

Guardian gods 341

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Still, the priest's men were relentless. A zealot with bloodshot eyes lunged at a Terra warrior, sinking a dagger deep into his side, even as the Apeling crushed his arm. The zealot only laughed, his hand twisting the dagger deeper before he was finally thrown to the ground and stomped into the blood-soaked dirt.

The priest watched from the backlines, his red eyes gleaming with satisfaction as his warriors drew strength from the violence, each death seeming to fuel them further. He raised his arms, chanting a guttural incantation, and a fresh wave of red mist rolled across the battlefield. Terra warriors clutched their heads, the eerie mist igniting a flash of pain that seared through their veins. Some stumbled, momentarily blinded, and the zealots used the opportunity to lunge, daggers flashing.

But the Terra warriors held strong. They roared in defiance, their body pulsing with a fierce energy, rooting them to the earth. In response, stones burst from the ground, ensnaring the zealots and holding them in place long enough for brutal strikes to land. The Apelings moved as one, an unstoppable force grounded by the earth's power. They carved a path through the priest's forces, who began to falter under the relentless assault.

At one point, the princess found herself face-to-face with a zealot who had clawed his way through three Terra soldiers, his face a mask of blood and madness. He leered at her, brandishing a jagged blade. She met his gaze with icy determination, swinging her hammer in a brutal arc that shattered his ribs and sent him sprawling. The zealot coughed blood, laughing through the agony as he struggled to stand. She didn't give him the chance, slamming her hammer down, crushing him with a final, resounding blow.

Throughout the village, blood soaked the earth, turning the ground slick and dark. Severed limbs littered the streets, and the air was thick with the stench of iron and sweat. Screams echoed from both sides, yet the Terra clan remained unwavering, driven by the will to protect their home.

All through the town, the Terra clan moved with calculated precision, swiftly dispatching each Zealot they encountered. Unknown to the press or maybe ignored by her, the more they killed the Zealot, the thicker the red mist became.

Even the well trained Terra clan members had a look of glee on their face as they chased down a Zealot to kill, some momentarily leaving their position only to shake their head in confusion after finishing the kill.

The Priest, however, had already abandoned his vantage point, his eyes fixed on the distant golden glow as he and his mages pressed onward.

As they drew nearer, a rich, sweet fragrance began to envelop them, thick with mana. Each breath filled their lungs with soothing energy, seeping into their bones. The Priest quickened his pace, surprised to find the area completely unguarded. He scoffed; the apelingms must be so confident in their defenses that they hadn't considered anyone might reach this far.

Yet as he and the mages moved forward, the scene began to blur, becoming distorted as though they were slipping into another realm. A flicker of unease ran through the Priest, but the enticing aroma pulled him onward, compelling him to take another step.

With that step, it was as if he crossed an invisible threshold. The landscape opened into a vast, surreal farmland stretching endlessly before him, its abundance so unnatural it resembled a mythical garden. His gaze was drawn to one of the trees, its branches heavy with deep, crimson apples that gleamed invitingly. The Priest and his mages couldn't look away, their eyes locked on the tree, entranced by the allure of the fruit.

The priest's steps quickened, almost without thought, as he felt an insatiable hunger rising within him. Each apple seemed to pulse with raw mana, radiating an energy so potent he could feel it across the distance. He approached the tree, his hand twitching with anticipation as he reached out toward one of the apples. It felt warm beneath his fingers, almost as though it was alive, and his mouth watered in anticipation.

One of the mages whispered, his voice trembling with a mixture of reverence and fear, "This must be the gift of the god of nature. We have to take it for our lord."

Without a word, the priest plucked the apple from its branch, and the nearby mages shifted uneasily, their staves held in nervous hands. But the priest, undeterred, lifted the fruit to his lips and took a single, deliberate bite. His eyes rolled back as an overwhelming surge of power coursed through him, mana flooding his veins, lighting up every nerve, and bringing each cell to life with a radiant vitality. The world around him sharpened, colors growing vibrant, sounds crisper—his senses magnified tenfold.

In that moment, he could feel himself break through the fifth stage, a threshold he'd skirted for years but had never crossed—until now. Drunk with the taste of newfound power, he snatched a second

apple and bit into it eagerly. But this time, the rush of ascension did not come; the apple gave him only raw energy, a hollow echo of his first bite.

"Was it a one-time miracle," he wondered, "or did it work because I was on the cusp?" He took a measured step back, glancing over the land stretching before him. "Now I understand why they say this gift could preserve an entire kingdom."

The vast farmland was littered with mysterious plants and bountiful treasures, enough to elevate any faction wielding them. Nearby, one mage leaned down, captivated by a small, unassuming plant, and carefully plucked it with trembling hands. "This...this plant," he murmured, his voice reverent. "This is one of those rare treasures capable of extending life itself. I've only heard of samples a century old, and those granted an additional twenty years to those lucky enough to find them."

The mage made a shallow cut into the stem and sipped the precious sap. His eyes widened as he examined it further. "My lord, do you realize how many mages would sacrifice everything for even a taste of this?"

The priest looked out over the fields, horrified to see the life-extending plants scattered everywhere, like ordinary weeds. He let out a laugh, one of bitter horror rather than triumph, the truth dawning on him with brutal clarity: The Apelings may have lived in exile, not for the land they inhabited, but for the treasures buried within it.

The mages, too, seemed to realize the depth of what they had stumbled upon. "This isn't something we can seize or even destroy," muttered one mage, his eyes flicking nervously to the horizon.

The priest's gaze hardened. "If we can't take it all then we should be at least be able to leave with one." He summoned an axe, still dried with blood from earlier battles, and with a fierce swing, cleaved into the apple tree. He waved his hand, attempting to stow the tree into his magical ring, but it resisted, as if the tree's sheer life force rejected confinement. The priest sighed, barely surprised.

"This thing's practically alive," he muttered, hoisting the tree onto his shoulder. "This realm brims with life energy too potent for a mere trinket to contain."

He raised his voice, a sardonic edge coloring his words. "No need to hide, Princess. I know you're already here."

A low chuckle echoed in response, and the ground shifted. From the earth emerged the princess of the Terra clan, her presence calm yet fierce. Beside her were five warriors clad in armor of woven ironwood, each bearing a look of silent amusement as they observed the priest and his companions.

"So," she began, her voice soft but unyielding, cutting through the tension in the air. "You have come to plunder the lifeblood of our land." Her gaze flickered to the apple tree over the priest's shoulder, eyes narrowing with disdain. "You steal what you cannot comprehend, trampling on our sacred soil."

The priest sneered, still high from his surge of power. "It is the nature of the strong to take from the weak. Your people hoard treasures that could transform kingdoms, and you expect us to let them wither here in obscurity?" He gestured broadly at the fields, his eyes gleaming with barely restrained hunger. "Our god deserves this bounty."

The princess smirked, eyes never leaving the priest. "Then come, thief," she said, swinging her hammer off her shoulder. "Claim it—if you can."

The mages moved quickly, forming a protective circle around the priest as he clutched the apple tree, his face twisted with both fear and determination. Their hands crackled with magic, and they cast spell after spell to buy the priest time, their voices chanting in sync as they built a shimmering shield between the Terra warriors and the priest.

The princess's gaze narrowed, but she paused, raising a hand to signal her warriors to hold back. "Let him run," she said, her voice low but deadly.

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As she surveyed the farmland, the princess spoke quietly but firmly, her gaze intense. "This land has yet to taste bloodshed, and I won't allow that to change now." With that, she sank into the earth, leaving one final command behind: "Take care of these nuisances while I handle the priest."

Meanwhile, the priest, unburdened by the tree on his shoulder, moved quickly, retracing his steps. He went back beyond the boundary of the farmland, his sight shifted. Soon, he reached the town, only to find the bodies of his soldiers scattered across the ground, a familiar deep red mist curling over them. He felt a heavy dread at the sight of the Terra clan army amassed before him.

Looking at the army of Terra clan in front of him, The priest roared out loud to hype himself up as he ran towards them but instead of charging him, they parted, creating a clear path.

"Such arrogance," he muttered, taking their gesture as a sign of weakness, perhaps even an opportunity to escape. But after only a few steps, he stopped dead in his tracks, his breath catching. A grim realization took hold, and a hollow chuckle escaped him, his voice tinged with bitterness.

There she stood in the center of a vast clearing that seemed crafted just for this confrontation. Walls of earth rose up around them, seamlessly formed by the clan's magic, and as he looked closer, he saw the faces of the Terra warriors melding into the walls, watching him with solemn, almost mournful eyes.

The princess remained still, a formidable presence in the quiet. Her stance was relaxed, but there was a charged tension in her posture, like a coiled spring. She tilted her head as she studied him, and he tightened his grip on the apple tree. Her voice, soft but laced with authority, cut through the silence. "You took what was never yours to take. Did you truly think you could plunder this land and leave unscathed?"

The priest clenched his jaw, forcing himself to ignore the trembling in his hands. He was a high priest, a leader of the faithful, and he would not be cowed by these heathens, no matter how powerful they were. Yet, a sliver of doubt gnawed at him. The circle of warriors, the faces in the walls, the eerie silence—it felt as though the land itself had come alive to judge him.

Taking a deep breath, the priest removed his blood-stained robe, each layer peeled back as he wrestled with a whirlwind of thoughts. When had his devotion wavered, his purity been tainted? He had once held unshakable faith, but now, faced with a moment every devout follower of Björn would covet, he felt no joy—only dread.

Memories surfaced of the woman who had been reshaping their beliefs. She had spoken of coexistence, of lives beyond war and bloodshed. Was she right?

Had he been so far away from his culture and people that he began adopting the behaviors of humans, a behavior that his people once looked down upon.

When did politics become so alluring to him, One by one, he stripped off his rings, his human disguise fading. His true form emerged—massive, not lacking in size compared to the Terra clan and pale skin

filled with muscle and a slightly bloated stomach but bearing a thick horn resembling a rhino, an unmistakable symbol of his heritage. His gaze drifted upward, the red dome receding, Signifying the death of the mages but his attention was snagged on a red star in the sky, a distant reminder of the god he served.

The princess watched the priest with newfound respect. She couldn't quite understand what had shifted within him, but his aura now reminded her of the zealots she had just encountered and Killed—though this priest possessed a clarity they lacked, a control over the madness that simmered within.

Nonetheless no matter how the priest had changed, this was an honor he most certainly deserved "Why do you do all this princess, you could have had your army rush me?" She heard the priest asking her.

The princess regarded him carefully, her gaze sharp and calculating. She hadn't missed the shift in his demeanor, the way he had shed his human-like guise to reveal his true form, and for the first time she felt a strange resonance of respect. He looked at her now, not without the arrogance he had displayed earlier but with a controlled fervor, a zeal tempered by self-reflection.

She met his gaze, her voice calm yet resolute. "Because some battles," she replied, "demand to be fought with honor."

She continued, "This was my father's vision, a tradition he conceived after years of safeguarding this land. If ever an outsider—someone beyond the cursed clans—managed to escape the farmland with one of its treasures, we would reclaim what was taken. But as a mark of respect, my father believed such a person deserved an end befitting their own culture."

The priest blinked, surprise breaking through his hardened expression. He had known of theapelings reputation for unyielding loyalty to their traditions, but he hadn't expected this... this honor.

"I've heard of the Björn people's love for battle and the god you serve," she continued, her words deliberate. "It seemed only right to grant you that respect—a farewell that honors your beliefs, a glimpse of understanding between us. I know I would hate to meet my end far from the soil of my homeland. Perhaps, in this battle, you'll find a piece of that closeness."

"I go by the name Myrrha, what's your name warrior?" The princess asked the priest who hesitated before answering "Kjoric"

The priest lowered his head, his grip tightening around his weapon, and with a voice that was half a whisper and half a battle cry, he began his prayer to Björn.

"Oh, Björn, Lord of Madness and warfare, hear me now, In this moment far from home, surrounded by earth and iron. I stand not as a conqueror nor thief, but as one who knows the pull of battle's edge.

Grant me madness in this final hour, the clarity of fury that sears all fear"

"Let the pulse of war pound through me, as it does in your veins. May my mind break its bindings and my body shed its limits, That I might be a vessel worthy of your reckless strength. Björn, be with me in the frenzied dance of blade and blood, So that when I fall, I fall not in silence but with the roar of the faithful".

"Witness my spirit, my god, for this is my offering: A soul that knows the beautiful madness of war and will never turn from it."

As the priest offered his fervent prayer, Björn, for the first time in years, felt pure faith energy flow toward him—a sensation that brought a rare, soothing clarity to his mind. Intrigued, he cast his gaze downward to discover the source of this devotion.

His expression shifted as he recognized the situation. For a moment, he thought he had found a priest who truly embodied his teachings, someone whose faith might persist. But now, as the scene unfolded, he realized that the priest stood at the edge of his own mortality, likely taking his last breaths.

Just as Björn began to draw back, his attention snagged on a faint connection—a thin, glistening thread visible only to him. It stretched from the princess to the priest, intertwining their fates. The priest, even in his final moments, had bound himself to this battle as an offering, his devotion manifesting in the form of this intangible thread. And now, as the princess prepared to engage, she too seemed to join in this worship, her focus unwittingly amplifying the faith directed at Björn.

Björn watched the impending battle with renewed interest, recognizing that regardless of the outcome, the surge of faith energy he would receive would offer a precious respite for his mind, warding off the creeping madness for a while longer.

The priest's eyes gleamed with a mixture of fervor and delirium as he pressed his hands together, his whispered invocation to Björn filling the air with intensity. In response, a thin, golden shimmer enveloped his body, clinging to him like molten armor, pulsing with the rhythm of his heartbeat. His breasts grew heavier, fueled by exhilaration. Across from him, the princess stood steady, her gaze solemn, a subtle tremor beneath her feet as if the earth itself awaited her command. The ground pulsed with her resolve, ready to spring to life under her control.

With a roar, the priest launched himself forward, closing the distance with alarming speed. His golden shield gleamed as he swung his fist, reinforced with power and shimmering with divine energy, aiming straight for the princess's chest. She twisted gracefully to the side, and the earth responded to her unspoken command. A wall of stone surged upward to block his path, and he crashed into it with a thunderous impact, splintering rock and shaking the ground.

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He rebounded quickly, barely staggered, the thin film around him rippling with his force. The priest laughed, a low, unsettling sound, and extended his hand. The golden shield stretched, snaking from his arm in a thin, malleable stream that he whipped toward her like a lash. It snapped through the air, cracking like thunder as it aimed to strike her across the face.

With a swift motion, the princess summoned a slab of earth from below, lifting her off the ground and raising her above the reach of his weapon. She extended her arms outward, and jagged rocks erupted from the ground, spearing toward the priest. He deflected each with a flick of his golden shield, each shard bouncing harmlessly off the gleaming film. But it cost him focus, and in that instant, she attacked.

Seeing her attacking like a reckless rhino, He charged towards the princess. The princess met his charge with her hammer raised, stone skin weaving over her arms and chest. The hammer swung forward, colliding with his axe in a massive clash, ringing through the air like thunder.

The princess wasn't done as she created a foothold made of earth that held her in place and positioned her above the priest as her arms turned into a blur as she began hammering away the priest.

The priest twisted, using the golden shield around his arm to deflect her hammer's head. Each blow driving him further into the ground, soon the golden light covering him began flickering.

The earth beneath him rippled and cracked, splitting open to form deep crevices around his feet. The priest stumbled, but his eyes blazed with exhilaration rather than fear. The golden film shifted, moving from his arms to his legs as he stomped down hard, stabilizing himself as the shield absorbed the energy from the tremors.

"Now" The priest roared out loud as time seemed to slow down as the princess hammer was about to fall on him, The golden film covering him formed a shield which he used to deflect the blow as he delivered a fierce kick to her side.

The princess recovered with a fluid roll, her movements as natural as flowing water. With a flourish, she summoned a curtain of dust and stone, obscuring herself from view. Her body sank seamlessly into the earth, disappearing without a trace. The priest's eyes darted around the battlefield, his senses on high alert. Then he felt it—a vibration, a warning from the ground beneath him. He leapt just as the earth beneath exploded upward, jagged spears of rock slicing through the air, narrowly missing his legs.

She reappeared behind him, her body emerging from the stone like a shadow, and delivered a powerful kick to his back. The impact sent him stumbling forward, but his shield caught the brunt of the force, though he could feel the power in her strike.

The priest let out a primal roar, licking the blood from his lips as the mist of red surrounding the fallen zealots was drawn into his body. His axe clattered to the ground as his bones began to twist and crackle, reshaping painfully. In moments, where he once stood, there now towered a massive rhino the size of a house, his hide wrapped in a thin golden sheen that shimmered like molten armor.

The princess raised a brow, observing his transformation before she discarded her hammer and pounded her chest rhythmically with her fists. Her body began to swell, abandoning its human form. In her place now stood a towering golden gorilla, her body armored with patches of stone that looked as though they'd grown naturally, reinforcing her already imposing form.

"You're the first to see my full strength in the fifth stage," the princess growled, her voice rumbling. "Too bad you haven't had time to digest the fruit's gift, or this would be more enjoyable."

The priest, now an enormous rhino, snorted, "I've been wondering why I broke through so easily."

"That's the garden's gift to newcomers," she replied with a knowing smile. "It pushes you to the peak of your current realm, and if you're already at the peak, it grants a breakthrough. But the fruit's effect is only once, after that it just a fruit filled with pure mana."

Around the princess, a domain began to materialize, drawing the priest into it. They found themselves in an otherworldly landscape of towering rock formations and ancient monoliths carved with symbols and inscriptions weathered by time. Mirror-like pools lay scattered among the stones and cliffs, their surfaces flickering with hazy reflections of past events, memories frozen in the water's depths. Caves peppered the cliffs, and from within them, faint echoes of ancient footsteps drifted like whispers of long-forgotten lives.

Hardy trees, ivy, and moss thrived between the stones, their colors muted and timeless. Each plant seemed nourished by the memories lingering in the rock, giving the entire scene an ancient, dreamlike quality.

"I call this domain the Stone-Born Memory," the princess intoned, her voice heavy with power. An oppressive weight settled upon them both, and the priest felt his mind drawn deeper, his senses blurring as he and the princess slipped into a shared trance.

A figure emerged, shorter than either of them, crouched as it dug into the ground with bare hands, planting seeds or young saplings into the earth. Though the figure was indistinct, the princess felt a powerful sense of kinship, as if an invisible bond connected them. For the priest, however, the figure stirred forgotten memories—a war long past, between the Silver Kingdom and his people. He recalled a presence so immense it reshaped the landscape with a mere gesture, altering the land as easily as shifting sand.

The figure paused, seeming to sense their gazes. The priest felt its attention brush over him, an unsettling awareness that left him trembling. The princess blinked, only to find the figure standing directly before her, examining her with piercing eyes.

"Interesting domain you've crafted, girl," the figure remarked, its voice a blend of power and wisdom. Then, with a gentle but firm push, it forced her back, its presence like an ancient force of nature.

"You're not ready to handle the strength of this memory," the figure said. "No need to rush. Have a fulfilling battle."

In the hazy aftermath of the figure's words, the domain shimmered with new intensity. The trance ended abruptly, leaving both the priest and princess reeling, yet a fresh resolve burned in their eyes. Both had been deeply affected by the vision; for the princess, it felt as if she'd glimpsed an ancient legacy, while the priest grappled with a lost memory, awakening long-buried instincts.

The priest, now in the form of a massive rhino cloaked in a shimmering golden film, let out a guttural snort, pawing at the ground. His body tensed with anticipation, golden tendrils from his shield stretching and winding over his massive horn, which now glowed with a metallic sheen. The transformation had amplified his raw strength, and each step he took sent tremors through the stone-riddled landscape.

Across from him, the princess, in her own colossal gorilla form, felt the weight of her power. Stone skin covered her chest, forearms, and legs, hardened and crackling with latent energy. With a deep breath, she squared her shoulders, her knuckles pressing into the ground as she held herself low and steady, ready to charge.

The priest charged first, his horn lowered, aiming to skewer her with devastating force. The princess braced herself, her massive fists slamming down into the ground, creating a thick wall of rock in front of her. The priest's golden-coated horn shattered the barrier with ease, his weight and power unrelenting. However, the collision gave the princess the opening she needed—she sidestepped, swinging one stone-encrusted fist down onto his back, the impact creating a massive indentation in the ground.

The priest bellowed in fury, twisting his body as his golden shield reformed to reinforce his spine and prevent further damage. He spun, his horn glinting like a blade, aiming to catch her in his deadly arc. The princess leaped back, her powerful legs carrying her effortlessly up a nearby cliff. With a roar, she launched herself off the rock face, the air whistling as she descended, fists raised to land a shattering blow. The priest's golden shield surged, forming a protective dome over his head just as her fists crashed down.

The ground caved beneath them, the sheer force of the impact sending shockwaves through the domain, scattering rock and shattering stone monoliths. Despite his shield's protection, the priest was driven back, his colossal frame leaving deep gouges in the earth as he slid. But his eyes burned with relentless fury, and he retaliated by slamming his forefoot into the ground, calling upon the golden shield to encase his entire body in a hardened shell. He then launched himself forward, turning into an unstoppable, rolling force.

The princess met him head-on, digging her fists into the ground and summoning stone to bind her to the earth, her own body taking on a defensive, statue-like rigidity. When the priest collided with her, the impact was cataclysmic—rocks exploded, dust billowed, and the ground split in jagged lines around

them. Both held firm, locked in a clash of wills and raw strength, their roars blending with the echo of shattered stone.

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As they separated, the priest's golden film wavered, cracks spidering through the shield as he breathed heavily. The princess, too, showed signs of wear, chips and fissures marking her stone armor. Yet, undeterred, she raised her arms and drove them into the earth once more, invoking the full strength of her domain.

Around them, the cliffs shifted, forming stone hands and arms that moved to encircle the priest, pressing down with enormous force. The priest's golden shield rippled and expanded, morphing into large spikes to pierce the stone limbs and free him, but the stone hands continued to close in, grasping tighter.

In a final show of strength, the priest let out a thunderous bellow, his shield collapsing inward before it exploded outward, fragments of golden energy dispersing in every direction. The blast shattered the stone hands, scattering debris across the domain. But the princess was waiting—she charged forward, her form blurring with the speed, and brought her massive fists down onto his exposed back.

The blow connected with a sickening crack, and the priest staggered, the golden film flickering and fading as he slumped to the ground. Dust settled around them, leaving the two giants in silence. Both had fought with every ounce of their strength, but the princess stood victorious, breathing heavily as she looked down at her fallen opponent.

As Kjoric fell, his vision fading, his last glance was one of silent, desperate hope, fixed on the place where he had thrown the sacred tree. His final moments carried the weight of his mission, the heavy expectation that someone might still retrieve what he had fought so hard to protect.

Outside the wall where the battle had raged, Terra clan members began emerging cautiously from their hiding places. Children scampered toward the bodies of the fallen zealots, poking at their strange armor and lifeless forms with a mixture of fear and curiosity. For the adults, however, somber duties were called; those who had lost family members gathered to honor their dead, placing them gently in stone coffins etched with clan symbols. Their faces, though stoic, bore traces of pain as they murmured last farewells, even as the sounds of the princess's recent clash echoed faintly in the distance.

Among the clan members, one apeling stood out, his movements stilted, his eyes darting with unease. Unlike the rest, he appeared to avoid all interaction, his posture tense as he edged closer to the place where the tree had fallen. He walked with a singular focus, never lingering or looking back.

The sacred tree itself had already begun to respond to the earth's embrace, fresh roots burrowing deep, anchoring it once more as life pulsed back into its trunk. Some Terra members gathered around, debating in low voices whether to wait for the princess's judgment on its fate or simply leave it where it now stood, an unexpected addition to their . Childtownren played nearby, laughing as they raced around the tree, unaware of its recent trauma.

In the shadow of this scene, the suspicious apeling sidled closer. With one swift, calculated motion, he reached up and sliced off a branch. Clutching the fresh cutting, he slipped away, casting quick glances at the other clan members, who remained oblivious to the theft as the tree rapidly regenerated, hiding any sign of his tampering.

His heart pounded as he began to put distance between himself and the village, his steps growing faster, more desperate. Every fiber in him now focused on a single goal: to leave Terra territory before anyone realized a branch was missing. But as he cast a last, frantic look back, his blood ran cold. The enormous wall of earth that had hidden the princess and her opponent had begun to recede, revealing the princess in her humanoid form, standing tall beside the massive, motionless form of the priest.

The Terra clan members gasped, their attention drawn to the scene as they rushed toward the corpse, murmuring about the faint glimmer of gold still visible on the priest's skin—a relic of his mystical power that lingered even in death. The suspicious apeling, however, felt no awe, only a rising terror as he realized what the end of the battle would mean. He had only moments before the attention of the princess and her warriors would shift back to their territory—and if someone noted the broken branch, he knew he wouldn't get far.

The princess, meanwhile, surveyed her people, her gaze falling on the tree. Something tugged at her mind, an instinct born from her connection to her domain. She noticed a branch, fresh but slightly misaligned, as if recently disturbed, and a memory flashed across her face. She turned, her expression sharp and questioning.

"Has anyone seen a stranger among us?" she asked, her voice steady but carrying a force that silenced the crowd. Terra members exchanged confused glances until an elder stepped forward, a thoughtful frown deepening. "There was someone," he said slowly, "an apeling I didn't recognize. Seemed nervous. Didn't look around like he belonged."

The elder pointed to the path where the stranger had disappeared, and the princess's face hardened. She turned swiftly to a nearby warrior, her voice commanding. "Gather the trackers. Send word to the mountaineers—if this thief seeks to cross our borders, he will find no escape."

As the Terra clan's tracking party gathered, the apeling spy was already making his escape, racing through the dense, rugged landscape surrounding the town. He could still feel the pulse of adrenaline from blending into the apeling clan's village mere moments earlier, but now, with the faint echoes of footsteps behind him, he knew his time was dwindling.

His mission from King Nwadiebeube had felt like an honor at first, a daring feat none before him had dared attempt. It had seemed like a crowning achievement, one that would elevate him in the king's eyes. Armed with an artifact—a gift from the king to assist him—he'd been instructed to observe the priest's dealings with the apelings, and more importantly, to secure any treasures the priest might find.

The artifact had served him well, cloaking him from sight and allowing him to blend seamlessly into the apeling village. He had watched, unseen, as the priest engaged in fierce combat with Terra clan members, all over a treasure he'd eventually recognized as a strange tree. When the priest was drawn into a deadly struggle, he knew it was his chance. Concealing his human features with the artifact's magic, he'd slipped away unnoticed.

Now, on the outskirts of the apeling village, he broke into a sprint, pushing past low-hanging branches, jagged rocks, and knotted roots that seemed determined to trip him up. The distant sounds of laughter and village life faded as he put every ounce of strength into his escape, the prize—wrapped safely in his arms—a heavy reminder of the danger he faced. He could almost taste the thrill of escape, but a sudden shift in the air warned him otherwise. The Terra warriors were gaining on him.

A chill gripped him as he ducked into a nearby ravine, slipping and stumbling over loose stones in his haste. He risked a glance over his shoulder, catching sight of shadowy figures moving with graceful precision. The Terra warriors, with their calm, predatory focus, seemed to blend with the landscape, their dark eyes locked onto his position, relentless in their pursuit. For a moment, he pressed his back against a boulder, forcing himself to slow his breathing, clutching the branch to his chest.

Yet, each step seemed to echo through the forest, the land responding to their presence with subtle shifts—the tremor of roots, the rustling of leaves—almost as though the very earth aided their pursuit. In a desperate bid to throw them off, he activated the artifact again, willing it to transform him into a rabbit, hoping the disguise might buy him precious seconds.

He veered off the path, plunging into a dense thicket where low branches and thorn-laden bushes clawed at his fur-cloaked skin. But the Terra warriors, skilled in every corner of this wild terrain, seemed undeterred. As he darted deeper into the forest, he could feel their rhythm steady and unfazed behind him. Vines and branches moved as if obeying the warriors, parting for their passage, while closing in around him, making his escape harder with each step.

Finally, he reached the edge of a steep ravine. The moon offered faint illumination, casting a silvery outline over the sharp rocks below. His mana was almost depleted, the artifact's magic waning with each passing second. Glancing back at the approaching figures, he knew he couldn't afford hesitation. Taking a deep breath, he stumbled down the slope, sliding over loose stones that clattered noisily, announcing his descent.

The Terra clan's mountaineers halted at the ravine's edge, their eyes tracking his movements below with practiced calm. One gestured to the others, their silent signals calling them to position around the ravine's base, ready to close in. Feeling their watchful eyes above him, he spotted a narrow crevice nestled among the jagged stones and squeezed inside, pressing himself flat against the cold, damp rock. The branch held tightly to his chest, his breathing shallow, each heartbeat thunderous in the confined space.

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A shadow appeared at the ravine's edge. The apeling princess, accompanied by her warriors, surveyed the disturbed earth with a knowing gaze. Her eyes traced his hurried descent, lingering on the overturned stones and scraped earth. She raised her hand with a measured, deliberate grace, her powers causing the rocks around the ravine to shift and constrict with a grinding groan. The spy felt the vibrations resonate through the stone, and a chill raced down his spine as the walls closed in.

The princess and her people were caught off guard by the sudden appearance of a thick mist. As the thick mist suddenly descended, the princess and her people tensed, their senses heightened by the unnatural arrival. Amid the fog, the princess felt two powerful presences closing in—one of them unmistakably stronger than her own, radiating an energy she couldn't ignore.

"Walls," she commanded, her voice cutting through the dense mist. At her command, the earth around them shifted and rose, forming a towering barrier with her warriors poised along its edge, each scanning the mist with wary eyes. They stood ready, alert to any movement beyond the wall's formidable protection.

A tall figure emerged from the mist, shrouded in a dark cloak that concealed their face and form. The princess's gaze narrowed as she watched a small, familiar shape—a rabbit, clutching a branch—bound over to the figure, leaping up to rest on their shoulder. Her heart sank, a realization taking root as she recognized the stolen branch in the rabbit's grasp.

For a long moment, her eyes met the figure's across the divide, each of them appraising the other in silence. Then she ground her teeth, acknowledging the tactical disadvantage. She sensed a subtle, rhythmic pulse in the earth around her—the figure had laid traps or signals, threads of energy that resonated with the terrain, reinforcing their position.

"Let's fall back," she said, her voice low but decisive. "We'll inform Father of this... development."

Though she itched to confront them, she knew her forces were outmatched and the enemy too prepared. The princess turned, signaling her people to retreat, their movements swift yet disciplined.

Nwadiabube, concealed beneath his robe, took a deep breath as he watched the princess and her people depart. He knew they had to be far away soon; he estimated they had only a few minutes, perhaps an hour, before a search would begin.

He accepted the branch from the camouflaged rabbit, who transformed back into human form as he knelt, trembling with relief after his narrow escape from death, expecting some praise from Nwadiabube.

Nwadiabube placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Suddenly, a sharp crack was heard as the kneeling man's neck twisted backward. Behind Nwadiabube, a woman emerged holding a staff.

She murmured something under her breath, and the corpse began to twitch. Moments later, it stood, its neck cracking back into place as it returned to a normal position. The man's face, however, had lost all signs of life, and he quickly began to grow pale.

Without watching, Nwadiabube commanded, "We leave immediately. Everyone should take a different route and remember: better death than capture."

With that, he broke through the sound barrier as he sped away. The others nodded and followed suit, quickly exiting the apeling territory. He had killed the man because he was unsure of what method the apelings had on them, but he knew one thing for sure as his people dapple in death and its nature. There is no way to make a dead person talk.

As Nwadiabube ran, he couldn't help but wonder how the apelings would respond to this incident. Would they close their borders again? Would they suspect him and his people? After all, the dead priest and his men's bodies could easily implicate him, a man who had once been an ally.

From the start, Nwadiabube had known the priest was heading toward death, but then he had also entertained the possibility of gaining something from it. When he first heard of the priest's proposal, talking of a treasure, it piqued his interest, especially having previous knowledge and encounter with artifacts that had fallen from the sky. He wondered what kind of artifact would attract a god's attention and be granted to his son.

There were still gaps in the story, yet Nwadiabube's family had long had what seems to be a close ties with the apelings. He had heard whispers of the four cursed apeling clans, akin to human nobility, and of their possible hidden secrets. He had encountered only one member, Zephyr, who had once posed as the apeling king; only later did Nwadiabube realize it had been a ruse and that Zephyr wasn't the real leader.

He still hadn't seen the true leader but knew it wasn't Zephyr. He was certain of this because, unlike humans, the apelings adored alcohol and all manner of interesting drinks. His people's primary trade with the apelings was the alcohol business. In an attempt to extract information through drinking, Nwadiabube had once invited one to his home.

If not for his strong will and sense of purpose, he would have given up after they downed the fiftieth bottle. It took everything in him to get the apeling drunk. When he finally mentioned how great of a king Zephyr was, the apeling looked at him in confusion and replied, "Human, you seem to have drunk too much. Zephyr is the prince, not the king. He still has a long way to go to measure up to our king's greatness."

That was all Nwadiabube managed to get before passing out on the table, remaining drunk for an entire week. Worse still, the apeling he drank with kept inviting him back for drinks all week. Nwadiabube hid from him, convinced the apeling was trying to drink him to death. But these encounters only fueled his belief that the apelings harbored secrets, and he was willing to take risks to uncover them.

What better opportunity than during the apelings' annual celebration? and lately they have had their border down so it wasn't unusual to see humans in the apeling territory. As he ran, Nwadieube could feel the powerful energy within the branch he carried. He didn't know its full potential yet, but he was certain it would bring him and his people closer to their goal.

Back in the apeling capital, although the sun had set, the festivities continued. Streetlights illuminated the scene as apelings and visitors alike ate, drank, and laughed together.

The first day of the competition had ended in a tie between the harpies and a member of Zephyr's clan, both prideful races of godly origin. Losing ground in a domain they considered their own had been a blow to both their egos.

In the following rounds, they no longer focused on each other, instead channeling all their energy into increasing their speed. Flags were claimed before other competitors were even halfway there.

This trend continued over the next few rounds, with both of them securing and tied at eight points. In second place were the Mermen, who performed exceptionally well in underwater zones, securing seven points. Close behind were the Ripple clan with six points.

The werewolves came next with four points, followed by the apeling students with three points, and then the Terra clan with two points. For the Terra clan, it seemed they used up their luck getting to the first flag.

They had thought of acting like the Harpies and Zephyr's by sabotaging the stage but having seen how that usually turns out, they held back and instead ran the normal route to get to the flags.

With two teams tied for first place, a tiebreaker race was scheduled for the following day to decide the overall winner. After that would come the highlight of the competition: the combat rounds.

Meanwhile, Ikem and Ursula were nowhere to be seen, but the princes and princesses were gathered in the throne room, indulging in their own kind of fun. Smoke filled the room as they played card games, laughter occasionally breaking through the haze. Suddenly, everyone's attention shifted to one person.

Terra, who had been laughing a moment ago, now wore an expression as cold as stone, his eyes narrowing with a sharp edge.

Ripple noticed her brother's sudden change and asked worriedly, "What is it, brother? Is everything alright?"

Terra dropped the card he was holding, his gaze sweeping across the others at the table. His voice cut through the jovial air like a blade. "My clan was attacked, and the attackers managed to take something of great value."

Zephyr, who had been lounging with a drunken grin, instantly became sober, his gaze hardening. He spoke to the shadows, his voice laced with steel. "I want news on everyone—not Apelings or invited guests—who've entered or exited our borders in recent months."

Turning to Wulv and Drowz, Zephyr offered an apologetic look. "I apologize for the unsightly behavior. Once this is resolved, I promise to make it up to you both."

Chapter 346:

Drowz and Wulv exchanged a glance, their own expressions mirroring the gravity of the situation. Wulv nodded. "Please, let us know if there's anything we can do to help."

Zephyr inclined his head in gratitude, then turned to Terra. "Come with me, brother. Father will want to hear of this."

Terra stood, his footsteps now echoing with a strange heaviness, each one leaving a deep impression on the floor. Yet his face remained calm, eerily so, as if he were containing a storm within.

When they reached Ikem's quarters, the door opened before they could knock. Ikem, seated calmly with a drink in hand, looked as though he had been expecting them. Ursula was beside him, braiding his hair.

He sighed as he glanced at his sons. "I sensed a disturbance. What has you both so serious on this day of celebration?"

The brothers bowed to both Ikem and Ursula before Terra spoke, recounting what his daughter had reported about the attack and the stolen relic. Contrary to their expectations, Ikem did not react with alarm. Instead, he regarded his sons with a thoughtful gaze.

"You're both smart enough to recognize my current position," he said quietly. "The only advice I can give is to keep your actions measured and controlled. Remember all that I've taught you."

A wave of sadness passed between Terra and Zephyr. They had held onto the faint hope that their father's reaction might be different, that he would be there to lead them through this crisis. But now, they saw clearly that he was preparing to leave, that his time on this plane was nearing its end.

Sensing the shift in the room, Ursula knocked Ikem on the head before drawing both sons into a warm, firm embrace. "Your father means to say that he will be watching you closely," she reassured, her words filled with both strength and love.

Ikem let out an indignant huff. "I never said that, woman!" He looked ready to argue further, but a stern glance from Ursula silenced him, and he downed his drink instead.

Terra and Zephyr exchanged a look, their hearts lightened somewhat by the scene. They saw a glimpse of the carefree side of their father, a side that carried far less weight than before. He had done all he could for centuries; now it was their turn to carry on his legacy.

As they turned to leave, Zephyr casually swung an arm around Terra's shoulders, calling out with a grin, "We should have Stepmom convince Father to give us one of his treasured wines. At least two centuries old!"

Ursula caught on to the ruse immediately and turned to Ikem with a mischievous smile. Ikem, already one step ahead, was backing toward the open window. "Get back here and give the boys what they want!" Ursula demanded.

Ikem didn't hesitate—he leapt from the window, shouting over his shoulder, "You're lucky she loves you, boys!"

Zephyr and Terra laughed as Ursula pursued Ikem. But as their mirth subsided, they shared a determined look. Their duties awaited, and they needed to get to the bottom of the attack. The stakes were higher now, and they would face them together, as their father had taught them.

Looking at the now silent Terra, Zephyr asked, "What do you plan to do, brother?"

Terra stayed quiet for a moment before replying. "I'd thought about going directly to the Omadi kingdom to see what their so-called visitor was doing in my lands. But now, thinking more calmly, I suppose I need to get home first and reassure my people."

Placing a hand on Zephyr's shoulder, Terra continued, "I'll leave the strategizing to you, brother—thinking isn't exactly my strength. But know that I support any decision you make. And if you find out who's behind this, let me know."

Zephyr watched silently as Terra left, his steps quiet and no longer heavy.

"Do I visit Omadi's son myself, or should I send an envoy?" Zephyr thought as he made his way back to the throne room.

Opening the door, he saw Terra bidding farewell to everyone. Zephyr's entrance drew the attention of the room, and Terra gave him a nod before leaving.

Zephyr looked at those gathered and announced, "The competition will proceed as usual. This is only a minor setback and will be dealt with shortly."

Everyone nodded, and then Zephyr turned to Wulv. "May I have a moment alone with Prince Wulv?" he requested.

The others exchanged looks before leaving the room. Zephyr sighed as he poured two cups of wine, handing one to Wulv.

"Björn's followers were the ones who invaded Terra's land," Zephyr revealed.

Wulv's eyes widened. "Have they really become that bold?" he asked, bewildered.

Zephyr nodded. "That's what I want to discuss. Among all of us, your people know the most about Björn and his followers, given that you share the same continent. Have there been any notable movements on their end lately?"

Before Wulv answered, he knowingly asked, "Your father and Lady Ursula didn't react much to this news, did they?"

Zephyr recalled his father's reaction and nodded. Wulv chuckled. "Same with mine. When I reported this development, all I got was a raised brow before he went back to spending time with my sister."

Zephyr took a sip of his wine. "I've long wanted my father to take a step back and let us handle things, but now that the chance has come, they're not around to see what we can do."

There was a moment of silence as they both drank before Wulv spoke. "I wonder if you know anything about the demon on the southern continent."

Zephyr nodded, and Wulv continued. "This will make it easier, then. We recently learned that this demon has some kind of alliance with Björn's people. We've observed a female figure bearing features of those from the southern continent, bringing change among the people of Björn. Whereas before, Björn's followers who sought only war and bloodshed, now under her influence, they've started operating with more sophistication."

"Her background remains unknown, aside from her link to the demon, but we believe she's been the driving force behind the spread of Björn's religion to other continents."

Wulv paused thoughtfully. "Given what we know about her and the state of Björn's followers, it seems out of character for her to risk such a reckless move. There might be more going on than we're aware of."

Zephyr nodded and added, "I didn't want to interrupt, but we also have someone akin to a demon among us. He recently informed us that the demon on the southern continent might be attempting to overwhelm Björn with faith energy, possibly turning him into a puppet for war."

"Now that you mention this woman and her efforts to spread Björn's religion beyond their borders, it starts making more sense."

Zephyr and Wulv's expressions grew serious as they considered the audacity of Björn's followers in targeting Terra's lands.

"If they're willing to provoke us like this, they must have something planned," Zephyr muttered, his gaze hardening. "Björn's followers are moving so openly after our action against them—it's unusual. We need to figure out their endgame."

Wulv's brow furrowed. "They struck on a day when all eyes are on the capital. Maybe they wanted the Terra Clan distracted by the celebrations. But why now? And why specifically target Terra?"

Zephyr thought back to Terra's expression, the way his brother's usually unshakable composure had nearly cracked with anger.

"There must be something in Terra's lands they want badly enough to risk possible conflict over. Terra didn't mention what was stolen, but it must be significant." Wulv looked thoughtful as he said that.

Zephyr knew Wulv was hinting for him to say what was taken so he added, "It's not exactly a secret. You know about the mana-rich fruits and plants we exclusively share with your family and other godling royal family"

Wulv nodded, and Zephyr explained, "What they took was just a branch from one of the trees."

Wulv's eyes narrowed in confusion. "The people of Björn have little interest in mana-rich plants; they gain neither power nor pleasure from them, even with their recent shift in behavior."

Zephyr nodded thoughtfully. "And yet, the priest was willing to give his life to ensure this branch reached this mysterious figure's hands."

The two exchanged a look, a mutual understanding sparking between them as they began piecing together the mystery.

"If Björn's people truly have no use for Terra's flora, then why risk so much for a mere branch?" Wulv questioned, his tone skeptical.

Zephyr's grip tightened around his cup. "There are two possibilities. Either someone is trying to frame Björn's followers to incite conflict between our lands, or the priest acted on his own with a purpose we haven't yet considered."

Wulv's expression shifted as he contemplated the idea. "Perhaps he was proving his devotion to this 'unknown figure' by delivering something rare from Terra's land. It could be more of a token of proof than a valuable object. By infiltrating Terra's territory, he could demonstrate his loyalty and capability."

Chapter 347:

Zephyr nodded, understanding that the priest's motives might have been symbolic. "If that's the case, then he was likely trying to elevate his standing with this figure—to secure a place in their inner circle through this act."

Determination sparked in Wulv's eyes. "Our next step should be to identify this figure and any influence they may have on Björn's followers. If there are others acting independently, we could be dealing with a rogue faction within Björn's people—one with its own agenda."

Zephyr stood, his gaze resolute. "We won't let this go unchallenged. I'll have Terra's guards increase their patrols and remain on high alert. Meanwhile, Wulv, if your people can track down any trace of this faction within Björn's lands, we may be able to stay one step ahead of whatever they're plotting."

Wulv rose as well, nodding. "I'll inform my people at once."

Meanwhile, at the border of the Apeling Kingdom, two figures perched silently atop a towering tree. Ursula, wings faintly glowing in the dim light, sat beside Ikem, who was watching Nwadiebube and his team disappear into the distance.

"Aren't you going to stop him? He did steal from you," Ursula said, biting into an apple similar to those in Ikem's garden.

Ikem's eyes stayed fixed on Nwadiebube's retreating form. "Even if I wanted to, I can't interfere without risking my ascension. Besides, I've grown bored of humans and their endless treachery."

Ursula tilted her head, curiosity gleaming in her eyes. "Still, letting him walk away unpunished—doesn't that threaten your standing? His actions were a direct challenge."

Ikem shrugged, his gaze never wavering. "All he managed to take was a branch. The fruits themselves are beyond his reach. Mortals constantly grasp for power they don't understand."

Her eyebrow arched, amusement flickering in her gaze. "But this theft feels too precise to be mere ambition. Surely, you suspect he's not acting alone?"

A hardened glint appeared in Ikem's eyes as he considered her words. "If he is part of something larger, he'll be consumed by it. These desperate moves often conceal fear, not strength."

Ikem turned to Ursula with a slight smirk. "But you, Lady Ursula, seem unusually captivated by mortals and their little schemes. I thought your aspirations lay far beyond these trivial games."

Ursula's lips curved into a half-smile. "Power reveals itself in the most unexpected places. Besides, my fascination with mortals is hardly new—it's simply worn out as time passes. As my ascension approaches, I find myself recalling why they used to intrigue me."

Ikem studied Ursula's expression for a moment, a knowing smile flickering across his face. "Perhaps you're right, Lady Ursula. Mortals can be amusing, particularly when they believe themselves capable of outmaneuvering us."

He shifted his gaze back to where Nwadiebube had vanished into the forest, a dark satisfaction glinting in his eyes. "But they are still only pawns, easily manipulated. If he survives whatever awaits him, I may yet find a use for him."

Ursula nodded, contemplating Ikem's words. "Sometimes, even the most inconsequential pieces have a way of altering the game. But you don't seem inclined to gamble on that possibility."

"True," Ikem replied, his tone casual but laced with an edge of confidence. "I don't need to gamble. With the fruits of my garden, I hold all the pieces I require. But as for the branch..." His voice trailed off as he glanced at Ursula. "Why let a single branch reach mortal hands if it might serve a purpose? A trial, perhaps, for the bold?"

Ursula's smile widened. "A trial or a trap, perhaps. But how many mortals would risk their lives to claim something that doesn't benefit them directly?" Her gaze turned distant as she weighed the possibilities. "There is always the chance this branch could be a lure, drawing others in like flies to honey. And if more mortals attempt the feat, we might discover those who have had their eyes on the godlings"

Ursula nodded, her eyes taking on a golden glow as she turned to the side, where a dark, incorporeal figure was eerily watching them. "More of these beings are appearing in our world," she murmured.

Ikem's expression grew serious as he stared at the figure. His past encounters with such entities made him hesitate to engage them again. Knowing that the counterparts of their own world's guardians were now watching made it all the more unsettling—they might be tempting them to engage, only to drag them into the Upside-Down world.

"Ember is almost done setting up the wards. Once we place them and ascend, we can at least take comfort that the world will remain safe for our children," Ikem said to Ursula, who smiled in response.

But then Ikem's next question wiped the smile from her face. "What about the human Edward? The king your people once supported?"

Ursula's frown deepened as she unfurled her wings, slowly lifting herself into the sky. "I've had my people stay away from him. Something must have happened to him during the war against Silas."

Ikem chuckled as he stood and began heading back. "You know, come to think of it, maybe we had an easier time in the mortal world compared to our children. It feels like they're dealing with so much more."

Their voices gradually faded as they returned to the camp. Meanwhile, the eerie figure continued to watch them retreat. Then, as though slipping through an impossibly tight space, it vanished, reappearing in the Upside-Down, where the world remained unchanging, monochrome in its bleakness.

In this shadowed realm, the figure wandered until it spotted something rare in that lifeless world—a patch of color. It was a forest, shrouded in a deep grey mist. Occasionally, ghostly shapes, almost like animals, flickered through the haze. Sensing the aura radiating from the figure, the spectral creatures edged away, recognizing it as a servant of the forest's owner. Here, the forest was a twisted mockery of the one in the mortal world, a perverse abomination.

The ground was soft and spongy, layered with damp, rotting vegetation that released a faint, acrid odor. These layers seemed to pulse, as though alive, giving an eerie impression of sentience. Dark, inky pools dotted the forest floor, their surfaces reflecting distorted images of the grotesque surroundings.

In this cursed forest, nature itself felt predatory. Thorned vines twisted around every tree, some reaching outward as if to ensnare intruders, their thorns glistening with a dark, sticky substance. The trees bore curling, dark leaves that occasionally shuddered without a breeze. Hollow trunks and branches seemed to watch with gaping knots, resembling hungry mouths or hollow eyes. Faint whispers echoed through the air, though no source could be seen, as if the trees and the ground shared a bitter, malevolent consciousness.

At the heart of this forest stood a massive tree-like structure, far more grotesque than the others. Its bark, appearing fossilized yet pulsing with dark energy, was laced with spiderwebbed cracks that glowed with a dull crimson light. This tree's twisted, ancient limbs bore blackened leaves and ghostly fruit oozing thick, dark liquid. The roots, resembling enormous contorted limbs, spread out across the forest, drawing sustenance from the corruption beneath.

Underneath the tree lay the god's sanctum, accessible by descending through a network of roots that formed an archway into a shadowed cavern. This lair was faintly lit by bioluminescent plants and eerie mineral glimmers. At its center sat a throne, carved from ancient wood and stone, entangled with dark, thorny vines that wrapped around it like serpents. Dark, coiled roots extended from the throne into the cavern floor, connecting the god directly to the tainted lifeforce of his domain.

Seated on this throne was a figure resembling Ikenga, though twisted and corrupted. Where Ikenga might have looked like a healthy, thriving plant, this counterpart resembled something sickly and decaying.

The horns atop his head, once vibrant and adorned with leaves, were now blackened and twisted, like scorched wood. Brittle, black leaves hung loosely from the horns, some disintegrating into wisps of dark smoke. Each horn was etched with faint, glowing cracks, pulsing with a deep crimson light, as though the wood had been burned from within. Occasionally, tendrils of dark mist seeped from these cracks, swirling ominously around his head.

His once robust, stone-like arms now appeared fractured and decayed, as if ancient stone had been worn down by millennia of curses. Faint, pulsing veins of dark energy snaked through the cracks, radiating a dull, sickly glow that highlighted his gnarled, clawed hands. His fingers, elongated and claw-like, were covered in dark, bark-like armor that split open around the knuckles, revealing hints of his own cursed energy leaking through.

The eerie figure entered the cavern and kneeled before his counterpart, who had taken the name "Omenka." Omenka regarded the figure with an unreadable expression as roots wrapped around it, breaking it down to food and nutrients that were transported along the roots connected to him.

Closing his eyes, Omenka absorbed everything the figure had seen in the mortal world. "Ah, my son, why do you refuse your father's well-thought invitation?" he murmured, referring to Ikem as his "son."

Chapter 348:

Recently, Omenka had been sending shadow-like beings from the upside-down world to observe Ikem, hoping to unsettle him. Their efforts to expand the rift between worlds had slowed nearly to a halt as the Origin Gods increased their vigilance, creating a formidable barrier against intrusion. Complicating matters, Jaws' counterpart reported losing an agent he had been monitoring. This setback led Omenka to consider a new plan involving Ikem: if he could draw him into this world and gradually corrupt him, it would significantly serve their ambitions.

Driven by this notion, Omenka ordered the shadow beings to appear before Ikem each night. The goal was simple—test Ikem's patience, weaken his composure, and wait for him to take the bait. Ikem, however, had enlisted Crepuscular's daughter to spend time with him, taking his mind off the shadows' constant watch. During his surveillance, Omenka had also learned about the ascension of a demigod, a development he and his counterpart loathed, as it meant yet another divine power to contend with. Moreover, rumors suggested that the Origin Gods were devising a plan to counter them.

A dark chuckle left Omenka's lips as he opened his eyes. They had adapted well to these challenges, and now they held a surprise for the Origin Gods and demigods alike.

Omenka's gaze grew distant as he looked beyond the upside-down realm, focusing on an underground sanctuary filled with cloaked figures whose faces remained hidden beneath their hoods.

Meanwhile, in the heavens, Björn—now clear-minded from the pure faith energy absorbed during Kjoric and the Terra Princess's duel—frowned, caught in a dilemma. In such instances, tradition dictated that he should bestow a blessing upon the victor. However, the princess was not his follower, and the political ramifications of blessing her could strain his newly improved relations with the Origin Gods. While honor urged him to grant the blessing, politics advised caution.

Björn pondered this as he looked down at his hand, enveloped in a red light, and back at the Terra Clan, who were rapidly repairing the damage to their village. His gaze settled on Kjoric's corpse, sparking an idea.

With a decisive motion, Björn cast the red light from his hand. The light descended from his celestial domain down to the Terra Clan's village. The princess, overseeing her people, still wore her armor and wielded her hammer, occasionally sending pulses through the earth to search for any lingering threats.

"Look up, everyone!" came a shout from her people, catching the princess's attention. She looked up to see the red light falling from the sky.

Not knowing what it was, she immediately ordered, "Get into your homes and stay clear of the light!" Her people obeyed without hesitation.

The princess watched tensely as the red light enveloped the priest's massive rhino corpse. The creature's body, the size of a house, began to levitate as the light formed a cocoon around it, which broke open shortly after.

In place of the corpse now stood a magnificent rhino armor, covered in a thin golden film. The princess's eyes widened as the armor drifted toward her, attaching itself to the armor she already wore. The new armor absorbed her Ironwood armor, adopting its properties and transforming into a design that suited her perfectly. A subtle message accompanied the gift.

Raising an eyebrow, the princess laughed and looked up at the red star. "I appreciate the gift, Lord Björn," she said, as a phantom image of the rhino appeared behind her, roaring up at the sky.

The princess marveled at the transformation of her armor. The rhino's essence, a powerful symbol of strength and resilience, had fused with her, giving her both the protection of Björn's blessing and the remnant spirit of her fallen opponent. The faint golden film that lined the armor shimmered as it adjusted to her frame, absorbing the properties of her Ironwood armor and enhancing its already formidable defenses. The plates felt sturdy yet responsive, as though the armor itself was alive, attuned to her every move.

The ethereal rhino spirit behind her roared, its deep, resonant cry sending tremors through the earth. The townspeople, huddling inside their homes, peeked out in awe, watching their princess clad in divine armor, now with the unmistakable aura of a blessing from a god.

While admiring her armor, the princess felt a familiar pulse resonate through the earth—a response to the signal she'd been sending out. A smile crossed her face as she recognized the unique vibration of earth magic. Her father was back.

Nwadieube and his people had returned to his territory under the cover of night, safely making their way to the capital. Arriving at last, Nwadieube felt a thrill of excitement coursing through him, holding the branch was like holding onto a hot iron. Yet, before he could properly celebrate, he needed to put away a powerful, dangerous artifact. This artifact was a "perk" of his leadership, something discovered by one of his followers—shaped like a key.

At first, he'd thought it was insignificant. But one day, a trembling researcher presented it to him, nervously explaining its capabilities. The artifact was one presented to him by his subjects and was later discovered to be a summoning key—a double-edged sword, as dangerous to the user as to the enemy. Its strength depended on the energy sacrificed to it, and its range of summoning was still unknown.

The researchers had learned its power by accident, summoning a creature they couldn't control. The creature had slain the one who summoned it as their energy had been drawn out and then turned on the others in the room, only to be subdued by nearby guards. This key had given Nwadieube a sense of security as he ventured into Terra Clan territory, where he planned to sacrifice his followers' energy to the key if things went awry.

Thankfully, the apeling he encountered had shown wisdom, avoiding confrontation, which had been a relief to Nwadieube—he secretly dreaded using the artifact. Now, back in his kingdom, he secured the key in a safe alongside other dangerous artifacts. With a vibrant branch in hand, he made his way to the underground caverns where Ezinne resided. If anyone could interpret the power contained in the branch, it was her.

Though he had reached the fifth stage of his training, he still sought Ezinne's guidance on matters like this. Entering the cavern, the residents stirred, their attention drawn to the branch. Ezinne, an elderly woman, appeared before him with a speed defying her age, reaching out a trembling hand toward the branch.

"Where did you find this, child?" she asked.

The king paused before replying, noticing his sister just behind Ezinne. He deflected, "Does it matter how I came by it?"

Ezinne pulled her hand back, frowning at him. "That response is exactly what I feared, boy," she said, her tone unusually stern. "How much did you risk to obtain this?"

Nwadiabube scowled, a golden circle emanating from his feet to encompass Ezinne and the princess, drawing them into his domain. There, he explained what had happened, and when he released them from the domain, both women stood in silent horror. His sister's hand flew to her mouth, and Ezinne staggered back, eyes wide.

"Have you forgotten the full name of the patron god of the ape-lords?" Ezinne asked, her voice shaking.

Annoyed by their reactions, Nwadiabube gritted his teeth. "What is your point, woman?"

Ignoring his frustration, Ezinne replied, "Ikenga—the god of nature and curses." The last word struck him like a splash of cold water.

"Curses." How could he have overlooked that? His kingdom's structure and rules had largely shielded him from the impact of curses. Even his nobles, despite their faults, were disciplined enough to avoid actions that would draw curses upon themselves.

He'd dismissed curses, believing they held no threat to him or his people. But now, it seemed he'd stolen something from the garden of the very god who created those curses.

In all his planning, he had never considered the gods' action in his plan. Even though he knew the supposed treasure came from a god, he never considered his action from taking from Ikenga.

"Was it because the gods were elusive and never had taken much action against them mortals which made him complacent in their ways, what happened to him?"

The weight of his realization hit Nwadieube like a tidal wave. His once-confident demeanor faltered as he stumbled, his knees buckling slightly under the crushing weight of the implications. Ezinne's warning echoed in his mind, reverberating with a dreadful certainty he could no longer ignore.

Ezinne regarded him with a hard but sympathetic expression. "You may have prepared yourself for the consequences of your actions, child, but the god of curses does not play by rules we mortals understand."

Taking a deep breath, Nwadieube steadied himself and straightened. "So, you're saying... that simply possessing this branch might doom us? Or is there a way to reverse this before Ikenga's wrath falls upon my kingdom?" He looked at Ezinne, searching her face for any hint of hope

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Ezinne nodded slowly. "The branch, filled with vibrant energy, is exactly what shamans like myself need. The journey to the underworld is not a simple task, especially for someone like me who already has one foot in the grave."

She paused, her eyes intense. "Having this branch nearby during my breakthrough will increase my chances significantly. My occasional conversations with ancestral souls reveal that the underworld is changing. I strongly believe my shamanic path could help advance this transformation."

"The ancestors have mentioned that the goddess finds joy in seeing the changes the souls bring to the underworld," Ezinne continued, her voice now softer. "This is a dangerous and daring thought, but what if we shamans break through with the help of this branch and hope that our breakthrough brings a significant change to the underworld?"

She looked directly at Nwadieube. "If it works, I believe we could earn the grace of the goddess Keles, who might intercede to offset Ikenga's wrath."

Nwadiabube's mind raced as he absorbed Ezinne's words. She was proposing an audacious plan, one that sounded as much like a gamble as a solution. Yet, her logic was compelling. If the shamans, guided by the ancestral spirits and empowered by the branch, could make a breakthrough that impacted the underworld itself, it might indeed catch the attention—and possibly the favor—of the goddess Keles. Her influence might be enough to shield them, or at least temper Ikenga's inevitable wrath.

The princess stepped forward, watching the exchange closely. "Brother, Ezinne's suggestion may be our only hope. The branch is powerful, perhaps powerful enough to do what she suggests. But... can we be certain Keles will listen?"

Ezinne turned to the princess, her voice solemn. "Keles is known as the goddess of death and darkness. Her joy in the changes happening in the underworld is no secret. If we can show that this breakthrough will add to the beauty and strength of her domain, she may lend her grace to offset Ikenga's fury. But you must understand, child," she added, looking back to the king, "there are no guarantees. We may succeed, and Keles may grant her grace—or we may awaken her ire as well."

Nwadiabube let out a long sigh, running his hand over the branch as if seeking answers from its ancient, pulsing bark. "Then we proceed with the ritual for your shamanic breakthrough. But Ezinne," he warned, "we must prepare for any outcome. This ritual must be executed with precision; no detail can be overlooked."

Ezinne nodded, her eyes flickering with both excitement and apprehension. "I will prepare the sacred grounds and consult with the ancestors one last time."

Handing the branch hastily to Ezinne, Nwadiabube felt its vibrant energy like fire in his palm, suddenly wary of the power it held.

Just then, his hand began to pulse. He looked down to see a red mark forming. "The people of Björn are contacting me," he muttered, frowning. "It seems the news of their priest's death has already reached them."

The princess and Ezinne nodded solemnly as Nwadiabube left the underground chambers, his hands clenched. He was troubled by their call, realizing there were unseen eyes from Björn's people observing the events within his kingdom. His plans to take his time in contacting them were now disrupted.

Ignoring his pulsing hand for a moment, he took a calming sip from a drink in his office drawer. Straightening his clothes and composing himself, he sent mana into his hand, activating the connection. A red hologram appeared before him, displaying a woman dressed in southern attire, her face half-covered by a fan as she gave him a calculating smile.

"King Nwadieube, I believe this is our first time meeting," she said smoothly.

The king took another sip, replying with calm composure. "It wouldn't have been the first if your priest had allowed me a direct contact with you sooner."

The woman laughed, opening her fan to cover her lower face, her eyes twinkling with intrigue as she assessed the king, who was equally scrutinizing her.

"I believed it was best for the priest to act as a medium before we could truly trust each other," the woman said, staring at the king.

Nwadieube looked at the woman before asking, "What should I call you?"

"Oh, I've forgotten my manners. I go by the name Yuki," she replied, smiling at the king.

Before he could respond, she added, "We can get familiar with each other later. Right now, I have something important I'd like to know."

"Here it comes," the king thought to himself, taking a sip of his drink.

"It has come to my attention that one of our head priests met an untimely death. As believers in Björn, we welcome death, but I understand there hasn't been any war or conflict in your kingdom to explain his passing?" Yuki raised an eyebrow at Nwadieube, who nodded.

Standing up from his seat, Nwadieube began explaining how the priest suddenly decided to enter the apeling territory, careful to leave out details about obtaining the branch after the priest's death.

Yuki maintained her calm smile, piecing things together, already suspecting why the priest had taken such a drastic step.

The priest wasn't wrong about fearing replacement due to his incompetence, but still, there had to be something more to push him to such a desperate edge.

"Had there been any incidents involving the priest before his death or actions against the godlings?" Yuki asked. Nwadieube looked lost in thought for a moment before replying.

"There was a rumor he started at one point to draw in believers. He made people believe that sacrificing godlings to Björn would bring them greater blessings and power."

"The rumor was quashed by the radical actions of the apeling godlings, who massacred those involved. After that, it became difficult for the priest to spread Björn's religion, as people feared what the apelings might do if they found out."

Yuki frowned as she listened. "It seems his death was deserved, then," she thought, but kept that to herself.

Still smiling, she asked, "And what about you, King Nwadieube? What part did you play in the priest's death?"

Nwadieube, taken aback by the question, shook his head. "Excuse me? Do you think I had something to do with the priest's death?"

"I didn't say that," Yuki replied, still smiling. "But perhaps you led him to his death, fearing what the apelings might do to you and your people."

The king's hand slammed down on the table beside him, breaking it apart. "Do you know how valuable your priest was to me and my army?"

Raising an eyebrow, Yuki watched as he continued, "During the priest's time here, he introduced this religion to my army. Though they've faced no war, I saw a change—every soldier's death seemed to carry meaning. There was a beauty to warfare I'd never noticed before. Even the weakest soldier met death with a smile, having wounded the one who struck them, leaving that opponent vulnerable to others."

"Your priest showed me a chance to win against Osita, who I'm sure he's already informed you about. So, why would I want him dead before he could truly help me?"

"You're leaving some details out, but I like the look in your eyes right now," Yuki said, her expression intrigued.

"What?" Nwadiebube muttered in confusion, taken aback by her response.

"Now that the priest is dead, I want to establish a new alliance with you. I'll be sending a more experienced and responsible priest, one who will follow your commands."

Yuki's words lingered, her smile unfaltering as she watched the king absorb the weight of her proposition. Nwadiebube remained silent, his brows knit in a mix of intrigue and suspicion. This woman had a way of twisting the narrative, catching him off guard. Her calm demeanor didn't match the power behind her words, and he felt himself pulled between respect and wariness.

"And what would you ask in return for this 'responsible' priest?" Nwadiebube finally asked, folding his arms across his chest. "I assume such a valuable asset doesn't come without a cost."

Yuki's smile widened. "A fair assumption, Your Majesty. You've seen a glimpse of Björn's teachings and the way his blessings transform even the ordinary into fierce warriors. However, you've only scratched the surface. I offer you not just a priest but a bridge to Björn's favor. If you agree to an alliance, we will deepen this bond beyond mere faith. Your army will learn to harness the strength that lies beyond life itself."

Nwadiebube's eyes narrowed. "Strength beyond life itself? You speak of dangerous powers, ones that could threaten the very balance we've kept in these lands."

Yuki tilted her head, her expression softening for a brief moment. "Dangerous only to those who would stand against you, Your Majesty. The followers of Björn fear neither death nor the wrath of any godling. In time, neither will your warriors."

"Your offer is bold," he replied, his tone measured. "But Björn's path has already led to conflict with the godlings. If I ally myself further with you, I may provoke more than Osita. Tell me, Yuki—what exactly would be expected of me in this alliance?"

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She leaned forward, her gaze unwavering. "It's simple, the dead priest's job was very underwhelming and undeserving. What is needed from your Majesty is to open your kingdom to Björn's priests, allow them to establish temples and strengthen the faith among your people. In return, we will train your soldiers to embrace a strength that surpasses any mortal's—and, if you so desire, we will stand with you against Osita. Together, we can create a power that will be remembered across ages."

If this had been earlier, Nwadiabube might have agreed. But now, having realized he may have incurred the wrath of the god of nature, he was wary of allying with someone who opposed that god.

Ezinne had just proposed a temporary solution for the situation, though it was still uncertain if it would work. But at the moment, Nwadiabube needed every advantage he could get.

In truth, while he'd made the priest's death seem significant, it didn't truly matter to him once he understood the trouble he was in.

He needed to gain the apeling's favor, and this gave him an idea—a plan he would need to set in motion as soon as this conversation with Yuki ended.

Nwadiabube met Yuki's gaze with a calculating stare, hiding the uncertainty gnawing at him. Her offer was alluring—a chance to wield a power strong enough to turn the tides against Osita, perhaps even against the godlings themselves. But after Ezinne's warning about the god of nature's wrath, he knew he had to tread carefully.

"Your ambitions are clear, Yuki," he said finally, his voice calm but guarded. "Björn's influence and strength are tempting, yet I must consider my kingdom's standing with the godlings. They are a force neither of us can ignore, and their favor can be as powerful as their wrath."

Yuki's smile faltered ever so slightly, and Nwadiebube noted the shift. She was not used to resistance.

"I understand your caution, Your Majesty," Yuki replied smoothly. "But the godlings cannot shield you from all threats. With Björn, you would be building an army capable of withstanding any force—divine or otherwise. And should the godlings see your strength, they may think twice before opposing you."

The king nodded, feigning consideration, though his mind was elsewhere. He knew that appealing to the godlings, particularly the apelings, might offer him a different path—one that wouldn't involve aligning himself so closely with Björn and his priests. If he could win their favor, perhaps he could stabilize his kingdom without incurring the wrath of the god of nature.

Nwadiebube put on a thoughtful expression, masking his plan. "It is a bold vision you present, Yuki. You offer power, yes, but power is only useful when wielded with wisdom. Let us say I agree to open my kingdom to Björn's faith and allow your priests to strengthen their influence here—what assurances can you give me that my people won't become pawns in Björn's ambitions?"

Yuki's eyes narrowed slightly, and she leaned forward. "Your people will not be pawns but soldiers, Your Majesty. Björn's favor does not come lightly, but it brings strength and unity. With our guidance, your people will find purpose, something beyond mere survival. They will fight for a cause greater than themselves, with you as their leader."

Nwadiebube allowed himself a faint smile. "I will consider your offer, Yuki. I need to ensure my people's safety and prosperity above all else. Give me time to make preparations, and then we can discuss how to proceed."

Yuki seemed to study him for a moment, sensing the shift in his tone. She nodded slowly, her smile returning but colder, as if she knew she had yet to fully convince him. "Of course, Your Majesty. I will await your answer—and may I remind you, Björn is a god who rewards loyalty and decisiveness."

With that, Yuki took her leave, Nwadiebube immediately called for the servants to change the table. At the same time he got to his room and began writing a message which will be sent to the apelings.

In the current situation, he felt it was better if he contacted the apelings first rather than waiting for them to come over, who knows what action they may take once they arrive in his kingdom.

Most importantly, he knew it was best for him and his people if everything looked okay with the apelings on the surface.

At the Apeling capital, as the sun rose, godlings could be seen sprawled drunk on the streets, bright smiles on their sleeping faces.

A loud bell rang, followed by an announcement: the second day of the competition had begun. At the sound, the godlings scrambled to their feet and hurried home to clean up, eager to prepare for the day's events.

Meanwhile, Zephyr held a letter in his hand sent by King Nwadiebube. He looked at it thoughtfully before it was shredded into pieces by a gust of wind.

"Inform King Nwadiebube that I will pay him a personal visit in one week," he ordered. An armored apeling briefly appeared, bowed, and vanished.

Patting down his attire, Zephyr took a deep breath, put on his usual silly smile, and walked out of the palace. As on the previous day, the stadium was filled with godlings and buzzing with excitement.

Everyone returned to their seats, as before. Ikem and Ursula were also present, though they seemed more focused on each other than on the competition.

This didn't dampen the godlings' anticipation for the next event. The upcoming challenge had been a longstanding debate among them, fueling discussions about which godling groups were strongest. Today, they'd finally get a taste of each group's capabilities.

The announcer appeared once again, stylish as ever, now sporting a pair of glasses.

"Unlike the race for the flag, where every team member participated, this time each group must choose three members to compete. For example, the Harpies will select three representatives, while the Apelings will choose one from each competing cursed clan," he announced into the microphone, sparking cheers from the audience.

"For the first round, the Cursed Apeling clans will face off against the Apeling students!" The whole arena erupted with cheers.

"Next, for Match 2: Mermen vs. Harpies!" More cheers followed. "And the winner of the first match will get a thirty-minute break before facing the Werewolves."

"After these three matches, there will be a short break for each group to recuperate before the next rounds begin." The announcer raised a hand, signaling the crowd to quiet down.

"Let us welcome our first competitors." One by one, the fighters entered, each representing their clans and groups with pride. The Cursed Apeling clan stepped forward first, draped in armor representing their clan and equipped with weapons that amplified their natural strength. They stood in stark contrast to the Apeling students across from them, who appeared in more natural, wild attire. Both sides radiated anticipation, their expressions hard with rivalry.

Adjusting his glasses, the announcer grinned as he introduced the fighters. "Representing the Cursed Apelings, we have the formidable trio: Kuro of the Zephyr clan, Okon of the Ripple clan, and Garrock of the Terra clan!" The three apelings stepped forward, each exuding a fierce aura that reverberated through the arena. The crowd erupted with cheers, nearly drowning out the announcer as he continued.

"And from the Apeling students, we have Aduke, Ndidi, and Torrent!" Unlike the cursed apelings, these three had a sharp look of eagerness but lacked the hardened experience worn on the faces of their opponents. Even so, there was a glint of determination in their eyes, a quiet defiance as they prepared to prove themselves against their elder kin.

The arena quieted as a magical barrier shimmered to life around the combat zone, separating the crowd from the action. The announcer's tone took on a solemn note, setting the stage for the intense matches. "Remember, godlings, today we witness more than just strength. Today, we see the clash of history, tradition, and the future."

"And just a reminder—if anyone forgot the rule: everything is allowed except death. Go all out; we godlings have enough healers to make sure you're pristine for the next match."

With a gust of wind, the announcer was swept away, leaving the arena to the competitors.

Ndidi, from the Apeling students, looked nervously at the cursed apelings and muttered, "This isn't looking good. We've never won when they set up this way."

His teammates nodded. The cursed apeling clan was an unbelievably strong and challenging opponent, especially when their clans were forced to work together. Their combat style transformed dramatically in these situations, making them formidable and annoying foes.

Torrent, grinning confidently, slapped his two teammates on the back. "We've studied their formation and their tactics. It'll be different this time—with everything we've learned from the teachers. Even if it's not enough to win, let's make them work for it."

His words stirred up a fire in the others, and they exchanged grins before turning to the crowd, raising their fists and rallying the audience into a frenzy.