

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

1.37 Aftermath

The immediate aftermath of the battle was as messy as all battles were. Perhaps this one even moreso, as it was a fight between gods.

Burial shrouds were laid out for those who had been slain, or whose souls had been so grievously injured they might have to re-enter the cycle of reincarnation to heal. Many of the Heavenly Host were among the dead. Two of Elvira's angels had been victims of such a fate, and one god. More were so badly injured, they would take millennia to heal properly.

Reika walked among the injured, supported by Kei, who I had retrieved from my palace, her healing green light washing out to heal wound of all involved. Gods and other spiritual beings alike crowded around her, licking their injuries and staring out over the realms at the smoking destruction. She even did this for many of the mortals, her healing light washing out to right as many of the wrongs as she could, as quickly as possible. Argent, the god of metal, was a particular focus of hers, injured as he was from holding back the Shadow. The god just laughed at his wounds, pressing Reika to look after others first.

Reika's presence would be instrumental in healing the Realms; her biggest role, by her own begrudging admission, was not to fight, but to pick up the pieces afterwards. I daresay her knowledge in the healing arts were nearly as good as, if not better than, my own. Add to that the large Treants she had made, who walked the wilds of the Physical Realm, healing the land and cleansing it of whatever foul miasma the Shadow and its forces had inflicted upon it, and things were quickly looking better for the mortals. Even the lesser planets had these creations upon them, little battle though they'd seen.

After ensuring the barrier between realms was secured, Keilan immediately set about fixing the Karmic Palace and sorting out the lines of souls, easing much of the ill karma that had been accrued and taking it upon himself to handle. This was a war, after all, a near apocalyptic-level event. It would be wrong of us to not lighten the burden of karma. An incarnation of mine aided

him – the karma of the Realms was my karma as well, and it would be remiss of me to not take an active hand in dealing with it. Thankfully, now that things were wrapping up, it seemed like I wouldn't be forced into meditation for a while yet and I could actually get some work done.

Manasa, his holy beast, and the few karmic angels he'd managed to raise flit about the Valley, directing souls and aiding the karmic kings. His security force proved instrumental in the process, as well. Asuras and Psykers, he called them, beings of intense karmic ties with strong psionic powers.

Elvira rallied what remained of her army, praising them despite the way her own heart raged at her inability to end the battle. She, like most of my children, refused to meet my eyes out of shame, when it should be I who apologized to them. Despite needing to let things play out this way, to draw out the Shadow so I could handle it properly, I still felt like I should have done more to mitigate the damage. I just...I couldn't imagine what it all would have been like, had I let the Shadow continue to fester and lurk. At least now we had a chance to keep growing.

She directed much of the relief efforts, sending those who were healthy to go rescue any they could from the aftermath. What remained of the Heavenly Host marched with them, armor gleaming. I asked Elvira what they were called, beyond that. She said she hadn't thought of a name for them yet besides Heavenly Host.

She cried tears of relief and grief both when Randus returned with Gilles, the god of shadows' body burnt, but alive. I told her to tend to him, and I would handle the relief efforts. She refused, though her gaze lingered upon Gilles as he was tended to.

Alexander was the most injured, and I – or, at least, a part of me – spent a great amount of time ensuring his well-being. Tanking multiple direct explosions from all manner of spirits, as well as doing direct battle with the Shadow itself, empowered as it was by my blood, had left him in bad shape. I ignored his protests as I eased some of his pain, fixing his broken horn and meeting his sad eyes with a proud smile. He lived up to his namesake, despite falling victim to the Shadow's scheming. We had all done that. Nonetheless, I knew he felt inadequate. But I saw him as a paragon of virtue, the fiercest of guardians and most powerful of the Four. He tried to rise, to aid in the efforts, but I told him to rest.

I would handle the Spirit Realm while he healed. I would handle much while all my children healed; take the reins back into my own hands, as it were. They had done well, and I was proud of them all. As he slunk away to go sleep in his cave, the god of fire and goddess of water joined him, fussing over his wounds together, he muttered his thanks.

Randus waved me off when I approached, the butler god standing tall with shoulders set. The land of dreams had been damaged by the Shadow's presence, and he needed to calm it to keep giving the mortals more positive dreams. I didn't leave, however, without giving him a hug, which he stiffly returned. He had done excellently, even if I knew he felt inadequate in his ability to fight. His duty had never been to fight, though, and he had bought me more than enough time.

Most of the other gods I personally visited as well. The wind goddess Aeriel smiled at me as she spread news of victory across all the Realms from where she was laid up in the healing branches of the Tree, under Reika's care. The wind carried words of joy and sadness with it to all who would listen, proclaiming victory. I praised her for her bravery, and she responded by blowing a light breeze in my face. It smelled faintly of cinnamon, and carried with it the whispering sounds of birdsong.

There was still more to be done for all the gods and mortals and angels, after I made my first rounds, but before that I had something else to do. There were dark spirits to deal with.

I walked among the dark spirits and dark angels. Many were sealed away, or had fled back into the hidden realms the Shadow had come from. Those would need to be explored later, but for now no one had the energy to go chasing after them – we needed to focus on healing first, and then that could be dealt with. But, primarily, I had to deal with a specific few beings.

The Shadow had imbued a few dark angels with my blood. They didn't have full drops, usually only half or quarter of a drop, but that is what gave them the power to contend with the gods. For each one I, personally, went up and retrieved that drop. Partly because it was symbolic. Partly so the sudden absence of power didn't collapse their souls. Each one collapsed in a heap afterwards,

power draining from them as they lost the status of “dark angel” and fell back into merely spiritual beings – I personally sealed each away in jade talismans, gifted to me by the Heavenly Host.

Then I came upon the chaotic goddess Gilles had battled.

She had been knelt just outside of Reika’s palace, atop the Tree, alongside the other dark angels I had needed to deal with. Golden rope bound her, shackles of jade fixated upon her wrists and ankles. After the fighting she had apparently willingly surrendered, not least because she had been surrounded by gods and powerful spiritual beings alike. She sneered as I approached, able to do little else.

“Well? What are you waiting for?” She challenged me. The caging of the Shadow had taken much of the fight out of her...or so I had thought, but the defiance in her shifting, red eyes told me otherwise. “Strip me of my powers, oh great *god*. Lay upon me the terrible might of the Heavenly Dao, which will not stand for one of *my* path! Do it, you coward!” I was silent, Fu Hao and Stilicho bristling from where they walked beside me.

“Put respect upon His name, cur!” Stilicho raged.

“Silence your tongue!” Fu Hao snapped. The goddess rolled her eyes as I observed the chaotic aura that rolled off of her, stroking my chin and observing bits of her past. Now that she laid before me, I could see her past quite plainly...

“Or what, assholes? God will smite me?” she argued. I smiled, not unkindly as I met her eyes. The expression seemed to catch her off guard, especially when I knelt before her, laying a hand upon her shoulder.

“Thyia.” I said, nodding. She blinked.

“What?”

“Thyia. That will be your name, if it’s alright with you. Sorry it took so long to name you, I just...well, I didn’t know you existed if I’m honest. And wow, that makes me sound like an absent parent, doesn’t it?” I mused, patting her shoulder and standing. She gaped at me. “It’s a decent name for a goddess of sacrifice and catastrophe, I think.” She wasn’t just the goddess of suicide, after all. There was a touch of something else there, unfinished and unrealized, that bordered on the catastrophic. It was an...interesting revelation, that I could see clearly now.

“But – aren’t you going to...I mean, the Shadow,” she stammered.

“You gained divinity through a legitimate way. The other dark gods committed suicide, and had been artificially elevated through my own blood; I would have stripped them of their divinity were they still here. As had the Shadow, who would have likely been around Alexander’s level had it not ingested my blood.” I explained calmly. “You still did some bad things, many bad things, and will be imprisoned for a time because of it. Even I can see how the Shadow manipulated you, cut you off from my influence to make you as you are now. But you will not be stripped of your divinity.”

“But – I’m a dark god! Not of sacrifice, but suicide!” she spluttered.

“Are you? Is that all you are?” I asked sharply, trying, and failing to have patience. “Suicide is a dark, and dangerous thing. Sacrifice is the surrendering of something to an end. Were the angels who suicided themselves not sacrificing their existence to a greater goal? Is a man who throws himself to the wolves to distract them and save others, not still a suicidal act? There is nobility in self-sacrifice, just as there is a light within suicide. Heed my words, Thyia, or a goddess of suicide is all you will ever be, when you could be more.” I told her, standing and shaking my head. She gaped at me as I walked away, Fu Hao and Stilicho following. Anger burned in my gut still at all that had happened, but I had to do my best to play the role of an impartial judge.

It was one thing for mortals to make decisions like this, to imprison or kill. It was another thing entirely for one in my position to.

I'd visit Thyia, wherever she ended up being imprisoned, of course. We needed to make up for lost time...time the Shadow had prevented me from having with her. I resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose, to stave off the coming headache. There was something someone had said in my old life, though for the life of me I couldn't remember who it was, that said something to the effect of "If I can't be a ruler who never uses cruelty, I want to be a ruler who only uses cruelty once."

The worst part was, I hadn't been expecting to have to use that cruelty on Sol. I knew he'd been disgruntled about the pending Lunar Star, but not that angry. A large part of me had expected to have to use it on the Shadow...that same part still expected to, still *wanted* to. But that decision wasn't wholly mine, anymore.

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So I continued down the line, examining the dark spirits, sealing many away. The worst offenders, though, had all blown themselves up. Those who remained, were those who were not as dedicated to the Shadow. They were the least of the offenders.

Then there were no more. The imprisonment was finished for all save one – the most important one. And for this, I would need to gather my first four children. With a quick word of thanks to Fu Hao and Stilicho, who bowed in respect, I vanished, sending out a silent call to my kids. We had a Shadow to deal with.

We sat together in a small room, the walls carved stone, like a cave. Outside, the thundering of the true Abyss, where the primordial chaos met the Void, echoed like waves against a cliffside as it raged against the true Void. Alexander was curled up near the entrance, head held high and injuries still healing. Elvira and Keilan sat opposite each other, arms crossed, both of their wings

bandaged and set in splints as the bones mended. Reika sat closest to me, her hands twitching with the desire to get back to work. This shouldn't take long, though.

Before us stood a large, round table of reddish stone, flat and smooth, unadorned. And above it floated the Shadow, bound in a cage of primordial chaos, head resting on its paws as it stared out at us despondently.

“I believe I owe you children an explanation.” I started. “Of what, exactly, the Shadow is, and what made it strong.”

“Besides devouring your blood?” Alexander ground out, glaring at the Shadow. I nodded and procured the jar of essence I had taken from it. The black mass within swirled and writhed, pressing against the container as it sought to rejoin with the Shadow, whose eyes locked onto it.

“This is my weakness.” I said simply. “That which was removed from me when I became an Origin Deity, so the necessary things could grow. Parts of my soul that were too weak to handle the power. It had to go somewhere, and it latched onto the Shadow – a soul created in the darkness of my own Light. This, moreso than the Void, is what kept it hidden from us all. It is the part of myself I did not want to see.” At this explanation, even though it had heard a bit of it before, the Shadow perked up slightly. In fact all of my greatest children leaned forward in interest. “It twisted its fate, creating something that mirrored destruction and hatred. The Shadow, as my child, wanted to show me some truth. Ironically it did, just not what it was aiming for; and what it was aiming for would end in nothing less than the total annihilation of creation.” I explained, shaking my head.

It was a fool’s goal, that would end in all of our deaths. And to make matters worse, almost all the blame could be laid upon me. How I designed the Realms, what I created first, my desires when creating the universe...all of it had culminated in this storm. This was the consequence of creation, beyond even the Void trying to consume us. We managed to weather this storm, but if I did not handle it delicately, the next storm might overwhelm us. Which was why I sought a permanent solution to that which was called the Shadow.

“What are you going to do with it?” Reika asked, gesturing to the jar. I smiled at her.

“This.” In one smooth motion I popped open the lid and sucked it all into my mouth, swallowing it whole. All of them sat directly upright as I groaned in relief, the power flowing down into me and rejoining my soul, filling a hole I had not even noticed was there. In an instant it was overwhelmed by the rest of my being, assimilated and made to join with the rest of me once more, immediately being raised up to the necessary level of power. “I am strong enough now, that such weakness is immaterial to me. And, in fact, only makes me stronger – oh!”

Relief surged within me, some nexus of power being restored as I straightened upright, an itching sensation burning behind my eyes, and along my lost arm. I blinked rapidly, banishing my prosthetic arm of primordial chaos, noting that nearly two inches of flesh had been restored by that one simple action, before remaking it once again. Then my sight *blurred*. Things I had never seen before became far more clear – even the Shadow’s hidden realm became visible to me, stretching across all of the Realms like a spiderweb, hidden just under the surface.

My smile died on my face as I turned back to my children, each of them flinching in turn as I turned my gaze to them, seeing deeper into their domains and selves than I ever had before...at least, with such a casual glance. I could see the breaths catch in their lungs, their eyes flitting away from my piercing gaze instinctually...

“Well, that was a pleasant surprise.” I mused, then shook my head. This was only step one. “Now, however, we must decide what to do with the Shadow.” They were all silent for a long, long moment, while the Shadow continued to stare at me.

“Destruction is not an option, I assume,” Elvira asked.

“No. Not just for the reason you’re thinking, either; if we destroy this version of the Shadow, another one will rise to take its place.” I said. I could, technically, absorb the entirety of the Shadow into myself...but I had no idea what that would do. The future of such an action was dark and mysterious to me – and considering how delicate a situation this was right now, I couldn’t take

the risk of it being a bad future. “This Shadow, at least, feels some sort of connection with you all, myself, and all of creation. Even if I have been rejoined with my weakness, the nominal cause, the Shadow is something that will return in one form or another.” It annoyed me to no end, but that was the truth. Because of Balance, there had to be some chaos. Because of freewill, there would always be discord to fuel it.

Better the devil you know, in a way.

“What if we banished it to the Void?” Keilan suggested, glaring at the Shadow. “Never to return.”

“Eternal imprisonment might not be bad, either, though I am loathe to keep it beneath my Tree. Perhaps some other prison? Creation is painful for it, is it not? So imprisonment near the Sun could be fun. For us. A bit of well-earned revenge for everything it put us through.” Reika suggested coldly. The Shadow turned to look at her, and she raised an eyebrow at it. “You stabbed me in the chest, tried to destroy my Tree, but most importantly, threatened to kill Kei. No, I will not be lenient.”

“I do not think banishment will work, brother Keilan. Imprisonment is good,” Alexander said slowly. “For it must be punished for its crimes against us, against the Realms, and against Father. But for all its faults, it did not seek to truly kill us, not like Sol. It actively sought to not damage the truesouls of most beings – even its own forces, that self-destructed, kept their souls intact. Do not misunderstand, the damage it wrought is inconceivable, but we must also look at all the facts.” Elvira scowled and ran a hand over her face, while Reika looked away with a frown.

“It had void shards in its stomach.” Keilan said softly. “Mother told me that, after the battle. When it stabbed you, Reika, it had enough time to potentially spit one out, send it through the core of yourself and shatter all that you are. It could have swallowed a few of us, most likely, with the power granted to it by Father’s blood. Repeatedly it said it did not want to kill us.” He reasoned.

“Just because it did not do what it could have will not win it any favors. It shouldn’t have done any of this in the first place.” Elvira snapped, Reika nodding her head in agreement.

“I do not disagree, I am simply trying to sell it to myself, for Father is right. I fear the Shadow cannot ever be truly destroyed. As much as it would please me to tear it limb from limb, we cannot. The loss of Sol will have to be enough. I vote for imprisonment.” Alexander snarled.

“Imprisonment. Upon thinking it over, banishing it to the Void makes the Shadow someone else’s problem, and that does not sit right with me.” Keilan agreed.

“Fine. But I expect it to either never see the light of day again, or put some work in to helping the Realms eventually.” Elvira snapped.

“Is wiping its soul away, so the truesoul remains, truly not an option, Mother?” Reika asked.

“...if you all ask me to, I will do it.” I allowed slowly, stressing each syllable to make sure she understood how little I thought of that solution. She met my eyes, and nodded firmly.

“Imprisonment is not punishment enough for its actions. We need to come up with something else for it, then I will agree to imprisonment.” Reika said. Her siblings rumbled in agreement, and she nodded, sitting back. Not satisfied, but abated for now.

“That’s it? You’re going to lock me away for all eternity? Pitiful.” The Shadow snapped. I looked up at it, eyebrows raised, expressing my thoughts on the matter in one simple look. *Give me a reason.* It said. Its imprisonment would not be some simple, sordid affair – the Shadow liked and wanted solitude. “You should kill me while you have the chance.”

“But this meeting cannot be about something as simple as imprisonment.” Alexander continued, drawing my attention and meeting my eyes. “Father, you have something else you require of us.” I nodded as all eyes turned to me, lifting one palm, facing it skyward. The Sword that Does Not Cut appeared above it, floating and spinning, still holding the Shadow’s fate on the shield. I could see it now, with my new eyes, as a round, pill-shaped ball, fist sized and sitting in the center of the buckler-sized shield.

“We need to take a piece of the Shadow’s fate.” Elvira said bluntly, realizing what I was about to say before I even said it. I nodded at her.

“For each of us to take a share of the burden.” Keilan muttered. “To spread out the Shadow’s fate between each of us...so not one is overburdened.”

“It does not mean you will change as a person, though it may evolve your divine domains.” I said.

“We will take the weight.” Reika said, cutting me off. “Evenly. Between the five of us; the Shadow was born of it, so it cannot escape that fate even if we stripped it down. Don’t even think of touching it, Mother.” She accused, her brusque tone directed not at me, even if her words were. I nodded in agreement – it wasn’t like I could, even if I wanted to. I already took back what I needed to.

“Split it into four, Father.” Alexander said. Quietly and without preamble, I grabbed the sword and gripped the fate it had severed with my other hand, using the void-coated blade to cut it into four equal strips. None of my children spoke as I circled the table, handing a sliver to each of them. Reika was the last, and she stared at hers without blinking, expressionless and cold. Before anyone else could speak she put it in her mouth and swallowed, her soul and divine essence shuddering.

“Feels weird. Tastes awful.” She complained under her breath. Following her example, each of the others followed suit as well, making similar faces of disgust. And the Shadow was forced to watch through it all.

There was not much more to talk about, after that. My children filed out one-by-one, each saying their own farewells and leaving myself alone with the Shadow. I would make the cage for it. No other could do so, even grossly weakened though it was. And I had something special in mind for it.

“So that’s it?” the Shadow asked as I twisted the cave we resided in, fashioning it into a cage suitable for it. “You’re just going to leave me here, alone? Pitiful.”

“Make no mistake,” I spoke over its next words, uncaring as to what it had to say. A wave of my hand created a small window in the rapidly shrinking cave, allowing the light of the Realm Sun to shine through. The Shadow hissed as the light hit it, its cage of primordial chaos vanishing and allowing it to scurry away into the darkness. “This is about as cruel of a punishment as I could think of. You feed off of pain and misery. You thrive on darkness and hate. You had to sit there and watch as everything you had built yourself up to be was divvied up and given to those you think unworthy, without losing everything you were. You know exactly what you lost. And now I am giving you a view, to watch them continue their work. And soon, when I create the Lunar Star, it, too, will shine its light upon you. There will be no hiding from this.” I told it, pulling out the orb that contained all the power of the Star.

Its light would shine in this cave eternally, reaching even the hidden realms of the Shadow, as a light in the darkness. A light for the darkness. I could feel it would be so.

Even now I could sense its power raging within the orb, begging to be let out and allowed to become what it needed to be. But it couldn’t yet. The Shadow hardly even reacted, though, just watching and listening.

“But I will leave you with something special. A personal gift of mine, to show you exactly what it means to be me – to show you what I do, why I do it, in the way I do it. I’m going to give you dreams. The dreams of all those in the Four Realms. Experience all the pain you caused, to each soul you caused it to. Experience all the joy of living, from the day-to-day doldrums of mortality, to the greatest of successes, and to the worst of days. Then, only then, after you have experience all

that, will we talk.” I said, fixating it with a look. It stared back at me, and I had to set my heart to the side to keep my expression firm.

It looked so lost. A child who hadn’t been given the proper upbringing. But that did not excuse its actions in any way – and wiping away its soul would have been a mercy to it. No, it needed to understand the pain it caused in the truest, fundamental sense. I snapped my fingers, and its prison finished with a rumble.

“Be seeing you, Morgan,” I said, floating upward. The Shadow furrowed its brows at me.

“Morgan?” It rasped, as I reached the ceiling. It was there that I paused, still meeting its eyes.

“It was high time I gave you a name.” I told it. “It’s a little late, but better late than never. The name itself has a meaning, but...well, I didn’t choose it for the meaning. I chose it for lack thereof; it will be, what it is. As will you now.” And with that, I vanished through the ceiling, intent on moving forward. There were still two more important things I had to do.

I had mortals to talk to and a Star to create.