2371 Nine Fates  
As the echoes of the little girl's voice turned into silence, the nine of them fell into silence, as well. Her words had sounded like jesting… or at least they were supposed to. How could mortal men kill the gods?  
  
And yet, a solemn atmosphere settled in the inner sanctum of the Oracle temple. This peaceful realm of theirs was breathtaking and thriving, but it did not enjoy the protection of a god. The gods had grown aloof and distant long ago… their temples stood proudly, and yet no matter how piously the priests and priestesses prayed, they were usually met with indifferent аbsence. Even War, the patron deity of humanity, had withdrawn from watching over the great, awful empire of his.  
  
The mortal realm where the nine of them had been born was not protected even by a neglectful deity, and so, it venerated no god. The ones they venerated instead were the Oraclе - the women capable of glimpsing Fate. The vast tapestry of fate was not something that mortals were meant to see, so the Oracle was blind, the awful visage of what they had witnessed burned into their eyes, destroying them forever. That was their curse, but also their solace. The Oracle was telling them that their rеalm was doomed, and that they would have to kill the gods.  
  
Prince Eurys finally spoke, his voice shaking subtly: "Mother… oh, Oracle. But… how can nine mortals kill the gods?"  
The old hag seemed to study him with her blind eyes, then leaned back a little. Her creaky voice resounded in the inner sanctum: "The War Empire is an insatiable beast that feeds on conquest. It is vast; it is prosperous. However, that prosperity is wicked, and worse than that, it is unsustainable. Their economy and their way of life can only be sustained by an influx of riches, or resources - and most importantly, of new slaves. Without the slaves, the Empire could not produce anything. But slaves… are not a renewable resource."  
  
The woman spoke next, her words echoing somberly in the inner sanctum of the temple.  
"You've read the imperial treaties, my son. You know the cruelty of their ways. The slaves they take do not last long, enduring endless labor. A few years, possibly… a decade, at most. And so, the Empire needs to conquer new lands, and procure new slaves. It won't ever stop, because it can't stop - if it does, it will starve."  
The little girl spoke last, her voice turning small.  
  
"Our kingdom is a peaceful one. It is a land of art, wine, wisdom, poetry, and culture. The Empire will come and take our art. It will take our wine. It will take our poets and philosophers and turn them into house slaves to educate the young masters. The rest - those who survive - will be sent to toil in the fields. In just a few generations, our culture will be no more. Our people will be us no more. Consumed and stolen by the conquering tyrants."  
The woman wearing a deerskin around her shoulders finally spoke, her quiet voice sounding calm and even:  
"That doesn't answer the question. All of us can't even stop an empire that one god watches over. How will the nine of us kill all six of them?"  
The Oracle grew silent.  
  
Eventually, the old hag spoke solemnly: "You are a huntress, are you not? You should know how to kill a beast that is stronger than you."  
The woman spoke next.  
"The answer is simple. Not that it will be easy, far from it. It will be difficult. It will be unbearable. It will be impossible, even, for each of you."  
The little girl finished what the woman started saying:  
"But you must achieve the impossible, each of you. You must find the beast's weakness. You must lure it into a trap. You must sink your blade into the weak spot that you found."  
  
The three of thеm spoke in unison then…  
"The nine of you were chosen because you are special, just like this realm of ours was. Some of you are wise, and some of you are strong. Some of you are holy. However, fate has no use for those who are strong or those who are wise, and neither does it care for sages and saints. The only ones it cares for…"  
Their voices enveloped the sanctum, sounding like a prophecy.  
"Are those who are fated. And that is what you are, the nine of you. You are blessed by fate… you are cursed by fate. The strings of fate wrap around you tightly, and so, everything you do will echo across fate, shaking its very foundation."  
  
The old hag opened its mouth to continue, but at that moment, the prince who was kneeling on the floor interrupted her: "You say that our land will be ravaged by the empire, that our people will be slaughtered and enslaved. That we cannot save anyone, but must instead avenge everyone. That we must kill the gods?" His voice shook with barely suppressed anger.  
"But must we really abandon our people? And what will happen to the world when the gods die? Aloof as they are, the gods serve as the pillars of existence. All of it rests on their shoulders. Must we… destroy it all?"  
Instead of the Oracle, it was one of the nine who answered - a tall warrior with broad shoulders, his face as pale as ash, his eyes brimming with sorrow and darkness:  
"If everyone we know and love will not exist anymore… then what is the worth of that existence? You are young and noble, my prince. You have no wife, no lover, no children. You will not have to watch them die or be taken by War. There is only one thought more awful than knowing that our everything is doomed - the thought that those who bring us doom will remain unpunished. So, yes… if the Oracle speaks the truth, we shall destroy it all. We must. Why would we not?"  
  
The young prince gritted his teeth.  
"Because we will be destroying our own people, as well! Those who'll survive the slaughter and be taken by the empire?"  
His words seemed to cool the inner sanctum. The faces of the nine people fell, and hints of doubt found their way into their eyes. They fell into a somber silence.  
  
And in that silence, the courtesan wearing the clothes of a priestess spoke quietly, her voice resounding with the darkest kind of resolve: "It is better to be dead than to be a slave. It is better to be killed than to be shackled. I will welcome death before I welcome chains… those I loved will mourn me, but they'll know. When I die, I'll be free."  
Death was merciful, after all, but the life of a slave was cruel.  
Slowly, the rest of them nodded their heads, and the prince lowered his.  
The faces of the Oracles changed subtly.  
Eventually, the old hag spoke:  
"Each of you will have a task of their own. A great task… a terrible task. A task that must be accomplished at all costs. We are the Oracle, and we see fate. And so, we offer you as a sacrifice to fate. Go forth and drown the world in ichor as a retribution for the blood of our people that has not been spilled today, but will paint the sea red tomorrow."  
  
The winds outside the temple howled as the woman turned to look at the bewitching scholar.  
"Sorceress Aletheia, the Philosopher. Your task is to scout truth. Go forth and reveal the lies of the gods! You will find their weakness, and teach the others how to bring upon doom."  
The little girl glanced at the slender man in elegant clothes.  
"Aemedon the Sculptor, the Shaper of Stone. You will build the trap for the gods… you will herald the truth that Aletheia learns, and bring it to those who must listen. To form their hearts into gravestones, and build the walls of the trap from that stone."  
  
The woman leaned forward, her features twisting with sorrow.  
"Prince Eurys… my son. Forgive me. Your task is the most bitter of all…"  
The young prince was to become a slave.  
The blind poet was to become lost in illusions…  
The woman wearing a deerskin around her shoulders listened to what the Oracle ordered the others, her expression turning somber and pale. The task entrusted to the young boy, Auro, was especially distressing.  
She shuddered when thе little girl spoke the terrible words. Eventually, though, the Oracle grew silent and dismissed the others.  
She was the only one left.  
  
The woman raised her chin faintly.  
"What of me, then? What is the task that I must accomplish?"  
Despite her questions, the oracle remained silent.  
After a while, the old hag let out a long sigh, so ancient and frail that it seemed like she would fall into pieces the next moment.  
Her voice sounded hoarse, tired, and scared.  
"You… oh, courageous huntress. Your task is the gravest. Your task is the most important of them all, as well as the most fearsome."  
The little girl continued:  
"We the Oracle have witnessed fate. And using fate, we charted a course for the Nine. However… there is a being who knows fate far better than we do; who is far more adept at twisting its strings than we are. That being is your greatest adversary. And so, the task that you must accomplish is to strike that enemy down."  
The third Oracle shivered, then leaned forward and said in a tone of ruthless resolve:  
"Slay Weaver, the Demon of Fate. That is your fate, and what you must do."