

## **Guardian gods 761**

Chapter 761:

At that moment, the air shifted. A huge hand, gripped the Beast King's claws, halting its movement. The sharp, metallic tang of ash filled the air, accompanied by a presence both calming and commanding. The World Spirit, herald of Keles, the goddess of death, had arrived.

Its gaze fell directly on the soul cradled in the Beast King's grasp, and a low, resigned sigh escaped its lips.

"Today has been... quite a busy day," Wardenwild said, "So many souls to guide to the underworld..."

A while back before Amina's soul was pulled out, Wardenwild with his many children were busy guiding the souls that met their end at the hands of the two fighting.

It was then its attention sharpened. It had felt a life end but the soul had been suppressed from its natural destination. It took him a glance to locate the soul. Wardenwild's eyes flicked to Osita, and recognition passed between them. Osita's heart skipped, he knew this being. The World Spirit knew him too.

Turning its attention to the Beast King, Wardenwild waved a hand. Instantly, Amina's soul lifted from the Beast King's grasp and floated into Wardenwild's own, luminous and untouched.

"That does not belong to you," Wardenwild said, voice absolute. "It must be guided to its rightful place."

For a heartbeat, Osita allowed himself a flicker of relief but he then realised what that meant. Before the World Spirit could depart, a sudden surge of desperation took over. Chains of energy sprang from his still open domain, wrapping around Wardenwild. He lunged forward, reaching for Amina's soul, intent on reclaiming it with his own hands.

But Wardenwild was not so easily thwarted. With a flick of his hand, the soul vanished from Osita's grasp, and in an instant, a deer appeared from nowhere, ethereal and luminous, gently taking the soul into its care.

Osita skidded to a halt, chest heaving, eyes fixed on the fleeting image. The World Spirit, still bound in chains, gave no warning, no hesitation—only the steady, unwavering presence of inevitability. Osita's desperation burned hotter than ever, yet he was faced with a stark truth: some forces, even gods could not be wrested from their purpose.

The luminous deer cradling Amina's essence was about to vanish into the Underworld, the final destination ordained by death itself.

Then the Beast King moved.

Something had changed. The chaotic uncertainty that had always surrounded the monstrous entity was gone. No longer were multiple dark gods masked within its form, only one remained. The air seemed to tighten as the true presence of Keles counterpart took over.

The Beast King teleported directly before the deer. The ethereal creature barely had time to react before a pulse of dark presence brushed against it. The life within it was snuffed out, Amina's soul was absorbed back into the Beast King's possession.

Wardenwild's authority, absolute in the realms of life and death, faltered before this counterpart. Every power he wielded, every command he could issue, proved insufficient. His authority handed to him by Keles fell short when faced with the shadow of Keles.

Osita and Wardenwild alike were forced to watch, powerless, as a new rupture tore the void open. Across the widening rift, a figure emerged. Osita's chest tightened, recognition and dread colliding. The Queen of Omadi's Kingdom. A thought, sharp and cold, pierced his mind, and he screamed internally: No... no, this can't be happening...

But it was happening. The Beast King, unmoved by his desperation, pressed Amina's soul into the clueless body of Nwadiebeube's wife, merging life and essence with ruthless finality.

A voice, layered with amusement and chilling calm, rang out in the void.

"You know where to find your wife. Go... and get her."

With those words, the last tenuous thread holding the Beast King's monstrous body together vanished. Its form shattered like fragile glass, scattering into nothingness. The presence that had been so fearsome dissolved, leaving only emptiness behind.

Wardenwild exhaled slowly, shaking his head as he looked at Osita. The devastation on Osita's face, the shock and grief, was plain to see. Wardenwild reached down to the shattered remains of the deer, the ethereal creature that had carried Amina's soul, one of his own children. With a solemn gesture, he absorbed the child back into his essence, and in an instant, the spirit vanished, leaving no trace behind.

For Osita, the world tilted on its axis, yet the voice's words lingered, a cruel mocking invitation: Go... and get her.

For the second time that day, the residents of the planet Nana learned what true fear felt like.

It was not the fear of death, nor of destruction, but something far more suffocating, helplessness. Feet that had been moving moments ago froze in place as panic seized hearts all at once, an instinctive understanding spreading faster than thought itself: something vast and terrible was unraveling.

Then the voice returned.

It tore through the fabric of realit

y, dragging minds away from whatever small, fragile normalcy they clung to. This time, it was no longer distant or restrained. The pain carried within it was raw, unfiltered, and overwhelming. Loss thundered through every syllable, and as the voice roared, it forced itself into the souls of all who heard it.

People who did not know why found tears streaming down their faces. Warriors dropped their weapons. Elders clutched their chests as though mourning someone they had never met. The anguish in that roar did not ask for sympathy, it demanded it, infecting every living being with its weight.

Osita roared until his throat shredded, until his voice cracked and finally broke. Blood seeped from his eyes, running like crimson tears down his face, staining the ground beneath him. There was nowhere for the rage to go, nowhere for the grief to settle.

After schemes layered upon schemes, after being toyed with by dark gods who treated lives like pieces on a board, this was how it ended.

His wife was still beyond his reach.

The realization burned worse than any wound. The injustice of it threatened to tear him apart from within.

But this time, he did not lose himself.

He did not let his pain lash out blindly, did not allow his domain to swallow innocent lives in a moment of uncontrolled despair. He remembered the devastation of his past mistake and the wrath it could incur. He would not repeat it.

Osita closed his bleeding eyes.

And vanished.

Space folded around him without ceremony. One heartbeat he stood amid fury, the next he was somewhere impossibly quiet.

A bedroom.

Soft moonlight filtered through drawn curtains. The air was warm, untouched by divine wrath or celestial despair. On the bed lay a woman, peacefully asleep, her breathing slow and steady, unaware that the presence of a broken man now stood only steps away.

Osita stared at her, his rage coiling tightly beneath a fragile layer of restraint.

She looked nothing like his wife.

The shape of her face, the way her hair was made, the rhythm of her breathing, none of it matched the woman he had lost. And yet, Osita did not see her with mortal eyes alone. His gaze slipped past flesh and bone, past the fragile illusion of individuality, into the deeper truth that lay beneath.

There she was.

His wife's soul, woven seamlessly with the Queen's own, two essences braided together so perfectly that even he had to focus to tell where one ended and the other began. It was not domination, nor possession, but a fusion, deliberate and meticulous. The dark god handiwork was unmistakable. As time passed, the threads binding them would tighten, memories bleeding into one another, emotions aligning, identities smoothing into a single, indistinguishable whole.

Soon, there would be no clear line left to draw.

Osita stood at the very edge of his domain, the invisible boundary humming faintly against his presence. All it would take was a single step. One reach of his hand, one act of will, and the Queen would be his. No alarm would sound. No mortal would sense his intrusion

But Murmur never did anything without reason.

If Murmur had placed his wife here, as a queen then this was not mercy, nor coincidence. It was a trap shaped like a temptation. If Osita took her now, it would not be a reunion; it would be a declaration. The Queen of a rival kingdom vanishing without explanation, stolen away by a mad man whose name already carried fear.

The narrative would write itself.

Murmur was patient, relentless, and cruelly precise. He wanted Osita to reach out. To claim. To prove every whispered accusation true. To turn him into the villain of the story, draped in righteous outrage and holy condemnation.

And Osita felt the bitterness of it settle deep in his chest.

He sank slowly onto a chair without realizing it, his attention never leaving her. Minutes bled into hours as he watched her sleep, memorizing a face that was not his wife's yet carried her presence in every subtle movement. When the Queen finally stirred, when her eyes opened and she rose from the bed, Osita did not look away.

She moved through the room unaware, unguarded, utterly human.

## Chapter 762:

Even when she left the chamber, even when the door closed softly behind her, Osita remained where he was, still watching the empty space she had occupied, caught between longing and restraint, knowing with painful clarity that the hardest battles were not fought with power...but with patience.

Osita could not stop the tears as they carved slow, burning paths down his face.

For all his power, for all the terror his name could inspire, he had never felt so small. Every path before him was narrowed by the people he loved. His will, capable of shaking worlds, now felt bound by invisible chains forged from care and responsibility.

His children.

What would become of them if he took the Queen away? What kind of existence would he be dragging them into, a life spent fleeing sanctuaries, hunted by kingdoms, cursed by prayers filled with rage? The thought alone made his chest ache. To claim his wife at the cost of his children's future would be nothing short of cruelty.

That kind of selfishness was something he refused to become, it was not an action she would be proud of.

"She is safe," he whispered to himself, the words trembling as they left his lips.

She was still here. Still breathing. Still anchored to the world, even if not in the way he had dreamed. She was within reach, not of his hands, but of his hope. Given time, given patience, he would find a way.

For now, restraint was the only mercy he could offer.

There were other burdens waiting for him heavier and unavoidable. The consequences of what he had done today could not be ignored. Lives had been lost, and no amount of justification could erase that truth. The echoes of their deaths already rippled outward, carried by rumor, fear, and grief.

He knew the world would not stay silent.

The people of Nana would demand answers. Entire nations would gather with accusations, with trembling voices asking whether the devastation had been necessary. Whether the price paid had been worth the survival of others. Whether Osita was still a protector... or something far worse.

He would not hide from it.

The hatred would come, thick and suffocating, and he would stand in its path alone. His kingdom could not be allowed to shoulder that weight. His children could never be bound to the fate he had carved for himself with blood and fire.

If the world needed a monster, then he would give them one.

Better that their eyes turned toward him, every curse, every prayer, every blade of intent, than ever toward the fragile lives of his loved ones.

Osita straightened, wiping the tears from his face.

This was the role Murmur wanted him to play.

And for now... he would play it.

Months passed after the incident, and the world did what it always did in the absence of truth, grasp at straws.

Fragments of the event spread across continents and planes, distorted by fear and distance. Every retelling twisted the story further. Some claimed Osita had snapped, others insisted it was a warning, a calculated show of dominance meant to remind the world of its place. No one truly knew what had happened, and worse... no one knew why.

Speculation filled the void where answers should have been.

For the first time in ages, humans and godlings found themselves bound by the same limitations. Both sides lacked information. Both lacked certainty. And, perhaps most telling of all, both lacked the courage to seek the truth directly.

Conclusions were drawn in private councils. Verdicts were spoken behind wards and sealed doors. Yet not a single one of them dared to cross the threshold into Osita's kingdom to confront him. Fear was the one belief they all shared.

The display of power Osita had shown that day had carved itself into the collective consciousness of the world. The kind of power that did not threaten or boast, but simply was. To realize that such an existence lived beside them, separated only by borders and fragile treaties, filled even immortals with quiet despair.

They all remembered the same thing.

The moment they had been dragged into his domain, everything they thought defined them had been stripped away. Divine heritage meant nothing. Arcane mastery evaporated like mist. Their so-called power became a hollow concept, something distant and unreachable.

Inside Osita's domain, there was no fight to be had.

Thought itself bent under the pressure of his presence. Instincts screamed surrender before reason could even form a plan. Every being who had experienced it understood the same truth in that helpless moment.

It was through their vampire kin that the godlings finally learned the truth.

They spoke of Roth, of how he had acted when no one else could. Piece by piece, the godlings assembled a clearer picture of the event.

They spared no effort in expressing their gratitude. Envoys crossed seas and skies alike, bearing gifts, relics, and tributes. Offerings meant to honor Roth's help and perhaps to ease their own conscience for having been powerless when it mattered most. Gratitude, in this case, walked hand in hand with relief.

Across the planet Nana, the long process of recovery began.

The world had suffered disasters before, but never one that pressed so closely against total annihilation. Not since the great meteor shower had Nana faced a crisis that threa

tened everything at once. Cities were rebuilt stone by stone, rituals were held for the fallen.

This time, however, the people were different. They were stronger. Yet strength did not erase grief. Mourning echoed through streets and halls, and leaders of every kingdom gathered debating safeguards, alliances, and contingencies that they all knew might never be enough.

And looming over every conversation was the same unspoken presence.

Osita.

His existence had become a thorne in the minds of the world, a seat of absolute power that no one had elected, no one could challenge, and no one dared to approach. There was nothing more terrifying than power unrestrained by oversight... especially power proven willing to be used without hesitation.

The question haunted every chamber, every sleepless night.

What if Roth had not been there?

The answer was always the same, no matter how gently they tried to phrase it. There would have been no resistance. No miracle waiting in reserve.

All would have been lost.

Power became the axis upon which the world began to turn.

Both the godlings and the greatest human kingdoms poured every resource they possessed into understanding what Sixth Stage truly meant. Theories once dismissed as myth were dragged into scholarly debate. If this level of power existed and clearly it did then ignorance was no longer an option.

What also became prevalent was how quickly reverence shifted.

The existence of the gods, both the Origin Gods and those who had ascended became more beloved than ever before. In the aftermath, the people of Nana began to recognize the quiet restraint those gods had always practiced. Divine law, once seen as distant was now understood as protection. The gods were powerful... and yet they chose not to cross certain lines.

That distinction mattered.

Among the people, a new and chilling definition of the Sixth Stage took root: Gods among men.

But unlike the divine gods, who were bound by immutable laws that forbade the endangerment of mortal life, Sixth Stage powerhouses bore no such universal restraint.

While many Sixth Stage beings had their own laws and followed it, their own codes, oaths, principles, loyalties, the distance between them and ordinary life was terrifyingly small. Not a gulf measured in heavens or planes, but an arm's reach. A single decision. A single moment of emotion.

And the world had already seen what happened when that restraint failed.

If a kingdom was unfortunate enough to exist without a Sixth Stage powerhouse of its own, someone capable of shielding them, deterring others, or at the very least answering overwhelming force with overwhelming force, then history could repeat itself.

Osita had proven that lesson brutally.

Of all those shaken by the aftermath, Nwadieube was among the most deeply affected.

The moment he had been dragged into that domain, the moment reality bent and his strength became meaningless, something inside him had fractured. Pride, carefully cultivated over centuries, had cracked in an instant. He had always known Osita was powerful, but knowing and experiencing were two very different things.

Only then did it truly make sense.

Osita had never taken him seriously. Not out of arrogance, but out of perspective. Like a parent watching a mischievous child lash out, full of noise and confidence yet incapable of causing real harm. The memory burned now, every dismissed insult, every calm glance, every moment where Osita chose patience over retaliation.

With the scale of power Osita possessed, Nwadiébe finally understood why his provocations had never mattered. Why his threats had never been answered. Why he had been allowed to speak at all. Against that kind of existence, his actions had been no more than ripples against a mountain.

The realization hollowed him out.

And into that hollow, something else began to seep. A whisper that slid between his doubts and his wounded pride, offering understanding for his humiliation. Murmur words began to dance in his ears.

Power that would place him beyond condescension, beyond being overlooked. Power that would ensure he would never again feel that small, that helpless.

Power that could be his.

Godhood.

Chapter 763:

Before he realized it, before he could name the moment where resentment turned into desire, he found himself leaning closer to the whisper, wondering not if it was possible...but how far he was willing to go to claim it.

With everything that had happened, Nwadié bube would have been a fool not to recognize Murmur's intentions.

He saw the shape of the plan clearly now, the way it had been laid out piece by piece. The classic tale of demon kings vs the hero. Osita had been thrust into the role of the demon king, an overwhelming force feared by all, isolated by his own power, painted in shades of inevitable destruction. The world already whispered his name with dread.

That part of the story was complete.

All that remained was for someone to rise as the counterbalance. The figure who would stand before the masses not as terror, but as hope. The one who would challenge the monster not with fear, but with resolve.

The hero.

And Murmur had made it abundantly clear who that hero was meant to be.

So the months that followed were not wasted.

While the world hesitated, while Osita's kingdom remained distant and unreadable, Nwadiebube acted. His capital, once scarred by the incident began to resemble its former self far sooner than anyone expected. Reconstruction was swift, deliberate, and visible. He poured resources into rebuilding without restraint.

He moved before Osita ever did.

His people were everywhere. Borders blurred as his envoys crossed into neighboring lands, offering food, shelter, healing, and warmth. Aid came without demands, without banners raised, only quiet presence and steady hands. To the grieving, there was comfort. To the displaced, there was refuge. To the angry, there was someone willing to listen.

At the same time, shamanism, the oldest power system long studied by his people rose sharply in prominence. Once regarded as esoteric, it was now seen as necessary. As relevant. None drew more attention than the practitioners of Death Shamanism.

Those who had walked the underworld and returned.

They spoke of journeys beyond the veil, of bargains made with forces that governed the departed, of truths glimpsed that most mortals were never meant to know. They carried fragments of the dead's secrets memories unanchored by flesh, echoes of what waited beyond life.

To a world drowning in mourning, that knowledge was intoxicating. Nwadié bube did not discourage it.

Hope, after all, came in many forms.

Within shamanism, offerings had always been a common and deeply personal practice.

People gave what felt right, home-cooked meals placed beside the hearth, the fruits of a successful hunt, carefully chosen harvests, or simple objects filled with memory and meaning. There was no rigid rule governing what could be offered. What mattered was sincerity. What mattered was intent.

For generations, most believed these offerings were symbolic, a way for the living to remember the dead.

Death shamanism changed that understanding entirely.

Through their journeys into the underworld, death shamans caught fleeting glimpses of what truly happened beyond the veil. They began to piece together the function of offerings, not as gestures, but as mechanisms. Something real. Something measurable.

According to the death shamans, a heartfelt offering did not vanish into nothingness. It reached its intended recipient.

When made in earnest, when memory, love, and longing were poured into the act, the offering fed the soul of the departed in the underworld with presence, with identity.

The underworld, as the shamans described it, was not a place of immediate clarity. When souls were first relocated there, they existed in a state of disorientation. They did not recognize their death, nor did they remember who they had been in life. Names, faces, and bonds dissolved into a fog, leaving only fragments of emotion behind.

Time alone restored awareness.

The longer a soul remained, the more memories slowly resurfaced, until identity reformed piece by fragile piece. But this process could take years or far longer depending on the soul.

What the death shamans discovered was that offerings could shorten that suffering.

Each sincere offering acted as an anchor, pulling memory back into focus. It reminded the soul of who they were, of who loved them, of the life they had lived. The more genuine the offering, the stronger the effect. In some cases, repeated offerings allowed souls to regain awareness in a fraction of the time it would have taken naturally.

To the grieving, this knowledge was a balm.

Their actions mattered. Their love reached beyond death. Mourning was no longer helpless, it became a form of care, a way to tend to those who had passed on.

And so death shamanism spread, in a world scarred by loss, the idea that the dead could be fed, remembered, and guided back to themselves was hope given structure.

A family could cook a meal and set aside an extra plate for their loved one.

They would gather at the table as they always had, speak their names aloud, and invite them to join, believing, with quiet certainty, that even from another dimension, they were not eating alone. The idea alone was enough to steady shaking hands and soften grief that had felt unbearable only weeks before.

Praise for Nwadié bube and his kingdom began to ripple across the land. In these dark times, he became a shining light in the eyes of many because his people offered solace.

Mothers who had lost their children found the deepest comfort of all.

To know they could still feed their child, to nurture them, even after death was a mercy few had ever imagined possible. This truth, once closely guarded, had been shared during the last Judge Meeting by one of the godlings themselves, to a grieving woman.

Yet the teachings were never given without warning.

The death shamans spoke openly of the danger woven into the practice. While offerings nourished loved ones in the underworld, they also acted as beacons. Stronger souls, older, hungrier, and far more aware could sense these acts. Some of them understood the value of offerings all too well.

Such souls could masquerade as the departed.

They could wear familiar memories like borrowed skin, deceive the living, and devour the weaker soul meant to receive the offering, claiming it and the nourishment for themselves.

Because of this, the death shamans urged restraint.

Families were advised to create their own traditions, fixed times and personal rituals that anchored intent and identity. The practice should never become casual. Never routine. Daily offerings were strongly discouraged. Even once a month was considered risky, and only to be done with care, preparation, and clear remembrance.

Love, when broadcast too often, could become an invitation.

Nwadiébe's aid reached even the smallest kingdoms, places easily forgotten in times of crisis, including those allied with Osita's realm. Food caravans arrived without banners. Healers crossed borders without conditions. Reconstruction teams worked side by side with locals as if they had always belonged there.

Not once did Nwadiébe speak ill of Osita.

He never accused. Never pointed fingers. Never allowed his name to be used as a contrast. To all appearances, his actions came from nothing but sincerity. From the quiet compassion of a ruler doing what needed to be done when the world was hurting.

That, more than anything, made people trust him.

Meanwhile, within Osita's kingdom, the atmosphere could not have been more different.

Where the rest of Nana trembled at Osita's power, his people had long since grown accustomed to it. To them, it was not something to fear, it was a certainty. A wall that had always stood between them and annihilation.

His actions during the incident only deepened that belief.

To the citizens, Osita remained their guardian. Their unshakable shield. What weighed on them now was not fear of him, but fear of what had been lost.

The queen.

Her absence cut deeper than any devastation. Months passed, and still no word came. The royal family withdrew from public view, their silence louder than any proclamation. Streets once filled with the echo of running feet and careless laughter fell quiet.

The street she used to walk, where merchants once smiled at the sight of their queen stopping to chat, to buy fruit with her own hands stood unchanged, as if waiting for someone who would never come.

Grief settled into routine. Then, one morning, the bells rang for an announcement.

The kingdom was informed of an upcoming coronation.

No details were given. No explanations offered. Only the certainty that something irreversible was about to take place.

And for the first time since the queen's disappearance, the people of Osita's realm felt a fear that power could not shield them from the fear of change.

The announcement came quietly, King Osita was abdicating the throne.

Leadership of the kingdom would pass to his son, Nwadike.

No reason was given.

The words spread through the kingdom. Many immediately sensed that something was deeply wrong. The timing alone made it impossible to ignore. The queen had not been declared dead, yet neither had she returned. The people found themselves trapped between grief and hope, wanting to mourn her, yet clinging desperately to the belief that she still lived, somewhere, gravely wounded but breathing.

Chapter 764

It left the kingdom in a painful limbo.

Daily life continued, but cautiously. Conversations lowered to whispers. Laughter felt inappropriate, yet silence felt dangerous. People measured their words carefully, fearful that careless talk, rumors, doubts, even sorrow spoken too loudly might be the final strain that pushed Osita past restraint.

No one wanted to be the reason.

Despite that fear, there was a small, fragile comfort that held the people together.

The court remained open. The royal family, though visibly strained, did not withdraw entirely. Ministers worked longer hours. Nobles walked the streets more often. The palace gates did not close.

They were trying.

Trying to preserve the shape of normalcy, to show that the kingdom still stood, that its people were not forgotten even in the queen's absence, even with the king stepping away. That effort mattered. It reassured the citizens that someone, somewhere within the palace walls, still cared.

And so the people endured. Waiting quietly, patiently for answers that had yet to come, all while praying that the man who had always been their guardian would not finally break under the weight of his silence.

Taiwo, Nwadiebube's wife, found herself caught in a strange and unsettling state.

For days now, the same dream returned to her each night. It always began the same way, with the sense that she was not alone. There was a man there, close enough that she could feel his presence even without seeing him. No matter how hard she tried, his face remained hidden, blurred as if the dream itself refused to grant her that clarity.

Yet she knew him.

Not by name, not by memory, but by something deeper. The way her heart softened around him. The way she felt safe, anchored. The connection she felt was as strong, as intimate as the bond she shared with her own husband.

That frightened her more than the dream itself.

When she woke, the feeling did not fade. It followed her through the day, settling quietly into her thoughts. She began to change in small, unexpected ways. Cooking, something she had always left to servants, suddenly fascinated her. She insisted on preparing meals herself, fumbling through techniques she clearly did not know.

The results were... terrible.

Yet when Nwadiebube ate the food without complaints, smiling, encouraging her she felt a warmth bloom in her chest. Joy. Pride. A fierce desire to do better. She practiced more, burned more meals, and laughed more than she had in years.

But those were not the only changes.

There were moments when Taiwo would drift, her gaze unfocused, her mind slipping somewhere she could not name. At times, she called her own children by the wrong names, names she did not recognize, names that did not belong to anyone she knew.

And yet they felt painfully familiar.

She could not say where they came from, only that speaking them made her chest ache. Each day she woke with a hollow longing that had no clear shape. A sense of absence so strong it bordered on grief, though she could not say who she was missing.

Only that she was missing someone.

And with every passing night, as the dream returned and the unseen man stood waiting just beyond her sight, Taiwo felt her quiet life was taking a strange path.

The whole planet of Nana was in motion. For a while, desperation had lingered quietly at the edges of people's minds, especially among the godlings. They had occupied high positions, controlled kingdoms, guided mortals, and wielded divine authority with confidence. And for centuries, that had created a false sense of safety, a belief that they controlled their own fate.

Now, that illusion had shattered.

All it took was the existence of a single Sixth Stage being to unravel everything they had built. All the fortresses, laws, alliances, and schemes could be undone in a heartbeat. For the first time, the godlings realized their power was fragile, conditional, and terrifyingly exposed. And this this vulnerability was something they would never allow to repeat itself.

Down in the Upside-Down World, it looked nothing like the reality it was meant to reflect. The familiar laws of form and symmetry were gone, as though the concept of mirroring itself had been shattered. Where there should have been an inverted sky and land, there was only a vast, lightless void.

Fragments of the world drifted aimlessly through the darkness, broken slabs of stone, some no larger than rubble, others the size of entire islands. Cracked mountains floated upside down, oceans frozen mid-spill, their waters suspended in jagged arcs that would never fall. There was no horizon, no sense of direction. Only endless black, swallowing everything that did not shine.

This was the aftermath.

The battle between the gods and their counterparts had torn the Upside-Down World apart at its very foundation. It was a collision of mirrored existences, of beings who shared the same origins yet embodied opposing truths. All restraint had been abandoned. All frustration, centuries of silent rivalry, fear of replacement, resentment of inevitability had been unleashed in a single, cataclysmic clash.

This world could not survive such hatred.

Floating within the void were three massive figures.

Once radiant and untouchable, they now bore wounds that should not have been possible. Their bodies were torn, cracked, pierced, divine flesh split open, leaking streams of golden ichor that drifted away like dying stars. Unlike before, the wounds did not close. The ichor did not return. Each injury throbbed with a foreign resonance, one that resisted their regeneration.

These were wounds inflicted by their counterparts. Power born from the same source. Damage that could not simply be undone.

The three Origin Gods had won. The victory was undeniable, but it had been anything but easy. They had pushed themselves beyond what even they believed possible. It was not an impossible fight... but it had come dangerously close to becoming one.

As it stood, the Origins still held an advantage.

They were the first to be born, their counterparts, though terrifying in potential, had been born later. Newer. Less refined.

Yet that advantage had been slipping.

The counterparts were growing at an alarming rate, adapting, evolving, learning with every clash. Had the Origin Gods continued to grow at their current pace slow, steady, complacent then in a mere century, the gap would have vanished entirely. The outcome of this battle, had it been delayed even a little longer, would have been vastly different.

The Origins Just understood this.

Now, in the aftermath, all five counterparts lay dead, unmade, their divine cores shattered and dispersed across the void. With their destruction, the Upside-Down World itself had collapsed, its existence no longer anchored by those who embodied it. What remained were fragments, echoes of a reality that would one day reform.

Because revival was inevitable.

The counterparts would return. The Upside-Down World would knit itself back together, piece by piece, law by law. Existence always corrected itself. Mirrored truths could not remain absent forever.

But not yet.

This victory had bought the Origin Gods something precious.

Time. Time to recover, time to grow stronger. Time to widen the distance between themselves and what was destined to rise again.

They would grow stronger while their counterparts remained in the long process of revival.

That knowledge alone filled Crepuscular, Jaus, and Mahu with a strange, almost unsettling satisfaction. A sense of having bent inevitability, if only slightly, in their favor.

Their performance in the battle itself had been... lacking. They were gods, yes, but not warriors. They had been creators, maintainers, principles given form not beings forged for combat. Against their counterparts, who mirrored their power yet twisted it toward conflict, that weakness had shown painfully clear.

And yet, they learned. With every exchanged blow, every near-fatal wound, instinct sharpened into understanding. Power once used abstractly became immediate, brutal, precise. By the end of the battle, they were no longer fighting blindly.

Crepuscular was the clearest proof of that growth.

He hovered in the void, one arm extended, palm open.

Resting there was a sun.

Small, no larger than a city at most but undeniably real. A living star, burning quietly, its surface churning with nuclear fire. Space around it bent subtly, light warping as its gravitational pull asserted itself even in the broken laws of the Upside-Down World.

And that alone was not all.

Crepuscular imposed a single law upon it.

A law of purification.

The sun's light shifted, not brighter, but cleaner. Its radiance carried intent now, stripping corruption, erasing residue, reducing all things to their most fundamental state.

Mahu watched him for only a moment before turning away.

She reached into the empty void itself, her fingers digging into nothingness and tore.

Reality split like fabric under strain, revealing a gateway beyond the Upside-Down World. Through the rupture spilled familiar laws: distance, direction, causality. A path back to reality.

Without hesitation, Mahu stepped through.

Jaus followed close behind, casting one last glance at the fractured remains of the mirrored world before disappearing after her. The tear sealed itself behind them, leaving only silence.

Chapter 765:

Crepuscular remained.

He looked out over the ruins before him, the drifting continents, the shattered echoes of a world that had failed to endure divine excess. Slowly, deliberately, he lifted the small sun higher into the void.

Then he released it.

The moment it left his palm, its power unfurled in full.

Gravity roared to life.

Fragments of stone, oceans frozen mid-motion, entire landmasses were ripped from their aimless drift and dragged screaming toward the growing star. Mountains collapsed inward. Divine residue, world-fragments, and broken laws themselves were pulled in, stripped, purified, and consumed.

With every piece absorbed, the sun grew.

Crepuscular turned away as the Upside-Down World began its final undoing, stepping through a tear in space of his own making. The rupture sealed behind him leaving the expanding sun alone in the void.

Where a fractured world once lingered, there would soon be only darkness... and a star that ensured nothing impure would remain.

Once the Origin Gods returned to reality, their strength finally gave out.

One by one, they descended into their own realms, bodies heavy, divinity exhausted. The moment they crossed their thresholds, they collapsed sinking into a sleep-like trance, neither fully unconscious nor aware. A forced withdrawal, a retreat of the self so that something deeper could work.

Their realms responded immediately.

The foundations of their domains stirred, mechanisms of divinity awakening. Power flowed inward, wrapping around their broken forms. Golden light seeped into fractured flesh, knitting wounds that had resisted healing since the battle. The faint traces of foreign law, imposed by their counterparts were slowly unraveled and erased, thread by thread.

More troubling were the remnants of corrupted divinity. These stains clung stubbornly, embedded deep within their essence. It took time, weeks of silent purification for their realms to burn them away completely. Only when the last echoes were gone did their divinity stabilize once more.

And so, the Origin Gods slept.

Two months passed.

In the Upside-Down World, there was nothing left.

No fragments, no drifting islands. No echoes of structure or form.

Only the sun remained.

It had grown vast, bloated with stolen mass, divine residue, and the purified remains of an entire world. Yet its size was a lie. The star was unstable, its core collapsing inward as the laws sustaining it devoured themselves.

Slowly, inevitably, it began to shrink.

Light folded into itself. Gravity spiked beyond reason. What had once been a blazing sun condensed further and further, until it became a small black hole, silent and absolute, hanging alone in the void.

For a brief moment, there was perfect stillness.

Then, The black hole collapsed.

It detonated into a colossal wave of light, a blinding surge of purified radiance that tore through the Upside-Down World in every direction. What little remained of that broken realm was scoured clean, erased down to the conceptual level. Even the void itself seemed to recoil as the light passed through it.

The shock did not stop there. The wave pierced the boundary between worlds.

In reality, the effect was felt instantly.

Stars flickered. Leylines screamed and a subtle earthquake affected the whole world.

Across the world, sensitive beings felt a sudden pressure in their chests, a flash of warmth followed by dread, as though something immense had exhaled after holding its breath for far too long. The sky itself seemed brighter for a heartbeat then returned to normal, leaving only confusion behind.

It was at this time that Nana rested within her own realm, lying sideways upon the bed her son had prepared for her. The surface was warm, shaped by his power and concern alike, yet sleep refused to come. Her gaze drifted beyond the veil of her domain, toward the distant realms where her children lay recovering.

They were wounded, exhausted, but alive.

As a mother, pride swelled quietly within her. They had acted decisively, without hesitation, and that single choice had spared their world from calamity. Nana knew better, survival often demanded resolve that mercy could not afford. For that, she was grateful... and proud.

Yet her relief was short lived, her thoughts returned, again and again, to the two who were absent, Ikenga and Keles.

How long would it take before they returned? Days? Years? Or would the currents of fate delay them far longer than she could afford?

She needed Ikenga now more than ever.

Her world was changing fast. It was approaching the threshold of the Sixth Tier, an age where beings of immense power would begin to rise, figures capable of shaping nations or civilizations, and influencing the very direction the world itself would take.

On the surface, this should have been a cause for celebration. The emergence of Sixth Tier powers was proof that the world's heritage was deepening, its foundations growing strong enough to give birth to such entities. By all natural measures, it was a sign of progress.

But Nana felt no comfort in it.

If these emerging figures shared a single purpose, if they stood beneath one banner, bound by a common vision then she would have nothing to fear. Order could be maintained. Growth could be guided.

But her world was not so simple because of the multiple strong kingdoms and races in it.

Each Sixth Tier being would rise carrying their own ideals, their own ambitions, their own interpretation of what the world should become. And where ideals diverged, conflict was inevitable.

It was then that Nana felt it.

A calling so faint that she nearly dismissed it as longing made manifest. For a heartbeat, she thought her mind was betraying her, weaving hope from absence. But the sensation did not fade. It grew steadier, more insistent, resonating deep within her essence.

It was real.

Her children were reaching for her.

Ikenga and Keles were returning, their voices calling out for her to anchor herself to the plane they now occupied so she could draw them home. There was no hesitation in Nana's response.

She acted at once.

With a single wave of her hand, the space before her shimmered and folded in on itself. Starlight spilled outward as a gate took shape, countless points of light forming an archway that seemed to lead not merely across distance, but across worlds.

Nana stepped forward and reached for the handle formed of condensed constellations. She pulled.

The gate opened.

A rush of unfamiliar air washed over her, heavy with traces of conflict and foreign power. Nana took a measured step back and waited, her expression calm even as her heart tightened with anticipation.

Soon, two silhouettes emerged from the sea of stars, their forms growing clearer with each step they took toward her.

Her children had come home.

After leaving Zervok's layer, Ikenga and Keles found themselves ascending a long, quiet stairway that stretched upward into nothingness. Then, before them, a gate appeared.

It bloomed into existence without warning, its edges glowing with familiar starlight. From beyond it, both of them felt it at the same time,

Home.

Relief surged through them, followed almost immediately by trepidation. Excitement warred with unease, for they knew that some of their actions, however necessary, would wound the very ones they longed to see again.

Ikenga reached for Keles's hand.

The gesture grounded him, steadying the storm of thoughts threatening to overtake his composure. At the same time, it was a promise, a silent vow that no matter what awaited them beyond the gate, he would stand beside her.

Keles tightened her grip in return.

Together, they stepped forward, crossing the threshold toward the one who had been waiting for them all along.

Both stepped through the gate and found themselves in a place that felt instantly familiar.

Before either could speak, Nana was already there.

She closed the distance between them in a heartbeat and wrapped them both in an embrace that left no room for hesitation. Ikenga and Keles leaned into it without resistance, the tension they had carried for so long finally loosening in her arms.

Within her presence, each of them felt something different.

To Ikenga, Nana carried the scent of living earth, lush forests after rainfall, roots deep in fertile soil, the quiet endurance of nature that had always grounded him.

To Keles, the scent was different.

She was welcomed by the familiar calm of death, not rot or decay, but the stillness that followed an ending, the peace of a final breath, the certainty that all things, once complete, were allowed to rest. It was comforting in a way only she could understand.

Nana mirrored them both perfectly, "Welcome home," Nana said softly.

She stepped back, her hands lingering on their shoulders before her gaze shifted, drawn instinctively to Keles. Her eyes lowered, then widened as they took in her daughter's noticeably swollen stomach.

For a moment, Nana simply stared.

Then she reached out, her movements uncharacteristically careful, as though the very air might bruise what she touched. She took Keles's arm and gently placed her palm upon her daughter's stomach, her touch warm and reverent.

Joy lit her face, bright and unrestrained.

"It seems you both had quite the adventure," she said, her voice rich with amusement and delight.

Chapter 766:

"Mother, please..." Keles murmured, her voice tinged with shy embarrassment as she allowed herself to be guided.

Nana pulled her closer and eased her down onto a bed of blooming flowers, arranging her with the practiced care like someone who had done this countless times before, though never quite like this.

Ikenga watched in silence, a faint smile tugging at his expression. Ikenga at the same time found his gaze drifting across the realm. The land responded to his presence as it always had but something was wrong.

Someone was missing.

His siblings were not here.

They should have felt it by now. His return, Keles's return, such events would ripple through the realm like a bell struck at its core. Yet the space remained strangely empty, untouched by their familiar presences.

Turning back to his mother, who was still fussing over Keles with barely restrained excitement, Ikenga asked "Where are the others? They should have known about our return."

Nana looked up at him, already about to answer, then she paused.

A knowing smile curved her lips.

"Oh, they know," she said lightly. "And they seem quite eager to see you both."

As if summoned by her words, the realm itself trembled.

Light fractured the air, space folding inward as three figures began to emerge. The ground shimmered beneath their feet, and the sky above brightened as though welcoming them.

The first to fully manifest was Crepuscular.

Bathed in radiant golden light, he burst forward with barely contained energy, laughter ringing out long before he reached Ikenga. In a blur of motion, he wrapped his arms around him and lifted him clean off the ground, spinning him around with unrestrained enthusiasm.

"Oh, little brother," Crepuscular boomed, laughter thick in his voice, "how I have missed you and your weird little quirks!"

Ikenga let out a startled breath, caught somewhere between protest and reluctant amusement, before giving in and returning the embrace.

At the same time, a second figure peeled away from Crepuscular's form, identical in appearance. This one headed straight for Keles... only to slow halfway, his expression shifting as he took in her condition.

His approach became gentler.

He leaned down and carefully embraced her, mindful of her swollen stomach, his touch warm and sincere.

"You seem to have gained weight, sis," he remarked casually.

The response was immediate.

Keles struck him squarely in the stomach with surprising force.

The impact sent him stumbling back a step, wheezing as laughter erupted around them.

Following closely behind Crepuscular came Jaus, his arrival far less explosive. Where Crepuscular radiated unfiltered warmth and noise, Jaus carried himself with measured calm.

His eyes moved first to Keles, lingering just long enough to take in her condition then shifted to Ikenga.

Without a word, Jaus stepped forward and shoved Crepuscular aside with his shoulder, ignoring the startled protest that followed. He extended his hand to Ikenga, and the two of them fell seamlessly into a peculiar, intricate handshake, one that clearly carried history behind it.

Crepuscular stared at them, eyes wide.

"Hey, when did you two make that without me?" he demanded, sounding genuinely betrayed.

The handshake ended. Ikenga gave Jaus a small nod of acknowledgment, the kind reserved for those who understood him without needing words.

Then the air changed. A soft silver light spilled across the realm as the final figure emerged.

Mahu.

Her form was wrapped in a gentle radiance that reflected her beauty, but her presence changed the mood. Where the others brought noise and motion, Mahu brought stillness, the laughter and chaos dimmed.

Crepuscular and Jaus both glanced at Ikenga, then at each other. Subtle gestures followed, raised fingers, slight nods.

Ikenga clenched his jaw. They were betting, he resisted the urge to curse them aloud.

Mahu's gaze brushed past Ikenga as though he were no more than a passing thought, and she moved instead toward Keles. She stopped before her, eyes settling on the curve of her daughter's stomach.

As the goddess of motherhood, Mahu could feel it instantly, the budding life within, fragile yet radiant, surrounded by layers of fate and divinity.

She took a slow, careful step forward. Ikenga's muscles tensed. He shifted his weight, every instinct urging him to move, to place himself between Mahu and Keles.

But he did not.

The Mahu he knew would never harm a child or its mother.

Still, his hand curled behind his back, fingers clenched tight as he watched, heart pounding in a silence far louder than any laughter that had come before.

Nana saw Mahu approach, and her heart tightened.

As a mother, it pained her to witness how deeply this moment weighed on Mahu. Yet her sorrow was layered with conflict, for Mahu and Keles were both her daughters and the one at the center of it all was her son. There was no side she could take without betraying another.

So Nana did the only thing she could. She stepped back.

Her hands folded together, her expression carefully neutral, even as worry stirred beneath the surface. All she could do now was hope, hope that this moment would not fracture the bonds her children had spent centuries cultivating.

Keles, meanwhile, felt herself caught in a strange and unfamiliar tension.

With every step Mahu took closer, something within her stirred, a quiet but fierce instinct rising from deep within her being. She felt the urge to respond, to shield, to protect the life growing inside her.

Yet she did nothing. She glanced toward Ikenga, he remained still, silent, offering neither intervention nor retreat. His inaction spoke volumes of trust. Trust in Mahu. Trust in Keles. Trust in the bonds they shared.

So Keles stayed where she was and waited.

In that stillness, she imagined herself in Mahu's place. If their roles were reversed, if she were the one standing before a truth that cut this deeply what would she have done?

As gods, they carried pride as naturally as breath. Though they had shared relationships that went beyond siblinghood, none of them had ever laid explicit claim over another, not his, not hers. Such declarations were unnecessary.

They had always understood. There had always been something more between them.

Before Ikenga's long journey with Keles ever began, it was Mahu who shared a quiet, unspoken connection with him.

Their bond had never needed names or declarations. It existed in glances held a moment too long, in shared silences that felt heavier than words. There had been affection, understanding, something that walked the line between companionship and love, never crossing it, yet always aware of how close it stood.

Keles, before the journey, had never shared anything like that with Ikenga. Whatever existed between them then was familial, distant from romance. But time has a way of reshaping boundaries, and the long path they walked together, through danger, loss, and reliance made something inevitable.

And so it happened.

From shared hardship came intimacy. From intimacy came consequence. And from that consequence, a new life began to form.

What Keles carried now was something Ikenga had once denied Mahu.

Before his departure, Mahu had asked him to leave her with something of himself, a child. A hope, she believed that even in his absence, such a bond would tether them together, strengthen what they had begun to build.

Ikenga had refused.

Not because he did not care, but because he cared too much.

He had already made that mistake once, with his first son. He had not been as present as he should have been, and the weight of that failure never left him. He would not leave Mahu with a child he could not stand beside, guide, or protect. He would not ask her to bear that burden alone.

He had told Keles all of this during their journey.

And so she understood.

She understood why Mahu stood as she did now, silent and heavy with emotion. Something Mahu had wanted, something she had been denied, now existed before her, embodied in Keles herself.

Keles did not feel triumph at that.

Mahu finally came to a stop before Keles.

For a while she simply stood there, silver light gently washing over them both. Then, without warning or ceremony, she leaned forward and wrapped Keles in a firm embrace. Keles stiffened for only a heartbeat before returning it.

"Welcome home, sister," Mahu said softly.

Keles nodded, meeting her gaze, words failing her in the presence of everything Mahu represented in this moment.

Mahu's eyes drifted downward, settling on Keles's stomach. Her expression shifted a bit before a smile appeared.

"Quite a strong boy," she said, placing a hand upon it.

Keles tensed instinctively, her body reacting before thought could intervene. Then Mahu laughed, light, genuine, almost surprised.

"He is also quite the talker."

The tension melted away.

Keles felt it then, her son reaching outward, curious rather than afraid. There was no sense of threat, no warning instinct flaring. Only recognition.

"You have my blessing, sister," Mahu said.

As she spoke, her divinity unfurled gently, not overwhelming but warm, extending its grace to both mother and child. It wrapped around them like a quiet promise, something given freely despite everything.

Then Mahu straightened. She turned toward Ikenga.

Crepuscular and Jaus both froze, breath caught in their throats.

This was it.

Chapter 767:

Mahu regarded Ikenga for a long moment, her expression unreadable. When she finally spoke, her voice was calm but distant.

"Welcome home, brother." There was no step forward. No embrace. No gesture of closeness.

Ikenga met her gaze and smiled anyway.

"You seem to have gotten more beautiful in my absence," he said lightly, attempting warmth where silence threatened to settle.

Mahu returned the smile.

But it was thin. Polite. Distance clear in it.

Ikenga's expression faltered, his smile fading as he truly saw her, how composed she stood, how much effort it took to remain so.

His voice turned sharp as he noticed something "You're injured, no..." His gaze flicked from one face to the next, jaw tightening as realization settled in. "You all are injured. What happened?"

Jaus let out a low, humorless scoff, throwing Crepuscular a sideways glance, one filled with irritation and mild embarrassment. He'd clearly lost whatever wager they'd made.

"A lot has happened while you both were gone," he said flatly, directing the words at Ikenga.

Before Jaus could continue, Ikenga's attention shifted. His eyes lingered on Nana for only a heartbeat before his presence unfurled outward, rippling across the world itself. Though time had passed and much of the damage had been repaired, the scars remained, faint fractures in reality, lingering distortions only a being like him could sense.

His expression darkened.

"Inside or outside job?" Ikenga asked, his tone tense.

Crepuscular and the others stiffened, exchanging brief, uneasy looks. It took them a moment to fully grasp what he was asking, not about the injuries, but about the world.

"No, brother," Crepuscular said at last, shaking his head. "Our world is still safe." He paused, then added grimly, "This was an inside job. Planned. Carried out by the one called Murmur."

Ikenga exhaled slowly, the sound heavy with restrained frustration.

He opened his mouth to press further, but Jaus cut in before he could speak.

"We'll talk about all of this later," he said firmly. "Right now, we still need to fully heal. We only stopped because we felt you both return." His gaze flicked briefly to Keles before returning to Ikenga. "Besides, you both need time to readjust. A lot has changed in our world."

Then, more quietly but no less pointed Jaus added, "And I'm sure some things need to be settled before our next meeting."

Ikenga didn't respond right away. He simply turned his gaze toward Mahu, understanding dawning between them without another word spoken.

Just as they had arrived, the Origin Gods began to withdraw, their towering presences folding back into the realms that birthed them. One by one, the air stilled as their divine signatures vanished.

Mahu was already turning away, ready to return to her own realm, when a hand caught her wrist.

She froze.

Slowly, she looked back and met Ikenga's gaze.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Mahu's eyes flicked past him to Keles, who stood at the edge of her own departing portal. Keles had noticed the interaction. She hesitated, studying them with a quiet, unreadable expression, before finally saying nothing at all. Her form dissolved into light, slipping back into her realm and leaving the two alone.

A silver portal bloomed open before Mahu, without a word, Ikenga stepped forward, still holding her, and together they passed through.

Mahu's realm greeted him with familiar radiance, vast and profoundly changed. Towers of light rose where once there had been emptiness; entire systems moved in quiet harmony.

But Ikenga didn't look at any of it.

His attention never left her.

"Speak to me, Mahu," he said, his voice low, strained beneath restraint. "Acting like nothing..."

The words never finished.

Her hand moved before thought could stop it.

The slap cracked through the air, sharp and final. Ikenga's head snapped to the side from the force, his jaw clenched as pain rippled through him. A line of gold split his lip, divine ichor spilling down his chin in a slow, gleaming trail.

For a heartbeat, there was only silence.

"Let go of me."

Her voice was quiet but tightly coiled, restrained fury barely holding itself together.

Ikenga slowly turned his head back toward her.

That was when he saw her face.

Tears clung to Mahu's lashes, spilling freely now, carving glowing paths down her cheeks. Her expression was a collision of emotions, anger, hurt, longing, and something far more fragile beneath it all. Her hands trembled, clenched into fists at her sides as if holding herself together required every ounce of her strength.

Ikenga's grip loosened instinctively.

The wound on his lip mattered far less than the one he was finally forced to see.

He pulled her into a hug before she could stop him. For a heartbeat, Mahu stood rigid then she shattered.

Her hands fisted into his chest as a sob tore free, the sound breaking straight through her composure.

"Do you know how much I missed you?" she cried, her voice cracking under the weight of years held back. "All that time you were gone..."

She pressed her face against him, tears soaking into his robes.

"Every day you were on my mind," she went on, words tumbling out unevenly. "You were a pillar I kept reaching for, one I was so eager to lean back on. I wanted to return to a time when I didn't have to think around you, when I could just be."

Her breath hitched.

"But somewhere inside me, I knew," she whispered. "And I dreaded it. I knew your return would hurt me."

Ikenga stiffened, but she didn't stop.

"I knew you would hurt me," Mahu said, her voice rising with anguish. "I knew and I still wanted you to come back. I still waited. And even with you here now, the pain is unbearable." Her hands shook violently. "That should have been me. I should have gone with you."

She pulled back just enough to look at him, her eyes burning through tears.

"I should have been the one sharing those bonds with you. I should have been the one waiting eagerly at your side, waiting for our unborn child." Her voice broke completely. "But I was denied all of it."

Suddenly, she shoved him away.

Ikenga stumbled back a step, stunned.

"Do you think I'm gullible?" Mahu demanded, her grief twisting into fury. "Do you think everything could return to how it was with a few jokes and carefully chosen words from you?"

Her chest rose and fell sharply.

"Do you know how much I wanted to hurt that child?"

The words fell as Ikenga went rigid, his entire being tensing, divine power instinctively bracing as if for impact.

Mahu noticed. A bitter, broken smile flickered across her face.

"You saved that child's life," she said quietly. "You think I didn't notice how tense you were? Had you dared stand between me and Keles, had you made yourself my obstacle it would not have ended as peacefully as it did today."

Her voice trembled, but her conviction did not.

"It pleased me that you trusted me," Mahu said. "That despite everything, you believed I was still mature enough, still strong enough to face this without becoming something I would hate."

Her hand pressed briefly against her chest as though steadying herself.

"That trust... that faith in me," she said softly, "that is what saved that child's life."

Silence stretched between them. Mahu wiped at her tears with the back of her hand, her posture straightening once more not whole, but standing.

"So do not mistake my restraint for forgiveness," she said quietly. "And do not mistake my love for weakness."

Ikenga didn't move as Mahu stepped closer. The distance between them vanished when her hand fisted into his clothing, fingers curling with purpose as she pulled him down to her. Before he could speak, before he could brace himself, her lips met his.

For a fleeting moment, it felt achingly familiar.

Ikenga tasted the memory of her: warmth, divinity, everything he had lost and never stopped yearning for. His breath caught, his hands reaching out to her but then she pulled away.

"I want to hurt you," Mahu said quietly, her voice steady despite the tears still clinging to her lashes. "The way you hurt me. And I will."

Ikenga's chest tightened.

"I will bear your child," she continued, each word merciless. "I know how much regret you carry over Ikem. How that wound never truly healed." Her gaze hardened. "Sadly for you, that regret will not end there."

His eyes widened slightly.

"I will have your child without you in their life," Mahu said. "I will do everything in my power to ensure they never know your connection to them. You will watch your own child grow into a stranger, unable to call you father, unable to heed your counsel, untouched by your presence." Her voice trembled with pain sharpened into resolve. "Your words will mean nothing to them."

She leaned in once more, pressing her lips to his again soft, lingering, cruel in its tenderness.

"That," she whispered against him as she pulled back, "is how I will hurt you."

Chapter 768:

She leaned in once more, pressing her lips to his again soft, lingering, cruel in its tenderness.

"That," she whispered against him as she pulled back, "is how I will hurt you."

She turned away, already walking toward the towering silhouette of her castle.

"Once your seed is planted in me," Mahu added without looking back, "that will be the last time you ever set foot in my realm."

The light shifted as she departed, her figure receding into the vastness she ruled, unyielding, resolute, gone.

Ikenga remained where he stood, frozen, the echo of her words ringing louder than any blow.

His vision blurred as he closed his eyes and when he opened them again, his form vanished from Mahu's realm.

The moment his presence vanished, Mahu's strength failed her.

Her knees buckled, and she collapsed to the marble floor, the echoes of her footsteps still lingering in the vast hall. The composure she had worn like armor shattered completely. A raw, broken cry tore from her chest as she curled inward, clutching at herself as if trying to hold together something that had already splintered.

She cried louder now, unrestrained, unashamed.

A ripple of sound announced another presence.

Siren appeared beside her, lowering herself without hesitation. There was no lecture, no questions only quiet understanding. She gathered Mahu into her arms, cradling her as Mahu sobbed against her shoulder, grief pouring out in waves that shook her entire being.

Ikenga's next destination tore him away from that pain and straight into another.

Keles realm unfolded around him, cold and quiet. He appeared to find Keles reclining on her side, one hand slowly massaging her belly in a protective, absent-minded motion.

Her expression distant but calm. She felt him before she saw him. When her eyes opened and found him standing there, she exhaled slowly.

"It seems it didn't go well," she said.

Ikenga gave a low hum in response and nodded once. He took a step forward, then stopped as Keles spoke.

"I hope," Keles continued, her voice even but edged with something sharper, "that you didn't come here thinking it would go well here as well."

That made him freeze.

Keles pushed herself upright, adjusting her robe as she sat. Her gaze locked onto his, steady and unflinching.

"I am no trophy, Ikenga," she said. "And neither is Mahu." Her hand slipped beneath the folds of her robe, fingers clenching tight where he couldn't see. "You have to make a choice."

She leaned forward slightly.

"You can't have us both."

The words hung heavy in the air.

Ikenga let out a breathless laugh, short, bitter, and self-directed.

"Fuck," he muttered, shaking his head. "Of course."

He walked toward her slowly. When he reached her, he lowered himself to his knees instead of standing over her. Gently, carefully he rested his head against her stomach.

For a moment, he said nothing. He listened.

To the faint rhythm of life within her. To the quiet reassurance of a heartbeat that had nothing to do with gods, conflicts, or impossible choices.

As he stayed there, listening, Ikenga began to speak.

He told her everything, Mahu's tears, her anger. The kiss, her promise of cruelty born from love and loss.

His voice was low, stripped of pride, every word weighed down by regret. Keles listened without interrupting, her fingers slowly threading through his hair, her expression unreadable, caught somewhere between sorrow, fear, and resolve.

When he finally fell silent, the only sound left between them was the steady, undeniable proof of life beneath her palm.

Ikenga remained there for a long moment longer, his head still resting against her, as though lifting it might break whatever fragile calm had settled.

Then, quietly, he spoke.

"You know I can't choose, right?" They were weary. Almost apologetic.

Silence stretched.

Keles did not answer right away. Her fingers continued their slow, absent motion over her belly, grounding herself before she spoke.

"I know," she said at last.

Ikenga lifted his head, searching her face. "I know," she repeated, meeting his gaze without flinching.

"But ," Keles continued, her voice shaky. "You will stay. You will be present." She placed her hand more firmly over her womb. "We will raise this child together. For his sake... and for mine."

Ikenga's breath caught.

"I was named the sin of envy by Mother," Keles went on softly, a faint, self-aware smile touching her lips. "And she was not wrong." Her eyes lowered briefly, then rose again. "I envy the connection you share with Mahu. The history. The depth. The way she occupies a part of you I cannot reach."

Her hand tightened slightly in her robe, unseen.

"I want that connection," she admitted, voice barely above a whisper. "I want it for myself. For myself alone."

The confession hung between them "And because of that," Keles said, "things cannot continue as they were between us." She drew in a slow breath. "Your access to me will be limited, as protection to myself and this world." She said with Ikenga understanding her words.

She leaned closer, resting her forehead briefly against his.

"My realm, however, remains open to you," she said gently. "You may come and go as you wish. Stay as long as you need. You are welcome herea, lways."

Ikenga swallowed, something unsteady flickering in his eyes. Keles didn't wait for an answer.

She leaned in and pressed her lips to his soft, unhurried, aching with restraint.

When she pulled back, her gaze remained steady while giving him a smile.

Ikenga kept his gaze on her for a long moment, as though trying to memorize the lines of her face, the tremor she refused to show. Then he turned away.

With a simple wave of his hand, the air in the chamber rippled like disturbed water. Threads of violet light stitched themselves together, weaving wood and linen, silk and memory into existence. The bed they once shared, familiar, warm, bearing the faint impression of countless nights spent in conversation materialized at the center of the room.

Without a word, he lay down upon it, drawing Keles gently into his arms. She came willingly, resting against him as she had done so a thousand times before. Their bodies fit together in a silence deeper than speech. No reassurances were offered. No promises were made.

There weren't many things in existence that could unnerve Ikenga but this was one of the few that left him utterly wordless. There was nothing he could say to mend what had been strained. No sweet phrase could untangle divine duty from personal longing. Words would only cheapen the gravity of it.

On one side stood the Goddess of Motherhood, her essence bound to creation, nurture, and fragile beginnings.

On the other, the Goddess of Death, eternal and inevitable, whose domain ensured the balance of all things.

Any fracture between them was not merely emotional. A tremor in either would ripple outward, disturbing birth and burial alike. Seasons would falter. Souls would hesitate. The world itself would feel the imbalance.

And so both women endured as best they could, swallowing their private turmoil for the sake of something greater than themselves.

Ikenga could only hope that time and his actions would prove stronger than doubt. That the connection he shared with them would not erode and still hold strong.

He lay there, lost in thought, listening to the quiet rhythm of Keles's breathing. Slow. Steady. Alive.

He glanced downward.

Her belly curved prominently beneath his hand, life stirring within. His expression softened in a way few beings had ever witnessed. Carefully, reverently, he pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"Rest," he murmured, though whether to her or to himself, even he did not know.

His form began to dissolve into a flurry of soft purple petals, one of his creations, beloved by Keles for their peculiar scent: something like rain on stone and distant twilight. They drifted upward and outward, catching the dim light as they scattered through the chamber.

Then he was gone, silence lingered. Keles's eyes opened.

She had felt it the moment he dispersed, the subtle withdrawal of his presence, like warmth leaving the air. Slowly, she lifted her hand. Several petals had settled there, delicate and cool against her skin.

She brought them to her nose and inhaled deeply.

The scent wrapped around her, bittersweet.

A sudden movement pressed outward from within her. She blinked, then laughed softly as another kick followed.

Her hand moved instinctively to her stomach.

"You have quite a greedy father," she said gently, amusement warming her voice. "Even when he leaves, he insists on staying."

The child kicked again, stronger this time.

Keles smiled, though there was a sheen to her eyes that had nothing to do with mirth.

"Do not worry," she whispered, fingers tracing slow circles over her belly. "He will find his way back. He always does."

Ikenga returned to his realm.

The skies parted for him as they always did, clouds bending like courtiers before a king. Below, vast plains of luminous grass swayed beneath a wind that carried the scent of rain and wild blossoms. Colossal beasts lifted their heads at his arrival, serpentine creatures coiled around crystal trees, winged leviathans gliding between floating isles, their roars echoing in welcome.

Chapter 769

The vast beauty of it and the welcoming roars of the creatures in his domain did little to improve his mood. Normally, their calls would have stirred something in him pride, satisfaction, even amusement. Today, they were distant sounds against the weight in his mind.

His realm had grown during his absence.

Forests stretched farther than before. The rivers had widened, their currents stronger. Even the sky seem to have stretched longer no long as close as he remembered.

High above, the sunflower he had once placed in the heavens had changed.

It no longer resembled a plant. Its petals had fused into a radiant sphere of light, its roots merging seamlessly with the very space of the realm. It looked like a sun now, self-contained, steady, and immense. It did not carry the unbearable heat of a true star, but that was never its purpose. It was meant to provide warmth and life, nothing more.

And it did so perfectly.

Ikenga raised his hand and reached for his new ring, the one that contained the celestial body he had taken during his adventure.

The ring slipped from his finger into his palm.

He ascended into the sky of his realm, stopping at a distance from the sunflower-sun. Holding the ring outward, he let it hover in the open space opposite the radiant sphere.

He released it.

The ring began to tremble. Its shape distorted, the circular band unraveling as light spilled from within. It expanded, shedding its confined form. Space adjusted around it as the object returned to what it truly was.

A habitable moon.

Its surface formed fully as it stabilized in the sky. Landmasses became defined. Large body of water spread across its surface. The work he had done with his nature divinity remained intact, the atmosphere stable, the land fertile, the waters alive with potential.

Ikenga stepped back, watching as the moon settled into its position across from the sunflower.

One to bring light and warmth, one to reflect and cool.

They aligned naturally within his realm.

Only then did he lower his hand.

The creatures below quieted, sensing the shift above them. His realm now had a cycle, not just endless daylight, but balance.

The moon could not reach its full size.

Ikenga felt the limitation clearly. His realm, though vast and still expanding, could not yet sustain a celestial body of that magnitude. So the moon stopped growing once it reached a size the realm could endure. Large enough to dominate the night sky. Small enough not to fracture the space that held it.

It was sufficient.

As the moon stabilized, something stirred upon its surface. The plant which one beheld his eye unfolded. Its slender stem straightened. Leaves trembled. Then, slowly, its roots stretched downward, burrowing deeper into the moon's soil as if testing it.

Taking in the different atmosphere of his divine realm. Learning it.

Ikenga watched it in silence, observing the way it matched well with the moon.

A thought occurred to him "Mahu would love this plant." The idea settled instantly into certainty the moment it came up.

He reached out. The plant tore free from the moon's surface without resistance and flew toward him, its roots trailing behind like loose threads. When it reached his hand, it coiled around his wrist and palm like a serpent.

Ikenga studied it for a moment before patting it lightly.

"I have a new home for you," he said. The plant tightened slightly at his voice.

"A place I may one day no longer be able to gaze upon... but I hope you will in my absence. Watch over her and"

He stopped.

His gaze shifted into the distance, unfocused for a brief moment.

"...you will know the rest for yourself when the time comes."

A portal opened before him, leading to Mahu's realm. Ikenga threw the plant through, the portal sealed behind it.

Silence followed as Ikenga remained where he was, waiting.

If it was rejected, it would return. Divine realms did not easily accept foreign life without permission.

He waited as moments passed, nothing came back. The corner of his lips lifted slightly.

Accepted, his mood shifted subtle, but enough and his realm felt it.

Below, creatures that had been cautiously observing the new celestial body grew restless with curiosity. Winged beings burst from the forest canopy. Massive avian forms and smaller luminous creatures alike took to the sky, their destination clear.

The moon.

They rose in waves, circling upward toward the newest addition to their world.

Ikenga watched them ascend, the faint smile still present.

For the first time since his return, the weight in his chest felt lighter.

At the same time, Ikenga perceived a shift within his realm.

It was faint. The air felt denser with meaning. The flow of power through the land no longer moved in a single direction, it circulated. The sunflower above, the moon opposite it... something between them had settled into order. As though a missing principle had been introduced. A quiet law now anchored the realm more firmly than before.

It felt...

complete not finished. But closer to something whole.

Ikenga remained suspended in the sky, sensing the change with narrowed eyes.

Was this the nature of Origin gods?

To begin with territory... then structure... then law?

Was his realm slowly approaching the state of a true world?

A world capable not only of sustaining life, but would one day create it's own life with souls.

Nana had once spoken of souls as something elusive. Even Keles, who governed death and guided souls beyond their end, could not fully explain what a soul was or how it first came to be.

Souls were not assigned, they were not designed. They simply... existed.

Ikenga had created many beings which carried intention, strength, instinct, role. He could design their bodies, define their abilities, anchor them to purpose.

But he could not grant a soul, that was the boundary. Yet now, as he felt the new stability in his realm, the subtle strengthening of its laws, a thought emerged.

Perhaps the limitation was not permanent, perhaps it was premature.

If a realm could mature, If laws could deepen, If cycles could be established... Then perhaps one day, he would not need to wait for souls to form on their own.

Perhaps one day, he could shape one, not assign instinct or craft obedience. But create true life.

A being that could choose beyond design, a being that possessed self.

"A Creator," Ikenga murmured, the idea did not feel arrogant. It felt inevitable.

Ikenga let himself fall from the sky, the wind parting around him as the moon and sunflower remained suspended above. The creatures continued their ascent behind him, their excitement no longer his focus.

The familiar outline of his shed came into view, modest, weathered, unchanged despite the realm's growth. Beside it stood the great tree where he often slept, its trunk thick and ancient, roots spreading deep into the soils of his domain.

The moment his feet touched the ground, he saw it.

Wrapped around the trunk of the tree was a massive serpent with folded wings, scales dark and iridescent beneath the filtered light.

"Boros."

Her golden eyes opened at the sound of his voice.

Beneath the tree stood another figure, tall, quiet, bark-toned skin with faint veins of green light beneath it.

Ikenga's gaze softened.

"Osisi." The two demigod lifeforms of his realm.

They had felt his return long before he arrived. Of all the resident of his realm, they were the closest to something beyond mere purpose.

Ikenga opened his arms with a wide, genuine laugh the first few unguarded sound he had made since returning.

Boros did not hesitate.

Her enormous serpentine form shimmered, shrinking and reshaping mid-motion. Wings folded inward, scales receding into smooth skin as she took on a humanoid shape. She launched herself forward and collided into his open embrace.

Ikenga caught her easily. She buried her face against him and inhaled deeply.

"You are not happy," she said quietly.

The words made him pause.

"Do you know?" he asked.

Boros shook her head against him.

"I know nothing," she admitted. "But as residents of your realm... we felt it. Your saddened mood."

Ikenga was silent for a moment.

So even that had spread. His emotions were not entirely his own, they resonated through the realm. Through them.

He lifted a hand and gently patted her head.

"No need to worry," he said. "Things happen. Besides... my mood is certainly better seeing you two."

Boros lingered a moment longer before pulling back. Without another word, her humanoid form dissolved. Scales returned. Wings extended and folded again as she resumed her serpentine body.

She slithered upward and settled across his shoulders, coiling into her familiar position, comfortable, her head resting near his.

Ikenga adjusted slightly to accommodate her weight, though it was nothing to him.

He turned to Osi who had changed.

He no longer stood rooted in place as a towering tree bound to one patch of earth. He seem to have shed a piece of himself, the rigid trunk and unmoving branches were gone. In their place stood an old treant bark layered like aged skin, limbs sturdy but flexible. Moss traced his shoulders like a mantle, and from his chin flowed a thick green beard of vines and leaves.

Age suited him.

Chapter 770

Unlike Boros' immediate affection, Osi's greeting was measured.

"Your Grace," he said, bowing properly.

Ikenga smiled at the sight.

"You have changed since last we saw each other."

Osi straightened, brushing his leafy beard with slow amusement.

"The world is changing," he replied, voice deep and textured like wood shifting in wind. "And this old man would like to be part of this change. Changes needed to happen."

Ikenga paused at that "Indeed," Ikenga nodded. "It is as you say."

Osis shifted slightly before speaking again.

"The young master and his mistress visited earlier," he said. "But you were not present. He... had to leave. He is now a god and has duties to uphold."

The words landed heavier than Osis likely intended.

Ikenga's expression stilled. For a brief moment, his gaze drifted past them both, distant and unfocused. Time passed in that silence.

His son had come and left. He nodded after a while.

"I will be heading over to his realm to meet him later," Ikenga said calmly. "Thank you for the update."

Osis inclined his head but he did not withdraw. There was a faint hesitation in him, subtle but present.

"May I offer a piece of advice, Your Grace?"

Ikenga looked at him with mild surprise before nodding.

"You may."

Osisi chose his words carefully.

"I may not fully understand the nature of your relationship with the young master," he began. "But as a close friend of his... I can say this."

He met Ikenga's gaze directly.

"He truly admires you. And he has missed you far more than you can imagine."

Ikenga's eyes narrowed, then warmed.

A genuine smile spread across his face, unguarded, sincere. A quiet laugh escaped him, lighter than he had intended.

He stepped forward and placed a firm hand on Osisi's wooden shoulder.

"Let me thank you on my son's behalf," Ikenga said. "You are a great friend, I hope your friendship with him continues as it is."

Osisi bowed his head again, but there was a faint satisfaction in his posture.

As he said that, Ikenga looked around the clearing.

The shed was as it always was. The great tree stood tall. Boros rested on his shoulder. Osisi remained nearby.

But one presence was missing.

"Where is Oracle?" Ikenga asked lightly. "Am I not even worth his greeting anymore?"

There was no real displeasure in his tone, only amusement.

Boros answered this time, her voice carrying faint annoyance.

"That curious and bookish fool has found a new interest recently. He is probably lost in it somewhere, ignoring your return."

Ikenga raised a brow.

"New interest?"

He did not move, but the moment the thought formed, his awareness expanded.

Within his home world, nothing was truly hidden from him. The trees, the rivers, the wind, the soil, all of it responded to him. Omnipresence came naturally. Effortlessly, he found Oracle.

As Arch Curse Creator, the nature of curses, their shaping and manipulation, resonated clearly to him. He sensed what Oracle was doing.

Ikenga's gaze lowered slightly.

He looked at his shadow "Second place might be taken from you if you don't hurry," he said casually.

His shadow rippled subtly at his words before settling back into stillness.

As for who held first place, Juggernaut had taken it.

His path alongside Xerosis had yielded great benefit. Through that journey, he had advanced significantly. Among his siblings, he now stood first.

A Sixth Tier figure. A faint smile touched his lips.

"Good," he murmured. Let them compete, let them strive. A creator did not fear his creations rising.

He welcomed it.

Meanwhile, in the mortal plane of Nana, the world reacted the moment Ikenga and Keles returned.

More accurately, Nature reacted for any visible reaction from Death would have been catastrophic.

The first change was unseen.

The threshold that separated the upside-down world from the normal plane, a barrier few even knew existed had been left unstable during the absence of both Ikenga and Keles. Their departure had created two vast openings, weak points in the unseen boundary.

Pillars were created during the ascension of the demigods to act as a stand in, in the absence of Ikenga and Keles but recently the Origin Gods destroyed two pillars, and their had been slight concern on what comes after if Ikenga and keles never came back on time.

But the moment both returned, the openings began to close. The fractures simply sealed themselves, as though the world exhaled in relief. What could have spiraled into potential crisis resolved quietly.

Most never noticed. Those who did understood how close things had come.

Then came the second reaction, this one could not be ignored.

During Ikenga's absence, nature had not withered but it had dulled. Crops no longer grew in days or weeks. Harvest cycles stretched into months. Soil felt heavier. Growth felt reluctant.

Nothing collapsed, but abundance faded. Now, farmers woke to fields far fuller than they had been the day before.

Grains ripened early, fruits swelled on branches out o

f season. Seeds planted only recently broke through soil with unnatural vigor.

The change was not isolated, forests thickened. New trees rose where none had stood before, grasslands regained their rich green.

Across the planet, animals reacted instinctively. In deep forests and open plains alike, beasts lifted their heads and roared to the sky. Birds burst upward in flocks. Herds moved with restless energy.

The other party that felt this clearly was the deep worshippers. Those devoted to Ikenga felt warmth settle into their hearts again, a responsiveness that had been absent.

Those devoted to Keles sensed a steadiness in the passage of souls.

The two presences that had once gone silent were no longer distant. The realization spread quietly at first.

Across temples and shrines, the same conclusion was reached. The absent gods were back.

On the eastern continent, within the territory of the apelings, there existed a region few dared to approach, a land dominated by fire and restless mountains. Volcanoes stood like ancient sentinels, their peaks constantly bleeding smoke and ash into the sky. Rivers of lava cut glowing paths through dark rock, and the air itself shimmered from the overwhelming heat. It was not a place meant for ordinary life.

But it was perfect for the Ember Cursed Clan.

The clan had chosen this land not in spite of its brutality, but because of it. The constant heat strengthened them. The closeness of active volcanoes fed their curse, sharpening their bodies and

tempering their spirits the way fire tempers steel. Their city was built within this inferno structures carved from hardened lava and blackened stone, standing firm against eruptions and tremors alike.

At the highest volcano, where the heat was most intense, stood the home of Ember.

The sound of hammer striking steel rang across the mountainside.

Clang.

Each strike was heavy, deliberate, and impossibly powerful. The impact alone caused the surrounding ground to tremble. Loose rock shifted. Fine ash slid down the slopes. The volcano itself seemed to respond to the rhythm of his forging.

Clang.

Ember stood before his anvil, his burning eyes fixed on the heated steel beneath his hammer. Sweat did not bead on his skin, it evaporated instantly in the surrounding heat. The steel glowed white-hot, bending under his strength.

Then, he stopped as he felt a tremor. The tremor beneath his feet was different.

Not the recoil of his own strike, nor was it the natural shifting of the mountain.

Slowly, his burning eyes turned toward the crater behind him.

The lava inside the volcano was rising.

It bubbled and swelled unnaturally, climbing higher and higher as if something beneath it was pushing upward. The surface broke apart, molten waves spilling over the inner edges.

Then a shape emerged.

A massive head pushed through the lava, magma cascading off hardened scales. Horns broke the surface first, followed by glowing eyes that opened with a slow awareness.

A roar erupted from the crater.

It was deep and draconic, shaking the sky itself. The sound rolled across the volcanic range, echoing through the Ember Clan's city below.

Red had awakened.

The dragon slowly climbed out from the volcano's core, his enormous body displacing lava in every movement. Molten rock scattered outward as he rose, spilling down the mountainside in blazing streams. His wings unfolded, sending bursts of heat outward in waves.

Fully emerged now, Red stood atop the volcano, lava dripping from his scales as smoke curled from his nostrils.

Red lowered his great head and turned his gaze toward Ember, who stood unmoving before him.

"An old friend is back," Red said, his voice deep and resonant, like magma shifting beneath the earth. "I have to pay my visit."

Ember met his gaze without hesitation. There was no surprise in his expression, only understanding.

"Tell grandpa I said welcome."

Red gave a slow nod.

Then his wings spread wider.

For a brief moment, they blotted out the fiery glow of the volcano, casting the summit into shadow. The air trembled as he beat them once, twice and then he rose.

