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But Maul himself made it clear: his divinity was not so grand.

Unlike gods who extended their protection over entire civilizations, Maul's unyielding protection was deeply personal and fiercely selective. He was not a benevolent guardian of the weak, nor a patron of those who simply sought safety. Instead, his protection was reserved for a chosen few—those who had earned his loyalty, proven their worth, or belonged to his self-defined "inner circle."

Maul's vengeance was as precise as his protection. He did not seek justice for all, nor did he avenge wrongdoing indiscriminately. Instead, his retribution was personal, calculated, and unforgiving—a punishment inflicted only upon those who dared to harm what he claimed as his.

Tide's divinity was not bound to vaults of gold or static riches. Wealth, in his domain, was not something hoarded—it was something that moved, flowed, and returned. His treasury was everflowing, an endless current of prosperity that mirrored the tides of the ocean—sometimes receding, but always destined to rise again.

Tide understood that true wealth was not in mere possession but in motion, exchange, and renewal. More than any other god, Tide understood the weight of time. Wealth and ruin were both fleeting, and the greatest fortunes came to those who could read the shifting currents of fate.

Tide made it known he was not just a god of riches—he was a god of movement, foresight, and the eternal cycle of gain and loss.

To rulers and merchants, he was a guide to prosperity.

To scholars and visionaries, he was a god of foresight and wisdom.

To fools and hoarders, he was a cruel tide that washed away all they clung to.

For wealth would always flow—but only those who understood its tides would prosper with it.

Merchants, bankers, economists, and those that deal with trade, and wealth.

When it comes to Flowua, the Goddess of Unimpeded Progress and Adaptive Force.

Flowua embodied the unstoppable momentum of progress—a force that neither tradition nor resistance could hinder. She was not simply a god of change, but of purposeful evolution, where stagnation was a greater sin than failure itself.

True power was not in brute force, but in the ability to change, adjust, and thrive under any condition. Flowua's divinity was one of fluid resilience, an understanding that rigidity leads to downfall, while adaptability ensures survival.

Flowua did not grant patience, comfort, or certainty. She offered only the drive to push forward, to break through stagnation, and to become something greater than before.

As for Xerosis who took the divinity of Justice and Veiled arbiter. Xerosis did not wield justice as a sword, nor did she define it with absolute proclamations. She made it known to her priest that justice was not a rigid concept but a fluid force, shifting with time, perspective, and circumstance.

She rejected the notion of unyielding law, believing that no single truth existed in isolation. Justice was not found in punishment alone, nor in mercy alone, but in the act of seeing—truly seeing—before judgment is passed.

She taught her followers not to pass judgment based on emotion, bias, or surface-level truths. Instead, she demanded patience, the gathering of knowledge, and the wisdom to see beyond what was immediately apparent.

Xerosis's most sacred teaching was simple: "See before you judge."

She demanded that her followers learn to observe with all their senses, not just their eyes.

"Look before you act" – Do not pass judgment until you have seen every side of the story.

"See through the eyes of both the accused and the victim" – Justice requires empathy, but empathy without clarity is blindness.

"Even the guilty have a story" – Before punishment is given, understand why the crime was committed. Not all actions stem from evil—some stem from desperation, manipulation, or ignorance.

"Justice is never perfect, but it must be true" – A judgment should bring balance, not merely serve revenge.

Xerosis made sure it was known that she was not a god of personal morality. She did not place herself above mortals as the ultimate authority, but rather as a guide who concealed herself behind the veil of impartiality.

In the years following the ascension of the gods, the understanding of their doctrines became clearer. Each god's essence and ideals gradually took form in the hearts and minds of their followers. Five years after their ascension, their faiths were fully articulated, and in the following five years, these beliefs were systematically introduced and nurtured among the godlings. As a result, new professions emerged, each dedicated to upholding the values and principles of the divine.

For ikem it was biologists, ecologists, Druids and Herbalists while for Ursula it was community leaders, healers, caregivers, and anyone who values strong relationships.

For Maul it was Warriors, guards, Martial Philosophers and weirdly most fatehr figures found themselves drawn to his faith as his doctrine revered protectors and those who guided the next generation with wisdom and firm but fair discipline.

For tide it was, Merchants, bankers, economists, and those that deal with trade, and wealth. His followers sought to master the movement of wealth, ensuring its fair and strategic distribution.

For flouwa it was, Inventors, scientists, explorers, revolutionaries, and anyone who embraces change and innovation.

For xerosis, It was Judges, Enforcers, Detectives and Investigators.

Once the doctrines were fully understood, the next five years saw a concentrated effort to spread these faiths among the godlings. Temples, academies, and guilds were established, each dedicated to the teachings of a specific god. The integration of these beliefs into daily life shaped a new era where divine influence was not only worshiped but lived.

Sacred Institutions were founded, blending faith and profession. For instance, academies dedicated to Ikem trained future ecologists in both science and spiritual connection to nature. Courts dedicated to Xerosis were revered for their unyielding pursuit of justice.

Cultural Shifts took place, where societal roles became infused with divine purpose. A healer was no longer just a doctor but an extension of Ursula's mercy. A merchant was not merely a trader but an agent of Tide's prosperity.

After the retreat of the godlings, it did not take long for whispers to spread among human kingdoms about the rise of new gods. The godlings, already a formidable race, had now gained deities of their own.

For the greater human kingdoms—those who had long been aware of the godlings' ascension—this revelation did not come as a surprise. Yet, knowing of it beforehand did not diminish the weight of its implications. The power of the godlings continued to rise, while humanity, by comparison, seemed to stagnate. The balance of power, already fragile, tilted ever further in the godlings' favor, breeding unease among human rulers.

However, with the godlings largely absent, their divine figures focused on cultivating their new doctrines, human leaders found themselves emboldened. At first, they moved cautiously, sending spies and observers to study the reactions of the godlings in their distant territories. Each decision, each movement was calculated, awaiting the slightest sign of retaliation. But when no retribution came—when the godlings remained passive to human affairs—the ruling families of the human kingdoms began to relax, though never fully.

Yet, history has a way of repeating itself. Just as they had done with the Origin Gods before being chastised by the godlings, humans took it upon themselves to establish places of worship for these new ascended gods.

Out of both respect and a desperate desire to gain divine favor, humans built shrines, temples, and places of worship dedicated to each of the newly ascended gods. Some did so out of genuine reverence,

while others sought power, believing that if they could appeal to these new gods, they might receive divine blessings or protection from the ever-strengthening godling race.

But their ignorance became a source of irritation for the ascended gods.

The newly ascended gods had been doing their best to purify their divinity, ensuring that faith and belief in them were aligned with their true purpose. Unlike the Origin Gods, who were vast, primordial forces intertwined with existence itself, these new gods were still shaping their domains, defining the meaning of their divinity. Mortal worship, vast and uncontrolled, introduced unpredictable elements into their nature.

Some gods, such as Xerosis, Ursula, and Tide, were largely unaffected. Their domains—law, community, trade—were concepts humans already understood. Human worship of them, while still flawed, did not greatly distort their intended divine roles.

But for Ikem, Maul, and Flouwa, the situation was far more complicated. Ikem found himself worshiped in ways that echoed his parent deity rather than his own principles. Many humans revered him as merely a god of bountiful harvests and prosperity, reducing his divine nature to a patron of agriculture. His teachings on the interconnectedness of all life and the necessity of equilibrium were ignored in favor of prayers for abundant crops and endless fertility of the land.

Maul was distorted into something far from his true essence. Humans, shaped by their own past traditions, associated him with war and conquest, erecting shrines where warriors prayed for victory and dominion over their enemies. His teachings on self-mastery, restraint, and the burden of strength were overshadowed by the age-old human belief that power existed to be used against others. In their minds, Maul became a war god—an image he never wished to embody.

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Flouwa suffered a different kind of misunderstanding. Humans, viewing her through the lens of her predecessor, saw her as a force of divine progress, of endless change without consequence. They sought her favor not to challenge stagnation or push the boundaries of knowledge, but to justify reckless ambition and unrestrained upheaval. Revolutions, once meant to be a means of positive transformation, became chaotic destruction in her name.

This realization struck deep. Björn had warned them that their previous methods were never foolproof—that each era, each civilization, would interpret divinity in their own way. The godlings had

believed that by ascending and taking control of their faith, they could guide it into purity, yet humanity had found a way to alter its meaning all the same.

The ascended gods faced a dilemma. To ignore human worship entirely could allow their divinity to be reshaped in unintended ways, yet to actively intervene could lead to even greater entanglement with human affairs. Some of them, like Xerosis and Ursula, were indifferent, seeing human worship as an inevitable consequence of their divine existence. Others, like Ikem and Maul, found themselves deeply frustrated, unsure whether to reject or embrace the interpretations mortals had assigned to them.

For the human kingdoms, this misinterpretation of divinity gave them a sense of security, a belief that they could once again claim a connection to the gods, even if the godlings had left them behind. Yet, they did not know how these new gods would react—whether their attempts to honor them would be seen as devotion or insult.

While the newly ascended gods grappled with the unintended consequences of human worship, they were not the only ones disturbed by mortal devotion. The dragons, long content in their solitude, found themselves unwillingly dragged back into the affairs of humanity.

For centuries, the dragons had been forgotten by humans, their existence reduced to myths and old legends. The godlings and their deities had become the dominant divine figures, and the dragons—by design—had faded from mortal memory. They preferred it this way. Their kind had always done their best to remain neutral, avoiding entanglements with both the Origin Gods and their counterparts.

But that changed on the fateful night the humans later named "The Night of Sundered Whispers."

No human truly understood what transpired that night. It was an event shrouded in secrecy, the details known only to the godlings and the dragons themselves. What the mortals did know was that something immense had happened—an event so significant that even the most powerful beings had acted in unison to resolve it.

On that night, the presence of dragons had once again made itself known. Some were seen soaring in the skies, their colossal forms silhouetted against the moon. Others had reportedly clashed with unseen forces, their roars shaking the heavens. The godlings, too, were involved, though neither they nor the dragons ever spoke of what truly occurred.

For the humans, it was a moment of revelation. The dragons were real.

The reemergence of these legendary beings ignited something within humanity—a forgotten reverence, a rekindling of old faiths buried beneath centuries of neglect. As news spread, temples dedicated to dragons began to rise once more, their altars filled with prayers and offerings.

But to the dragons, this was nothing short of an annoyance.

Dragons were not like gods. In most other worlds, they might have welcomed faith and worship, basking in the reverence of lesser beings. But this world was different.

Here, the very structure of existence revolved around divine influence. To be worshiped was to be bound—to have one's nature shaped and defined by faith, much like the gods themselves. The dragons had always known this, and it was why they had chosen seclusion. By staying out of the affairs of the Origin Gods and their counterparts, they had remained free, unshackled by belief.

Their neutrality during The Night of Sundered Whispers had not been by accident. They had acted purely of their own will, not as pawns of any divine scheme. Even the gods' counterparts had failed to account for their interference, so distant had the dragons remained from the conflicts of gods and mortals alike.

And now, their actions had come back to haunt them.

As the prayers of humans reached their slumbering minds, many dragons found themselves restless and irritated. Some awoke in frustration, cursing the mortals for daring to call upon them. Others stubbornly ignored the worship, hoping that in time, the foolishness of humanity would fade.

For ten years, they resisted.

For ten years, they refused to answer.

At first, dragon worship spread like wildfire. Temples were erected in grand fashion, prayers were offered, and hopeful devotees sought to understand these ancient beings. Some saw the dragons as

protectors, others as divine judges, and a few even believed that through reverence, they might gain the favor of these mighty creatures.

But unlike the gods—who, whether they liked it or not, could not fully escape the influence of faith—the dragons had no interest in acknowledging their worshippers. They did not grant boons, did not answer prayers, and did not bestow divine favor.

And so, as quickly as the temples rose, they began to fall.

Faith without response is fragile. A decade of silence was enough to shatter the certainty of many. Some abandoned their beliefs, convinced that the dragons had never returned at all. Others, disillusioned by the lack of divine intervention, turned to more tangible sources of power—seeking favor from the ascended gods instead.

Yet, not all worshippers wavered.

Amidst the ruins of collapsed temples, there remained a handful of individuals who refused to let go of their faith. These people—whether out of true reverence, blind devotion, or sheer obstinacy—continued to believe.

They kept the remaining temples standing, maintaining shrines that had long since been abandoned by the masses. They spoke to the dragons in hushed prayers, even when no response came.

And though the dragons wished to ignore them, they took notice.

For the first time in centuries, the dragons found themselves faced with a dilemma. Unlike the broader wave of worship that had already faded, these particular mortals were persistent. They had no guidance, no divine voice, yet they remained unwavering in their allegiance.

The dragons had no desire to be bound by faith, yet ignoring this group entirely could prove unwise. These individuals were few in number, but their conviction was unshakable—a force that, if left unchecked, could one day lead to something far more significant.

For now, the dragons remained in a state of uneasy observation. They would not answer prayers, nor would they acknowledge their worshippers openly. But they watched.

They took note of the ones who remained loyal, memorizing their names, their faces, their actions. Not out of fondness or obligation—but out of caution.

Because if there was one thing dragons understood, it was that faith, once planted, had a way of growing into something uncontrollable.

And whether they liked it or not, the seeds had already been sown.

If possible, the godlings would have preferred to stay away for centuries, the godlings had existed in a delicate balance amongst themselves choosing to remain withdrawn from the mortal world.

As for the ascended gods, though divine by nature, they had no desire to immerse themselves in the constant demands of human faith. To them, faith was a substance best kept pure and measured—not something to be recklessly squandered on the fickle emotions of mortals.

Yet, that balance had now been disturbed.

The gods, in their wisdom, had issued divine orders. The godlings—whether they wished it or not—were to make an appearance once more.

For a time, many had resisted. They had lingered in their domains, content to let the faith of their own kind sustain them, to let the world move forward without their interference. But the ignorance of humanity had proven more disruptive than they anticipated.

The raw, untamed waves of mortal faith surged through the world, touching even those who had sought solitude. The sheer magnitude of it was intoxicating, an overwhelming flood of power unlike anything the gods had experienced in ages. It was exhilarating. Addictive.

But it came at a price.

The gods had no love for excess. To them, faith was best when drawn in controlled, refined streams—never in chaotic, unpredictable torrents. What the humans gave freely was too much, too impure, too volatile. It surged and swayed with every whim of their emotions, making the godlings' existence less stable, less predictable.

They would have much preferred the limited, steady faith of their own kind. Pure, unwavering, undemanding. But faith and worship were not things one could simply deny to mortals.

The godlings understood one truth above all—faith was the right of mortals.

To take that from them would be to impose a cruelty far worse than any divine judgment. Worship was not just about power—it was a fundamental part of human existence, a tether that connected them to something greater than themselves.

If the godlings refused to acknowledge their faith, if they dismissed it as unworthy, they would risk something far worse than discomfort.

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They would risk war.

The last thing the gods and godlings desired was to set themselves above humanity in a way that bred resentment. To do so would be to plant the seeds of enmity and rebellion, to create a divide that could never be repaired.

And though the godlings were powerful, the reality was undeniable—humans were growing.

Their numbers multiplied at an alarming rate, and with each passing generation, they grew stronger. Their knowledge expanded, their magic evolved, and their faith—unruly though it was—only made them more dangerous.

The godlings emerged once more, not as rulers, not as masters, but as guides. Their purpose was clear: to teach mortals the true doctrine of the gods, to guide them along the proper path of faith.

They would not involve themselves in mortal affairs beyond this. They would not grant blessings on a whim, nor would they interfere in human conflicts. Faith, if it was to be given, must be given in truth—not out of desperation or misunderstanding.

But hope was a fragile thing. The best they could do was teach. Whether mortals would truly hold to the lessons given to them was a matter only time would answer.

Among the ascended gods, Ikem understood the dangers of mortal perception more than most.

He could see why they wished to make him their patron of agriculture, though he was no such thing. The longing for security, for a force that would ensure their lands remained fertile and their harvests plentiful, was understandable.

But their ignorance was dangerous.

Faith shaped the divine. Worship, when misguided, could warp a god's very essence. If mortals pushed the wrong ideals onto Ikem, they could unknowingly force him into a role he was never meant to hold.

Even more troubling was the absence of Ikenga.

Each passing year made Ikenga's absence more undeniable. The forests, once lush and ever-thriving, were beginning to settle into a more neutral, passive state. Crops were no longer unnaturally bountiful, and nature—once an unceasing force of abundance—was now beginning to reflect its true self.

For generations, mortals had become accustomed to a world touched by Ikenga's presence. They had never known a time where the land simply followed its own rhythm, where growth was not endlessly generous. Now, as that silent divine influence faded, they struggled to adjust.

But this shift was not an active punishment. It was merely the nature of the Origin Gods.

Ikenga had never dictated how nature should be. He had not forced abundance upon the world, nor had he demanded growth.

Yet, as an emotional being—a god who embodied both nature and greed—his mere existence had shaped the world around him.

His subconscious desires, his unspoken wishes for endless bounty, had become reality simply because he was. Now, in his absence, that silent influence was gone.

And nature, untouched by divine emotion, simply returned to what it had always been—a force of balance, not excess.

The godlings, attuned to these changes, were not unprepared. They sought solutions, experimenting with artificial means to preserve nature's former bounty. Among them, the apelings already had "The Garden"—a sanctuary where nature could still flourish beyond its natural limits.

But the mortals?

Those in power did not concern themselves with such matters.

The loss of nature's abundance was a problem for farmers, merchants, and laborers—not for kings and lords. With minds set on their own ambitions, they did not seek to understand, nor did they wish to.

Instead, when word reached them that Ikem, the son of the god of nature, had now ascended to godhood, they did what came naturally.

They worshiped.

Not in truth, nor in understanding, but in selfish, desperate hope.

Even without realizing it, they pushed their faith upon Ikem, shaping their prayers to fit their desires rather than his reality.

And in doing so, they risked making him something he was never meant to be.

Ikem had little choice but to seek out the one person who might have the answers he needed—Björn.

The price for this wisdom? His collection of fine wines grew even smaller.

A glimpse into the past showed Ikem seated in Björn's realm, a world soaked in the scent of rust and the faint metallic tang of blood. The divine palace was imposing yet oddly intimate, with towering iron pillars and a throne hewn from the remains of war.

Björn sat across from him, swirling his drink. The god who had once been a demon had become something far greater, yet his presence was still familiar in an unsettling way.

Ikem downed his cup and sighed. "Faith should be a gift, not a burden."

Björn chuckled, shaking his head. "Funny how your problem is the kind of opportunity most beings at the fifth stage wish they could get their hands on."

Ikem frowned, the weight of expectation pressing down on him.

Björn smirked. "Your issue isn't that faith is overwhelming—it's that it's not the right kind of faith." He leaned forward. "You don't understand it. You don't accept it. But if you did? If you embraced it, reshaped yourself around it... your divinity would grow."

Ikem folded his arms. "I think we should be considered friends at this point."

Björn raised a brow and scoffed. "Just because you became a drinking buddy doesn't mean we're friends."

Ikem waved a dismissive hand, smirking. "No need to get caught up in the details. I know it's not as simple as you make it sound."

Björn let out a low chuckle. "You got that right."

Then, he set his cup down with a soft clink. The air around them grew heavier.

"Let me ask you something." His gaze darkened. "What is the core of your realm? What god was your throne built upon?"

Ikem hesitated, but Björn continued without waiting for a response.

"Now imagine gaining faith from a divinity that isn't centered on that core."

Ikem narrowed his eyes, listening intently.

Björn's tone shifted, carrying a weight of experience, of warning.

"The fall of an ascended god begins with selfishness—selfishness for faith, for power, for divinities they were never meant to hold. That's how it starts. At first, it feels like an expansion, a growth. A god begins to take in faith from something foreign, believing they can wield it without consequence."

Björn leaned back, voice colder now.

"But faith is not just power. It is expectation. It is demand. The moment a god allows themselves to be shaped by mortals, rather than the other way around, they lose control of their own divinity."

Ikem felt the truth in his words, the weight of it pressing into his chest. He had previously imagined what it would be like if they had not had Björn who told them of the machinations of faith, being warped into something without no say in it was a nightmare.

Björn met his gaze. "So tell me, Ikem. Are you ready to let mortals define you?"

Björn leaned forward, his gaze sharp as he swirled the wine in his cup. The liquid gleamed darkly in the dim light of his realm, a reflection of the weighty truths he was about to unveil.

"Nothing is wrong with attaining more," he admitted, "but when one exceeds the core of one's faith, that begins the downfall. A god who spreads themselves too thin, who stretches their essence beyond its original nature, is no longer grounded. And when that happens..." he paused, letting the silence settle. "They become vulnerable."

Ikem listened carefully, his fingers tapping idly against his arm.

Björn continued, his tone carrying the weight of someone who had seen the cycle play out before. "Having more divinity at hand makes one susceptible—an easy target for mortals who wish to ascend to the throne of gods."

A slow smirk formed on Björn's lips as he lifted his cup. "Take, for example, the divinity of agriculture that is practically lying at your feet. If you choose to comprehend it, one of two things will happen." He held up a single finger. "First, your core divinity will fade in recognition. Fewer and fewer will remember your true nature, while the majority will worship you as the god of agriculture. It solves your problem of misplaced faith—yes—but at what cost?"

He raised a second finger. "The second issue is far worse. This new divinity will never truly be yours. It will always be something borrowed, something accumulated rather than inherent. And like all things acquired, it can be taken away."

Ikem tensed at that. His mind spun with the implications, but before he could ask, Björn preempted him.

"No," he said with certainty, "an ascended god's core divinity cannot be taken away. The only way to strip a god of their essence is through their death. That is the one absolute law."

Ikem exhaled slowly, nodding as he took in the words.

Björn set his cup down with a soft clink and leaned back, watching Ikem with knowing eyes. "An ascended god has only one true divinity—their core. Any other divinity they gain along the way is just an addition, a tool to gather more faith. But never forget, Ikem..."

His voice lowered, edged with something ominous. "Tools can be stolen. Borrowed power can be stripped away. And the more you take, the more you risk losing everything."

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After Ikem got this information, it was also when it was decided that the godlings had to leave from their retreat to head to the mortal world to teach them.

Something else that became a sensation in the past ten years, which was the birth of the world map. Map was never something new in the world of Nana but a map of the whole world was something never seen before.

The world of Nana had never been so vast.

Or rather, it had never felt so vast.

For centuries, men knew only what their feet could touch, what their ancestors had spoken of, and what the maps of old whispered in vague, uncertain lines. Their continents, their borders, their cities—everything was drawn only as far as their knowledge allowed. Beyond that? There was nothing. Only empty space. White voids of the unknown.

But that changed.

No one could say when exactly the first complete world map appeared. No one knew its origin, nor the hand that had drawn it. The only certainty was that one day, the world found itself staring at something that should have been impossible—a map of everything.

Every mountain. Every river. Every nameless valley tucked away in forgotten lands. Even the hidden realms of the godlings, places known only by few, were now laid bare. The merfolk's underwater kingdoms were etched in perfect clarity. The unbroken sprawl of the Skyward Peaks, where storms raged eternal, was detailed with eerie precision. The lost isles swallowed by mist, where only myths dared to tread, were now as real as the streets beneath one's feet.

It was a map that should not have existed.

And yet, it did.

And somewhere, in the vast openness of this newly discovered world, there was a lone figure drifting through the sky.

They moved with an almost careless grace, weaving between the clouds, their path uncertain, dictated only by the fickle whims of the wind. A jug of wine was always strapped to their waist, its contents sloshing with every turn and dive. The scent of fermented grapes clung to them, a fragrance of indulgence, of distraction. Their head often lolled to the side, their gaze unfocused, their body swaying as though at the edge of sleep.

A fool, many would say. A drunkard without purpose, a wanderer lost in their own haze.

But the truth was something else entirely.

For this nameless traveler, the world was a mystery until it was put to paper. The lands, the seas, the skies—they did not exist in their mind, not until their hands traced them, not until ink met parchment and shaped the formless into something real. It was only when they wrote, when they mapped, that their thoughts sharpened, their mind cleared.

And so they traveled.

From the frozen wastes where no man dared to walk, to the burning dunes where the sun reigned unchallenged. From the ruins of forgotten civilizations swallowed by time, to the celestial gardens of gods who had long abandoned their thrones. They saw, they recorded, they sketched and wrote—until what was once unknown became known.

And when the last stroke of ink was done, when the world before them was understood, the haze returned. Their mind drifted back into a fog of wine and aimless wandering, until the next place, the next unknown land, called them forth once more.

Perhaps, one day, they would finish. Perhaps, one day, the map would hold no blank spaces, no edges fraying into mystery.

And on that day... What would become of them?

Its arrival was not marked by great fanfare. No heralds announced it, no scholars debated its creation in grand halls. It simply was. One day, the people of Nana awoke to find it in their midst. Some discovered it folded neatly on their doorsteps, others found it slipped between the pages of their books, and for many, it was pressed into their hands by strangers who could not recall where they had first acquired it. The world map spread like wildfire, slipping through the cracks of mortal society faster than any decree or suppression could contain.

And with it, the world itself seemed to open.

For centuries, people had lived within the safe boundaries of their known lands, their horizons set by the limitations of old maps and whispered rumors of what lay beyond. But now, with every valley, every hidden coastline, every stretch of unexplored wilderness laid bare before them, the desire to see with their own eyes took root in their hearts. A great hunger awakened—a longing to step beyond their doorsteps, to cross the seas, to climb the mountains and reach the edges of the world itself.

The nobles and elites tried to quell the wave of wanderlust. They attempted to label the map as false, a trick, an illusion. When that failed, they changed their approach, warning of the dangers that lurked beyond. The territories of the godlings, they said, were not to be disturbed. The godlings were not kind to intruders, and those who strayed too far would pay the price.

Yet even this was not enough to dissuade all.

The merchant lords suffered the worst blow. For generations, they had hoarded knowledge of distant lands, keeping their own secret maps locked away, using them as leverage to control trade and wealth. The ability to go beyond the seas, to reach hidden markets and undiscovered treasures, had been their greatest advantage. But now, with a single stroke of ink, all their closely guarded secrets had been laid bare for the world to see. Their private paths, their hidden harbors—all of it—was now in the hands of common travelers.

Wealth and power that had once been theirs alone was now slipping from their grasp.

But even as the mortal world reeled from this sudden change, another group watched with quiet unease—the godlings.

They had long existed apart from mortals, their realms untouched and unseen by human eyes. Yet now, they found themselves gazing at a map that detailed their lands with eerie precision. The underwater spires of the merfolk, the floating islands of the harpies, all were drawn with a clarity that should have been impossible.

It was not offensive—not quite. But it was unsettling.

Who had done this?

Had a mortal truly moved so freely through their sacred places? Had they been blind to an intruder so skilled that not even their divine senses had detected them? It was not anger that stirred in the hearts of the godlings, but unease.

Then came word from the harpies.

Unlike most of the godlings, the harpies were wanderers themselves, their wings carrying them far and wide. They had seen the figure in question—a lone traveler, weaving drunkenly through the skies, parchment in one hand, a jug of wine on their waist.

The moment the godlings heard this, their unease faded.

They knew him.

Or at least, they knew of him.

A great elder, one who had walked the world and sat with the oldest godlings. Respected, but... odd. Lost, in a way that none could quite understand. He did not seek dominion, nor did he meddle in the affairs of mortals or divine beings. He simply wandered, mapping the world with single-minded clarity—only to forget it all once his quill left the parchment.

The godlings did not move to stop him.

Instead, they did what little they could for him. They gathered the finest wines of their realms and carried them to the highest mountain peak, leaving them there as an offering. They knew he would find them, eventually.

And they wished, in their silent way, that he would one day find whatever it was he was looking for.

A great deal can change in a decade, but some changes are less surprising than others.

The shift in the Sun Kingdom's stance toward the Harpy godlings was one such change—expected, foreseen, and, in some ways, welcomed.

The Harpies were not taken aback. From the moment they had aided in the Sun Kingdom's rise, they had anticipated that, one day, the tides would turn. It was inevitable. No kingdom, no matter how grateful, enjoys the weight of another's influence pressing down upon it.

For years, the Harpies had quietly prepared for this. Their guidance had shaped the Sun Kingdom into one of the great powerhouses of the western continent, but power breeds pride, and pride resents oversight. The Harpies had no desire to rule. The support and growth of the sun kingdom came as a necessity at the time to keep the power balance in check, yet they had always known that the Sun Kingdom—once strong enough—would seek to stand alone.

It was better this way.

Edward's change of heart worked in their favor, providing the perfect excuse to withdraw without conflict. They did not resist his shift in attitude, nor did they question it aloud. Instead, they gradually pulled away, letting distance grow naturally between them and the kingdom they had once nurtured.

And yet, they watched, because while distance was expected, Edward's change was not.

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It was too sudden. Too complete.

Edward had been an admirer of the Harpies and the twilight-born people of Crepuscular. His kingdom's very culture, its structure, its philosophies—so much of it had been shaped by their influence. For him to turn away from them so decisively, to cast aside admiration so easily, raised silent alarms among the godlings.

Something had changed within him.

The war with Silas had been the turning point. Everyone could see that. But what had truly happened in the aftermath?

Edward spoke to no one about it. The Sun Kingdom could only speculate, and the godlings could only observe. Yet those who knew him best saw the shift in his eyes, the way his thoughts seemed heavier, the way his certainty had turned to quiet suspicion.

Only Edward knows what he was going through, because Edward knew Silas.

Silas, the schemer. Silas, the manipulator.

His downfall had come too easily. His death had been too simple. And as the years passed, that seed of doubt grew in Edward's mind. Had they truly defeated Silas? Or had they merely stepped into the next phase of his design?

Edward could not shake the thought.

The war was over. The world moved forward. But something had been left behind in the ruins of that battle—something that had followed him home.

At first, it was subtle. A flicker in the corner of his eye, the faintest shift in the darkness beneath him. A shadow that seemed too still at times, and too fluid at others. Some nights, he could swear it stretched and twisted on its own, curling in ways that did not match the angle of the light.

Then came the hallucinations.

He would turn, convinced that someone was watching him, only to find his own shadow staring back. He told himself it was fatigue, the lingering toll of war. But there were moments—brief and terrifying—when he saw it move.

The last straw came after a diplomatic meeting with a Harpy envoy.

It had been a peaceful discussion, as pleasant as any such meeting could be. Edward had smiled, spoken with practiced ease, reassured them of stability. When the envoy left, he exhaled, letting the mask slip for a moment.

Then a voice, his own yet not, murmured:

"Why do you lower yourself to flatter them?"

Edward froze.

His breath caught in his throat as his eyes darted around the empty room. He was alone. He was sure of it. Yet the voice had come from somewhere.

Then he looked down.

His shadow was no longer behind him where it should have been. It had moved, slithering across the floor to rest directly in front of him. And within its shifting darkness, two hollow, white eyes glowed back at him.

Terror surged through Edward's veins.

With a reflex honed in battle, he flung out his hands. Fire erupted in a torrent, engulfing the unnatural shape in an instant. The room flashed with golden-red light, the heat warping the air. The shadow dispersed, vanishing in the blaze.

Edward staggered back, heart hammering, gasping for breath. Relief settled over him—until the voice returned.

"Why do you lower yourself before them?"

His body went rigid. The voice was calm, insidious. It was not defeated. It had never been afraid.

It was real.

From that day on, Edward's mind was plagued with doubt and paranoia. He began asking those around him, in quiet moments, if they noticed anything strange about his shadow. The responses were always the same—puzzled looks, hesitant bows, reassurances that nothing was amiss.

Yet Edward knew the truth.

The shadow was playing with him.

It made itself known only when he was alone. It stayed docile in the presence of others, shrinking back into normalcy as if mocking him. No one else could see it. No one else could hear it.

And that, more than anything, unnerved him.

Because if no one else saw it—if no one else heard the voice—then the question that haunted him most was this:

Was it truly something outside of him?

Or was it something that had always been there, waiting for the right moment to speak?

That moment marked the beginning of Edward's change.

At first, he resisted the shadow's whispers. He told himself that it was unnatural, that trusting it would be dangerous. But the voice was not like a demon's temptation or a trickster's deceit. It did not demand or mislead. It simply knew.

The problems his people struggled with, the knowledge lost to time, the obstacles that seemed insurmountable—the shadow always had the answers.

It understood agriculture in a way his scholars could not. It foresaw economic shifts before his advisors did. It spoke of advancements in architecture, warfare, and diplomacy with an ease that made even the brightest minds of his court seem dull.

And so, little by little, Edward listened.

Little by little, he relied on it.

And with each whispered suggestion, the kingdom flourished.

Edward had always admired the Harpies and their wisdom. The Sun Kingdom's foundation was built upon the knowledge they shared, shaping its culture, its structure, its way of life. But the Harpies never gave everything. They hoarded their greatest secrets, holding back the knowledge that would allow humanity to outgrow their careful balance.

Edward had long suspected this, but now he knew.

The shadow told him.

With its guidance, he no longer needed the Harpies. Their wisdom, once a coveted treasure, became obsolete. When they began their retreat, Edward saw no need to stop them. In truth, he welcomed it. Their absence severed the last tether of dependence, allowing the Sun Kingdom to rise on its own.

Contact between them lessened until, eventually, it was no more.

Outpacing the Humanity Kingdom

Now, years after the war with Silas, Edward stood at the head of the most powerful kingdom in the western continent.

Unlike the Humanity Kingdom, ruled by Erik, Edward's people had not been ravaged by war. The great battle against Silas had drained Erik's forces, cost him thousands of lives, and left his kingdom in a slow, arduous recovery. They had been the sword and shield, the frontline warriors who bled for the continent's survival.

The Sun Kingdom had taken a different path.

Edward had fought, yes, but strategically. His kingdom had deployed no grand army. They had lost few lives. Instead, he and a select few elites had intervened only when necessary, ensuring their survival while still claiming a stake in victory.

And now, the results were clear.

While Erik's people rebuilt, Edward's people thrived. While the Humanity Kingdom focused on replenishing its numbers, the Sun Kingdom surged forward in strength, wealth, and influence.

Edward could now say with certainty—and with pride—that the Sun Kingdom was the strongest human nation on the continent.

And though his people credited his wisdom, his leadership, and his vision for their prosperity, Edward knew the truth.

It was the shadow's whispers that had shaped this new era.

And in the deepest part of his mind, where even he dared not linger too long, he wondered: Had the shadow, since that first whisper, been leading him somewhere he could not yet see?

Years had passed since the ascension of the gods, and now, the godlings were making their presence known.

At first, Edward had been concerned. Their sudden emergence could have signified a shift in the balance of power, a new force that might disrupt the carefully built dominance of the Sun Kingdom. But after learning of their purpose, his worries faded.

They were not his problem.

Instead, his focus remained on something far more tangible—the spectacle left behind after the Night of Whispers.

The Dark Lake.

Its waters, ink-black and fathomless, defied understanding. Strange energies emanated from its depths, and both Edward's scholars and Erik's people had taken interest, each conducting their own research while maintaining an uneasy truce.

But Edward did not rely solely on his scholars. He had an advisor that no other king possessed.

And so, he called upon his shadow.

A vial of the lake's water sat on his desk, its contents swirling like liquid darkness. Edward, seated alone in his office, turned to the ever-present silhouette at his feet.

"What do you make of this?" Nothing.

No whisper. No mocking response. No movement.

For the first time since it had revealed itself, the shadow was silent.

A slow, creeping unease settled over Edward. He tried again, speaking with authority, with command—but still, the shadow did not respond. It stood there, as any normal shadow should, featureless and unmoving.

Was it possible that it had never been sentient? That all this time, it had been a trick of his mind?

No. That was impossible. He had seen it move. He had heard it speak.

This silence was deliberate.

Edward's golden eyes flickered as he shifted his attention back to the vial. The timing was too perfect. The shadow had never once ignored him before.

It had to be the lake.

And so, he decided to test it.

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With a slow, deliberate motion, he lifted his hand. Flames flickered to life in his palm, forming a spectral hand of fire that reached forward and grasped the vial.

Then, without hesitation, he tilted it.

A single drop of the dark water spilled toward the ground—toward the shadow.

And that was when it moved.

For the first time, not out of malice. Not out of mockery.

But out of fear.

Edward watched in fascination as his shadow recoiled, retreating from the falling droplet before it could make contact. Even after the liquid had splashed onto the floor, the shadow refused to return to its proper place.

Edward leaned back in his chair, a slow smirk forming on his lips.

For years, the shadow had held power over him. It had whispered in his ear, guided his actions, shaped the course of his kingdom.

But now?

Now he had something it feared.

And in his gleaming eyes, hidden beneath his composed expression, was a single thought:

"Finally, an opportunity to truly control this shadow."

The smirk on Edward's face filled the shadow with an emotion it had not felt in a long time—disappointment.

How foolish, how utterly foolish.

Edward thought he had found a means to control it. That he had discovered some grand weakness to exploit. But the fool had no idea what he was truly holding, what he had invited into his kingdom with open arms.

The black shadow—what he had become—could no longer be called Silas.

It had once been a seed cast forth by the fallen one, a last desperate attempt at revival. But its target had not been some ordinary mortal. No, it had attached itself to one blessed by Crepuscular, the Sun God himself.

The divine light had done its work, purging Silas's influence, purifying the corruption. Yet, despite this, the essence of Silas remained—his will, his darkness, his purpose.

Even stripped of his identity, one thing had endured:

"For Humanity."

The words had echoed within its being, reverberating endlessly until they became its own. The shadow had no name, no master, but it had inherited Silas's ultimate goal. It sought the rise of humanity—not as pets to gods, not as allies to other races, but as a force that could stand alone.

And so, it had guided Edward. It had driven a wedge between him and the harpies, ensured that humanity severed ties with those who would hold them back. Every moment of division, every lost alliance, every step toward isolation had filled it with satisfaction.

A bright future lay ahead.

A future where humanity had grown strong—only for it to harvest the fruit of the seeds it had planted.

But now? Now, its plans were at risk.

Edward, in his blind arrogance, had stumbled upon something that should never have been found.

The Dark Lake.

An abomination. A force beyond its current ability to handle and the idiot king had the audacity to believe it was afraid of him.

Of course, it was afraid. But more than that, it was irritated.

It was bound to Edward, shackled to the fool's shadow, unable to simply leave and flee to another continent. If it had that freedom, it would have abandoned him immediately, leaving him to face the consequences of his recklessness alone.

But no. It was stuck. Forced to watch as Edward toyed with forces he could not comprehend.

Forced to witness the inevitable destruction he was about to bring upon himself—and perhaps, upon everything.

Edward had no idea, he was about to doom them all.

Shadow was not going to let that happen, it was not going to let its future be prematurely brought to an end by a fool.

While the two were making plans for their own ambitions, far away on the westernmost reaches of the continent, a place long forsaken by history stirred once more.

This place had once been the nightmare of rulers, the whispered terror of kings and scholars alike—a land so fearsome that entire civilizations trembled at its mere mention. Yet, as time passed, it became a phantom of the past, forgotten by those who once feared it.

Forgotten, yes—but never truly gone.

When the Harpy's goldings made its move, sweeping across the lands in purchase of the imposter, people were forced to acknowledge this place once more. Even the Harpies, who soared above the highest peaks and dictated the fates of others from their lofty domains, could not erase it. Their encounter came and went, yet the cursed land endured, untouched and indifferent to their efforts. It was an unshakable reminder that some forces were beyond human dominion.

The only solace humanity found was that the place's growth had been halted. There was no expansion, no encroachment. It remained within its eerie, unnatural borders, giving the world a fragile sense of

peace. And so, as the years passed, people adjusted. The cursed forest became a fixture of the world, an anomaly that was simply accepted, like a wound that refused to heal but did not fester.

At the heart of this forsaken land, within a vast lake tinged in shades of unnatural purple, a Jaguar lay sprawled on a small island.

To the untrained eye, it was nothing more than an ordinary feline, stretching lazily like a housecat basking in the sun. It let out a wide yawn, baring sharp fangs, before stepping to the water's edge, lapping at the shimmering liquid with an air of supreme indifference.

But this was no mere beast.

This land—this realm—was his. A domain that stretched far beyond its visible borders, an independent pocket dimension interwoven with the cursed forest itself. Those who gazed upon it from the outside could not comprehend its true vastness, nor could they grasp the enormity of what had taken root within.

For years, he had been absent from the world's sight, hidden within his sanctuary, watching, waiting. Though unseen, he had not been idle. Slowly, methodically, he cultivated his power, fortifying his dominion in ways no mortal—or even most gods—could fathom.

He was now something new. Something greater.

A god.

And yet, the gods of this world knew nothing of his position except the world will.

Compared to the place of terror which this forest was once thought out to be, a huge change has occurred in the past few decades. Buildings of different sizes can be seen spread across this whole forest.

Imagine stepping into a forest that defies all natural laws. The air itself hums with an unnatural energy, a palpable thrum that vibrates through your bones. The trees, though appearing rooted, possess a subtle

sentience. Their bark ripples and shifts, like skin stretched over muscle, and their branches writhe with a slow, deliberate motion, as if constantly observing. The ground beneath your feet is a tapestry of strange flora; luminescent fungi pulse with an eerie glow, and vines adorned with thorn-like crystals coil around gnarled roots.

As you venture deeper, the unsettling beauty intensifies. The forest opens into a vast, sprawling city, a stark contrast to the surrounding wilderness. This is a testament to the warped genius of the demon-leopard and its corrupted followers.

Towering spires pierce the sky, crafted from colossal bones fused with shimmering, obsidian-like crystal. These structures defy gravity, twisting and curving in impossible angles, their surfaces etched with intricate, pulsating runes. The bones themselves seem to retain a faint, spectral glow, hinting at the creatures they once belonged to.

Enormous, pulsating membranes stretch between the spires, forming living walls that shimmer with an iridescent sheen. These walls are not static; they breathe and shift, their surfaces rippling with a network of veins that glow with an internal light.

Massive citadels rise from the forest floor, crafted from the interlocking plates of colossal carapaces. These structures resemble immense, organic fortresses, their surfaces covered in a network of chitinous ridges and spines.

Vast, meticulously cultivated gardens wind through the city, filled with flora that defies all natural classification. Trees with crystalline leaves shimmer with an internal light, and flowers with razor-sharp petals unfurl in slow, deliberate motions.

The city is alive with a cacophony of sounds. The clicking and chittering of insectoid creatures, the guttural growls of monstrous beasts, and the eerie whispers of the sentient trees create a symphony of the unnatural.

Beneath the visible city, a network of tunnels and chambers stretches deep into the earth. These are the hidden workings of the beast kingdom, where the demon-jaguar's followers conduct their experiments and forge their weapons.

The foundation of his power lay within his inherited memories—the ancient knowledge passed down through his lineage as a demon. Within these memories, he unearthed the key to creating his own dimensional domain, a task that required an immense understanding of space itself.

But knowledge alone was not enough.

The necessary materials for constructing such a realm eluded him. Space-type resources were rare, their scarcity making them nearly impossible to acquire. And so, he turned to the only resource at his disposal: the creatures within his cursed territory.

It was a slow, grueling process, but he had time.

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Deep within the forest, he scoured the ranks of demon beasts, sifting through generations of mutations and latent abilities. Eventually, he found them—creatures with a natural affinity for space. At first, they were weak, their talents underdeveloped, their grasp of spatial manipulation crude at best. But that would change.

He initiated a project, an experiment of selective breeding and forced evolution. Through careful cultivation, he guided their development, ensuring that with each successive generation, their affinity for space grew stronger, their abilities refined. What was once a mere flicker of talent soon became an innate force, woven into their very being.

And then, when his work bore fruit—when one side of his cursed forest had become a breeding ground for creatures steeped in spatial energy—he claimed his reward.

There was no celebration for their newfound strength. No era of prosperity for the race that had unknowingly served his purpose.

Instead, they were torn apart.

Their bodies were shattered, every piece of their flesh and bone repurposed. Their very essence was scattered and buried at the forest's boundaries, fusing their spatial energy into the fabric of his claimed land.

It was during this time, as he moved methodically through his cursed domain, laying down the intricate spellwork necessary to birth a space boundary, that his ambition evolved.

A realization struck him—why stop at merely creating a barrier? What if he could take it a step further? What if he could merge his personal domain with the very fabric of the space boundary he was about to construct?

The thought ignited something within him, a hunger for creation that surpassed mere survival or territorial dominance. This was not just about establishing control over the cursed forest—it was about transcending it. If he succeeded, he would possess a domain untethered from the physical world, a realm truly his own.

And so, he acted.

With the groundwork meticulously laid, he reached the final stage of his grand design. At the heart of the lake, buried deep beneath the violet-hued waters, a pulsating core began to stir—the Heart, an ancient and powerful organ formed from the main consciousness body and its condensed lifeforce. It had lain dormant for years, but now, under the influence of his spell, it began to beat.

A slow, steady rhythm at first.

Then, faster.

The moment the spell fully activated, the Heart roared to life, sending shockwaves rippling through the entire lake. The space-boundary magic surged through the land, igniting every runic inscription, every sacrificial marking. The bodies of the space-affinity creatures, painstakingly cultivated over generations, now served their final purpose. Their essence, the very reason they had been bred and nurtured, was consumed by the forming boundary, their energy woven into the nascent dimension.

Then, as the magic reached its crescendo, he made his move.

With a mere thought, he opened his personal domain.

It unraveled like a vast shadow, stretching outward from within him, seeping into the forming space. The boundary hungrily devoured it, melding the two into one. His domain, which had once existed in a secluded fold of reality, was now inseparably fused with the new spatial construct.

And just like that, a pocket dimension was born.

At first, it was small. A mere fragment of what it could become.

But he knew this was only the beginning.

With time, with his growth, and with the continuous evolution of the creatures within this new dimension, the space itself would expand. As the beings that inhabited it became stronger, as their lifeforce enriched the foundation of his realm, the pocket dimension would stretch and swell, feeding off their power.

This was his world now, an extension of his will, a domain where no god, no mortal, no force of the outside world could challenge him.

And yet, despite this monumental success, he did not stop. This was just the first step.

Before the birth of his pocket dimension, he was never blind to the world beyond the cursed forest. While his body remained hidden, forgotten by time, his eyes roamed freely.

Through his followers—beasts and lesser demons he had carefully nurtured and trained—he extended his vision past the boundaries of his land. Some of them had left the cursed territory long ago, slipping into the vast reaches of the western continent and beyond, their presence unnoticed as they blended into the mortal world. They were his eyes and ears, feeding him glimpses of distant lands, the rise and fall of civilizations, the maneuverings of gods and demons alike.

He watched as his fellow demon consciousnesses fought their battles—some ascended, others fell. He observed their victories, their failures, their blind arrogance. The gods, both ancient and newly ascended, moved like pieces on a grand chessboard, some striking in the open, others lurking in the shadows.

Nothing ever escaped his sight.

And of all the beings he observed, none intrigued him more than Murmur, the main consciousness that now stirred with a grand design. He had followed Murmur's machinations with interest, tracking the silent war Murmur waged upon the world, the delicate way he played with faith, trying to bend mortals and gods alike to his will.

And now, Murmur was moving.

The Jaguar let out a quiet chuckle when he realized what Murmur was planning. With a flick of his tail, he whispered into the void:

"You finally are learning."

For centuries, he had studied this world. He had examined the way mortals and gods wove their fates together, the invisible chains that bound them in a cycle of faith, power, and control. And he came to one undeniable truth—this world could never be conquered.

Not truly.

The only real chance would have been in an era of great war, when the world was at its weakest, when its foundations trembled and its protectors were scattered or slain. But history had denied them that opportunity.

The war that should have shattered the world never came.

And as long as the Origin Gods and their children stood, no amount of meticulous planning could ever succeed.

Family.

The word held no meaning for him.

Not in the way the gods understood it.

He had been born like countless others, one among thousands hatched from the cursed waters of the River Styx—a demon spawn among demon spawn, cast into the world with nothing but hunger and instinct. There were no bonds and no love. Only kill or be killed. The weak were devoured, their essence fueling the growth of the strong. It was the way of demons, the cycle of evolution through slaughter.

Yet, as he observed the divine families of this world, he saw something different.

He saw kinship, unity, unwavering loyalty—the very things that made gods unshakable in their rule. It was not power alone that secured their dominion. It was their unwillingness to betray one another, their instinct to stand together against all threats.

And therein lay the real problem. The demons had always relied on division—turning allies against each other, whispering doubt into the hearts of mortals, exploiting the gaps in relationships. It was through chaos that demons thrived, for in the ashes of disorder, power could be seized.

But the gods of this world... they left no gaps.

Their unity was their fortress.

Without that weakness to exploit, without war to weaken their foundations, every plan, no matter how delicate, would crumble before it even began.

The strategy of turning allies against each other had been a tried and tested method, especially against beings as powerful as the Origin gods—creatures whose power was unquestionable in this world. Their might was too vast to challenge directly, their faith-woven existence making them nearly untouchable.

A more subtle approach was always needed.

Corruption from within. The slow unraveling of trust. Planting the seeds of doubt where once stood unwavering loyalty. These methods had long been the tools of demons, ways to guarantee a victory without direct confrontation.

But in this world, it would not work.

The gods of this realm had something rare—a strong bond, a unity that had not yet fractured. They did not scheme against one another. They did not war for dominance or rip apart their own kin for power.

To the Jaguar, this unnatural harmony was simply a result of their youth.

The oldest of these gods had lived for only a thousand years.

A mere infant in the eyes of demons.

Compared to his main consciousness, compared to those who had walked the chaos of existence for tens of thousands of years, these gods had barely begun their journey.

And that was the mistake the main consciousness and the others kept making.

They believed these young gods would be easily swayed, that their bonds would shatter under the weight of ambition and pride. They assumed that the same chaos that ruled demonkind would apply to the divine.

But they had been proven wrong time and time again.

These gods did not turn against one another. Instead, they grew stronger together.

The Jaguar watched as the other demon consciousnesses threw their plans into the world, only to be thwarted at every turn. Their underestimations had cost them.

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But unlike them, he was patient. He would not act hastily.

He would wait, Because time was on his side and no family, no unity, no empire lasts forever.

The Jaguar had long abandoned the idea of taking over this world. He had observed, he had learned, and he had adapted.

Watching the ascension of Björn, the first demon to rise to godhood in this era, had given him an idea—one far more practical than waging a war he could not win.

He would create his own realm.

A pocket dimension where he alone ruled, where his power would be absolute, untouchable by the influence of the Origin Gods and their divine hierarchy.

He could have stepped out at any time, declared his divinity, and his name would have been etched into the heavens.

His throne would be raised to the stars, his existence recognized.

But that would cost him his greatest advantage—the power of being forgotten, hidden, and underestimated.

And so, he remained in the shadows.

He had succeeded. Even if he was not yet a complete god, he was still a god in his own right.

Yet there was a drawback.

The pocket dimension granted him divine authority, but the moment he stepped outside, he would return to being mortal. He had no intention of leaving yet, as nothing in this world had moved him enough to do so.

But time had finally begun to favor him.

The demigods—the children of the Origin Gods—were rising. Unlike their parents, these new gods had not yet solidified their bonds. Their ambitions and desires had not been tested.

Conflict would come and for the first time, there would be a true opportunity.

However, that was no longer his concern.

His priority now was to carve his mark into the fabric of this world, to ensure that his existence became permanent, even if he remained hidden.

Yet, there was a problem.

His pocket dimension's growth had stalled.

The resources and creatures of the Cursed Forest had been depleted. The unnatural expansion of his realm had reached its limit, and now, it would take centuries to grow at a natural pace.

Time was something he had in abundance, but at the same time, he was running out of it.

Because he knew one undeniable truth— No world would allow a god to exist freely in its background, unbound by its laws.

Sooner or later, the gods would notice him. Sooner or later, they would act.

But before that time came, the Jaguar had things to put in place.

The second phase of his plan had begun.

Krogan's figure vanished, reappearing atop his throne—his massive werebeast form clad in regal robes, the air around him heavy with authority.

The great doors of his palace creaked open.

A towering figure entered first, his goat-like head bowed respectfully as he approached. Without a word, he took his seat.

Behind him came a burly figure with the head of an elephant, casually sipping from a living coconut, the fruit still pulsing with life. He made a simple bow before settling into his throne.

Next was a tall figure with the head of a dragon, his multiple eyes gleaming as he observed the room. He sat down first, then gave his bow—a sign of quiet confidence.

The last two to enter were just as imposing.

A golden-skinned titan with the head of a gorilla, dressed in a suit, his sheer presence radiating dominance.

Following behind him was a charming woman, her piercing serpentine eyes scanning the chamber, her hair a writhing mass of snakes.

Both bowed before taking their seats.

Krogan nodded, his gaze sweeping over the five figures before him.

These were his commanders, his fellow rulers, each governing a territory within his pocket dimension. Together, they maintained order over the demon beasts and creations within their domains.

But today, their concerns lay beyond their realm.

He had summoned them to discuss the second phase of his plan.

This phase did not concern humans, nor did it concern the goldlings or even the gods themselves.

Instead, his sights were set on an overlooked species—

The Beast Kings.

Magical creatures that had surpassed all expectations, evolving into intelligent rulers of their own territories.

The outside world had long recognized them, giving them a name, yet treating them as nothing more than wild kings.

Powerful, yes.

But limited. And most importantly—alone.

When the humans eventually deemed them a nuisance, it would take only a few elite warriors, working together, to slaughter them.

Their bodies would be reduced to materials— Their horns and fangs turned into ornaments for nobles.

Their flesh transformed into medicinal elixirs to strengthen the next generation of humans.

They were kings, but kings without a kingdom and Krogan saw in them an opportunity.

Krogan's five generals—his most trusted and powerful commanders—were not mere demon beasts.

Each one was a Beast King, standing at the peak of the 5th stage, only a step away from divinity.

With certainty, Krogan knew—no Beast King outside his pocket dimension could defeat them.

Perhaps a few exceptional individuals with rare talent could pose a challenge, but even they lacked what his generals possessed:

Guidance. Growth. Knowledge.

Krogan had provided his generals with something no other Beast King had—a path forward.

He had taught them to understand their talents, to refine their innate abilities, to wield their power with precision and purpose.

The Beast Kings of the outside world had no such mentor.

No matter how strong they were, they eventually fell—

Slain by human hunters, their remains turned into trophies and artifacts.

Hunted by godlings, their lives reduced to mere training exercises for younger ones or those who wish to prove themselves.

It was a cycle of waste and Krogan intended to end it.

The second step of his plan was simple: He would make his presence known to the Beast Kings of the outside world.

He would show them that he had created a sanctuary—a realm where they could thrive, beyond the reach of mortals and gods.

A place where they could grow without fear, a true kingdom for beasts.

His long years of observation, combined with the knowledge of his generals, had given him an advantage.

They knew where each Beast King resided.

And today, Krogan had called his generals to decide how to approach them.

Krogan sat upon his throne, his massive frame draped in royal robes, his piercing golden eyes sweeping over the gathered generals.

The air was thick with expectation as his commanders took their seats.

A deep, rumbling voice broke the silence.

"We finally move beyond our borders," the Elephant-headed general rumbled, his voice slow and deliberate as he sipped from his living coconut. "But how do we convince them? The Beast Kings of the outside world have always ruled alone."

The Goat-headed general let out a short chuckle, reclining in his chair. "That is because they are fools, Balogun." His sharp, slitted eyes gleamed with amusement. "They believe themselves untouchable until they are skinned and mounted on some noble's wall."

The Dragon-headed general, silent until now, folded his clawed hands. His many eyes blinked at once. "They do not trust easily," he said in a low tone. "If we go to them as rulers, they will resist. If we go as equals, they may listen."

Krogan let out a small, knowing grunt. "Exactly."

The golden-furred Gorilla in a sharp, well-tailored suit leaned forward. His deep voice carried a weight of authority. "Then we send messengers first. Not us, but beasts they may recognize—ones who have suffered under humans and godlings alike."

The serpent-eyed woman flicked her forked tongue, her hair of living snakes hissing softly. "Clever. If they believe we are another kingdom seeking to rule them, they will resist. But if we present ourselves as the ones who can free them, they will come willingly."

Krogan's lips curled into a slight smirk.

"Then it is decided."

His golden gaze swept across his generals. "Each of you will choose a Beast King. One who holds sway over others. Someone powerful, but not too arrogant to listen."

His fingers tapped against the armrest of his throne, a slow, measured sound.

"Approach them. Offer them sanctuary. A future. But do not beg. We are not desperate. We are their salvation—but only if they are wise enough to see it."

A silence settled over the room.

Then, the Dragon-headed general stood. His many eyes shimmered.

"I know of one."

The Gorilla nodded. "As do I."

One by one, each of the generals gave their silent agreement.

Krogan leaned back on his throne, satisfied. At the same time his brow furrowed.

Krogan's golden eyes swept across his generals, his presence commanding and unyielding. He could see the flicker of ambition in their eyes, the quiet excitement of beasts who knew their strength. That same strength, however, could just as easily become their downfall if left unchecked.

He exhaled slowly, his deep voice carrying a quiet warning.

"You are all powerful. You know this. I know this. But power is not enough."

The Goat-headed general, the brash one, scoffed. "If they refuse, what harm is there in forcing them to listen?" His sharp eyes glowed with predatory confidence.

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Krogan's fingers tapped against his throne's armrest. Once. Twice. The subtle sound sent an unmistakable warning through the room.

"Because the moment we force them, we will have already lost."

The room fell silent.

Krogan rose from his seat, his towering form casting a long shadow over his generals.

"We are still hidden. Forgotten. That is our greatest advantage. Do not throw it away for something as petty as pride."

The Elephant-headed general, Balogun, let out a deep rumble of agreement. "If we are exposed before we are ready, we will have the gods and their spawn at our gates before we have even begun."

The Dragon-headed general, ever the strategist, nodded slowly. "If they refuse, we leave. We offer once and once only. No threats. No ultimatums."

The Gorilla in the suit adjusted his golden cuffs and chuckled. "A simple proposition: join us, or remain as you are. The choice is theirs."

The serpent-eyed woman flicked her tongue, her voice smooth as silk. "And if they change their minds later?"

Krogan smirked. "Then they will come to us."

The Goat-headed general sighed, rubbing his horns. "Fine, fine. No fighting. No threats. We leave if they refuse."

Krogan gave a single nod, his authority absolute. "Good. Then go. Choose wisely."

He exhaled slowly, feeling the weight of his plans settle over him like a heavy mist. The second phase was already in motion, but his mind drifted to the final step—the true foundation of his power in this world.

If the second phase dragged on too long, he could turn his attention to the lesser magical creatures. Their numbers alone could accelerate his progress, but that course of action was far too reckless. The disappearance of so many creatures would not go unnoticed. The humans, the godlings, and even the gods themselves would start to ask questions.

No, the beast kings were the key. With them came entire domains—territories teeming with subordinates that would naturally fall under his rule. A single conquest would bring him hundreds, perhaps thousands of new followers. Two birds with one stone.

Satisfied with his reasoning, Krogan vanished from his throne, his figure melting into the shadows.

When he reappeared, he was back at the lake, his massive jaguar form stretching lazily as he sank onto the cool earth.

His golden eyes fluttered shut.

For now, all he had to do was wait and watch.

Meanwhile, down on the northern continent, much had changed within the Kingdom of Björn following the birth of their long-awaited prince. To the people of Björn, this birth was not just the arrival of an heir—it was the second coming of Björn himself, a reincarnation of the god-like warrior who had once led them. This belief reignited a deep, almost fanatical devotion within the kingdom, binding them even closer to their old ways while also solidifying their faith in their current ruler, Yuki.

With the birth of the prince, Yuki's power and position soared to unprecedented heights. No longer merely the Queen, she became something more—an oracle, a divine authority whose words carried absolute weight. In the eyes of her people, her decisions were unquestionable, her vision infallible. What she declared became law, and none dared to challenge her. But Yuki was not blind to the dangers of absolute control; she understood that even the most devout followers could become disillusioned if change was forced upon them too abruptly.

Rather than abolishing the old ways, she wove them seamlessly into the new order she envisioned. She knew that suppressing the violent, battle-hardened nature of the Björn people would only lead to disaster. If denied their instincts, they would inevitably find an outlet elsewhere—through rebellion, bloodlust-driven riots, or self-destruction. Instead, she created structured outlets for their primal urges, introducing grand events and ceremonies where they could indulge in their natural inclinations without plunging the kingdom into chaos.

These events became sacred traditions, an opportunity for the people to release their deep-seated hunger for combat, revelry, and carnage in a controlled environment. Gladiatorial battles, ritual hunts, and brutal trials of strength became not only accepted but celebrated, reinforcing their warrior culture while preventing them from becoming mindless berserkers at the first sight of blood.

Over time, this tempered the people of Björn, honing their savagery into discipline. They no longer lost themselves to madness at the mere scent of violence, nor did they succumb to reckless bloodshed at every opportunity. Instead, they became warriors with sharpened instincts, capable of restraint yet always ready for battle should the time come. Under Yuki's rule, Björn was not just a kingdom of war—it was a kingdom of refined chaos, where savagery and order coexisted in perfect, delicate balance.

Something Björn himself wanted to achieve but because of his devilish nature, it tilted more towards the side of Chaos more.

At the moment, the young prince of Björn was not within the lush, battle-scarred lands of his homeland. Instead, he roamed the unforgiving terrain of the Endless Expanse of Ice, a frozen wasteland that stretched beyond the northernmost borders of the kingdom. Unlike many who feared the desolate, frigid landscape, he embraced it, considering it both a refuge and a proving ground. The savage creatures that lurked within the ice-covered abyss served as the perfect challenge to temper his hot-blooded nature, their relentless struggle for survival mirroring the very essence of Björn's people.

Meanwhile, in the grand palace of Björn, Yuki sat in contemplative silence, her piercing gaze fixed upon the letter before her. The elegant script belonged to Nwadiebube, a figure of considerable influence in the eastern continent, and his words spoke of a desire to strengthen their alliance. A proposal that, under different circumstances, she might have welcomed.

She exhaled slowly, fingers drumming lightly against the polished surface of her desk. This was partially her own doing. Before she had encountered Björn in person, before she had become his woman, her ambitions had been her own. She had operated with sharp cunning, forging connections and weaving strategies that did not necessarily align with Björn's greater vision. Establishing contact with Nwadiebube had been one of those plans, a carefully cultivated relationship meant to serve her own ends. She had even made promises—assurances that she would send a new priest to aid in rekindling faith on the eastern continent, along with a pledge of support in his impending war.

But all of that had unraveled the moment she pledged herself to Björn. His path had become her path, and in following him, her previous goals had been rendered meaningless. The idea of sending a priest to the east—to spread faith, to solidify alliances—now stood in direct opposition to what Björn desired at this moment.

And it seemed Nwadiebube had noticed.

Subtle yet deliberate, She had begun withdrawing the priests who had already ventured forth, slowly dismantling the fragile web of influence that had once extended into the distant lands. The spread of Björn's faith beyond the northern continent was quietly fading, its momentum stalled by unspoken resistance. Whether this was a calculated move or merely an act of self-preservation, Yuki did not mind as it made her job easier for her.

Still, the message in his letter was clear—he sought reaffirmation, a sign that their alliance had not been forsaken.

Yuki's lips curled into a smirk, though there was no humor in it.

What will you do, Nwadiebube?

Would he press forward, seeking to secure her favor? Or would he step back entirely, choosing instead to chart his own course? Either way, Yuki knew one thing for certain—she would not act without Björn's will in mind.

Her plans had changed. And if Nwadiebube wished to remain in her good graces, he would have to understand that.

Placing the letter aside, Yuki's gaze drifted toward the large map sprawled before her. Her eyes fixated on a particular mark—a large circle denoting the territory of the Silver Kingdom. For days now, her instincts had been unsettled, and as she studied the map, she could not ignore the growing unease stirring within her.

There had been unusual movements from the King of the Silver Kingdom. Subtle at first, but unmistakable to those who knew how to watch. More patrols along their borders, a quiet but steady shift in supply lines, and the sudden recall of key military figures back to their capital. But beyond strategy and logic, there was something more primal—a scent that lingered in the air.

Blood and iron.

It was unmistakable, a harbinger that every soul of Björn could recognize without fail. The scent of war.

Yuki exhaled slowly, allowing herself to sink into her instincts. She knew better than to ignore them. If war was coming, she would not sit idle and wait for it to arrive at her doorstep. She had already begun preparations, reinforcing key positions and ensuring that Björn's warriors remained in peak condition.

Fortunately, the current state of the Björn Kingdom worked in her favor. Unlike other nations that stretched their forces thin to maintain peace and control distant lands, Björn's forces did not need to be spread out. The kingdom's warriors were the land itself—every village, every town held blooded warriors ready to answer the call. The people of Björn did not merely live in their lands; they ruled it, bound by an unshakable unity and an insatiable hunger for battle.

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Yuki's fingers traced the border between Björn and the Silver Kingdom, her mind already several steps ahead. If the Silver King thought he could move unnoticed, he was sorely mistaken. She would not wait for the first sword to be drawn—if war was truly coming, she would be the storm that struck first.

Yuki's attention shifted inward as her hand drifted to her stomach, fingers brushing lightly over the place where life had once stirred within her. Her son. The mere thought of him was enough to send a storm of emotions raging through her heart.

Fear. Pain.

He had brought both into her life in ways she had never imagined. The pregnancy had been unlike anything a mortal—or even a half-demon—could endure. And yet, the moment she laid eyes on him for the first time, all those emotions were eclipsed by something far more powerful.

Devotion.

From that instant, she knew she would do anything for her child. No force in the world, not even Björn himself, could stand between her and the life she had brought into existence. But the child of her and him was never going to be normal. That much had been certain from the very beginning.

His mother was a demigod-level half-demon, a being whose very presence commands attention. His father, Björn, was something even greater—a god-level demon whose mere existence warped the world around him. What kind of being could be born from such a union?

Yuki closed her eyes, recalling the months of her pregnancy.

Unlike other children, the prince did not simply take nutrients from her as an ordinary infant would. He required something else—something she had not been providing.

It had started subtly at first, an unnatural hunger stirring within her. She had dismissed it, attributing it to the strain of carrying a being so powerful. But then, one night, the hunger had taken hold of her completely.

Her eyes had turned blood red, and before she could comprehend what was happening, she had sunk her claws into the throat of the maid who had come to serve her.

She could still remember the warmth of the life spilling from the girl's body. The scent of iron. The silence that followed.

Only after the deed was done had her mind returned to her. Horror had barely begun to set in when she felt it—a movement within her womb, the slow, deliberate stirring of her child as he absorbed something from both her and the maid.

At first, she thought it was blood. Or perhaps the soul of the one she had slain. But the truth was far more unsettling.

She did not truly understand until much later.

One night, she had woken to find herself standing in the middle of the palace, surrounded by corpses. The scene was eerily quiet, the air thick with the scent of death. And in the dim torchlight, she saw them—Olaf and Finn, two of Björn's most trusted warriors, kneeling before her, their gazes unreadable. They had brought the bodies to her.

She had not needed to ask why.

Looking down at herself, she realized that her womb had stirred again, her child drinking deeply—not of blood, not of flesh, but of something far more primal.

The essence of her actions, the madness. The depravity.

That was what fed him.

And at that moment, Yuki understood the truth.

Her son would never be like other children. His existence was forged in chaos, sustained by the raw, unfiltered essence of violence itself. And yet, even knowing this, she did not recoil.

If this was what he needed—if this was what it took for him to thrive—then she would give it to him.

No matter the cost.

Noticing that, Finn immediately presented the idea of the colosseum founded by Björn. What better place to feed the prince than there?

It was not just about nourishment—it was about ritual, about ensuring that the young heir would grow into his nature rather than be consumed by it. The colosseum, drenched in centuries of blood and violence, was the perfect cradle. There, warriors clashed, criminals fought for redemption, and beasts were unleashed for spectacle. There, amidst the frenzy of battle and the screams of the dying, the prince would feast—not on flesh or blood, but on something deeper, something rawer.

The essence of battle. The madness of violence. The depravity of unrestrained slaughter.

And so, it was decided. Whenever the prince's hunger stirred, Yuki was led to the colosseum, where she watched as warriors battled to their deaths beneath the ever-present roar of the Björn people. Her son, nestled within her womb, would drink of it all—the agony, the fury, the ecstasy of carnage. Each time, she felt him grow stronger, his presence inside her shifting with satisfaction.

But as the day of his birth approached, Yuki felt something else.

Something wrong.

The presence of death hung over her—not the kind she had known on the battlefield, nor the kind she had wielded as a demon. This was different. It was intimate, inevitable.

And it was coming from within her.

At first, she thought it was paranoia, a trick of her overworked mind. But as the hours passed, the sensation only deepened, sharpening like the edge of a blade pressed against her throat. Every movement of the child inside her sent shivers down her spine, and a whispering thought wormed its way into her mind.

He does not want to be born.

He wants to take me with him into the void.

Yuki was no stranger to death, but this was the first time she felt it looming over her like an executioner's axe.

And then her water broke.

A tremor ran through her body, not of pain, but of certainty. This was it. The air grew thick with something ancient, something primal, as her contractions wracked her body. The maids rushed forward, prepared for the grueling task of delivering their queen's heir.

But Yuki knew, in that moment, that they would not be enough.

The death she sensed was not an external force—it was her child. He did not intend to enter this world like a fragile, wailing infant. He would carve his way into it, and if she proved too weak, she would be his first offering.

Her lips curled into something between a grimace and a smirk.

Is that how it is, my son?

A deep, guttural laugh bubbled in her throat. The maids flinched as a dark aura erupted around her, warping the very air. Her body shifted, bones cracking, flesh warping as she embraced her true form. The horns upon her head gleamed, her blackened claws extending as her robe slipped from her shoulders, revealing her protruding stomach.

Fear should be the first instinct for most creature but for the people of Björn, it brought them excitement and it struck the hearts of those around her, but none dared to move.

Then, in one swift, deliberate motion, Yuki dragged a single claw across her stomach.

The flesh split open with unnatural ease, blood spilling onto the cold stone beneath her feet. There was no cry of pain, no hesitation. She reached into herself with unwavering resolve, her fingers curling around the thing within her womb.

And then she pulled.

The chamber filled with the wet, sickening sound of something being torn from its resting place.

Silence fell.

The prince did not cry.

Instead, he opened his blood-red eyes, his gaze dark and piercing, filled not with confusion or fear, but with annoyance.

His mother had denied him his first feast.

Floating in midair, the newborn shook off Yuki's grasp, levitating as though gravity itself was beneath him. His gaze locked onto hers, the blood dripping from his small form staining the air around him like an unholy baptism.

He had wanted to be born into death. Instead, he had been dragged into life.

Yuki, still in her devil form, met his gaze without flinching. The maids trembled in horror, pressing themselves against the walls as mother and son stared at each other, their power filling the room like a suffocating storm.

An unspoken challenge passed between them.

This is the world you are born into. The prince's lips parted, as if to speak, his first word being—

"Weak."

The word was spoken with eerie clarity, carrying a weight far beyond the voice of a newborn. It was not the wailing cry of an infant, nor the helpless coo of one just entering the world. It was a declaration—one filled with judgment, disappointment, and something even darker.

The maids, already trembling from witnessing their queen rip open her own stomach in a grotesque display of power, gasped as the prince hovered in mid-air. Blood still clung to his small yet unnervingly perfect form, his tiny chest rising and falling in slow, deliberate breaths. His skin bore a strange, unnatural red smoothness, untouched by the wrinkles or fragility of new-borns. His small protruding horns and small tail, flailing behind him.