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Ezinne bowed her head slightly in acknowledgment of Nwadiebube's order, her gaze lingering on him for a moment longer. The tension in his posture, the subtle tremor in his clenched fist—it all spoke volumes. She knew Nwadiebube well enough to recognize the weight of his unease, even if he refused to voice it.

"Very well," she said softly, turning away to leave the courtyard. The branch in her hand pulsed faintly, as if resonating with her own concern. She would contact the Merchant of Death again, though she doubted even the strongest bodies could quell the storm brewing within Nwadiebube's soul.

As she departed, Nwadiebube stood rooted in place, his gaze fixed on the faint shimmer of spectral energy still dancing in the air where she had vanished. His thoughts churned like a restless tide, each one louder than the last. Had he truly offended Ikenga, the god of nature and curses? The silence of the deity weighed heavier than any words could. It wasn't a reprieve—it was a void. The kind that ate away at his resolve, leaving behind only uncertainty and dread. Every passing moment without a sign felt like a clock ticking down to something he couldn't see, let alone prepare for.

His mind wandered to Osita. The clash between them felt inevitable, something written into the fabric of his life. He just hadn't expected it to come so soon. Deep down, Nwadiebube knew why—it was his own actions that had hastened the confrontation. That realization should have filled him with regret, but instead, a strange acceptance began to take root.

If Ikenga's punishment was coming for him, why not make use of the time he had left? Why not leave behind something great, something that would echo long after he was gone? The thought was both a defiance and a resignation. If his days were borrowed, he would spend them turning his kingdom into an empire, carving out a legacy his people would remember. To do that, Osita's kingdom had to fall. It was a bold gamble, but if he succeeded, only the apelings would stand in his people's way to mastering the continent and its riches.

A bitter smile crept across his face. He'd once been naive enough to think declining Yuki's request for an alliance would win him favor with the apelings. But now, with his plans taking shape, he realized he would need their help after all. That alliance could be the key to securing his ambitions, even if it came at a cost he hadn't fully measured.

Tomorrow, Zephyr was scheduled to visit. They were supposed to discuss the rising problem with Björn's priests, but Nwadiebube had something else in mind. He'd been crafting a proposal, one that carried

more risk than certainty. Given their strained relationship, there was every chance Zephyr would refuse. But if Zephyr agreed, it could shift everything. It would mean no need to ally with Björn's followers and Yuki, no need to tread dangerous ground with a god whose influence was spreading like wildfire.

The next morning arrived with the faint glow of dawn spilling over the horizon. Nwadiebube stood on the palace balcony, his hands resting on the stone railing as he watched his people stirring to life below. Farmers carried tools to their fields, merchants set up their stalls, and soldiers patrolled the gates. Life went on, as it always did, indifferent to the weight of his decisions.

His thoughts swirled as he waited for Zephyr's arrival. What would it take to convince someone like Zephyr? Their history was complicated, marked by uneasy "alliances" and moments of betrayal mostly on his side. Yet, Nwadiebube had to try. The stakes were too high to let pride or past grievances cloud his judgment.

When Zephyr arrived, it was without pomp or ceremony. The heavy doors of the grand hall creaked open, admitting a gust of cool air before closing again with an ominous finality. Nwadiebube sat alone, his hands clasped tightly, betraying the storm beneath his calm exterior.

The figure who entered was cloaked in shadow, his long mantle brushing the polished floor with every deliberate step. Zephyr's piercing gaze swept across the hall, seeming to take in every detail at once, his presence as sharp and unyielding as a blade.

Suppressing the pounding of his heart, Nwadiebube rose to his feet. His expression is calm but his mind is a storm. He had rehearsed his words a hundred times, but now, as Zephyr approached, doubt crept in like a shadow.

"Zephyr," Nwadiebube greeted, inclining his head with measured grace.

The response was cool, almost mechanical. "Nwadiebube. You summoned me. Let's not waste time."

A faint smile touched Nwadiebube's lips as he gestured to the chair opposite him. "Of course. Please, sit. There is much to discuss."

Zephyr lowered himself into the seat without breaking eye contact, his movements fluid and deliberate. "This is about the priest of Björn," he said, leaning back, his tone even but edged with suspicion.

Nwadiebube nodded, his voice steady despite the tremor threatening to break through. "Yes. What I say may sound like a convenient excuse, but it is the only explanation I can offer."

Zephyr's expression didn't shift, but his silence was heavy, pressing Nwadiebube to continue.

"I, too, was shocked by the priest's disappearance," Nwadiebube began, his voice tinged with carefully measured regret. "After our last conversation, I thought I had dissuaded him from taking drastic measures. Clearly, I failed to make him see the gravity of his actions."

Nwadiebube's eyes glimmered with restrained emotion as he pressed on. "When I learned of what had transpired, I acted quickly to inform you, not only to clear my name but to prevent unnecessary conflict between our peoples."

Zephyr's gaze sharpened, a faint glow flickering in his eyes. "What exactly did you discuss with the priest?"

Nwadiebube hesitated, his expression tightening as though reliving an uncomfortable memory. "He came to me seeking help," he finally admitted, his voice low. "His mission to expand Björn's faith had faced resistance. The Apelings' actions against his zealots—punishment for their blasphemy—had sown fear among the people. Many began distancing themselves from his faith, afraid of drawing your people's wrath."

Zephyr remained silent, his face impassive as Nwadiebube continued.

"The priest grew desperate," Nwadiebube said. "In our final conversation, he proposed an idea. He believed it would break the fear your people inspire and restore faith in his god. I tried to dissuade him, to show him the foolishness of his plan, but..." He trailed off, spreading his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

His eyes locked with Zephyr's, pleading for understanding. "Now, I can only apologize on his behalf for the chaos he has wrought."

Zephyr leaned forward, his glowing gaze narrowing. The pieces of the puzzle shifted in his mind, aligning closely with what he and Wulv had deduced. Yet, Nwadiebube's version painted him as a mere bystander, devoid of responsibility.

"My brother Terra," Nwadiebube added after a pause, his voice weighted with warning, "whose clan the priest invaded, is enraged. The priest and his men stole a sacred branch, killing Terra's people in the process. He was close to making a personal appearance in your kingdom."

Nwadiebube's eyes darkened as he leaned in. "Had Terra come in his fury, your capital would have been reduced to rubble, replaced by a mountain of his making."

"The priest and his men are dead but that isn't enough to appease my brother so tell me Nwadiebube, What am I to tell my brother when it was you who opened your gate to the priest of Björn leading to the current situation?"

The air in the grand hall grew heavy as Zephyr's words lingered. Nwadiebube sat in silence, his practiced calm cracking under the weight of the accusation. His gaze faltered momentarily before he straightened, meeting Zephyr's piercing eyes.

"I understand the gravity of your brother's anger," Nwadiebube began, his voice steady but low, like a man treading carefully on thin ice. "And I take full responsibility for allowing the priest into my kingdom. It was a decision made with the hope of maintaining peace, not sowing chaos."

Zephyr's expression didn't soften. His glow intensified, causing the air in the hall to thicken, Nwadiebube found himself caught off guard as he took long deep breaths. "Hope for peace? Your actions have nearly brought a war to my family's doorstep, Nwadiebube. Do not dress this as naivety when it reeks of carelessness."

Nwadiebube bowed his head slightly, his tone humble but not groveling. "You're right. I underestimated the priest's resolve and ambition. I thought I could control the situation, keep his influence contained. That was my failing, and I won't deny it."

The tension in the room was suffocating, but Nwadiebube refused to waver. "What happened to Terra's clan is unforgivable, and I will not diminish his pain. But if his anger were to fall on my kingdom,

innocent lives would be lost—lives that had no part in this tragedy." He paused, his voice softening. "I am prepared to make amends, Zephyr. Whatever it takes to restore balance and honor."

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Zephyr studied him, his silence more intimidating than any words. Finally, he spoke, his voice like ice. "And what amends could possibly satisfy Terra's wrath? What could prevent him from flattening this city with a mountain?"

Nwadiebube's mind raced. This was the moment he had dreaded and prepared for in equal measure. "I will offer reparations to Terra's clan," he said firmly. "Gold, resources—whatever it takes to show that my kingdom takes full accountability. And more than that, I will make it clear to all who seek refuge here that their actions must not endanger the balance of power on this continent."

Zephyr raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Gold and resources? Do you think Terra as an apeling cares about trinkets and trade goods? Have our limited contact with your people made you forget about us to think treasures and what not will look enticing to us. Terra is not a man who values wealth, Boy. He values respect. And right now, you have very little of it."

"I will go further," Nwadiebube said, his voice hardening. "If Terra will accept it, I will send my finest builders and magi to aid his clan in repairing the damage caused by the priest. They will work under his command, for as long as he deems necessary. It won't undo the past, but it will show my kingdom's commitment to righting this wrong."

Zephyr looked at Nwadiebube like he was stupid "You think after all this, that I or my brother will let humans or your people step foot into our home and territory? Need i remind you kid that you're not dealing with your fellow human so be careful with the words and offer that comes out of your mouth"

Nwadiebube's jaw tightened, but he kept his expression calm, even as Zephyr's words bit into him. The reminder of the vast gap between their worlds—the apelings' pride, their power, their disdain for human ways—was one he could not afford to forget.

"My apologies," Nwadiebube said, his voice steady though he felt the heat rising in his chest. "I misspoke. My intention wasn't to insult your brother or your people. My goal is to find a path forward that doesn't escalate this further."

Zephyr folded his arms, his piercing gaze unwavering. "Then speak plainly, boy. If you're hoping to salvage what little goodwill remains, tread carefully. My patience is not infinite."

Nwadieube took a deep breath, choosing his words carefully this time. "I understand that my actions—or lack of foresight—have led us here. I will not insult Terra, or you, with half-measures or empty promises. If there is a way to prove my respect and commitment without crossing boundaries, I am willing to hear it."

Zephyr leaned back slightly, his gaze still sharp but less overtly hostile. "At least you're learning to listen. Good. But respect isn't something you can hand over like a gift. It's earned. And after what's happened, you have a mountain to climb."

Nwadieube nodded, accepting the rebuke. "Then guide me, Zephyr. I know I cannot erase the past, but I can shape what comes next. What would Terra see as a true act of reparations? What would show him that my people are not his enemies?"

For the first time, Zephyr's expression softened—though only slightly. "You ask for guidance, but you'll find none from me. Terra is not a simple man, and his forgiveness is not mine to offer. However..." He paused, as if weighing his words. "If you truly wish to begin earning his respect, you will not grovel. You will not offer trinkets or hollow gestures. You will prove your worth through action, not words."

"And what kind of action?" Nwadieube pressed, his brow furrowing.

Zephyr's lips curled into a faint, almost predatory smile. "That's for you to decide. But know this: Terra respects strength—not the kind that comes from brute force or gold, but the strength of character, of resolve. Show him that you're not just another arrogant human scrambling for favor. Show him you understand the weight of what's happened and are willing to bear it without complaint."

The room fell into silence, the tension thick in the air. Nwadieube met Zephyr's gaze, a flicker of determination sparking in his eyes. "I will find a way," he said quietly but firmly. "Not to appease, but to prove that I can stand as an equal, not a threat."

Zephyr's smile faded, replaced by an expression of faint intrigue. "We'll see, boy. For your sake, I hope you mean that."

"Now, I have another question for you, What happened to the branch stolen by the priest?"

Nwadiébé did his best to keep his composure as Zephyr continued "Our information states that there was a second party that made an appearance at the attack and their goal for the branch, do you have any idea who those second party are"

Nwadiébé knows the most challenging part has come but he knows that no matter what happens he was never going to tell the truth on this, the branch was in his hand and turned out to be a very important treasure.

He even may have angered a god because of the branch which he had come to terms with, the only issue now was how to get past this currently.

Nwadiébé inhaled deeply, steadying himself. Zephyr's sharp gaze bore into him, demanding answers. Lying outright to someone as perceptive as Zephyr was dangerous, but the truth was far worse. He had to tread carefully.

"Second party?" Nwadiébé echoed, his tone calm but measured. "I never heard whispers of a third group, yes. But details were scarce. If you should know the priest's zealotry had earned him no shortage of enemies who might have seen his action as an opportunity to please your people"

Zephyr's eyes narrowed, his expression hardening. "A convenient vagueness. Are you certain that's all you know?"

"That is all I truly know, I rather should ask your majesty if you had gotten the branch back but instead want to defame me and my people because of your suspicion" Nwadiébé said as he stared at Zephyr.

Zephyr raised a brow as Nwadiébé continued "The priest might have had people keeping an eye on him and looking for opportunity to catch him off guard and offer him up to your people, it's people that such people could be the third party involved"

"And if this branch is from your people, I have no doubt it would be an artifact that will arouse greed on those who lay their bare eyes on it"

Zephyr stared at Nwadieube as he brought up his hypothesis before laughing out loud, Zephyr tried controlling it but he couldn't so he let himself go on for a while before calming down.

Nwadieube meanwhile clenched his fist as he picked up that Zephyr didn't believe the words coming from his mouth.

Zephyr had a look of pity in his eyes as he stared at Nwadieube "You boy don't strike me as someone bright, just from our few conversation just now you strike as someone impulsive, ambitious and with illusion of grandeur"

"I looked at you as someone smart because of the great kingdom you led but now I question if it truly was done by you or the one hiding in the pillar over there" Zephyr said as he looked to the side.

An armoured female figure stepped out from the shadow, Princess Nwadinma bowed toward Zephyr as she found herself a place to sit.

"I thought I had hidden well" She said as she smiled at Zephyr.

Zephyr shook his head "You did well but there is no hiding from me"

The princess nodded as she said "To your previous words, your majesty. It was the hard work of My brother and I that led us to leading one of the greatest human kingdom in this continent"

Zephyr nodded as he said "That i understand but your brother words and action makes me have doubt of his capabilities"

Nwadieube's composure wavered momentarily, his fists clenched tighter as he shot a quick glance at Nwadinma. The sight of her calm demeanour only fuelled his frustration.

"Your Majesty," Nwadinma began, her voice smooth and diplomatic, "my brother has always been one to rely on his instincts and strength. But as you know, sometimes the heart can outpace the mind. He means well, but his methods are... unconventional."

Zephyr tilted his head, studying her with a faint smirk. "Unconventional is putting it kindly, Princess. I expected a more convincing web of deceit, not one so riddled with holes."

Nwadiabube, no longer able to hold back, spoke up. "You may think little of me, Zephyr, but don't mistake my boldness for incompetence. My kingdom didn't rise to greatness by accident, nor by chance." His voice was firm, though tinged with defiance.

Zephyr's gaze shifted back to him, unimpressed. "Bold words for someone who dances on the edge of destruction. Do you believe deflecting with bravado will save you from my brother's wrath or mine?"

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Nwadimma interjected, her tone measured and calm. "Zephyr, my brother has his faults, but his ambition is not without purpose. If his words do not convince you, allow me to offer something more tangible to prove our commitment to resolving this matter."

Zephyr raised a brow, curiosity flickering across his face. "Oh? And what might that be?"

Nwadimma hesitated, her eyes briefly meeting Nwadiabube's. "It is clear to us or those paying attention that you lack information on the people of Björn and their ways especially their religion"

"We have been in close contact with them and could even be considered friends, what if we act as the medium who relays messages on the happenings and actions taken by them?"

Zephyr's expression shifted, his intrigue deepening. He crossed his arms, staring at Nwadimma as if trying to dissect her proposal. "You offer to play the role of a messenger, a bridge between us and Björn's people?" he asked, his tone laced with skepticism. "And why would I trust you with such a task? What guarantees do I have that you won't twist the information to suit your own interests?"

Nwadimma maintained her calm demeanor, her voice unwavering. "Because our survival depends on maintaining peace, Zephyr. The actions of Björn's priest have already brought us to the brink of disaster. Any deceit on our part would only accelerate our downfall. We have the most to lose if this situation worsens, and we understand the gravity of that responsibility."

Zephyr studied her in silence, his piercing gaze weighing her words. "Your logic is sound, but intentions can be fickle. How do I know this isn't just a ploy to gain leverage over both my people and Björn's followers?"

Nwadimma hesitated for only a moment before responding. "Because we would be placing ourselves under your scrutiny. You are welcome to send your people to oversee our operations or embed representatives within our court to ensure our neutrality."

Nwadieube, who had been silently fuming, finally interjected. "Sister, you overstep—"

"Do I?" she shot back sharply, cutting him off. "If we do nothing, Terra's wrath will crush us. If we act, we have a chance to rebuild trust and avoid destruction. Which path do you prefer, brother?"

Nwadieube's face darkened, but he didn't respond.

Zephyr's lips curled into a faint smirk. "A bold offer, Princess. One that suggests either desperation or genuine understanding of your precarious position. Still, the question remains—why should I care about this arrangement? My people have little interest in Björn's followers beyond ensuring they don't disturb us further."

Nwadimma inclined her head slightly. "Because Björn's influence is growing. His people are spreading, and their zealotry knows no bounds. Ignoring them now will only allow their power to fester unchecked. By using us as intermediaries, you can monitor their activities without exposing your people to unnecessary risks."

Zephyr tapped his fingers against his arm, his gaze drifting toward Nwadieube. "Your sister is far more persuasive than you, boy. But even her silver tongue doesn't guarantee my agreement."

He turned back to Nwadimma. "I'll consider your proposal, Princess. But know this—if I sense even a hint of betrayal or manipulation, there will be no negotiation, no second chances. My brother's wrath will be the least of your concerns."

Nwadimma nodded, her expression resolute. "Understood, Your Majesty. We will prove our sincerity through action, not just words."

Zephyr gave a curt nod and turned toward the door, his cloak billowing behind him. "You'd best hope your actions speak louder than your brother's arrogance," he said over his shoulder before disappearing into the corridor.

As the doors closed, Nwadiebube rounded on Nwadimma, his anger barely contained. "You dare to undermine me in front of him?!"

Nwadimma met his fury with a calm, piercing gaze. "I dare because you were driving us toward ruin. If you want to protect this kingdom, brother, then act like a king—not a petulant child."

Her words left him seething, but he couldn't refute them. Suddenly both their eyes widened as they both ran to the nearest window. Opening the window, they looked to the sky where the Zephyr stood in the sky above the city.

He seemed to sense them as he turned towards the window they were in, the king and princess both had a serious look in their eyes as they focused on the energy gathering at Zephyr's raised finger that was pointing down at their city.

They both heard a scoff carried by the wind to their ears, followed by Zephyr flicking his finger to the sky and him disappearing. His disappearance was followed by a loud sound of explosion, followed by a heavy gust of wind that swept throughout the whole city throwing everyone outside into disarray.

Nwadiebube and the princess closed the window with a heavy down look on their faces.

The room fell into a tense, suffocating silence as Nwadiebube and Nwadimma stood frozen by the window, their gazes lingering on the now-clear sky. The faint echo of Zephyr's parting show of power still reverberated in their ears. The city below was alive with chaos—citizens scrambling to recover from the gust of wind that had swept through like an invisible tidal wave. Shouts and cries carried through the streets, the sounds of people shaken to their core.

Nwadiebube clenched his fists, his jaw tight with suppressed rage. "He dares mock us, flaunting his strength in our own skies. As if to say we're beneath him."

Nwadimma's expression remained calm but grim, her voice sharp. "He didn't need to say it. He proved it."

She turned away from the window, moving to sit at the heavy oak table in the center of the room. "Zephyr's message is clear. He may have humored my proposal, but he holds all the cards. That was a warning, brother—a show of restraint masked as a threat."

Nwadieube followed her, pacing back and forth like a restless lion. "And what do you suggest? Bow to him? Let him treat us like insignificant insects?"

"Control your temper!" Nwadimma snapped, her tone cutting through his fury. "If you let your pride dictate your actions, you'll doom us all. Zephyr doesn't respect empty bravado; he respects results. If we're to survive, we must outthink him—not challenge him head-on."

Nwadieube stopped pacing, his gaze hardening as he met his sister's eyes. "And if he's already made up his mind? If he's just toying with us before destroying everything?"

"Then we ensure he has no reason to," Nwadimma replied, her voice steady. "His departure means he hasn't made a decision yet. That gives us time to act wisely. We focus on what we can control—fulfilling the promises I made and proving we're worth keeping alive."

"I didn't even get to mention on my plan to attack Osita, now it seems we really have to get in the same boat with the people of Björn" Nwadieube said as he sat down with a heavy look on his face.

Nwadimma placed a steady hand on her brother's shoulder, her voice calm but firm. "Aligning with Björn's people helps us kill two birds with one stone. We gain their assistance while offering Zephyr and his followers valuable intelligence."

Nwadieube turned to face her, his expression a mix of exhaustion and determination. He sighed as he rose to his feet. "Leave the court to you, then. I have a war to prepare for."

Nwadimma remained silent as she watched him walk away. His recent behavior—his impatience, his rash decisions, and above all, the fear that clouded his judgment—concerned her deeply. Her brother was afraid, and she could do nothing to change that.

She couldn't defy a god to save him. But she could protect their people from the consequences of his ambitions. He had promised her he would tread carefully, avoiding the wrath of the godlings, yet he had broken that promise. His actions had sealed his fate, and now he seemed determined to make a lasting mark, no matter the cost.

Their kingdom thrived on its militaristic foundation. Every citizen was trained, the values of discipline and readiness etched into their lives. It was a proud but rigid system, one that the court's leaders—men who thrived on conflict and conquest—would undoubtedly exploit when they learned of her brother's plans.

Nwadimma saw an opportunity amidst the chaos. As the interim voice in the court, she could subtly rally support for her cause. She would need allies, not only to temper her brother's reckless strategy but to ensure the kingdom's survival in the aftermath of war.

Osita, the looming opponent, was no ordinary adversary. The kingdom would need every ounce of its strength to face him. But Nwadimma couldn't help but think beyond the battle. Victory might come at a devastating cost: a shattered leadership, a depleted army, and a kingdom left vulnerable in the power vacuum that followed.

Her gaze shifted to the bustling streets below, where soldiers marched with precision and discipline. Their kingdom prided itself on its militaristic culture, and the citizenry held unwavering trust in their leaders' ability to protect and lead them. But would they follow a king driven by desperation? Or would they rally behind a queen who sought to safeguard their future over fleeting glory?

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Nwadimma clenched her fists, her nails biting into her palms. She had no desire to wrest power from her brother; such ambitions had never been hers. But his descent into fear-driven irrationality left her with no alternative. If the kingdom was to endure, it needed a leader who valued the lives of its people above personal glory. She would not oppose him outright—not yet. Instead, she would tread a cautious path, quietly building her influence and steering the court toward a more prudent course of action..

Zephyr who has left the human kingdom was now in the sky with his hand to his ear where a small magic circle can be seen, he was in contact with Terra.

"So, brother, have you found those responsible?" Terra's tone was unexpected—calm, almost gentle, devoid of the anger Zephyr had anticipated.

The unexpected softness in Terra's voice gave Zephyr pause. He had considered lying, spinning a story to mask the truth, but the genuine curiosity in his brother's tone changed his mind. "The priest and his army, whom your daughter vanquished, were the true culprits. Nwadieube's only involvement is that he possesses the branch—though I am certain it is now in his hands."

There was a moment of silence before Terra's voice broke through again, measured and direct. "Did you retrieve the branch?"

Zephyr exhaled heavily, glancing down at the kingdom far below. "No."

"Why not?" Terra's question was devoid of accusation, but it carried the weight of expectation.

Sitting cross-legged in the air, Zephyr ran a hand through his hair, his frustration evident. "The boy is a fool, brother. A frightened fool. His demeanor during our meeting reeked of desperation and impatience. It was clear he was chasing something, though I never gave him the chance to broach the subject."

He paused, his gaze distant. "I suspect the branch is integral to whatever scheme he's concocting. I admit, I'm mildly curious to see what he hopes to accomplish with it. However, I did manage to secure an advantage—either Nwadieube or his sister will act as informants for us against Björn's people."

There was a long silence on the other end before Zephyr finally asked, his voice tinged with uncertainty, "Did I fail you, brother?"

Terra's response did not come immediately, leaving Zephyr to sit with the weight of his question. After a pause that seemed to stretch endlessly, Terra's voice finally broke the silence. It was calm and measured, but heavy with thought.

"You did not fail me, Zephyr," Terra began. "You exercised caution, and that is something I value more than blind ambition. Retrieving the branch is important, but it is not the only matter at hand. What

troubles me more is the recklessness you described in this boy, Nwadieube. A frightened man with power is dangerous, not just to himself but to everyone around him."

Zephyr leaned back slightly, the tension easing from his shoulders as he listened to his brother's measured words.

"Still," Terra continued, "your choice to leave the branch in his hands for now is... acceptable. I trust your curiosity, Zephyr, but do not let it blind you. If his intentions threaten or endanger the balance we seek, I expect you to intervene—decisively."

There was a brief pause, the magical connection buzzing faintly with residual energy, before Terra's tone softened. "You have always sought my approval, brother, and I will tell you this: I value your judgment as a brother and one chosen by father. Do not doubt yourself. However, I must caution you to tread carefully. Nwadieube may seem desperate, but desperation often breeds unpredictability. And as for his sister... watch her closely. Sometimes the quiet ones are the most dangerous."

Zephyr smirked faintly at that. "You think she'll prove more formidable than her brother?"

"I think she's already proving it," Terra replied. "A woman who stands in the shadow of her brother's ambition yet moves with deliberate purpose... such individuals have the potential to reshape kingdoms."

Zephyr's expression grew thoughtful. "So, I continue to observe them both. Should I press them further, or let them make the next move?"

"Let them move," Terra answered. "But keep your presence felt, as a reminder. Sometimes a shadow is more powerful than a strike. If they falter, you will be there to correct the course."

Terra began laughing all of a sudden catching Zephyr off guard. Zephyr blinked, startled by the sudden laughter from his usually composed brother. Terra's mirth was an unexpected shift, and it caught him off guard.

"In our anger and your stress, brother," Terra chuckled, his voice light with amusement, "we forget that death isn't the end for our people—not with Grandfather watching over us. His influence ensures that our legacy continues, one way or another."

Zephyr frowned, trying to parse the sudden change in tone. "You're saying we shouldn't worry about losses because of Grandfather's... unique involvement?"

Terra's laughter softened, his voice taking on a more reflective quality. "It's not just that, Zephyr. I've heard from my daughter—her battle with the people of Björn was everything she could have hoped for. Fulfilling, even. She said they fought with honor, and when it was done, she was rewarded handsomely by Björn himself."

Zephyr's frown deepened, his curiosity piqued. "Rewarded by Björn? That doesn't sound like the actions of a mad god."

"Exactly," Terra said, his tone turning thoughtful. "Perhaps we've painted Björn and his people with too broad a stroke. It seems they value strength and resolve, even in their enemies. My daughter doesn't speak lightly of those she respects. For her to say that of Björn means there's more to them than we assumed."

"My other concern now is you brother, I believe you must have come to an agreement with Wulv about him informing you on the people of Björn, why involve the humans now. Don't you trust your fellow godling?" Terra asked.

To Terra's question, Zephyr replied with a chuckle and a question of his own "How long do you think we can be called fellow godlings?"

"Huh?" Terra said in confusion.

"I have been thinking on a lot brother since father made it clear that i am going to take over his position, this competition we just had made me realize we soon will be on our own"

"The other demigods like our father have a special connection we don't share with the other godlings. With their ascension close, we soon will be on our own and i am sure other godlings realize that too"

Terra fell silent for a moment, letting Zephyr's words sink in. The weight of what his brother was implying wasn't lost on him. The gods they had always looked up to, their parents, were nearing their

ascension to higher planes of existence. That would leave the next generation—those like him and Zephyr—alone to contend with a world full of competing agendas, unresolved conflicts, and fragile alliances.

"You're saying we're entering a new age," Terra finally said, his tone subdued but contemplative. "One where the bonds we have now may not hold the same weight."

Zephyr nodded, his expression unreadable. "Exactly. Right now, we share a loose camaraderie with the other godlings because of our shared lineage and the presence of our parents. But once they ascend, the foundation of that camaraderie will begin to crack. Wulv, for example, might be trustworthy now because of his connection with our sister, but what happens when his people start looking to him to secure their future? He'll have to make hard choices, just like us."

Terra hummed in thought. "And you think involving the humans gives you an extra layer of security? A failsafe in case the godlings... change?"

"Not just security, brother," Zephyr replied, his tone sharp and deliberate. "Leverage. Humanity may be fragile compared to us, but their numbers, ingenuity, and tenacity make them invaluable allies—or dangerous adversaries. If I can foster loyalty among them, it's a card I can play when the inevitable fractures among us begin to show. It's not about distrusting Wulv. It's about being prepared for the reality of leadership."

Terra sighed, though there was no frustration in it—just understanding. "You've always thought several steps ahead, haven't you? I can see why Father chose you to take his place."

Zephyr chuckled, though the sound lacked humor. "Thinking ahead is a necessity, Terra. I envy your position, you know. You get to focus on being a warrior, leading your people and guarding the garden. My path is... heavier. Strategy, politics, alliances—it's exhausting."

"And yet you wear it well," Terra said with a smirk. "But don't think you can do it all alone. Even leaders need support, Zephyr."

"I know," Zephyr admitted, his voice quieter. "That's why I'm building connections where I can—among the godlings, the humans, even the people of Björn. If I can weave a web strong enough, maybe... just maybe, we still will be at the top for whatever is coming."

The brothers shared a moment of silence, their connection humming faintly in the background. Finally, Terra spoke again, his tone lighter but still laced with meaning.

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"Well, I suppose I can't argue with that. Just don't forget, Zephyr—we're in this together. Whatever comes, you'll have me at your side."

Zephyr smiled faintly. "I'll hold you to that, brother."

Zephyr let his body free fall as he let go of his control, he felt the wind rushing by him and the elements excitedly fluttering around him as he got closer to the ground. Once he got close enough it was followed by a shockwave that pushed everything apart as he headed back home.

Down at the southern continent, back at the town now occupied by vampires. The existence of Roth and Xerosis have turned the whole forest near the town into a spooky place.

Every tree, plant and animal in the forest was dead, tree branches were naked with no leaves, the most disturbing thing was the never ending mist that blocked the sight of the whole forest even in day time.

At the town which now looked different from how it was before, looking more rich and developed, a weird sight can be seen in the town where kids are the one mostly seen occupying the town followed by a small group of men and women mostly those up in age.

This weird sight came as a result of vampires and humans mating, once Roth and Xerosis knew it was possible they began a radical take over of the closest town.

Ethan and Roth were prepared to use a heavy controlling hand to take over the town but Xerosis stopped that when she pointed out that a negotiation can be held with the humans of the town, where the benefits of being a vampire can be shown to them as long as both can work with each other.

At first the humans were terrified of the fact that a blood sucking monster is among them and is even going as far as trying to negotiate a deal with them.

Roth at the time was angry at Xerosis as the result she promised was what they got instead they had exposed themselves possibly to the empire.

That was when Xerosis took action, she was for some reason great with the women and it was her connection with the women that gave them the control over the town.

Xerosis's first target were the mothers and older women, she had Ethan give them the bite letting them get a taste of what it was to be extraordinary, what won them over wasn't the power but the eternal beauty.

Older women after the bite and feeding of blood found themselves younger and more good looking, it became easy from then on as women began pressuring them men and enticing them to the beauty of the power.

The agreement between humans and vampires centered on mutual benefit. The humans, bolstered by the resources and training provided by Roth and Xerosis, became stronger and more capable. They served dual roles: as a renewable source of sustenance for the vampires and as the parents of a new generation of hybrids.

This arrangement required strict oversight. The town's leadership established clear rules governing feeding, ensuring that no human was drained to the point of death or harm. In exchange, the vampires offered protection, prosperity, and the allure of eternal beauty and power to those willing to join their ranks.

The half-blood children quickly became the pride of the town. They embodied the ideals Xerosis had envisioned: a union of human adaptability and vampiric prowess. These children could walk in the sun, unlike their full-blooded counterparts, and exhibited extraordinary physical and mental capabilities.

As they grew, the half-bloods were trained rigorously, their talents nurtured to ensure they could protect and expand their community. They were seen as the bridge to a new future.

With their strength consolidated, the town turned its attention to the surrounding villages. The strategy was clear: integration through diplomacy where possible, but force if necessary. Xerosis spearheaded negotiations, her charisma and the allure of vampirism convincing many villages to join willingly. Those

that resisted were swiftly subdued by Roth and his vampires, their leaders made examples of to discourage further defiance.

Each village was assigned a specific purpose within the growing domain. Some became agricultural hubs, others centers for craftsmanship or trade. This division of labor ensured that the burgeoning society remained self-sufficient and prosperous.

While the town thrived in the sunlight, the forest became a haven for the vampires during the day. Its eerie transformation continued, with the first generation of vampires reshaping it into a sanctuary.

The mist grew denser, laced with newly emerging vampiric magic, creating a natural barrier that protected them from outsiders. Within the forest, the vampires built hidden structures—training grounds, resting chambers, and fortified outposts. The dead trees were used as raw materials for construction, their lifeless forms repurposed into hauntingly beautiful dwellings.

The forest also became a proving ground. Vampires tested their strength and honed their abilities in its labyrinthine expanse, while the half-blood children underwent rites of passage to prepare them for their roles in the community.

You would think the radical changes happening would be noticed by the empire but it wasn't as the continent was too big and so the empire tended not to have a strict look over their owned lands.

City lords and mayors functioned with near-autonomy, their allegiance to the empire demonstrated through periodic tributes rather than stringent oversight. As long as they maintained the peace and met their quotas, they were left to their own devices.

This hands-off approach gave rise to a patchwork of small, self-governed territories, each with its own unique culture and challenges. In this fragmented environment, the vampires' gradual rise went unnoticed. To the outside world, the changes in the forest and the nearby town appeared as nothing more than local peculiarities.

Also the distance from where the capital city and town being occupied by the vampires are months away but Roth knows that as they slowly expand sooner or later they will get on the empire's radar.

Which is why they are slow with their expansion and make good usage of the best advantage which is time and night. Deep in the misty forest where a peculiar castle stands which was the home of Roth and Xerosis.

Both can be seen having a serious conversation, from the expression of Roth it can be said the conversation was something he was unhappy with.

"Can't you wait a bit longer sister, we still have a lot of work to do together and I really will need your help with them" Roth said to Xerosis who looked at her brother before shaking her head.

"It's been a long time coming brother, I have held off these times because I wanted to be of help to you but not any longer, as demigod we don't need sleep as much but I find myself sometimes sleepy and being called out to having the same dream over and over again" Xerosis said with a sigh.

"If not for our previous encounter and our cousin Ikem who informed me about the beings I see in my dream, I would have still been in confusion"

Roth sighed hearing his sister's words, he knew she was right and that it was time to let her go but she has been a great help to him during this whole time since they started their journey of creation.

Unlike other demigods who were answering the call of ascension, Roth wasn't as he held it off, his creations were still young and needed a lot of protection and time to fully grow.

Roth placed a hand on Xerosis's shoulder, his grip firm but not forceful. "I won't pretend I don't understand your decision," he said, his voice tinged with a mixture of sadness and acceptance. "The call of ascension isn't something we can ignore forever. But you've done more than enough for me, for us. If this is your time, then you must answer it."

Xerosis placed her hand over his, offering a small, bittersweet smile. "I know how much you've sacrificed, Roth. You've delayed your own ascension for the sake of this world we've built, for the people you've brought together. I don't want my leaving to add to your burdens."

Roth shook his head, his eyes reflecting both pride and melancholy. "You're not adding to my burden. You're fulfilling your purpose. That's all I could ever want for you." He paused, then added, "But promise

me one thing, sister. When you ascend, don't forget about us down here. The forest, the children, the people you helped guide—they're as much a part of you as they are of me."

Xerosis nodded, her resolve firming. "I won't forget. This place will always be a part of me. And I will watch over from above till you decide to join me."

They stood in silence for a moment, the weight of the moment settling around them. Roth finally broke the quiet. "Before you go, let me make you a parting gift—something to carry a piece of this world with you into the next."

Xerosis raised an eyebrow, curious. "What kind of gift?"

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"You'll see," Roth said with a faint smile. He turned and walked toward the heart of their shared domain, the mist-shrouded forest that had become both their sanctuary and proving ground. Xerosis followed, her curiosity piqued despite the bittersweet occasion.

At the center of the forest lay a massive, ancient tree, its roots intertwining with the earth like veins of lifeblood. Roth approached the tree and placed his hands on its bark, channeling his power into it. The tree began to glow faintly, its light cutting through the ever-present mist. Slowly, a small, intricately carved wooden amulet emerged from the tree's bark, as though the tree itself had offered a piece of its essence.

"This," Roth said, handing the amulet to Xerosis, "is a fragment of our home, imbued with the strength of the forest and the memories of our people. It will remind you of what you've left behind, but also of what you've helped create."

Xerosis held the amulet in her hands, her expression softening. "It's beautiful, brother. Thank you."

Roth nodded as he waved his hand clearing the mist to show an opening where a giant structure was waiting around it were the first generation vampires who helped build the structure.

Xerosis looked at the giant ship standing in front of her, Roth held her hand as they walked into the ship which looked like a replica of their home "The woods in this forest has taken a property of ours which is the generation of mist to shield us from the sun and snooping eyes"

"This material was used in building this ship as you will be traveling far to the eastern continent where Ikem's father's realm will be more accessible to you. This ship was built to help with that and hide you and your special servants from the eyes of mortal"

Roth took her into the cockpit which was huge, he extended his hand taking the amulet and placing it on an opening, the ship hummed to life, placing a hand on the orb, the ship began to slowly leave the ground as it took to the sky.

No sound was heard from the ship, silent as the vampires who created it, Roth seeing his sister so absorbed with the sight smiled as he collapsed into a smoke of dark mist.

Xerosis caught herself as he ran outside to the railing of the ship where she looked down to see Roth, Roth had gathered the community to bid farewell to Xerosis. The humans and half-bloods who had come to know her as both protector and leader looked on with a mix of gratitude and sorrow. Children waving to her, their eyes filled with tears

Finally, under the light of the full moon, Xerosis stood at the edge of the Ship. She looked at Roth one last time, her voice steady but filled with emotion. "Take care of them, brother. And take care of yourself. You've carried so much for so long—it's okay to let others help."

Roth stepped forward and appeared on the ship and embraced her tightly. "I'll be fine. Go, Xerosis. Become the god you were always meant to be, I wish i could have made your journey easier but we are still weak in taking control of the gate"

Xerosis shook her head "You have done enough brother, no need to be impatient and remember mothers warning"

Roth was about to answer when both heard cackling of chains, Both Xerosis and Roth looked back to see Xerosis servant, the beautiful resentful souls of dead women and extending from their hand was the chain wrapped around the neck of men who did them bad now serving as the eternal undead knight.

Xerosis servant number hasn't grown since they both left their mother's realm as she no longer had access to dead souls like before, of course she could ask Wardenwild but she knew how important his work is and how much his presence was making a difference for both her and her brother.

Roth stepped back as the ship's engines—if they could be called that—began to pulse with greater energy, the dark wood and mist-infused materials glowing faintly as the craft prepared for its journey. The servants took their positions along the railing, their chains clinking softly, an eerie but harmonious symphony of power and purpose.

Before the ship fully ascended, Xerosis turned to Roth one final time. "Promise me you'll take care of yourself. And don't keep delaying your ascension for too long. The world you're building will endure, but you're needed elsewhere too."

Roth gave her a small, knowing nod. "In time, sister. I'll join you when the time is right."

The ship lifted off, its movements graceful and soundless, an unnatural marvel against the backdrop of the night sky. Xerosis stood at the edge of the deck, watching her brother and the community she had helped build grow smaller below.

The ship hummed softly as it ascended higher, the mist from the forest curling away as if reluctant to release its hold. Below, the gathered crowd continued to wave and cheer, their voices faint but filled with admiration.

As the ship ascended into the dark, star-speckled sky, Xerosis was taken aback by a familiar presence. She moved to the deck's rail, gazing down, only for her view to be enveloped by a radiant, luminescent light.

Xerosis's eyes widened in surprise as she spotted Wardenwild, whose spectral form floated mid-air, staring at her and the ship. Xerosis understood he had come to say goodbye. She raised her hand in a wave, and Wardenwild nodded in acknowledgment.

However, their expressions soon turned grim as an unwelcome presence made itself known. A massive, glowing eye appeared in the night sky. It first turned toward the forest, only to be blocked by the protective mist, before shifting its focus to Wardenwild and the princess.

Wardenwild's body began to glow brighter as a massive, skeletal hand materialized, reaching toward the ominous eye. "Stay in your lane, Murmur," he commanded, sweeping the bony hand across the eye, which dispersed into a faint dot of light.

With the intruder banished, Wardenwild vanished as well, leaving Xerosis alone. She gazed down at the forest below, worry etched on her face. It seemed the demon now knew where they were.

In the depths of Murmur's underground lair, the demon lord pressed a hand to his eye as a sharp pang coursed through it, fading just as quickly. Swirling the wine in his goblet, Murmur scoffed. "Pesky beast," he muttered, irritated by Wardenwild's interference.

He was well aware of the two siblings lurking on the edge of his domain but dismissed them as insignificant, unworthy of his concern. His focus lay on grander schemes—ambitions that extended beyond mere demigods, his challenge was the gods themselves.

His son, the empire's ruler, was expected to handle such nuisances. Unfortunately, the boy's ineptitude was a constant disappointment. In contrast, Murmur's daughter was proving far more capable, accomplishing significant feats beyond the continent. He saw the demigods' emergence as a necessary challenge to temper his son into usefulness.

But what truly unsettled Murmur wasn't Björn's recent return to sanity—it was the silence. The voices, the incessant whispers from the gods' counterparts beyond this realm, had abruptly ceased.

Murmur, a being intimately familiar with things like whispers and corruption, knew what silence signified in such situations. It was calm before a storm. His hand clenched instinctively, shattering the wineglass in his grasp and spilling its contents across the floor.

He had thought himself close to achieving his goal of dominion after banishing two origin gods. Yet now he faced a sobering reality: other powerful entities were eyeing this world as well.

Murmur found himself sharing the same sentiment as the left origin gods once the silence came. For most beings of dark power, Murmur knows whispers was meant to corrupt and twist the mind of those with strong mind but weaker will power, meaning the whisper him and the origin gods found annoying wasn't directed at them, but at those with strong mind who could hear them.

Coming to that conclusion, Murmur could guess why the whispers stopped as the gods counterpart had achieved their goal and was now waiting for the result.

Murmur had all his men immediately deployed scouring the whole continent to see if there has been any weird movement or development among the humans but nothing has been found yet till now, which made Murmur finding himself wishing for the whispers once again.

Elsewhere, Jaws, Mahu, and Crepuscular sat cross-legged in their respective domains, their senses attuned to the world. Unlike Murmur, who had found nothing, they had detected faint traces of something troubling—tainted divinities clinging to certain individuals scattered across various human cities.

The gods debated their next move. Informing the demigods seemed logical, but the implications were dire. The sight of godlings entering cities and seizing individuals without explanation would sow fear and rebellion among humans. Such actions could shatter the fragile trust between godlings and mortals, fueling resentment and potentially forging alliances against the godlings.

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The option of informing the humans has been thought of but knowledge of the gods' counterparts would plant dangerous seeds in mortal minds. The very idea of knowing such beings existing means they would fall into the sight of their counterpart who will take root in them. With the demigods' ascension approaching, the gods had to tread carefully, considering the consequences of their actions.

After a council with Nana, the gods reached a decision: they would wait. If their counterparts dared to descend into this world, it would constitute an act of intrusion according to the law, granting the gods the right to retaliate. Until then, they would keep watch.

As the gods monitored the movements of the tainted, their collective attention shifted toward the vast expanse of the ocean, where there was movement among man tainted.

On a small island in the ocean, a ship could be seen in the distance, steadily making its way toward the shore. The figures aboard were shrouded in dark robes, their hoods concealing their faces. On the backs of their robes was an ominous depiction: a mass of water with countless eyes peering from beneath the surface.

On the island, a massive sea beast lay in a deep, peaceful slumber. This was the demon Leviathan, Aska, who had retreated here to escape the maddening whispers of the deep. Leaving the sea had brought him much-needed relief; the whispers had grown faint, their torment dulled to the point of endurance.

Recently, the whispers had ceased entirely. This unexpected silence had lulled Aska into a deep, restorative sleep.

As the ship drew nearer to the island, its robed occupants murmured a spell that shimmered over their forms, cloaking them further.

Meanwhile, far away, the three gods who had turned their attention to the scene observed closely. Every figure aboard the ship carried traces of the same tainted divinity, but the Leviathan was the most saturated with this corruption—a level unlike anything the gods had ever encountered, which was why the creature was one of their most observed subjects.

The gods were not alone in their vigil. Beneath the waves, the mermen who guarded the island were also watching.

Deep under the ocean, a shark-like merman knelt before the shimmering projection of two figures: another sharkman and a mermaid. These were Flowua and Tide, the demigod siblings of the sea.

As the children of the ocean, their connection to its vast depths was unbreakable. When a revered resident of the deep—a creature as powerful as the Leviathan—abandoned its domain for the surface, it did not escape their notice. Flowua and Tide immediately sought to understand the Leviathan's motives.

Although they didn't recognize that this creature was no ordinary Leviathan, the siblings refrained from acting rashly. Instead, they dispatched scouts and soldiers to observe and guard it from a distance. When Aska chose this island as his resting place, it baffled the demigods, but they maintained their vigilance.

Today, those vigilant guards spotted the approaching ship and relayed the information to Flowua and Tide, whose projections now loomed over the sharkman messenger.

Tide turned to the kneeling merman, his tone measured but firm. "Stay hidden and remain observant. We need to understand their purpose before taking action."

Flowua nodded, her gaze sharp as she focused on the distant ship. Both demigods watched intently, their unease growing with every passing moment.

The gods continued observing the ship's approach toward the island. Their divine presence stayed attuned to every movement of the tainted individuals aboard. This wasn't the first time they had dealt with mortals tainted by divine corruption, but the concentration of taint in these figures was unsettling and growing.

Mahu spoke, her tone sharp and questioning as she continued scanning.

"Their spell is meant to keep them hidden and silent?."

Jaws gave a low growl of agreement.

"Their spell is purposeful, masking their presence not to the naked eyes but to the creature. It only proves they aren't ordinary mortals. What worries me most is that they dare approach the Leviathan so boldly."

Crepuscular's faintly glowing eyes narrowed as he shifted his focus to the Leviathan's resting form on the island.

"He slumbers, unaware of the web closing in around him. Their goal is clear, but the why eludes me. What purpose do they serve?"

Mahu's gaze hardened. "They serve none but the whispers that tainted them, and now the silence has emboldened them. These fools believe they are acting of their own will, instead they are but pawns in a game far beyond their comprehension."

As their conversation continued, they turned their focus to the mermen sent by Tide and Flowua.

Down beneath the waves, the sharkman who had alerted the demigods remained hidden but watchful, his powerful tail keeping him steady against the currents. He turned to his comrades, whispering a command.

"Hold your positions. Do not reveal yourselves until the demigods give the order."

Back in the depths of their respective kingdom, Tide and Flowua discussed their next move.

"Do we act now, brother?" Flowua's voice carried a note of uncertainty, though her resolve remained strong. "Or do we continue to watch and wait?"

Tide's expression remained unreadable as his gaze stayed fixed on the ship nearing the island. "We wait. They must reveal their purpose before we act. Sending soldiers now would risk escalating this situation before we understand what we're dealing with."

Flowua nodded but cast a wary glance toward the Leviathan. "If their purpose involves harm to the Leviathan, we may have little time to intervene. His fall would not go unnoticed—or unpunished by those in the deep "

The ship docked on the island, and the robed figures disembarked, their movements deliberate and synchronized. This time, additional captives accompanied them, tied up and struggling with bags over their heads. The captives' muffled cries and frantic movements were futile against the sheer strength of their captors. The robed figures, unyielding, kept their pace steady as they approached the sleeping Leviathan.

When they were close enough, the captives were forced to their knees. The bags were ripped from their heads, revealing faces twisted in fear and streaked with tears. The robed figures paid no heed to their terror. They drew curved knives and began carving sigils into the captives' flesh, their cries of pain reduced to muffled screams by the gags binding their mouths.

As the blood flowed freely from the captives' bodies, the robed figures knelt and began murmuring a ritual incantation. The blood darkened unnaturally, pooling into intricate shapes as the air grew heavy with malevolence.

On the island, Aska stirred. His massive tail twitched, causing tremors that rippled through the ground. Though the Leviathan remained in a deep sleep, his subconscious sensed the growing danger. The whispers that had tormented him before had ceased, but this new presence carried a weight far more sinister. He struggled to wake, but an unseen force held him bound to his slumber.

The robed figures, trembling from the tremors caused by Aska's restless movements, did not falter in their chanting. Their incantation reached its climax as the blood pooled together, taking on a life of its own. From the darkened blood, a clawed hand emerged, followed by the rest of a towering figure formed of pure shadow.

The gods observing the scene frowned in unison. They recognized the creature that emerged, but its appearance was unlike the shadowy, semi-corporeal entities they had encountered before. This being was more solid, compact, and disturbingly real, its form molded from darkness yet anchored in this reality.

The creature's gaze fell upon the sleeping Aska. Its voice, familiar yet subtly altered, echoed with mockery. "I told you—you belong to us. There is no escape."

The gods exchanged tense glances. Jaus frowned deeply as he realized the speaker was his counterpart from beyond the veil. The creature, sensing the gods' presence, tilted its head upward and smiled.

"Fancy meeting you all here," it said with a grin, its voice dripping with dark amusement. Without another word, it turned its attention back to Aska and strode forward confidently, stepping over the lifeless bodies of the sacrificed captives.

"He was confident because he knew as long as his true body doesn't descend here the gods are not allowed to take action and besides it wasn't like he came unrequested, he was very much sought out and he responded" Jaws counterpart thought to himself.

Mahu's voice broke the grim silence. "This is different. The barrier between worlds grows weaker. If they can manifest in this form, it's only a matter of time before their full presence forces its way into our realm."

Crepuscular's shimmering, ethereal form flickered slightly as he focused on the creature. "They've found a way to anchor themselves—blood rites. And those captives... they were marked before the ritual began. This was well thought out."

Jaus clenched his fists, his deep voice rumbling like distant thunder. "My counterpart," he muttered. "Always so bold. Always so sure of himself."

Beneath the waves, Flowua and Tide observed the unfolding events from their palace, their unease clear and visible. Tide, the more perceptive of the two, turned to the sharkman messenger, who knelt before their projections.

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"Fall back to a safe distance and remain hidden," Tide commanded, his voice filled with urgency. "If that thing takes control of Leviathan, none of you will stand a chance."

The sharkman hesitated but ultimately nodded, signaling his comrades to retreat further into the ocean's depths. Their movements were swift and silent, disappearing into the shadows of the sea.

On the island, Aska stirred again, his colossal body shifting as if resisting an unseen force. The dark figure knelt beside him, its clawed hand hovering just above the Leviathan's scaled hide.

"You've been stubborn," the creature mocked, its tone dripping with disdain. "But I am patient. You belong to the depths, to us. And now... you will return."

It placed its hand on Aska's side, and the Leviathan roared—a deep, resonating sound that shook the entire island. The robed figures staggered, but the dark entity remained unmoved, its claw digging into the Leviathan's consciousness.

"If you're going to act, now is the time," Mahu said, breaking the tense silence.

Jaus shook his head, his expression grim. "Not yet. It hasn't broken the rules—it hasn't fully descended into our realm, nor is its goal to take over the Leviathan's body."

Crepuscular spoke, his tone calm but grave. "It's eroding his consciousness, pushing him toward their side. If Aska falls, he'll become one of those robed thralls. But that also gives Jaus an opening."

Jaus raised a brow before laughing, he turned to his sibling as he said "I will be back." He stepped into the space around him as his figure disappeared.

The shadow creature, whose hand rested on the leviathan, frowned as he sensed a heavy presence descending. The sky above the island darkened, and the ocean began churning and growing louder, as though it were welcoming someone.

Moments before, after Tide had ordered his people to stand down, he had a brief conversation with his sister about whether or not to inform their father of the situation.

Communication between the gods has achieved a breakthrough for some time, and as a result, the potential for divine and mortal interaction has expanded.

Tide, sensing that the presence on the island was stronger and more powerful than them, immediately decided to inform his father, who assured him that he was already aware of what was happening.

Tide received immediate information on everything and quickly acted. He summoned an artifact, which was sent through a small portal to his men near the island.

Powerful artifacts are one of the ways discovered for mortal creatures to be able to let a god descend through them, The artifact could act as a sacrificial vessel, absorbing and redistributing the god's immense energy. Gods, especially one as powerful as Jaus, exert an immense amount of force when they descend into the mortal realm. If the soldier were to bear this alone, the transformation might be too much, tearing their body apart or shattering their mind. The artifact could act as a cushioning agent, absorbing the brunt of the divine power and allowing it to flow through the soldier without devastating them.

Depending on how long and how much power the god uses, the artifact tend to turn to dust after this usage but that at least spares the mortal from dying from the power.

Seeing the artifact has gotten to them, he then informed them of what was to come and who would be ready to give themselves up, allowing their god to take control.

The reason for this was that there was no priest of Jaus among the people guarding the island. One soldier, however, was ready and willing to surrender himself and be controlled by his god. Despite his devoutness, he subconsciously resisted the idea of being controlled.

Finally, one soldier stepped forward and offered himself up. He took hold of the artifact that Tide had sent through the portal and began to pray:

"O mighty Jaus, ruler of the tempest, keeper of the depths, I surrender my will to your boundless currents. Let my spirit be as a ship, unanchored, carried by your tides and shaped by your waves. Guide my soul through calm waters and raging storms alike, until I am no longer myself, but a vessel of your might."

The artifact in the soldier's hands glowed faintly, pulsating with a rhythm that mirrored the crashing waves of the turbulent ocean. As the soldier's prayer resonated through the waters, the surrounding air grew dense, charged with divine energy. The artifact's glow intensified, enveloping the soldier in a swirling vortex of water and light.

The other soldiers stepped back, reverent but cautious, as the transformation began. The man's form became cloaked in the divine essence of Jaus. His eyes glowed a deep oceanic blue, and his veins illuminated like rivers of light beneath his skin. The voice of the ocean seemed to echo through him, a low, reverberating hum that spoke of ancient power.

The shadow creature on the island, still gripping the leviathan, turned sharply toward the shore. It scowled, its form flickering as if destabilized by the overwhelming divine presence now approaching.

"You dare meddle?" the shadow creature hissed, its voice reverberating with malice. "This is no domain for gods."

The soldier, now a vessel for Jaus, stepped forward. His every movement was deliberate and powerful. The waves crashed violently behind him, as if in rhythm with his stride. His voice, layered with the commanding tone of Jaus, echoed across the island.

"Where my domain is touched, I am called. You have erred in your arrogance, shadow-born."

The creature sneered, attempting to mask its growing unease. "You abide by rules. You cannot act against me directly. Or have you gods forgotten your bounds?"

Jaus, speaking through the soldier, gave a low, rumbling laugh that seemed to shake the very ground. "True, but it so happens the beast you attempt to erode falls under my rule. As a divine being, I am allowed to defend what is mine."

"I am you, as much as you are me. And as I would say myself, I was invited, and I responded," Jaus said, his voice calm yet resonant, as his piercing gaze locked onto the kneeling, robed figures before him.

The shadow creature, its form a mass of twisting, shifting darkness, twitched unnervingly. Its glowing, hollow eyes flared briefly before it collapsed into a liquid shadow, melting into the ground. In an instant, it reappeared before the humans, its form coalescing with unsettling grace. A wave of its hand conjured a shimmering shield of dark, viscous water that encased the humans, pulsating faintly like a living membrane.

Jaus shifted in the body he had possessed, his movements unnatural as he adjusted to his host. With deliberate steps, he moved forward, his presence commanding the environment. The surrounding seawater began to writhe and climb as if alive, tendrils of liquid snaking up from all directions. The island floor became submerged, and soon the water had risen to knee level, its once clear surface now dark and ominous.

His eyes flicked to the humans, shielded by the shadow creature's barrier. A faint smirk tugged at his lips as he addressed his counterpart. "Your anchor?" he asked, his tone laced with mockery. The shadow creature offered no reply, but the deepening black hue of the water around it betrayed its emotions.

Aska, his consciousness momentarily freed from the haze gripping him, felt a surge of strength coursing through his body as the rising water resonated with his being. Slowly, he managed to open his eyes, but what he saw made him freeze. His vision was fractured. One eye showed the tangible world—an island sinking into a clash of elemental chaos. The other revealed something else entirely: a desolate, colorless void where nothing lived. Yet, he felt the oppressive sensation of countless unseen eyes staring back at him.

His normal eye took in the real world. The island was drowning in water of two distinct shades—one natural, the other an inky blackness. Two figures stood at its center. The shadow creature emanated a kinship he could not deny, its form shrouded in dark waters that stirred memories Aska had desperately buried.

The other figure, Jaus, was monstrous. A humanoid shark whose presence weighed heavier than even the shadow's. His sheer existence felt like a challenge, an insult to Aska's very being, and his blood roared in response, boiling with uncontainable energy.

Shaking his head to clear the disorientation, Aska turned his serpentine body to face them both. The sight solidified in his mind, and terror clashed with fury. Claws erupted from his scaled form as he reared up, unleashing a guttural roar that echoed across the island. Above him, a colossal magic circle materialized, glowing ominously like a halo of raw, unfiltered power.

Jaus and the shadow creature turned their attention to him. The shadow's expression twisted with annoyance, its contempt visible even without a clear face. Jaus, on the other hand, wore a look of weary indifference tinged with a warning, as if Aska's defiance was beneath him yet unwelcome.

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Under their oppressive gazes, the magic circle shattered like glass, leaving Aska staggering. His courage faltered, and he stumbled back before turning. Letting out a desperate roar, he dove headfirst into the ocean, his serpentine form cutting through the dark waters.

As he fled, his thoughts spiraled into panic. "Leave me alone. Just leave me alone. I just want to sleep... I just want to sleep..."

Aska's body coiled instinctively as he plunged deeper into the dark waters, the ocean swallowing him whole. The oppressive weight of the sea pressed against him, but it was nothing compared to the gnawing exhaustion in his very core. His mind was a storm, split between his fractured visions and the unrelenting pull of his body's primal needs.

Sleep. The thought consumed him, louder than the currents roaring past his ears. He could feel the Leviathan's body faltering, muscles sluggish and unresponsive, its powerful form trembling with every motion. The creature needed rest, and so did he—but the sensation of being hunted clung to him like a second skin.

The void from his corrupted eye throbbed in his skull, the lifeless world it revealed unnerving and relentless. Shapes—impossible, shifting things—seemed to flit through the edges of his vision, but they vanished when he tried to focus. It made him feel exposed, watched, vulnerable.

His other eye, the one rooted in reality, strained to keep track of the faint light filtering down from above. The water there was tinged with the two opposing forces he had fled: the shadow's oily corruption and Jaus's heavy, commanding presence. Even at this distance, their power churned the ocean, and he felt it reaching for him like cold, invasive fingers.

Aska's breaths grew ragged. No escape. No refuge. Just silence... just sleep... The thought was desperate now, clawing at his fraying mind. He sank lower, deeper, where the pressure would drown out the noise of the world. The Leviathan's instincts guided him, pulling him to a trench where the ocean's embrace was cold and ancient, where even the light dared not trespass.

His chest ached, his soul burned, but his need was simple: to escape, to find stillness, to hide in the crushing black until the storm within him quieted. Yet even as he slowed, curling into the depths, the corrupted vision remained. The empty, hollow world. The sensation of unseen eyes.

He shuddered. Sleep was a fleeting dream now, slipping further away. But it was all he had left to chase.

The ripples of Aska's retreat through the dark waters left behind a tense silence, broken only by the churn of waves now consuming the island. Jaus tilted his head, his shark-like maw twisting into a sharp, predatory grin.

"Your influence is waning," he said, mockery dripping from his tone. "Your prey seems more inclined to flee than to fight. How much longer until your grip shatters completely?"

The shadow creature's form writhed violently, its silhouette shifting with barely contained rage. Behind it, the kneeling humans within the protective dome of dark water remained untouched by the surging sea. Their prayers grew louder, more desperate, as though willing the shadow being to respond.

"I do not require his will," the creature hissed, its voice layered with venomous malice. "Only his essence. That... remains mine to command."

The waters surrounding the shadow god pulsed in response, an oily wave spreading outward to taint the already swelling ocean. The once-pristine sea took on a murky, malevolent hue as the corruption crept closer to Jaus.

He chuckled, raising a clawed hand. At his command, the ocean roared to life. Towering columns of water rose around him, shimmering with energy as arcs of lightning flickered between them. The sea glistened with the raw, untamed fury of storms, bending to its master's will.

Lightning coalesced in Jaus's hand, forming a trident of blinding brilliance. Its radiant glow pierced the darkened waters, a beacon of power against the shadow's creeping taint. With a deafening roar, Jaus hurled the trident forward, unleashing a bolt of lightning that split the ocean surface. Steam and water erupted skyward as the attack carved through the waves.

The shadow god moved unnaturally, sliding out of the trident's path with an alien fluidity. Jagged tendrils of darkness unfurled from its form, lashing out with predatory precision. Each strike sizzled and hissed against the golden aura shielding Jaus, their corrosive energy clawing at his divine essence.

The storm above answered Jaus's fury. Thunder cracked across the heavens, and rain fell in torrential sheets as the waves swelled higher, rising like walls of liquid rage. Leaping atop one such wave, Jaus surged forward, his trident carving deadly arcs through the storm. Each strike forced the shadow being to defend with blades of black ichor, their clashes sending shockwaves across the sinking island, now submerged up to its neck.

With a roar that vibrated through the waters, Jaus's maw crackled with lightning, releasing a feral blast that scattered the shadow's tendrils. Yet the creature was that bothered. It dissolved into the sea, a swirling pool of darkness that spread like ink, tainting the waters around Jaus. The ocean hissed and boiled under its corruption. From below, a massive claw of shadow surged upward, aiming to drag Jaus into the abyss.

Jaus slammed his trident into the claw, shattering it in an eruption of divine energy, but the shadow god was already reforming. It rose again, its shape shifting into a towering serpent-like figure, jagged rows of ethereal teeth snapping with murderous intent. The creature lunged, its corrosive form seeking to envelop him.

Rather than retreat, Jaus charged. Calling upon the storm, he summoned a massive bolt of lightning that struck his trident, empowering it with pure, destructive energy. With an ear-splitting roar, he drove the weapon deep into the serpent's gaping maw.

The resulting explosion of light and sound turned the darkening sky into day. The shockwave rippled through the storm and sea, scattering the shadow construct into a thousand writhing fragments. For a fleeting moment, the battlefield fell still, save for the relentless roar of the storm and the heaving of the corrupted sea.

Jaus' counterpart was relentless. Its shattered fragments reformed into a swarm of smaller, razor-edged constructs, each one a fragment of its malice and power. The swarm converged on Jaus, attacking from every direction with razor-sharp precision. For the first time, the sharkman's mortal form faltered under the relentless onslaught. Blood stained the darkened sea as shadowed tendrils pierced his defenses, leaving trails of searing agony in their wake.

Yet Jaus remained undeterred. His lips twisted into a grin, "he was enjoying this". Despite the wounds, he felt the artifact still holding strong within him, its resilience fueling his confidence. "Let's see how much more you can take," he muttered, his voice steady despite the chaos.

With a thunderous roar, Jaus unleashed a surge of divine energy. The sea roared in response, rising in an enormous vortex of water and light that encased his body. The churning spiral shimmered with raw power, pulling the shadow constructs into its depths. Their corrosive energy dimmed against the purifying force of Jaus's divinity, their screams of rage drowned by the relentless storm.

Jaus condensed the vortex into a single, radiant orb of energy, pulsing with the might of the sea and storm. Gripping his trident, he drove it downward with all his strength, releasing the orb in a catastrophic burst of destruction.

The ocean floor trembled violently as the explosion erupted, a blinding flash of energy ripping through the darkness. The shadow god's form was obliterated, scattered into nothingness. Even the humans once sheltered by its dark shield were erased, leaving no trace behind. The force of the blast carved an immense crater into the seabed, displacing the water entirely.

As the sea began its slow return, Jaus hovered mid-air, his body silhouetted against the aftermath. Below him yawned a vast, spiraling void—a deep, gaping hole where the explosion had struck. The waters struggled to fill the abyss, swirling downward as if dragged by an unseen force. Occasional flashes of lightning illuminated the depths, revealing the sheer scale of the devastation.

Jaus floated back, moving to a safer distance. His mortal vessel trembled, cracks spidering across its form. With a final, audible snap, the artifact that had fused him to the body disintegrated into dust. Freed from its confines, Jaus's divine essence lingered briefly in the air, before dissipating into the roaring storm.

The turbulent weather and raging sea began to calm as Jaus's presence faded. He rejoined his siblings, who were staring down at the void where the island had once been.

Jaus wore a bright smile. "That was fun," he said, clearly unbothered by the destruction.

Mahu shook her head before turning to Crepuscular. "This will remind them that we haven't let our guard down. But in response, they might become even sneakier."

Crepuscular nodded, his form beginning to dissipate as his consciousness returned to his true body. "We'll need to watch them more closely. Today's events prove they're planning something."

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Mahu added, her tone firm, "One thing is certain: they won't make the same mistake twice. Jaus's counterpart crossed a line, which allowed our interference. Next time, they'll avoid that."

As her form and Jaus's continued to fade, Mahu's voice lingered in the air. "Ember is close to finishing the seals."

Meanwhile, in a world ruled by goblins, now plunged into total war, a battlefield roared with the clash of demons and ratmen. Amid the chaos, a massive carriage, invisible to the naked eye and undeterred by the bloodshed, moved unbothered through the carnage.

At the front of the carriage, a goblin dressed like a butler sat with an air of indifference. Occasionally, his hand reached out to grasp the soul of a ratman, tearing it to pieces. Some fragments he consumed, while the rest he shared with his companion.

The interior of the carriage, however, was a sight unsuitable for children—or most eyes, for that matter. What had previously been a modest space with seats and a table was now transformed. A large, flower-adorned bed dominated the space, where Ikenga and Keles lay together, entirely unclothed and deeply entangled.

The two gods had seemingly forgotten their earlier resolve to avoid disrespecting Crepuscular—or, in Ikenga's case, Mahu's potential reaction to their situation.

The reason for their current state? Boredom.

The journey to reunite with Phantom was a long one, and neither Ikenga nor Keles had initially minded. For the first two months, they busied themselves observing the monotonous and mildly interesting lives of the ratmen marked by Ikenga. But as the invasion escalated into full-blown war, they abandoned their vigil, turning their focus to the battles.

Even the war, however, eventually lost its allure. With nothing left to distract them, Ikenga found it increasingly stressful to share such close quarters with Keles, especially after they had both made their feelings for each other clear.

There were stolen glances, followed by shy smiles and quick lookaways. Her pale skin seemed to catch his eye at the worst—or best—moments, slipping into view beneath her robe.

One day, Ikenga gave in. He made his move, only to discover that Keles had been feeling the same. What followed, however, nearly made him question his own divine nature as he thought that was something that only happened to mortals.

He performed poorly at first—a fact that might have embarrassed him if Keles hadn't stepped in to guide him. Ikenga had approached her with the same approach he used with Mahu, who preferred a rougher, more aggressive style.

But Keles was the complete opposite. Aggression didn't move her. She responded to gentleness, a slower pace, steady eye contact, and an abundance of kisses. With her guidance, Ikenga learned how to please her, adapting his usual approach to something softer and more intimate.

Ikenga remembered her exact words being "You're not a beast, Ikenga. If you're going to touch me, do it like you're sculpting something beautiful, not breaking it."

Her words were both a chastisement and an invitation, a call for him to step into a realm of intimacy he had never truly explored before. For gods like Ikenga and Keles, who embody primal aspects of existence, the act of intercourse transcended the purely physical. It was a merging of their divine essences, their powers intertwining in a dance that was as much about connection as it was about pleasure.

For Ikenga, the god of nature and cures, his essence was one of life, growth, and renewal. His energy flowed like rivers through fertile lands, carrying with it the promise of vitality and healing. His touch, when guided by gentleness, became an extension of this power, nurturing rather than conquering. When Keles taught him to slow down, to savor every moment, she was asking him to channel this divine energy into something that resonated with her own nature.

Keles, the goddess of darkness and death, was an entity of quiet inevitability and solemn beauty. Her essence did not seek to destroy for destruction's sake but to end things with grace and finality, making way for new beginnings. For her, the act was not about domination or yielding but about balance. Her pale skin, cool and smooth like marble, seemed to absorb Ikenga's warmth, creating a harmony that neither had anticipated.

When their bodies moved together, it was not a clash of opposites but a melding of complementary forces. Ikenga's warmth and vitality seeped into her, and in return, her stillness and calm tempered his wildness. The flowers that adorned the bed bloomed and wilted in cycles, reflecting the ebb and flow of their divine energy.

As they continued, Ikenga began to realize that his usual approach, fueled by vigor and dominance, was ill-suited for Keles. Her needs called for him to explore a different side of himself—one that was patient, attentive, and deeply present. Each kiss, slow and deliberate, became a prayer of devotion. Each caress was an acknowledgment of her divinity, her individuality.

He learned to read the subtle cues in her body—the way her breath hitched when his hand lingered on the curve of her hip, the way her eyes softened when he whispered her name. The steady eye contact she demanded at first unnerved him, but he soon found it grounding, an unspoken vow of honesty and vulnerability between them.

Keles, for her part, found a quiet satisfaction in guiding Ikenga. Despite his initial fumbling, she appreciated his willingness to learn and adapt. There was a softness in her laughter when he got something wrong, and a spark of pride when he finally understood what she needed. She showed him that intimacy was not a battlefield to conquer but a sacred space to share.

Her cool touch against his heated skin created a tantalizing contrast, and the way she looked at him—with both mischief and something deeper—made him feel seen in a way he had not been before.

For Ikenga, being with Mahu, the goddess of the moon and motherhood, was entirely different. Mahu embodied nurturing warmth, boundless care, and a love that felt as vast and eternal as the night sky. Their intimacy reflected these qualities, a dynamic of raw passion tempered by deep emotional connection.

Mahu's approach to intimacy was neither timid nor overly restrained—it was a balance of fierce passion and tender devotion. She could match Ikenga's fiery energy, meeting his roughness with her own strength, but she did so with an undercurrent of care. Every movement, every gasp, every embrace from Mahu carried an unspoken promise: "You are safe here, you are loved."

Her moonlit skin seemed to glow with a silvery light, making her appear ethereal in their shared moments. The curves of her body felt like the gentle slopes of rolling hills, welcoming and grounding, while her steady gaze reminded him of the unchanging phases of the moon—a constant in his life.

Mahu's connection to Ikenga was deeply emotional, tied to her role as the goddess of motherhood. She had a way of making Ikenga feel whole, seen, and cherished, as though their union was not just a physical act but a reaffirmation of their shared purpose as gods who shaped life and cared for creation.

The scene changed as the carriage remained perched on the hill, the air was heavy with the sounds of war—clanging metal, guttural roars, and the sharp crackle of arcane explosions. Despite the chaos below, Ikenga appeared strangely calm, his head nestled in Keles's lap as she absentmindedly ran her fingers through his hair. Her dark, cool aura enveloped them, a stark contrast to the blazing inferno of the battlefield below.

Vaegur adjusted his chef's hat with a theatrical flair as he stirred a cauldron over a portable flame, the tantalizing scent of spices wafting through the air. Lavderh, standing a few paces away, held down a squirming ratman with one hand. His expression was one of quiet satisfaction as he bit into it.

Ikenga's one eye scanned the battlefield below, drawn to the ebb and flow of the battle. The ratmen were a surprising force. Even as the demons tore through their ranks with brutal efficiency, more ratmen poured forth from the glowing portals erected by the goblin mages. Each wave was equipped with crude but effective technology, and their sheer numbers made them a formidable opponent.

"It's fascinating," Ikenga murmured, his voice low but contemplative. "How they keep coming, no matter how many fall. Almost like an unending tide."

"They're like cockroaches," Keles replied, her tone flat, though her fingers never paused in their gentle motion through his hair. "Persistent. Hard to kill entirely."

Ikenga chuckled softly. "Persistent, yes. But also... adaptable. Their capacity to expand, even in such dire circumstances, makes me wonder if this is what the mages were hoping for. Were they experimenting on this world to replicate the ratmen's resilience? Their ability to endlessly multiply?"

He paused, the thought lingering, but then shook his head. "No... that doesn't seem to be the case. The seal placed on the ratmen's potential suggests they had something else in mind".