

Guardian gods 441

Chapter 441:

Speaking of the child, Xerosis looked around and found herself alone. Panic set in, never in her long life as a demigod has she gone through the feelings she was going through now.

Xerosis looked around frantically, her sharp eyes scanning the vibrant landscape of the spirit realm, but the child was nowhere to be seen. A cold weight settled in her chest, unfamiliar and disorienting. Panic. She had faced death, gods, and monsters without fear, yet this—this was something new.

Never in her long existence as a demigod had she been truly alone. There had always been someone at her side: her mother, her brother, or, in their absence, Crepuscular. But now, in this vast and beautiful realm, she was utterly alone.

Abandonment.

The concept was foreign to her. Even in solitude, she had always been tethered to someone. But now, there was nothing. No guiding voice, no reassuring presence. Just her and the endless, unknowable expanse of the spirit realm.

She clenched her fists, forcing herself to steady her breathing. She could not afford to break here. The words of the child echoed in her mind—her path to ascension was unlike that of her cousins or brother. It was uncertain, perilous. And if she faltered, there would be no second chance.

Closing her eyes, Xerosis inhaled deeply, centering herself before taking a single step forward. Then another. She trekked through the realm, taking in its wonders with cautious reverence. The towering trees whispered in voices too faint to grasp, the elemental treants moved with an ancient grace, and unseen eyes continued to watch her every move.

After what felt like hours, she stumbled upon a small house nestled within the ethereal landscape. It was unassuming in structure, but the air around it pulsed with an unmistakable aura of divinity. Power radiated from its walls, ancient and commanding.

Curiosity stirred within her. Perhaps this place held answers. She turned towards it and began to approach.

Or so she thought.

The more she walked, the farther it seemed. No matter how many steps she took, the house remained at the same unreachable distance, as if space itself refused to allow her closer. Time stretched, or perhaps collapsed entirely. She was unsure how long she had been moving, only that she had not moved at all.

A sigh escaped her lips. This is not where I am meant to be.

Reluctantly, she shifted her gaze past the house and continued walking. This time, she did not choose a direction—she simply moved. The realm, for all its beauty, felt like a shifting maze, guiding her towards something unseen.

Then, without warning, she felt herself squeeze through something.

It was not a doorway, nor a barrier she could see. The very fabric of reality seemed to contract around her, pulling her through a space that should not have existed. A strange pressure enveloped her body, then released her all at once.

She stumbled forward, breath caught in her throat.

And when she looked up, she was somewhere else.

Xerosis stood frozen, her mouth slightly open, an unfamiliar emotion creeping into her heart. Awe.

Before her lay a hoard unlike anything she had ever seen—treasures scattered in chaotic abundance. Mountains of gold, gleaming gemstones, divine relics pulsing with latent power, and artifacts from long-forgotten ages. The sheer opulence of the sight sent a shiver down her spine.

She was entranced.

Her fingers twitched, an unnatural urge welling up within her—an instinct to take. To own.

It was only then that she sensed the presence watching her.

A colossal figure loomed within the shadows, its sickly golden form shifting unnaturally in the dim glow of the treasure piles. Xerosis' breath hitched as her gaze met its cursed, glowing eyes—pools of insatiable hunger and twisted obsession. They flickered wildly, darting from one treasure to the next, yet always returning to her, as if she, too, were something to be possessed.

Then she saw its mouth—not the one on its face, but the grotesque maw embedded in its stomach. Lined with jagged, gold-tinted teeth, it gaped hungrily, a viscous mix of saliva and molten gold dripping from its edges. Each drop hissed as it hit the floor, pooling into molten veins that slithered across the cavernous hoard like living filaments of greed itself.

Xerosis shuddered. Yet, despite the horror before her, she found herself... fascinated.

She didn't notice when her expression began to change, her awe twisting into something darker. Greed. Hunger. Need.

Her hands clenched into fists.

This was not her.

As a demigod, she had never known lack—riches had always been within reach, and hunger was a foreign concept to her, her divine physique sustaining her effortlessly. Yet right now, she felt a gnawing emptiness. A primal, overwhelming desire to consume, to claim everything around her as her own.

Her lips parted slightly. Had she... always been missing something?

The golden leviathan did not speak, yet its presence whispered to her, its aura slithering into the cracks of her mind.

This was her first step.

Unknowingly, by stepping into this place, Xerosis had set foot upon her path to ascension.

And the realm of the Arch-Curse, The Covetous Leviathan, was eager to welcome her.

Xerosis' breath came in shallow gasps. The sensation was strange—unfamiliar yet undeniable. A hollow pit clawed at her stomach, an ache unlike any wound she had ever received. Hunger.

Her fingers twitched again, reaching toward the closest pile of treasure—gleaming golden chalices, sapphire-encrusted daggers, divine relics humming with dormant power. They called to her, their luster promising fulfillment, completion, something she had never known she lacked.

No.

Xerosis clenched her jaw, willing herself to look away. She did not need these things. She was a demigod. She had never wanted for anything.

And yet...

Her hands did not move away.

A voice, deep and resonant, slithered through the cavern like liquid gold.

"You have never wanted, because you have never known what it means to lack."

The leviathan's eyes bore into her, and suddenly, the cavern was gone.

Xerosis gasped as she felt the shift. The air around her changed—thicker, heavier. The warmth of divine energy that always surrounded her was gone.

She was somewhere else.

The first thing she noticed was the cold. A biting, merciless chill that gnawed at her skin, sinking into her bones. She was barefoot, standing on cracked earth, the remnants of an abandoned village surrounding her. Huts, long since burned to husks, loomed in the distance. Ashes swirled in the wind.

Then came the hunger.

A searing, twisting pain coiled in her gut, worse than any wound she had endured. It was an emptiness that clawed at her insides, relentless, maddening.

Xerosis gritted her teeth. She had never felt this before. Never had to fight for sustenance. Never had to wonder where her next meal would come from.

A child's cry pulled her attention.

She turned her head and saw a thin, frail boy, barely clothed, curled in on himself. His lips were cracked, his ribs visible beneath his sickly pale skin. His hollow eyes stared at her—not with fear, but with something far worse.

Resignation.

Xerosis' heart twisted.

"This is the fate of those who have nothing," the voice whispered. "Do you understand now? The hunger, the desperation—when one has nothing, greed is not a sin. It is survival."

The boy's breathing was shallow, his eyes fluttering. She needed to help him. She needed food.

Her gaze darted to the ruins. A single, half-rotten loaf of bread sat among the wreckage. Just enough for one.

She moved to take it—only to stop.

A presence loomed behind her.

She turned.

More figures emerged from the shadows—ragged, hollow-eyed, starving. Men, women, children. All of them looking at the bread in her hands.

Her mind raced. If she gave it to the boy, the others would suffer. If she kept it, he would die.

"Decide," the voice whispered. "What will you do when you, too, have nothing?"

Xerosis clenched the loaf in her trembling hands. The hunger clawed at her throat. She had never been forced to choose. Never had to fight for something so simple.

Her fingers tightened around the bread.

And for the first time in her existence, she understood.

The vision shifted.

Now, she stood in a grand palace, draped in finery, her body strong and healthy once more. Servants lined the halls, bowing as she passed. Trays of exotic fruits and meats were carried before her. She had everything.

Yet, a bitter taste filled her mouth.

She looked down—her fingers adorned with golden rings, yet they felt empty.

Beyond the palace walls, she could hear them—the starving, the desperate.

And inside, she could feel it—the fear of losing what she had gained.

She had climbed out of hunger and into wealth. But was it enough? Would it ever be enough?

"Now, do you see?" The leviathan's voice echoed through her mind. "Hunger and greed are one and the same. One drives the other. Even gods are not immune."

The realization struck her like a thunderclap. This was her trial.

The experience would not end until she truly understood it.

Xerosis gritted her teeth, her divine pride warring with the mortal instincts forced upon her. She refused to lose herself to this hunger—to this greed.

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But even as she fought it, she knew the truth.

She had already changed.

Xerosis clutched her chest, her breath uneven as she staggered back. The golden palace, the starving villagers, the hollow-eyed boy—they all dissolved into the abyss, leaving only darkness and the unbearable weight of her own thoughts.

She had never known need, yet in mere moments, she had felt its crushing grasp. The hunger, the desperation, the gnawing fear of having nothing and the paranoia of losing everything. Even now, though the vision had faded, a part of her still craved.

Her hands trembled.

"How quickly divinity crumbles under the weight of mortal suffering," the voice of the Covetous Leviathan rumbled.

Xerosis snapped her head up, her eyes burning with defiance. The giant loomed over her once more, its sickly golden glow pulsating with an unnatural light.

"You felt it, didn't you?" it continued, its many teeth gleaming. "That terrible need. That overwhelming desire to hoard, to take, to hold onto what was yours. And when you had everything? The fear of losing it was worse than the hunger itself."

Xerosis steadied herself, forcing her mind to clear, to suppress the lingering hunger and greed that clawed at the edges of her soul. "You are mistaken," she said, her voice firm but laced with something she did not want to admit—uncertainty. "I am not ruled by desire."

The Leviathan let out a deep, guttural chuckle, its cursed eyes narrowing. "Not yet."

Then, the world shifted once more.

Xerosis gasped as the dark void around her warped into a battlefield.

Smoke choked the air. The ground was cracked and broken, littered with bodies, some still breathing, others motionless. Warriors clad in ruined armor groaned in agony, their weapons shattered beside them.

And at the center of it all—Xerosis stood victorious.

She felt it before she even realized—the power surging through her veins, the way her body pulsed with unnatural strength, her wounds nonexistent.

At her feet lay the defeated. Not just enemies. Not just warriors. Rulers, scholars, gods.

Her hands tightened around the golden spear in her grasp. The weapon felt right, like it had always belonged to her.

And then, she heard the whispers.

"Take it."

Her gaze shifted to the grand throne before her—a monument of divine power, authority, and eternal control. It was hers for the taking. All of it.

She had fought for this. She had earned this.

She stepped forward.

Then—

Hands grabbed her ankles.

She looked down.

The defeated warriors were reaching for her, their bloodied, desperate hands pulling at her legs, their voices hoarse.

"Don't take it."

"You'll become like him."

"Please, Xerosis—don't—"

Her breath hitched.

She didn't know why, but something about their words sent a sharp fear through her chest.

Like who?

Then, a voice—not the Leviathan's, but something worse, something deep inside her whispered—

"Like the Leviathan. Like the gluttonous kings. Like the tyrants who take until there is nothing left."

Xerosis froze.

For the first time since this ordeal began, the weight in her chest was not just the burden of hunger or greed.

It was the fear of what she could become.

She looked at the throne again, and for the first time, she hesitated.

The vision shattered, and Xerosis was thrown back into the golden cavern of the Leviathan's domain. She fell to one knee, gasping, her body drenched in sweat.

The Leviathan watched her with a knowing grin, its golden drool sizzling against the treasure-covered floor.

"So, now you understand." Xerosis looked up, her hands still shaking.

The hunger, the greed—it wasn't gone.

It would never be gone, but she could still choose and that, more than anything, was what terrified her.

Xerosis remained on one knee, her breath still uneven, but her mind—her mind was no longer clouded. The echoes of hunger and greed still clung to her, whispering, clawing, trying to make a home within her soul. But she did not recoil from them. Not anymore.

She lifted her gaze, meeting the Covetous Leviathan's cursed, golden eyes.

"You ask if I understand." Her voice was steady now, firm. "I do."

The Leviathan let out a deep, guttural chuckle, its hulking form shifting as it loomed over her. "Then tell me, Demigod—do you finally see greed for what it is? A hunger that consumes all? A sickness that festers within the soul? Or do you still fight against what you felt—what you are meant to become?"

Xerosis exhaled slowly, pushing herself to her feet. The weight of what she had experienced still lingered, but she was no longer suffocating beneath it.

"No," she said. "Greed is not a sickness."

The Leviathan's grin faltered, its glowing eyes narrowing.

"Greed is a desire," Xerosis continued. "It is need, it is want, it is the hunger for more. It is what drives the starving child to steal, what pushes the warrior to take up the sword, what fuels the king to conquer and the merchant to trade."

The Leviathan tilted its head slightly, as if waiting for the inevitable concession, the moment she would call it a curse.

But Xerosis did not.

"These emotions, this hunger—they are not evil in themselves. They are not sins to be punished," she said. "They are merely forces, like the wind that can nourish the land or tear it apart in a storm."

The Leviathan's molten saliva hissed against the gold-covered floor. "So, you would let the glutton hoard until his people starve? The tyrant take until his people kneel? Would you allow greed to rule unchecked?"

"No." Xerosis took a step forward.

"Because greed without restraint turns to ruin. Because hunger without control leads to desperation, madness, destruction."

She gestured to the cavern of riches surrounding them.

"Greed is not the sin. Letting it rule you is."

She clenched her fist, feeling the lingering hunger gnawing at her soul, the want that still whispered. And yet—she remained standing.

"That is the difference between the starving child and the gluttonous king. Between ambition and obsession. Between a ruler who leads and a tyrant who takes."

The Leviathan stared. Xerosis met its gaze, her voice unwavering.

"Desire is natural. But surrendering to it? Becoming a slave to it? That is the true curse."

A silence stretched between them.

Then—the Leviathan grinned.

"Hah."

The sound rumbled through the cavern like an avalanche, deep and knowing.

"So, you finally understand." Xerosis said nothing.

The hunger still lingered. The temptation still called.

But she would not be ruled by it.

Xerosis, a nascent deity, had approached her potential ascension with a certain clarity. She envisioned herself as a beacon of justice, a protector of women, a force that would rectify the imbalances of the world. Her understanding, however, was born of idealized concepts, drawn from stories and her own experiences, rather than the brutal, multifaceted reality of divine responsibility.

She had, perhaps, been too focused on the specific, the targeted redress of grievances against women, neglecting the intricate web of cause and effect that permeated existence. Her encounter with the "arch cursed being," a creature steeped in a miasma of ancient suffering, shattered her comfortable assumptions. It was a visceral lesson, a jarring confrontation with the true weight of godhood.

This being, and the others like it, were not merely embodiments of sin; they were living, writhing testaments to the consequences of her narrow vision. Each sin they represented was a facet of justice she had overlooked, a shadow cast by her selective focus.

Xerosis stood amidst the glimmering treasures, her reflection distorted in the warped gold at her feet. The gnawing hunger that had seized her, the overwhelming greed that had whispered to her—it was gone now. Wiped away by recognition.

For so long, she had called herself a force of justice. She had sought balance, retribution. She had granted power to the women who had suffered, allowing them to retaliate, to take back what was stolen from them—even in death.

But as she stared into the cursed, ravenous eyes of the Covetous Leviathan, a deep unease settled within her.

She had been a fool.

She had always thought she understood justice. But had she ever truly questioned its weight?

It was easy to stand for the oppressed when the oppressor was clear. It was easy to wield retribution when the victims all bore the same wounds. But what of those who did not fit into the world she had constructed?

What of justice for those she had overlooked?

Her fingers twitched at her sides. She had seen men wield power and crush others beneath them. She had seen women stripped of agency, betrayed, violated, forgotten. She had fought for them, lifted them, given them the power to strike back. But had she ever considered the other side?

The men wronged by their own kin, by their own rulers. The children cast aside, unseen, because their suffering did not fit within the lines she had drawn. The justice denied simply because it did not belong to those she had chosen to fight for.

Xerosis closed her eyes, feeling the weight of that revelation settle in her chest.

Justice could not be partial.

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To wield true justice, she could not be blinded by her own sense of righteousness. She could not choose only the victims she wanted to avenge.

She opened her eyes and looked up at the Leviathan.

"So, you see now."

Its voice was a deep rumble, rich with amusement, with something almost like satisfaction.

Xerosis exhaled, a slow, steady breath.

"Yes," she said. "I see."

Xerosis turned around looking different than she did when she walked into this realm, as she took a step, her view changed and she was now back on the woods of the spirit world.

Now even more cautious she continued to walk with no direction in mind until a similar sensation came over her.

Xerosis took a step forward, and the sensation gripped her again—that strange, insidious pull of emotion.

She had felt it before. The gnawing hunger. The all-consuming greed. But now, something different took root in her chest.

She exhaled sharply, pressing it down, forcing herself to focus. Suppression had worked before. It would work again.

Her eyes wandered across the space, taking in the endless paintings that adorned the realm. Each one was a window into another's life—a glimpse into a moment, a feeling, a struggle. Some pieces radiated warmth and triumph, filled with the colors of hope and fulfillment. Others were cold, jagged, darkened by the weight of failure, abandonment, and despair.

And then, at the center of it all, stood him.

A massive figure, his back turned, his form hunched over a canvas, lost in his craft. The scent of oil paint and aged parchment filled the air. Every stroke of his brush was meticulous, deliberate, as if he were trying to capture something just beyond his reach.

The Despairing Virtuoso.

Xerosis knew what he was—the Arch-Cursed Being that embodied talent, or the pain of its absence. The curse of yearning for greatness, of being tormented by envy, of watching others soar while being shackled by one's own limitations.

She stepped forward, her gaze drifting back to the paintings as she moved. She couldn't help but be drawn in.

Each canvas whispered to her.

A young warrior staring at a sword he could never lift.

A poet crushed beneath the weight of unwritten words.

A musician with hands too broken to play.

Dreams unfulfilled. Desires turned to anguish. The longing for talent, for recognition, for meaning.

Xerosis slowed her steps, her throat tightening.

For all her strength, for all the certainty she once carried about her own purpose, she had never truly considered this kind of suffering.

Was talent a gift? Or was it a curse?

She clenched her fists.

The Leviathan had forced her to question greed. But now, standing in the Virtuoso's realm, she was forced to confront something deeper.

The suffering of those who longed for greatness but could never grasp it.

And for the first time since stepping onto this path, Xerosis wondered—if she had been born different, if she had been powerless, if she had lacked the gifts granted to her by blood and fate... would she have been one of them?

Would she have despaired? Would she have envied?

Would she have been worthy of justice?

She looked ahead at the giant figure before her, feeling the weight of the question settle in her soul.

And then, she took another step forward.

When she got close to the sitting giant, she looked over his shoulder to see what he was painting.

Xerosis's breath caught in her throat as she gazed upon the painting.

She had steeled herself against the emotions creeping at the edges of her mind, but now, they crashed over her like a wave.

The brushstrokes told a truth so profound, so raw, that for the first time, she could not ignore it.

At the top of the pyramid stood the godlings—her kind. Draped in wealth, adorned in power, untouched by the struggles of those below. Their gazes were indifferent, their hands held treasures beyond measure, their divine auras marking them as those chosen by fate. They did not reach for more because they had no need to.

Just beneath them were the human nobles—their crowns gleamed, their garments fine and pristine. They were not divine, but power had been granted to them by birthright, securing their place above others.

Lower still, the mages and knights. Warriors of skill and intellect, individuals who had forged their own paths to strength, but still confined to a station beneath those born superior.

And at the very base—the common people.

Haggard. Hollow.

Their arms stretched toward the heights above them, toward a place they would never reach.

Some trampled over the weak, stepping upon the bodies of those who could not climb. Desperation and cruelty intertwined.

Others, too broken, too weary, had long since stopped trying.

The weight of it pressed against her chest, suffocating in its enormity.

This was not just a painting.

This was the world.

Xerosis felt something burn in her—something unfamiliar and unwelcome. Was it anger? Frustration? Sorrow?

Or perhaps... guilt?

Had she ever thought of them before? Truly? She had wielded justice, yes. But justice only for those she had chosen to see.

Her gaze flickered back to the godlings at the top.

Her people. Her kin.

And then, for the first time, she asked herself—what did it mean to be born above?

Did it mean she was more deserving?

Or did it mean she had more to answer for?

Her hands trembled as the thoughts took shape. Had she ever given true justice? Or had she only given it to those she deemed worthy?

What of the ones at the bottom? The ones who had no strength to demand justice at all?

She looked to the Despairing Virtuoso, her voice caught between breath and sound.

This was what he painted. This was what he saw and now, she saw it too.

The giant turned towards her "Tell me your story princess, what is your justice towards a world like this" He said as he pointed to the painting.

Xerosis barely had a moment to react.

The giant's words—his challenge—lingered in the air like a heavy fog.

"Tell me your story, princess. What is your justice towards a world like this?"

She parted her lips to speak. To give an answer.

But before she could, the painting twisted. The canvas rippled, warped, and then—collapsed inward.

A great whirlpool of color, ink, and oil ripped itself from the frame, swallowing her whole.

She plunged into the painting.

Into the world it had depicted.

Xerosis hit the ground with a force that rattled her bones. It was real beneath her hands—rough, cold, and cruel.

She stood at the base of the pyramid.

The lowest level. A beggar.

Her once-pristine form was reduced to rags. The divine power that had always hummed in her veins? Gone. She felt small. Weaker than she had ever known.

The air was thick with desperation. Around her, figures pushed, shoved, trampled over one another in their struggle to ascend.

A man grabbed her wrist, wild-eyed with hunger.

"Give me your bread!" he snarled.

Bread?

Xerosis looked down. In her hands, she held a single piece of stale, crumbling bread.

A heartbeat passed. Her first choice.

Would she fight for it? Would she surrender it?

Would she judge him for his desperation, as she once would have?

Did she deserve to judge him at all?

The world demanded her answer.

Xerosis looked at the man before her.

His sunken cheeks, the way his trembling fingers dug into her wrist—he was starving. Desperation burned in his hollow eyes. He had no strength to fight, yet he still reached for the bread in her hands.

Once, she would have judged him instantly.

"A man who steals is unjust."

But here, in the lowest depths of this world—was it truly injustice to want to survive?

She felt the hunger clawing at her own insides, something she had never experienced before. A mortal's hunger. A weakness that gnawed at her body and mind alike.

A choice.

Give, or keep?

If she gave it away, she would suffer. If she kept it, she would deny another.

And above them, the pyramid loomed.

The godlings, nobles, and mages—none of them suffered like this.

Her grip on the bread tightened.

Would this man give to her if their places were reversed?

Would anyone give to her?

The weight of survival pressed down on her, an invisible force dragging her lower. She could feel the despair of this realm creeping in, the same despair that fed the giant painter.

A soft laugh echoed around her. The Despairing Virtuoso watched. Waiting.

This was only the beginning, Xerosis took a slow breath.

She made her choice.

Xerosis exhaled slowly, feeling the warmth of the bread in her hands. The man's sunken eyes never left it, flickering between desperation and silent pleading.

"What is justice in a world like this?" The Despairing Virtuoso's voice echoed in her mind, its question lingering like an unfinished brushstroke.

Justice, in an ideal world, was fairness. It was balance. It was order.

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But the world was not ideal. She felt the hunger gnawing at her own insides, the weakness that made her limbs feel heavy, her mind slow. Mortals could not afford fairness. They lived by necessity, not ideals.

A bitter thought struck her "Even if I give, this man will hunger again tomorrow."

It was never-ending. Her mind warred against itself, but her body moved first.

She tore the bread in half and placed a piece in his trembling hands.

Not everything had to be absolute. Not every choice had to be one or the other.

The man blinked at the bread in shock before shoving it into his mouth, devouring it like a starving beast.

Xerosis watched him, the hunger still twisting inside her, the unfairness of it all pressing down on her chest.

But she had made her choice and for now—that was enough.

Behind her, the Despairing Virtuoso smiled. The painting began to shift once more.

The world around her rippled like wet paint, colors bleeding and reforming as the scene changed. Xerosis felt herself being lifted, as if pulled by an unseen force. She was no longer in the starving city—she was within the painting itself.

A grand hall unfolded before her, gilded and towering, with chandeliers casting golden light over a lavish feast. Nobles and scholars, adorned in silks and jewels, laughed and dined, their hands adorned with rings of power, their tables overflowing with food untouched by hunger.

Xerosis stood among them, her own attire changed—a regal gown woven with celestial thread, her divine blood recognized and honored in this world.

At the head of the table sat a woman with piercing silver eyes, draped in flowing robes that shimmered like the sky at dusk.

"You are one of us," the woman spoke, lifting a goblet of deep crimson wine. "Why trouble yourself with the struggles of those below?"

Xerosis' throat was dry. The scent of roasted meats and spiced wines wrapped around her, tempting, suffocating.

This was comfort. This was power.

And yet...She turned her gaze downward. Through the grand marble floor, she could still see them.

The starving, the struggling, the ones stepping over others just to reach where she stood.

Their world, their pain, was merely a painting beneath their feet. Her fingers curled around the goblet.

Another choice. Would she drink, accept the warmth of privilege, stand at the top and call it "just"?

Or would she tip the goblet over, stain the table, shatter the illusion of fairness that the powerful clung to?

She exhaled. This world—this painting—had given her the answer.

Xerosis let go of the goblet.

It slipped from her fingers, crashing onto the floor, red wine splattering like blood upon the marble.

The room gasped. The woman's silver eyes narrowed. "You would throw away what was given to you?"

Xerosis met her gaze, her voice steady "It was never given to me. It was taken from them."

The world shuddered. The feast, the nobles, the grand hall—all of it distorted, unraveling like torn canvas.

She was falling again. The Despairing Virtuoso's voice whispered in her ears, this time filled with something other than despair.

"Then paint a better world."

Darkness swallowed her whole.

Xerosis awoke in a new world, the remnants of the unraveling painting still clinging to the edges of her mind.

This place was hers.

A world she would shape with her own hands.

She took a step forward and the ground beneath her responded, shifting, forming. The cracked earth smoothed into fertile soil. A city rose in the distance, its towers reaching toward the sky. Roads wove through the land like veins, leading to villages where people gathered, speaking in hopeful tones.

Xerosis had set one rule upon this world:

"All shall have equal chance."

No one would be born into greatness, nor into suffering. No one would be lesser or greater by fate's design. The concept of birthright and inheritance was erased—all must earn their place through effort, through merit.

And for a time, it worked.

Scholars and farmers stood side by side, their worth judged not by status but by what they contributed. Soldiers were not chosen by bloodlines, but by strength and skill. The powerful could not hoard wealth, and the weak were not left to rot.

A world of fairness. A world where justice was not an illusion.

Or so she thought. It started with a child.

A boy, frail and weak, born from parents who had tried and failed to rise in this world. His mother had once been a weaver, his father a laborer. They had no legacy to pass down, no advantage to give him.

Though he worked tirelessly, he was always behind. His hands shook too much for the sword, his mind grasped too slowly for books. In a world that only rewarded merit, he had none.

No one oppressed him. No one harmed him.

Yet he suffered all the same.

"Why?" he asked, staring at Xerosis with wide, hollow eyes. "Why was I born like this?"

She had no answer.

The second sign came in the form of a merchant.

He had once been a beggar, rising through clever deals and hard labor. He followed all the rules, never cheated, never stole. His wealth was built from nothing, a testament to the fairness of this world.

Yet people resented him.

Whispers grew into murmurs, murmurs into accusations.

"How is this different from the nobles of old?" they cried. "He has more than the rest of us! Is this justice?"

Xerosis tried to reason with them "He earned it. He did not take it from you."

But fairness was not enough. Envy rotted fairness into perceived injustice.

The merchant's house burned that night.

And the third sign—the one that shattered her belief entirely—came from a trial.

Two men stood before her. One was a murderer, the other was a thief.

The law was clear—a life for a life, and the thief must return what was stolen.

But the murderer had killed to protect his family.

And the thief had stolen to feed his dying child.

If she followed justice, both would suffer.

If she showed mercy, was it still justice?

Would the next murderer also claim righteousness? Would the next thief also be a desperate soul?

Xerosis hesitated.

And in that hesitation, she understood.

There was no such thing as fairness.

There was no perfect balance between justice and mercy.

No law could account for every soul's burden, no rule could ever be truly fair to all.

Justice was not an absolute truth.

It was a story people told themselves, a dream they clung to because the world without it was unbearable.

And she had tried to turn a dream into reality.

Her world began to crumble.

Not because of war. Not because of violence.

But because it was a lie.

People abandoned her laws. Some clung to their pain, unwilling to believe that fairness was possible. Others twisted fairness into something else, seeking revenge in the name of justice.

And those who truly followed her vision were the first to fall.

The boy who worked hard but had nothing.

The merchant who was hated for his success.

The mother who stole to keep her child alive.

Xerosis stood at the center of it all, watching her creation die.

She clenched her fists.

Her heart ached—not with anger, but with grief.

She had believed justice was an answer.

But now, she saw that it was only a question.

And she had not yet found the truth.

As the last remnants of her world faded into dust, Xerosis closed her eyes.

The voice of the Despairing Virtuoso echoed in her mind.

"And what will you paint next?"

When she opened them again, she was falling once more.

Xerosis fell.

She did not scream, did not struggle. The ruins of her world drifted past her like falling petals, each fragment carrying the weight of her failure. She had tried. But in the end, justice had proven fragile, a dream too delicate to survive reality.

She landed—not with a crash, but with a quiet step.

The world she found herself in was a void. No sky, no earth, just an endless abyss of grey mist. The only thing that existed was a mirror, standing before her.

And in the mirror, she saw herself.

But not as she was now.

The reflection showed a version of her that never faltered, never failed. A demigoddess of justice, pure and unyielding, blindfolded like the statues mortals carved in reverence of the law.

This reflection did not hesitate, this reflection did not question. This reflection did not suffer.

Xerosis stared at it. And then, it spoke.

"Why do you waver?"

She opened her mouth, but no words came.

"Justice is not meant to feel. Justice is meant to act."

The voice of her reflection was not cruel, not warm. It was absolute.

It continued: "You saw too much. You felt too much. That is why your justice failed."

The void around her shifted. A thousand voices whispered, crying out for fairness, for vengeance, for mercy. Conflicting. Contradicting. The weight of it crushed her mind, splintering into echoes of every unjust moment she had witnessed.

She saw the boy, the merchant, the thief, the murderer.

Chapter 445:

She saw injustice, endless and boundless and she saw herself, frozen in indecision, unable to move forward.

Her sight had betrayed her. If she could not see, she would not waver.

If she could not see, she would not hesitate. She raised her hands to her eyes.

The mirror shattered, Pain tore through her, sharp and merciless.

Blood ran down her face like molten gold, divine and damning. Yet as the world burned red behind her eyelids, clarity came.

"You do not need to see."

"You only need to judge."

The whispers fell silent. The weight pressing on her heart lightened, not because the burden had vanished, but because she had chosen to carry it differently.

The voices would not sway her anymore.

She would no longer be paralyzed by the sight of a suffering world.

Justice would move forward, even if she could no longer see the path it walked.

And with that, she took her first step as something new.

Xerosis stepped out of the painting.

Her bare feet touched the cold wooden floor of the studio, yet she did not hesitate. Blood streamed down her cheeks, twin rivers of molten gold staining her pale skin. Where once her piercing gaze had carried the weight of her judgment, there was now only emptiness.

Yet her face was calm.

Serene.

The room was silent save for the rhythmic scratching of the Virtuoso's brush against the canvas. The giant, still seated before his painting, looked at her with something akin to amusement... or respect. His many eyes, scattered across his form, blinked slowly, drinking in the sight of the newly blind goddess.

And then he smiled.

"Tell me, young goddess. What do you see now?"

Xerosis did not answer immediately.

She turned her head, though her eyes no longer served her. But in blindness, new sensations filled the void.

She could feel the weight of the studio's paintings—not with sight, but with understanding. Each brushstroke carried something deeper than color: emotions woven into the very fabric of the world. Despair. Envy. Hope. These feelings whispered to her now, no longer drowned out by the distractions of vision.

She could hear the slow, deliberate heartbeat of the Virtuoso. The quiet hum of the cursed realm around her. The echoes of all those who had once stood where she now stood.

Xerosis breathed in, feeling the truth settle into her bones.

And then, she answered.

"I see the world as it is."

The Virtuoso chuckled, but there was no mockery in it.

"And what does that mean?" he asked, dipping his brush into the ink, poised to continue his endless painting.

Xerosis raised her hand, as if to gesture at the canvas she could no longer see.

"Before, I sought justice through sight—through observation. I thought fairness was something I could grasp, something I could shape with my own hands. But that was a lie.

"Justice is not about what I see. It is not about what I believe to be right."

She turned toward him fully, though she did not need to see to feel the weight of his attention.

"It is about what is needed."

The brush in the Virtuoso's hand froze.

A ripple ran through the painting.

The figures within the pyramid—the godlings, the nobles, the knights, the commoners—shifted. The desperate hands reaching for power trembled, as if caught in the realization of something profound. Something beyond despair.

The Virtuoso watched with fascination, his many eyes gleaming with something almost unreadable.

"Hah," he exhaled, a quiet breath of laughter. He placed the brush down, steepling his massive fingers together. "You understand, then. That there was never such a thing as true fairness. That justice will always be flawed."

Xerosis nodded.

"Yes. But even if it is flawed, it must still exist."

The studio creaked, the air around them shifting.

Something had changed.

The Virtuoso leaned back, regarding her with the weariness of an artist who had painted a thousand tragedies and a thousand dreams, only to see them crumble.

"Then, tell me, young goddess—" he gestured at the painting once more, where the pyramid still loomed, its figures forever struggling to climb, forever falling, forever reaching.

"What will you do with this broken world?"

Xerosis did not hesitate.

She lifted her bloodstained hands, fingers brushing against the ruined canvas.

And she tore it apart. With that her view once again changed, Only this time she was blind and could not see but Xerosis noticed her view of the world as changed, what her eyes barely surfaced before as beautiful now showed itself even more clearly.

She is now blind but she can see much clearer than everyone. Xerosis continued on her path as once again a similar sensation took over her and she was now in the realm of another cursed being "The Tyrannical Juggernaut"

What her eyes once painted as grand and majestic—a world of beauty, order, and purpose—had always been an illusion. Now, stripped of sight, she could perceive the raw, unfiltered truth beneath it all. No distractions. No deceptions.

And here, in the presence of the Tyrannical Juggernaut, she saw a world governed not by fairness, not by justice, but by an endless cycle of violence, domination, and unyielding ambition.

The air was thick with the scent of iron and blood. Clash.

Roar.

Swords cleaved through flesh. Axes split bone. Yet none of them truly died.

Xerosis listened—no, felt—the battle around her. The warriors fell, only to rise again. Wounds knitted together. Severed limbs reattached. They roared in triumph, in exhilaration, in the unyielding pursuit of strength.

A world where only the powerful ruled.

At the heart of the battlefield sat the Tyrannical Juggernaut, a giant with chains wrapped around his arms and torso, melding into his flesh. They became part of his armor, dark and twisted, reinforcing his already formidable physique. Crown of thorns on his head creating a circlet of sharp, metallic spikes around his head.

Its massive throne, carved from weapons and bones, overlooked the eternal struggle. It did not fight—it did not need to.

Its mere presence commanded battle. It watched with interest as warriors fought, lost, and rose again, their hunger for strength never ceasing.

But when Xerosis approached, blind yet unwavering, the giant turned its gaze toward her.

A presence like a thunderclap.

A voice like a war drum.

"You have no eyes, and yet you walk into my domain with certainty. Tell me, little goddess—" The Juggernaut leaned forward, its thorn crown reflecting the carnage of its world.

"Do you understand now?"

Xerosis remained still. The sounds of war echoed in her bones, but she did not flinch.

"I understand." The Juggernaut chuckled, a sound like shifting mountains "Then tell me—what is justice to the strong?"

The battle raged on. The warriors fought, tore each other apart, laughed as they rose again.

Xerosis could hear the truth in their cries. There was no justice in this place, only power.

Xerosis did not answer immediately.

She stood amidst the never-ending battle, blind, listening to the clash of steel and the cries of warriors. The air reeked of blood and sweat, thick with the heat of bodies colliding, of power endlessly sought and fought for.

There was no justice here. The Tyrannical Juggernaut leaned forward, armored fingers tapping against the armrest of its throne.

"You hesitate," it mused, its voice a low rumble that sent tremors through the earth. "Do you fear the answer?"

Xerosis did not fear. She understood now.

Justice belonged only to those strong enough to enforce it.

What use was fairness to the weak? What meaning did morality have in a world where power ruled all?

The blind goddess clenched her fists, she had walked this path to find an answer. To understand what justice truly meant.

And here, before the Juggernaut, she saw a truth she had not wished to face.

Justice could never be separated from strength.

Without power, there was no fairness. No righteousness. Only the whims of those strong enough to dictate it.

"I see now," she finally said. Her voice was calm, but something burned beneath it. Resolve.

The Juggernaut tilted its head. "Then tell me—what will you do with this truth?"

Xerosis breathed in, then she stepped forward. The battlefield shifted and the warriors turned their eyes to her.

Something in her presence—something unseen, something felt—commanded them.

For the first time, they hesitated. The Juggernaut let out a slow, thundering chuckle. "Ah... you would challenge me?"

It rose from its throne, and the battlefield trembled.

The warriors, once lost in their endless struggle, now watched something greater.

A new battle was about to begin, the blind demigoddess against the Tyrannical Juggernaut.

And in this fight, she would carve the next answer herself. The Juggernaut stepped forward, and the earth quaked beneath him.

His form, immense and heavy, cast a shadow over Xerosis, his armor etched with the scars of countless wars. Each step he took resonated with power, as if the world itself obeyed his presence.

Xerosis, blind but unshaken, stood her ground.

Chapter 446:

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She raised a hand, her voice an unearthly wail, a dirge of the forsaken. The air shimmered, vibrating with the cries of women long forgotten, their agony woven into her very being.

"Rise."

The battlefield shuddered as the corpses of long-dead warriors stirred. From the bloodied dirt, spectral figures emerged.

Women wronged, women silenced, women betrayed.

Their translucent hands reached toward the armored bodies of men long fallen, dragging them from their restless slumber with the clanging of chains.

Helmets turned. Rusted swords were gripped by skeletal fingers. Eyes, empty and soulless, glowed with unrelenting duty.

The Dead Knights had risen.

They turned their spectral gazes toward the Juggernaut. A hundred warriors. A thousand, perhaps.

But the Juggernaut only laughed "Ah... you bring me entertainment, little goddess."

And then he moved.

His speed defied his massive frame. A blur of destruction.

Before Xerosis could even command them, his fist crashed into her.

Pain.

Her incorporeal body tore apart like mist in a storm.

Xerosis flew backward, crashing into the ground with a force that splintered the battlefield.

The Dead Knights charged.

Blades, rusted but sharp, sang through the air. The Juggernaut laughed.

A war axe appeared in his hand, large enough to cleave a fortress in two, swung once.

A shockwave tore through the dead. Knights shattered like glass. Spirits snuffed out like candlelight.

Their souls did not even have time to scream. Xerosis, staggering to her feet, felt their presence vanish.

One by one. Her banshee wail rose once more, a desperate attempt to call them back, to bind the fallen anew.

But the Juggernaut was already before her, His armored foot slammed into her chest.

Everything went black. This was not a battle, It was annihilation.

The Juggernaut did not kill her.

He did not need to, She was beneath him., His voice reached her, distant, almost amused.

"You are soft, child. You think justice alone is strength. But strength itself is the only truth." Xerosis did not answer.

She could not, the world around her faded and then, like a whisper on the wind—

She fell. Xerosis gasped.

Her body, or what remained of it, lurched back into awareness.

She felt the weight of the battlefield pressing down on her like an unbreakable chain. Her corporeal body flickered, unstable, on the brink of dissipating.

Yet, she rose. Her blind eyes no longer needed sight.

The battlefield was alive in her mind.

The endless clashing of blades, the guttural roars of warriors and The scent of blood and burnt steel.

The Juggernaut sat upon his throne of war, watching.

Mocking.

His golden-red armor gleamed under the fires of battle, his fingers gripping the handle of his war axe, still stained with the essence of her fallen dead.

She had never been so outmatched, but this time, she did not waver.

The dead whispered in her ears, their voices echoing through her being.

They were waiting. Xerosis let out a breath.

Her wail rippled through the air, not in grief, not in rage—but in defiance.

The fallen knights rose again, this time not to fight, but to become her armor.

Their souls wrapped around her, binding to her spectral form.

A gauntlet of vengeance, A cloak of suffering and A helm of silent wrath.

She charged. The Juggernaut smiled. "Good."

He met her head-on. Their clash shook the small realm. His axe descended like the wrath of the heavens.

Her scream met it like the cry of the forsaken. The impact sent shockwaves across the battlefield.

Xerosis weaved through the onslaught, her form twisting like a wraith, dodging the axe that threatened to erase her entirely.

She struck, A hundred spirits surged forward, slamming into the Juggernaut's armor.

The Juggernaut grunted, his movements slowing, if only for a second.

But a second was not enough. His fist caught her mid-dodge.

Xerosis felt herself rupture.

Pain.

The force shattered her spectral armor, the souls bound to her dispersing like ash.

She coughed, her form wavering, her banshee wail turning into a whisper.

As the axe neared, she saw death. Not merely her own, but the vast, intricate tapestry of all deaths. A panorama of extinguished lives unfolded before her spectral eyes, a symphony of suffering that resonated with the deepest chords of her being.

She witnessed the forgotten warriors, their names lost to the sands of time, their valor sacrificed on the altars of kings who cared little for their sacrifice. She saw the women, their lives consumed by the whims of power, their voices silenced, their stories erased. She felt the crushing weight of the strong upon the weak, the relentless march of oppression that had stained the world with endless tears.

She had fought for them, she had been a vessel for their vengeance, but she realized, with a chilling clarity, that she had never truly understood. Justice alone, the righteous fury that had fueled her spectral existence, was not enough. It was a flickering flame in a hurricane, easily extinguished by the relentless winds of reality.

Strength moved the world. Not the strength to oppress, the brute force that crushed the innocent beneath its heel. Not the strength to conquer, the ambition that fueled endless wars and built empires on the bones of the fallen. But the strength to protect, the unwavering resolve to shield the vulnerable, the indomitable will to defend an ideal.

And in that moment, she saw it. The Juggernaut, the architect of her destruction, was not her enemy. He was the embodiment of that strength, a force of nature that had shaped the battlefield, a master of power that understood the true cost of control. He was the answer she had been searching for, the missing piece in the puzzle of her existence.

As the axe, a symbol of absolute power, neared, Xerosis did not resist. She did not flinch, she did not cower. Instead, she reached out her spectral hand, her form wavering, her touch as insubstantial as smoke. And, strangely, the axe did not cleave her in two. It paused, suspended in mid-air, its malevolent glow dimming slightly.

She raised her head, the empty sockets where her eyes had once been now twin voids, dark and fathomless. Her voice, a mere whisper, carried a desperate plea, a fragile hope amidst the carnage. "Will you be my strength?" she asked, her words echoing through the silence that had fallen over the battlefield.

The battlefield was silent.

The endless clash of warriors had ceased.

The Juggernaut stood before Xerosis, his towering form casting a shadow over her, his axe buried deep into the ground. Yet his eyes—fierce and unyielding—held no resentment.

Instead, there was acknowledgment.

A slow, rumbling laugh escaped his lips. "You understand now, don't you?"

Xerosis, battered yet unbroken, lifted her blind gaze. Her voice was steady. "Justice alone is not enough. Strength is the force that shapes the world. Without it, justice is a whisper in the wind."

The Juggernaut grinned, "And what will you do with this truth, young goddess?"

She took a step forward. "I will not wield strength to dominate. I will not let power blind me to justice. I will be both. A force that protects, that punishes, that upholds the balance."

For the first time, the Juggernaut lowered his head.

Then, he took a knee.

"Then take it. My strength, my will. You have earned them, Young goddess"

Xerosis reached out her weak hand to the chin of the juggernaut as she nodded. The space behind changed with Juggernaut dissipating and appearing behind, hovering behind her like a guardian angel.

The realm of Juggernaut broke to pieces with Xerosis finding herself back in Ikenga's realm and not in the spirit realm where she was supposed to be.

Coincidentally she found herself under the root of the big tree with the snake wrapped around it. The trail was heavily affecting Xerosis mentally and physically as soon as he found herself in the comfort of the realm, she fell asleep on the root.

Sitting beside her was the Juggernaut who was looking at the tree or more so another arch curse walking out from the tree.

The all knowing oracle looked at Juggernaut "It seems you have found your anchor to ascension"

Juggernaut let out a deep, rumbling chuckle, his massive arms crossed over his chest. His eyes, no longer wild with the hunger for power, instead watched over Xerosis as she lay resting against the roots of the ancient tree.

"Anchor? Hah." He glanced at Xerosis, her chest rising and falling with slow, exhausted breaths. "More like the one who finally broke my chains."

The All-Knowing Oracle stepped forward, emerging from the shadows of the massive tree. Draped in tattered, flowing robes that seemed to shift with unreadable symbols.

"And yet," the Oracle mused, "she is the one who needed breaking."

Chapter 447:

Juggernaut exhaled, his arms falling to his sides. "She thought justice was enough. That it could stand alone. But justice without strength is a dream... and strength without justice is tyranny. She understands now."

The Oracle tilted its head. "Does she?"

For a long moment, Juggernaut did not answer. His gaze lingered on Xerosis, watching her brow twitch in restless dreams. Even in slumber, the battle had not left her.

"She will."

The Oracle turned its gaze back to the great tree, tracing a hand over its ancient bark. "Then let us see if she has the will to claim it."

The wind stirred. The leaves blew by.

And beneath the roots of the great tree, Xerosis dreamed of the path she was about to take.

Beneath the ancient tree, wrapped in the warmth of the sacred earth, Xerosis drifted into a dream—a dream that felt more like a vision, painted in shades of prophecy and doubt.

She stood once again before the great pyramid, the very one drawn by the Despairing Virtuoso. The layers of power remained the same—the godlings at the peak, the nobles and mages beneath them, and the common folk clawing for even a taste of the power that reigned above them. Yet, something had changed.

At the very top of the pyramid, where once stood the godlings basking in divinity, now stood herself.

Draped in the cold authority of justice, she loomed over the structure, her presence undeniable, but the moment her shadow fell upon it, the world below began to tremble.

The nobles, once secure in their stations, cried out in fear. The warriors and mages, who had once wielded their power with confidence, clutched their weapons and whispered of her tyranny. Even the gods, those who had long ruled the celestial order, turned their gazes upon her with suspicion and doubt.

Her cousin.

Her brother.

Her kin among the divine.

Would they see her as a savior?

Or a threat?

Would they resist her justice, fearing it was but another form of judgment in disguise?

Her breath grew heavy as she gazed at the faces before her. She had dreamed of justice—of a world where the scales balanced for all, where the weak did not suffer under the weight of the strong. Yet, looking at the pyramid before her, she saw the terrifying truth:

Justice did not serve the powerful.

If she were to truly uphold it, she would find herself standing against them.

Would her cousin, the one who welcomed her into godhood, stand beside her?

Would her brother, the one she once trusted, raise his blade against her?

And if the day came when her justice demanded that even the gods be judged—could she pass that judgment without hesitation?

As these thoughts clawed at her mind, the world around her warped.

The pyramid beneath her cracked, splitting down the center. The cries of the people blurred together—some screaming for salvation, others cursing her name. The gods above stared down in judgment, the nobles whispered in fear, the warriors prepared for war.

And in the midst of it all, she stood alone.

Her fingers clenched, her breath ragged.

"Am I to become a tyrant... just as they are?" she whispered, her voice lost in the storm of voices around her.

Then, a deep voice rumbled from behind her.

"Do you think justice is kind?"

Xerosis turned, and there, standing over her like an immovable mountain, was Juggernaut. His massive form cast a shadow over the chaos, his golden-red armor gleaming against the fractured world. His presence was unshaken, his expression unreadable.

"Strength is neither good nor evil," he continued, his voice steady. "Justice is the same. A sword does not choose who it cuts. It simply does."

She looked down at her own hands. Would she wield her justice like a sword?

"This path will set you against the world," Juggernaut warned. "Can you bear that weight, knowing there is no fairness in battle, no peace in judgment? Knowing that even those closest to you will call you unjust?"

Xerosis inhaled sharply.

She had known justice as a concept, a guiding force. But now, standing on the threshold of godhood, she saw its full nature.

Justice was not a promise. It was not peace. It was conflict.

"I do not seek fairness," she finally said, her voice resolute. "I seek justice. And justice does not ask for permission."

Juggernaut studied her for a long moment, then gave a slow nod.

"Then wake, young goddess. Your path begins."

The dream's fading echoes still clung to her thoughts as Xerosis awoke beneath the ancient tree. The great roots cradled her like a sleeping infant, the air thick with the scent of earth and divinity. Yet the weight on her soul had not lightened.

She had seen the future—or at least, a version of it.

Justice did not serve the powerful.

Justice did not serve the weak.

It simply was.

A sharp exhale left her lips as her senses adjusted, but before she could gather herself, a familiar presence emerged from the golden mist before her.

Nana.

The old goddess stood with a knowing gaze, her gentle presence radiating warmth in contrast to the chaos that still churned within Xerosis. For some reason, Xerosis felt a deep, uncontrollable urge—to seek solace, to be held, if only for a moment.

She threw herself into Nana's embrace, trembling as tears of blood streamed from her hollow eyes. Her body shook from exhaustion—not just of the flesh, but of the soul. The weight of justice, the weight of choice, threatened to consume her.

Nana's arms were steady, unwavering, like a mother cradling a child who had wandered too far from home. She ran her fingers through Xerosis' hair, her voice soft yet unbreakable.

"You have put too much pressure on yourself, child," she murmured. "But you will come to understand—your worries are naught once you ascend."

Xerosis, still raw from the battle within her heart, pulled back slightly, confusion clouding her face.

Would her worries truly fade? Could ascension grant her the clarity she desperately sought?

Her hands clenched into fists against Nana's robes.

"Then why does it feel like I am losing myself?" Xerosis whispered. "Why do I feel like justice demands more than I can give?"

Nana smiled, though there was something old and knowing in her expression.

"Because it does."

Xerosis stiffened.

"Justice is not gentle, my dear," Nana continued. "It is cruel. It is merciless. And it will ask of you everything, whether you are willing to give it or not."

A lump formed in Xerosis' throat.

"Then why do I walk this path?" she asked, voice strained.

Nana reached out, brushing a crimson tear from her cheek.

"Because you were born to."

Silence stretched between them, heavy yet comforting.

Then, Nana stepped back, folding her arms. "Now, child, tell me of your path."

Xerosis inhaled deeply as she began explaining the understanding she came to understand during her trial at last she said " Her voice was quiet but firm, unwavering despite the weight pressing upon her:

"I will not seek fairness. I will not seek peace."

"I will be justice. Even if it sets me against the world."

Nana's gaze softened, her smile deepening. "Then, my dear child, you are ready."

As those words left her lips, the very air shifted. The sky above, infinite and unfathomable, pulsed with divine resonance. It was as if the stars themselves were leaning closer to bear witness.

With effortless grace, Nana lifted her hand, and in her palm a throne manifested—a construct of celestial authority, woven from the very essence of judgment. It was neither lavish nor imposing but carried an air of absolute certainty, of inevitability.

She raised it toward the heavens, and the vast cosmos, once impossibly distant, felt no further than an arm's reach.

As she set the throne among the constellations of the ascended, Xerosis' body began to rise.

The wounds and exhaustion that had plagued her from the trial, the battles, and the weight of her choices faded as golden light enveloped her. The divine aura seeped into her very being, strengthening her in ways beyond flesh and bone.

A veil-like hat materialized upon her head, its ethereal fabric cascading down to obscure her features. It was not meant to conceal her, but rather to symbolize her neutrality—justice's refusal to be swayed by familiarity or sentiment.

Her throne awaited.

As her body ascended, the very essence of her domain took form among the celestial expanse. It was a realm woven into the fabric of divine authority, a dot of light among many—a seat of judgment, existing in tandem with the others.

And yet...

As she rose, her sight changed once more.

Despite her blindness, Xerosis had gained a vision far beyond mortal comprehension. And now, she saw them.

Figures clad in flowing robes of golden radiance stood in solemn observation. Each bore the insignia of judges, their presence exuding an overwhelming aura of impartiality and wisdom.

Yet, it was not their mere existence that shook her.

It was the threads that bound them.

Chapter 448:

These judges were not solitary. Each was connected by threads of luminous fate to those within the world.

One was bound to Nana. A divine arbiter, watching over the goddess of world herself.

And then—

One was bound to her.

A deep, intrinsic connection tethered Xerosis to a judge, a guardian of her justice, one that had always existed beyond her understanding.

Curiosity overwhelmed her. She reached out—not physically, but with her soul, drawn deeper into the fabric of judgment itself.

And then—

She saw it.

Something vast.

Something immeasurable.

A presence so immense it did not simply exist—it encompassed. It was not a god, nor a force. It was something older, greater, something that had always been.

The moment she glimpsed it, her soul was pulled toward it.

She could not resist.

Her very essence trembled as she was drawn toward this colossal existence, a force beyond divinity itself. It was not malevolent, nor was it kind. It simply was.

The weight of its awareness threatened to unravel her.

Just as she teetered on the edge of something irreversible—

A firm grip seized her.

The judge bound to her had appeared.

With a decisive pull, it yanked her back, severing the connection before she could be consumed by whatever truth she had nearly witnessed.

Gasping, Xerosis snapped back into her body.

Her chest heaved as if she had just escaped drowning, the lingering remnants of that vast presence still pressing against her mind.

As she steadied herself, she turned her gaze toward Nana—who was smiling.

Not with amusement.

Not with superiority.

But with understanding.

And in that moment, Xerosis laughed.

The burden she had carried, the crushing weight of fear—the terror that she would forever stand alone against the gods, against the overwhelming might of the strong, against the ceaseless tide of injustice—it all dissolved, becoming meaningless in the face of a newfound clarity.

She understood now. She was not alone. There were already forces, unseen and powerful, that kept watch over the realms, balancing the scales of existence. Her role was not to judge the gods, to challenge the powerful for the sake of it.

Her true duty, her purpose, was to be justice for the forsaken, the voiceless, the forgotten. For those whom even fate itself had ignored, those who slipped through the cracks of existence, lost and abandoned. She was their advocate, their shield, their unwavering voice in the face of overwhelming indifference.

Her soul, once weighed down by the leaden chains of uncertainty, felt light, buoyant, as if a great weight had been lifted. The spectral armor, once a burden of sorrow, now felt like a mantle of purpose, a symbol of her commitment.

And as she fully embraced this truth, as she surrendered to the understanding that had bloomed within her spectral heart, the celestial pull of divinity took hold. It was a force that resonated with the very essence of her being, a symphony of cosmic energy that transformed her from a wraith of vengeance into something more, something greater.

Her spectral form began to shimmer, radiating an ethereal light that banished the shadows of the battlefield. The empty sockets where her eyes had been now glowed with an inner light, a reflection of the cosmic balance she now embodied.

Her voice, once a whisper of despair, now resonated with the power of a celestial decree. "I am Xerosis," she declared, her voice echoing through the ravaged landscape, "daughter of Keles, the goddess of death, and now, I am the Goddess of Justice, the Veiled Arbiter!"

Xerosis' body dissolved into radiant light, her essence drawn into the heart of her new realm.

The realm of the Veiled Arbiter.

At first, there was nothing—only vast emptiness stretching infinitely. But from the depths of that void, a single sound resonated.

A solemn toll of a bell.

It rang, neither harsh nor gentle, but absolute—a declaration of law and order. And with its sound, reality began to weave itself around her.

At the heart of the realm, a grand structure manifested from nothingness.

A colossal courthouse-temple, suspended in the void, its foundation resting upon an endless, spiraling staircase of black stone. The stairs had no beginning, no end—an eternal path leading all who sought justice to her throne.

Towering pillars rose high into the abyss, each one engraved with the oaths of those who sought vengeance or justice in life. Their voices whispered in the wind, murmuring unresolved grievances, awaiting their reckoning.

At its center, an elevated throne stood beneath an open sky, where no stars shone—only an endless scale, suspended in the heavens.

One side of the scale gleamed with celestial gold, shimmering with the weight of righteous intent. The other side drenched in abyssal blackness, holding the grievances of the forsaken.

It never balanced.

It was never meant to.

Justice was never equal—it was a force that tipped only where it must.

Beyond the courthouse, a grand river of silver mist stretched into the horizon. It was not water, but memory. The lingering essence of those who sought justice in death.

The spirits of the wronged wandered its banks, awaiting judgment.

They did not wail, They did not beg, They simply waited.

And when their grievances were answered, their forms would dissolve, returning to the cycle of existence—at peace.

But those who had committed great sins, those who had defiled the very nature of justice—their souls would not leave.

Beneath the courthouse, within the labyrinthine halls of her domain, Juggernaut and the other cursed spirits under him stirred.

They were no longer mere cursed spirits—they were her executioners, the embodiment of judgment given form.

Juggernaut stood taller than before, his monstrous physique refined into something primal, unbreakable, but disciplined. His once rampant destruction was now channeled, his immense hands no longer meant for chaos, but for enforcement and his chains to ensnare them.

With her realm fully formed, Xerosis took her place upon her throne.

The veil over her face remained, her expression forever hidden from those who sought her gaze. But behind that veil, her vision was limitless.

Sadly she still was unable to see those golden figures anymore. It seemed like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to gaze at the wonders of the world, a fleeting glimpse into a reality beyond her grasp. The memory, however, remained, a shimmering, ethereal echo in the quiet corners of her mind.

Xerosis' ascension was short-lived, as she soon received an invitation from one of the god thrones surrounding her, and this one was from Ursula. If before, Xerosis was scared to face them, now she was quite eager to see them. A strange sense of belonging, a curiosity sparked by her recent, brief transcendence, propelled her forward. She took a step out of her realm, and was welcomed to the vast emptiness of space. Down below was their planet.

Following the induction, she went to the small star where Ursula's realm resided. Without struggle, she was easily let into the realm, the star's corona parting like a welcoming curtain.

Xerosis' first look at Ursula's realm was met with a wave of awe. She noticed there were other gods available in the realm, their forms flickering like embers in the ambient light. She was led by a flame spirit, its movements fluid and graceful, a silent, welcoming guide.

Walking on this realm of soothing fire, Xerosis felt a gentle warmth permeate her being. The air hummed with a low, resonant energy, a symphony of crackling flames and whispered promises. She was soon led to a palace, its architecture a blend of swirling fire and solidified starlight. The inside was empty except for the large flame hearth at the center, its flames dancing in a mesmerizing ballet.

Surrounding this hearth were her cousins: Ikem, his form flickering with internal light; Maul, his presence a solid, grounding force; Tide, his movements fluid and unpredictable; and Flowua, her energy a gentle, rippling current. They all had smiles on their faces as they looked towards her, a collective warmth that radiated from their forms.

Xerosis soon felt warm hands wrap around her from behind, a familiar, comforting embrace. She heard Ursula's voice speak to her, a low, melodic tone that resonated with the hearth's flames. "Took you long enough, you got us worried," Ursula whispered, her voice laced with affection and a hint of gentle rebuke. "We thought you were going to stay lost in your own little world forever."

"Lost?" Xerosis echoed, a flicker of confusion crossing her features. The memory of the golden figures resurfaced, a sharp contrast to the warmth of Ursula's embrace. "I saw... something."

"Something?" Ikem interjected, his eyes glowing with curiosity. "Something wonderful?"

"Yes," Xerosis replied, her voice barely a whisper. "Something... beyond."

"Beyond what?" Maul asked, his voice a deep rumble.

"Beyond... everything I knew," Xerosis said, turning slightly in Ursula's embrace. "It was like seeing the threads of the universe, the patterns of creation, all woven together in a single, breathtaking moment."

A silence fell over the hearth, broken only by the crackling flames. The other gods exchanged glances, a mixture of curiosity and concern etched on their faces.

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"And now?" Flowua asked, her voice soft and gentle. "What do you see now?"

Xerosis looked around at her cousins, their forms bathed in the warm light of the hearth. "Now," she said, a sense of belonging settling in her heart, "I see family."

Ursula's figure took hold of her hand as she walked towards the hearth. "I have invited our parents and a few others. For now, we are discussing the changes that came with our ascension."

Xerosis, hearing that their parents were also invited, had her heart skip a beat. Finally, she would meet him, her uncle Crepuscular. A wave of anticipation washed over her, quickly followed by a chilling dread. She thought of her new form, the form without eyes. Will he detest me? she wondered. I am no longer the woman he fell for. The trial has changed me, but it never changed the way I felt about him.

Ursula, perceptive as ever, seemed to sense the turmoil within Xerosis. She placed a reassuring hand on hers and offered a warm smile. "My father isn't so simple that a mere change in look will change his feelings."

"Meet him with confidence," Ursula continued, her voice gentle but firm. "Your confidence, and not fear of him, is the best he could ever hope from you."

Outside Ursula's realm, not too far away, a red star pulsed with a fiery glow, the realm of Björn. Björn paid no mind to the addition of the ascended gods. Instead, his attention was consumed by the reform his country and people were undergoing, and the temples in the distant lands that were being systematically dismantled. He observed the shifting tides of power, the subtle changes in the fabric of his realm, with a focused intensity.

He was then abruptly distracted, letting out a soft, "Huh?" in confusion. He initially dismissed it as a trick of his mind, but a thorough mental check revealed nothing amiss. Then he felt a pull, a subtle nudge on his consciousness.

"An invitation?" Björn spoke aloud, his voice a low rumble. A lost look crossed his face, a flicker of hesitation warring with an undeniable sense of curiosity. He was a creature of action, not contemplation, yet something about this invitation resonated with him. With a decisive movement, he stood up and walked out of his realm, heading towards the realm of Ursula. He moved with a purpose, a sense of duty guiding his steps.

As he traveled, Björn pondered the reason for the summons. He was not one for social gatherings, preferring the solitude of his realm and the tangible results of his work.

He approached Ursula's realm, the small star growing larger in his vision. The warm glow of the star's corona beckoned him forward, promising answers and perhaps, a confrontation. He was ready, as always, to face whatever challenges lay ahead. He had a feeling that his world was about to change, and he was determined to be a part of that change, to shape it, to control it.

While Björn was on his way to Ursula's realm, three portals opened directly within Ursula's realm, and Jaws, Crepuscular, and Mahu stepped through.

The newly ascended gods, seeing their parents for the first time in hundreds of years, were caught in a strange paralysis. They didn't know how to react, the familiar figures now imbued with an aura of immense power.

If they were still children, they would have rushed forward, leaping into their parents' arms without hesitation. But they were grown now, gods themselves, and the weight of past experiences, the long years of separation, created a barrier of unspoken emotions.

Even the origin gods seemed momentarily stumped, unsure of how to bridge the gap that time had created. There was, however, an exception. Flowua squealed like a little girl seeing her father, Jaws.

She threw herself into his arms, a whirlwind of pure joy. Jaws caught his daughter, his booming laugh echoing through the palace. "It's good to see you haven't let time change you, daughter," he said, his voice filled with warmth.

Flowua said nothing, burying her face against his chest, her emotions overwhelming her. Jaws raised his head, his eyes meeting Tide's. Tide walked towards him, his chest puffed out, his gaze unwavering. Lightning flickered in Jaws' eyes as he stared at his son, who was silently showing him how far he had come.

Carrying Flowua with one hand, Jaws walked towards Tide, placing his other hand on his son's head. "You did well, son," he said, his voice a deep rumble of approval.

Tide felt a torrent of emotions rise within him, a thousand words clamoring to be spoken. But in the end, he simply nodded, accepting his father's praise with a quiet dignity. Jaws then walked away, his two children by his side, settling near one edge of the palace.

Crepuscular, meanwhile, found two figures occupying his line of sight: his daughter, Ursula, and Xerosis, a presence he was beginning to understand and, perhaps, even appreciate.

Xerosis' figure was veiled, but that meant nothing to Crepuscular, who possessed the ability to perceive beyond the physical. He sent out a thought, a silent communication unique to their kind.

The response he received prompted him to shift his attention to Ursula, who now stood directly before him. Looking down at his daughter, Crepuscular found himself at a loss for words. He had never truly harbored any grand expectations for her.

Her safety and well-being were his primary concerns. Yet, she had accomplished much, far more than he had anticipated. Before he could speak, Ursula broke the silence. "I would like to visit home after this gathering," she said, her voice laced with a gentle request.

Crepuscular was about to refuse, his paternal instincts urging him to protect her from any potential danger. But looking into her pleading eyes, he relented, nodding and saying a simple, "Okay."

In response, Ursula made a move that triggered an unexpected reaction from him. In his perception, time seemed to slow to a crawl, everything but the other origin gods becoming a frozen tableau. He watched, in heightened awareness, as Ursula's arm reached out, clearly intending to embrace him.

His first instinct was to step back, to create distance. But he quickly realized the futility of such an action. His current state and form posed no threat to her. Relinquishing his heightened senses, he allowed himself to be enveloped in the tight embrace of his child. He reciprocated, wrapping his arms around her, a silent acknowledgment of the bond that connected them.

Compared to the other two origin gods, Mahu was unrestrained in her display of affection. She had Ikem and Maul enveloped in a powerful hug, squeezing them tightly. The two newly ascended gods, attempting to maintain an air of dignified composure, found themselves thoroughly embarrassed, especially under the watchful eyes of the other gods.

It took a considerable amount of time before Mahu released them, her cheerful energy filling the space. Ikem and Maul exchanged a weary glance, realizing that this was likely to be a long and emotionally charged day. "Nice seeing you too, Mom," Ikem managed, his voice a mix of affection and resignation.

Just then, Björn made his presence known. A wave of silence swept through the palace as all eyes turned towards him. The air crackled with unspoken questions and a palpable sense of anticipation. Only one figure moved to greet him, a warm smile gracing her features. Ursula walked towards Björn, taking his hand, which he instinctively tried to withdraw. "This is one of the guests who will be joining us," she announced, her voice clear and welcoming, as she introduced him to everyone present.

Ikem sighed, a mix of amusement and exasperation evident in his expression. Observing Ursula's enthusiastic welcome, he decided to take a more direct approach. Walking towards Björn, he extended his hand for a handshake. "Welcome to the family, buddy," he said, his tone friendly and sincere, though a hint of playful sarcasm lingered beneath the surface.

Björn, hearing Ikem's greeting, took his hand in a firm grip. His eyes, sharp and observant, roamed across the assembled gods, taking in the scene. When he saw Mahu, he inclined his head in a respectful bow, acknowledging her presence.

He then turned his attention to the other origin gods, their gazes fixed upon him. Suppressing his inherent pride, he offered a gesture of respect, a subtle nod that conveyed his acknowledgment of their power and authority.

Weirdly, Björn found himself experiencing a sense of unexpected comfort, particularly drawn to the warmth emanating from the hearth at the center of the palace. Even the gauntlet on his hand, usually a source of constant pain and agitation, was unusually calm, its fiery energy subdued.

Finding a place to stand, Björn observed the surrounding gods. He noticed the familial bonds that connected them, the unspoken understanding that flowed between them. He realized he was the only outsider, or so he initially thought.

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His thoughts were interrupted by the sudden appearance of a portal, a shimmering gateway to the spirit world. From within, the arch curses emerged, their presence immediately altering the atmosphere. The first to step through was the Enchanting Siren, a figure of captivating beauty that instantly drew the attention of every male god present. Even Flowua, her gaze typically reserved, found herself drawn to the Siren's allure.

The other gods, mindful of their partners, remained steadfast in their affections, though their eyes couldn't help but linger. The Siren, seemingly relishing the attention, accentuated her movements, her graceful walk and the subtle reveal of her long legs and thighs beneath her robe igniting a spark of desire.

Mahu, knowing the Siren's penchant for causing trouble, cleared her throat, drawing the Siren's attention. Having spent time with her, she was well aware of her mischievous nature. Pulling the Siren to the side, Mahu offered a reassuring smile to Ursula and Xerosis, who were both visibly fuming, their expressions a mix of annoyance and possessiveness.

Following the Siren's grand entrance, the Covetous Leviathan lumbered through the portal, surrounded by a menagerie of animals: chickens, boars, deer, and cows. In his hands, he carried a basket overflowing with fruits of every imaginable color.

His first words, directed at Ursula, were a blunt, "Do you have a kitchen here?"

Ursula, taken aback by the figure drooling a viscous, golden liquid, clearly driven by insatiable hunger, replied, "No, I don't. Didn't think I had a need for that anymore."

"Well, with me, you do," the Leviathan declared, his voice a guttural rumble. He walked to a corner of the palace, setting down his basket. A chef's apron materialized around his waist, followed by a tall chef's hat. With a wave of his hand, a small, fully equipped kitchen set appeared before him. The animals that had accompanied him approached him one by one, meeting their fate as he swiftly and efficiently butchered and disemboweled them.

Ikem, noticing Ursula's eyes twitching in disgust as blood splattered across the floor, intervened. With a flick of his wrist, a thick, red root emerged from the ground near the Leviathan, forming a gaping maw. The maw eagerly devoured the blood and discarded organs, cleaning the mess and restoring order to the palace floor.

The Leviathan seemed pleased, patting the maw like a pet before returning to his culinary endeavors.

Next to emerge from the portal was the Tyrannical Juggernaut. The clanging of his chains announced his arrival, accompanied by a palpable sense of oppressive pressure that permeated the palace. However, the pressure was not emanating from the Juggernaut himself, but rather, he was the one bearing the brunt of it.

The gods turned to the source of the pressure: Crepuscular. Xerosis, understanding the source of his anger, gently touched his hand. She knew he was reliving the memory of the Juggernaut's brutal treatment of her during her trials. "It was necessary," she said softly.

Crepuscular scoffed, the oppressive pressure dissipating as quickly as it had appeared. The Juggernaut, his expression unchanged by the tense exchange, continued his walk, stopping beside Xerosis. He offered a slight bow to Crepuscular, acknowledging his presence with a respectful, "Your grace."

Jaws erupted in laughter, his booming voice cutting through the remaining tension. "I like the boy," he declared, followed by another round of laughter that helped to clear the lingering atmosphere of unease.

The last two to emerge from the spirit world portal were the Despairing Virtuoso and the All-Knowing Oracle. They entered together, their contrasting presences adding another layer of intrigue to the

gathering. The Virtuoso clutched a plain sheet of paper, his expression a mask of melancholic contemplation. The Oracle, in contrast, carried a basket filled with vibrant fruits, plucked from the bountiful realm of Ikenga.

Björn, observing the newly arrived cursed beings, licked his lips, a flicker of dark interest in his eyes. "How the abyss would like children such as this," he mused to himself, his thoughts laced with a mixture of curiosity and a predatory hunger.

The gods began to mingle, a strange mix of familial warmth and divine formality filling the air. Flowua, still clinging to Jaws, regaled him with tales of her latest escapades, while Tide and Maul engaged in a silent, unspoken conversation, their eyes conveying more than words ever could. Crepuscular remained a stoic presence, his gaze occasionally flickering towards Xerosis, who stood beside the Juggernaut, their silent understanding a stark contrast to the lively chatter around them.

Meanwhile, the Leviathan, oblivious to the social dynamics, began his culinary performance. The aroma of sizzling meat and exotic spices wafted through the palace, a stark contrast to the usual ethereal scents of the realm. The gods, accustomed to sustaining themselves on pure energy, found themselves strangely drawn to the enticing smells. Even the origin gods, who had long since abandoned the need for sustenance, felt a stirring of primal hunger.

The Leviathan's cooking created a sensation. It was a spectacle of raw, primal energy transformed into delectable dishes. The animals, once living creatures, were now transformed into culinary masterpieces, their flavors enhanced by the Leviathan's unique touch.

The aroma caused a chorus of rumbling stomachs, and the gods, surprised by their own reactions, found themselves drawn to the Leviathan's makeshift kitchen. Ursula, noticing the growing hunger among her guests, particularly the origin gods who seemed to be fighting a long forgotten urge, turned to Ikem with a mischievous glint in her eye. "Ikem," she said, her voice laced with a playful demand, "I believe you have some of your 'special' vintage hidden away."

Ikem, who had been discreetly trying to keep his prized wine collection a secret, let out a sigh of resignation. He had known this moment would come. "Ursula," he protested, "that wine is for... special occasions."

"And what could be more special than this?" Ursula countered, gesturing towards the gathering. "Besides, everyone is hungry, and a good wine will complement the Leviathan's cooking perfectly."

The other gods, sensing Ikem's reluctance, joined in the chorus of requests. Even Jaws, who rarely indulged in such pleasures, seemed intrigued by the prospect of a good vintage. Ikem, outnumbered and outmaneuvered, finally relented, summoning a collection of exquisitely crafted bottles from his realm. The air filled with the rich, fruity aroma of aged wine, adding another layer of sensory delight to the already intoxicating atmosphere.

Björn, a demon with a history of conflict and mistrust with the other gods, found himself experiencing an unexpected sense of tranquility. The warmth of the hearth, the tantalizing aroma of the Leviathan's cooking, and the easy camaraderie of the gathering combined to create an atmosphere that was surprisingly soothing. He watched as the gods interacted, their laughter and conversation filling the space, and he felt a strange sense of detachment, yet also a subtle connection.

He observed the Leviathan's culinary artistry, the primal energy of the cooking resonating with his own demonic nature. The raw power of the transformation, the way the animals were rendered into something both beautiful and delicious, was a spectacle he found strangely compelling.

As the wine flowed and the food was served, Björn found himself relaxing, the tension that usually coiled within him easing. He even found himself engaging in small talk, offering brief, gruff comments on the food and wine. He spoke to the Juggernaut, acknowledging his strength and resolve, and he exchanged a few words with the Oracle, his curiosity piqued by his enigmatic pronouncements.

He found himself drawn to the warmth of the hearth, its flames dancing and crackling, casting a comforting glow over the gathering. He felt a sense of belonging, however fleeting, a moment of peace amidst the chaos of his existence. He even found himself laughing, a low rumble in his chest, as Jaws regaled the group with a boisterous tale.

The gauntlet on his hand, usually a source of constant pain and agitation, remained calm, its fiery energy subdued. Björn realized that for the first time in a long time, he was not consumed by anger or resentment. He was simply present, enjoying the moment, a rare and unexpected experience for the demon god. He even allowed himself to take a small glass of Ikem's wine, savoring the rich, complex flavors, a small gesture of acceptance and participation. He was a demon, but he was also a guest, and for this moment, he allowed himself to be both.

Björn cleared his throat, a bit drunk as he said "Let me offer a small piece of advice as a gift for the great time and accomodation"

The lively chatter of the gathering ceased abruptly, and all eyes turned towards him. The atmosphere shifted from relaxed joviality to attentive silence.

Björn, his gaze sweeping across the newly ascended gods, began, "My advice pertains to what comes with being an ascended god. This knowledge comes as a result of mistakes made by ascended gods after their ascension."

He paused, allowing his words to sink in. "Many ascended gods have been tricked by tales of what a god means, and in turn, behave that way. There is a stark difference between being born as a god and ascending to be one."