

Guardian gods 491

Chapter 491:

His hand, pale and steady, returned to his cup. He took a slow sip of the crimson drink, savoring the warmth it brought his cold blood while staring past the rising mist outside the high windows of the library. He had gifted them immortality, strength, and a chance to forge their own path.

But perhaps... he had also cursed them.

And himself.

"What do you want?" Roth asked, his voice low and cold.

Ethan stood still, the flickering candlelight casting long shadows across his crystallized limbs. The soft, rhythmic ting of his blood-crystal feet had gone silent now, replaced by a tension that clung to the air like mist. His expression remained unreadable, sculpted from discipline and detachment.

"I am here about our previous conversation," he said, tone neutral—deliberate.

"That being?" Roth asked again, colder this time, his eyes narrowing slightly, glowing faintly in the dim library.

Ethan gave the faintest nod. "Isn't it time," he said, "for our godling race to make contact with our brethren?"

Roth's eyes didn't waver, but the silence that followed was a loud one. His stare was sharp—piercing, as if weighing Ethan's soul. "Do you think your people are ready to meet them?" he asked, each word slower, more pointed.

This time, Ethan didn't answer immediately.

He stood there, back straight, his gaze meeting Roth's not with defiance but with something more somber—conviction.

"No," he admitted at last, and for the first time, his voice cracked the shell of his impassiveness. "We are not. And that is exactly why we must."

He stepped forward slightly, letting his words carry before Roth could reply.

"Our people believe the empire is the summit of all ambition, the peak of all resistance. They believe our existence—our struggle—is confined to this continent, to its politics, its rivalries, its fleeting empires. They think the blood in their veins marks them as something supreme... divine."

Ethan shook his head.

"They are blind. Not out of ignorance, but pride. And I would have shared in that blindness too, if you had not shown me what lies beyond. The stars. The others. The truth."

Roth's fingers tightened slightly around the edge of the white table, but he said nothing.

Ethan took another step.

"They need to see what I've seen. They need to understand that our throne rooms mean nothing in the eyes of beings who shape reality itself. That our petty feuds, our obsessive dances for power and prestige—they are meaningless to the greater world."

He paused.

"I grow tired, Father. Tired of watching them circle one another like wolves in the dark. Tired of pretending that the game they play matters. I sit on a throne that means nothing. And I think... they should know why."

Roth looked at Ethan—truly looked. His eyes searched the lines on his son's face, the subtle tension in his voice, the crystalline growth across his limbs like a burden he wore with pride. There was no naivety left in him. No boy who once bowed with wide, admiring eyes.

Only a man—one molded by power and disillusionment.

For the first time in a long while, Roth didn't immediately dismiss the idea. The thought of contact with the other godling races, of breaking the isolation he had preserved for so long, stirred something within him... a sense of inevitability. Perhaps it was time.

But inevitability and readiness were not the same.

And neither were safety and truth.

Roth rose slowly, the motion graceful and silent, yet commanding. His form, draped in flowing robes of inky black, loomed even taller than before, casting long shadows that seemed to stretch unnaturally across the library floor. The fabric whispered as it swept the stone beneath him, like the quiet rustle of wind through a graveyard.

Then, with a simple wave of his pale hand, the world shifted.

The ancient library vanished into nothingness—its shelves, books, and the lingering scent of parchment all swallowed in a blink. In its place, an endless expanse of white bloomed outward in all directions. A void of pure, unbroken stillness. There was no floor, no ceiling, no horizon. Just infinite white.

And silence.

Roth stood at the center, a dark tower in the midst of nothing. Ethan remained where he was, surrounded by the vastness, the sound of his breathing suddenly louder, more real, in the overwhelming quiet.

With a second gesture—a mere snap of the fingers—Roth summoned something into the void.

A flag.

Small and weathered, it fluttered in a wind that didn't exist. It bore the familiar sigil of the vampire race: a crimson fang biting into a silver crescent, a symbol of their bloodline and divine ancestry. Yet here, in this boundless whiteness, it looked fragile. Insignificant. A flicker of identity in a sea of endless potential.

But then two more flags emerged from the nothingness, each unfurling with a silent force, larger, more vivid.

They bore the same central sigil—still the fang and crescent—but were distinguished by their color. One was a deep, oppressive black that seemed to swallow light. The other was radiant white, almost glowing, etched with patterns of gold and crimson thread.

And at the heart of both, dwarfed by their scale, floated the original vampire flag—reduced in size, embedded within them.

Ethan's eyes narrowed as the meaning became clear.

He knew what these banners represented. What Roth was showing him wasn't just symbolism—it was prophecy, it was politics, it was history unraveling before it happened.

The black flag represented the Full-Blooded, those born directly from Roth's purest bloodline—vampires who clung to tradition, power, and purity. They viewed themselves as the rightful rulers, sacred descendants of a god.

The white flag stood for the Hybrids, born from mixed bloodlines, those with resilience to sunlight, a capacity to adapt, and a new perspective shaped by coexistence with other races. They represented the future in motion—progress, change, unpredictability.

Roth turned to Ethan, his crimson eyes dimmed now, as if weary from what he already knew lay ahead.

"When the time comes," Roth asked, his voice deep and unflinching, "which of these factions... should speak for us?"

The question lingered like a blade suspended in the air, its edge not pointed at Ethan's throat, but at his very soul.

Roth wasn't asking about preference.

He was asking about fate.

Who would define their people's place in the greater world? Who would represent their godling race when they finally stepped out of the mist and shadows, into the light of other divine descendants?

Ethan stared at the flags. The black one pulsed with pride and power, the weight of tradition. The white one shimmered with possibility and uncertainty.

And the original flag—the one he and Roth had first raised themselves—sat quietly between them, like a memory being swallowed by its own children.

Ethan stood still, the vast whiteness pressing in around him, yet it was the question that truly weighed on his chest. His eyes, hardened over the years, shifted from one flag to the other—black and white, past and future, purity and change.

He had been born beneath the black flag. Raised among the full-blooded elites, taught their doctrines, molded in their image. But it was the white flag that had sheltered him when his body began to change—when the red crystal began creeping across his skin, when his strength threatened to break him, when others whispered that he was no longer "pure."

It had been the hybrids who helped him endure.

It had been the full-blooded who taught him pride.

Both sides had shaped him, and yet... neither fully defined him anymore.

Ethan stepped forward, his blood-crystallized foot echoing with that distinct ting as it touched the unseen ground. The sound reverberated strangely in the formless world, like a bell tolling from a distance. He moved toward the flags, his voice steady but laced with something deeper—conflict, perhaps... or conviction.

"They are both us," he said finally, his gaze locked on the floating sigils. "Both are born from you. Both are born from this land, and from our struggle."

He turned to Roth.

"But neither is ready to represent all of us."

Roth watched him in silence, the question still lingering between them, unanswered.

Ethan stepped beside the white flag, placing a hand near it, but not touching. His eyes softened just slightly. "The hybrids... They see beyond what lies in front of them. They adapt, they question, they learn fast. Their bodies carry the blood without the curse of the sun, and their minds are shaped by the world as it changes. They might be the future."

He turned to the black banner. "But the full-blooded... They carry our history. Our dignity. They remember what it means to hold power in stillness, to endure centuries unchanged. Their flaw is their pride. But pride... can become resolve, if tempered."

Ethan let his hand fall.

"If we choose one, the other will rebel. That much is certain. They already walk on a thin edge. And when you are gone..."

His voice trailed off. For a long moment, there was only silence.

Then, his gaze lifted again. "I believe the answer isn't choosing one to represent us. It's forging something that binds them both. A third path."

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Roth tilted his head slightly, his eyes narrowing—not in disapproval, but consideration.

"A third banner?" the ancient demigod asked, voice a low hum that seemed to echo across the void.

Ethan nodded slowly. "A new banner. One not built on just bloodline or strength, but on understanding. On unity. One that takes from both, but bows to neither. Something... beyond what we were."

He stepped back, letting the words settle.

Roth stared at him for a long time. Then, with a slow motion, he reached out into the air.

From the empty white void, a small spark of color bloomed—a deep violet flame, flickering quietly between the black and white banners. It floated there, untouched, unshaped, unclaimed.

A possibility.

"You speak like a god, yet still carry the doubt of a man," Roth said quietly. "Perhaps that makes you fit to shape such a banner."

Ethan's expression didn't change, but something subtle shifted in his posture—less rigid now, more resolved.

"Then give me the time," he said. "To try."

Roth closed his eyes for a moment, as though weighing not just the request, but the path that would follow. When he opened them again, they glowed—not fiercely, but softly, like embers in a dying fire.

"Then begin," he said.

And with that, the flags vanished. The whiteness receded. The library returned—dusty, quiet, eternal.

Ethan, upon hearing Roth's confirmation, stood still for a moment—silent, unmoving. Then the mask cracked.

A mad grin tore across his face, sharp and wild, revealing the glint of his crystallized fangs. His Fifth Stage aura began to leak out, filling the space with oppressive energy. He had waited years—decades—for this moment. For Roth to finally give his approval.

Now, he was ready. Ready to purge the court of the vermin who clung to old power, who had stalled the rise of their people for far too long.

Roth raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. He sipped from his glass, calm even in the face of Ethan's intensity.

Then, with a single line, he poured cold reason over the fire.

"I see you're getting carried away," Roth said evenly, "but have you considered whether the other godlings would even accept your people?"

Ethan blinked, his grin faltering slightly. "Why wouldn't they? History shows that godlings, no matter their origin, have always maintained strong familial ties. We share the same divine roots."

Roth nodded, swirling the liquid in his cup before taking another sip. "That they do. But have you considered the darker truth of who we are? What sustains us? What we do in the shadows to survive?"

The words settled like ash.

Ethan's smile vanished completely, and the oppressive aura began to recede. He stood still once more, returning to that stoic, unreadable posture he wore so well.

Roth continued, his voice quiet but heavy with implication. "You and I both know—our people survive on needs others would find monstrous. Blood. Control. The manipulation of life and death itself. Would they not fear us turning our gaze outward, toward them?"

Ethan said nothing.

He didn't need to.

Roth had struck the truth—the one they both knew but rarely spoke aloud. The one that reminded them that even gods have limits to what they accept... and that not every door is opened by shared blood alone.

Moral values—Roth wasn't certain how the other godlings would react to theirs.

His people needed blood. A lot of it. This wasn't just a trait of the full-blooded vampires; it was equally true, if not more volatile, among the hybrids.

One might assume the purebloods were the ones most likely to lose control when tasting blood—but the opposite was true. It was the hybrids who had to be watched the closest.

For the hybrids, blood brought a unique kind of ecstasy. Unlike the purebloods, who were born into a constant need for blood and thus developed a measured control, hybrids could sustain themselves on regular food and drink. Feeding on blood was rare for them. Rare—and dangerously intoxicating.

A single taste could unhinge a hybrid.

The reaction was visceral, almost addictive. A hybrid who tasted blood too often entered a state that was difficult to pull them back from—a euphoric frenzy that risked turning them into monsters.

And yet, despite this danger, the need remained.

"Bloodbanks"—humans raised and kept as living sources—had long been the answer. But they were limited. The number of humans under vampire control was never enough to satisfy the growing population, especially with both factions—the hybrids and the full-blooded—requiring them.

Though hybrids could survive without regular blood, their occasional cravings created dangerous spikes in demand. Cravings that, once ignited, were nearly impossible to extinguish without consequence.

Bloodbanks had become one of the greatest points of contention between the two factions. The vampire kingdom, as it stood now, maintained several small cities of captive humans whose sole purpose was to supply blood.

It was an unspoken truth—a necessary evil, some argued. Others saw it as a growing rot beneath the surface of their so-called civilization.

A problem waiting to explode.

In the beginning, maintaining these human cities had been simple.

There was a mutual understanding—an alignment of purpose between the vampires and the humans. The humans provided blood, and in return, they received protection, comfort, even a sense of importance. It was a delicate balance, one born from necessity and sustained through respect.

But as the vampire population grew, so too did the strain.

What once was mutual soon demanded force. Subtle guidance turned into control. Agreement into enforcement. The growing needs of the vampires required heavier methods, and slowly, the nature of these cities changed.

The turning point came when envy took root among the humans.

They longed for the immortality, the unaging beauty, the power the vampires held. Their admiration twisted into obsession. Some begged to be turned. Others took matters into their own hands—capturing young vampires, forcing bites, hoping to be transformed.

The vampires learned a hard lesson in those days. Trust could become a weapon. Power, once shared, had to be reclaimed.

From that moment on, the old agreements were dissolved. The cities became farms. The humans within—no longer partners—were stock. Bred, raised, and conditioned for one purpose: to supply blood. It became tradition. A quiet horror normalized over time.

Even now, it remains one of the most bitter points of contention between the two vampire factions. And now, with Roth pointing it out, Ethan was forced to consider what such a history would mean on the world stage.

To reach out to the other godlings meant exposing everything—their fractured politics, their dark methods of survival.

Their shame.

How would the other races react? How would they be judged? Especially when their very nature was bound to something as visceral as blood?

In the eyes of the godlings, would they be seen as kin...

...or as monsters?

Ethan stood still, his arms at his sides, fists slowly clenching.

He had always known, of course. On some level, every vampire did. But hearing it laid bare by Roth—spoken with such clarity and finality—made it feel heavier. Real.

Their legacy wasn't just carved in blood and power.

It was soaked in silence and complicity.

He looked up at Roth, the glow from his crystalized fangs now dimmed beneath the weight of responsibility. "Then what would you have us do?" he asked, voice low. "Hide forever? Remain ghosts while the world moves without us?"

Roth regarded him quietly, then turned his back. His voice came soft, like a whisper carried on ancient winds.

"No, Ethan. I am saying you must walk into the world knowing what shadow follows behind you."

He raised a hand, and the air around shimmered, shifting silhouettes of other godling races flickered into existence—blurry forms of apelings, harpies, merfolk and werewolves. Each one a sovereign race, each one bound by their own divine heritage.

Other godlings... they are not innocent," Roth continued. "Each has done what they must to survive. But the difference lies in how they justify it. How they speak of it. How they atone."

"You want our people to step forward?" Roth asked, turning back to Ethan. "Then teach them to own what they are. Not with pride, not with shame—but with clarity."

Ethan, hearing Roth's words, subconsciously began to nod, the weight of realization deepening behind his eyes. His mind drifted, unbidden, through fragments of history—moments and records buried in archives, about each godling race and their dealings with humans.

Other godlings... they too had walked the blurred line between necessity and cruelty.

Compared to the vampire courts, the others might still be judged less harshly. After all, blood consumption was visceral—intimate. It unsettled the senses. No matter how structured their feeding systems were, no matter how carefully monitored, the image conjured in the minds of others would always be that of predation.

But Ethan now saw what Roth meant.

It wasn't about matching others in brutality or purity—it was about narrative. How the story was told. How they chose to be seen. And more importantly, how they saw themselves.

He clenched his jaw slightly, a fire beginning to kindle behind his composed gaze. The radical act he was about to take in court—the purging of stagnation, the silencing of old ones and the young one who profited off arrogance and pride while preaching progress—suddenly felt less like rebellion and more like preparation.

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If their people were to stand before the other godlings... they needed to be more than blood-fed beasts with ancient titles. They needed to prove they were in control—not just of their urges, but of their future.

Roth watched his son carefully. The way Ethan's silence grew more resolute. The subtle shift in his posture. He knew that look.

With a wave of his hand, Ethan found himself outside the territory but he could hear the voice of Roth in his ear "You have grown well son"

Ethan, confused by the scenery change, adjusted himself before smiling. He turned, cloak trailing behind him like a deep red shadow, heading back to the heart of the budding kingdom.

On the eastern continent, a moment of monumental significance was quietly unfolding—one that would reshape the course of history if handled with care. Nwadiebube, High King of the rising kingdom of Omadi, was filled with an emotion he had long suppressed: pride, pure and unrestrained. It wasn't often that the weight of history made itself known in the present, but this time, he could feel it. The meeting he was preparing for would be unlike any other in living memory.

The envoy approaching his court was not from a neighboring nation, nor from the confederacies of the north. No—this was a delegation from the southern continent, a place shrouded in mystery and spoken of in myths more often than facts. A land completely isolated for generations, where human civilizations were said to thrive without the direct interference of godlings. That alone had set Nwadiebube's mind alight with possibilities.

The records—what little existed—suggested that the divine influence in the South was minimal, or at least discreet. Where the godlings of the other continents weaved their wills into mortal affairs like puppet strings, the South had seemingly grown unencumbered, their empires built on human ambition alone. That word—empire—stuck in Nwadieube's mind like a sacred hymn.

It had always been his vision, his destiny, to elevate his kingdom into a true empire. Not just a union of tribes or a confederation of city-states, but a continental force—an entity that could rival the godlings in power, in reach, and in myth. To tame the eastern lands and bind them under a single name: Omadi. And now, unexpectedly, a path forward had presented itself, one cloaked in foreign silk and unfamiliar dialects.

The southern envoy had initiated the contact, not the other way around, which both intrigued and unsettled him. In their first cryptic messages—delivered through symbols and translators—they hinted at mutual interests, specifically offering assistance in his rising conflict with Osita. It was an unexpected proposal, and one Nwadieube was hesitant to ignore. His alliances with Yuki and Björn's followers had grown increasingly strained in recent months. Promises once made under firelight now felt hollow in the coldness of realpolitik. The more those allies distanced themselves, the more elusive his dreams of dominion became.

And yet, ambition had not dulled his wits.

After the initial excitement had faded, Nwadieube began to think more critically. Why him? Why now? Why would an isolationist power suddenly choose his kingdom, from all the dozens that lined the eastern coast, as their first point of contact? The flattery of being chosen gave way to suspicion. Were they merely using him as a foothold? A pawn to test the waters before asserting themselves?

Still, it was too significant to ignore.

The envoy's ship had landed months ago at the edge of the eastern coast, a port city nestled between cliffs and swamplands. Protocol demanded caution, and respect. Escorting the foreign envoy inland would take time—nearly a month's journey on horseback through rough terrain, sacred forests, and lands still unclaimed by the crown. Every step of their progress was tracked, recorded, and guarded.

In the capital, preparations had been feverish. Banners were sewn in gold and crimson. The royal guards had been drilled to perfection. And Nwadieube himself had spent countless nights reviewing every fragment of lore on the southern lands, gathering intelligence, and whispering strategy into the ears of his most trusted advisors.

Now, as he stood on the high terrace of the palace, gazing out toward the winding roads that would soon deliver history to his doorstep, he could feel the delicate balance of fate shifting.

The meeting could be the dawn of an empire—or the beginning of a slow descent into manipulation and war.

Either way, Nwadiebube intended to make sure that he remained the one holding the reins.

The sun, a molten orb beginning its ascent over the spires of the capital, cast long shadows that danced and swayed with the anticipation rippling through the assembled crowds. Nwadiebube, his posture regal and his gaze unwavering, watched as the head of the Nwadiebube troop emerged from the capital gate. Their crimson and gold uniforms, meticulously cleaned and pressed, shone in the morning light, a vibrant vanguard for the history they were ushering in.

Behind them, riding in ornately carved palanquins carried by sturdy steeds draped in embroidered silks, came the envoy. Glimpses of their faces, framed by elaborate headdresses and adorned with delicate jewelry, were caught by the eager onlookers. Their garments, a kaleidoscope of jade, sapphire, and sunstone hues, spoke of a culture both ancient and refined. The air hummed with a mixture of curiosity and respect.

At intervals along the route, dignitaries and high-ranking officials offered symbolic gifts: intricately woven tapestries depicting scenes of their land, finely crafted jade carvings, and chests overflowing with fragrant spices unknown in the northern kingdom. Each offering was received with a solemn nod by the leading members of the Nwadiebube troop, who ensured the gifts were handled with the utmost care and respect.

Finally, the procession reached the grand plaza. Nwadiebube descended the terraced steps, his every movement deliberate and commanding. He was met halfway by the leader of the troop who was assigned to protect the envoy, a strong warrior named Chinedu, who knelt and offered a respectful bow.

"My Lord," Chinedu's voice resonated across the hushed plaza, "the envoy from the Southern Lands has arrived. They come in peace and with intentions of... mutual understanding."

Nwadiiebube's eyes, sharp and intelligent, scanned the faces of the foreign dignitaries as their palanquins were gently lowered to the ground. He noted their composed expressions, the subtle curiosity in their eyes, and the air of quiet confidence that surrounded them.

Stepping forward, Nwadiiebube addressed the envoy in a measured tone, his voice carrying the weight of his authority and the carefully cultivated warmth of a gracious host.

"Welcome," he declared, his words echoing across the plaza. "Welcome to the heart of our kingdom. Your journey has been long, and your arrival is a moment we have anticipated with great... interest. May your time among us be filled with understanding and respect. Let us hope that this meeting marks not just an encounter between two lands, but the forging of a bond that will benefit us both."

A figure emerged from the central palanquin, their attire even more elaborate than the others, their bearing suggesting leadership. They returned Nwadiiebube's gaze, a subtle smile gracing their lips.

"Your Majesty," their voice was melodic, carrying a hint of the exotic cadence of their homeland. "We thank you for your gracious welcome and the meticulous care taken for our journey. We too come with hopes of fostering understanding and building a bridge between our peoples. The lands to the south hold much, as I am sure your scholars have discovered. And we believe that through respectful discourse, we can find common ground and mutual prosperity."

There was a poise to the envoy's manner, a grace not born merely of courtly training, but of cultural depth—of a people who had known power in their own right, even if hidden from the larger stage.

Nwadiiebube smiled and gave a slight bow of acknowledgement, the kind used between rulers who knew the game. "Your presence honors us," he said warmly, then gestured for the envoy and their entourage to follow him, the ornate door to the palace creaked open behind him, revealing courtyards lush with blossoms, fountains, and columns carved with the mythos of Ikenga. Followed by the scent of burning myrrh that perfumed the air.

Among the vibrant crowd of citizens gathered to witness the arrival of the envoys, a small cluster of watchers stood apart. Cloaked in subtlety, their eyes were alert, their bodies still with a practiced calm. These were no ordinary spectators—they were apelingis, chosen servants of the divine, born with the grace of beasts and the burden of divine purpose. Sent forth over a year ago by the gods to walk among humankind, their task had been clear: guide, teach, and observe. In silence, they had offered wisdom, sowed seeds of spiritual understanding, and waited—waited for the day their purpose would be fulfilled so they might return to the sacred mountains.

Today, however, something disrupted that calm.

They had come to see the visitor out of simple curiosity. Yet the moment their eyes fell upon the envoy and their entourage, that curiosity gave way to unease. The appearance of the visitors was foreign, yes—but not unfamiliar.

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To put it simply, their appearance was something that should never have crossed the sea and yet here they are and were being welcomed.

And then it happened.

A few members of the envoy looked directly at them.

Not by accident.

They smiled. Bowed, even.

Not in jest, not in mere diplomacy—but in recognition.

One of them, a keen-eyed apeling named Irema, narrowed their gaze as they scanned the visitors. Their faces stiffened. A few members of the envoy's delegation—dressed more plainly, perhaps attendants or guards—had turned their heads toward the apelings. Not by accident. Not in passing. Their eyes found them directly, and held their gaze. One even smiled gently and offered a respectful bow.

The apelings, trained for centuries in discipline and spiritual control, responded as they had been taught—smiling in return, tilting their heads in polite acknowledgment. But the moment they turned their backs, their expressions fell.

Irema's voice was a low whisper, tight with urgency. "We need to inform the king."

The others nodded, their expressions grave. They did not speak again, slipping back into their roles as shadows among the faithful, heading toward the hidden temple where the sacred flame still burned.

Unbeknownst to them, they too were being watched.

High above, cloaked in the lattice of shadow and sunlight, Princess Nwadimma observed the interaction with hawk-like precision. She crouched in the narrow upper corridors of the outer palace wall, surrounded by a small team of elite watchers—silent, skilled, and sworn to her command. Her eyes flicked between the departing apelings and the envoy's rear guard. She missed nothing.

This was her mission, entrusted by her brother, King Nwadieube, though truth be told, she would have taken it upon herself even if he had not asked.

Nwadieube was arrogant, yes, but he was not foolish. His grand welcome of the southern envoy—the public spectacle, the golden banners, the ceremonial dancers, the fire-singers—all of it had been orchestrated with precision. It served two purposes.

First, to announce to the rest of the eastern human nations that Omadi was now a diplomatic gatekeeper to a foreign power. Prestige. Position. Influence.

Second—and more subtly—to observe the apelings.

He knew he lacked intelligence about the southern continent, and while the envoys could lie with smiles and flatter with honeyed words, the apelings' reactions would not lie. If they recognized something—or someone—he would know. And now, the test had yielded results.

Princess Nwadimma exhaled slowly. She could sense the unease in the apelings' retreat and the veiled acknowledgment from the visitors. It confirmed what they feared: something else had come with the envoys.

"They know each other, or at least recognize a kindred presence," she whispered to her second-in-command. "And that smile—that bow—it wasn't diplomatic. It was reverent."

Her gaze shifted to the palace gates, just as they closed behind the envoy's last guard.

"Something else walks among them."

The princess and those with her took a step back and was gone into the shadows.

Nwadieube gestured with a sweeping hand towards the grand entrance of the Royal Dining Hall. Its towering oak doors, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and depicting scenes of legendary hunts, were held open by liveried guards.

"Please," Nwadieube said, his voice smooth and inviting, "join us within. Refresh yourselves after your long journey. Let us break bread together and begin to know one another in comfort."

The envoy leader offered a gracious nod and, followed by their entourage, stepped into the hall. The interior was breathtaking. High vaulted ceilings were adorned with intricate frescoes depicting celestial events. Sunlight streamed through massive stained-glass windows, casting kaleidoscopic patterns on the polished marble floors. A long, ornate table, laden with an array of delicacies – roasted meats, platters of colorful fruits, fragrant cheeses, and decanters of rich wine – stretched across the length of the hall.

Nwadieube led the envoy leader to the head of the table, seating them to his right. His most trusted councilmen, their faces a carefully neutral blend of curiosity and caution, took their places along the table, interspersed with the key members of the envoy's entourage. The atmosphere was thick with unspoken questions, a delicate balance between polite hospitality and the underlying tension of two powerful entities meeting for the first time.

As servants moved silently, offering refreshments, the initial exchanges were carefully curated.

"The journey must have been arduous," Nwadieube began, his tone conversational. "The eastern coast, while beautiful, can be... unforgiving to travelers unfamiliar with its terrain."

"Indeed, Your Majesty," the envoy leader replied, accepting a goblet of crimson wine. "Your guards were exemplary guides. Their knowledge of the land and their unwavering vigilance were most appreciated." A subtle emphasis on "vigilance" did not go unnoticed by Nwadieube.

One of Nwadiéubé's senior councilmen, a wizened scholar named Obi, interjected with a seemingly innocuous query. "We were fascinated by the descriptions of your vessels, which arrived at the port. Their design is... unlike anything we have seen in our waters. They spoke of sails that harnessed the very breath of the sea in a unique manner."

A member of the envoy's party, a man with keen eyes and an air of quiet intelligence, responded. "Our shipwrights have spent generations perfecting their craft. We have learned to read the currents and the winds in ways that allow us to traverse vast distances with efficiency." A slight pause. "The seas to the south can be... unpredictable. Necessity breeds innovation."

Another councilman, a shrewd and new upcoming strategist named Adebayo, steered the conversation towards more cultural aspects. "Your garments are exquisite. The intricate embroidery and the vibrant hues speak of a rich artistic tradition. The symbols woven into the fabric... do they hold particular significance?"

A woman from the envoy's delegation, adorned with intricate silver jewelry, smiled gently. "Indeed. Each motif tells a story, represents an aspect of our history, our beliefs, our connection to the land. Just as I am sure the gold and crimson of your banners hold deep meaning for your people."

Nwadiéubé observed these exchanges, a silent conductor orchestrating the flow of conversation. He noted the subtle pauses, the carefully chosen words, the almost imperceptible shifts in posture. Each pleasantry was a probe, a delicate attempt to glean information without revealing too much in return. The envoy was clearly as cautious and observant as he was.

He himself offered a seemingly casual remark. "We were intrigued by the accounts of the flora and fauna of your continent. Tales of vibrant jungles and creatures unlike any found in our northern climes have long been whispered in our lore."

The envoy leader's eyes flickered momentarily. "The Southern Lands are indeed blessed with a unique ecology. Life flourishes in abundance, though it also presents its own... challenges. The balance of nature is a delicate thing, something we have learned to respect."

The meal progressed in this manner, a tapestry of polite inquiries and carefully veiled responses. They spoke of the weather, of the beauty of the capital, of the long journey. Each side offered glimpses into their culture and customs, but steered clear of any substantial revelations about their resources, their military strength, or their true political intentions.

The dinner passed in a blur of pleasantries—casual conversations, harmless jests, and the clinking of goblets echoing softly against marble columns. Nwadiebube played the perfect host, smiling when he was expected to, nodding thoughtfully at stories of southern cities, and laughing—just enough to appear sincere. But beneath the surface, his thoughts stirred restlessly.

As the final course was cleared and the musicians began to play something soft and slow, the king gave a courteous farewell. The palace maids, dressed in ivory linens with gold-threaded hems, moved with practiced grace to lead the envoy and their entourage to their prepared chambers in the east wing.

Nwadiebube said nothing as he turned down the hall toward his private wing. The corridors were quiet now, torchlight flickering gently against the intricately carved walls, casting long shadows that danced with secrets. When he reached the door to his study, he paused only briefly before opening it.

The scent of red plum and cardamom wafted through the air. He stepped inside, and his eyes immediately found the princess seated comfortably in one of the leather armchairs beside his desk, already pouring herself a glass of wine. The bottle—an old vintage he had been saving—sat beside her, uncorked.

His eyes flicked to the ornate shelf near the window. One bottle missing.

He sighed.

Nwadiebube crossed the room, snatched the bottle from her hand—not too roughly, but with the annoyance of familiarity—and poured himself a generous cup.

"You couldn't have asked?" he muttered, settling into the seat across from her.

"I did," she said dryly, lifting her own glass to her lips. "You weren't here."

For a moment, they sat in silence. The fire crackled softly in the hearth behind them. Nwadiebube sipped, then set his cup down with a quiet clink.

"What did you find?" he asked, his voice low and even.

Across from him, Nwadiemma leaned back, cradling her glass with a pensive expression. She didn't answer immediately.

Instead, she asked, "What do you want to know?"

His gaze sharpened. "I want to know about their interactions. Their expressions. What did they convey?"

Chapter 495:

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Nwadiemma turned her head slightly, eyes half-lidded as if replaying the events in her mind. When she spoke again, her voice had lost its casual edge.

"They weren't surprised by the city. Or the palace. Or us. They were... curious, but not awed. It's as if they've seen this before. Or something like it." She paused, swirling her wine. "But what caught my attention wasn't the envoy himself. It was the ones behind him."

Nwadiemma leaned forward.

"Go on."

"The apelings were in the crowd," she continued. "Trying to blend in. I don't think they expected anything unusual. But the moment the envoy stepped out, they stiffened. Just for a breath—but I saw it."

"Recognition?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes. Or familiarity at least. One of the envoy's guards—tall, scar over his left brow—looked right at them. Smiled. Bowed." She took another sip, slower this time. "And they bowed back. But as soon as they turned away, their faces changed. They were rattled."

"Did they leave?" Nwadieube asked, voice tense.

"Immediately. Heading west, toward the temple. I assume to report."

He drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair, brow furrowed. "So they know each other. Or the envoy knows what they are."

"Possibly both," Nwadinma replied. "But there's more."

He looked up.

"They weren't just observing us, Brother. They were watching the apelings too. I think they wanted to see their reaction as much as you did." She leaned forward now, voice softer. "That tells me they know something about what the apelings are. Maybe who sent them. Maybe why they're here."

A long silence settled between them. The fire crackled louder now, filling the room with its warmth—and its tension.

Nwadieube finally broke the silence.

"Then it's confirmed. They didn't just come for diplomacy. There's something beneath the surface."

Nwadimma set her empty glass down with a soft clink. "There always is."

He looked at her with a small, tired smile. "You should've been the one sitting on this throne."

She smirked faintly. "And miss out on the pleasure of raiding your wine shelf and shadowing foreign diplomats from rooftops? Never."

The king chuckled, but the mirth didn't quite reach his eyes. He stood and walked to the window, looking out at the night sky where stars blinked like watching eyes.

"Keep watching them," he said at last, his voice low, barely above the hum of the evening wind outside. "And find ways to keep the envoys busy until I receive word from the apelings."

He placed a hand against the cool surface of the window, as if trying to feel something beyond the stone and glass. "In times like these, they—" he meant the apelings "—prefer to meddle in riddles, speaking in cryptic phrases, wrapped in mystique and layers of omission. It's maddening. But that's exactly what we need right now."

He turned slightly, glancing over his shoulder at his sister.

"Their silence. Their hesitation. Their vagueness. All of it... it will help us gauge the true weight of the guests we've welcomed into our home. If the apelings speak plainly, we'll know to prepare for war."

For a long moment, Nwadimma said nothing. She sat still, wine glass resting in her lap, watching the deep red liquid shimmer in the firelight. Her own reflection stared back at her—distorted and flickering, as though unsure of what expression to wear.

Then softly, she spoke. "You're becoming harder to read, brother."

The words hung in the air like smoke—gentle, but pointed.

Nwadieube raised an eyebrow, curious. "Oh?"

Nwadimma met his gaze now, and there was something thoughtful in her expression. Not suspicion, not praise—something else. "Your previous actions... as reckless and foolish as they seemed... made me wonder if you'd finally lost your footing. If you'd been blinded by ambition and your own reflection in the polished floors of this palace."

She stood slowly, brushing imaginary dust from her robes. Her voice remained calm, but her eyes were sharp. "But the man standing before me now—the one speaking of shadows and strategies, using caution like a blade—he doesn't match that man from before. That man would've barged forward, declared strength, forced a hand. This one watches, waits, measures."

She walked to the window, standing beside him. For a moment, they were both reflected in the glass, two pieces of the same puzzle—regal, quiet, and haunted by something older than either of them dared name aloud.

"So I find myself wondering," she continued softly, "which version of you was real? Or have you simply... evolved into someone else entirely?"

Nwadieube didn't answer immediately. His gaze remained fixed on the stars. When he did speak, his voice carried the weight of someone who had been thinking far longer than he let on.

"Perhaps I've simply learned what the crown truly demands."

He turned fully to face her now, and for the first time that evening, there was a trace of weariness in his eyes—buried deep, but visible to someone who had known him since birth.

"Or perhaps," he said, "I've grown tired of being underestimated."

Nwadimma nodded slowly, studying him.

The king's brow furrowed slightly at his sister's words, though his face remained composed. He turned his gaze skyward again, the stars above glittering like ancient truths written across the velvet of the night—aloof, impartial, eternal. Their light was cold, but it had watched over kings far older than him... and would outlast even the boldest legacy.

Her reminder was subtle, but sharp. He had not forgotten his past transgression—how could he? The theft of a divine branch, sacred and forbidden, still lingered in the whispered corners of the palace and in the edge of every shadow that fell across his throne. The gods did not forget so easily. Nor, he suspected, did his enemies.

"If I were faced with the same choice again," he said, his voice quiet but unwavering, "I would still do the same."

The words dropped like stones into still water.

He inhaled deeply, his posture tall but reflective. "The branch—what I stole—it has elevated our kingdom's strength in a way generations of rulers before me only dreamed of. And, strangely, it brought us into the good graces of the death goddess."

He allowed a small smile to tug at the corner of his lips, though it was touched with the grimness of irony. "Ezinne speaks now of strange tides rising in the underworld, a shift born as a direct result of my actions. Yes, perhaps it was reckless. Perhaps it bordered on hubris. But I... I did what had to be done for the future I envisioned."

A wind stirred through the open window, tugging gently at his robes like the soft breath of something ancient and unseen.

"My fear of the consequences," he continued, "of the retribution I might one day face... has rekindled something I had let go cold—my faith. The great god Ikenga."

He turned from the stars, facing his sister once more. His eyes held a quiet fire now—darker than conviction, more complex than regret.

"My newly reignited faith," he said, stepping closer, "has allowed me to see Ikenga more clearly. To understand him—not as the distant, aloof deity many make him out to be, but for what he truly is."

There was reverence in his tone now, and something like defiance.

"He is the god of nature and curses. He is the keeper of raw, untamed law. And what is nature if not theft, struggle, survival? What is growth if not the taking of something greater's strength to become something more?"

"To steal from a god is to challenge the natural order. But challenges... are part of nature too. The wolf does not ask the deer for permission. The seed does not apologize for breaking the soil. My actions, while controversial, are in alignment with what Ikenga embodies."

He paused, his voice now heavier, laced with understanding.

"My punishment—if it comes—will not be from Ikenga's wrath. Not because he is offended... but because even gods must uphold a reputation. Power, even divine power, has a face it must wear."

He leaned back then, shoulders relaxed but his mind still sharp, thoughtful.

"That is the cruel paradox of divinity. Even when they understand, they must act as if they don't. Even when they agree, they must punish to maintain the illusion of distance. Perhaps that's what sets us apart from them."

Across the room, Nwadiemma said nothing. Her wine glass was still half-full, forgotten in her hand. Her expression was unreadable—part respect, part concern, and something else lingering quietly beneath the surface.

Finally, she whispered, "And if the punishment comes not from Ikenga, but from one of the other gods?"

Chapter 496:

Nwadiemube didn't blink.

"Then I'll face them as I did before. Knowing I did not act for pride alone... but for the fire of something greater than fear."

He turned back to the window, his reflection barely visible in the glass—just a silhouette framed by starlight and the long shadow of consequences.

"Either way," she said at last, "the throne seems to suit you better when you wear it with silence."

Then she stepped away, her robe whispering behind her as she moved toward the door. But before she exited, she paused one last time.

"I'll keep watching them, and I'll find ways to keep the envoys entertained. But promise me one thing."

Nwadiébe tilted his head.

"Don't play this game so well you forget who you are."

And with that, she disappeared into the hall, leaving Nwadiébe once more in the quiet company of the stars and his own thoughts.

As for the envoy and his entourage, as soon as the maids had bowed and departed, leaving the entourage to settle into their rooms, it didn't take long for subtle glances and quiet signals to pass among the group. Within minutes, they reconvened in the chamber assigned to the envoy—twelve figures in total, shadows sliding across the polished floor like whispers in motion.

The room fell into a tense silence as the door clicked shut behind them.

Among them stood a woman cloaked in flowing silks, her expression serene, almost reverent. She raised her hand, and a soft glow began to radiate from her palm. A complex magic circle unfurled midair—an intricate weave of symbols and foreign sigils that shimmered with violet light. As her chanting began, low and rhythmic, the air in the room thickened. The circle expanded slowly, rippling out to the very edges of the chamber until it gently sank beneath the floorboards and vanished from sight.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then came a tearing sound—wet and unnatural.

The man with the scar on one side of his eyes, the same one the princess had marked as strange, moved without hesitation. His hands reached to his throat and gripped the edge of his jaw—not to speak, but to peel. The flesh of his face came away like parchment soaked in oil, revealing beneath it the hulking, snarling form of a beast.

Thick horns curved out from his head, and his skin was the mottled gray of ancient stone, veined with molten red. A snort of steam hissed from his nostrils. His voice rumbled like thunder in a deep cavern.

"It's suffocating being in this human skin," he grunted, cracking his thick neck as his transformation completed.

He was not alone.

Four others followed suit—ripping free of the fragile illusions that masked them, tearing through glammers of flesh as easily as one might discard clothing. Their forms varied—some serpentine, others skeletal, one with wings folded unnaturally close to her body, feathers blackened and slick. Their eyes glowed with predatory hunger and patience, as though they had waited too long to finally breathe as themselves.

Among them, the spellcaster—now fully transformed—let her human guise melt away to reveal an elegant but chilling form. Her skin shimmered like moonlight on poisoned water, her eyes burning with violet flame. Horns curled back from her temples, delicate but deadly, and her smile was lined with fangs far too sharp for anything natural.

The envoy and the remaining members of the entourage who retained their human forms stood tense, their discomfort palpable. Though they had known of their fellow travelers'... nature, the full reality of it was still difficult to accept. Their expressions strained under the weight of forced calm.

They didn't know where the Emperor had found these creatures—these monsters—nor why he had chosen to send them on a diplomatic mission of all things. The idea itself was almost blasphemous, yet here they were, walking as wolves among unsuspecting sheep.

The demonic woman—now fully in her element—stepped forward, her heels clicking softly on the stone floor as she glided past the envoy. Her voice was honeyed venom, seductive and ancient.

"You've done well," she purred to the envoy, trailing a clawed hand along his shoulder. "But you look... tired."

A sweet mist curled from her lips as she exhaled—a silver fog that spread rapidly, lacing through the air with an almost invisible grace. The envoy's eyes fluttered as the mist reached him. Beside him, the others staggered slightly, then slumped—silent and heavy—into dreamless sleep.

She turned back to her kin, her expression shifting from sultry to serious in an instant.

"They're in place," she said coldly, her voice cutting through the lingering silver mist. "Now let's see what kind of game this king likes to play."

The room was quiet for a beat, heavy with layered intent.

Then the minotaur-like figure shifted his bulk, the wood beneath his hooves groaning under the weight. His horns gleamed faintly in the low light, and his eyes glowed with a dull, simmering red. He folded his thick arms, voice gruff and grounded.

"What are we to do about the apelings?" he asked, the word laced with disdain. "Do you think they'll hinder us? They're already sniffing around, and they tend to bite when they sense weakness."

A flicker of a forked tongue tasted the air as the serpentine one leaned against the far wall, his scales glistening like oil under candlelight. His voice was smooth and composed, the kind that spoke in coils and veiled intentions.

"We have nothing to worry about from the apelings," he said with a hissing calm. "As long as we give them no reason to act, they will remain in their little cage of observation. Their kind lives for secrets and shadows, yes—but suspicion is not the same as proof."

He let his eyes wander lazily toward the now-sleeping envoy, a sly grin curving across his lipless mouth.

"As far as the world sees it, we are delegates, arrived under the seal of royal purpose. As long as that illusion holds, they can only whisper and watch."

A low creaking sound filled the room as another figure turned toward them—one far more still than the others. The skeletal being stood like a forgotten statue, cloaked in tattered robes of gray and black. His voice, when it came, was a hollow rasp—like wind through tombstones.

"The master's mission," the skeletal one intoned, "can be accomplished without ever crossing paths with the apelings."

He stepped forward slightly, his joints crackling as if every movement disturbed centuries of stillness.

"Our focus must remain on the king," he continued, his voice deathly calm. "He must dance—gracefully or not—to the master's tune. Every decision he makes from this moment must be a step toward unraveling the veil around this realm. The rest is... noise."

Silence followed his words.

The room seemed to grow colder.

The demonic woman nodded slowly, her expression unreadable as she gazed at each of them in turn. "Then it's settled. The apelings are not our concern—unless they make themselves so. We maintain the façade, push the king gently where he needs to go, and wait for the master's signal."

She glanced toward the sleeping envoy, then added, almost idly, "Let him dream of diplomacy. We have real work to do."

The minotaur chuckled darkly, the sound rumbling like distant thunder. "Then let's hope this king is the kind who likes to dance."

And so, with the glamour of diplomacy still holding strong, the true purpose of the monsters in fine silks began to unfold—hidden beneath smiles, behind courtesies, cloaked in elegance.

Far above the mortal world, the Origin Gods—ever-watchful, ever-distant—had, since the ascension of their children, behaved exactly as Björn had predicted. Their gazes had shifted from the chaotic, vibrant lands of men and beasts to matters far more immediate, far more personal. The realm of mortals, once so full of intrigue and passion, had become a fading echo to them. What mattered now was within reach—tangible, intimate, and infinitely more precious.

Crepuscular found himself strangely captivated. He spent more and more of his time lingering within the ever-shifting boundaries of Xerosis' realm, quietly observing her. He watched as she tirelessly labored to shape reality in accordance with her doctrine, aligning ley lines, redirecting streams of thought, and whispering to the minds of mortals who dared to listen. It was unlike anything he had known.

The idea that a god would work—would toil with such purpose and fervor—struck Crepuscular as almost absurd. He himself had never lifted a finger unless it was to tip the balance between dusk and dawn, and even that, he now realized, required no true effort on his part. Yet here was Xerosis, radiant in her devotion, alight with joy at every milestone reached. Each time her teachings took root in the mind of a mortal, she would quite literally glow, laughing with the kind of unburdened delight that left Crepuscular stunned. And, though he would never admit it aloud, a subtle envy coiled within him.

Chapter 497:

He remembered his mother's words—their birthright as Origin gods: "You are not made to strive. You are made to be." They were born from raw cosmic potential, beings who required no growth, no learning, only time to ascend further into themselves. But Xerosis, with her blisters and her brilliance, her fragile need to be understood and the stubborn strength she used to shape her realm—she had become something more.

Elsewhere, Jaus had withdrawn back into his own expansive realm, where the sea moved as he wished and reality danced to his quiet hums. There, he was no longer the god of sea and storms—he was simply a father. Flowua, his daughter and newly ascended, basked in the nostalgia of being doted on again. She missed the feeling of being a cherished child, a little princess twirling in the halls. Her father's domain had grown immensely over the past centuries, full of hidden corners and strange wonders she had yet to explore. It was a playground of infinite dreams, and she indulged herself completely, knowing she was safe, adored, and, most importantly, seen.

And in the heart of another realm, Mahu reigned with the unchecked zeal of a mother reunited with her brood. Every day, Ikem and Maul were smothered with waves of affection that teetered between divine warmth and unrelenting chaos. She fed them, hugged them, kissed their foreheads unceasingly, and, in

the same breath, rattled off an endless stream of potential names for their newest sibling—who, by all accounts, had yet to be made.

"I was thinking Adannaya! Or maybe Erika! What do you think? Something soft, don't you think? Ikem, Maul, listen to me—this is important—"

The two gods, once formidable in their own right, now found themselves humbled, desperate, and in silent prayer.

"Please, Ikenga," Maul whispered one morning, as Mahu braided glowing strands of his hair into patterns old as the stars, "come back soon. I can't do this anymore."

Ikem, beside him, nodded solemnly, his expression hollow, his eyes red from another night of divine lullabies and ancient childhood stories that would never, ever end.

The Origin Gods, once aloof, had been pulled into the gravity of love, purpose, and quiet transformation.

Though they resided in realms far removed from the clamor of mortal lives, the Origin Gods had begun to shift in subtle, irreparable ways.

Once, they had been content to exist as abstract forces—divine constants around which the world turned. They observed the world as one might watch a river run: distant, unmoving, beautiful. But ever since the ascension of their children and the ripple it caused in the realm of gods, something had stirred within them.

It began as curiosity. Then, fascination. Now, it has evolved into a slow-burning understanding.

For the first time in their timeless lives, the Origin Gods were beginning to comprehend why they were once named the Guardian Gods.

The title had always seemed ornamental—a grand label for beings so far removed from danger, conflict, or struggle. After all, what need did the world have for guardians when there was nothing that could ever truly threaten it? But now, with the ascension of the new gods, with Murmur whispering at the

edge of all things, and with the ascended gods changing the tempo of the divine symphony—they finally understood.

They had not been called Guardians for what they did, but for what they would one day be required to do.

And that realization unnerved and excited them.

They had been idle not out of negligence, but because their world—their domain—had never truly required their intervention. So long as balance held, their presence had been unnecessary. But now the balance teetered, and even their old blood began to stir. There was, for the first time in years, the possibility of danger. A whisper of something strong enough to challenge them.

Something like them or similar to them.

Their awareness of this fact did not manifest in panic or even urgency. Instead, it was a quiet, collective awakening. A hum beneath their thoughts. They didn't speak it aloud, but all of them felt it: the pull of responsibility. The weight of potential action. The slow birth of purpose.

And amidst all of this, they waited.

They waited for Ikenga and Keles to return. More than familial yearning. It was anticipation.

For while the Origin Gods still stood at the peak of creation, they had begun to feel a certain loneliness. Their power was unmatched. Their roles unquestioned. But they had never truly interacted with their equals.

Crepuscular, in his quiet moments beside Xerosis, often found himself lost in thought. Will his siblings return changed? he wondered. Stronger than before? Stranger?

Mahu, between suffocating her children in affection whispered prayers—not to another god, but to the cosmos itself. Let them return safe. Let them return ready.

Because when Ikenga and Keles returned, the stage would be set. The universe would no longer be a place where only Origin Gods reigned in silence. It would become a world of dialogue, challenge, and shared stewardship. The old gods would, for the first time, meet beings on equal footing—beings not bound by birthright.

And with that, the title of Guardian would no longer be a dormant prophecy.

It would become an active vow.

Back in the Invaded World, the landscape had changed so drastically that only echoes of its former self remained. The skies, once blue or gray depending on the season, were now forever shrouded in a swirling tempest of smoke and thick, oppressive clouds laced with demonic energy. These clouds pulsed faintly with a sickly crimson glow, as if the sky itself had become a living wound festering above the earth.

The scars of war were visible for miles. From the original breach where the abyssal portal first tore open the fabric of reality, waves of corruption stretched far and wide. Jagged black spires erupted from the ground like broken teeth, marking the spread of the abyss demons' dominion. What were once fertile lands, bustling towns, and peaceful forests had long since been twisted into grotesque mockeries of their former selves—twisted trees that wept blood, rivers that ran sluggish and dark, and ruins that echoed with the screams of the dead.

Despite their massive spread, the flow of demons through the portal had not slowed. If anything, it had grown more frenzied—an endless tide of snarling, shifting horrors pouring forth from the abyss. And now, they no longer marched unchallenged. They face an enemy one disturbingly similar in nature—chaotic, massive in numbers and filled with resentment.

Amidst this chaos, the empire showed its true face. Gone was the veil of civility, the speeches of unity and honor. Years of subtle cruelty had finally erupted into open brutality. The empire had stripped away its hollow rhetoric and embraced the cold, ruthless machine beneath. And at the center of its cruelty stood the ratmen.

Once offered the illusion of choice, the ratmen people were now met with iron and fire. Villages were razed. Families torn apart. The old were drafted alongside the young, trained with harsh discipline or sent to die as cannon fodder.

Even newborns were not spared—left to the wilds or thrown into labor camps to toil until they could hold a blade.

Confusion and grief swept through the ratmen communities. They had lived under the empire's shadow for generations, trying to survive, to contribute, even to show loyalty. They believed themselves safe—perhaps not equal, but tolerated. The empire's sudden and violent shift left them stunned, unable to grasp why they were being hunted, why they were no longer citizens but enemies.

What they failed to understand was that something had changed within the empire's core—something known only to a few in the highest echelons of power. A hidden event from years prior had shaken the empire's leadership to its core, unraveling old doctrines and instilling a single, blood-soaked priority: extermination.

Whatever this event was, it had not only redefined the empire's goals, but also birthed a paranoia so deep that even the invasion itself was considered secondary. The ratmen, once a marginalized but tolerated race, were now seen as a threat that could not be allowed to persist.

The empire, ever calculating in its cruelty, found a way to kill two birds with one stone. With cold pragmatism, they orchestrated the end of the ratmen race—not by their own blades, but through the merciless hands of the invading abyssal demons. It was a perfect solution in their eyes. The ratmen, now forcibly conscripted and thrown into the heart of battle, became expendable buffers—cannon fodder to slow the abyssal tide while the empire's true soldiers regrouped and conserved strength for their own ends.

Each ratman death served a dual purpose: weakening the demon horde, and advancing the empire's quiet genocide. No longer did the empire have to stain its own hands with the blood of an entire race.

Far from this charnel theater of war, deep within the heart of the abyss, Ikenga and Keles had returned to Zarkov's sanctuary. A strange contrast to the battlefield they had left behind, the scene now was one of decadent stillness.

Chapter 498:

Ikenga lounged in a steaming abyssal hot spring, the blackened waters bubbling gently around him, their warmth tinged with strange magical energy that soothed both muscle and spirit. Surrounding him were women—eerie and beautiful, their forms both human and not, born of the abyss and yet sculpted to allure. Their hands moved across his body with practiced grace, massaging out the tension from his

shoulders. Some whispered praise in ancient tongues. Others giggled softly as they traced the jagged scars across his chest and arms.

Scars that should have faded long ago.

Any ordinary wound would have vanished from Ikenga's body with a single thought, his form easily capable of rejecting injury. But these he had kept, though not by choice. Something deeper, buried in the marrow of his soul, wanted them to remain. Subconsciously, he clung to the pain they represented. These scars were not marks of weakness, but memories—proof that he had felt something real for the first time in what felt like an eternity. That fight, brutal and exhilarating, had given him something no pleasure or conquest ever had in recent years: fun.

And now, as his body lay relaxed and half-submerged, his single remaining eye stared into the rising steam, glazed over with the weight of memory. The soft moan of the springs and the faint sighs of the women became white noise against the louder echo of the past.

On the edge of the spring, Keles sat cross-legged with uncharacteristic stillness. Her normally sharp and impatient demeanor was dulled, focused entirely on the grotesque trophy Ikenga had brought back with him—the severed head of a cursed being, or rather, what remained of it. Its twisted features were frozen in an expression of agony and defiance, its aura still faintly pulsing with residual curse energy. She studied it like one might a riddle or a weapon yet to be understood.

Back in the water, one of the women's hands began to wander. She drifted lower, fingers brushing bold territory. Ikenga raised a brow lazily but said nothing. He didn't stop her, nor did he encourage her. His mind was no longer here—not really.

Because in the privacy of his thoughts, he was still back in that moment—steel clashing against flesh, the roar of a dying enemy, the thrill of near-death. He could still smell the blood in the air, still feel the heat of the cursed aura biting at his skin.

And it made him smile, just a little.

After their last serious exchange, Ikenga found himself weighed down not just by the words he had spoken to Keles, but by the way he had delivered them. Harsh. Dismissive. Demeaning. It had not been

his intention to belittle her, but intention rarely softened the sting of truth, especially when wrapped in cold steel.

For a while, he told himself it was necessary. That she needed to hear it. That, as gods walking a world of treachery and ruin, sentimentality was a luxury they couldn't afford. But even amidst his pride and pragmatism, a flicker of guilt remained. And it grew.

So he began to think: how could he make it up to her? What could this dark, desolate world possibly offer that would be worthy of a goddess like Keles—the mistress of death and darkness.

The answer came to him, not in words, but in memory.

He recalled a subtle moment—her gaze lingering a little too long on the soul of a sixth-stage being, her aura vibrating faintly with curiosity and fascination. She had been intrigued then, perhaps even moved. It was rare to see Keles interested in anything, let alone the soul of a creature whose power rivaled gods.

And so, a seed of inspiration took root.

Death.

What better gift could he offer a goddess like her than a soul steeped in power and suffering? A relic of finality. A symphony of destruction. The gift of the dead.

Ikenga buried the idea deep within his mind, locking it away like a prize not yet claimed. He would act when the time was right.

As the carriage approached the great abyssal portal, the world outside grew dimmer, the air thick with heavy, demonic energy. Inside the carriage, however, the stillness was heavier than the air itself.

The silence between them wasn't hostile, but it was dense—saturated with unspoken thoughts and unfinished feelings.

Ikenga stared out the window, jaw clenched, his only eye reflecting the void-scape beyond. He said nothing, but his mind was a storm. Regret tangled with resolve. Should he apologize? Would she even accept it? He wasn't used to explaining himself—not to anyone. And yet, Keles was not just anyone.

Across from him, Keles sat stiff and quiet, arms folded loosely, fingers drumming against her elbow in a slow, thoughtful rhythm. But her silence did not mean resentment. Quite the opposite.

She felt shame—not from his words, but because they had hit closer to the truth than she liked to admit. He was right. She had allowed herself to be manipulated too easily, swept into someone else's game. If not for Ikenga's intervention—his warning, his grounding presence—she might have walked blindly into a trap she would never escape.

But unlike what Ikenga believed, she wasn't angry at him. She was angry at herself. And more than that, she felt something deeper: a flickering desire not to retreat from his judgment, but to prove herself worthy of standing beside him. Not beneath him, not behind him—beside.

All she needed was a chance. A real opportunity to show her strength, her control, her clarity.

And that unspoken tension—the guilt, the shame, the pride, the need to reconcile—hung thick in the space between them, filling every breath with meaning neither of them dared speak aloud.

Then, without thinking, she glanced up.

Ikenga sat with his shoulders square but heavy, one arm resting on the window frame, his brown eye half-lidded with thought. There was something distant in his gaze, a quiet turmoil masked beneath the sharp edges of his features.

Keles parted her lips to speak, her thoughts finally forming into words—yet before a single sound escaped, Ikenga's form shimmered... and unraveled into a cascade of dark crimson petals.

They drifted gently to the floor of the carriage, flickering with embers of godly energy, then vanished before they ever touched it.

A breath later, she felt his presence outside.

Then came his voice—soft, deep, and unshakable—not in the air, but in her mind. A whisper wrapped in power:

"Wait for my gift."

Keles's eyes widened, a storm of questions and fury beginning to boil inside her, but before she could rise, she realized—she couldn't move.

Invisible bindings clung to her limbs like shadowed chains. She grit her teeth in defiance, her energy flaring, but the seal was precise—measured—not meant to harm, only to delay.

From the front of the carriage, Vaegur and Lavderh stirred. They'd felt the shift.

Ikenga's command had been clear, and both guardians knew they had only seconds before Keles shattered her restraints. Acting without hesitation, the two fused their energies—Vaegur's goblin form was gone, replaced by a hulking demonic presence and Lavderh's wooden-like flesh grew in size matching Vaegur.

For a brief instant, their bodies seemed to merge into one pulsating force, an abomination of grace and menace.

The next step the carriage took could barely be perceived. It was a blink—a ripple through space—and suddenly they were there, right before the towering abyssal portal.

The portal hummed, gaping like the throat of a beast ready to devour all.

By now, Keles had already broken free, shadow tendrils lashing and tearing apart the last remnants of the seal with an enraged flourish. She stepped out of the carriage, her presence warping the air around her. Her aura boiled in fury—her expression sharp, cold, and radiant with insulted pride.

Her eyes immediately found him.

Far in the distance, atop a jagged cliff of bone and blackened stone, Ikenga stood—half-shrouded by swirling winds and drifting ash. Even from so far away, their eyes met. His lone eye locked onto her with wordless resolve.

She held his gaze for a long, weighty moment.

Then, she scoffed.

It wasn't anger alone. There was a flash of something else—a threat laced with concern.

She turned without another word, walking toward the portal, her silhouette sharp against the abyssal light.

Just before stepping into the yawning maw of the gateway, she threw one last glance over her shoulder. Her voice rang out, clear and echoing like a curse—or a promise:

"You better take care of yourself, Ikenga. Because if you die—deal or no deal—this world will crumble to mere space dust."

And with that, she vanished into the dark, her form swallowed by the portal's hunger, leaving only silence in her wake and the faint trace of her divine fury in the air.

Ikenga stood alone on the ashen plains, his lone eye fixed on the sky above. A faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips—wry, calm, and almost amused.

He could feel it, the sky was shifting. The clouds churned unnaturally, no longer just formations of weather but currents of mana and powerful figures coalescing.

Chapter 499:

Powerful presences—five of them—converging fast. This was no surprise, the moment he peeled away the shroud of his curse—the power that had masked their divine signatures—he knew this would happen.

The Empire's mages had long been hunting, watching, waiting.

They were searching for them, but Ikenga had made sure only he would be found.

A crack of thunder rumbled—not from storm, but from pressure.

The clouds parted with reverent obedience, unveiling five figures descending through the sky like executioners delivered by the heavens.

They floated down in perfect formation, each one radiating vast magical pressure, their robes flickering with runes and enchantments, their presence filling the air itself.

Five sixth-stage goblin mages—some of the Empire's most terrifying spellcasters.

They did not land. They hovered, a deliberate distance away from Ikenga, not out of caution... but because they had no intention of showing respect.

One among them glowed with a golden hue that shimmered like sunlight refracted through shattered glass. Vellok—archmage and leader—floated slightly ahead, his stare locked on the man before him.

This was not what he expected.

There was no divine aura. No suffocating pressure. No overwhelming brilliance. The figure that stood below—unarmored, unadorned, just a single-eyed man bare chested and piece of clothing wrapped from his waist with a relaxed posture—seemed... ordinary.

Vellok's first reaction was disappointment. This was the so-called god? His jaw tightened. The mages records were wrong.

But then—Ikenga tilted his head upward slightly, and their eyes met.

And in that single instant, Vellok felt something wrong stir inside him.

His heart skipped a beat.

A chill ran down his spine, unnatural and primal, like something from the deepest part of himself recoiling.

He had to force himself—truly force himself—not to look away.

The air around him no longer felt like his own. The world, the clouds, even the magic he wielded—it all suddenly felt distant.

That eye. That one eye.

It looked at him with a gaze that made him feel exposed. Stripped of pretense, reduced to meat and soul. It was the same gaze he'd given the terrified subjects in his mage tower—the test subjects strapped to stone, begging for mercy.

Now, he was the one being studied. No malice, No pity. Just cold, dispassionate interest.

Vellok swallowed hard. He dared not speak first.

Around him, the other four mages grew still. None of them laughed. None sneered. They too had felt it—that gaze.

A subtle shift passed through the air.

Ikenga's gaze, once steady and relaxed, narrowed slightly—just enough for the seasoned eyes of the mages to notice. One of them had caught his attention.

Among the five floating figures, a particular mage stood out to him—a man wreathed in gentle arcs of flame, his presence simmering rather than burning. The crimson runes on his robe pulsed faintly, matching the glow in his irises.

Ikenga's smile deepened.

"I believe we've met before," he said, his voice carrying effortlessly through the space between them, smooth and unbothered.

The flame mage's brow furrowed. He tilted his head slightly, his expression twisting in confusion—until recognition flared in his eyes.

"You..." he murmured, voice hoarse. "You're the one... on the moon."

Ikenga gave a slow, deliberate nod.

"Ah," he said, as if they were old acquaintances crossing paths in a market square. "You found my eye, didn't you? Clever. I had forgotten where I left it."

The flame mage's composure cracked just a bit. He took a subconscious step back, flames flickering more erratically around him. Ikenga's tone wasn't threatening, but it didn't have to be.

Before tension could snap into something worse, Ikenga raised one hand lazily and waved in casual dismissal.

"No need to worry. I've no intention of dropping the moon on your world anymore. That plan no longer serves any purpose."

The words were said with ease, but they hit like falling stars.

Vellok's golden aura flickered. His instincts screamed that this man was lying—he had to be. Who spoke of planetary destruction like it was a fleeting idea? Yet something in Ikenga's demeanor made interrupting feel... dangerous.

It wasn't that any of the five lacked the capacity for planetary destruction. Each had mastered a unique concept to cement themselves as sixth stage beings.

It wasn't a matter of lacking individual strength. Instead, for them to bring about the annihilation of a world, it would require a specialized method they could apply to a world, guiding it along a path toward its ruin. However, their power required a crucial link: the ability to connect their mastered concept to a world and then meticulously steer it through the process of its demise.

Think of it like this: they couldn't just punch a planet into oblivion. Their power needed to work in concert with an existing cosmic alignment or an inherent instability within the planet itself and skillfully guide that process to its conclusion.

However, this new god's pronouncements carried a different weight entirely. His confidence suggested a capability far beyond subtly guiding existing forces. He spoke of directly interfering with the very forces that held the moon in its orbit. To displace those fundamental forces and cause the moon to fall upon their world implied a level of power that operated on a completely different scale, one that didn't rely on pre-existing conditions for planetary destruction. It was a direct act of cosmic manipulation.

Their previous arrogance was gone as their feet touched the ground since the first time they have made their appearance.

Before Vellok could find his voice, another mage stepped forward, limping on ancient, gnarled crutches. He was a hunched figure, shrouded in layers of dark robes that jingled faintly with every movement—the sound of small skulls swaying from his belt like trinkets of forgotten prayers.

He carried a staff of blackened wood, worn smooth by time and ritual. His eyes—milky and rimmed with scarlet veins—locked onto Ikenga's bare chest, and he inhaled sharply.

There, carved into skin and soul, were the signs. Cursed sigils. Symbols twisted in agony and power, crawling like ink burned into muscle.

The old man trembled, not from fear—but from desire.

He knew what he was seeing. This god... had a curse for a divinity and he was the one who amde an appernace at the town now overlooked by Vellok.

To him, Ikenga was a being sculpted in suffering, pulsing with the purest cursed energy he had ever witnessed.

The old mage's tongue darted across cracked lips. His grip tightened around the staff as his breathing grew shallow.

He looked at Ikenga not as a threat, nor as a god... but as a treasure trove. A living embodiment of everything he had chased through rituals, sacrifices, and death.

Ikenga felt the weight of the stare and turned slightly, his one eye meeting the old man's.

His single eye meeting the old man's clouded gaze. For a brief heartbeat, the air thickened with expectation. The old mage braced himself, anticipating a look of disgust, perhaps revulsion—the gaze any divine being would cast upon something as tainted and vile as himself.

But what he saw instead unnerved him more than any disdain could.

Fascination.

Ikenga's eye shimmered faintly, not with malice, not with pity—but with an almost childlike curiosity. It was the look of a predator admiring another species of predator—an acknowledgement of the monstrous, an appreciation of the grotesque.

The old man's breath caught in his throat. Why? Why would someone like him—someone with pure, ancient, overwhelming cursed energy—look at him like that?

He had spent centuries cloaked in rituals, experimenting on the dying and the innocent, sacrificing those untouched by corruption just to extract the raw essence of suffering. And all of it—every sigil inked into his skin, every artifact clinging to his gnarled form—was an echo of that pursuit. Of power. Of forbidden understanding.

If he stood in Ikenga's place, looking at himself with cursed purity, he would've felt revulsion. He would've destroyed himself for being impure.

But this god didn't.

And as their eyes remained locked, something inside the old man shifted. A thought—half dread, half wonder—bubbled to the surface.

It wasn't him Ikenga was staring at.

It was the space around him.

His heartbeat quickened. Sweat beaded on his brow despite the cold void of the sky above. A question formed in his mind—one he had never dared to ask aloud, not in his studies, not even to the spirits he tried to commune with.

His voice wavered.

"Your grace..." he whispered, almost reverently. "Are... are there people behind me?"

The other mages turned to look at him, confused and wary. There was no one there—just the vast openness of the land beneath the dark sky.

But Ikenga's nod was slow, deliberate.

"In my world," he said, voice like rustling chains in the dark, "The cursed spirits would have had a ball with you. You'd have been a nightmare whispered across kingdoms... a story used to frighten children into silence. An abomination cloaked in human skin."

His tone was calm, but the words hung heavy.

The old man's lips parted to speak, but he could feel it now. He could feel them.

A chill clawed down his spine.

Though he couldn't see them, he knew something was there—behind him, around him, within him, he has always known. The godsight in Ikenga's single eye saw far more than his perception ever could.

Chapter 500:

And what he saw was enough to quiet even his curiosity.

Millions of souls, Old and young. Women and men. Newborns that never took a breath. Fetuses torn from silence—not one, but many.

All of them bound to the old man like rusted chains forged from suffering. They clung to him in layers, draped over him like a cloak of the damned, their translucent forms barely visible—moaning, screaming, whispering.

And they cursed him. Not with magic or hexes, But with emotion. Pure, unfiltered rage. Crushing sorrow. Jealousy so sharp it could cut through reality and was having effect on the old mage.

Ikenga could hear them.

Whispers not meant for the living, echoing through realms—curses he'd never encountered before. Languages long dead, carried by unborn tongues. A child whispering hate with the knowledge of an elder. A mother weeping promises of vengeance as she hovered beside her killer. A fetus... cursing the very idea of its own conception.

And through it all, the old man simply stood there, unaware of the full horror he carried.

"You're not alone," Ikenga said, his voice softer now. "You never were. They've followed you for years."

The old man didn't speak. He couldn't. His mouth opened, but no sound came.

And for the first time in decades, he felt... small. A man swallowed by shadows he himself had nurtured.

Ikenga took a step forward—not to threaten, but to examine. To understand.

"How long," he murmured, more to himself than to anyone, "can a man wear the dead before they start to wear him?"

Ikenga took a slow step forward, the earth beneath his bare feet trembling gently—not from force, but reverence.

The old man, despite his vast knowledge and twisted strength, felt it immediately: he had no control here. The space around Ikenga bent, not from pressure, but from acknowledgment. The land remembered him. The air honored him. The curse within the world itself sang his name in a tone older than language.

Even among sixth stage mages—beings capable of warping the sky and tearing mountains—the old man felt small.

And then, before he could blink, Ikenga was in front of him.

He hadn't seen him move.

No wind, no blur—just a god, suddenly near.

An arm reached out. Long, steady, calloused not from time but from purpose. The old man tried to step back, to cast something, anything, but his body refused. His limbs were frozen, not by spell or paralysis, but by the sheer weight of the curses who were now holding him down looking down at him with anger.

Ikenga's palm rested gently upon the old man's scalp, like one might touch a child, or a beast. Not in malice—but in solemnity.

The cursed markings across Ikenga's chest and arms pulsed—a deep, organic rhythm like a second heartbeat. The drawings, inked in languages that had died long before this world's first empire rose, began to shift and shimmer. Words twisted. Symbols rotated like gears in an eternal mechanism. They weren't just marks—they were living etchings, and they were hungry.

And then they fed.

The cursed energy clinging to the old man—thick, layered with decades of ritual and death—peeled away from him like mist in sunlight. Not torn, not extracted violently, but absorbed, drawn in like water into thirsty soil.

Ikenga's body responded—new markings bloomed across his skin, coiling like vines on fresh bark. His upper torso became something impossible to comprehend—an infinite space, as if he were both man and forest, shrine and void, a living domain unto himself.

The old man opened his mouth to scream.

Only then did pain arrive. It came not in fire or blades, but in the truth being devoured: every cursed soul he had bound now being unbound, redirected, given voice.

The whispers turned to shrieks. The fetuses screamed with ancestral rage. The mothers howled through teeth they never grew. The warriors cursed him and the unborn wept in betrayal and unfairness of not being born.

As the other mages snapped to action—trying to understand, trying to move—it was already over.

A scream tore through the air, jagged and inhuman, not just from the throat but from the very soul of the old man. It echoed through the clouds, split the sky in two, and was silenced in the blink of an eye.

And where he once stood— There was nothing but a severed head, hovering just above the ground. Its mouth still open in defiance, its eyes wide in disbelief and agony. His soul, still trapped within, churned inside the flesh like a moth beneath wax.

Ikenga's hand remained open a moment longer before he lowered it, the markings across his body settling, now glowing with dark Purple and violet hues—new curses written into his very being.

He turned slightly, admiring the head. Not as a trophy. Not as an act of cruelty. But as a gift.

"Perfect," he murmured. "Keles will appreciate this one."

The head floated into his palm, the faintest hum of curses still vibrating within it—like a heart that refused to die, too stubborn for peace.

A wooden tendril, gnarled and dark like the roots of an old tree, unfurled from Ikenga's waist. It coiled with organic precision around the head, gently latching it like an offering on his belt. The tendril pulsed once, acknowledging the new burden, and then stiffened, holding the head in place. The hum of curses continued, now syncopated with the slow breath of the god of nature and curses.

Behind him, the four remaining mages stood frozen—silent, still as statues.

For the first time since they reached the sixth stage of magical ascension—becoming beings capable of rewriting the laws of nature with their will—they felt something unfamiliar gnaw at their core.

Not fear of death. They had danced on that edge many times.

But this? This was something older. Something primal.

It was the fear of not knowing. The fear of being in the presence of a god whose nature defied all records, all philosophies, all prepared contingencies.

Ikenga was something other and not knowing what he was terrified them more than anything.

Ikenga turned slightly, feeling the subtle pull of shifting energies behind him. His single eye locked onto Vellok, whose form had begun to flicker with phantom wings—wings made of pure white feathers and a slight lovely hymn, half-formed by panic and instinct.

But something stopped the transformation.

A new presence pressed against the world.

Vellok felt it first. He turned slightly, eyes widening. He didn't speak. He didn't cast a spell. He simply took a single step back—and the space behind him ripped open, like paper cut with an invisible blade. Without a sound, he vanished.

His retreat was not questioned.

The remaining three mages didn't even blink. They weren't surprised as they knew why he retreated "He was given an order"

Now they looked at Ikenga with new eyes. Not with arrogance, not with terror. But with caution.

Measured. Calculating. As if their minds were scrambling to build new frameworks to define the kind of god they now faced.

The presence of the Emperor made itself known. He extended his will through the fabric of existence like a ripple across still water, touching the hearts and minds of his subjects with both authority and clarity.

From his distant vantage, he observed the aftermath of the confrontation. When he saw how the old mage had fallen, he was momentarily taken aback—not by the death itself, but by the manner of it. It lacked the chaos and struggle one might expect from a practitioner of such a high level. But the clues were there, faint and fragmented, embedded in the remnants of magic and will that still lingered like fading echoes in the air. With a thought, he pieced them together.

The Emperor understood. But Vellok and the others who had been closer, who had felt the clash with their own eyes, did not. The fear that clung to them was not from ignorance of death—it was from the uncomprehending nature of it. Something had happened that defied what they thought they knew about power and the way it should behave.

So, the Emperor extended his will once more, this time as a balm. Through this link, he conveyed what had truly occurred.

"The old mage," his voice echoed within them, both near and infinite, "was both fortunate and unfortunate to encounter one such as Ikenga. In another time, under different stars, Ikenga might have guided him. There is wisdom in Ikenga—stillness, patience, even compassion. But today, they were enemies.

The mage walked a path flawed from its very foundation. Ikenga merely revealed it. He did not strike him down in brute force; he simply showed him the inevitable consequence of his choices. The collapse was internal—Ikenga only gave it the gentlest push. That is why the old man fell so easily. A sixth stage practitioner... undone not by might, but by the truth he could no longer bear to carry."

A hush fell over those gathered. The explanation did not erase the fear, but it gave it shape. And

In understanding, there was a grim sort of comfort. The Emperor said no more. His presence receded like the tide, but the impression he left remained.