

## **Guardian gods 781**

Chapter 781:

The wing bones creaked under pressure. The drake struggled, muscles straining, heat flaring along its throat.

Ikenga growled. A warning, his eyes locked onto the drake's burning gaze, his intention clear, submit.

This was a hunt but it was not slaughter. Ikenga had no desire to spill blood today.

There was a natural order to his realm. Predators hunted prey. Strength rose and fell. Death came when it must. He would not disrupt that balance with his own hands not for sport, not for nostalgia.

Today was not about killing. It was about running beside his son. The drake snarled, smoke billowing from its nostrils, but its movements slowed. It felt the weight on its wing. It felt the precision of the bite at its neck strong enough to crush, restrained enough not to.

Maul pressed down slightly harder.

The earth beneath them groaned. For a moment, the forest held its breath.

When Ikenga's jaws loosened and Maul lifted his paw, the creature did not flee immediately. It rose slowly, smoke curling from its nostrils as it glared at the two wolves.

A low growl rumbled from its chest, acknowledgment.

It spread its wings and took to the sky. Once it had gained enough height, it threw its head back and roared, a long, resounding cry that rolled across the forest.

It was announcing its loss, declaring it. The sound carried far beyond the shattered clearing.

Ikenga watched it go then he lifted his head and howled. Maul followed a heartbeat later.

The forest answered again but this time, it was different. The drake's roar had not been one of humiliation.

It had been a challenge passed onward.

Across valleys and ridges, creatures stirred. They had heard the proclamation: two wolves had entered the hunting grounds and forced a sky tyrant to yield.

A second roar echoed from the western cliffs. Then another from the marshlands.

Heavy footsteps shook the earth somewhere to the north.

The air thickened with anticipation.

Ikenga's ears twitched. Maul's nose lifted, sorting through the sudden flood of scents, fur, scale, musk, iron, heat.

Ikenga glanced sideways at his son. Maul met his gaze, a silent understanding passed between them.

Then they ran as the forest erupted into motion.

From the left, a hulking, antlered beast burst through the undergrowth, hooves cracking stone. Ikenga pivoted sharply, his body twisting mid-stride as he lunged at its shoulder, forcing it off balance without tearing into flesh.

From the right, a scaled feline lunged from a tree, claws extended. Maul ducked beneath it and slammed his hindquarters upward, knocking it spinning into the brush.

They moved as black and white streaks cutting through green and gold.

More came.

A serpentine creature coiled around tree trunks, striking downward. Maul leapt vertically, pushing off the trunk itself to change direction mid-air. Ikenga intercepted from below, snapping near its jaw just enough to send it recoiling.

They do not linger much on one creature, it was Subdue, move.

Subdue and ove again. The forest floor became a shifting battlefield of momentum and instinct. Leaves spiraled upward from their passing. Branches cracked. Soil tore beneath powerful paws.

At one point, three beasts converged at once, a horned boar from the front, a winged predator from above, and a long-limbed crawler from the rear.

Ikenga barreled straight through the boar's charge, deflecting its tusks with sheer force while Maul pivoted low, sweeping the crawler's legs out from under it. The winged predator descended.

Too many. Ikenga barked sharply, that was the only signal.

They broke.

Both wolves burst forward in unison, accelerating beyond what seemed possible without divine power. They weaved through trees in tight spirals, leaping over fallen logs, slipping through narrow rock formations where larger pursuers could not follow.

Behind them came a chorus of frustrated roars. Hours passed like minutes or perhaps minutes like hours. Time did not matter here.

Eventually, they slowed. The sun dipped low, staining the sky in amber and crimson.

They climbed a ridge overlooking the vast forest below.

Side by side. For a moment, they said nothing. Then Ikenga huffed, nudging Maul's shoulder.

"You're slower."

Maul bared his teeth in what was unmistakably a grin "You're louder." Ikenga barked a short laugh.

"You miss it," Ikenga said quietly.

Maul did not deny it.

"Yes."

"You miss being... this."

"Yes." Ikenga nodded slowly.

"You chose your path," he said. "Godhood is not meant to feel like childhood."

Maul's ears flicked slightly.

"But that does not mean you must abandon who you were," Ikenga continued. "Power changes you. It should. But if you let it erase you... then what was the point of becoming stronger?"

The wind moved through their fur. Far below, creatures resumed their rhythms.

Maul finally spoke.

"I do not regret my ascension."

"I know."

"But sometimes..." he hesitated, searching for the word.

"I know," Ikenga repeated softly. They sat there as the last of the sun disappeared.

"Ikem informed me of your stance regarding the situation with your mother," Maul hummed, his voice carrying a note of practiced disinterest.

Ikenga let out a short, dry chuckle. "And do you hate your Aunt Keles, then?" he asked, his tone shifting into something uncharacteristically serious.

Taken aback, Maul shifted his gaze from Ikenga toward the dense canopy of the forest below. "In my eyes, things are the way they are because of her. I should hate her. I should resent her," he admitted, his voice dropping into a low, cold rasp. "But I cannot. I know that such hatred would only disappoint you and make things harder for you."

Ikenga reached out, his heavy paw settling on Maul's head in a grounding gesture. "And do you also hate the child she carries? Your brother?"

Maul froze. The words died in his throat. By every law of pride and lineage, he should have loathed the unborn child as an interloper. Yet, the confirmation remained locked away.

Despite his icy exterior and calculated aloofness, family was the singular tether that bound him. He had always seen himself as the silent sentinel, the wall between his kin and the world. It was the very reason he was revered as the God of Cold Vengeance and Selective Protection.

He pursued strength for one reason: to be the shield they lacked. This new brother would be born into a world of power, yet he would be inherently vulnerable. Maul knew now of how things function for gods and Origin Gods who faced suffocating restrictions and ancient laws that tied their hands.

Eventually, the weight of the child's protection would slide off the parents shoulders and fall squarely onto his and Ikem's. That was the natural order. That was his duty. So why, then, had he hesitated to answer?

The child was innocent of the parents' choices; Maul had already decided to remain detached from the drama between his mother and father, leaving them to settle their own debts.

Settling his resolve, he looked back at his father, his expression returning to its trademark icy discipline. "I bear no hatred for the brother to come."

There was silence after his answer "I have long since lost the right to tell you what is right or wrong, or even how you should feel," Ikenga said, a trace of relief softening his voice. "But it pleases me to hear those words, son. Your brother will have need of your protection."

Maul watched Ikenga closely, noting a shadow of concern in the older god's eyes. Ikenga shook his head slowly. "We are still unsure of the specifics, but something is... different. It pertains to his divinity."

Maul gave a sharp nod, acknowledging the mystery of his brother's divinity. Sensing the heavy atmosphere, Ikenga shifted his focus. "I notice that, unlike your brother, you seem unbothered by the matter of faith energy."

"My divinity doesn't exactly invite a crowd," Maul replied, his tone flat and unconcerned. "A god of cold vengeance and selective protection... mortals rarely seek that out unless they are desperate. It was only after the incident in the courts with Xerosis that I gained any real notice at all."

Ikenga sighed, then began to explain as he had to Ikem, the growing necessity of believers. In the coming times, faith would not just be a luxury; it would be the fuel required to sustain their strength against the coming enemies.

Yet, Ikenga found himself at a crossroads. Maul was right; his divinity was difficult to approach. His current doctrine appealed only to a narrow sliver of the population: hardened warriors, or those with a singular, burning intent to shield their kin.

While the latter should have brought him a sea of worshippers, the world had been too peaceful for too long. Families felt safe; the hearth was rarely threatened. It was only in these recent, darkening days that mortals had begun to feel the cold prickle of fear, leading to the slight uptick in Maul's followers. Even so, he remained a niche deity compared to the more "approachable" gods.

Maul needed a bridge, a subtle connection to the mortal soul that didn't require a blood feud or a direct threat to a loved one. He needed to find the thread of his power that existed even when the world was at peace.

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Ikenga caught himself before he spoke further, realizing he was straying toward a dangerous path. To suggest a fundamental shift in Maul's doctrine now would be to tamper with the very foundation of his divinity, a reckless move for any ascended god. A god's nature was not a coat to be tailored for comfort; it was the bone and marrow of their power.

Besides, as Ikenga looked at his son, he realized Maul's "unpopularity" was actually a strategic blessing.

The current powerhouses of this world were rarely oriented toward pure, direct combat. Ikenga looked inward with a grim honesty; despite his victories, his own divinity was not built for a brawl.

It wasn't that he was weak; his victories over the sixth-tier mages had been absolute. But those battles had taught him a lesson about the nature of divinity, It was a Clash of Concepts. At their level, combat was no longer about who can punch a mountain into dust; it's about whose "Definition of Reality" is more absolute.

He had won through sheer ingenuity, weaving his divinity into a trap, layering suppressions and debuffs until his opponents' very existence was too heavy for them to lift. He was a master of the "long game," a strategist who bled the enemy's conceptual authority dry before delivering the final blow.

But the names Ikenga tallied in his mind, Björn, Crepuscular, Jaus, and the Arch-Curse Juggernaut occupied a different echelon of violence altogether. They didn't rely on tactical ingenuity or the subtle weaving of intent; they were the win.

Their divinity and the concepts they commanded were so dense, so inherently aggressive, that they functioned as a sensory overload. In a conceptual battle, where a being's mind must remain a clear, focused engine of imagination to manifest their will, these entities were a screaming static.

The sheer, overwhelming force of their presence stripped an opponent of their agency. To face them was to be pinned under the weight of an absolute reality, forcing one to abandon all offense just to maintain a shred of self-preservation. And at their stage of existence, the moment a being is forced into a purely defensive stance, the battle is already over. You cannot rewrite the world if you are too busy trying not to be erased by it.

In such a world Maul was something different. He was a specialist. He didn't need the shallow worship of a million peasants; he needed the cold, sharpened intent of the few.

"I spoke in error," Ikenga corrected himself, his voice deepening with newfound clarity. "Do not change the foundation of your house to please the neighbors, Maul. Your divinity is not meant to be a comfort to the masses. It is meant to be a terror to our enemies."

Ikenga understood that Maul was currently weak not because of a flaw in his nature, but because the world was stagnant. A god of vengeance without a conflict is a sword in a sheath. But the winds were shifting; the peace was brittle. Ikenga saw this and finally let the matter of faith energy rest.

"You don't have to concern yourself with the masses for now," Ikenga conceded, waving a dismissive hand. "Your time will come. Instead, I advise you as I did your brother to use this quiet before the storm to research the Altars. Prepare yourself. My realm and your mother's are open to you both; perhaps with the two of you, a solution will reveal itself."

Listening to his father ramble about his future path and strategic growth, a rare, genuine smile tugged at the corner of Maul's mouth. This specific brand of paternal fussing was something he hadn't realized he'd missed.

Yet, as the warmth of the moment settled, his curiosity piqued. He remembered the echoing roar of frustration that had rattled the heavens earlier.

"Father?" Maul asked.

Ikenga pulled himself out of his tactical reverie and turned. "What is it?"

"What exactly did you say to my brother before you appeared in my realm?"

As soon as the question left his lips, a strange, prickling sensation washed over him, the instinct of a protector sensing a different kind of "danger." He looked into Ikenga's eyes and saw a familiar, mischievous glint dancing there. The grimace on Maul's face formed instantly; he didn't need the answer to know that his father had been meddling again.

Ikenga let out a long, lazy yawn, his eyes dancing with a playful light. "I merely informed him," he said with practiced nonchalance, "that I would like both his help and yours in raising the child to come from your mother."

Maul's reaction was an exact, involuntary echo of his brother's. "...Huh?"

A low, knowing chuckle was the only answer he received.

Before he could demand an explanation or perhaps a sanity check, the world blurred. The warmth of Ikenga's presence evaporated, replaced instantly by the biting, familiar gale of the frozen plains. Maul stood alone, the frost already beginning to crystalline on his cloak. His father had unceremoniously tossed him back into his own realm the moment the "bomb" had been dropped.

Maul remained motionless, replaying those final words against the howling wind. He hadn't misheard. Despite the bitter silence, the ongoing "situation," and the divine friction between them, his father and mother were bringing another life into the fold.

A short, dry chuckle escaped his throat, quickly escalating into a genuine laugh that rang out across the ice. He wasn't sure if being born into this chaotic, convoluted family was a supreme blessing or a well-crafted curse.

But as the laughter died down, his eyes hardened with a familiar, icy resolve. It didn't truly matter. To the God of Selective Protection, it simply meant there was one more head to shield from the coming storm.

Ikenga shifted back into his human form, as his feet touched the ground, his connection to his realm flared to life, whispering a cold stream of updates directly into his mind, a status report of everything that had transpired during his short absence.

Red and the two world spirits had vanished, leaving only Tweet behind, who was currently locked in a sharp, petty bickering match with Boros.

Ikenga ignored the chatter. He opened his palm, and a crystalline shard manifested from thin air. It hummed with a faint, rhythmic pulse. This was more than a gem; it was their bridge to the cosmos, the key that would allow them to transcend their current limits and finally grasp the true nature of the world that had birthed them.

"Hegemons," he muttered, the word feeling heavy on his tongue.

For a fleeting moment, he felt the urge to reach out across the void to Lady Tiamat. He had a thousand questions about those ancient entities, but he suppressed the impulse. Curiosity was a luxury he couldn't afford to indulge recklessly.

His fingers curled shut, and the crystal vanished back into his palm. It wasn't time. Not yet.

Real change was coming to this world, a transformation he had been sculpting in his mind for a while. But it wasn't a burden he intended to carry alone. This was a masterwork that required the hands of his siblings.

Drawing from the deep wells of his past life knowledge, Ikenga finally grasped the catalyst required to stir his world from its stagnant peace. To cast a perfect utopia into the fires of progress, one only needed to introduce a single, terrifying concept: Resource Scarcity.

During his absence, his nature divinity had operated without the guiding hand of his subconscious. For ages, his innate desire for a "bountiful world" had acted as an invisible thumb on the scales. His divinity had been a silent gardener, ensuring that hunger was a myth and the harvest was an eternal guarantee.

But nature, in its truest form, is not a charity. It is a cycle of brutal efficiency, of rot and regrowth, of lean winters and fleeting springs. Without his subconscious bias "blessing" every seed, the world began to revert to its natural, indifferent state.

Crops no longer surged from the earth with mindless enthusiasm, for the first time, the people looked at a fading sunset and felt the cold prickle of uncertainty. They were forced to stop consuming and start calculating.

He watched as the inhabitants began to monitor the growth of their stalks with newfound intensity. They were learning the hard lessons of soil health and nutrient requirements. Most importantly, they were doing something they had never been forced to do before: saving.

The act of putting aside a portion of the harvest for the next season, the concept of a "seed bank" marked the true birth of their evolution.

Ikenga had long suspected it, but now the truth was undeniable: the perfection of their world was an artificial grace. It wasn't that the people were inherently superior or the land naturally kinder; it was simply himself and his siblings that were inadvertently smoothing over every rough edge of their world.

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The evidence was everywhere once he knew where to look, in his past life, childbirth was a threshold of blood, sweat, and agonizing risk, a biological gamble where both mother and child could be lost. Here, under Mahu's silent blessing, pain was a forgotten concept. Every birth was a success, every mother remained radiant, and every infant was born into a guaranteed safety that defied the laws of biology.

The weather was never "wild." Because of Jaus, the rains arrived with the punctuality of a clock. Storms were never destructive; they were merely dramatic displays of mana that refreshed the earth. The world was perpetually hydrated, perfectly tempered, and fueled by a mana-rich atmosphere that made survival effortless.

From Crepuscular's perfectly timed sun to the orderly transitions of Kele's underworld, the cycle of life and death had been sanitized. There was no terror of the dark, and no lingering ghosts of a "bad" passing.

On the surface, this was a triumph. Who wouldn't want a world without birth pains, droughts, or existential dread?

But Ikenga saw the rot beneath the beauty. By being "always on," their divine auras had robbed the mortals of their agency. They never needed to innovate irrigation because Jaus provided the rain. They never needed to develop courage because Mahu removed the fear of loss.

Ikenga understood the bitter irony: they had accidentally built a gilded cage. By providing everything, they had stripped their people of the very friction required to sharpen a soul.

In this world, "Powerhouses" were born from talent and abundance, not struggle. They reached heights of strength simply because the air was thick with mana and the earth was overflowing with life-sustaining resources. But Ikenga has seen the truth of the cosmos, out there strength was forged in the fire of scarcity.

If his people stepped into the stars now, they would be like giants made of glass, immense in stature, yet shattering at the first hint of a real strike. They possessed the raw energy, but they lacked the will and the desperate cunning that only comes from knowing what it means to lose.

As if to mock his realization, the moment Ikenga had fully reintegrated into his realm after his long absence, the world responded. The slightly wilting crops he had observed in his absence suddenly stood tall, bursting with unnatural vitality. The soil turned rich and dark once more. His mere presence was a "glitch" in the natural order, forcing a bountiful harvest whether the land was ready for it or not.

"Our emotions are the chains," he realized.

The problem wasn't their power; it was their humanity. Because they felt love, pity, and a desire for comfort, their divinity acted as a protective parent rather than an impartial force of nature.

This had to change but Ikenga decided to wait. His siblings were still recovering, their essences settling after their recent endeavors. But once they were gathered, he would present a radical shift in their governance.

They needed to separate their emotional whims from their elemental duties. To let the rain fall when it was heavy, not just when it was "timely." To let the earth be hard and the winters be truly cold. To let the "Aspects" they represented function with the cold, beautiful indifference of the true universe.

Removing the emotional constraints of the gods, the world would finally be forced to grow up. The people would have to fight for their resources, innovate to survive, and bleed to protect what they built. Only then, with calloused hands and tempered spirits, would they be ready to follow Ikenga and his siblings into the hungry mouth of the cosmos.

The realization hit Ikenga with a jolt of historical irony. Standing in the center of his silent, blossoming realm, he felt a phantom tether to his past life, a memory of scholars, theologians, and philosophers who had spent lifetimes debating a single, agonizing question:

If a Creator is truly all-powerful and all-good, why is there suffering in the world?

In his previous world, this was the "Problem of Evil," a logical knot no one could ever quite untie. But here, standing as a living god in a world without flaw, Ikenga had found the answer. It was a terrifyingly simple one.

He and his siblings were the "All-Good Creators" the ancient philosophers had dreamed of. They had answered every prayer before it was even whispered. They had smoothed every path. And in doing so, they had committed the ultimate divine sin: they had stopped time.

A perfect world, Ikenga realized, was a dead world.

In a world without hunger, there is no drive to invent the plow. In a world without disease, there is no pursuit of medicine. In a world where every birth is a guaranteed joy, there is no reason to cherish the fragile miracle of life. By removing the "Evil" and the "Suffering," they had stripped their people of their evolutionary momentum.

He thought of the "Powerhouses" of this world, beings of immense raw energy who had never known a day of true desperation. If they were to meet a warrior from a "broken" world, someone who had fought for every scrap of mana and bled for every inch of ground, his people would be slaughtered.

To be a "Good God" was to be a suffocating parent.

Ikenga looked at his closing palm, where the cosmos-key had just vanished. To prepare his people for the stars, he had to do the one thing his past-life philosophers would have called "Evil."

He had to become truly indifferent.

Shaking his head at the stray thought, Ikenga turned his mind toward a duty that demanded his attention.

He was bound to punish a mortal king, Nwadieube, who had dared to steal from what was once his own garden. Looking down, Ikenga took a moment to observe all the king had accomplished. In a way, it pleased him; Nwadieube had shown a profound, if unintended, a brief understanding of Ikenga's own divinity.

In the king's own mind, his actions were merely following the laws of the wild. Using his own strength and cunning, he had seized something he knew would be a salvation for his people. To the king, it was nature's will to grab what one lacks to take by force what is necessary to thrive.

Watching the mortal justify his theft with such cold clarity got a raised brow from Ikenga. It was an honest reflection of the world's oldest truths: survival of the fittest, and the victor claiming the spoils.

By the laws of strength, the king deserved a blessing for his boldness. Yet, by the higher principles of things, he could not be rewarded. He was, after all, a mere mortal who had dared to plunder from a god. Such an affront, no matter how skillfully executed, had to come with a price.

During his long absence, the price of the king's transgression had gone uncollected; now that Ikenga had returned, the debt was due.

Yet, as Ikenga's gaze lingered over the kingdom, his gaze gave way to intrigue. He noticed the distinct, shimmering mark of Kele's blessing upon the king, and more curiously, was the king's wife soul.

Nwadiabube suddenly was no longer a simple thief; he was the center of a swirling vortex of conspiracy.

Ikenga felt a flicker of something resembling pity. He could see the invisible threads of Murmur's influence, the former demon king was already deep in dealings with the mortal.

Digging deeper into the king's recent history, Ikenga realized the man was tethered to the global upheavals that had recently threatened all of existence.

Recognizing this, Ikenga stayed his hand. He needed a clearer picture of the world's current state before deciding which punishment would be most fitting or most useful. From what he could see, Nwadiebube was destined to play a pivotal role in the grand designs unfolding for this world.

The punishment was already centuries overdue; it could wait a few more years. For now, Ikenga had found a new source of entertainment to pass the time until his siblings finally woke. He would watch this king closely, curious to see how the mortal would handle the weight of Kele's blessing and the revelations it would bring to him.

A month has passed since the return of the two gods, a month that, for Nwadiebube, has been the most grueling and transformative period of his life.

He found himself caught in a pincer movement: on one hand, the looming shadow of the god he had dared to rob; on the other, the overwhelming "blessing" of Keles, the Goddess of Death.

Initially, Nwadiebube was blind to the source of the strange power coursing through him. It was only after consulting the Death Shamans, those grim intermediaries who walk the line between worlds that the truth emerged. They instantly recognized the unmistakable mark of Keles. Through them, Nwadiebube learned of the Goddess's renewed presence and the dark grace she had bestowed upon her chosen few.

Only then did a cold calm settle over him. He stopped fighting the sensations and began to process the torrent of information his "new eyes" were feeding him.

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The true weight of this gift manifested one morning shortly after his feverish dreams which was the goddess's visitation. Nwadiebube woke to find his wife sleeping peacefully beside him. But the blessing had stripped away the comfort of the mundane.

He no longer saw merely the woman he loved, the curve of her shoulder or the rise and fall of her breath. He saw more. His vision pierced through the veil of skin and bone, revealing the shimmering, intricate pulse of her soul.

For Nwadieube, the world of the living had become a glass house, and he was the only one forced to see what lay beneath.

If that had been the extent of his vision, Nwadieube might have found peace. But what he saw in the depths of that soul made his blood run cold.

Under his piercing gaze, his wife's soul possessed two faces, joined at the back of a single head. The face in front was the woman he knew, the soft, familiar features of Queen Taiwo. But the face on the back was a stranger to this bed: it was Queen Amina, the wife of Osita.

As if sensing his intrusion, the second face, Amina's face suddenly snapped its eyes open. Her gaze locked onto his with predatory precision. The shock sent Nwadieube reeling; he leaped from the bed in a blur of motion, his hand reflexively grasping his sword. He leveled the cold steel at his wife, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

Queen Taiwo stirred, her eyes fluttering open. She looked around the dim room, confused and vulnerable, only to find her husband hovering over her with a bared blade.

"What are you doing, husband?" she asked, her voice thick with sleep.

Before Nwadieube could find his tongue, his new sight showed him a sickening shift. Within the spiritual tether of her body, the two faces swapped. Taiwo's face receded into the darkness of the skull, and Amina's visage rotated to the front, seizing control of the vessel.

The expression on his wife's face shifted instantly. The sleepiness vanished, replaced by a sharp, inquiring gaze that didn't belong to Taiwo.

"Can you see?" she asked.

A chill raced up Nwadieube's spine. The voice was identical to his wife's, the same pitch, the same cadence yet he knew with terrifying certainty that it was not her speaking.

Despite the dread pooling in his stomach, he remembered his crown. He was a King "See what?" he asked, his voice steady, feigning a perfect mask of confusion.

The Queen remained silent, her eyes boring into his, searching for the slightest flicker of recognition or a crack in his armor. Nwadieube held his composure, refusing to blink as the entity wearing his wife's skin weighed the truth of his words.

Through his new, cursed vision, the shift happened once more. The faces rotated with a sickening fluidity, and suddenly, it was Taiwo looking back at him, innocent and concerned.

Before she could voice her confusion at the blade still in his hand, Nwadieube lowered his sword, his voice dropping into a well-practiced, sorrowful register. "I am sorry, my lady. I had a rather harrowing dream," he said, the lie tasting like ash.

The Queen rose from the bed, her movements graceful and unburdened by his action. She stepped toward him, pulling him into a firm, grounding hug. "Are you still worried about the return of Ikenga?" she asked softly, her voice muffled against his chest, assuming the weight of his fear was for the god he had wronged.

"Yes," he replied, leaning into the lie to shield the truth.

Taiwo's embrace tightened. "Whatever it comes out to be, we will handle it together," she promised.

Nwadieube offered a low hum of agreement, a sound that vibrated with a hidden tension. "I must go. There is a long day ahead," he said, planting a gentle, lingering kiss on her forehead.

He turned to walk away, his boots clicking rhythmically against the stone floor. But his attention never truly left her.

Even with his back turned, the "Revelation" gifted by Keles allowed him to sense the shift. He didn't need to look to know that the air in the room had cooled, or that the soul behind him had rotated once again.

He felt a gaze boring into the space between his shoulder blades heavy, it was no longer his wife watching him leave. It was the other one.

The week following the revelation was a slow descent into madness for the King. Keles's blessing did not fade; it intensified, turning his world into a gallery of spiritual horrors. Nwadiébé, once the proud architect of a thriving kingdom, became a ghost in his own palace. He spent those seven days in hiding, avoiding the court and, most of all, avoiding the woman who wore his wife's face.

In his isolation, the pieces of a jagged puzzle began to fit together. Every strange new habit Taiwo had developed, her sudden interest in the culinary arts, her shifting mannerisms, even the way she laughed, now had a sinister origin to him. It wasn't a "new spark" in their marriage, it was simply the influence of the second soul, bleeding through the cracks of his wife's identity.

On the seventh night, sleep was an impossibility. Nwadiébé lay paralyzed, staring at the dark ceiling as the weight of his ignorance crushed him. He suspected that Mei's master, the shadowy hand behind so many of the realm's recent upheavals was the weaver of this spiritual knot.

He turned his head to the side, intending to watch the rhythmic flicker of the two souls within his wife as they slept. Instead, he froze.

The air in the room didn't change. No floorboard creaked. To his mortal eyes, the room was empty, draped in the velvet shadows of midnight. But as the Goddess's blessing flared within his vision, the truth was revealed.

A third presence stood by the bed.

It was a massive, radiant soul, burning with a brilliance that made the twin-faced spirit of his wife look dim by comparison. The entity didn't move; it simply stood over the sleeping Queen, watching her with

a gaze that held no malice, no hunger, and no threat. It was filled with a profound, aching love, the look of a man watching his most precious treasure.

As Nwadieube traced the features of that giant, glowing face, his heart hammered against his ribs like a trapped bird.

"Osita," he whispered into the dark.

As a Sixth-Tier figure, Osita's essence was sensitive to the weight of a gaze. He felt the King's eyes pressing against his spirit, and slowly, his head turned. His eyes drifted from the sleeping Queen to Nwadieube, noting the raw, unadulterated fear etched into the King's features.

For a brief moment, Osita was confused; a mortal should not have been able to perceive a soul of his magnitude. Then, he saw it, the faint, shimmering trace of divinity clinging to Nwadieube's pupils. The golden light of Keles.

Osita raised a spectral hand, perhaps to speak or to gesture, but he stopped mid-motion. A large, ornate key had materialized in Nwadieube's grip. The dead King's brow furrowed. Every instinct in his refined spirit began to tingle; whatever that key represented, it was a problem he wasn't prepared to solve. With one final, inscrutable look at the man in the bed, Osita vanished, his radiant soul snapping out of existence.

The silence that followed was deafening. Nwadieube collapsed back against the pillows, his breath coming in ragged, shallow heaves. His body was slick with sweat, the physical toll of witnessing such power.

Since knowing the true extent of Osita's strength, it had cast a long, suffocating shadow over his heart and now, that very shadow had been pacing his bedroom, watching his wife, and lingering in the corners of his life.

Without the Goddess's blessing, he would have remained a blind man in his own home. From Osita's calm demeanor, it was clear this wasn't a first-time visit. The realization hit him like a physical blow.

How long had Osita known about the twin-faced soul?

How long had his private sanctum been laid bare under that divine gaze?

Was his Queen even his own anymore, or was she merely a vessel for another man's widow?

The insecurity was a poison, fast-acting and cold. Nwadié bube realized with a sickening lurch that he might not have the strength to defend his own crown or his wife from the entities now playing for his kingdom.

Sleep was gone. Peace was a memory.

His figure became a blur of motion as he bolted from the room. Driven by a frantic need for certainty, he began to run through the palace grounds. He was a man possessed, his "new eyes" scanning every servant, every guard, and every shadow. He needed to know if his world was still his, or if his entire kingdom had already been replaced by the ghosts of his enemies.

Nwadiabube's frantic sprint through the palace grounds was a spectacle of pure, unadulterated terror. He was a king stripped of his dignity, his eyes darting toward every shadow, every pillar, and every servant.

Chapter 785:

To the onlookers, the guards, the startled maids, and his own sister, Nwadiemma, he looked like a man possessed. His gaze was hollow, fixed on a horizon only he could see, searching for the shimmering outlines of souls that shouldn't be there.

That night, no one in the palace slept. They watched from the periphery as their ruler paced the stone corridors like a caged animal, his mind a whirlwind of insecurity and divine revelation.

As the first grey light of dawn touched the horizon, the week-long grace of Keles reached its end.

The transition was violent. One moment, the world was a vibrant, terrifying map of spiritual energy; the next, the "curtain" slammed shut. The brilliant glows and the twin-faced horrors vanished, replaced by the flat, mundane reality of stone walls and morning mist.

For Nwadiabube, the return of his normal sight felt like being struck blind. The only layer of security he had, the ability to see his enemies was gone. He was vulnerable again, a mortal man surrounded by invisible giants.

The court stood paralyzed as the King's knees buckled. He collapsed onto the dirt of the courtyard, his fingers clawing at the earth. A desperate, broken sound escaped his throat, a plea that chilled the blood of everyone present.

"Please... give it back," he sobbed, his voice cracking. "Please, give me the truth-sight back. I need it... Please, don't leave me blind!"

The desperation turned to a frantic, self-destructive mania. Before the guards could react, Nwadieube raised his trembling hands to his own face, his fingers curling like talons as he began to dig at his eyes, as if he could physically tear away the veil and force the Goddess's vision to return.

The Princess Intervened "Brother, no!"

Nwadimma moved fast, in a blink she was before the king. Before he could do permanent damage to himself, she surged forward. With a sharp, practiced strike to the side of his neck, she cut through his hysteria.

Nwadieube's body went limp instantly. His hands fell away from his face, and his sister caught him before he hit the stones, pulling his head to her chest. The palace fell into a deathly silence, the only sound the heavy breathing of the Princess as she looked at the terrified faces of the court.

The Princess didn't wait for the shock of the court to settle. She shifted her grip on Nwadieube's limp form, her eyes sweeping over the gathered guards and servants like twin blades of ice.

"This is never to leave the palace," she commanded. The weight of her voice anchored the panicked staff; they bowed in unison, a silent pact of secrecy sealed by the terror of the morning.

With a surge of mana, Nwadimma vanished from the courtyard, her silhouette a blur as she descended into the bowels of the royal residence. She didn't head for the infirmary or the King's chambers. She headed for the dark.

Her destination was the subterranean sanctuary of Ezinne, the First Death Shaman. Nwadinma had been briefed days prior, Ezinne had confirmed the touch of Keles upon the King's soul. But the sight of her brother clawing at his own eyes told a different story. To the Princess, it looked less like a blessing and more like a divine curse designed to hollow a man out from the inside.

Nwadinma disregarded all royal decorum, kicking open the heavy iron-bound gates of the underground ward. Her voice echoed off the damp stone walls, raw with a sister's desperation.

"Ezinne! Help him!"

Deep within the gloom, amidst the scent of dried herbs and old bone, Ezinne sat in a trance. The intrusion snapped her eyes open. Initially, a flash of irritation crossed the Shaman's withered features, few dared to disrupt her meditation with such manner.

But as she stepped from her hut and saw the King draped like a broken doll in Nwadinma's arms, the annoyance vanished, replaced by the sharp, clinical focus.

"Put him down," Ezinne ordered, her voice cutting through the Princess's panic. In that moment, titles and bloodlines were irrelevant; there was only the healer and the dying light of a King.

She knelt beside Nwadinma, her hands hovering just inches above his closed eyelids, sensing the residual "burn" of the Goddess's departure.

Nwadimma watched, her chest heaving with exertion, as Ezinne worked. The Shaman reached into a weathered leather satchel at her waist, withdrawing a handful of grey, unassuming ash. With a rhythmic, low-thrumming chant, she cast the dust into the air.

As the particles drifted toward the King, they ignited, transforming into a constellation of shimmering green light. The emerald sparks settled over Nwadieube like a cooling shroud. Almost instantly, the violent tension in his jaw relaxed, and the frantic, pained furrow of his brow smoothed into a deep, drug-like sleep.

Ezinne placed a withered palm against the King's temple, her eyes fluttering shut as she tasted the residual energy clinging to his skin. Suddenly, her eyes snapped open, sharp and calculating.

"The Lady's blessing is gone," she murmured, her voice echoing in the damp chamber. She paused, tilting her head as if listening to a whisper from the shadows, then shook her head slowly. "No... not gone. It was never meant to stay. It was a window, not a door. It was meant only to show him what he needed to see before slamming shut."

Having stabilized the King's spirit, Ezinne finally turned her full attention to the Princess. She stood, smoothing her robes and performing a shallow, respectful bow, a courtesy she had momentarily forgotten in the heat of the crisis.

"Princess," Ezinne began, she looked down at the unconscious Nwadieube, then back at Nwadimma. "Might I ask what happened? What did he see with those divine eyes that broke him so completely?"

Nwadimma shook her head slowly, the flickering torchlight of the underground chamber casting long, jagged shadows across her face. "I have no idea what came over my brother," she admitted, her voice tight with a mix of exhaustion and fear.

She recounted the night's horrors to Ezinne: how the King had sprinted through the palace grounds like a man hunted by invisible hounds, his eyes wide and vacant, staring at things that weren't there. She spoke of the chilling silence that followed, and the visceral, bloody desperation at dawn when he had turned his own fingers into talons against his eyes.

Ezinne listened, her weathered face darkening with every word. She let out a long, heavy sigh that seemed to vibrate with the weight of centuries. "It seems the Goddess's blessing might not have been a gift of comfort for the King," she murmured. "He must have seen something... something that shattered the very foundation of his reality to leave him in such a state."

Nwadinma's frown deepened into a look of royal indignation. "You said earlier that the Goddess's blessing was meant to reveal and help my brother! Why should he suffer for a gift he didn't even ask for?"

Before the Princess could finish her protest, Ezinne moved with surprising speed. She pressed a finger to her own lips and leveled a stern, commanding gaze at Nwadinma, her voice dropping to a sharp whisper.

"Be silent, child. You must not speak ill of the Goddess," Ezinne warned. "Keles does not deal in 'comfort.' She deals in Truth. Your brother saw exactly what the Goddess intended for him to see. It is not the fault of the Divine if the mortal mind is too fragile to pay the price for what was revealed."

The reprimand hung heavy in the air. Both women fell into a somber silence, their eyes drawn back to the sleeping King.

Even under the influence of Ezinne's soothing green light, Nwadinma was not at peace. His brow remained tightly furrowed, his eyelids twitching as if his mind were still trying to process the image of

the two-faced soul and the towering, radiant ghost of Osita. He was a man who knew too much, trapped in a body that could no longer see the very dangers he now knew were real.

Hours passed before the King finally stirred. The hysteria that had claimed him before the darkness took over was gone; in its place was a heavy, eerie stillness. He lay there for a moment, his gaze drifting across the familiar carvings of the ceiling, anchored by the grounding scent of cedar and incense.

The heavy thud of the door being pushed open broke the silence. Ezinne and Nwadimma stepped into the room, both freezing mid-stride as their eyes met his.

Ezinne immediately dropped into a deep, respectful bow. Nwadimma, however, remained upright, her feet rooted to the floor. Her expression was a fragile mask of uncertainty, caught between the duty she owed a king and the love she felt for a brother.

"How are you doing, Brother?" she asked, her voice soft as she moved toward the bedside.

Nwadiébe let the silence hang for a moment, his voice raspy when he finally spoke. "Not so well... but I suspect I will be."

Chapter 786:

Ezinne watched him closely, the question burning in her mind. She desperately wanted to ask about the Goddess's blessing, what he had seen, what visions had been seared into his mind but she bit her tongue. Despite her closeness to the royal siblings, there were still boundaries of blood and crown she dared not cross.

She glanced at the Princess, grateful that Nwadimma's concern would likely lead where her own curiosity could not.

"What did you see, Brother?" the Princess asked.

The question acted like a sudden breach in a dam. Nwadiabube's brow furrowed deeply, his hand flying to his temple as if to physically hold back the surge of memories. A sharp, stinging pain flared behind his eyes, but Nwadiemma did not rush him. She stood as a silent pillar, giving him the space to stitch his thoughts back together.

Slowly, he began to recount the visions, the blurred passage of a week that felt like a lifetime and finally, his encounter with Osita.

Hearing that name, Nwadiemma's composure shattered. "Are you certain, Brother?"

Nwadiabube nodded, his eyes wide and hollow. "Yes, Sister. Osita has been walking among us for the longest time, unseen and unknown."

He cast a frantic, paranoid glance around the shadows of the room, as if the very air might solidify into a threat. "He could be right here with us at this moment, watching, and we would never know."

His fingers curled into a fist, his knuckles emitting a series of sharp, dry cracks. "My bedroom, my wife... everything was laid bare to his gaze. I was helpless, Nwadiemma. A spectator in my own life."

The king's voice dropped to a low, dangerous tremble. "He could take the Queen from me at any moment. How would that look to my people? To the vassals? A king who cannot protect his own family, how can he claim to protect a kingdom?"

He turned to her, his teeth gritted so hard his jaw muscles corded. "I need power, Sister. And I need it fast."

The Princess did not reprimand her brother this time. There was no attempt to reason him out of his fury or temper his ambition. As she processed his words, a cold clarity settled over her; he was right. There was no other way.

This lingering weakness was a rot that had to be cut out. Playing fair and staying "safe" had brought them to the edge of a cliff. They needed power, and they needed it immediately.

She felt a strong understanding of her brother's helplessness. What had the centuries of tradition and expansion truly bought them? The great kingdom they had painstakingly built, what did it amount to if a single man could dismantle its very foundations with a glance?

Placing a steadying hand on her brother's shoulder, the Princess spoke with a new, hardened edge to her voice. "Rest and recover well, Brother. When you are whole again, we will seek this higher power together. No matter the price we must pay."

Ezinne stood in the corner, her mind reeling from the weight of their words. Despite her shock, the practical reality of the palace pushed her to speak. "And what of Queen Taiwo's state?" she whispered. "What should be done about her?"

Nwadiabube hauled himself into a sitting position, his movements stiff but determined. "Taiwo knows nothing of her current soul-state," he said, his eyes dark. "I have gone to great lengths to ensure she remains in the dark... though after my recent actions, it may be far harder to hide the truth this time."

"Do you truly believe it is wise for her to remain unaware?" the Princess asked, her voice hushed.

Without a moment's hesitation, Nwadiabube nodded. "I believe her ignorance is her only protection. From everything I have observed, it has left no negative mark on her thus far. All has been well, save for those brief, hollow dazes she falls into."

He let out a heavy, ragged sigh, the weight of his secrets pressing down on him. "I fear that informing her would only spark a hunger for answers, a path of discovery that wouldn't bode well for her, or for any of us. I have no idea where to even begin helping her, and I doubt even Ezinne could offer a remedy. Not after what those eyes showed me."

A heavy silence stretched between them. Finally, Nwadiabube gave a single, sharp nod and stood up, smoothing her robes.

"Leave the Queen to me. I will handle the explanations for what happened today," she said, her tone brooking no argument. "You must focus only on recovery—and on how to make contact with Mei's Master."

With that, she turned and swept out of the room, leaving the King and Ezinne in the sudden quiet of the chamber.

Nwadiabube turned his gaze toward Ezinne. "My thanks for your help," he said, his voice softer now.

Ezinne bowed low, her eyes averted. "It was nothing, Your Grace. Only my duty."

A shadow of hesitation crossed the King's face, a question hovering on his lips before he finally spoke. "Tell me... we don't seem to have a temple dedicated to the Lady Keles, do we?"

Ezinne raised a brow at the suggestion, her expression thoughtful. "It was discussed in the court previously," she reminded him softly. "The consensus was that a temple dedicated to Lady Keles might unsettle the people. Her relationship with death is... intimate. Many still fear what they do not understand."

Nwadiabube let out a dry, sharp cough, shifting against his pillows. "Times have changed," he countered, his eyes burning with a sudden, feverish intensity. "The Death Shamans have gained a formidable reputation over the last month. We should seize this momentum. A grand temple, built in the Goddess's honor, would be seen as an act of gratitude, a tribute for allowing us mortals to glimpse even a fraction of her power."

Ezinne saw right through his political maneuvering. She knew his "gratitude" was merely a bridge to the power he so desperately craved, but she had no intention of calling him out. As a Death Shaman herself, the King's ambition sang to her. Any path that brought the kingdom closer to the veil of death was a path she was eager to walk.

The pull was even stronger now, ever since she had felt the freezing, absolute touch of the Goddess on the spiritual path she and her fellow shamans had carved. That divine intervention had scoured a great danger from her very soul, leaving her with a terrifying sense of peace and the clarity to push her craft further than ever before.

She looked at the King, her gaze steady and knowing. "I understand, Your Grace. Leave the matter of the Goddess and her temple to me."

With a final, lingering bow, she swept out of the chamber, leaving Nwadiebube alone with the silence and his own dark thoughts.

As soon as the door clicked shut, the mask of royal composure shattered. Nwadiebube's face contorted, his eyes bulging as he scanned the empty corners of the room. He was desperate to claw back the visions, to see through the veil once more. He went so far as to force raw mana into his optic nerves, straining until his vision swam with static, but he found nothing. Aside from the standard physical enhancement of a mortal, his sight remained stubbornly ordinary.

He fell back against the pillows, staring at his trembling hands with a hollow, haunted expression. "Power," he whispered to the silence, the word sounding more like a curse than a prayer.

A week bled by before the King regained enough of his faculty to appear in public. He resumed his duties, a hollow imitation of his former self, until the universe seemed to offer a cruel mockery of his progress.

Nwadiebube sat in his private study, the air thick with the scent of old parchment as he reviewed the mountain of state affairs he had neglected. He was deep in concentration, his quill scratching rhythmically against a decree, when the light in the room suddenly flickered and died.

He snapped his head up. Sitting across him was the face that had haunted his nightmares every night since his collapse.

"Osita."

The moment the name left his lips, the massive, ethereal key manifested within his vision, hovering over the intruder. But this time, Nwadieube didn't collapse in terror. A manic, jagged grin spread across his face as he began to flood the key with every drop of mana he possessed, the ancient symbol beginning to pulse with a violent, blinding radiance.

Osita sat casually in the heavy oak chair across from the desk, watching the King's frantic display. He raised a brow, a flicker of dry amusement crossing his features before he slowly shook his head. "There is no need for such hostility, Nwadieube. I simply came to talk."

The calm, steady vibration of Osita's voice acted like a bucket of ice water. Nwadieube froze, his chest heaving as he fought to pull his racing heart back under control. He took several ragged, deep breaths, the golden light of the key dimming but remaining dangerously present in his vision.

Chapter 787:

"I believe," the King spat, his voice trembling with a cold, jagged edge, "that we have absolutely nothing to discuss."

Osita didn't flinch. "Previously, perhaps. But now? We both know that has changed." He spoke with a quiet finality that left no room for protest.

In truth, Osita was calculating. After their last encounter, his first instinct had been to simply take the Queen and vanish. The secret was out; he could have reclaimed his Amina, brought her home, and found a way to mend her fractured soul in private.

But he knew such an act would be the spark that ignited a catastrophic war, one he wasn't entirely sure he could now finish. While his own strength could likely level the kingdom, NwadiEbube had the backing of Murmur, and Osita had children to protect, lives that couldn't be bartered in a blood feud.

Moreover, his eyes drifted to the glowing golden key hovering in the King's sight. That was a trump card he hadn't fully accounted for. Diplomacy was a bitter pill, but it was the only way to ensure everyone including the woman they both claimed survived the fallout.

"Our wives' situation, sharing the same soul was the handiwork of Murmur and the dark gods," Osita said, his voice level and steady. NwadiEbube remained silent, his eyes fixed on the man who had invaded his sanctuary. "We are both pawns in their game, and our hands are being forced to play along."

Osita leaned forward slightly, his gaze piercing. "I have been observing, and I know the truth of your relationship with Queen Taiwo. It was never a bond of the heart. You have both played the roles expected of you by the crown, but the foundation has always been hollow."

NwadiEbube's brow furrowed, a low growl vibrating in his chest. "What, exactly, are you implying?" he asked, his tone heavy with suppressed rage.

Osita allowed a long silence to stretch between them, letting the weight of the situation settle. "It means," he said finally, "that you can function without her. Unlike me, who cannot."

He stood up slowly, gesturing to the air as if tracing the invisible strings of fate. "We don't have to play the game Murmur laid out for us. The fact that two queens share one essence is the greatest threat to us both, a tether they can pull at any time. But that can be resolved with a simple agreement."

Osita's eyes locked onto the King's. "Hand the Queen over to me. I can guarantee her safety and her soul's stability. In doing so, we strip the dark gods of their leverage. We ruin their plan before it even begins."

NwadiEbube let out a sharp, bitter scoff that echoed off the stone walls. "Hand over my Queen? To a man who haunts my palace like a ghost?"

"If you had done such a fine job protecting your own Queen, this situation would never have occurred," NwadiEbube spat.

The words had barely left his lips before the world went dead. A silence so absolute it felt physical as if every vibration of sound had been rubbed out of existence fell over the room.

NwadiEbube suddenly found himself hyperventilating, his lungs burning as if the air itself had turned to lead. Osita's eyes, cold and abyssal, bore into his soul with the weight of a collapsing mountain. Yet, fueled by a week of pure, unfiltered paranoia, the King refused to break.

"It is true," the King wheezed, blood beginning to trickle from the corner of his mouth as the sheer pressure of Osita's presence crushed his ribs. "My Queen and I... we never shared the bond you claim. But the situation has changed." He forced a jagged, bloody grin. "Your wife's soul has been a good influence on her. It has given us the hope of something greater. Something... shared."

The explosion was instantaneous.

NwadiEbube was slammed into the stone wall with a bone-jarring crack that spiderwebbed the masonry. Osita's hand was a vice around his throat, lifting him off his feet. The man's human mask had

slipped, and a fragment of his demonic essence leaked out, a freezing, oily darkness that began to unravel the King's very sanity.

"Mind your words, boy," Osita hissed, his voice no longer human, but a chorus of grinding stone. "I am not nearly as helpless as your delusions suggest."

He leaned in, his breath cold as the grave. "I play along with these human games, these roles of husband and subject only because it is what my wife would have wanted. Do not strip me of that reason, Nwadieube. The consequences of that would be... dire."

For the first time in his life, the King felt the literal shadow of Death standing over him, scythe already mid-swing. The arrogance of the crown vanished, replaced by the primal terror of a prey.

"I... am sorry," he managed to choke out through a throat that felt like it was being crushed into powder.

Osita's grip vanished. Nwadieube crumpled to the floor, gasping for air as the pressure in the room finally began to dissipate.

Looking at the pitiful state of the King, Osita's expression shifted into one of genuine bewilderment. Why was the man so stubborn? He had laid the truth bare: they were both being played as pawns by Murmur and the dark gods, yet Nwadieube seemed strangely indifferent to that reality.

From Osita's perspective, there was nothing for the King to gain by resisting him. It made him wonder, was the King in a deeper alliance with Murmur than he let on? What could have been promised to him that was worth this level of humiliation and risk?

A darker thought flickered through Osita's mind as he watched the King gasp for air: Maybe he didn't lose his wife to this soul-tether by accident. Maybe he willingly offered her up to further Murmur's designs.

The mere thought brought an oncoming headache. Osita rubbed his temples, a sudden wave of fatigue hitting him. Why had he even appeared before the King today? What result had he actually expected to achieve?

He realized then that he hadn't been thinking clearly since the incident with Amina began. In fact, it had been a very long time since he had been forced to think deeply at all.

Ever since he reached the Sixth-Tier, and especially with his wife by his side, the world had been simple. Most obstacles were resolved with a wave of his hand or the weight of his fist. His wife had handled the complexities of the mind, leaving him to be the hammer. Now, without her guidance and faced with a situation he couldn't simply crush, he felt the heavy, rusted gears of his own diplomacy grinding painfully into motion.

If he could only find Murmur, this entire twisted game would be over in an instant. But the old demon was a master of the shadows; Murmur had been incredible at laying low, his very existence seemingly erased from the fabric of the world.

Osita took a long, stabilizing breath, forcing his demonic essence back into the depths of his soul. He could afford to wait for a few months, at least. His oldest son was nearing his ascension to the throne, and with it, a likely breakthrough to the Sixth-Tier. Once that happened, Osita would be unburdened, his hands free to act without fearing for his lineage. The playing field would finally be his to tilt.

He looked down at the crumpled King one last time, his voice dropping to a glacial, detached tone. "Count your days, boy. In a few months, my wife will be back in my hands whether you permit it or not."

With those final words, Osita's figure simply unraveled into the air. He vanished exactly as he had arrived: with no fluctuation of mana, no ripple in the air, leaving no trace that he had ever been there at all.

The moment the pressure vanished, Nwadieube let out a primal, ragged roar. He scrambled to his feet, blinded by a white-hot surge of humiliated fury. He began to trash his office, sweeping stacks of priceless records off the desk and shattering inkwells against the stone walls.

How dare he? How dare that creature mock him so openly in his own sanctum? Even the godlings he had encountered had never made him feel this small, this utterly pitiful. He was a King, a ruler of men, yet Osita had treated him like a nuisance to be stepped on.

"I will have that power!" he screamed at the empty room, his chest heaving as ink and blood mingled on his floor. "I will tear it from the heavens if I must!"

Half a year bled into the past as Ikenga watched these ripples turn into a tidal wave. For him, the most telling moment was that final, jagged interaction between Osita and the King.

Ikenga looked on from his vantage point, slowly shaking his head. Osita's approach had been a masterclass in how a high-tier cambion, for all his ancient blood failed to understand the fragile architecture of the human ego. In Osita's eyes, his own actions were flawless. Why should a Sixth-Tier being weigh the bruised feelings of a lesser creature? He had arrived, issued his proclamation, and vanished. To a predator, that was simply the natural order.

Chapter 788:

But to a "lesser" being who had spent a lifetime convinced of his own absolute sovereignty, it was a different story altogether. To be faced with the raw, undeniable reality of one's own insignificance wasn't just a defeat, it was salt rubbed into a festering wound.

Had Osita played a different hand, the outcome might have been salvageable. Instead, his arrogance had acted as a catalyst, shoving the King deeper into Murmur's waiting embrace.

At least Murmur was a craftsman of emotions and ego. The demon had never once made Nwadiebube feel small; he had never let the King realize the leash was there. Murmur offered the illusion of control, the seductive promise of hope. Osita, in a few moments of cold efficiency, had stripped the King of his dignity and laid his utter incompetence bare for him to see.

A dark, thoughtful smile touched Ikenga's lips. Seeing this play out had given him a brilliant spark of inspiration for the King's ultimate punishment. He found himself genuinely intrigued by Murmur's machinations and he was more than willing to lend a helping hand to ensure the tragedy reached its proper crescendo.

Due to the cause and effect between Ikenga and Nwadiebube, he could descend to the mortal world to aly out the punishment but he didn't need to descend. To a god of nature, the King's soul was like a sapling in a vast forest easily bent, easily grafted.

Ikenga reached out, his fingers trailing through the metaphysical "soil" of Nwadiebube's fate. He didn't add something new; he simply over-watered the King's own greed. He took that tiny spark of "survival of the fittest" that Nwadiebube used to justify his theft and fueled it with a divine, suffocating possessiveness.

"You like to keep what you take, little thief?" Ikenga's thought rippled through the immaterial, silent but heavy as a falling mountain. "Then you shall never know the peace of letting go."

In the mortal world, Nwadiabube was standing on his balcony, looking toward the northern horizon where the Rival King's lands lay. The sun was warm, the breeze was light and then, in the heartbeat between one breath and the next, the world changed.

It wasn't a sound. It was a pressure.

Nwadiabube felt a sudden, violent jolt in his chest, as if his heart had grown roots that were suddenly digging deep into the stone of his palace. His vision sharpened with a predatory clarity. The distant mountains of the Rival Kingdom no longer looked like beautiful landmarks; they looked like thieves lurking on the edge of his property.

He turned away from the horizon, his movements jerky and filled with a new, restless energy. He walked toward his wife's chambers.

Earlier that morning, he had looked at her with confusion, fear and weakness. But now, as he entered the room, the wonder was gone, replaced by a terrifying hunger of ownership.

He saw her sitting by the window, the sunlight catching the "Two-in-One" shimmer of her mortal vessel.

He saw his wife's grace, he saw the Rival Queen's regal posture. He saw his greatest prize.

The thought of Osita, the man who once loved the second half of this merged soul hit Nwadieube like a physical blow to the stomach. A cold, black jealousy, fueled by Ikenga's curse, surged through him.

He didn't feel cursed. He felt right. He felt like a lion who had finally realized he was surrounded by hyenas.

"Guard!" he roared, his voice echoing with a new, jagged authority that made the servants jump as they ran around in confusion, thankfully the head general who also was the king's good friend was around.

His general entered, confused by the King's sudden intensity. "My Lord?"

"Cancel the trade with Osita kingdom," Nwadieube snapped, his eyes fixed on his wife with a gaze so possessive. "They are no longer neighbours. They are scouts. They come to see what I have so they can plan to steal it. The Northern King thinks he is stronger? He thinks he can claim what is mine?"

He paced the room, the curse thrumming in his veins like a fever. His consciousness meanwhile felt something was wrong but he could not pinpoint where the sense of instability came from.

"We strike first. We don't just defend the border; we erase the threat. I want his kingdom in ashes before he even realizes I've seen through his 'peace'."

The general paled. "But Sire, there is no provocation! The people"

"The people belong to me!" Nwadiebube hissed. He stepped closer, his presence suddenly becoming heavy, almost suffocating as it crowded the room. "And what is mine, I protect."

As the final word left his lips, Nwadiebube froze. A flicker of something dark passed over his eyes before he snapped his attention toward the General.

"You heard my orders. See to it," he commanded, his voice tight with suppressed energy. "Keep your men warm and ready. I want steady eyes on the Osita Kingdom at all times."

Watching from the periphery, Ikenga saw the King in a sobering new light. The curse was taking hold with a speed and ferocity he hadn't anticipated. It was clear now that Nwadiebube had been suppressing years of resentment, reaching a breaking point that the curse had simply provided an outlet for.

Ikenga hadn't intended for the magic to act so swiftly. He felt a flicker of relief that the King still possessed enough lingering self-control to avoid a formal declaration of war a bell that, once rung, could never be silenced.

Ikenga turned his gaze toward the horizon, where the Osita Kingdom lay. They held a formidable advantage, particularly in the form of Osita's son. Narrowing his eyes, Ikenga sensed a familiar ripple in the air; a subtle, jagged fluctuation in the boy's aura.

He's already touching the Sixth Tier, Ikenga realized. The stakes had just been raised.

It was an unfair world, but Ikenga knew how to tip the scales. He understood how to balance the board in a way that wouldn't just favor his side, but would reshape the entire world. His attention shifted toward the arch-curse known as The All-Knowing Oracle.

Since Ikenga's return, the Oracle had been a storm of restless energy. Ikenga knew exactly what was fueling this agitation: it was the collective trauma Osita had inflicted. By making every soul on earth feel utterly helpless, Osita had unintentionally lit a wildfire of ambition.

Across every border, a desperate flame for knowledge had been ignited. People no longer wanted to be victims; they craved the Sixth Tier. They hungered for that level of absolute power, the kind of strength required to seize control of their own fates rather than remaining like fish on a chopping block, waiting for the blade to fall.

The pressure was further intensified by the Xerosis Court, which had recently pulled back the curtain on the world's most guarded secrets. By exposing the truth behind the magical systems and the nature of the gods, the court had shattered mortal ignorance. The demand for knowledge had reached a fever pitch.

As a curse born of and tethered to knowledge, the Oracle perceived this global shift more acutely than anyone. He had spent his time confined within Ikenga's realm, prowling through the personal library housed inside the great Osisi. The weight of the world's collective desire to know was vibrating through him, demanding to be released.

The library contained every scrap of knowledge this world had ever produced, from the mundane to the forbidden. As the arch-curse of this domain, the Oracle did not just guard this information; he was the information. He knew every secret ever whispered.

He understood why the world was crying out for answers. However, his response was not a public invitation; he was not a teacher waiting for students to knock on his door.

The Oracle's answer was reserved only for the "Destined". He responded only to those whose hunger for truth was so violent and pure that it acted as a beacon. When a mortal's desire for knowledge reached a breaking point, they could actually pull the Oracle's domain toward them, folding space and time until the library manifested in their path.

This phenomenon created a strange, haunting sight across the realms. In one corner of the world, a Flame Mage stood at the edge of his own understanding. He had mastered the heat and the light, yet he knew, he felt that there was a deeper essence to fire that remained just out of reach.

Despite his mastery, he had hit a wall. His own talent had reached its ceiling, and the existing records of magic offered him nothing more. He was trapped in the gap between what he knew and what was possible. As his frustration turned into a desperate, singular craving for the truth of the flame, the air around him began to shimmer.

The Oracle was listening.

For seekers like the flame mage, the transition would happen overnight. They would wake to find their familiar surroundings warped, their homes literally merging with a foreign, ancient space. Standing where a wall or a window once was, a massive, monolithic door carved in the likeness of an open book waited for them.

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From the threshold of the door, a physical sensation would radiate outward. It wasn't just a sound; it was a rhythmic, pulsing whisper that spoke directly to their deepest frustrations. It promised the exact secrets they had been clawing for, the missing pieces of their craft, the possible key to the Sixth Tier, all waiting just beyond the wood and stone.

All they had to do was reach out.

The moment a hand brushed against the surface, the truth of the domain would flood the seeker's mind. They would instantly know whose threshold they stood upon: The All-Knowing Oracle.

For those well-versed in the history of curses and their devastating costs, this realization brought a sudden, chilling pause. They knew this wasn't the Oracle's first foray into the mortal realm. Many of the legends currently standing at the peak of the Fifth Tier had, at some point in their ascent, made a dark bargain at this very door.

Mages and the "super-abled" individuals of the world were no fools. They understood the fundamental law of the universe: nothing is free. Knowledge of this magnitude required a tithe, a sacrifice of something important, sanity, or service.

While some drew back in terror, paralyzed by the potential cost, those with hearts of iron or those whose desperation had finally outweighed their fear would take a breath and heave the heavy pages of the door open.

Beyond the threshold lay a scholar's paradise, a realm of pure, quiet focus. The library of Osi did not merely contain shelves; it was an architecture of infinity. Stretching into a golden, shadowed distance, the sheer scale of the archives made even the most powerful mages feel small. Yet, that insignificance was quickly replaced by a trembling expectation: the realization that here, knowledge was the raw ore that could be refined into absolute power.

The Oracle's most frequent "customers" were the powerhouses of the Fifth Tier. Stuck at the final hurdle before the legendary Sixth, these masters found something unexpected within the library. The Oracle did not just provide secrets; he shared the living theories and experimental breakthroughs of other Fifth Tier seekers.

In this way, the library acted as a silent crossroads. Without ever meeting face-to-face, the world's greatest minds were in constant contact, glimpsing the notes and failures of their rivals. Every failed ritual recorded and every half-finished equation left behind by a seeker became a stepping stone for the next.

For the Oracle, this influx of seekers was a long-awaited feast. To him, the world had felt stagnant for centuries, a pond with no ripples. The spark of genuine discovery had seemingly died out until now.

His motivation was simple, the more the world learns, the more he knows. Every time a mortal pushed the boundaries of magic or uncovered a hidden law of physics, those truths were instantly transcribed into his shelves. As the world's collective intellect grew, so did the Oracle's own power.

However, even an arch-curse has his limits. While the Oracle's library was near-infinite, he found his understanding of the Sixth Tier to be... incomplete.

He had already synthesized multiple certain paths to reach that god-like stage from what he had gathered from everyone. He possessed formulas and the requirements with a promising percentage of working, but there was a catch. Every path he had mapped was paved with extreme, existential danger if one failed.

Despite the wealth of information at his fingertips, the Oracle was far from benevolent. At his core, the very essence of his curse was rooted in monopoly. He didn't just want to know everything; he wanted to

be the only one who knew. To him, sharing the secrets of the Sixth Tier he had felt like giving away pieces of his own soul, a thought that sparked a deep, possessive resentment.

He certainly had the means to offer his theories on the Sixth Tier to the mortal seekers, perhaps one of them would even succeed, transcending their limits to become a god-like entity. In the grand scheme of the world, that would be a monumental achievement.

But the Oracle hated the idea. To him, that mortal's success had nothing to do with him. If they used his notes to climb higher, they offered nothing in turn to him. He had no interest in being a footnote in someone else's legend.

Furthermore, his vast research had revealed a frustrating truth: the transition to the Sixth Tier was not a universal formula. It was a chaotic, deeply personal evolution. What served as a breakthrough for a Flame Mage would be a death sentence for a Necromancer. Every individual's soul required a different catalyst, and a specific alignment of will.

The paths were too fractured, too specific. And this is where the Oracle felt his own incompleteness most sharply.

He knew there was a gap in his archives and knowledge. Somewhere in the vast mechanics of the cosmos, there had to be a General Method, a foundational law that guided all Fifth Tier beings toward the threshold.

The Oracle theorized that there was a universal "first step" that everyone must take together. Only after placing their foot on that shared step would their paths begin to diverge into the unique, personal choices that defined the Sixth Tier.

Until he found that "General Method," the Oracle felt like he was holding a thousand different keys without knowing where the master lock was hidden. He didn't just want to help mortals reach the Sixth Tier; he wanted every successful transition experience to feedback to him.

The Oracle was a hoarder, but he wasn't a fool. He knew that knowledge was most potent when it was active. If he possessed the General Method, he would share it as every mortal who used that shared step to reach for the Sixth Tier would become a living experiment, their struggles and ultimate ascensions feeding back into the library. For the Oracle, that collective data was his own personal path to ascension.

But he was missing the key.

Ikenga watched in all as he already possessed the answer. Before his return to this realm, Ikenga had made a specific, calculated request to Zarvok. He had secured the fundamental laws of the General Method, the universal "first step" that the cosmos demanded of all Fifth Tier beings.

Now, Ikenga prepared to hand this knowledge to the Oracle. He knew the arch-curse's would do the rest of the work for him.

Ikenga's motives were far broader than the Oracle's ego. He was looking at the entire world as a board, and currently, the pieces were uneven. By releasing the General Method through the Oracle's library, he was effectively "leveling the board."

He needed the playing field to be fair for the coming conflict. If both the Nwadieube and Osita kingdoms had access to the same fundamental secrets, it would trigger a desperate race to produce Sixth Tier powerhouses.

Ikenga didn't want a one-sided slaughter; he wanted a balanced war where every side had a chance to grasp ultimate power.

While Murmur's recent machinations happened to align with his own designs for this world, Ikenga had no intention of making the path easy for the demon. He certainly wasn't about to let the entity have the last laugh.

Before departing his realm to convene with his awakening siblings, Ikenga performed one final act: he reached out and summoned the Oracle.

In the silent depths of his vast library, the Oracle felt the familiar, vast tug of divine will. Reality blurred, pulling him from his sanctuary and depositing him in the presence of his maker. The sight triggered a flicker of old memory, reminding him of the days when he was merely an intelligent cursed spirit, trembling in the wilderness.

Now, however, things were different. The Oracle had evolved into an Arch Curse, a pinnacle of malevolent intellect. He no longer found himself cowering in the dirt or straining his neck to look up. Instead, he was seated comfortably, eye-to-eye with his creator.

Ikenga leaned back, his expression warm. He gazed at the Oracle with the genuine, pride of an artist admiring his finest masterpiece.

"You have been working hard, Oracle," Ikenga said, as he studied the shifty, old looking man before him.

A ripple of darkness shifted at Ikenga's feet, and from it Phantom manifested. He loomed over the Oracle, a jagged, mocking grin carving through his changing features. "So hard," Phantom sneered, "that he saw fit to ignore your return."

The Oracle's eye twitched, a spark of indignation flickering beneath his weary facade. He began to rise, his mouth opening to retort, but Ikenga cut him off with a laugh.

"Ease your tongue, Phantom. There is no need for such harshness." Ikenga waved a hand dismissively. "Oracle wasn't the only one distracted by the winds of change. Many of your siblings are preoccupied, even Siren, who seems rather fond of hiding from me lately."

The Oracle's composure stiffened. He bowed his head low, his voice tight with practiced deference. "I held no part in that little wench's schemes, Creator. Her actions were her own, and I have never once sought to offend your design." He looked up, his expression earnest. "My absence was not a slight; I have merely been pursuing a lead, a discovery that demanded every ounce of my attention."

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"Ah, yes. That," Ikenga murmured.

The Oracle's eyes flared, a hunger he couldn't quite mask, and the heavy, chained book bound to his waist began to rattle, a frantic, metallic shivering, as if the artifact itself anticipated the revelation.

Ikenga opened his palm, and the space above it distorted. A single, brittle scrap of aged parchment materialized, pulsing with a faint, abyssal light.

"You've been tearing the realms apart in search of this," Ikenga said, watching the Oracle's gaze lock onto the paper. "This is the method you've been so desperately chasing. The missing key to your ambition."

The Oracle's gaze locked onto the parchment. The world around him, the presence of his creator, the biting taunts of Phantom, everything ceased to exist. His breath hitched as he stared at the document, his voice a mere sliver of sound.

"Is this... for me? Creator?"

Ikenga didn't answer with words. He flicked his wrist, sending the parchment fluttering through the air like a falling leaf. The Oracle didn't reach for it with his hands; he didn't have to. The heavy, iron-chained tome at his hip sensed its master's intent, snapping open of its own volition. The parchment drifted into the void of the book, settling onto a blank, yellowed page before the covers slammed shut with a final, resonant thud.

The moment the seal clicked into place, the Oracle's body shuddered. Knowledge, raw, potent, and old surged through his mind like a wildfire. He began to laugh, a jagged, broken sound that echoed off the surrounding.

"Such ingenuity," he rasped, his eyes swirling with newfound fervor. "To craft a mechanism of this caliber... the sheer brilliance of it is intoxicating."

He seemed to forget where he was entirely, his fingers tracing the cold iron of the book's binding. "This must have originated from a civilization of the sixth tier and that wasn't even at the peak of their evolution."

His eyes widened as he read the secret truth hidden within the text. "World Domination." A cruel, satisfied smile spread across his face. "So, that is the official designation for the sixth tier. A title well-earned, given the absolute dominion it commands."

He continued to mutter, his mind racing through calculations and conquests, completely oblivious to the fact that Ikenga and Phantom were watching him. Phantom looked ready to intervene, his shadow-form bristling with irritation at the Oracle's lack of decorum, but Ikenga merely raised a hand, his expression unreadable.

The pieces clicked into place, and the sheer audacity of it left the Oracle breathless. The sixth tier was never meant to be a measurement of power. It was a language, a universal tongue. Suddenly, the chaotic inconsistencies between different sixth-tier theories he had made perfect sense.

He had always operated under the assumption that the sixth tier was about imposing one's reality onto the world. But the method now revealed the fatal flaw in that logic: if a mage forcibly grafts their law onto reality, the world identifies them as a foreign body. It treats them like a pathogen, eventually mounting an immune response to reject and erase them.

"They are islands," the Oracle whispered, his eyes wide as he processed the cosmic truth. "A fifth-tier on the path to sixth-tier screams their law at the void, but the universe simply drowns them out. They speak a dialect the cosmos refuses to recognize like a very loud 'World Suggestion.'"

He looked down at his chained book, his fingers trembling with the weight of the revelation. It wasn't about the magnitude of the energy one could manifest. It was about the Frequency.

"You don't force the world to change," he murmured, a terrifying clarity dawning on him. "You simply convince the universe that your law is, and has always been, the original law."

The missing piece was finally in his grasp: The Universal Translation.

The General Method was not a blueprint for a bigger engine; it was a broadcast array. By translating one's personal "Law" into the foundational script of the cosmos, one would bypass the universe's resistance entirely.

The moment the silver transcript touched the Oracle's shelves, a ripple spread out. It tore through the fabric of the realms, reaching Keles in her domain. Both she and Ikenga felt the same jolt, a shared premonition that made the air grow heavy.

Their child was coming.

And because of the nature of its parents, the child's arrival wouldn't be silent. It would be a "Flood of Breakthroughs." The infant's first breath would act as a massive surge of conceptual energy, pushing those who held the Universal Translation over the edge. The world was about to be populated by sixth-tier beings.

The Oracle was still lost in a feverish frenzy, his mind already calculating a thousand ways to distribute the new script, when a heavy hand clamped onto his shoulder. The grip was like iron, grounding him instantly.

Ikenga's presence had turned cold. The intellectual curiosity was gone, replaced by the grim focus of a father.

"You know what to do," Ikenga commanded.

Before the Oracle could even ask a question, Ikenga vanished, taking Phantom with him in a blur of shadow. The Oracle now stood alone in the silence of his infinite library, feeling a strange, lingering dread. "What caused such a sudden change in the Creator?" he whispered to the empty aisles. But only the rustle of turning pages answered him.

Ikenga materialized in the heart of the Underworld at its center sat Keles. She was looking down, her hands resting gently on the curve of her belly.

The veil she wore obscured her features, making her seem like a statue of mourning, but Ikenga didn't wait for her to speak. He stepped forward and lifted the gossamer fabric.

He found her smiling.

She was softly massaging her stomach, her eyes filled with a beautiful light. Seeing that expression brought a wave of relief so sharp it nearly made Ikenga stumble. He had been haunted by the premonition, haunted by the fear that his hunger to "level the board" and release the Sixth Tier secrets had accidentally forced the birth before the child was ready.

Keles's calmness was like a steadying anchor for Ikenga. The frantic worry that had gripped him began to dissolve.

"He says he is eager to see our world," Keles said.

Ikenga couldn't help but chuckle, though the sound was tinged with a bit of bittersweet irony. He looked at the curve of her belly, thinking of the "World Domination" scripts he had just unleashed and the war that was brewing. "The world might look very different by the time you are born, my son. I fear you may not get to see its true, untouched beauty."

Suddenly, a voice resonated directly within Ikenga's consciousness. It was youthful, yet it carried an ancient weight.

"I know, Father. But the world to come holds great stories and an end I look forward to seeing."

Ikenga's eyes widened, and he looked up at Keles in shock. "I heard him. I actually heard him." His voice was no longer that of a cold strategist; it was filled with a raw, unfiltered joy.

Keles reached out, her cool palm cupping his chin with a tender familiarity. "His voice grows clearer as the day approaches. It is no surprise that he can finally speak to you directly."

The connection remained open, but the tone of the child's voice shifted. The previous wisdom was replaced by a distinctly tired, almost grumpy yawn.

"I have been wanting to say this for some time now, Father," the childly voice said, sounding thoroughly unimpressed. "No more 'night activities' until Mother has given birth to me."

A final, heavy yawn echoed through Ikenga's mind, followed by the distinct sensation of someone tucking themselves back into a deep slumber. Silence returned to the Underworld.

Ikenga and Keles remained frozen, staring at one another in the dim light of the realm of the dead. The great architect of the world and the Queen of the Underworld were, for the first time in years, completely speechless.

"Did I... did I hear him correctly?" Ikenga finally managed to ask, his face a mask of disbelief.

In response to their son's blunt request, Keles didn't say a word. She simply gave Ikenga a firm push, her veil falling back into place like a shutter closing. The air rippled as a portal tore open before her, and she stepped through it with a dignified grace that ignored the awkwardness entirely.

Left alone in the echoing silence of the room, Ikenga let out a long, frustrated sigh. "Damn it," he muttered to the shadows. "I knew we should have stopped when Keles first told me he was speaking to her."

Dragging his hand over his face, Ikenga composed himself. He shook off the lingering shame and stepped through the portal, leaving the Underworld behind for the high seat of Nana's Realm.

Ikenga was the last to arrive. His siblings were already positioned on their massive thrones, their auras filling Nana's realm with the weight of fundamental laws.