

Every day she woke up and every day she dreaded having to come into work.

Not because the job itself was *bad* in any way; quite the contrary, as being in charge of an entire universe was a privilege afforded to a relative few outside the top gods themselves, and she was very happy to have been given the honour, especially for one of the instances of reality overseen by a member of the Judicial Council. It wasn't every day that a low-level demigod such as herself was allowed to even get near one of those things in *any* position of authority, so for Clara to sit in front of a wide array of monitors and be entrusted with keeping things in line was, ultimately, a dream come true.

But, just as one should never meet one's heroes, one's dreams should probably never truly be fulfilled, because after the initial wonderment wore off, the Arcanine began realising things weren't quite what they were cut out to be. She'd spent years looking up to those on the top of the pantheon, wondering what it would be like to have a universe of her own to nurture, to help grow and develop, to interact with and treat as her prized possession. As it turned out, however, none of the fantasies she'd cooked up in her head were anything *remotely* close to the truth, because the day-to-day running of one of those things was... surprisingly boring.

Clara had imagined great feats of mega-engineering, days spent agonising over the positioning of galactic strands, maybe years of carefully tending to a particular civilisation so that it may flourish above all others and enlighten those around it to a life of greater fulfilment. She imagined ruling a universe involved a great deal of active... well, *ruling*, where the deity in question would spend a large amount of time directly overseeing the goings-on of their assigned reality. As it turned out, not so much.

What surprised her the most was the ridiculous amount of paperwork that came with having to govern a single cosmos. Every single day, she had what felt like *dozens* of forms to fill, most of them needing nothing different from the other times where Clara had filled them out: universal constants and whether or not they'd shifted from acceptable ranges, matter density in critical areas, population numbers, galactic structure arrangements, even a handful of esoteric checks such as whether magic had spontaneously appeared from thin air without any obvious explanation. Most of them were filled out in the exact same manner day after day, to the point where the Arcanine had to, on occasion, go back to check if she'd actually made a mistake whenever there *was* something different to note.

It reached a point where Clara, after gathering enough courage to actually try and do something about what was happening (or *not* happening, as the case may be), decided to ask her supervisor if he didn't want to do something... exciting? New? Novel? *Something*, anything in fact, with the universe they were handed to rule over. Perhaps the worst part about the god's response was how there wasn't one: when Clara brought the subject matter up, he merely looked

back at her, seemingly confused as to why the Arcanine would want to “mess” with a “perfectly functional reality”.

It was only then that she came to understand the reality behind how most of the multiverse was *actually* run; she had expected a great many things, but instead, all she received was a move between one bureaucracy to a slightly larger one. After spending aeons trudging through low-level management and almost losing her mind keeping track of individual atomic count, Clara had come to believe that there *had* to be something more there. Perhaps as a means of psychological self-defence, she’d developed an earnest belief that the “full” gods *had* to be having *some* kind of fun with the whole thing; the idea that they were treating it like a job as well, that their lives were just as monotonous as hers was, boggled the mind, and led her down a pit of despair that the demigoddess had no intention of being in.

So for her to be promoted and given the honour of serving directly under one of the most important personages in the pantheon, only to have her worst fears confirmed, was not something Clara could deal with very well. To be given absolute power over a universe, only to turn around and *not* use it, or instead to wield it purely to keep things stable and observe from afar, seemed... wasteful. Like she had so much to do, like she *could* do so much, but wasn’t allowed to, because things weren’t broken and thus didn’t need fixing. It felt like a waste of her time, a waste of her talents, and quite frankly, a waste of a perfectly good paradise that could be made for the little ones in that screen she was staring at.

She knew the logic: one couldn’t just give them wings to fly to Heaven, lest the mortals get uppity and decide to usurp the divine order. Rubbish as far as Clara cared; not a single soul residing within any of the extant universes had the power to even so much as scratch a low-level bureaucrat down at the seldom-used Accountancy department, needing a great many permits and allowances before they could even *begin* to break through the divine barrier. Authority was handed down from on high, and ultimately, if They Who Shine decided that someone wasn’t worth belonging in the pantheon, they just wouldn’t. Clara herself remembered that her own application took a few millennia to go through the whole process, and she was one of the *fast* ones; on occasion, an unlucky aspirant would need to sit out for a thousand thousand lifetimes before they were allowed in!

Thus, to use the excuse of proactive self-defence was ludicrous, to not use a more forceful and insulting word. The mortals were no threat, which made Clara assume that the real reason was that everyone in the hierarchy had just gotten used to treating their job as, well, a *job*, and didn’t feel like rocking the boat as long as things worked. And, to be fair, they *did* work; perhaps the Arcanine was the one outlier who wanted to do more than was *necessary*, and everyone else saw in her what they could be seeing in themselves, hence why they tried their best to get her to shut up and not talk about revolution too much.

But for Clara, this wasn't about herself; it had never *been* about herself, but the little ones she'd been put in charge of. Every day she'd wake up and go to work, turn on her monitors, and see a whole bunch of problems that she could easily solve if she only had the permission to do so, problems which at times weren't even the little one's fault! Sure, a few of them were entirely on them, but what about those times when they *weren't*? What about the times when, say, a comet just smashed into a world that didn't have the technological means to defend itself, or a supernova bathed enough of its local region in radiation bursts that it killed off multiple civilizations? None of them had *ever* deserved such an ignominious end, and Clara would be *damned* if she left things standing like that.

Of course, the main issue there was access. She could very easily manipulate things within the universe; she *was* the maintainer for it after all. All she had to do was make a branch, make a few changes, pull it back in and let things sort themselves out; she was reasonably sure she could even do so without causing (too many) bugs, but the issue there was that it was *noticeable*. If she went through the proper channels, everyone would immediately notice, then start asking questions like "Why are you making changes to your universe without authorisation?" or "Why is everyone immortal and capable of flying through space on a whim?"

No, she had to be sneaky about it, and as much as she hated the idea of betraying her supervisor's trust like that, Clara hated the notion of apathetic stagnation even more. Better to be found out and disciplined than to let things carry on the way they always had been, that's what she was thinking; besides, all things considered and moral implications set aside, the Arcanine was *reasonably* certain she was good enough at her job to install a backdoor without anyone noticing. Truth be told, there was a reason why her file had been sped through the application process as much as possible for someone without any inside contacts, and it wasn't because of her shining personality (much); she was good at what she did and everyone knew it, and now she was finally going to live up to that "rebel with a cause" aesthetic she'd pursued for her entire mortal life.

Actually installing a backdoor, however, was far less glamorous than most would think: it boiled down to, once again, typing words on a keyboard to make the right sequence show up on the screen, followed by a long process of doublechecking to make sure she didn't leave any typos, then despairing when it worked the first time around instead of failing catastrophically with a cascade of bugs, thus *ensuring* it *had* to be broken in some new and esoteric fashion she hadn't foreseen before. This process repeated itself enough times for Clara's superstitions to be sated, after which she had a fully functional, all-access pass to the very coding of the universe she was supposed to be maintaining and *nothing else*.

From there, it was all down to her personal creativity. Having a way in like that allowed her to do things that wouldn't normally be possible, such as making sweeping alterations to universal constants without asking for prior authorisation *and* while bypassing the usual confirmation checks: rather than requesting permission and have someone stamp their approval, Clara could instead tweak the numbers on her own, push the changes in, and no one would be the wiser... that is, unless they bothered to check by themselves.

The thing was, most universes were self-contained, and the gods in charge of them didn't quite enjoy having other divinities snooping around what they saw as "their" work; for once, Clara couldn't blame them, as she'd be pretty pissed off as well if she opened up her work folder and suddenly saw a whole bunch of alterations she didn't personally put in there. Thankfully, this meant that there was very little actual oversight apart from the occasionally-mandated "shakedown", as it was called, and as long as a deity said everything was fine and the long-range scanners didn't disagree, then nothing would be done. In her case, she'd been entrusted with one of her supervisor's cosmoses, and after deliberately playing the part of the hyper-dutiful servant for a few months to flush out any suspicions, she had more or less free rein on whatever she did with the damned thing.

There was no chance in all the hells that her nominal superior would turn around and randomly start asking questions out of nowhere; they were far too busy with backroom politicking and power playing to take an active interest in actually doing anything with their universes anymore, hence why they were one of the few who'd begun "outsourcing" the job to some of the lower level demi-deities. Clara was thus more than happy with her assumption that she could do whatever she damn well wanted and no one would be any the wiser... assuming she didn't screw with things *too* much; even the divine bureaucracy, for all that it had ceased caring all that much, still had an entire department in charge of monitoring anomalies, forcing her to work within certain constraints.

However, said constraints were more than loose enough for the Arcanine to go out of her way to make some "proper" adjustments to the way the universe worked. First off, no more deadly gamma ray bursts: if a star big enough to set one off was scheduled to detonate when there were any living species within range, then probability would dictate the burst would simply miss any planet that might be carrying life. Technically speaking, it *was* a possibility: by it being a *possible* event, Clara could alter the odds and make sure that best desired outcome was always achieved; at the same time, she could allow for some variation, such that a few of those bursts would come *close* to hitting an inhabited planet, giving those little ones living there incentive to work towards protecting themselves from any such future events.

Next was stability: couldn't have a universe just *end*, it had to be made to endure! Plenty of realities out there were eternal and simply had their constituent elements recycled through

whatever exotic means their attendant deities decided to use, so it was really just a matter of slowly adapting the cosmos she was altering to fit the mould; mercifully, it was close enough that not much recoding was necessary, though she *did* have to get rid of a few chunks of it, hopefully not enough that it would set off any alarms.

Once that was taken care of, the next step was making sure the many disparate civilisations living within that universe would live for long enough to be able to meet one another. Now, admittedly, this part was the trickiest: self-destruction was an issue, yes, and there was always the risk that even if everything went right, a sentient species might decide that all others were nothing more than food to be devoured, or chattel to be enslaved. It was important to curb these unfortunate impulses and lead these peoples away from what would be more destructive paths, towards more *constructive* ones; couldn't have a swarm of proverbial locusts flying around eating everything, that just wouldn't be nice to everyone else.

She *could* just intervene directly, but that would *absolutely* set off so many alarms that the only way she'd get away with it would be if she deliberately made a disaster happen that was on a large-enough scale that it justified a deity coming in and physically altering things within the universe itself. Seeing as she had absolutely no intention of harming the little ones under her care, that was *not* an option as far as Clara was concerned; sadly, this left nothing but "waiting it out" as the only available course of action when it came to seeing how civilisations developed, though, to be frank, the Arcanine had nothing but time on her hands. And besides, having to wait meant she had the opportunity to... embellish things.

Truth be told, Clara wasn't altogether innocent. She might play the part, and deliberately act in a way that made it look like she had no interest whatsoever in anything of a more sexual bent, but the truth was, there were a lot of ideas swimming around in her head that never saw the light of the day, and *good for that* as far as she was concerned. Better that those thoughts remain unseen and unheard rather than risk anyone actually approaching her and making them happen; Clara was beyond terrified at the prospect of living out any of her fantasies, knowing for a fact she'd trip over herself and be unable to contain the boundless energy that only dozens of millenia's worth of self-denial could produce.

But there, in her workspace, surrounded on all sides by so many monitors that they occasionally had their total count changed when she wasn't looking, the Arcanine could live out these thoughts in a way that almost seemed consequence-free. It wasn't, and she was going to be found out the *moment* she tried, she just knew it, but as she stared down the population schemata and thought to herself how much *bigger* she could make them... well, it was hard for her to say no to the side of herself that really, *really* wanted to see how far she could take things.

There was a giddy look on her face when Clara began altering sliders. Lucky for her the standard system was so easy to use: *everything* had a slider, up to and including mental traits and the like, but those were a bit too much for her to really use. No, she was more interested in the physical aspects, such as how *wide* people could be, how much fat they could carry in a few specific spots, how much weight they could put on before it started to affect functionality. Production rates, heights, even number of limbs and assets, all of them could be altered, and thus, all of them -should- be altered... for the little ones' sake, of course.

She wasn't doing it for herself, no, Clara was doing it so her precious charges could enjoy life to the fullest (and quite literally so)! She was doing it because, after a whole lifetime of living under the same conditions as always, mortals within her universe *deserved* to be given a little something extra. They *deserved* to be big, and bountiful, and jiggly all over, and so horny and aroused all the time they just wanted to fuck all day long; and above all, they deserved to live in a universe that would *let them* do such a thing, nevermind the consequences for it. And she, she would be there, presiding over it all, watching as her pet universe progressed into a state of absolute perfect-

“Excuse me, Clara, what are you doing?”

The door opened so quietly she hadn't even noticed it. But that voice... she recognised that voice.

“I was coming to check in for something I forgot at the office, and wouldn't you know it, I could barely recognise the place once I looked in. Would you mind *explaining* yourself?”

Welp.