeared at his name, bowing and with both a bottle of whiskey and pot of steaming tea at the ready. I smiled gratefully at him, but now was not the time, much as I wished it was. “Keep track of the dreams. You may not have the raw power of many of the other gods, but your specialty does not lie there.”

“I know, Ma’am. You needn’t worry. Would you like me to leave these here?” Randus asked, gesturing to the bottles. I shook my head.

“No, thank you. I fear I will not have the chance to enjoy them.” I said. Randus nodded, bowing deeper and dropping the drinks back into dreamland.

“I will keep watch. No one will disturb you.” He said, and promptly marched out of the room, the doors slamming shut behind him.

That’s not what I’m worried about, I thought with a heavy sigh, feeling the runes carved inside of the stone coming to life. Formations divine in nature ignited across the entirety of the room, keeping my power trapped within and preventing others from entering. Space and time itself were locked down in here; only I had the ability to freely move in and out. Here, I could meditate in peace. Here, I would work in secret.

With that in mind I sat cross-legged on my stone pedestal, evening my breath and closing my eyes. The void shards remained separated for now, but once I had a clearer idea of what I needed I would forge them to suit my purposes. But for now, they had to wait. Pieces of my divine power splintered off at my will, incarnation spreading through the Four Realms to do my work.

They were limited in power, but clear in their purposes.

“Alright, Fate.” I muttered. “It’s just you and me now. Show me what you’ve got.”

In the first thousand years, I meditated. My incarnations ran amok; creating suns in the physical realm and teaching various gods how to do the same; nurturing seeds in the iconic features of the Realms, the holy mountain, the life-giving tree, the karmic valley, and the spirit river; nurturing mortals and guiding my angels; soothing stress cracks, and a thousand other major and minor issues.

In the second thousand, my mind started to drift, Fate revealing itself to me in cryptic tones. Not once did I look into my own fate, for only a fool claims to know their own fate, even if that being is a god. Instead I looked at others, and the nature of fate as a rule. Keilan helped me quite a bit with this, unaware though he was of this fact. And many things began to reveal themselves to me.

In the third thousand, I recalled all my divine incarnations save five.

In the fourth, the last of my incarnations vanished, and I sunk deep into my meditations and power-gathering.

My will noticed the shadow moving, now, desperately rushing to build up its forces while my children did the same. But it was only one being compared to the entire might of the divinities within the Four Realms. Though the Shadow had more time to prepare, the big four would be ready for it.

More time passed, and I came to a realization. The future of the eight pillars laid itself out for me, each slot that needed filling sitting clear as day before my eyes. What was once a hint of an idea, a vision of the future, was now far more solid – and this war provided an opportunity for certain souls to grow, gathering the potential to fill these slots. Though that is all it was; potential, and many things would stand in the way of such a fate. Ironically, blocked by the fate of another.

Fate and destiny were odd things, it seemed. They were ephemeral and nebulous, more a result of one's own decisions than some grand design of my own making. In fact I had very little hand in "deciding" someone's fate because of this fact, only giving a hand here and there where it was needed. As such it could be changed, for nothing was written in stone.

Heat blossomed in my chest, radiating from me as my will took hold of the void shards floating within, forcing them together. My heart was the fire, filling it with passion. My soul was the forge, containing the heat, directing it to the shards. And my will was the hammer, beating them into place. Fate guided my hand. Balance drove my actions. That which I had to make formed within the depths of my soul, imbued with the powers of the void, and my own essence.

And, satisfied, I fell once more into the depths of my meditations, watching, amassing power, the depths of which strained against the fabric of my being, uncontrolled and uncontained. There would be a time to intervene. I could feel it in my bones. But it had to be perfect. So I waited.

I waited to hear the call of war.