

Guardian gods 741

Chapter 741

But she did not act.

Xerosis understood the danger all too well.

Once she responded, once she allowed herself to be shaped by their voices, there would be no end. Every answered prayer would invite a thousand more. Every miracle would tighten the chain binding her identity to mortal expectation.

She would become what she had been avoiding all this time. A god molded by the hopes, fears, and worship of others.

A reflection instead of a self.

And so she endured the strain in silence, choosing restraint over ease, preserving her sense of self, even as the world clamored for her to become something else entirely.

Even as Xerosis labored to refine the excess of tainted faith flooding her realm, her thoughts repeatedly returned to Tide.

She was not alone in this burden, she had the Tyrannical Juggernaut at her side, an Arch-Curse/ her protector who in a way bears her divinity with her, was capable of enduring and breaking down corruption that would have overwhelmed lesser beings. Together, they could manage the strain.

Tide had no such aid.

That realization unsettled her.

Faith energy did not vanish when ignored. If left unattended, it seeped into a realm regardless, staining its foundations, reshaping its god. The only way to keep it at bay was effort or pain great enough to drown it out.

So how was he holding up?

For Tide to be allowing such excessive, tainted faith to permeate his realm without response... Siren's actions must have wounded him far more deeply than Xerosis had initially believed.

As his cousin, as family, she felt a responsibility she could not dismiss.

She would inform the others. Quietly. Without alarm. And they would watch over him from a distance, not to interfere, but to ensure he did not bear the weight alone until it crushed him.

Divinity did not make one invulnerable. He was a perfect example of that.

Meanwhile, among the humans, the words spoken by the godlings during the court began to take root.

Along with it was the chant "For Humanity" which did not fade after the verdict, it spread. It appeared in rallies, in quiet gatherings, whispered between workers and spoken aloud in halls of governance. But it was not the words alone that mattered.

It was the idea behind them.

Humans began to understand something fundamental: their safety was not something to be passively awaited from above. It was not solely the responsibility of gods, godlings, or their leaders.

It was theirs.

Leadership was no longer viewed as an untouchable authority, but as a role entrusted by the people and one that could be questioned, corrected, or replaced. If rulers made decisions that endangered humanity, then it was humanity's duty to hold them accountable.

This shift did not ignite rebellion.

It sparked awareness.

Alongside this awakening came guidance hidden in the godlings words, on how humans might safely approach the supernatural forces of their world. Not through blind worship or hopes, but through understanding: learning the nature of gods, the limits of divinity, and the rules that governed power itself.

Sadly, humans came to a painful realization.

They had missed their chance.

There had been a time, long before the court when the godlings themselves had walked their lands. Not as rulers or enforcers, but as teachers. They had journeyed from settlement to settlement, speaking of the gods, of doctrine, of balance, and of how mortals might exist alongside with the emerging divinities.

At the time, many but few had truly listened.

People nodded along, repeated the words they were given, and feigned understanding while the godlings were present. Once they left, once their eyes turned elsewhere, life resumed as it always had. Crops needed tending. Coins needed earning. Doctrine faded into background noise.

To most, the teachings had never truly mattered.

All they remembered was the promise, that the ascended gods, unlike the Origin Gods, would bless their believers. That worship alone was enough. That prayer would bring favor.

They prayed.

And when no answer came, they moved on.

That era passed quietly, the moment lost without anyone realizing its weight.

Now, after the words spoken by the godlings in court, the truth struck with brutal clarity: power had always been within reach. Not gifted freely, not seized through faith alone—but attainable through understanding, through effort, through a willingness to truly learn what had been offered.

It had been there, at their fingertips.

They simply had not taken it.

This realization stirred something new, regret, yes, but also resolve.

With this awakening, many began to look toward the old man from the court, the one who had demanded justice not for wealth or vengeance, but for the chance to reclaim his hope. To become a scribe once more. To document the gods, their doctrines, and their relationship with mortals as it truly was, not as rumor or hollow prayer had painted it.

In him, people saw a second chance.

If knowledge had been neglected once, it would not be ignored again. This time, they would listen. This time, they would record, study, and preserve what was learned.

The age of blind faith was fading.

And in its place, humanity began reaching for understanding.

They understood that what the old man would write was more than a record.

It was hope.

Not only the common folk sensed it, the nobles did as well, as did rulers and councils across kingdoms who felt unease settle into their halls. The godlings words at court had not merely inspired the masses; they had threatened the very structure of human rule.

Nobles knew the truth of their own power. They were not chosen by divinity nor elevated by fate. They were what they were because of the resources they commanded, the armies they funded, and the systems they controlled. Authority flowed downward from them, not outward from the people.

The idea of a society where this order was reversed was unthinkable.

A world in which ordinary people wielded power, real power was not a dream to many of them. It was a nightmare.

And it was not only the nobles who felt disturbed. Many among the common folk felt it too, though they struggled to articulate why. The godlings words sounded righteous, even liberating, but liberation carried danger. A society where everyone wielded power did not feel safe, it felt volatile.

Especially when that power was foreign to the human race.

Godlings were born unique. Power was intrinsic to them, shaped from birth, tempered by time, and understood as part of their existence. Their societies were built on the assumption of everyone wielding power knew its cost.

Humans were different.

Human civilization had been built on limitation. On cooperation born from weakness. On restraint enforced by necessity. To suddenly introduce widespread power without the culture, discipline, or understanding to wield it was not progress, it was chaos.

To many, it felt like pushing humanity toward failure.

The godlings ideals were sound in theory.

In practice, they risked tearing apart everything humans had built to survive.

The fourteen accused godlings stood as the perfect example.

They were the proof the nobles needed, living evidence of what happened when civilians wielded power without restraint, when emotion was given the means to enact itself unchecked. Power had made them feel untouchable, elevated above consequence, emboldened enough to ignore direct orders from their leaders.

And people had paid the price for it.

This was precisely what the nobles feared would happen if power were spread among humanity without structure or control. The godlings were not monsters by birth, they were civilians once.

So when hope among the masses began to falter, when people realized they had missed their opportunity to truly learn, to truly prepare, the nobles felt relief.

They did not celebrate openly, but inwardly, they were grateful.

Petitions soon followed.

From every continent came formal requests, pleas thinly veiled as diplomatic concern. Each asked the same thing in different words: something must be done before it is too late. Before humanity reached for power it could not understand. Before society fractured under forces it was never meant to hold.

The Western nobles received these petitions with calm assurance.

They had already begun.

Even without outside pressure, plans were already in motion across the Western Continent, carefully layered, deliberate, and vast in scope. Plans concerning all humans under their influence.

Nothing could be allowed to go wrong.

Not now.

The court had been only one part of something much larger and the gains it had produced were undeniable. Influence. Insight. Leverage. It had reshaped the world's attention in their favor.

Naturally, their vigilance increased.

Especially toward the old man.

He was watched closely now, not as an enemy, not yet, but as a variable. Someone whose written words could shift minds if left unchecked. For the moment, nothing would be done to him. Too many eyes were on him. Any direct action would invite suspicion, outrage, perhaps even divine scrutiny.

But that did not mean he would be allowed to act freely.

Every movement, every conversation, every written word would be observed.

The old man believed he was reclaiming hope. The nobles believed they were preserving stability.

Chapter 742:

Meanwhile, on the eastern continent, as news from the court continued to ripple outward like slow-moving thunder, unseen currents were already shifting on this side of the world.

Along a well-worn trade road, six ornate carriages rolled forward in solemn unison. Each carriage bore two passengers seated within, twelve individuals in total. Their posture was upright, their breathing steady, yet their eyes remained firmly shut, as though locked in a deep slumber. Behind them stretched a long caravan of supply wagons, escorts, and retainers, all flying the banner of a minor but well-known nation: the Weps Kingdom.

Weps was a trading kingdom by nature, its influence built not on armies but on contracts, routes, and carefully maintained alliances. Among those alliances, its relationship with the Osita Kingdom stood foremost. Any seasoned merchant or border guard could tell from the caravan's route alone that this procession was bound for Osita's capital, likely bearing envoys, gifts, or negotiated promises meant to strengthen diplomatic ties.

To any observer, the twelve silent passengers appeared unmistakably human, nobles, perhaps, or high-ranking officials resting their eyes during a long journey. Their clothes were refined, their features calm, unmarred by fear or strain. Nothing about them suggested danger.

Nothing, except the truth.

They were Murmur's pawns.

The very same pawns who had once acted as envoys to the Omadi Kingdom, a nation infamous for its long-standing rivalry with Osita. Where these pawns traveled, Murmur's will followed, unseen and unquestioned.

The caravan trailing behind believed they knew exactly who they escorted. These were the same lords and nobles who had departed with them days ago, exchanging pleasantries, issuing orders, and discussing trade figures by lantern light. Every guard, every servant, every merchant would swear their lives on that truth without hesitation.

Yet none of them realized what they were truly transporting.

Or rather, what these new lords carried with them along this journey..

A presence, a seed of influence, patiently waiting to be planted at the heart of Osita. Something capable of reshaping power, and forcing the stable hands of the eastern continent.

Within the confines of their borrowed bodies, Mei and the others communicated in silence, their thoughts weaving together in a closed mental channel. No lips moved, no expressions shifted, yet their concern was unmistakable. The conversation circled relentlessly around a single question, what were their true chances of remaining undiscovered once they crossed into Osita territory?

This time of year was the worst possible moment.

Osita's borders were never lax, but during this season security reached its peak. Patrols doubled, checkpoints multiplied, and even court mages individuals who would normally command respect and authority were reduced to little more than vigilant sentries. Their sole purpose was to scrutinize everything that passed through the kingdom's veins, ensuring that nothing harmful, foreign, or anomalous slipped through unnoticed.

Not even magic was trusted.

One of the men among them, bearing a faint scar across his face, though his current appearance told a very different story sent his thoughts firmly into the shared space.

"We must trust our lord and follow his orders as they were given. He has prepared us for this."

His mental voice carried an unshakable certainty, the kind born from long service rather than blind faith.

"Each of us was given artifacts specifically designed to keep our identities hidden," he continued. "They will hold."

Almost immediately, another presence pushed back against his confidence. A woman's thoughts cut in, sharp, no comfort in her tone, only realism.

"Those artifacts are not limitless," she replied. "They have a fixed number of uses. Every time a detection measure is employed against us, the artifact activates to shield our true nature."

A pause followed, heavy with unspoken implication.

"And depending on the strength of the measure used," she added, "a crack forms."

They all understood what that meant.

Cracks accumulated. And cracks, eventually, became fractures.

"We all know how important this season is to Osita and its royal family," she pressed on. "If a detection method, no matter how extreme can guarantee their safety, they will not hesitate to use it. Lesser measures will not be spared simply for convenience."

Silence returned to the mental channel.

Beyond the carriages, wheels continued to turn and banners fluttered peacefully in the wind. To the guards and attendants, nothing was amiss. The road was calm. The journey routine.

Another presence joined the mental channel, calm and unnervingly composed.

"We were never meant to survive this plan. Whether we are discovered or not means very little, as long as we..."

His thoughts cut off abruptly.

All twelve of them opened their eyes at once, their gazes snapping toward the first carriage.

Within it, a small box wrapped tightly in layered chains began to tremble. The chains rattled softly at first, then more violently, as though something inside had drawn a single, restless breath. The disturbance lasted only a moment before the box fell still once more.

A collective release followed. Relief washed through the mental channel.

Their eyes closed again, and the mental connection reformed.

"Before I was rudely interrupted," the calm voice resumed, untouched by fear, "our only purpose is to ensure that reaches its destination before we are found."

Mei's hand curled into a tight fist.

Hearing his words, feeling their cold certainty, something inside her fractured. The fear she had buried too deeply surged upward, overwhelming the discipline Murmur had carved into her. Her thoughts spilled uncontrollably into the shared connection.

What echoed through the link was not a sentence, but a raw, wordless roar born from the depths of her heart.

I don't want to die.

The reaction was immediate.

One by one, the others turned toward her. Though their faces remained composed, their minds were anything but. Cold intent pressed down on Mei from every direction, sharp and merciless. She could feel it, clean, efficient calculations forming in an instant.

She realized her mistake too late.

In their eyes, she was no longer a comrade this instant. She was a flaw.

A liability to be removed.

The pressure grew heavier, the unspoken decision nearing completion, when the calm voice spoke again.

"Let her be."

The killing intent wavered.

"We need her if we are to achieve our goal."

Reluctantly, the others withdrew their focus, though the judgment remained. Mei could still feel it lingering at the edges of the mental linkcold, watchful, waiting for any sign of weakness.

The mental meeting collapsed into silence.

Mei's outburst had left a residue, unease clinging to every shared thought. None of them spoke again. None of them dared to. And then, as if the world itself had noticed the fracture among them, a sudden shiver ran through their borrowed bodies.

Something brushed against them.

It was brief. Precise. Cold.

A scan.

The mental connection severed instantly.

All twelve opened their eyes at once, alert and rigid. Several leaned forward, peering out from their respective carriages just as a voice called out from the caravan trailing behind them.

"My lords," the escort announced respectfully, "we are now approaching one of the border gates of the vast territory of the Osita Kingdom."

The announcement were unnecessary.

These disguised pawns knew exactly where they were.

Every hair on their bodies stood on end. The air itself felt different, denser, sharper, as though the land was watching them. They had underestimated Osita's vigilance. This was not a single perimeter to breach, but a living net woven from spellwork, ritual, and disciplined paranoia.

Another scan passed over them.

Then another.

Each one came at irregular intervals, sometimes seconds apart, sometimes nearly overlapping. There was no rhythm to predict, no pattern to exploit. And with every pass, a subtle irritation crept deeper into their minds. Not pain. Not damage.

Provocation.

Their powers bristled in response, instinctively resisting the intrusion. They suppressed it, forced it down but the irritation lingered, persistent and invasive, like an itch beneath the skin that could not be scratched.

If this continued, something would slip.

A subtle nudge pressed into Mei's mind not words, but intent.

"Now".

Her breath caught.

For a moment, she hesitated. Then her hand slipped into the folds of her robe and withdrew a small, living lizard. Its scales shimmered in unnaturally bright hues, pulsing faintly with alchemical life. The creature twitched, sensing danger.

Mei tightened her grip.

With a sharp squeeze, she crushed its head.

The lizard burst apart, its body dissolving into a spray of warm, bloody mist that splattered across her palm and the air before her. Mei did not flinch. Her lips began to move rapidly, voice spilling forth in a low, hurried chant, ancient syllables layered with binding clauses and concealment seals.

The spell took shape.

As the final incantation left her mouth, the blood-red mist shimmered, its color shifting and thinning until it transformed into a vibrant, dust-like cloud, iridescent and faintly luminous.

Mei raised her hand and swept it outward.

The colorful mist drifted down, settling gently over the small box wrapped in chains within the first carriage. It seeped into every crevice, clung to every link, and then vanished entirely, as though it had never existed.

At that same moment, another scan washed over them.

This time, it lingered, paused then passed on.

Chapter 743:

The mist settled over the chained box and then it was gone.

Not hidden, not cloaked.

Gone.

It was as though reality itself had been edited, the object's existence erased. Even Mei, reaching out with her own consciousness, could no longer sense it. Nor could the others. The space it had occupied felt empty.

A collective breath escaped them, Mei had succeeded. But success never went unnoticed.

At the border wall, a mage who had been seated in quiet meditation suddenly opened her eyes.

Once Opened they were no longer human.

Her pupils stretched and sharpened, irises reshaping into the keen gaze of an eagle. The world before her compressed, distance folding in upon itself as her vision locked onto the approaching carriages and the long caravan behind them.

Without a word, her body lifted from the stone wall, mana gathering beneath her feet before releasing her into the sky. She felt it, a ripple, faint but undeniable.

A fluctuation in mana.

On any other day, such a disturbance would have been dismissed as harmless residue from enchanted goods or protective charms. But this was different. The signature was crude, violent in its efficiency.

A spell had been cast.

And worse, life had been offered to fuel it.

That alone was enough to warrant investigation.

Curiosity had nothing to do with it. Duty did.

Her gaze sharpened as she descended, hovering above the road, the carriages growing larger beneath her.

Within the third carriage, a voice echoed calmly through the shared mind.

"Incoming".

Moments later, her presence pressed down on them like a weight. The female mage hovered in the air above the procession, robes fluttering in the wind, her transformed eyes scanning every inch of the convoy with merciless precision.

Inside the carriages, the disguised pawns did not react.

They played their roles flawlessly nobles at ease, unaware of danger, unbothered by authority. No spikes of fear. No flinching. No resistance.

Outside, however, their companions were not afforded such discipline.

Startled by the sudden appearance of the mage, one of the escorts stepped forward quickly, bowing low in practiced deference.

"Esteemed mage," he called out, voice respectful yet tense, "may we know the reason for your sudden descent?"

Above him, the mage did not answer immediately.

Her eagle eyes continued to search, through flesh, through mana, through lies, unaware that the most dangerous thing she sought had already ceased to exist.

Finding nothing of immediate note, the female mage shifted her attention to the man who had spoken.

She descended slowly from the sky. As she drew closer, the first thing that caught everyone's attention was her bare feet, unprotected soles about to touch the dirt road without concern, but stopped a bit above the ground, unmarked by dust or stone.

Her skin was a smooth, unblemished brown, warm in tone and faintly luminous under the sunlight. Combined with her sharp features and quiet authority, her beauty struck the man harder than he expected. He swallowed instinctively, his mouth suddenly dry, his carefully rehearsed words momentarily slipping away.

When the mage finally spoke, her voice carried clearly across the road, practiced, and unmistakably official.

"Our sensors detected the signature of a spell being cast."

Her gaze did not rest on the man.

It moved past him, locking onto the carriage Mei occupied.

The implication was immediate.

The man stiffened, understanding at once. One of the nobles he escorted must have used magic, carelessly or out of convenience and drawn the mage's attention. He felt no alarm at the accusation itself. This level of scrutiny was expected. During this season, Osita tolerated no irregularities, especially from foreign convoys.

He bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment.

"Understood," he replied.

Turning, he approached Mei's carriage. Following proper etiquette, he rapped his knuckles against the polished wood, then stepped back.

The window slid open.

Mei leaned forward just enough for her face to catch the light.

The man froze.

He knew that face. He recognized her, yet something about her seemed different. No... enhanced. Her features appeared sharper, her presence more composed, her beauty carrying a subtle weight that unsettled him. He searched his memory, confused, unable to recall the noblewoman ever looking quite like this.

"My lady," he said slowly, "the mage claims a spell was cast, and it may have originated from your carriage."

Mei smiled.

She nodded once, an unspoken dismissal. The meaning was clear: he need not involve himself further. She would address the mage personally.

The female mage's gaze lingered on Mei for only a heartbeat before her mind moved, quick and precise.

Third tier? she assessed silently.

The conclusion didn't surprise her much. A mage of that level traveling as a noble was not uncommon. If anything, it made the situation easier to explain.

She floated closer to Mei's carriage, her bare feet never touching the ground.

Before she could speak, Mei's voice rang out, smooth and lightly amused.

"It never ceases to amaze me," Mei said, eyes shining with practiced admiration, "the vigilance of the Osita Kingdom during this season."

The mage did not respond immediately. Her attention was momentarily drawn to Mei herself, to the careful symmetry of her features, the unnatural polish of her appearance. There was something too refined about it, like a painting freshly touched by a master's hand.

Mei noticed.

She tilted her head slightly, letting her hair spill and sway, the motion deliberate to draw attention.

"I recently came across a spell said to enhance one's appearance," Mei continued casually. "Seeing as we are nearing our destination, I thought it appropriate to use it on myself."

Her lips curved faintly.

"What do you think of the spell?"

The mage drifted closer still, now near enough to peer into the carriage. Inside sat a man, another supposed noble who, upon noticing her scrutiny, lifted his hand and offered a friendly, unassuming smile.

Nothing alarming.

Her attention returned to Mei.

"If the lady does not mind," the mage said at last, her tone even but curious, "I would like you to cast the spell once more."

Her eagle eyes gleamed with interest.

"Such a unique spell would drive the noble ladies quite mad."

The request hung in the air, polite on the surface, but unmistakably a test.

And Mei knew it.

Mei laughed softly, lifting a hand to cover her mouth in a gesture of playful modesty.

"Of course," she said lightly. "But the spell is not for everyone. I doubt most women are as daring as the two of us."

As she spoke, Mei reached into her sleeve and withdrew a living spider.

It was small and beautiful, its body glossy and dark, legs twitching faintly as it rested in her palm.

The female mage's eyes narrowed slightly as she studied the creature. She did not recognize it, not as a familiar, nor as any commonly used catalyst. That alone made the spell unusual and unknown.

Mei hesitated. The pause was brief, but it was enough "What's wrong?" the mage asked, her tone neutral.

Mei lifted her gaze, meeting the mage's eyes without flinching.

"I have already cast the spell on myself," she said calmly. "There is no need to repeat it. But if you do not mind... I could cast it on you instead. That way, you may experience it fully."

The mage searched Mei's face for deception and found none, only confidence.

After a moment, she nodded, just as she had earlier.

Mei's fingers tightened around the spider.

There was a soft, wet sound as it burst apart, dissolving instantly into a cloud of crimson mist that bloomed between them. Mei began to chant, her voice steady, precise, every syllable measured.

The mage watched her lips closely.

Her own mouth began to move, mirroring the words in perfect sync. She was learning the spell in real time, dissecting its structure, memorizing its flow. To any untrained observer, it would appear as though both women were casting together, two mages weaving a single incantation.

The spell reached its conclusion.

The bloody mist thickened, condensing into a dark, viscous paste that settled into Mei's palm. She glanced down at it, then back at the mage, waiting.

The mage grimaced, nose wrinkling in clear distaste.

Still, she extended her hand.

Taking the paste, she smeared it across her face without hesitation, coating her skin in the crimson substance. The sensation was cold at first, then warm, almost alive. Within seconds, the paste began to sink into her skin, seeping away until not a single trace remained.

Silence followed.

Then "Wow," Mei breathed, eyes widening as she took in the result.

The mage lifted her hand, and a shimmering sheet of water rose before her, forming a perfect mirror suspended in the air. She leaned closer, studying her reflection with sharp, practiced eyes.

Then she froze.

For a long moment, she said nothing. Her expression shifted from curiosity to disbelief, fingers lifting to trace the contours of her own face as though to confirm it was real. The spell had not merely enhanced, it had refined, polishing her features with an elegance that felt almost unreal.

Slowly, she turned back to Mei.

"I apologize for delaying your journey," the mage said, her voice measured but unmistakably altered by awe. "You may continue."

Chapter 744:

With a casual flick of her wrist, the water mirror collapsed into drifting droplets before vanishing entirely. The mage rose into the air once more, her form lifting effortlessly skyward. In the blink of an eye, she was gone.

Or so it seemed.

Mei knew better.

All of them did.

The mage's presence never fully disappeared, it merely thinned, retreating high into the clouds. From above, concealed by altitude and mist, she continued to shadow the caravan, watching, waiting.

The carriages rolled forward again, wheels creaking softly against the road as they approached the border wall. To maintain appearances, conversation resumed among the caravan's escorts, idle chatter about trade routes, weather, and noble gossip. Meaningless babble, carefully chosen to fit their supposed status.

Not one of them dared to reestablish the mental link.

An hour passed like a held breath.

Then, at last, they reached the border.

High above, the watching presence finally lifted away. The pressure faded, the invisible gaze loosening its grip. When the mage's mana signature vanished entirely, Mei and the others allowed themselves a single, shallow sigh of relief.

They had passed the first gate.

But none of them believed the danger was truly over.

The inspection did not end at the gate.

Knights in polished armor moved with disciplined precision, forming lines as soldiers stepped forward to conduct a thorough control of the convoy. Documents were checked and rechecked, seals examined under enchanted lenses, and wagons searched with methodical care. Every movement was deliberate, practiced, and devoid of haste.

One by one, the carriages were cleared.

For a moment, it seemed they had truly passed.

Then the air shifted.

Mei felt it first, a tightening behind her eyes, a pressure that made her breath catch. The others sensed it as well. A presence descended, heavier and far less courteous than before.

The female mage appeared again.

This time, she did not bother with pleasantries.

She hovered above the gate, her bare feet inches from the stone, her eyes no longer shaped like an eagle's but something deeper, older. Runes ignited around her pupils as she raised both hands.

"This will be brief," she said.

Mana surged as a huge magic circle appeared before her.

The spell she unleashed was invasive, forceful, less a scan and more a dissection. It tore through layers of false identity, pressed against the edges of their souls, and demanded truth without consent.

Inside the carriages, the artifacts reacted instantly.

Hidden sigils flared beneath clothing and skin, burning cold as they erected barriers around each pawn's true nature. The pressure intensified as the spell pushed harder, probing, prying, doubting.

Then, a sound only they could hear.

"Crack" unmistakable fine fractures spiderwebbed across the unseen surfaces of their artifacts, hairline breaks forming as the spell scraped past their limits. Mei clenched her teeth, forcing herself to remain still, her expression perfectly composed even as panic clawed at her chest.

The mage's brow furrowed, for a heartbeat, her spell lingered.

Then she released it. The runes in her eyes dimmed, and the weight lifted all at once.

"...Clear," she said at last.

The knights stepped aside.

The gates opened.

The convoy rolled forward, wheels crossing the threshold into Osita territory at last.

Only when the walls were behind them did Mei dare to exhale.

Within the safety of their borrowed silence, they all felt it, the damage done, the cost paid. The artifacts still held.

But they were no longer whole and every crack brought them one step closer to being seen.

They continued onward, their course now firmly set toward the capital of the Osita Kingdom.

More precisely, their destination lay just beyond it, a vast, domesticated forest under the direct ownership of the royal family. During this season, the forest was traditionally opened to the public, for a hunting party. Festivals were held beneath its ancient canopies, pilgrims and nobles alike allowed to wander its paths. Yet beneath its beauty lay layers of warding and authority that made it one of the most closely watched regions in the kingdom.

As they traveled, passing through town after town, excuses were carefully woven. One by one, members of the caravan were given reasons to separate, urgent trade matters, delayed shipments, familial obligations, alternate routes. The caravan thinned naturally, leaving no cause for suspicion as Mei and the others continued alone toward their destination.

Shaking off people was easy.

What awaited them was not.

The closer they drew to the capital, the quieter they became. Conversation died away, replaced by heavy, shared disbelief. None of them dared speak, even aloud as the pressure mounted.

The scans from before changed.

At first, they had been intermittent and distant. Now they were constant, layered, and aware. These were not simple detection scans they felt from crossing the border. These ones were more wide-spread, overlapping fields of perception, deep, intuitive magic that did not merely search for anomalies, but felt for them.

Days passed under that invisible scrutiny.

Their bodies grew weary, their minds strained. Sleep brought little relief. Even when the scans receded, the sensation lingered, like a phantom touch that refused to fade.

The irritation they had felt before intensified.

It was no longer a mild discomfort, but a relentless itch beneath their borrowed skin, an instinctual warning screaming at them to flee. With every step closer to the capital, the truth became clearer.

They had entered the lion's den.

Had it not been for their mission and servitude to Murmur, had it not been for the crushing vigilance that blanketed the land, Mei and the others would have shed their disguises without hesitation and run as far from the capital as their legs could carry them.

Each wave of scanning magic felt like countless eyes opening at once, gazes converging, pressing down upon them from every direction.

They knew and truly understood that they were still safe.

They had not been discovered. No alarm had been raised. No pursuit followed their steps. And yet, the sensation refused to loosen its grip, leaving them feeling as though they were being singled out, toyed with by something.

The reality was there weren't, which was a truth they were forced to swallow, again and again: they were not special in this regard. The scans were not meant for them alone.

They were for everything.

The land itself was being watched.

This realization came from observation. As they moved through settlements and shared roads with travelers, merchants, and guards, they began to notice the reactions of those around them. Individuals with notable strength or cultivated mana would stiffen briefly when a scan passed, eyes widening in momentary surprise before relaxing once more.

Then they would carry on.

No irritation. No mounting pressure. No instinctive urge to flee.

For many, the sensation seemed almost forgotten, like a familiar presence that had faded into the background of daily life. A reminder of protection rather than intrusion.

That difference was damning.

Where others merely noticed the scans, Mei and the others suffered under them. It was like their nature bristled against the pervasive scrutiny, reacting violently to magic designed to embrace, protect, and preserve.

The incompatibility was clear, to people like them, it felt like being slowly skinned alive under a thousand patient eyes.

Unknown to them, what they were experiencing was not by chance or planned.

It was a decision.

High within the inner circles of the Osita Kingdom, the Head of Securities had authorized it, a measure born from long years of failure, compromise, and bitter lessons. This season, more than any other, defined Osita's bond with its people. It was a time of openness, celebration, and royal presence. And with that openness came vulnerability.

For decades, the kingdom had sought ways to make this period safer.

They had fortified borders, multiplied wards, layered detection spells, and stationed elite mages at every conceivable point of entry. Yet no matter how dense the net became, there were always gaps.

A sufficiently advanced spell could slip through.

A powerful enough artifact could render its bearer invisible to conventional scrutiny.

Cases like Mei and her group were expected. The security council understood a hard truth: there were threats they could not directly detect, no matter how refined their methods became.

So they changed their approach.

It took years. Countless failed attempts. And more than a few disastrous trials before they finally succeeded. When they did, the result was classified immediately, sealed as one of the kingdom's most closely guarded secrets.

The wide-scale scan itself was not the achievement.

That part was easy.

Osita's mages and warlocks had long been capable of maintaining a massive, continuous sensory field across their territory. What had taken time, what had demanded innovation was redefining the purpose of those scans.

And the sensation Mei and her companions were experiencing was a direct result of this decision.

In simple terms, the scans were designed to emit waves that latched onto hidden intentions.

For those who carried harmful or hostile intent toward the Osita Kingdom, the effect was unmistakable. The discomfort Mei and her team felt was a clear example of this. For those without such intentions, the scans were nearly nonexistent, easily overlooked, fading into the background like ambient magic.

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Such a creation came at great cost to the kingdom. Maintaining it drained Osita heavily, which was why it was never meant to be permanent. The scans would last only for the duration of the event and the season, no more than a week.

Even so, the burden was immense.

Now the question turns to why all of this was done for only a single week. What meaning could such a brief span possibly hold?

The answer lies in the peculiar and deeply symbolic relationship between the royal family and the people of the Osita Kingdom.

Osita was a kingdom unlike any other. On the surface, it appeared ruled by a king, yet in truth, the people governed much of their own lives. Customs, trade, and even local disputes were often settled without royal decree. This was not born from rebellion or neglect, but from understanding. The people had long realized that their king, Osita, held little interest in ruling them at all.

Osita was never a king by ambition. He was, first and foremost, a husband and a father, a man whose world revolved entirely around his wife and children. The prosperity and stability of the kingdom were not the result of his desire to lead a people, but rather the consequence of his relentless effort to build a civilization safe enough to shelter his family. Walls were raised, enemies were crushed, and laws were enforced not for glory or legacy, but so that those he loved could live without fear.

The people understood this truth, and they accepted it.

To them, it was no heresy to say that Queen Amina was the true leader of the Osita Kingdom. She was the one who presided over the court, who listened to the cries of the desperate and the grievances of the wronged. It was her voice that offered judgment, mercy, and resolution. Where Osita's presence loomed like a distant storm, Amina was the steady sun, seen, felt, and relied upon.

They adored Queen Amina.

Yet they feared King Osita.

On countless occasions, he had made it painfully clear how little he cared for the people themselves. He neither sought their love nor valued their approval. And yet, intertwined with that fear was an unshakable respect. Osita was strength incarnate, the shield that stood between the kingdom and annihilation. His indifference did not diminish the safety he provided; if anything, it made it more absolute. He protected the kingdom not because it was his duty, but because it was the foundation upon which his family stood.

This, in turn, elevated Queen Amina and her children to the highest priority in the hearts of the people.

The royal family was so deeply loved and so thoroughly protected that the kingdom itself became a place where royalty could be seen growing, not hidden behind walls. The people watched the younger members of the royal family grow year by year, not through distant announcements, but with their own eyes.

Princes and princesses could sometimes be found running through the streets, laughter echoing between stalls, playing freely among the common folk. They joined in childish mischief, stealing fruit from vendors only to flee in exaggerated panic, laughing as the merchants shouted after them, knowing full well no harm was meant. These moments were not scandals, but cherished memories shared by the city.

The people also witnessed Queen Amina's hand in their upbringing. They saw her scold mischievous princes and princesses in public when lines were crossed, firm yet loving, never sparing them simply because of their blood. It was not uncommon for townsfolk to see the queen herself walking the markets, a familiar presence rather than a distant figure, selecting goods with her own hands. To many merchants, she was not just their queen, but a regular customer whose taste and habits they had come to know.

This relationship between crown and commoner was kept pure by mutual understanding. The people knew that as long as their queen and her family remained safe, their own safety was assured in return. The king's protection of the kingdom was inseparable from the well-being of his family. So long as they were loved and unharmed, Osita's strength would stand unchallenged, and the great kingdom would continue as it always had.

It was through this closeness that the people also came to know of the queen's more personal passions.

Queen Amina possessed a deep fondness for hunting, often venturing out alone into the wilds beyond the city. She did not do so for spectacle or ceremony, nor did she bring entourages to bear witness. What she hunted, she prepared herself. With her own hands, she would cook the meat and present it as a meal to Osita, as a wife offering something born of care and skill.

To the people, this too was a quiet reassurance.

The queen who listened to their pleas, who raised her children among them, and who walked their streets without fear was the same woman who could step into the wilderness alone and return unharmed. And the king who rarely spoke to them directly was the same man who ensured that such a woman and such a family would never fall.

The queen's hunting hobby continued peacefully, until the day she returned from the forest grievously wounded.

Her injuries were severe enough that word spread through the kingdom before she herself reached the palace gates. Healers were summoned, prayers were whispered, and fear gripped the people, not only for their beloved queen, but for what this would mean once the king learned of it.

What followed forced everyone to confront a truth they had never fully understood.

They had always known that Osita loved Queen Amina. He had never taken concubines, never entertained other women, and never hidden his devotion. In a world where kings surrounded themselves with excess and indulgence, Osita remained unmoved. Yet even with this knowledge, the people had underestimated the depth of that love.

The day Osita chose to act, the kingdom itself trembled.

A roar, inhuman, primal, and filled with fury erupted from the palace, shaking stone and soul alike. Those who heard it would later swear it reached into their bones, freezing blood and stealing breath. Without escort or command, the king departed alone, striding toward the forest where the queen had carried out her hunt.

What followed was not a battle.

It was a massacre.

The forest was torn apart as though a calamity had descended upon it. Trees were uprooted, the land split open, and the blood of magical beasts flowed like rivers through shattered earth. Three Beast Kings creatures worshipped and feared in equal measure met their end at Osita's hands. When the king finally emerged, he was barely intact himself, his body bearing wounds that would have ended any lesser being.

Yet he did not stop.

Having reduced the forest to ruin, Osita began to rebuild it.

With the full force of the kingdom's magical reserves and powerhouses at his command, he reshaped the land. Hunters and adventurers were dispatched across the realm to capture living beasts of every kind, delivering them to the king. Under his will, the forest was remolded its creatures domesticated, its dangers controlled, its balance rewritten.

All of it was done for one purpose.

He forged a forest where his queen could hunt without risking her life.

A wilderness bound by his strength, where no creature could rise beyond his control, and no threat could ever again lay a hand upon her. To the people, this act was both awe-inspiring and terrifying. They realized clearly then that the kingdom itself was not the object of Osita's devotion, it was merely a tool.

Even the beast that had wounded Queen Amina did not escape his wrath.

Osita skinned it with his own hands. Its flesh was used to prepare a soup, one he cooked himself. During the queen's recovery, he fed it to her personally, each motion deliberate and silent, as if sealing a vow carved in blood and bone.

That day, the people of the Osita Kingdom understood even more, that as long as Queen Amina lived and was cherished, the kingdom would stand unbroken beneath the shadow of a love powerful enough to destroy and remake the world itself.

That incident opened the eyes of many within the kingdom. A question began to linger in the hearts of the people, unspoken yet heavy:

What if the queen had died that day? What if she had met her end in the forest?

The answers they imagined were far more terrifying than any enemy invasion. Few dared to voice them aloud, yet all understood the truth. If Queen Amina had fallen, the king's grief would not have been contained by walls or borders. Whatever remained of the kingdom afterward would no longer resemble the Osita they knew.

And so, action was taken immediately.

What began as fear became resolve. From that moment onward, the safety of the queen and by extension, the royal family was no longer merely the king's concern. It became the responsibility of the entire kingdom. Thus was born the foundation of the unparalleled security Osita is known for today.

Alongside these changes, a new event was introduced, one that transformed terror into tradition.

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During that time of year, the queen would once again enter the forest, but she would not go alone. Women from across the kingdom, nobles and commoners alike, would join her in the now-domesticated woodland. Together, they hunted the creatures that lived within it, some still dangerous, others tamed but untamed enough to test skill and courage.

When the hunt concluded, the women would return to the city bearing their catches.

There, they were welcomed by the men of the kingdom, dressed in traditional cultural attire. The men received the spoils of the hunt from the women's hands, skinned the beasts, and prepared meals from their flesh. Those meals were then served to the women, honoring them as providers, protectors, and participants in the kingdom's survival.

The ritual carried layered meaning. It reminded the people of the queen's near loss. It honored the king's wrath and restraint and it reaffirmed the balance between strength, care, and devotion that defined Osita's rule.

From this tradition emerged a single week each year, a time when the security of the Osita Kingdom reached its absolute peak. Patrols doubled, magical defenses were fully awakened, and every possible threat was watched with relentless vigilance. The event meant too much to the people to ever be allowed to fail.

Over the years, it grew in scale and significance, passed from generation to generation not merely as a celebration, but as a lesson.

A reminder that the kingdom stood not on crowns or laws alone, but on a fragile truth: as long as the queen lived and was cherished, the king would protect the world itself.

And for one sacred week each year, the entire Osita Kingdom existed for that purpose alone.

In time, even noble women began to take part in the hunt. What had once been a tradition rooted in fear and devotion evolved into an event of prestige and reverence. Delegations from neighboring kingdoms journeyed to Osita during this season, their noblewomen seeking the honor of joining the queen in the domesticated forest. To hunt alongside Queen Amina was no longer merely a test of skill, it was a statement of respect, courage, and political goodwill.

It was for this very event that Mei and her team had come.

Their goal had always been this week.

Their goal this time was the hunt itself. Considerable risks had already been taken to acquire the present they carried, one prepared specifically for Osita and its people. It was not something meant to be revealed openly, nor something that required attention in this moment. For now, it simply needed to remain where it was.

Mei glanced toward the place where the chained box was meant to be.

She could neither see it nor sense it. To anyone else, there was nothing there at all. Yet Mei did not doubt its presence. She had been the one to cast the spell upon the box, and because of that, a connection remained. It was faint, yet certain, strong enough that she knew, without question, that the box still existed exactly where it should.

If she wished, she could open it. The spell recognized her intent, and that bond had not weakened with time. For now, she let it remain sealed, its contents undisturbed, as the hunt and the festival continued around her.

Mei shuddered, unable to stop herself from imagining the horror that would unfold if she were to open the box. The thought alone made her breath hitch. She did not need to see what lay inside to know the devastation it could bring. That single possibility was enough to draw her back into memory, to the steps they had taken to acquire what the box now held.

After Mei and her team made their swift exit from the Omadi Kingdom, they did not follow the main group returning to the southern continent. Instead, they quietly broke away. Their mission had not yet ended. There was another purpose they had to fulfill, one that had never been spoken of openly.

When they stopped, a map was laid out before them.

Upon it, a single route had been clearly marked. It led not toward safety or civilization, but toward a place all nations feared, a place deliberately left untouched. Even the strongest kingdoms had agreed, without treaty or discussion, to keep their distance from it.

The destination was the Crystallized Mountain.

It had appeared suddenly, rising during the Night of the Untold, as though the world itself had been pierced and frozen in that moment. The upper echelons of power knew how the mountain had come to be and more importantly, what it signified. That knowledge alone was enough to ensure silence and caution.

Measures had been taken to mark the region as forbidden. Borders were drawn, patrol routes altered, and records sealed. Yet beyond these precautions, little more could be done. The mountain's very existence rendered further security meaningless. Attempts to control or contain it had already proven futile.

Anything that drew too close risked corruption.

Living beings, artifacts, even spells were said to twist under its influence, reshaped into pawns of the dark gods that lingered beyond mortal understanding. Proximity alone was enough to invite that fate. For this reason, both kingdoms declared the region off-limits, allowing only a handful of individuals to ever approach and even then, only briefly.

It was into this place that Mei and her team had gone.

There was still security in place around the region, but it was limited in both scope and effectiveness. The most that could be done was to establish checkpoints and borders at a safe distance, keeping civilians and wanderers away. Anything more aggressive proved pointless.

Mei and her team's first destination had been the mountain itself.

Their objective was simple in wording, yet dangerous in execution: obtain a crystal shard no larger than a fist from the Crystallized Mountain and leave within a strictly limited time. Any longer spent within its influence risked exposure to the whispers, the murmurs and half-formed words of the dark gods said to emanate from the mountain. Those who lingered too long did not return as they had entered.

Passing the borders posed little difficulty.

The guards stationed there were third-tier soldiers, competent but unremarkable. This was to be expected. Higher-tier warriors had no desire to waste their time standing watch over a place no one was meant to enter in the first place. Their role was not to stop determined intruders, but to discourage the careless and the ignorant.

Mei still remembered the moment she and her team crossed beyond it.

If the magical scans around the Osita Kingdom had given her the sensation of countless unseen eyes observing her, this was something far worse. The instant they passed the border, it felt as though they had stepped into a different layer of reality. The land itself remained unchanged, same ground, same sky, same air yet everything felt wrong.

The silence pressed in unnaturally.

From the corner of her vision, Mei could have sworn she saw something dark pass between the crystal outcroppings. It was never clear enough to define, never present long enough to confront. The others felt it too. None of them spoke, yet their tightened expressions betrayed shared unease.

They seem to have entered a place that existed beside the world, not within it.

At times, a voice would whisper so close to their ears that Mei could almost feel breath against her skin. The nearer they drew to the mountain, the stranger it became. The whispers grew clearer, forming fragments of words that lingered just long enough to be understood before dissolving again. The dark shapes that passed at the edge of their vision became more defined, more compact, so close it felt as though they were a thin breath away from reaching out and touching them.

Or being touched in return.

Their strength and more importantly, the discipline of their minds was the only reason they continued forward. Each step required deliberate effort. They had to convince themselves that what they were seeing was not real, that the sensations pressing in on them were nothing more than the mountain's influence trying to take hold. To hesitate was to listen, and to listen was to fall.

Then, as if it had been waiting for them, they saw it.

A crystallized shard, no larger than a fist, rested against the mountain's surface. There was no struggle, no resistance, no hesitation. Mei and her team moved at once. The moment their hands closed around the crystal, they turned and retreated with everything they had.

What followed remained unclear even in memory.

They did not remember the path they took, nor the distance they covered. All they knew was that they escaped. When they later tried to recall the retreat, each of them found the same unsettling absence. The dark shapes, the whispers, the oppressive presence, all of it vanished the instant the crystal was taken.

It was as though the shard itself had shielded them.

As though it had guided them out.

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That realization unsettled them far more than the whispers ever had. The ease with which they had been allowed to leave felt wrong. No one spoke of it, but all of them carried the same thought as they made their way to their next destination.

The material they now carried felt aware, like it was eager to see what they had in plan and wanted to play along.

Their next destination, after securing the shard, was a crucial piece of the plan laid out for Osita.

This time, the target was not a place, but a living being, the lair of a Beast King. Their objective this time was to take the firstborn child of that Beast King.

It was common knowledge among those versed in such matters that once a beast ascended to the rank of Beast King, reproduction became exceedingly rare. Their strength and existence stood closer to natural laws than living creatures, and so each offspring they produced carried immense value. A firstborn, especially, was not merely a child it was legacy, continuation, and proof of dominance.

To steal such a child was not just theft.

It was an unforgivable provocation.

The rage this act would ignite was precisely what the plan required. A Beast King stripped of its offspring would not act with reason or restraint. It would lash out blindly, consumed by fury, devastation following wherever it turned. And that rage was meant to be guided, its path bent toward the Osita Kingdom.

The loss of life would be immense.

More importantly, the lives lost would not be random. The destruction would claim figures of importance, events would spiral outward, and consequences would stack upon consequences, eventually giving rise to far greater upheavals. It was a spark meant to start an avalanche.

And so, while remaining vigilant of the crystal shard they carried, Mei and her team moved toward the Beast King's domain.

The day finally came for the Beast King to hunt.

Across the mountain range, an uneasy stillness settled in. Those watching held their breath as the massive shadow briefly broke through the clouds above the peak. Moments later, the land darkened as its vast figure moved away, its presence pulling light and wind with it as it gained distance.

"Now."

The signal was given, and in that instant, everything moved.

The two winged members shed their human forms without hesitation. Their true bodies emerged mid-motion, blends of different beasts, built for the sky. With a thunderous snap of wings, they launched upward, slicing through the thin air and into the violent mountain winds.

Mei's spells took hold almost immediately.

Layer upon layer of acceleration wrapped around the two flyers, compressing air and space alike. Speed was forced beyond what their bodies should have endured. The ground vanished beneath them in a blur as they surged toward the upper reaches of the mountain, their velocity climbing until it bordered on light itself.

Mei and the others rose from their place of concealment as well, lifting into the sky but holding their position far behind. Their eyes remained fixed on the distant shape of the Beast King, watching as it continued to move away.

Or so they believed.

Without warning, the immense figure in the distance stopped.

Then it shifted.

The Beast King climbed higher into the sky, its form disappearing completely into the clouds, leaving behind only an unnatural stillness.

The air twisted.

At first it was subtle, barely noticeable but within moments it became violent. Space itself rippled, warping like disturbed water. Every instinct within Mei and the others screamed in unison.

The Beast King had sensed something.

And it was no longer where it was supposed to be.

The flyers reached the nest a moment before the Beast King fully sensed the intrusion.

Nest was hardly the right word. It was a vast hollow carved directly into the mountain's heart, wide enough to house a town. The stone walls were scorched and smoothed by repeated contact with an immense body. At its center lay the child still, colossal even in infancy, its breathing slow and heavy, each rise and fall sending tremors through the cavern floor.

There was no hesitation.

The chained box was opened.

Light bent inward as space compressed violently around the opening seal. The air screamed as reality folded in on itself. Before the child could even register the presence of the two strangers who had appeared out of nothing, it was drawn in completely, its form erased from the mountain in a single instant.

The box snapped shut.

Chains tightened with a sound like grinding stone, final and absolute.

And in that same instant, the Beast King reappeared at the entrance of the cavern.

It did not charge in. It did not roar. It simply was there.

The two flyers froze.

Their entire view was filled by an eye larger than their bodies, its pupil reflecting the empty hollow where the child had been moments before. The Beast King's gaze moved past them first, toward the nest.

There was nothing.

No scent, no life signature or presence. Then its gaze returned to them, to the two intruders standing rigid, clutching a strange, chained box.

The realization was immediate.

The scream that followed tore through the mountain. Air warped, stone fractured, and the sound itself carried rage, loss, and fury so absolute it transcended language. The shockwave rippled outward, shaking the peaks and sending avalanches cascading down the slopes.

It's child was gone.

That was when Mei and the others arrived from below. They burst through the cloud to see the beast king's giant body blocking the entrance to the nest.

There was no time to speak.

One of Mei's companions moved instantly.

The minotaur-like figure, his body etched with stone-like lines and veins of molten red fire threw himself forward without hesitation. As he charged, power surged outward, his domain unfolding violently around him, molten light racing along the lines of his body as he slammed into the Beast King's presence with everything he had.

For a brief moment, space overlapped.

The Beast King's massive figure vanished and with it, the obstruction at the cavern's entrance. The path was suddenly clear. The two flyers did not need words or signals. Still wrapped in Mei's acceleration spells, they turned and launched themselves into the open sky, their forms tearing through the air and vanishing into the distance without a single glance back.

Then space cracked.

A jagged fracture tore open in the air itself, its interior revealing a violent, flaming backdrop that looked less like fire and more like a place where reality had failed to exist properly. From that hole, the minotaur-like figure was thrown out violently.

Half his body was gone.

Stone-lined flesh ended abruptly at the waist, molten veins spilling light rather than blood. Yet somehow, impossibly, he was still alive, barely conscious, barely breathing.

From within the cracked space, the Beast King emerged.

Its enormous form pushed its way out as though breaking free from confinement, shaking its body once, as if casting off water. The fracture widened just enough to allow its full body to pass through before snapping shut. The surrounding space healed almost instantly, leaving no trace of the rupture behind.

The mountain fell silent for a heartbeat. The Beast King turned its gaze first to the nest.

Empty.

Then it looked to Mei and the others fleeing.

They did not hesitate once they saw space cracked, they grabbed hold of their fallen comrade who was plummeting from the sky to the ground, they fled, pouring everything they had into speed and escape. Their breaths were ragged, their movements strained, but they moved, desperate to gain even a fraction of distance.

They did not get far.

Anger flashed within the Beast King's eyes. It let out a sharp, piercing squeak, brief, almost insignificant in sound.

The world blurred.

In the next instant, Mei and the others found themselves back where they had been moments before. Their bodies locked in place mid-motion. The air around them froze, space itself hardened, denying movement entirely.

They tried to respond.

Domains flared, power surging as they attempted to unfold and combine them, but it was useless. The Beast King's control over space was absolute. The space surrounding them was cleanly severed from their domains, isolated and sealed as if wrapped in invisible walls.

They could think, they could see but they could not move and before them stood a Beast King whose rage had nowhere left to go.

The Beast King studied its captured victims.

Its gaze lingered, noticing immediately that two were missing and more importantly, that the box was nowhere in sight. Then, from its massive form, a voice emerged.

It was cold, female and clear "Where is the box?, "Where is my child?"

The words carried no distortion, yet they pressed down with more weight than the mountain itself.

One by one, Mei's companions reacted.

Some closed their eyes, shoulders slackening as though they had already accepted the end. There was no struggle left in them, only the quiet understanding that this was beyond what they could escape.

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Mei's thoughts drifted.

They fell back upon Nwadiebube.

So this was where it ended. Her ambition, her dream of grandeur cut short before it had even begun. In the end, she had never escaped her role. No matter how far she climbed, she remained what she had always been: a pawn, moved into position and sacrificed when the board demanded it.

The Beast King watched them carefully.

Their silence told it everything it needed to know, they would not speak.

The space imprisoning them began to shrink.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

Invisible walls pressed inward, tightening around their bodies. Bone groaned, breath became shallow, and pain crept in not as a sudden strike, but as a promise. The Beast King was in no hurry. It intended to break them not because it enjoyed it, but for information.

It needed the box.

Whatever it was, it had severed the Beast King's senses completely. The bond to its child, once absolute had been erased. Without the box, it had no direction, no trail to follow, no place to begin its search.

So it waited.

Letting the pressure build, letting despair do its work. All of a sudden the pressure stopped.

The shrinking ceased abruptly, as if the space itself had hesitated. The invisible walls loosened, and suddenly, Mei and the others felt it, their limbs responding again, air rushing back into their lungs.

They could move. The space that had bound them released its hold, for a heartbeat, no one spoke.

Shock and confusion rippled through Mei and the others as they tried to understand what had prompted the sudden change. Then they saw it.

The fist-sized crystal shard they had taken from the Crystallized Mountain was no longer where it had been secured. It had slipped free without warning, floating silently in the air between them and the Beast King.

The moment the Beast King sensed movement from the crystal, its reaction was instant.

Every fiber of its being screamed danger.

Without hesitation, it released its hold on Mei and the others, redirecting its control entirely toward the crystal. Space folded sharply as it isolated the shard, forcing a gap between itself and the floating object. Its massive wings unfurled, beating once as it retreated, instinct overriding rage.

Then the crystal shone.

A burst of blinding light erupted outward, and from within it, chains formed, crystalline links snapping into existence one after another. They shot forward violently, tearing through the air.

The Beast King reacted immediately.

Space warped as it activated its ability, severing and erasing most of the chains before they could reach it. Link after link shattered, dispersed, or vanished entirely under its control.

But one chain slipped through.

It latched onto the Beast King's body.

And everything went wrong.

The moment the chain connected, the Beast King's spatial control collapsed. Its ability slipped from its grasp as if torn away, space snapping back into rigid stillness. More chains surged forth, wrapping around its massive form faster than it could react.

The Beast King thrashed, but its movements were sluggish now, distorted. Its body warped unnaturally as the chains tightened, binding not just flesh, but the very force that sustained it.

Mei and the others watched in stunned silence.

A being the size of a mountain, one that had bent space at will was dragged down. Its colossal body slammed into the mountainside, the impact shaking the land and sending dust and debris roaring into the air.

The Beast King was chained and for the first time since their nightmare began, its roar was not one of fury but of fear.

At the same time, a sound reached Mei and the others.

Five voices spoke as one, overlapping yet perfectly clear, emanating directly from the floating crystal.

"Tell your master, We are watching. Now leave." The words themselves carried a cost.

The instant they were heard, Mei and the others felt their bodies rebel. Flesh twisted, bones groaned, and foreign sensations surged through them. It was not pain alone, it was intrusion. Something fundamental had been touched, altered, simply by listening.

An example being their minotaur companion, who had been moments from death, convulsed violently. Before their eyes, his ruined body began to regenerate. The severed half reformed, but not as it once had been. One side returned intact, stone-lined flesh restored while the other rebuilt itself as exposed muscle and sinew, wreathed in bright yellow flames that burned without consuming him.

He lived.

But he was no longer whole in the way he once was.

The command to leave was not a suggestion.

Mei and the others felt it seize them, an overwhelming urge layered atop terror and instinct. The surrounding blurred. Their bodies moved faster than thought, faster than intent. In the span of a blink, they were gone, ripped from the mountain and cast far away, escape forced upon them whether they wished it or not.

Silence returned to the lair.

The Beast King remained alone, bound tightly by crystalline chains. Its breathing was heavy, its mind reeling. For a moment, it wondered if what followed was merely hallucination brought on by rage and loss.

Then it saw them.

Five shadows stood reflected in the fractured light around the crystal indistinct, formless, yet undeniably present. They stared at the Beast King without eyes, without faces, and still it felt seen in a way that stripped it bare.

Before it could react, the crystal shattered.

It did not explode outward. Instead, it broke apart into countless tiny points of light, like falling stars drifting gently downward. The Beast King shook violently, instinctively trying to dislodge the descending dust, but the chains held firm, locking its massive body in place.

The luminous particles settled onto its scales and feathers.

They sank in.

Absorbed into its flesh.

The Beast King roared, but no space answered its call. The light vanished beneath its skin, leaving behind a sensation it could not name, a presence that lingered, watching from within.

And far away, beyond mountains and borders, Mei carried the echo of those words with her.

We are watching.

The plan had succeeded.

The Beast King's consciousness continued to blur, its thoughts slowing as though smothered beneath an unseen weight. The rage that had driven it moments before dulled, replaced by a creeping heaviness that dragged it downward. Its vision dimmed. Sound became distant.

The crystalline chains binding its body began to lose their luster. One by one, they dulled, fractured, and crumbled, transforming into inert stone that cracked and fell away from its massive frame. Yet the Beast King did not rise.

Its body remained still in an enforced sleep as it underwent change. Deep within its flesh, where the crystal's dust had been absorbed, something remained awake.

Far from the mountain, inside the sealed carriage racing across the land, Mei shuddered violently as the memory resurfaced. Even recalling it sent ripples through her body. They had risked everything for this mission.

It had to succeed.

For the first time in a long while, Mei found herself longing for Murmur's presence, not for answers, not for power, but for cleansing. A full one. Whatever price it demanded, she would pay it. The mutations she carried were subtle, hidden, but she could feel them waiting beneath her skin.

All of them could.

Within the carriage sat noble figures in composed human forms, faces calm, postures refined, appearances untouched. Yet beneath those borrowed shapes were bodies that no longer fully belonged to the natural order.

They had been changed by words alone and none of them knew how much of that change could ever be undone until the mission was complete.

Meanwhile, within the grand palace of the Osita Kingdom, the air was alive with warmth and celebration. Corridors that were usually solemn and orderly now echoed with hurried footsteps and laughter. Maids and servants hurried past one another, arms laden with polished trays and steaming pots, the rich scents of spices trailing behind them.

"The Queen asked for more pepper, no, more than that!" one servant called, nearly colliding with another.

"And salt! She said the stew must bite back!" came the reply, followed by a burst of laughter.

Orders flew through the halls like sparks, and each was met with eager obedience. Bowls of flour were carried in haste, baskets of vegetables passed from hand to hand, and fresh meat was rushed toward the heart of the palace, the kitchen.

There, amidst the clatter of pots and the hiss of open flames, stood a figure unlike the rest.

Though dressed no differently from the women surrounding her, simple fabric wrapped neatly around her form, sleeves rolled, hands dusted with flour, she commanded the room without effort. Her voice rang out, loud and full of affection, cutting through the noise with ease.

"Careful with that pot, you'll scorch it if you turn away!" she called, then laughed warmly. "Ah, add a little more oil, yes, just like that. Food must be cooked with confidence!"

Chapter 749:

This was Queen Amina.

She was a beauty impossible to ignore, even without crown or jewels. Her dark skin glowed softly in the firelight, flawless and rich as polished obsidian. Thick curls framed her face before cascading down her back, her afro falling freely to her waist like a living mantle. Her figure was full and graceful, moving with practiced ease as she stirred, tasted, and corrected.

But it was her smile that truly held the room, a bright, genuine warmth that made servants forget their nervousness and remember their pride. She spoke to them not as subjects, but as family, offering praise as freely as instruction.

To any outsider, it would have been strange to see a queen standing in the heat of the kitchen, sleeves stained and hands busy. Yet within the Osita Kingdom, this was simply Amina, beloved ruler, heart of the palace, and a woman who believed that a kingdom was best governed not only from a throne, but from the shared labor and laughter of its people.

And tonight, the palace thrived under her presence.

"Give me that," Queen Amina said lightly as she reached for the stirring spoon.

She scooped a generous portion of the soup simmering before her and brought it to her lips. As she tasted it, her eyes slipped shut, the noise of the kitchen fading for a brief moment as she focused solely on the flavor.

The maids in charge of the soup froze, watching her with bated breath. No one spoke. The crackle of fire and the soft bubbling of the pot were suddenly far too loud.

Then Amina opened her eyes.

They sparkled with unmistakable joy.

"Let's go, ladies, perfect," she declared with a wide smile. A collective sigh of relief followed, along with quiet cheers. "Start the next batch immediately. We don't have much time before nightfall. There are so many stomachs waiting to be fed."

Her personal maid, who had been standing close by and fanning herself discreetly, leaned in and spoke in a hushed voice. "Lady Amina... you do know we can't fill every stomach that came today."

Amina did not slow her steps as she moved past her, already heading toward another cooking station. Her tone remained gentle but firm. "I do know," she replied, glancing over pots and cutting boards, assessing what was needed. "But we should feed as many as we can."

Reaching the next station, she clasped her hands together and asked cheerfully, "Now then, how may I be of help?"

The women working there glanced at her briefly, barely pausing in their work. One of them nodded toward a pile of vegetables. "We need those cut up. Get busy."

Amina laughed softly, entirely unbothered. "As you command." She turned toward the station, then nudged her personal maid with her elbow. "Sassy, aren't they?" she said, amusement dancing in her voice as she rolled up her sleeves.

Her maid rolled her eyes in return before straightening and offering a polite bow to the women while thinking. "They are ladies from noble families and close friends of the Queen herself."

The kitchen buzzed on, not only with the sounds of chopping, stirring, and sizzling, but with lively conversation as well. Gossip slipped easily between tasks: whispers of upcoming celebrations, playful teasing, news from the city, and quiet laughter shared over steaming pots.

The rhythm of knives against wooden boards soon settled into a steady cadence, punctuated by bursts of laughter and hushed voices. As Amina worked, the women around her leaned closer, conversation flowing as easily as the steam rising from the pots.

"Did you hear?" one lady murmured, keeping her voice low despite the noise. "They say the northern market sold out before noon. Travelers came in droves this morning."

"Mm," another replied, slicing onions with practiced ease. "I heard it wasn't just travelers. Some say messengers from a neighboring kingdom arrived unannounced. No banners, no fanfare."

A third woman scoffed softly. "Unannounced visitors are never good news. Especially with nightfall so close."

Amina listened quietly, her knife never slowing. "People talk far too much," she said gently, though there was curiosity in her tone. "Until I see them myself, they're simply hungry guests."

That earned her a few smiles.

Still, the gossip continued.

"They also say the streets are fuller than usual," one woman added. "Not just the poor, merchants, soldiers on leave, even scholars. It's as if everyone felt drawn here today."

"Drawn by the Queen, more like," another teased, casting Amina a playful glance. "Word spreads quickly when you open the palace gates."

Amina laughed softly. "If kindness is a summons, then I suppose I am guilty."

Her personal maid huffed quietly from nearby. "Your Majesty will work herself to exhaustion one of these days."

"Perhaps," Amina replied, brushing flour from her hands, "but not today."

On the opposite side of the palace grounds, a wide open space stretched beneath the open sky, alive with motion and sound. Though no walls confined it, the area felt whole animated by the presence of six figures whose energy filled every corner.

At one end stood a young woman, feet planted firmly in the earth, her posture straight and disciplined. Her gaze was sharp, unwavering as she drew back the string of her bow. The arrow rested steady between her fingers, her breath slow and controlled.

She released.

The arrow cut cleanly through the air before striking its target with a solid thud.

This was the First Princess of the Osita Kingdom, determined, composed, and already carrying herself with the quiet authority of someone born to lead. She intended to accompany her mother on the hunt this time, and every movement she made spoke of preparation rather than play.

Not far from her, the stillness was shattered by shrill laughter and excited screams.

Two smaller figures tore across the open space, chasing one another in tight circles. The twins barely ten years of age were a blur of flying limbs and tangled braids, their voices ringing with mischief and joy.

"Give it back!" one shouted.

"You dropped it first!" the other replied, already sprinting away.

They darted past servants and training posts alike, heedless of warnings, their energy endless and infectious. Where the Princess trained with focus, the twins brought chaos and somehow, the space felt richer for it.

On the far side of the grounds, the air grew thick with the unmistakable scent of smoke and spices. A low fire crackled beneath a covered barbecue, its contents hidden but impossible to ignore. Standing watch over it was a tall man with long, well-kept locks, an apron tied firmly around his broad frame.

His expression was serious, almost stern, as he lifted the cover slightly, inspecting the meat within with a practiced eye.

Perched comfortably on his shoulder was a small girl, entirely unbothered by his intensity. She gnawed happily on a stripped bone, grease shining on her fingers and cheeks, utterly content as she swung her legs.

"Careful," the man muttered without looking at her. "You'll drop that."

She giggled in response and bit down harder.

The man was Osita, King of the Osita Kingdom, ruler, husband, and father who wore his crown lightly when among his family.

Nearby, another man worked with quiet precision. Bowls of spices lay arranged before him as he mixed, tasted, and adjusted, humming softly under his breath. Once satisfied, he rubbed the blend generously over slabs of meat laid out before him, ensuring every cut was coated evenly.

This was Prince Nwadike, observing closely and occasionally reaching out to help.

The small girl perched on Osita's shoulder suddenly reared back and flung the bare bone across the open space. In an instant, a blur of fur shot after it, paws pounding against the ground as the family dog skidded to a stop and claimed its prize with a triumphant bark.

Satisfied, the girl turned her attention back to her father.

Her hands, still slick with sauce from the barbecue, reached out and tapped Osita sharply on the shin leaving a bold smear of spices and grease.

"Next, old man," she declared without shame. "Feed me."

Osita's mouth twitched, caught between a sigh and a smile. He glanced down at the sauce now decorating him before looking back up at her. "You know," he said calmly, "I asked for your presence away from your mother because I thought you'd give me an unfiltered opinion on how the meat tastes."

The little girl froze.

Realization dawned on her face. Slowly, she straightened, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and nodded with exaggerated seriousness. "It was... delicious," she said solemnly.

Osita huffed a laugh and reached up, lifting her from his shoulder and setting her gently on the ground. "You said the same thing for the last twenty pieces of meat you've eaten."

She grinned, entirely unapologetic.

"I told you that little glutton would be useless," Nwadike's voice cut in as he shook his head, watching the exchange with amused exasperation. "You'll never get an honest answer out of her as long as there's food involved."

Osita glanced at his son, one brow lifting. "And yet," he replied dryly, "she remains the most enthusiastic critic I have."

Chapter 750:

The little princess snapped her fingers and pointed at her brother, "Spice boy isn't supposed to be speaking," she declared, sticking her tongue out at him and pulling an exaggerated face. "Your input isn't helpful."

Osita paid neither of them any mind.

He had turned fully back to the barbecue now, lifting the lid and carefully turning the meat. His expression grew intense, brows drawn together as though he were not cooking but crafting a masterpiece worthy of legend. He adjusted the fire, brushed on more sauce, and nodded to himself, utterly absorbed.

Nwadike noticed immediately.

With their father distracted, a mischievous grin crept across his face. He raised a hand casually and flicked his fingers.

A tiny ball of crackling lightning leapt from his hand and struck his sister.

She yelped.

Her curls frizzed instantly, standing on end as a sharp tingling sensation ran through her body. She shook where she stood, eyes wide, before glaring at him. Nwadike's grin widened, clearly proud of his handiwork.

The little princess pouted, reaching up to touch her ruined hair. Then her expression shifted.

Slowly, deliberately, she turned toward their father.

A grin spread across her face, one Nwadike recognized far too well.

In the sweetest, most innocent tone she could muster, she said, "Papa... big brother is being mean to me."

Osita, still focused on the meat, responded without even looking up. "Hey," he said firmly, flipping a piece with precision, "stop being mean to your little sister."

The girl immediately turned back to Nwadike with a triumphant grin, sticking her tongue out once more.

Nwadike sighed, shaking his head, though a smile tugged at his lips. "One day," he muttered, "that trick is going to stop working."

She laughed, unfazed, while the scent of perfectly cooked meat filled the air and Osita continued his work completely unaware that justice, once again, had been expertly manipulated at his expense

The girl beamed at that, already eyeing the next piece of meat as the dog returned to hover nearby, tail wagging in hopeful anticipation.

Nwadike glanced toward his father, wiping his hands on a cloth as he spoke. "Old man, there aren't any more combinations left with the spices we have. You'll have to pick one for tomorrow, something special for Mom."

Osita paused.

The crackle of the fire filled the brief silence as he straightened, eyes narrowing thoughtfully at the rows of spices laid out before him. He folded his arms, staring at them as though they were pieces on a battlefield.

"Hmm," he hummed. "Which combination do you think is best? Your mother loves her meat, but this..." He reached out, pinching a bit of spice between his fingers, letting it fall slowly. "This needs to be a once-in-a-lifetime taste. Something she's never had before. Something that'll leave her wanting more after the hunt tomorrow."

Nwadike stepped closer, his tone shifting from teasing to serious. "If it's Mom, then bold is better but not overwhelming. She likes strength that sneaks up on her."

He gestured toward a blend already mixed. "That one. Smoked peppers for depth, a touch of sweetness to balance the heat, and the bitter spice at the end to linger. It won't hit all at once. It'll unfold."

Osita studied him, eyes flicking from the spices back to his son. Slowly, a smile tugged at his lips. "You've been paying attention."

Nwadike shrugged. "You cook, I watch. Mom eats, I listen."

A low chuckle escaped Osita as he reached for the suggested blend. "Then we'll trust your judgment." He inhaled the aroma, eyes softening. "If this works... she won't forget it."

From the side, the little princess piped up, hands on her hips and hair still half-frizzed. "If Mom cries because it's too good, I want credit."

Osita laughed outright this time. "You'll get credit for not eating it all before sunrise." She gasped in mock offense as the fire crackled on.

Another arrow flew.

Thud.

"Still too wide," the young woman muttered, already reaching for another arrow. She adjusted her stance, shoulders squaring. "If I miss like that tomorrow, I'll only slow Mom down."

One of the twins skidded to a stop nearby, hands on his knees. "Zainab, you didn't miss," he protested. "You hit it dead center!"

"Center isn't enough," she replied without looking back. "One shot. One kill. No suffering."

The other twin grinned. "She's scary when she talks like that."

"I'm standing right here," the First Princess said flatly, drawing again.

The twins burst into laughter and immediately took off running before the arrow was released.

"Hey! You'll knock over the targets again!" she called after them.

"Not our fault if your arrows are slow!" one twin shouted.

"They're not slow," she snapped, releasing the string.

The arrow sliced through the air and struck the target cleanly, dead center this time.

The twins froze.

"...Okay," the other one said quietly. "They're fast."

She exhaled, finally allowing herself a small, satisfied smile. "Good. That's how it should be."

The twins exchanged looks before one of them nudged the other. "She's definitely Mom's daughter."

"Yeah," the other agreed. "Just less yelling."

From across the space, Osita didn't look up from the barbecue. "If either of you get shot, I'm not explaining it to your mother."

"See?" one twin whispered. "She gets it from both sides."

The First Princess rolled her shoulders, reaching for another arrow. "If you're done talking, run somewhere else."

The twins didn't need to be told twice.

They were already gone.

Night fell swiftly over the capital, yet darkness found no dominion there.

The city of Osita burst into life as though dawn itself had returned. Street lamps lined the roads in glowing rows, their warm light spilling over stone and paved floors alike, so bright that one might have mistaken the hour for day. Shadows danced along the walls as people flooded the streets, laughter ringing freely from every corner.

Excitement hummed in the air.

Families, merchants, elders, and children alike moved through the capital with eager steps, each person carrying a bowl, simple, unadorned, and all of the same size. It was a curious sight to any outsider, a quiet uniformity born not of law, but of tradition. No one wanted more than another on this night. No one could.

Tonight was special.

Once each season, on the eve of the great hunt, the people of the Osita Kingdom were given a rare opportunity to taste a meal prepared by the Queen herself. Not ordered, not overseen, but cooked with her own hands.

It was a tradition older than memory, passed down through generations, a reminder that before crowns and thrones, a queen was first a servant to her people.

And Queen Amina honored it without fail.

Anticipation shone on every face. Stories were shared as people waited, tales of past hunts, of flavors remembered long after the bowls had been emptied. Some spoke with longing, others with quiet acceptance, knowing that not all would be fortunate enough to taste the meal this year.

That understanding was part of the night as well.

At the Queen's own request, those who had been lucky enough to receive a serving the previous year were gently urged to step aside, to give space for those who had never known the honor. No guard enforced it. No name was recorded.

Yet most obeyed.

Because in Osita, tradition was not carried by decree but by trust.

And so the city waited, bowls in hand, hearts full, knowing that whether or not they tasted the Queen's cooking, they were already part of something far greater than a meal.

Many in the capital swallowed hard as they looked toward the palace, thin trails of smoke rising into the night sky. Every so often, the wind shifted, carrying with it the rich scent of cooked meat and spices. The aroma drifted through the streets, teasing empty stomachs and tightening grips around waiting bowls.

Within the royal kitchen, the atmosphere began to shift. The frantic pace softened as the final stages of preparation approached. Queen Amina stood with her companions, women of noble birth and trusted friends, hands resting briefly on the counters they had labored over for hours.

"One last stir," Amina said warmly, watching the maids take over with practiced ease. "Mind the heat. Let it rest before serving."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the maids replied in unison.

One by one, Amina and the other ladies stepped away from their stations. Though they had cooked like commoners, they were still women of royalty, and appearances unfortunately still mattered. They glanced at their hands, their sleeves, the faint clinging scent of spice and smoke.

It would not do to appear before the people smelling of pepper, garlic and oil.

Reluctantly but knowingly, they prepared to leave the kitchen. Baths awaited them, fresh garments, scented oils, rituals of refinement that had little to do with who they were and everything to do with what the world expected them to be.

Yet the irony lingered.

For when the time came, it would be these same women, clean, adorned, and composed who would step into the streets and personally distribute the food. They would kneel, smile, and serve with their own hands, spices or no spices.