

## **Guardian gods 771**

Chapter 771:

The force of his ascent scattered lava in every direction. Ash and sparks spiraled upward in his wake as he cut through the smoke-filled sky, heading toward a place few beings could perceive.

His destination was Ikenga's realm.

A boundary hidden from ordinary sight. A domain so concealed that most did not even know it existed, let alone where it lay. Only those with the right awareness or the right connection could find the path to it.

Red disappeared into the distant haze.

Silence settled over the volcano once more.

Ember stood still for a moment longer, watching the sky where Red had vanished. Then, without ceremony, he let his hammer fall from his hand.

It struck the volcanic stone with a thunderous impact, shaking the summit and sending cracks spidering outward.

Ember turned and walked toward the crater.

As he moved, his clothes fell away, burned by proximity and discarded without care. The heat intensified with each step, yet his pace remained steady.

Then he dove.

His body disappeared into the molten lava without hesitation.

This was routine.

Whenever Red awakened from a long slumber and left the volcano, Ember returned to it.

A dragon's body was treasure in every sense. The residual essence left behind in the magma, shed scales, condensed heat, fragments of hardened draconic energy were invaluable to his craft. What Red naturally released during his rest became materials no forge elsewhere could ever produce.

The volcano was not just Red's resting place. It was Ember's treasury.

Unlike many who sought the path to the Sixth Tier, Ember found himself drawn instead to the idea of godhood.

It simply felt right to him, part of that certainty came from his heritage. The Ember Cursed Clan was not ordinary, and neither was he. But more importantly, unlike many, Ember was clear about what he needed to do. There was no hesitation in him, no wandering between paths. While others explored possibilities, he had already chosen his direction.

Ember understood something simple, ascending for him meant crafting something beyond a mere artifact, it had to be a god-tier artifact.

Not something impressive to mortals or something powerful among strong beings. But something that even the origin gods, beings of divinity and overwhelming strength would find useful.

That was the standard, that was the requirement he set for himself. Because he had been the one to craft the Pillars, the Origin Gods rewarded him. From them, he was granted a Sun Fire, a flame from the Crepuscular Realm.

It was no ordinary flame.

Even with his cursed status, even with a body long accustomed to extreme heat, he found it unbearable. The fire was on a different level entirely. It was not something he could treat like dragon flame or volcanic magma.

Receiving that flame clarified his path.

Through it, Ember came to a realization: Neither the Origin Gods nor the Ascended Gods possessed weapons of their own.

The Origin Gods existed as they were, complete. The Ascended Gods had divinity, but not crafted instruments made to properly bear it.

And that was where Ember saw his place.

In the case of Ascended Gods, he was confident. If he were granted even a glimpse of their divinity, just enough to understand its nature, he believed he could craft a weapon capable of bearing it.

One worthy of a god.

He was, however, prideful.

That pride was the reason his gaze did not rest on the Ascended Gods but on the Origin Gods themselves.

The small fragment of Sun Fire granted from the Crepuscular Realm made Ember aim higher than his current reach allowed. The flame had been given as a reward, yet it became a challenge instead.

Because he could not control it, he could not forge with it. No matter what material he tested, no matter how he refined his technique, nothing could properly contain it. Any vessel he crafted either cracked under its presence or failed to draw out even a fraction of its true power.

The Sun Fire did not respond to his skill, it judged it.

The only material he had found capable of holding even a glimpse of the flame was what Red left behind during his long slumbers, fragments infused with draconic essence. Those remnants could endure a trace of the Sun Fire without collapsing.

But there were too few, far too few to mold into anything complete. Not enough for a weapon, not enough for an instrument worthy of the gods.

And Ember refused to waste them on something lesser.

He understood that if he wished to take the next step, if he wished to forge something capable of truly containing that flame then the change required was not in the materials alone.

It was in himself. Ember knew that once he crossed that threshold, once he committed fully to this path, he would glimpse his own divinity.

Meanwhile, on the northern continent, across the endless icy plains, a lone figure drifted through the sky.

There was no destination in his movement. No direction guiding him. He floated as though carried by habit rather than intent, a jug of alcohol raised loosely in one hand. His eyes were unfocused, distant, absent like someone who had long ago stopped searching for anything in particular.

The icy plains were known for their merciless winds. Blizzards roamed freely across the frozen land, and the air itself cut like blades.

Yet around him, the winds died. Not even the edge of his clothing stirred, the cold bent away from him.

At that same moment, far beyond mortal sight when Ikenga stepped back into his realm.

The drifting figure stopped even the jug halted mid-tilt before reaching his lips.

For the first time in centuries, something shifted in his eyes. The haze thinned. The emptiness receded. Clarity—slow, unfamiliar—began to return.

"...Home." The word left him quietly and with it came understanding.

He had been searching, wandering. Drifting across skies and continents without knowing what he lacked.

Home, it had always been where it was, he had simply forgotten. The winds across the icy plain surged without warning. Snow lifted violently into the air, spiraling outward in a sudden storm. The sky groaned as currents collided, the sound sharp and harsh, like air being torn apart.

The figure changed.

His form expanded, light bending and reshaping as feathers burst into existence, glistening white against the storm. In place of the wandering man now stood a massive white bird, wings vast and radiant against the gray sky.

The winds stopped the moment the figure appeared. With a single powerful flap of his wings, the storm collapsed into silence.

The enormous white bird vanished from the icy plain in an instant and for a while after his departure, the northern winds did not return as though the wind itself had left with him.

High above the clouds, Red cut through the sky with steady, powerful wingbeats. In one claw he carried a massive cow-like creature, its body limp but intact, a gift and a meal brought along for the visit.

Before him, the clouds were beginning to part.

Through the shifting layers of white and gray, something unseen by most slowly came into view. To Red's eyes, Ikenga's realm was not hidden. The boundary shimmered faintly ahead, like heat rising from stone.

It was then that the white bird appeared, no warning, no sound of approach. One moment Red flew alone, the next, a colossal white bird with glistening feathers was beside him, matching his pace effortlessly.

Red paused mid-flight, wings slowing slightly as a familiar scent reached him. Smoke curled from his nostrils as recognition settled in.

Sparks flickered between his teeth when he spoke.

"Is that you, Tweet?"

The white bird seemed to snap back to awareness at the sound. His entire focus had been forward, on the boundary, on home. Only now did he properly register the massive red dragon flying beside him.

In a blur of light, the bird's form shifted, feathers folding inward as he took on a humanoid shape midair, still moving at impossible speed.

"Ah, if it isn't Sir Roast-a-Lot," Tweet replied, a grin tugging at his lips. "You sure have grown big, Red." Even with clarity returning to his eyes, his mischievous nature surfaced easily.

Red's response was immediate, a burst of flame shot from his mouth. Tweet twisted aside smoothly, the fire passing harmlessly behind him.

"The same can be said to you, you overgrown chicken," Red shot back. They continued forward, trading insults as naturally as breathing, their voices echoing between clouds as they crossed the invisible boundary.

The air changed the moment they entered Ikenga's realm.

Red's massive draconic form shrank, scales receding as he assumed his humanoid shape. The large cow-like creature floated mid air beside him.

Tweet was already in his humanoid form. The moment his feet touched the ground, he stopped.

He closed his eyes.

Arms spread wide, he drew in a deep breath, long and steady. The air around him shifted violently, currents pulling inward as though the realm itself rushed to meet him.

His chest trembled, tears slipped down his face. For a long moment, he simply stood there, breathing.

Then he threw his head back and roared "I AM BACK HOME!!"

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The declaration shook the realm.

Red flinched slightly at the sheer force behind it, not from power alone but from the emotion laced within it.

He looked at Tweet's tear-streaked face and he understood. The past centuries had not been kind to him.

Red said nothing, he simply stood beside him, allowing the moment to belong to Tweet.

"Welcome home, you bad-mouthed chicken. They're waiting for us," Red said.

Without lingering, he lifted off again, flying toward Ikenga's shed. The massive beast he had caught floated alongside him, suspended effortlessly as he moved deeper into the realm.

Tweet remained where he stood.

The earlier roar still echoed faintly in the air, but now that the surge of emotion had passed, something heavier settled in its place.

Shame.

How could he have forgotten home?

For centuries he had drifted without purpose, numbing himself, convincing himself there was nothing to return to. And yet home had always existed. Waiting.

What had he accomplished all that time?

What had he done to deserve coming back?

The wind shifted gently, carrying distant laughter to his ears. Some voices he recognized instantly, familiar tones that stirred old memories. Others were new, unfamiliar, signs that time had not stood still in his absence.

He looked up. The sky had changed, the realm had changed. It had grown, matured moved forward without him.

Tweet inhaled deeply, steadying himself. Whatever doubts lingered, this was still home.

And so he followed after Red.

They were not the only ones who felt the return.

In the spirit world, two world spirits stirred.

Aqua and Brix.

They felt it the moment Ikenga stepped back into his realm, their origin, their ruler, the one who had granted them life and the opportunity to rise into the greater beings they had become.

Excitement rippled through the spirit world. There was so much to tell him.

The growth of the spirits, the expansion of their domain. Ikenga ruled not only his own realm but the spirit world as well, and his presence anchored both.

When Tweet's proclamation thundered through the realm, the sound reached even them.

Both treants turned toward the source of the voice.

They exchanged a glance.

"He is finally back after all these years."

Long before Red crossed the boundary, long before Tweet's voice shook the realm. Ikenga had already known they were coming.

He was outside his shed, calmly gathering dried wood into a neat pile. On his shoulder rested Boros, coiled comfortably, her voice filled with curiosity as she asked what he was preparing.

It was then Red's present was felt, and then Tweet loud voice was heard. Boros blinked as her question answered itself.

Ikenga chuckled.

"We are going to have a large party," he said warmly. "It's been a while since everyone was together. I even plan on bringing out my finest wine."

The laughter in his voice was genuine. But the moment he mentioned his finest wine, he felt it, the subtle tensing of Boros' body on his shoulder.

Ikenga paused.

"Boros." His voice lowered slightly, as she stiffened further.

"My finest and old wine," he repeated, slowly turning his head to look at her.

Boros was suddenly chuckling nervously, her gaze drifting away as if the sky had become incredibly interesting.

Her wings twitched.

In the next instant she blurred, attempting to flee, but Ikenga's hand was already there.

He caught her effortlessly.

The moment he did, Boros' snake form went completely limp in his grasp.

She played dead.

Ikenga stared at her unmoving body, one brow twitching.

"...Did you at least leave me some?" One of Boros eyes cracked open slightly.

"You're not angry?" she asked cautiously.

Ikenga sighed "Would that bring my wine back?" For a brief second, Boros looked relieved

She quickly resumed her position on his shoulder as if nothing had happened.

"I only emptied a few barrels," she said lightly. Ikenga slowly turned his head toward her.

"Barrels?" His hand rose again.

Boros stiffened.

"I only have a few barrels left," Ikenga continued calmly, "which means you left me with nothing." The last words was followed with his shouting.

Osisi stood nearby, watching Ikenga and Boros argue.

He shook his head slowly, he had warned Boros many times to be mindful of her drinking. Each time, she had waved him off confidently, claiming nothing would happen.

Fortunately, Osisi had prepared for this.

Red and Tweet arrived fully into the scene just in time to witness Ikenga and Boros bickering openly voices rising.

Before it could escalate further, Osi stepped forward and bowed slightly.

"Your Grace, you have no need to worry," he said calmly. "I have had the young master refill the empty barrels for you over the years... while someone was stealing from you."

There was a brief silence, Ikenga slowly turned toward Osi then he released Boros.

A smile spread across his face.

"That is very thoughtful of you," Ikenga said warmly, glancing sideways at Boros. "Unlike someone I know."

Boros looked away, pretending sudden innocence. Before anything else could be said, a figure slammed into Ikenga.

He did not resist the impact. Instead, he let himself fall backward slightly, catching the figure securely in his arms.

Tweet clung to him tightly.

"Welcome back, Tweet. We have missed you," Ikenga said gently, patting his head.

Tweet trembled slightly.

"I... I..." He struggled to speak. The words were there, crowded and heavy, but they would not come out properly.

Ikenga did not press him.

"You have no need to blame yourself," he said softly. "It wasn't yet time for you to come home. But now it is. And all that matters is that you are here."

He stood, bringing Tweet upright with him.

Tweet stepped back, embarrassed. He had forgotten others were present. He had lost his composure completely.

But when he looked around, it was quiet, just him and Ikenga. The others had given them space and for that, Tweet was silently grateful.

Not far from the shed, a bonfire had already been lit. A barbecue stand was set up beside it, flames steady and strong. Red stood nearby, overseeing the preparations, while Boros, now in humanoid form moved around the fire with exaggerated seriousness.

Osisi was calmly cutting up the massive cow-like creature Red had brought, his movements precise and efficient.

From the direction of the shed, Aqua and Brix walked out as though it were their own home, each carrying a barrel of wine with ease.

The sight struck Tweet deeply. The firelight, the familiar faces. The casual movements.

It was all so... normal, so unchanged.

His eyes began to cloud again as memories surfaced, laughter, arguments, nights that stretched endlessly beneath this very sky.

But before the moment could fully take him, a teasing voice drifted across the clearing.

Boros wasn't speaking directly to him. She leaned toward the others, whispering loudly enough to be heard.

"I never knew that bad-mouthed bird was so emotional." Snickers followed.

Tweet's fist clenched and said nothing but the laughter grew louder "Better than being an alcoholic feathered straw!" he shouted back immediately.

The clearing went quiet for half a second. Boros eye twitched, she hated being called an alcoholic

"I am not an alcoholic, crybaby!" she screamed.

In the same breath, she shifted, her true form appearing, though smaller, more compact. Without hesitation she rushed toward him.

Tweet transformed as well.

In an instant, both became blurs, white and shimmering motion clashing midair as they snapped and darted at one another.

Feathers and sparks scattered across the clearing. Red didn't even look concerned.

Osisi calmly continued cutting the meat. Aqua and Brix exchanged a glance and shook their heads.

"Those two will never grow up," one of them said with a sigh.

The bonfire crackled steadily beneath the chaos. Some things, no matter how many centuries passed, simply did not change.

"Indeed. Unlike you two who have grown up so well."

Aqua and Brix both stiffened at the familiar voice.

Ikenga stood behind them, holding a basket filled with freshly picked spices from his garden. The scent of herbs mixed with the smoke from the bonfire, grounding the lively scene in something warm and homely.

The two treants turned quickly, each scratching the back of their heads.

"You flatter us, Your Grace," they said almost in unison.

Ikenga laughed, as he stepped forward and patted each of them on the shoulder.

"Come now," he said. "I want to hear everything I've missed over these years."

Before either of them could begin, another voice cut in.

"I am here for the drinks and food," Red said casually as he approached. "I have slept away the years and would also like to hear what took place during my slumber."

Without ceremony, he took the basket of spices from Ikenga's hands, inspecting its contents as if evaluating whether it met his standards.

Ikenga shook his head, it seems red still was the same "Of course," Ikenga replied calmly. "You never miss a meal, even after centuries of sleep."

Red huffed lightly but said nothing in defense.

In the distance, a loud crash echoed as Tweet and Boros slammed into the ground before shooting back into the sky again in another blur of motion.

Aqua sighed, Brix shook his head. Ikenga simply smiled, the realm felt complete again.

Chapter 773:

The night deepened, and the party truly began.

The bonfire burned high, flames dancing wildly as Red adjusted the meat over the grill with careful precision. The scent of roasted meat mixed with Ikenga's spices filled the air, rich and inviting. Aqua and Brix rolled the wine barrels closer, prying them open as cups then jugs were passed around without restraint.

Laughter came easily.

Red drank deeply, claiming it helped "warm him properly," though no one believed he needed help with that. Boros loudly insisted she would pace herself this time, only to be the first demanding refills. Tweet, after initial hesitation, allowed himself to be pulled fully into the celebration.

Even Ikenga drank.

At first, he merely sipped, listening more than speaking. But as stories were told of changes in the spirit world, of minor disasters narrowly avoided, of Boros many failed attempts to hide empty barrels, he let the wine take effect.

For once, he did not hold himself back.

His laughter grew louder. His posture relaxed. The weight he quietly carried as ruler of both realm and spirit world eased, if only for the night.

Red recounted exaggerated tales of ancient hunts during his previous awakenings. Tweet countered with embellished versions of his own travels, conveniently omitting the lonelier parts. Aqua and Brix added details that exposed both of them, earning protests and thrown bones in response.

At some point, Boros attempted to prove she was not drunk by standing on the edge of a barrel and declaring a toast only to lose her balance and fall directly into Red's side. Red, tempted to push off her, shook his head but refused to move.

Ikenga watched it all with softened eyes.

This, this chaos, this noise, this shared presence was what had been missing.

Later, when the fire burned lower and the sunlight dimmed as the moon hung clear above, the conversations turned slower. Voices softened. Some leaned against others without thinking.

Red sat with arms crossed, cup in hand, pretending not to listen while clearly listening to everything.

Boros had curled up near the fire, still muttering half-formed arguments even in her haze.

Aqua and Brix were deep in discussion with Osi about changes in the spirit world, their words occasionally drifting into philosophical territory before dissolving into laughter again.

Tweet sat beside Ikenga, not speaking just present. Ikenga, slightly flushed from the wine, leaned back against a log and exhaled slowly.

As the night stretched on, the fire burned low.

One by one, the voices faded. Laughter softened into murmurs, murmurs into silence. Even Red, who rarely seemed tired, had grown quiet. The barrels stood half-empty.

Eventually, only the crackling of embers remained.

Ikenga sat alone within his thoughts, he replayed everything he had heard tonight.

The ascension of new gods. The spectacles left behind by their counterparts, events so vast they carved permanent marks into the world itself. Scars upon land and sky that would not fade with time.

The beastfolk and the rise of their god. Murmur then Osita. Each name carried weight. Each story carried consequence.

The world had not been stagnant in his absence. It had moved, climbed and had changed.

And yet Ikenga felt no concern, no anxiety. No resentment that events had unfolded without him.

What he felt was joy, genuine joy. Because the world was alive.

Also after what he had witnessed with Keles during their small adventure, one thought had lingered in his mind ever since: their world was too peaceful.

Not fragile, not weak but untested. Beneath the surface calm, there was complacency. Growth had slowed. Ambition had dulled. Without pressure, even the strongest roots grow shallow.

He had wondered, more than once, how conflict might be introduced into a world that had grown comfortable.

How to push it forward without breaking it, yet things were already fixing itself.

There were players more eager than him for this world to grow restless, only difference being that the chaos he wants is not for the end of the world itself

With his return and Keles return their world would no longer remain confined to its quiet orbit.

It was about to step onto a greater cosmic stage and once that happened, no one would be exempt not mortals, nor spirits or gods.

Growth would be demanded and growth, more often than not, was born from struggle.

It was an uncomfortable truth. Innovation had always risen from conflict. Kingdoms advanced after wars. Power deepened through opposition. Peace nurtured stability but conflict forged evolution.

Ikenga stared into the dying embers. It was not cruelty that stirred these thoughts in him.

It was preparation for the cruelty that would come from elsewhere.

From beyond. Blood would be shed, whether he wished it or not, so better that it be shed in a world ready to endure it.

Better that they harden now, better that they grow before they are forced to.

He exh

aled slowly.

Ikenga was not the only one delighted by his return. Keles, too, found herself astonished.

When she had first taken up dominion over the underworld, it had been a silent expanse, vast, solemn, and orderly. Souls drifted like mist upon still waters, each absorbed in fragments of memory and identity. It was not lifeless, but it was... suspended. Timeless.

Now, it was changing.

A sight she had always envied in the mortal world, movement, culture, shared purpose had begun to take root in her realm of the dead.

Before she left with Ikenga, the first signs had already shown itself. Keles had quickly understood the cause for the change then, the souls themselves were shaping the underworld. As their memories returned and their beliefs about the afterlife crystallized, those thoughts became structure. Expectation became landscape and foundation.

The earliest manifestation had been the River of Reflection. It had begun as a whisper, souls murmuring of a crossing, of a place where one must confront who they had been. And so, the river appeared.

Its waters shimmered with silvery light, flowing not with current but with memory. To gaze into it was to see oneself, not merely as one remembered, but as one truly had been.

After regaining their senses, the souls began to build. Simple bridges of pale stone arched across its breadth, each crafted from collective will. Walkways of translucent crystal stretched along the banks, allowing safe passage over its whispering surface.

And then something even more unexpected occurred.

Marketplaces, souls began to trade memories and experiences as if they were tangible goods. A mother's lullaby exchanged for a soldier's final sunrise. The taste of first love bartered for the echo of a long-forgotten victory.

There was no greed in it, only curiosity and connection.

Further beyond the river lay what the souls themselves named the Fields of Remembrance.

Here, they cultivated gardens.

Flowers of forgotten dreams bloomed in soft blues and violets. Trees of lost hopes rose tall and radiant, their branches heavy with shimmering leaves that chimed like distant bells when stirred by unseen winds.

The plants fed on memory transforming it. Grief became petals. Regret became roots. Joy became fruit that glowed warmly in the twilight.

Even more wonders had emerged since she was gone. Structures now rose in the distance, towers shaped from interwoven recollections, amphitheaters where souls gathered to recount their lives as living epics. Pathways formed naturally where souls frequently traveled, solidifying into luminous roads.

But what intrigued Keles most was something different.

Organization.

Certain souls had begun to gather with intention. They called themselves a clan.

A portion of her realm had been marked. The twilight haze parted differently there. The ground held a firmer texture, as though it had accepted a claim. Symbols unfamiliar to her older landscapes shimmered along the boundary, etched by the agreement made.

Ownership.

That word alone would have once been meaningless in the underworld.

Yet here it stood.

When Keles focused her perception more closely, she understood. The souls gathered within that claimed expanse had once been bound in life, by blood, by name, by shared ancestry. Grandmothers stood beside grandsons. Forgotten patriarchs conversed with distant descendants. Cousins separated by generations now recognized one another with tearful clarity.

Even in death, they had found each other and the source of that lay beyond her realm.

In the eastern continent of the mortal world, a profession had quietly taken root.

Death shamans.

Mortals who refused to accept that the boundary between life and death was absolute. They studied ritual, memory, lineage. They took the true names of their ancestors and whispered them beneath moonlit skies. They offered prayer not to the gods, but to their own blood.

And they had succeeded.

Keles saw the tether each time it formed: a thin, luminous thread piercing the veil between realms. Through it, a living shaman would reach into her dominion, grasping for the presence of an ancestor. In return for guidance, protection, or power, an offering was made.

An exchange.

The ancestors lent strength from beyond death.

The living gave sacrifice.

It was this exchange that had begun to alter her realm so erratically.

Chapter 774

Sacrifice was not set on one thing. It could be anything: a bowl of rice, a woven garment, the life of a goat, a bundle of herbs, a blade once carried in battle. Whatever was given with intent and reverence did not remain in the mortal world.

It appeared here.

Keles had watched in fascination as objects materialized in the hands of long-departed souls. At first, they stared at the offerings in confusion. Then recognition dawned.

With recognition came memory. Each gift carried fragments of familial remembrance, restoring clouded identities. Faces solidified. Forgotten dialects returned to their tongues.

But that was not what intrigued Keles most.

It was what came after.

One day, a simple offering was made: a pouch of rice seeds.

It appeared in the palms of an ancestral matriarch within the clan's claimed territory. The seeds shimmered faintly, still warm from mortal hands. For a long moment, the souls simply regarded them.

Perhaps it was instinct. Perhaps it was habit carried across the grave.

They planted them. The underworld had never known agriculture. Its gardens grew from memory, not biology. Yet when those rice seeds were pressed into the twilight soil, something unprecedented occurred.

They sprouted, thin green shoots pierced the ashen ground, not as spectral illusions nor constructs of belief but living growth.

Many things that crossed from the mortal realm did not remain as they were once they reached her realm.

Steel lost its weight but retained its edge of intent. Cloth unraveled into threads of memory that could bind wounds of the spirit. Animal offerings dissolved into currents of strength that flowed through ancestral veins.

Everything changed, everything became useful and at the center of this transformation stood the clans.

They alone had mastered the method. Through the death shamans, through sacrifice, through ancestral bonds, they had become conduits between worlds. What entered Keles realm through them did not scatter randomly, it accumulated, organized, and was repurposed.

The rice fields multiplied. Seeds became harvest. Harvest became sustenance. Sustenance became power.

When the glowing grain was gathered and shared among the clan, the effect mirrored sacrifice itself. Not as potent as a direct offering from the living, but still powerful. When consumed, the rice restored clarity, strengthened form, sharpened memory. Souls who partook grew more defined, less like drifting mist, more like solid beings of purpose.

And the clans did not hoard entirely. Some among them began distributing small portions to wandering souls, those who drifted near their marked territories. A gesture of charity. Or perhaps strategy.

The results were undeniable.

Where rice was shared, stability spread. Souls regained themselves faster. Small communities formed around clan territories. Work began to divide naturally, tenders of fields, keepers of stories, defenders of boundaries.

Civilization was emerging and organizing itself in her realm, but structure always casts a shadow.

Not every soul had descendants who remembered them. Not every name was spoken by a death shaman. Many had lived obscure lives, left no lineage, or were forgotten by time. These souls watched the clans grow in strength, watched their lands flourish, watched their members sharpen into something almost... living.

They wanted in. But without a mortal connection, there was no steady offering. Without offering, there was no stable growth.

Resentment began as slow murmurs then it gathered and gangs were born.

They were not bound by lineage but by circumstance. Forgotten soldiers. Abandoned criminals. Unclaimed laborers. Souls who remembered enough of themselves to know they had been denied something in death as they had in life.

Unlike the clans, they did not wait for offerings. They fight and take it from the clans.

At first, it was small theft, handfuls of rice stolen from racks. Seeds taken from storehouses. A harvested bundle vanishing into the twilight.

But when those stolen grains were planted elsewhere, something new occurred.

They grew but not as brightly or steadily as the one grown by the clans.

Power, even diluted power, was still power. The gangs realized they did not need shamans, they simply needed access.

Raids became organized. Skirmishes erupted along the borders of clan territories. Fields were trampled. Spectral tools became weapons. Ancestral halls, once places of quiet counsel, now was filled with strategic planning.

For the first time in her dominion, conflict carried ideology. Clans defended tradition, lineage, and earned strength.

Gangs fought for equality through force, believing power should not belong solely to the remembered.

And Keles watched all this unfold.

From her throne, she observed the currents of her realm like a queen surveying a thriving kingdom. Each clash, each alliance, each new planting sent ripples through the foundation of her existence.

She did not feel anger at the

disorder.

She felt joy. Her realm was no longer static. It pulsed. It reacted. It adapted. The feedback flowing into her divine consciousness was richer than ever before. Growth, tension, ambition, fear, cooperation, emotions and structures layered upon one another like the beginnings of history.

Her underworld had gained something akin to life, not biological life but civilizational life.

Through that feedback, clarity dawned upon her, clarity about herself, and other origin gods just as it dawned upon Ikenga upon his return.

About the path they walk as Origin Gods. It was small but Keles felt it, as he realm continue to grow and evolve, understanding of souls won't be far off to her, it was already astonishing to her of the changes that took place in a empty husk of soul of a few memories.

As for the clans and the gangs, Keles favored neither.

From her throne, she watched their movements with equal fascination. The clans stood for continuity, lineage, structure, earned strength through sacrifice. The gangs embodied disruption, adaptation without permission, power seized rather than granted.

Both were necessary, both were growth.

The clans anchored her realm. They stabilized regions, cultivated land, and accelerated the restoration of souls. They were architects of order.

The gangs tested that order. They exposed weaknesses, forced innovation, and ensured that power could not stagnate. They were catalysts of change.

If she crushed the gangs, the clans would grow complacent. If she suppressed the clans, chaos would consume potential structure.

So she did neither.

Instead, she observed.

She was curious, deeply so about what their tension would produce. Would the gangs develop their own methods of summoning power? Would the clans formalize governance, perhaps even appeal to her authority? Would a new system emerge entirely?

At last, Keles shifted her attention beyond her twilight dominion.

Her gaze pierced upward, through the thinning veil between realms, and settled upon the mortal world.

Specifically, upon the eastern continent. Upon the mortals who had birthed this innovation.

Death shamans.

They had done what few in any era dared attempt, not merely speaking to the dead, but forming structured exchange. They had stabilized a bridge between life and death without her direct instruction.

They had altered the mechanics of her realm. Such audacity deserved acknowledgment.

Such achievement demanded reward. At first, she was uncertain what form that reward should take. Blessing? Protection? Power?

Then her perception narrowed.

She saw them clearly.

Four fifth-tier peak death shamans, seated in ritual formation beneath an ancient cedar grove. Their bodies were mortal, frail compared to gods but their souls burned with disciplined intensity. Their threads extended deep into her domain, cleanly woven and reinforced by ancestral cooperation.

As she gazed upon their souls, understanding unfolded effortlessly within her. She saw the structure of their profession, the spiritual pathways carved through repetition, the ancestral sigils etched into their essence, the small fragment of her authority they unknowingly borrowed each time they invoked death.

Dealing with death always came with a price. These shamans knew that.

But they underestimated the scale.

Their advancement to their current tier opened a path, a gate formed. a thinning of boundaries. A channel through which influence could pass in both directions.

They had learned how to open it. They had not learned how to close it and so the gate remained, subtle but persistent.

Through that unattended aperture, things could slip.

One of the four shamans caught Keles attention as he had succeeded in marking ancestral land within her realm, but not cleanly. At the critical moment of invocation, when his spirit descended to anchor the claim, something else had answered.

A foreign soul, not one of his lineage had slipped into the tether, masking itself as an honored forebear. It now wore the ancestor's identity convincingly, drawing offerings, strengthening itself quietly within the clan's territory.

But that was not what Keles wished to intervene in.

The foreign soul masquerading as an ancestor... the imbalance within one lineage... those were problems born of growth. They would correct themselves in time.

Her reward was something else entirely.

It was simpler and far more important to these shamans than they realized.

As Keles noticed earlier, the souls of the four fifth-tier death shamans did not merely glow with spiritual strength, they functioned as apertures.

Small portals.

Each time they reached into her dominion, they threaded their essence through the veil. But unlike ordinary mortals who brushed against death and recoiled, these shamans left something behind. Their souls remained partially aligned with her realm, like doors left slightly ajar

Chapter 775

At present, this posed no immediate threat.

The underworld was still young in its awakening. Most souls were now preoccupied cultivating fields, forming clans, skirmishing in gangs, rediscovering themselves. Few yet possessed the cohesion or predatory instinct required to notice the faint shimmer of a living soul tethered to them.

But Keles saw further, her realm was evolving. The rice strengthened souls. The sacrifices restored memory. Conflict sharpened identity. With each passing cycle, certain spirits were becoming more defined, more willful, more powerful.

Eventually, some would begin to look outward.

And when they did, those four shamans would shine like lanterns in the dark.

To the growing powers within her realm, the shamans souls would not appear as distant mortals.

They would appear as openings, one-way portals. From the mortal side, invocation required ritual, discipline, ancestry.

From the underworld side? nothing. A powerful soul could press against the thin membrane of connection and slip through. Once across, it would find a mortal body alive, warm, vulnerable.

A vessel, devour the resident soul. Take the body. Walk the mortal world again.

Keles did not find the prospect horrifying but inevitable. At the same time inevitability did not mean immediacy.

The four shamans had advanced her realm. Their innovation had accelerated civilization among the dead. They had unknowingly contributed to the foundation she and Ikenga were building as Origin Gods.

They had earned protection.

With a slow, deliberate wave of her hand, Keles exerted her authority.

The thin apertures embedded in their souls responded instantly. The spiritual seams tightened. The lingering fractures sealed. What had once been open conduits became structured channels, accessible only when deliberately invoked, and closed cleanly upon completion.

The glow of vulnerability faded. The one-way passage was gone, no soul from her realm would cross into them uninvited.

Far away, beneath the ancient cedar grove, the four shamans felt only a subtle shift. A lightness. A clarity in their spirit. The faint spiritual pressure they had grown accustomed to simply... vanished.

They did not know how close they had stood to catastrophe.

Keles withdrew her gaze. As for death shamans who would follow after them, future death shamans, imitators, ambitious disciples that was another matter entirely.

Innovation carried danger and power demanded understanding. If others sought to carve threads into her dominion, they would need to learn the consequences themselves. They would need to devise safeguards, refine rituals, discover sealing techniques through hardship and loss.

Growth without risk was stagnation. She would not interfere endlessly. The four had been spared because they were pioneers.

Those who came after would face a different era, one where the souls of the underworld were no longer dormant, where clans and gangs sharpened themselves daily, where ambitious spirits might actively seek escape.

Her gaze shifted again. Beyond the cedar grove, beyond the four shamans.

It settled upon another mortal, one whose hands, though untrained in ritual, had shaped history just as profoundly.

King Nwadiebube.

He was no death shaman. He did not chant invocations or thread his soul into the underworld. But it was his patronage, his decree, his hunger for continuity beyond death that had allowed the practice to flourish. He gathered scholars. He protected the first shamans from persecution. He funded the preservation of ancestral records.

Without him, the profession would have withered as heresy.

Through him, it became doctrine. Keles regarded him thoughtfully.

A mortal king who had nudged the boundary between realms and survived.

She decided she would bless him.

It would be simple, subtle reinforcement of fortune, perhaps longevity, perhaps clarity in governance. A quiet divine favor befitting a ruler who had advanced her domain without even knowing her name.

Her will began to gather but then she saw further. A premonition unfolded like a ripple across still water.

She saw his past actions layered beneath his achievements. In his desperation to secure legitimacy, in his ambition to further this path, he had committed a heavy act .

He had stolen. Stolen from a god. A branch from a garden once belonging to another god, Ikenga.

To the king, it had been an artifact of power, a means to stabilize the early rituals of the shamans. The theft had succeeded and it had borne fruit.

But offense against a god was not erased by ignorance. Keles stilled her blessing.

She could not shield him from consequence. Not when the balance between her and Ikenga mattered more than a single mortal king.

Punishment would come. Measured or severe, that would depend on Ikenga.

She could only whisper in his favor when the time arrived. A softening of judgment nothing more.

She was about to withdraw her gaze when something else caught her sight.

It was n

ot the king. It was the woman sleeping beside him, his queen.

Keles focused and frowned. At first, the queen's soul appeared stable. Bright. Refined. But as Keles looked deeper, she felt the disturbance beneath the surface, an impossibility woven so seamlessly that even most gods would overlook it.

Two souls merged perfectly. So perfectly that there was no seam to pull apart, no fracture to trace. The identities had fused into one coherent existence. Not dominant and subordinate. Not parasite and host.

Unity. Keles felt anger flare within her. From the faint divinity left behind, this was divine interference.

Her counterpart with the same authority as her had manipulated the very structure of the queen's being, folding two souls into one body with surgical precision. It was craftsmanship of the highest order. Dangerous. Intimate. Irreversible at her current stage.

Keles tested the weave. There was no safe way to undo it, to separate them now would mean annihilating both.

Her anger dissipated as quickly as it had risen. What was done was done.

With acceptance, came understanding which settled heavily upon her. If she had been present, fully attentive, this would not have occurred unnoticed. She could have intervened. She could have contested the act. She could have prevented her counterpart from altering a mortal queen in such a fundamental way.

But she had been away and in her absence, something irreversible had taken place.

Just like that, Keles realized she owed them. Not because the king was righteous nor because the queen was innocent.

But because a boundary under her jurisdiction had been crossed while she was not watching.

Responsibility lingered where oversight failed.

She could not undo the fusion but she could offer help in another way.

She would bless the king after all, but not with fortune or power. She would give him knowledge.

That night, as the king lay in uneasy sleep, Keles reached down to stir his dreams.

The vision would be sudden but clear.

He would see a field split by a river. Two currents flowing into one another until they became indistinguishable. He would see a throne balanced upon shifting earth. He would see a shadow behind him, always present.

With this dream was also a time limited blessing where the king sight would be the same as hers, the king would see souls just as she does and that was enough.

Enough for the king to know that something within his queen was more than it seemed.

Enough to tread carefully, enough to prepare. It was the only repayment she could offer.

A warning disguised as revelation.

Keles withdrew her gaze from the mortal world and allowed her eyes to close.

It had only been a short while she was gone, yet so much had shifted. Death shamans had risen. Clans and gangs had formed. A mortal king had stolen from a god. A queen carried a fused soul.

Too much had occurred in her absence.

She needed a full accounting.

Her siblings were resting. Their presences dimmed, withdrawn into cycles of restoration. She had so much to ask them but instead, she decided to summon her herald "Wardenwild".

Wardenwild would know.

He had remained when she departed. He had watched the first sacrifices fall. He had witnessed the birth of the first clan and the first theft. If there were patterns hidden beneath these events, he would have traced them.

But before she called him fully into her presence, a different signal brushed against her awareness.

Two distinct signatures.

Familiar.

Two presences stood at the threshold of her dominion, requesting entry. Her daughter and her son.

They were knocking.

Keles lips curved faintly. Even as civilizations formed and gods meddled with mortal queens, motherhood remained.

"Let them enter," she whispered into the fabric of her realm.

Meanwhile back in Ikenga's realm which now echoed with the aftermath of celebration.

Bodies were sprawled in careless heaps across the open grounds. Laughter had faded into heavy breathing. Treant limbs tangled with stone benches. Aqua lay half-submerged in a pool he had conjured mid-celebration. Even Osisi, whose physiology resembled an ancient tree more than flesh, leaned sideways against Brix, both lost to intoxicated slumber.

It had to be acknowledged.

Ikem had outdone himself.

His brewery was no ordinary craft.

He had managed to create a brew that did not merely dull the mind or inflame the senses, it affected the soul. A fermentation of essence itself. It bypassed physical resistance, slipping directly into spiritual channels.

Even treant physiology dense, resistant to corruption had succumbed. Ikenga surveyed the scene with quiet satisfaction, this too was growth in his eyes.

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He walked toward the grill where embers still glowed. Several slabs of roasted meat remained, preserved by the leftover heat. Without ceremony, he conjured four wooden boxes, each sturdy and simple.

The meat divided itself cleanly, portions settling neatly within the containers.

At the same time, a barrel floated toward him, the last of Ikem's experimental brew. Its surface shimmered faintly, the liquid within still humming with potency.

Ikenga placed a hand upon it.

Then he stepped forward and vanished.

Ikem at this time was managing his realm alongside Bara, carefully dealing with the still many steady streams of unrefined faith energy left behind from Tide's incident. The energy no longer surged violently as it once had, but it remained dense and unprocessed, flowing like an endless current through the foundation of his domain. It required attention. Patience. Structure.

Bara stood rooted at the center of the realm, the huge and tall blood-red tree, its presence stabilizing the surrounding space as Ikem worked in coordination with it.

It was while directing another careful adjustment to the flow of faith that Ikem's brow rose slightly.

A familiar presence.

A smile crossed his face.

He rose quickly but calmly, smoothing his attire as his voice traveled instantly across the realm.

"Get ready," he told Ursula. "Father is coming."

There was no urgency in his tone, but there was hint of expected preparation.

Moments later, Ikenga appeared before the massive blood-red tree at the center of Ikem's realm.

Four boxes floated beside him, sealed and orderly. Barrel hovered nearby as well.

Ikenga's eyes immediately went to the tree. For a brief second, he did not speak.

He remembered Bara had once been small enough to be held. A creation. A gift to his son before he left his own realm.

Now it towered high above him, rooted deeply within Ikem's domain, grown far beyond its original state.

A quiet acknowledgment passed through him.

"Father." Ikenga turned at the sound of his son's voice.

Ikem stood a short distance away, composed as always.

"Welcome back," Ikem said.

Ikenga smiled.

"I heard you visited earlier," he replied. "But I was not there. I had a few matters to tend to."

His gaze lingered briefly on Ikem, assessing.

"You seem occupied."

Ikem glanced toward the drifting streams of unrefined faith energy that continued to circulate through the realm.

"Tide's incident left more behind than expected," he said evenly. "It is steady now, but it still requires refinement."

His tone carried neither complaint nor strain. Ikenga looked around once more, taking in the state of the realm, the towering Bara, and the controlled flow of power moving through it all.

Then his eyes shifted briefly to the four boxes floating beside him.

"I see," he said calmly. There was more to say and more yet to unfold.

"I know," Ikem said quietly after a moment of silence. He held Ikenga's gaze without accusation, only clarity.

Ikenga's brow rose slightly.

"Mother's sadness reached both Maul and me because of our bond," Ikem continued. "It was strong and painful, we had to visit to see what was wrong. So yes... I know."

Silence answered him.

Ikenga did not look away.

"Are you mad," Ikenga asked at last, his tone steady, "or disappointed in me?"

Ikem did not respond immediately.

He took a breath, not because he needed it, but because he chose to measure his words.

"Maul and I decided we would not involve ourselves," Ikem said. "Whatever is between you and Mother is yours to resolve. We will not interfere."

"So no. I am not mad." A pause.

"I would say I am disappointed though, Father."

Ikem watched Ikenga carefully, but the older being's expression remained composed, unchanged.

"Your action was so like you," Ikem continued, voice calm but firm. "And that is why I am disappointed. You sometimes act as if you have forgotten that there are people who care about you. People who will be hurt by what you choose to do."

The words did not accuse but silence fell between them, heavy stretching longer than either cared to measure.

The realm itself seemed to quiet.

Boros, in his towering blood-red tree form, had been preparing to manifest and properly greet Ikenga. But sensing the atmosphere, he stilled. His branches remained motionless. This was not a moment to intrude upon.

It was then that another presence entered.

Radiant, warm. Ursula appeared, her figure materializing with a soft glow. Pure white fabric draped over her form, gentle and flowing. Glowing wings rested behind her back, feathers shimmering faintly in the ambient light of the realm.

Her belly was round and pronounced. Life unmistakably carried within her.

There was no tension in her.

No hesitation.

Her innocence shone openly as she hurried forward.

"Father!" she exclaimed brightly.

Without restraint, she threw herself into Ikenga's arms, wrapping them around him with unfiltered affection.

"We heard you were back," she continued excitedly.

dly. "Ikem and I have been waiting! There is so much to tell you, you have missed so much!"

The heavy silence fractured Immediately, Ikenga instinctively caught her, steadying her with care, far more carefully than one might expect from him.

Behind her, Ikem watched.

And for a brief moment, the disappointment in his eyes softened not gone, but tempered by the simple fact that despite everything... They were still a family.

Hearing her call him father took Ikenga by surprise, the way she said it without hesitation, without distance.

And then there was her divinity.

It spread outward from her naturally, not as a display of power but as something instinctive. Soft. Pure. It rolled through the space between them like warm light, dissolving the sharp edges of the tension that had settled moments before.

Ikenga felt it clearly and leaned into, for the first time since arriving, his posture eased.

Welcoming the hug, a genuine smile broke across his face.

"Ha," he laughed lightly. "I'm glad I came prepared."

With one hand still steadying her, he gestured, and two of the floating boxes drifted toward Ursula. She took them carefully, eyes bright with curiosity and delight.

Ikem watched the exchange quietly.

Ikenga's gaze then lowered to her rounded belly. The pleasant expression on his face softened further. He lifted a hand and placed it gently against it.

There was no overwhelming surge of power. No dramatic reaction. Just contact and then a response. Immediate and firm.

Ikenga's brows lifted slightly before a low laugh escaped him.

"She is a strong one," he said, amused and pleased.

Ursula's smile widened, one hand resting over his.

"I know," she replied softly.

Ikenga withdrew his hand slowly before glancing toward Ikem with a sideways look.

"I hope the blockhead has been taking good care of you?"

Ursula turned immediately toward Ikem, her expression bright.

"You have raised a good man, Father." Ikenga blinked once at that.

Then he shook his head lightly.

"No, no," he said dismissively. "I haven't done much. He practically raised himself."

Ursula's wings shifted faintly as she shook her head.

"I doubt that," she replied gently. "You have too much influence on him for that to be true."

Ikem remained silent, but there was the faintest shift in his expression.

Ikenga glanced at his son.

For a brief moment, neither spoke. A mischievous smile appeared spreading across his face as his eyes shifted toward Ikem.

Ikem, for his part, was now glaring at Ursula with the restrained tension of someone who had suddenly become the center of attention.

"It seems I have a fan," Ikenga said smoothly.

Ursula burst into laughter.

"He is more than a fan," she added between snickers. "Look at him, all tense, not knowing how to act."

That was it. Both of them pointed shamelessly at Ikem, laughter spilling freely and without restraint.

Ikem stood there, shoulders stiff, jaw tightening as he tried and failed to maintain composure.

Playing along fully, Ikenga spread his arms slightly.

"Come on, son," he said through his laughter. "I don't bite."

Ursula, still giggling, took hold of Ikenga's arm and began leading him toward their home within the realm, her wings fluttering lightly as she walked.

Their laughter echoed faintly as they moved farther away.

Ikem remained where he stood.

Watching their retreating backs.

Unsure whether to follow. Unsure whether to pretend none of that just happened.

It was then that Boros manifested beside him.

The massive blood-red tree form shifted and condensed, taking shape as a towering treant of crimson bark and deep-rooted presence. His heavy steps were quiet despite his size.

He placed a large wooden hand on Ikem's shoulder.

"You chose a good one," Boros said calmly.

Ikem said nothing in response.

He didn't need to.

He and Bara both understood Ikenga's personality better than most. For Ursula to see this side of him from their first official meeting spoke volumes. Ikenga did not open that part of himself easily.

And yet... "She handled him well," Boros added.

Ikem's eyes narrowed faintly as distant laughter reached them again.

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"Who cares about that," Ikem muttered under his breath. "He's already a bad influence on her."

Boros shook his head, a faint smile forming across his wooden features.

Ikem had always been an easy target for this sort of teasing ever since he was born. Growing up around Tweet had been relentless; if you weren't quick on your feet, you were finished.

Now it seemed Ursula had discovered just how entertaining that could be.

And she was enjoying it.

Boros gave Ikem's shoulder a light squeeze before withdrawing his hand.

"You will survive," he said simply.

Ikem exhaled slowly. From the distance, Ursula's laughter rang out again, bright and unrestrained.

And despite himself... The faintest trace of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

After some time, Ikem's realm began to echo with warmth. Laughter rolled through the open halls like wind through chimes, mingling with the low murmur of familiar voices.

Ursula moved about with lively purpose, clearly eager to please Ikenga. She took the barbecue he had brought with clever improvisation, repurposed it entirely into an elaborate meal. She served it with quiet pride, watching closely for his reaction.

Ikenga welcomed every gesture with genuine appreciation. He praised her ingenuity and savored each bite, but he did not allow the moment to settle into mere indulgence. Mindful of his hosts, he filled the space with stories, careful not to let the atmosphere grow dull or stagnant.

He spoke of the new lifeforms he had encountered in his travels with Keles. Ratfolk and goblins even demons, he recounted battles fought beneath fractured skies, where gravity twisted and the ground split open with every clash of power. He described the thrill of survival, victory, the fleeting connections forged even among enemies.

His voice carried through the hall painting vivid images for both Ursula and Ikem.

This continued for some time, laughter rising, fading, and rising again until eventually Ursula excused herself. She left with a soft smile and a graceful nod, her presence retreating down the corridor until the sound of her steps dissolved into silence.

The realm shifted with her departure. What had moments before been alive with warmth grew still, left with the quiet between Ikem and Ikenga.

Ikenga broke it.

"I will be paying your brother a visit right after this," he said, his tone steady but thoughtful. "It has been a while since I spent quality time with him."

Ikem froze for the briefest moment. A flicker in his gaze before he composed himself and gave a small nod.

"He has always been reclusive," Ikem replied, a faint smile forming on his face. "And now that he has his own realm, even more so. He keeps to himself... perhaps more than he should." His eyes softened, carrying both fondness and concern. "I try my best to spend time with him whenever I can."

"I am happy to hear that your relationship is still as strong as before," Ikenga said softly.

As he spoke, his gaze drifted outward. The walls of Ikem's hall parted at his will, revealing a vast expanse, the full breadth of his son's realm. His sight stretched far beyond the visible horizon, perceiving not just form, but essence.

The landscape pulsed with quiet evolution. Strange lifeforms wandered across its crimson plains, creatures formed from blood-red roots that had once belonged to Bara. Their bodies crude at first sight, knotted masses of fibrous tendrils intertwined like veins exposed to open air. But under the steady influence of Ikem's divinity, they were changing. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, flesh began to grow over those roots. Pale membranes stretched across vascular frames. Muscle-like fibers tightened and layered themselves with increasing complexity.

They were becoming more than mere extensions of Bara's remnants.

The only thing missing was the presence of souls. Without that spark, the animating essence that granted will, memory, and true individuality they could not yet be deemed fully alive. They moved by instinct, still, it was progress.

A step forward.

Ikenga's eyes narrowed slightly in contemplation.

"I noticed earlier," he continued, his tone measured, "how dissatisfied you were with the faith energy you receive from your mortal worshippers."

Ikem let out a quiet sigh, the sound heavier than he intended. His shoulders sank, and for a moment the composure of a god gave way to the fatigue of a son.

"Dissatisfaction is an understatement," Ikem admitted, his voice edged with exhaustion. "It is honestly tiring. Refining their faith, filtering it, stabilizing it, stripping away its impurities, it consumes so much of my time."

"I spend more time purifying belief than shaping my own realm," Ikem added, annoyance slipping through despite his effort to hide it.

Ikenga remained silent for a moment, watching him carefully "It pains me to tell you this, my son," Ikenga said, his voice steady, "but you must grow accustomed to it."

Ikem's gaze hardened slightly, though he did not interrupt.

"Faith is not merely power," Ikenga continued. "It is connection. It binds you to the mortal plane. It anchors your existence in ways you may not yet fully understand. The effort it demands is the price of influence and of stability."

He turned his eyes once more to the evolving creatures below.

"In fact, I would advise that you deepen your relationship with them. Strengthen their belief. Cultivate it intentionally. Seek not only quantity, but devotion with clarity."

His tone grew quieter.

"The times ahead will not be gentle. When they come, nothing but the depth of the faith that stands behind you will sustain and preserve you."

Ikem frowned at his father's words, the tension in his brow deepening.

"You do know the danger that poses to us ascended gods?" he said, his voice tightening. "That very danger is why so many of us distance ourselves from mortals."

Faith energy did not arrive pure. It came tangled with doubt, fear, selfish desires, and fleeting devotion. Each prayer carried expectation. Each offering bore conditions. To convert that chaotic influx into usable divine power required focus, discipline, and constant vigilance

To draw deeply from mortal faith was to allow their emotions, their instability, their collapse, to ripple back into the divine. A god too entangled in mortal dependence could be shaken, diminished... even fractured.

"I do know," Ikenga replied calmly. "But that is a challenge you must overcome, not avoid."

His gaze remained steady, "As ascended gods, faith energy is your primary source of strength. It is the foundation upon which your divinity stabilizes itself. It is not a resource you can afford to treat lightly, nor one you can do without."

Ikem exhaled slowly, frustration threading through his voice.

"I am not without it, Father. The godlings provide more than enough of what I require. Their devotion is stable, pure, far less troublesome than the faith provided by humans."

Godlings were different. Their belief was structured, disciplined, unwavering. They did not doubt. They did not bargain. Their faith did not carry the chaotic residue of mortality. It flowed cleanly, almost mechanically.

"If we had the luxury to procrastinate," Ikenga said, his tone sharpening just slightly, "I would have no issue with that approach."

He leaned in closer "Tell me, how much of the energy provided by the godlings remains to strengthen you after you have spent the majority of it maintaining your realm?"

Ikem paused, he did not answer immediately because he knew the answer, not much.

The faith gathered from the godlings was steady, but it was also largely consumed in sustaining the realm itself. Maintaining the evolving lifeforms. Stabilizing the dimensional boundaries. Nourishing the divine infrastructure that kept his world from collapsing into formless essence.

Very little remained for him.

It was only after Tide's incident that he had experienced something close to surplus. The sudden surge of belief, fear-driven, desperate, overwhelming had flooded his domain. For a brief time, he had possessed more faith energy than he could immediately process.

But most of it had remained unrefined.

Before it could be fully accepted into his core, it required careful purification. Without refinement, it could destabilize him, pollute his divinity.

Still... it had been surplus.

If not for the inherent difficulty of mortal faith, its impurities, its unpredictability he would not be having this conversation.

Ikem's expression shifted, irritation giving way to reluctant acknowledgment. Godlings sustained his realm but mortals if properly cultivated could sustain him in the longer terms.

"My return with Keles marks the beginning of a new age for our world," Ikenga said, his voice carrying a quiet gravity that seemed to ripple through the very fabric of the realm. "A greater stage is being set, one that can only be commanded by those who possess true strength. I would hate for my own son to lag behind in what is to come."

He paused then, something uncharacteristically hesitant flickering across his expression.

"I know I have always placed great expectations upon you," he admitted. "Often before you were ready. But this time is different, my son. This time, You won't tackle it alone, i can extend my hand without limit, without breaking any cosmic law."

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Ikem remained seated, silent, studying his father carefully. The weight of those words did not escape him.

"How could you possibly help with this, Father?" he asked at last. "This is a matter of faith refinement something so far away from Origin gods such as yourself. I would imagine someone like yourself would find it even more hard to come with a probable solution."

Ikenga laughed, deep and unrestrained, the sound echoing across the open hall.

"Indeed," he replied, amusement still lingering in his tone. "I have no understanding of the burdens of faith as ascended gods experience it. I was never shaped by mortal belief."

His expression softened slightly.

"But your grandmother, Nana, once spoke of how other ascended gods overcome such limitations."

At the mention of Nana, Ikem's posture shifted almost imperceptibly. The name carried authority.

"She once told us," Ikenga continued, "that ascended gods like yourself often wage war upon the realms of Origin gods, gods like me in order to glimpse the 'Altar' from which we were born."

The word lingered in the air.

Altar.

Not a structure of stone or ornament, but a primordial convergence point. A divine crucible where pure cosmic principle condensed into existence. It was not shaped by faith. It did not fluctuate with mortal emotion. It simply was.

"These Altars," Ikenga said, "are designed to handle the instability of mortal belief in the case mortals decide to worship us. They filter it. Stabilize it. Refine it into the precise divine energy required. In your case, the faith energy would purer, untainted by emotions."

Ikem's eyes narrowed slightly as understanding began to form.

"As the son of an Origin god," Ikenga went on, "you are not bound to follow the same perilous path as other ascended gods. You do not need to invade or conquer to gain access."

He turned fully toward his son.

"My realm is open to you. My Altar is open to you. You may come and study it, observe its refinement process, understand its structure."

His voice lowered, sincere.

"If you do so... there may be hope. Hope to resolve most of your struggle with mortal faith energy. Hope to refine it without it draining your time and strength. Hope to stand prepared for the age that is coming."

Hearing his father's words, Ikem's mind began to race.

The implications unfolded rapidly before him. It would not be easy, studying an Origin Altar, dissecting its principles, adapting its refinement process to his own ascended nature but if he succeeded, the danger of faith energy could become a thing of the past. No longer would he spend endless cycles purifying unstable belief. No longer would mortal doubt erode his focus.

He could devote himself fully to the next stage of his path as an ascended god.

His gaze lifted to Ikenga, a weird look on his face, for as long as he could remember, his father had always seemed to possess an answer, if not immediate, then inevitable.

Yet even with the promise of the Altar, another question gnawed at him, one far more personal.

It concerned his divinity itself.

Ikem was the God of Verdant Communion, the principle that the microcosm exists within all things. That every grain of soil, every cell, every fragment of existence mirrors the greater whole. His authority governed the unseen interactions that shaped reality's foundation, the subtle exchanges between decay and growth, death and renewal, consumption and transformation.

To him, rot was not destruction.

It was preparation. Decay fed growth. Growth invited excess. Excess collapsed into decay. A seamless communion.

His doctrine resonated most strongly with mages who studied living systems, those who understood that biology was not mere flesh, but an intricate web of balance. Experienced farmers who knew that cultivation was more than planting, watering, and waiting. Druids who felt the pulse of ecosystems and respected the quiet intelligence of forests and soil.

They understood but they were few.

Most mortals did not grasp microcosm or communion. They did not contemplate the invisible architecture beneath reality. Even farmers, who benefited daily from his influence often reduced him to something simpler.

A god who should make crops grow. A divine hand that multiplied harvests.

Nothing more.

Ikem's jaw tightened slightly.

If he solved the problem of faith refinement... if he mastered the Altar's principles... that alone would not resolve this deeper issue.

Faith was shaped by understanding.

And mortal understanding of his doctrine was painfully limited.

To bridge that gap, he would need more than refined energy, perhaps intermediaries who could interpret his divine truths into concepts mortals could grasp.

His divinity was vast and intricate and mortals were narrow and practical.

Ikem turned back to his father, the earlier frustration replaced by contemplative resolve.

"If I learn to refine faith as you suggest," he said slowly, "then my next challenge is not power... but mortal perception of my divinity."

Ikenga considered his son's words carefully before speaking.

"So what you are saying... is that the threshold of your divinity is too high for mortals? That they cannot fully grasp it, cannot truly anchor themselves to your doctrine?" Ikem nodded to Ikenga break down of his problem.

Ikenga did not answer immediately. Instead, he tilted his head slightly and asked,

"When did you begin overlooking the fundamentals?" The question for some reason struck deeper than any critique.

Ikem froze.

He searched for an answer, some justification, some reasoning but none came. He had been thinking in terms of scale, complexity, cosmic refinement... and perhaps had forgotten where his path had truly begun.

Ikenga observed his silence, then gently asked, "May I?"

He was requesting permission to exert his will within Ikem's realm. Ikem nodded.

With a simple snap of Ikenga's fingers, space folded. The grand hall dissolved into wind and crimson horizon. In an instant, they stood upon the open plains of Ikem's realm.

Before them prowled one of the realm's creatures.

It bore the powerful frame of a tiger, its muscles coiled beneath newly formed flesh. Yet woven into its structure were the elegant traits of a deer, slender limb articulation, heightened sensory awareness and from its brow rose a pair of branching antlers, polished like living ivory.

The creature exhaled softly, steam rising from its nostrils, unaware of the divine presences observing it.

Ikenga pointed toward it.

"How did you learn to create beings like this?" he asked. "When did that interest begin?"

Ikem's gaze lingered on the creature and memory answered where words could not.

He was no longer standing in his realm, he was back to his mortal time in his kingdom when there had been a sickness.

At first, it did not concern him deeply. Plagues had come and gone before. Healing magic had always resolved such matters swiftly. Clerics channeled restorative spells. Mages wove purification arrays. Symptoms vanished within hours.

But this time was different, magic did not cure it. It dulled the pain. It slowed the deterioration. But the people continued to suffer and die.

Confusion had spread first among the healers... then fear among the populace.

For the first time, Ikem had witnessed magic fail to address the root of a problem.

That was when doubt entered him, not in himself, but in his understanding of mana and the elements. Had he misunderstood something fundamental? Was there a layer of existence untouched by spellcraft?

Determined to uncover the truth, he turned to Bara his companion. Through his connection, he extended a fragment, just a sliver of Bara's essence into the bodies of the afflicted as a probe.

And that was his first contact with microcosm, that was when he saw it, a world beneath the visible.

An invisible ecosystem of minute organisms, replicating, mutating, interacting in patterns far too small for ordinary perception. Life that existed within life. Conflict occurring at scales no mage had ever considered.

He realized then that mana did not govern everything directly. There were processes, fundamental, biological, structural that operated beneath magic's reach unless properly understood.

The sickness was not a curse. It was imbalance, it was living matter interacting with living matter in ways that required comprehension, not brute magical force.

That was when his doctrine began to take shape. The microcosm within all things.

Ikem slowly returned to the present, eyes still fixed on the horned tiger.

"I did not begin with an initial interest in it," he murmured. "I began because magic failed."

Ikenga's voice came softly beside him.

"And what did you do then?"

"I observed," Ikem answered. "I studied. I understood the smallest components before attempting to command the whole."

Silence followed and within that silence, the weight of Ikenga's earlier question returned.

When had he stopped doing that? When had he shifted from teaching mortals the smallest truths they could grasp... to expecting them to comprehend the entirety of Verdant Communion?

Ikem turned fully toward his father, the memory still fresh in his eyes.

"It all began with a desperate desire to heal my people... my children."

There was no grandeur in that confession. Only desperation and love. Ikenga nodded slowly.

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"When you spoke of your divinity," he said, "and the professions that practice it, I was struck by something."

He glanced sideways at his son.

"You did not mention healers."

Ikem stilled.

"Do you know how many mortals succumb to ailments they do not understand?" Ikenga continued, his voice neither accusing "Some are fortunate and survive by chance. Others meet their end without ever knowing what afflicted them."

"Your divinity," Ikenga went on, gesturing toward the horned tiger nearby, "is uniquely suited to breach that ignorance. Among all the kingdoms in this world, the medical knowledge of your people, the Apelings stands unmatched. Their understanding has advanced so far under your influence that they can now merge traits, guide biological harmony, and birth creatures like this."

The tiger-deer hybrid prowled through crimson grass, its existence a testament to mastery over life's building blocks.

"You have deciphered the microcosm," Ikenga said. "You have seen the unseen. You have touched the smallest engines of life."

He turned fully to Ikem.

"Do you understand where I am going with this?"

Ikem did not answer immediately.

His thoughts moved rapidly, connecting threads he had kept separate for too long.

Healing, disease. The microscopic world. The terror mortals felt when facing illness they could not comprehend.

The countless prayers whispered in desperation for relief. For survival.

He had been looking at mages, druids, scholars, those capable of grasping the depth of Verdant Communion.

But the foundation had never been scholars. It had been the sick, the grieving.

The desperate parent watching a child fade.

He had been sitting atop a mountain of gold without recognizing its value.

His divinity was not too complex for mortals. It simply needed an entry point, healing was that doorway.

If he guided healers, not merely with restorative divine spells, but with knowledge of the microcosm... if he revealed the unseen causes of illness... if he elevated medicine across kingdoms...

Faith would not come from abstract doctrine. It would come from gratitude, from lives saved, from understanding granted and from suffering reduced.

Ikem exhaled slowly, the realization settling into him "I have been presenting them with the forest," he murmured, "when all they needed was the seed."

Ikenga smiled faintly.

"Fundamentals," he reminded him.

Ikem looked once more at the hybrid creature, then toward the distant settlements within his realm.

It felt... simple, heal them. Teach them why they are healed and through that understanding, let them glimpse the greater communion. The microcosm would lead them to the macrocosm, one life at a time.

Looking at his father, Ikem let out a quiet breath before speaking.

"You really are a cruel man, Father." Ikenga raised a brow slightly, but he did not react defensively. There was no venom in Ikem's tone. Only pain layered over understanding.

"I understand Mother's pain even more now," Ikem continued.

He lowered himself to the crimson earth, lying back as he stared into the red sky of his realm. The shifting clouds above reflected the pulse of his thoughts.

"You make people want to keep you," he said softly. "To claim you. To hold you close because of the safety and strength that comes with you."

His voice tightened just slightly.

"And then you remind us, coldly that we can never truly own you."

The words hung between them.

"I apologize for my childish outburst earlier," Ikem added after a moment. "I understand your difficulties now. The weight of what you face. But understanding is easy..."

He closed his eyes.

"Acceptance is harder."

Ikenga said nothing. Instead, he lowered himself to sit beside his son, the ground yielding gently beneath divine presence. He listened.

"It was hard, you know," Ikem went on. "At the beginning of my journey. I had grown used to the comfort of your realm. Its safety. Its certainty."

He let out a small breath of laughter "And then it was gone. I was alone left to defend myself."

"I knew you could see my steps," Ikem admitted. "That you were aware of everything. But that made it worse in some ways. You were so close... yet impossibly far. I could not call for your help. I could not ask for advice."

His lips curved faintly at the memory. "That reality truly set in when I was swallowed by a snake."

Ikenga's eyes flickered with recognition.

"It was the third day after I left your realm," Ikem said. "A massive serpent. Thought it had claimed an easy meal."

He chuckled.

"Bara saved me." For a moment, father and son shared that quiet memory of early chaos and survival.

Then Ikem turned his head slightly.

"Welcome back, Father," he said again, this time more emotion behind each word.

Ikenga remained silent for a long moment before replying.

"You have stepped fully into divinity," he said at last. "We now stand upon the same plane of existence. No longer separated by mortal boundaries."

His voice was softer than before when he was teaching "Those days of distant observation are behind us."

Ikem felt something settle in his chest at those words.

"My realm will always be open to you," Ikenga continued. "When you need me."

Then his tone shifted, almost casually "And I am hoping you will help me take care of your to be sibling... whose life I have not been permitted to be part of."

Ikem blinked.

"Huh?" The word slipped from him unconsciously.

But there was no further explanation, he sat up quickly. Ikenga was gone.

The space beside him held only the faint residual warmth of divine presence.

Ikem rose to his feet, his voice expanding through the entirety of his realm, through crimson forests, across the plains, into the very fabric of its sky.

"What the hell do you mean by that, old man?!"

His words rippled outward, extending beyond his realm. Far away, in a new and unfamiliar surrounding, Ikenga stood beneath a different sky. A faint smile curved his lips as he took in the atmosphere of this new domain.

He had heard and he did not answer.

"What have you done to my brother this time?" a voice asked, threaded with suppressed amusement that did little to hide its curiosity.

Ikenga turned, arms already spread wide as though he had been waiting for the question.

"Maul," he said warmly, pulling his son into a firm embrace. Frost crept faintly along Ikenga's arms where Maul's aura touched him, but he paid it no mind. After a moment, they separated. Ikenga drew back with exaggerated heaviness, placing a hand over his chest as if wounded.

"Your brother has been quite the bully to me," he lamented dramatically. "No respect for his father at all."

Maul shook his head, unfazed by the performance. "Welcome back, Father," he said evenly, though the faint upward twitch of his lips betrayed him.

Ikenga's playful expression softened into something more thoughtful.

"Hmm."

His awareness unfurled, rolling outward across the vastness of Maul's realm.

It was different from his Ikem's where everything was crimson, Maul's stretched wide in pale stillness. An expanse of white upon white. Jagged glaciers rose like frozen mountains. Snow drifted in eternal spirals, the air itself seemed crystalline, sharp enough to cut the unprepared.

Ice elemental lifeforms roamed freely, towering colossi with bodies of compacted frost, serpentine constructs slithering beneath the snow, delicate humanoid figures sculpted from translucent blue crystal. They paused in their movements as Ikenga's presence brushed over them, some bowing instinctively, others bristling in territorial defiance before recognizing the bond between ruler and heir.

Then Ikenga paused.

His awareness sharpened, narrowing.

There, near the distant frost fields where auroras shimmered in the sky like frozen fire.

Small figures, not elemental. They moved among the crystalline outgrowths, leaving faint trails of stardust in their wake.

Ikenga's gaze deepened.

"Curious."

He stepped forward, boots pressing into snow that did not dare melt beneath him. "You've been busy."

Maul followed his father's line of sight. "You noticed."

"They carry stellar residue," Ikenga said. "Strong fluctuations of it."

The small beings shimmered faintly, their forms composed of condensed light encased in fragile bodies of frost. Constellation-like markings pulsed beneath their translucent skin, dimming and brightening in uneven rhythms.

"Fragments," Ikenga murmured. "Or refugees." He asked as they felt foreign to this realm,

Maul's voice came from beside "They one day drifted to the doorstep of my realm."

Ikenga glanced at him.

"From a dying star I think," Maul continued. "Its collapse tore through the outer veil. They would have dissipated in the void. My realm held great attraction to them due my familiarity with stellar constellation"

"So you caught them," Ikenga concluded, amusement returning faintly. "Your brother bullies me, and you gather strays from collapsing stars. I see how it is."

"They are not strays," Maul replied, mild but firm. "They are displaced. Their core is unstable. The cold stabilizes their stellar essence."

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Ikenga studied the small star-born beings more carefully now. He could feel it, the tension in their energy signatures. They pulsed like hearts beating out of rhythm, threatening to either implode or flare violently.

"And you can sustain them?" he asked.

"For now," Maul said. "But they are adapting slowly to my realm"

As if in response, one of the small figures lifted its head. Its eyes twin pinpricks of condensed light met Ikenga's across the vast expanse. A ripple of star-energy flickered outward, cautious but not hostile.

Ikenga felt it brush against his awareness.

A greeting. He chuckled softly.

"You always were the patient one," Ikenga said. "I would have tested their limits already."

"I know," Maul replied dryly.

The snow shifted gently around them, parting as several ice elementals approached in silent guardianship of their lord. Above, the auroras brightened, streaks of violet and blue dancing across the firmament like celestial scars.

Ikenga folded his arms, gaze thoughtful now rather than teasing.

"A realm of ice... harboring fragments of dying stars," he mused. "Cold preserving fire. There is poetry in that."

Maul said nothing, but the faintest tremor passed through the snow a subtle acknowledgment.

After a moment, Ikenga placed a hand on his son's shoulder. The contact sent a brief clash of heat and frost into the air, steam rising before vanishing instantly.

"If they destabilize," Ikenga said quietly, "call me, beside you need to raise them well, I have a few ideas which if it works will have you in the graces of your aunt and uncle including me"

Maul nodded once.

"And Father?"

"Yes?"

"Brother did not bully you."

Ikenga's expression shifted back to theatrical offense. "Traitor." For the first time, a quiet laugh escaped Maul.

A single footstep, light yet impossibly heavy with restrained power, reached Ikenga's senses reminding him of someone.

He turned.

Across the snow-laden plain, a woman approached, each step measured, elegant. The frost did not cling to her; it parted. The aurora above seemed to dim slightly in acknowledgment of her presence.

Ikenga leaned slightly toward his son and whispered, low enough that only Maul could hear:

"Did I come at the wrong time?"

Maul rolled his eyes, long-suffering and entirely unsurprised.

The woman stopped before them and offered a graceful bow, one hand resting lightly over her heart.

"Your Grace," she greeted.

This was Amethyst, the female dragon Maul took as his wife. Ikenga inclined his head in return, warmth flickering in his gaze.

"I was just asking Maul if I arrived at a poor moment," he said lightly. "I would hate to intrude upon the precious little time you both have"

Amethyst's lips curved into a knowing smile.

"No, Your Grace. Earlier, my husband and I received word from his brother that you would be paying a visit soon."

Ikenga blinked, then laughed, the sound rolling through the frozen expanse.

"Ikem has spoiled my grand entrance," he said, mock offense lacing his voice. "I had every intention of arriving dramatically. Perhaps through a tear in the sky. Or a pillar of flame. Something memorable."

"You are memorable without theatrics," Amethyst replied smoothly.

Maul snorted.

Ikenga sighed theatrically before lifting the remaining two of the four ornate boxes he carried. The containers were carved from dark volcanic stone, faint heat escaping from the seams. Even here, in a realm of eternal frost, they radiated restrained warmth.

"These are for you," Ikenga said, handing them to Amethyst.

She accepted them with both hands, the three of them began walking toward Maul's dwelling.

The same scene that had once unfolded in Ikem's realm played out again but this time was a bit different.

There was no booming laughter shaking the rafters, no sharp jests thrown like spears to test pride and wit. Instead, the atmosphere was softer.

Maul sat slightly apart from them, as he often did. He was never one for speeches so Ikenga and Amethyst were those mostly speaking while he listened.

At first, it was simple recounting, Ikenga narrating his journey with Keles. The roads they had taken, the dangers, fun. But the conversation began to change once Ikenga understood that Amethyst listened not merely as a wife, nor as a daughter-in-law offering courtesy.

But as a dragon, a true one.

With her inherited memories, it was almost like she has lived and seen what Ikenga saw so the conversation went deeper than it should have but Maul didn't mind any sight of this.

This heated loud conversation was something of a rarity in his realm so he welcomed it and more.

Being the sensible woman she was, she knew when the conversation had reached a threshold it should not cross in her presence.

Some words were meant to pass only between father and son. She rose gracefully, the faint shimmer of draconic aura rippling like heat above her skin.

"I believe," she said lightly, though her eyes were knowing, "that I have spoken enough for one evening."

She inclined her head to Ikenga, then to Maul. "Do not let silence harden into distance." It was a reminder, then she excused herself.

Silence settled between them once she was gone.

Ikenga looked at Maul, who sat across from him, composed as always.

"When was your last hunt since you ascended to godhood?" Ikenga asked.

The question was simple but Maul's expression shifted, melancholy touched his features briefly before he shook his head.

"My realm isn't exactly a place to hunt," he said calmly. "And I no longer have access to the mortal world since my ascension."

Ikenga watched him for a moment, then he smiled as he stood up.

Space folded.

A portal tore open before them, beyond it lay heat-hazed air, towering forests, distant mountains beneath a golden sky.

"Just like old times," Ikenga said, before the words fully settled, his figure blurred.

Where he once stood, a massive black wolf now remained. Its fur was deep midnight. Without hesitation, the wolf glanced once at Maul then leapt through the portal.

Maul stayed still for a heartbeat, then another. A smile, small but genuine, crossed his face.

His father had not forgotten.

Without hesitation, Maul's form shifted. Ice-like energy rippled outward as his body expanded and reshaped into a great white wolf fur like fresh snow, eyes pale.

He plunged into the portal as it closed behind him. He landed in warmth.

The scent hit first. Earth. Pine. Wild water. Prey. Maul lifted his head slowly, drinking it in.

This realm, his childhood. Only now it stretched wider than memory. Forests denser. Mountains higher. The sky broader with new addition.

Across the clearing stood Ikenga in his own wolf form "Just as usual," Ikenga said, his voice just as deep. "We hunt. No spells. No dominion. No godhood."

He raised his head and howled. The sound tore through the forest,

a challenge to the creatures in his realm.

The realm answered.

From distant valleys came the roar of something massive. From the treetops, wingbeats thundered. Deep beneath the earth, something stirred and shifted.

Predators, very old ones.

Maul felt it. The responses vibrated through his bones and something in him, something long silent beneath responsibility and stillness awoke.

He threw his head back and howled. His voice cut through the air colder, sharper, but no less fierce and held more provocation in it.

The forest reacted instantly as the creatures in it answered.

Ikenga moved first, breaking into a powerful run across the plains. Maul followed without hesitation. Their strides were effortless, instinct guiding them as it once had.

No words were needed. Branches snapped beneath their speed. Grass bent in their wake. The thrill of pursuit sharpened their senses.

Ahead, something large moved through the trees.

Ikenga glanced once at Maul, that was enough.

They split naturally, circling. A shadow crossed overhead.

Maul glanced up just as a massive horned drake dove from the sky, scales like ironwood, breath smoking with primal heat.

Ikenga veered left as Maul veered right.

No command given as they split the beast's focus in perfect.

The drake roared mid-dive, banking sharply toward Maul, it was a mistake.

Maul planted one paw into the earth and pushed. The ground fractured beneath the force as he launched upward. He met the drake mid-air, his body slamming into its flank.

A shockwave burst outward on impact, flattening grass in a wide ring and snapping smaller trees clean at their trunks. The drake was knocked off balance, its wing clipping the forest canopy as it crashed through branches and bark in a violent tumble.

Before it could recover, Ikenga was there.

He surged from the forest floor like a streak of black lightning, jaws locking around the drake's thick neck scales. His bite did not pierce through flesh immediately; instead, it clamped down with crushing force, dragging the creature sideways and pinning its head to the ground.

The drake thrashed, claws gouging trenches into the soil.

Maul landed heavily, snow-like fur stark against the scorched patches of earth where the drake's breath had struck. He moved without hesitation, placing one massive paw down on the creature's wing joint.