

Guardian gods 751

Chapter 751

Because appearance might demand distance but tradition demanded closeness.

The palace gates slowly opened, their heavy doors groaning as they parted, and a hush rippled through the waiting crowd.

First emerged the royal family.

Queen Amina stepped forward at their head, cleansed of the day's labor yet carrying its spirit with her. Fresh garments flowed around her, elegant and dignified, though simple enough to remind the people that she stood with them, not above them. At her side walked King Osita, solid and steady, his presence grounding. Their children followed, each distinct in their own way.

A murmur of awe passed through the streets.

Behind them came the leading noble houses of the kingdom, men and women clad in fine fabrics, their faces composed as they took their places. For once, rank did not separate them from the people, they were here to serve, not to be served.

At a silent signal, servants began carrying out the great covered vessels. Steam curled into the night air as the lids were lifted, and the scent that followed drew a collective breath from the crowd. Lines began to form naturally, orderly and patient, bowls held close to chests.

Queen Amina raised a hand.

The noise softened, fading into attentive stillness.

"My people," she began, her voice clear and carrying easily across the square. "Tonight, we gather not as rich or poor, noble or common but as one kingdom."

She gestured toward the steaming food behind her. "This meal was prepared in anticipation of tomorrow's hunt, a tradition meant to honor the land that feeds us and the hands that protect us."

Her gaze swept over the crowd, gentle. "Not all will be able to taste it tonight, and for that, I ask your understanding. If you have eaten in years past, I thank you for giving space to another. That kindness is what keeps Osita strong."

A pause then a soft smile.

"Eat well. Share what you can. And may tomorrow's hunt be guided by skill and the best hunter."

She lowered her hand.

At once, the lines moved forward. Bowls were extended, ladles dipped, and the night filled with the sound of gratitude, soft words, relieved laughter, and the quiet clatter of shared hope as Osita once again proved itself not just a kingdom, but a family.

After a while, once the first rush had eased and the lines had settled into a steady rhythm, the royal family began to move as part of the crowd.

Queen Amina walked slowly through the lantern-lit streets, King Osita at her side, their children trailing close behind. Noble attendants kept a respectful distance, allowing the murmurs of the people to reach them unfiltered. Steam still curled from bowls as families stepped aside to let them pass, bowing briefly before returning to their meals.

The talk around them was no longer about the food.

"Tomorrow will be different," a woman said eagerly to her companion. "Did you hear? The Queen herself will hunt again."

"Amina hasn't missed a season," another replied with admiration. "But this year... there are more women joining than ever."

Near a street corner, a group of hunters laughed loudly, weapons resting against their shoulders. "The western forest won't know what hit it. I hear the First Princess is joining her mother this time."

"She is?" one of them scoffed, then hesitated. "Actually... I believe it. Have you seen her aim?"

A younger voice chimed in, excitement barely contained. "They say whoever brings down the strongest beast earns the right to lead the closing rites. Imagine if it's a woman again this year."

"Again?" an elder chuckled. "Strength doesn't belong to men alone. Osita learned that long ago."

As the family continued on, whispers followed them like a tide.

"Which creature do you think will appear this season?"

"Something big. The land has been restless."

"I'm betting on the iron-tusked boar."

"Nah if the Queen is hunting, it'll be worse than that."

Amina listened quietly, her expression calm, though her eyes sharpened with interest. She glanced briefly at her eldest daughter, who walked with her chin lifted.

Osita leaned closer, his voice low. "They're already placing bets."

Amina smiled faintly. "Let them. Anticipation is part of the fun."

Ahead, laughter rose as children pretended to stalk invisible beasts, sticks held like spears, while their elders watched with fond caution.

Tonight, the city dreamed of tomorrow.

The capital partied the night away, no, more than that, the entire kingdom did. From the towering spires of the capital to the most distant villages clinging to the edges of the realm, the Osita Kingdom was awake, alive with firelight, laughter, and ritual.

Those who could not make the pilgrimage to the capital did not feel excluded; tradition ensured that the celebration reached them all the same. In every corner of the kingdom, the same customs were observed, adapted only by distance and circumstance.

In manor halls and ancestral estates, the Ladies of the noble houses took the lead, as they had for generations. They oversaw the preparation of ceremonial meals, directing servants and kin alike, ensuring that every dish carried the proper symbolism.

Long tables were set beneath banners and lanterns, mirroring the splendor of the capital itself. Though separated by miles, the people of Osita shared the same sights, the same gestures, the same unspoken anticipation, all awaited tomorrow.

While music echoed through city streets and wine flowed freely, far from the warmth of celebration, another story unfolded.

Deep within the western reaches of the realm, where the forest for the hunt is located. Mei and her companions had already drawn close to their destination. Their journey had been long and punishing, every step toward the capital weighing heavier on their minds than the last.

Not far from the forest's edge, hidden within a shallow cave, stood rows of stone statues.

At first glance, they appeared like old weathered figures frozen in silent vigil. But a closer look revealed something deeply unsettling. The statues bore an unmistakable resemblance to Mei and her companions. Every detail had been captured: the tilt of a head, the curve of a shoulder, even the faint suggestion of expressions long worn by exhaustion and pain. It was as though the stone itself had studied them, memorized them.

This was no coincidence, it was a deliberate countermeasure.

The Osita Kingdom's surveillance was relentless, its gaze stretching far beyond walls and roads, probing minds as much as lands. The statues served as decoys, anchors of false presence meant to mislead scrying eyes and senses. More than that, the cave offered something the open world no longer could: a fragile refuge for their sanity. Here, away from the kingdom's ever-tightening grip, they could breathe, recover, and mend themselves if only slightly.

The reality for them was, the more they drew nearer to the capital, the more their torment had intensified. Whispers crept into their thoughts, dreams turned cruel and invasive, and reality itself seemed to bend under unseen pressure. The cave, the statues, it was all part of their struggle not just to remain hidden, but to remain "themselves" One of the statues trembled.

Fine cracks spider-webbed across its stone surface before it violently collapsed inward, fragments scattering across the cave floor. In its place stood one of Mei's companions, if stood was the right word. The moment his form fully returned, his face twisted into a sharp, instinctive grimace. He barely had

time to inhale before his knees buckled, and he crashed to the ground, clutching his head as though trying to keep it from splitting open.

A heartbeat later, another statue gave way.

Then another.

Stone shattered and fell apart, revealing Mei and the others one by one. Each of them suffered the same fate, appearing only to collapse, bodies convulsing as they writhed against the cold cave floor. Hands dug into hair, nails scraped skin, muffled cries forced past clenched teeth. Pain seized them immediately, brutally, as though their very existence in this land was being challenged.

The surveillance that blanketed the Osita Kingdom turned hostile the instant they returned to their flesh form.

Now in the capital, it was no longer a distant pressure or an oppressive awareness. It became voices, countless, overlapping, shrill and relentless, screaming directly into their minds. Leave, go back, you do not belong here, you are not accepted.

The sound tore through soul and flesh alike. Their skin burned and crawled, as if trying to peel itself away from bone, desperate to escape the agony. Their souls strained just as violently, tugged and twisted as though something unseen was attempting to rip them free and cast them out.

And yet, through the torment, their senses still worked. Beyond the forest, beyond the walls. They could hear it.

Laughter. Music. Celebration.

Joy drifted through the air like an insult, proof of how alone they truly were. They were under the same surveillance as everyone else in the kingdom... yet they were the only ones being punished by it. The kingdom embraced its people, even smothered them but to Mei and her companions, it was nothing but rejection and pain.

Chapter 752:

A faint pulse of warmth clung to them, the artifact.

But it was failing.

Thin fractures had begun to form along its surface, spreading slowly, each crack a quiet promise of what was to come. It was only barely holding back the full force of Osita's gaze. When it finally gave way, there would be nothing left to shield them.

They could already imagine it, the sensation waiting on the other side of that breaking point. If this was the misery endured with protection, then what awaited them without it was beyond comprehension.

When the artifact shattered, their fate would no longer be guided by deception or concealment.

It would be entirely in their own hands.

And the kingdom would finally be free to do as it wished with them.

How they wished they could open the box, just once and let the little cub slip free into the night, unburdened and wild, while they themselves retreated into obscurity. The thought tempted them like mercy. But they knew better. To do so would render everything they had endured meaningless. Every step taken, every scream swallowed, every fracture in mind and soul, it would all be for nothing.

There was no room for deviation.

Everything had to be done, precisely and mercilessly, in the order Murmur had decreed. Only then would the plan hold. Only then would their suffering matter.

So they endured.

The pain dulled, not because it lessened, but because they learned how to exist alongside it. The voices never fully faded, but they receded into a constant, grinding pressure, like a storm locked behind their eyes. With trembling breaths and unsteady resolve, Mei and her companions forced themselves upright.

They moved.

They had to reach the forest. They had to position themselves correctly. There would be no second night, no chance to recover lost time. Tonight was all they had.

Beneath the dark canopy of the night sky, while the kingdom drowned itself in joy and celebration—a small group slipped into motion. Their progress was slow and deliberate. Every so often, they stopped, bodies stiffening as stone overtook flesh once more. For a brief time, they became statues again, silent, unmoving, resting out of necessity.

Then they would move again.

Step by step. Freeze by freeze.

And so, little by little, the night passed.

Dawn crept in quietly.

In the capital, streets that had once echoed with laughter now lay strewn with remnants of revelry, discarded cups, wilted flowers, fading lantern light. Servants began their work as the city exhaled, unaware of how close it stood to calamity.

Within the palace walls, Osita stood before his wife, Amina, helping fasten the final straps of her hunting attire. His movements were careful, almost reverent, fingers lingering just long enough to ensure everything was secure. Despite the calm morning light, unease clung to him like a second skin.

True to his nature, paranoia refused to leave him be.

One by one, he whispered protective incantations, his magic weaving unseen wards around Amina, layers upon layers of defense meant to shield her from harm. Each sigil flared briefly before sinking into place, invisible yet potent. He told himself it was precaution. He told himself it was love.

But beneath it all, something gnawed at him.

Even as he laid the final wards into place, Osita's face remained tense, his expression far from satisfied. The magic responded flawlessly to his will, each protective layer settling around Amina like an invisible mantle, but the unease did not lift. Instead, it clung tighter.

Since waking that morning, a nagging sensation had followed him. Not fear. Not panic. Something worse, certainty without clarity.

At his stage of existence, such a feeling was not to be dismissed. Instincts like his did not misfire. If something felt wrong, then something was wrong. Absolutely, undeniably so. Yet no matter how he searched, he could not grasp its shape, could not place his hand upon the source of the disturbance.

That, more than anything, unsettled him.

Amina noticed, of course. She always did. It was rare for Osita to wear such an expression, brow drawn, gaze unfocused, jaw tight with restraint. As she turned to face him, her voice was gentle but direct.

"What is wrong?"

Osita hesitated only a moment before answering. He spoke of the sensation, of the weight pressing against his awareness, of the feeling that the world itself had shifted slightly out of alignment. He did not dress his words in reassurance or false calm; Amina had never needed that from him.

She listened without interruption.

When he finished, Amina did not laugh, nor did she attempt to dismiss his concerns. She believed him immediately. Doubting Osita's instincts would have been foolish and dangerous.

Still, her answer came without hesitation.

"Even so, the hunt has to be carried out," she said.

Osita fell silent.

Amina continued, her tone steady, resolute. "It represents too many things. It binds the kingdom together, tradition, faith, unity. It means more to the people than a single day's safety, even one shadowed by uncertainty." She met his eyes, unwavering. "It is not something we can simply cancel."

Her words were true. Osita knew that. The hunt was not merely an event; it was a declaration to the kingdom, to the gods, to the world itself about Osita's rule.

Yet the unease did not fade.

Osita reached within his cloak and produced a pendant, its surface etched with old sigils that pulsed faintly with restrained power. He stepped closer and carefully placed it around Amina's neck, his fingers lingering for just a moment longer than necessary.

"Have this with you at all times," he said quietly. "It should keep you safe and buy enough time for me to appear."

Amina closed her hand around the pendant, feeling its warmth. She smiled, soft and unafraid, and before he could say another word, she wrapped her arms around him. Though she was tall, Osita still towered over her, and so she rose onto her toes. Their foreheads brushed briefly before they shared a long, deep kiss, hurried, intimate, and heavy with things left unsaid.

When she finally pulled away, Osita watched her go, every instinct screaming to stop her, to keep her close. But he didn't. He never could say no to her.

The moment the doors closed behind her, the warmth vanished from his expression.

The softness in his eyes hardened, replaced by something cold and dark. Whatever affection lingered was sealed away, buried beneath authority and suspicion.

A presence stirred near the doorway.

Nwadike appeared without sound, as if he had always been there. One look at his father's face told him enough. This was not the Osita who laughed with his family. This was the Osita the kingdom feared.

"What's next?" Nwadike asked.

Osita turned to him slowly. "Nothing, for now," he replied. "We do not yet know what we face, nor how it will come."

Then his gaze sharpened.

"Surveillance is to be increased immediately. No region is to be left without deep scrutiny." His voice carried command, each word precise. "Everything the palace has is to be deployed, the mages, the knights, the warlocks, the beast summoners. If anything so much as twitches out of place, I want it found."

He paused, then added, colder still, "Double the eyes on your mother's and your sister's security. No exception."

Nwadike inclined his head, understanding the gravity beneath the orders. Whatever shadow Osita sensed, it was enough to awaken the full machinery of the palace.

Outside the palace, Amina emerged into the morning light with her daughter at her side.

She hid her uncertainty well. Her posture was straight, her expression composed, every movement befitting the queen the people expected to see. Yet beneath the practiced calm, worry coiled tightly. One last time, she tried to dissuade her daughter, softly, reasonably suggesting that perhaps it would be wiser to sit out this year's hunt and return stronger, safer, in the next.

The princess refused.

Her resolve was firm, her eyes bright with stubborn conviction. She would not be left behind.

Amina did not press further, nor did she allow the moment to grow into a scene. Instead, she leaned closer, her lips brushing her daughter's ear, her voice dropping to a whisper meant for no one else.

"I need you to promise me something," she said. "At the very first sign of anything unusual, anything strange, you leave. Immediately."

The princess opened her mouth to protest, but Amina cut her off without raising her voice.

"If you cannot promise me that," she continued calmly, though her gaze sharpened, "then you are going nowhere today, young lady."

She straightened and looked at her daughter fully.

The princess hesitated, biting her lip. Then, with a small nod, she agreed.

"Then let's go," Amina said, taking her daughter's hand.

The palace gates swung open.

Beyond them stretched a long, magnificent procession. People lined the streets as far as the eye could see, baskets overflowing with flowers lifted high in celebration. As Amina and the princess stepped forward, petals rained down upon them, soft bursts of color and fragrance that filled the air with joy.

Chapter 753:

They walked onward, mother and daughter, beneath the shower of flowers.

With every step, the procession grew. Women clad in prepared hunting attire emerged from side streets and courtyards, falling into place behind the queen and princess. Their armor was light but ceremonial, adorned with sigils and tokens of past hunts. Together, they formed a living tide, moving as one toward the gate that led beyond the city, toward the forest, toward tradition, toward whatever awaited them there.

To the onlookers, it was a sight of unity and splendor.

Only Amina felt how thin the line was between celebration and catastrophe.

High above the procession where no ordinary eyes could reach, mages and knights moved through the air in silent arcs. Some rode currents of magic, others bore winged constructs or summoned beasts beneath their feet. Their task was singular: scout the path ahead and scour it for any hint of danger.

Sigils flared briefly as spells were cast and dismissed, invisible nets of detection sweeping the ground below.

Among the women who joined the queen and princess, a few stood apart without ever truly separating themselves. There was something different in their eyes, sharp, calculating. They watched faces, measured breathing, noted posture and tension. Their bodies were positioned subtly, deliberately, always angled to react at a moment's notice. Guards in all but name, blending seamlessly into the ritual.

Soon, the procession reached the boundary of the western forest.

The air changed there, cooler, heavier, carrying the scent of damp earth and old growth. No words were spoken. No signal was given. Amina and the princess exchanged a brief glance, and then they ran.

In an instant, they broke into a sprint, their forms blurring as magic and training carried them forward. By the time most had drawn breath to react, the queen and princess were already gone, swallowed by the trees.

The others did not hesitate.

The hunt had begun.

Women scattered into the forest in every direction, splitting apart with practiced ease. Some chased deeper paths, others vanished into thickets and canopies. A handful followed the trail taken by Amina and the princess, knowing full well what it meant to keep pace with them.

Meanwhile, deeper within the forest, an unsettling sight revealed itself.

Stone statues stood scattered across the terrain, half-hidden among roots, perched on ridges, or standing brazenly in clearings. From above, they were impossible to miss. Their shapes broke the forest's natural rhythm, drawing the eye no matter how well concealed they were from the ground.

The scouts noticed immediately.

Messages flared to life, quick exchanges of thought and whispered spellwork. Were the statues part of the hunt? Some new addition to the tradition? Or had they appeared recently, unrecorded and unexplained?

No clear answer came.

But one thing was certain: the statues did not belong.

Many fell from the sky, abandoning their aerial vantage to take a closer look as reports of the statues multiplied. Wings folded, spells unraveled, and boots touched forest ground as mages and knights converged on the locations being marked. What had begun as scattered sightings quickly turned into a pattern.

Then a new detail emerged.

One of the statues, standing in a shallow clearing was reported to be holding a strange box bound in heavy chains.

That report spread fast.

The forest grew crowded, attention tightening around the anomaly. Almost as if drawn by coincidence, a group of women participating in the hunt arrived at the same clearing. They slowed when they saw the statue, curiosity overtaking caution. It stood unnaturally still, its stone grip wrapped protectively around the chained box.

Questions followed in hushed voices.

Was this part of the hunt? A new trial? Some secret addition the royal family had prepared?

The thought was comforting. Exciting, even.

With that assumption easing their nerves, they approached the statue.

Elsewhere, in the forest grounds, another group of mages and knights examined a different statue. This one's expression was carved in vivid agony, mouth open in a silent scream, body twisted as if frozen mid-torment. Spells were cast, senses extended, and wards brushed lightly against its surface.

Nothing.

No lingering magic, no sign of life. No trace of a spell having been cast upon it.

Out of caution rather than suspicion, one of the knights stepped forward. He raised his fist and struck the statue hard.

Stone shattered instantly.

Fragments collapsed into a heap at his feet, dust rising briefly before settling. The group tensed, weapons ready, spells half-formed, waiting.

Nothing happened.

No movement.

No reaction.

No retaliation.

Slowly, their guards lowered.

The statues, it seemed, were nothing more than stone.

And that assumption, quiet, reasonable, and terribly wrong spread just as quickly as the reports had.

Without warning, the shattered stones began to move.

Fragments scraped across the forest floor, pulled together by an unseen force. Chunks of stone twisted and fused, reshaping themselves with sickening precision. In moments, the pile of rubble reformed no longer a statue, but a human.

The transition was wrong.

The expression carved into the stone did not fade as flesh replaced it. Pain etched in marble clashed violently with living features, as if the body itself could not decide what it was meant to be. Then the figure collapsed, crashing to the ground as a roar tore from its throat, raw, broken, and unmistakably alive.

Pain.

Pure, unfiltered agony.

Weapons were raised instantly. Spells flared to life. Knights and mages snapped into formation, eyes locked on the writhing figure. Shouted orders followed, sharp and urgent. Reports of the phenomenon were relayed at once, rippling outward through magical channels.

The response was immediate.

Across the forest, attention shifted. Patrols redirected. More eyes turned toward the remaining statues as groups began to converge on every reported location.

At the same time, fatally out of sync. The women who had approached the statue with the chained box reached it.

Curiosity overrode caution. Without hesitation, one of them took hold of the box, fingers curling around the cold metal chains. Before doubt could take root, she pulled it open.

"Stop!"

The shout came too late.

The women froze as the voice echoed across the clearing. They looked up just in time to see a mage descending rapidly from above, flying toward them with urgency etched across his face.

Then the box began to glow.

Light spilled out between the parted chains, unnatural and pulsing, flooding the clearing with a radiance that made the forest recoil. The air thickened, pressure bearing down on every living thing nearby.

Whatever had been sealed inside had just been set free.

The women screamed and dropped the box, stumbling backward as the glowing chains slipped through their hands.

Then, in a heartbeat, the box disintegrated turning to ash before their eyes. From the vanishing remnants, a massive shape erupted into the clearing.

A bird, enormous, easily eclipsing the height of the women spread its wings, each feather catching what little light filtered through the forest canopy. Yet even in its staggering size, something in its movements, its posture, betrayed its youth. The women realized with a mix of fear and awe: this was no ordinary bird. It was a cub.

For weeks it had been imprisoned, confined within the tight, unyielding chains of the box. Now, free, it roared a sound both terrifying and plaintive. Its cry tore through the trees, reverberating across the forest like the tolling of a great bell, echoing in every corner.

But the roar had barely faded when danger struck.

A fireball, blazing like a fragment of the sun, fell from the sky with impossible speed, aimed directly at the cub. The forest shimmered with heat before the impact, leaves scorching midair, and the women froze, helpless.

The cub's eyes widened as it felt the sudden, unnatural heat. Its small mind struggled to comprehend the threat, but something deeper, inherited, surged within, the bloodline that carried instincts older than itself.

A sharp, desperate roar split the air. It called out not for itself, but for its mother, a lifeline in a world suddenly too large and dangerous.

Then, as instinct and inherited magic coiled within it, the cub acted. The forest around it shimmered, air folding unnaturally. In an instant, it vanished from the path of the fireball, teleporting away with the force of a creature both terrified and awakened. The heat of the fireball hissed harmlessly against the space it had occupied just moments before.

The women collapsed to the ground, hearts pounding, eyes wide in disbelief.

The cub had survived, its first taste of freedom accompanied immediately by the brutal reminder that the world outside its prison was no less deadly than the one it had escaped.

Meanwhile at the very moment the cub was released, far beyond the borders of Osita's kingdom, something else stirred.

A mountain-sized body shifted.

Stone cracked. earth and dust cascaded from feathers the size of towers as the colossal form trembled, the deep, unnatural sleep forced upon it finally was gone.

The Beast King had sensed it, its child.

One vast eye opened, then the other. Once, those eyes had held clear, piercing intelligence, an awareness it had gained for its long life. That clarity was gone. What remained was warped, bent inward, as though something unseen had coiled itself around the Beast King's mind. The intelligence was still there... but it was being shared.

And whatever shared it was gleeful.

Chapter 754

A presence lingered behind the Beast King's gaze, wearing its body like a throne. The creature's beak curled slightly, in something disturbingly close to a smile.

Whatever inhabited the Beast King allowed just enough of its original senses to surface. Just enough for instinct to recognize blood. Just enough for pain, urgency, and rage to bleed through.

The Beast King roared.

The sound tore across the world, a thunderous cry that carried for leagues, bending the air itself. Forests shuddered. Beasts cowered. Lesser creatures fell silent as the roar stamped itself into the land like a declaration of war.

With a single, titanic flap, entire stretches of forest were obliterated. Trees were torn from the earth and hurled like debris, the resulting gale flattening everything unfortunate enough to lie beneath its shadow.

The mountain-sized bird rose.

Another flap carried it higher, its massive form piercing the clouds, vanishing into the churning gray above. The world shrinking beneath it.

Then it roared again, louder, sharper, filled with purpose.

Its course was set.

Guided by the echo of its child's presence and by the unseen will riding within it, the Beast King turned its beak toward Osita's kingdom.

Back in the forest, the mage who had hurled the fireball stared at the empty space where the cub had been only moments before. Residual energies still clung to the air, fractured traces of space folding back into itself. His expression hardened as recognition set in.

A space talent.

And not a weak one.

He reached for his ear, fingers brushing the rune embedded there, and opened a direct connection to the surveillance network. His voice was steady, but urgency cut through every word.

"We have a huge problem on our hands," he said. "A large cub, likely the offspring of a Beast King with confirmed spatial talent has entered the forest. Lost visual on first contact."

He paused, eyes scanning the trees, senses stretched thin.

"I strongly recommend all personnel immediately move to secure the Queen and the Princess and bring them to safety."

Another pause, longer this time.

"At the same time, begin preparations for the appearance of a Beast King. It will not be far behind now that its child is lost."

The connection faded.

The mage exhaled slowly, then turned toward the group of women huddled nearby, their faces pale, bodies trembling. They had seen the explosion. They had seen the cub.

And they had felt the fear.

"You need to leave this forest," he said firmly, urgency bleeding into his voice despite his composure. "Now. Head away from this place, any direction that puts distance between you and here. Relay this warning to anyone you meet along the way."

He met their eyes, one by one.

"Do not come back."

With that, mana gathered around his feet, wind spiraling upward as he was lifted up, prepared to take to the sky when something moved.

Too fast.

A thick, gnarled root burst from the undergrowth like a living serpent, coiling around his legs with crushing force. Before the mage could react, the root yanked hard and slammed him into the ground.

The warlock did not stay down.

The moment the root tightened around his legs, flames erupted from his body. Fire raced along the vine, consuming it in an instant as it shrieked and recoiled, collapsing into blackened ash. He struck the ground with his fist, magic surging outward in response.

The earth answered.

Flames burst from the forest floor at a distance, tearing through soil and roots as a massive hand of fire emerged, fingers curling around a figure caught mid-motion. Heat warped the air as the burning grasp closed tight.

The figure trapped within it laughed.

A female demon was revealed, her form tall and unnatural, skin marked with sigils that pulsed like open wounds. Most unsettling of all were her two faces: one gazing forward with sharp, calculating eyes, the other mirrored on the back of her head, twisted in a restless, half-aware expression.

This was Mei.

She had been the statue holding the chained box.

She could have remained in her stone state longer, allowed suspicion to pass her by but the mage's fireball had struck her directly, shattering her disguise and forcing her out in a cascade of rubble. With the cover broken and the cub released, the second phase of the plan activated immediately.

Her task now was simple.

Buy time.

Time enough for the Beast King to arrive.

At the same time, when she had shed her human guise completely, the voices vanished. The screaming pressure that had gnawed at her mind since entering the kingdom ceased all at once. The surveillance remained, watchful, probing but it was no longer unbearable. She had revealed herself fully.

There was no more hiding. The price of that revelation was she found peace again in her mind and at the same time was forced to face something she previously avoided.

The second face was a mutation, a consequence of their last dealings with dark gods, an affliction she despised. Even now, she could feel it stirring, its awareness growing slowly, patiently. It was eager. Curious. Alive in ways it should not have been.

She would deal with it later.

For now, she had a warlock to occupy.

The flaming hand clenched tighter and Mei held by it, burst apart into shimmering bubbles, the illusion popping harmlessly as her true body reappeared several strides away. Her hand was already raised, sigils snapping into place as lightning screamed from her palm, tearing through the air toward the mage in a blinding arc.

The forest shook as the first true clash of power erupted.

The same horror unfolded throughout the forest.

One by one, the statues began to crumble and wake. Stone cracked and peeled away as Mei's companions were forced out of concealment, their disguises collapsing under scrutiny and violence. With the loss of their statue forms came the loss of restraint.

And with it, revelation.

Among the first group, the same knights and mages who had confidently shattered the statues stood the man who had been screaming moments earlier. His cries cut off abruptly.

Silence.

Then his chest burst open.

Flesh tore apart in a wet, explosive rupture, blood and fragments raining across the forest floor. Several knights staggered back on guard, others frozen in place as something stepped forward from the ruin of a human body.

A two-legged humanoid stood where the man had been.

Its frame was serpentine, elongated and coiled with unnatural grace. Wings, leathery and ridged unfurled from its back with a hiss of displaced air. From the base of its spine, where a tailbone should have been, emerged a living snake, its body twisting independently, head lifting as if tasting the air.

The creature's eyes were distant, unfocused not empty, but divided.

It was the newly mutated appendage Mei companion got and like Mei, it could feel it, the snake was not just an extension. It was becoming a ware. Slowly. Patiently. Learning what it meant to exist.

The mages and knights stood transfixed.

There were no records of such a being. No bestiary, no old text, no whispered legend they could call upon. Their spells hesitated, not out of mercy, but ignorance.

The creature blinked.

Then, the first word it spoke echoed through the stunned clearing.

"Fuck."

The word carried no malice. No threat.

Only profound, aching relief.

Mei's companion exhaled shakily, shoulders sagging as if a weight long carried had finally been set down. With its true form revealed, no longer hidden, no longer pretending, the unbearable torment of the kingdom's surveillance lifted.

The screaming pressure was gone.

The voices were silent.

Whatever came next would be violent, terrifying, and likely fatal, but for the first time since entering Osita's domain, they were themselves.

And across the forest, as more statues broke and more truths bled into the open, the hunt ceased to be a hunt at all.

The creature took in the gathered group before it, eyes flicking across armor, sigils, and half-raised weapons. Then it snapped its fingers.

The forest erupted into motion.

Thick, green poisonous smoke burst outward, rolling across the clearing in choking waves. The air burned, lungs screamed, and vision vanished in seconds. At the same time, its wings stretched wide, muscles coiling as it launched itself upward, cutting through the haze toward the sky.

It almost made it.

A shield tore through the smoke, spinning end over end as it hurtled toward the airborne figure. The creature twisted mid-flight, dodging it with ease.

Only for the shield to vanish midair.

In its place came a massive blur of steel and muscle.

A large, burly knight slammed into the creature from above, tackling it out of the sky with brutal force. Both bodies crashed into the ground below, earth splitting on impact as trees shuddered from the shockwave.

The forest exploded into sound.

Steel rang against claws. Spells detonated against bark and stone. Roars, shouts, and screams overlapped as battles ignited across multiple fronts. Sensing the violence tearing through their home, the forest's creatures reacted instinctively, some froze in hiding, others fled deeper into the woods, retreating from places that were no longer safe.

Chapter 755

Meanwhile, elsewhere among the chaos. The queen and the princess were swiftly surrounded.

The women who had been tailing them since the hunt began closed ranks, forming a tight, protective formation. No words were wasted. With practiced efficiency, they redirected the queen and princess, guiding them rapidly toward the forest's edge.

Then, Crack.

The sound echoed everywhere at once, sharp and wrong, as if the sky itself had fractured. Every head snapped upward. Magic faltered. Movement stalled.

Above them, space split open.

Reality fractured like glass, jagged lines spreading across the air before tearing wide. From within that broken space, a familiar figure tumbled out, The cub.

Its massive form emerged mid-fall, wings flailing awkwardly as panic drove it. It had teleported randomly, desperately, fleeing danger it could not understand.

And in doing so, it had landed directly above the queen, the princess, and those sworn to protect them.

The women reacted instantly.

"Two people, get the queen and her daughter out!" one of them shouted. "The rest of you, engage the cub and keep it away from them!"

There was no hesitation. Two broke formation at once, gripping Amina and the princess by the arms and pulling them back toward the forest's edge. The others spread out, blades gleaming, magic flaring as they placed themselves between royalty and the falling beast.

The cub hit the ground hard.

Its wings, still too weak and untrained to lift its massive body, twitched uselessly against the earth. It raised its head slowly, golden eyes locking onto the figures surrounding it, the sharp metal in their hands, the killing intent written plainly in their stances.

It roared.

The sound was soft, raw with confusion and fear. In its own tongue, the meaning was simple and desperate:

Why are these two-leg creatures all hostile to me?

Layered beneath the anger was another call, higher, panicked, reaching far beyond the forest.

Mother.

The women did not understand the words. They heard only a beast's roar.

They charged.

Steel flashed as they rushed forward, boots tearing through leaves and soil. The cub sensed the danger immediately, instinct screaming but its body refused to answer the way it needed to. There was no strength left to tear space open, no power to flee.

Panic took over.

With a distressed cry, the cub collapsed inward, wings spreading wide as it curled into itself. Its enormous frame shrank, compressing unnaturally as it folded down, covering itself protecting what it could, the way a child might hide from a storm.

The attack came anyway.

Infused blade energy tore through the air, crescent arcs of lethal force meant to carve the cub apart, enough power behind them to reduce flesh and bone to nothing.

They never reached it.

The moment the attacks crossed a certain distance, the air locked.

The blade energies froze mid-flight, suspended as if embedded in invisible glass. Leaves caught in the shockwave hung motionless. Dust stopped falling. Even sound seemed to choke and die around the cub.

Its inherited talent had acted on its own mixed with its own will to survive.

At the same time, the strange shield surrounding the cub began to fracture.

The suspended blade energies trembled, then slowly dissolved, breaking down into raw power that streamed inward, drawn into the cub's starved body. The air shimmered as the energy was consumed. The cub flinched at first, then cautiously peeked out from beneath its wings, golden eyes widening when it realized.

It was still alive.

Warmth spread through its limbs. Strength returned, if only a little. Instinctively, it quacked a sharp, plaintive sound at the women who stood frozen in shock.

"Retreat!" one of them shouted.

The order was immediate and absolute.

There was no hesitation. The women broke formation and scattered, sprinting away in multiple directions, abandoning the attack entirely. This was a tough opponent, they realized and it would take a lot of time to deal with it when they are supposed to be protecting the royal families.

The cub watched them run.

Confusion rippled through it, followed by distress.

The ones who had fed it were leaving.

With a frightened cry, it lurched forward, wings dragging uselessly as it chased after the retreating figures. Its massive body tore through brush and roots, driven not by aggression, but desperation.

By chance or cruel fate the direction it chose was the same path along which the queen and princess were being hurried away.

And so, unknowingly, the cub ran straight toward them.

At that same moment.

High above the capital, space collapsed inward.

Darkness spilled across the sky as a colossal shadow blanketed entire districts, plunging them into sudden twilight. The air screamed as something vast forced its way through the boundary of reality.

Then it emerged.

The Beast King.

Its mountain-sized form swam out of torn space, feathers brushing clouds aside as its titanic wings spread wide. The sheer presence of it crushed the atmosphere, driving a tremor through stone and soul alike. The city below fell silent, its celebration obliterated in an instant.

Osita had already been receiving reports, some fragmented, alarming, incomplete. He had held his position, uncertain of the full shape of events unfolding, weighing every possibility with care. But through it all, one priority remained unchanged.

The safety of his wife and daughter.

When no new information came, when there seemed to be nothing new, he made his decision.

He would act himself.

Osita rose and turned toward the palace exit, resolve settling heavily in his chest. One step forward when he froze.

His head snapped upward, eyes locking onto the massive form now hovering above his kingdom. Power rippled across his skin as instinct and recognition collided. He felt it immediately.

Something was wrong.

The Beast King's presence was distorted. The sensation was familiar, twisted. Its aura was fractured, warped by an alien undertone that did not belong to it. He sensed the beast king was incomplete, suppressed... ridden by something else.

A somber expression crossed Osita's face. This was not simply a parent coming for its child.

From the Beast King, he sensed danger that a beast king should not have possessed to someone like himself.

Through the haze of fractured awareness, he sensed multiple vast presences, immeasurable, and utterly alien each of them focused on him. Their attention pressed down like a crushing weight. And then he felt them smile.

Before he could speak or react, space itself betrayed him. Osita found his body froze mid-motion, locked in place as though reality had decided he no longer had the right to move.

At the same time, he felt it then something ripping through the Beast King's mind. The last remnants of its true consciousness screamed soundlessly before being erased, wiped clean as though they had never existed.

And then, something else opened its eyes.

The host was claimed.

The people of Osita's kingdom, already breaking under panic from the Beast King's arrival, were suddenly confronted with a new spectacle, one far worse than fear.

The Beast King moved, its huge body glided forward, its destination clear: the western forest.

But as it moved, something impossible happened.

Behind its massive form, reality itself began to peel apart, like a curtain being slowly, deliberately drawn open. The air warped and thinned, stretching into translucent strands that tore one by one.

By the time the Beast King had fully passed, the sky behind it was no longer the sky.

A vast gash split open above the capital.

And at the same moment, the beast king space talent acted upon everyone, every man, woman, child, mage, knight, froze unable to move.

Their bodies locked where they stood, unable to scream and run away or fight what was happening before them.

Above them, the heavens had been replaced.

It was as though the night sky itself had descended upon the city, endless darkness filled with distant, glittering stars. Cold. Silent. Infinite.

But something was wrong, the stars were moving. Slowly at first but it was then clear that something in the stars was moving.

They were drawing closer.

Each "star" pulsed faintly, rhythmically, like a living thing breathing in the dark. And as they approached, the pressure in the air grew heavier, crushing thoughts, bending wills.

Some people wept without realizing it. Some screamed soundlessly, mouths open, eyes wide. Others felt their minds slipping, dragged toward something vast and waiting beyond the tear.

And far below, deep within the western forest, a cub cried out for its mother. Unaware that what was coming for it now was no longer the mother it had known.

From the torn gap left in the Beast King's wake, the sky wept fire.

Meteors began to fall.

They screamed as they descended, tearing through the false night above the capital, their burning tails carving scars of light through the darkness.

Osita felt it before he saw it.

His body was frozen in space, bound by a domain not his own. The pressure pressed in from every direction, attempting to pin his existence in place.

Osita frowned as his power activated.

Space folded around him as his own domain erupted outward, overlapping and then shattering the one restraining him. The invisible cage fractured like glass, and Osita stepped free.

Chapter 756:

The first thing he saw, fire raining from the heavens. Instinct took over.

With a single thought, a massive shield manifested above the city, a vast arc of condensed will and space. The first wave of meteors slammed into it, detonating in blinding bursts of flame and shockwaves that rolled across the barrier.

The city was safe.

For now.

Osita was not satisfied.

His gaze shifted, sharp, furious locking onto the colossal back of the Beast King as it moved relentlessly toward the western forest.

My wife, my daughter. That was where they were, not here. Not this city, not these people who called him king.

And yet, he was still protecting them.

The irony burned hotter than the falling meteors.

At that moment, the oppressive force holding the city eased. Bodies that had been frozen suddenly dropped back into motion. Cries erupted, chaos spilling free once more.

Nwadike moved instantly.

Always punctual.

He appeared at Osita's side the moment movement returned. No words were exchanged. Osita thrust the core of the shield into Nwadike's grasp, raw power condensed and stabilized.

Their eyes met for a single breath.

That was enough.

Osita turned.

The air screamed as he vanished, tearing forward in pursuit of the Beast King, racing toward the western forest.

Toward his family.

Behind him, meteors continued to fall.

Meanwhile, for the Beast King, it took only a single, powerful flap of its massive wings to soar above the forest canopy. From that height, the world below stretched out like a patchwork of green and shadow, but its gaze was already fixed, sharp, on the figure of its child, teetering on the brink of death at the hands of the queen and her princess.

The cub had proven unexpectedly persistent. With its newfound energy and a fierce, almost instinctual need to reunite with its new feeders, it had been able to keep pace despite the distance. Its talent, once erratic and long-range, had evolved in response to its desire. No longer did it teleport across vast stretches of land. Instead, it could now manifest just within the edges of its sight, appearing mere moments ahead of its target, bridging the distance with uncanny speed. This shift made chasing the fleeing queen and her guards terrifyingly simple.

The cub's confidence had grown with each encounter. Every clash with these two-legged creatures had ended in its favor; their weapons and cunning had barely scratched it. The realization fanned the flames of its arrogance. With a guttural roar that echoed through the treetops, the cub announced its presence, a declaration of dominance that made the ground tremble beneath its claws. The queen and her retinue froze for a fraction of a second, caught between fear and disbelief, just as the cub lunged forward with terrifying swiftness.

Its movements were a blur, fluid yet brutal, every stride and swipe exuding the raw power that only youth and instinct could harness. In the cub, there was no hesitation, only the inexorable pull of those who could feed it. It would suppress them and make them feed it.

Amina stopped abruptly, drawing her bow with deliberate calm. Her words directed towards her tense daughter "When dealing with creatures and beasts with talents for space," she said, her voice steady, "your domain is your greatest asset, it is the only space they cannot easily manipulate or affect."

As she spoke, her aura flared to its fifth-tier peak, a visible shimmer of power that made the air around her pulse. Her domain did not fully unfold, yet its essence infused the bow and the arrow nocked within it, sharpening their potency.

She released the arrow. It surged forward like a streak of light, aimed straight at the Beast King cub. The cub, swollen with newfound confidence, barely registered danger. It had grown used to freezing attackers mid-air, dismissing threats before they could reach it. But this, this arrow moved as if space itself bent to Amina's will. There were no barriers, no sudden distortions to halt its flight.

The arrow struck true, slicing through the air and rending the cub's wing. It managed to lift it at the last second, but not enough, the force tore a large, jagged hole, feathers and flesh splintering under the impact.

The cub let out a bone-chilling roar, a mixture of pain and disbelief, before its form flickered violently and blinked away, retreating to safety.

Without hesitation, Amina nocked another arrow. Around her, the women moved with disciplined precision, closing in on the other retreating cub.

This was the sight that greeted the Beast King. Amina sensed the danger instantly, her instincts sharp despite the helplessness she felt. Against all odds, her first action was to reach for her daughter.

The pendant her husband had given her glowed suddenly, activating as she hurled it toward Princess Zainab. The princess caught it absentmindedly, still unaware of the true danger closing in around her.

It was then that Amina saw it, an enormous, gaping maw that seemed to manifest out of thin air tearing through the forest floor, swallowing up earth, trees, and even her mother and the guards in a horrifying sweep. The mouth lunged toward her as well, angry and relentless, but in the same instant, a shield flared into existence around her, throwing her backward through the air.

Where they had stood mere moments ago, the forest was gone, carved out into a long, jagged scar, a testament to the Beast King's raw power. Even without its acute senses, the massive creature landed nearby, its attention immediately drawn to its cub.

The chaos of destruction around it barely registered; The instinct left on the huge body was checking on its child, ensuring its safety.

Then came a roar, a guttural, pained bellow from behind. Reacting instinctively, the Beast King tore open space itself, a sudden void that sucked its cub away, pulling it from danger before it could be

harmd further. Its attention then snapped to Osita, who stood atop the jagged rift the Beast King had created.

"My wife!!" Osita's scream tore through the air, a voice soaked in anguish and fury that made everyone nearby break into a cold sweat. Power, raw and uncontrolled, began to leak from him. His domain, a world-sized sphere of influence unfolded, expanding far beyond his intentions.

The entire planet of Nana felt the sudden shift. Godlings, humans, even creatures far removed from the immediate chaos were caught in Osita's burgeoning domain. No one was spared as his grief and rage warped reality itself, pulling everything into the center of his uncontrollable power.

Behind everyone caught in the space of his domain, unclear entities can be manifesting from thin air behind them, arms reaching to grasp the back of their head.

"Amina!!" Everylife on the planet, heard this broken roar filled with pain and sadness.

For a brief, terrifying moment, it seemed like all life on the planet itself would be undone. Then, as suddenly as it began, a scoff cut through the chaos. Reality snapped back. Everyone who had been ensnared by Osita's raging domain found themselves returned to their normal positions, as if the incident had never happened.

Far away, in the southern continent, Roth sat at his desk, absorbed in his studies as always. The sudden unfolding of a world-sized domain stirred him from his focus, but what drew his attention was how it drew in everylife, and the the malice. This domain exuded intent to destroy, a force hungry to end lives.

He responded immediately. His own domain expanded, colliding with and merging into Osita's. A tense, brief conversation passed between them, silent to everyone else, yet charged with weight. Roth's words were clear, unwavering: Osita must not endanger innocents, and his anger should be directed at the one who had caused his suffering, not the world around him.

Roth's actions, taken to save everyone, had another effect on Osita himself.

As the Roth's domain was pushed back, it reached Osita just as his mind was slipping thread by thread into the abyss of despair. The pressure crushing his senses loosened, and what had been a roaring void receded like a tide pulled back by sheer will.

Osita gasped, consciousness snapping into place.

His consciousness steadied.

Instinctively, Osita took in his surroundings, his awareness sweeping across the area in a quick, almost reflexive scan.

Things became clearer, details he had ignored, drowned out by the sight of his wife's fate replaying endlessly in his mind. Now, with that fog lifted even slightly, reality forced itself back into focus.

His eyes found his daughter.

She was unconscious.

The sight sent a tremor through him. His heart lurched as he took in her still form, her condition uncertain. Fear, quiet, sharp, and immediate cut through him far deeper than the despair had. She was alive, but the realization of how vulnerable she was shook him to his core.

His domain was still active.

But it no longer spread indiscriminately. Innocent lives were not being drawn into it anymore. Its reach had narrowed, restrained.

Mei and her companions unfortunately were not innocent, hence they were held in it's boundary. They were in the space of his domain engaged with his people.

Chapter 757:

The Beast King noticed the change.

It sensed that Osita had not fully succumbed, that the despair threatening to swallow him had momentarily loosened its grip. Yet it did not react immediately. There was no sudden aggression, no rush to strike while Osita was unsteady.

Instead, it remained where it was.

Standing.

Watching him.

Its attention fixed on Osita as though waiting, to see what he would do now that he had found his footing again.

Osita reached out into empty space, his hand opening as though asking for something that was not there.

The effect was immediate.

Mei and her companions, locked in battle, froze mid-motion. Confusion spread across their faces as their bodies betrayed them. Muscles no longer responded to their will. Limbs moved without command, as if seized by an unseen authority far greater than their own.

Panic surfaced, brief and helpless.

Then, like devout servants answering a silent summons, their bodies obeyed.

Claws drove into their own chests, piercing flesh and bone without hesitation. Another hand rose, fingers digging into their skulls. With terrifying strength, they tore them free. There was no struggle left in them by then only motion, precise and deliberate.

Blood spilled freely.

As if completing a ritual they did not understand, Mei and her companions turned toward Osita. They dropped to one knee in unison, arms extended forward. In their grasp lay their own hearts and skulls, offered outward, steady and reverent, like sacrifices placed before a god.

Osita's people, who moments ago had been engaged with them, could only stare.

Shock rippled through their ranks. Even seasoned knights faltered, their steps unsteady. Mages, those accustomed to horrors and arcane atrocities felt their stomachs churn violently at the sight. Some looked away too late. Others could not look away at all.

Just a simple, casual gesture from Osita and it was over. Mei and her companions, like a flesh statue, held their heart and head, their bodies finally released from the force that had claimed them.

Osita's domain is known as "Aethelgard, The Absolute Bastion" a manifestation of osita new reality as a family man, his obsession with the safety of his family lives.

The first thing an intruder sees isn't a horizon, but the underbelly of a world. Aethelgard is so massive that it curves over the "ground" of the domain like a second sky. It is a brutalist masterpiece of Obsidian representing his demonic, unbreakable core and Silver representing the purity of his devotion to his family.

At the center of this floating world-fortress is a sun-like engine of compressed magical energy, the sum total of Osita's vast knowledge, burning like a star to keep the lights on for his "children."

Aethelgard works in a way that any entity he deems uninvited or sees as harmful to his family life takes massive psychic and physical damage just by existing within the space. It feels like the weight of a billion tons of stone pressing down. Conversely, his allies receive a massive boost to regeneration and mana recovery.

The domain due to being the manifestation of a father's hyper-vigilance. Depending on the nature of the threat, the internal geography of the planet-sized fortress shifts to create specific "Counter-Environments."

When a threat is detected, Aethelgard doesn't just crush them; it swallows them into specialized chambers designed to neutralize their specific "type" of harm.

What happened to Mei and her companions were the effect of those lower than the sixth stage being targeted by the domain.

Within Aethelgard, the "Weight of a Billion Tons" is not just felt by the muscles; it is felt by the Conscience. Osita's obsession with his family's safety is so pure and absolute that it manifests as a "Holy Radiance" of the home. When an ordinary being even a powerful warrior or mage enters this space with ill intent, they are struck by a crushing realization: "I am a monster in the presence of a Perfect Protector."

The intruder is flooded with the collective love, anxiety, and protective rage Osita feels for his family.

To the intruder, their own life feels small, dirty, and dangerous.

They begin to view their own presence as a "stain" on the pristine silver and obsidian floors of the fortress.

Because they cannot endure the psychic weight of being "The Enemy" in a place of "Absolute Safety," their survival instinct flips. They decide that the only way to ensure the safety of the "Family" is to remove themselves from the equation.

With a look of ecstatic, terrifying peace, they reach into their own chests. Because the Domain is a higher dimension, the laws of biology are secondary to the Law of the Bastion. They pull out their own still-beating heart and skull without a scream.

They are presenting the "Tools of Life" and the "Tools of Thought" to the Master of the House. It is a silent plea: "I give you my life so that I can no longer be a threat to yours."

These ritualistic sacrifices are not wasted. As the intruder dies, holding their heart out in the middle of a grand obsidian hallway, the silver filigree on the floor rises up like liquid mercury.

It wraps around the offering and the body, pulling it down into the floor. The intruder's life force is converted into Structural Integrity for the fortress.

The walls of Aethelgard are literally reinforced by the remorse of its enemies. Every new stone in the fortress was once someone who realized they weren't worthy of breathing the same air as Osita's kin.

"Take the princess and leave" Osita's voice came out hoarse, scraped raw by strain and grief.

His people did not hesitate.

They moved as one, crossing the space in seconds, their presence brief and purposeful. None of them acknowledged the Beast King. They reached the princess, lifting her body with practiced care.

At the same moment, Aethelgard responded.

The domain released them.

Space folded inward, then expelled them outward, returning them to the normal world in a single, seamless transition. The oppressive weight vanished instantly. Blue sky appeared overhead, vast and open, almost jarringly peaceful.

Osita's people froze.

They did not speak. They did not relax. They understood what this meant. A battle of higher dimensions was about to unfold around them, one that would not involve them and one they could not interfere with.

Behind them, Aethelgard sealed itself.

Osita remained.

His gaze settled fully on the Beast King.

Something about the creature was wrong.

Before, it had registered as a fifth-stage entity, dangerous, yes, but fundamentally limited. Now, standing within the Bastion without being crushed, that assessment no longer held. The absence of suppression was unmistakable.

The Beast King had been forced into the sixth stage, pushed beyond its natural limits.

The domain's failure to weigh it down was proof enough.

Yet the advancement was incomplete.

The Beast King lacked a world-wide domain of its own, unable to impose its reality over others. That absence came at a cost but also with a trade-off. The power that should have been spread outward had instead collapsed inward.

Its spatial talent had intensified.

Space around it felt unstable, resistant in a way that set it apart from lower-stage beings.

The Beast King before him was present and not.

Its vast body existed slightly out of alignment with reality, layered within a different stratum of space. Even within Aethelgard, Osita could not fully touch it. The domain pressed against that warped boundary and simply... slid past, unable to anchor itself to the creature's true position.

It was here.

And elsewhere.

Osita recognized the technique immediately. He had methods to deal with such spatial displacement, several in fact but none of them needed to be used yet. This was a problem that might still be resolved without violence.

His gaze shifted.

Slowly, deliberately, Osita looked toward the Beast King's stomach.

In his initial rage, something important had slipped his mind.

"She is still alive, isn't she?"

The question was calm, but the air tightened around it.

The Beast King smiled.

It was a deeply wrong expression, one that did not belong on such a massive, avian creature. The curve of its beak, the way its many eyes narrowed in something approximating amusement, sent an instinctive sense of revulsion through the space.

Osita exhaled.

A long, controlled breath of relief escaped him, tension easing from his shoulders just enough to matter.

"Why," he asked quietly, "have I drawn the attention of you dark gods? I have never stood against you. I have never sought you out. I only wished to live in peace."

His eyes did not leave the Beast King.

"Why is my peaceful life being disturbed by you?"

The answer did not come from a single mouth.

Five overlapping voices spoke at once, layered and discordant, resonating from within the Beast King's form. Each voice carried a different tone, yet all spoke the same words.

"We have no quarrel with you." The smile widened.

"We were merely invited out to play."

A pause.

"And you," the voices continued, amused and certain, "are the target of the one who sent the invitation."

Chapter 758

From the kneeling remains of Mei's companions, one skull began to crumble. It did not crack or fracture, it simply turned to ash.

Osita's eyes flashed.

"Murmur." The name left his mouth like a blade drawn halfway.

Anger surged through him, sharp and immediate, and Aethelgard answered. The Bastion flared, its laws tightening as Osita directed his will outward not at the Beast King, but beyond it. The domain searched, layers upon layers of reality peeling back as he attempted to locate Murmur and drag him into the Absolute Bastion by force.

There was nothing, no resistance, no attempt at evasion, no trace at all. Murmur had prepared for this.

The realization settled heavily.

Osita's gaze returned to the dark gods before him, and through his connection to his wife, strained but still present he felt her life force. Faint and alive.

He closed his eyes in acceptance.

"Release her," Osita said quietly, the words scraping from his throat, "and deal with me as you wish."

Mocking laughter answered him. It came from the Beast King's form, five voices overlapping in amusement, echoing slightly out of sync with one another.

"It pleases us to see such willingness," they said. "We always welcome new zealots."

The laughter softened into something colder.

"But your goals and desire does not align with ours."

The Beast King straightened slightly, its many eyes fixed on Osita.

"Even now, with the pain you carry, we cannot tempt you to take root within you," the voices continued.
"You do not hear us the way others do."

A pause.

"The one you call Murmur does."

The Beast King lowered its massive head until its beak hovered near Osita's ear, its presence warping the space between them.

"He listens," the voices whispered. "You do not."

"You have been assigned a role," the voices said softly. "One you must now play."

A faint smile crept back into the creature's expression.

"You have to play with us, to our satisfaction."

The Beast King lingered there for a moment longer, close enough that Osita could feel the distortion of space ripple against his skin.

"So," the voices concluded, amused and patient, "why don't we get on with it?"

As the last word left the Beast King's mouths, its massive form vanished. There was no buildup, no distortion. The colossal body simply ceased to be.

In its place stood a humanoid, avian figure leaner, denser its silhouette sharp and wrong. Five dark wings unfurled behind it, layered and asymmetrical.

It was already in front of Osita.

The punch landed before the thought of defense could form.

The blow struck Osita square in the gut, space folding inward around the point of impact. His feet lifted from the surface of Aethelgard as if gravity had been dismissed outright. The force carried through him, launching his body backward.

The Beast King did not pause.

Portals bloomed open behind Osita mid-flight, perfectly timed, perfectly aligned. He was swallowed by one and expelled from another, each transition compounding his velocity. With every portal, his speed increased, acceleration stacking without limit.

Space screamed as he crossed it.

Osita became a streak, then a point. Then a falling star.

By the time he broke free of the final portal, he was no longer visible as a figure only a dot of light plunging downward like a meteor.

Far below, in the capital city, the vast tear in space that had rained destruction finally sealed shut.

The sky returned to blue.

In the aftermath, Nwadike lay sprawled across the ground, his chest heaving violently. His clothes were soaked through with sweat, clinging to him as his hands still trembled.

The shield. His father's shield, he had held it.

Every instinct in his body had screamed to let go, to collapse, to flee but he had not. He had anchored himself and endured, bracing against the onslaught until the last of the meteors had fallen.

Or so he believed.

High above, Osita tore through the air.

The moment his awareness sharpened enough for him to recognize where he was headed, he tried to arrest his descent. He twisted, forced power through his body, reaching for control.

A portal opened, perfectly placed.

He passed through it and was flung out again, his trajectory corrected, his speed preserved. Each attempt to regain balance was answered the same way. The Beast King allowed no deviation.

Osita could barely react anymore.

His body had accumulated mass through velocity and compression alone, a consequence of the space he had been forced through. His flesh could endure the impact.

The world beneath him could not as he fell, the air ignited around him.

And the ground below was about to learn what it meant when a protector was turned into a weapon.

The people of the capital city watched in stunned horror as a small dot appeared in the sky above them. Flames licked the edges of its form, hot and fierce, as it fell toward the earth. The sound came next, like the roar of a nuclear strike, crushing and deafening, followed instantly by a shockwave that ripped through districts and streets alike.

Those closest to the impact were obliterated in an instant, reduced to a bloody, unrecognizable mush.

But that was not all.

From above came the cackling, overlapping laughter of the Dark Gods, echoing in the minds of every living soul in the city. The moment it reached them, civilians collapsed, clutching their heads in agony, writhing as invisible hands tore at their sanity. Panic rippled like wildfire, though it mattered little. The destruction had already begun.

Osita reacted instinctively.

Even when bruised, even barely in control of his battered body but quickly healing body. Aethelgard's power surged outward. Tiny, imperceptible shield bubbles snapped into existence over every citizen, covering them like protective domes. Within the shield, the people slipped into a deep, instant sleep, insulated from both physical harm and psychic torment.

His body shot upward, slicing through the sound barrier, flames trailing behind him as he closed the distance to the Beast King. The air itself tore around him.

Mid-air, Osita struck.

Two rapid, precise blows hit the Beast King in succession. His fist connected with its torso and then its wing, each strike landing with devastating concussive force. Without hesitation, Osita grabbed one of the dark wings, spinning violently.

The overlapping voices of the Dark Gods laughed in amusement at the display, their echoes distorted and eerie.

Osita drew deep on the core of his power. Energy surged through him, the weight of Aethelgard behind every muscle, every thought. With one final heave, he flung the Beast King.

The creature became a blur, a streak of darkness hurtling into the distance, faster than sight could follow.

Osita hung momentarily in the sky, surveying the devastation below. The city, his people, his home, it was all shattered. Fires blazed, streets crumbled, and cries of terror would haunt the ruins long after the dust settled.

There was no hesitation.

He surged forward, leaving the ruined capital behind, his figure a comet of retribution as he gave chase to the Beast King.

The battle was far from over.

Osita's mind caught fire with shock from what he saw when he caught up.

The Beast King mid-fall made no effort to correct its trajectory. It did not beat its wings, did not twist to slow itself, did not resist the fall. Instead, it deployed the same tactic it had used against him: portals opened behind its body, propelling it downward with terrifying acceleration.

The realization hit Osita like a punch to the chest.

Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

They were no longer within his territory or domain space. The familiar laws of Aethelgard, the Absolute Bastion, the crushing certainty of his domain no longer applied. They had crossed the invisible threshold. They were now within Omadi Kingdom territory.

Even as comprehension sank in, Osita's instincts took over.

From the final portal opening beneath the Beast King, he discerned the trajectory: straight for the capital.

He acted.

A gesture, fluid and immense, and the hand of his true form appeared.

It was enormous, larger than any city block, black and silver, veined with energy. It stretched outward, a living manifestation of his power, reaching for the cackling dot of light that aimed to annihilate the capital of his rival kingdom.

From the perspective of Omadi's citizens, the sky above their city suddenly tore apart with a cry of air being ripped asunder. Heads tilted, eyes widened, hearts hammered in unison. High above, a blazing dot of light fell faster than reason should allow, trailing flames and energy in its descent.

And then it happened.

Out of nowhere, a colossal, scaled hand appeared, blotting out the sky. Shadows fell across streets, buildings, and terrified faces. The hand descended, reaching for the dot of light.

The city watched, frozen, as the falling streak approached. The hand closed around it with impossible precision. For a heartbeat, it seemed the dot of light had been captured.

And then, just as suddenly, it passed through.

Chapter 759:

Like it had not been there at all.

The crowd gasped. Children screamed. Soldiers scrambled. But no one could comprehend the scale or the physics of what they had just witnessed.

Somewhere above, Osita's eyes narrowed. A deafening explosion tore through the sky, shaking the very air. The following shockwave struck the ground like a hammer of pure force, shredding flesh from bone and flattening streets in its path.

The Beast King's body, unlike Osita's, could not withstand the assault. It struck the deep hollow left by its own fall, flattening against the earth with a sound that made the world itself tremble. Limbs bent at impossible angles, wings splayed uselessly, feathers and scales sheared apart.

And yet, from that mangled form, the cackling did not cease.

The sound spread, dissonant and mocking, as the Beast King pushed itself upright. Flesh tore, bones realigned, and injuries healed as if nothing had happened. Its body reformed, regenerating with a horrifying, unnatural precision.

At that moment, Osita appeared, anchoring the creature with his domain. With a single motion, he pulled the Beast King back into Aethelgard.

At the same time, flames rose from where the beast king body fell burying away any traces of it left.

The moment it crossed the boundary, everything changed.

The Beast King found itself confined in a room of Aethelgard, its spatial talents gone, its portals disabled. It could not manipulate the environment. Its body, powerful and monstrous, was trapped under the absolute authority of Osita's Bastion.

From the floor, dark purple flames began to rise, licking upward like sentient tongues, heat coiling in the air. They aimed to reduce the Beast King to ash, to incinerate every trace of its existence.

But it reacted.

With a savage motion, the Beast King tore its own stomach open, revealing the figure of Amina, swallowed whole within its body. The display was grotesque, horrifying, and deliberate, an attempt to provoke, to manipulate.

Instantly, the environment shifted. The room vanished.

The Beast King now stood directly before Osita, before the seething, unyielding form of the Bastion's master.

"I told you," the overlapped voices said, voice low and lethal, "you have a role. You must play it."

The Beast King snarled, eyes glowing, wings spread. Without hesitation, it lunged.

The two collided midair.

The force of the encounter shattered the space around them. Reality bent, buildings in distant lands shook, and the world of Nana itself seemed to tremble under the weight of their battle.

Each strike tore fragments of the environment apart. Each movement carried the potential to reshape continents.

As Osita and the Beast King tore through the veil separating Aethelgard from reality, their battle no longer remained confined to any single plane.

Every strike, every collision, every sweep of wing or limb reshaped landscapes. Mountains shattered, forests ignited, rivers boiled, and oceans heaved. Entire regions disappeared in the wake of their fight, leaving behind smoldering wastelands and craters that could be seen from space.

No one was spared.

Not a single godling, regardless of race, station, or continent, was immune. The speed and scale of the strikes left no time for reaction. No army could marshal in defense. No protective wards could hold. Every life on the planet of Nana, from the smallest creature to the greatest warrior, found itself utterly at the mercy of two sixth-tier beings, their intentions unknowable, their presence invisible.

People could not see who or what was striking. All they felt was destruction raining down around them, indiscriminate and unyielding. The sky cracked, the earth shivered, and the world itself seemed to scream.

And behind it all, in the shadows of the cosmos, far more was unfolding.

It began when the Dark Gods seized power. Shadows of creation themselves. The Origin Gods sensed the intrusion immediately. For sometime now, they had laid low, watching from the spaces between worlds, their attention fleeting, almost detached, as if the unfolding events were a mere curiosity.

But when the Dark Gods influence crept toward Osita's kingdom, the amusement faded. Their eyes turned toward the mortal realm. They observed everything, every thought, every heartbeat, every flicker of ambition and fear. Nothing escaped their gaze. Until the equilibrium shifted.

It began with Osita. The man who had once walked the line between human and demon faltered. Madness seized him, subtle at first, like a shadow curling around the edges of his mind. But soon, it consumed him entirely. His domain, a reality-warping extension of his will, began to draw all life within

the world of Nana into itself. What had happened to Mei and her companion, an isolated, tragic echo now threatened to repeat on a global scale.

Osita's fractured mind perceived every living thing on Nana as a threat. Every city, every forest, every sentient being was an enemy. And as his perception expanded, so too did the reach of his domain, stretching tendrils of destruction into every corner of the planet.

At that moment, the Origin Gods stirred. The law holding them was lifted. Their world, their creation, was in jeopardy. Action, once unnecessary, became imperative. Yet Roth struck before Osita could fully enact his fatal will, staving off immediate annihilation.

Still, much went unnoticed. Nana's surface surged to lethal temperatures, oceans boiled, and skies ignited with unearthly storms. Crepuscular, whose patience was thin, readied to snuff Osita from existence entirely. But Osita, by some sliver of fortune reclaimed his mind, which marked his survival. Still the danger was still there.

The escalation resumed with brutal inevitability. Osita's first fall in his own capital city left untold numbers dead, buildings reduced to rubble, and the very streets soaked in the ash of despair. The magnitude of his act approached the limits set by cosmic law for sixth-tier beings.

It was then that the presence of the Judges began to manifest. Silent, impartial, inexorable, they emerged as an undercurrent of inevitability. Each city that fell, each life extinguished, lent them form and strength. The more Osita and beast king action reflected on reality, the closer they came, their influence stretching across the world like the slow tightening of a celestial noose.

But the Origin Gods sensed yet another force, one their mother had once feared to name. Its emergence was neither sudden, it unfolded with the inevitability, no less formidable than the Judges, no less absolute as it began to assert itself.

Long ago, when they had first been introduced to the laws that bound higher beings like themselves, the Origin Gods had asked a simple, yet dangerous question: what would happen if one chose not to obey these laws? What if a being defied the equilibrium and acted against the balance itself?

At the time, the answer was vague, almost evasive. The Judges were the enforcers of order, the upholders of balance but what protected those who refused to submit to their authority? Who intervened when a being turned away from law and harmony, choosing chaos or ambition over cosmic stability?

Today, the answer became chillingly clear. The Origin Gods learned the name of that counterforce: Dominion. The name appeared in their mind like it has always been there waiting to be uncovered. But a name alone offered no comfort; they had no understanding of what kind of entity it was or entities that served as the opposite of balance. This was a cosmic order their mother had long feared they might ever encounter, one she had hoped to shield them from.

Osita, fractured by madness and due to his demonic heritage, had fallen into the domain of Dominion. By aligning whether willingly or unwittingly with this antithesis of balance, he drew the attention of its champions. The Hegemons, powerful and relentless enforcers of Dominion, emerged in his defense, just as the Judges would have risen for order. Where law and balance might have punished him, Dominion intervened to protect him.

As this was unfolding, the Origin Gods themselves sensed a storm approaching. A response radiated from their mother, Nana, fear permeating even her eternal essence. She had been briefed on this before: the tremors of cosmic-scale conflict, the clash of forces so immense that worlds could unravel in its wake.

The magnitude of the danger became undeniable. If the battles between the Judges and the Hegemons escalated unchecked, what remained of their creation, the world of Nana, the kingdoms and cities, the

very fabric of life would be obliterated. Nana's fear was for everything she had wrought, for the fragile balance that even gods could not easily restore once broken.

And so, even as Osita "fought" for his life, even as Dominion and balance began their inexorable dance of destruction and protection, the Origin Gods prepared themselves for war. They were no longer distant observers.

It was at this moment that Crepuscular acted, and his decision stunned his mother and siblings. Without warning, he shed the trappings of his human guise and revealed his true, godly form, a blazing avian entity, a phoenix whose flames rivaled the light of the sun. His wings spanned wider than continents, his body immense, nearly the size of one of Nana's moons.

Chapter 760:

He descended toward the planet, claws digging into the ethereal barrier that enveloped Nana, and began to tear it apart, rending the fabric of reality itself. The sight left his siblings frozen, awe and shock painted across their faces.

"I don't have the brains of our little brother," Crepuscular said, his voice clear even in the void. "He may have found a better solution in this situation, but he is not here. It would be a shame for me as an older sibling to let there be no home left for him and our sister to return to."

As the rupture widened, a glimpse of the Upside-Down World became visible, a shadowed, inverted mirror of reality, distant yet impossibly close. Beneath their gaze, the pillars that had been erected by ascending demigods trembled violently. Their purpose was clear: to maintain the boundary between worlds, to resist incursions like this. Yet Crepuscular's power was absolute; cracks began to splinter across their surfaces. Two of the towers shattered entirely, unable to withstand the strain as the rift grew ever larger.

Without hesitation, Crepuscular launched himself through the opening, wings slicing through the void as he dove toward the Upside-Down World. Here, he would face their dark counterpart directly, taking initiative for the first time in this eternal confrontation of theirs.

He understood the stakes clearly, for the cosmic order to remain unbroken in their world, the source of the chaos had to be neutralized. That source was clear Osita, driven to destruction by the Dark Gods, whose actions had sparked the rise of both Judges and Hegemons. Only by halting the devastation at its root could he ensure that neither force would have reason to fully manifest in Nana, preventing the world from becoming a battlefield for cosmic enforcers of order and dominion alike.

A voice thundered through the void, cutting through the brilliance of Crepuscular's descent. Jaus shed his mortal guise, revealing his true form, a colossal whale, its body as vast as the flaming phoenix before him. With a roar that shook the very edges of the gap, he charged forward.

"Don't hog all the fun, brother!" Jaus bellowed, his tone playful but serious. "I've long wanted to smash the faces of those imitators!"

Mahu trembled as she watched her siblings transform, her own voice rising to reach the ears of every ascended god, both old and new.

"Take care," she said, her tone calm but urgent. "Keep this world safe while we are gone."

Then, like a living shard of moonlight, Mahu revealed her true form: a silver-white wolf, radiant and impossibly graceful. She leapt into the widening gap, and once fully through, she reached for the edges of the rift. With a force that radiated authority, she pulled the fabric of reality together, sealing the gap behind her. The world of Nana shuddered in relief, the crackling tension of the barrier easing under her touch.

Inside the Upside-Down World, Crepuscular's attention was immediately drawn to the Dark Sun, a black star suspended in the void, radiating heat and corruption. The intensity of its flames made him scoff in contempt.

"How could such a disgrace be my counterpart?" he muttered, wings slicing through the inverted skies.

With a motion both casual and terrifying, he opened his massive beak and swallowed the Dark Sun whole, extinguishing its fiery malevolence as though it were no more than a bitter morsel.

But before he could fully savor his triumph, a massive force collided with him. A creature, bearing an uncanny resemblance to him and wreathed in dark flames, rammed headlong into his body. The impact sent shockwaves through the void, rippling across the edges of the Upside-Down World and echoing even through the sealed rift. Crepuscular's eyes narrowed, fire flaring along his wings, as he braced for the counterattack.

Crepuscular's counterpart engaged him with ferocious intensity, wings of fire clashing against shadows of darkness, igniting the void with every strike. Across another part of the Upside-Down World, the same chaos unfolded as the Origin Gods, though outnumbered two to one, tore through the landscape with unrestrained fury.

But the odds did nothing to dampen their resolve; if anything, it exhilarated them. For a millennium since they were born, they had never known a battle like this. Every strike, every surge of power reminded them of the thrill of true conflict, the pure, unbridled clash of forces that existed dormant in them.

Meanwhile, far from the immediate storm of combat, Murmur exhaled heavily. He felt a gnawing urgency deep within him, a pressure he could no longer ignore. The presence of both Judges and Hegemons manifesting as ripples in the cosmic order unerved him.

From the beginning, Murmur had known that dealing with the Dark Gods could only lead to uncontrollable chaos. He had still taken this path, and despite the devastation, it had been the correct choice. Yet the Dark Gods were still a wild, uncontrollable factor in the equation. Their influence could undo all of his carefully laid plans.

If the conflict continued unchecked, there would be nothing left for him, no power, no victories, no gains, only ash and ruin. Every strategy, every patient calculation would be meaningless if all that could have been won was destroyed in the storm of divine and infernal warfare.

Thankfully, he sensed a turning point. Osita's battle, the catalyst for all this cosmic upheaval, was finally nearing its conclusion. A sliver of hope flickered in Murmur's mind; the chaos might be contained, the forces he could not control might be held at bay.

After leaving Omadi's kingdom behind, Osita began to truly comprehend the scope of what was happening. The words of the Dark Gods, twisted as they had seemed before, finally aligned in his mind.

He understood, with grim clarity, that he really had a role to play. Especially when the Dark Gods revealed their threat involving the still-living Amina, the consequences of refusal became undeniable. To survive and to keep the fragile lives of those he cared for intact, he would have to accompany them, to act as a participant in the game they orchestrated. And in doing so, he would fulfill the role that had been assigned to him from the moment the Dark Gods had chosen him as their amusement.

He also understood the cost. When the dust settled, when the world came to learn who was responsible for the sudden, incomprehensible deaths and devastation, it would be him. Osita, the reluctant pawn, would be hated, reviled, and feared.

It was at this time abruptly, the cackling Beast King froze midair. Osita hesitated, instincts screaming to strike, but he held back. The monstrous figure of the beast king began to crumble before his eyes, its body disintegrating into fragments as the Dark Gods let out a resigned sigh. The game, their amusement, was drawing to a close.

For a millennium, the Dark Gods had been confined, imprisoned behind the pillars the demigods had erected. They had languished in darkness, cut off from open sight of the world they longed to manipulate, forced into blindness. Until today, they had only been able to observe, to whisper, to plot.

But now, the veil had lifted. Their return had been subtle, deliberate and Osita, whether willingly or not, had become the catalyst for their resurgence.

Osita froze. Before him, the Beast King held Amina's body by the throat, her unconscious form limp and fragile in its massive grasp. His heart clenched, every instinct screaming to act, but his eyes were locked on her face, on the life that still flickered faintly within her.

"Please," he whispered, voice raw with desperation. "Please... return her to me."

The Beast King tilted its head, the first hint of a serious tone since their encounters. With deliberate slowness, it tapped Amina's forehead, and Osita felt it before he saw it, the pull of her soul, drawn out like a silver thread, shimmering in the void between life and death. His stomach dropped as her essence hovered in the Beast King's grasp.

Then, with a cruel sort of precision, the Beast King let her lifeless body fall. Instinctively, Osita caught her, arms tightening around her fragile frame, but his gaze never wavered. All his attention, all his being, was fixed on her soul, held just out of reach like a prize.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, voice trembling, eyes blazing with restrained fury.

The Beast King's gaze met his, serious and sharp. Its voice, multiple, overlapping, layered answered as one:

"Fulfilling our end of the deal."

Osita's blood boiled. Every fiber of him wanted to strike, to obliterate the monstrosity before him, to end the existence of this being that toyed so mercilessly with him. And yet... he didn't move. He couldn't.

Because he could see her soul, tender, fragile, but whole. It was there. It was real. And as long as it was, there was hope.

He took a steadying breath, clutching Amina's body tighter to his chest, and allowed himself a single, desperate thought: she was still there. That was enough... for now.