2372 Distant Gods  
  
Sunny was startled awake - or rather, he regained his senses after receiving the truth. Just like the previous times, the boon he received was not quite a vision, but also not quite a memory. Rather, it was as if the knowledge of what had happened was placed directly into his mind, vague and disjointed, but somehow easy to understand.  
  
The world of Ariel's Game was the same. The Shrine towered behind him, while the lake of lava was radiating insufferable heat in front of him. The sky was obscured by smoke and ash.  
  
However, Sunny was different from how he had been before throwing the jade figure into the lake. There was a stunned, disbelieving expression on his face, and his heart was beating wildly.  
His eyes were open, but he did not seem entirely aware of his surroundings just yet, overwhelmed by what he had learned.  
  
"No way…"  
Sunny jumped to his feet.  
  
He was too rattled, his mind too full of chaotic thoughts, to calm down easily. He remained motionless for a while, then commenced pacing, kicking pieces of rubble with his feet.  
"No, really. No way!"  
  
Finally, Sunny stopped and looked at the distant mountains with wide eyes.  
"What the hell did I just witness?"  
  
The magnitude of the revelation he had received as a reward for killing the Wolf was too vast to fathom. Gods, daemons, the fate of the world, Weaver…  
And the Nine.  
  
The mysterious group of people whose faint traces he discovered from time to time. Sunny always suspected that the Nine had been important - to the degree that his glorious appraisal in the First Nightmare could have very well been mostly due to the fact that he had managed to kill Hero… Auro of the Nine.  
The young boy with vibrant red hair who had appeared in two of the truths Sunny had learned in Ariel's Game.  
But to think thаt the Nine had been responsible for the death of the gods.  
  
…Had been determined to kill the gods, at least.  
There was no telling if they had succeeded.  
But, somehow, Sunny was inclined to believe that they had.  
  
When he tossed these two jade figures into the lava, the question he had asked wаs about the end of the world. Instead of a scene of total devastation on a battlefield between the gods and the daemons, though, he had been shown a seemingly mundane event of mortal men arriving on a gorgeous island to inform a huntress who lived there that a Supreme Beast was rampaging on the border of their kingdom.  
Sunny had assumed that he had been shown a moment of Slayer's past then and he had.  
  
But what if that moment was also the answer to his question?  
What if that… was the moment the world's fate had been sealed?  
Sunny grabbed his head and tried to calm himself.  
'So… let's… let's think about it slowly.'  
  
There was an empire founded by War God… by one of War God's mortal vessels, most likely. At the dusk of the Golden Age, the gods grew aloof and distant, paying less and less attention to the mortal realms. And in their absence, the Empire of War embarked on an endless conquest.  
It devoured myriad realms, subjugated myriad people, burned the temples of Shadow God… all for the glory of their neglectful deity.  
  
Glory, glory, glory,  
Sunny had experienced the torment of being an imperial slave himself, during his First Nightmare. He experienced the savagery of the War zealots as well, in his Second - granted, those had been driven mad by Hope, their most ardent desires set aflame by her poisonous influence.  
The Empire continued to grow, conquering more and more land until it encountered a particular realm. It was a beautiful and peaceful realm… but it was also a very special one.  
Because the people of that peaceful realm venerated no god, and were ruled by an Oracle instead.  
  
In the revelation Sunny received, the Oracle mentioned that their kingdom was special in passing. But he knew that it had to be true - not only because of the three seers themselves, but also because there had been nine people living in that realm who all possessed the [Fated] Attribute… just like he possessed it once.  
'That alone is mad! It's completely crazy!'  
  
The Nine - all of them - had been Fated, just like Sunny was. Attributes were not unique to people, so there could be someonе out there sharing this one with him, even if [Fated] felt like something exceedingly, if not inconceivably, rare.  
Sunny would have accepted that one of the Nine had been Fated, but all of them? Nine people, living in the same kingdom, and at the same time on top of that?  
That… that sounded like their existence itself had been fated. As if it had been one of the knots holding up the great tapestry of fate together.  
That small realm of theirs had indeed been special.  
  
And when the hungry gaze of the Empire fell upon it… the Oracle sent nine fated champions to destroy the Empirе. Not to save their homeland, which could not contend against War, but to avenge its destruction. To avenge their people, who were destined to be slaughtered and enslaved.  
There was only one problem, though… the Empire had a guardian deity. One of the six great gods.  
And so, the Nine were sworn to kill the gods.  
  
'They… they couldn't have succeeded, could they?'  
Only they could. The gods were dead, after all. The Empire had been destroyed. The sins it had committed brought upon a truly wrathful retribution - both on the Empire and on the rest of the world.  
  
Sunny lowered his hands slowly.  
'Can… can it really be the reason?'  
Could the world have been destroyed by nine mere mortals and their dark resolve?  
If it had been… then it would be quite poetic, if a little terrifying. It would make it so that the gods doomed themselves by neglecting the world they had created, and allowing those who claimed to wield their authority to rampage across the mortal realms.  
The great gods would have been undone by little, insignificant mortals, whose suffering they had ignored. But how could the Nine have killed the gods? That was what Sunny did not understand.  
The clues were already in his hands, though…'