

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

3:42 Nothing Bad Happens Today

Elvira approached me, mere hours before I was to get ready and finalize the preparations, get everyone in place, everything ready. We had less than twenty-four hours before the One World became visible. Less than a day. Everyone was settling in of their own accord, everything had been fine-tuned and checked, and I was going over everything obsessively when she arrived in a flash of white.

I had assumed she was going to take me to my position, to wait.

I was wrong.

“I’m pregnant,” she told me with a brilliant, beaming smile, despite the nerves running through her. I stood, frozen in place, part of the defensive formation clutched in one hand as I gawked at her, looking down at her stomach. “I wasn’t sure, but, with everything happening, I figured I should tell you now. Gilles and I just confirmed it. You’re going to be a grandparent again.”

I squealed, leaping forward and wrapping her in a tight hug, spinning her around and laughing in the face of such joy. Another addition to the family! It didn’t matter that we were facing calamity; I would ensure nothing bad happened today.

That little thought allowed me enough comfort to enjoy the announcement for what it was.

“Elvira, I am so happy! I am going to spoil that child rotten, just like I did Kei,” I told her. She giggled, hugging me back, wings enveloping me.

“Just don’t do anything stupid, so he can grow up knowing his grandpa,” she whispered back. I squeezed her tighter, opting to ignore the concern for me there.

Then I pulled away, and, grinning, met her eyes.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I told her. “Thank you for telling me before all this, and not after.” The timing may be weird, but...well. I’m happy to know now.

...a grandparent, once again. I laughed and joked with Elvira as we headed to our places. It was about time my kids started having families of their own, and I was all too happy to welcome another member of the family; this time, a soul that was not created based off of my own, but of Elvira and Gilles. A true grandchild. The third; Kei, Sequoia, and now this future little one.

What a joyous day!

Curie appeared before Yueya’s chambers with Alala at her side, radiating fury. She had no idea what her other third was thinking – they were hours away from the Four Realms becoming visible, maybe even *minutes*, and her entire third of the defensive structures was blank. Utterly dark, like she hadn’t even booted them up yet; and, to top it off, she hadn’t been responding to either her or Alala.

To not have appropriate communication during such a crucial time was beyond irresponsible, and Curie was more than merely livid.

“I’m going to tear her eyes out,” she growled out, putting her hands on the doors to Yueya’s chambers. The great oaken constructs resisted her as she shoved, the magic woven into their being too much for her comparatively weak, noodle arms. Strength was Alala’s strong suit, and Yueya’s to a lesser degree. Curie scowled deeper, shoving harder, the doors groaning a little. Alala crossing her arms.

“We should get back to our places,” she said nervously, eyes flicking skyward to peer through Yueya’s ceiling. “We can feel each other through the bond, we don’t need to check on her. She’ll be ready. She is ready,”

“We cannot guarantee that,” Astraea, the goddess of stars, whispered, appearing in a flash of silver light. The little goddess, so weak compared to some of the others yet still somehow Yueya’s favorite, had her hood up, her silver eyes shining through the darkness of her hood. “Something is wrong,” Curie huffed and rolled her eyes, glaring at Alala to help her.

She acted dismissive of Astraea, but in truth the little goddess’s words resonated within her core, plucking at some string of doubt within her. Yueya hadn’t been acting any different lately, so why did that worry her?

“Fine. Let’s make this quick, I don’t want to be off-station when the Four Realms appears,” Alala grumbled, placing both hands on the door and *shoving*. The wooden constructs groaned as they swung inward, scraping against the floor, hinges groaning as if they hadn’t been opened in eons. The interior was dark. The only source of light came from the glass dome in the ceiling, a shaft of golden sunlight streaming down to illuminate only the very center of the room, where Yueya’s unmade bed was, like she hadn’t bothered to fix the sheets. It was characteristic of her.

Art projects, untouched or covered in dirty sheets, lined the circular room, and Curie's stomach twisted in apprehension. Everything felt like Yueya, the unfinished projects, the thoughts floating in the air, but it still felt...off, somehow. As if something was wrong. She glanced at Astraea while Alala strode into the room uncaring. Had the star goddess not said something, she may have not been able to pull herself back in time to notice the subtle difference in Yueya's magic and power saturating the room. Such was her focus and anxiety about what was to come; she still feared Statera Luotian would do something rash to protect his children, but actually talking to the god had soothed most of those worries.

Now, she worried about something else.

“Yueya!” Alala barked, words echoing in the relatively empty room. “Where ya at, girl?”

“Something is very wrong,” Astraea whispered, dropping back a step. Curie frowned. She could feel her other self right there, in the room, but –

“Alala!” Yueya’s voice echoed out from below, panicked and breathless, like she had been working out. “What are – I’m fine!” Curie felt panic and confusion through their connection; a strange cocktail of emotions that could have been written off as nerves about the coming collision, perhaps why Curie and Alala were out of place. Curie frowned deeper as she circled around the bed, spotting a little hatch in the floor that was wide open, letting the light from above spill down into the chamber below. Curie and Alala both peered down into it, spotting Yueya – sweat beading her brow, red hair matted to her forehead, breathing labored.

Her hair looks redder. Curie noted. She’d seen her hair growing darker and darker, but now it was almost crimson in color. Almost like –

“What are you doing here? You should be – I just – what are you doing out of position!?” Yueya demanded, twisting her hands nervously, shifting from foot to foot in that way she did when she was caught off guard and needed to lie. Curie and Alala looked at each other, then back down at

their other third. A conversation of multitudes ran between all three in the matter of nanoseconds, Alala convincing herself that Yueya was fine, while Curie only became increasingly suspicious.

“I’m coming down,” she said, stepping forward and slowly descending into the circular underground chamber. The air down there was stale and smelled faintly of incense. Butterflies flitted about in the little space, odd decorations lining the rounded walls. Paintings of red butterflies, sculptures of people, a little painting of Statera Luotian, both male and female version; they were made in a style that felt distinctly...old. Like she had revisited her old stuff. Yueya was panicking, wringing her hands, her eyes darting about as Curie’s feet touched down.

Suspicion swirled in her chest, and she opened her mouth to speak, only to freeze when she sensed it.

You could always hide things from yourself. That was part of not realizing who you were. But Curie had not realized that one could hide something of this magnitude from herself.

“Yueya, what have you done?” she breathed as Astraea descended behind Alala, the illusion shattering.

A crib stood in the far corner; a babe swaddled in cloth resting within. Yueya’s eyes filled with tears but Curie held up a hand, sensing the energy radiating from the little one. It made sense now. Why the connection between the One World and the Four Realms had solidified so hard that Curie could not longer sever the connection. She’d had a child. A child between herself and Statera Luotian.

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But why hide it? Why not be honest?

That question niggled the back of her mind as she stepped forward – only to find Yueya standing in the way. She looked everywhere but at Curie, left, right, up, down, even glancing at Alala, but never directly at Curie. She folded her arms across her chest.

“Explain, Yueya,” the problem was that she shouldn’t have to explain. They should have already known about this – the fact that she was able to hide it was alarming in and of itself. That she felt the need to, doubly so. Her distrust, her suspicion echoed through their link hard enough that even Alala flinched at the self-reprimand, mind and body unified against the heart. “I said explain!”

“I’m sorry,” Yueya sobbed, tears pooling in her eyes as her hands trembled. She sank to her knees, covering her face in her hands as she sobbed – regret, doubt, fear, all of that and more echoed through her and into Curie. Such were their strength she had to steady herself as Yueya sobbed, tears streaming down her face, loose robes pooling about her knees as she shook. Alala immediately knelt, laying a hand on Yueya’s shoulder and looking up at Curie in confusion and concern. “I tried – I tried to hold it back. But it had to come today, it wouldn’t not. I – I couldn’t – I’m so *sorry*,”

It came today. She gave birth today, of all days. Coincidence? I think not. Curie figured, looking over at the crib and the baby slumbering peacefully within. Divinity rolled off of the young one in palpable waves, yet its growth was subdued, withheld, not nearly as powerful as Curie would have expected from the offspring of two origin deities. Curie’s frown deepened. Yueya called the child *it*.

“Yueya,” she began, but that third of herself was babbling now.

“It couldn’t have come earlier – I tried, I really tried, I tried to delay it too – but I just – I’m so *sorry*. I don’t know how it happened,” she sobbed, hands buried in her face. “I just – I couldn’t help but think about *family*, and I had some of Statera’s essence, and I just, it just, I *couldn’t*, it took everything I had just to protect the little one, and I couldn’t focus to see what was happening...”

“Curie,” Astraea warned, but Curie dismissed her, doing her utmost to parse out what Yueya was saying. The puzzle piece was right there, she just needed to – her gaze snapped to Astraea as the star goddess flashed her power, standing beside the crib as she was. The baby babbled something, a flash of red darted in the corner of Curie’s eye, and *fear* echoed in her soul. Ah. So that’s what it was.

Fuck.

She looked down at Yueya, whose head slowly turned up to look at her. For one brief, terrible moment, she saw her old self in those eyes. All bright and intelligent, filled with creative joy that saw the beauty in all things. An intelligence that rivaled Curie’s own, but emotional and creative instead of book-smart.

She had almost forgotten what that woman had looked like. Had the change been truly so subtle they had missed something this big?

Yueya opened her mouth, red *rot* coating the back of her throat, fungus-like roots seeping down from her abnormally red hair to run along her temples and, in a final act of defiance, uttered one word. “Run,”

Curie threw herself backwards with all her might, while Alala, beautiful, brave, stupid Alala hurled herself at Astraea and the child. Yueya screamed – a haunting, echoing cry of death and despair as foul red rot burst out of her body in a pulsating, grasping mass. Lances arced at Curie only to be blasted away by a shield of crackling lightning, giving her just enough time to shoot out of the small room and into Yueya’s bedchambers. Alala had Astraea slung over one shoulder as she desperately dodged the grasping limbs, her powerful body digging through stone to reappear in the bedchambers and meeting Curie’s eyes.

Neither said a word as they shot out of the room, slamming the doors shut behind them, Curie flicking on a magic seal that cut the entire room off from the rest of the world – a stopgap measure at best. Alala spun as the doors shook, the Rot already eating away at the magic seal, Yueya's screams still echoing in her ears.

It felt like an entire piece of her had been carved away. What she had once been was all but destroyed, an aching, gaping hole in her heart throbbing painfully, drawing her attention in, leaving no room for other thoughts – she jerked her head, snapping her attention away from that obsessive train.

“Shit,” Curie glanced at her hand, a spot of red blooming on the back of her palm. She had not time to waste – in a single, desperate move, she lopped off her arm at the shoulder. Golden blood spurted from the stump, quickly staunched as Curie’s power wrapped around it. The red dot shrieked its fury, digging into the discarded limb’s flesh, vanishing entirely from view and senses. Astraea gaped, the star goddess clutching the babe close to her chest.

Curie eyed the baby suspiciously, but...no. She was understanding now, what Yueya had been trying to say. The rot was obsession, it was insidious. She had spent all her power protecting the child from the rot, without even realizing she had been infected. When had she been infected? How had that happened? Curie bit her lip.

“We need to contact Statera Luotian,” she said, already backing away from the door. Astraea followed close behind, the oaken mass shuddering.

“I think I’m done for, Curie,” Alala said softly, resting her back on the doors as they shuddered and groaned. Curie’s gaze snapped to her other self, fear bleeding to concern, shifting to outright horror. A red mushroom pulsed on Alala’s shoulder, roots already digging into her chest, feeding on her energy and divinity. The tanned, muscular woman winced in pain.

“We have to get you to my lab – “

“No time. It’s already too late, Cu,” Alala winced, reaching up and tearing off the mushroom, roots and all, golden blood dripping from holes in her shoulder. Yet spores likely remained. If even one speck remained within her...Curie desperately reached within her robes with her remaining arm, hand grasping around the teleportation shard that would take them both to her most secure facility. “You need to get word out. I don’t have much time, I would bet, before this thing takes me over; it was already inside me, dormant. The vines got me good, woke everything up. I know my body, and this doesn’t feel right. Fuck, it used our obsessions against us; Statera Luotian, the defenses, the calamity...snuck in while we were waiting,”

Curie’s throat clenched, a whine of distress escaping her as she took a single step forward, toward Alala – the woman bared her teeth.

“GO! Now, Curie! The damn thing’s breaking through, and I still have some fight left in me! While you still have time, get to one of your safe houses! If it gets you, too, it’s all over!” she barked, the doors rattling, the seal fading and cracking beneath its might.

“But, we could fight, we could burn it together, it only has Yueya’s power not all of us,” Curie stammered, but she already knew what she had to do. The teleportation shard cracked ever so slightly in her grip while Alala grinned. They couldn’t take the risk. Not when they didn’t know how deep Alala’s infection ran; she could already feel it eating away at her other self’s sanity.

“Protect the kid for me, yeah?” Alala grinned. Curie clenched her jaw as her barrier spell began to shatter, the wooden doors that had stood since the dawn of time, the doors Yueya had spent eons carving with nothing but a chisel and passion in her heart, cracked and groaned beneath the pressure. Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes, and she crushed the teleport shard.

She, Astraea, and the child all appeared in a sterile white facility hidden deep underground, sensors blaring alarm as if she didn’t already know the danger. A choked sob tore its way from Curie’s throat, her vision blurring from pain and anguish both as she felt Alala purposefully sever her connection; just in case the Rot could get through that way. She wouldn’t know her sister self’s

fate. She felt empty, part of a whole, a shell of who she was; her own mind felt wrong without Alala's joy, and Yueya's constant wonder to temper her rationality.

"Mistress Curie," Astraea's voice was soft, and filled with horror. Yueya's gaze snapped to her, the rational part of her brain wondering how she, of all gods, had managed to discover Yueya's infection...too late as it had been. The other part of her brain followed Astraea's finger, to the large screen that depicted the One World. This facility had been designed not as her main workshop – that had too many spores of the Rot within it, for testing, and she couldn't take the chance – but as a monitoring station to keep an eye on the fractures.

It was a safehouse, essentially, a bunker for if the One World collapsed so they could start again. A million tiny seeds in stasis.

She had not expected to have to use it this way.

The map glowed red, dots of rot blooming and growing with sudden power as it fed off of Curie's other selves abilities, its treachery finally revealed. She swallowed thickly, hand slamming onto the control panels, reaching out to as many gods as she could.

It was hell.

Everyone could feel the change. Some were already infected – she could hear it in their voices now that she knew what she was looking for. Others were panicking. Curie barked out orders, sent out a universe-wide alert, but even then it would not be enough. She could almost see the collapse of their reality happening in real-time; the rot was taking over the defense structures, its intelligence clearly far greater than the shapeless, hapless blob that she had initially taken it for.

Or perhaps it was stealing intelligence from her sister-selves...the thought hurt to much to even consider, the wounds to her mind, heart, and soul still raw.

Astraea hummed a soothing tune to the baby, her silver starlight wrapping around the little one, checking for infection just in case. It slumbered peacefully, echoes of Yueya's true self clinging to the little one's skin, protecting it.

Curie hadn't even had time to look at the little one, see its features.

There has to be something I can do. Something. Curie tapped away on the screen, searching for an out, panicking without her two balances there to keep her steady. This facility was cut off. Safe. If the rot got ahold of her power...or worse yet, if it got ahold of Statera Luotian's power...

She looked up at the ceiling, toward where the Four Realms would appear. And she despaired. *I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry.*