

## **Guardian gods 411**

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Ursula's expression softened, though the weight of her concern lingered in her eyes. "Good. Just remember, strength isn't only about enduring pain or overcoming obstacles. It's also about knowing when to let others help you. Even the strongest flames need fuel to keep burning."

Xerosis gave a small nod, her lips curving into a faint smile. "I'll keep that in mind. Thank you, Ursula."

Ursula nodded as the call ended, leaving both of them lost in their own thoughts.

While the demigods were laying out their plans, so was Nwadieube. He had fallen into a calm state after receiving word from Yuki that the gods he feared would punish him were not present in their world at the moment.

This news lifted a significant burden from him. His previous haste to accomplish his goals had left many gaps in his kingdom's stability. The most painful of these was the theft of the sacred branch.

Ezinne had used half of the branch to break through to the fifth stage, leaving only the other half. This meant they had the potential to produce another fifth-stage death shaman to strengthen their forces.

Unfortunately, the process for achieving a death shaman breakthrough proved problematic. Unlike Ezinne, who had successfully reached the underworld and condensed her domain with the help of her ancestors, the death shaman who followed her was not as fortunate.

This second death shaman attempted the same process, but the ancestral souls were overwhelmed. The underworld souls, drawn by the benefits that Ezinne's ancestral soul was reaping, could not stand by and watch another chance be lost like last time.

In their overwhelmed state, a soul that was not of their ancestry infiltrated the process. This foreign soul played a pivotal role in condensing the death shaman's domain. While the result was a new fifth-stage powerhouse, there was a major drawback: the death shaman now had to pay a price to activate their domain. This was in stark contrast to Ezinne, whose ancestors aided her freely without any cost.

Ezinne proposed returning to the underworld to expel the foreign soul with the help of her ancestors. However, Nwadieube found himself rejecting this offer.

The foreign soul's capabilities exceeded what was required for the war Nwadieube was planning. While Ezinne's domain was powerful, it was constrained by a sense of honor. The foreign soul's domain, by contrast, had no such restrictions. It drew power from an almost limitless pool of forgotten souls—remnants of those denied proper rites, erased from memory, or consumed by resentment in the afterlife. Their vast numbers made the foreign soul's strength nearly inexhaustible.

However, this immense power came with risks. When too many of these forgotten souls were summoned, they became uncontrollable, threatening everyone involved. Still, Nwadieube believed the death shaman would know their limits.

At the moment, Nwadieube was reading a message sent by the apelings. To his surprise, it was a formal letter—something he had never received before.

As he opened the letter, a powerful presence emanated from it, making him sit upright with trembling hands.

There was no doubt in his mind: this letter was not written by Zephyr. It must have come from the true leader of the apelings. The letter states "A month from now, at night when the moon is high. A parade of apelings will be moving through your territory. This is something of importance for the safety of the world and it would be best kept secret."

The message sent shivers down his spine. A parade of apelings, moving through his territory under the cover of night. What could it possibly mean? And why the secrecy? He felt a growing sense of unease, a premonition of something significant and potentially dangerous.

Nwadieube picked up his pen and began to write. He understood this wasn't just a letter; it was the start of a dialogue. "Why the secrecy, your grace?" he wrote. "Are my people in danger? How can we help?"

After a moment, words began to form on the original letter, answering his questions. "The secrecy is for your safety and is needed to deal with the enemy. Your people are in no danger, if all goes well. As for how you can help, ensure the parade is undisturbed and hidden from the view of your people."

Then, the message continued, causing Nwadiebeube's breath to hitch. "The enemy is among your people. Inform your alliances and other smaller kingdoms. Do not be surprised and act when sudden changes begin arising among your people. We are there to attract their attention."

Nwadiebeube didn't get a chance to write a reply. The letter in front of him crumbled into dust, leaving him with the chilling pronouncements and a heavy burden of responsibility. The enemy was among them. He had to warn his allies, prepare his kingdom, and somehow ensure the apeling's parade remained hidden, all while dealing with an unknown threat lurking within his own walls.

The dust swirled on the table, a ghostly reminder of the urgent message. Nwadiebeube stared at it, his mind reeling. The implications were staggering. An enemy within, a secret parade, and the safety of the world hanging in the balance. He had to act quickly.

He immediately summoned his most trusted advisors. When they arrived, he recounted the message, the crumbling letter, and the chilling warning. The room fell into a stunned silence. The idea of an enemy hiding within their own kingdom was unsettling, to say the least.

"We must inform our allies at once," Nwadiebeube declared, breaking the silence. "Messengers must be sent to every kingdom we are bound to, and even to those smaller territories who look to us for protection. We must warn them of the potential threat."

One of his advisors, a seasoned general named Okeke, spoke up. "But what of this parade, Your Majesty? How do we ensure it remains hidden? And how do we identify this enemy among us?"

Nwadiebeube sighed. "The apelings said the secrecy is for our own safety. We must trust them on that. As for the parade, we will increase patrols along the expected route, under the guise of increased vigilance against bandits. We will also issue a curfew on that night, claiming it is for a special ceremony. This should keep most of our people indoors."

"As for the enemy, who do you think they are?" Nwadiebeube asked, and the room fell silent.

A figure emerged from the shadows. Everyone rose to greet her. "Princess," they murmured respectfully. Nwadimma nodded to her brother, the king.

A seat was brought for her, and she settled onto it, her gaze fixed on Nwadiebeube. "You already have a suspect, but you're still uncertain, am I right?"

Nwadiebeube nodded. "I do indeed, sister. If my suspicions are correct, then I understand why the apelings asked us to stay clear. With our own resources, we could never find this enemy."

Okeke connected the dots, a grave tone entering his voice. "Your Majesty, are you suggesting that the enemy is responsible for the occasional inexplicable disappearances of people?"

Nwadiebeube and the princess both nodded. The air in the room grew heavy with dread. The disappearances had been a source of fear and speculation for years, a dark undercurrent in their otherwise prosperous kingdom. The idea that a hidden enemy was behind them, an enemy so powerful that even the apelings advised caution, was deeply unsettling.

Nwadimma spoke, her voice calm but firm. "These disappearances are not random. They are deliberate, orchestrated. This enemy is cunning, well-hidden, and possesses abilities beyond our current understanding. That is why the apelings are taking the lead. They are the only ones equipped to handle this threat directly."

The implications were clear. This was not a threat they could fight conventionally. It was a shadow war, fought in secrecy, with stakes far higher than they had ever imagined. Their role was simply to stay out of the way, to ensure the apelings could operate unimpeded, and to protect their own people from the fallout. But knowing the enemy was among them, responsible for the disappearances that had haunted their kingdom, made the waiting all the more agonizing.

The meeting adjourned, leaving Nwadiebeube alone in the council chamber. The weight of the apelings' message, the hidden enemy, and the disappearances settled heavily upon him. Yet, amidst the chilling revelations, one thing remained unchanged: his resolve to wage war against Osita. In fact, the current situation only solidified his conviction.

The knowledge that a hidden enemy lurked within his kingdom, a threat so powerful that even the apelings were involved, didn't diminish his desire for conquest. Instead, it clarified his purpose. Taking over Osita's lands and resources was no longer just a matter of expanding his kingdom; it was a strategic move, a way to gain the attention of the godlings. He chafed at the idea of being a mere bystander while supernatural forces battled for the fate of the world. He refused to be relegated to the sidelines.

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A bitter resentment simmered within him. The absurdity of it all struck him: he was planning war games, strategizing troop movements and siege tactics, while beings of immense power were engaged in a struggle of cosmic proportions. It felt trivial, almost insulting. He envisioned himself as a child playing with toy soldiers while a storm raged overhead.

"They think they can handle everything themselves," he muttered to the empty room, his voice laced with frustration. "They think they can keep us in the dark, protect us like children. But I will not be protected. I will not be kept in the dark."

He paced the room, his mind racing. He understood the apelings' desire for secrecy, their need to operate without interference. But he also felt a burning need to contribute, to prove his worth, to show the godlings that he was not just a king of men, but a force to be reckoned with.

"If they want to fight their secret war," he thought, "then I will fight my own. I will expand my kingdom, amass power, and make myself impossible to ignore. When the dust settles, they will see what I have accomplished. They will see that I am not a child to be protected, but an ally to be reckoned with."

Nwadiebeube wasn't the only king to receive this message—Osita did as well. Major kingdoms across different continents were sent the same warning, even Murmur, who had believed his presence had long been forgotten.

The entire world was in agreement about the plans of the demigods. Even Murmur, who had stepped back from the mortal realm and refrained from exploiting the situation, realized there was nothing to gain if everything was lost to the gods' counterparts.

The only one planning to make a move was Björn, who received the message from Mahu. For him, there was no better time to insert himself and his ambitions than when the world's attention was consumed by the demigods.

Björn had decided that Yuki would bear his child, who would ascend to the throne of the Björn Kingdom. This child would stabilize the kingdom's fractured structure and establish it as one of the powerhouses of the Northern Continent, alongside the werewolves and humans of the Silver Kingdom.

Change was occurring rapidly with the coming ascension of the demigods. Björn knew that the origin gods would no longer focus as intently on the mortal realm, as one of their primary concerns—the safety of their children—was now addressed. With the ascensions underway, this concern was no longer relevant.

For mortals who understood the implications of this shift, they recognized it as their moment to rise and cement their positions. Without the weight and constant oversight of the demigods and gods, it was no surprise that the world would soon fall into a constant state of war.

Björn was not surprised by the changes unfolding. As a former demon who had ascended to godhood, he likened the situation to the power struggles that occurred among demon lords who conquered layers of the Abyss.

In these new positions of power, their perspective broadened to encompass grander schemes. Souls and fleeting gains of power became lesser interests.

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Take, for example, a high-tier demon known as the Prince of the Abyss. His title wasn't merely a reflection of his strength; it spoke to the nature of his domain—a layer of the Abyss that was a universe unto itself. His game differed entirely from that of the origin gods, whom he viewed as insignificant compared to the vastness of his own influence.

The same would apply to the origin gods themselves once their two siblings returned. Their perspective and understanding of existence would inevitably expand, and with it, their game would evolve. No longer concerned with the petty struggles of mortals, their attention would turn to even greater cosmic endeavors.

In contrast to this were the ascended gods, like Björn, and the soon-to-ascend demigods. The waning interest of the origin gods presented an opportunity—and a threat. For ascended gods, faith was the lifeblood of their existence, and the divine fire of faith from mortals couldn't afford to be extinguished. Where the origin gods saw irrelevance, the ascended gods saw necessity.

Björn, in particular, understood this dynamic all too well. He knew that the shift in divine attention would leave a vacuum, one that the ascended gods would fiercely compete to fill. The demigods, on the verge of their transformation, would soon join this struggle, vying for power and influence in a world no longer governed by the old gods' watchful eyes.

The mortal realm would feel the weight of this competition. Faith, once a source of solace and guidance, would become a commodity—a resource harvested by ascended beings to fuel their strength and secure their positions. Temples would rise, wars would be waged, and alliances would form, all in service of these ascended gods who now stood as the caretakers of divine presence.

Björn's ambitions placed him squarely at the center of this new order. For him, the ascension of the demigods wasn't a threat—it was an opportunity. He had already positioned himself to claim the faith and loyalty of the Northern Continent, using Yuki as a key piece in his plans.

In this chaotic landscape, mortals, too, would be forced to adapt. Those who understood the shifting tides of power would rise to prominence, while others would be swept away by the coming storm. The world was no longer a place of balance and peace; it was a crucible of change, forged by the ambitions of gods, demons, and mortals alike.

And as the first sparks of war began to ignite, one truth became undeniable: the era of divine oversight was over. What came next would be determined not by the gods of old, but by those who dared to grasp the reins of power in this newly untethered world.

A week before the demigods have to carry out the plans, the Björn kingdom was determined to take a strong step in their status. Meanwhile behind the scenes this was a well detailed plan laid out by both Björn and Yuki.

The air in Björn's great hall was heavy with the tension of expectation. The banners of the god of insanity and warfare, adorned with chaotic patterns and streaks of red, hung from the high ceilings. Yuki stood at the center of it all, her mind steady despite the weight of what lay ahead.

She had been aware of the rift within Björn's kingdom since her arrival. There were those who saw her as a herald of change, a symbol of progress and stability, while others whispered of betrayal, accusing her of dulling the edge of Björn's legacy. The alliance she and Björn had forged was fragile, held together by a delicate balance of mutual need and ambition.

Now, the time had come to prove her worth—not just to Björn, but to his people.

The Colosseum was sacred ground, a testament to the kingdom's devotion to their god. It was a place where blood spilled freely, where warriors fought not for survival but for the sheer glory of chaos. To participate was to embrace the essence of Björn's teachings. For Yuki, this was more than just a test of strength; it was a statement to both her allies and her detractors.

In her private quarters, Yuki prepared for the trial ahead. Her armor, forged from dark iron and inscribed with runes of protection, gleamed under the flickering torchlight. She ran her fingers along its edges, feeling the weight of each piece as it settled onto her body.

"You're certain about this?" asked Kalen, her trusted advisor. He had been a staunch supporter of her since the beginning but had grown increasingly concerned about the demands placed on her.

"I have no choice," Yuki replied, fastening the last strap of her gauntlet. "The Colosseum is more than a tradition; it's a crucible. If I fail to honor it, I'll lose the trust of those who cling to the old ways. Björn's kingdom will fracture, and everything we've worked for will crumble."

Kalen frowned but nodded. He handed her a blade, its surface etched with Björn's sigil. The weapon felt alive in her hands, its hilt warm as if it carried the faint heartbeat of the god it represented.

"The insanity will try to consume you," Kalen warned. "The arena has a way of amplifying the madness in those who step inside. Keep your focus, Yuki. Remember who you are."

She gave him a faint smile. "Who I am is precisely why I must do this."

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The Colosseum roared with life as Yuki stepped into the blood-soaked sands. The stands were packed with thousands of Björn's followers, their chants rising like a storm. Warriors, clad in mismatched armor and painted with symbols of chaos, circled the arena, their eyes gleaming with bloodlust.

A booming voice echoed through the Colosseum. "Today, the outsider steps into our sacred grounds! Let her prove her worth in the eyes of Björn!"

Olaf sat in his place, watching as Yuki marched into the colosseum. He couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't as it seemed.

His suspicion stemmed from Finn, who sat calmly on the other side of the colosseum, his gaze also fixed on Yuki. Olaf knew Finn despised Yuki's way of doing things. For Finn to pass up an opportunity like this—where Yuki's life could so easily be claimed by anyone—was strange. It was unlike him, and Olaf couldn't help but feel that something was going on behind the scenes.

Suddenly, Olaf stopped himself mid-thought. Whatever schemes were unfolding beyond his understanding, they didn't concern him. His position and role within the Björn empire were unshakable.

With that thought in mind, he turned his attention to the beautiful woman beside him. Grabbing her roughly, he tore her upper clothing to shreds, leaving her bare-chested. She didn't seem to mind; instead, she pressed herself closer to him. Olaf sucked on her breasts, drawing a moan from her lips as his eyes took on the same red glow that seemed to infect everyone in the colosseum.

Madness and insanity had reached their peak. Everyone, even those who had tried to suppress their primal instincts, found themselves overcome by the frenzied atmosphere. Their eyes glowed red, filled with anticipation for the bloodshed they were about to witness.

On the other side of the colosseum, Finn noticed the growing chaos. A bright smile spread across his face, his inhuman form briefly flickering as a single wing sprouted from his back. This was the sight he longed to see—something he believed his people had lost long ago.

Rising from his throne-like seat, Finn roared, "Björn! Björn! Björn!" His chant spread like a plague throughout the colosseum, echoing even in the minds of the kingdom's residents. Soon, everyone was chanting Björn's name in unison.

In his kingdom, Björn basked in the pure, intoxicating power of the faith being sent to him. The madness only confirmed that his plan was the right course of action.

Down in the colosseum, Yuki stood at its center, second-guessing her decision to accept this deal.

The chants of Björn's name filled her ears as she looked around at the sea of red, glowing eyes fixed on her. The scene was hauntingly familiar. It reminded her of the first time she had arrived in the Björn kingdom—how barbaric and repulsive she had found them then.

All the work she had done over the years felt meaningless. Even those who had once been her allies had succumbed to the frenzy.

The worst part was that she, too, could feel herself slipping. The blood-red soil of the colosseum seemed alive, seeping a red mist that made her blood boil with excitement. Her pupils flickered in and out of a deep crimson as she fought to maintain control.

It was at this time that the gates of the colosseum opened up. The roar of the crowd intensified as other opponents stepped into the arena. The air crackled with a palpable bloodlust.

The Björn warriors were in their Inhuman forms displaying their animalistic features: a boar's tusk jutting from a man's jaw, feathered wings sprouting from a woman's back, reptilian scales shimmering beneath pale skin. Their eyes burning with a savage hunger for blood.

The air crackled with raw bloodlust, each opponent emanating an almost suffocating aura of power. The chant of "Björn! Björn! Björn!" reverberated through her bones, the red mist thickening around her like a tangible force.

The wolf-headed warrior charged first, his obsidian claws slicing toward her face with a speed that caught her off guard. She barely managed to twist away, the claws grazing her cheek and leaving three deep, burning cuts. Yuki retaliated with a kick aimed at his knee, but instead of snapping, the joint bent unnaturally, absorbing the blow. His jaws snapped toward her throat, forcing her to wrench herself back, narrowly avoiding death as his teeth clicked inches from her skin.

Before she could recover, the serpentine warrior struck from her flank, his venomous claws slashing toward her ribs. Yuki twisted just in time, but the tips of his claws raked her side, tearing through her leather armor and drawing blood. The venom burned as it seeped into the wound, sending a wave of nausea through her. She stumbled, her vision blurring for a moment, and that was all the opening the bear-armed brute needed.

With a guttural roar, he barreled into her like a freight train, his massive fists hammering down. Yuki barely managed to raise her blade in defense, but the force of the blow sent her skidding across the blood-soaked sand. Her arms screamed in pain, the impact nearly dislocating her shoulders.

The crowd erupted into a frenzy, their cheers and chants blending into a deafening cacophony. Above it all, Finn's voice rang out like a king commanding his subjects. "Yes! Make her bleed! Make her feel what it means to fight for her life in Björn's world!"

Yuki staggered to her feet, blood dripping from her side and mouth. Her breaths came in ragged gasps, the red mist seeping into her mind, amplifying the pain and fear. But there was no time to rest. The reptilian warrior came next, his scaled body moving with unnatural agility. He slashed at her, each strike a blur.

Yuki parried the first two attacks but was too slow to block the third. His claws raked her thigh, carving deep gashes that sent her to one knee. The wolf-headed warrior, now recovered, leapt at her with a feral snarl. Desperation overtook her as she drove her blade upward, catching him in the stomach. Blood sprayed onto her face, but he didn't stop, slamming her into the ground with his full weight.

Yuki's head smacked against the sand, stars exploding in her vision. The wolf's jaws clamped down on her shoulder, teeth sinking deep into flesh. She screamed, the sound drowned out by the crowd's manic roar. Summoning all her strength, she drove her elbow into his throat, forcing him to release her. She rolled out from under him, but her body was already faltering, her movements slower, her breaths heavier.

The others didn't wait. The bear-armed warrior was on her again, one massive fist slamming into the ground where she had just been. The impact sent a shockwave through the arena, the sand trembling beneath her feet. The serpentine man flanked her, his venomous claws slashing at her once more. She twisted away, but the effort left her open to the scaled warrior, who tackled her from behind, dragging her down into the blood-soaked dirt.

Clawed hands and fanged jaws descended upon her, tearing at her armor, ripping into her flesh. The crowd's chants became a fevered drumbeat in her skull, driving her closer to the edge of madness.

Somehow, Yuki found a surge of strength. Her demonic side clawed its way to the surface, her pupils flickering red as a guttural growl escaped her lips. She grabbed the scaled warrior by the throat and drove her knee into his face, shattering his snout in a spray of blood and bone. He fell back, howling in agony, but the others closed in.

The bear-armed brute swung a massive fist, and this time Yuki couldn't dodge. The blow connected with her ribs, the sickening crack of bone echoing through the arena. She hit the ground hard, coughing up blood as the world spun around her.

"Is this it?" Finn's voice rang out, mocking. "Is this the great Yuki? Is this all she can do?"

The crowd jeered, their bloodlust palpable. The red mist thickened, seeping into her lungs, her veins, her mind. Her vision blurred, and for a moment, she thought she might give in. The soil beneath her hands felt alive, pulsing with the energy of the colosseum, as if it too demanded her submission.

But something deep inside her refused to break. A low growl built in her throat, growing into a roar that matched the frenzy of the crowd. Her pupils burned red, her demonic side fully unleashed. She rose to her feet, blood dripping from her wounds, her body shaking with a mixture of pain and adrenaline.

"You want a fight?" she snarled, her voice distorted, inhuman. "Come and get it."

The Björn warriors hesitated for a moment, sensing the shift in her aura. But the frenzy wouldn't let them stop. They roared as one, charging her with renewed fury.

Yuki's roar shook the air, silencing the crowd for a heartbeat before they erupted into an even more frenzied roar. Her crimson pupils glowed like burning coals, and the dark mist swirling around her thickened, taking on the faint outline of writhing, clawed specters. Her wounds stopped bleeding, her muscles tensed with otherworldly power, and the air around her vibrated with an almost unbearable heat.

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The bear-armed brute charged again, fists raised high to crush her. This time, Yuki didn't dodge. She lunged forward, catching his descending arm with her clawed hands. The impact cracked the ground beneath her feet, but she held firm, muscles bulging as she forced the beast's arm to bend backward.

With a savage snarl, she wrenched the arm at an unnatural angle, bone splintering and muscle tearing with a sickening squelch. The brute roared in agony, but before he could pull away, Yuki sank her claws into his throat and tore it open. Blood gushed in torrents, spraying her face as the hulking figure collapsed, choking on his own life force.

The wolf-headed warrior saw his chance, leaping toward her exposed back. Yuki twisted with inhuman speed, catching him mid-air by his snout. His jaws snapped and snarled, but she grinned through bloodied teeth as she pulled.

Snap! His lower jaw tore free in a fountain of gore, leaving his tongue lolling grotesquely from his shattered maw. She slammed his twitching body into the ground, caving in his skull with a stomp that sent tremors through the colosseum.

The crowd screamed in ecstasy and horror, the chant of "Björn!" replaced by gasps and cries of disbelief.

The serpentine warrior hissed and lunged, his venom-tipped claws aiming for her exposed neck. Yuki didn't flinch. She caught his wrist mid-strike, squeezing until the bones crumbled beneath her grip. He shrieked, but his cries were cut short as she drove her knee into his gut, forcing him to double over.

"Did you think I'd let you bite me again?" she growled, gripping his head with both hands. She twisted sharply, and his neck snapped with a sickening crack, his head lolling lifelessly as she tossed his corpse aside like garbage.

The remaining warriors hesitated, their bloodlust waning as the reality of Yuki's ferocity sank in. But the red mist in the air wouldn't allow retreat. It fed their frenzy, driving them forward despite the carnage around them.

The feathered woman took to the skies, her wings beating furiously as she circled above. Arrows of golden light rained down, each one faster and deadlier than the last. Yuki snarled, dodging with supernatural agility, but one arrow grazed her shoulder, searing her flesh with holy fire.

Yuki growled, a plume of smoke rising from the wound. Her lips twisted into a wicked smile. "You think the air will save you?"

Her muscles coiled, and she launched herself upward, a streak of black and crimson against the pale sky. The winged warrior had no time to react before Yuki's claws tore through her wings, shredding feathers and flesh alike. She screamed, plummeting to the ground in a tangle of blood and broken bones.

Yuki landed beside her with feline grace, crouching over the writhing figure. The winged woman whimpered, trying to crawl away, but Yuki grabbed her by the hair, yanking her head back to expose her throat.

"No running," Yuki hissed before sinking her fangs into the woman's neck, ripping out her jugular with a spray of crimson that painted the sand.

The reptilian warrior and two remaining Björn charged together, their movements coordinated in a last-ditch effort to overpower her. Yuki laughed, a guttural, bone-chilling sound, and met them head-on.

She ducked under the reptilian's claws, driving her fist into his stomach so hard it pierced his scaled hide. Her hand emerged from his back, clutching his twitching spine, and she yanked it free in a spray of gore.

The next warrior, a hulking figure with rhino-like features, swung a spiked club at her. She caught it mid-swing, splinters of bone and wood embedding in her palm. With a growl, she ripped the weapon from his grip and drove it into his chest, the jagged spikes tearing through his ribcage and puncturing his heart. He fell to his knees, gurgling blood, before collapsing.

The final warrior—a lithe figure with feline features—hesitated, her predatory eyes flicking between Yuki and the carnage surrounding her. Yuki grinned, her face and body drenched in blood.

"Go on," Yuki taunted, her voice a sultry growl. "Run. Or try your luck."

The feline warrior snarled and lunged, claws extended. Yuki sidestepped effortlessly, catching her mid-air and slamming her into the ground with bone-shattering force. The warrior writhed, but Yuki placed a clawed foot on her throat, pinning her in place.

"Not good enough," Yuki said, her tone almost playful. Then she pressed down, her claws slicing through flesh and bone, until the warrior's head was severed from her body.

Yuki straightened, her chest heaving, her body trembling with adrenaline and raw power. The arena was silent now, the crowd stunned into speechlessness. Blood pooled at her feet, the bodies of her enemies scattered like broken dolls around her.

She turned to the crowd, her crimson eyes burning.

"Is this all you've got?" she roared, her voice echoing like thunder.

The silence shattered as the crowd erupted into a chaotic cacophony of cheers, screams, and cries of terror. Finn watched from his high perch, his expression unreadable, but there was a glint in his eye—a mixture of awe, expectation and pride.

Yuki stood amidst the carnage, her breath ragged, her body battered and bruised. The remnants of the Björn warriors lay scattered around her, a gruesome testament to the brutal fight. The dark whisper, now a constant hum in her mind, was a chilling reminder of the darkness she had embraced.

Throughout the fight, a single figure had remained somewhat aloof, a silent observer in the chaos. He was a Björn warrior with striking lion-like features. A thick mane of tawny hair framed his face, and his eyes, a piercing amber, held an unnerving intelligence. While the other Björn had thrown themselves into the frenzied battle, this warrior had moved with a calculated precision, dispatching his opponents with swift, efficient strikes. He hadn't joined the initial fray against Yuki, instead focusing on eliminating threats closer to him, as if clearing the stage for a more personal confrontation.

He had watched Yuki's descent into savagery with an almost detached curiosity, his amber eyes following her every move. When she finally brought down the last of the initial wave of Björn, he saw his opening. As Yuki stood panting, momentarily vulnerable, he moved.

He didn't charge with a roar or a display of brute force. He moved with a predator's grace, a blur of motion too fast for the eye to easily follow. He appeared beside Yuki as if he had teleported, his hand a blur as it lashed out, claws extended.

Yuki, still reeling from the previous fight, barely had time to react. The lion-Björn's claws raked across her side, reopening the wound she had sustained earlier and deepening it. A searing pain shot through her, and she stumbled back, clutching her bleeding flank.

He didn't pursue his initial attack, instead taking a step back, his amber eyes fixed on Yuki. He exuded an aura of quiet confidence, a predator toying with its prey.

The crowd, sensing the shift in the fight, erupted in a fresh wave of excitement. This was the true test, the clash of two powerful forces.

Yuki took a look at her final opponent, recognizing that this was Finn's assistant and the other protagonist of their plan. Even though he himself knows nothing of it but Yuki knows if she made any mistake at this moment her life would be lost.

Yuki straightened, her claws flexing despite the agony tearing through her side. Blood trickled down her body, staining the sand beneath her feet. Her crimson eyes locked onto the lion-Björn, and for the first time, she felt a spark of hesitation. This wasn't a frenzied brawler or a reckless brute; this was a hunter, deliberate and deadly.

The crowd roared in anticipation, the cacophony pounding against her skull. The dark whisper in her mind grew louder, a seductive murmur coaxing her to let go, to abandon restraint and embrace her true nature. Her lips curled into a bloodied grin as she gave in.

"Fine," she hissed, her voice carrying a guttural resonance. "If you want the demon, you'll get her."

Her body convulsed, and a surge of dark energy exploded from her core, forcing the lion-Björn to take a cautious step back. Her back arched as jagged, black horns erupted from her skull, curling upward like a crown of malevolence. Her skin darkened, cracks of fiery red spreading across her body like molten veins. From her shoulder blades, enormous, leathery wings tore free, unfurling with a deafening snap.

The air around her grew heavy with oppressive heat, the ground beneath her feet sizzling as the sand turned to glass. Her claws elongated, her fangs sharpened, and her eyes glowed with an infernal light. When she finally stood tall, the crowd fell silent, stunned by the transformation.

The lion-Björn's amber eyes narrowed, his calm demeanor unshaken. He allowed himself a small, feral smile. "Finally," he said, his voice deep and resonant. "A worthy opponent."

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With a low growl, he began his own transformation. His tawny mane expanded, flowing like golden fire as his body grew in size and mass. His muscles rippled with supernatural strength, and his claws extended, each one glinting like polished steel. A golden aura enveloped him, shimmering like sunlight breaking through a storm. His roar shook the arena, a sound that resonated deep within the bones of all who heard it.

He moved first, his speed now even greater, a streak of light barreling toward Yuki. But this time, she was ready. With a powerful flap of her wings, she propelled herself backward, avoiding his strike by inches. The force of his claws hitting the ground sent a shockwave rippling through the arena.

Yuki retaliated immediately, swooping in low and unleashing a barrage of dark energy blasts from her claws. The lion-Björn weaved through them with uncanny agility, his golden aura deflecting the few that came too close. He closed the distance between them in an instant, swinging a massive, clawed fist toward her.

She caught his strike, their claws locking in a clash of raw power. The impact sent a shockwave through the arena, and the crowd roared with renewed fervor. For a moment, they were locked in a stalemate, their auras clashing like opposing storms.

But the lion-Björn was stronger. He forced her back, his claws raking across her chest. Yuki hissed in pain but used the momentum to spin, her wings whipping around like scythes. The edges of her wings, now razor-sharp, sliced across his arm, drawing blood.

The lion-Björn staggered slightly, his golden eyes flaring with both pain and admiration. "Impressive," he said, his voice a growl. "But you'll need more than that."

With a roar, he summoned pillars of golden light that erupted from the ground, each one homing in on Yuki's position. She dodged and weaved, her wings propelling her with blinding speed. But the lion-Björn anticipated her movements, appearing in her path and slamming his fist into her midsection. The force sent her crashing into the arena wall, the impact shaking the entire colosseum.

Yuki groaned, the dark whisper in her mind now a deafening roar. Her vision blurred, but she refused to falter. She rose slowly, her wings folding behind her as the molten cracks on her body began to glow brighter. The air around her shimmered with intense heat, and the ground beneath her feet began to melt.

"You're not the only one who can bend the arena to your will," she snarled.

She slammed her clawed hands into the ground, and fiery fissures spread outward, erupting into geysers of black flame. The lion-Björn leapt and dodged, his golden aura dimming as the intense heat began to wear him down. Yuki launched herself at him, her wings propelling her forward like a missile.

Their clash was a blur of motion, claws and teeth meeting in a feral dance of destruction. The lion-Björn's golden aura flared with each strike, but Yuki's dark energy seeped through the cracks, sapping his strength.

The two warriors broke apart, panting and bloodied. The arena was unrecognizable, a battlefield of molten glass and scorched sand. The crowd's cheers were deafening, but Yuki could hear only the thundering of her own heartbeat.

The lion-Björn grinned, his amber eyes blazing. "Not bad," he said, his voice tinged with respect. "But let's see how long you can last."

Yuki bared her fangs, her claws flexing as the molten cracks on her body pulsed with power. "I'm just getting started."

They both are at the fifth stage and could open up a domain but that defeats the whole purpose of the fight, it brings no joy and satisfaction when the fight can be seen by all who was attending.

The colosseum became a ruin of fire and molten glass, a testament to the ferocity of their clash. Yuki, wings outstretched, breathing ragged, glared at the lion-Björn. Her body was battered, cracks on her darkened skin pulsating like dying embers. She was pushing herself to the edge, her energy flickering like a candle in the wind.

The lion-Björn, bloodied but still exuding a quiet, predatory confidence, stood tall amidst the destruction. His golden aura shimmered faintly, though it had dimmed from the prolonged fight. His mane, streaked with his own blood, still burned with an ethereal light. His piercing amber eyes locked onto Yuki, unrelenting and unyielding.

"You fought well," he said, his voice calm but tinged with a growl. "But this ends here."

Before Yuki could respond, he moved—a blur of golden light that she could barely track. She raised her claws to defend herself, but his speed was overwhelming. He struck her chest with an open palm, golden energy erupting from the point of impact. The force sent her skidding back, her feet digging trenches into the molten ground. She gasped as the molten cracks on her body dimmed further, her strength rapidly waning.

The lion-Björn pressed his advantage, closing the distance with relentless precision. He ducked under her desperate swing, delivering a bone-crushing uppercut that lifted her off the ground. Before she could recover, he slammed her back down with a brutal kick, the ground shattering beneath her.

Yuki coughed, blood dripping from her lips as she struggled to rise. Her wings twitched weakly, her claws scraping against the molten glass beneath her. The dark whisper in her mind screamed at her to keep fighting, to tear him apart, but her body was failing her.

The lion-Björn grabbed her by the throat, lifting her off the ground effortlessly. His claws dug into her neck, but he didn't squeeze. He wanted her conscious, aware of her defeat.

"Do you feel it?" he growled, his voice low but powerful. "The weight of inevitability. You're strong, Yuki, but strength alone won't save you. Not against him."

He slammed her into the ground, pinning her beneath his massive hand. Yuki's wings curled inward, her body trembling as she tried to push back against him, but it was no use. He was too strong.

The roar of the crowd reached a fever pitch, their cries a discordant hymn of devotion and madness. The air was thick with the acrid scent of blood and molten earth, mingling with the heady aroma of sweat and adrenaline. Finn's gaze remained fixed, his posture rigid yet radiating anticipation. The faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth betrayed his satisfaction.

The lion-Björn, his tawny mane now streaked with crimson, hoisted Yuki's battered form high above his head as if she were a sacred relic. His golden aura flared violently, arcs of energy crackling around him and licking at the ground like hungry flames. He stood at the center of the carnage, a triumphant priest presiding over a grotesque altar.

"Björn, god of insanity and warfare!" His voice rang out like a war horn, cutting through the cacophony. The crowd fell silent, their breath caught in their throats as they clung to his every word. "Bear witness to this offering! See her strength, her defiance, her very essence—and know that all power, all rebellion, bends and breaks under your divine will!"

He lowered her slightly, cradling her limp body like a broken marionette, and then cast his gaze upward. His amber eyes burned with fanaticism as he continued, his words a blend of prayer and incantation. "Through blood and chaos, through war and madness, we offer you her might, her spirit, her soul! Accept this, Björn, and sanctify this ground with your presence!"

The air grew heavy, a suffocating pressure settling over the colosseum as the atmosphere shifted. A low, otherworldly hum began to emanate from the very stones beneath them, rising in pitch until it resonated like a scream on the edge of hearing.

The lion-Björn convulsed, his muscles tensing and rippling unnaturally. His head snapped back, his mouth opening in a silent roar as golden light erupted from his eyes and chest. His body contorted, dissolving into a swirling mass of molten gold and crimson mist. The crowd screamed in frenzied ecstasy as the phenomenon consumed him, reshaping the space he had occupied.

When the transformation ceased, a towering figure stood in his place—a hulking, grotesquely beautiful manifestation of chaos itself. Björn had arrived. His skin was a patchwork of blood-red and deep onyx, pulsating as if alive. Horns spiraled upward from his skull, jagged and uneven, crowned with red flickering flames. His wings, vast and tattered, spread wide, casting a shadow that seem to swallow the colosseum. His eyes, glowing orbs of molten crimson, surveyed the scene with a terrible intensity.

Every Björn present fell to their knees, foreheads pressed to the ground. Their reverence was palpable, a collective surrender to the god of madness. Across Björn's lands, the sky darkened, bleeding into shades of red and black. Lightning crackled in the distance, and the earth trembled as though bowing to its master.

Björn turned his gaze to Yuki, still limp in his massive clawed hand. He exhaled a slow, deliberate breath, a crimson mist spilling from his lips and enveloping her. The mist seeped into her wounds, knitting flesh

and bone with an almost tender precision. Her eyes fluttered open, and she gasped as the burning pain faded, replaced by an overwhelming sense of vitality and dread.

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He set her down carefully, his massive frame towering over her. His clawed hand tilted her chin upward, forcing her to meet his gaze. The weight of his presence bore down on her, yet there was a strange, almost gentle acknowledgment in his movements.

"Rise," he commanded, his voice resonating with a power that shook the walls of the colosseum. Yuki staggered to her feet, her body trembling but no longer broken. She glanced around, taking in the sea of bowed heads, the palpable worship directed at the two of them.

A smile, slow and dangerous, curved her lips. She loosened her tattered kimono, letting it slip from her shoulders. The crowd stirred, their gasps and murmurs a mixture of reverence and awe. Yuki took a step toward Björn, her bare form illuminated by the eerie glow of his aura.

Björn's claw traced along her jawline, tilting her head slightly as if examining her. His booming voice echoed across the colosseum, each word dripping with finality. "My queen."

The collective gasp of the Björn was deafening, their devotion deepening into fanatical worship. Björn straightened, his wings folding behind him as he addressed his people. "Prepare yourselves," he commanded. "Tonight, you celebrate the birth of a new order. A queen to guide you. A prince to carry my will. The war to end all wars begins anew."

Yuki's laughter rang out, sharp and melodic, as she stepped closer to Björn. The crowd erupted once more, their cries a frenzied hymn to their god and his chosen queen.

A low growl rumbled through the colosseum, emanating from the people of Björn themselves. It began as a single, guttural sound, then multiplied, spreading like wildfire through the stands. The

growls morphed into snarls, then into howls of primal hunger. The reverence that had gripped them moments before shattered, replaced by a raw, unrestrained frenzy.

This was no longer a colosseum; it was a bedlam of raw instinct, a temple of depravity consecrated by their god's presence. The people of Björn, driven to the peak of their feral nature by Björn's very essence, began to enact their own twisted ritual, mirroring the divine union before them.

They tore at their garments, shedding the pretense of civility as their bodies twisted and contorted in fits of ecstasy. Some clawed at the earth, drawing symbols in their own blood, while others locked themselves in savage embraces, their howls merging with the deafening roar of the arena.

A Björn in the front row, his face smeared with dirt and blood, threw his head back and screamed, a piercing cry that carried the fervor of the crowd to its zenith. The others joined in, their voices rising as one in a chaotic, discordant hymn. They began to mimic the divine union before them, their movements a grotesque parody of the god and queen's interaction. Couples formed and dissolved in moments, their bodies colliding with animalistic ferocity as if the act itself were an offering to their deity.

Blood and sweat glistened under the crimson-hued sky, the metallic tang of it filling the air. The colosseum floor became a chaotic mosaic of writhing bodies, broken chains, and discarded weapons. The people of Björn abandoned all reason, succumbing to the primal instincts that Björn's presence had unleashed.

In the center of it all, Björn and Yuki remained untouched by the chaos, their union a towering beacon of depravity and divine power. Björn's crimson gaze swept across the arena, his expression one of cruel satisfaction. His wings unfurled, casting a shadow that engulfed the frenzied masses below.

Yuki, emboldened by her newfound status, tilted her head back and laughed—a sound both haunting and triumphant. She stretched out her arms, welcoming the madness that surged around her. "You see?" she called, her voice slicing through the din. "This is his gift! This is our gift! Chaos unbound! Worship unchained!"

The Björn responded with renewed fervor, their cries and howls reaching an almost unbearable pitch. Fights broke out among them, each combatant seeking to prove their devotion through blood and brutality. They tore at one another with claws and teeth, their bodies breaking and mending in grotesque displays of resilience.

Björn watched, his massive form radiating power as he raised a clawed hand. The crowd stilled momentarily, their bloodied faces turning to him with wide, adoring eyes. "Enough!" he thundered, his voice shaking the very ground beneath them. "Your devotion pleases me. Your chaos feeds me. But

now..." He gestured to Yuki, who stood beside him, glowing with an almost ethereal light. "...You will honor your queen."

The people of Björn fell silent, their eyes fixed on Yuki. Slowly, they lowered themselves to their knees, their frenzy giving way to a reverent stillness. One by one, they bowed their heads, their bodies trembling with a mixture of awe and fear.

Björn turned to Yuki, his lips curling into a cruel smile. "You have their worship," he said, his voice low but heavy with meaning. "Now show them why you deserve it."

Yuki stood amidst the silent colosseum, her gaze sweeping over the crowd of Björn who knelt before her in reverence. The primal chaos that had consumed the arena moments ago was now replaced by an eerie, anticipatory stillness. She adjusted her kimono with slow, deliberate movements, but her hand lingered on her stomach, her fingers brushing the spot where something now stirred—something new, something most mortal will refer to as divine.

The Lion General, who had moments before been Björn's vessel, knelt before her. His once-confident gaze was clouded with confusion, as though the events that transpired were but fragments of a half-remembered dream. Yet that confusion quickly faded, replaced by a look of unshakable loyalty. He bowed his head low, his voice trembling with conviction. "My queen," he murmured, the words carrying the weight of absolute devotion.

The sound of wings slicing through the heavy air drew the attention of the gathered Björn. Finn descended gracefully, his powerful frame folding into a reverent kneel before Yuki. His eyes, usually sharp and calculating, were now soft with awe. But his focus was unwavering, fixed solely on her stomach. The way his gaze lingered spoke volumes—he didn't need to say a word. His posture alone conveyed his understanding, his acceptance of the profound shift in power.

Yuki's lips curled into a small, knowing smile. She could feel it—the faint pulse of something growing within her. Björn's essence had not left; it had transformed, rooting itself deep inside her. She was no longer just a queen to these people. She was the vessel of their god's will, the bridge between mortal chaos and divine insanity.

Olaf, leaning casually against a broken pillar, was the only one who didn't kneel. His expression was as unreadable as ever, but there was a glint in his eye, a flicker of something that might have been approval—or perhaps just amusement. He had always been a wildcard, a wolf that chose his own path.

And yet, even he couldn't help but glance at her stomach, the faintest smirk tugging at the corners of his lips.

"This changes everything," he said, his voice low but filled with anticipation. "I look forward to seeing what you do next, my queen."

Yuki exhaled slowly, her hand never leaving her stomach. She turned her gaze to the crowd, her crimson eyes gleaming with newfound authority. The silence stretched, heavy with expectation. Finally, she spoke, her voice carrying the weight of Björn's chaos and her own rising power.

"Rise," she commanded, her tone sharp yet regal. "The chaos of this kingdom will no longer be aimless. Together, we will forge it into something unstoppable. A force that even the heavens will fear."

The Björn rose as one, their collective roar shaking the very foundation of the colosseum. It was not the sound of mindless beasts, but of soldiers ready to march, of zealots ready to die for their queen.

Yuki's hand fell to her side, and she turned her gaze to Finn and the Lion General. "Prepare the city. The age of chaos begins today, and we will lead it to glory."

The Lion General thumped his chest in salute. "Your will is our command, my queen."

Finn nodded, his wings spreading wide. "It will be done."

As they dispersed to carry out her orders, Yuki turned to Olaf, her smile sharpening. "And you, Olaf? Will you stand with me in this new age?"

Olaf chuckled, his arms crossing casually over his chest. "I've already made my choice, Yuki. Let's see if you can keep things interesting."

Yuki let out a soft laugh, her crimson gaze turning toward the blood-red sky. The air was thick with the scent of iron and the promise of change. She could feel Björn's essence stirring within her, urging her forward.

Far to the south, in his secluded chamber, Murmur's face remained impassive. After centuries of navigating the treacherous currents of this world, he was rarely surprised. Plans, he had learned, were ephemeral things, constantly shifting and morphing, rarely surviving contact with reality unscathed. Every carefully laid scheme had been countered, hindered, or outright shattered.

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He had grown accustomed to this dance of disruption, even anticipating it. Now, observing his daughter's unexpected path, he could already envision multiple ways this could be twisted to his advantage. Yet, a nagging doubt lingered. Was this truly what he desired?

His ambition had always been clear: to ascend to a status that would inspire envy among all beings, to claim a place on the grandest stage of power. But this world, with its unpredictable nature and powerful players, was proving to be more of an obstacle than a stepping stone.

Murmur now faced a stark choice: ascension or descent. Both options were equally distasteful, yet necessary to remain a player in this cosmic game.

Ascension would grant him immense power, but it would also sever his direct influence on this world. He would become a distant observer, unable to actively manipulate events. This, in turn, would leave him vulnerable to exploitation by the origin gods, those ancient entities who predated every part of this world. They were beings of unimaginable power, and Murmur knew he would be little more than a pawn once he ascends to their line of sight.

As for returning to the Abyss... that path offered little more than stagnation. The chances of him ever regaining, let alone surpassing, his current power were vanishingly slim. His fate would depend entirely on the specific layer he found himself in: conquered or unconquered, ruled by a powerful demon lord or a demon king with countless army at their head. In either case, his ambitions would be effectively extinguished.

He paced the chamber, the silence broken only by the soft rustle of his robes. The weight of his decision pressed heavily upon him. Both paths were fraught with peril, yet inaction was not an option. He had come too far, invested too much, to simply fade into obscurity. He had to choose, and that choice would define his future, for better or worse.

An idea, dark and ambitious, was already forming in Murmur's mind, the idea was dark if hidden but of purity once in the light. But it would have to wait. The gods' counterparts, those irritatingly resilient

obstacles to his previous grand design, needed to be dealt with first. This time, however, he would not remain cloaked in shadow. The whispers and manipulations had served their purpose, but the time for anonymity was over. It was time for his name to be spoken, feared, and ultimately, worshipped.

Playing from the shadows had reached its limits. It was a tool, not a strategy for ultimate victory. The subtle currents of influence he had manipulated were beginning to coalesce, to form a recognizable pattern. If he remained hidden, others might discern his hand, potentially uniting against him. He needed to step into the light, to seize control of the narrative.

A wind blew in his chamber with Murmur no longer present. It was night time with stars filling the sky. He was now standing in front of a pillar like tower filled with runes, just getting close to it was enough to speak tales of its power.

This was carried over by apeling through the portal gates to his continent, he was already informed of what it was meant to do and the demigod who will be handling it.

Running hands through the tower and the rune faintly pulsing and glow, Murmur found himself captivated by the craftsmanship. Suddenly things went silent and the surrounding went completely dark.

"Destroy it" A whisper like suggestion said to his ear. The voices was one Murmur recognized only this time they were directly speaking to him.

"Destroy it," the whisper echoed again, laced with an undercurrent of growing impatience. The darkness intensified, pressing against Murmur like a physical weight. He could feel their presence, vast and old, like the crushing pressure of the deep ocean. They were testing him, probing his will.

Murmur remained unmoved. "And why would I do that?" he finally responded, his voice calm and measured, a stark contrast to the oppressive atmosphere. He knew they could hear him, their attention laser-focused on him.

The darkness pulsed, a subtle shift in the oppressive pressure. "It is not yours to command," a chorus of voices whispered, overlapping and intertwining, their tones laced with ancient malice. "Its power is...unclean. Dangerous."

Murmur chuckled softly, a dry, humorless sound. "Unclean? Dangerous? You speak of power as if it were a delicate flower, easily bruised. I have walked the Abyss, bathed in its rawest energies. 'Unclean' is a matter of perspective."

The darkness roiled, and a vision flickered before Murmur's eyes. A swirling vortex of iridescent colors, a glimpse into the infinite chaos of the Abyss. He saw colossal beings, their forms defying description, writhing and devouring each other in an endless cycle of creation and destruction. The sheer scale of it was enough to shatter a mortal mind, to reduce a normal god to gibbering madness.

"This," the voices hissed, "is the true power. Submit to it. Become one with the endless chaos."

Murmur did not flinch. He had seen such visions before, glimpses into the true nature of the Abyss. They were meant to intimidate, to break his will. But he was not easily swayed. "A tempting offer," he said, his voice laced with irony. "But I have my own path to power. One that does not involve becoming another mindless beast in your cosmic menagerie."

The vision vanished, and the darkness seemed to draw back slightly, as if the primordial entities were momentarily surprised by his defiance. "You...dare to refuse us?" the voices whispered, their tone now laced with something akin to curiosity.

"I dare to choose my own path," Murmur replied. "I respect your power, but I do not serve you. I merely wished to examine this...structure. Its craftsmanship is...intriguing." He gestured towards the tower, his tone now casual, as if he were discussing a piece of art rather than a potential source of immense power. He had no intention of claiming it for himself; he simply wanted to understand it. Knowledge was power, and understanding this structure could be valuable, even if he didn't control it.

The darkness remained silent for a moment, as if considering his words. Then, a chilling laughter echoed through the void. "Arrogant...foolish...creature," the voices hissed. "You believe you can still grab a piece of the pie. We shall see...we shall see..."

The darkness began to recede, the oppressive pressure easing. The silence returned, but it was a different silence now, a silence pregnant with unspoken threats. Murmur knew they would not forget his defiance. They would likely try again, perhaps with more subtle methods. But he was ready for them. He had faced worse in the Abyss, and he would not be deterred from his goals. He glanced at the tower one last time, a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes. He had learned what he needed to for now.

The scene was the same in all the different continent, people wake up to find a towering pillar like tower off in the distance and were highly prohibited by their leaders from getting close to it.

One month flew by fast quickly and today marks the day planned by the demigods on setting up the rune pillar and ascending to godhood at the same time.

At the territory of the apelings, the mood was heavy yet was filled with light of festivities, it was still day light at this time. The apelings in the long time always do well to party and drink themselves to coma when ever the opportunity arises yet this day fell sour to most apelings for some reason.

The drums, dancing and drunk chatters everywhere yet no one looked drunk, like they knew something was going to happen and their suspicion was confirmed when words came in that their king will have word at the evening when the sun went down.

Ikem at the moment was standing proud with his arms spread apart in front of a huge mirror. Around him were all his child, leaders of the four cursed clans and those who were no leaders but still exceptional apelings and have brought prosperity to their people.

Ikem's children took upon the duty that should have be reserved for maids and servants as they began to dress up their father who had a look of pride on his face seeing his children.

An armor set crafted by Ember himself was placed on the room where each of his kid picked up a piece while putting it onto him.

The metallic clang of the armor pieces resonated softly in the room, a counterpoint to the muffled drums and shouts from outside. Each plate, each buckle, each strap was handled with reverence, imbued with the love and respect Ikem's children held for him. Their faces, usually alight with mischief or carefree joy, were now serious, focused on the task at hand. There was a hint of sadness in their eyes, a knowledge of the change that was coming, but it was tempered by pride. They were dressing their father not for battle, but for something far greater, something that would forever alter the course of their lives and the lives of all apelings.

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Ikem watched them in the mirror, his own expression a complex expanse of emotions. He saw the love in their gestures, the unspoken questions in their eyes, the faint tremor of fear that they tried to

conceal. He wanted to reassure them, to tell them everything would be alright, but he knew he couldn't. The path he had chosen was fraught with uncertainty, a leap into the unknown. He could only offer them his strength, his unwavering resolve, and the silent promise that he would do everything in his power to ensure their future.

As the last piece of armor was secured, a hush fell over the room. Ikem turned, a magnificent figure clad in gleaming metal, radiating an aura of power and determination. He looked at his children, his gaze lingering on each of them for a moment, etching their faces into his memory. He offered them a small, reassuring smile, a silent blessing.

The silence that followed the securing of the last piece of armor was broken by Ikem's sudden, mischievous grin. "Zephyr," he said, a twinkle in his eye, "head to my secret wine storage. What better time to enjoy them than on such an occasion?"

Zephyr's eyes darted away from Ikem's gaze. "Secret storage? You speak as if I know of it," he mumbled, feigning ignorance.

Ikem simply stared at him, a knowing smirk playing on his lips. Not only Ikem, but all of Zephyr's siblings joined in the silent scrutiny. Zephyr, unable to withstand their combined gazes, finally cracked. "Oh, how forgetful of me," he said, a sheepish grin spreading across his face. "I'll get to it right away." He quickly slipped out of the room, leaving behind a wave of laughter.

Ikem placed his hands on the shoulders of Terra and Ember. "Why don't we all head to the dining room?" he suggested. "I'm sure Ember and Terra came prepared with plentiful fruits and meats."

Ripple chimed in, "Don't forget me too, Father! I caught a lot of sea delicacies for the occasion. I even had my chef prepare my favorite seal meal for you."

Ikem laughed heartily as he led the way out of the room, his children following close behind. "It seems my own daughter has been holding out on me," he chuckled. "Who else is planning on sharing something of their own with me today?"

The dining room, usually a place of formal gatherings and strategic discussions, was transformed into a scene of warm, familial chaos. The long, polished table was laden with a feast fit for kings, or perhaps,

for gods. Platters of roasted meats, baskets overflowing with vibrant fruits, and bowls brimming with exotic delicacies filled the air with tantalizing aromas. But the true feast was the company.

Ikem, surrounded by his children, was a different man. The weight of leadership, the burden of his impending ascension, seemed to melt away as he basked in their love and laughter. He recounted stories of their childhood, tales of mischief and adventure, of triumphs and blunders, each memory sparking a fresh wave of joy and nostalgia. He teased Zephyr about his attempts to pilfer snacks from the royal kitchens, earning him a playful shove. He shared a knowing glance with Terra as they reminisced about her early experiments with alchemy, some of which had resulted in rather explosive consequences. He listened patiently as Ripple described her latest deep-sea fishing expedition, marveling at her courage and skill. And he offered words of encouragement to Ember, whose quiet demeanor hid a brilliant mind and a fiery spirit.

The conversation flowed effortlessly, punctuated by bursts of laughter and shared jokes. They spoke of the past, of the present, and of the uncertain future. There was a bittersweet undercurrent to their merriment, a quiet acknowledgment that this might be one of their last moments together in this way. But they didn't dwell on it. Instead, they chose to celebrate the bond they shared, the love that had sustained them through trials and tribulations. They savored the present, creating memories that would last a lifetime, or perhaps, even beyond. For Ikem, these moments with his children were more precious than any treasure, more valuable than any power.

The laughter around the table was infectious, fueled by good food, good wine, and cherished memories. Ikem, warmed by the atmosphere, leaned back, a twinkle in his eye. "Speaking of mischief," he began, a chuckle rumbling in his chest, "do you remember the time Zephyr tried to... liberate... the royal hippogriff?"

Zephyr groaned, burying his face in his hands. The others, however, were intrigued. "Oh, tell us, Father!" Ripple exclaimed, her eyes wide with anticipation.

Ikem chuckled again. "It was during the Harvest Festival. Zephyr, convinced he could ride anything, decided the hippogriff was his ticket to... well, I'm not entirely sure what his destination was. Glory, perhaps? He snuck into the stables, armed with a... a rather flimsy rope, I believe. The hippogriff, as you might imagine, was less than amused."

The children erupted in laughter, picturing a young Zephyr attempting to tame the majestic creature. Ikem continued, his voice laced with amusement. "The hippogriff, with a disdainful snort, promptly sent Zephyr flying. He landed in a pile of... well, let's just say it wasn't a pile of roses. He was covered head to toe, smelling rather ripe, and sporting a rather impressive bruise on his backside."

The laughter intensified, tears welling up in some eyes. Ikem, beaming, looked around at his children, expecting to share in their mirth. But then, a different kind of silence fell over the table. It wasn't a somber silence, but a heavy one, pregnant with unspoken understanding. The laughter had died down, not because the story wasn't funny, but because the realization of what it represented crashed down upon them.

Terra's smile faltered, a wistful look in her eyes. She wasn't laughing at Zephyr's mishap; she was remembering the carefree days of their childhood, days filled with silly escapades and shared laughter. A pang of sadness resonated within her. This... this might be the last time we have a moment like this, she thought, the unspoken words hanging heavy in the air.

Ember's gaze drifted to Ikem, a mixture of pride and sorrow in his eyes. He wasn't laughing at Zephyr either. He was remembering all the times their father had shared stories like this, weaving their childhood into a tapestry of love and laughter. He understood that these moments, these simple, joyful moments, were coming to an end. Their father was ascending, and their lives were about to change irrevocably.

Ripple's usual exuberance was replaced by a quiet contemplation. She wasn't just remembering the hippogriff incident; she was remembering all the family gatherings, the shared meals, the bedtime stories, the countless moments of joy and connection. A lump formed in her throat. This is it, isn't it? she thought. This is the last time we'll be like this, all together, just a family.

Even Zephyr, still slightly red-faced, understood. He wasn't just embarrassed by the memory; he was saddened by the realization that these lighthearted moments, these shared stories, were a precious commodity, soon to be a thing of the past.

Ikem, still smiling, looked around at his children, sensing the shift in the atmosphere. He saw not sadness, but understanding, a quiet acceptance of the inevitable. He understood now. This wasn't just a funny story; it was a farewell.

The warmth of his children's laughter, the clinking of goblets, the rich aroma of the feast – it all swirled around Ikem, a comforting embrace. He watched them, his heart swelling with a bittersweet mixture of pride and longing. This was it. The culmination of his journey, the threshold of his ascension. And yet, all he could think about was how different this farewell was from his own.

He remembered the day his father, an origin god of immense power, had sent him on this path. There had been no tearful embraces, no lingering goodbyes. His father, powerful, had simply stated the task, outlined the trials. He never said it out loud but to Ikem, it felt like what he got was "Prove yourself worthy,".

It may not have been the case but as Ikem grew and matured, it started to feel that way, he knew his father loved him but he couldn't help but want for more and hoped his father showed him more when it was just them.

Ikem had embarked on his journey with a burning ambition, a desperate need to prove his worth, not just to his father, but to himself. He had faced unimaginable challenges, battled fearsome creatures, and overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. He had forged alliances, made sacrifices, and learned to wield the power that coursed through his veins. He had become a demigod, a leader, a force to be reckoned with.

He looked at his children, their faces alight with love and admiration. He saw the genuine affection in their eyes, the unspoken understanding that passed between them. He felt the warmth of their presence, the tangible connection that bound them together.

Chapter 419:

And then it struck him. His father was powerful, a being so vast, so that human emotions were perhaps... insignificant to him. His farewell hadn't been cold; it had been... detached. Impersonal. Not because he didn't care, but because his perspective was so different, so far removed from the human experience.

The remnants of the feast lay scattered across the table, a testament to the joyous, if slightly blurry, celebration. Laughter still echoed softly, interspersed with the contented sighs of those pleasantly inebriated. Even Ikem, a demigod of considerable willpower, felt the warm fuzziness of the wine. He savored the feeling, knowing it was fleeting. He wished this could last forever, this bubble of familial warmth and carefree joy. But the time had come.

He rose, the movement surprisingly steady despite the copious amounts of wine he'd consumed. A hush fell over the room, the lingering merriment replaced by an anticipatory quiet. His children, his people, looked at him with a mixture of love, awe, and a touch of trepidation. They knew what this meant. This was goodbye.

Ikem surveyed the faces before him, each one a reflection of himself, a piece of his own being. He saw the playful glint in Zephyr's eyes, even in his slightly drunken state. He saw the quiet strength in Terra's expression, the unwavering loyalty in Ember's gaze, the boundless spirit in Ripple's smile. They were his legacy, his greatest creation, the embodiment of everything he had strived for.

He cleared his throat, the sound resonating in the sudden silence.

"Time to address the people" He said as he began walking out of the throne room to the gate of the palace now filled with millions of apelings turning their sight towards the palace waiting for him.

"My children," he began, his voice strong and clear, "my people. Today, we stand at a crossroads. A turning point in our history. The journey I began so long ago, a journey ordained by my father, the Origin God of Nature and Curses, has reached its culmination."

He paused, his gaze sweeping across the crowd. "Many of you know the story of my departure. The trials I faced, the battles I fought, the sacrifices I made. I did it all for you. For the future of our people, for the prosperity of our land, for the preservation of the unique gifts that flow through our blood."

He took a deep breath, the weight of his impending ascension pressing down on him. "My father's farewell was... different," he admitted, a hint of wistfulness in his voice. "It was a charge, a test. A cold, distant decree. There was almost warmth, no emotion. Just a task, a challenge to be overcome."

He smiled, a genuine, heartfelt smile that reached his eyes. "But my farewell... this is different. This is not a cold decree. This is a celebration. A testament to the love that binds us together, the bond that makes us family. You, my children, are my heart, my soul, my everything. And though I must leave you now, know that a part of me will always remain with you."

He raised his hand, a gesture of blessing. "I leave you with my blessings, with my love, and with the hope that you will continue to thrive, to grow, to embrace the power that resides within you. Remember the lessons I have taught you, the values I have instilled in you. Be strong, be courageous, be kind to one another. And never forget the bond that unites us."

His voice softened, becoming more intimate. "This is not goodbye, my children. It is a... a transformation. I will become something more, something... different. But my love for you, my

connection to you, will never fade. It will endure, as strong and unwavering as the roots of the oldest tree."

He looked at them one last time, etching their faces into his memory. "Farewell, my children," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "Until we meet again." Then, he turned and walked towards the waiting rune pillar, ready to embrace his destiny.

As soon as Ikem reached the rune pillar, the sun dipped below the horizon. A hush fell over the gathered crowd, their breaths held in anticipation. Then, a vast shadow loomed over them.

They looked up to see Ikem transformed, now fully embracing his divine heritage. His true demigod form was revealed—a towering ape-like figure clad in armor that had seamlessly adjusted to his immense size.

Ikem placed a hand on the pillar, and it began to hum. An unseen, sonar-like force radiated outward, spreading across the planet, reaching every demigod stationed before their own pillar.

With his enormous stature, the once-massive pillar now seemed small in comparison. He placed both hands on it, lifting it with ease. As the ancient runes ignited with power, the pillar grew even heavier, pressing down with an immense force. Ikem's legs sank into the earth, creating a deep impression beneath his feet.

The pillar's function activated, and a flood of instinctive knowledge surged through Ikem—he now knew his destination. He turned back for one last look at his people before taking his first step. The earth trembled beneath him, the resounding boom echoing across the land.

Even as Ikem departed, his colossal form remained visible to all. The apelings watched in solemn silence, tears streaming down their faces, yet no one uttered a word.

The apelings of the five cursed clans exchanged glances before nodding to one another, each heading their separate ways. By tradition, they should have accompanied their father from the shadows, ensuring his safety as he carried the pillar. But the attack on the Terra clan had been a harsh lesson. Who was to say their divine counterparts wouldn't seize this opportunity to strike again, hoping to throw their father off course?

To prevent such a risk, it had been agreed—by Ikem himself—that they would remain behind. The duty of protecting their people and clans now fell upon them.

As for those entrusted with Ikem's protection, the apelings had spent centuries preparing. Anyone who dared interfere would soon witness the fruits of their relentless training.

Trailing from the shadows, cloaked figures moved in silence, ensuring Ikem's path remained undisturbed. Further behind them, elite troops from the cursed apeling clans followed. Though they made no effort to hide, the cover of night rendered them nearly invisible.

Leading this silent vanguard were four key figures: Princess Myrrha, daughter of Terra; Ash, eldest son of Ember; Brook, son of Ripple; and Tula, daughter of Zephyr—Ikem's most trusted guard.

Yet, only three of them could be seen. The fourth was nowhere in sight.

Suddenly, a figure materialized atop a tree, helmet in hand, watching over them all.

It was Tula. The others turned, finally noticing her arrival. "I have scouted ahead," she reported, her voice low and urgent. "No sign of enemy activity... yet."

"Yet," Ash echoed, his brow furrowed. "That's what worries me. It's too quiet." He adjusted the grip on the ancestral blade strapped to his back. "They wouldn't just let him ascend unopposed."

Myrrha nodded, her expression grim. The attack on her clan still fresh in her memory. "They're planning something. We need to be ready for anything." She gestured to the small contingent of elite guards flanking them, their forms barely visible in the darkness. "They're relying on us. We can't fail them."

Brook, ever the pragmatist, scanned the horizon. "Tula, anything on the other demigods' positions? Are they encountering any resistance?"

Tula shook her head. "Comms are down. The surge of power from the pillars... it's disrupting everything. We're on our own for now."

A tense silence hung in the air, broken only by the distant, rhythmic boom of Ikem's colossal footsteps. They were following him, but the vast distance between them and their father, coupled with the disrupted communication, made them feel unsettlingly isolated.

"We stick to the plan," Myrrha stated, her voice firm. "Tula, you continue scouting ahead. Ash, Brook, you stay with the guard. I'll flank Ikem on the other side. We maintain visual contact as much as possible."

It was going to be a long night. The children weren't the only ones keeping a vigilant watch over the demigods they were sworn to protect. Across the vast expanse of existence, the Origin Gods—those primordial beings who had shaped and safeguarded the world—turned their collective gaze toward the planet, observing, waiting.

But they were not alone.

For every god that stood in the light, there was a shadow cast in the realm beyond. A mirrored world, a reflection stripped of color and life, where only echoes of existence lingered. And in that void, the dark counterparts watched with equal intensity, knowing that the time to act had finally come.

They did not need to exert themselves. Not yet. The intricate dance between gods and mortals had rules, and they were willing to play by them—for now. Their task was simple: inform their zealots and pawns that the moment had arrived. Let the mortals clash. Let them struggle. Let them bleed. And in the chaos, the Origin Gods would be distracted, forced to abide by the very laws woven into reality.

Chapter 420:

The last battle had taught them much. The assault on Jaws' counterpart had been an invaluable lesson—one that revealed how the demigods had learned to usher the Origin Gods into the mortal realm, allowing them to manifest briefly. If left unchecked, the demigods would ascend, and those damned rune pillars—bindings of order and balance—would be laid out once more, fortifying the world against their intrusion. That could not be allowed.

So, they waited. They gathered. Their zealots had grown in number, their power needed not to be tempered but amassed. If the Origin Gods wanted to play by the rules, then so be it. The dark counterparts would do the same. Let mortals fight mortals, let devotion clash against devotion—there would be no loopholes, no technicalities to exploit. Just war.

Across the void, the five dark counterparts exchanged silent glances. No words were needed. They all came to the same conclusion.

The absence of Ikenga and Keles had left two vulnerable points in the divine barrier.

Unlike their previous attack, where they had blindly battered the shield in a frenzy, this time, they moved with precision. As one, the five dark counterparts converged upon a single gap in the defenses.

This time, they would not be repelled. This time, the world would tremble.

The first sign was a low, guttural hum that reverberated across the land—a sound not heard by mortal ears but felt in the bones, in the very essence of existence. The night sky, once clear, darkened at the edges, as if an unseen force was pressing against reality itself.

The dark counterparts had begun their assault.

The breach point—one of the two left by Ikenga and Keles' absence—shuddered as the five counterparts poured their will into it. The divine barrier groaned, the air rippling like fabric stretched too thin. And then, a single fracture. A hairline crack in the shield.

That was enough.

From that crack, corruption bled into the physical world. It did not come as a flood but as a whisper, a subtle warping of reality that infected the air and the earth. The land beneath the breach blackened, as if scorched by unseen flames, and a creeping chill slithered through the wind, sapping warmth from everything it touched.

In the cities, the devout felt it first—a sudden weight in their chests, an inexplicable sense of dread that made their prayers falter. The rune pillars that had been erected in preparation flickered, their inscriptions twisting for the briefest moment before stabilizing.

But it was enough.

The Origin Gods, ever watchful, reacted in an instant. Aetherial forms descended like falling stars, each Origin God taking their position, radiating power that blazed against the growing taint. Divine energies surged, stabilizing the cracks before they could spread further. In the heavens, celestial light clashed with abyssal shadow as the first blows were exchanged, rippling across both realms like shockwaves.

And just like that, the dark counterparts achieved their initial goal.

The Origin Gods' attention was pulled away, their focus shifting toward containing the breach.

The demigods, left unguarded by divine oversight, now stood vulnerable.

It was time for the zealots to move.

Scattered across the world, those who had pledged themselves to the dark counterparts stirred. Some had been waiting in the shadows for this very moment. Others had lived among the faithful, wearing masks of loyalty until now. As one, they began to act.

Since today's events had been long anticipated, the demigods had sent an early notice to every kingdom. Now, the entire continent was silent. Each ruler had ensured that no one remained outside at this crucial hour—people huddled in their homes, whispering prayers, hoping the night would pass without incident.

The night stretched on, thick with the weight of unspoken fear. Across the land, kingdoms had sealed themselves away, their citizens clinging to faith behind locked doors, waiting for dawn. But in one city—teeming with hundreds of thousands under Omadi's rule—prayers would not be enough.

The first sign was the red shield.

Without warning, it flared to life above one of the noble houses, its crimson glow bleeding across the skyline like an open wound. The eerie pulse of its light matched the hidden rituals taking place below, where the Zealots—once human, now hunched and feathered, their devotion consuming them—completed the final step of their long-prepared sacrament.

Beneath the noble estate, deep in the underground chambers, loomed a grotesque statue of Crepuscular's counterpart. A writhing mass of flesh, formed over years of sacrifice and secrecy, sat at its center, its gaping cavity waiting.

Then, at last, the offering was placed. A tremor passed through the city's very bones.

The Zealots spoke as one, their voices merging in unnatural harmony:

"The time has come." Luminous eyes turned skyward.

"It is time to welcome our brethren." And the world answered.

From the mirrored realm—the upside-down world where shadows beings now under the rule of the gods dark counterparts—a shift occurred. For a moment, the barrier between worlds trembled, fragile. Excitement rippled through the waiting entities, their formless shapes flickering and pulsing as they stirred.

The red shield had not been a defense. It was a beacon, a key and the gate had been unlocked.

In the city's silent streets, where even the wind no longer stir, shadows stretched unnaturally. They rippled across cobblestones, pooled in alleyways, darkened doorways. And then—they stepped through.

At first, they were nothing more than shapes, silhouettes bleeding from empty spaces. But as they fully crossed into the physical world, they took form—inhuman figures that twitched and contorted, their eyes brimming with unnatural hunger. Their gazes cut through walls and stone, piercing through the city with eerie clarity, separating those who belonged to them from those who did not.

The people, huddled in their homes, were unaware of what had come for them.

But the Zealots knew.

They stood with bowed heads, bodies trembling in ecstasy, as the first of the shadow beings reached them. There was no fear, no resistance—only acceptance. The Zealots convulsed as the entities poured into them, warping their flesh to accommodate the dark essence now surging through their veins.

They had become vessels. For the rest of the city—the unknowing sacrifices—there would be no such mercy.

The hunt had begun. At first, it was subtle.

A creeping unease settled over the city, gnawing at the edges of the mind. Prayers faltered in darkened rooms as an unnatural chill slithered through the air. Fires dimmed without reason, their embers flickering weakly. The very walls of homes groaned, as if something unseen pressed against them, waiting.

Then came the sound.

A low, resonating hum—not human, not mechanical, but something else entirely. Something alive. It vibrated through stone and wood, rattling windows, shaking dust from the rafters. It pressed against skulls, seeped into marrow, igniting a primal terror beyond words.

Something was wrong.

Doors creaked open. Curtains were pushed aside. Hesitant hands reached out, eyes peered into the night. And then, the realization struck.

The city was no longer as it had been.

Above, the red shield loomed, its eerie glow staining the streets in unnatural crimson. The sky beyond it was no longer the familiar night—no stars, no moon, only a swirling abyss of black and red, shifting like something alive. And the shadows... they moved where no light touched, stretching, writhing, reaching.

Then, the first scream shattered the silence.

A woman stumbled from her home, her eyes wide with terror, her voice raw with desperation. She clawed at the air, as if grasping for something unseen. Then, her body seized. Dark tendrils coiled around her, sinking into her flesh. Her mouth opened in a silent, soundless cry before she collapsed.

When she rose again, she was not herself. Panic spread like wildfire, People poured into the streets, abandoning their homes in a frantic bid to flee. Families clung to their children, nobles and commoners alike running without direction, without purpose—driven only by the desperate need to escape.

But escape was an illusion.

The red shield that had once seemed distant now loomed impossibly close, pressing down like an omen. They ran—toward the city gates, toward alleyways and hidden passages—only to find them sealed.

Some tried to scale the walls, fingers clawing at stone in frantic desperation, only to be dragged back down by unseen hands. Others turned to the temples, seeking sanctuary, only to find the doors barred, the once-sacred halls now twisted into something unholy.

And through it all, the Zealots watched. Feathered forms lurked in the shadows, their eyes gleaming with something between reverence and madness. They did not move to stop the fleeing masses.

They did not need to, the hunt had only just begun.

And the city—sealed, entrapped, doomed—belonged to the shadows now.

Along the noble district, the city guards stood at their posts, rigid under the ominous glow of the red shield. The night had been unnervingly silent—until the first scream shattered it.

Then came the flood. Terrified people surged toward the gates, clawing at the barricades, pounding on doors that would not open. Their cries filled the air, raw and desperate.

Something was wrong.