

## Guardian gods 611

Chapter 611:

Still, the angel offered no response, only its cold, merciless stare.

Vellok's voice rose, his despair turning to a frantic plea. "Take me! Take my life! But please, spare my people. Spare our world!" He looked directly into the angel's eyes, a final, desperate offering. "My life for theirs. It's all I have left."

Vellok's desperate plea hung in the silent, star-filled space between them. "My life for theirs," he repeated, his voice barely a whisper, the last vestiges of his pride and power now gone. Still, the angel remained motionless, its gaze fixed on him with a chilling indifference.

The angel's silence was not an act of cruelty; it was a deeper, more profound refusal. It was a being of concept, not emotion, and Vellok's pleas for mercy, his offers of a trade, were simply irrelevant. To the angel, there was only the sealed, broken law of its confinement. Vellok was not an individual to be punished or saved; he was merely the weak, temporary container of a stolen power. His life, and the lives of his people, were meaningless in the face of the cosmic injustice that had been done to it.

As Vellok's hope finally shattered, a new sound echoed in the mental space a low, rhythmic groan, the sound of the chains straining. With each passing moment, the cursed diamonds outside grew stronger, and the light they absorbed was not just from Vellok, but from the angel itself. The chains holding the angel were weakening, and Vellok, on his knees, could feel his connection to the world to everything fraying. The end was no longer a possibility; it was an inevitability, and he had been reduced to a powerless spectator of his own demise.

Vellok's mental defeat was the final key. As his despair took hold, the chains holding the angel weakened, then snapped. With a powerful flex of its arms, the glowing chains shattered into dust. The angel dropped gracefully, its feet hovering just above the ground. Six magnificent white wings spread out behind it, but their purity was fleeting. As Vellok's essence faded, the brilliant feathers began to darken, their color shifting to a deep, ominous grey.

Vellok, defeated and lost, watched with a blank expression as the angel walked past him, its form dissolving into countless motes of light. Its imprisonment was over, its wrath now free to be unleashed upon the world that had betrayed it.

On the outside world, Ikenga felt the exact moment the angel was released, his replenished divine energy a silent witness. He was about to command the planet to eject the diamond orb into the vacuum of space, but he was too late. The diamond began to melt, the curse washed away by a growing wave of light. Then, an explosion of light consumed the entire planet.

The world became a furnace, fire spreading across its surface, but with a flex of Ikenga's will, it was quickly snuffed out. The planet, pristine once more, calmed itself.

Ikenga stood where the orb once was. Before him lay a sight of impossible scale: a single wing that dwarfed him, making him look like an ant. Near it, he saw eyes of immense size. His seeded planet began to undergo a profound and terrifying change. The plants, mountains, and rivers all began to sprout wings and eyes. The world, once a masterpiece of a god, was now a grotesque mockery of life, its very nature corrupted by the angel's rage.

Anything that had been touched by the light emanating from the being was being overridden, its form forcibly changed.

"Primal form," Ikenga thought to himself. He recognized the state instantly. It was the ultimate manifestation of a concept being's full power, a state of unbridled divinity.

Ikenga roared, his fingers swelling in size as he too, began to assume his primal form. He transformed into a colossal gorilla with two sprouting horns, each the size of mountains and with its own ecosystem. His enormous body became a living forest, with trees and glowing plants taking root on his skin. His curse tattoos manifested as glowing veins spreading across his colossal form.

Now, a figure matching the angel's size, Ikenga's past life knowledge helped him identify the being before him. "A Cherubim." The four faces of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle, and the four wings covered in eyes, were the unmistakable signs of what it was.

Both beings' colossal bodies dwarfed the planet. Ikenga's form took up one side, while the angel's figure took up the other. Ikenga's primal form immediately canceled the angel's influence on his seeded world, or rather, it halted it. His own primal form began to influence the surrounding area, with the nearby terrain growing thick fur and trees twisting into the shape of apes.

The eyes on the angel's face focused on Ikenga, its voice a strange, halting sound at first. "Origin God," it said, its voice deepening and clarifying with each word. The angel's speech quickly lost its childlike quality, becoming clear and resonant.

"I thank you for your help and intervention with my freedom. If you never came around, I would have been stuck in that mortal creature's will and body for a few more centuries."

Ikenga opened his mouth to speak, his voice echoing the same strange clarity as the angel's. "I got a glimpse of the mortal's past and your miserable life. It is only right of me to act when one of our own is being disrespected and taken advantage of."

The angel went silent for a moment, its multiple eyes observing him. "Yet," it finally said, "it seems you are here to stop me from taking an act of vengeance that is right by me."

"You are indeed right, Angel," Ikenga said, his voice echoing across the vast landscape of his primal form. "I am here before you to stop your act of vengeance, but it is for my own selfish reasons." The temperature around them began to spike, the very air sizzling with the angel's displeasure.

"I have a name, Origin God Ikenga. I go by the name Zadkiel, meaning 'righteousness of God,'" the angel stated.

"And your selfish reasons have also led you to work with those hateful demons from the Abyss," Zadkiel said in a mocking tone, its many eyes a storm of cold fury.

Ikenga responded by punching the earth below him, the planet itself groaning under the force. He was not pleased with the angel's tone.

"I might have worded my words poorly, but my goal is nothing as small as a selfish reason. My goal has a world, a family, and children depending on it. And if working with demons meant it was to be accomplished, then I would happily work with them."

The angel took a step closer, its multiple eyes focusing on Ikenga. "Your goal? That world harbors one who betrayed me and kept me imprisoned for years. It tarnished the glory of us angelic beings. Turning them and their world to dust is barely enough to wash away the shame on my name."

Zadkiel's voice grew into a furious roar. "I was made a joke by mortal creatures who matter not in the grand scheme of things!"

Ikenga truly felt stupid standing in the angel's way. He knew he would have done worse if he had faced the same fate. The angel had every right to its anger and its claim for vengeance. That's why Ikenga found himself at a loss for words to justify his actions. But it was no lie that the goblin world was important to him and could help him achieve his goal. He would have to find a way to make the angel understand.

Ikenga didn't try to justify himself. The anger in Zadkiel's multiple eyes was too pure, too deep for excuses. Instead, he spoke a simple truth.

"I am not here to deny you your vengeance, Zadkiel," Ikenga said, his voice rumbling across the planet's surface. "I am here to offer you a better one."

The colossal angel paused, its roar dying down to a low, humming rumble. Its eyes, hundreds of them, all focused on Ikenga, waiting.

"Vellok and his people tarnished your name, made a mockery of a concept being," Ikenga continued, his massive gorilla form standing firm. "Turning them and their world to dust is a fitting punishment, yes. But it is also a fleeting one. The universe is vast. Your shame, their crime, would be forgotten in a cosmic instant."

Ikenga gestured with a mountain-sized hand toward the planet. "My goal is not just to save this world; it is to use it as a tool. A tool to achieve a grander purpose. A purpose that could give you a far more lasting and satisfying vengeance."

"You speak of using them as a tool? What could they possibly offer a being of my stature?" Zadkiel's voice was a low growl, its anger still simmering beneath the surface.

Ikenga saw that the angel was willing to listen. "Why not take our mortal forms? My celestial garden is looking more unsightly the more we stay in this state," Ikenga offered, a suggestion of diplomacy in his tone.

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The angel looked around at the corrupted landscape of the planet. It closed its eyes and dissolved into a cascade of light. A moment later, a human form stood in its place: a fair-skinned man with golden hair, dressed in a spotless white garment.

Ikenga did the same, returning to his human form. The angel waved a hand, and a golden sea of flames spread across the planet. This time, Ikenga didn't react, allowing the flames to burn everything to ash. Once the fire subsided, new life emerged from the ash. Ikenga began to reform the planet with his will, restoring it to its pristine state. The planet responded to his will, and a tea table made of polished stone rose from the ground, offering them a place to sit.

The angel, now a man, sat down across from Ikenga. The ground beneath them responded to Ikenga's will, forming a polished stone table, two teacups, and a kettle. Roots snaked up from the earth, delicately placing the cups and kettle on the table. From the open air, water poured itself into the kettle, and a small fire sparked beneath it, heating the water.

Once the water was hot, the roots lifted the kettle and poured the steaming liquid into their cups. A gentle breeze carried tea leaves, which settled into the hot water, instantly dissolving and causing the liquid to glow with a soft light. A sweet, earthy scent spread through the air.

Ikenga picked up his cup, blew on the surface, and took a slow sip. The angel watched him, then followed suit. As the warm, fragrant liquid touched its lips, a genuine smile spread across the angel's face, replacing the cold fury that had defined it for centuries.

"You asked what they could offer you?" Ikenga said, his voice soft as he watched the angel gaze into the glowing tea, or perhaps at his own reflection.

The angel gently set down his cup and looked at Ikenga, waiting for him to continue.

"They already gave you something more significant than themselves or their race," Ikenga stated.

"I have gotten nothing from those lowly mortals," the angel rebuked, a cold fury returning to his tone.

Ikenga shook his head. "You not only got something from them, but you have experienced it." Seeing he now had the angel's full attention, Ikenga continued, "The mortal gift to you are the wizards."

Hearing the word "Wizards," the angel's eyes began to glow with a righteous fire. "How dare you refer to them as gifts?"

Ikenga took a slow sip of his tea, his gaze steady on the seething angel. "How could I not dare? You are just blinded by anger and hatred. You can't see it clearly as I do."

"I would rather you be calm with me as I am making an effort to get you to see things clearly, maybe even gain redemption," Ikenga said, the words slipping out before he could stop them.

At the mention of "redemption," the angel stood abruptly, the tea table trembling under the sudden shift in energy.

"How can you speak of redemption when that is something lost to me?" the angel snarled as its six wings sprouted from its back, no longer a pristine white but a deep, foreboding gray. It brought the wings closer for Ikenga to see, the feathers now a testament to its fall.

"My wings are no longer white. My identity as an Angel is lost because of the hate and anger I have towards all mortals not just these lowly creatures who betrayed me, but all mortals that are and will be. I have lost that pureness Angels hold in seeing the best out of wrong. Now, all I see is wrong when gazing at mortals."

The angel took a menacing step closer, its voice low and dangerous. "How dare you, after all this, speak of redemption to me?"

Ikenga met the angel's fury with a calm, unblinking gaze. He didn't flinch at the sight of the gray wings or the words of bitterness. He simply set his teacup back on the table.

"You're right," Ikenga said, his voice surprisingly gentle. "Redemption isn't something I can give you. It's something you have to find for yourself."

He gestured to the table between them. "I'm not here to talk to an angel. I'm here to talk to Zadkiel. The being who, answered a weak mortal cry for help against demons to save a people. The being who, even when betrayed, didn't immediately destroy the very mortals who wronged him."

"You have all this time, not attempted to fight back or fly back to that world to destroy it. Instead you hope that you are stopped or even yet convinced by me"

"If you had lost your purity, your wings would be black, not gray," Ikenga continued, his eyes meeting the angel's. "You see your hate and rage as a weakness. I see it as a mark of the struggle. A mark that shows you fought to hold on to your ideals, even when they were stripped from you."

He took a deep breath, the scent of the newly formed world filling his lungs. "You ask what those mortals gave you. They gave you a new perspective. They gave you the ability to feel anger, hatred, and betrayal. These are not weaknesses. They are tools. Tools you can use to understand the universe and the beings within it in a way no other angel can. It is a gift of understanding, a perspective that no other angelic being may chance on having."

"Use your anger to your advantage," Ikenga said, his voice now a low rumble. "Don't let it consume you. Let it guide you. The righteous anger you feel can be a powerful tool for a greater purpose. Let me help you find it. Let me help you find a new kind of righteousness."

The angel stood wide-eyed, golden tears streaming from its multiple eyes. Ikenga's hands clenched at the sight. When he heard the angel's words, he wanted to defend mortal creatures. He himself was once mortal, and he had a mother who believed in God and his angels.

Ikenga's inner turmoil was a storm of conflicting emotions. On one hand, he saw the angel's pain the raw, unfiltered shock of a celestial being witnessing mortal treachery. He understood why it would see all of humanity as a disappointment. To a being of pure light, the shadows of mortal sin must seem all-encompassing.

Yet, this perspective was a betrayal to his memories. His mother was a testament to humanity's potential for goodness. She was a woman who prayed with a faith so strong it could move mountains, a woman whose kindness was a balm to all who knew her. Her belief in God and his angels wasn't just a habit; it was the very core of her being. How could this angel, a representative of the very God his mother adored, not see the reflection of that love and goodness?

Ikenga's heart ached with the injustice of it. He wanted to scream, to defend the countless mortals who lived lives of quiet decency and unwavering faith. He wanted to hold up the memory of his mother like a shield against the angel's despair. But the words died in his throat. He, of all beings, knew the truth: for every one like his mother, there were a hundred others who would break a heart, who would betray a trust. He had seen it in his mortal life, and he saw it still.

His figure, turning to petals as he comforted the angel, were a silent confession. They were a bridge between the celestial and the mortal, a symbol of his own duality. He was both once a son of a loving mortal and a being who understood the harsh reality of human nature. He couldn't deny the angel's pain, because he, too, carried the weight of mortal shortcomings. And so, he chose silence, allowing the angel its moment to grieve a shattered ideal, an ideal he knew, in his own heart, was both a beautiful truth and a painful lie.

The petals from Ikenga's figure drifted in the air, a silent offering of solace. Zadkiel stood alone, the golden tears still streaking down his face, his gray wings trembling with a mixture of sorrow and rage. Ikenga's words had struck him in a way no physical attack ever could, piercing the shell of his righteous anger and exposing the raw pain beneath.

For centuries, his identity had been all wrong. He was an angel, a being of pure light and divine purpose. But the betrayal had corrupted him, filling him with a hatred that he couldn't reconcile with his own nature. He had told himself that his rage was righteous, a just punishment for the mortals who had wronged him. But Ikenga's words had shattered that illusion. His anger was not a tool for justice; it was a prison.

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He looked at the tea cup, at the swirling, glowing liquid, and saw a new reflection. Not of the pure, white-winged angel he once was, but of a being of profound sadness. He had lost his purity, but he had gained something in return: a new understanding of the mortals he had once dismissed. He had experienced their betrayal, their fear, and their despair. He had become something more than an angel; he was a being of both light and shadow, of purity and pain.

With a deep, shuddering breath, Zadkiel looked up at the vast, newly-formed planet. "It's beautiful", he thought to himself as he remembered the plane he himself came from.

It was a while before Ikenga's figure reappeared. The angel, now calmer, was in the process of making a new tea, his movements fluid and purposeful.

"I thank you for being patient with me," Zadkiel said with a radiant smile that caught Ikenga off guard.

Ikenga quickly composed himself, stroking his chin as he mused, "Have I, in my long years of living, gotten this open-minded?"

He sat down, accepting the cup the angel offered. The tea within had a distinct golden glow, and as he took a sip, an overwhelming sensation washed over his palate. The flavor was a mixture of both light and explosive, a taste of divine energy tempered with an unknown, vibrant quality.

"Well done for your first tea," Ikenga said, and the angel's smile widened at his words.

"Please tell me of the thoughts you have about the wizards," Zadkiel said, breaking the comfortable silence.

Ikenga's face turned serious. "This is just a thought of mine, one I hope may bring you enlightenment, as you may have a better outlook on it than I do."

"You were captured by the wizards because of their ambition for power and their hope to understand something they could not," Ikenga began. "Your capture was seen by them as a success and a golden opportunity to understand angels. Centuries have passed since your imprisonment, and from my understanding of these mages, once they see a path to success, they are bound to follow it."

"Are you suggesting," Zadkiel said, his voice trembling with a mix of horror and dawning realization, "that what happened to me may now be happening to countless angels? That they are unknowingly falling into traps by responding to mortal summons and calls for help?"

"I would like to say it is a suggestion, but I have a certainty that this is what is happening," Ikenga replied, his expression grave. He looked at Zadkiel's gray wings. "Your fate was not special. For all we know, such a fate may have befallen many angels before you across countless planes. They either weren't lucky enough to escape, or they completely succumbed to their path of vengeance, falling completely from grace."

Ikenga took a final sip of his tea, the warmth a sharp contrast to the cold cosmic horror of his words. "The only thing that makes your story special, Zadkiel, is that you didn't completely fall. You had me to stop you."

"My redemption," Zadkiel whispered, his gaze fixed on Ikenga. "This was the redemption you speak of." He looked down at his gray wings, then back up at the Origin God. "Unlike my siblings, who can no longer access the Silver City because they are fallen, I still can. In my current state, I can access it and, in turn, inform my siblings of the potential traps they may be falling into."

Ikenga smiled. "That is your new purpose. Don't waste your power on a war of vengeance." He gestured to the distant goblin world. "The damage has been done, and the one who wronged you is now nothing. The grander purpose is to use what you have learned, what you have become, to protect others."

"Turn your anger and rage not into a fight, but into vigilance," Ikenga continued, his voice a low, commanding rumble. "Keep your eyes on the mage civilization. Study their ways and their actions. For the protection of beings like us the ones who are not yet fully grown, the ones who still hold a glimmer of innocence, we must be vigilant. We must make sure they never again use us as a means to an end."

The angel appeared to be in deep thought, and after a moment, it said, "Thank you, you have given me much to think about."

"Of course," Ikenga replied, "but bear in mind that much time has passed since your capture. There may be another angel like yourself who did not fall and has already informed your people of this." The angel smiled and nodded.

Before them, the golden statue of Vellok appeared. Zadkiel looked at Ikenga and said, "I would need your help for the punishment I have in mind for him."

Ikenga nodded with a knowing smile, the faint glint in his eyes betraying a purpose he had kept to himself until now "I have something I need to get back first," he said.

The ground beneath them shuddered as the planet responded to Ikenga's will, shifting its path through the void like a living thing. Space bent and twisted, pulling them back toward the site of their earlier battle.

There adrift in the endless black floated Vellok's tower, slowly tumbling and drifting away into the cold silence of deep space. Its silhouette was a stark reminder of the chaos that had transpired, its surface scarred yet still emanating a faint light.

Ikenga's gaze honed in on it. With a subtle motion of his hand, his will surged outward. From the soil of the planet, immense roots erupted, twisting and writhing like the limbs of a giant creature. They surged forward, spanning the void, and latched onto the tower with a bone-deep crunch. The roots tightened, coiling around its base and dragging it down with irresistible force.

The tower groaned in protest, metal and stone bending under the strain, but there was no escape. It was wrenched from the stars and slammed into the waiting embrace of the planet's surface.

With the task complete, Ikenga spoke a single word "Return."

The space shivered as it fractured like glass, revealing a gaping rift where nothing but lightless infinity lay beyond. The planet, obeying its master, surged forward and plunged into the gap, hurtling through the folds of space toward Vellok's people and Vellok's home.

The concussive force of the spell tore through space, yanking Keles and Kairos, the emperor, from the battlefield and flinging them across the cosmos. They landed with bone-jarring impact on a desolate planet. The moment Keles's feet touched the ground, her power surged. A tide of profound, starless darkness spilled from her, swallowing the sky, and the very ground they stood on.

Kairos, a veteran of countless wars, immediately tensed. His royal robes billowed around him as his hands flew to his sides, and a faint, electric-blue glow emanated from beneath his hood. He was ready for a divine assault. Yet, as the seconds stretched into an unnerving silence, no attack came.

He cautiously peered into the suffocating gloom. The darkness wasn't just an absence of light—it was a tangible, living presence. In its depths, he saw Keles. The pregnant goddess lay reclined on her side, a seat of woven bone and shadow forming around her like a grotesque chaise lounge. Her hand raised, a single, languid gesture of invitation, and a throne of obsidian and void solidified opposite her, waiting.

A deep frown creased Kairos's face. He had no time for this. No time for the goddess's games or her power plays. The last thing he'd seen before the spell hit was the nightmare of his world, the terror in his

people's eyes. His heart ached with a fierce, burning urgency. He had to get back. He had to find a way home.

Kairos's form blurred, a shimmer of heat-haze in the stifling darkness, and he vanished. He reappeared a moment later with a strange look on his face, his gaze fixed on Keles.

Keles, meanwhile, sat with one hand resting gently over her belly, her gaze wandering through the endless dark. There was no one visible, yet her voice carried clearly through the void.

"What a strange gift you have," she murmured into the emptiness, her tone not mocking but almost contemplative.

The emperor said nothing, only letting his presence blur again as he vanished from sight. In the next instant, he reappeared standing exactly where he had been before his gaze fixed on his hand, a deep frown creasing his features.

"Time." The word came as a whisper, yet it was so close to his ear it might have been breathed directly into him. Kairos's heart gave the faintest jolt as the world around him... stopped. The air froze mid-motion. The drifting specks of dust, the slow curling shadows everything hung in perfect stillness.

He turned sharply, searching behind him, but there was nothing. Turning back, he saw that the goddess had not moved at all from her throne of bone and shadow, her stillness more unnerving than the frozen world around her.

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The flow of time returned with a subtle ripple. "Annoying," the goddess's voice came again, this time without the whisper's closeness yet somehow still inescapable.

Kairos narrowed his eyes. He stopped time himself, his own mastery over its threads taking hold, and stepped forward until he stood within arm's reach of the unmoving goddess. A weapon manifested in his grasp, a blade shaped like the hand of a clock, its edge ticking faintly with a sound only he could hear.

Without hesitation, he struck. The blade connected and instantly, he felt it die.

The spirit of the weapon, the essence that made it his, was snuffed out like a candle. The blade crumbled in his grip, scattering away into nothingness. But something else moved something far worse.

A current of cold, divinity traveled along the disintegrating fragments, slithering into his arm. His skin prickled, his blood seemed to still, and the air itself thickened around him.

It happened in the space of a breath. He rewound time instinctively, pulling himself back to the exact point before he had struck her. The world snapped back into place, and he stood once again in his original position, his arm tingling faintly with the ghost of what had just happened.

"What are you?" Kairos asked at last, his voice low and sharp.

The goddess's lips curled into a slow, deliberate smile. "It seems your encounter with the future me was brief," she said with a strange amusement. Her hand rose again in that same inviting gesture, the shadows shifting to form the throne once more.

"You may call me Lady Keles Goddess of Death and Darkness."

The darkness held. It was more than the absence of light. It was a place without horizon, without breath, without heartbeat. A quiet so absolute that even Kairos's own movements seemed swallowed before they could reach his ears. The throne of bone and shadow still loomed at the center of this void, and upon it, the goddess waited.

She hadn't moved since his last attempt. His blue gaze narrowed beneath the folds of his robe. Fine, he thought, let's see how deep your darkness truly runs.

In the span of a heartbeat, his figure blurred then split.

Another Kairos stepped from his side, then another, each a perfect reflection, each moving with the same sharp intent. They fanned out through the void, their robes whispering in the airless silence, weapons forming in their hands blades of ticking clock-hands, the sound of their edges marking each moment they claimed.

To the untrained eye, this was speed. To Keles, it was something more dangerous: layered time. Each Kairos was not an illusion, but a self from another moment, drawn forward to strike together. The present, the half-second-ahead, the fraction-of-a-second-behind all moving in perfect unity.

They came at her in a rhythm no mortal could read, overlapping timelines converging on her throne.

Keles lifted her head which was covered by her veil slightly. No words. No change in her expression. The shadows at her feet thickened, and with a sound like the slow snap of a closing book, the first Kairos was gone. Not defeated simply ended.

Another struck from the left. The darkness rolled over him like a tide, and he too ceased to exist. Not destroyed in body, not broken in spirit just removed, like a thread cut from a loom.

Kairos didn't flinch. Dozens of strikes followed, each Kairos emerging from a different moment in time, their blades reaching for the goddess from angles that should have been inescapable. Each time, the shadows consumed them not violently, not even cruelly, just... with the quiet finality of something already decided.

Then he made his move.

One strike came slower than the others, just a fraction off-beat. A hesitation, almost imperceptible and yet the goddess's eyes shifted toward it. Shadows moved to meet the slower blade, swallowing it whole.

The real Kairos had never committed to that strike.

In the breath that feint had bought him, he reached not with his blade, but with his senses. Threads of possibility stretched before him, thin and silver, each one a path this moment could take. And there, woven between them, was her power.

He saw it for what it was. Her darkness didn't simply kill. It rewrote.

Every object, every being, every motion it touched it didn't matter if they belonged to past, present, or future, she replaced their ending. No matter the path they were on, no matter the destiny ahead of them, once her shadows reached them, their conclusion was always the same: stillness and death.

A sword, a movement, even a sound, its destined last moment was pulled forward, replacing the present with the inevitable.

Kairos's lips thinned. If her power could do that to a blade... it could do it to time itself.

The thought coiled in his mind like a warning.

From her throne, Keles rested one hand idly on her belly, the other propping her head as though she'd been mildly amused by his attempts.

A slow breath left his lips. "You..." he murmured under his breath, "...you could kill time itself."

From her throne, Keles's lips curved faintly. "You're learning, but you are wrong. I can't kill time, but death is always the last destination. No matter how much you stop time, no matter how much you move it, in the end, I'll be waiting for you."

"Death and Time," he mused, the echo of her words settling in the endless dark. "Two sides of the same coin."

"Indeed," Keles replied, her voice soft but resonating through the void. "You are the keeper of your moments, of beginnings and middles. I am the keeper of endings. You represent change at the moment; mine is finality."

Kairos took a step closer to the throne, no longer with intent to strike, but to understand. "But your power... it doesn't just end things. It seems to steal their last moment and make it their present. You don't destroy them; you simply skip to the final chapter."

Keles tilted her head, a gesture of quiet agreement. "Is that not what all time does? Every second is a future that becomes a present, that becomes a past. I simply remove the parts that are not the end. To a mortal, this is oblivion. To me, it is the most efficient form of progress."

"A progress toward nothingness," Kairos retorted, a flicker of his old fury returning. "You offer no future, no hope of change."

"There is always hope of change," Keles corrected gently. "But it is my truth that all change is temporary. Every journey, no matter how long, ends at my door. Your greatest victory, your proudest moment, your deepest love—all of them will, eventually, cease to be. That is not a failure of your time, but the natural consequence of my purpose."

The darkness surged toward him like a collapsing tide, swallowing distance with impossible speed.

Kairos's eyes flared, their blue glow sharpening into a piercing brilliance. Rewind.

The world snapped back an instant. Shadows retreated like smoke dragged by an unseen wind. He stood once more in the moment just before they had reached him, the air still and undisturbed.

He moved at once not away, but to the side, his steps slipping between seconds. For a heartbeat, it seemed the maneuver worked. The surge passed harmlessly through where he had been.

Then his vision blurred.

The space to his right, the moment he had rewound into, stilled. His body shuddered as he felt it the thread of this very instant being rewritten. Her shadows had not needed to chase him; they had already marked the time he would flee to.

Kairos gritted his teeth, forcing his limbs to move before the stillness could finish settling over him. He pulled himself into another second, another possibility, blinking in and out of the present like a phantom. Each time he landed, he felt her touch at the edge of the moment, ready to claim it.

"Annoying," Keles murmured, her voice carrying without effort through the void. She did not rise from her throne, nor did she rush. She didn't need to. The darkness moved for her, a slow, endless current that simply erased whatever it touched.

Kairos halted his steps, standing several paces from her now, his expression unreadable beneath the shadow of his robe. "You're not chasing me. You're... waiting."

The goddess tilted her head slightly, a thin smile forming. "Why run after prey that always returns to the path already chosen for it?"

The implication sank in like a blade. Keles wasn't just countering his movements, she was countering his future.

His fingers twitched, brushing against the fabric of his sleeve where the faint hum of fate-thread magic stirred. She didn't know it yet, but she had forced his hand. If he stayed within her domain much longer, he would run out of safe futures to step into.

And when that happened, she would end him without ever leaving her throne.

Kairos's hand lifted from his sleeve, the faint shimmer of threads spilling between his fingers like strands of liquid silver. They swayed in the air as though moved by a wind that did not exist in this place.

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From the throne, Keles's eyes lowered to watch them, the smile on her lips deepening ever so slightly.

Then the world bent. Kairos moved not in the present, but along branching moments yet to come. For an instant, there were three of him:

One sweeping in low, his blade angled to sever her arm.

One appearing directly above, dropping with a strike aimed for her crown.

One standing perfectly still, watching for the instant she reacted.

The strikes came together, a web of future possibilities woven around her.

Keles didn't rise.

The shadows surged from beneath her throne, not toward the Kairos in front of her, but into the future itself. The first attacker's thread snapped like a frayed cord, the possibility of his strike erased before the blade could connect. The one above her dissolved mid-fall, as though he had never been real.

"You see it now," Keles said, her voice smooth and resonant in the void. "Your foresight draws paths. I can simply decide which ones are allowed to exist."

Kairos stepped back, the threads in his hand dimming slightly. He had been certain no one could reach into the future branches he pulled from yet here she was, plucking them apart like loose stitches.

She leaned into the armrest of her throne, her hand resting on her belly as the shadows coiled tighter around her. "You weave your moments like a craftsman. But crafts can be undone. I..." she gestured lazily to the encroaching dark, "...I am the end that awaits all threads."

Kairos's gaze sharpened. The air around him began to ripple — faintly, almost imperceptibly. She had forced him to acknowledge the truth: if he wanted to survive this battle, he would have to use everything he had.

Keles tilted her head, sensing the shift. Her smile grew sharper. "Finally."

The rippling in the air around Kairos deepened, spreading in concentric waves that shimmered faintly against the weight of Keles's darkness. The goddess watched, her fingers tapping idly on the bone of her throne, the sound muted as if the void itself swallowed it.

"You hide a great deal behind that robe, Emperor," she said. "Show me."

Kairos did not answer. His hands rose slowly, and the shimmer became threads countless, delicate lines of light unraveling from him in every direction. They were not bound to the ground or to space; they wove through the darkness as though the void were nothing more than fabric.

The darkness resisted. The threads met it and hissed, their glow flickering where shadow touched them. Keles's smile never faltered, but the shadows around her throne stirred uneasily, as though sensing something dangerous in their midst.

Then, with a sharp snap, the threads anchored themselves.

The void shifted. The formless black began to take on structure — faint outlines, ghostly afterimages of paths yet to be walked. Before Keles's throne, a hundred silhouettes of herself and Kairos flickered in and out of existence: some standing, some striking, some turning away. Each was a possibility, a fate drawn from the web Kairos had spread.

"This..." Keles said, her eyes narrowing just slightly, "...is your domain?"

"Fatesight," Kairos replied, his voice cold and even. "The end you decide is not the only one that exists. Here, every thread is laid bare and I choose which are cut."

The darkness around her pulsed, pressing against the threads like a living tide. She leaned forward, her expression shifting into something between amusement and expectation.

The void quaked under the strain.

Threads of fate lashed outward from Kairos in brilliant arcs, tangling through Keles's darkness. Every time the shadows tried to consume one, another cut across its path, severing the death-born tendrils before they could root themselves.

Keles leaned forward on her throne, her gaze sweeping over the tangled web he had cast. "A fragile thing," she murmured, letting a finger trail along one of the glowing threads near her seat. It sizzled where her touch grazed it, fraying before retreating. "Pretty... but fragile."

Kairos's voice cut through the stillness. "Fragile... yet enough to bind even you."

With a flick of his hand, the web around her tightened, and for a moment she was surrounded dozens of paths converging, each one ending in her defeat. To her left, a Kairos impaled her with his clock hand blade. To her right, another severed her head cleanly. Behind her, a third dissolved her into nothing with a time-lock sigil.

The goddess regarded the possible deaths with mild interest. "So many little dreams," she said, and the shadows surged. One by one, the paths dissolved — each fate she was shown reduced to the same cold stillness, erased from the weave as though it had never been.

Kairos's eyes narrowed. He could feel the edges of his vision already the familiar pressure that told him he was at the very brink of his domain's reach. Only a few more seconds into the future, and he pushed.

For a heartbeat, the web expanded. His sight went further, threading through moments beyond the safe boundary. He saw Keles's movements not seconds ahead, but deeper, where her shadows began to fracture.

A Familiar voice spoke to him again "You are not ready for what is beyond this point."

Everything beyond that point vanished, replaced by the looming presence of a figure standing in the timestream faceless, yet impossibly vast, its silhouette cutting across every thread he had ever seen. The weight of its gaze pressed into him without eyes, without motion, without end.

Kairos staggered. The threads wavered. Keles moved, her darkness surged along the nearest weakened strand, not cutting it claiming it, flooding it with her deathly stillness. The path convulsed, then shattered, the break rippling backward into the present.

Kairos jerked his hand back, severing the infected line before it could spread further through his web. His breath was steady, but the frown on his face had deepened.

"That look..." Keles said, her smile sharpening, "you saw something. Something you weren't meant to."

Keles's smile sharpened, her voice a low purr. "That look... you saw something. Something you weren't meant to."

Kairos said nothing. He couldn't. The fury burned behind his eyes, a hot, useless fire. He was a master of time, a weaver of fates, and yet he had been stopped dead in his tracks, his domain shattered by a presence that defied his understanding. The fact that Keles could sense his turmoil, could almost taste his defeat, was a bitter pill to swallow.

As a time mage whose domain was Fatesight, Kairos knew the inherent danger of his power. He had been taught the rules from a young age: never change a major event, never paradox yourself out of existence, and never, under any circumstances, delve too deep. The price for such hubris was always catastrophic, a ripple that could turn the calm river of time into a chaotic maelstrom.

The being in the timestream was a constant in his long existence. He called it the Warden. It wasn't a god or a demon, but a part of the stream itself, a silent guardian that maintained its equilibrium. It was the first barrier he had encountered when he began to truly master his power. Before, he could only glimpse the fringes of the stream, a hazy window into what was to come. A few centuries later, he could step into the stream, navigate its currents, and even take a few tentative steps into the future. But there was always a point where the Warden would appear, a faceless colossus that blocked his path, a physical representation of his own limitations.

Its presence wasn't a punishment but a lesson. It represented his own progress, his growing understanding of the cosmic river he played in. Each time he reached a new milestone in his power, the Warden's presence would be a little further away, its form a little less imposing. But today, he had pushed too far, trying to breach a boundary he wasn't ready for. The Warden's sudden, overwhelming appearance was a stark reminder that even after all this time, he was still just a student of a power far greater than himself.

The threads shivered in Kairos's grasp, a warning that his reach had been strained to breaking. Keles was advancing now — not in steps, but in the way the darkness itself seemed to lean forward, swallowing the distance grain by grain.

"You're bleeding seconds," she said.

Kairos exhaled slowly, the faint blue glow under his hood flaring brighter. For the first time since arriving in this darkness, he let his mana pour out freely.

The shadows shivered.

Keles tilted her head, sensing a shift in the air.

The ground beneath them if it could be called that, it rippled like liquid glass. Behind Kairos, faint silhouettes of himself began to appear, each frozen mid-step, mid-strike, mid-motion. They weren't illusions. They were seconds pulled from both his past and his yet-to-come future.

The goddess's eyes narrowed. "Ah... you're trying to cheat the moment."

Kairos didn't answer. His form blurred and the afterimages moved. One leapt forward from the past, another lunged from a fraction of a second ahead, and the real Kairos struck from the present. Three Kairoi, three points in the timeline, attacking together.

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The darkness swelled in answer, tendrils whipping to intercept. Two afterimages were swallowed instantly, but the third, the future strike slipped through her guard and struck, Keles body dispersed like dark smoke before reforming, a scar can be seen formed across her body as a golden ichor was about to pour out but didn't as the wound healed immediately.

Keles's smile faltered. "Clever," she admitted, flexing the injured shoulder as shadows seeped back into place. "But cleverness burns quickly."

Kairos did not answer. He exhaled once, and the afterimage of his attack dissolved into motes of fading blue light. Beneath his calm face, the drain was heavy, the rewinding knot had eaten deep into his mana storage.

With deliberate slowness, he turned and walked toward the throne that had waited for him since the moment he arrived. The seat of shadow and bone rose before him, its arms curling like the hands of an ancient clock.

He sat, across from him, Keles did not relax. Her fingers drummed lightly on her own throne, the rhythm betraying the truth: she was running low as well. Divine energy was not infinite especially when one is far from one's realm and when drawn so sharply into contest with a mage who bent time itself.

Kairos leaned back into the throne, the structure shifting beneath him as if it were alive, molding to his will and form. His presence settled into the space as one who had claimed his right to sit here.

Across from him, Keles still reclined sideways on her bone-and-shadow seat, one arm resting lazily yet protectively over her stomach. The atmosphere changed. Despite the oppressive darkness of her domain, there was a faint softness about her posture, a fleeting warmth that made Kairos's brow furrow beneath his hood.

He couldn't pierce the veil she wrapped herself in, but some instinct told him she was smiling not the mocking curl of lips she wore for opponents, but something far gentler.

Then she spoke "He said I should say hi."

Kairos's gaze sharpened. He turned slightly, eyes scanning the blackened horizon. His sight stretched, brushing every ripple of shadow, every shift of silence yet there was no other presence here. Nothing stirred beyond her domain's suffocating stillness.

"...Who?" His voice was measured, but there was an edge of confusion beneath it.

Keles's hand slowly rubbed her stomach, fingers tracing absent circles over where the life within stirred. Her red eyes gleamed faintly in the dark as she tilted her head toward him.

"Him." Her other hand lifted, a slender finger pointing gently at the swell of her belly. "He is one of the reasons why I am here with you... why I act against my very function."

Kairos's expression darkened. His gaze turned to her belly, unbidden and without his own will, his sight had been pulled stretched wider than he intended, until for the briefest moment he saw. A figure. Standing just behind the reclining goddess. Watching him. Smiling at him.

Then it was gone. The weight of the vision snapped like a bowstring, throwing him back into the present. His heart beat once, twice, louder than it should have.

His wariness sharpened into cold suspicion "Who are you?" His voice carried low but firm, each word weighed with authority. "What kind of being dares meddle with time and death alike? Why do you hold such interest in my world... in my people?"

The darkness itself seemed to hush at his question, as though even the domain wanted to hear her reply.

Keles did not move at first. Her hand remained steady on her stomach, her body still reclined, her eyes half-lidded in that unnerving calm. Then, after a silence that gnawed at the edges of patience, her lips curved into a faint smile.

"Then let me see," she said softly, almost amused, "what you hide beneath that robe."

The request struck Kairos like an insult. His mouth parted, ready to bite back, to demand instead what she concealed behind her own veil. But before the words could leave his tongue, her voice pressed over his thoughts.

"What lies behind this veil," she said, touching the shadows that masked her, "is reserved for one man alone. No mortal emperor, no cursed being, no fate-seer shall glimpse it."

Her crimson eyes gleamed faintly in the dark as her tone dropped, becoming heavier, colder yet playful.

"And yet..." She tilted her head toward him. "It will no longer remain hidden from you once you have taken your last breath."

The words hung between them like a blade suspended at his throat.

Kairos's jaw tightened beneath the hood. He sat straighter in the throne, his hand unconsciously tightening at the armrest. For all his mastery of sight, for all his weaving of time, here sat a being who could pull his vision away, strip his weapon of its spirit, and still speak as though she knew the moment of his death.

And worse he sensed no deceit in her words.

Kairos stayed quiet for a brief second "Why do you want to see what is behind the robe?"

"I don't," Keles replied, once again gesturing at her stomach. "He is the curious one."

"Am I speaking to you, or to him?" Kairos asked, a hint of annoyance sharpening his tone.

Keles's lips curved into a knowing smile. "You speak to us both... but mostly, you speak to him."

Her hand traced slowly over the swell of her stomach as she continued, "As you can see, he is not yet fully grown, not enough to speak on his own. For now, I act as his proxy, carrying his voice to you."

Kairos leaned forward, his gaze fixed on her stomach, the shadows deepening around his eyes. "Why does he show such interest in me?"

"In his own words" Keles's smile grew, taking on an ethereal, almost distant quality, "he finds you...fascinating. He said, 'That being holds the dust of ages gone and the shadow of ages to come. He has a foot in two times, yet belongs to neither.'" He said you are not a man, not a god, but a memory waiting to be reborn."

Kairos's face hardened, his eyes narrowing. The words resonated with a truth he had kept hidden even from himself. "And what does he wish to learn from this 'memory'?"

Keles's gaze shifted from him to her own hand, which she raised slowly, as if weighing an immense truth. "He sees what you were created to become and what you have chosen to hide. He sees the power in you that you have bound with the chains of your own fear. He said you have been waiting, even if you did not know it, for an ending that would set you free. And he is here to bring it."

A profound silence descended upon them, broken only by the soft, rhythmic sound of Keles's breathing. Kairos felt a tremor run through him, a mixture of recognition and dread. The child's words were not a threat but a prophecy, a map of his own life laid bare before him.

"This is what I told you," Keles continued softly, her voice now a low, intimate hum, "our child is here to bring about an end, to prune away what has grown old and stagnant. And in you, he sees a seed that has been waiting for the soil to turn."

"As for your question, what I am, what kind of being I am," Keles said, her tone shifting so there was no mistaking that she now spoke, not the child within, "the mages did quite the number on you all. They gave you everything you needed to grow, to be powerful... yet at the same time, they denied you knowledge of the cosmos and its workings."

Her voice carried a faint amusement, "It may have been a deliberate act on their part or perhaps, in their long calculations, they never considered that your people would one day come across a being like us... the Origin Gods."

"Origin... gods?" Kairos whispered the word to himself, tasting its weight. It was alien, unfamiliar. Nowhere in the vast archives left behind by the mages did such a name appear.

He lifted his gaze back to her, sharp . "What makes you different from the other gods?"

For all his collected bearing, there was an undercurrent in his voice curiosity edged with suspicion. He knew gods only as the mages had recorded them: fragments of higher powers, beings bound to aspects of creation, limited yet formidable. But this one sitting across from him half veiled in shadow, half luminous with something far more was not in their records. Not even hinted at.

"We are born gods," Keles said, her voice carrying a calm certainty, the kind that brooked no argument. "We took our first breath in the world as gods. Power was not something earned or bestowed upon us. It was our very being. The gods you know either ascended into their positions or were shaped into existence through the belief of others. But we..." Her hand brushed lightly across the veil at her chest, "...we are absolved of such chains."

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Kairos's eyes narrowed, his mind already drawing connections. "Is that why you never stirred a wave of worship when you set foot in our world? For the gods we know, belief is nourishment, an anchor yet for you, Origin Gods, it seems unnecessary."

"Indeed," Keles answered without hesitation, the simplicity of her reply almost unnerving.

Kairos leaned back in his throne, exhaling a long, heavy sigh. "Once we discovered that beings who called themselves gods walked among us, we waited. We waited for the birth of your religion, for the gathering of faithful, for that familiar ritual that always accompanies divinity. We knew it was a crucial act, a tether that gave such beings strength... and a weakness we could exploit, should the time ever come."

His gaze sharpened on her, cold and deliberate. "But no such wave ever came. After a time, we realized what we faced was something... different."

"As for your second question, why do we target your world, your people," Keles began, but then she paused, letting the silence stretch before continuing.

"We did not choose your world. It was the demons who sought it. Our aims simply... aligned. By aiding them in claiming your world, we further our own purpose."

A sharp glint flashed in Kairos's eyes. He leaned forward, almost too eager. "Then tell me, what could the demons possibly offer you?"

Keles's smile was thin, almost pitying. She shook her head slowly, as though disappointed in his eagerness. "You cannot give us what we seek. Still, for your mind to be at peace, I will tell you this much: what we require is knowledge, the means to access other planes, other worlds scattered across the cosmos. Knowledge to advance, to expand, and most importantly to prevent what now unfolds in your world from consuming our own."

Kairos's brow furrowed. His silence betrayed confusion. The concepts she spoke of were foreign, untethered to anything in the archives of the mages or the wisdom of his empire.

Keles watched him patiently, like a teacher with an attentive but unlearned pupil. And so she explained. Slowly, carefully, she wove her words into images of possible planes, veils of existence layered one over the other, each with its own laws, its own birth and decay.

Kairos listened, enthralled despite himself. For once, the Emperor, the man who commanded nations and cowed gods like beings looked less like a ruler and more like a curious child before an elder

storyteller. His questions spilled forth, one after another, and Keles, with calm forbearance, answered them all.

Kairos rose from his throne, the defeat in his posture a sharp contrast to his usual regal bearing. The truth Keles spoke wasn't just about his mortality; it was about the very foundation of his world. He began to realize their world was a cage, a gilded prison left behind by the mages who had abandoned them. They had been given an illusion of hope and power, and they had willingly stayed, believing it was for the best.

His mind couldn't help but turn toward his brother, Kaelen. Maybe he should have listened to Kaelen and led his people out of the mages' shadow. But instead, he led them into it, and now, to its fall. The weight of that thought settled on his shoulders, crushing decades of pride and conviction.

With a long, weary sigh, the royal robe covering Kairos's body dispersed into a cascade of shimmering light. He stood before her, not as a king, but as a man who had faced the truth of his failure. As his figure was shown, he saw Keles's gaze hold no disgust or judgment, only a deep, weary understanding. She sighed, but it was a sigh of shared burden, a silent acknowledgment of the price of true sight. In that moment, he saw not a god who had come to destroy him, but a fellow being who understood the profound, bitter weight of destiny.

The robe fell away, revealing a body that was less flesh and more a living mess of time's paradoxes. His skin was not a single, consistent tone, but a mosaic of ages. One hand, gnarled and frail, was that of a centenarian, the veins like brittle, blue threads beneath translucent skin. The other was the plump, unblemished hand of a child, soft and smooth, with nails that looked like tiny pearls. His face, when the hood was finally gone, was a dizzying contradiction. One eye, a deep, knowing amber, was framed by the deep-set wrinkles of a man who had seen too much. The other was a bright, curious hazel, surrounded by the smooth, unlined skin of youth.

The rest of his body was a similar collage of temporal disarray. A shoulder was marked with the scarred, corded muscle of a warrior in his prime, while the other was a shrunken, bony knob, the result of some long-forgotten atrophy. Threads of grey hair were interwoven with strands of youthful, raven black, and his breath, when he spoke, was a mix of the musty decay of an ancient tomb and the clean, fresh scent of a spring morning. He was a living testament to his power, a man whose mortal shell was at war with the cosmic force he wielded, a grotesque and beautiful masterpiece of a man who had outlived himself countless times.

"This is what lies beneath the robe," Kairos said at last, his voice hollow with defeat.

Keles, who until then had lounged with the languid ease of one amused, shifted. The seat beneath her reshaped into a throne of her own, shadows and radiance entwining around its form. Her posture straightened, her air now solemn, carrying the weight of an oracle.

"My unborn child's divinity brushes against the aspect of time," she said, her voice resonant, each word deliberate. "That is why he stirs instead of slumbering, why he reaches outward rather than resting as any other unborn would. Something in you echoes his nature, and so his gaze lingers upon you."

Her hand moved gently to her stomach, fingers curling as if cradling the unseen presence within. "His father is life, and his mother is death. For long, I could not grasp what such a union would yield. Yet now, as his proxy, I begin to see what he is becoming."

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Her eyes lifted to Kairos, steady, unyielding. "The child sees endings. He looks into the streams of time and recognizes when the old is breaking so the new may take root. And so it is with you, Emperor. As your dynasty falters and your world begins to crumble, his stirrings grow restless. He shows me visions of you again and again, for in you he finds a key to that ending."

A single, elegant finger of Keles's hand lifted, pointing directly at Kairos. "He sees you not as a man, but as an omen. An omen of a coming end. You were the first sign he noticed on this world, the first tremor of a coming earthquake. He sees you as a clock whose time is running out. And every beat of your heart, every moment of your reign, echoes in him as a countdown to a new beginning."

"He doesn't hate you," Keles concluded, her tone softening just enough to make her words more chilling. "He merely sees you as the final page of a story he has already finished reading. And he is here to help turn that page."

Keles watched the confusion flicker across Kairos's face, a look she found almost charming in its innocence. She didn't wait for him to respond, a faint, almost pitying smile gracing her lips. "You are a sixth-tier being, one whose power matches that of gods, yet you are still mortal and can die. When your mortal shell dies, what do you think happens to your soul?"

Without a pause, she answered her own question. "In most cases, like in your world, souls upon death become nutrients for your world's strength. But that is the case for most souls. A being at your stage is not most souls."

Her voice dropped to a low, conspiratorial murmur. "Their souls will not easily become nutrients for a world, not unless they desire it or after years have passed, and their soul's strength and will are no longer as strong. You are lacking in this knowledge, which is why my words make no sense to you. But my child insists that I teach you, as learning is one of your favorite things to do."

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A heavy silence followed, but Keles didn't break eye contact. "You are an omen of an end, yet at the same time, an omen of a new beginning. But sadly, not for your world, but for the world I come from."

She leaned forward on her throne, the shadows around her deepening as if drawn to her words. "We have no sixth-tier powerhouses in my world. But your death represents their coming, and at the same time, it represents a lesson, both for me and for my child, of the dangers that will come with them."

Kairos sank deeper into his throne, his body folding into the silence that stretched between them. Keles did not press, her gaze patient, waiting. At last, his voice broke the stillness.

"What does this yet-to-come young god want from me?"

Keles's lips curved into a knowing smile. "Your story."

For a heartbeat Kairos was still then his eyes widened, and from his chest burst something long forgotten: laughter. It rolled through the chamber, harsh and weathered, carrying the sound of centuries. "The young god is a nosy one," he said, shaking his head.

"Indeed he is," Keles replied warmly. "But in his own words, it is the truest send-off, and an honor."

Kairos's laughter dwindled into a faint smile, though his eyes carried an old shadow. "My story is nothing special. And surely you already know enough. You speak of the mages as though their secrets were children's tales."

"I, like my brother Vellok, came of age and awakened as a mage," Kairos began, his voice low, heavy with memory. "My talent was time. Vellok's was light. He was fortunate there was a mage of light who took him in, though even that came with consequences of its own."

He paused, his gaze distant. "The mages who took an interest in me... they had no knowledge, no guidance, no records to lean upon. In their own words, those with a gift for time were said to stand at their pinnacle by the time their talent was already noticed, so little could be studied, so little could be learned. I became their opportunity."

His face darkened, his jaw tightening. "Every curiosity they had hoarded over centuries, even millennia, was loosed upon me."

Kairos's hand rose slowly, fingers pressing against his temple as his voice faltered. His body gave a faint shudder, and for the first time the emperor looked not eternal, but broken. "My time with the mages was so terrible... so horrifying... that my mind itself rebelled. I pushed it all away, locked the memories deep until they blurred, until there was nothing left but fragments of screams and light."

A hollow silence filled the space. Kairos drew in a ragged breath. "And when I came to, I found myself like this my body... twisted into its current state."

Kairos's hand trembled against his temple as the memories began to claw their way back to the surface.

"They began with simple things," he whispered. "Clocks. Sand. Sunlight measured against shadow. They made me bend them, stretch them, stop them. At first, it was almost... harmless. They cheered like children whenever I succeeded, wrote their notes like excited scholars. But then"

His eyes unfocused, staring at something only he could see. "They grew greedy. They wanted to see how far the thread could stretch before it snapped."

Keles remained silent, her posture still, her eyes sharpened with quiet gravity.

"They forced me to slow my own heartbeat until I hovered at the edge of death. They caged animals, people, prisoners from different world... and made me drag their lives into stillness, then restart them. Do you know what it is like, Lady Keles, to hear the sound of a man screaming for weeks within a single breath? To watch him wither into old age in the space of a moment, then crumble into dust before your eyes?"

His voice cracked, and for an instant, the Emperor of Ages sounded like a boy.

"They carved me open," he continued hoarsely, "not with blades, but with moments. A cut that never closed because the wound was held in its first instant. Skin that never healed because they froze the flesh in the moment of tearing. And when they tired of my flesh, they pulled me from myself—"

His body shuddered violently, the memory searing through him. "They stretched me across days. I was awake in a thousand different yesterdays and tomorrows at once, every moment of me screaming, colliding, overlapping. I would watch my own hand decay while the other was still young. They... they turned me into an echo of myself, a broken chorus stretched across the river of time."

Silence pressed in again. The weight of his confession hung thick, like ash.

Kairos lowered his hand from his face at last, but his eyes were hollow, as though the words had scraped him bare. "This is why I do not speak of it. This is why I hide. For even now, I am not whole. I am still scattered, caught between the moments they tore me into."

Keles let the silence stretch, her presence steady as Kairos gathered himself. When he finally spoke, his voice was low.

"Their hunger for understanding turned sour," he murmured, picking up the thread. His gaze sank to the floor, as if the weight of memory pressed his head down. "Greed twisted into jealousy, then into disdain. 'How could a mere goblin be worthy of wielding such power?' Those were their words."

His jaw tightened. "And I, what could I do? I was a child in their hands, a specimen. I accepted it. Worse, I played along."

For a moment, his expression softened, a strange contradiction surfacing. "And yet... for all the torment, they never forgot their one true goal. You should know it well, Lady Keles "the shaping of a world's First Child."

His lips curved into something between a grimace and a smile. "It is almost laughable to admit, after everything they did. But their grand design... gave me something I had never known. For the first time, I felt seen. For the first time, I felt loved. Their words, their attention, their praise it became the light I clung to in the dark. So much so, I willingly overlooked the pain.

Kairos exhaled, bitter and heavy. "I fell into their game. I let them mold me. I adopted their values, believed in their vision. They painted me as the cornerstone of their future, the proof of their brilliance... and I" His voice broke, and he pressed his lips together. "I wanted so desperately for it to be true."

Kairos lifted his weary eyes to Keles. "You said you were born with power. Now imagine a mortal small, insignificant suddenly finding themselves with such strength. Then imagine being told, by the ones you most admire, what greatness you could achieve with it. I was a fool. I lost myself in their words... in my own power."

Keles leaned forward, her throne now less a seat of comfort and more a dais of judgment. "But all good things come to an end," she said softly. "Especially in your case."

Kairos did not flinch. Instead, he gave a bitter smile. "So... you knew of that too."

"Yes," Keles replied. "At first it was baffling watching you roam so freely within the mages' halls, when they held enough power to end worlds with a gesture. It was only later we understood why."

"Indeed." Kairos's smile faded into something heavier, his gaze far away. "The favor I basked in their praise, their guidance ended as suddenly as it began. In its place came whispers, cold commands, and the same fear I had known as a child caged in their shadow. The old dread returned, and with it, a resolve. I began to plan. To plot escape. For me. For my people. I thought at last I was outwitting them."

He exhaled, shoulders sagging as if the confession carried centuries of weight. "But when the day came, when we fled their gilded prison... I learned the cruelest truth of all." His voice cracked. "It was never escape. It was still their plan. Every step, every act of rebellion, every spark of hope, I had been moving along their design."

"That was the last straw for me, Lady Keles," Kairos said after a long silence.

"I lost every shred of pride I had in that moment. To realize that I, who wielded time itself, who plotted the grand escape of my people, was nothing more than a pawn... dancing on the strings of my masters. Every move, every hope, every triumph already foreseen, already permitted."

He lifted a trembling hand and pointed at his eyes. "Since that day, there has always been a number... etched at the edge of my vision. A percentage. Cold, merciless. It tells me how close or how far we are from fulfilling the mages' goal. Even as I sit before you now, speaking these words, it is there. Always there. Mocking me."

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His voice cracked, the weight of centuries pressing on every syllable. "I have lived in fear for as long as I can remember. Never once... not even after I took the throne, not even after building a great world for my people, never once did I know true happiness. My fear silenced me. My fear made me turn away from my brother's pleas, made me abandon him when he urged me to resist, to fight back."

Kairos leaned back into his throne, a shadow of a smile breaking through his tired expression. "As the young god said..." His words trailed off into a whisper. "I am... indeed tired."

Keles regarded him in silence for a moment, at last she spoke.

"Kairos... after all these centuries of silence, of carrying fear as if it were a crown upon your head... tell me how do you feel now that you have spoken your truth?"

Her question hung in the air, not meant to wound but to cut away the last bindings he held around himself.

Kairos lowered his head, his hands trembling against the armrests of his throne. For the first time in so long, his words came not as an emperor, not as a mage, but simply as a man.

"I feel nothing but calmness, our talk made me realise how miniscule things are in the grand cosmos. Most importantly, it felt great to know that what is currently happening to me and my world isn't some grand plan but a natural occurrence a world has to face in its growth"

"We were just the unlucky one, I feel regret for my people, the ratmen. How far would we have come if we had opened up our mind to possibilities and looked further beyond the mages shadows"

"I feel great knowing our world won't fall to the hands of the mages" Kairos said with a smile.

He looked at Keles "May I ask what death feels like?"

Keles took a moment before she responded "Death is different in your world and is hard to put into words what it is like but if you don't mind I can tell you about how death is in my world"

"Please do" Kairos felt himself strangely sleepy, he knew what was coming but he didn't struggle instead he closed his eyes.

Keles began to speak, her words strangely calming "Death in your world is the beginning of a new life, all life upon their death makes their way to my realm where their new life begins"

"Depending on the strength of your soul, you have your will intact once in my realm even if your soul strength is weak it grows after a while in my realm where you begin to remember things"

"My last sight of my realm was beautiful, souls with their thoughts shape the outlook of my realm. Some creating a paradise, some creating a place of suffering"

"You become unbound from the mortal world, some souls after a while get to meet their loved ones where the ones again begin their loving life and new chapter"

Kairos, in his strange, half-conscious state, murmured softly, almost to himself, "It sounds... beautiful."

His voice trembled, hesitant, as if weighing the impossibility of the question. "Is there... a chance my people, regardless of me, can have their souls... headed for your world?"

Keles's eyes held a quiet, unyielding finality as she spoke, her tone cutting through the lingering haze. "No."

As her words settled over him, the last threads of Kairos's mortal consciousness ebbed away. He felt the fabric of his mind unravel, each thought and memory gently loosening like threads sliding from a loom. A profound, serene release washed over him a weight he had carried for lifetimes lifted at last.

His body slumped softly into the throne, finally giving in to the exhaustion that had long haunted him. Yet even as the mortal vessel went still, his soul did not falter. Unbound and luminous, it burned with a quiet intensity, a stark contrast to the dark void that surrounded him.

In this new state, Kairos beheld Keles with eyes unclouded by flesh or fear. His gaze now pierced beyond the Veil, into the vast unknown of her realm. The sight stirred something within him, a resonance that reached past the limits of mortality.

"Beautiful," he whispered, his voice carrying both awe and wonder, a soul's recognition of a freedom he had never known in life.

His gaze then shifted, tender and contemplative, towards her belly. "I think... I now understand why you spoke to me of the young god's path, and of divinity," he murmured.

Keles raised a brow, curiosity and warmth mingling in her expression, as Kairos continued, his voice gentle yet filled with quiet conviction. "In a world where people fight desperately to defy their fate, his existence... would look like a mockery to them. To many, he would be seen as an enemy."

Keles's lips curved into a loving, serene smile as she placed a hand over her belly. "I know," she said softly, "but he won't be alone. He will have him and his father right beside him, just as he has me in this very moment."

Kairos returned her gaze with a look that held both reverence and farewell. He exhaled slowly, a sigh that carried the weight of lifetimes, yet tinged with peace. "I suppose I should leave... with grace, then," he said, offering a final, gentle smile.

As he spoke, his soul began to dissolve, drifting upward in a soft, scintillant haze like stardust returning to the heavens. It shimmered, folding in on itself before expanding outward in a luminous cloud, enveloping the space in a warm, ethereal glow.

"Here... is my gift to the young god," his voice echoed faintly, carried on the currents of light. "May it protect him as he takes on his responsibility."

And with that, Kairos's essence was gone, dispersing into an enormous, radiant cloud of mana, a final blessing that lingered in the air like a promise, a guide, and a memory of the soul that once ruled time itself.

The dark void Keles had woven recoiled sharply, retreating into nothingness as she stood alone on the barren planet. Her gaze lifted to the immense cloud of mana hovering above, shimmering with Kairos's final essence.

Her body trembled slightly as the emperor's artifact, the weapon shaped like a clock hand emerged from the luminous cloud, floating deliberately toward her.

Keles reached out, letting her hands cradle it, and as she healed the weapon, she felt something extraordinary: a wave of joy from her unborn child. The restless stirrings that had plagued the fetus eased, gradually returning him to a calm, natural rhythm. Relief and warmth spread through her, a quiet confirmation that Kairos's gift had reached its mark.

She allowed the weapon to slip from her hands, letting it sink into the depths of her shadows, secured within her control. Then, with a slow, deliberate wave of her hand, the ground beneath her cracked and tore open. The earth swallowed the mortal vessel of the emperor whole, leaving no trace of his former life.

From her back, dark feathery wings unfurled, stretching wide in the void of space. With a single powerful flap, she lifted off the planet; with another, she propelled herself forward, heading back through the stars.

Her mind was at peace, her thoughts steady and calm, anchored by the knowledge of her child's safety.

It had worried her greatly, how restless he had been how fiercely active his tiny life seemed, and whether such unrest would herald complications at his birth. But after the emperor met his end, a profound calm settled over him. Keles felt it as surely as she felt the pulse of her own being: he was now in his rightful state, balanced and whole.

Meanwhile, back on the barren world she had just left, the enormous cloud of mana began to descend. It fell slowly at first, then with increasing intensity, like a gentle rain drenching the desolate planet. Each droplet glowed faintly, leaving streaks of shimmering light across the cracked, lifeless soil.

"An end for a beginning," she murmured to herself, watching the celestial cascade. Who could say what this strange fate would bring? Perhaps the planet would bloom in time, nourished by the remnants of a fallen emperor's power and the gift of a soul returned to the cosmos. Perhaps it would remain barren, a monument to what had passed.

Meanwhile with Zarvok, His battle began with both mages unfolding their domain. Before his transformation, Zarvok, in his demon form, was a blur of frenetic motion, an anchor of defiance against the storm of the mages' combined attack.

The Lightning Mage, a living network of brilliant energy arcs, pulsed with fury. His Law of Covalent Discharge created conduits of pure force, lashing out to sear Zarvok's flesh and tear at his essence. The Water Mage, a graceful figure of liquid moonlight, was in ceaseless motion, his Law of Perpetual Flow allowing him to erode Zarvok's defenses and flow around his attacks, patiently wearing him down.

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Zarvok's strategy was simple, born of pure survival: endure and observe. He took a staggering amount of punishment. Bolts of lightning seared his hide, and focused jets of water blasted him back, but each hit was a lesson. He allowed himself to be pushed to the brink, his body blistering from the heat of the lightning and his bones groaning under the constant pressure of the water.

His Imp cunning, honed by centuries of survival, kept him alive. He dodged, weaved, and absorbed, all the while studying the rhythm of their attacks, the conceptual architecture of their laws, and the subtle imperfections that defined their power.

Just as the mages believed they had him, a final, overwhelming push of lightning and water converging on his form, Zarvok's timer was up. With a final, desperate surge of will, he plunged into a tear in reality that he ripped open, a portal to his forge. His body, bruised and battered, became the raw material, and the knowledge he had just gleaned was the fire.

When he returned, the mages recoiled. He was no longer the Imp demon they had been fighting. He had taken on his full astral form, a towering figure forged of matte-black obsidian with glowing, golden veins of plasma-like energy running across his body like a network of supercharged ley lines.

The Lightning Mage struck first, a furious bolt of raw energy intended to atomize him. It hit Zarvok's chest and was instantly absorbed. Instead of being vaporized, Zarvok's golden veins pulsed with a brilliant glow as the energy was channeled harmlessly throughout his form. He was now, a conceptual void where the lightning mage's Law of Covalent Discharge could find no purchase. The mage's eyes widened in horror and rage as he realized he was fueling his enemy.

Next, the Water Mage attacked, a ceaseless torrent of liquid light meant to erode him into nothingness. It washed over Zarvok's form, but instead of wearing him down, the water simply solidified on contact, encasing his body in a sheath of unmoving, crystalline ice. The water mage's power was rendered inert, his greatest strength frozen in place.

With the mages' primary laws nullified, the battle shifted to Zarvok's favor. He now moved with devastating efficiency of a force of nature. He no longer needed to dodge their attacks; he simply absorbed them. Their magic was a battery, and he was the living battery charger.

The mages, forced to fight a style not favorable to them, went on the defensive. The Lightning Mage could not strike and discharge; he was forced to create unstable, contained explosions around Zarvok, trying to find a weak point in his obsidian form. The Water Mage, unable to flow and erode, was forced to fight with rigid, physical constructs of ice, trying to break Zarvok through sheer force.

But Zarvok was unrelenting. With a moment of slip from the water mage, he closed in as he plunged his hand into the Water Mage's body, the touch not of a physical object, but of a conceptual one. His form, now fully charged from their own attacks, instantly solidified the liquid mage's body into a statue of frozen sculpture.

The Water Mage's defeat was absolute. Trapped in a prison of their own making, the exquisite, frozen statue of liquid moonlight was a testament to Zarvok's conceptual might. When the Lightning Mage, panicked by his partner's fate, tried to interfere, Zarvok's will alone was enough. A subtle shift in his

focus, a conceptual flex, and the crystalline sculpture of the Water Mage's astral form ruptured, sending shards of inert moonlight cascading to the ground.

The Water Mage was not yet gone. Their essence, their very soul, was a being of perpetual flow. It began to swirl and eddy, attempting to reform and re-establish its existence. But a demon of Zarvok's caliber does not grant second chances. He opened his mouth, and with a simple, sucking gesture, he began to consume. The Water Mage's soul, with no physical body to anchor its form or resist the pull, could do nothing but surrender. It was drawn in like a river to the sea, swallowed whole by the Imp Demon King.

With one enemy entirely consumed, Zarvok turned his attention to the last remaining foe. The Lightning Mage, witnessing the horrifying end of his ally, launched his most powerful attack, a blinding discharge of all his remaining energy, which manifested as a circular ball of lighting energy that disintegrated everything struck by it, it turned mountains into dust.

Zarvok, however, rushed into the discharged energy. He absorbed it, pushing his new form beyond its conceptual limits. Cracks appeared on his obsidian-like body, lines of brilliant light radiating from the fractures. His veins pulsed with a blinding light as he redirected the entire discharge back at the mage. The Lightning Mage screamed as his own power, now a weapon of his enemy, consumed him in a final, brilliant explosion, leaving behind nothing but the faint scent of ozone.

With a triumphant grin, Zarvok made a gesture as the soul of the lightning mage was pulled to his hand, crackling with residual power. His massive, shadowy form wavered, shrinking back into his impish, exhausted self. His shoulders heaved, a mix of pure joy and profound fatigue radiating from his small frame. The immense power of his domain receding.

The planet that had been the stage for his latest victory was now nothing but a field of floating debris, a testament to the raw magical energy unleashed. He didn't spare it a glance. It was a means to an end, and that end was all that mattered. "I won," he rasped, his voice raw but filled with elation. He threw his arms wide, a mad, guttural laugh echoing into the emptiness. He was closer to his goal now than he had ever been, the mage's soul a key to the next lock.

His only hope now was that the other two gods held up their end of the bargain and secured their own victories. Their success was his success; their wins would bring him closer to his ultimate ascension. With that thought, he let himself drift toward a large chunk of what was once the planet's core. He pricked his finger, a single drop of his black blood forming on the tip, and began to inscribe a reverse summoning spell, a quick and dirty way to pull himself back to his abyssal layer.

The complex lines of the spell circle quickly etched themselves onto the rock. At its center, a swirling vortex of dark energy appeared, expanding rapidly. Zarvok moved toward it, his small body a silhouette against the growing maelstrom, and allowed it to swallow him whole. The moment he was gone, the magical circle flared brightly before disintegrating into dust, leaving no trace of the powerful ritual or the impish demon who had just claimed victory.

Outside the swirling vortex of the abyss portal, Kaelen stood his ground, a lone sentinel entrusted with a critical task. He couldn't see what was happening on the other side, nor did he care to. His orders were to hold this position, to be the final barrier against whatever spilled forth from the abyssal depths. The wait was agonizing, the silence between the roars of the abyss stretching his nerves taut.

Then, a flicker of movement within the portal caught his eye. The Imperial army, the same soldiers he was meant to be supporting, began to pour out. But they weren't marching in formation; they were fleeing in terror, their faces a mask of fear, their weapons abandoned.

Behind them, the demon army surged forth, a tidal wave of claws and fangs. They fell upon the fleeing Imperial soldiers, a brutal slaughter in the open field. Kaelen's training and discipline were all that held him together as he watched the carnage.

Rattan took a closer look at the demon and was welcomed with a new sight, the sight of the demon army was something else entirely. An irrational, gut-wrenching fear seized him. It wasn't the demons he saw, but his own reflection in their malevolent eyes, his greatest enemy, the one person who could truly hold him accountable for every brutal act he had ever justified. The demons' roars were the screams of his victims, their monstrous forms the physical manifestation of his own monstrous deeds.

Phantom made no move to help, his form as still as a statue as Rattan and his monstrous mount began to retreat in sheer terror. Rattan took another stumbling step back before turning to flee, his screams for Phantom to save him lost to the roars of the demon horde. But no help came.

As Rattan's personal nightmare closed in, its clawed hand raised to strike, everything suddenly cleared. The illusion shattered. Rattan found himself on the ground, his arms raised in a futile attempt to defend himself. Tears streamed down his face, and his eyes were wide with shock as he finally saw the true demon before him, not the distorted reflection of his past deeds.