

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

1.31 Interlude: The Shadow of the Four Realms

The Shadow remembered the first breath of creation. That great sigh that rippled through the Void, bringing with it awareness and a litany of souls. It had been born before that first breath, leaving it, a few lesser souls, and the Great One alone in the Void. The Void, which harmed neither it nor the Great One, yet would destroy the lesser souls in an instant. Curiosity had driven it to explore the empty vastness some, though it never strayed too far from the Great One as They toyed with those beings They had created.

Instinctually, it knew the two were connected, it and the Great One. It could see hints of memories that were yet to be revealed, feelings that were yet to be unleashed within that mighty being. And it celebrated the fact that none knew the Great One better than itself.

The Shadow had remained silent through it all, content in the silent solitude, content with the company it kept. The aura of the Great One was loving and careful, gentle in its actions and nature, embracing all before it. Joyous, however, had been the time which the Great One had created more companions, four greater souls than those who had first been born – yet lesser than itself – that clambered about the Great One in their excitement at life. The Shadow of that time, though it had yet to take that mantle, had found itself annoyed by the Four's energy and excitement. But who was it to complain about more siblings? They could not brave the Void like it could, but siblings were siblings, and in time they, too, could be taught to brave the emptiness.

First it had to figure out how to speak to them, however, as its time in silence had wrapped the notion around itself like a cloak, hiding it away from even the Great One. Then it could teach them to brave the Void.

But the Great One was more magnanimous than it, and created a place of safety for those lesser beings.

With a flash and a roar, suddenly there were more *things* about it. Substance was odd, and uncomfortable. The Shadow far preferred the emptiness of the Void, the solitude it provided and inner reflection that came about with silence and solitude. The chaos that was substance was far too loud, and it sought a touch of silence, drifting away from its siblings and creators to seek its own comfort. Something to keep the noise at bay – it had nearly found it, at the edges, near where the Chaos met the Void, when *The Others* started to twist the Great One's creation.

It was an explosion of white and black that knocked it off its heels, two of the Four running amok in...in *tainted* forms! The bodies they took were blasphemous, a mockery of the perfect souls the Great One had created them as, but was nothing compared to the fact that they dared to take the Great One's creation, and turn it in their own images! The Shadow was forced to watch, lurking on the edges as its newborn siblings wrought changes into the Great One's universe, creating Realms in the Great One's perfect, simple, chaotic universe.

How dare they? How dare they alter the Great One's design?! And how dare it indulge them, balancing their abominable creations?! The Shadow slunk further away, watching closely as the Great One sat back and observed its creations and the creations of its children. And it stayed hidden, trying to figure out what the point of all this was, watching all beings from its spot on the fringes. And, to its mounting horror, as it gazed upon the Great One, it came to a realization.

The Great One was lesser now. They had surrendered much of Their power, much of Their self, to create the children and this place. Their power was imbued in all things, but no longer was it apart of itself – Their glory had been lessened. The Shadow scowled. It would have to tell the Great One, somehow, stop it from making any more mistakes.

“LET THERE BE LIGHT.”

The words echoed out from the Great One, radiating through all of creation and bringing with it a searing, burning pain. The Shadow's howl of pain was lost in the din, scrabbling madly through the chaos as it sought a reprieve from the light of the Sun. It dug and dug, heat searing at it, light burning its nascent eyes – *since when had it had eyes?* – and only accidentally did it stumble upon

its salvation. In the place where the substance of creation met the Void, the Shadow slipped through a crack and fell into a realm separated from all others. It was small, and tight, and confined, but at least it was safe. Silent. A space, hidden between the Void and Creation.

But it was not enough for it. Even now it could feel the Great One's aura wane, shrinking to but a fraction of its previous glory. Horror gnawed at the Shadow's gut, but it could not surface. Not with the pain of the Sun still lurking in the back of its mind. Instead it bit and clawed, pressing up against the walls of its safe little bubble and pushing it outward, creating lines and trenches through the Realms that none but it could traverse. A hidden realm beneath all of creation, a prison, only escapable by tunneling up into the Realms to create a doorway.

It watched as the children spread themselves out, building their Realms, while the Great One was content to sit back and watch, its very presence keeping the whole of creation stable.

It observed as more souls rose to power, absorbing energy and making it their own, *taking* from their parent without ever giving in return.

And it gazed hatefully at the damnable sun from the safety of its hole.

And it came to a conclusion, as it watched the Great One work, building new houses for the lesser souls to inhabit.

The Great One had forgotten what it was like, in the beginning. It had forgotten the blissful silence of the Void – the Four and its children had made it forget perfection. But it would remind them. They were too entrenched now for mere words to reach them, no. It had to *show* them. Perhaps it wouldn't destroy everything, but most things. The chaos, at least, it could see a use for, to protect those miserable little souls who couldn't live without the Great One's presence in the Void.

And it would all start with the destruction of the Sun. After that, the rest of the Realms would come crumbling down. But it was not powerful enough yet. The Sun was too much for it, and it was certain the Four would fight against its plan.

So it slunk back into its caves and plotted and planned, braving the pain of the sun to steal away souls, twisting them to its own purposes. It lured them into its realm with whispers and promises, secreting them away and nurturing them with the most destructive elements of creation. Twisting them, swaying them to its side, letting their influences leak out in the Realms but never letting them free. It was a slow process, but it made headway in that time.

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But nothing could have prepared it for when the Great One created life.

It was terrible. The Shadow had no choice but to watch in horror as the Great One sacrificed bits of its own soul to create these foul beings, lesser creatures who scraped and begged and sniveled in the dirt, never appreciating the love and care the Great One – or even its siblings, the Four! – put in to their existence. They were ungrateful and hideous, with auras that were tainted and twisted, taking the Great One's light and forcing it to suit their own petty deeds.

It couldn't understand why. Why did the Great One love them so? Even these beasts. Why did it persist, yet still making its greater works? And why did it let the nascent gods roam free, doing as they will, making a mess of its perfection? The Great One dared to call it balance, not chaos.

The Shadow studied these lesser beasts, watching the spirits dart about them, energy leaking from their souls to nourish the realms. The energy was tainted and weak, colored with foul emotions...nothing that the Great One would likely touch, letting it sink into the Realms to be purified naturally. And in that, the Shadow saw an opportunity. It scooped up the energy and devoured it, a delicious feeling shivering down its spine, adding to its own abilities. To its surprise

the more it ate, the less the light of the Sun affected it; it licked its metaphorical lips, scooping up as much as it could and devouring greedily.

After thousands of years of eating and learning how to get the beasts to release more of this dark energy, it had an idea. The longer it stayed in the Realms, the likelier the chances of being discovered. Surprise was on its side, for now, and it would be best to keep it that way. So, in an act that shamed the Shadow greatly, it mimicked its siblings, twisting its own hidden realm to be accepting of life. Then it stole a few of the beasts and dragged them into its realm, copying the Great One in how to nurture this life.

A farm. That is what it made, and it devoured the dark energy created from it gleefully, sharing some with those souls whom it had tempted.

But nothing compared to the creation of the Fae. Oh, how terrible their creation was to the Great One, sending Them into a deep sleep from which it had feared They would never emerge. And they dared to curse Their name – dared to blame the Great One and leverage hate against them! Unforgivable! How dare they?!

The Shadow turned its wrath upon them, tempting these beings, scaring them, tricking them into self-destruction and, to its immense surprise, finding that they produced as much if not more energy than the beasts. But they were less easily molded, which made them less useful to its purposes.

The Shadow still stole a few away, whispers among the mortals going around of a shadow that steals children in the night. The gods wrote it off as mortal superstition, and the Shadow cackled with glee as it continued to search and research, tormenting those foolish Fae who slipped into its grasp. Its power grew by leaps and bounds, until, one day, something in the Void drew its attention.

Something was out there, lurking about, and it called the being to the Four Realms. A blue shield of power prevented the Shadow from venturing too far away, so it had to lure it in instead. And lure it

did; the being was mighty, and skilled, but driven mad from loneliness in the Void which made it an easy target. The Shadow whispered to it, making empty promises, tainting its will further with the Void, then unleashed it upon the Realms.

The destruction it caused was lovely, the dark energy produced by the chaos thick and delicious. Though the Shadow had never intended to provoke the Void. Watching the Great One lose an arm to protect creation had only firmed its resolve, however. If these whelps were not properly grateful to the Great One, who would sacrifice so much for them and their safety, then they did not deserve to live. The Shadow hated them all, all of them! Even the Four, who had been so corrupted by life and creation that they dared to make beings like the Fae, as if they would ever be able to live up to the Great One's vision!

In a fit of anger, the Shadow did something it never would have done otherwise. It stole drops of the Great One's divine, golden blood, shards of the Void, and devoured them both.

It took centuries to assimilate them. But when it did, its power grew even greater. While none of the Four would have been a match for it before, now it was at the pinnacle of its power. But its forces were not, and powerful though it might be, the Shadow alone was no match for all the gods working together. Especially not with the Four now aware of their own weakness, and striving to strengthen themselves. Their awareness came too late, in the Shadow's opinion. Only now did they try to give back to the Great One? Foolishness.

The answer to this dilemma came from the Great One itself, in the creation of the angels. Fu Hao and Stilicho.

They were among the only beings the Shadow truly respected. They, of all the Great One's children, elected to dedicate themselves wholly to the Great One's will. Hopefully they could be spared in the coming war. And while the Shadow dared not create an angel, for it was even unsure if it could, it *could* twist the spirits it already had and steal new ones away, raising them to become angels. Angels that pledged themselves to the Shadow and its purpose. Angels whose only goal was the destruction of the Four Realms, and the return of creation to perfection.

Sacrificial pawns, in other words.

But what surprised it the most was when the Fool found it.

Of all beings, even the Great One, it was the Fool who found the Shadow first, and begged it for knowledge and power. At first it had been cautious, thinking it a trick, but had quickly come around. It could see the dark energy swirling about the Fool's heart, clouding their judgement, separating them from the Great One's guidance.

A very powerful puppet had just fallen into the Shadow's clutches, and it was loathe to let them go. It bound the Fool with dark magic, taking away senses of reason and logic, separating its heart from emotion in exchange for what it called 'power.' Fool indeed. There was only one power, and it came from the Great One. Something it would carve into the soul of every single being that called the damnable Realms home; there was only one perfection, and it came from the Great One.

Even if it was too kind, too willfully ignorant to make them see that.

The Great One's heart was too big. The Shadow's was not. It tried to bide its time, but the Great One became impatient and sequestered itself away to build power. The Shadow scowled – impatience did not suit the Great One, but it did force the Shadow to move. Its forces were not ready to take on the Realms...but as it plotted, and planned, a realization came to it. It didn't need to overpower the gods. It didn't need to outfight them. It just needed to outplay them. And a plan came to mind, one that aligned with its goals perfectly – though it rankled the Shadow to resort to such...blasphemous measures, twisting things against the Great One's vision.

It had to wait until the perfect time, however. Until the last possible minute, to make its moves as damning as possible – that time when the Great One was well and truly sequestered away, unable to move for the power They were building for another of its Great Creations.

Not just because the Great One was sequestered away, and could not intervene (though, it realized, it needed to have a plan for such an event.) But to also show them that the Shadow was right. They had been blinded by the light, and it was the Shadow's duty to remind them of the dark. A grin spread across the Shadow's maw, having built a form for itself over the course of the endless eons, savage and menacing as it opened its hidden realm to the greater Realms.

It was time to remind them all what they had forgotten. It was time to remind the Great One who They were, and make Them forget those silly past lives that colored Their thoughts. It was time for war. It was time to destroy the Four Realms.

The question was, which did it start with first? Devouring the Sun, or destroying the Tree? It bared its fangs, feeling the endless hunger of the void within it. Why not both?

1.32 The Call to War

The entirety of the Four Realms trembled when the Shadow emerged from its hiding place. Rifts opened in the skies, gaping holes in reality that led to a hidden network of spaces that wove throughout all of creation, and darkness seeped out.

War came with it.

Alexander was first to act. He had been resting in his cave, watching the spirit river flow by. The moment the stench of the Shadow reached him, long before he saw any of its forces, golden flames began to spill from between his teeth. His head snaked out of the cave and he rose to his full, impressive height. His aura shot to its peak as he unleashed a roar to shake the very heavens themselves, flying up, up, into the skies to behold the entirety of creation as the mighty god he was. Rifts shattered the skies of all the Realms, centered around the central symbols. The Holy Mountain, the Life-Giving Tree, and the Karmic Valley. With a snarl he threw himself forward to greet the incoming hordes of dark spirits, pouring out of the false Void that separated the Realms from the primordial chaos. His scales were impenetrable. His claws weapons of destruction. And the first wave shattered beneath his might.

Elvira heard Alexander's roar, sitting on her throne listening to the chattering of gods and spirits alike as she was. The walls of her palace trembled from the force and she rose to her feet, knuckles cracking with thunderous booms as she readied herself for battle, white robes billowing in an unseen wind, golden hair whipping about her head and wings flaring out dramatically.

"To battle!" she bellowed, aura unleashed, billowing upward in a brilliant white beam of light. The gods scattered, Sol drawing his sword beside her, Gilles readying whips of pure shadow. Beneath her palace her forces stirred – forces hidden from the sight of the Shadow, and ready to march.

Keilan sighed when he heard the roar of his brother, setting down his pen. Unlike his siblings, he never got a break from work. Still, as he rose from behind his desk, wings curling about him and aura restrained, something stirred. Thuds echoed from beside the doors of his office as he swept out, snapping his fingers. Karmic threads raced to do his bidding, mental messages flying out as his people readied themselves. The karmic kings fortified the karmic palace, portals opening all above and about it, and his new security force stirred from their spots.

Reika was perhaps the one most ready, of all her siblings. The chaotic nature of the physical realm meant she was used to surprises, so even as she looked up at where she knew Mother's palace to be, knowing there was only a little time left before She was ready to create the Lunar Star, her people were moving to action. From her place atop the Life-Giving Tree, she saw myriad portals open around the Heavenly Palace, the Karmic Palace, and her own Tree. More still floated in space above, hiding a more sinister goal...

With nothing more than a gentle hum to indicate her orders, trees began to move, wood groaning and creaking. This would not be a protracted war. It would be short. It would be swift. And it would be brutal. And she was ready for it.

Of all the mortals and immortals of the physical realm, only Dei noticed the coming of war. He didn't hear Alexander's roar, for it was meant for the gods. But he did feel it in his bones. He walked slowly through the halls of his palace, a young avian girl who had taken much of the

responsibility of ruling off his shoulders trailing behind him, chattering. Her white wings fluttered audibly as she talked, a habit of hers that Dei had been forced to grow used to.

His hair was grey. Wrinkles lined his face, and his bones creaked when he moved. His horns had been worn down from age; he had yet to take his immortality ascension trial, and was reaching the end of his admittedly ridiculously long lifespan. A little over ten thousand years – that seemed to be the limit to a Fae's lifespan at the peak of cultivation, a half-step away from immortality. Much to the chagrin of his followers, he had no heir, either. He stroked his beard, a long, flowing grey thing, and paused to look out one of the windows of the palace. Manu Ti lay before him. It had grown much; there were now three flying islands, beside this first one. Three immortals called this place home; Fang Xu, Celene, and a Karae who had recently ascended. It was peaceful. It was calm. Millions of cultivators lived here, and many more mortals.

“My lord?” the young girl asked, his pause lasting too long.

“Rally our forces.” He said simply, tugging at his beard. “War has come.”

To her credit the girl did not question him. Such was the finality of his tone, the surety of his posture, that she leapt to do his bidding, shouting orders as she hurtled down the hallway, leaving Dei alone. He smiled, grimly, fiercely.

“Once more into the fray,” he muttered. “Let this be the last good fight I’ll ever know.”

Dark angels poured from the skies, spirits following after them as they screamed bloody murder and war. Angels and other powerful spiritual beings rose to meet them, the initial clash sending shudders through the foundations of the Realms...and the Light struggled to keep their enemies at bay. The Shadow’s forces struck with a ferocity that shook the angels and holy beasts alike to the core; they fought savagely, heedless of their own wounds as they sought to strike down any who stood in their path.

Alexander crashed into a wave of them, each thrash of his tail and toss of his head sending dozens flying. He alone cordoned off an entire section of the sky, none able to pass him by, but he was still only one dragon. Dark beings flooded toward the physical realm, magic spilling from their fingertips as they sought total destruction.

Gods rose from their resting places, all the elements alight with power as they struck out against the aggressors, but none were greater than the might of Heaven. Elvira's light exploded out from her palace, radiating out in a wave that brought with it three thousand soldiers in gleaming silver armor. Thousands rode upon winged horses that took to the skies, crashing into the lines of dark angels with a roar and led by the angel Stilicho. Magic flew from the tips of their gleaming spears, talismans of pure jade shining, capturing and sealing away dozens of evil spirits in moments. They were not stronger than the average angel, but they were disciplined and well-trained, fighting as one cohesive unit.

That alone gave them advantage against the raging tides of dark spirits.

Elvira stood behind them, wings flared as the Army of Heaven tore into the skies, led by her angels and holy beasts, crashing through lines of their enemies.

"Go!" She boomed. "Protect the Tree!" For in a quick glance she had properly deduced the goal of the dark angels – many attacked the Holy Mountain and the Karmic Valley, but more still flooded toward the Life-Giving Tree. If their goal was the destruction of the Four Realms, the annihilation of the Tree was a good place to start; it kept the Heaven and Karmic Realms from touching and clashing, after all.

"For the Empress!" her army bellowed, the winged cavalry hurtling through the skies and through a portal opened by Gilles, who teleported them to the physical realm. The rest stayed upon the mountain, battling those dark spirits who remained and sealing away those they could. Elvira's angels and holy beasts stood with them, alongside a few elemental gods, keeping the army from overextending, and collapsing against the far more numerous enemies. Elvira, herself, flew into the skies with Gilles and Sol to join her brother in holding the area – and to tempt out the Shadow.

“Is that all you have to muster? I tire of your games!” she bellowed as she struck a dark angel, the force of her blow shattering the very air and sending the being hurtling back into the rift from whence it came. Sol and Gilles fell in beside her, beams of light and whips of shadow cracking through the lines of dark spirits and angels, many of whom stuttered at the appearance of more gods. Alexander bellowed, golden flames sweeping through their ranks.

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Below, an explosion rocked the karmic realm. Smoke billowed from the Karmic Palace as dark angels forced their way inside, disrupting the flow of souls from the spirit river. Panic surged through Elvira at the sight, but that panic was quickly subdued as Keilan emerged from the hole, holding a dark angel by the throat as it struggled in his grip. A quick glare had it silenced, karmic strings wrapping around it and sealing it away, vanishing as it was stored beneath the Karmic Palace. He was flanked by two beings; pale, muscular humanoids with glowing pale blue eyes, a third glowing white eye in their forehead, six arms, and long, white hair. Swords floated behind them, and wherever they looked their weapons followed.

Elvira relaxed, and turned her gaze back to the army of the Shadow as Keilan floated up out of his Realm to join his siblings above.

“We must protect the Tree,” Sol said gravely. “As you surmised, that is where the Shadow seems to be aiming.”

“Go, then, and take Gilles with you. Guide the army.” Elvira said, cracking her knuckles as she waited for the Shadow’s promised fight. “I will stay here. We must be ready for the Shadow.”

Gilles and Sol nodded to each other and shot off, streaking down to the physical realm, where the worst of the battle was taking place. Reika stood atop her Tree, dozens of gods circling the trunk firing bolts of energetic wrath at the attackers, watching the battle dispassionately. Beasts twisted beyond recognition poured out of the portals onto Pangaea, ignoring the smaller planets, causing havoc wherever they went. Forests burned, plains were overturned, cultivation resources consumed en masse...yet the trees fought back. Giants of wood and sap lumbered through the forest, crushing beasts underfoot and protecting the natural world, healing the land as they went. The Army of Heaven protected the skies, spearing and sealing away powerful spirits and slaying beasts, tossing the sealed beings to allied spirits, who took them to the Tree or the Mountain to be stored.

Keilan floated up to stand beside Elvira, both watching Alexander as the great dragon tore through the enemy ranks. Reika was soon to join, satisfied that her realm was under the proper protection.

“This is where the fun begins, brother, sister,” Elvira said with a grin, itching to show off the skills she’d honed in the past few millennia.

“Fun, not so much. The aftermath is going to be a pain to deal with,” Keilan said with a sigh, cracking his neck.

“Aftermath?” the Shadow answered, voice raspy yet subdued. Elvira tensed as a portal appeared before them, leaking a dark miasma. Eight glowing red eyes shone from the hole, an evil grin of gleaming white teeth visible through the darkness. But its presence was not the only one. The power of three gods radiated from the portal as well, dark and twisted and *evil*. Elvira grit her teeth. How dare this being twist Father’s creations so? Who did it think it was?! “You assume there will be anything to clean up afterwards, dear *brother*. Because this is not all I can muster. Is it yours?”

Elvira readied her fists as Alexander came tearing back through the enemy ranks to fly beside his siblings, the Shadow slowly pulling itself free from its prison. This was where the real fight began.

The forces of Manu Ti fought valiantly, a bastion of safety amidst the chaos. Dei stood at the forefront, flying above the chains that kept his city anchored while shouting orders. He was incredibly thankful for the technique that made flight possible – the younger generations had figured it out, and now even sub-immortal cultivators could fly through the skies. Fang Xu and Celene floated beside him, the former firing arrows at intensely powerful spiritual beings flying through the air, while the latter coated their soldiers' armors in layers of protective ice. Spirit beasts flooded toward the city, fouler than anything he had ever seen, seeking to tear down the walls and destroy all they had built.

“What is happening, Fang Xu?!” Dei demanded, eyes locked on a particular section of wall that seemed likely to fall, near the northern chain. Fang Xu’s formations held strong for now, but it was only a matter of time. There were too many of them, and though the average cultivator was more powerful, quantity did count for something.

“Gods protect the Tree, though the number of dark beings attacking them is worrying.” The man responded, his golden aura shining brilliantly. “Our children, the Xu clan, has the south protected. The east is being retaken by the trees, and the angel Fu Hao stands guard over the western wall alongside reinforcements from the Karmic Realm. Never seen anything like them –” Dei turned away from his friend’s report as the northern wall was breached, instantly teleporting to where a dozen flame-fisted monkeys had clambered atop – which was the very edge of his teleportation range – tearing into the soldiers guarding it.

“Stand firm, men!” he bellowed, striking them down with vicious blows from his spear. “You are the soldiers of Manu Ti, of the celestial palace! We are the righteous, and we will prevail!” the words felt empty compared to what he knew existed in the heavens above, but nonetheless they rallied his men.

A cheer went up, yet evil shivered its way down Dei’s spine.

“Celestial palace?” a new voice said from above. He turned his gaze skyward, and beheld doom. They had the aura of immortals, but he could only see them as devils; four men and women flying in the skies above, savage in countenance and bloody in thought. “What an arrogant name. Don’t you know how high the heavens are, when you are just mortals, old man?”

“I’ll show you ‘heaven,’” Dei growled out, readying his spear. Beside him his men hesitated. He did not. Before the devil cultivators had a chance to speak, before they had a chance to act, he had launched himself skyward. His soul coated his spear as he thrust, the strike parried by a saw-toothed sword as the immortals fell upon him. One sprouted four arms, each wielding a chained whip, and struck like thunder. Another blew poisoned darts at him that were deflected by a sweep of his spear. Yet another still layered illusions upon him, which were repelled with a scoff, while the final attempted to stab him with a dagger.

“Foolish mortal, we have been brought up on war and conflict,” an immortal taunted as Dei dodged to the side, only to be struck with a palm-strike that sent him flying, blood spilling from his mouth. “On rage and hatred. Your peaceful forces are no match for us or our people.”

“Blah, blah, blah, shut up.” Dei spat, righting himself midair and glaring. They thought they could toy with him. He’d show them. “All I hear is a bunch of whining and gloating. ‘Woe is me,’ bullcrap. If you think you can take me, shut up and come on.” He readied his spear. He braced himself, sensing below that more devil cultivators, though not immortals, now besieged the walls alongside the demonic beasts.

The devil cultivators laughed and lunged – only for a host of silver-armored men riding winged horses to descend, crashing into them.

“Defend the wall! Keep the mortals safe!” one of them bellowed, striking at an immortal with a sword of pure green jade. The man snarled and backstepped – right into a green net, that shrunk and shrunk and was carted away by two soldiers, the immortal kicking and screaming. The remaining three fought like the devils Dei likened them to, fleeing from the four cavalry-men that pursued.

“Do try to not throw your life away. Courageous you may be, but you have nothing to prove, young man,” a new voice said. Dei looked up to see a pale man clad in black, shadows swirling about him as he smiled down at Dei. Above him floated a giggling green-haired girl that played with the wind like it was her own – and he knew he was meeting two gods. “Go help your people. Fang Xu could

use some aid. I would hate for you to perish before you achieve immortality. The Heavenly Host will handle what is here."

And with that the god teleported away, though the silver-armored warriors remained. Dei sighed and let his shoulders sag a bit, the weight of his age weighing upon him. There was work to be done. People to kill. He couldn't rest. Not when he could still feel *it* lurking in the back of his mind.

Despite everything, things were going too smoothly. And he would be ready when the shit hit the fan.

Gilles talked a big game to Dei, but he was concerned. He hadn't teleported away from the man willingly, after all, floating high above the physical realm as he currently was.

The Heavenly Host, the immortal warriors Elvira herself had trained up in the past nine thousand years, were struggling against the appearance of demons and devil cultivators, who utilized foul magic unfit for sane men, despite appearances. There were simply too many, and their more powerful members struck with lethal precision, aiming for those who were preoccupied with the sheer quantity among the lesser hordes. That was not what worried him, though. No, his worry belonged to the presence that was following him, and the other that had been following his brother, Sol.

"Be on guard, Aeriel," Gilles said, gripping his two shadowy whips and speaking to the wind goddess above him. She giggled in response, even as a portal opened and *she* stepped out. Lethally beautiful, sensual even, wearing tight black clothes and long black hair that frizzled out in odd places. Her eyes gleamed with a fell light, instability radiating from her like lightning as she walked forward, hips swaying with uncanny confidence. Her grin promised doom, her gaze destruction.

"Oho, little god of shadows," she crooned sweetly, the very air cracking with each word. He swallowed his nerves, readying his whip. "How sweet of you to wait for me. But your attention is

misplaced. You're playing right into our hands, and won't that just lead to such delicious catastrophe?"

Gilles narrowed his eyes at the cryptic words but didn't have a chance to consider them as the dark goddess launched herself at him in a maelstrom of hate and bloodshed. Shadows wrapped himself around him as the two danced; and Gilles found himself in a fight to the death.

1.33 Explosions

Once again, I was forced to watch as my children slaughtered each other, this time on a far grander scale than ever before. What surprised me the most about this entire thing, however, was not the ferocity in which both sides fought – it was the fervor with which the Shadow's forces proclaimed to be loyal to *me*.

No fight emphasized this more than the battle surrounding my two angels, Fu Hao and Stilicho.

"You dare to call yourself loyal!" Fu Hao bellowed, clapping her hands together. A mountain of gold energy appeared in the sky, crashing down upon a collection of dark spirits that had been attacking her as she flew above the cultivator's city of Manu Ti. Stilicho charged about in the skies above, wielding a spear of silver light as he did battle with another three dark angels, handily keeping them back. "I am an extension of the Creator's will! They do not wish this!"

"It does not matter what Statera Luotian wishes!" the dark angels shouted back, crackling black energy erupting from their forms and shattering the descending mountain. "They have forgotten the truth! We will remind them, and the world will return to the perfection it once was! The false gods and faulty creators have blinded our Lord, and we will remind Them of the Way!"

Perfection? What perfection? And what Way? How am I blind? It's pretty arrogant to call me blinded. I frowned, clenching my fists tightly and tamping down on my emotions as best I could.

Stone cracked beneath me as my irritation spiked. I had to fight the urge to open my eyes – watching the conflict through my other senses and connection to the will of the four realms was safer – and turned my attention to another part of the fight.

Chaos gods. Three of them, in totality, if you didn't count the Shadow. Two battled with the gods surrounding the Tree, Greed and Hatred using all of their might to weave discord amongst their ranks. But the gods were holding firm, formations of elements keeping the destructive, evil gods at bay...for now. Sol was being taken away from the battle by the god of metal Argent, blood dripping down his side from a blow Hatred had dealt him. The proud sun god waved his sword at the dark being, screaming madly, rays of furious light blasting out every which way.

Meanwhile Gilles and Aeriel did battle with the third, a goddess who felt different from the others. She cackled, dancing about the two with an agile grace that could only come from endless amounts of training.

“I told you, little god,” she taunted, stealing control of Aeriel’s wind as she blew a gale at her. It swirled about her finger, her domain sinking into it and twisting it to her own ends as she unleashed it back upon her, a veritable hurricane blowing the wind goddess halfway across the Physical Realm. “I have been fighting since the day I was born. And mere training is nothing without experience.” She continued, dodging Gilles’ whips, smirking the whole time. Gilles remained calm, though, only keeping her at bay, not overextending or lashing out beyond his means. And suddenly, I realized what he was doing.

Battles between gods were battles of philosophy, in a way. The goddess had just shown it in the fight with Aeriel; she had taken what was supposed to be the wind’s domain, and colored it with her own to strike back. Gilles was preventing her from doing that to him. He was patient, waiting for his moment to strike...like a snake, leaping out of the shadows. And she was waiting for that same opportunity, but by her nature she was not as patient as Gilles – shadows simply were, while she just *arrived*. My lips twisted into a frown as I shifted in place, the sounds of groaning stones echoing beneath me. This goddess fought differently than the other two; she fought like a true goddess, with battlefield experience. Hatred and Greed...weren’t. There was something off about the way they used their power, as if it wasn’t truly their own. As if the power itself fought back against them.

My focus narrowed upon those two, peering into their very beings, and what I found there nearly had me leaping to my feet, rushing out to end this here and now. A roar filled my ears as the power within me threatened to burst out, responding to my emotions – but I tamped it down, keeping the reins on this power.

Blood. Hatred and Greed had been twisted into becoming gods by using droplets of my blood, tainted with dark miasma and the maddening power of the Void. Even now the power tore away at their souls, driving them further into madness – it was suicidal, whatever transformation they had undergone to be able to accept the power in my blood, however briefly. The other goddess had not; she was a true deity, by all rights.

Unacceptable. Absolutely unacceptable. A part of me wanted to leap up right now, jump into the fray and end this conflict before it blossomed into something even worse – but Fate kept me still, kept me seated. I had to let things play out, until it was time to intervene. Assuming my children didn't win this, and there was a fairly good chance they could, only then could I intervene. My own heartbeat thundered rage into my ears as I turned my gaze to the source of all of this, the being that was responsible for everything happening right now.

The Shadow, alone, did battle with the Big Four.

Foul miasma radiated from its canid form, its wolf-like body covered in mangy grey fur, bone spurs sticking out from its joints. Eight spider-like limbs sprouted from its back, tipped with vicious points dripping a dark, sticky substance. Eight red eyes blinked on its forehead, always watching, while a maw that could open far too wide and contained far too many jagged, dagger-like teeth slavered beneath it. Injuries had accumulated on its body throughout the fight, but with how rabid it looked, it was hard to tell just how injured it was.

The wolf leapt back as Alexander breathed flames, narrowly avoiding the golden fire while simultaneously batting at Keilan with its blunted foreclaws. He blocked with a web of karmic strings, but was still forced back as the Shadow's foul miasma rushed forward to poison him. Green light from Reika flooded over Keilan, countering the miasma's poison, while Elvira leapt into the fray. Her wings were lightly tattered, her bare fists striking with all the weight of her titular Mountain. The air bent and cracked, the Shadow scrabbling as it desperately tried to avoid a direct blow from Elvira's fists. But she was fast, and vicious, and it was forced to block with one of its

spidery legs – the limb shattered under the force of the blow, a howl of pain tearing its way from the Shadow’s throat.

But I could see what it was doing, as far away from the fight as I was. I wanted to scream out a warning, shout out about the danger, but it was already too late and I couldn’t move even if I wanted to. The Shadow had been tactically retreating, only taking glancing blows and dealing minimal damage to sell the illusion.

It didn’t have to overpower the others, not that it could. It merely had to outplay them.

“You cannot win! Together, we are too strong!” Elvira bellowed, jumping back, away from the Shadow’s snapping jaws. Keilan filled in her position, black yin-based energy forming a shield that repelled all of the Shadow’s miasma right back to it. Alexander roared and dove at him from above, narrowly missing a great bite but whipping the Shadow with his tail as he swam by. The blow sent it flying, straight to a web of Keilan’s karmic strings – but the Shadow was not so easily contained. It flipped over midair, twisting its momentum, dodging around Keilan’s net, and aiming straight for Reika.

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What happened next, happened in slow motion. Keilan and Elvira’s eyes opened wide, Reika raised her arms, a shield of wood raising before her – the Shadow’s seven remaining spider legs pierced it with ease, stabbing into her and injecting its foul poison. She coughed, golden blood spraying from her lips as she fell to her knees, the Shadow whirling.

A whine of concern forced its way out of my throat, the sound rumbling through my entire chamber, but Reika was not so easily felled. Even now the powers of life coursed through her, healing her wounds and combatting the poison. But she was effectively taken out of the fight for now.

“Don’t you know the basics of combat?” The Shadow asked rhetorically, sprinting forward with astounding vigor and speed, revealing the true depths of its power. “Always take out the healer first.”

Alexander roared and charged, the great dragon snapping and snarling, striking like a snake – but the Shadow, despite being far smaller, struck with lethal precision. Its spidery limbs stabbed viciously, tearing off scales and drawing blood, beating him back and threatening to take out his eyes. Elvira jumped in to intervene, but the Shadow leapt into the strike, burying a bone spike on its spine into her stomach. She was sent hurtling back coughing blood and crashing into Keilan, who had been prepared to lash out with a burst of psychic force, the two colliding with a shockwave of power.

“Now, now, ‘o siblings of mine. I truly don’t want to kill you,” the Shadow said in its raspy voice, hiding its panting beneath bravado. “But if you keep standing in my way I will not hesitate.”

It was Reika who replied, clutching her stomach and desperately healing the seven holes in her body, green light flooding from her. Alexander moved over to fly beside her, casting a worried glance at her even as he bled from the face, deep gashes surrounding his eyes from where the Shadow tried to blind him.

“Shut...up,” she gasped, the Shadow’s paralytic poison forcing her to focus on herself, and only herself, lest she succumb to her wounds. I grit my teeth, worry eating away at me from the inside. “I don’t...care...what you spout...it is all...lies. You fight against...Mother’s creations. You are...anathema to everything She represents. You are...poison, to Her works. Know...your...place, beneath Her.”

“No!” the Shadow snapped with surprising force. “You are the poison! You who defiled Their great creations; forced Them to twist Their perfection into this...abomination! Even my cursed form I took, only because I was forced to! It is you who need reminding of your place! I am the only one who can truly see the lies you have poisoned the Great One with – you, my siblings, who are supposed to be equal to me yet find yourselves scrabbling in the dirt, with the worms, with these

petty acts of creation! And you, *dear* sister, are the worst of the lot! Taking the Creator's lessons of creation, and filling the world with your own imperfect visions! I deny you!" it howled.

"Reika, go back to the Tree," Alexander rumbled. "Heal yourself. Please." Reika struggled to her feet and nodded, wiping her bloody mouth on the sleeve of her green dress. Already her wounds were closing, the poison fighting against her but not able to withstand the sheer density of her vitality for long - I heaved a sigh of relief. Despite all its bluster, the Shadow had not struck a fatal blow, she would be fine in not but a few hours.

Still, injured as she was, she had to retreat for now, lest the Shadow target her again. With a promise to return she slowly flew off, a cadre of spirits rising up once she was far enough away, swirling about her to protect her return. The Shadow watched her go with a smug smile, not concerned in the least, and I frowned at it. What was it planning?

"You have lost, Shadow," Elvira intoned, visibly fighting back the urge to go charging in once again, despite the wound in her stomach. "Look below. Even now your forces are in retreat. The dark angels are losing, your foul gods are being captured. If this was a battle of ideals, you lost."

True to her words, the Shadow's army was...well, not in retreat, their madness drove almost each and every one of them into a violent rage, but actively being sealed away. The army of heaven continuously sealed away dark spirits in amulets of jade or plain nets, to be carted off and sealed beneath the Life-Giving Tree and the Holy Mountian. Manu Ti was largely secured, the devil cultivators in full retreat while demonic spirit beasts scrabbled uselessly at the walls. Even in the karmic realm, Keilan's new creations actively bound and sealed the few remaining dark beings that fought there with karmic strings and psychic powers.

As for the dark gods, Hatred and Greed were being held down by a pile of gods. The gods of fire and water had them trapped in individual maelstroms of their respective elements, while others still swirled about them, caging them with bolts of lightning and pillars of ice. It was only a matter of time before they were properly sealed away, while the final goddess, who continued to battle against Gilles, cackled with gleeful madness.

She was on the retreat now, Gilles having been joined by ten cavalry men of the heavenly host in pursuing her. They readied their talismans while he beat back their advances, Aeriel rejoining the fray with a furious expression, wind howling at her back. My frown deepened. Her glee came not from the joy of battle and chaos, but from another feeling. It was that of someone who knew something the others didn't, it was...

My mind flashed back to the dark gods of Greed and Hatred. Suicide. Wait, *suicide!*

“NO!” I boomed, my entire palace threatening to explode from the force.

“That’s exactly where I want them,” the Shadow said with a grin, sucking in deep breath and *howling*. All at once the dark angels laughed and leapt upon their attackers, igniting their very souls and cultivations. Explosions rocked the Realms, lines of fire detonating in the Tree and Holy Mountain. Every single sealed or captured being was blown to pieces, their souls stripped of all hints of their former power, and most of their personalities, as they flew back to rejoin the spirit river, leaving destruction in their wake. The Karmic Palace was blown wide open, its roof destroyed and the lines of souls flooding into the valley utterly disrupted.

Screams rippled through the Realms, the pain of every living thing flowing to me, telling me just how bad the destruction really was. The Life-Giving Tree groaned, the two dark gods laughing as they tore free of their captors, spinning through the gods and tearing them apart, disrupted as they were by the explosions.

The Mountain listed dangerously, bits of the heaven realm sagging downward, threatening to collapse upon the Physical Realm where the Tree smoked, branches snapping off with cracks that echoed through creation. And the Shadow stared up at me the entire time, grinning, anticipating, *waiting*. Almost as if it had something to prove to me.

Fine. Fine! I hadn't wanted to do this, but things have taken a turn for the worse. My other failsafe's would have to be put on hold; be they using the Will of the Four Realms, or a dozen other things, none were as quick as I needed. Suicide bombing was beyond even my expectations. What a

fool I was, to not expect martyrdom. Not to mention fate...it whispered in my ears, telling me which path to take, which ones to avoid. Futures in which the Four Realms remained stable fell away like crumbling roads in the wake of this catastrophe, leaving a few narrow options. Timing was key. To minimize damage and maximize benefits, few as there were...

I shuddered to imagine what the damage would have been, had I not forced the Shadow's plan, given it more time to build its forces.

With a grunt I stood, squaring my shoulders and opening my eyes. I was greeted by a beaming light of blue – the stone of my meditation chamber transformed to crystal so bright it hurt even my eyes to look at.

“RANDUS.” I spoke, as softly as I could but was still a yell. “BUY ME TIME.”

“How much time?” Came his soft reply, barely audible through the roaring of power in my ears, begging to be unleashed.

“FIVE MINUTES.” That was all the time I needed. That was all the time I would get. Taking a deep breath I braced myself, the power I had been amassing condensing. And once more, I sacrificed a piece of myself for the good of the Realms.

1.34 Keep it Together

The Shadow made a noise in the back of its throat as it turned back toward Elvira and her siblings, amusement writ all across its features. “It seems the Great One has turned Their gaze away from us. Seems you no longer have Their favor,” it drawled out. Elvira scowled, six wings flaring outward as she grit her teeth, fighting against the pain that came with the damage to her Realm.

It felt like a dagger had been driven into her gut, deeper even than the bone spur of the Shadow. The destruction wrought upon the Heaven Realm echoed in her very soul, the damage done to her Mountain marked by the grimace on her face, and the taste of blood in her mouth. Her mind flickered to Reika, who had retreated to her Tree – but she couldn't think of that, she had to finish the Shadow first. She would have felt it had her sister been in any true, life-threatening danger.

Unfortunately, it was Alexander who responded first.

“I will END YOU!” he roared, charging forth, tail thrashing and golden flames billowing from his maw. Elvira could only imagine the pain he felt, as his realm reflected all the damage of the Four Realms. That didn’t make the decision of the normally stoic dragon wise. She cursed and shot after him, lagging behind the faster dragon.

“Alexander, no!” Keilan shouted, but it was too late. The Shadow nimbly dodged Alexander’s flames, dodging to the left, plastering a look of fear upon its face as Alexander’s snapping jaws drew near –

Only to leap away at the last second, one of its legs cutting a hole in reality that Alexander dove straight into, unable to halt himself. In that same instant the Shadow sewed the hole shut – but not before echoes of explosions rang out of it, followed by a pained roar.

“And then there were two,” The Shadow cackled, turning – only to be met with Elvira’s fist. Bone shattered beneath her knuckles, the Shadow’s head snapping to the side as she struck it. Father’s words echoed in her ears; *Do not give your enemy an inch*. He had told her, in those few times she had taken Him up on training. Her elbow collided with the Shadow’s neck, driving it downward, toward the smoldering Realms, and she blurred to keep up with its descent. *Don’t give them time to think. Don’t let them create space*. The force behind her strikes lessened, but the power did not as she reminded herself of those words.

Her fists flew with blinding speed, battering the Shadow and never giving it an inch of space. No longer did she send it flying, a cold, cool anger keeping her mind steady as she thundered against this foul beast. Its spider-like legs lashed out at her, black blood dripping from its snarling maw, the bones healing. Elvira parried them with bare flesh, their length skittering against her skin like stone against steel, leaving naught but white lines. A direct hit from the needle-like tips would be dangerous, but an indirect strike could do nothing against her tempered flesh.

She had not spent millennia honing her body to the same, nigh-indestructible levels as the foreign god for nothing.

“You-“ the Shadow began, coughing out a cloud of black miasma – Elvira pushed through, white light radiating from her in waves, clashing against the hateful air that burned her skin and lungs, setting her feathers to smoking.

And then Keilan was there. Webs of karmic string lashed out, binding the Shadow’s legs together. Elvira struck it hard enough in that moment to shatter a few of its ribs, hurtling the wolf up toward her brother. He held out one hand, face a mirror of her own icy rage, and a burst of raw power struck the Shadow. It screamed, blood seeping from ears and eyes as it thrashed – Elvira was upon it in an instant, grabbing two of its spidery legs and ripping them free of its back.

“GREED, HATRED!” The Shadow howled, the sheer force of its voice setting Elvira to stumbling, her very bones rattling. “NOW!”

The fighter in Elvira told her to keep chasing the Shadow, that they finally had it on the defensive, that all-out aggression should have been their first move. Instinct, however, guided her gaze back to the Realms. Terror struck her, momentum killed as she turned back to the Realms.

The normally spherical form of the Realms were distorted, the Mountain sinking down, threatening to collapse upon the Tree below, while the white, cloud-like energy that made up most of the realm outside of the landmass of Heaven looked thin and wispy. The Ocean of Memories had great tidal waves rocking the shores of the Karmic Valley, bits of spray leaping up to pound against the

natural barrier of elements the Physical Realm formed – a barrier two of the evil gods had latched onto, cackling madly even as the elemental gods tried desperately to stop them.

Keilan and Elvira lunged, surging forward. Neither reached their god in time.

She teleported, appearing in a flash of white just beside the dark god, fist cocked back and ready to pound its skull in. Behind it Aeriel and a dozen other elemental gods surged, wind swirling about them, trying to tear it away from the barrier between the Heaven and the Physical. It just cackled at them, eyes bloodshot and blood seeping from its face as it bound up all of its terrible power, and detonated it in one, massive explosion.

For a moment, all Elvira could see was fire and death, sent hurtling away from the epicenter of the blast, head over wings. A horrible, gut wrenching pain tore through her as she righted herself, coughing up blood, multiple wings broken from the explosion. But her mind could not deal with her own injuries at the moment, gaze locked upon the Heaven Realm as it was. The skies were falling.

Pieces of heaven fell from the skies, threatening to fall upon the physical realm and cause a true collapse of the Realms.

Elvira cursed, hurtling forward, heedless of the pain in her wings, and placed her hands upon the skies. Power surged through her, white light radiating out from her as bright as the Sun itself, a roar of defiance tearing its way out of her mouth. And the heavens stabilized, the weight of the skies laying themselves upon her shoulders – but the Physical Realm began to peel away. She shifted, bracing Heaven upon her shoulders, reaching out with one hand to sink her power into the Physical Realm's barrier and *pull*, the weight of the Realm straining her muscles. She alone held up the skies and kept the ground from falling. With grit teeth and squinted eyes, golden blood dribbling from her mouth, she turned her gaze back to the Realms.

The explosion of the dark god had sent many elemental gods reeling, their forms tossed haphazardly about the Tree. More still battled the remaining dark spirits, the most powerful of

whom would toss themselves at the gods, clinging to their forms before detonating all they were – leaving only their soul, scrubbed nearly clean, to re-enter the realms.

The Army of Heaven surged forward on winged steeds, doing their utmost to mitigate the damage alongside Reika's army of living trees and members of Keilan's mysterious security force. Gilles still battled with the last remaining dark god, who laughed and seemed to surge in power from the catastrophic event. Keilan stood between the Physical and Karmic Realms, a massive web of strings binding the two together like stitches. More strings lashed out at the Shadow, seeking to bind it, but it was too nimble, dancing away from him on the fringes of the physical realm.

Elvira strained beneath the weight of two Realms, her aura surging, seeking to rebind the Realms together. The damage was not irreparable, but it would take time to mend. The Shadow had thoroughly outplayed them – and she'd had it on the run! But they needed help, and Reika was missing.

“Hold for four minutes. The Mistress will be here soon.” Randus' voice echoed in her ears, and she grit her teeth, closing her eyes and forcing more of her power into mending the barrier between realms. Four minutes – her own pride at needing to once more rely upon Father's arrival was set aside, as she prayed for a miracle and help.

It came from an unexpected place, and Kei entered the fray.

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Kei had been in the Tree when Reika returned, bleeding from multiple holes in the stomach. She had smiled at her daughter, cracked a joke about being far more Holey now, and had extended her aura outward to try and heal as many injured as she could even while healing herself.

That was when the Tree exploded. Her mother screamed in pain, her skin cracking as her Tree was damaged – and had been forced to sink herself into the trunk to keep everything from falling apart. Things only worsened with the second round of explosions, igniting the skies and threatening to collapse everything. Only Aunt Elvira and Uncle Keilan kept it all from collapsing, gods scattered from the sudden explosions.

And Kei felt an anger unlike anything she had ever felt before. Her hands tightened around her weapon, the wooden haft creaking beneath her grip as she fixated her senses upon the foul, mangy, *small* wolf floating in the skies, dodging Uncle Keilan's strings as it hurtled toward the Sun.

She teleported before she could even think about it. Unlike her elders, she could not teleport freely within all the Realms, her range extended only in the Physical. Thankfully, the Shadow was within the bounds of the physical, having chased Keilan and Elvira there.

Space warped around her, a terrible, furious, wordless scream ripping from her lips as she appeared in front of the Shadow, her staff cocked back. Its eyes widened in confusion and surprise – with a mighty crack, she brought her staff down between its eight eyes, sending it hurtling back into the Physical Realm, where she could utilize the most of her power.

“You-“ it started, catching itself midair, but Kei was there. The elements wrapped themselves about her like a cloak, lightning, fire, wind, water, earth, metal, space-time, illusion, and divine all wrapping together, her limbs elongating, extending, form twisting and growing in size to dwarf the Shadow. Divine light radiated from her reddish fox-fur, a snarl pulling her lips back over her fang-like teeth, power echoing from her form. It was a very convincing illusion.

“Stall it for four minutes, Kei. Be careful.” Randus' words echoed in her ears as she lurched forward, the giant-nine tailed fox snapping at the Shadow. It howled and charged forward, spidery limbs stabbing viciously at her muzzle. Lightning thundered from her fur, bolts of blue light blasting the Shadow – but it was more powerful than she, powering through to land upon her illusory form, tearing apart her elemental construct with vicious bites.

Illusions wrapped themselves about Kei's true body as she lunged forward from within her fox construct, staff lashing out to smack against the Shadow's side. It howled as more elements surged, snapping against its fur and driving it down, down, down – only for it to open its maw and *inhale*. It felt like a vacuum. Kei scabbled away, the elemental construct torn apart in seconds, swirling as the Shadow sucked every ounce of elemental energy into itself, swallowing and smacking its lips like it just ate a good meal.

Then it locked its gaze onto her, invisible though she was, and fear lanced through her as its hateful red eyes narrowed, blood dripping from between its teeth and bones fixing themselves before her eyes. And she realized, suddenly, that she was way out of her league here.

“Arrogant brat.” It snarled, then froze. The air beside it trembled, shook, then cracked – and with a roar of absolute rage, Alexander came barreling out of a rift. His scales were cracked and blackened, bleeding in a hundred different places, one of his horns snapped off, yet none of those things denied him his target. His jaws closed around the Shadow, teeth sinking into its flesh as he savaged it, golden flames pouring from his mouth and burning its flesh. Kei grinned and stepped forward to help – only for something else to put itself in her way.

A woman who reeked of chaos and danger, her black hair disheveled, hurtled toward her, Gilles trailing behind with shadowy whips at the ready, trying to halt her.

“It won’t be that easy, darling,” the woman cooed, and chaos reigned.

To call Alexander furious would be a disservice to the raw fury pounding through his veins. He snarled and snapped as the Shadow fled his wrath, long, spidery limbs stabbing at his face – he ignored the sharp pain they caused, the aching in his bones from what seemed like hundreds of spirits self-detonating after clinging to him, and the way his vision swam. His sole focus was the Shadow, and even when Randus tried to whisper something in his ears, for he had enough presence of mind to recognize the voice, he could not tell what was said.

“Brother,” the Shadow barked, dodging around a burst of golden flame that tried to drive it down toward the Tree. Alexander could see the branches swaying, Reika’s will working to fix the damage and control the limbs – if he could get the Shadow close enough, could they capture the Shadow? Then he could tear it limb from limb. “Enough already!” Dark miasma poured from the Shadow’s body, and Alexander charged through it, ramming his horns into the Shadow’s side and yanking upward. It howled in pain, darting away on three limbs, its front right leg torn to ribbons but healing quickly. It scowled at him, and he *roared*.

Shockwaves of force battered the Shadow, eddies of energy from the Spirit River pooling behind Alexander in a great maelstrom of power.

“You made me do this,” The Shadow warned through the din. Alexander dove down toward it, the spirit river surging behind him as a great wave of force – and something within the Shadow burned. Bones snapped into place as its wounds healed, a *familiar* presence echoing through the air. “And with the Great One’s gaze turned away, I have no fear of Them noticing.” Alexander’s eyes grew wide as he realized what the Shadow was doing, what it had done, a tainted, twisted version of Father’s power echoing briefly from its body.

The Shadow glowed and grimaced in equal measure as it leapt forward, powering through the great wave of energy Alexander sent hurtling toward it, breaking through the waves as the same power that healed it, that empowered it, set its fur to smoking. Alexander roared in defiance, maw open wide to snap around the Shadow, savage it with his fangs – only for it to dart around his bite with astonishing speed and latch onto his throat with its too-wide bite.

His vision blurred, power leaking from him as the Shadow took him earth-ward, hurtling to Pangaea. And his only thought as he fell was; *how dare it twist Father’s power so*.

Dei watched gods do battle in the skies above. The war for Manu Ti was all but over now. From his spot in the skies, floating above the northern chain, he could keep tabs on most of what happened below. The spirit beasts and devil cultivators had all but been routed, the walls of the cities were being patched, and Fang Xu told him that most of the armies in the skies had been cleared. His expression had been one of fear despite this news, however, and kept glancing around as if searching for something.

Dei kept his gaze fixated upon the dragon in the skies. The battle was mostly a blur. He saw a flash of fire here, darkness there, and a serpentine form hurtling through the skies. Once or twice he thought he saw Kei, the mischievous fox-girl dancing about with a man of shadows and a woman whose powers even Dei could feel. He could feel it in his very bones, setting the ground of Pangaea to shaking and the air to stilling.

“Fang Xu,” he said, one hand braced against his knees, the other gripping his spear as he leaned over, breathing heavily. “Talk to me. What is happening?” Said man was flying in the air above him, bow at the ready as he stared heavenward, brows furrowed. Celene stood next to him, her aura radiating outward and threatening to cause a snowstorm from the sheer intensity of it all, and similarly looked skyward in concern. The scent of smoke tingled Dei’s nose, the Tree groaning as branches threatened to snap off. Whatever those explosions earlier had been, they had done terrible things to the Tree.

“We’re in bad shape, but holding for now.” Fang Xu admitted. “I can’t see much from here, but Fu Hao is telling me that the dark spirits mostly committed suicide – detonating their cultivation and souls to damage the Realms and keep the gods in check. Elvira is holding up the skies, Keilan is keeping the ocean from falling away – and Alexander is doing battle with a wolf. He is holding his own, for now.”

Dei shook his head. Those were all very big names to be dropping so casually like that. But that wasn’t his question, either.

“What can we do?” he asked.

“I don’t...they’re saying we need to buy time. For what, I don’t know.” Fang Xu frowned, cocking his head to the side, muscles flexing as he plucked the string of his bow. His red hair whipped about his head as the wind picked up, Celene glancing at him worriedly. “Sorry, Dei, I have to go. Stay here, keep the city safe. Celene, come with me.”

“Go, go,” Dei said with a wave of his hand, taking a deep, shuddering breath, but his friend was already gone, shooting off into the sky with bow half-drawn. Celene chased after him, the other Immortal in the city doing a large, sweeping search of the outer reaches of the city. Gleaming members of the army who called themselves the Heavenly Host circled the skies and marched through the streets alongside the remains of his own forces, helping people out of rubble.

He frowned and descended a bit. He’d seen something fall into one of the houses down there earlier, when an explosion rocked the skies. Where was it...?

A pained roar shook the skies above, and Dei’s gaze shot skyward. There, falling from above the boughs of the Life-Giving Tree, crashing through the branches, was a great white dragon falling to the earth. Golden fire scorched the skies as it fell, colliding with the ground just beside the northern chain, sending up a plume of dust and shaking Dei to his very bones.

A howl tore through the air, setting Dei’s hair to standing on end; he recognized the sound. It carried the same tune the shadow panthers had made, when his old mentor had killed herself and they’d taken his city. It was a howl of victory. His hands gripped his spear, and he frowned.

This would not be like that day.

1.35 This Is How High the Heavens Are

Alexander fell from the skies, drawing my attention away from the condensing of the Lunar Star’s power, the Shadow gripping his throat between its jaws as they tumbled to the ground, colliding with great force upon the lands of Pangaea. I could only spare one eye to watch my mightiest child as I finished my work, counting the seconds until I was finished.

And what I saw roused old blood within me.

Alexander bit and snarled, all but immobilized as the Shadow rose victorious from their clash, standing atop his head and howling its victory. Its fur was all but scorched off, bleeding from a dozen places, injured, but not stopped. The gods who stood against it were scattered to the winds, those who remained frozen at the sight of Alexander beneath it; Alexander, the mighty, indomitable dragon, the most powerful of the Four, incapacitated. Elvira and Keilan hung on with desperate might, seething as they tried to mend the rift between realms as fast as they could, desperate to get back into the fight.

The Tree bent what few branches were uninjured, Reika's will guiding them to reach down and swat at the Shadow – who sneered at it, undaunted.

All others were frozen. All but a few.

“This is it,” the Shadow breathed. “This is what I wanted. To pit my will against yours, my *faith*, and come out victorious. You have no idea what I had to do to get this far. What blasphemy I had to endure and commit for the greater good. But now it’s over. The Great One is preoccupied. You lay beneath me, your siblings tied up,” at this Alexander growled, snarling and shifting his head to gnash his teeth as the Shadow.

“I will annihilate you, how dare you twist –“ his growling retort, spit out between gasps, was cut off as the Shadow pressed its paw against his throat, cutting off his snarl. Between his time in the Shadow’s hidden realm and its own attacks, he was all but totally wiped. Yet still he raged, tried to deny the Shadow’s will, his spirit indomitable, even if his body refused to follow his will. *Fifty seconds.*

“...I admire you, brother. Your will is admirable, and you are closest to myself than anyone else. Do not make me kill you,” the Shadow pleaded. It was not a threat; it was genuinely begging Alexander to not force its hand.

“I...deny you. I am nothing like...you. Abusing...Father’s power...” Alexander snarled between breaths. The Shadow sighed and shook its head – but whatever it was about to say was cut off by Kei, who landed before it in a flash of fire. Illusions layered themselves upon the Shadow like wet blankets, a dozen illusory Kei’s leaping at it at once. The Shadow sneered and barked, the illusions too weak to hold together and vanishing in an instant. She skidded back as the bark pushed her away, feet digging furrows in the ground, the staff she held shattering.

“My useless underlings,” the Shadow snapped, looking skyward. Above, the goddess of catastrophe continued to do battle with Gilles, who had managed to ensnare her and himself in an orb of darkness, allowing Kei to aid Alexander. “The universe will be much better off without them. I –“ The Shadow froze, eyeing the skies, looking directly at where my palace hovered near to the Realm Sun. Looking directly at me. *Thirty seconds.*

“You’re stalling.” It said, realization dawning, dodging casually as Kei leapt at it, swinging her staff. I rose to my feet, sensing its sudden desperation, its challenge. The Shadow roared, whirling upon Kei, who had returned to strike another blow, with malicious intent, maw open wide and ready to devour her whole –

Randus was there and Kei warped away, rescued from certain doom to be deposited in the halls of my palace a few moments later, just outside my mediation chambers. She raged and spluttered for a moment, glaring about.

“Grandpa!” she shouted, rising to her feet. Anger wrought itself across her face, and while I was proud of her for her actions, her anger was misplaced. “What are you doing?! Help us!” I ignored her cry of rage, turning my attention to the others who still moved.

Dei knelt before a young-looking, green-haired girl, laying in the rubble of a collapsed house. The two shared a look, and he narrowed his eyes. The question he asked was silent. *Can you get me there?* The answer she gave was silent as well, lifting one finger to her lips, a small, weak smile on her face.

Fu Hao and Stilicho shot skyward, toward the heavens and where they figured the Shadow was heading. And Randus waited for his chance.

“The Great One...” the Shadow said, eyes widening. “They’re accelerating the creation. No. No! They were supposed to keep that power for Themselves! You don’t know the price of that! You sniveling, whining curs, standing in the way of my duty!” Alexander snapped at its heels as it leapt into the sky, darting between the net of karmic strings Keilan tried to ensnare it with, weaving between the few inaccurate bursts of power from the few remaining gods – Argent, the god of Metal, appeared before it with a frown, his metallic skin scorched and smoking and fists raised.

For five seconds the two did battle. Argent put up a valiant front, staying true to his Dao. He was immovable. Determined. A steel wall. It didn’t matter, in the face of what he confronted – but it gave others time to get into position.

Argent was struck down, sent hurtling through space, bleeding but not dead. The Shadow hurtled forward, mouth agape, heading for the Realm Sun – my eyes widened. With the chaos the Realms were currently in, the permanent destruction of the Sun would be...catastrophic. *Twenty-five seconds.*

The Shadow rushed forward, breaking through the realms and bursting into the faux void between the primordial chaos and the realms. It was nearly as fast as me, at that speed, even without teleporting. Why wasn’t it teleporting? *You have space locked down around the Sun and your Palace. No teleporting, in or out.* I stood, stone cracking as I moved.

The wind blew, and it carried Dei with it. Aeriel had her hand held up from where she lay in the physical realm, whispering to the wind with a small smile on her face. *The wind hears everything.* She whispered. *The wind blows everywhere.* My fists clenched, and the Shadow skidded to a halt as a mere mortal appeared before it, transforming from wind into a body of flesh and blood.

“So that is what travelling as the wind is like,” Dei mused, cracking his neck. His long hair whipped in the wind, his trim, grey beard flecked with bits of blood from his battles. Then his gaze flicked to the Shadow, whose eyes rolled every which way as it searched for something, anything, that could explain why a mortal, not even an immortal, had appeared in its path. True, he was a relatively powerful mortal, but he was a mortal all the same. One nearing the end of his lifespan, no less. “...you’re one ugly looking dog. Do you have rabies? If you do, I’m putting you down.” Dei drawled, raising an eyebrow.

“What?” the Shadow hissed.

“You can speak? Good. Come on then, we haven’t got all day.” Dei said shrugging and readying his spear, his soul stretching out to cover the entire length of the weapon. I took a single step to my doorway, my limbs feeling as if they were pushing through molasses as my full faculties returned.

“Grandpa!” Kei shrieked from the other side of the doors, all puffed up and angry with righteous rage. *Twenty seconds.* Without someone or something standing in the way, the Shadow would reach the Sun in less than a fraction of that time.

Fu Hao and Stilicho, my loyal angels, hurled themselves in the direction of Dei and the Shadow, urged forward by Randus, flying with all the speed they could muster. Down below, Alexander raised his head, fire pooling in his mouth as he prepared the last of his energy.

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The Shadow charged, mouth agape, seeking to swallow Dei whole - he just laughed, the primordial chaos shuddering as he called down his immortality ascension trial. The Shadow's eyes widened as its momentum faltered for a microsecond; a microsecond of hesitation, mere inches from Dei, that gave Randus all the time he needed to pull his greatest trick yet. The bridge of immortality

descended from the heavens, wrapping itself around Dei and the Shadow both, stretching miles across the sky and widening the gap between the two. The Shadow whirled and snarled, paws scrabbling on the clear glass planks that made up the bridge, slamming its body into the golden railings - only for the pressure of the will of the Four Realms to keep it in place, compelling it to stay on the structure.

And the entire thing sunk into the ephemeral land of dreams.

A bubbling laugh echoed in my chest as I fueled a bit of power into the trial, lightning crackling in the skies above as it tried to create a trial worthy of stalling the Shadow itself. Leave it to a mortal to weaponize an Immortal Ascension trial, and leave it to Randus to figure out a loophole. The proximity of the Shadow to Dei had allowed him to trick the Will of the Realms into accepting both as the applicants. Even worse, his was no simple trial. It was the trial of the Soul.

“Huh, so this is what my trial looks like,” Dei said, planting his feet on the bridge and rolling his shoulders, breathing heavy as the Shadow’s miasma wracked his body. His skin cracked from the poison, threatening to kill his mortal body as lines of blackness spread through his veins, but still he stood, a smile on his face and death in his eyes.

“You DARE?!” The Shadow snarled, feet scrabbling as it got used to the sudden change – running, but unable to move. It was dreamlike state, but wouldn’t last long. Dei snorted. *Fifteen seconds.*

“I thought that was obvious that I do, indeed, dare.” He drawled, the colors of the world distorting as the Shadow threw itself against the glass bridge, attempting to break free. It rattled, but held, Randus appearing in the skies above, the butler god of dreams wagging one finger at the Shadow in a disapproving manner.

“Ah, ah,” he tutted. “There’s only one way to go, dear Shadow. The Mistress granted me access to the Trial of Souls, as the soul is where dreams are held. You are in my Realm now, until it is completed. And I promise you, here, I reign supreme. Here, even a mortal can fight a god.”

Dei readied his spear and let out a breath as the Shadow snarled, glaring at Randus hatefully before turning its gaze back to him; one man standing between it and the Sun. “*Hold for thirteen seconds,*” Randus whispered in his ears, opening small portals in the skies for Fu Hao and Stilicho to slip through. The will of the realms and, by extension, I, allowed such a bending of the rules – in this case, it was the only way to make the Trial more challenging for both Dei and the Shadow.

Randus himself struggled to keep everything with the realm of dreams; as it was not a true realm, he had to dedicate much to prevent physical objects from being ejected out. Even still, as I watched, I saw his power wrapping itself around the minds and bodies of those present in his land, bolstering his allies' minds, and strengthening their bodies.

“Take as long as you need.” Dei promised, whisps of green wind swirling about him. I narrowed my eyes slightly - that was Aeriel's wind. A blessing. She had granted him a divine blessing, gifting him powers of the wind. “I will stand and keep the bridge, even if I must stand alone.” Fu Hao and Stilicho touched the bridge beside him, the latter readying his own spear, while the former placed one hand upon his back comfortingly, telling him of their presence, all while cracking the knuckles of her other hand with her thumb.

“We stand beside you, and keep the bridge.” Stilicho said seriously, silver light gleaming off of him.

“Let’s ring this dog’s bell,” Fu Hao challenged, readying her stance.

“You damnable *insects.*” The Shadow snarled, paws pattering against the glass bridge, the trial slowing its steps, testing its resolve with every passing moment. No mere trial could keep it contained, but for this glorious moment it was stalled. Dei roared, energy swirling about him as the trial tested him as well; his feet pushed forward, rushing to meet the enemy. Fu Hao and Stilicho charged beside him, silent in their fury. They met three quarters of the way up the bridge, and the Shadow batted Dei back easily, knocking him all the way back to the beginning while coughing up blood. *Eight seconds.*

Fu Hao landed an uppercut along the Shadow's jaw, and a single bat of its paw sent her flying out of the trial and the land of dreams – this was not her trial, and as such she was tossed away with ease. Stilicho did not fare any better, his spear scoring a line along one of the Shadow's paws before he, too, was sent hurtling away with a mercifully non-fatal swipe. *Seven seconds.*

“What is it you mortals like to say?” The Shadow hissed, wiping its jaw, stalling for a brief moment as glass chains leapt from the bridge, binding it in place for one crucial moment. Dei stood and wiped his mouth, life force flickering from mere proximity to the shadow. Yet defiance filled his heart, Aeriel's wind swirling around his spear as he readied it.

I reached the doors to my meditation chamber, and opened my eyes.

“You don't know how HIGH THE HEAVENS ARE!” It roared, shattering its chains and lunging forward. *Six.*

“Today, for you, *this* is how high the heavens are,” Dei whispered, hurling himself forward, his soul's own pure, clear energy mixing with Aeriel's wind and the power of Randus' dreams, his desire igniting a response in the universe as he hurled his weapon - the spear itself shattered, Aeriel's wind roaring, the clean energy of his soul piercing through the Shadow's miasma to allow the wind to strike it. It didn't do much, in the end. But for one, glorious moment, it was stalled; a small line carved into the Shadow's hide, a few drops of black blood leaking out. *Five.*

The doors to my chamber swung open, revealing an irate Kei. Her expression froze upon seeing me, immediately paling and sweat pouring down her face from the unrestrained might of my presence.

“Grandpa – your – you...” she stammered out. I spared her a glance, then looked away, fighting the urge to rush forward.

The Shadow reached the end of the bridge as Dei righted himself from the throw. The trial shattered beneath its might, breaking free of the fragile land of dreams, and it bypassed Dei entirely, rushing to the Sun. Fu Hao and Stilicho were ready for it, hurling bolts of gold and silver energy at the beast. Alexander roared and unleashed his fires, a stream of golden flames reaching from the center of the physical all the way out to nearly the Realm Sun as a beam of pure light. The Shadow screeched and narrowly dodged, a line of heat burned along its side from mere proximity to the beam. *Three.*

Dei leapt upon its back in its distraction, driving his soul into the space between its remaining spidery legs, the broken aura of an immortal surging from him – and Randus was there, warping space, teleporting Dei out of the way just in time to avoid the stabbing limbs. He reappeared beside Fu Hao and Stilicho, laughing madly, swaying on his feet as his body began to fail from the poison and, technically, his failed trial. He had not crossed the bridge, but that did not matter to him.

Two.

“Not one step further than this.” He promised, drawing a line in the Void with his soul. The Shadow surged forward, eyes rolling wildly, black miasma pouring off of it to obscure its movements as it charged to the Sun. All three poured all their might into resisting, Randus gifting them sight to see the Shadow and interject themselves in its way – while simultaneously layering dreams over the Shadow, making distance seem longer than it actually was. It snarled, desperation in its tone as Dei hurled himself forward suicidally once more, Fu Hao and Stilicho flanking, to prevent its dodge.

ONE.

My power collapsed in upon itself, no longer so obscenely oppressive in its weight but still carrying with it a large portion of the Lunar Star’s power. The Shadow stalled its steps. Fu Hao and Stilicho looked skyward as I stepped out of my palace, away from Kei – and appeared right behind them and Dei, one hand resting upon the man’s back. In a blink the poison ceased to spread, though the damage had been done.

“Go now. For I am here.” I said to him, eyes locking upon the Shadow. It stared at me, eight red eyes wide, as Fu Hao and Stilicho each grabbed Dei beneath the arm, fleeing my heavy presence. Only once did my angels look back, gazing upon my visage in fear and awe alike; then they were warped away by Randus. I, for one, glanced at my feet at the line Dei had drawn, visible only because his intent marked the spot. The Shadow’s front paws had skidded to a stop just before that line.

“No. No, what have you done,” the Shadow hissed. This close, I could see the power that made it, it, clinging to its soul like a leech, empowering and feeding off of it in the same instance. It squirmed uncomfortably in my presence, reaching out and pulling away in equal measure.

The smile that stretched across my face was not one of amusement, nor of kindness, as I grabbed the hilt of the weapon that hung at my side, the one I had forged just for *it*. Fate hissed at the action as I raised the glowing blue orb that was the core of the Lunar Star’s power – condensed and contained, ready to be released at a moment of my choosing. All it took was a bit of my blood – quite a bit, actually, a solid inch of flesh – condensed into a more solid shape. Only my own body could contain that much power.

“What I, as a doting, loving parent, had to. You went too far, and threaten the collapse of all creation.” I said simply, fixing my gaze upon the Shadow and drawing my long, straight sword. Darkness coated the edges, echoes of the Void humming within the glowing blue metal. A shield covered the hilt, while a brush hung from the pommel – more than just mere decorations, their purposes yet unrevealed. “Now come, and let your Father teach you some manners.”

1.36 Of Fate and Fools

“You would raise a hand against Your own child?” the Shadow asked, baring its fangs even as sadness crept into its tone. I smiled thinly, keeping my posture relaxed and sword at the ready, held loosely in my grip as it was. The blade seemed to vibrate in my hand, as if sensing my intentions. “They truly have corrupted You, haven’t they? Great One, I will remind You of Your true self.”

I did not verbally respond, stepping forward and swinging in the same motion, space warping around me to make the strike connect. The Shadow yelped and tried to leap away but was too slow, my blade slipping into it and reverberating off of something held tight, deep in the Shadow's core. With a grunt I stumbled backward, caught off guard by the fierce backlash, and inability to cut through the Shadow's core. Was my resolve not strong enough? I narrowed my eyes at the Shadow, whose eight eyes were wide as it inspected itself for an injury that was not there, the blade having seemingly harmlessly entered its body, then back out again.

No, my resolve was fine. As much as I wanted to talk to the Shadow, to understand it, this had to end now. It was the Shadow's fate that was stronger than expected.

“What was that?!” it howled, scrabbling away from me, limbs flailing. I glanced to the side, at Elvira and Keilan, who were hastily mending the barriers between Realms. They needed more time before they could leave. That was fine. I would handle this.

“The Sword that Does Not Cut.” I said simply, stepping forward once more. Space warped, the Shadow attempting to flee, to dart around me and aim for the Realm Sun once more, but found I was always in front of it. It howled, power it had kept in reserve for my entrance surging outward and upward, dwarfing the power of its siblings by threefold yet still not reaching my height. Dark miasma rushed toward me, flowing off of my skin like mist – seeking to enter my body, but unable to.

The sword flashed, the Void that comprised its edge, twisted with my intent and purpose, soaking up the rays of light from the Sun. Once, twice more I struck, the first time once again rebuffed with an echoing clang like metal upon metal, while the second swing finally cut through. I grunted as a weight unlike anything I had ever felt launched itself at me, the Shadow's fate severed at its core. The shield on the sword's hilt rung like a bell, vibrating terribly as I was sent skidding backward through the faux void, toward the primordial chaos, the Shadow howling in confusion and surprise.

“What have you done?!” it roared as I steadied myself, gripping the sword with both hands and gritting my teeth. This was far, far heavier than I expected.

“Severed your fate,” I ground out, feeling out the Shadow’s fate. At a quick glance I couldn’t tell exactly what it was beyond destruction, and an intense connection to the Sun. A wolf, devouring the sun? That sounded familiar. “The blade to sever, the shield to block the backlash and catch the strings, and a brush to rewrite it all. I saw the truth of what you are, Shadow, in the depths of my meditations. Not even you know it, I suspect. This will give you something...else,” I muttered. Disconnecting the Shadow from the fate of the Sun was a tactical move, and the first step to truly defeating it. Just capturing and imprisoning the Shadow, or even wiping away its soul, would not solve the problem. The fundamental cause of the Shadow ran far deeper than that.

“What I am?! No, I know what *you* are, Great One!” it snapped. I took a deep breath and flipped the sword around, so the brush on the pommel was held outward like a knife. The weight of the Shadow’s severed fate hung as heavy as the cosmos, from the shield. “I need to remind you—“ I gave it no further time to speak, darting forward and grabbing it by the scruff of the neck, shocking it with my speed. It yelped and struggled – *odd, I expected more resistance from it* – limbs flailing; its snarl deepened into a foul growl, four remaining spidery legs stabbing forward and sinking inches into my chest.

A burst of power silenced all of its protests, its limbs remaining in me. It was not painful, the wounds largely superficial, but that was not the *point*. It was the principle of the matter.

“Child,” I ground out, glaring at it and readying the brush. “That is *enough*. Now sit still and let me work.” Two quick strokes was all it took, to seal the ends of the Shadow’s severed fate. I pressed no purpose onto the Shadow, not replacing it with anything else. That was not the point of this. Its crimes could not go unpunished, but neither could it be erased, either. The weight of what it had been still sat heavy in my hands, the sword vibrating from the pressure, but...I stilled.

Something was wrong. I looked down at the Shadow’s face to see it grinning, and found I could not move my limbs. *What?*

“I know who and what you are, Great One. I saw those memories you keep locked away, hidden from the Others. They, just like my siblings, have tainted your greatness with imaginings of what

was. I will free you of your bondage,” the Shadow promised. My eyes widened as I peered into the Shadow’s being, peeling back its layers, forcibly hidden from my eyes. Seven drops of my blood swirled beside the Shadow’s soul, tainted and twisted to its own purposes, alongside a few void shards. That was not what was surprising; upon seeing how it had empowered the dark gods with my blood, I had expected this much.

I did not expect to see threads of power linking said droplets to me, binding my limbs with chains of my own power. It was not a seal that would hold me for long, a few seconds at most, but I dreaded what the Shadow could do in those few seconds – were I not still holding it by the scruff of the neck, and therefore containing it. Oh, we were going to have *words*

“FOOL!” The Shadow yelped. “NOW!” *Fool?* I wondered. *What...?*

And the Sun exploded. Fire and heat washed over the two of us, singing my robes and searing the Shadow’s fur. It cackled madly despite the pain it had to be feeling – and suddenly the fires of the Sun began to recede, sucked into a single point, almost as if a vacuum had sucked it up. Light beamed off of the being that stood where the Sun had been, no less radiant than when it had been a giant, celestial object, its power now concentrated into a single person.

“Sol! What are you doing?!” I demanded, straining against my chains. The Shadow continued to cackle as the Sun God stepped away from the primordial chaos, sparing me only a single, furious glance before descending upon the Realms. Heat rolled from him in waves, distorting the air and searing all of creation. Alexander rose into the sky weakly, a bit of his power returning as he charged heedlessly at Sol – the Sun god spared him barely a glance, dodging around him in a flash of light.

I turned my gaze upon the Shadow, fury writ across my features as it looked up at me smugly, still held by the scruff of its neck, even as it retracted its spidery limbs from my chest.

Such an expression would not last.

Sol stopped before Elvira, who bared her teeth in a feral snarl. His mere presence so close to the realms burned away energy and land alike, threatening to boil oceans and burn away the Tree. The miniature suns in the physical realm flickered, reacting to his presence, their flames seeking to reach up to join him.

“I should have been emperor.” He told her, raising a hand. A miniature sun appeared in his palm as he glared at her, beams of white light shooting off of her. “None of you know what it’s like, to be told you have been found wanting, that your purpose is inadequate, to have your authority infringed upon by your own parent! The skies are mine! As the Four Realms should have been!” Keilan’s karmic strings leapt up, trying to reach out to snag Sol, but he was too far away, his heat too intense.

“You’re a damn fool,” Elvira ground out, fingers twitching as she prepared to release the Realms and leap out of the way. “As soon as I let go, I’m going to crush your head like a *grape!*” Sol snorted out a half-laugh, and I jerked my limbs forward, one leg breaking free of the Shadow’s binding seal.

“Quit stalling, fool! Finish it!” The Shadow roared, frothing at the mouth for destruction. “I can only bind the Great One for so long!” I flexed my arm, the hand holding my sword breaking free as I smote the Shadow across the back of the head, effectively silencing it for a brief moment.

“You have a place in my future kingdom.” Sol said to Elvira, lowering his hand and turning to the Physical Realm and his brother, Gilles. Said god was racing up toward him, shadows curling about his form, the chaotic goddess he had been fighting standing back and watching with a small frown.

“Brother, no! What are you doing?!” he shouted, desperation filling his chest as he tried to reach Elvira and his brother, torn between who to tackle away. And Sol hesitated. I saw it in him, upon seeing his brother, the other half to his light. Another flex of my power and another shackle was broken, allowing my movement of my other arm. All of this had happened in less than three seconds.

“Shadows do not have a place. All will know my Light,” Sol promised, and unleashed the sun in his palm. It raced toward Gilles, who could do nothing but blink in surprise at the betrayal of his own brother. It was a powerful strike, meant to wipe out something completely and utterly. And many things happened at once.

The sun struck Gilles.

“GILLES!” Elvira screamed in horror and pain.

Randus snagged him away at the last second, reaching the god of shadows just in time to protect him and pull him into the land of dreams, saved from annihilation.

And power rippled through the primordial chaos as the Will was awoken.

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I thought I was already mad. Mere anger did nothing to justify the absolute rage that pounded through my veins now.

“SOL!” I boomed, the weight of control freely taken from my shoulders as the Will of the Four Realms activated. The constant, mighty power that flowed through me, strong enough to break reality even without the added weight of the Lunar Star, stored though it was, given an extra set of hands to keep it precise as punishment descended. The bonds that bound me shattered, lightning crackling all through the primordial chaos as it writhed, a face forming in it.

My face.

Sol paled as I stepped forward and reached out a hand, the primordial chaos matching my movements, a hand half the size of the Four Realms itself surging from the chaos to reach toward him.

“YOU HAVE COMMITTED A CARDINAL SIN, ATTEMPTING TO DESTROY THE TRUESOUL OF ANOTHER DENIZEN OF THE REALMS.” I boomed. My voice echoed through the chaos, through all of creation. Even the Shadow was pacified, eyes wide as it stared up at me. *I had expected you to try this. Not Sol.* I thought to myself.

“No!” Sol shrieked, backpedaling. Fire surged from his form, his bronze skin melting as the power within him sought to change his body back to that of a sun – and he surged downward, toward the physical realm and away from my hand. I grit my teeth and reached for him, waves of fire lashing out to bathe the Realms in flames and heat in some last-ditch effort to do *something* – only for arrows of pure light to strike him, sinking into his chest. It did little more than startle him, backing him off, away from the realm as he stared down at the spiritual objects in his chest – for it being spiritual was how it bypassed the sheer heat he radiated – in surprise.

Fang Xu stood above the tree, firing arrow after arrow as Sol descended; one archer, trying to shoot down the Sun. Formations sprang to life around him and from the arrows he launched, a small cage forming around Sol in an attempt to mitigate the damage.

In that next split-second the Hand reached Sol, shrinking in size but not in strength as it closed around him and tore his body from his power; the light of the Sun separated from his soul.

“No! You can’t do this to me!” Sol raged, struggling against the fate he brought upon himself.

“PUNISHMENT COMES FOR YOU NOW. I STRIP YOU OF YOUR POWER, YOUR TITLES, YOUR DIVINITY, YOUR IMMORTALITY! I STRIP YOU OF ALL THAT YOU WERE, DOWN TO THE VERY LAST INCH!” Each statement was punctuated by another piece of his being, being wiped away, until all that remained was his truesoul. That last piece I would leave alive, though I would lessen it greatly. It was a truesoul that decided whether a being would reincarnate as a mortal, like a Fae, or an insect or a plant. It was a truesoul that contained one’s dao, one’s path to becoming greater. When I said that the truesoul contained all that which most important, I did not lie. Personality, memories, all those could be built up again, and remembered. Losing the core of one’s self, letting it die, that could not be.

Even that, I lessened in Sol.

He would rejoin the Realms, starting as the lowest of the low. In time, he might rise up again, with new lessons learned, and new purpose. I didn’t much care, though I would be watching for him. *It is a punishment I wish I could give to the Shadow.* I thought icily, almost begging it to cross one of those lines, to give me that final reason. The Shadow squirmed in my grip, trying to break free of me and reach the energy of the Sun, contained though it was. It was in that moment the Shadow tried to do something stupid.

Power surged within its gut as it ignited my blood, pooling within it. I scowled and turned my full attention to it, the explosion building within itself as it tried to self-destruct, clearly hoping to do some final amount of damage, perhaps even make me lose control over the Sun –

“Enough out of you!” I snarled, letting go of the sword – which floated beside me all the same – and grabbing its forehead with my now-free hand. The raging explosion stilled for a moment as I wrapped my power around my blood, the void shards, and the *other thing* that made the Shadow what it was. It took a moment. We wrestled with each other for a moment longer than I wanted it to, the Shadow resisting me with all its might. But eventually the Shadow’s grip slipped, and I yanked that which was mine to begin with free of its grasp, loosened as it was by the severance of fate.

The Shadow sagged as I hauled this chunk of power and being free, the thing that made its fate what it had been shifting in my grip like a ball of smoke and darkness. I bared my teeth at it, hissing in momentary indecision what to do with it. In an instant I cooled the explosion threatening to rip through those droplets of blood, separating out the void shards. A bit of primordial chaos floated up to me, forming a cage in which I stuffed the now-defeated Shadow into, then promptly sealed away the power I had taken in a glass jar, to be dealt with later.

I turned back to the Realms, and what I saw surprised me.

The Shadow's final gambit had made me lose a bit of focus, even with the Will of the Realms aiding me. Some of the Sun's power had slipped through the grip of my hand of primordial chaos, rays of fire and heat shooting off through the realms – most not hitting anything important, but a few coming dangerously close to certain objects. Alexander batted away two with his tail, his scales now blackened from the heat. The gods of fire and water contained another, directing it away from Keilan, injured though they were. Elvira took one to the face with gritted teeth. It was Fang Xu who surprised me the most, however, standing before the Tree with arms spread.

Five streaks of fire and light flowing into his chest as he channeled it into his soul, the power burning him inside and out. Celene screamed from below, the immortal woman too far away to reach him as he stood before the Tree, absorbing all the rays that had threatened to hurt it further. His soul shuddered under the strain, another ray of light curling around to sink into him. I narrowed my eyes.

Wait...all the rays were flowing to him now.

Alexander blinked in surprise as residual energy clinging to his scales, heat and light from the Sun seeping out of his form to rejoin the rest of itself in Fang Xu. My eyes narrowed further as the other rays of light, such as the one which was contained by Fire and Water, for example, gently turned and flowed to Fang Xu as well. The man's face was red in pain and frustration, his soul shaking – and I realized what was happening.

The Sun was seeking its core, the power that manifested it trying to remake itself and return once more to being that great big ball of fire in the sky. And Fang Xu, in his brave stupidity, in his attempt to protect the Realm and his loved ones in the only way he knew how, had thrown himself in the way and unwittingly offered up himself as the core. There was just one issue.

Sol's destructive intent still lingered in the Sun's essence, fading though it was. It burned Fang Xu not just because it was too much for his immortal body to maintain, but also because it sought to destroy him inside and out. And destroy him it would try, right down to his truesoul.

I scowled and made a grasping motion with one hand, Fang Xu hurtling out of the Realms to float before me – I had to get him out of there before the power imploded to become the Realm Sun once more.

“You idiot,” I hissed, looking the man over as he struggled before me, sweat beading his brow – only to be evaporated an instant later. “You bloody idiot. You’re killing yourself again – when will you learn your lesson, damn it?!” I barked, though the man couldn’t hear me. Already pieces of himself had burned away into free energy; his immortality was gone, as was his qi and a large chunk of his soul. His will, however, remained, and kept him from collapsing.

Then I stilled, staring at him, mind working in overtime, fully aware of the Shadow’s eyes upon us, greatly weakened though it was. Fang Xu’s soul was whispering to me, begging me not to save him, but to simply end the threat of the Sun exploding and destroying everything, unaware as he was that I already had. The corners of my lips tugged into a frown as I grabbed him by the chin, unable to control my unrestrained aura and uncaring that it put even further pressure on him. And something tickled the back of my mind. Visions and dreams came to me as I studied Fang Xu for what felt like an eternity, but was in fact mere nanoseconds.

Eight pillars. And the Sun does need a guide...

“Damn fool. Fang Xu, you foolish, brave mortal, I have a proposition for you. It’s going to suck, but it will give your soul a chance for survival.” I promised, touching his soul and easing its pain for

but a moment. I put a hand upon the power of the Realm Sun, slowing its eager flow. There were no words of comfort here. It was either this, or watch his soul burn away under the pressure of the Sun – in fact, the pressure was the only thing keeping what little remained of his soul together; stopping the process could even shatter him. I could maybe protect his truesoul, but that would mean the Red String that connected him and Celene would instantly shatter, as well. Even this was likely to sever it...unless. The orb of the Lunar Star burned cold in my pocket.

Do it. Fang Xu's soul beseeched me, clutching tightly to that red string. I stood and held out my hand, the Sword that Does Not Cut flying back into my palm. In one smooth motion I swung it down upon the man, severing the burned pieces of his soul. He screamed in pain and anguish – for there was no pain like having your soul injured – and held out my other hand, what remained of Sol's divinity flying into the other. This, too, I cut in half before stuffing it into Fang Xu. Immediately his expression slackened and relaxed, red hair igniting in flames, eyes glowing gold...then rolling up into the back of his skull as he passed out.

“It’s up to you now. It will take tens of thousands, if not millions of years to assimilate the divinity and the power of the Realm Sun – it will not be comfortable, that I promise, as it burns away your mortality. But you may yet survive to find Celene again.” I whispered, before shoving him away and letting the rest of the Realm Sun’s energy go.

It flowed to him instantly, igniting in a burst of power and flash of light – and then the Realm Sun floated once more outside the Realms, its light no longer harsh and burning, but soft and warming. Immediately I felt the Realms sigh in relief as it was returned to some semblance of normalcy; even the hand of primordial chaos started to fade, though I directed that raw stuff of creation into the cracks in the Realms to act as glue and begin the mending process. Elvira and Keilan sighed in relief as a weight was taken off their shoulders; even Reika pulled herself out of her Tree, green light radiating from her as she began to heal the Realms.

I, however, turned my attention back to the Shadow, who stared at me despondently.

“What...” it rasped weakly. “Did you take from me...?”

“What was originally mine.” I said bluntly, retrieving the jar I had sealed that dark power in. I cast a critical eye over it, knowing what I had to do. But not yet. My children deserved an explanation as well. “And I don’t mean just the blood. This was my weakness.”

“...weakness?” The Shadow asked.

“Yes. Becoming a god is hard enough, but becoming a creator god? That is another matter entirely. Parts of my soul had to be removed - weakness in my being, that could not stand up to the unfiltered power of creation - so the right, stronger parts could grow to the required levels. That weakness of mine clung to you. Empowering you, growing in strength just as I did.” I explained, twisting it back and forth. I hadn’t taken it all away from the Shadow, because it had been born of that weakness. As one of those first, weak little souls I made, that weakness had latched onto the Shadow and twisted its growth. But I couldn’t let it be controlled by my own weakness, given purpose by some foul machination of fate and the nature of creation.

“What...are you going...to do with it?” The Shadow asked.

“For now, nothing,” I said, turning away from the Shadow, leaving it in the cage I had made for it. It wouldn’t last forever, but it would do for now. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have your mess to clean up. Then we’ll decide what to do with you.”

This decision, however, would not be mine alone to make. The severed fate was far too heavy for that.