

## Guardian gods 481

Chapter 481:

The meeting had concluded, but neither leader departed with a sense of ease. If anything, they were burdened with new questions, the weight of unresolved matters pressing heavily on their minds.

In the grand, frost-laden halls of the werewolf kingdom, Wulv now sat upon an imposing ice throne—the very seat once occupied by his father. The crystalline structure gleamed under the soft, ethereal glow of the stars visible through the high-vaulted ceiling. Yet what stood out most was the constellation behind him, an intricate celestial pattern etched into the air itself. It pulsed faintly, its presence becoming an ever more frequent sight ever since Wulv had taken his place as ruler.

This was the gift of his constellation. The power granted to him, one necessary if he was to lead his people in the times ahead.

But now, after the encounter with Zirikon, his thoughts were consumed by a single, troubling question.

"Krogan" A name long forgotten. A being who had seemingly faded from history.

Why now?, Why had Krogan begun to stir again?

And, perhaps most pressing of all—what did he want with the Mammoth Beast King?

The throne room was eerily silent, save for the occasional distant howl of the winter winds. Then, a soft but deliberate sound broke the stillness.

Footsteps.

A lone figure approached.

A werewolf, broad-shouldered and clad in a heavy cloak of dark fur, strode toward the throne, carrying a massive, ancient tome bound in thick, weathered leather. The air around him seemed heavier, as if the book itself carried an immeasurable weight—not just physically, but in knowledge.

He halted at the base of the throne, bowing deeply before Wulv. Then, with careful precision, he took a seat.

For a moment, the two said nothing.

The only sound was the soft crackling of frost forming and breaking along the edges of the ice throne.

And then, as the werewolf placed the book between them, Wulv finally spoke, his voice quieter than before, but no less firm.

"Tell me what you know."

The massive tome trembled for a brief moment before lifting into the air, as if guided by an unseen force. Slowly, it floated toward Wulv, its thick, weathered pages rustling like whispers carried by the wind. Then, with a faint hum, the book flipped open, its pages turning rapidly—dozens, then hundreds—before abruptly stopping on a specific entry.

Wulv's blue eyes sharpened as he leaned forward, scanning the aged parchment with unwavering focus. His gaze moved carefully over the intricate script, ensuring he missed nothing. Every word, every diagram, every footnote—he absorbed it all.

Yet, despite his meticulous attention, he found nothing of true significance.

The book was a meticulous record of the many beasts that roamed the frigid lands of the northern continent. Countless ages cataloged the mighty Beast Kings—their appearances, territories, strengths, and habits—each entry written with scholarly precision.

And yet, the Mammoth Beast King held no extraordinary distinction.

Its recorded strength was formidable, but not unique. Its domain, vast but unremarkable. There was no forgotten legend, no concealed truth buried within these pages.

Wulv's brow furrowed slightly, the faintest trace of frustration flickering across his usually amused expression.

"Are you certain this is all you could find?" he asked, his voice calm but laced with an edge of expectation.

The werewolf before him met his gaze and gave a solemn nod.

"That is all, Your Grace," he confirmed. "However, I have dispatched a unit to retrieve one of its offspring. If there is anything we have overlooked, we may find our answers by examining its lineage up close."

Silence stretched between them for a moment, heavy with thought.

Wulv exhaled slowly, his fingers lightly tapping against the armrest of his icy throne. His constellation pulsed faintly behind him, its glow flickering like distant starlight.

Something about this didn't sit right and he intended to find out why.

The massive tome lifted once more, pages fluttering as it drifted back toward the werewolf figure. Wulv let out a long sigh, his fingers idly tracing the armrest of his throne as his thoughts swirled.

"Did I take it too far this time?" he murmured, his voice devoid of its usual playfulness.

The werewolf before him regarded him carefully before speaking.

"As a king, you did the right thing," he replied evenly. "But as a brother... it was never the right thing to do—putting your sister in danger."

Wulv's golden eyes flickered as he turned his gaze toward the distant horizon, where his sister was making her way back to the kingdom. She was unharmed, but the weight of his actions lingered in his mind.

This entire sequence of events had been orchestrated by him.

Not everything, of course—her unexpected encounter with Yuki's son, their joint hunt that had ended with the icy ground collapsing beneath them, the deaths of the Mammoth Beast King's offspring—those were unforeseen developments. But from the moment he learned that Yuki had entered the Beast King's territory, he had set his plans in motion.

It all stemmed from her weakness.

Not in skill, nor in willpower, but in the absurdity of her own bloodline.

She was a child of their father "A demigod" and a descendant of a true dragon.

Traces of divine blood and pre-draconic lineage ran through her veins—an inheritance that should have granted her an unshakable path to power.

And yet, despite that potential, she remained at the peak of the Fourth Stage.

A disappointment. For someone of her lineage, the Fifth Stage should have been an inevitability, a natural progression with no obstacles in her way. Only upon reaching the Sixth Stage—where talent alone was no longer enough, where sheer will and understanding of the world became paramount—should her growth have slowed.

And yet, here she was. Stagnant.

Wulv exhaled through his nose, his constellation behind him flickering with dim light.

Perhaps this gamble had been necessary after all.

She could not be blamed for her stagnation—at least, not entirely. She was a princess, after all. She had no need for such strength.

Wherever she went, Fifth Stage guards trailed her in the shadows, ensuring her safety. There was no urgency for her to grow stronger, no true danger to push her forward.

This was something Wulv himself struggled to understand.

He had stood beside their father centuries ago, when their kind had no kingdom, no throne, no warm halls to call their own. Back when they huddled in makeshift igloos, enduring the bitter cold, where survival depended on strength alone.

Back then, stagnation meant death.

But times had changed. The newer generations of werewolves, born into an era of prosperity, had lost that fire. With abundant resources at their disposal and the luxury of long lifespans, few felt the need to push beyond their limits.

Yet Wulv believed that, as a member of the royal family, his sister should be different. She should be strong. The duty to protect their people rested upon them more than anyone else.

And yet, her situation was dire. Despite her Fourth Stage strength, she struggled against elite warriors at the Third Stage. A disgrace, considering her lineage.

That was why Wulv had placed her in the Mammoth Beast King's territory. It was not merely a coincidence—it was an orchestrated trial. A calculated risk.

He had wanted to push her, to force her into danger, to see if the fire within her could be ignited.

But then Leiko appeared.

Wulv had not expected him. And in the boy's presence, he saw something his sister lacked.

Ferocity, a refusal to stop and Ambition.

Wulv did nothing to prevent their meeting. In fact, he welcomed it.

He even smiled when Leiko greeted his sister in an attempt to cleave through both her and the mountain she sat upon.

At that moment, Wulv abandoned his initial plan. He no longer needed a powerful beast to test his sister—Leiko would serve that purpose far better.

Even as events spiraled beyond his expectations, even when his sister faced an opponent she stood no chance of defeating, he did not give the order for his men to intervene.

He let it happen. Because if she could not rise from this trial stronger...

Then she never would.

The cold air of the throne room settled heavily around Wulv as he reclined against the ice-forged seat, his mind churning. His sister had survived, but had she changed? Had the fire he sought to ignite within her finally caught flame? Or had she merely endured, waiting to be saved?

He clicked his tongue in mild irritation.

Leiko had proven himself far more than a simple pawn in Wulv's designs. There was potential in him—a hunger that reminded Wulv of the old days, when survival was uncertain and only the strong carved out a future for themselves.

Perhaps that was why Wulv found himself watching the boy with growing interest.

Standing up from the throne, he ordered "Prepare the mirrors, it's time to speak with the other godlings"

While Wulv prepared for his meeting, Yuki, on the sunlit side of the world—far beyond the vast expanse of ice and snow—sat in quiet contemplation, her fingers tracing the smooth, time-worn surface of a small skull. Dark mist curled lazily from its hollowed eyes and slack jaw, seeping out in slow, deliberate tendrils that dissipated into the warm air.

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This used to be a link, a direct tether between her and her father—a device through which his voice, sharp and calculating, once echoed in her mind. It had carried his orders, his lessons, his silent expectations. A connection that had once been unbreakable. Until she shattered it herself.

The moment she submitted her body to Björn, forsaking the past for the future growing inside her, she severed the link. She could not risk it. Not for herself. Not for her unborn child. Her father was a man who operated in shadows, a being who viewed sentiment as weakness and ties as nothing more than tools to be exploited. If he knew of her pregnancy, if he deemed it relevant to his grand design, she had no doubt he would try to reclaim control—over her, over the child, over everything. And so, for the past decade or more, Yuki had waited.

Waited to see if he would reach out. If he would find a way to break through the silence. If her defiance had left even the faintest ripple in his vast, omniscient mind.

But he never did.

Not once.

It was as though her betrayal had never mattered. As though she had never mattered.

Perhaps he had written her off the moment she ceased to be useful. Or perhaps, in his cold, indifferent way, he had always known this day would come. The day she would find herself here, staring at the remnants of their connection, needing him for the first time in her life.

Yuki exhaled sharply, an almost bitter chuckle escaping her lips. How ironic.

Her father saw everything. That was one unshakable truth of the world she had been raised in. He did not need to ask questions because he already knew the answers. He did not need to look for things because, inevitably, things found their way to him. It was under his relentless gaze that Yuki had grown, a daughter molded in the image of one who knew all. She had once been his eyes and ears in places he could not reach. She had built her authority in Björn's kingdom on the strength of that knowledge, on the understanding that she could see further, hear more, know before anyone else did.

But now?

Her today was not the Yuki of the past. The certainty she once carried, the unwavering confidence that she was always a step ahead—gone.

The world was moving, shifting in ways she could no longer predict. She no longer knew what her father was thinking. She no longer knew if he was even watching.

And for the first time in her life, Yuki realized what it was like to be in the dark.

What she knew—what she had always known—was no longer enough.

Yuki had built her strength on knowledge, on the certainty that nothing moved beyond her awareness. But that certainty was gone. And she knew exactly why.

It all stemmed from the silence. The absence of her father.

Krogan, Zirikon, the cursed forest—events unfolding beyond her lands, slipping through the cracks of her understanding. A decade ago, such an oversight would have been unthinkable. She would have known. She would have anticipated. But now?

Now, she was left grasping in the dark.

This was her father's greatest gift, the advantage that had once made her untouchable. And today, for the first time, she had been forced to acknowledge that it was no longer hers.

That was why she sat here now, alone in her chamber, staring at the small skull she had kept hidden all these years.

The mist still leaked from its hollow sockets, curling like whispered secrets in the dim candlelight. The weight of it in her hands was heavier than it had ever been, laden with a question she had tried to avoid asking.

Should she reestablish contact?

And if she did, how much did he already know?

Had he been watching, as he always had, waiting for her to come crawling back? Had he anticipated this moment, this exact hesitation, long before she even realized she would break?

What would he demand of her? What price would she have to pay?

And more than anything—what plans did he already have for her son?

Yuki exhaled slowly, fingers tightening around the skull. She could already feel it happening. The shift. The slow, inevitable pull back into the state she had spent so long trying to escape.

To be in her father's presence—whether through words or silence—was to surrender to an endless, invisible game. There was never a moment of rest with him. Every action, every word, every flicker of expression had to be scrutinized, unraveled, understood from every possible angle. Because before you knew it, you were moving to his tune.

And he never had to say a word. That was his power. His control.

Her father was old. Older than most could comprehend. His knowledge, his wisdom—it was a force of its own, honed through lifetimes of patience and precision. If not for the Origin Gods, Yuki had no doubt that this world would have already been his.

Five beings of overwhelming power.

No matter how intricate his arrangements, no matter how meticulous his plans, in the face of their might, all of it amounted to nothing.

And yet, for all his failures, her father had never stopped moving. Never stopped watching.

Had he been watching her?

Yuki pressed her lips together, a sharp pang of unease settling in her chest. She had spent so long believing she was free. But now, as she sat here, staring into the empty sockets of the skull, she realized the truth.

She had never been free. Only forgotten, and now, she was about to remind him.

The Origin Gods were beyond even his reach. For all his wisdom, for all his boundless knowledge, they remained the one force in the world immune to his influence.

But others? Others were not so fortunate.

Yuki was not so fortunate.

To take him as an opponent? That was unthinkable. A battle she would never dare to dream of, let alone fight. That was why, the moment she heard even the faintest whisper that he had allowed her out of his sight, she had seized the opportunity. She had fled across the sea, crossing to a continent so distant, so removed from his immediate reach, that she could almost pretend she was free.

Almost.

She had left behind her brother—the only one who could ever truly understand the weight of growing under their father's gaze. And yet, she had abandoned him without hesitation.

Because she pitied him.

Yuki loved her brother. Or rather, she would have loved him if they had been given a normal father, a normal childhood, a normal life. But love had no place in the house they were raised in. Affection had been replaced with rivalry, trust with manipulation. Now, whatever bond they could have had was long shattered. All that remained was hatred—a mutual, seething hatred that had festered for years, until it twisted into something irreversible.

They had both been broken.

She had developed her own complexities under their father's rule, chains she had mistaken for her own thoughts, her own will. And when she left—when she thought she had finally escaped—those chains snapped and sent her spiraling. She believed herself free, but instead, she unraveled.

And her brother? He was left behind, left to suffer, trapped beneath the crushing weight of an inferiority complex he would never be allowed to grow beyond.

Yuki's breath hitched, her vision blurring.

The skull slipped from her hands, landing with a dull, lifeless sound against the floor.

And then—so did she.

Her body crumpled like a puppet with its strings cut, trembling hands clutching at her chest as sobs tore from her throat. Her shoulders shook violently, her breath coming in ragged, uneven gasps. She pushed herself away from the skull, dragging herself across the cold floor like it burned her.

"What... what am I to do?"

The words barely formed, spilling from her lips in a broken whisper.

For the first time in her life, she felt powerless.

Truly, utterly powerless.

She crawled, her fingers scraping against the ground as she retreated to the farthest corner of the room. There, she curled into herself, drawing her knees to her chest, pressing her forehead against them as she tried to make herself small—so small that she could disappear.

And then, through her sobs, she called out.

A plea, desperate and raw.

"Husband... what am I to do?"

Björn.

The man she had given herself to. The man who, for better or worse, was hers.

Would he answer? Would he save her? Or was she, once again, left to drown alone?

Since regaining his senses, Björn had never once wavered in his focus. His kingdom—the land he had claimed, the people who worshiped him—was now the foundation of his power, the very source of his growing divinity.

He had not ignored Yuki.

How could he?

She was his. His wife. The mother of his child. The one who had once bound herself to him, body and soul.

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And now, she was kneeling on the cold floor, crumbling, breaking, that cursed skull not far from her trembling hands.

His anger was immediate. It was vast. It was felt.

The sea of blood in his realm churned violently, its waves crashing against unseen shores, mirroring the storm within him. Across his kingdom, his people stilled for the briefest of moments, their eyes flashing red with his fury before the glow disappeared.

Björn exhaled slowly, but his rage did not subside.

Power surged through him as he began to expend faith energy, pushing his vision beyond the land he had claimed, beyond the confines of his dominion. His sight stretched outward, reaching across the vast distances, until it settled on the southern continent.

And there—there—was the man responsible for this.

His gaze locked onto the hidden place where Murmur lurked in the shadows, the demon who whispered and weaved his unseen threads into the fabric of the world.

Björn's divine sight bore down upon it, sharp and unrelenting.

Yet, he was met with something even the Origin Gods had never been able to break.

A veil. A wall. A barrier woven by Murmur himself—an impenetrable guard over his sanctuary, a place concealed from all who sought him.

Björn's rage flared hotter, but he did not falter.

He would not stop. More faith. More power.

His presence pressed against the veil, demanding, searching, burning—and that was when he noticed it.

A single detail, Murmur was not there.

Björn narrowed his eyes, the revelation only fueling his fury. If Murmur was no longer in his place of hiding, then—

"Where was he?" Jaw clenched, Björn turned his focus outward.

A clean sweep of the entire southern continent.

No land was beyond his sight. No shadow deep enough to elude him. He would find him. He would see.

And when he did— There would be no place left for Murmur to hide.

Björn's relentless search led him to a city—a place teeming with life, bustling with the chatter of merchants and the rhythmic clatter of wooden carts rolling over stone pathways. The scent of spices, roasted meats, and freshly baked bread filled the air, blending with the noise of haggling voices and the laughter of children weaving through the crowd.

And within this vibrant market, moving unbothered through the sea of people, was an old man.

His long white beard swayed slightly with each step, his traditional robes flowing around him. He held no air of divinity, no oppressive presence, yet there was something about the way he walked—calm, deliberate, untouched by the chaos around him. His hands moved slowly along his beard, his expression one of quiet amusement as he observed the world around him.

Then, without warning, he stopped.

The old man's gaze lifted to the sky, but what he saw was not the boundless blue stretching above.

In his eyes, they were there—two massive red eyes, burning with raw fury, staring directly at him from beyond the fabric of reality.

A lesser being would have crumbled beneath such a gaze. The weight of that anger, that unyielding will, was enough to shake the strongest of men.

But the old man merely smiled.

"Ah, it's been a while, old friend." His voice was light, almost playful, as if addressing a long-lost companion.

The red eyes—Björn's eyes—remained fixed on him, filled with silent scrutiny. Then, just as suddenly as they had appeared, they vanished, dissolving into nothing.

The old man stood there for a moment longer before he let out a quiet sneeze, covering his nose with the sleeve of his robe. He rubbed his nostrils and muttered to himself, "Why is everyone suddenly so interested in an old man like me?"

Meanwhile, back in his realm, Björn sat in silence, his expression strangely calm.

But beneath that calm was something else.

Uncertainty. A feeling he was not accustomed to.

His fingers tightened into a fist as he exhaled, murmuring to himself, "What the hell are you planning next?"

Before he could dwell further on the matter, his attention was pulled back by the sound of Yuki's quiet sobs.

His jaw tensed.

Björn sighed, shifting his gaze beyond his blood-drenched realm, past the expanse of empty space that separated divine dominions. His eyes landed upon the distant glow of another realm—one that belonged to Maul.

He let the silence linger before speaking, more to himself than anyone else.

"I hope our new friendship is enough for you to overlook this."

With that, he turned his focus back to Yuki, his connection to her deepening through their sacred bond—his voice, his will, reaching her as his head priest.

Björn extended his power, sending a blessing to Yuki as she lay curled up in her room, lost in her despair. The moment his energy touched her, a crimson glow enveloped her trembling form, its warmth seeping into her bones. Her sobs quieted as her breath steadied, and for a brief moment, her vision blurred.

Two images flashed in her mind—fleeting, yet vivid.

Her eyes returned to normal, but the glow did not fade. It lingered around her, wrapping her in its silent reassurance.

A message. A presence. A quiet but undeniable proof that Björn had been watching. That he had never turned his gaze away.

Yuki, still trembling but now steadied by the warmth of his power, pushed herself up. Slowly, she turned her attention to the skull.

The object that had once been her tether to her father. The one thing that had almost drawn her back into his grasp.

She lifted a hand, fingers slightly curled, and with a mere flick of her wrist, the skull obeyed—rising from the ground and flying effortlessly into her palm.

Björn had responded to her. And if all went as she and he both hoped...

She would have no need to contact Murmur.

On the other side of the world, deep within the heart of the eastern continent, Zephyr sat upon the throne his father once occupied. The grand chamber was bathed in the soft glow of enchanted lanterns, their light casting long, flickering shadows upon towering bookshelves that lined the walls. Despite the room's vastness, there was an intimate stillness to it—a quiet sanctum where wisdom and power intertwined.

In his hand, Zephyr held a small wooden book, its surface worn smooth from generations of handling. A faint green glow emanated from the carved sigils on its cover, pulsing like a heartbeat. His eyes, sharp with focus, traced each word with the reverence of a scholar unraveling ancient secrets. Floating around him in a slow, rhythmic dance were books of varying sizes and bindings, their pages fluttering as if whispering knowledge into the air.

Each time he grasped a new concept from the wooden book, one of the larger tomes hovering nearby would drift toward him. He would receive it with silent understanding, flipping through its pages with a discerning gaze. Sometimes, a quill—suspended in midair like an extension of his thoughts—would scrawl notes onto parchment, capturing insights that demanded further reflection.

The book in his hand was no ordinary text. It was a relic, a treasure passed down through his lineage. His grandfather, Ikenga, had gifted it to his father, Ikem, before he embarked on his journey to forge one of the greatest godling kingdoms in history. And now, in the wake of Ikem's ascension, the book had been entrusted to Zephyr.

This ritual—reading the book each morning before court—had become a sacred duty. It was more than just an act of learning; it was a communion with the wisdom of those who came before him. As the days passed and his understanding deepened, Zephyr found himself gaining newfound respect for his grandfather, Ikenga. He had always known his grandfather as a great god who blessed himself and his siblings, but now, through the words left behind, he glimpsed the depth of Ikem's reverence for his own father, Ikenga.

The weight of legacy settled upon Zephyr's shoulders. The more he read, the more he wondered about the man who had set all of this into motion. Who was Ikenga, truly? What dreams had shaped him? What burdens had he carried? And what, if anything, had been left unsaid in the pages of history?

Curiosity stirred within Zephyr—a desire not just to rule, but to understand. He knew that one day, he too would leave behind a legacy. And when that time came, what wisdom would he pass down?

As Zephyr delved deeper into the book, the intricate design of their kingdom unfurled before him like a carefully crafted machine. It became clear where the blueprint of their empire had originated—from the structure of ruling powers to the intricate balance maintained between the nobles and the cursed clans. Every facet had been meticulously planned, every potential conflict accounted for, with solutions preemptively devised.

He now understood why his father's reign had been so stable, unmarred by the power struggles that often plagued other great nations. It wasn't luck, nor sheer authority, but a carefully engineered system—one where the court functioned in harmony, not because each member wielded equal power, but because they had no choice but to move in the same direction. Their voices were heard, their opinions debated, but in the end, the system ensured that the final outcome remained inevitable.

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A hidden truth lay within those pages, one not spoken aloud but now revealed to him—the illusion of choice. What had seemed like an empire where all voices mattered was, in reality, a masterfully designed mechanism of control. And now, Zephyr alone bore the weight of this knowledge.

Yet, with this revelation came another—one that unsettled him far more.

The book pointed out a growing issue within the kingdom, one that Zephyr had not yet noticed but would inevitably come to face. What disturbed him most was not the problem itself—though it was indeed a grave one—but rather the solution the book proposed. The words seemed almost alive, as if the book could peer into his mind, recognizing his unease and addressing it before he had even finished forming the thought.

And unknown to him, someone else had already acknowledged the issue and was handling it. But not in the way the book recommended.

A subtle tension settled into Zephyr's chest. The knowledge burned within him, and instinctively, he rebelled against it. The floating books that encircled him were not mere sources of information; they were his weapons against a truth he desperately wanted to disprove. If the book was right, then everything he believed in—everything his father had built—was at risk. And so, he had begun his own record, an effort to counter what he had read, to carve out a different path.

For ten years, he had searched, studied, and documented. Ten years of gathering knowledge, seeking alternatives, fighting against the quiet, suffocating certainty that the book was right.

And yet, despite all his efforts, a lingering question remained.

Was he merely delaying the inevitable?

The more Zephyr studied the book, the more he was forced to accept a grim truth—one he had spent years trying to deny. Every insight, every warning embedded in its pages had proven true.

It was in the Chapter titled "The Fall of the Great Power" that he finally understood what the book had been foreshadowing all along. For ten years, he had sought to decipher its meaning, and now, with unsettling clarity, the answer lay before him.

If he were to condense the problem into its simplest form, it was this:

"The Apelings, and not only them but the Godlings as well, had grown too comfortable."

It was a bitter realization, yet one that explained everything. Complacency had taken root within the kingdom. Strength, wisdom, and structure had built an empire that seemed unshakable, yet it was that very stability that would lead to its downfall.

At the beginning of the book, his grandfather Ikenga had written,

"Whoever lays their hands upon this book will bring about the birth of a great power."

Yet, in the final passages, he had left behind a far grimmer message:

"Just as this great power is birthed, so too will its fall be mocked by those who come after. They will learn from its failure and laugh with pointed fingers at the fallen empire, saying: 'How could you, with so much power and wisdom, overlook such a simple problem?'"

Zephyr exhaled slowly, gripping the edges of the book as if anchoring himself to reality. The words struck him deeper than any blade.

This downfall was not an act of war, not the result of some external enemy. No great conqueror would lay waste to their kingdom. No divine punishment would strike them down.

No.

Their end would come from within.

The book's strange power allowed anyone to read its contents, no matter their language or origin, yet there was one section that remained hidden to all but the cursed clans. That passage held an even more cutting truth:

"It is a simple problem for those who laugh, for they could never grow to such heights where something 'so small' would become their downfall."

Zephyr's jaw tightened. It was cruel in its simplicity. Those who would later mock the kingdom's demise would never understand how problems at the peak of power differed from those at the bottom. To them, such an issue would seem insignificant, laughable. But only those who had risen to great heights would understand how something seemingly trivial could fester and unravel an empire from within.

His grandfather had made his point even clearer through a parable—a short, seemingly insignificant tale woven into the book's pages.

The story disturbed Zephyr so much that he had spent days poring over historical records, searching for any trace of it. Had this event truly happened in their world? Had his grandfather witnessed it firsthand? If not, then how had he come to know of it?

The more he searched, the more questions he uncovered.

And the more questions he uncovered, the more uneasy he became.

The tale spoke of two figures—the Conqueror and the Conquered.

The Conqueror hailed from a barren land, a place where survival was a constant struggle, where resources were scarce, and every day was a battle against nature itself. His people had known hardship for generations, and from that hardship was born an unyielding will to take what they needed to survive.

The Conquered, by contrast, lived in a land of abundance. Their soil was rich, their rivers flowed with clear water, and their cities flourished under the shade of fruit-bearing trees. They had everything they needed—food, shelter, wealth—so much so that they never once considered the possibility of loss.

Then came the fateful day when the Conqueror set his eyes upon the land of the Conquered. He saw not just resources, but opportunity—the kind that his homeland had never afforded him. And so, he did what he had been raised to do.

He conquered.

Generation after generation, the cycle continued. The Conqueror's descendants took the wealth of the conquered land, using it to build their own empire, turning their once-barren homeland into a land of beauty and opportunity. Over time, the once-struggling conquerors created a nation so grand that even the descendants of the conquered were drawn to it.

Then came the debate.

The descendants of both sides—those of the Conqueror and the Conquered—stood before one another, locked in heated discussion. It was an argument fueled by history, by identity, by a clash of perspectives too deep-rooted to be easily reconciled.

And then, one voice from the Conqueror's side posed a question—perhaps out of curiosity, perhaps out of arrogance, or maybe sheer ignorance.

"If your land and people were so great, then how come you weren't the conquerors?"

A hush fell over the gathering. The words hung in the air, heavy with implication.

The descendant of the Conquered frowned, confusion flickering across his face. To him, the answer was obvious—so obvious, in fact, that he hesitated, wondering if he had misunderstood the question.

And yet, he gave the only answer that made sense to him.

"Why bother to conquer when we had it all?"

The room fell silent.

It was in that moment that Zephyr understood. The weight of the story settled deep in his bones, intertwining with the knowledge he had already gathered from the book.

It wasn't just a tale. It was a warning.

Zephyr's grip on the book tightened for a brief moment before he exhaled, forcing his fingers to relax. The knowledge within its pages was damning, and yet it was not the words that stung the most—it was the fact that he had seen the signs himself and still refused to acknowledge them until now. He had let himself become blind, indifferent, complacent—the very thing he loathed and vowed to never be.

His eyes flickered over to his own book of records, floating gently before him, as if mocking his earlier confidence. It opened on its own, revealing the cold, hard calculations he had painstakingly compiled. Numbers. Ratios. Declining trends. Proof that the stagnation wasn't just paranoia—it was real.

The birthrate among his people had plummeted.

Fewer and fewer individuals were advancing in strength.

Innovative thought had dulled. No new techniques, no revolutionary insights—just repetition. The same cycles over and over, slowly dulling to mediocrity. Even the Apeling Academy, which had once been a crucible of ambition and fire, was now little more than a smoldering ember. What was once a thriving competition between the common apelings and the cursed clan had become a shadow of its former self. There was no hunger. No drive. No defiance against fate.

And yet Ikenga had predicted all this.

Zephyr's jaw clenched. He thought of the god's detached gaze, the way he spoke of curses with neither remorse nor justification, simply stating them as truths woven into reality. A god of curses. A god who did not intervene. A god who let things rot away, waiting for them to wither into something new, something that would force itself to survive or be swept away entirely "God of nature"

"How evil and indifferent can a god be to curse something his own son created?" Zephyr thought bitterly as he snapped the book shut.

But was it truly cruelty? Or was it merely the nature of divinity?

His own anger felt like a mirror, reflecting something deeper within himself. Perhaps what unsettled him the most wasn't Ikenga's apathy, but the realization that he had already been cursed long before he even recognized it. Stagnation had crept into his people, and in turn, into himself.

Chapter 485:

Taking a deep breath, he finally allowed himself to sit, feeling the weight of everything pressing down on his shoulders. When a truth is laid out so clearly before you, when it calls you out in ways you cannot deny, there is nothing left to do but accept it.

Acceptance, however, did not mean submission.

His eyes drifted back to the book, his mind already shifting. The calculations were inevitable, but inevitability was merely an excuse for those who had already given up. Zephyr was not ready to surrender just yet and besides his grandfather's book offered solutions.

The cursed clans were not exempt from this decay. Zephyr's fingers skimmed over the records, his expression darkening as he took in the undeniable truth. Training regimens, once grueling and unrelenting, had softened. The drive that had once burned fiercely in the hearts of warriors had dulled to embers. They still trained, still followed the routines passed down through generations—but it was hollow. The intensity, the hunger, the need to push beyond their limits had faded.

It was not just a matter of declining strength—it was a betrayal of purpose.

Zephyr's gaze locked onto the next passage in the book, his breath slowing as he absorbed the words. The cursed clans had been created for a singular reason: to be the vanguard, the unbreakable shield and unstoppable sword of the Apeling Kingdom. Their curses were not punishments but gifts—gifts that allowed them to transcend natural limits and wield overwhelming power. They were meant to stand at the forefront, to be the storm that shattered their enemies before war could even take root.

Of course, the normal apeling army still existed. Their presence was necessary, an additional force that could wage conventional battles. But the book made one thing clear—the standard army only mattered on a surface level. They were soldiers. The cursed clans were weapons. When they marched, they were expected to end wars before they truly began. Their presence alone should have been enough to break morale, to instill fear so profound that surrender became the only option.

The cursed clan army numbered between two to three hundred thousands—a formidable force. Among them, twenty thousand warriors had reached the fifth stage of strength, evenly five thousands among the four cursed clans. The vast majority remained at the fourth stage, with the weakest still sitting comfortably in the middle of that tier.

At a glance, they were still strong. But strength without growth was nothing more than stagnation in disguise.

The normal apelung army, by contrast, numbered in the millions. In raw numbers alone, they dwarfed the cursed clans. And yet, despite their overwhelming population, their highest stage warriors could hardly compare with the cursed ones. Only seven thousand of their troops had reached the fifth stage, and while the distribution among lower tiers was still respectable, their lowest members were merely at the peak of the third stage.

This should not have been an issue. Should not have been.

But Zephyr could already see the cracks forming in the foundation.

The cursed clans had become complacent, relying on their inherited strength without striving for more. Their numbers still held weight, but their purpose was eroding. An army without willpower, without ambition, was little more than a lifeless machine.

And that, Zephyr realized, was the true curse.

Not the supernatural gifts bestowed upon them.

Not the expectations placed upon their shoulders.

No—the real curse was the slow, creeping rot of stagnation. The moment they stopped becoming stronger was the moment their purpose began to crumble. If left unchecked, they would be nothing more than relics, warriors in name only, living in the shadow of the strength they should have possessed.

If the two armies were to clash, even with the overwhelming numerical advantage of the normal apelungs, Zephyr knew with absolute certainty that the cursed clan would emerge victorious. In his mind, the outcome was undeniable. All it would take was the deployment of ten thousand fifth-stage apelungs from the cursed clan—no more, no less—and the battle would be decided with only minimal losses on their side.

The reason for this was not just raw strength or superior combat ability. It was something far more fundamental—a phenomenon that had been observed time and time again among the strongest warriors.

The Power of Domain.

The defining trait of a fifth-stage warrior was the awakening of their domain—a manifestation of their essence, the purest form of their understanding of their own power. Every fifth-stage warrior possessed one, unique to their attunement with their elemental affinity. Fire, earth, wind, lightning—no matter the element, the principle remained the same: a domain was a space where their power reached its absolute peak while minimizing the cost of mana expenditure.

Fighting a single fifth-stage warrior within their own domain was already a daunting task.

Fighting thousands of them at once?

It was an impossible battle.

Zephyr's confidence in this fact did not stem from arrogance or blind faith. It came from history—proven history.

His father had once conducted an experiment, a simple test that yielded results so overwhelming that it had solidified this truth in Zephyr's mind forever. In that test, five thousand fifth-stage warriors from the Ember Clan gathered in unison and activated their domains at the same time.

What manifested was not just overlapping fields of fire.

It was an entirely different world.

Normally, when two fifth-stage warriors clashed, their domains would battle for supremacy. If they were evenly matched, their domains would either coexist in a fragile balance or merge slightly in chaotic, unstable ways.

But what happened that day was something else entirely.

The Ember Clan's cursed gift was fire—an element that was not just wielded, but deeply ingrained into their very being. It was not something they learned or tamed; it was something they were. Each of the 5,000 Ember Clan warriors who took part in the experiment had domains fundamentally built from fire, the only real difference lying in their understanding of its nature.

Domains, by their very nature, were not vast. A newly awakened fifth-stage warrior's domain was only slightly larger than the size of a room, growing steadily as their strength and control expanded. At the peak of the fifth stage, a domain could reach its absolute limit, stretching only as far as the wielder's mana allowed.

But what happened when 5,000 fire-aligned domains were superimposed onto each other?

The answer was simple—a world of fire.

It was not merely an inferno that burned everything indiscriminately—it was an entire realm where fire existed in many forms, carrying different meanings for different warriors.

In one part of the battlefield, golden flames surged forward in roaring waves, consuming enemy attacks before they could even land. Elsewhere, deep crimson embers lingered in the air, their heat sharpening the minds and reflexes of those who fought within them. A pale blue fire raged cold as ice, slowing movement and numbing limbs, while flickering green flames clung to wounded warriors, sealing their injuries shut instead of burning them further. There was no ground, no sky, no air—only a plane of pure fire, stretching as far as the combined mana of 5,000 warriors allowed. A true realm of flames, where anything that entered would be reduced to ash before it could even take its next breath.

This was why Zephyr had no doubts about the outcome of a battle between the cursed clan and the normal apeling army. Even with 7,000 fifth-stage warriors among the normal apelings, the result would remain unchanged.

The difference lay in unity.

If those 7,000 warriors attempted to do the same—if they tried to merge their domains—they could. But the result would not be the same. The sheer variety of elemental affinities among them would cause their combined realm to be muddled, unstable, and nowhere near as devastating. Fire, water, earth,

lightning, wind—all these forces would exist in the same space, but they would not enhance each other. They would conflict.

Instead of a seamless realm, their domains would collide and resist one another. Some elements would neutralize each other, some would struggle for dominance, and in the end, their combined realm would be nothing more than an unstable mess of competing forces.

Of course, this was not a technique that could be used carelessly. The sheer amount of mana required to sustain such a vast and unified domain meant that it could only serve as a final trump card—one deployed to ensure a swift, decisive victory. Even the most elite of the cursed warriors could not maintain it for long without exhausting themselves.

Yet, to deny the current strength of the apeling kingdom would be foolish. Their power was undeniable, and their military structure was formidable. However, strength alone was not enough. Strength had to be cultivated.

And if there was one truth Zephyr knew well, it was this: complacency is the first step toward decline.

The humans, despite their shorter lifespans, were relentless in their pursuit of progress. Their numbers were vast, their ambition unyielding. They were always advancing, always innovating, their societies driven by an insatiable hunger for more—more knowledge, more strength, more influence. Even now, the gap between them and the apeling race was beginning to shrink.

Chapter 486:

If the apelings allowed themselves to grow comfortable, to rest upon the laurels of their past victories, it was only a matter of time before they were overtaken. Outgrown.

As for how to deal with this, it requires the inclusion of other godling races.

The heavy silence of the throne room was disturbed as the grand doors creaked open, revealing the arrival of an apeling—a member of the Ripple Clan. The creature moved with a fluid, almost ghostlike grace, its sleek fur catching the dim light, with its robe trailing behind. It stepped forward with a deep bow, pressing a fist against its chest in deference.

"There is a call request from the wolves, my king," the apeling announced in a measured tone, its voice carrying an air of urgency.

Seated atop his throne, Zephyr's expression shifted from mild confusion to concern. His fingers, which had been absently tracing the cover of an old tome, stilled. His mischievous eyes flickered with realization as he abruptly rose to his feet.

"What day was my sister's wedding?" he asked, his voice edged with tension.

The apeling hesitated for the briefest moment before replying, "I believe it is two months from today, my king."

Zephyr exhaled slowly, relief washing over him. At least he had not missed something of paramount importance. However, his brows furrowed once more as suspicion took hold.

"Then why are they calling now?"

He waved a dismissive hand, signaling the apeling to take its leave. As the servant withdrew, Zephyr turned his attention back to his surroundings. His throne was surrounded by scattered books, scrolls, and aged parchments—fragments of knowledge he had been immersing himself in. With a casual flick of his wrist, the collection vanished into the depths of his storage ring, leaving the chamber pristine once more.

Before him, the air shimmered, and a large, ornate mirror materialized in midair. Zephyr straightened his posture, smoothing his robes and composing himself. His reflection stared back at him, regal and composed, though a flicker of curiosity still burned in his gaze.

This call comes at an interesting time... he mused. I, too, have matters to discuss with Wulv.

He reached out with his mind, flexing his will, and the mirror pulsed in response. The polished surface rippled like disturbed water before stabilizing. But just as he expected to see Wulv's visage staring back at him, the mirror split.

Zephyr's breath hitched as the reflective surface divided into four separate mirrors, branching out like the limbs of a great tree. His gaze darted across them, taking in the unexpected company.

The first mirror showed Drowz, the son of Tide. His silver-blue skin glowed faintly under the ambient light, and his oceanic eyes carried the calm patience of the tides themselves. Zephyr had dealt with him before—he was calculated and deliberate, much like his father.

The second mirror revealed Kael, grandson of Ursula. Zephyr knew little of him, except that he had risen through the ranks with a meteoric speed, proving himself capable enough to claim the throne after Ursula's ascension. The young ruler's demeanor was unreadable, his gaze sharp and searching, assessing Zephyr just as much as Zephyr assessed him.

In the third mirror stood Raina, second daughter of Flowua. Her glistening, pale skin and piercing green eyes made her look every bit the daughter of the great Flowua. She was known for her fierce spirit, and willingness to go against the norm.

And finally, in the last mirror, stood the one Zephyr had anticipated most—Wulv. His powerful frame, draped in the ceremonial furs of his people, exuded an aura of authority. His deep blue eyes, with a twinkle of a star, locked onto Zephyr's with the weight of unspoken words.

Something had brought these four rulers together, and Zephyr was determined to find out why.

With a steady breath, he composed himself and spoke.

"This is quite the gathering," he remarked, his voice cool and collected. "I take it this is no ordinary conversation."

A heavy silence settled between them, weighted by an unspoken awkwardness. Unlike their parents, who had long maintained diplomatic ties and occasional alliances, this new generation of rulers had shared little direct contact with one another. There was an unspoken challenge in their gazes, a quiet testing of strengths and intentions.

Wulv was the first to break the tension, clearing his throat before addressing them.

"Greetings, everyone," he said, his deep voice carrying both authority and sincerity. "I apologize for the sudden call, but I felt this was a matter that needed to be addressed immediately."

The others gave small nods in response, indicating they had no objections. Wulv took this as a sign to continue, his expression remaining serious.

"This issue does not directly concern my region," he admitted, his gaze sweeping across the gathered leaders, "and yet, it has somehow found its way into my lands."

A shift in energy coursed through the group, subtle but noticeable. The mention of an external force infiltrating Wulv's domain was enough to command their full attention. Then, Wulv's sharp eyes landed on Kael.

"Do you know the name Krogan?" he asked, his voice even but carrying weight.

Kael's expression remained neutral, but his eyes flickered with recognition. He glanced away from the mirror briefly, his mind drawn into the throne he was sitting on which triggered one of its abilities, as it pulled up a record, sifting through the vast knowledge stored within the records. A brief pause stretched between them before he finally spoke.

"Records indicate that the name belongs to a being from the Cursed Lands," Kael stated, his voice carefully measured.

A ripple of unease passed through the gathering at the mention of that accursed territory—a place that should have been forgotten.

Wulv remained unfazed. "Why the sudden interest?" Kael questioned, his light red eyes locking onto Wulv's through the mirror. "There has been no recorded movement from the Cursed Lands."

Wulv let out a slow exhale, his jaw tightening slightly. "If there was no movement," he said bluntly, "then there would be no need for this call."

Kael did not bristle at the statement. He merely regarded Wulv with calm calculation before responding.

"We possess no deep research or insight into the happenings within the Cursed Lands," he admitted. "The former queen reached an agreement with this Krogan figure long ago. As far as our records indicate, that agreement still stands." His tone remained steady. "As I said before—there has been no movement from the Cursed Lands."

The silence that followed was thick, brimming with unspoken thoughts and speculation.

Sensing the rising tension, Raina chose that moment to interject, her voice carrying a calming yet firm presence.

"Let's not allow this to escalate unnecessarily," she said, her green eyes moving between Wulv and Kael. "Wulv, please—tell us exactly what it is you have noticed."

The gathering stilled, all eyes turning to Wulv, awaiting the revelation that had brought them all together.

Wulv's gaze flickered toward Zephyr for a brief moment before he raised a hand, summoning an image before them. The air shimmered, and a figure materialized—a shadowed silhouette standing against an eerie backdrop.

"Zirikon," Wulv announced.

The gathered rulers turned their attention to the image, their eyes briefly darting toward Zephyr, as if expecting recognition. Zephyr, however, merely narrowed his gaze, scrutinizing the figure. After a moment, he shook his head.

"No connection," he stated simply.

The others exchanged glances before offering small nods. As godlings, they each had their own methods of distinguishing beings of significance, be it through divine resonance, spiritual lineage, or sheer instinct. If Zephyr claimed there was no connection, they would take his word for it.

Wulv acknowledged Zephyr's verdict with a curt nod before continuing.

"This figure goes by the name Zirikon," he explained, his tone even yet carrying a sense of weight. "He appeared on the Northern continent a day ago."

The statement alone was enough to stir intrigue. It was no small matter when an unknown entity emerged in a godling's territory, particularly one bearing a name that had ties to the Cursed Lands.

"He came in the name of Krogan, declaring him as his lord," Wulv continued. His voice remained steady, but the implication of his words sent ripples of unease through the group. "His target was this."

With a subtle gesture of his hand, another image materialized beside Zirikon's—a holographic projection of the Mammoth Beast King.

The towering creature loomed within the projection, its massive frame exuding both primal strength and an ancient, unknowable presence.

Wulv pointed at the image, his expression unreadable. "This is one of the many Beast Kings that roam the Northern Continent," he stated. "Nothing exceptional has been recorded about this one in particular... except for a trait they all share."

His eyes swept over the gathered rulers before he spoke again.

"They each possess what we call 'Weird Unknown Talents.'"

The phrase lingered in the air, vague yet ominous in its implications.

"From my observations, the ability exhibited by this particular Beast King appears to be a form of erasure," Wulv continued, his voice lower now, more measured. "The full extent of its power remains unknown, but..."

He waved a hand once more, and the image shifted. The holographic projection dissolved, replaced by a panoramic display of a devastated landscape.

Chapter 487:

A vast field stretched out before them, cleared and sunken, the land severed with unnaturally sharp edges. The sight was unnatural, the destruction too precise, too absolute, as if reality itself had been carved away.

A heavy silence followed, the gathered rulers absorbing the implications of what they were seeing.

Wulv's gaze lingered on the image before he finally turned back to the others.

"This," he said, "is the aftermath of the Beast King using its talent."

No one spoke immediately. There was no need—what lay before them was already unsettling enough.

The image of Zirikon shifted, seamlessly merging into the newly displayed scene. The gathered rulers watched as the projection now depicted a golden portal standing ominously behind him, shimmering like liquid gold against the backdrop of the cleared-out field.

Wulv's expression darkened as he raised a hand, gesturing toward the portal.

"This," he stated, "is evidence that Krogan—and this Zirikon figure—possess a teleportation technology."

His voice was measured, but the weight of his words was undeniable. The air in the room grew heavier as the implications sank in.

"This technology," Wulv continued, "is something we have long restricted—The Gates."

A tense silence followed. The Gates were not meant to be used freely. The godlings themselves had ensured that.

"But from my observations, this is no prototype," Wulv went on. "Even in its brief use, it was clear that this portal was fully functional. It was neither unstable nor experimental. It brought Zirikon to his target with precision and then successfully extracted both of them."

The atmosphere in the room had shifted completely.

Gone was the previous neutrality—now, every ruler present bore a look of grim seriousness.

For an outsider—especially one tied to the Cursed Lands—to possess unrestricted teleportation, bypassing barriers meant to control movement across domains, was a severe development.

Yet Wulv was not finished.

"Krogan," he continued, his voice like a blade, "has shown great interest in recruiting this Mammoth Beast King."

The words hung in the air like an ill omen.

Wulv exhaled slowly, his expression unreadable. "And unfortunately... he succeeded."

His admission sent an unspoken ripple through the gathered rulers.

"I had no choice but to let it go," he added, his tone carrying a rare note of frustration.

Even for a godling, certain situations left little room for maneuvering.

Before concluding his report, Wulv fixed his gaze on the others, his next words spoken with deliberate weight.

"Their teleportation capabilities are a serious threat. Were it not for a strange coincidence that led me to clash with their objective, I—and everyone else—would have never even known they were in my domain."

Silence.

Kael's voice broke the silence, calm but resolute.

"I understand your earlier frustration, Wulv," he said, inclining his head with sincerity. "And I would like to apologize for my oversight. It wasn't intentional."

He paused, his tone growing more somber.

"My people have long upheld the agreement with Krogan—not out of kinship, but out of respect for the strength he wields... and in deference to the former queen who brokered the accord. But in light of these recent developments, it seems we may need to reexamine that understanding."

Wulv gave a slow nod, mildly surprised by the young Kael's composed response.

He hadn't expected such measured maturity.

"Then allow me to apologize as well," Wulv said, his tone softer now. "I was too quick to point fingers at your people. I should have known—things are never that simple. There's always more at play."

Kael nodded back, the faintest smile curving his lips—not smug, but genuine, a silent show of shared understanding.

A small but meaningful crack formed in the wall of formality between them.

Seeing the moment settle, Wulv straightened slightly and addressed the room once more.

"This meeting," he said, his voice clear and deliberate, "was initiated by me—but this is not just about my territory."

He swept his gaze across the gathered rulers.

"I called you all here because I want to know—have any of you noticed anything unusual?"

A pause.

"Strange movements near your borders, disturbances in the flow of mana, beasts behaving abnormally—or more specifically..." He leaned forward slightly. "Have any of your Beast Kings gone missing?"

The gravity of the question hung thick in the air.

They all knew the implications: if Krogan was truly building something—recruiting Beast Kings under their noses—then this was no longer just a matter of Wulv's domain.

The atmosphere shifted—heavy and uncertain—as the other monarchs exchanged glances, their expressions darkening.

No one spoke at first. Not out of disregard, but because the truth was more unsettling than silence.

Beast Kings had never been a problem.

They were powerful, yes—beings to be respected, even feared—but they rarely ventured from their territories. Ancient and prideful, they ruled vast swaths of land in isolation, disinterested in the affairs of mortals unless provoked.

They existed more as legends etched into record, names passed down through generations as cautionary tales or as targets for the ambitious young.

In truth, the primary purpose Beast Kings served for most of them now was as trials. Living gauntlets for young prodigies to challenge, to test their limits against.

But that was the issue.

Their continents were vast—too vast. Even with all their resources, it was impossible to monitor every corner, every movement. And now, with Wulv's revelation about the forbidden portal technology—

That changed everything.

If a Beast King could vanish or be taken in mere moments, without warning, then what else might slip past them unseen?

The tension was palpable. Unspoken guilt clung to their silence—not from neglect, but from the realization that they may have already lost more than they knew.

Wulv, reading their troubled expressions, spoke up gently.

"You needn't force an answer," he said, his voice low but steady. "I understand how difficult it must be. Even for me—it was only because it happened so close to one of my outer territories... and by sheer chance, my people happened to be nearby when it occurred."

He folded his hands before him.

"I know how it sounds. Like we're already two steps behind. But this isn't to shame anyone."

His gaze swept across them once more, firm and resolute.

"This is a warning—and a chance. Because next time... we might not even get that."

Zephyr's expression shifted—subtle, but noticeable. A flicker of doubt passed over his features before he finally spoke, his voice laced with hesitation.

"I believe I might have something... regarding the Beast Kings within my territory," he said slowly. "Not a full picture, of course—but if something is amiss, there are those who would notice."

The others turned their attention to him, the ripple of interest breaking the tense quiet.

Drowz, observant, narrowed his eyes slightly. "You sound uncertain, Zephyr," he said. "Is it your information, or your informant?"

Zephyr gave a slight nod, exhaling through his nose. "It's not the information I doubt—it's the source. They're... peculiar." He paused for a moment, choosing his next words carefully. "Their reliability isn't the problem. It's that they don't always share what they know—especially if it conflicts with their 'principles.'"

Before anyone could probe further, Zephyr lifted a hand and continued.

"You all must have heard of them by now—the druids."

That name alone was enough to change the atmosphere once more.

The gathered monarchs tensed visibly. Not from fear—but discomfort. Unease.

A silence settled again, not of confusion but of recognition. Each of them wore the same look—darkened, as if a shadow had crept across the memory of that word.

Druids. The strange, reclusive practitioners who had emerged from eastern lands—born of a deep, mystical reverence for the God of Nature.

They claimed no allegiance to kings or borders, only to the balance of the land. And while their abilities were undeniably potent, their practices were... unpredictable. Their ideals, too rigid. Their code, immutable.

Some saw them as sages. Others, zealots.

And even among Zephyr's own people, the druids were a subject of debate—revered by some, regarded with suspicion by many.

Zephyr gave a half-smile, dry and knowing. "Judging by your expressions, I see your lands share the same... sentiments."

No one denied it.

"But eccentric or not," he added, "if there's anyone who would know of irregularities among the Beast Kings—especially those that aren't visible to our eyes—it's them."

He paused, gaze turning thoughtful.

"I'll reach out to them. But like I said—if their code deems it unworthy of interference, they won't speak. Even to me."

A moment passed. And then Zephyr looked up, his voice steady.

"Still, I think it's worth trying."

Apart from the apeling, the only other godling race known to practice the druidic faith were the merfolk. Bound by their own deep reverence for the cycles of the sea and nature's quiet wisdom, it was no surprise they found kinship in the druids' way of life.

The werewolves, in contrast, dismissed the path entirely—seeing it as a denial of instinct, of hunger, of survival. And the harpies, prideful and freedom-loving, found the idea of submitting to the will of

forests, beasts, or ancestral trees beneath them. To them, the druids' passive, symbiotic existence was shackling.

Chapter 488:

Across the continents, irritation toward the druids was not uncommon.

They were too zealous. Too... different.

It wasn't just their doctrines—it was their unwavering protectiveness of nature. The creatures that inhabited it. The wild places others sought to tame or harvest, the druids vowed to defend with their lives.

More than that, they didn't merely coexist with nature—they melded with it.

They reshaped themselves, both body and spirit, to better understand the creatures they protected. Some took on the forms of beasts—wolves, birds, reptiles—losing their humanoid shape entirely for seasons at a time. Others built their homes within the dens of wild animals, sharing space with them like family.

To outsiders, it was... unsettling.

Their bond with nature wasn't just mystical—it was deeply personal, deeply emotional.

And among the creatures most fiercely guarded by the druids were the Beast Kings.

While most of the world regarded these titanic beings as natural hazards—dangerous entities to avoid or subdue—the druids saw something far deeper. To them, the Beast Kings were ancient spirits of balance, the raw and untouched will of the world incarnate.

It was not rare for some druids to befriend a Beast King, forging bonds that exceeded even the ties they had with their own kin. Some Beast Kings even took young druids under their wing—or paw, or scale—and raised them in remote, forgotten places.

For the druids, there were no "bad" creatures. Only misunderstood ones. And for those that could speak, reason, or emote—even if only in gesture—they would rather remain silent or feign ignorance than ever be complicit in their harm.

They refused violence against nature unless absolutely necessary. Even the suggestion of it drew their scorn.

And so they stood apart.

Even from their own people.

They abstained from meat, unwilling to take the life of another creature for sustenance. Their diet consisted only of plants, fruits, and roots—often harvested in ways that wouldn't even harm the plant's life.

They were difficult, they were strange.

But they were also essential.

Because if anyone knew what the Beast Kings were doing—where they were going, what they were thinking—it would be them.

And that, perhaps, made their silence the most frustrating thing of all.

"I'll be bringing one of them into this meeting," Zephyr said, his voice calm but tinged with uncertainty. As he waved his hand, the enchanted mirror branched into another pane, its surface swirling as it attempted to establish a connection.

The other kings and queens sat in patient silence, though some shifted slightly in their seats, their expressions mixed between curiosity and skepticism. Moments passed. Then, the mirror flickered.

The call was answered.

A druid appeared.

Or rather... something resembling a druid.

The brows of the gathered rulers collectively furrowed. Even Zephyr, who initiated the call, now had a hand over his face, half-shielding his expression in secondhand embarrassment.

What stared back at them through the mirror was a massive white tiger, easily the size of a carriage, lounging lazily on what appeared to be a bed of moss. A single horn curled elegantly from the side of its head. Its fur shimmered slightly in the light—clearly not an ordinary beast, but a druid in one of their many animal forms.

That alone wasn't the issue.

The issue was the object it was cradling between its massive paws.

"...Is that catnip?" Raina asked, her voice flat with disbelief.

The tiger-druid gave the leafy bundle a slow, appreciative sniff, eyes glazed over in bliss. It blinked at the gathered rulers with the unfocused contentment of someone interrupted mid-dream.

Wulv's composure cracked for a fraction of a second. A brief grin tugged at the corner of his mouth, and though he tried to hide it, the slight shake of his shoulders gave him away.

The druid finally stirred, stretching lazily before flopping back down with a yawn. "Mmm... who's calling...?" it asked, voice thick and dreamy, like it had just woken from a week-long nap.

Zephyr sighed audibly, muttering something under his breath about regretting his choices.

The other kings exchanged looks—equal parts baffled and amused.

Zephyr's eye twitched.

He inhaled deeply, as if summoning every ounce of restraint he had left. "It's me, Zephyr," he said through gritted teeth, "and in case you haven't noticed... there are others on this call."

The druid paused, mid-sniff. Its glassy eyes blinked slowly. There was a brief moment of lucidity, just enough to process Zephyr's words. The paw holding the catnip hesitated. And then—with all the deliberate grace of a misbehaving child—it drew the herb to its nose and inhaled deeply once again.

Its body gave a sudden shudder as the catnip hit.

"...Oh," was the druid's only response. Monotone. Detached. Unbothered.

Zephyr could no longer contain himself. With a sharp slam, he struck the armrest of his chair and shot to his feet.

"You're a fifth-stage powerhouse!" he bellowed, pointing an accusatory finger at the mirror. "Act like it! Stop embarrassing me in front of the others!"

The druid blinked lazily at him, its long pink tongue briefly flicking out to lick its lips before tilting its head ever so slightly, as if trying to comprehend the outburst.

Zephyr's face reddened, his composure unraveling by the second.

Sensing the rising tension, Kael quickly stepped in with a small laugh. "We still have questions to ask," he said, his tone laced with amusement. "Zephyr, calm yourself—your blood pressure's climbing higher than your title."

The other kings murmured in agreement, some clearly struggling to hide their own smirks. Even Wulv's stony expression twitched at the corners.

Zephyr, fists clenched at his sides, slowly sat back down—muttering under his breath and shooting the druid a murderous glare.

The druid simply rolled onto its back, paws in the air, utterly unbothered.

Zephyr exhaled slowly, regaining a semblance of composure as he sank back into his seat.

"Have there been any changes with the Beast Kings on your side?" he asked, voice steadier now. "Any strange movement or behavior?"

The druid, still sprawled on its back in tiger form, scratched at its twitching nose with a claw. "They're doing great," it said casually. "We had an amazing party about a week ago."

The room fell into stunned silence.

The druid's ears twitched as a thought seemed to surface. "Oh right," it added. "Now that you mention it, a few of the Beast Kings did say something about being visited by some beautiful snake woman... made them offers, or something? Forgot what it was. Anyway, the party was great. You should all come next time. Good vibes."

Kael, eyes narrowing, waved his hand, casting an image into the shared mirror. It showed a towering serpentine figure—an enormous snake coiled around a mountain, its upper half distinctly feminine and draped in silken scales.

"Did she look like this?" Kael asked.

The druid blinked lazily, then squinted at the image. "Yeah, yeah. I think that's her. Lucky bastards, honestly. How come I never get visited by women like that?"

Before another word could be spoken, Zephyr's eye twitched violently.

With a swift wave of his hand, the druid vanished from the call.

Silence returned—thick, awkward, and oddly tinged with secondhand embarrassment.

Zephyr tried to maintain a composed, serious expression as he turned to Kael. "How did you get your hands on the image of the snake woman?" he asked, voice tight with suspicion.

Kael, unfazed, gave a nod and raised a hand. A soft pulse of light shimmered from his throne, casting a brief glow across its surface. A moment later, several new images floated into the shared mirror, slowly spreading out like cards on a table for all to see.

"These," Kael began, his tone somber, "are the few images we've recovered from my people last visit and appearance into the Cursed Lands. What you see here... are believed to be its rulers."

The first image to expand depicted a massive beast—its frame hulking and covered in dense, golden fur. Wulv's eyes narrowed. "Zirikon," he muttered, recognizing the creature immediately. Only this time, he wasn't in the humanoid form Wulv had seen him in. Here, he was fully bestial—a colossal, gorilla-like figure with glowing gold in his fur, and a dreadful rage in his gaze.

"Unbelievable," Wulv added grimly, the image in front of him could hardly compare to the composure the Zirikon he met had.

Kael nodded and waved again, prompting the mirror to shift focus. Another image enlarged—this one showed a demonized leopard, lean yet monstrous, its fur blackened with ash, eyes glowing with an eerie purple hue.

"This," Kael said, "is the one we suspect to be Krogan. The same Krogan who once came to terms with our former queen. The image was captured the day she chased a figure into the cursed lands—her figure seen high in the sky with the Phoenix of Flame, Ursula, circling above."

The visual showed a scorched sky, lit with ethereal fire, a majestic flaming bird hovering behind a female figure draped in regal armor. The very air in the image seemed to hum with divine energy.

Kael's voice dropped slightly as he continued. "When Wulv mentioned a golden gorilla before, I thought perhaps it was a coincidence... or maybe a rogue beast king. But with the recent confirmation of a serpentine visitor—the one Zephyr's druid spoke of—my doubts have only deepened."

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He gestured to the image of the towering snake coiled around a mountain, its gaze directed downward with an unnerving serenity. The image pulsed faintly, emphasizing her importance.

"Their appearances aren't random," Kael said firmly, now turning his eyes toward the rest of the kings and queens. "A pattern is forming. A collection. Beast Kings and ancient creatures—once isolated and disinterested in world affairs—are aligning. And all signs point to Krogan as the one binding them together."

Silence fell over the gathering, the weight of Kael's words settling into the chamber like fog.

"They're gathering rulers," Wulv said at last. "Monsters. Powers we thought would never be an issue."

"And soon," Zephyr added quietly, "they may not just be ruling the Cursed Land. They may be coming for the rest of us."

Drowz and Raina, who had remained noticeably quiet since the druid's revelation, finally stirred.

Drowz was the first to break the silence, his voice low and thoughtful as he turned to Kael.

"How big is the Cursed Land?" he asked, his brows furrowed. "And is there a large body of water there? Something vast enough that the sea beasts wouldn't feel... cramped?"

Before Kael could even draw breath to answer, Wulv interjected with a calm voice and an apologizing gaze directed at Kael.

"Ah—right. That might've slipped my mind earlier, but... they have a way to shrink the massive forms of the Beast Kings. Temporarily, I think. Just enough to move them safely without drawing attention or causing them pain."

A murmur rippled through the group, but it quickly died down as Raina finally spoke up, her tone edged with unease.

"The sister-druids among my people... they've just updated me. Said some of the Beast Kings have gone missing on their side too."

That earned everyone's attention.

A heavy silence fell over the group, thicker than before. It was Drowz who cut through it once more, his tone calm, but layered with a quiet insistence.

"Maybe... maybe we're looking at this all wrong. From what we've seen, from the actions we've gathered—this Krogan, he doesn't strike me as someone eager for war."

He looked around, letting his words settle in the air "He avoids conflict when he can. Moves quietly. Doesn't take by force unless he has no other choice."

Raina nodded in agreement, her gaze distant but firm "I couldn't agree more. He managed to enter our lands, took what he needed, and left without causing a single incident. Even after we rejected him—he didn't lash out. No threats. No ultimatums."

She paused, then added with emphasis, "And the Beast Kings who chose to follow him? They weren't coerced. They went willingly. That alone should be enough to shift our perspective."

Drowz leaned back slightly, his fingers steepled in thought "Instead of bracing for an invasion... maybe we should be asking: what did he offer them? What vision, what promise, could make them leave everything they knew behind to follow him into a cursed land?"

Kael raised his hand, steady and deliberate, commanding attention without force.

"I am in agreement that we approach this differently."

Wulv and Zephyr exchanged a glance—brief, but weighted. Their silence spoke volumes: uncertainty, perhaps pride, but ultimately, reason prevailed. It was three voices now aligned in purpose—Kael, Drowz, Raina. The tide was shifting.

With a reluctant sigh, Wulv rubbed his temples and muttered, "So how do we go about this? We have no other information on the workings of the Cursed Lands. That means no frame of reference. No base for insight."

Kael nodded solemnly "You're right. That lack of knowledge is our greatest weakness—and I have an idea to make that no longer an issue. But it will require cooperation from all of us."

Zephyr raised a brow, intrigued. "And what exactly are you proposing?"

Kael looked around the circle, meeting each pair of eyes with quiet intensity. "A joint expedition. A team, carefully selected and sponsored by each of us—leaders, scholars, and voices from every walk of our society. Researchers, diplomats, healers, warriors... and if possible, druids."

He paused, letting the idea settle in before continuing. "They will venture into the Cursed Lands—not as invaders, not as spies, but as seekers. Their mission will be to observe, learn, and if fate allows, establish peaceful contact."

Drowz leaned forward, hands folded, his tone cautious but not dismissive. "You want a council-backed delegation. One that carries the weight of our nations, but not our weapons."

Kael nodded. "Exactly. If Krogan is as we now suspect—a leader, not a tyrant—then communication may be possible. And if so, then perhaps we don't stand at the brink of war, but at the edge of diplomacy."

Zephyr frowned, still thoughtful, but the fire in his voice had cooled.

"It's a gamble. We don't know how far gone the Cursed Lands are. Or what kind of order, if any, Krogan has managed to form."

"And that," Raina said gently, "is why we must find out. Speculation leads to fear. Fear leads to conflict. If we can replace that with understanding, we might avoid something worse."

Wulv exhaled deeply, then finally gave a nod. "Alright. I'll lend some of my best for this team. But I want regular reports. If things start looking dangerous, we pull them out. Agreed?"

Kael offered a hand in solidarity. "Agreed. This isn't a leap of blind trust. It's a step forward—with our eyes open."

As hands were raised and met with silent affirmations around the room, there was a quiet sense that something rare was happening.

That was the end of the meeting, each went on their day with something new. Zephyr meanwhile remembered he had something he wanted to bring up.

He soon shook his head, his issue was more about the future and Krogan issue was something ongoing, it won't be too late to hold a call for him to bring up the issue.

On the southern continent, far beyond the reach and watchful eye of the Empire, a new civilization had begun to blossom—one that thrived in seclusion, rooted in philosophies and traditions wholly alien to the imperium's rigid doctrines. It was a land unclaimed by imperial banners, untouched by their laws, and, for now, unconcerned with the Empire's. The people here prayed to the old gods unlike the empire, nor did they speak the tongue of the south. They now also have a whispered songs in a language still shaping itself in the mouths of poets.

At the heart of one such land, deep within an ancient, mist-laden forest where the sunlight filtered in silver strands through a ceiling of gnarled branches, stood an old castle that gave the opposite feeling like it was new, exuding an eerie majesty, its stones pulsed with magic. Few dared approach it. The forest guarded it jealously—twisting the paths, silencing birdsong, and letting no beast if there was any, stray too close.

Within the highest tower of this forgotten stronghold, nestled between shelves filled with tomes bound in skin and inked in languages long dead, a tall figure sat alone in a vast circular library. He could easily be mistaken for a giant at first glance—tall, broad-shouldered, his presence unnatural and too still, like a

statue left behind by some long-departed god. A dark robe cloaked his frame, woven with runes that shimmered faintly in the low candlelight.

Beside him sat a delicate white table, its surface perfectly clean and unmarked despite the dust that lay thick upon everything else in the room. Atop it rested a pristine porcelain tea set, almost dainty in contrast to the figure's grave stillness. In the cup was a drink so dark and rich a red it could be mistaken for fresh blood—thick and slow, it clung to the rim like it resisted being parted.

The figure, engrossed in a tome with no title, slowly reached out with long, pale fingers and lifted the cup to lips that bore the faint glint of fangs—elegant, bestial. As he drank, his eyes shimmered—two glowing rubies in the gloom—before dimming once more as the cup returned to its saucer with a soft chime.

This was Roth. Once hailed among the pantheon of mortal-born demigods, now the last of his kind to remain tethered to the world below. His people now called him many things: the Blood God, the Ancestor, the Progenitor. But to his children—those he birthed not from womb or forge, but from magic, curse, and will—he was simply Father.

Two decades had passed since the last demigods had ascended, shedding their mortal shells to claim the stars. Roth alone had resisted the pull. He had turned away from the gates of divinity, sealing his fate on the mortal plane for the sake of his creation—a new race unlike any the world had known. The Vampires.

They were still young, by his reckoning. Fragile in some ways, yet brilliant. In them, he saw something with the potential to grow. Not just power, but will. Purpose. The hunger that drove them was not just for blood, but for place, for meaning, for a home. In them, he poured not only his strength, but his hopes, his frustrations, his loneliness.

He sipped again, tasting not just blood but memory—remnants of lives long extinguished, mingling with the quiet warmth of his solitude.

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The passing years were not idle for Roth. Though time meant little to him now, its slow rhythm brought a quiet kind of fulfillment. His people—his children—were thriving. From the seed he had planted, a race had flourished, and what had begun as an experiment born of defiance now stood as a civilization in its own right.

What pleased him most, however, were not the numbers, nor the growing reach of their culture. It was the emergence of the hybrids—those born of vampire and human blood, beings who retained the strength, longevity, and instincts of their full-blooded kin, yet walked freely beneath the sun. These were not mere anomalies. They were, in many ways, a refinement—what many began to call the perfected kind. They represented a future unshackled by the ancient weaknesses of vampirism. To Roth, they were both blessing and omen.

Beyond the veil of mist that clung eternally to the old forest, these hybrids had built a city—elegant, cunning in design, harmonized with the wilderness yet radiant with ambition. Towers of dark stone crowned with copper roofs pierced the clouds. Aqueducts carried water laced with blood and wine. Markets bustled at dusk, and lanterns of colored glass lit the streets by night. Their culture was their own—echoes of the old empire could still be heard in their accents and rituals, but their identity was wholly new.

Meanwhile, the misted forest remained sacred. It was the cradle of their beginning and the last true haven for the full-blooded vampires—those for whom the sun was still death, not warmth. They lived in the twilight beneath the trees, in quiet groves and deep burrows beneath the roots, forming a society of their own. They revered Roth not just as their progenitor, but as a living myth—half-forgotten by the younger generations, remembered only in song and symbol. Few had seen him in recent years.

And that was no accident.

As the decades passed, Roth found himself drifting ever further from the civilization he had nurtured. Their councils, their disputes, their hunger for expansion and innovation—all of it began to feel hollow. Mortal concerns. No longer his. Their voices, once vibrant to his ears, grew dim and distant. He listened less, watched from afar, and in time, even his direct guidance ceased.

He might have ascended then, joining the others beyond the veil of mortality, claiming his rightful place among the divine. Yet he lingered. Not out of doubt in his people's future—but because of Murmur.

He had not forgotten the continent in which he had made his claim.

Though his people now thrived, Roth could not shake the unease that curled in his chest like cold smoke. Their success, their unchecked growth so far—it was too easy. Too... allowed.

The land they had made their home, this southern continent so rich in mana and unguarded by the Empire's long reach, did not belong to him. It belonged, in spirit if not in claim, to Murmur—a being of mystery and madness enough to challenge the origin gods, whose dominion touched the shadows between thoughts. Roth had expected resistance, a reckoning, a price. But none had come.

Not a whisper. Not a sign.

This, more than anything, unsettled him.

Was Murmur watching? Waiting? Did the demon truly care nothing for the creeping civilization forming beneath his gaze? Or was this the quiet before something far worse?

So Roth had hidden himself away, allowing rumor and legend to paint him as a god long ascended. In truth, he lingered in stillness, watching from his tower, his presence a shadow behind the mist. He hoped that by playing the part of the vanished deity, he might coax a reaction. That Murmur, mistaking Roth's absence for departure, might make a move, reveal something—anything.

But nothing came. Years passed. The hybrids built temples. The full-bloods retreated further into their traditions. And Murmur, if he still watched, did so in silence.

Still, Roth waited.

Still, he listened.

And though he told no one—he feared the silence more than he ever feared the storm.

Roth was drawn from his thoughts by the soft creak of the library doors swinging open—a sound that rarely interrupted his solitude. What followed was a distinct, unnatural noise: a metallic ting, sharp and rhythmic, echoing through the silent chamber with each step. It was not the sound of ordinary footsteps, but something heavier, deliberate, almost ceremonial.

He did not look up at first. The scent was familiar. The presence even more so. He knew who it was before the figure even crossed the threshold.

The steps drew closer, stopping just beyond the pool of lamplight that illuminated the white table where Roth sat with his book and cup of thick red liquid. The silence that followed was not hesitant, nor respectful. It was confident—deliberate, even.

Finally, Roth lifted his gaze.

Before him stood Ethan.

No longer the youthful, wide-eyed boy who once called him Father with reverence and fear. Gone was the eager apprentice, the child who used to bow his head and lower his eyes in Roth's presence. What stood before him now was something else—taller than most men by far, nearly reaching three meters, with a posture that spoke of experience hard-earned and strength carefully measured.

Ethan's body bore the signs of transformation—of uncontrolled potential forced into shape by sheer will. Veins of blood-red crystal lined his limbs, glimmering in the low light like living armor. The growth had begun in his adolescence, a consequence of his gift being too potent for his mortal frame. The crystal had formed as a mutation, a defense mechanism. A prison. A power source. No one knew for certain. Least of all Ethan himself.

The crystalline structures encased his feet and shins like armored greaves, explaining the sharp ting that followed him wherever he walked. They cracked slightly with each motion, but never broke—constantly growing, constantly reforming. They had become as much a part of him as his name.

Yet it was not Ethan's size, nor his mutation, that gave Roth pause. It was the gaze.

He no longer bowed.

He no longer flinched beneath Roth's crimson stare.

Instead, he met it with one of his own—cold, unwavering, sharp as a blade yet hollow in a way that made Roth feel, for a brief moment, as though he were the one being judged.

The boy had changed.

Roth had watched it happen, slowly, inevitably. Years of leadership, and the burden of being the first—the original—had forged Ethan into something other than what Roth had intended. He had inherited the first blood, the purest strand of Roth's own power, and with it came expectations, praise, fear... and a creeping distance.

There were days Roth wondered if Ethan even realized the change within himself.

How his voice had grown quieter, colder.

How the weight of command had replaced the warmth of curiosity.

How his once-bright dreams had dulled into grim resolve.

This change... this coldness in Ethan's eyes... it was not unique.

It was a flaw Roth had begun to see more clearly with each passing year—a pattern, a creeping rot hidden beneath the beauty and strength of his godling race. Vampires, born of his divine blood, were not evolving into a unified people as he had once dreamed. They were fracturing.

There was too much intrigue—whispers in shadows, silent rivalries simmering beneath polite smiles, and ambitions masked behind false loyalty. Even within his inner circle, Roth could feel it: the weighing of power, the measuring of favors, the unspoken calculations of what might be possible after he was gone.

Perhaps it was the human nature in them—something his blood gift could not entirely erase. His creation had been born from mortals, after all. Their base instincts lingered beneath the surface: the hunger not just for blood, but for control, for dominance, for meaning.

They were not like the godlings of the North, or the deep-forest godlings of the east. Other divine lineages seemed to move as one—unified, directed, almost hive-like in their singular devotion to a cause, an ideal, a god.

His children? They wandered. They splintered. They whispered.

They fought each other more than they prepared for the world beyond.

And while they had not yet descended into chaos, had not yet drawn true blood from one another... Roth knew the only reason was him. His presence—his authority, his shadow—was the dam holding back the flood.

But what would happen when he finally took the next step?

What would happen when he was gone?

He could see it clearly now. The silence he once mistook for harmony was merely stillness before the storm. The factions already forming. The feuds disguised as philosophy. The future he feared was etched behind Ethan's eyes—a future where blood would run freely, not from prey, but from kin.

And what troubled Roth most was not the inevitability of it.

It was that he did not know if it was wrong.

For a race born of blood, was conflict not its natural evolution?