

Guardian gods 291

Chapter 291:

"But we found ourselves in a world occupied by the pioneers of knowledge. The mages may have gone wrong with their experiments, but before we do anything or make contact, we should at least understand what experiment has been carried out."

Extending his hand toward Keles' face, Ikenga asked, "May I?" Keles nodded as Ikenga reached forward and tapped her forehead.

As he did so, Ikenga explained, "I should have done this earlier, but we were too close to Zarvok, and he may have noticed something. So, I kept it to myself."

Ikenga shared his vision of the events on the phantom side, as well as the small bits of information gathered from ordinary goblins.

Looking at his sister, Ikenga said, "Whatever those mages did, somehow turned a mediocre race into something remarkable. The surprise in Malzor's voice when the goblin used a complete spell should show you how serious this matter is."

"Zarvok's expression didn't reveal much, but we can't conclude that goblins using a complete spell is something usual," Ikenga added as he gazed out the carriage window.

Keles absorbed the vision her brother had shared, her expression growing more contemplative.

"The goblins..." Keles murmured, her eyes narrowing as she considered the implications. "If they've harnessed magic to this degree, there's no telling what other creatures may have been affected or what else might have changed in this world."

Ikenga nodded to Keles' words. "That is exactly the problem, sister. We know nothing. The ogres we saw leading a charge toward the demon army—we know nothing about where they came from. Are they connected with the goblins, or were they also part of the mages' experiment?"

Hearing about the ogres, Keles' expression shifted. "It seems to me, brother, that compared to the goblins, the ogres have shown nothing exceptional. From their previous actions, they seem to prefer force over intelligence. Maybe we should start with them."

Ikenga shook his head at her suggestion. "I understand why you might think that, but because of the first impression we got from a few thousand ogres fighting for their survival, we can't conclude from their actions that they are not intellectually capable."

"They seem to be a small, thriving village. It's reasonable that they know nothing about demons, so their previous actions were correct—they attacked and defended against something they believed was an invasion of their village and land."

"We also have to consider that knowledge of demons and invasions isn't something everyone is aware of. This is all based on the assumption that they aren't part of the mages' experiment."

"If we assume they are part of the experiment, then seeing them as you do would be wrong. Considering they are living in a village, they might not even be aware of what they are capable of. They may not even know they were part of an experiment, as it may be something of the past to the current residents of this world."

Keles listened intently to Ikenga's reasoning, her initial skepticism giving way to deeper contemplation. The world they had entered was far from ordinary, and the implications of the mages' experiments were becoming increasingly unsettling.

"You're right, Ikenga," Keles admitted. "We can't afford to underestimate any of the creatures here. The goblins have already shown an unexpected level of magical proficiency. If the ogres have also been enhanced in some way, we need to find out how."

Keles' agreement with Ikenga was interrupted by the sudden awareness that they were being watched. Both siblings, ever perceptive, instantly sensed the intrusive gaze. Without hesitation, they severed the connection to the prying eyes.

Ikenga's hand glowed with a dark, ominous purple light as he inscribed a complex curse into the carriage wall. It was the same protection spell he had once used to guard his house in the Abyss.

As the curse took hold, Ikenga could feel the frustrated gaze of their unseen observer struggling to relocate them, but the carriage had vanished from their sight entirely. Ikenga let out a breath, his tense posture relaxing slightly, though his mind remained sharp.

Elsewhere, far from where Ikenga and Keles traveled, a female goblin draped in regal attire stared at the orb before her with a puzzled expression. She had been watching the carriage, curious about the strange power it emitted, but now it had simply disappeared. The last thing she remembered was a goblin-like figure driving the carriage. "Which mage was in that carriage?" she mused, her thoughts turning over the possibilities.

Her thoughts darkened as she considered the implications. "This must be reported to His Majesty immediately. If one of our mages has had contact with the Abyss, it could mean trouble for us all." She stood up, her mind already forming the report she would deliver to the goblin king. The Abyss was a place of dark power, and any connection to it was a matter of grave concern.

Back in the carriage, Ikenga and Keles exchanged a knowing glance. They had narrowly avoided discovery, but they knew their presence would not go unnoticed for long. The goblins, or perhaps something else, were already onto them.

"I think it's time we contact Phantom," Ikenga suggested, his tone serious. "We need him to do what he did with the gargoyles—to infiltrate the ranks of the goblins or the ogres, whichever proves most beneficial."

Keles nodded in agreement. "No matter what the mages did to these races, they couldn't alter the fundamental nature of sentient beings. Their emotions, their hierarchies, their biases—these are the very things that define a civilization, but also its greatest weaknesses."

Ikenga's eyes darkened with intent. "Exactly. If we can exploit these divisions, we can destabilize their society from within. But to do that, we need information—Phantom can provide that. He's skilled at blending in, manipulating, and gathering intelligence. We'll need him to uncover the fractures in their society, the places where we can apply pressure."

Keles chuckled, a cold, deadly aura looming inside the carriage. "Once we understand their weaknesses, we'll be able to bring this world to its knees. The goblins, the ogres, even whatever remnants of the mages' experiments remain—they will all fall before us."

With their course of action decided, Ikenga prepared to reach out to Phantom. Phantom was still in the Abyss, and though the wisdom occasionally leaked by Malzor was tempting to Ikenga, his current need for Phantom outweighed his greed for knowledge.

Phantom, standing before the portal, received Ikenga's instructions. Without hesitation, he stepped through, vanishing into the swirling vortex. On the other side, Ikenga, still seated within the carriage, immediately sensed Phantom's location. Instinctively, he waved his hand, attempting to open a portal to bring Phantom closer, but instead, he was met with heavy resistance. The fabric of this world was denser, and something was pushing back.

Ikenga caught himself, his brow furrowing as he looked at his hand in frustration. With a deep sigh, he realized the enormity of the challenge before them. "This world is far larger than I anticipated," he muttered. The distance between Phantom and their current location would take two to three months to cover at the pace of their carriage. Even with Phantom moving in tandem, it would be risky.

"If Phantom moves alongside us, he'll be exposed," Ikenga reasoned, speaking aloud more to himself than to Keles. "He'll be under constant pressure from this world's repulsion, not to mention the watchful eyes that lurk in the distance."

Sighing again, Ikenga shifted his plans. "Phantom will remain with Malzor for now. Let him gather information, observe the flow of things from the Abyss. We'll keep moving; there has to be something we can exploit."

Ikenga tapped the wall of the carriage. "Take us to the nearest gathering of life forms."

Vaegur, seated at the front of the carriage, nodded upon receiving the message. He adjusted the reins, steering their mount toward a new destination.

By the time the carriage reached its destination, it was nighttime. As the carriage came to a halt at a safe distance from the city, Ikenga and Keles peered out at the scene before them. The city was much larger than the village they had passed earlier, fortified with towering stone walls and bustling with activity despite the late hour. It was clear that the inhabitants were on high alert—whether due to external threats or internal tensions was hard to say just yet.

Ikenga narrowed his eyes, studying the movements of the guards. "They're expecting something," he murmured, his gaze shifting toward the lamp towers, which flashed beams of light into the distance every few moments. "Something significant like us?"

Keles leaned closer to the window, her expression thoughtful. "They're clearly well-organized, not like the goblins or ogres we've encountered. This level of vigilance suggests either a long-standing threat."

Keles paused as she finished her sentence. "They've already been informed of the invasion, or maybe our disappearance from their sight has put them on high alert."

Ikenga studied the guards again, noting the disciplined way they moved, each patrol synchronized as though they were prepared for an immediate threat. "They're not just waiting for something. They're prepared, expecting a confrontation."

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Keles leaned back in her seat, her eyes gleaming with a mix of amusement and caution. "So what now? If they're expecting us, that complicates things."

Ikenga shook his head. "It only complicates things if we were planning on confronting them. We're just here to observe their society and see if they have something we can exploit. Besides, our divinity makes us perfect for infiltration."

As he spoke, the floor beneath Ikenga's feet merged with his leg as he used his divinity to blend with the surrounding nature. Vaegur heard Ikenga's voice whisper in his ear, "Let it guide you."

Vaegur hesitated briefly before releasing the reins, allowing the creature to move slowly. Occasionally, it would stop as the light from the watchtower washed over it, yet after a moment, the light would pass, and the creature would continue moving.

An ogre in the watchtower frowned, feeling as though it was forgetting or overlooking something. It increased the frequency of the light flashes, but still, it saw nothing.

The curse Ikenga had placed on the carriage was taking effect now. Soon, the carriage arrived beneath the city wall, yet it didn't stop moving, even with the wall directly in front of it.

Vaegur, who had been in a constant state of panic, raised his hand to blast open the wall but was ordered to stop. The creature continued toward the wall, walking through it as though it wasn't there.

This was Keles's doing. Ikenga had originally planned to use his earth manipulation to pass through the stone wall, but he had noticed it was reinforced with magic. Keles had blessed the carriage, just as she had done with Wardenwild.

She had bestowed upon it an ability innate to souls, allowing it to pass through solid objects unnoticed.

Once inside the city, the atmosphere shifted immediately. The city was alive with activity even at night, but there was an underlying tension that clung to the air like a thick mist. People moved about the streets with hurried steps, their eyes flickering warily toward the towering walls and watchtowers. It was clear that the city was not only vigilant—it was afraid.

"They're on edge. This fear is useful," Ikenga said to Keles.

The carriage continued its journey through the city, with the residents ignoring its presence. Suddenly, the carriage stopped. Ikenga, Keles, and Vaegur all focused on a resident who looked out of place compared to everyone else.

"A wererat," Ikenga and Vaegur thought simultaneously, each recognizing the creature due to their experiences. Keles, who had no prior knowledge of the creature, looked at her brother in surprise.

"It seems this world has other residents apart from goblins and ogres," she said.

Ikenga nodded, his eyes narrowing as he studied the wererat. "Indeed, sister. But a closer look shows why their existence wasn't known to us."

Keles examined the scene more closely and began to notice a pattern. There wasn't just one wererat; there were many. Each wore a collar adorned with runes and followed behind goblins and ogres of higher status like servants or slaves.

Keles's eyes widened slightly as the realization sank in. "So they've been enslaved, bound by magic. That explains their low profile. They aren't a recognized power in this world—they're controlled and subjugated."

Ikenga's expression remained neutral as he studied the collars more closely, noting the intricate runes inscribed on them. "Runes of suppression."

Turning to his sister with a smile, Ikenga said, "I believe we have found our flaw, sister."

Keles understood what Ikenga was thinking and nodded in agreement. Meanwhile, back in the Abyss, Zarvok was seated on his throne with his eyes closed, observing through Vaegur's eyes.

The sight of the ratmen made him open his eyes. "Interesting," he murmured to himself as he disappeared, only to reappear with a thick book in his hand.

Ikenga, focusing on a target, grew a small pebble in his hand while placing a curse on it. In a swift motion, the pebble shot out of the carriage, hitting a wererat leading a massive crocodile-like mount with a carriage on its back.

The moment the pebble left the carriage to strike the wererat happened in the blink of an eye. Meanwhile, in the sky above the city, a massive eye appeared, scanning the area vigilantly.

The appearance of the enormous eye caused a disturbance in the city. People began to panic as the massive eye cast its watchful presence over the city. Guards rushed to their posts, shouting commands, while citizens scattered in confusion, unsure of the cause of the sudden commotion.

Ikenga observed the situation with a composed expression. "They're more organized than we anticipated," he murmured to Keles, his tone cold but calculating. "This response isn't merely panic. They've anticipated something like this."

Keles leaned back slightly, eyeing the massive eye that scanned the city below. "Perhaps, but their response only shows how afraid they are. Fear often leads to mistakes." She glanced at Ikenga, a knowing look passing between them. "Did you mark the wererat before or after the eye appeared?"

Ikenga smiled faintly, still watching the chaos unfold. "Before. The curse should be deep enough to track its movements without arousing suspicion. The eye is likely a defensive mechanism—an automatic response to any perceived threat."

As the eye in the sky searched for the source of the disturbance, it passed over their carriage multiple times without hesitation, a testament to Ikenga's concealment spell. The guards continued their frantic movements, but the wererat struck by the cursed pebble remained oblivious, still leading the giant crocodile-like mount through the streets.

In the Abyss, Zrvok flipped through the thick book he had retrieved, scanning ancient knowledge for anything about the creatures he had seen through Vaegur's eyes. "Ratmen, collars, runes of suppression," he muttered, a smirk forming on his lips. "I see. They are bound by the magic of the land, but their nature is older." He continued to read.

Back in the city, Ikenga's voice was low but confident as he addressed his sister. "We've set things in motion. The eye may be searching, but it won't find us. Once it passes, we'll follow our cursed wererat and see where it leads. There's more to uncover here."

Ikenga suddenly frowned, looking up at the massive eye. Tapping the carriage, he ordered, "We leave this city now!" Vaegur responded quickly, sensing the increasing threat.

The air around them shifted as the massive eye above the city began to stir with ominous energy. What was once a passive watcher, scanning the streets without purpose, now seemed to focus, its gaze sharpening as if it had become aware of something deeper. The lifeless presence was no longer just a defensive mechanism; it was waking up.

The creature pulling the carriage reacted immediately, turning with fluid precision as it began to retreat from the heart of the city. The eerie quiet that had accompanied their arrival was replaced by a building tension, like the calm before a storm.

Keles, her expression sharp and focused, glanced at Ikenga. "What changed? Did the eye sense the curse?"

Ikenga shook his head, his eyes still trained on the sky as the colossal eye continued to transform, its pupil slowly forming, giving it an almost sentient appearance. "No, it still can't sense or see through the curse."

Whenever Ikenga placed a curse, it passively consumed no energy from his divine reserves, but when activated, the curse tended to sap divine energy to maintain its function. Ikenga used the amount of energy sapped to gauge the level of threat.

Before the eye began to gain sentience, Ikenga had noticed an increase in the amount of divine energy being drained. Though the amount could be ignored at first, it kept growing, and Ikenga knew it was only a matter of time before the curse's resistance to the eye would begin to affect the physical world, exposing their position.

That wasn't the only problem. Ikenga thought of the mages and wizards—curses shouldn't be new to them. "If there's even a slight chance of that, the changes in the eye might expose us," he muttered. "Something—or someone—is interfering. That eye... it's being controlled now."

As the carriage made its swift exit, the streets around them seemed to pulse with energy. The citizens, still oblivious to the carriage's presence, began to move with more urgency, their eyes darting toward the sky as if they, too, sensed the change. Guards shouted orders, and the organized patrols became chaotic.

The massive eye in the sky shifted its gaze, locking onto the path where the carriage had been moments before. A beam of light shot down from it, sweeping the area in search of the intruders, but thanks to Ikenga's earlier concealment, the carriage remained unseen.

"Faster, Vaegur," Ikenga commanded, his voice calm but firm. The creature seemed to understand the urgency as its form began shifting, morphing into something faster.

As the creature pulling the carriage elongated its legs, muscles rippling beneath its skin, the carriage surged forward with newfound speed. The ground beneath them blurred, and the once-calm streets of the city faded into a haze as they raced away from the looming threat.

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Keles kept her eyes on the sky, her brow furrowed. "It's growing stronger, isn't it?" she asked, her voice tense but composed.

Ikenga gave a sharp nod, his gaze still fixed on the pulsating eye. "Yes. The energy it's drawing from the city is feeding it. Whatever's controlling it is using the city's magic to amplify its reach."

The carriage thundered on, the creature now moving at an unbelievable speed, cutting through the landscape like a shadow. With Keles' blessing, they exited the city the same way they had entered.

Only the distant flicker of torches marked the frantic movements of the guards, now far behind them.

Vaegur, hands gripping the reins tightly, glanced back nervously. "Are we far enough yet?"

Ikenga tilted his head slightly, feeling the gradual lessening of the divine energy being drained from his curse. "Not yet," he said, though there was a hint of relief in his tone. "But soon."

As they passed into the outskirts, away from prying eyes and the magic-laden city, the massive eye in the sky began to waver. Its glow dimmed slightly, and its sentience flickered like a flame in the wind.

The beam of light that had swept over the streets searching for them faltered, as if the connection between the controller and the eye was weakening.

Keles exhaled slowly, sensing the shift. "We've bought ourselves some time."

Ikenga nodded, though his eyes remained wary. "For now. But whoever or whatever is behind that eye... they'll be searching for us. We'll need to avoid cities or any gatherings."

"They seem more than ready to face any threat. Looks like Zarvok and the other demons will have a hard time taking this world," Keles remarked, glancing at Ikenga as he looked back at the city, now just a dot of light in the distance.

Ikenga grinned as he opened his hand, revealing a small figure of a ratman, constructed from purple light, moving as though it were mimicking the actions of the real ratman.

A table grew in between Keles and Ikenga as he placed the construct on the table, the construct turned into purple dust as it penetrated into the table soon like a mirror, the sight seen by the ratman was exposed to the two gods.

"Zarvok has his own problem, meanwhile we already have our own answers" Ikenga said as he chuckled while looking down at the table.

Soon the view shown on the table began turning dark, soon it was complete darkness. Ikenga grabbed the darkness as it grew in size, he placed the darkness where the carriage door was supposed to be.

Standing up Ikenga extended a hand to his sister "Our journey will be boring for a while, why don't you take a trip down the memory lane of our found flaw"

Keles eyed the darkness forming at the carriage door, her curiosity piqued as Ikenga extended his hand to her. "A trip down memory lane, you say?" she mused, her lips curling into a smirk. "You've always had a flair for the dramatic, brother."

Taking his hand, she rose from her seat and glanced at the shifting portal, now swirling with the dark, dense energy that Ikenga had conjured from the wererat's mind. She could already sense the deep-rooted pain and subjugation embedded in the memory of the enslaved creatures, a world of forgotten horrors now ripe for their exploitation.

"Very well," Keles said, stepping closer to the door, her gaze sharpening. "Let's see what secrets lie beneath the surface of this... flaw."

Together, they stepped through the portal of darkness. The sensation was immediate—a cold, suffocating pull as the fabric of reality shifted around them. When the darkness lifted, they found themselves standing in a dimly lit tunnel, dank and lined with ancient stones. The air was thick with the stench of decay and filth, and the faint scurrying of unseen creatures echoed from the shadows.

Keles wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Charming place," she muttered, her voice laced with sarcasm. "This must be where the ratmen are kept."

Ikenga, his expression unreadable, pointed ahead. "More than that, this is the birthplace of their servitude." The tunnel stretched on, and as they ventured deeper, flickers of light began to dance on the walls.

While Ikenga and Keles were exploring, back at the city where they just left. A blue portal opened up, a goblin the size of a normal human walked out holding onto a mage staff.

The goblin looked young with a serious look on his face as he looked around the area. It tapped its staff on the ground, with it at the center small ripple on Invisible energy spread out like it was searching for something.

The goblin mage found nothing as it frowned as it began looking around but soon it stopped as around him, blue portals opened up.

As the blue portals opened and the goblin mages stepped out, their presence was immediately felt in the air, thick with the pulsing of arcane energy. Each mage, whether young or old, moved with purpose, their eyes scanning the city and the surroundings for any trace of the disturbance.

The lead goblin, the one who had first emerged, tapped his staff again, this time harder, sending out another ripple of energy that swept through the streets like an invisible wave. His frown deepened. "Nothing... but there was something here," he muttered, his voice low and dangerous.

One of the older goblins, his skin lined with scars and wrinkles, looked out of place with the other goblins, around its waist was a dried corpse of what seemed like a baby fetus.

He took a deep breath like it was trying to smell something pleasant with its eyes closed. "Curse but well hidden" The goblin so entranced with the scent fell to the ground like a dog as it took a deep breath.

Almost like he was tickled the goblin fell to the ground but soon its expression turned to annoyance. The curse was too well hidden, he could only grab hold of the lingering scent yet it was dispersing quickly.

This goblin unlike other mages was well versed in curses, it has been his long life work. It was proud of his work when it comes to curses but right now in front of it.

It felt like there was a mountain in front of it that it can never cross. Compared to the smell of curses around him, this one left behind was almost divine.

"Divine!" the old goblin suddenly stood up "Yes, even the best curse mages could only hope to replicate this scent yet never truly achieve it"

"A god was here" the old goblin spoke out, catching the attention of the other mages around.

The old goblin's sudden outburst caused the other mages to stop what they were doing and turn toward him, their eyes narrowing in suspicion and curiosity. They all knew the elder was no ordinary goblin. His knowledge of curses and the dark arts surpassed their own, but hearing him mention the presence of a god sent a ripple of unease through the group.

The lead goblin mage, the young one who had first appeared through the portal, stepped forward, his staff glowing with a faint blue light. "A god? Here? Impossible. There haven't been gods in this realm for centuries." His voice was cold and skeptical, but there was a flicker of doubt in his eyes.

The older goblin's chuckle turned into a low, rasping laugh as he continued to breathe heavily from his encounter with the lingering curse. "You children wouldn't recognize divinity if it slapped you in the face," he muttered, his voice dripping with condescension. "But I have tasted a similar presence before—long ago. It's faint now, almost gone, but there's no mistaking it. A god was here, and a curse was left behind... none of us could hope to understand it's purpose"

The younger mage's grip on his staff tightened, the glow from its tip dimming slightly as he processed the old goblin's words. His frown deepened, eyes narrowing. "If a god was here," he began slowly, "what were they doing? And where are they now?"

The old goblin gave a careless shrug, but his eyes gleamed with admiration—and envy. "That's the question, isn't it? They've hidden their trail well, clever gods that they are. But the scent of divinity lingers. We may not be able to follow it directly... but we know that something divine has meddled in our domain." He grinned, his jagged teeth glinting in the dim light. "I say we inform the council. They'll want to know about this."

As the goblin mages gathered to discuss their next move, the world beyond stirred with far more troubling developments.

Back in the world of Nana, chaos brewed in the aftermath of the gods' decision. The message, sent swiftly to the demigods, had caused an uproar. They were to ascend, to take on their divine roles in a world that still resented their presence. Many of them were far from pleased, for the timing couldn't have been worse.

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In the eastern continent, the most powerful kingdom had thrown its full support behind the religion of Björn. This belief system, once a fringe cult, was spreading like wildfire. Its teachings offered power to the powerless, and the cost? Blood. The ritualistic murder of others, in the name of Björn, granted individuals strength without the need for talent or hard work. For a kingdom/ Individual hungry for power and dominance, this was a tempting offer.

Reports of ritualistic killings were becoming commonplace, whispered in the streets like gossip. People murdered in their own homes, their bodies desecrated in sacrificial rites to gain power. And the more the religion of Björn spread, the more humanity's fear of the children of the gods began to fade. Björn's followers believed they could challenge the demigods themselves.

Only a week ago, Ikem received news of missing apelings who had ventured out on an expedition. Their bodies were soon discovered—used in a brutal ritual. The discovery ignited a wave of unease, but something more sinister was brewing beneath the surface. Rumors began to spread: the children of the gods, with their divine blood, made even more powerful sacrifices. It was said, though unproven, that the blessings of Björn were doubled when a demigod was offered in ritual.

This rumor, however unsubstantiated, was enough to fan the flames of fanaticism. Humans, convinced of its truth, now had their sights set on the children of the gods. Ikem, sensing the growing danger, sent word to his people scattered among human societies. He warned them of the rising threat and gave them a choice: return to the safety of the mountain or stay and face the danger on their own terms, Whichever option they choose he made sure to make it clear that he will always stand by them.

To Ikem's surprise, not a single apeling chose to return. Instead, they were insulted—angered even—by the very suggestion that they should flee. While the apelings were known for their kindness toward humans, they harbored a deep, underlying pride in their divine lineage. Their bloodline, connected to the gods themselves, was not to be disrespected.

Under normal circumstances, this pride was kept in check, hidden beneath their civilized exterior. But the news that humans were hunting them, using them as objects to increase their own power, ignited a fury within them. Many apelings spoke of razing entire cities to the ground in retaliation.

However, Ikem's warning tempered their rage. He reminded them that not all humans were followers of Björn, and there were still many who opposed the barbaric rituals. Acting in blind anger would only sow more chaos. If they were to strike, they needed to know who their true enemies were.

This decision, though measured, became the nightmare of Björn's followers. The apelings, well-educated and strategic in their approach, began to operate under the cover of darkness. They infiltrated human society, silently seeking out Björn's believers, one by one.

Night after night, the apelings moved like shadows. Their intelligence and methodical nature made them nearly undetectable. Each night, another follower of Björn disappeared, their presence erased without a trace. And the humans began to fear once more—not the gods themselves, but the quiet, calculating vengeance of the demigods' children.

For the followers of Björn, it was no longer a matter of gaining power. It was a matter of survival.

The moon hung low in the sky, casting a dim light over the quiet town. The streets, once bustling with life, were eerily silent now. For weeks, rumors had spread like wildfire—followers of Björn disappearing without a trace. Some spoke of divine retribution, others of vengeful spirits, but none dared utter the truth out loud: the children of the gods had come to exact their vengeance.

A small group of Björn's followers huddled together inside a decrepit stone building on the outskirts of the town. They whispered to one another, their voices shaky, eyes darting toward every shadow. The air was thick with tension, the weight of their fear palpable.

One of them, a tall man with ritual scars etched into his skin, stood and slammed his fist onto the table. "Enough of this cowardice! We are the chosen of Björn. We have tasted his power! The gods' spawn are no match for us—"

A sharp, bone-cracking noise interrupted him mid-sentence. His eyes went wide, the force of his voice faltering as he looked down. A jagged, wooden spear protruded from his chest, slick with blood. Before

he could gasp for air, the spear was yanked backward, pulling him off balance and sending him crashing to the floor. Blood pooled around him as his life slipped away.

The room erupted into chaos, the remaining followers scrambling to draw their weapons. But it was already too late. The apelings moved with deadly precision, their forms barely visible in the flickering candlelight. Their attack was swift, calculated—merciless.

One of the Björn followers, a woman with a ceremonial dagger clutched tightly in her hand, lunged at a shadow. Her blade swung through the air but hit nothing. She barely had time to react before a heavy blow landed on her back, sending her sprawling onto the ground. She struggled to rise, but a booted foot slammed down on her spine, pinning her to the floor.

A low growl rumbled above her, and as she craned her neck to look up, she saw the apeling towering over her, his amber eyes glinting with rage. Without hesitation, he grabbed her by the head, his large hands closing around her skull. With a sickening crack, he twisted, her neck snapping like dry wood. Her body went limp instantly, and he tossed her aside like a rag doll.

The sound of flesh being torn apart echoed through the room as the apelings descended upon the remaining followers. One by one, they were hunted down with terrifying efficiency.

An older man, his body already weakened from prior rituals, tried to crawl away, dragging himself across the blood-soaked floor. His breath came in ragged gasps, desperation overtaking him. But the apelings were relentless. One of them leapt from the shadows, landing atop him. He tried to scream, but a rough hand clamped over his mouth, silencing him. With a single, swift motion, the apeling raised a jagged stone knife and plunged it into his back, again and again, each stab precise, each one meant to inflict maximum pain.

The man's muffled screams slowly faded into gurgles as blood bubbled from his throat. His limbs twitched once, then fell still.

Another follower, a wiry woman with wild eyes, fought back with everything she had. Her blade flashed through the air, narrowly missing her attacker. She was quick, but the apelings were quicker. One of them darted behind her, sweeping her legs out from under her. She fell hard, her head smacking the stone floor with a dull thud. Dazed, she tried to push herself up, but an apeling was already upon her.

With a snarl, he grabbed her arm and yanked it backward. There was a wet snap as her shoulder dislocated, followed by a scream of agony that filled the room. The apeling didn't stop there. With a twisted grin, he pulled harder, tearing her arm completely free from her body. Blood sprayed across the walls as the woman convulsed, her eyes wide with horror and disbelief. Her scream became a weak gurgle as blood filled her throat, and she collapsed into a lifeless heap.

Outside, the remaining followers who had been standing guard heard the screams and rushed into the building. But the moment they stepped through the door, they were met with a scene of carnage. Bodies lay strewn across the floor, twisted in unnatural angles, blood soaking into the stone.

The apelings, their eyes glowing with predatory fury, turned toward the newcomers with deadly intent. The guards barely had time to react before the apelings were upon them. The first to fall was a hulking man wielding a battle axe. An apeling darted behind him, slashing his Achilles' tendon with a razor-sharp claw. The man stumbled forward, howling in pain, but his cry was cut short as another apeling drove a spear through his throat. Blood spurted from the wound as he collapsed, choking on his own fluids.

The others tried to retreat, but the apelings gave them no quarter. One man, a scrawny acolyte, made it to the doorway before an apeling hurled a weighted net over him. He struggled, but the more he thrashed, the tighter the net became. Within seconds, he was immobilized. An apeling approached him slowly, savoring the terror in his eyes. Without a word, the apeling unsheathed a curved blade and, with brutal efficiency, slit the man's throat. The acolyte's eyes went wide as he gurgled his last breath, his body collapsing in a heap.

When the last of the followers lay dead, the apelings stood in the aftermath of their slaughter, their bodies spattered with blood, their breaths steady and calm. This was not an act of senseless rage—this was a message. The gods' children had sent their warning.

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The aftermath of the apelings' brutal strike was like a shockwave, reverberating through the human settlements. The sun rose on a town changed forever. The once-bustling streets were now filled with hushed whispers, pale faces, and the weight of a grim realization. Loved ones had vanished overnight, their places in homes left cold and empty. Those who knew the secret allegiances of their fallen family members—Björn's followers—turned pale with fear, rushing to the outskirts of the town.

What awaited them was beyond their worst imaginings. Bodies, or what was left of them, lay scattered, their brutalized forms barely recognizable. Blood still soaked the earth, and the scent of death hung heavy in the air. Mothers wept uncontrollably, fathers stared blankly in horror, and the townspeople,

once emboldened by the promises of Björn's power, were reduced to broken shells. Panic spread like wildfire. The followers of Björn, once confident in their growing power, now felt the icy grip of fear.

Rumors of the apelings' swift retribution spread far and wide. No longer were they seen as the peaceful children of the gods, easy to manipulate or take advantage of. The image of their passive nature, exploited by humans who sought to use their divine bloodline, was shattered in a few nights of violent justice. The humans, and their leaders, quickly realized their mistake. It was as though cold water had been poured over their reckless ambitions.

In the Omadi kingdom, Nwadiabube received the reports of the carnage with a mixture of disbelief and fear. The sheer ruthlessness of the apelings took him by surprise. He had always assumed that their peaceful demeanor comes from them disliking war and bloodshed. But now, the truth was clear—they were capable of terrifying retribution when provoked. For a brief moment, panic gripped him. Had he gone too far in allowing the religion of Björn to spread unchecked? Had his ambition blinded him to the danger that lurked just beyond his borders?

As more information reached him, Nwadiabube began to understand the true meaning behind the apelings' actions. They were not looking for war. They did not want to involve themselves in the petty conflicts of humans. But they would not tolerate being hunted, manipulated, or used as tools for power. The message was clear: as long as the humans left them alone, they would remain indifferent. But should the humans dare to cross that line again, there would be no mercy.

Armed with this knowledge, Nwadiabube took decisive action. He summoned the priest of Björn, his expression cold and unyielding. The room filled with tension as the priest, still confident in his growing influence, tried to argue his position.

"This is a sign from Björn," the priest insisted. "The apelings are nothing compared to the divine power we are—"

"Silence!" Nwadiabube's voice cut through the room, sharp as a blade. The priests fell silent, taken aback by the sudden shift in his demeanor.

"Do you not understand?" Nwadiabube growled, his eyes burning with intensity. "The apelings will not hesitate to destroy us if we continue down this path. I will not risk the safety of my kingdom for your misguided ambitions. From this moment forward, no one—no one—is to lay a hand on the children of the gods."

The priest, used to wielding influence through fear and promises of power, began to protest, but Nwadiébe would not hear it. "If you defy me, if you or your followers continue to pursue this madness, I will end our cooperation. And I will see to it that the full force of my kingdom crushes your order before you can even blink."

The priest, hearing that, turned silent. If he was to lose the safety of the Omadi and his kingdom, the success rate of his mission would fall and he fears the repercussions of the higher ups. Nwadiébe's reputation as a strategic and ruthless leader has been well known to him after spending some time with him. He realized that he was not bluffing. Reluctantly, he agreed, vowing to relay the message to the rest of Björn's followers.

With the Omadi kingdom now distancing itself from the dangerous ambitions of Björn's priest, the children of the gods became a subject of taboo once more. Fear of the apelings spread like wildfire through the human population. The once-rising power of Björn's religion now faltered, as many of its followers began to question whether the power they sought was worth the risk of invoking the wrath of divine bloodlines.

The humans, once emboldened by their growing influence, were reminded of an unshakable truth: the children of the gods were always watching, and they would not hesitate to strike down those who dared to challenge their dominion. The nightmarish memory of every brutal night lingered in the minds of all who had witnessed it—a chilling reminder that some forces, no matter how peaceful they may seem, were not to be trifled with.

Ikem chuckled as he drained the last of his wine, feeling the warmth of both the drink and the pride swelling within him. His son Zephyr stood beside him, a reflection of youthful strength and wisdom that Ikem had come to rely on more and more over the years. The echoes of his booming laughter reverberated through the grand halls of the apeling palace, a stark contrast to the tense atmosphere of the human settlements below the mountain.

"Ah, my son," Ikem said, setting the cup down on the polished wooden steel table before him. "Perhaps I've spent too long trying to protect our people from the world, assuming they needed shielding. It seems I was the one who forgot the blood that runs through their veins."

Zephyr nodded, his own smile widening. "Father, our people carry the blood of gods. It's in our nature to face challenges, not hide from them. You've always taught us that we should avoid needless bloodshed.

But the humans don't understand that avoiding conflict isn't the same as fearing it. The minute they saw our patience as weakness, they sealed their fate"

Ikem leaned back in his chair, his eyes gleaming with a mixture of pride and newfound understanding. "For centuries, I believed that our position of isolation in these mountains was our greatest advantage. I believed that by keeping our people distant from the conflicts and influences of outsiders, we could maintain our way of life—our purity. But this... this situation with Björn's followers has shown me something different. Our people aren't just passive observers of the world; they are actors in it. And when their divine privilege is challenged, they will act. Brutally, if need be."

Zephyr poured his father another drink, the liquid shimmering in the golden cup. Ikem took the cup "I suppose I needed this reminder. We are not like the humans. Their greed, their thirst for power—it blinds them. They forgot that our people carry the legacy of gods. And when that legacy is threatened, our people will rise, not out of anger, but out of duty. Out of pride."

Zephyr's smile took on a fiercer edge. "Exactly, father. We've been patient, but patience doesn't mean submission. We would have watched as they fumbled with their petty religions and power struggles. But now, they've overreached. Our people will remind them of the balance. That they are not the top of the food chain."

Ikem's eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he swirled the wine in his cup. "It's interesting, isn't it? For so long, I've tried to avoid this—tried to keep our people uninvolved in the mess of human affairs. Yet, despite my efforts, they were drawn into it. And not only did they rise to the occasion, they did so with a precision and ferocity that even I hadn't anticipated."

Zephyr leaned forward, his voice taking on a more serious tone. "Father, the world is changing. The humans are growing bolder, and as much as they fear us now, there will be others like Björn's followers who will test us again"

Ikem studied his son's face for a moment, the pride in his chest swelling further. Zephyr was right. The world beyond the mountains had shifted, and perhaps it was time for the apeling kingdom to shift with it. Not by stepping into every conflict or asserting dominance over others, but by embracing the truth of who they were. They were children of gods, and that legacy was both their privilege and their responsibility.

Ikem sighed deeply, the weight of his thoughts pressing down on him. The joy that should have come with the news of ascension was muted by the gravity of the situation. For centuries, he and his fellow

demigods had built a legacy—a world for their children to thrive in, far from the meddling of humans and the invaders. But now, with ascension on the horizon, that world felt fragile.

He glanced at Zephyr, who still stood beside him, unaware of the storm brewing in his father's mind. Ikem's heart swelled with love for his son and other children, but also with a deep worry. Would Zephyr and the other children of the gods be ready to face what was coming? Could they protect the kingdom in the face of the rising human threat and the divine forces that would soon collide?

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His mother's message, delivered in cryptic words laced with divine authority, echoed in his mind: "It is time. Your duties to this world will soon end, and your place in the stars awaits." He had been told since childhood that the time would come when his mortal ties would dissolve, and he would take his place among the gods. But he never expected the moment to feel so... ill-timed.

"Father?" Zephyr's voice snapped Ikem back to the present. "You're troubled. Is it the humans? Or something more?"

Ikem studied his son again, wondering if now was the time to share the burden he had carried since the moment the gods had spoken. Zephyr had proven himself time and time again, but the truth of ascension was not an easy one to bear. Yet, he couldn't shield his son from it forever. If the apeling kingdom was to endure, they would need to prepare—not just for the human threat, but for a world where the children of the gods would soon stand alone.

Ikem decided against his thought by not telling Zephyr about the decision. Ikem's mind settled as he made the decision. Conflict with the humans, particularly the followers of Björn, was still in its infancy. It would be foolish to rush headlong into a full-blown war when patience could yield better results. Zephyr, sharp and capable, had been right—the humans would test them again, and when they did, Ikem wanted his son to be in the best possible state of mind to face the challenge.

For years, Ikem had kept Zephyr close, stationed in the capital to serve as his swift messenger, able to discreetly communicate with his sibling scattered across the kingdom. His son's natural affinity for wind made him an invaluable asset—his speed and ability to traverse vast distances in moments allowed Ikem to stay informed and maintain unity among his children and subjects. Zephyr had thrived in this role, growing stronger and wiser with each passing year.

Now, with the looming reality of ascension, Ikem began to see the necessity of a transition. He had watched Zephyr's growth closely, observing his increasing sense of duty, his strategic mind, and his connection to the people. It was time to consider passing the mantle of leadership to him. The kingdom would need a strong leader in the wake of his departure, and Zephyr, more than any of his other children, was ready to step into that role.

As Ikem mulled over his decision, his thoughts drifted beyond his own kingdom, to the eastern continent. Three months' journey from the Omadi Kingdom lay the territory ruled by King Osita, a well-known rival. Unlike the apeling kingdom, where the people's loyalty to the gods was unshakable and their isolation protected them, Osita's territory thrived on a different set of principles. His people lived freely, walking the streets with smiles on their faces, unconcerned with the chaos beyond their borders.

Osita's land was a place where the worship of many gods flourished. Statues of the origin gods dotted the territory, marking it as a melting pot of beliefs and traditions. In contrast to the strict religious adherence seen elsewhere, Osita had allowed his people to choose their own paths of worship, offering a unique sense of freedom. Osita kingdom had no culture of their own so they took part of others' culture they liked and decided to live with it depending on which culture each individual found fitting for themselves.

The people of Osita's kingdom were, in many ways, similar to the apelings in their indifference to the growing human conflicts. As long as their own interests weren't threatened, they paid little mind to the power struggles unfolding in distant lands. They knew well that their safety and prosperity were tied to their king's leadership—and while Osita's subjects believed their peace stemmed from his benevolence, the truth was far more complex.

Osita alone knew the real reason his kingdom remained untouched by the turmoil beyond its borders. Centuries ago, he had entered into an agreement with Ikem, a pact that shaped the fate of his kingdom. Ikem, at the time, had imposed a strict condition on Osita: he was to refrain from attacking any humans or engaging in unnecessary conflicts. Instead, Osita was to focus on growing his kingdom, protecting his people, and maintaining a peaceful existence. If attacked, he could defend himself—but he was forbidden from initiating any aggression. It was a compromise born out of necessity. At the time, Osita had been far weaker than Ikem, and with the weight of Ikem's power looming over him, he had little choice but to accept.

In those early years, Osita had been frustrated by the agreement, feeling it ran counter to his ambitions. His initial goal had been one of expansion and conquest, seeking to assert dominance over the weaker human kingdoms surrounding him. But with Ikem's decree hanging over him, those dreams were dashed. He had no choice but to comply, curbing his ambitions in favor of survival.

Yet, as the centuries passed, Osita had come to see the wisdom in the arrangement. The stability it provided allowed his people to thrive in ways he hadn't anticipated. They had grown prosperous, their kingdom flourishing under his leadership, and the peace brought by the agreement had become a valuable asset.

Osita himself had undergone a transformation, Osita's transformation, unlike the pact with Ikem, was a consequence of his own actions—one that came with deep, irreversible lessons. His life as a Cambion, half-demon and half-human, was the product of choices he made without fully grasping their weight. His attempt to take over a human soul was driven by his demonic instincts at the time, yet it instead became a cautionary tale about the complexity and unpredictability of human emotions.

Demons like Osita had always relied on manipulation, thriving on the belief that emotions could be wielded like tools to control and influence. Left over inheritance memories from his demonic past showed of the many times demons had tangled with human emotions, finding themselves ensnared by them rather than in control. Demons' traits of trickery and unpredictability arose from eons of dealing with humans, who, despite their fragile bodies, possessed something otherworldly in their hearts—the power of emotion, a gift from the Seven Deadly Sins and Virtues.

Humans, above all other life forms, seemed to be specially more blessed with this gift. Their emotions were erratic, contradictory, and impossible to predict. Demons could control, provoke, and manipulate feelings, yet with humans, these emotions often turned on them, leading to unforeseen outcomes. Osita, like many demons before him, had underestimated this power.

In his time as part of Murmur consciousness, Osita had seen emotions as nothing more than bargaining chips. When he encountered a human body he desired, he thought the emotions tied to it could be manipulated like any other. The man whose body Osita took over had been in a state of intense emotional turmoil, his pregnant wife adding weight to every decision. Osita believed the human's fear for his unborn child's safety would be the perfect leverage, a way to extract the man's soul and claim his body without resistance.

He was right—the man did give up his soul, and Osita assumed control. But what he didn't anticipate was the lingering emotional attachment that remained. Despite the man's soul being gone, his deep longing for the safety of his wife and unborn child had imprinted itself on the body, a shadow that now haunted Osita.

It was the beginning of a slow, agonizing transformation. What should have been a simple possession turned into a much more complicated ordeal. Osita found himself feeling emotions that weren't his own—tenderness, protectiveness, and even love toward the woman and child who weren't his by blood. But they were his now, in a way that no demon could truly understand. The demon within him recoiled at this unfamiliar sensation, but the human half, which had taken root in his Cambion form, began to accept it.

The more time Osita spent in the human body, the more he began to understand the burden of these emotions. He tried to resist, attempted to detach himself from the family, but the longing remained. The child, once born, cemented his transformation further. Against his will, Osita became a father, not just by circumstance, but by emotion. The demon inside him warred with these human feelings, but the Cambion state of being allowed both to exist within him.

This experience taught Osita a brutal lesson: humans could not be defined by their emotions, nor could their actions always be predicted based on what they felt. They were beings capable of feeling one thing and acting in an entirely opposite manner. It was a complexity that demons had long struggled with, and Osita was no different. His demonic instincts had been outplayed by the very essence of humanity.

Over the centuries, Osita learned to live with this transformation. He could no longer view humans with the cold detachment he once had as a demon. The family he had unintentionally created had grounded him in ways he hadn't thought possible. While he still retained his demonic cunning and power, he also carried with him the weight of fatherhood and the responsibility of protecting those he had once seen as mere pawns.

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His leadership style had changed as well. The once ruthless demon who sought only power and control now led with a more measured hand. He allowed his people the freedom to worship as they wished, understanding that forcing them into submission would only breed rebellion. He had become more attuned to the emotions of those around him, recognizing that human emotions, while chaotic, were also a source of incredible strength.

Osita sat in his grand hall, reflecting on Björn's ascension. When he noticed that one of Murmur's consciousness had managed to ascend to godhood, he knew that changes would soon come to this world.

He understood that this marked the demons' successful stamp on the world. Considering Björn's divinity, Osita already knew it would pose a significant problem for this world. Perhaps in other realms,

Björn's divinity wouldn't have the same effect, but this world was too peaceful—a peace that had once troubled Osita but had since grown on him. The gods of this world and their children had done everything in their power to ensure peace, but as a demon who had dealt with humans before, Osita knew that peace wasn't the defining trait of their race.

The chaos now unfolding was something he had expected once humans learned of Björn's religion. The peace the gods maintained was like a cage, and Björn presented an opportunity to break free of it.

Osita's main concern, however, was how organized Björn's religion seemed. Osita understood what Björn's divinity could do to ordinary humans exposed to it, and even to Björn himself. Planning and strategizing were not something Björn's followers should be capable of, yet somehow a religion had been created. Osita already had someone in mind who might be behind it all, but he didn't have enough evidence to conclude it was truly him.

Nevertheless, Osita knew that Murmur's main consciousness somehow had a hand in everything, and that Björn was playing right into it.

If the war Murmur hoped for came to pass, Björn would be in great danger of being weakened and possibly killed. His ascension tied him to this world, and certain actions against it would bring severe repercussions.

Osita knew that Murmur was counting on this. He seemed to be boosting Björn's strength, fattening him like a caged animal, waiting for the right moment to devour him.

The rapid growth of Björn's religion may look good for now, but Osita knew how dangerous it was for Björn. Unlike Origin gods, who had natural gifts to filter faith energy, Björn had none. At the moment, he was simply absorbing raw, unfiltered faith energy.

If the growth had been gradual, Björn could refine the energy himself. But with the rapid expansion of his religion, the option to refine it slowly was out of the question.

Osita stood and walked to the window, gazing at the red dot in the sky where Björn's godly throne was. If Osita had to guess, Björn was likely suffering at this very moment, struggling to maintain his sanity as his power grew.

Murmur wanted Björn's divinity to erode him, leaving nothing but an empty husk driven solely by its Divinity. With subtle manipulation, Murmur could then point this weapon of war at anyone he wished.

Osita shook his head, knowing it wouldn't be as simple as that. Although he was no longer part of Murmur's consciousness, he could still guess what Murmur was planning—and if he could do that, so could Björn.

Osita clenched his jaw and turned away from the window, his mind racing with possibilities. The demon inside him relished the idea of watching Björn fall and Murmur's plan failing, knowing that another potential threat would be eliminated. But the human side—the part of him that had learned compassion and responsibility—saw the tragedy in it all.

Osita had no desire to involve himself directly in the affairs of gods and demons anymore. His agreement with Ikem and the peaceful life he had built in his kingdom were his priorities now. But he also knew that once the world descended into chaos, no one would be spared from the fallout.

At the moment, he himself was also involved in the chaos, as Omadi's children had their eyes on him. A cruel smirk appeared at the corner of his lips. He would be lying if he said he wasn't looking forward to it—Omadi's son had done well to make his past centuries less boring.

"War is inevitable," Osita finally admitted to himself. His hands clenched into fists, but there was no anger. Instead, there was an unsettling excitement, a small flicker of the demon he once was, eager for the coming conflict. He could deny it all he wanted, but the truth was clear.

Osita was brought out of his thoughts when the door to his office opened, revealing a young, brown-skinned man who looked like him. This was his son, Nwadike.

Nwadike at the moment have a serious look on his face as he walked in, Closing the door behind him, he bowed to his father before sitting down.

Osita studied his son's expression and asked, "What is it, son?"

"The Apelings have made a move," Nwadike said, prompting Osita to sit upright.

"Tell me what happened," Osita urged.

Osita leaned forward, his eyes narrowing as he listened to Nwadike read the report. The room seemed to grow colder as the weight of the situation settled on his mind. The Apelings—peaceful by nature and loyal to Ikem.

For them to strike back against Björn's believers meant that something truly grave had occurred.

"Ikem's people have always been slow to anger," Osita mused aloud, his voice low and contemplative. "For them to retaliate... this is no small thing."

Nwadike nodded, his brow furrowed. "The believers targeted the Apelings because of their divine heritage, a rumor somehow spread about how better Björn's blessing was if children of gods were sacrificed to him"

Osita's fists clenched once more, but this time not out of excitement. A shadow passed over his face as he considered the implications. The Apelings were sacred in their own way, beings whose existence bridged the gap between humans and gods. For them to be drawn into this conflict meant the lines were blurring, and neutrality was no longer an option.

"How far did it go?" Osita asked, his voice tense.

Nwadike hesitated for a moment, his eyes shifting to the scroll in his hands "Several small groups of Björn's believers were found. The Apelings struck, and it was one-sided—the humans were massacred to send a message."

Osita's jaw tightened, his gaze hardening as Nwadike's words sunk in. The peaceful Apelings had not just defended themselves—they had unleashed a brutal and decisive response.

"Massacred..." Osita muttered under his breath, the weight of the word hanging heavily in the air. "Ikem's people were pushed too far."

He rose slowly from his seat, his mind racing with the implications. If Björn's believers were spreading rumors of divine blessings through sacrifice, then this was no longer just a matter of faith. This was about power. Power that Björn likely didn't fully understand, manipulated from behind the scenes by Murmur's hand.

"And these rumors," Osita asked, his voice sharp, "where do they come from? Who is spreading such blasphemy?"

Nwadike's brow furrowed as he looked back at the scroll. "The origin is unclear, Father. But it seems to have spread quickly among Björn's more fanatical followers. They believe that offering the blood of the children of gods will enhance his blessings. They think this is what will grant them more power."

Osita's eyes narrowed further, a flash of anger finally breaking through his composed exterior. "This is Murmur's doing. He's stoking the fire, pushing the believers into madness. They're becoming pawns in his game, and Björn is too unstable to realize it."

Nwadike nodded, his expression serious. "The Apelings, in their rage, have made a statement. It will scare some of the believers back into their senses but it is only a matter of before they fall back to being senseless pawn"

Osita turned away from his son, his gaze once more drawn to the red dot of Björn's throne in the sky. War was no longer a distant possibility—it had already begun.

Osita's mind raced as he stared at the distant red dot in the sky, Björn's throne glowing ominously. War, once a vague concept, was now unfolding with every move made by both sides. The Apelings had acted out of desperation, and while their attack would instill fear, it would only be a temporary reprieve.

"Fear won't be enough to stop this," Osita muttered under his breath. "Murmur has woven his influence too deeply into Björn's followers. They crave power and purpose, and they'll see this massacre as a challenge—a call to arms."

He turned back to Nwadike, his face grim. "The Apelings' retaliation was swift and brutal, but it won't stop the tide. The fanatics will regroup, more dangerous and more desperate. They'll come for blood. Murmur will ensure that."

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Nwadike's eyes remained fixed on his father, absorbing the weight of his words. "What do we do, Father? The Apelings acted out of necessity, but they've drawn themselves into a deeper conflict. And Ikem... he won't stand for much more bloodshed."

Osita shook his head slowly. "Ikem is wise, but even he cannot control the emotions of his people once they've been provoked. The Apelings have tasted violence, and though it is against their nature, they will be tempted to act again if pressed. And this is what Murmur wants."

A heavy silence fell over the room, the gravity of the situation weighing on them both. Osita knew that Murmur's ultimate goal was not simply the downfall of Björn's followers, but the erosion of Björn's own stability. By fanning the flames of conflict, Murmur was pushing Björn toward a breaking point, feeding him raw faith energy at a rate that would drive any mortal to madness.

Osita's gaze darkened. "We need to find the source of these rumors, Nwadike. If we can sever Murmur's influence before it spreads further, we might slow the momentum of this war. But that will only buy us time."

The silence hung in the air again as Osita paced across the room, lost in thought. "We have to act before it's too late," Osita finally said, his voice firm. "Reach out to Ikem. Warn him of what's coming. We can't allow this conflict to spiral out of control any further"

Nwadike nodded, understanding the urgency of the situation. "I will do as you say, Father"

As Nwadike stood to carry out his orders, Osita glanced once more at the red dot in the sky. He had long embraced the conflict within himself—the demon and the human—but now, he would need both sides working together to prevent the world from descending into chaos.

"Prepare yourself, Nwadike," Osita called out as his son left the room. "War is here, whether we want it or not".

AS for the Origin gods, they no longer could be bothered by the happenings of the mortal world. Jaws even has forgone his role on mending things in Ikenga's absence, His whole attention like his other siblings, Mahu and Crepuscular was on the movement of their counterpart in the upside down.

The more things are spiraling out of control in the mortal world, the more the whispers from the upside down can be heard by the Origin gods.

The sacred language of the gods in the tongue of their counterpart has turned into something awful, disturbing and weird. From the slow expanding hole left by Ikenga and Keles presence, this twisted language is being constantly played in the ears of the gods.

For the origin gods, they could ignore the effect of this language but for most mortals, the effect was something the origin gods were not looking forward too.

Last time when the gods counterparts were born, For a small amount of time, they were allowed to show true form, the damage from that was prevented by the gods who also showed their true form to mitigate the damage being done.

Nonetheless, the damage was done as many mortals who laid their eyes on the counterpart of the gods have been imprinted by them. When Ikenga and Keles were here, their world shield was strong and could keep the counterpart away from their world.

Now the shield has two holes in it, their world once again was exposed to their counterpart. Crepuscular knew the whispers from the hole weren't meant for them but instead for those who had been imprinted.

Their counterpart is trying to get to them, to turn them into their agents. For now, Mahu, Jaws and Crepuscular are making sure that no whispers get by them and keep it on hold.

But the whole was expanding, their counterpart on the other side is doing everything to widen the hole. Each day, the divide between worlds grew thinner, and the gods knew they couldn't hold it back forever.

The only way to stop this was by Keles and Ikenga coming back or they somehow find a way to stop their counterpart from expanding the hole.

Down in the mortal world. In the western continent. Mahlon woke with a start, his skin clammy and slick with sweat. The darkness of his room pressed in on him, suffocating, and for a moment, he wasn't sure

if he was awake or still trapped in the nightmare. His heart thundered in his chest, each beat rattling through his ribcage like a prisoner banging to escape.

He sat up, shivering, though the room was sweltering. He could feel it again. That presence. Lingering just out of reach, like the ghost of a dream clinging to the edges of his mind. His hands trembled as he pressed them to his temples, trying to silence the dull, rhythmic thrum that had become his constant companion.

"It's nothing," he whispered to himself, voice shaking. "It's nothing."

But he knew it wasn't nothing. The whispers hadn't fully reached him yet, but he could feel them circling him like hungry wolves at the edge of a dying fire. And it was getting worse.

The dreams were the first sign. They had started innocuously enough—fleeting images, vague shapes in the fog of sleep. But they had grown darker, more vivid, until he could no longer tell where the dream ended and the waking world began. Even now, with his eyes wide open, he could still see them. Their faces, twisted and melting, slipping between expressions too fast to comprehend.

He rubbed his eyes furiously, hoping to banish the hallucinations. When he opened them again, he nearly screamed.

In the corner of the room, barely visible in the dim light, a figure stood watching him. Its shape was wrong, all wrong. It was tall and thin, but where a head should have been, there was only a shifting mass of flesh, writhing as if trying to form a face but never quite managing it. Mahlon's breath caught in his throat. He blinked. The figure was gone.

It's in my mind. It's not real. It's not real.

But it felt real. It always felt real now.

Mahlon stumbled out of bed, his legs weak and shaking. He fumbled for the candle on his desk, lighting it with trembling hands. The flickering flame cast long, jagged shadows on the walls, making the room seem like it was warping, bending inward. He looked at his hands and saw that they were shaking uncontrollably. The tremor had started a few days ago, small at first, but now it was constant.

His magic—his once flawless, precise control—was slipping, as if the whispers gnawing at the edges of his sanity were slowly unraveling the thread that held him together.

He moved toward the mirror, drawn to it despite the gnawing fear in his gut. His reflection stared back at him, pale and gaunt, the dark circles under his eyes deepening every day. He barely recognized the man looking back.

Then, the reflection smiled.

Mahlon's breath caught in his throat. His own face twisted into a grin—a wide, grotesque smile that stretched far too wide, teeth bared in a sick parody of joy. His reflection's eyes bulged, the pupils shrinking to pinpricks, and the skin around its mouth began to crack and bleed, as though the flesh itself couldn't contain the expression.

"No," Mahlon whispered, backing away, but the reflection kept smiling. It started to laugh, a high-pitched, broken sound, like glass grinding against metal. The sound filled his ears, echoing, bouncing off the walls of his skull until it became a cacophony of noise.

He turned away, gasping, but the laughter followed him. His room twisted and warped around him, the floor rising and falling as if the ground beneath him was buckling. He stumbled toward the door, clutching his head, but the whispers began again, low and guttural, just out of reach. He couldn't understand the words, but they slithered across his mind like snakes, hissing and spitting venomous thoughts.

"It's not real. It's not real. It's not real."

The words echoed in his head, a mantra he repeated over and over, but they were losing power. Deep down, Mahlon knew something was coming. Something real.

He reached for the door handle, desperate to escape the room, to get away from the oppressive, suffocating darkness. But when his fingers touched the metal, it turned to flesh. The door handle pulsed under his touch like a beating heart, soft and warm. He yanked his hand back, his stomach turning. The wood of the door rippled, veins running through it like a living creature.

"No," he gasped. "No, no, no."

His vision blurred, the walls of the room closing in, the air thickening like sludge. He couldn't breathe. The whispers were louder now, not just from outside but from within, crawling through his brain like maggots feeding on his thoughts. His skull felt too tight, like his mind was expanding, swelling with the pressure of something trying to break through.

Chapter 299:

They were coming. They were coming for him.

He fell to his knees, clutching his head as the whispers grew louder, more insistent. He could almost make out the words now, though they were distorted, twisted, like something speaking through water.

The dreams had shown him glimpses of them—figures with too many eyes, too many mouths, limbs bending in impossible angles, their voices a chorus of suffering and madness. And now they were here, standing just beyond the veil, watching him, whispering to him, waiting for the right moment to break through.

Suddenly, the whispers stopped. The silence was deafening.

Mahlon looked up, his breath coming in ragged gasps. The room was still again, but different—darker, the corners filled with shadows that moved on their own.

And then he saw it. Standing in the center of the room again, a figure, tall and grotesque. Its body was an amalgamation of flesh and shadow, constantly shifting, its features warping and distorting as if trying to take on form but never quite succeeding. Where its face should have been, there was only a void, a deep, hollow blackness that seemed to pull at the edges of reality.

Mahlon couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. He felt the weight of its presence, pressing down on him, suffocating him. The void where its face should have been seemed to reach out to him, pulling him in, and for a moment, he felt himself slipping, his mind unraveling.

The whispers returned, louder than ever. This time, he could understand them.

"You are ours."

This human mage wasn't the only one experiencing such a phenomenon. Others marked by the counterpart were also plagued by nightmares as the hole widened, their presence becoming more apparent.

Mahu, despite her differences with Björn, had the presence of mind to pay him a visit to ask for help. However, she was stunned when she saw his current state.

Mahu was allowed into Björn's realm, and the growth in his power was evident. The sky bled red, broken war weapons littered the landscape, and a blood mist seeped from the sea of blood surrounding the area. Compared to when he first ascended, his realm had expanded significantly.

As Mahu looked around, she was startled by a scream of pain. Turning toward the sound, she saw Björn sitting on his throne. In one of his hands was a gauntlet, steaming and eroding his skin, with light leaking from it.

Mahu could hear the sizzling sound from the gauntlet, but Björn seemed unfazed by the pain. Instead, he clutched his head, roaring like a madman.

It seemed Mahu's presence caught his attention. He looked toward her with blood-red eyes, and the oppressive weight of being in another god's realm descended upon her.

With a growl, Björn shot up from his throne and descended toward Mahu. Frowning, Mahu summoned a pillar of ice from the ground, lifting Björn into the sky. At the same time, behind her, a replica of the moon appeared, bearing the weight of the realm on her behalf.

Björn roared, punching at the ice pillar, but it did nothing as it carried him upward before stopping. A hand sprouted from Björn's back as a spear flew into his grasp.

The weapon, covered in thick red energy, spun like a drill, cracking the ice. Björn punched with his other hand, shattering the pillar.

As the ice broke, it dissolved into a cold mist. Björn, uncaring, fell from the sky with his fists clenched. Mahu raised her hand, summoning a brilliant barrier of lunar light. Björn's gauntleted fist smashed into the barrier, sending shockwaves across the landscape.

The barrier rippled but held firm. Mahu raised an eyebrow, feeling something grab her ankle. She looked down to see a corpse climbing out of the sea of blood beneath her.

Distracted, the barrier shielding her broke. Mahu's eyes widened as the corpse's cold, decayed fingers tightened around her ankle, dragging her toward the blood. She barely had time to react before Björn's overwhelming force sent her flying backward, crashing into a jagged rock formation that jutted out like twisted metal.

Snarling, Björn landed on the blood-soaked ground, his body radiating raw, chaotic energy. The blood mist pulsed in sync with his breaths, thick with violence and madness. The gauntlet on his hand hissed and steamed, but he paid it no mind. His focus was solely on Mahu, who struggled to free herself from the corpse's grip.

Mahu gritted her teeth, her lunar magic flaring as her body shimmered with a soft, silvery glow. The moon replica behind her grew brighter, its light cutting through the bloody haze. She waved her hand, and a crescent arc of light sliced cleanly through the corpse's arm, freeing her leg. Rising to her feet, her expression fierce, she conjured a swarm of ice shards that whirled like a storm, each sharp enough to cleave through stone.

"Björn, you're not yourself!" Mahu shouted, her voice cutting through the oppressive weight of the realm. "You must fight it!"

But Björn's blood-red eyes showed no recognition, his mind consumed by the chaotic energy coursing through him. He charged at her again, the gauntlet leaving a fiery trail in its wake. The spear in his other hand crackled with malevolent energy, its tip aimed straight at her heart.

Mahu reacted instantly. The ground beneath her froze as she summoned a vast, mirror-like surface of ice. With a flick of her wrist, the ice reflected the blinding light of her moon, creating a dazzling

explosion that temporarily blinded Björn. He growled in frustration, swinging his spear wildly, narrowly missing her as she darted away, leaving glowing afterimages in her wake.

"You're letting it consume you," Mahu murmured, her voice soft but sorrowful as she stood at a distance. Among her siblings, she was the only one who had ever felt the threat of being overwhelmed by one's own divinity.

Mahu's lips curled into a sad smile as she gazed at Björn's tormented form, the raw divinity coursing through him stirring something deep within her. Memories of her own struggle, when her siblings had pulled her back from the brink of being consumed by her divinity, resurfaced. But unlike her, Björn had no one to save him.

"Poor Björn," Mahu said mockingly, her eyes gleaming with malicious intent as she stepped forward, ice spreading in her wake. "You're nothing but a puppet now, thrashing in your chains. No one's here to help you."

Her voice softened, almost taunting. "But lucky for you, I've been in a bad mood lately."

She raised her hand, and the moonlight behind her intensified, casting long shadows across the blood-drenched battlefield. Her serious expression betrayed the cold calculation behind her smile. Mahu didn't truly care about Björn's well-being. His pain was a boon, a way to vent her frustration while dealing with a problem that could ultimately work to her advantage. If she could break him, she might pull him from Murmur's grasp—or at least beat him into submission long enough to make him useful.

"Two birds with one stone," she mused, her tone dripping with cruel delight. "I get to beat you senseless and help you crawl out of your misery, all at once."

Björn roared again, the light from the gauntlet glowing as his body convulsed. The twisted spirits around him screamed louder, their forms distorting as if feeding off his agony. His spear ignited with dark red energy, and he lunged at Mahu with terrifying speed, his eyes filled with nothing but madness.

Mahu's expression hardened. With a snap of her fingers, towering pillars of ice erupted from the ground, forming a labyrinth around them. Each pillar reflected the cold light of her moon, trapping Björn in a maze of shimmering ice. As he slashed wildly at the walls, Mahu moved gracefully, her figure gliding through the maze as if dancing, always staying one step ahead.

"You're not even worth a challenge like this," she taunted, her voice echoing through the icy walls. "But I suppose it'll be fun to watch you try."

Björn's spear finally shattered one of the ice pillars, and he charged forward, his body radiating chaotic energy. But Mahu was already prepared. With a wave of her hand, the moon above her flared with brilliance, and beams of concentrated lunar energy shot down from the sky, each one aimed precisely at the cracks in his armor.

The beams slammed into Björn, forcing him to his knees, the ground beneath him shaking as his power clashed with Mahu's lunar energy. He roared in defiance, trying to rise, but the weight of Mahu's energy bore down on him like the weight of the heavens.

Mahu's sadistic smile returned as she approached, her eyes glinting with cold amusement. "Look at you. The great Björn, brought to his knees." She crouched down, her face inches from his as she whispered, "If you want to survive this, you'd better start listening."

Björn's chest heaved, his breath ragged, but his blood-red eyes locked onto hers with fury. The gauntlet on his hand pulsed violently, but Mahu was no longer concerned with the pain it caused him.

Chapter 300:

Mahu stood, her voice losing its mocking edge. "The world is falling apart, Björn. We need answers, and you might have them. So let me be very clear: I will break you if I have to, but I will not let you die here. Not yet."

The cold light of her moon intensified, wrapping around Björn like chains, binding him to the ground. Björn, in his madness, roared as his muscles bulged and his height grew. The chains vibrated, struggling to hold him in place.

Mahu watched the struggle but knew she had to act immediately. Extending her hand, she placed it on Björn's head, invoking her divinity of motherhood.

Björn's body stilled under Mahu's touch, his raging divinity momentarily subdued by the ancient, comforting feeling that radiated from her. The cold light of her moon, once harsh and punishing, shifted

into a maternal warmth. For Björn, who had known only chaos and war since his ascension, this feeling was alien, but in this moment, it felt undeniably right.

His muscles, which had been bulging and growing with unrelenting fury, began to relax. His eyes, which had burned with the fire of insanity, softened. The roar that had been echoing in his realm faded into a quiet, almost childlike whimper. Mahu, with her hand still resting on his head, exuded the essence of motherhood, an echo of the abyss that Björn had been severed from.

Mahu's expression hardened even as her power soothed him. She wasn't here to grant peace or respite, and Björn's weakness wouldn't last long.

"You've lost something, haven't you?" Mahu whispered, her voice laced with both understanding and cruelty. "Something essential. You've become a shadow of what you once were."

Björn's mouth opened slightly, but no words came out. His body remained bound by the cold chains of moonlight, yet his mind wandered into the abyss that Mahu now mirrored. For a moment, he was no longer the warlord consumed by madness but a demon longing for the only comfort he had ever known.

But Mahu had no intention of letting him stay in this state for long.

The shift was subtle at first. Her hand, which had gently cupped his head, began to tighten. The warmth that had been soothing and calming started to chill once more. Her divinity of motherhood twisted, taking on a harsher tone, as though the embrace of a loving mother had turned cold and distant.

Björn's body tensed, his muscles contracting as he felt the change. The warmth was fading, replaced by the bitter cold of isolation. His red eyes showed panic at the loss, but that was exactly what Mahu wanted, so she kept pulling back slowly.

"No, no, no!" could be heard from Björn, though he was previously incapable of speech, screaming desperately for the motherly presence not to leave him.

Mahu decisively pulled away from Björn, and his eyes snapped back into focus. He looked around in confusion, then down at his chained body, with Mahu standing before him.

"What are you doing in my realm?" he asked, but Mahu shook her head in disappointment as the moon phantom behind her disappeared.

"You invited me in, don't you remember?" Mahu replied. Björn looked momentarily lost before taking a deep look at Mahu and saying, "Thank you."

He stood up, the chains holding him dispersing. Björn remembered someone knocking at the door of his realm. He had been in a bad state at the time, and when he noticed it was one of the gods, he purposely let them in, hoping that whichever god it was could help him with his current situation.

Thinking of his predicament made Björn frown. Even at this moment, he could still feel his sanity being overwhelmed. He had known that dealing with Murmur would come with a price, but he had underestimated how far it would go.

When Yuki began reforming his people's ways and religion, he already knew something was wrong. Her reformation was dismantling parts of himself that were left in his people, molding them into something more suitable for Murmur.

Each day that passed, Björn became more of an ornament and object of worship. His followers called his name, but they followed the ways of Murmur and his daughter.

The vast supply of faith was good for his personal strength and standing among the gods, but if it came at the cost of losing his mind and sense of self, that was something Björn did not want.

His eyes glowed red as he gazed down at the mortal world where his kingdom lay. A frown creased Björn's face as he felt repulsed by the sight—it appeared far too orderly for his liking.

A werehuman had caught his attention back when he didn't have much faith energy. It was the deputy of Finn, the were-lion. This deputy intrigued him because he understood Björn's ways and followed well in the path of his teachings.

Björn had wanted to take things slowly, but Murmur wasn't giving him that option. He would have to act fast and get this deputy on his side before losing all his people.

"Quite rude of you to ignore your visitor," a voice cut through Björn's thoughts.

Björn turned to Mahu and flashed her a smile. His armor was immediately replaced by a red robe depicting his religion's mark. "What can I offer you?" he asked as he glanced around his realm, searching for something to entertain a guest, but he found nothing—only a realm filled with blood and war.

Mahu's lips curved into a sly smile as she watched Björn shift back to his calculated self. His sudden shift from madness to measured control intrigued her, but she wasn't fooled. Beneath that crimson robe, she could still sense the fractures in his mind. Murmur's influence was deeply rooted, and Björn was teetering on the edge of losing everything.

She took a slow step forward, her eyes scanning the barren, war-torn realm that surrounded them. Blood-streaked battlefields stretched endlessly in all directions, punctuated only by the lingering cries of fallen warriors. It was a kingdom built on chaos, destruction, and unchecked power—an empire that reflected Björn himself.

"Your hospitality leaves much to be desired," Mahu quipped, her tone light but her gaze sharp. "But I didn't come here for comfort."

Björn chuckled, though there was no warmth in it. He waved a hand dismissively at the carnage around them. "My realm is as it has always been. War, bloodshed—this is where I thrive. But if you seek something more... soothing, you'll find no such luxury here." His eyes flickered for a moment before continuing, "I gave that up the moment I embraced my divinity."

Mahu crossed her arms, her gaze narrowing as she fixed her attention on Björn's red eyes. "That's precisely the problem, isn't it? You've let yourself become a mere reflection of what your followers think you should be. And now, with Murmur twisting your people's faith, you're losing whatever remained of your true self."

Björn's expression darkened, the bitterness now fully etched into his features. He knew Mahu was right—he was spiraling toward a fate he couldn't control.

But the power he'd gained through Murmur's influence was intoxicating, and tearing away from it would mean relinquishing the strength that had defined him for so long.

"I didn't invite you here to lecture me," he said, his voice low and dangerous. "I invited you because I needed help."

Mahu's eyes gleamed with amusement as she took another step closer, her presence and height looming over him despite his formidable stature. "Your current state shows that I have helped enough."

Björn smacked his lips as he walked to his throne. "Indeed you did, so what do you want in return?"

"Don't you hear the whispers?" Mahu asked, looking at Björn.

Björn closed his eyes for a moment as a smirk appeared at the edge of his lips. "Ah, the problem that comes with Origin gods. I seem to have forgotten that."

Mahu, unfazed by his smirk, said, "I believe their goal clashes with yours, and if they succeed, you will lose sight of your own."

That wiped the smirk off Björn's face. "What makes you think I still hold onto my original goal and haven't yet accepted this new world and position?"

Now it was Mahu's turn to smirk. "Need I remind you what happened a few moments ago? You still long for the embrace of the abyss, so your goal is clear. Even if your goal has changed, it won't change the fact that you'll have to protect this world as it holds your interest and share in it."

"I don't like you," Björn said bluntly. Mahu laughed. "Oh Björn, you have no idea how much it would please me to wring your neck."

The air grew heavy following Mahu's words but was broken by Björn's sigh. "What exactly do you think I can help with?"

"Your extensive knowledge—what can you tell us about the Upside Down and how to stop the hole from expanding?" Mahu asked as a huge wine barrel appeared in her hand, which she threw at Björn. He caught it effortlessly.