

Gods Daily 146

Chapter 146: The Struggle for Interests

Ross issued his order to the senior officer directly. "Withdraw our spies from the Governor's Mansion. Redirect every resource we have to watching the people they are sending out. The moment the exact location of the vein is confirmed, I want to be the first to know."

The senior officer bowed low, understanding without further explanation. "By your command."

"Wait." Ross halted him with a single word. His fingers tapped lightly against the armrest of his throne, a deliberate rhythm that made the silence grow heavier. "Once the location is confirmed, send the news to the Violet Rose Institute, the Monden Shrine, and the Muwen Mountain Fortress."

The officer froze, confusion flashing across his eyes. But obedience was carved into his bones, and he quickly answered, "Yes, my lord."

The scar-faced elder leaned forward, his ruined cheek twisting as he asked, "The master intends to muddy the waters completely?"

A cold smile touched Ross's lips. "For the Order to seize even a portion of this feast, we cannot ignore the mountain that stands before us—Skypeak Tower."

"Henry's choice to place himself under Grand Duke Sentino means the duke will intervene, and with him will come the shadow of Skypeak Tower."

That ancient power, enduring for ten thousand years, hidden above the clouds, was one of the unseen hands that stirred the empire's storms. Its influence spread like a web, covering half the empire's territories.

The Morningstar Order was strong, but against Skypeak Tower, it was still powerless—just as it had once been when confronted by the holy brilliance of the Ordon Theocracy.

Only by pulling in the Violet Rose Institute, the Monden Shrine, and the Muwen Mountain Fortress—those local snakes entrenched in the Venus Mountains—could the Order stand against the dragon and carve out its share.

To devour it alone? A foolish dream.

Even Skypeak Tower itself would not be allowed to succeed so easily.

"According to this plan, the share of profit we can seize will be far smaller." A white-browed elder frowned deeply, his face drawn with worry.

"Excessive greed is the fastest path to ruin," Ross said sharply, his voice brooking no dissent. "From this vein, the Morningstar Order will take only one-tenth."

The hall fell into silence. The elders exchanged glances in the dim light, but in the end, no one voiced an objection.

The cake was too large, too tempting. Securing even a tenth safely would be a rich return.

To attempt to swallow it whole would only bring the wolves down on them. Skypeak Tower would never permit it, and the other factions would not remain idle.

Shared profit was the only safe path. Anyone who tried to overturn the balance would find every other claimant at their throat.

And with the Firstfall Festival approaching, no one wished to light the fire of total war. Even if war broke out, the tangled terrain of the Venus Mountains and the competing interests of the factions there would bleed Skypeak Tower heavily.

Contentment would allow them to trade the smallest risk for the most secure reward.

The white-browed elder let out a slow breath. "Then so be it. A tenth will suffice. With such a resource, the revival of the Order will be within reach."

The scarred elder's thin fingers traced unconsciously over the old wound on his cheek, that mark of humiliation and hatred. "The debts of ten thousand years past... it is time we settled them with the descendants of the Veynar family."

Ross's eyes pierced the gloom of the great hall, as if seeing both the distant past and the turbulent future. In their cold gleam flickered calculations and ambition.

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Grand Duke Sentino's mansion rose over White Mountain Castle, the jewel of the empire's southwest.

The land here was fertile, its cities prosperous, its people abundant with talent.

Grand Duke Sentino, one of the five most exalted dukes of foreign blood, governed one hundred and forty-three cities. Two million soldiers answered his call.

The famed Hundred-Beast Legion, the Bloodaxe Legion, and the White Mountain host formed the heart of his armies, standing vigil across the border from the Pood Empire, divided only by the White Mountain Gorge.

That gorge was the empire's weakness in the southwest. Portions of it were already seized by the Pood Empire, who eyed the rest hungrily. For this reason, the empire garrisoned vast forces here, making the gorge a shield for the realm.

On a high viewing platform within the duke's mansion, one that overlooked half the city and the far mountain ranges, Sentino stood with hands clasped behind his back. His face was calm as water as he listened to a messenger from Revor Province deliver his secret report.

On the stone chair beside him sat a woman of extraordinary grace and beauty. She seemed surrounded by the rhythm of nature itself, every movement as harmonious as a painted scene. Her presence

smoothed the mind of any who looked upon her, pulling their spirits toward stillness. She remained silent, unmoved by the petty currents of mortal politics.

For a long time, Sentino said nothing. At last, his deep voice broke the air. "Return to Governor Henry. Tell him I have seen his loyalty and his efficiency. Soon I will dispatch capable men to Revor to help him stabilize the situation. His service I will remember. The southwest of the empire never forgets the loyal."

The messenger bent nearly double, words spilling in a fervent oath. "Revor Province will give its life and soul to serve the Grand Duke's great cause!"

He bowed again and withdrew with haste.

When the chamber was empty again, Sentino turned toward the elegant woman. A smile of quiet triumph crossed his lips. "If this vein falls into my hands, the White Mountain legions will be as a tiger with wings. The foundations of the southwest will be unshakable. And in the future... the crown will not be beyond reach."

Every hunter was waiting for the horn of the Firstfall Festival before they struck. Sentino could wait as well, smothering his restlessness with patience. The chessboard of the empire was chaotic, pieces scattered across every corner, too many hands moving at once. Until the other dukes revealed their play, Sentino needed to remain cautious.

Yet these words were not only for himself. They were spoken for the benefit of his guest—this woman from Skypeak Tower.

Her lips curved faintly, her smile elegant. "The duke intends... to claim this gift for himself?"

"To seize it alone would invite the wolves." Sentino shook his head, eyes gleaming with calculation. "We will take sixty percent. The other forty can be offered as a courtesy to the 'neighbors' of the Venus Mountains. That will buy us peace and convenience."

Who would not wish to devour the whole prize? But the Venus Mountains were no private garden. The factions entrenched there were too deeply rooted. To stabilize them with a share of the spoils was the only wise path.

At such a critical time, to make open enemies of the local forces would be to destroy his own foundations.

And that sixty percent? It could only be claimed because of the dread authority of Skypeak Tower, which lent weight to his demand.

For Sentino's vision, sixty percent was more than enough.

The elegant woman inclined her head. Her voice was calm, yet carried pressure that could not be ignored. "Sixty percent... Skypeak Tower will have it."

"I have never doubted the strength of Skypeak Tower," Sentino said with solemn respect. His eyes narrowed as he turned to gaze beyond the pavilion at the roiling seas of cloud.

"Only, I wonder... will Ross, the master of the Morningstar Order, know how to read the times?"

He paused, then shifted the topic. "And from Eryndor City comes other news. This Aurek, the emperor, may not be the weakling we thought. It is said his banners now command strange warriors, numbers as high as six or seven thousand, each equal in might to Hero Rank."

His brows knit in doubt. "Who is moving the pieces behind him? What power would gamble such priceless strength on a sovereign everyone believed was finished?"

Before, Aurek could be dismissed as irrelevant. But now six or seven thousand warriors of Hero Rank strength was enough to tilt the balance of the board.

How could the imperial family, weakened and suppressed for ten thousand years, conjure such an army from nothing?

The mystery of their origin made them dangerous.

The woman's eyes glimmered with quiet amusement. She lifted a crystal glass and took a slow sip of liquid like molten moonlight. "It is curious indeed. Who would place such treasures on what seems a losing bet? Whoever plays this hand has designs that reach far."

Her gaze lingered on Sentino. "Does the Grand Duke intend to probe them first?"

"No." Sentino's voice was resolute. "The other dukes remain silent, waiting. If I strike first, it is my strength that will be consumed, my prestige that will be diminished, and Skypeak Tower's majesty that will be tarnished."