

## RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

### 1.38 The Star

I watched Sol's memories, having not destroyed them, so I could understand his actions and motivations. Every passing second made me madder and madder at him; he'd felt cheated out of being the greatest thing in the sky, with the Lunar Star; he'd felt cheated by Elvira, who had rebuffed his attempts to woo her, more out of sense of duty than of a dislike of the sun god; his possessiveness of the Realms gradually increased, desiring nothing more than to have all of creation be his, to the point he grew to hate Gilles for representing that which avoided his light; and it all culminated with his finding of and approaching the Shadow.

The Shadow may have bound the two of them together with its dark magic, the two of them intent upon betraying each other in the end, but Sol had been ruthless in his suggestions.

He had been the one to suggest the suicide bombing, having taken inspiration for that from my detonation of my blood, and the explosive force of a sun. He had been the one to tell the Shadow to give droplets of my blood to other spirits and souls, to artificially elevate their power. Ironically, the Shadow seemed largely determined to shoulder the entire burden itself, leaving its minions to distract the gods while it devoured the Sun and destroyed the Tree. Without Sol, the battle would have been far more straightforward – though, ironically, I could see the Shadow having a greater chance to devour the Sun without him, too. Sol had intentionally lured it away from the Sun, after all, to protect his demesne.

His memories I made into a small book, and gave to Keilan for safekeeping in the archives of memories. The other half of his divinity, the part I didn't press into Fang Xu, I bundled up into a little ball and wrapped around the orb containing the Lunar Star. It was finally time to create the Star, now. And I had someone I needed to talk to about that.

I visited Celene. Or, more accurately, she came to me. Randus picked her up from the Physical Realm and brought her to my palace, the great doors slamming shut behind her. I stood at the far end of the grand hall, in front of the massive glass windows that gave me a perfect view of the

freshly-remade Realm Sun. Out of the corner of my eyes I could see the Four Realms, the gods – and many incarnations of mine – hard at work stabilizing and fixing things. I purposely did not turn to look at Celene as she approached, her foot steps shaky and light, echoing in the silence of my palace. Each step took longer than the last, as I was not restraining my aura as much as I normally would have. Only when she was twenty feet away and unable to step closer did I turn to face her.

Her legs gave out the moment the weight of my full attention landed upon her, driving her to her knees with head bowed. *Even an immortal is struck like this, in my presence.* I mused, clasping my hands behind my back. The chandeliers and torches that illuminated the large entryway, decorated with artworks made across all the Realms, flickered slightly as I studied the immortal woman.

“Rise, Celene,” I told her. Struggling, Celene lifted her head, but remained unable to meet my gaze. She looked terrible. Not physically; physically she looked as young and healthy as ever, such were the perks of immortality. But spiritually she had lost all will to live. Fang Xu’s death sat upon her shoulders like a mountain, weighing her down, and she did not have the strength or will to shake it off. Even that little red string her soul so desperately clutched was fading, despite it only having been a month since the battle. Such was the distance between them now.

“Walk with me.” I said, turning and heading down the hallway to my left, illuminated with a series of torches. Celene lingered for a moment, pausing before the windows to stare at the Realm Sun, before following a safe distance behind. “Beside me. We cannot talk with you so far away.” Although I colored my tone with amusement, my mood was anything but. I restrained my presence a little bit, and Celene walked faster, to walk beside me.

There was a point to all this. What I was going to offer her required strength of will, not the shell she was in danger of turning into.

My mind wandered a bit as we walked in silence, my steps echoless, hers heavy and thudding. We walked a fair way, past libraries and my workshop, beyond the doors of my meditation chamber – still cracked open, the interior of the room glowing a bright blue, as the stone had been saturated and transformed by the amassed power – and toward the opposite end of my home.

“I feel I owe you an apology,” the words just came out of my mouth, surprising even me. “The attention I placed upon you two put a large amount of pressure upon your souls, turned the nascent attention of the will of the realms upon you as well. It gave and gave, putting more pressure upon you until...well, here we are. One of you became the Sun. The other remains an immortal.” I said, shaking my head. Celene frowned, but didn’t say anything, my meaning going over her head.

I was tied to all things in the Four Realms, be it through karma, fate, or anything else. Things happened when I merely thought about it. Energy reacted. People sensed it. I had to be more careful with myself – it was a lesson I had to keep learning, especially as I continued to grow along with the Realms.

I had sought to aid the two of them, repeatedly. To keep them together. The attention of a being like myself is a great and mighty thing, and fate twisted upon itself in response to my inner desires. They likely would have reached immortality and remained together, even without my attention and desire to help. Now, because of it, they were being torn apart unless I did something drastic.

“You...sought to keep us together. You guided Fang Xu back to me, and me to him, all those years ago, didn’t you?” Celene suddenly asked, as we came to the end of the hall and a set of mahogany double-doors. I paused before them, and turned to look at her. She met my eyes, smiling sadly. “For that, I thank you.”

“You consistently found each other. And don’t thank me yet.” I warned, stepping through the doors. The vastness of the false void lay before us, the Four Realms now visible to the left, empty space and the shell of primordial chaos in front. Celene stood beside me, and for a moment, we were silent.

“Father Luotian,” she began. I glanced at her. ‘Father.’ Is that who she saw me as, right now? “Why did you bring me here?”

“The Four Realms need balance. That is one of the reasons the Shadow attacked when it did – I am about to complete a great work, and it sought to destroy it all before that happened.” I explained, slowly, pulling the Lunar Star out of my pocket. The orb glowed with a dim light, its radiance kept under control by my will and the container I had placed it in. “A Lunar Star. Something to balance the Realm Sun, which is only light and pride and heat. Fang Xu’s soul and personality will temper much of what made it problematic before, but a foil would do even more.” I said, and Celene’s gaze snapped up to my face.

I smiled at her. Now she understood why I brought her here. Why I continually pressured her with my aura, to force her to understand the weight of what I was suggesting. I expected to see light return to her eyes, color to her face, hope and joy in her heart. I did not expect to see sadness reflected in her expression, and pity. Her gaze drifted up along my horns, lingering on my face, specifically searching my eyes.

“I heard you were injured,” She said, softly. “I heard it in my dreams. And the wind told me, when I asked it about Fang Xu.”

“Yes, well. The power I had been building for the Star had to be contained somewhere so I could intervene. But I healed.” I said with a shrug. A lucky break is what it really was. I don’t want to have to keep surrendering body parts to protect the Realms, thank you very much.

“Where is Mother Statera? She didn’t...she wasn’t...injured, was she?” she asked, and I couldn’t help the small chuckle that escaped me. Silly mortals, and their insistence in thinking there were two of me.

“I am she, and she is me.” I said. “My full name is Statera Luotian. There is only one of me.” Celene’s eyes widened, and I pressed forward before she could ask more questions, extending the contained power of the Lunar Star to her. “This power, I now offer to you.” And I explained to her what it was. How it would remove and burn away parts of her soul, pressure her into becoming something more than what she was now. That she would, in many ways, become a different person – in a method far more severe than even reincarnation implied.

She stared at it for a long, long moment, once I had finished. Then gently reached out, and took it.

“It’s cold.” She muttered.

“Cold fire. Blue flames, a passion as deep as winter, not opposite, but different than the passion of an orange sun. Yes, it is.” I said. The nature of it was not lost on Celene, her own qi revolving around ice and snow. Cold did not necessarily mean frigid, emotionless. Some of the greatest moments of passion were held in winter. The Yin to the Sun’s Yang.

“Thank you,” she breathed, tears beading the corners of her eyes. I opened my mouth to speak, but once more she surprised me, throwing herself forward and wrapping her arms around me in a hug. The top of her head barely reached my chin, her horns, curling around the sides of her head, pressing into my chest awkwardly. My voice caught in my throat. “Thank you, for everything. For giving me the chance to chase after my idiot husband. For letting us be who we are, and find each other. You made the world, but you let us make it ours. *Thank you for loving us.*”

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes, the genuine confession catching me off guard, and I returned the hug.

“What else would I do?” I replied, shaking my head. For a moment longer she hugged me, then pulled away and looked at the orb once again. “I’ll give you six months to get your affairs in order, then we can do this.” I told her.

“No. We can do it now.” She said firmly, wiping her eyes, a bit of steel entering her expression. “I already said goodbye to my children and grandchildren. They knew I wouldn’t be coming back, when I told them I was leaving on a trip. What kind of parent would I be if I did not prepare them for my passing, immortal or no?” she asked. I felt a stab of guilt pierce my heart at the statement,

one I hid behind my smile. I had no intentions to die soon, but she did have a point, and there was always the possibility. My children would not be able to maintain the Realms without me.

“So be it,” I said, my words carrying with them a sense of finality.

“So, how do I...? Is it like a pill? I don’t really want to eat your...flesh? That would be patricide, or cannibalism, right?” she started. I laughed and shook my head, gently taking the orb back from her and putting one hand atop her head, pressing the condensed Lunar Star against her forehead. “Is it going to hurt?” she asked.

“Yes.” I told her. She took a deep breath, and I smiled as encouragingly as I could. “Here we go.” And pressed the star into her forehead.

She screamed in pain as her soul was seared, body all but disintegrating. With a single wave of my hand I pushed her out into the false void, blue light radiating from her, ever expanding. In a brilliant flash power exploded outward, the Moon, the Lunar Star, falling into orbit around the Four Realms opposite to the sun, a soft whitish-blue color, to the Sun’s burning orange. I stood there and watched it for a short time, hands clasped behind my back.

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Sweet, sweet relief flooded me in an instant, my shoulders sagging a little as the rest of the power needed to fuel the Lunar Star flowed out of me, that which was excess and leftover seeping out to go join the Four Realms, accelerating the healing process. There wasn’t much leftover, though, just a drop in the bucket compared to what had been used, as I watched the Star finish settling in place. The tugging sensation of the Sun eased – the weight of its existence, both spiritually and gravitationally, had been tugging the fabric of the Four Realms in a specific direction. There was a reason planets usually circled a sun, even if it was only because of mass. The addition of the Lunar Star provided a counterbalance for that – and that was among the least of its additions.

I sighed, feeling tension flee my muscles, but my attention quickly drifted. My gaze sharpened, peeling back the layers of reality to stare at Morgan, in its little cell. The light of the Lunar Star crept toward it, racing through its cell. It was hesitant at first, bracing for pain...that never came. I could see the confusion racing through it as it stood to the side of the cell, away from the central beam of light that was from the Realm Sun, yet unable to hide from the light of the lunar star.

Soft blues rolled over its fur, gentle and soothing, as compared to the harshness of the Sun. Morgan stared at it in wonder, cocking its head to the side as it moved about experimentally. My voice echoed across space to reach Morgan's ears.

*“See now? That wasn’t so bad.”* I whispered. Morgan’s ears twitched, eight eyes darting about, searching for me as it settled back down on its haunches, a complex expression on its muzzle. A myriad emotions roiled in its chest, not least of which was bitterness, and acceptance. I stayed watching Morgan for a time, judging its reaction, and ensuring that my assessment was not, in fact, incorrect.

This, in my opinion, was the greatest gift of the Lunar Star. Its light was softer, gentler. Designed for those who found the light of the Sun to be blinding. The “nocturnal” beings of the realms. As these creations weren’t just physical, but also spiritual, this new form of light represented a fundamental change to the Realms; just as the moon was spiritual. A guide in the dark; a promise that the light is still there. Though I had called Morgan’s punishment cruel, it was only cruel in the fact that there was little pity. Isolation was, in many ways, important, to let everyone’s heads cool.

But for now, I’d keep an eye on Morgan. Make sure everything was still going...alright. Even if I was mad right now, that didn’t mean I could neglect the Shadow – I doubt I’d even be able to stay away that long, not visiting, despite what I said earlier. There were just things I had to deal with right now.

A quick roll of my head had my neck cracking pleasantly, even as I settled my gaze firmly upon the Lunar Star, and the little red string binding them together.

It was up to those two now. They could keep their red string together, or let it fall apart as their souls were changed and remade – somehow, I didn't think it would matter much. They would stay together until the end of time. I turned my back to them. There was one more house call I needed to make.

Dei was dying. I could see it in him. His aura was that of a failed immortal – all the cultivation he had built up over the past ten thousand years was slowly fleeing him, and his subordinates knew it. The Shadow's miasma still coursed through his veins, eating away at his body and hastening his demise; yet he seemed to welcome death with open arms, denying even Reika's light as she healed what she could. The gods had been the cause of this mess; it was only right that, in many ways, they aided as best they could.

Lines had to be drawn. Not everything could be done for the mortals; the Realms still had to be healed and stabilized, after all, and preventing another collapse superseded most other things, but some aid could still be given. Many incarnations of mine were dedicated to that. This one was dedicated to visiting Dei.

I, however, did not go directly to him.

Once again, he found me.

I sat outside, on a veranda in his palace, a little table next to me and a glass of whiskey in one hand. A single, large ice cube rested in the glass, clinking merrily as I gazed up at the new Lunar Star, visible as a little more than a giant moon in the sky, bleeding pure, silver light onto Pangaea. The stardust of the Physical Realm filtered its light so it didn't look blue, I supposed, but I was pleased all the same.

His footsteps echoed loudly in my ears as he approached from the palace behind, gait firm and confident despite his weakening body. I didn't turn to him, even as he sat beside me with a grunt like an old man. Together we sat there, looking out over his city. It had only been eight months since the battle, and things were starting to go back to some semblance of normalcy. Buildings had been rebuilt. Walls fixed. The great chains that held up the flying island tempered and the formations redrawn. People still mourned the dead, and cultivators still healed the worst of their wounds, but the city was well on the path to full recovery.

I envied the mortals, in this case. How quickly they seemed to bounce back, from my perspective. Rubble remained, as did sadness and grief, but life continued...I would be fixing things for centuries, if not millennia to come, and only after that did the real work begin. The seeds of the Tree needed to be spread...

"All those times we met...they were all you, weren't they? The woman. The man. Now. You're the creator." He accused. I nodded, but did not reply. He let the conversation topic drop as we both looked out over the city.

"The restoration processes are going well," I said conversationally, casting those thoughts aside. Those were thoughts for other incarnations, or my true body. Not this one. I was here for Dei.

"Yes. Not that I've been much help. Whats-her-face, Allana, the avian girl, she's been handling most the efforts. Been trying to keep me holed up and surrounded by healers." He grumbled. I cast a glance over at him. His arm was bandaged up, almost immobilized up to the shoulder. Some of my power had stabilized his wounds when I had appeared behind him, but it wasn't quite enough. I could heal it. I had half a mind to offer it.

I didn't think he'd take me up on it. No, I knew he wouldn't.

"She means well." I said.

“Course she does. Don’t mean I want to spend my last days chained to a bed.” He said, shaking his head. “...already named her my successor. She’s a good egg. Be a better leader than I ever was.”

“Better is the incorrect word. You were the leader they needed you to be.” I corrected him, gently. He scoffed, plucking at the snow-white robe he had on with his good hand, then running said hand through his grey hair, touching his horns absently. We were silent for a second longer, and I waved my hand, procuring a second glass of whiskey. “Drink?”

“Normally I’d say yes, but Allana told the doc to keep me away from liquor and on this tea-only diet...hate to say I’ve grown to like the taste.” Dei said. I shrugged and poured the second glass into my own, taking a sip and savoring the burn.

“...those words you said, to Randus. ‘Keep the bridge.’ Why use them?” I asked suddenly. Dei shot me a look.

“Why do you ask?”

I swirled my drink in my glass, watching the way the amber liquid splashed against the ice. “...it’s nostalgic. An echo of a memory.” We sat in silence for a long, long moment, Dei’s breathing steady as he sat there, tugging on his beard but not answering the question. I was content with that. I don’t think he knew the answer.

“I want to be stronger, in my next life.” He said, finally, staring at the moon. “My entire life has been ‘not strong enough.’ Not good enough. I couldn’t prevent the fall of my first city. I couldn’t save Fang Xu – had to rely on you for that. Couldn’t even do anything to protect Manu Ti; even holding the Shadow felt like a fluke, possible only because of literal fucking gods helping me.” I listen to his lamenting words, but most importantly, I listened to his soul.

“Oh, so you admit gods exist now?” I mused.

“Doesn’t mean you’re not an asshole.” Dei snapped. I chuckled.

“Fair enough. Though I can’t help you with getting stronger.” I said.

“What, no reward for sacrificing myself to stop the Shadow?” Dei asked, half-joking.

“Not in the sense you’re thinking, certainly.” I said with a chuckle. A part of me wanted to say “there were no rewards for war,” but that was a little misleading. This situation was tangled. I understood that. Karma understood that. And now that Dei had proven his mettle...well. “I can give you a few hints at what awaits you, however. After your actions, your future is no longer so simple.” I allowed. He had proven himself a strong soul, and earned the respect of many. Dei’s full attention landed upon me as I took a sip from my glass, letting the burn of the fine, primordial whiskey, aged for ten thousand years, slide down my throat.

“If you are willing, if you wish to become stronger, you will be put through a growth phase. Eight lives, with this as the first. Each one with its own lesson, its own challenges, its own reason for existing – a cycle to build you up, until you reach that which is your peak.” I told him. It was the same deal that had been made for me, though I never got to see the end of that cycle and become a true god. Or did I? “And in the final life you will regain memories of all your past. You will no longer be Dei, but something and someone more.”

“I need eight lives to learn all I need, huh?” Dei mused. A small smile danced on his lips. “I’ll do it in four.” I blinked at him in surprise, then tossed my head back and laughed, slowly standing.

“Don’t tempt fate like that, Dei,” I warned, a small smile still dancing on my lips. He cracked a grin at me, letting out a wheezing laugh that devolved into a hacking cough – he covered his mouth with a clenched fist, and when he pulled it away blood stained his knuckles. My expression morphed into one of concern, and he scoffed, wiping his bloody fist on his pure-white robes.

“Be off with you.” He said. “For all the help you’ve given me, you still piss me off. Did you know that was one of the first thoughts I had, when we first met? I swear, someday I will punch you in the face.”

I smirked, leaning down just enough to get him to look up at me, life-force slowly fading, even as the fire in his eyes burned as bright as ever.

“I dare you to try.” I whispered. He coughed out a laugh, reclining back in his chair and looking up at the sky. Above, spirits danced, catching rays of moonlight and playing with them, twisting them into a multitude of shapes that reflected in the healing leaves of the Life-Giving Tree. His last thoughts echoed in his mind, words pressing themselves against his lips as he whispered a promise to his old friends, in the skies above. I did not listen, for it was not meant for me, but remained by his side all the same in his last moments. One last breath escaped him, and so died Dei, the failed Immortal through no fault of his own, his soul ascending to return to the Spirit River.

A scream echoed in the hall behind us and I turned, watching as Alanna, the little avian girl Dei had named as his successor, came running out of the palace to his deceased body. She did not see me as I floated into the skies above, watching not his body, but his soul, as it reentered the cycle of reincarnation.

“Kei,” I said, knowing the girl was watching. For a moment there was no response, only a light breeze blowing, then space warped and she was standing beside me, looking down. Her tails drooped sadly, ears folded atop her head. “You’ve been avoiding me.” She nodded in response, and I turned to fully face her.

“Grandpa...” she trailed off, and I responded by setting aside my glass – which floated in the air beside me – and wrapped both of my arms around her in a hug. She shuddered, shoulders shaking as she returned the gesture.

“You were amazing.” I whispered. “I am so very, very proud of you.”

“I – it wasn’t – I wasn’t strong – and then I said, to you – and *Dei*.” she stammered out, voice cracking. My heart went out to the sweet, playful girl; I wished there was something I could do to comfort her. But she had seen war, and it struck her harder than anyone had expected. Seeing her mother almost die, almost dying herself, struck with chaos...it was a lot for anyone. And she had proven herself to be far more powerful than anyone, besides myself and Reika, had expected. A few gods even called her one of the Big Four now – Big Five, they called it, though the title was incorrect. She had cemented herself as one of the Eight Pillars through her actions.

“Would you like some ice cream?” I asked her, instead of voicing any of that. She may have grown bigger, but she was still just a child in many ways. A bit of normalcy would do her good, I think, and she could talk about what she needed to in her own time. Whether it was to me, to her Mom, or anyone else, it didn’t matter. “I think you earned a little bit of a break, don’t you? Let’s go relax some, play in my garden.”

Kei was silent for a moment, tails and ears flicking as she tried her best not to cry. “...will *Dei* be ok?”

“Of course.” I told her. “He wouldn’t settle for anything less, and he made a promise to punch me.” At that, Kei chuckled a little, though it sounded a little wet.

“Ok,” she said finally, voice muffled by my robe. “If you have time, let’s go.” I patted the top of her head, right between her ears, and hummed, getting ready to teleport her and myself to my palace. “And grandpa?” she said, pulling away just slightly and looking up at me. “Thank you.”

I beamed down at her. “Always.” I said, even though I wanted to say sorry, sorry that everyone had to go through this. Kei just smiled, eyes wet with tears, and together we vanished into the sky.