

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

1.12 Mortals

“Where are all these dark spirits coming from?” I groused, running a hand through my hair as I stared at the dark thing weaving between the trees. It wasn’t a small spirit, either. Unmatured spirits didn’t have cohesive shapes, often appearing as little more than malformed blobs of color, while matured ones often selected a form. This one appeared as a demented squirrel, racing through the trees and dense undergrowth as it navigated the spirit realm.

More floated in the sky above, dancing above the leafy treetops, vastly outnumbering the benign or good spirits. The leaves of the Life-Giving Tree waved and rustled overhead, giving the entire sky a greenish tint, bits of blue peeking out from between the branches. Honestly, the leaves were so big most mortals couldn’t even recognize them as such, the raw amount of life energy they exuded almost blinding to me.

In the past thousand years since I’d introduced the Fae to the Four Realms the number of dark spirits had quintupled, and that number had only increased when my children introduced their Peoples a year or two ago. Whether they were regular spirits that got themselves entangled in some negative karma or were born of negative karma, it didn’t matter. There were more than I wanted. More than there should be. Almost as if something was fueling their growth.

I frowned hard, watching the forest, both in the physical and spiritual sense. Regular animals darted about, tree spirits watching me curiously as I examined them. There was a niggling feeling in the back of my mind, a thought that refused to be grasped. Whatever it was, it didn't want to be seen, heard, or found – I could almost touch it, when I really focused on it, almost push through the veil to see the Shadow –

“State your business here,” the guard said gruffly, breaking me out of my thoughts. The feeling slipped away as I turned my attention to the city guard, a young woman with sandy blonde hair and short horns, glaring at me as she was. I blushed a little at my distraction and cleared my throat, adjusting my robes awkwardly. Behind me a line of Fae stretched, waiting to enter the city.

“Just visiting,” I said with a shrug. This was only a sliver of my being, my powers suppressed enough that mortals wouldn't cower at the mere sight of me. It had taken me a long time to get it right, and now I was able to send little incarnations to visit my People in a more physical form. More specifically, I was visiting the first true city my people had ever built, on Pangaea.

Cradle was comfortable, they were still mostly tribes even if the people had proliferated quite a bit. Pangaea was different. The powerful spiritual beasts and more dangerous environment made it harder for the Fae to live, so they adapted quicker, grew quicker, and found greater riches. Alchemy had already

been discovered here, metal was being forged, and cultivation techniques were advancing by leaps and bounds. It was high-risk, high-reward. The fruits of which lay before me.

Walls at least a hundred feet tall, made of a tan stone and lined with torches. Crude formations lined them, guiding the natural qi of the land to strengthen the walls and cleanse the qi itself. Tall wooden gates of a dark wood stood slightly open at the entrance, marred only slightly by the attacks of beasts the Fae pissed off – or that just thought they saw an easy meal.

“Just visiting, eh?” The guard said suspiciously, tapping the butt of her spear on the ground and adjusting her leather armor.

“Don’t mind her,” the other gate guard said, a green haired man with thick muscles and a kind smile. His cultivation was clearly higher than his companion’s, and I saw little earth spirits floating about his head happily. His eyes glowed with the light of magic, the spirits helping him truly see rather than just look. It was a fascinating technique, and though I wondered what he saw when he looked at me, I restrained my curiosity. “She’s just suspicious with all the illusion beasts that’ve been hanging ‘bout recently. Head on in, welcome to the city.” I nodded my thanks to the young man and sauntered my way inside, mentally frowning.

Illusion beasts. That would be Reika's fault. Whatever she was doing in her tree, that secret project of hers, was prompting spirit beasts all over Pangea to start picking up illusion magic – she had an innate connection with them, but for whatever reason didn't really pursue it. I smacked my lips a little. Illusion magic was fine and dandy, I just thought it tasted weird.

"Oh," I said suddenly, remembering something and turning back to the guards. The man shot me a curious look, his companion carefully looking through a merchant's wares – for dangerous objects, I could tell by the way her emotions fluctuated. "Don't rely too much on those eyes of yours. You may be in the second stage of cultivation already, but the trickier illusion beasts will find a way to slip by nonetheless."

"I...will keep that in mind, Senior," he said respectfully, bowing his head hesitantly. I smiled and nodded, good deed done for the day as I wandered deeper into the city.

The sights and smells were something to behold. It stank of refuse, as it always tended to in cities, though hints of spices from food stalls cut the stench. Tall buildings of the same tan stone as the wall rose high into the sky, streamers of colorful cloth hanging between buildings. Cultivators of all different stages wandered the streets, some carrying weapons, others daily objects. I had yet to really name the stages of cultivation myself, partly because I saw no need and partly because no one had traversed the path far enough to really make a difference yet. And the Fae's thoughts...

It reminded me of why I hated the city. Proud as I was that my People were able to accomplish this, it was a mess for me to see through, especially with my powers limited as they were.

Thousands of emotions roiled all over the place, visible to me as every spectrum of light imaginable, and some unimaginable. They blurred into a sort of haze that fell over the city like smog, effecting everyone that walked through them as residual auras. Karmic strands stretched everywhere like a spiderweb, and spirits darted about through it all. Dark spirits feasted on the negative energy created by negative emotion. Benign or good spirits tried to guide people, and enjoyed the positive energy created by positive emotion. Though most of the benign spirits were starting to gather around me, enjoying the reprieve my aura provided from the chaos of the city while only clouding my vision further.

I rubbed my face, resisting the headache that threatened to bloom in the back of my skull. What a mess.

Bad thought. This is good, this is progress. I chided myself, heading toward the central palace. I hadn't found who I was looking for yet, but...

Hm. That's interesting. I turned my attention to a gathering of people, near the very center of the city, my feet absently wandering that way. Buildings opened up to a massive central square, backing up to a large palatial building in the background. A few people stood on a wooden stage addressing the crowd, one of whom I recognized as the current City Lord.

She was a grey old woman, practically more wrinkle than woman, with horns whittled down to nubs and wearing fine gold robes. Her karma told me she had lived a fairly righteous life, managing to stay on the straight and narrow for the most part; though she was nearing the end of her lifespan now. When she was reborn, she'd likely make it to the Heaven Realm. Maybe she'd even choose to be one of Elvira's People? The younger Peoples could use guides with strong karma.

Beside her stood a much younger man, whose cultivation base was like a light in the dark compared to all the others present. His hair was dark as the night, his horns long and thick, and he stood with shoulders squared and a serious expression on his already stern-looking face. A spear was held tightly in one hand, and his gaze scanned the crowd impassively before landing on me and stalling. We held eye contact for a moment, and I smiled.

"...I hereby formally announce my successor as Dei. Although he will not officially assume the mantle of City Lord until my passing, treat him as such until that time." The woman rasped out, sending a ripple of murmurs through the crowd. A cheer went up from the crowd and I clapped alongside the others, breaking eye contact with Dei as I resumed my search. I knew they

were around here somewhere...why did I insist on doing this the hard way again? Right, because I wanted to “experience the city for myself.”

Stupid main body. Even though I agreed, it was still stupid and dumb and all the energy and emotions were giving me a headache.

With a grumble I stepped away from the crowd, acutely aware of Dei's eyes still on me as I slipped down an alley. Red string, red string, oh where art thou? Ah, there it is!

“I see you,” a raspy voice said, from between a stack of crates in the alley. I paused, keeping my mind on where I'd seen the red karmic string floating in the sky, and turned toward the beggar that knelt there. The old man was snaggle-toothed and dirty, dressed in rags, but stared at me as if he knew who I was. He certainly thought he did. “Pretty lady, descend from the stars, here to keep an eye on us little ‘uns.”

...ok, maybe he did know me. Man, almost I forgot what it was like to not be able to see a mortal's thoughts at a glance. Or maybe I was just unfocused. And what did he mean by ‘pretty lady?’ I glanced down at myself.

Huh. This incarnation was a female. The more you know.

“Is that so? Keep on your path, young one, you’re doing fine,” I praised, kneeling next to him and laying a hand on the beggar’s knees. My energy soaked into him and he let out a sigh of relief, aches and pains vanishing in an instant. He wasn’t as destitute as he appeared, his karma better than it looked at first glance. In fact, if I were to hazard a guess, his soul had willingly chosen this sort of life to burn off some bad karma...and only kept up the lifestyle once it was gone as some sort of ill-perceived penance. Not all souls were strong enough to do that, and not make a mistake. Good for him. *Good* for him.

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He grinned at me as I stood back up, winking and tossing him a loaf of bread – created from nothing – as I continued on my way. Following the red string to its source took longer than I would have liked, weaving between buildings and through crowds, following it through a busy marketplace that nearly distracted me with all the pretty jewelry and delicious-smelling food, but I was all too pleased to see where it was when I got there.

A little café, or what passed for one here, with sweet-smelling pastries and delicious smelling tea. Not that the tea would be able to hold a candle to the stuff Randus made, but still. And there, sitting at a table just outside the main restaurant, were two star-crossed lovers.

The first two Fae I had ever created, bound by a red string of fate. They had chased each other across lifetimes, across planets, to stay together, and had chosen to be bound this way. I couldn't help but find the whole thing adorable, sucker for romance as I was. Quietly I slipped into the café, ordering a tea and one of their pastries as I observed the couple. The woman was a touch older, with a stronger cultivation base and a serious air about her. But she melted every time the man, younger and wire-thin, yet still pretty in his own way, told a corny joke or fed her bits of his food.

I couldn't do anything for them. Not personally, and not that I even needed to. Direct intervention could do more harm than good, but...I still wanted to watch them. This was the first red string of fate to have ever appeared in my Realms! Of course I wanted to pay attention to them.

But in the meantime, I mused, leaning back in my chair and letting the sounds of the city wash over me. I should deal with my little stalker.

His name was Dei, and he was meant to be the next city lord. Which meant he had a responsibility to his people to protect them from threats both foreign and domestic, even if he was the strongest being for leagues around. No spirit beast could challenge his might, no cultivator could match the depth of his understanding. Or so he had thought, until he'd seen that woman in the square.

Her hair was black as night and touched with grey, her eyes an emerald green that pierced through him so cleanly it was like he didn't even exist. There had been no evidence of the woman's cultivation, no evidence of her *power*, but he knew strength when he saw it. Especially casual strength, like hers, the kind that didn't need to be proven. He'd spent his entire life honing his sense for such things, from when he was a boy in a tribe, surviving in the thick of spirit beast territory, to making his way to the City and clawing his way to where he was now. He knew power.

Which was why he feared the woman. Which was also what pissed him off. He *hated* feeling small.

"That's her?" he asked the guard beside him, a muscular man with green hair. They currently stood together in an alley just outside one of the main streets, looking at a café the woman currently sat at. This late at night, with the sun having set and the leaves of the Life-Giving Tree glittering in the dark night sky above, still reflecting the light of the sun, few people were still out and about. But the woman clearly paid well if the café owners were willing to let her sit at an empty table for as long as she had, staring off into his city.

It had taken far too long to find her for his taste.

“Yes, sir, Dei, sir,” the guardsman stammered. “Just – I don’t think she’s a threat. The earth spirits love her in a way I’ve never seen before. They weren’t just happy to see her, they were overjoyed. That’s why I let her in without much fuss.”

“You’re not in trouble.” Dei assured the man. In fact, he’d made the objectively correct decision. Had that woman decided to make a scene about some perceived slight, and if she was as powerful as he suspected, then the guard might’ve been dead before anyone realized. “I’m just going to make sure everything’s...alright.”

And with that, he marched right across the empty street, weaponless and shoulders squared, drawing glances from bystanders left and right.

“That’s twice now in one day someone saw something in me when I didn’t want them to. I’m out of practice,” the woman said as he sat down across from her, meeting her eyes. She wore a wry smile on her admittedly pretty face, projecting an aura of calm and peace. Touches of grey danced through her hair tastefully, reminding Dei less of age, and more of stars in the night sky. “Can I help you?”

Dei couldn’t explain it, but he had the inexplicable urge to punch her in the face. Something about her just *pissed him off*.

“I’m wondering if I can help you,” he countered, crossing his arms and leaning back in the chair. One of the café owners glanced at him from behind the wooden counter of his shop, but Dei waved him off before he could come over. The woman nodded as if that explained anything, taking another sip of her still steaming-hot tea.

She’d been working on that same cup for nearly forty minutes now, ever since Dei found her again. Not once had he seen her refill it. So why was it still full and steaming hot?

“No, I don’t believe you can. I found what I was looking for, but...well, there’s not much I can do for them. You, on the other hand, come to me looking like a little lost puppy. I just have to wonder if you even understood what you were doing when you approached me?” she drawled slowly, tone without judgement despite her mocking words. Dei scowled and leaned forward, clasping his hands on the table.

“A lost puppy? I am the most powerful cultivator for leagues around, and I’ve never seen anyone like you before. You are welcome in my city so long as you don’t cause trouble.” He ground out, doing his utmost to keep his tone neutral. Why was this woman grating on him so much? He’d dealt with far worse insults before.

“Ah, that’s what it is. You have no goal anymore. You’re city lord, you’re stronger than most spirit beasts around here. But now you feel listless. *That’s* what I’m seeing in you,” the woman said, snapping her fingers in surprise. Dei’s first, instinctual reaction was to vehemently deny the accusation, but the words caught in his throat. A feeling of resignation rose up in his chest, heart hammering as his eyes fell to the table before him, frowning. She...wasn’t wrong? And he felt compelled to tell the truth – not to her, but to himself.

He’d been managing the city for years now, its lord in all but name. Now he was getting the title.

It wasn’t what he expected.

“There’s no shame in that. If you need a goal, though, why not aim for the realm of the gods?” she teased, a shit-eating grin on her face. Dei frowned at her.

“There’s no such thing as the gods. Immortality is but a rumor. There are only cultivators, and the world we live in.” he countered, and she froze in place, teacup halfway to her mouth and still steaming. Neither said anything for a

long time, her face frozen in what seemed to be shock, and him more surprised by her...exaggerated reaction.

Then she started laughing.

And *laughing*. Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes as she struggled to breathe, nearly spilling her tea in the process. She could hardly even look at him, wheezing as she huffed and puffed, every look she gave him only sending her into another fit of full-bodied laughter. The wind blew alongside her, swirling and echoing her joy, even the dying light of the sun seeming to momentarily brighten.

“Are you done?” he asked, raising an eyebrow at her to hide his growing apprehension, irritation at her largely forgotten. How powerful was this cultivator to have the very wind itself react to her laughter?

“No, no, I’m sorry, I just...saying that to *me!* Of all people! It’s just too rich! Oh my, I haven’t laughed like that in a long time,” she wheezed, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. Dei bit his tongue from adding anything else, even if he didn’t think what he said was all that funny. She may be one of those religious nuts – a zealot, that was the word! – she might be a zealot or something, and if she was as powerful as he suspected he didn’t want to say anything to piss her off.

Even if he thought, if there were gods, they were capricious and cruel. She shot him an amused smirk that moment he thought that, and he cleared his throat awkwardly. Good thing the ability to read minds was a myth...right?

“Pardon my rudeness, but why are you in my city?” he said, doing his best, and failing, to keep his tone deferential. The woman smiled, still flushed from laughing so hard, those green eyes of her looking right through him as she collected herself.

“I was looking for some people. I found them, but there’s really not much I can do for them.” She sighed. “So, I’ll likely be leaving soon. It’s nice to come visit from time to time, but there are other things to be doing. Thank you, though, for the laugh. I —” she paused then, cocking her head to the side slightly, a slight frown marring her features. Dei frowned as well, feeling the wind still, the very breath in his lungs struggling to move. Yet his next question came unbidden, something stirring in his chest that demanded an answer.

“How powerful are you? What stage do you lie in? I am only the second of my people to reach what we call the Nascent Soul, yet you are clearly more powerful.” He asked. Nascent Soul was the fourth realm of cultivation, where a cultivator may first start to feel and understand their own soul. Each step he took was a path untraveled by those before him...or so he had believed. Their

people had a history of over a thousand years, who was he to believe they were the only ones?

The woman, however, took far too long to answer as she stared heavenward, to the leaves of the Life-Giving Tree. He looked up as well. Was it some treasure she had found, up there, that had given her power? A fruit of the tree, perhaps? His pulse quickened at the idea of finding some hidden treasure, some ruin of a bygone peoples, that might enable him to reach the heights she had.

“Nascent Soul...you mean what I call Heart Center. Cultivation is the purification of body and spirit. The unification of understanding and power. The cleansing of your chakras and elevation of the soul to a greater realm of understanding.” She said finally. “There is a gross misunderstanding...” she paused again, frowning hard, muttering to herself. Dei thought he heard her say ‘something is coming,’ but was distracted by what she said next. “...of what that means. Impurities exist through actions and consumption. If you only accept the purest of Qi, then there would only be one stage of cultivation, be it mental, flesh, or of the soul.” Dei leaned forward, eyes gleaming, heedless of the increased intensity of the woman’s presence. Her aura had gone from peaceful to heavy very, very fast. Each passing moment it felt like another boulder was placed upon his shoulders, but he had to know – his drive, no matter where it came from, demanded he ask.

“The purest of Qi? Where would that be, atop the Tree?” he pressed. The woman snorted, the weight lifting from his shoulders for the briefest of moments. Only to come crashing back down the moment she spoke again, nearly knocking him from his seat.

“Fool boy. Look inside yourself; the purest of Qi comes only from within. There is nothing outside of yourself that can enable you to get better, stronger, richer, quicker, or smarter. Everything is within. Everything exists. Seek nothing outside of yourself.” Each word of hers compounded itself, layering itself upon his shoulders and soul with such a sense of finality that he could not dismiss it.

His breath was caught in his lungs.

In a split second the spell was broken and replaced by something else entirely. The woman’s expression twisted into one of intense rage, a fury so dark and powerful the wind howled in response. The ground quaked, fire from the nearby torches flaring to extreme heights as she shot to her feet, dark hair flaring out behind her head.

“You *dare!*” she snarled, and vanished in a flash of gold. The wind howled. The ground quaked. And an explosion of fire rocked the sky.

And for only the second time in his century of life, Dei feared what might come next.