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Zarvok's smile softened slightly, though his eyes remained calculating. "They are the key to our success. If we protect them, they will look to us as their saviors, their new rulers. But make no mistake—they are a means to an end. Their loyalty will ensure the world's submission, and with it, our victory."

"You make a great offer; we both get what we want at the end of the deal," Ikenga said, with a thoughtful look on his face.

Stretching out his hand for a handshake, Ikenga said, "We will accept your offer."

Zarvok smiled as he took Ikenga's hand. "That is good to hear." Opening his other hand, a flame combusted from his palm, only to disappear and be replaced by a large, pulsing ear, which he handed to Ikenga.

"This will be our means of contact. I will inform you when it's time to begin," Zarvok said as he turned to leave, obviously in a hurry.

Ikenga spoke up to stop him. "Why don't you stay with us for a while? There is much I would like to learn from you."

Zarvok halted at Ikenga's words, a smirk forming on his face as he turned around. "Are you sure about that? The Abyss will play no part in our further conversations, and the price will be paid between us alone."

Ikenga stood still, gazing at Zarvok before waving his hand, causing the door to open. Laughing, he put a hand on Zarvok's shoulder as he led him to the exit. "As it stands, I am truly poor and have nothing to exchange with you."

"Hmm," Zarvok scoffed and said nothing, leaving the house. He transformed into his imp form and took off into the sky.

Keles stood beside Ikenga as they looked up at the layered red clouds. Ikenga spoke first. "I might have been too arrogant in my earlier decision to engage with the Abyss. I thought that my observations of the lower-tier demons and my encounter with Murmur gave me a certain grasp of their race."

Keles remained silent, her gaze still fixed on the spot where Zarvok had disappeared into the sky. The uneasy feeling in her chest hadn't dissipated, despite Ikenga's attempt at levity.

After a long pause, Keles finally spoke, her voice low but firm. "You're right to question your earlier assumptions, Ikenga. This encounter with Zarvok has made me see all demons in a new light."

"The weak ones with no power, even with all the knowledge bestowed upon them, have no choice but to use brute force because it does nothing for them to play a game of intrigue. The powerful ones, while still brutal, understand that brute force isn't everything and begin to use the innate knowledge granted to them."

Ikenga nodded, absorbing Keles's words. "It's clear now," he said thoughtfully. "The Abyss is more than just a pit of chaos and violence. It's a crucible where power and cunning are forged together. Those who survive its depths are not just strong; they're sharp, adaptable, and relentless."

Keles turned to him, her expression a mix of concern and determination. "We've been treating these demons as if they're mere beasts driven by primal urges. But Zarvok showed us something different—a level of strategy and foresight that we hadn't anticipated."

"Knowing that the layers of the Abyss are uncountable and that there are more like him, or even more powerful, is truly unsettling."

Ikenga's gaze hardened, his earlier arrogance replaced by a sober understanding. "We've underestimated them, Keles. And that's a mistake we can't afford to repeat. Zarvok's offer may be an opportunity, but it's also a warning. We need to be prepared for challenges that go beyond simple battles."

Turning to Ikenga, Keles asked, "Do you still plan on creating a third Demon King to disrupt this game?"

Ikenga looked at his sister and laughed. "Of course, I still plan on doing that. Only this time, I'm lacking the confidence to win. Nonetheless, I'll take it as a good learning opportunity."

sed an eyebrow, a mix of surprise and concern flickering across her face. "You're willing to risk it, even knowing what we're up against now?"

Ikenga smiled, though there was a hint of steel in his expression. "The risk is higher, but so are the potential rewards. Besides, if we're to truly understand the depths of the Abyss and navigate its dangers, we need to engage with it fully. Creating a third demon king will not only disrupt Zarvok's plans but also give us a chance to observe how the Abyss reacts to such a move."

Keles crossed her arms, contemplating his words. "It's a bold strategy. By introducing another player into this twisted game, we could either tip the scales in our favor or unleash something even more unpredictable."

Keles sighed, though there was a hint of admiration in her tone. "You always were the risk-taker between us. But this time, we need to be even more careful. We're walking a fine line, and one wrong step could lead to disaster."

Ikenga nodded, smiling as he said. "I know, sister. But this is the path we've chosen. We came to the Abyss for knowledge, and knowledge often comes at a price. We just have to make sure that the price isn't too high."

Walking back inside and closing the door behind them, Ikenga waved his hand as the scene of the house changed again showing Phantom's point of view.

Back in the world of Nana, a year had passed since the war between Erik and Silas. Humanity rejoiced in their hard-won victory, with the nobles of Erik's kingdom particularly eager to capitalize on the power vacuum left by Silas's demise. They saw the unclaimed territory as an opportunity for expansion and wealth, envisioning a future where their influence would spread far beyond the borders of Erik's kingdom.

However, their plans began to unravel two months after the war, when an unsettling event occurred. A ship arrived at the port, carrying a priest unlike any other. Instead of the usual serene demeanor and immaculate robes of a holy man, this priest bore an ominous presence. His robe was a deep, blood-red

hue, and on his back was a terrifying mark—a symbol of dread that sent shivers down the spines of those who glimpsed it. In his hand, he carried a bloody axe, the dried crimson stains a testament to the violence that followed him wherever he went.

The mark on his back was dominated by a large, haunting eye at the top center. The iris was a swirling vortex of chaotic patterns, an embodiment of madness itself. The eye was bloodshot, its veins spidering outwards, giving it a crazed, unhinged appearance. It gazed upon the world with a sinister intensity, as if seeing through the veil of reality into the very souls of those who looked upon it.

Below the eye, a desolate battlefield was etched into the fabric of the robe. The ground was soaked in blood, dark red pools spreading across the landscape like the aftermath of a massacre. Shattered weapons and armor littered the ground—swords broken, spears splintered, and shields cracked and discarded. Torn banners lay among the debris, the remnants of once-proud armies now reduced to memories. Thin streams of blood flowed from the eye, merging with the blood on the battlefield, symbolizing the connection between the madness of the demon god and the chaos of battle.

As the priest stepped off the ship, a lone guard awaited him at the small port, sent by the king of Valio from the western continent. The priest's arrival did not go unnoticed. It was as if the world itself held its breath, sensing that something momentous was unfolding.

Soon after, rumors began to spread across the western continent of a disturbing new movement among the "Children of the Gods." These beings, revered and feared, had always kept to their lofty abodes—the harpies in particular were known to dwell in the highest mountains, far from the reach of mortals. Yet now, they were descending from the skies, their wings folded behind them as they walked the earth like common men.

Their sudden appearance sowed confusion and fear among the people. The small kingdoms, in their ignorance and desperation, saw the arrival of the harpies as a divine blessing. They opened their gates wide, welcoming the Children of the Gods with offerings and prayers, unaware of the true nature of what they were inviting into their lands.

The western continent wasn't the only one visited by strange priests. The eastern continent was also paid a visit, with the southern continent being the only exception.

Just like the children of gods in the western continent, the apelingings have also left their paradise deep in the mountains and started walking among common men.

In the northern region where the priests originated, there was also an increase in the movement of the children of gods, who, in this case, are werewolves.

Currently, on the eastern continent, Ikem sat on his throne as Zephyr, his son who had grown over the years, read out reports and information gathered.

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One piece of information that caught Ikem's attention was about a good friend of the apelings: "The people of Omadi."

The people of Omadi were among the first humans in the eastern continent to have close contact with the apelings. Though they never set foot in the apeling kingdom, they were accommodated in a mountain not far from the apeling kingdom.

Because of Osita, the cambion—a half-human, half-demon—Omadi, his friends, and family had to flee their home and territory with the help of the apelings.

This encounter with the apelings transformed the lives of Omadi and his people as they were introduced to a more magical world. At that time, Zephyr, who was playing with Ikem, shared some of the magical knowledge they had gathered with Omadi to help him create a stronger community or kingdom that would keep Osita in check.

The intention was good at the beginning, but as Omadi and his people grew in population and size, Ikem realized he might have been naive in his thinking.

It was only years later, after he met Ursula, that he realized he wasn't the only one who had underestimated the situation. Ursula had similar thoughts when the harpies began helping the development of the Sun Kingdom.

It was only after some time that she and her people, like Ikem and Zephyr, realized how wrong they were. In the beginning, it was easy to help, as the human population was still small, and resources seemed endless, but as they grew, so did the burden.

Ikem realized that in the process of helping Omadi grow his community and kingdom, he had indirectly become the king of another kingdom, and the humans grew dependent on their help.

At first, humans being dependent on them seemed like a good thing, but when Ikem realized he was too preoccupied to lead his own people and that his thoughts were constantly consumed with how to make the humans stronger, he began to see how mistaken he was.

Realizing this, Ikem started thinking about how to gradually distance himself from Omadi and the humans, allowing them to find their own path and move forward.

Fortunately, around that time, the dragons made their appearance. With the dragons taking the stage, Ikem slowly withdrew from Omadi and his people.

He still helped them from time to time, but not to the extent he had before. With the impartial guidance of the dragons, Omadi and his people quickly grew, with the apelings assisting from the sidelines as they found their own way and culture.

Omadi, the first king of the Omadi Kingdom, died of natural causes at the age of 109. His son, Nwadieube, took over the leadership after his death.

Unlike his father, Nwadieube didn't have much reverence for the apelings. He was thankful for their help, but that was it. In his mind, they had grown beyond their past, and as one of the largest human kingdoms on the eastern continent, showing such humility to the apelings was shameful.

At the same time, Nwadieube was ambitious. To him, Osita's existence was a stain on his family name and legacy, so he did everything possible to strengthen his people and ensure they were strong.

Unfortunately, he was up against a demon. Even though Osita had lost some of his inherited memories, the ones he retained were enough for him to build a strong kingdom, so no matter what Nwadieube did, he never surpassed Osita's kingdom.

Nwadieube's relentless focus on surpassing Osita consumed him. He saw the demon king not just as a threat but as a stain on his family's honor—a challenge he had to conquer at any cost. Under his leadership, the Omadi Kingdom transformed into a militaristic powerhouse. New fortresses rose,

warriors trained day and night, and the kingdom's boundaries steadily expanded. Its wealth and influence grew.

For almost a century, Osita's existence was a thorn in Nwadieube's side—until recent events.

Ikem sat up, a more serious look on his face, as he pondered what Zephyr had just reported to him concerning the Omadi Kingdom.

"Repeat what you just said," Ikem said to Zephyr.

Zephyr had a troubled look on his face as he replied, "The priest of Björn who landed on our continent was taken in by Nwadieube."

"Are you certain?" Ikem asked, his voice low and measured.

Zephyr nodded, his expression grim. "Yes, Father. Our scouts confirmed it. The priest was welcomed into Nwadieube's court with a great ceremony. It's unclear what he seeks, but the implications are... troubling."

Ikem rose from his throne, pacing the length of the chamber as he considered the gravity of this development.

"Are there any of our people currently in Omadi's kingdom?" Ikem asked Zephyr.

Zephyr wore a thoughtful expression before responding, "Due to recent events and our relationship with Omadi's people, their kingdom was never considered for involvement in the experimentation. However, some apelings from the cursed clans were curious about a human kingdom that our people support, so they chose to make their first stop at Omadi Kingdom."

Ikem nodded. "What about Osita's kingdom?"

Zephyr frowned at the mention. "We have some apelings deployed there too."

Looking to his side, which was empty, Ikem ordered, "Have every apeling deployed or found in these two kingdoms moved away, and relay an order to all apeling citizens that they are never to approach these two kingdoms until further notice."

Thula appeared out of thin air, a very dark helm on her head as she bowed to Ikem. "Yes, your highness," she said before disappearing once again.

Turning back to Zephyr, Ikem said, "We might have the very first serious human war on our hands."

Ikem's words hung heavily in the air, and Zephyr frowned as he spoke up. "Father, Omadi's son surely knows it's dangerous to deal with the deity Björn and his religion. He's ambitious, yes, but to align himself with a force as unpredictable as the priesthood of Björn? This could undo everything his father worked for—or worse, plunge his kingdom into chaos."

Ikem sat back on his throne, resting his head in his hand. "We didn't give him much of a choice. He has long wanted to be rid of Osita, but he can't do it alone. He has pleaded for our help, but we didn't offer it."

"We couldn't offer him the help he wanted. Osita, by far, has proven to be a better leader than Nwadieube, and that says a lot considering he is a demon. He has honored his part of our deal, kept his word, and led the humans under him well."

"He hasn't given us any legitimate reason to act against him. Nwadieube is too blinded by ambition to see how his actions will affect us in the long run."

Looking at Zephyr, Ikem continued, "Take, for example, Erik and Silas. After Ursula informed us of everything and handed us the blueprint of the magical device used to locate unknown demon parasites..."

"We were still doubtful of Osita so we used the device, yet he never tampered with the people under him. Except for the Warlock power system he gave to his people, which so far has proven beneficial, nothing gives us the right to move against him," Ikem said with a sigh.

Ikem's words weighed heavily on both him and Zephyr as they grappled with the complexity of the situation. The room was filled with tense silence, the gravity of their decisions pressing down on them.

Zephyr finally spoke, his voice filled with concern. "Father, I understand why we've held back. Osita, despite his demonic nature, has indeed been a better leader than we could have anticipated. He's maintained order, fulfilled his promises, and has not abused the power we feared he might. But Nwadiabube's desperation... It's pushing him towards dangerous alliances, ones that could destabilize everything."

Ikem nodded, his expression troubled. "Nwadiabube is driven by the need to surpass his father's legacy and to rid his kingdom of Osita's shadow. His ambition blinds him to the fact that his actions could bring ruin not just to his kingdom, but to the entire continent. Aligning with the priesthood of Björn is a desperate move, born out of frustration and impatience."

Zephyr leaned forward, his brows furrowed in thought. "But Father, if we continue to stand aside, Nwadiabube might go too far."

"You are right, son. We should do something, but the reality is that we can't do much. Other human kingdoms are watching us closely, waiting to see what we do and how we respond. At the end of the day, son, this is a human matter."

Ikem's words were heavy with the weight of responsibility and the limitations of their position. The godling races had always maintained a careful distance from human affairs, guiding subtly but never overtly controlling.

Zephyr, though understanding, could not help but feel a growing sense of unease. "But Father," he pressed gently, "if Nwadiabube's actions bring about a war of such magnitude, it won't just be a human matter. The consequences could spill over into our lands."

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"It won't son, I won't let that happen. We have our people out there who can relay news of things happening outside so we can quickly adjust to any changes. I believe soon, the humans will understand they are dealing with an uncontrollable force, they will then ask for our help, until then we stay behind and watch"

Looking at Zephyr, Ikem smiled "Besides, this situation is better for our people who are out to experience life and its challenges. With the chaos about to erupt in this continent, places to experience life, bloodshed won't be lacking"

Zephyr sighed as he bowed to Ikem before leaving the palace room, after he was gone. Ikem's expression turned serious as he looked off to the distance "Playing with the dead wasn't enough for you? Now you want to play a more bizarre stuff"

Far away from the apeling kingdom and territory, a large territory ruled by the Omadi kingdom lay across the plain. The Omadi Kingdom's territory unfolds like a vast tapestry, where golden grasses sway gently in the warm breeze under a boundless, azure sky. The land is alive with the vibrant hum of life, from the rhythmic drumming of hooves as herds of wildebeest and gazelle migrate across the savanna, to the distant roar of lions echoing from the rugged foothills of the northern mountains.

In the heart of this sweeping landscape, the Lifeblood River glistens like a silver thread, snaking its way through the plains. Its banks are lush and fertile, dotted with groves of towering acacia trees and clusters of villages, where the Omadi people tend to their crops and livestock. The air is thick with the scent of rich, tilled earth and blooming wildflowers, blending with the smoke rising from cooking fires as evening approaches.

On the horizon, the capital city of M'Tala rises majestically, its stone walls reflecting the golden rays of the setting sun. The sounds of bustling markets and the clang of blacksmiths' hammers fill the air. Beyond the city, the plains stretch out in every direction, a seemingly endless expanse of wild beauty, dotted with the occasional patrol of Omadi warriors, their bronze armor gleaming in the fading light.

At the center of this capital city Was a huge statue of Ikenga, around the statue was a small thriving garden that gave out a lovely scent that spread across the surrounding area.

In the palace of the city where Nwadiesube stayed. A banquet can be seen going on as the nobles sat at a long table raising their wine to the priest who paid them a visit.

At the head of the long table sat Nwadiesube silent as he took in the surroundings looking lost in thought as he took in the priest expression and the nobles toasting the priest.

Nwadiabube the king skin is a rich ebony even seated he seemed tall and imposing, draped in robes woven from the finest silks, dyed with the rarest indigo and crimson hues, Upon his head rests a crown of gold, embedded with shimmering emeralds and sapphires.

His broad shoulders bear a mantle of lion fur, a testament to his triumph over the great white lions of the High Plains, creatures revered as near-mythical beings.

The priest, clad in the red robe adorned with the sigils of his god, Björn, radiated an aura of barely restrained ferocity. His wild eyes flicked around the room, taking in the grandeur of the palace, the opulence of the feast, and the curious stares of the nobles. He was a figure out of place, like a wolf among sheep, and it made the nobles uneasy even though they tried to hide it. The priest's body smells like he took a bath in a blood pool.

One of the braver nobles, a man with a graying beard and a richly embroidered robe, raised his goblet towards the priest. "Tell us, priest of Björn, of the battles you have seen. We have heard tales of your god's fury and the madness that takes hold of his followers. What wars have you fought in? What victories have you claimed?"

The priest's lips curled into a grin that showed out his animalistic features. His voice, thick with a Norwegian accent, rumbled deep. "Wars? Aye, I have seen many, fought in more. I've marched through lands where the ground was so soaked in blood that it seemed the earth itself thirsted for battle. I've heard the screams of the dying mix with the war cries of the living until you could no longer tell one from the other. Björn grants us strength in the heat of combat, and madness... madness is our shield and sword."

He paused, letting his words sink in, his gaze drifting across the table, locking onto each noble in turn. "In the north, where the winds howl like the cries of the damned at night, I fought against the people of the silver kingdom who worshiped the lady of the moon. They outnumbered us I believe, but they had never faced Björn's wrath. We did not fight with strategy, with caution... We fought with fury, with abandon. We became the storm. And in the end, it was their blood that ran like rivers to the sea. It was in this battle that our god Björn ascended to his deity position"

The room grew still, the crackling of the fire in the hearth the only sound that dared to break the silence. The nobles, who had initially been intrigued by the priest's presence, now found themselves drawn into the dark allure of his tale. His words painted vivid images in their minds, scenes of chaos and carnage that both repelled and fascinated them.

Nwadiebube hearing ascension was filled with curiosity but did well to hide it. Another noble, a woman with sharp eyes and a voice as smooth as silk, leaned forward, her fingers lightly tapping the stem of her goblet. Coincidentally her eyes crossed with Nwadiebube before she asked "This ascension of Björn," she began, her tone measured, "how did it come to pass? How does a god of fury and madness emerge from such bloodshed?"

The priest's grin widened, his canines glinting in the flickering candlelight. He leaned back in his chair, as if settling in to recount a story well-worn in his memory. "Ah, the ascension," he murmured, his voice dropping to a near whisper, forcing the nobles to lean in closer. "It was in the heart of that battle, as our enemies fell beneath our blades, that Björn revealed his true nature. He had always been with us, a spirit of war, a whisper in the storm, but on that day, he became something more."

He paused, his eyes narrowing as he recalled the moment. "As the moon reached its zenith, casting a cold, silver light over the battlefield, the lady of the moon herself appeared to protect her people. She was radiant, her power immense, and for a moment, it seemed as though we might be defeated. But Björn... he laughed. Laughed in the face of her light. He called upon the madness that had always lurked within us, the fury that knew no bounds, and we answered. We fought with a rage that transcended mortal limits, and as the blood of our enemies soaked the earth, Björn took that blood, that fury, and claimed it as his own."

The priest's voice grew stronger, more fervent, as he recounted the climax of the battle. "Björn rose from the blood-soaked ground, no longer just a spirit, but a god, born of battle, fury, and madness"

The nobles sat in stunned silence, the weight of the priest's words pressing down on them like a physical force. The images of divine conflict, of a god born from bloodshed, hung in the air, refusing to dissipate.

Nwadiebube, who had been listening intently, finally spoke, his voice low and contemplative. "Your god, Björn, is one of fury and madness, but also of power, undeniable and raw. The Omadi do not worship such a god, but we understand strength when we see it. Yet I wonder, priest, what does it mean to serve a god born of madness? What becomes of those who follow such a path, where reason and sanity are cast aside?"

The priest's grin faded, replaced by a solemn expression. "To serve Björn is to embrace the chaos within, to wield it as both weapon and armor. It is to walk a path where there is no peace, only the endless pursuit of battle, of glory, of the next challenge. We are Björn's chosen, but we are also his instruments. We live in the fire of madness, and when that fire consumes us, we are reborn in it, stronger, fiercer, more devoted."

The nobles exchanged uneasy glances, captivated and horrified by the priest's words. Another noble, younger and more impetuous, leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with interest. "And what of this madness? Does it not cloud your mind in battle, make you reckless?"

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The priest's grin widened, revealing teeth stained by the red wine he had been drinking. "Reckless? Perhaps. But it is not a madness that blinds; it is a madness that sharpens. In the throes of it, you see clearer, feel deeper. The world slows, and every sound, every scent, every movement becomes a thread in the tapestry of the fight. Björn's madness is not a curse; it is a gift. It is the fire that burns away fear, doubt, and pain. It leaves only the purity of battle, the clarity of purpose."

Nwadiabube, silent, studied the priest carefully. The room had fallen quiet, the nobles no longer raising their goblets, their attention fully captured by the tales of the Norwegian warrior.

Finally, Nwadiabube spoke, his voice measured and calm. "Your god, Björn, and his madness... they are foreign to us, but there is strength in what you say. The Omadi respect power, and you speak of power born from chaos, from fury. But tell me, priest, in the aftermath of battle, when the madness fades and the blood dries... What is left? What becomes of those who live only for war?"

The priest's eyes darkened, and for a moment, the wildness within him seemed to retreat, replaced by something deeper, something almost melancholy. "What is left?" he echoed softly. "A hunger, a thirst that can never be quenched. We are Björn's chosen, but we are also his cursed. When the battle ends, we become shadows of ourselves, restless, always seeking the next fight, the next taste of that divine madness. It is a burden that we are trying to overcome"

Staring at his hand, the priest said "I am thankful for our three great leaders who took it into their hands to deal with such things. It's slow but it is working. A few months ago I would have never imagined myself sitting down and calmly telling tales without the need to tear the head of something off.

Nwadiabube observed the priest with a thoughtful expression, his dark eyes reflecting the flickering candlelight. The priest's words hung heavily in the air, the tension in the room palpable. The nobles, who had been so eager to hear tales of battle and fury, now found themselves confronted with the harsh reality of a life lived in constant violence.

The king leaned forward slightly, his gaze never leaving the priest. "Three great leaders, you say? Tell me more about them. How do they manage to quell the storm within, to bring calm where there is only madness? In the Omadi kingdom, we value wisdom as much as strength, and it sounds as though these leaders possess both in abundance."

The priest nodded slowly, as if weighing his words carefully. "They are not like the rest of us, though they too were forged in the fires of Björn's madness. They have found a way to channel the fury, to control it rather than be consumed by it. They lead us with a firm hand, guiding us through rituals, through meditation and discipline, teaching us to master the madness instead of letting it master us."

Nwadiabube's gaze softened slightly, a flicker of understanding flashing in his eyes. "Perhaps, then, there is something we can learn from one another."

The priest looked at Nwadiabube, his wild eyes momentarily calm, almost serene. "Perhaps," he agreed.

There was a silent agreement before things returned to normal, the nobles no longer disturbing the priest, having had their fill of scary stories.

Nwadiabube stood up and whispered to his butler, head servant of the palace, "See to it our guest is well entertained and show him to his room when he is ready." Patting the butler's shoulder, Nwadiabube slowly walked out.

Walking across the hall of the palace alone, with his hands behind his back, Nwadiabube asked the shadowy figure in front of him, "Have there been any movements from the apelings?"

The figure stepped out from the shadows, revealing a dark-skinned woman. Tall and statuesque, she carried herself with natural grace, her every movement a dance of elegance and authority. Her hair, thick and coiled, cascaded down her back in intricate braids adorned with golden beads and precious gems.

She wore a flowing robe of deep indigo, embroidered with intricate patterns. Her wrists and ankles were adorned with bangles that jingled softly as she walked, each one engraved with protective runes and the symbols of her royal lineage.

She didn't answer his question until she came close and pulled him into a hug. There was some hesitation in Nwadieube's eyes, but he welcomed the gesture.

Looking at the figure, he asked, "So, sister, have the apelings made any move yet?"

Princess Nwadiemma looked at her brother, who since his crowning seemed to have forgotten family etiquette. "They did make a move—subtle, but yes, they did react. Apelings began leaving our territory. The ones we managed to question said they were ordered to leave."

Nwadieube frowned. "That's it? No message from them to me?" he asked, slightly agitated.

Pulling back a bit to create some distance, Nwadiemma said, "I told you, brother, that you wouldn't get the result you were expecting.

"They have long since made it clear that humans should deal with human problems. Also, our relationship with them wasn't as strong as when Father was alive. Your action of taking in a priest of someone they all see as an enemy already tells them all they need to know about us."

Nwadieube stayed silent as his sister berated him for his past actions. "Do you know why I do what I do, sister?" Nwadieube suddenly asked as he began walking.

Nwadiemma had a confused look on her face as she responded, "I truly don't know anymore why you do what you do. I thought I understood before; that's why I stood by you after our other siblings and family members distanced themselves from you. I thought I understood; that's why I stayed."

Looking at his sister, Nwadieube asked, "What was it you thought you understood?"

The princess hesitated a bit before speaking up. "Father was a great parent but not the best leader. He was too humble, patient, and nice, but that was a quality needed for our people at the time.

"If he were still alive and still our leader, we wouldn't have come as far as we did when you became the ruler. I wanted to be the princess of a great kingdom. I wanted to be looked up to by thousands, and I knew if I followed you, I would get all I wanted."

Stopping to look at her brother, the princess said, "I did get what I wanted, but as we grew, I began to realize we lost our way at some point. We did become a powerful kingdom, but along the way, I stopped looking back and paying attention to my husband and family. That goes for you too, brother. When was the last time you sat down with your wife and children?"

Nwadiabube stopped and looked at his sister. "I do spend time with my wife and children."

The princess also stopped as she looked at her brother. "Let me rephrase my words, then. When did your wife become just a queen to you, someone only needed to push your agenda to those who will listen to her? Your children, the princes and princesses, are being treated like generals and tools needed to strengthen your power."

"Enough!" Nwadiabube barked, his voice causing the walls of the palace to tremble, the echoes of his outburst reverberating through the halls. The silence that followed was deafening, as if the very air held its breath. Princess Nwadiemma stood her ground, her expression unyielding, though a flicker of sadness passed through her eyes.

Nwadiabube's chest heaved with the remnants of his anger, but as the dust settled, so too did his fury. His gaze softened, though his voice remained firm. "You forget yourself, Nwadiemma," he said, though the words lacked the sharpness they once held. "I am the king, and every decision I make is for the good of this kingdom, for our people."

Nwadiemma did not flinch. "I have not forgotten, brother. But have you? Have you forgotten that you are also a husband, a father, a brother? A king may lead his people, but he does not do so in isolation. The strength of a kingdom is not just in its power, but in the bonds that hold it together. Those bonds are fraying, Nwadiabube. You are stretching them too thin."

Nwadiabube gave no answer as he continued walking. The princess stood in silence until they reached a gate-like door. Pushing open the door, a deep fragrance hit the siblings.

The serious and previously stern king, now seeing the sight beyond the gate, had a small smile on his face. Beyond the gate, the siblings were greeted by a small, enchanting garden, a hidden sanctuary within the palace walls. The garden was an oasis of tranquility, with a narrow cobblestone path winding through a symphony of colors and scents. Vibrant blooms of every shade imaginable danced in the gentle breeze.

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In the center of the garden stood a stone fountain, its waters murmuring softly as they cascaded into a clear, shallow pool. The air was filled with the sweet perfume of roses, lilies, and jasmine, mingling with the earthy scent of the soil and the crisp freshness of the leaves. On the walls of this garden was an inbuilt statue of Ikenga, the god of nature and curses.

Nwadiabube's smile grew as he took in the sight. This was a place he had nurtured himself, each flower a testament to his love for the beauty and peace that the garden offered. Here, he was not just a king burdened by the weight of his crown but a man who found solace in the simple act of tending to his garden.

Looking up at the glass ceiling above the garden, revealing the deep night sky, Nwadiabube said to his sister, who was watering a flower, "I am scared, sister."

The princess's hand paused for a moment, but she silently continued what she was doing as she asked, "Scared of what?"

Taking a deep breath, the king spoke. "Scared of not being known, of being forgotten—only to be momentarily brought up in conversations before being forgotten again.

"Watching Father die and mourning him, only for the people to forget him and what he did because I came up and did better than he did. I wonder how many, like you, still think of Father the way you do.

"Being a king and a father wasn't enough for him to be remembered as great. The only great thing to his name is that he is the founder of this great, standing kingdom."

Princess Nwadiemma continued to water the flowers, her movements slow and deliberate, as if each drop of water held a piece of the conversation. The soft murmur of the fountain filled the silence between them, a soothing counterpoint to the weight of her brother's words.

"Brother," she began after a moment, her voice gentle, "greatness is not measured solely by how long people remember your name. It's measured by the legacy you leave behind, by the lives you've touched, and by the principles you've upheld."

She turned to face him, her eyes meeting his with a quiet intensity. "Father may not be spoken of as often as you wish, but that does not mean he is forgotten. His influence is still here, in the foundations of this kingdom, in the way we live our lives, in the way you lead. You carry a part of him in everything you do, even when you don't realize it."

"I have no doubts about your word, sister, but people have dreams and expectations."

"Most humans, apart from us, know the true nature of what Osita is. The children of the gods have done well to keep his existence hidden from most humans, but soon it can no longer be concealed."

"The people of this world will realize that a stranger, an alien, is living among them in a world that is supposed to be their own. The children of the gods will be seen as saviors when this happens, but what about how other humans will view us?" Nwadieube said as he looked at his sister.

Not waiting for the princess to respond, Nwadieube continued, "We will be seen as cowards—our whole family and its name will be tarnished as cowards who dared not stop a stranger from taking their home."

"The prestige we held will amount to nothing with this kind of stain on our name. My relationship with Osita isn't only because of my ambition but also because of our history with humans. I want us to be known as the first humans who dared to fight such aliens."

"Erik from the western continent may have faced another demon and won, but he wasn't a pure human. His victory wasn't born out of the human race's hard work; it came from the other half of whatever he is."

The princess listened to her brother with a somber expression, absorbing the weight of his words. The silence between them grew thick, as if the very air held its breath, waiting for her response.

"Nwadieube," she began softly, her voice carrying a mix of sorrow and resolve, "I understand the burden you carry—the desire to protect our family's name, our legacy. But is it truly courage to fight out of fear of being seen as cowards? Or is it merely a different kind of fear—one that blinds us to the wisdom of restraint?"

She paused, searching his eyes for a sign of understanding. "Osita's existence is not a challenge to our authority or a stain on our honor. It's a test of our humanity, of our ability to coexist with what we do not fully understand. If we act out of fear, out of a need to prove ourselves, we risk becoming the very thing we despise—a force that destroys rather than protects."

Her gaze softened, and she reached out to place a hand on his arm. "Erik's victory, though lauded, was born of necessity, not pride. We must ask ourselves what truly matters: Is it the glory of a victory, or the wisdom to choose our battles wisely? Father taught us that strength is not in domination, but in the ability to foster peace, even in the face of potential threats."

She sighed, her voice dropping to almost a whisper. "The world will always remember the warriors who fought bravely. But they will also remember the leaders who chose the harder path—who sought understanding over conflict and who valued life, all life, over the fleeting satisfaction of a battle won."

The princess looked at her brother, hoping her words would reach the part of him that still held their father's teachings close. "If we must confront Osita, let it be because it is the right thing to do, not because we fear what others might think of us."

Nwadiabube's eyes flickered as he responded, "You speak wisely, sister, but what about my other fear—the children of the gods?"

The princess looked confused at her brother's words. "The children of the gods have given us no reason to fear them."

Nwadiabube walked to the statue of Ikenga, tracing his finger along its surface. "The children of the gods have indeed given us no reason to fear them, and that is exactly why I have a problem with them."

"For centuries, they have maintained peace from behind the scenes in our world. Their very existence has led us humans to live reasonably with each other. War rarely happens, and conflicts are avoided for fear of angering the children of the gods."

"In their attempt to keep peace, the children of the gods forget what makes us human. Conflict enables human evolution. If the children of the gods had continued as they did before the meteor shower, we humans would never have reached the point we are at now."

"The meteor shower forcefully pushed the evolution of the human race to where it is today by introducing rich knowledge, structure, and weapon creation."

"Unfortunately, humans weren't the only ones to get their hands on this knowledge. The children of the gods also gained access to it, making them stronger than ever, which means we humans lost the chance to overtake them."

The princess listened intently to her brother's words, her confusion gradually giving way to understanding as he spoke.

"Nwadiebube," she began, her voice steady but tinged with concern, "I see now where your fears lie. You fear that in their pursuit of peace, the children of the gods have stifled the very essence of what it means to be human—the struggle, the conflict, the growth that comes from overcoming adversity."

She took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts. "It's true that conflict can drive progress, that the challenges we face shape who we become. But must that conflict always be against each other, or can it be a shared struggle against a common threat? The children of gods have kept the peace, yes, but perhaps the time has come for us to redefine what that peace looks like—not as a fragile balance maintained by fear, but as a partnership where humans and the children of gods both strive for greatness together."

She moved closer to him, her eyes searching his face. "The meteor shower brought change—not just in power, but in opportunity. We humans have grown, adapted, and learned. We are no longer the same as we were before. But that growth doesn't have to be in opposition to the children of gods. What if, instead of seeing them as a barrier to our evolution, we see them as partners in it? What if the true test of humanity is not in surpassing them, but in working alongside them, finding a way to coexist without losing our own identity?"

Shaking his head, Nwadiebube looked at his sister and asked, "Do you know the average lifespan of a normal Apeling who hasn't undergone mana training?"

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The princess looked confused before shaking her head. The king looked at her before answering, "200 years."

"An average Apeling lives to 200 years, which is twice the age of humans. We humans can only reach that age once we've broken through to the fourth stage."

"If we, with our heritage, can break through to the fourth stage and extend our lives, what stops the Apelings from doing the same?"

Waving his hand, a potion appeared in his grasp. The king shook the potion in front of his sister's face. "Do you know what this is, sister?"

The princess shook her head. The king answered again, "This is a longevity potion. One of the Apelings who visited our kingdom casually gave this to a noble who had shown them good hospitality."

The princess stared at the potion, her eyes widening in realization. "You mean to say... the Apelings possess the knowledge to extend their lives beyond what we thought possible, and they share it so casually?" Her voice was a mix of disbelief and intrigue.

Nwadiabube nodded slowly, his expression grave. "Yes, they do. And if they can do this effortlessly, imagine what else they can achieve that we cannot even fathom. We are not just dealing with beings who have adapted to mana differently, but with those who might have tapped into the very essence of life itself. They aren't just advanced; they are years ahead of us in some aspects."

"But if they are so powerful," the princess began, "why haven't they simply taken over? Why do they bother with diplomacy, with coexisting at all?"

"That," the king replied, "is precisely the point, sister. They could easily dominate us, yet they choose not to. Perhaps it is because they see something in us, something worth preserving or cultivating. The question isn't just whether we can coexist, but why they are allowing us to. What role do they see for humanity in this world?"

"As the ruler of a large kingdom, I've noticed that the abrupt growth we gained from the meteor shower and the teachings of the dragon is waning. This means we will soon fall back into a slow pace of growth."

"The children of gods, with their long lifespans, can afford to wait and take their time to grow. We humans don't have that luxury."

He paused, his voice thick with emotion. "The children of gods have always been our guardians, yes, but they have also been our overseers—our silent rulers. They hold power over us, not just in strength, but in wisdom, in knowledge, in influence. They are long-lived beings who have watched humanity grow and struggle, always there to keep us in check."

"Their actions regarding my invitation of the priest of Björn clearly show their position. To them, humans can go ahead and self-destruct, as long as things don't get too messed up or their interests aren't harmed."

He began to pace, his steps echoing in the garden. "We humans, for all our achievements, are still mortal. Our lives are fleeting compared to theirs. We grow old, we die, and our knowledge, our progress, is passed down in fragments, never whole. But the children of gods—they remember everything. They've seen the rise and fall of empires. They are not just our protectors—they are our history, our past, and now, I fear, they will dictate our future."

He stopped and looked directly at his sister, his gaze intense. "What if the children of gods decide that humanity's evolution has gone far enough? What if they see our growing power, our growing independence, and decide that we are a threat to the balance they've maintained for so long? We have grown, yes, but we are still in their shadow. They can snuff out our progress with a single decision, a single act."

Nwadié's voice dropped to a near whisper, heavy with dread. "I fear that we are on the brink of becoming nothing more than puppets in their eternal game. We think we've achieved so much, but in the end, it is they who control the strings. We cannot surpass them, sister. We are not equals. We are their subjects, their creations, and as long as they exist, we will never be truly free."

"Since we came to know about the gods and their children, nothing has seemed to phase them more than this new religion of Björn. A discussion with this priest showed me exactly why the children of gods are very much disturbed by the existence of this new religion and god"

"Björn's religion threatens the peace they have tried so hard to keep, the religion could destabilize their rule and peaceful society. While that may be the case for them, for us human a religion of warfare and madness is exactly what we need to break through and evolve"

Nwadiébe's words hung in the air, charged with the intensity of his conviction. He continued, his voice still low but firm, every word weighted with purpose.

"Björn's religion is not like the others, sister. It's not a gentle faith that encourages submission or peace. It's a religion of chaos, of struggle, of bloodshed. It's a belief system that glorifies conflict, that sees war as a path to enlightenment, a way to transcend our limitations. And that is exactly why it terrifies the children of gods"

He paused, his eyes narrowing as he considered the implications. "To the children of gods, Björn's followers are a dangerous anomaly, a force that could disrupt their carefully crafted world. But to us humans, this religion represents something entirely different. It represents an opportunity—a chance to break free from the stagnant peace that has kept us subdued, a chance to ignite the fire of evolution that has long been smoldering within us."

Nwadiébe's tone grew more passionate, his vision crystalizing as he spoke. "The children of gods fear this religion because it embodies everything they've tried to suppress in humanity—our thirst for power, our hunger for progress, our drive to overcome. They see it as a threat to their control, but I see it as a catalyst. War, madness, struggle—these are the crucibles that forge greatness. Without them, we are merely existing, not living."

Nwadiébe's voice grew colder as he continued, the bitterness in his tone impossible to miss. "My recent reckless actions, sister, were not without purpose. I pushed the boundaries deliberately, tested the limits of their so-called guardianship. I wanted to see if they truly care for us, if they would intervene to save humanity from itself when faced with the possibility of our self-destruction. But what did they do? They pulled back, retreating into their divine shadows, leaving us to our fate."

He shook his head, a grim smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "It was a disappointment, though not entirely unexpected. Their retreat only confirmed what I've long suspected—that their interest in us is conditional, limited. They are willing to protect us, to guide us, but only as long as we remain within the bounds they've set. The moment we begin to challenge those boundaries, to push beyond the limits they've imposed, they withdraw. They leave us to falter, to destroy ourselves if need be, rather than risk losing their control."

His eyes bore into his sister's, filled with a fierce resolve. "This is why I cannot trust them, why I cannot simply accept the peace they offer. It is a peace that comes with chains, with restrictions on our potential. The children of gods do not wish for us to evolve beyond them; they wish to keep us

contained, manageable, docile. But that is not the future I want for our people. I want more than mere existence, more than a life lived in the shadow of beings who do not see us as equals."

Nwadiabube began to pace again, his movements sharp and restless. "Their lack of response, their unwillingness to engage, only fuels my belief that they fear what we might become if left unchecked. They know that humanity, if given the freedom to struggle, to fight, to break through the barriers of peace and comfort, could surpass them. And that terrifies them, because it would mean the end of their dominance, the end of their reign over us."

He stopped abruptly, turning to face his sister with a new intensity in his gaze. "But it also gives us an opportunity. If they are unwilling to act, then we must take action ourselves. We cannot wait for their permission or their approval. We must seize this moment, embrace the chaos that Björn's religion brings, and use it to propel ourselves forward. Yes, it will be dangerous, and yes, it may lead to madness and destruction. But it is only through that fire that we can forge a new path, one where humanity is not bound by the will of gods but driven by its own desires, its own ambitions."

He turned to face his sister fully, his eyes burning with a mixture of determination and urgency. "Imagine, sister, what humanity could become if we embraced this path. If we allowed ourselves to be consumed by the chaos, to be pushed to our very limits. We could evolve beyond our current selves, become something greater, something that even the children of gods would have to reckon with. No longer their subjects, but their equals—or perhaps, even their superiors."

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He stepped closer, his voice barely above a whisper now, but filled with conviction. "We have a chance to change everything, to break free from the chains that bind us, to create a future where humanity is not just surviving, but thriving. A future where we are not merely the subjects of gods, but the masters of our own destiny. But to do that, we must be willing to embrace the struggle, to face the chaos head-on, and to risk everything for the sake of our evolution."

Nwadiabube's gaze never wavered as he finished, "I do not expect you to agree with me, sister, but I need you to understand why I am willing to take this risk. Because if we do not, if we allow the children of gods to dictate our fate, then we will never know what we could have become. And that, to me, is a fate far worse than any war, any madness, any struggle."

The princess stood silently for a moment, absorbing her brother's words, her heart heavy with the weight of his convictions. The room was filled with a tense silence, as if the very walls were holding their

breath, waiting for her response. Finally, she met Nwadiebube's intense gaze, her own eyes filled with a mix of sorrow and resolve.

"Nwadiebube," she began softly, her voice steady but tinged with sadness, "I hear your fears, and I understand the depth of your concern. You see a future where humanity is chained, stifled by the very beings who once protected us. You fear that the children of gods have become our oppressors, and that their peace has become our prison."

She paused, searching for the right words, her expression thoughtful. "But brother, I cannot share in your desire for chaos and destruction, even if it is for the sake of our evolution. Yes, the children of gods may have withdrawn, but I do not believe it is out of fear of our potential. I believe it is because they want us to choose our own path, to determine our own destiny without their interference. Perhaps they see that we have grown, that we are no longer the fragile beings they once guided, and they are giving us the space to prove ourselves."

She took a step closer to him, her voice growing more earnest. "You speak of embracing Björn's religion, of using chaos and war as a means to break free from the influence of the gods. But Nwadiebube, at what cost? War may bring evolution, but it also brings suffering, death, and destruction. Is that truly the legacy we want to leave behind? A world torn apart by conflict, where humanity survives, but at the price of its soul?"

The princess suddenly stopped as she took a deep breath "That is what I would like to believe but as you said brother, the reality of our situation isn't so"

"Especially considering the fact they are long lived, who is to guarantee that the next generation after us will keep the kingdom we built strong, in the current peace, a lot of our trained nobles and soldiers have grown complacent, weak minded"

"And what stops the next generation after them to take after. It pains me to say this after my denunciation for the path you have taken but you are right brother, they can afford to wait but we can't"

The princess's voice faltered, a tremor of realization shaking her resolve as she continued. "Right now, we have a lifespan of a thousand years because we've reached the fifth stage in strength, a feat that took generations to achieve. But even with our extended lives, our time is still finite. The children of gods—they don't age as we do, they don't face the relentless march of time. They can afford to wait, to watch as we grow old and fade, while they remain unchanged. "

"The drive from the past gave our kingdom, five fifth stage power houses but lately that drive is gone replaced with safety so for some years now we have had no breakthroughs"

She stepped even closer to her brother, her eyes now filled with a mix of fear and reluctant acceptance. "You're right, Nwadiebube. The future of our people is not guaranteed, not in the peace we've come to know. Our soldiers, our nobles, even our scholars—they've grown soft, content with the world the children of gods have allowed us to build. But this world, this peace, is a fragile thing, built on the foundation of their mercy, their will. And when we are gone, who will be left to protect it? Who will have the strength, the resolve, to defend what we've worked so hard to achieve?"

She paused, the weight of her thoughts bearing down on her. "I wanted to believe that we could find a way forward without resorting to chaos—that we could preserve our humanity and still thrive. But perhaps that is a luxury we no longer have. Perhaps the only way to ensure our future and protect what we've built is to challenge the gods and their children now, while we still have the strength to do so."

Her gaze softened as she looked at her brother, the love she held for him clear in her eyes. "But even if we must walk this path, brother, I beg you—let us not lose sight of who we are. Let us not forget the values our father instilled in us, the principles that have guided our people for generations. If we must fight, let it be with honor and a clear purpose, not out of a thirst for power or a desire for destruction. Let our legacy be one of strength and wisdom, not just of war and conquest."

The princess took his hand, squeezing it gently. "We are on the brink of something monumental, Nwadiebube—something that could change the course of history. If we choose to fight, we must do so with the understanding that we are not just fighting for ourselves, but for the future of all humanity. And in that fight, we must hold on to our humanity, our sense of right and wrong. Because if we lose that, then no matter what we achieve, we will have already lost."

She looked up at him, her voice filled with quiet determination. "I will stand by your side, brother, as we face whatever comes. You have my support, Nwadiebube. But I ask you to remember this: power alone does not make us great. It is how we wield it, how we carry ourselves in the face of adversity, that will define our legacy. If we must walk the path of war, then let us do so not as conquerors, but as protectors—protectors of our people, our future, and the humanity that makes us who we are."

Hearing his sister's support and promise, Nwadiebube cracked a smile and nodded before pressing a button on the statue of Ikenga. After the button was pressed, a slight rumbling sound followed as the statue divided in two and opened up to reveal a staircase extending into the darkness.

Gesturing to the wall, the king said, "Right after you, sister." The princess nodded and walked down the stairs, her eyes glowing faintly as they adjusted to the darkness.

Soon, both the king and princess entered an underground space so vast that its size was not visible from where they stood. This cavern, illuminated by glowing crystals embedded in the rock walls, exuded a warm, golden light, casting intricate patterns across the ceiling and floor. The walls were adorned with ancient carvings and intricate murals depicting local legends, gods, and natural motifs, giving the space a rich cultural tapestry.

The cavern was a lush, verdant oasis. Massive trees with wide canopies, their leaves shimmering with bioluminescence, rose from the ground, their roots intertwining with the stone. Below, a network of waterways, fed by hidden springs, meandered through the space, their waters clear and sparkling, home to iridescent fish and vibrant water plants.

The pathways were lined with stones polished by centuries of use and interspersed with luminous fungi that glowed softly in various colors. Traditional woven mats and tapestries, hand-crafted by local artisans, decorated the paths, adding warmth and color to the environment.

Residential areas were built into the cavern walls, with homes constructed from local materials such as clay, stone, and woven reeds. A closer look revealed that all this had been artificially created to make the environment safe for living.

Sensing the presence of the king and princess, an old woman dressed as a shaman, with markings on her face, walked slowly up to them, surprise laced in her voice as she said, "I was not informed of your visit, Your Grace," she said to Nwadiabube, then turned to the princess and bowed. "And you too, Princess."

The princess smiled and hugged the old woman. "It's nice seeing you again, Ezinne."

Patting the princess's back, Ezinne looked at both the princess and the king with concern. "I hope everything is well."

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"All is well, Ezinne. I was just curious about how far you have come with your research concerning the fifth stage realm. Last time I checked, the merchant of death brought a few good corpses," Nwadiebube said, staring eagerly at the elder shaman.

Ezinne looked at the king as she turned and began walking towards her home. "You are still young and have many years ahead of you to be so eager for success."

The king remained silent at the elder's words. Seeing her brother's embarrassment, the princess went over and hugged the elder woman, cuddling her. "I am also curious about how far you have come, Ezinne."

The elder smiled at the princess and said, "There has been some progress. If you both hadn't come, I was planning on paying a visit myself as I need someone to test the path we've laid out and see if it works."

The people of the Omadi Kingdom revered Ikenga as their primary deity, and their understanding of mana was informed by the knowledge shared with them by the Apelings.

For years, they struggled to find a balance between their faith in Ikenga and the mana surrounding them. Eventually, it was suggested that they return to their roots and work from there.

This process began with developing their own understanding of nature, which for them was deeply intertwined with death—a concept they were very familiar with.

In their view, death is not an end but a vital part of life's cycle. Long before they knew of mana, their society's rituals involved practices that honored the transition from life to death. These rituals were deeply embedded in their cultural fabric and passed down through generations. They were not only a means to honor the dead but also a way to reinforce the community's values and beliefs.

Their understanding of nature's deity might encompass a duality where both creation and destruction are necessary. This led to the development of their own power system, divided into two paths: the "Physical Route," which focused on nature, and the "Shamanic Route," which focused on death.

In the initial stage of the Physical Route, users must venture into the wild alone, with no weapons or other aids. All they have is their belief in the god of nature. Guided by this belief, they encounter wild magical animals of various sizes.

This stage is remarkable as it enables the user to understand the nature of Ikenga's power. With belief as their weapon, predator animals that would typically hunt them on sight instead approach as if guided.

When an animal approaches, it stays with the human during this initial stage. If the animal leaves by night, the human must continue their journey. However, if the animal stays and accompanies the human through the night, a bond is formed. This bond signifies the beginning of the first stage. To advance to the next stage, the human must hunt alongside the bonded animal.

The first stage is called "Bone." During this stage, while hunting with the bonded animal, the user imitates and breathes like the animal, and their belief in Ikenga causes their bones to mimic those of the bonded animal.

In the second stage, known as "Swift Death," animals with weaker souls develop stronger souls through their bond with the human. Once the bond reaches the desired level, the animal offers itself to its bonded human. The human must then give the animal a quick, painless death, followed by entering a death-like state where the animal's grown soul becomes tethered to them. This stage is noted for a rapid boost in mana level and strength, as the combined souls of the human and beast allow them to suppress other elements and focus solely on the required element.

The third stage, known as "The Nature Spirit," involves the user immersing themselves in the natural environment associated with their bonded animal, such as spending weeks in swamps for a crocodile bond. This immersion leads to physical changes in the user, such as tougher skin, greater endurance, strength, and agility, reflecting their chosen animal. At this stage, the user can invoke minor traits of their animal, such as claws or tails.

The fourth stage, called "Spirit Fusion," marks a critical turning point in the Physical Route. At this stage, the bond between the human and the animal spirit deepens to the point where the distinction between the two begins to blur. The user can now summon the spirit of their bonded animal into their own body, temporarily transforming into a hybrid of human and beast. This transformation grants them extraordinary abilities tailored to the specific attributes of the animal, such as heightened senses, incredible strength, or unmatched speed followed by increase in the elemental attribute of the user, also at this stage the user can fully invoke their animal spirit as it fights alongside them.

Ezinne paused at the entrance to her home, her gaze fixed on the horizon. "The fifth stage is something elusive," she began, her voice tinged with both frustration and determination. "The Physical Route has been a path that we have walked for generations, each stage building upon the last. But this next step... it requires a deeper understanding of the bond between human and beast, something beyond what we've discovered so far."

She turned to face the king and the princess, her eyes betraying the weight of her words. "The corpses brought by the merchant of death have provided us with some clues, but they only hint at the complexity of the transformation required for the fifth stage. What we do know is that it demands a level of synchronization between the soul and the elemental force of nature that we have not yet mastered."

The king's expression darkened, a mixture of disappointment and resolve. "So, you're saying we're still far from achieving it?"

Ezinne nodded slowly. "Yes and no my king, My small understanding of the fifth realm shows that it something akin to interfering with the surrounding and creating an environment safe and useful for the user, something akin to a domain"

"My only problem and suspicion in doing such things, is that it will undo all that has been achieved in the past. From the third stage in the physical route, the user is required to stay and adapt to the living environment of their bonded animal"

"The stage comes with a risk and if left unchecked, the user might become a beast as whole forgetting their identity as a human, which is why in this stage after a certain level you leave that environment to prevent future problems"

"So, the fifth stage could potentially unravel all that we have painstakingly built," the king mused, his voice tinged with concern. "Creating an environment tailored to the user's needs sounds powerful, but if it comes at the cost of their humanity..."

Ezinne nodded, her expression serious. "Exactly, my king. The danger lies in the potential for the animal's instincts to dominate the human soul. The bond between the human and the beast, while immensely powerful, is also precarious. In the third stage, we teach the practitioners to immerse themselves in the wild, to become one with the environment of their bonded animal. But we are careful to ensure they don't lose themselves entirely, that they remember who they are as humans. This balance is delicate."

She paused, gathering her thoughts before continuing. "In the fifth stage, the concept of creating a domain—a personal environment that reflects the user's connection with their bonded animal—is compelling. It could offer unprecedented power, allowing the practitioner to harness the full potential of their bond in a controlled space. But it also introduces a new risk. What if, in creating this domain, the practitioner becomes too comfortable, too attuned to the animal's nature, to the point where the animal's instincts begin to overshadow their own? What if they start to think like the beast, live like the beast, and eventually, become the beast?"

The king's expression grew even more somber. "That would be catastrophic. We would not be creating warriors or protectors; we would be unleashing intelligent but dangerous creatures upon the world."

"Precisely," Ezinne agreed. "That is why I have been so cautious in my research. The fifth stage holds great promise, but it must be approached with the utmost care. If we are to pursue this path, we need to find a way to ensure that the human soul remains dominant, that the practitioner's humanity is not lost in the process. Perhaps there is a way to strengthen the bond without letting it consume them, a method to maintain control over the domain without being overwhelmed by it."

The princess, who had been quietly listening, spoke up, her voice filled with a mix of hope and concern. "Ezinne, do you believe it's possible? Can we find a way to safely unlock this stage without losing ourselves?"

Ezinne's gaze softened as she looked at the princess. "I believe it is possible, but it will require time and patience. We must proceed slowly, testing each step carefully. We need to better understand the balance between the human soul and the animal spirit, and how to prevent one from overpowering the other."

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The king sighed deeply, before asking "what about the shamanic route, has the fifth stage being found yet"

Ezinne looked troubled as she said "Progress has been made but it's requirement is something very troublesome as it requires going to the underworld"

The shamanic route emerged as a result of the limitations imposed by the physical route's age requirement. While younger and middle-aged individuals could easily undertake the physical journey, the elders found it increasingly difficult to do so. Feeling sidelined and determined to contribute, the elders embarked on their own research, eventually giving birth to the shamanic route.

The first stage in the shamanic route is called "Whisperer of Bones." In this initial stage, the shaman begins their journey by focusing on the bones of animals, unlike the physical route where practitioners must bond with a living animal. The shaman's path does not require a living bond but instead involves connecting with the remnants of the deceased. Animal souls, being too weak to traverse to the underworld, often linger around their physical remains after death, their essence gradually dispersing. The shaman must locate the bones of their chosen animal before the soul has completely dissipated.

Once the bones are found, the shaman engages in deep meditation, especially with the bones of their chosen animal, attuning themselves to the spiritual energies of death and the afterlife. This meditative practice allows the shaman to connect with the lingering spirits and hear their whispers. Additionally, this meditation is accompanied by the worship of Keles, the goddess of death, who governs over the souls and their transition.

The shaman's meditative state enables them to visit sacred sites, such as ancestral shrines or burial grounds. Here, they perform rituals to briefly communicate with the spirits of the dead, often involving offerings, chants, and the use of sacred herbs or incense. Initially, communication with the spirits was difficult and sporadic, but as time passed, it became a crucial aspect of the shamanic path, especially as the souls in the underworld began regaining consciousness.

The second stage, known as "Spirit of Swift Death," involves honing the ability to track and interact with spirits, particularly those associated with death. This skill includes entering trance-like states, where the shaman can follow spiritual trails or use divination tools, such as bones or shells, to sense the presence of nearby spirits. They learn to invoke the spirits of predatory animals, calling upon these entities during rituals or to imbue themselves with the animals' strength and swiftness. These practices often require specific offerings and chants to honor and summon the predatory spirits.

The third stage, known as "Sacred Spirit of Death," marks a significant progression in the shaman's journey. It begins with a binding contract between the shaman and one of the children of the Merchant of Death. This entity, unique in its ability to traverse the underworld and return, becomes essential as the shaman prepares to summon ancestral spirits. The summoning process involves complex rituals, which require the creation of sacred circles and the use of spirit-drawing sigils to bridge the gap between the living and the dead.

Ezinne, a notable shaman, observed that summoning ancestral spirits had become remarkably easier earlier this year. Previously, the process was arduous, with only a fragment of the ancestral spirit managing to break through, often needing to borrow a physical body to manifest. Unbeknownst to Ezinne and her fellow shamans, the reason behind this newfound ease was the absence of Keles, the goddess of death, from their world. Her absence had inadvertently loosened the barriers between the worlds of the living and the dead, allowing spirits to cross over with greater freedom.

As the shaman completes this stage, they not only gain the ability to summon and communicate with ancestral spirits but also gain the ability to awaken and use dead corpses.

The fourth stage, known as "Divine Spirit of Nature," involves a shift from death to the natural world. At this stage, the shaman focuses on controlling the elements, practicing in environments where these elements are abundant. For example, they might practice water manipulation near rivers or lakes, or earth manipulation in forests or mountains. This training often involves invoking elemental spirits and earning their favor.

The shaman performs rituals to earn their favor, such as offering sacrifices, creating intricate elemental sigils, or conducting dances and chants that mimic the movements of the elements themselves. Success in these rituals allows the shaman to command the elements, summoning storms, causing earthquakes, or directing rivers to alter their course.

When it came to the fifth stage, Ezinne hesitated as she looked at the statue of Keles in her home. "The fifth stage route that I managed to work out is that its requirements differ depending on the path chosen by the shaman."

For a shaman attuned to nature, the domain might be a vast, enchanted forest where the flora and fauna are under the shaman's control, capable of healing, protection, or destruction. This comes with a risk, as the shaman might become so attuned to the forest that they find it difficult to leave. At worst, the shaman might end up merging with the surrounding nature.

For a shaman of the elements, the domain might be a small storm-wracked island or a volcanic landscape where the shaman can wield elemental forces with unparalleled power. However, this path also comes with risks. The elements are wild and unpredictable, and a shaman who wields such power risks losing control. Storms might rage out of control, and volcanoes could erupt unexpectedly. The elemental spirits, powerful and often capricious, might challenge the shaman's authority. If not properly appeased, these spirits could turn against the shaman, causing the elements to rebel.

For a shaman of death, which is my path, the shaman must make a personal visit to the underworld. Once in the underworld, the shaman must seek out a specific ancestral soul, often one with whom they share a deep connection or one that holds significant power. This ancestral soul is usually a revered ancestor or a powerful spirit that has maintained its identity and influence in the afterlife.

The shaman's task is to help this ancestral soul claim a piece of land in the underworld, turning it into a domain. This involves battling other spirits for control, negotiating with underworld entities, or performing rituals to sanctify the land. The domain becomes a place where the ancestral soul can reside with a degree of peace and power, and where the shaman can draw upon the energies of the underworld. With a domain in the underworld, the shaman gains unprecedented control over death and the spirits of the dead. They can summon spirits more easily and command legions of the dead.

This path also comes with its own risks. If the shaman fails to return, they risk becoming trapped in the underworld permanently, their spirit unable to reunite with their body. This would result in the shaman's physical death and the loss of their power.

The underworld also hosts other powerful spirits and entities constantly vying for control. The shaman's domain could be targeted by these entities once they learn of its benefits. If the shaman's connection to their domain is weakened, they could lose it entirely, along with the powers it grants.

Both the king and princess looked disturbed hearing about the risks each route takes. Nwadiébe took a deep breath. "I will inform the others of your progress. It will be up to them if they are willing to take the risk and become trailblazers for our people."

"The work assigned to the other shamans—how is it going?" Nwadiébe once again asked Ezinne.

Sighing and giving the king a complicated look, Ezinne said, "They are finding the task impossible. Some shamans now harbor resentment toward you, as the task you assigned is something usually required of the divine. They see it as blasphemy that you ordered them to do so."

Nwadiébe showed no reaction to the fact that he was resented. All he said was, "I see. You can tell them to stop. There is no need to continue." Ezinne glanced at the king, wanting to say something, and then looked at the princess, who stood proudly with the king. She nodded as she responded, "Understood, Your Grace."

A look away from the eastern continent to the domains of the gods showed each god now had a weary, tired, and disturbed expression on their faces.

It had been a year since Ikenga and Keles were gone, and it was only a year later that the other gods began noticing the effects of the absence of their siblings.

It was exactly as the mortals say: you never know the worth of something until you lose it or it is gone. The first effect the other gods began noticing stemmed from the fact that they were all siblings and were deeply connected with each other, especially with Mahu, who had a special bond with Ikenga.

The connection and absence of the siblings made the gods feel like there was an empty hole that was impossible to fill no matter what was done, and a feeling of incompleteness weighed more acutely than ever before.

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Another effect was the abundance of nature, which was slowly waning with Ikenga gone. Previously, with Ikenga's presence, nature had embodied abundance and vitality, a flourishing reminder of the balance and harmony that once prevailed. The forests, once lush and vibrant, now appeared increasingly weary. The rivers, which had flowed with a ceaseless, joyous rush, seemed to move with a more subdued and hesitant pace. The vibrant colors of the flowers and the robust growth of the trees had started to pale, as if nature itself was mourning the loss of its beloved guardian.

Jaws, whose divine responsibility is to ensure the lands are nourished with mana-filled rains, felt the weight of his new role more heavily than ever before. The absence of Ikenga, his brother had left a void that none of them had anticipated. Jaws, Brix, and Aqua, now fully ascended spirits, were doing everything in their power to preserve nature, but the challenges were growing.

The forest fire was unlike anything they had faced before. The flames, born from the battles of magical creatures with fire-related abilities, had always been a part of the forest's natural cycle. But without Ikenga's presence to contain them, the fires began to spread uncontrollably, threatening the delicate balance of the ecosystem.

Jaws, Aqua, and Brix found themselves in a constant state of vigilance. Jaws summoned rain to douse the flames, but without the precision of Ikenga's control, the rains sometimes came too late or becomes too much causing more damage.

Meanwhile, on the southern continent, Wardenwild faced his own struggles. Tasked by Keles to ensure the safety of souls in the afterlife, he had always been meticulous in his duty. However, Murmur's growing influence over the souls around him was a threat Wardenwild couldn't ignore. He hardly let go of souls around him as he grabs them to recover.

Wardenwild, realizing the severity of the situation, made the difficult decision to leave the spirit realm and establish his presence on the southern continent. His goal was clear: hinder Murmur's progress and protect the souls from being consumed. But this decision came at a cost. With Wardenwild's focus solely on the southern continent, other regions began to suffer from his absence. His children, who had always relied on his guidance, struggled to manage the tasks left to them. Unlike before where souls goes directly to the underworld because the gate is opne, now they roam around aimlessly in the physical world. The living began to notice strange occurrences—ethereal whispers in the night, glimpses of figures that vanished in the blink of an eye, and an overwhelming sense of unease that pervaded the air every night.

The absence of their two siblings also created a two big hole in the shield surrounding their world, and that was the feeling on discomfort mostly come from presurring the other gods.

Mahu, the goddess of Motherhood, was particularly affected. She had always felt a deep connection with Ikenga, whose presence had been a source of stability and comfort. His absence left her with a sense of loss that grew more unbearable with each passing day. As her emotions fluctuated, so too did her divine influence over childbirth. Pregnant women across all races began to experience complications, and the once joyous occasion of birth became fraught with danger. The birth rate plummeted, and families across the land grew anxious, unsure of what had caused this sudden change.

When her siblings noticed the unsettling changes in the world—complications during childbirth, a plummeting birth rate, and the growing anxiety among families—they approached Mahu with concern. They gently informed her of the effects her sorrow was having on the world, hoping that awareness might help her regain control over her divine influence.

Mahu listened, her heart heavy with the weight of their words. She hadn't realized just how deeply her emotions were affecting the balance of life itself. Determined to make amends, she tried to calm her mind and focus on her duties. And for a time, it seemed to work—the severe complications during childbirth lessened, and the immediate danger to mothers and infants began to recede.

However, despite these improvements, the overall birth rate remained stagnant. The joy that once accompanied the news of a pregnancy was replaced by a pervasive sense of dread, as families feared for the health of both mother and child.

Mahu's siblings, though relieved by the reduction in complications, were troubled by the lack of progress in restoring fertility across the land. They knew that Mahu's influence was still crucial to the balance of life, and they couldn't afford to let the current state of affairs continue. The future of every race in their world depended on the goddess of Motherhood finding peace within herself.

Mahu, Crepuscular, and Jaws sat in Nana's realm, their expressions heavy with the weight of their world's predicament. Mahu, though physically present, seemed distant, her eyes glazed with a lingering sense of detachment. The once vibrant goddess of Motherhood now appeared weary, her usual warmth dulled by the absence of Ikenga. The sadness that had once consumed her had faded, but it was clear she was still far from her true self.

Crepuscular observed his siblings with a thoughtful gaze. He could see the strain in Jaws' posture, the frustration in Mahu's silence. It was time for action, and he knew they needed more than just their combined strength to restore balance.

"I have a proposition," Crepuscular finally said, breaking the heavy silence. His voice was calm but resolute, the tone of a god who had spent much time in contemplation. Mahu turned her head slightly towards him, her interest barely piqued, while Jaws shifted his stance, his curiosity clear.

"What do you have in mind, brother?" Jaws asked, his voice carrying a mix of hope and caution.

Crepuscular glanced between them before speaking. "I think it's about time our children begin their ascension to godhood. With the way things are now, we need every help we can get. Our powers alone aren't enough to manage the chaos spreading through our world. But if our children ascend, they can take on some of the responsibilities and we can focus on more dire things.

Mahu remained silent, her gaze unfocused, but Jaws leaned forward, intrigued. "Ascension?" he echoed, his mind racing with the implications. "But they're still young. Do you really think they're ready for such a burden?"

Crepuscular nodded, his expression resolute. "They may be young, but they are our offspring—born from gods and carrying our divine blood. We've trained them, guided them, and prepared them for this very possibility. With Ikenga and Keles gone, and the world falling into disorder, we can't afford to wait any longer".

Jaws was silent for a moment, considering his brother's words. The thought of their children assuming godhood was both daunting and necessary. The world was in turmoil, and the ascension of their children could bring fresh strength and new perspectives to the challenges they faced.

"I asked Mother about the current state of our world," Crepuscular continued, his voice steady. "She said that this is a normal occurrence when an origin god leaves their position. Our very existence is so intertwined with this world that our absence and presence make a significant difference. For example In a normal world, nature could handle itself, but here, nature is our brother. With him gone, things are out of hand."

Jaws frowned, the truth of Crepuscular's words sinking in. "So, this is why everything is falling apart. Ikenga and Keles departure has left a void that none of us can fill alone. But if our children ascend, they might not fill the void but they could still help with a lot"

Mahu, who had been quietly listening, finally spoke up, her voice carrying a hint of warning. "Do what you must," she began, her tone measured. "But might I remind you that the mortals are making bold moves in the eastern continent?"

She turned her gaze to Crepuscular, her eyes narrowing slightly. "You should be aware of that, especially with Roland, the Sun King. He's been moving strangely for the past year, hasn't he?"

Crepuscular's expression darkened at the mention of Roland. The Sun King's actions had not gone unnoticed. "Yes," he admitted, his voice grave. "Roland has been consolidating power and acting in ways that are... unsettling".

He paused, his eyes narrowing as he continued, "But need I remind you of our counterparts? The void left by Keles and Ikenga has given them unwelcome access to our world. While we've been consumed with our own struggles, their presence has grown bolder. You've been so deep in your misery, Mahu, that you haven't noticed the gaze from the other side constantly staring at us, waiting."

Jaws tensed at Crepuscular's words, the implication clear. The absence of their two powerful siblings had weakened the barriers that kept their counterparts at bay—beings from the darker, opposing realm who thrived on chaos and disruption. Their attention had turned toward the gods' world, seeking any opportunity to exploit the growing instability.

Crepuscular continued, his voice urgent, "We can't afford to focus solely on the immediate issues left by Ikenga and Keles' departure. Those are just symptoms of a larger problem. The true danger lies in the forces from the other side. They've been waiting for an opening, and now they have it. If we're not careful, they'll break through entirely."