

Guardian gods 631

Chapter 631:

Zarvok's smile did not falter. With a flicker of will, he loosened the binds that chained their strength. Power rushed back into their veins, not as full as before, but enough to remind them who they were.

"Follow me," Zarvok commanded, turning on his heel.

Ikenga's hand found Keles's, his voice steady despite the weight pressing on them. "Where to?"

Zarvok glanced back, his expression unreadable. "To behold a sight few across existence are ever granted. And," his smile widened just slightly, "to answer the questions burning in your hearts."

With a snap of his fingers, reality itself shuddered. The air fractured like glass, and the world around them began to peel away.

Their position shifted in an instant. The palace, the streets, the kneeling masses all vanished beneath them as they now stood suspended high in the sky, this abyssal layer expanse stretching far out around them.

Ikenga's eyes narrowed as he steadied himself against the strange vertigo of being carried by Zarvok's will alone. His voice cut through the heavy silence.

"What is your plan with Rattan and his people? Why keep them alive?"

Zarvok did not answer at first. His gaze turned outward, into the distance where the abyss bent and churned like a living sea. Then, with the faintest smirk, he lifted a hand and pointed.

"For this."

Ikenga and Keles followed his gesture and their breath caught.

Far in the distance, the River Styx stretched across the horizon. That eternal current, known to thread through every abyssal layer without end, was faltering. What had once been a torrent of endless dark red waters now trickled weakly, its tides receding as if some unseen hand had begun to drain its lifeblood.

The Mother of All Demons, source of their endless birthright was withering.

Ikenga's chest tightened. He knew what this meant. He connected the pieces at once: Rattan's imprisonment, the silence of the demons, Zarvok's hesitation when told of the mages' last desperate plan. His eyes flicked back to Zarvok, who was already watching him, and nodded as though he had read the thoughts directly.

"Now you understand," Zarvok said calmly, his voice carrying the weight of inevitability. "When you spoke of the mages' final stratagem, my silence was not hesitation, but foresight. I already knew what awaited us."

With his omnipresence spread through this layer, Zarvok had seen it all: the Styx shrinking, drying, vanishing tide by tide.

"Once an abyssal layer is claimed by a Demon Lord," Zarvok continued, his tone now edged with both gravity and pride, "this is the price. The river recedes. The Mother turns her gaze elsewhere. The strength and privileges once gifted to us are stripped away. No more tides of demons, no more unending spawn to hurl at our enemies."

He lowered his hand, eyes burning faintly as he turned to them both.

"A Demon Lord bereft of the river must forge his own army. He must build his own power with his own hands. Otherwise his path ends here."

For a long moment, silence hung heavy in the abyssal sky. The Styx dwindled in the distance, its waters slipping away like sand between fingers. Below, an empire teetered on the brink, and above, Zarvok's smile returned small, sharp, and utterly certain.

"This is why, at the final moment of the battle, I began to care for losses," Zarvok said, his tone almost casual but edged with calculation. "Especially when third-stage demons and above began to die."

He pointed outward toward the vast new land now seamlessly absorbed into the abyss, its mountains and plains stitched into place as though they had never belonged elsewhere. His smile widened.

"You should already know where I am going with this. These lands, these people... they will become my new army. They will be remade a host that will follow me into conquest, to expand both their growth and mine."

Keles's voice was steady, but her eyes narrowed with sharp suspicion. "And what of Rattan? What is his purpose in all this?"

Zarvok's gaze drifted downward, toward the palace that glimmered like an obsidian heart amid the abyss. His words came measured, heavy with intent.

"Rattan is the key. He is their emperor, their leader. Their obedience to him is the stepping stone to their obedience to me. Once he has played his role, he will not be discarded. He will take up a new one. For he is a king" Zarvok's eyes sharpened, a cruel glint in them "and a king will serve his Demon Lord."

Ikenga shook his head slowly, disbelief tugging at his features. "This... this is not what I expected a Demon Lord to be."

The words seemed to amuse Zarvok more than they offended. With a sharp snap of his fingers, reality twisted once more.

Their feet now touched polished obsidian floors, cold and gleaming. Above them rose a vast hall of impossible design, its pillars carved from shadows that seemed to breathe, its walls whispering faint echoes of things never spoken aloud. They were in Zarvok's palace.

Zarvok turned, his white-suited figure stark against the abyssal throne behind him. "Tell me, then" his voice softened, but carried the weight of inevitability "what did you have in mind?"

Ikenga shrugged, though the gesture carried more weariness than defiance. "Nothing, really. But it was not this."

"Well then," Zarvok said, his playful veneer peeling away as his true posture returned sharp, commanding, absolute. "Let me educate you on what a Demon Lord is."

His voice no longer carried the teasing lilt it had moments before. Each word rang through the hall as he spoke.

"As Origin Gods, the term world consciousness should be nothing new to you."

Ikenga and Keles exchanged a glance before giving a slow, silent nod.

"Good," Zarvok continued. "Then understand this: a Demon Lord is something... similar. An existence bound to a layer, its voice, its command, its sole will. But unlike a world consciousness. static, impartial, tethered, I hold freedom. This abyss layer does not merely exist; it bends, it shapes, it obeys. I am its pulse, its mind, its authority."

He spread his hand, and as if to prove his point, the obsidian floor rippled outward like water. Pillars shifted shape, walls bent and unbent, and then all snapped back into place as if nothing had moved at all.

"Here, mountains may rise at a whim. Seas can swell or vanish in the span of a thought. Entire landscapes may shift at my leisure. And because of the difference between us" his gaze locked on them, unblinking "I can with a mere impulse deny you access to your power so long as you remain within my abyss. You are not guests here, Ikenga, Keles. You are within me."

A silence settled, thick and crushing.

Zarvok's smile did not return. "And like the layer itself, I grow. But not as I once did, neither through faith or worship, nor as mortals do, through struggle and time. I grow by conquering. By swallowing worlds. Every land absorbed becomes part of me, every soul reshaped into my army, every root and stone bound into this abyss. That is the law of a Demon Lord."

He turned then, his eyes distant, almost reverent as he recalled something older than himself.

"I told you before," he murmured, "of a being whose abyss layer stretched to the size of a universe. Entire star systems devoured, worlds upon worlds swallowed into its endless fold. They began as I do now. Small. Bound to one layer. Stripped of privilege. Forced to craft their strength by hand. Before becoming what they are, they too stood where I stand now."

His gaze snapped back to Ikenga and Keles, hard and ambitious.

"And now, I begin my ascent."

"Why go through all this?" Ikenga asked, his tone sharpened by disbelief. "As long as you remain here, in this layer your realm, you are unstoppable. No one could lay a hand on you."

Zarvok shook his head slowly, almost pitying. "No. That won't do. That would be nothing more than building my own prison and locking myself inside it. A gilded cage, perhaps, but a cage nonetheless."

He stepped closer, his voice dropping lower, heavier. "You know little of the true cosmos, Ikenga. As a Demon Lord, I not only lost the endless tide of the River Styx, but also the abyss's protection itself. If a higher being desires this realm, if they have cause to take it, then all they need do is sever the space between this layer and the abyss. And then I am left... naked. Exposed. A sovereign cut loose, with nothing shielding me but the strength I can muster for myself."

The air in the hall seemed to darken, as though his words alone bent the atmosphere around them and fluctuated with his mood.

"So while I may seem strong now, while I may appear to hold absolute dominion, power without force to defend it is an illusion. To keep this throne, I must forge strength. To grow, I must conquer. Anything less, and all I have built will be swallowed by another."

Chapter 632:

Ikenga and Keles exchanged a long look, silent understanding flashing between them. In Zarvok's plight, they saw a reflection of their own. His path was no different from theirs.

He pursued strength to preserve his realm and they fought for strength to preserve their own home.

"Why are you so willing to tell us all this?" Keles asked at last. Her voice was low but sharp, her eyes fixed on him. She had spent enough time in Zarvok's presence to know, he was not a man who parted with his truths lightly.

Zarvok turned his gaze to her. For a moment, silence stretched, broken only by the whisper of the abyssal winds curling through the palace hall. Then he spoke.

"Because I require your help," he said plainly. "And in turn, I hope we can build an alliance."

Both Ikenga and Keles stiffened, surprise flickering across their features. The idea of a Demon Lord, an ascended sovereign of the abyss asking for allies was something both has not yet entertained or thought of.

Zarvok raised his hand, and with a wave, the world bent. The palace shifted with them, rising higher, until they stood suspended in the sky. Below stretched an endless land the goblins' planet, spread out beneath their feet like a map painted across the abyssal canvas.

"It all returns," Zarvok said, "to what I told you before. The loss of the River Styx. With it, I lost the endless tide of soldiers, millions of demons born with each swell. That army is gone".

He gestured toward the goblin lands below.

"But it is not as simple as snapping fingers, the abyss, while stripping me of its gifts, also left me another one last boon. The power to create demons myself. But for demons to be forged, I require fuel."

His gaze hardened "Souls. Countless souls."

He spread his hands, as though presenting the world below them. "A Demon Lord is a farmer. And the conquered worlds are my gardens. Gardens where souls grow, are harvested, and remade. That is why I spared them. That is why I kept Rattan and his people alive. They are not fodder to be spent in a single

war, they are soil. They are seed. They will live, procreate, fight, and die within my abyss. And through them, my garden will expand, my harvest will never cease, and my demons will be born anew."

His words echoed through the palace sky, cold and matter-of-fact, as though he spoke of tending crops instead of lives.

Zarvok's eyes settled on Keles "Lady Keles," he said, his voice steady, "as a goddess of death, you should know this truth better than most, the uniqueness of souls. Souls are the only true limitation in existence. No matter how strong one becomes, no matter how vast their reach, a soul cannot simply be willed into being. It cannot be forged from nothing. Only beings like the abyss itself holds that secret."

Keles's lips pressed into a thin line. She nodded slowly, for the words struck at a wound she carried. Souls were the one mystery she had never pierced. She could guide the dead, sever the mortal thread, even usher spirits into silence but the origin of a soul, its essence and connection to death itself, remained veiled. What are souls? Where do they come from? Why do they endure? These were questions she had yet to answer.

Zarvok's voice pulled her back.

"To me," he continued, "souls are more than mysteries. They are foundations. To a Demon Lord, a soul represents talent, potential, and the ceiling of growth. A demon born from a feeble soul will claw at the dirt and rise little. But one forged from a strong soul... will climb higher, with fewer chains weighing them down."

He lifted his hand, and between his pale fingers two orbs of pale light shimmered into being, pulsing faintly with an inner rhythm. They were not mere fragments—they carried weight, history, essence.

"These," Zarvok said, almost reverently, "are the souls of sixth-tier mages I faced in battle. When I reshape them, when they are reborn as demons, their climb to kingship will not be an if, but a when. With time and resources, they will rise to Demon Kings. Only then will they strain against the boundaries of their souls."

Ikenga's eyes narrowed as he studied the spheres, but Zarvok only smiled faintly.

"After you both depart," he said, closing his hand and letting the soul-lights fade, "I have long years ahead of me, years to cultivate, to plan, to shape this abyss into fertile ground for growth. The world I have assimilated carry potential seeds, yes... but not enough. Not nearly enough." His tone hardened. "So I will force it. I will create an environment where strength is not an option, but a necessity. Where survival demands growth, and growth expands the soul's capacity. When they die and they all will, those souls will return to me, greater than they once were, and their deaths will be the fuel for my future legions."

For a moment, silence filled the high abyssal hall. The weight of Zarvok's vision got them stuck.

Ikenga's jaw tightened as Zarvok's words settled into him. Where Keles recoiled inwardly at the cold pragmatism of treating souls as fuel, Ikenga found himself against his better judgment, acknowledging the logic.

To Ikenga, it was not cruelty but clarity. He had just seen the cycle of a world, the rise and fall of a civilization, the endless spiral of conflict that demanded strength at every turn. Zarvok was not inventing a new cruelty, he was just giving structure to what had always existed.

Ikenga's eyes flicked to the vanishing soul orbs, then back to Zarvok.

"So that is your plan," he said, his tone low but even. "You would forge an abyss where struggle itself breeds the kind of souls you need. A garden of suffering to harvest stronger fruit."

Zarvok inclined his head with a faint smile, neither confirming nor denying, as though Ikenga had already spoken the truth aloud.

Ikenga let out a quiet exhale. "I will not say it is right, nor will I say it is wrong. It is. The strong demand growth to hold their place. The weak resist, and in resisting, they feed the cycle." His hand brushed absently along Keles's arm, steadying her even as his thoughts turned inward.

He understood it because it was no different from his own struggle. The gods of origin were not so far removed, they too fought for strength, to preserve their homes, their people, their place in the cosmos.

"Souls are the reason why I request for your help and alliance," Zarvok said, his voice calm but carrying the weight of inevitability. "I no longer have the resource to let demons grow in their natural way. Devouring each other's souls to advance."

His gaze drifted to the world below them, then back to Ikenga and Keles. "Now, I no longer have souls to spare. But Lady Keles does. Your world still has souls or at the very least, access to souls with potential vast enough to bring my legion strength to a whole new level" His words lingered, deliberate, probing both gods for their reactions.

Keles's lips pressed into a thin line, though she remained silent. Zarvok took her silence not as refusal, but as contemplation.

"I do not make this request without offering something of equal measure in return," he continued. "An alliance with me would mean more than words, it would mean that your world will gain access to my abyss layer's strength when you face other worlds. My armies, my dominion, my abyssal power itself all lent to you."

He spread his hands, palms upward, as if offering the vast sky itself. "When your world finally emerges into the great race of the cosmos, you will not stand alone. You will face countless realms, countless predators, each seeking to devour or assimilate your existence. In such a race, even gods stumble and fall."

Zarvok's smile returned, faint but confident. "But with my strength bound to yours, the chance of survival tilts in your favor. That is what I offer. And in turn, I ask for the only resource you possess that I cannot create nor steal souls with the potential to grow."

"With my understanding of origin gods," Zarvok said, his voice smooth as though he were reciting a truth already written in stone, "their birth world is where they hold the greatest power. And with Lady Keles... souls from other worlds serve not as her path of growth, but as curiosities, something to play with, to research, to study. Meaning there will be countless souls left scattered, drifting without purpose."

Keles's eyes narrowed at the implication, and for the first time she cut in. "I could drag those souls into my realm if I wished. I have heralds who serve this very purpose. They gather, they guide, they preserve. I do not let them go to waste."

Chapter 633:

Zarvok paused, tilting his head, his sharp gaze lingering on her. A faint, knowing smile crept onto his lips. "Indeed, you could find uses for them. And perhaps in your hands they may serve a purpose that even you have yet to uncover. But," his tone shifted, firm and steady, "their use will never surpass the strength I could bring to your world. Knowledge is one thing. Survival in the race of the cosmos is another. And only one of those will decide if your realm continues to exist."

Ikenga's eyes lingered on Zarvok for a long moment before he finally looked to Keles. He could see the tension in her jaw, the faint tightening around her eyes. She did not like this, did not like the casual way Zarvok reduced souls to fuel, to seeds for war.

Yet Ikenga's thoughts weighed differently. He isn't wrong, he admitted silently. The race of worlds was not a place for purity or sentiment. It was a contest where only strength decided who remained and who vanished. Zarvok, for all his bluntness, spoke with the voice of reality.

Keles broke the silence first, her voice spoken inwards to Ikenga to avoid Zarvok hearing it. "To bind ourselves to people like him... the very idea unsettles me. Souls are not mere coin to be traded, Ikenga. To hand them over is to hand over pieces of what I am meant to shepherd." Her gaze dropped briefly, as though searching the unseen stream of spirits always lingering at the edge of her perception. "It feels like betrayal."

Ikenga nodded slowly, but his reply carried his own unshaken pragmatism. "And yet, if his words hold truth, then refusing may be a greater betrayal to our people, to our realm."

Keles's lips parted, as if to argue, but she faltered. His reasoning was harsh, but it was not wrong.

He placed a steady hand on hers. "We do not have to decide now. But consider this, alliances are not built on trust, but on necessity. Zarvok needs us, as much as we may one day need him. That balance gives us leverage."

Keles looked back toward Zarvok, who was waiting in silence, confident in the seeds he had sown. She exhaled softly. "Leverage, yes. But it feels like playing with fire."

Ikenga's gaze hardened, fixed on the abyss lord. "Then let us be the ones holding the torch."

Ikenga finally spoke, his voice calm but measured as he met Zarvok's gaze. "We have much to consider from your words. Such a decision is not ours alone to make. It will require the voice of our siblings, their counsel, and their will together before we can arrive at an answer."

Zarvok regarded him for a long moment, then gave a slow nod. "Hearing your words brings me peace of mind," he said evenly. "So, in turn, let me make the picture clearer for you."

His posture straightened, "My aim with you is nothing extraordinary. I am not the first demon lord, nor am I the only one to rise. What I seek is the same thing all demon lords require, a channel for souls. And I can promise you this: it is not conquest alone that has filled their coffers."

He let the statement linger, watching Ikenga's eyes flicker with silent calculations.

"Understand this," Zarvok continued, his voice low but steady, "alliances with demon lords are not a rarity. They are inevitabilities. Countless worlds have already chosen the same path you now stand upon, whether in desperation or pragmatism. What I offer you is not an aberration, it is the pattern that has shaped the very cosmos you are about to enter."

Ikenga's brow furrowed, though he said nothing at first. He was piecing the puzzle together, weighing Zarvok's claim against what little he and Keles knew of the greater cosmos. If alliances with demon lords were as common as Zarvok implied, then their world was already standing on the threshold of an order they had yet to fully grasp.

Keles, however, did not share his silence. Her voice was steady, but there was an edge to it. "You make it sound as if we have no choice. That every world must eventually bow to the abyss."

Zarvok's smile sharpened, though not cruelly. "Not bow," he corrected. "Align. Choose wisely where to tie your rope before the flood sweeps through. Refuse, and another demon lord will offer the same bargain perhaps less generously, perhaps with chains instead of open hands."

Ikenga responded, his tone even but laced with iron. "And yet, it is still a choice. You offer power, yes. You offer survival, yes. But you also offer dependence. To ally with you is to bind our fate to yours. If you fall, we fall with you."

Zarvok's expression did not waver. "Just as if I stand, you stand taller than you could alone." He leaned backward slightly, his voice carrying a weight that pressed down on the chamber. "That is the gamble of all alliances. Survival is never free."

Keles looked at Ikenga, her unease still present, but she did not speak again. Ikenga gave her hand a brief squeeze, then turned back to Zarvok. "As I said, we will not decide here. But know this: if we choose to walk this path with you, it will not be as supplicants. We will not kneel. It will be as equals, or not at all."

For the first time, Zarvok's smile shifted into something that almost resembled amusement. "Then perhaps there is hope for this alliance after all."

"Now," Ikenga said, his voice carrying the weight of old bargains, "where is our original pact with the abyss? We have played our part. I believe it is time the abyss walks its own path." His eyes fixed on Zarvok with quiet authority.

Zarvok's lips curved into a knowing smile. "The abyss has already placed your goal before you. I merely stayed its hand until now, so that we might have this discussion... and time together."

With a snap of his fingers, the air before them warped, folding in on itself like glass under pressure. From that distortion appeared an orb hard, diamond-like, shaped as a perfect teardrop. Within it, multitudes of shifting lights swirled endlessly, as though entire skies had been trapped inside.

The moment Ikenga and Keles's gaze fell upon it, their divine instincts surged forth. Precognition. A vision struck them both, hazy and fragmented, like a reflection in rippling water. Neither could grasp its full truth, yet its weight was undeniable, it was a glimpse of what was to come, and it was enough.

They turned to each other, faint smiles tugging at their lips. The silence between them spoke louder than words: whatever future lay ahead, the abyss had indeed delivered.

Ikenga raised his hand, and with a thought, wood scented of cedar and resin formed, shaping itself into a box of solemn beauty. As the orb descended, it fell neatly into his palm, and he guided it into the vessel. With a quiet click, he closed the lid, sealing its light within.

Keles's gaze lingered on Zarvok, cool and unyielding. "Now," she said, her voice like tempered steel, "for the price you owe us personally."

Zarvok's smile never wavered. With another snap of his fingers, the chamber shifted. Around them appeared the entirety of what had been taken from the goblin world treasures, artifacts, relics, even living beings, all diminished in size to fit within the space. Among them, even the "Mother" sat in miniature, her presence still unsettling despite its reduced form.

Ikenga released Keles's hand, her attention immediately pulled elsewhere. She felt a tug, not her own desire, but that of the unborn child within her, resonating with one of the treasures scattered before them. Keles walked with deliberate steps toward the object.

It was a tower.

Shrunken though it was, its presence radiated with a quiet gravity. The sight of it stirred her memory, the image of the emperor, their past discussion, his words that had clung to her mind like a shadow. She reached out, and as her palm touched its surface, her hand dissolved into a swirling aperture of darkness. The tower vanished, consumed whole as it was drawn into her, claimed as her own.

Ikenga, meanwhile, did not move toward the treasures of wealth or power. His thoughts were elsewhere, on something their world lacked, something it would continue to lack unless he seized it now. His expression hardened as the word formed clearly in his mind: Technology.

"I need all their acquired knowledge on the technological system," Ikenga said, his voice firm as his eyes locked onto Zarvok.

Without hesitation, Zarvok snapped his fingers. An orb, faintly metallic in its sheen, descended into Ikenga's palm, pulsing with threads of light, an archive of centuries of thought and invention compressed into a single vessel.

"What is your last request?" Zarvok asked, his tone steady, though curiosity flickered behind his smile.

Keles turned her gaze toward Ikenga, then back to Zarvok. "We need all their knowledge concerning the workings of the Sixth Stage."

Zarvok inclined his head, as though he had expected this. Another orb materialized in the air, drifting gently into Keles's waiting hand. Its glow was heavier, darker, filled with the weight of power and understanding that could shape the fate of race to acquire god like beings.

Chapter 634:

With their treasures secured, Zarvok spread his hands. "You have what you need, and what you desire. When will you be leaving?"

"Now," Ikenga replied without pause. "We have nothing left to do here."

Keles's fingers slipped into his, grounding him. "What about Vaeghur?" she asked softly.

Ikenga's eyes turned toward Zarvok. The demon lord let out a low laugh, then snapped his hand.

From the space between shadows, Vaeghur appeared disoriented, glancing around until his eyes found Ikenga and Keles. Relief softened his features as he hurried toward them, pausing only to bow his head toward Keles's belly, a silent gesture of acknowledgment to the life within her.

"Consider him and this my gift," Zarvok said. With a flick of his wrist, a small box adorned with intricate abyssal patterns flew toward Ikenga, who caught it without breaking his gaze from the demon lord.

Ikenga studied him for a long, silent moment before closing his eyes. Keles mirrored him, and together they summoned the image of their home, their world shimmering before their inner sight. Then, with unspoken unity, they called for Nana sending out the thought, the prayer, the command that they were ready to return.

At first, nothing stirred. Then came the warmth, the overwhelming embrace, maternal, eternal. The abyss trembled as a presence vast and nurturing descended, enveloping them.

Zarvok watched as Ikenga and Keles stilled, their eyes closed as the presence wrapped around them. For a heartbeat, the demon lord caught sight of her Nana, the Mother of their world. She gazed at him as he gazed back, an exchange silent yet heavy with meaning.

And then, in a blink, they were gone. Ikenga, Keles, their mount, and the child within her are drawn out of his layer, leaving only the echo of her presence in Zarvok's mind.

Zarvok sat in silence upon the obsidian throne of his palace, the great hall around him dark and still. The shadows seemed to breathe with him, patient and waiting. At last, with the faintest flex of his will, space folded, and a figure dropped heavily before him.

Rattan.

The man hit the polished floor with a grunt, instinctively recoiling from the sudden shift in his surroundings. His head snapped around, eyes darting across the vast and terrible chamber. The suffocating weight of the palace pressed down on him a space so alien, so utterly unlike the cold stone dungeon where he had spent his last months.

But something was wrong. For a moment, he couldn't even register Zarvok's presence. His senses slid over the demon lord as though the abyss itself refused to let his mortal mind acknowledge what sat before him. And then like a curtain torn away he saw Zarvok.

The sight rooted him in place. The sheer pressure of that gaze nearly crushed the breath from his lungs.

Rattan froze, body trembling, as memories from his imprisonment rushed through him. The endless silence. The crushing solitude. The gnawing weight of guilt that had eaten at him night after night.

He had hated his guardian once. Resented the man who had guided him. Resented the one who had pushed him down a path that demanded effort, demanded responsibility, demanded growth. But in that dungeon, when there was nothing but his own thoughts, he had been forced to face the truth.

His guardian had owed him nothing. Yet he had still done everything for him, given him tools, given him direction, given him the chance to stand taller than he ever could have alone. And what had Rattan done? Thrown it away. Turned on him. Spat on the hand that had lifted him.

He remembered laughing once, bragging to the chief of how fortune had smiled on him, how he had been given everything while others were left behind. The thought made his stomach twist now. How shallow he had been. How naïve.

His hands curled into fists. He had paid for his arrogance, yes, but perhaps not enough.

This was his first time standing before Zarvok, his new master, his supposed lord. And in the demon lord's presence, Rattan felt the weight of every mistake, every regret, every weakness laid bare.

He bowed his head. He did not dare speak first.

The silence stretched. The air itself seemed to press down on Rattan's back, urging him lower, until his knees hit the cold black stone of the palace floor. He could not raise his head.

Zarvok's voice finally broke the stillness.

"You've changed."

The words rolled across the chamber, deep and measured, as though spoken by the abyss itself. Rattan flinched. He dared not answer too quickly, not knowing whether silence or speech would condemn him.

Zarvok's eyes gleamed faintly red, fixed on the kneeling ratman. "The arrogance that once clung to you like rot is gone. What remains..." he leaned forward, resting his chin upon his clawed hand, "...is regret. Perhaps even humility."

Rattan's throat was dry. He swallowed hard, his voice rasping as he forced the words out "I... was a fool."

The admission echoed weakly, as if the palace itself weighed its truth. Zarvok gave no sign of satisfaction, only watching with that still, predatory patience.

"I thought everything was mine for nothing," Rattan continued, the words pouring out now, raw and uneven. "I thought strength was owed to me. That others would lift me, carry me, and I could take pride in it. But... in that darkness... I saw it. My guardian gave me more than I deserved. And I betrayed it."

Zarvok raised a hand, halting him.

"Enough."

The single word cut through like a blade.

"You regret. That is good. But regret alone is useless." The demon lord rose from his throne, each step sending faint tremors through the ground. His presence swelled until Rattan could barely breathe. "The abyss does not need those who cling to what was lost. It requires those who will tear forward, regardless of chains of the past."

Zarvok stood before him now, towering, his shadow drowning the man. Rattan remained on his knees, trembling, but managed to lift his head enough to meet Zarvok's gaze.

The demon lord studied him for a long moment, the silence heavier than any dungeon cell. Finally, Zarvok spoke.

"Good. Regret has carved you hollow. That means I may now shape you."

Rattan frowned, unsure of what the words meant, but dared not interrupt.

"You are not to be remade as demon, Rattan," Zrvok continued, his tone sharp and deliberate. "Your soul has value, yes, but not in consumption. Your worth lies in who you are to them, your people."

He swept a hand outward, and a vast illusion shimmered into view beside them: the goblin world, its cities rising once more under the abyss's shadow, its people rebuilding in fear and in hope. Tiny figures knelt before a great palace, their eyes turned upward, waiting.

"You are their emperor," Zrvok said. "Their loyalty flows through you. If I crush you, I must break them one by one. But if I raise you, polish you, hold you high like a banner... they will bow as one. Through you, they obey me."

Rattan's lips parted, but no words came. He felt the weight of it, the truth, and the trap.

Zrvok leaned close, his eyes burning like coals. "You will sit upon the throne I give you. You will speak the words I place in your mouth. And when your people kneel, their submission is mine. That is your purpose. That is why I kept you alive."

The images of his people flickered in the air, countless faces looking to him, waiting for his command. Rattan's chest tightened. For the first time, he saw his crown not as power, but as a shackle.

Zarvok's clawed hand rested briefly on his shoulder, a gesture at once terrifying and final.

"Rise, puppet king. Your new stage awaits."

Rattan rose to his feet, not from pride but because Zarvok's hand on his shoulder made refusal impossible. His knees trembled, but he forced himself upright, staring at the illusion of his people displayed before him.

My people...

For a moment, a wild thought rose in him, defiance. To spit in this demon's face, to deny the role of puppet. He imagined declaring, I am no one's pawn. I am emperor by my own right.

But the moment the thought formed, it collapsed under its own weight. He had nothing. No strength. No army. Not even the cube, his last safeguard, his artifact, his proof of authority. Gone. Taken.

His fists clenched. Without it, what am I? Just a man stripped of everything.

His jaw tightened as Zarvok's words echoed: Rise, puppet king.

A bitter taste filled his mouth. He hated it. Hated the chains he could not see but felt tightening around his soul. But the more he searched himself for rebellion, the more he found emptiness. His body wouldn't move against Zarvok's will. Even his own anger betrayed him—hollow, without fuel.

If I defy him, I lose even the scraps I have left. If I obey, I lose myself.

The image of his people lingered in the air, countless faces, waiting. Rattan's heart twisted. He had bragged once, long ago, to the chief about being "lucky," about destiny favoring him. Now luck had abandoned him, and destiny mocked him with a crown he could not refuse.

Chapter 635:

His knees wanted to give in again, but he forced them to lock. His pride, the last fragment refused to let him crumple before Zarvok, even if only for appearances.

Inside, though, the truth burned: he had no path but the one laid before him. The demon lord owned him, body and soul.

Still, a small ember whispered in the back of his mind: Puppets can cut their strings if they find the right knife.

Zarvok, lounging with casual poise on his throne, smirked as if he had overheard every unspoken word clawing at Rattan's mind. And in truth, he had. The abyss was his ear, his eye, his hand. Nothing within its reach could be hidden from him.

"You think of knives," Zarvok said smoothly, his voice dripping with amusement. "Of rebellion. Of freedom." His crimson gaze fixed on Rattan, sharp enough to pierce through the emperor's clenched fists and hollow pride. "Good. That flame will serve me well."

Rattan's throat tightened. For an instant he thought he had been discovered in treason, that this was the moment he would be crushed like an insect. But instead, Zarvok leaned closer, almost conspiratorial.

"Understand, puppet of mine," Zarvok continued, "a hollow man cannot rule. Your people must see strength. They must see ambition, hunger, pride... even if it is borrowed pride, borrowed strength. That is how they will move where I direct them. Not as my slaves, but as your subjects."

The words wrapped around Rattan like chains of honeyed steel. He could not tell if they offered hope or tightened his prison.

Zarvok straightened, his smirk never faltering. "So let that little ember in your chest burn, Rattan. Dream your dreams of cutting strings. Aspire, rage, curse me in silence if you must. It changes nothing, because every fire you kindle becomes my stage, every dream you shape becomes my army's foundation."

With a flick of his hand, the illusion of Rattan's people shimmered brighter. They appeared kneeling before an empty throne, waiting, desperate for direction.

"Now," Zarvok said, his tone shifting from indulgent to commanding. "Step into your role. Walk to your throne, Rattan. Show them their emperor has returned."

Rattan's feet moved before he decided to move them. Each step toward the phantom throne felt like a betrayal of himself, yet Zarvok's words echoed in his mind: A hollow man cannot rule.

Back in the main world, six decades had passed since the new gods first ascended. Entire generations had been born and raised under their reign, shaping a new era of stability, innovation, and hidden conflict. In this span of time, not only had a new god ascended altering the balance of divine power once

again, but a new profession had also emerged, one tied closely to the new divinity. These changes rippled through every corner of society.

The turning point had come when the four great godling races began to notice troubling patterns. Reports filtered in of the Beast Kings, creatures who were supposed to embody primal sovereignty over their domains, vanishing one after another.

The four races gathered in council, their leaders locked in grave debate. At first, suspicion and doubt clouded their judgment, was this the work of known enemy, an unseen hand of his games, or something worse? It was only after weeks of careful scrying, scouting, and whispered exchanges with those close to the beast kings that a revelation came to light: the disappearances were orchestrated. Someone, or something, was pulling strings from the shadows, manipulating events with a precision and foresight that unsettled even the most seasoned of the godlings.

The name of the mastermind emerged "Krogan". None of the races knew the full extent of his power or intentions, but his influence was undeniable. The godlings, unwilling to plunge the world into open conflict without understanding their enemy, resolved upon a course of cautious diplomacy. Each race would send forth envoys to confront Krogan directly and discern his designs.

The decision demanded subtlety. They could not risk alerting the humans or the wider world, for the consequences of open knowledge might spark panic or worse, curiosity. Thus, the gates, those mighty shortcuts across the continents, were deliberately left untouched. To reveal their hand by using such obvious means would be too dangerous. Instead, the envoys were dispatched in silence, setting out on a long and arduous journey across land and sea.

The harpies, already on their homeground on the western continent, circled high over the dark forests and broken plains that marked the cursed land's border. For the others, the road was slower and grueling. Beasts, storms, and hostile terrain tested their resolve, but secrecy demanded patience. Two months passed before, beneath the pale silver light of the moon, the scattered envoys at last converged.

The harpies descended from the skies in the dead of night, as they joined the groundbound delegations. There was no need for speeches or delay. With tension thick in the cool night air, the assembled teams acknowledged one another with silent nods.

Without waiting for dawn, they turned their steps toward the cursed land, the realm where Krogan awaited. The team of twenty godlings, five Harpies with wings folded tight against the mist, five apelings with their sinewy frames taut with anticipation, five Mermen whose tridents and whips gleamed faintly even in the moonlight, and five Werewolves, their eyes glinting amber, stood shoulder to shoulder at the threshold of the cursed land. The mist roiled before them, thick and unnerving, carrying with it the stench of decay and the faint echoes of whispers that seemed to crawl into their ears.

Yet there was no fear in their faces. Instead, excitement burned in their eyes. To be chosen for this mission was no burden, it was an honor, a rare break from the stagnant grandeur of their kind. For godlings, true challenges had become scarce; their power, their status, their long lives had dulled the edge of adventure. But here, finally, was a calling worthy of their blood. They had volunteered without hesitation, eager for the unknown.

They exchanged glances and took their first step forward. The mist coiled around them like a living thing, swallowing their silhouettes one by one until the cursed land devoured them completely.

Far away, their leaders watched through tuned scrying pools and enchanted crystals, the sight relayed across distances through the channels. They saw their chosen disappear into the fog... and then nothing. The link snapped. The image went dark.

On his throne of blackened bronze and stormwinds, Zephyr's brows knitted in displeasure. This was not what he needed, not now, not when there are so many uncertainty. The cursed land was already treacherous, but to lose all sight the moment his people crossed its threshold? That was deliberate. Someone wanted them blind.

Zephyr's fingers drummed against the armrest of his throne, the weight of decision pressing upon him. He could not intervene directly, not without shattering the delicate balance the four races had agreed upon. But he needed sight. He needed certainty.

Before he could summon his people in charge of surveillance or press further with his will, a second message arrived, carried by the urgent gust of wind.

He froze.

The words rang through his mind like a crack of thunder: a threat, not from the western continent, but dangerously close, far too close to ignore. The cursed land and Krogan's shadow games were perilous, yes, but this... this new message carried a danger that touched his borders, his people, his throne.

Meanwhile, the group who had entered the cursed land pressed deeper, their footsteps muffled by the damp earth of a swampy forest. The air was thick, heavy with a sour stench that clung to their lungs. Around them, ancient trees twisted unnaturally, their bark weeping black sap. Vines dangled from every branch, shifting and writhing as if alive, slithering against the damp ground like serpents.

At first, the godlings kept their pace steady, their confidence unshaken. But that calm was shattered when one of the apelings felt a sudden tug. In the span of a breath, thick vines lashed around his leg and yanked him toward the murky undergrowth. His comrades spun in alarm, only to see him react with reflexive precision: a sharp wave of his hand, and a wind blade carved through the vine, splattering dark sap that hissed as it hit the soil.

The group tightened their formation after that, eyes sharp, weapons ready. No more carelessness. Every shadow seemed to hold a threat.

What unsettled them most, however, was not the forest itself, but the creatures that crawled within it. To call them "mutations" would have been too kind. These were abominations, perversions of natural form. A snake slithered across their path, but instead of scales, its body sprouted countless centipede legs that clattered against the ground in a sickening rhythm. Above them, a bird wheeled clumsily through the mist. Its body was grotesquely swollen, its wings far too small to support its bulk, yet it flew with a jerking, unnatural grace, as though forced by unseen strings.

The further they walked, the worse it became. Wolves with eyeless faces, yet noses that twitched constantly as though sniffing into their very souls. Fish that flopped through the swamp waters on crude limbs of bone, their gaping mouths filled with jagged shards that clicked together like teeth grinding in impatience.

Chapter 636:

The cursed land was not only dangerous, it was wrong. Everything breathed of a corruption that had sunk deep into its roots, twisting life into mockery.

Still, the godlings pressed on. Their excitement had not faded, though it was now mingled with unease. They exchanged nervous grins, their hearts pounding with something they would not name as fear. For this was the adventure they had sought

The deeper they went, the worse the horrors became. They heard it first before they saw it, an animal's roar that split the swampy silence. Yet it was not the roar of any beast they knew. It was jagged, broken, warped into something that sounded chillingly like a person screaming in raw agony. The sound echoed through the mist, bouncing off the crooked trees until it was impossible to tell where it had come from.

Their ears twitched, eyes scanned, but nothing emerged. The silence that followed was almost worse than the scream.

But the scream was not the true enemy here. The longer they lingered, the more they felt the mist gnaw at their thoughts. It pressed against their minds like icy fingers, whispering doubts, twisting memories, making shadows seem alive. Their training and sheer willpower as Fifth Stage godlings kept them steady, but it came at a cost.

Each step forward demanded mana to keep the corruption at bay, to shield themselves from the mist's insidious grasp. It was effective, but costly. They were burning through reserves at an alarming rate. And unlike the open world, where mana flowed freely from the atmosphere, here the air was poisoned. The ambient energy was saturated with corruption, impossible to absorb without letting the rot seep into their own bodies.

They all felt it, the slow drain, the knowledge that their strength was not infinite. This land would wear them down, piece by piece, until even the greatest of them were nothing more than prey.

"I propose we mark our current position," one of the werewolf godlings growled, his voice low but steady, his amber eyes cutting through the mist. "Trace it back once we've refilled our mana. With our speed, we'll be back in a blink. Better to return here sharp and strong than waste ourselves stumbling deeper while drained."

The others hesitated, some bristling at the suggestion. To retreat, even temporarily, felt like weakness. Yet the logic was sound. Already some of them could feel the strain creeping into their movements, the way their mental shields trembled ever so slightly against the pressure of the mist.

The apelings exchanged glances, one of them muttering, "This land doesn't fight us with claws or fangs, it wants to grind us down. Every step is part of its trap."

The Mermen warriors dipped their tridents in the murky water, leaving faint glowing sigils to mark the place, their way of agreeing silently. The Harpies, restless and sharp-eyed, scanned the skies above, though the bloated birds circling made even the sky feel unsafe.

For a brief moment, silence settled again as they considered their options. The cursed land was vast, endless. If they pressed forward now, it might swallow them whole. If they turned back, they risked losing precious time.

But then, faintly through the mist, they heard it again. The scream-roar. Closer this time.

And moving.

The second scream tore through the swamp, rattling the vines above and shaking the foul water at their feet. This time, it did not echo from afar, it was close. Too close.

The mists ahead parted just enough to reveal a hulking shadow lurching toward them. At first glance, it looked like a great stag, its antlers splitting the air like jagged black trees. But then the details bled through: its body was bloated, its fur patchy, and its legs bent at angles that no natural beast should endure. Where its eyes should have been were hollow sockets, from which the scream poured out, an endless cry of torment that scraped against their skulls.

Before they could brace, another shape burst from the swamp behind them. This one slithered and skittered all at once, a serpent's long body riddled with snapping insectoid jaws along its length, dozens of them gnashing independently, each scream harmonizing with the stag's cry in a chorus of agony. Its tail ended in a grotesque human hand, bloated and twitching, grasping at the mud as though it were drowning on land.

The godlings fell into formation instantly. Excitement still burned in their eyes, but now it was sharpened by the taste of true danger.

The werewolf who had spoken earlier let out a low growl, claws extending with a metallic scrape. "Finally," he muttered.

The Harpies fanned their wings, flames appearing in their hands, circling high to keep the creatures surrounded. The Mermen raised their tridents, water from the swamp swirling unnaturally around them, glowing faintly blue as they forced corrupted liquid to bend to their will. The apelings crouched low, muscles coiled, their control of elements gathering like a storm about to break.

The stag-abomination lowered its twisted antlers, the mist curling tighter around it, and charged forward, its scream shaking the forest. At the same time, the serpent-insect lunged from the rear, its countless mouths gnashing, the human hand at its tail clawing desperately for purchase.

The stag-abomination lunged first, its malformed legs propelling it forward in lurching bursts. Each step sank deep into the swamp, but instead of slowing, it seemed to glide unnaturally, carried by the mist itself. The hollow sockets of its eyes released another ear-splitting scream, this one so sharp that the vines overhead quivered violently, showering the swamp with black sap.

The werewolves met its charge head-on. With a thunderous growl, two of them shifted fully into their hybrid forms, their bodies swelling with muscle and fur, claws gleaming like steel. They slammed into the beast's side, raking deep gouges across its bloated hide. Black ichor spurted, sizzling on the wet ground. Yet instead of weakening, the stag bucked wildly, flinging one werewolf across the trees. The impact splintered bark, but the godling rose instantly, with excitement in his eyes.

Behind them, the serpent-insect abomination surged forward, its dozens of mouths snapping in mad unison. The apelings leapt to intercept, their movements blurring with wind-augmented speed. One flicked his wrist, and blades of compressed air sliced across the serpent's flanks, severing several of the snapping maws. They dropped into the swamp, twitching grotesquely like severed worms. But to their horror, the wounds did not bleed, fresh mouths began to bubble out of the stumps, gnashing hungrily.

"Keep cutting and it multiplies!" one apeling barked, vaulting onto a tree branch to reposition.

The Harpies descended next, their wings carving the mist as they dove. Armed with gleaming spears, they struck at the stag's skull, stabbing for its hollow sockets. One Harpy drove her weapon deep into the creature's empty eye, but instead of piercing brain matter, the spear struck a pocket of mist inside its body. A violent shockwave burst forth, flinging her back midair, her wings straining to right herself before she could hit the swamp.

The Mermen focused their efforts on the serpent. Thrusting their tridents into the muck, they drew up streams of swamp water, forcing it into serpentine whips. The corrupted liquid resisted their will, twisting like a wild animal, but their mastery bent it enough to lash around the abomination's body. With a collective heave, they pinned its slithering form in place, its human-hand tail thrashing madly.

"Now!" one of them roared.

An apeling answered. Leaping high, he spun in midair, a cyclone of flames forming around him, at the same time he was blessed by a wind spell from another apeling. With a deafening crash, he unleashed it on the restrained serpent, shredding and burning half its length into chunks. The swamp erupted with pieces of twitching flesh and wriggling maws.

But even as the godlings celebrated the strike, the mist thickened unnaturally, seeping into the torn pieces. Each severed chunk convulsed, sprouting legs, teeth, or malformed wings. The battlefield multiplied with smaller abominations, writhing forward in a swarm.

At the same time, the stag let out another scream. This one was different, lower, drawn out.

The swamp reacted. The black water began to boil, bubbles of corruption rising and bursting, releasing tendrils of vapor that slithered toward the godlings' feet.

One of the werewolves snarled, claws dripping with ichor, as the ground beneath him writhed like flesh. "The land fights with them, this whole place is alive!"

The swamp shook as the stag-abomination lowered its crooked head for another charge. This time, the werewolves met it not with claws alone but with the power of their bloodlines. One of them raised his arms to the sky, and above the mist, faint starlight pierced through. It gathered around him, coalescing into burning orbs that drifted like constellations made flesh. With a roar, he hurled them forward. Each star-strike exploded on impact, tearing holes through the stag's rotten hide, burning away its corruption with pure celestial fire. The beast howled, the scream twisting between animalistic rage and human-like agony.

Chapter 637:

The Harpies capitalized on the opening. Three dove at once, their wings whipping storms of wind that fanned into arcs of flame. Fire roared across the stag's body, clashing against the black ichor like oil against water. Another Harpy hovered above, calling lightning down with a shriek that split the night sky. The bolt struck the beast's spine, convulsing its twisted limbs and sending shockwaves through the swamp.

The serpent-insect swarmed forward again, its new mouths shrieking as they writhed toward the group. The apelings answered with elemental mastery, their bodies moving with impossible speed as they

combined strikes. One slammed his hands into the earth, spires of stone lancing upward to pin part of the creature's length. Another exhaled a burst of flame that ignited the swamp gas, setting the water's surface alight with sickly green fire. A third swept his arm in a wide arc, summoning a wave of water and then instantly freezing it, locking dozens of snapping maws in blocks of ice that shattered under the serpent's thrashing.

One of the apelings extended a hand as the vines around swarmed in wrapping and pinning the stag in place.

The final apeling lifted both arms into one a swirling orb of flame. With a shout, he hurled it into the creature's midsection. The orb detonated like a miniature storm, ripping flesh, scattering ichor, and briefly clearing the mist.

The Mermen surged forward to finish the assault. Their strength unrivaled by any land-born warrior, they heaved their tridents like spears, piercing the serpent's length and anchoring it in place. Water rose around them at their command, forming massive serpentine whips that crashed down again and again on the abomination. Each strike split its hide open further until black ichor flooded the swamp, staining it darker still.

For a moment, it seemed the godlings were unstoppable, each race's power flowing seamlessly into the others, fire feeding on wind, lightning striking through water, stone reinforcing strength. Their battle cry thundered across the cursed land, shaking even the mist itself.

And yet...

As the stag collapsed under starfire and flame, its body did not dissolve. The mist clung to it, knitting flesh back together with strands of shadow. From its torn belly, smaller malformed creatures began to crawl, mockeries of deer, wolves, and even men. The serpent, pinned and shredded, writhed with

renewed frenzy. Each severed mouth twisted into a new creature, slithering from the corpse like children birthed from nightmare.

The godlings felt the drain of mana heavier now. Even victories demanded payment in this land. Every wound they inflicted bled corruption back into the swamp, feeding the cursed cycle.

One of the Mermen spat in disgust, his trident dripping ichor. "It's endless. The land itself won't let them die."

The godlings stood amidst the ruin, their chests heaving, their weapons and claws dripping with unnatural blood. They had won the skirmish, but it did not feel like victory.

Already the mist was thickening again, wrapping around the beasts' remains. The stag's body twitched, fresh limbs pushing out of charred wounds. The serpent's severed heads twitched violently, their snapping jaws crawling toward one another, ready to reassemble.

The werewolf leader snarled, the starlight fading from his hands as he clenched them into fists. "Enough. We could keep this up for hours and the land would only give birth to more filth."

The Harpy commander swooped low, her wings still sparking faintly with lightning. She scanned the forest ahead, eyes narrowing. "If this is what greets us at the border, pressing deeper is suicide. Not without replenishing our strength."

The apelings, silent and disciplined, exchanged tense looks. Their mana reserves were fraying. Even their bodies, built for speed and endurance, felt heavier with every breath they took in this poisoned mist.

One of them knelt and pressed a hand to the swampy ground, leaving behind a glowing rune etched in elemental energy. "This will hold for a time. Our mark. We can return here once we are whole again."

They turned to leave, their bodies weary from the battle, their minds strained from resisting the mist. For a time, the swamp dragged at their feet, the vines writhing lazily as if reluctant to let them go. But then, without warning, the air changed.

The acrid stench of rot faded. The oppressive mist thinned. And before them, the cursed land dissolved into something else entirely.

Where twisted trees and writhing vines had been, there now stretched a breathtaking forest bathed in golden light. Sunbeams filtered gently through vibrant canopies, their leaves shimmering in every shade of emerald and jade. Flowers bloomed across the forest floor, glowing faintly with mana-rich pollen. Birds of radiant plumage flitted between the branches, singing soft melodies that soothed even the most frayed nerves. Deer-like creatures with crystalline antlers pranced freely, their movements elegant and pure. The very air seemed alive, thick with mana so pristine it hummed against their skin, tugging at their exhausted cores.

It was temptation incarnate.

The godlings froze, exchanging wary glances. Slowly, they turned to look behind them. The swamp remained as it was, twisted, sickened, groaning under the weight of corruption. The cursed land still writhed and festered, waiting. But ahead lay beauty. Purity. Life.

The duality of it was unnatural. Wrong.

"Do we go in... or do we go back?" a Merman asked, his voice low, though suspicion edged every syllable.

One of the apelings stepped forward, his sharp eyes narrowing as he studied the inviting scene. His hand tightened around the haft of his weapon before lowering it slightly. "This isn't a coincidence. This is Krogan's formal invitation."

The others stiffened. Their eyes flickered, unease and clarity dawning at once. Of course. It made sense.

But the implication was far more dangerous: if Krogan could twist the cursed land so completely, then he was not merely within it, he stood apart from it, dwelling in a place of his own making. A space carved and hidden, a pocket realm veiled by the corruption outside.

A female Merman lifted her hand, her eyes flashing with cool resolve. With a graceful motion, she summoned a wave of crystalline water that burst outward in a shimmering bubble, enveloping the group. The water washed over them, cleansing ichor and swamp filth from their forms. Flesh wounds healed faintly under its touch, though it was more for dignity than recovery. When the tide receded, the twenty envoys stood once more in their full majesty, wings sleek and sharp, fur brushed and gleaming, scales polished, eyes steady.

They looked every inch the chosen of their peoples, not battered warriors crawling from corruption, but dignified envoys worthy of the mission placed upon them.

Without another word, they stepped forward together.

The golden light deepened as they crossed the threshold, the air thick with pure mana that welcomed and embraced them. The forest ahead shimmered faintly, as though aware of their presence.

And as the last of them crossed over, the border behind them sealed. The cursed land was gone, replaced by Krogan's domain his pocket dimension, a world too beautiful to be real.

A world that smiled at them even as it swallowed them whole.

As the envoys emerged fully from the shimmering veil, the golden forest parted before them, revealing a figure already waiting. He stood tall, broad-shouldered, and unmistakably humanoid. His suit, immaculately tailored, gleamed faintly in the warm light, a black tie resting neatly against a crisp white shirt. A cigar smoldered at the corner of his mouth, filling the air with a rich, earthy smoke that somehow didn't mar the pristine scent of the forest.

Zirikon.

He smiled faintly, his sharp eyes sweeping over the twenty godlings with an ease that bordered on arrogance. Then, in a gesture of disarming courtesy, he placed one hand across his chest and gave a shallow bow.

"Zirikon of the Menagerie of Maw is pleased to make your acquaintance."

The envoys exchanged brief looks, then mirrored his bow, their movements measured and polite. Though tension simmered beneath the surface, all twenty wore faint smiles, acknowledging his civility.

"Please," Zirikon said smoothly, his voice rich and practiced, accompanied by a subtle gesture. "Follow me."

The godlings fell in step, some cautious, others curious. The Harpies glided silently overhead, the Apelings padded forward with sharp eyes scanning their surroundings, the Mermen walked with calm grace, and the Werewolves brought up the rear, their fur bristling faintly though their faces betrayed nothing.

"I have been asked by the King to give you a tour of our home," Zirikon continued as the cigar's ember flared. His words rolled with an almost theatrical charm, smoke trailing lazily from his lips. "Only after you have seen it for yourselves shall we discuss the purpose of your visit."

One of the Mermen broke the silence, a striking woman whose eyes gleamed like polished pearls. Her voice was gentle yet alluring, carrying the cadence of water rippling over smooth stone. "We are curious indeed. This place" she gestured gracefully to the radiant forest around them "reminds us greatly of our own homes. A place of beauty and balance."

Chapter 638:

Zirikon's sharp gaze flicked to her. He drew deeply from his cigar, the tip glowing a deep ember-red. He let the smoke escape slowly from his nose, curling into strange, shifting shapes before dissipating into the air. His smile widened, revealing a glimpse of teeth just a shade too sharp.

"Then let us begin," he said softly, eyes glinting. "There is much to show you"

The group began to walk. The air in the dimension was thick with a Familiar energy, one similar to the cursed land but unlike it's corruption, this one was more pure. A wild and untamed scent that the godlings found both exhilarating and familiar. As they moved, the landscape shifted around them, a dizzying collage of impossible habitats. The ground beneath their feet, a moment ago a lush, primeval

forest floor, became a cracked, sun-scorched earth. Towering, crystalline mountains jutted into a blood-red sky, and the silence was broken by a distant, echoing roar.

Zirikon gestured to the vast, evolving terrain. "The Menagerie is ever-changing," he explained, his voice rumbling like a low growl. "It reflects the will of its inhabitants. A beast king's domain is their manifestation. You are currently in the domain of the Mountain Lord, a beast of stone and fury."

A tremor ran through the ground, and a colossal shadow fell over them. From the peak of one of the crystalline mountains, a creature of living rock and molten obsidian began to descend, its every step a thunderous quake. The godlings watched in awe and caution on their faces.

The ground continued to shift, the crystalline mountains fading into a lush, tropical jungle teeming with bioluminescent flora. The air grew humid, heavy with the scent of damp earth and strange, sweet-smelling flowers. From the shadows, a myriad of smaller, animalistic creatures with glowing eyes watched them pass, their movements silent and swift.

"This is the domain of the Queen of Whispers," Zirikon explained, his voice softening slightly as he looked at the vibrant growth around them. "She is a beast of stealth and illusion. Her children are the Lurkers, a race of feline hunters who see and hear all within these woods. They are the eyes and ears of this dimension, a warning system for any who might try to intrude."

The merman from before, her curiosity piqued, swam gracefully in the air beside Zirikon. "So each of your kings and queens shapes their world to their own image? A truly fascinating concept."

Zirikon chuckled, the sound a low rumble. "Indeed. Their power is not just in their claws and fangs, but in their very being. The will of a beast king is the law of the land they inhabit. The Menagerie is a reflection of its inhabitants wild, primal, and ever-changing."

The Harpies exchanged wary looks. They knew domains, each godling her carried the seed of one within them. But here? Here the domains overlapped and bled together, layered into a shifting landscape that bent reality itself.

Ahead, the foliage parted as if bowing to their approach. In the clearing beyond, a great feline prowled into view, sleek, obsidian fur veined with faintly glowing cracks, its eyes like twin suns. The Jungle Sovereign. Its presence was suffocating, not in malice but sheer scale of existence.

It watched them for a long moment, tail swishing lazily, before vanishing into the undergrowth as though it had never been.

One of the Apelings exhaled, half in relief, half in awe. "So many beast kings," he muttered. "All in one place... no wonder this realm feels like it is alive."

Zirikon gave a small smile at the remark, though he didn't look back. "Alive is one way to see it," he murmured. "But I would call it awake."

As they emerged from the jungle, they were met by a vast, shimmering desert of black sand. The sun, once a blood-red orb, had split into three smaller, pulsing suns that cast long, strange shadows. Ahead, a great sand fortress rose from the dunes, carved from the solidified ash of a long-dead volcano. Patrolling its walls were humanoid figures with the heads of jackals, their forms lean and muscular.

"And here we have the domain of the Sun-Scorched Tyrant," Zirikon said, a glint in his eye. "A beast king of fire and fury. His children, the Ash-Born, are masters of desert survival and martial combat. They are the guardians of the Menagerie's heart, a fiery wall against those who seek to harm our king."

At first, the tour had a sense of wonder. The godlings followed Zirikon through the shifting lands of the Menagerie with wide eyes and curious tongues, their questions tumbling one after another. They marveled at domains of fire and jungle, stone and sand, whispering among themselves about the strange harmony of beasts and world. But as the hours passed, their voices grew quieter. The awe faded, replaced by a silence that carried more weight than words. Each face hardened, their brows furrowed, lips pressed into thoughtful lines.

Zirikon noticed, of course. He always noticed. Yet he played his role well, keeping his rumbling explanations steady, never faltering in tone, as though he were oblivious to the storm stirring behind their eyes. But in truth, he understood all too well. If he had been raised in their palaces, with their background, he would be thinking the same thoughts.

How had the Menagerie grown to such strength, hidden in plain sight? How could a multitude of beast kings rise and thrive here, enough to threaten the delicate balance of power each godling race guarded so jealously?

The ones most shaken were the harpies. This was their continent, their skies and forests, their domain by ancient right. And yet, beneath their wings, something vast and untamed had taken root, spreading unseen. The realization cut deeper than pride; it was failure. Neglect. A sign that their watchful gaze had dimmed.

Even if they excused themselves by invoking the last queen's command, her decree that all was in order, that there was no danger, it rang hollow now. Obedience was no shield against the truth: their vigilance had waned. They had believed in peace, believed the world safe, and in that belief, they had let their guard fall.

Zirikon's gaze lingered on them for a moment longer, his expression unreadable. Inwardly, though, he shared their relief on one point. Krogan, for all his might, had not turned his ambitions toward dominion

or conquest. Had the beast lord desired thrones or crowns, the world outside this dimension might already have burned. In that, at least, the godlings could breathe easier.

"The king is now ready to meet you all," Zirikon said at last, his deep voice breaking the long silence.

The godlings glanced at one another, their expressions taut with unspoken thoughts. Still, none protested. None dared. They simply followed, their footsteps echoing softly behind Zirikon's steady gait.

Mist began to coil around their ankles, thickening with every step until the world seemed to vanish in a pale shroud. They walked in silence through the haze, the air damp and cool, the sound of their own breathing strangely loud. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the mist peeled away, and the sight before them stilled even the most restless heart.

A city stretched out beneath a star-woven sky. But it was no city of sleek marble spires, nor a realm of radiant palaces such as they had known in their won lands. This place breathed with the essence of the Menagerie itself.

Great halls rose from the skeletons of titanic beasts, their walls ribbed with ancient bones polished smooth by time. Towers of crystalline rock spiraled upward, entwined with petrified roots as thick as city streets, their surfaces glowing faintly with veins of luminescent fungi. Cascades of pure energy poured from obsidian cliffs, shimmering like liquid starlight as they fed into pools that pulsed with a gentle radiance.

The streets bustled with life, creatures of every shape and form, moving together in a strange harmony. Some bore fur, some scales, others wings or fins, but all carried themselves with an intelligence that belied their primal appearance. They were the children of the beast kings, the many lines of their sovereigns woven into a living tapestry. The godlings, to their surprise, did not look out of place among them; in fact, many of the inhabitants bore a striking resemblance to the godlings' own forms. This

realization drew faint, uneasy smiles from the visitors, as if the Menagerie itself were mocking their divine origins.

At the city's heart rose a towering fortress, its walls forged from burnished gold that gleamed in the star-dusted sky.

"That is where he waits," Zirikon rumbled, leading them forward.

The godlings followed through the golden gates, their steps echoing in the vast hall. The castle's interior was a wonder in itself, pillars carved from living crystal pulsed with a heartbeat of light, while floors of obsidian and bone reflected their passing like darkened mirrors. Strange murals lined the walls, depictions of beasts and kings locked in eternal struggle, the history of this dimension etched in primal memory.

Chapter 639:

Finally, Zirikon brought them before a pair of colossal golden doors, their surfaces etched with patterns that seemed to shift when looked at too long, spirals of claw marks, wings, and fangs woven into a single, eternal cycle. Without hesitation, Zirikon pressed his massive hands against them. The doors groaned, then swung open with effortless grace, spilling radiant light into the hall.

Beyond lay the heart of the palace, the place where the king of the Menagerie awaited.

The figure on the throne claimed the room the moment their eyes fell upon him.

Krogan lounged sideways on the golden seat, his humanoid leopard form draped in regal garb woven with threads of deep crimson and gold. His hand rested against his chin, his gaze half-lidded, his expression one of weariness more than majesty.

At his side stood a woman of striking beauty, her form elegant, her presence unsettling. Her hair writhed with living serpents, their scales glimmering in the golden light. She plucked a grape from a platter and pressed it to Krogan's lips with the familiarity of one who had done so countless times. Only then did her eyes flick toward the godlings. Her gaze was sharp, piercing, and deeply unsettling, like being measured and unmade at once.

Before her stare could linger, a massive shape moved. A Terra clan warrior stepped forward, his towering frame interposing itself between her gaze and the gathered visitors. His presence was a wall of flesh and stone, his actions to the godlings unspoken but clear. The snake-haired woman raised a brow at the gesture, a faint, knowing smile curving her lips, before turning her attention back to her king.

The godlings' eyes wandered upward, drawn to the raised platform flanking the throne. Three figures sat in silence, their stillness more imposing than movement. A goat-headed general, his horns spiraling outward like jagged spires; an elephant-headed general, his heavy tusks gleaming like ivory spears; and a dragon-headed general, whose slitted eyes glowed faintly beneath a crown of scaled ridges. Their collective presence radiated authority.

A rustle of movement drew their eyes as Zirikon ascended the steps with a familiarity earned through long service, taking his place among the other generals. His expression was unreadable, though the weight of his gaze pressed firmly on the godlings below.

The silence lingered, taut and expectant, until one of the merfolk broke from the group. The humanoid shark moved past the Terra guardian with ease, pausing only to pat the giant's arm in quiet gratitude. He advanced to the fore, every step echoing across the golden hall. When he stopped, he inclined his head, his voice respectful but steady.

"Lord Krogan," he said, bowing slightly.

Krogan finally stirred from his languid pose, his molten-purple eyes drifting toward the gathered godlings. His voice was smooth, deep, carrying the lazy drawl of a predator that had no need to rush.

"Imagine my surprise, no, my scare when word reached me that the godlings had wandered into my lands."

The silence that followed was tight, until one of the apelings stepped forward, his tone half-mocking, half-bold.

"We have heard great things about you, Lord Krogan... but none of the tales mentioned you were also a great jester."

A ripple of unease passed through the godlings. Even the air seemed to grow still, the weight of countless eyes pressing down on the bold speaker. The generals on the dais did not move, but the sharpness in their collective gazes made the tension palpable.

Then, Krogan laughed. It was not a laugh of amusement alone, it was the kind that rolled low and long, equal parts annoyed and warning. The snake-haired woman at his side tilted her head, her serpents hissing softly in chorus with his chuckle.

"You will find me a man of many talents," Krogan said, a fanged grin tugging at his lips. "Even being a jester is one of them."

The humor in his tone slipped away, replaced by something heavier. His gaze swept across the assembly, pinning each godling in turn.

"But I must say, it is a shame. A shame your kings sent you into such dangerous lands without care for your safety. No guardian, no direct envoy to shield you. Not even one who sits on a throne to stand among you. What does that say of their regard for you?"

The words were smooth, but their edge was sharp. A seed of discord, dropped carefully in fertile soil.

Before it could take root, one of the harpies stepped forward, her feathers bristling but her chin held high.

"You need not sow fear or discord among us, Lord Krogan. We do not see neglect in this charge but honor. Our leaders trusted us to handle what they themselves could not. That trust is our strength, not our weakness."

Her words rang clearly in the golden hall, a defiance meant to shield not only herself but the others who had begun to frown under Krogan's subtle needling.

"But what about your safety?"

The words rolled from Krogan's tongue like a sweet tale, but their weight pressed into the godlings' hearts with the persistence of a whispered temptation. Each syllable seemed to coil around their thoughts, as if some great beast were crouched behind them, breathing doubt into their ears.

For a moment, none spoke. Even the air felt heavier.

Then the same harpy stepped forward once more, feathers rustling as she straightened her back. Her gaze did not waver from Krogan's purple eyes.

"As I said, there is no need for such words, Lord Krogan," she replied firmly. Her sharp gaze flicked to the generals flanking him. "Your trusted men... I have no doubt they would give their all to see that no danger ever reached you or your heir if it could be helped. We trust in our leaders as they trust in yours. It is no different."

The hall stilled. The godlings, stirred by her words, lifted their chins and stood straighter. No longer did they avert their eyes from the generals' watchful stares or from the snake-haired woman's piercing gaze. For the first time since entering the throne hall, they looked directly at Krogan and his court, not as timid envoys but as scions of divine blood.

Krogan's expression shifted. He leaned forward, adjusting his posture until he sat upright upon his throne. The indolence that had draped his form like a cloak was cast aside. Now, his gaze was clear, focused, and heavy with the full weight of his presence.

"When I first learned of your arrival," he said, his voice resonant, "I was insulted. I thought it a mockery, that your great leaders would send children to face me, rather than come themselves."

He let the words hang for a breath, his gaze sweeping over each of their faces.

"But now..." His voice softened, tinged with something like admiration. "Now I find myself chastising that thought. For in you, I see not children, but steel tempered by faith. You stand as you are, without trembling, and that is no small feat in this hall."

A faint smile touched his lips, not the mocking grin from before, but something almost genuine.

"For that," Krogan continued, his golden eyes gleaming, "I find appreciation. The godling race has raised individuals of uncommon spirit. And I can only hope that, in this realm of mine, I might shape heirs of equal strength and conviction."

"You flatter us, Your Grace," one of the werewolves said, bowing low.

Krogan tilted his head slightly, a faint glimmer in his eyes. "I have an idea why you stepped into my land. But tell me, do you know? Did your leaders inform you of what it is you are walking into?"

The godlings exchanged brief glances before nodding in unison, a silent affirmation.

It was then that one of the harpies spoke, his voice sharp and steady. "Lord Krogan, I believe there was once a treaty with our former queen, now a goddess, Ursula, concerning the cursed lands."

Krogan's gaze flickered, but he remained still as he continued. "Yet we have received troubling reports from our neighbors. They claim cursed land residents have intruded upon their territories, even seizing their people and dragging them into your domain."

Krogan's tail flicked lazily across the side of his throne, though the subtle tightening of his jaw betrayed his interest. He gave a slow nod.

"Indeed. There was such an agreement. But the wording was clear. I was to halt the expansion of the cursed land's corruption, to keep its blight from spreading. And that, I have done." His gaze sharpened as his tone grew firm. "But the treaty never forbade me or its residents from stepping beyond its borders. You may claim intrusion, yet I see no breach of pact."

He leaned forward slightly, his voice carrying through the palace. "If anything, it is I who should be reprimanding you, for stepping into my land unannounced, with no courtesy, no herald."

The tension thickened. A silence pressed into the golden hall.

Chapter 640:

Then an apeling spoke up, his voice edged with boldness. "And yet, the agreement never stated that we were not allowed to enter the cursed lands."

The words hung like a thrown spear.

For a heartbeat, neither side moved. The generals' eyes gleamed with subtle shifts of interest. The snake-haired woman tilted her head, serpents stirring as though savoring the silence.

Zirikon stirred, parting his lips to break the stalemate. But before his voice could sound, Krogan raised his hand slowly, deliberately. The hall stilled again, his gesture commanding the silence.

Krogan's hand lowered slowly, his gaze sweeping over the godlings. His tone shifted, less edged but no less commanding.

"Let me start first by taking a step back and reflect on my actions. I was in the wrong for appearing unannounced in territories under the watch of your kind. I could have done better, made my intentions known. On that, I will not argue."

The godlings exchanged glances, their surprise evident at the sudden concession. For a moment, the hall seemed lighter, as if some of the suffocating weight had lifted.

A golden shimmer rippled across the chamber floor, and from the Menagerie's living essence itself, a table of bone and crystal rose. Seats formed around it, each sculpted to fit the stature of the visitors. Wordlessly, the godlings moved forward and sat, the gesture both a courtesy and a test of trust.

One of the mermen leaned forward, her scales catching the faint glow of the chamber's crystalline light. She bowed her head slightly, voice steady but respectful.

"That, Lord Krogan, is one of the main reasons we are here before you today. To better understand your intentions... and to establish stronger contact and clearer communication with each of the godling races."

Krogan studied her in silence, his expression unreadable. Then, with a weary exhale, he leaned back into his throne. His eyes, however, were sharp with a predator's clarity.

"You wish to know my intentions," he said, his voice low, deliberate, "with the beast kings I claimed from under your territories, and what I plan to do with them."

His words were not a question, but a statement.

The godlings sat straighter, the gravity of the moment settling on them. Their voices, though spoken as one, carried the weight of many races, many thrones.

"Indeed," they answered.

"Do you know of my true identity?" Krogan asked at last, his golden eyes glinting with a quiet sharpness.

The godlings exchanged glances, their silence betraying hesitation before one finally spoke.

"We have been informed of it."

Krogan inclined his head, a small nod of acknowledgment.

"Good. Then it will be easier to explain why I first hid my intentions when I moved unannounced across your territories. People like me..." His lips curled faintly, though the smile did not reach his eyes. "...have not made the best impression on the world. Least of all with your kind, the godlings."

The weight of his words hung in the air, forcing the godlings to hold their composure. Krogan leaned forward, his voice lowering, carrying the growl of something ancient beneath it.

"Knowing this, I had doubts. Apprehension. I wondered if you, or perhaps the demigods of your line at the time, would step in to hinder me before I could even begin my true work."

One of the Harpies straightened, feathers rustling, her tone steady. "And what is this goal of yours, Lord Krogan?"

The beast king's gaze lingered on her, unreadable. Then, with startling simplicity, he spoke:

"My goal is to ensure that I, my very existence will be accepted in this new world. To tie my fate to its fate, as I have chosen to accept it as my home."

His voice softened at the end, carrying a strange, almost mournful resonance. And though the words seemed addressed to the godlings, they quickly realized something peculiar: his eyes were not on them. His tone was not meant for them.

It was as if he were speaking to someone else entirely, someone unseen, someone beyond the hall.

The generals did not move, but a faint tension stirred among them. The snake-haired woman tilted her head ever so slightly, her smile inscrutable, as though she alone understood the hidden direction of her king's words.

The godlings felt a shiver of unease, each of them wondering the same unspoken question:

"Who, exactly, was Krogan speaking to?"

Indeed, his words were not for the godlings at all. They were for the Origin Gods. Their vast attention, once elsewhere, now settled on this hidden dimension. For so long, their gaze had been absent, their will scattered across the heavens. But now that the veil had been lifted with the presence of the godlings, Krogan's realm could no longer remain in shadow.

One of the werewolves broke the silence, his tone edged with suspicion "How is the gathering of fifth-tier beasts supposed to help you achieve this goal of yours?"

Krogan chuckled, deep and resonant, a sound that filled the hall.

"Simple. By making an impression. A long-lasting impression. The world knows nothing of me now, but soon they will know. They will see me, and understand what I represent."

Another werewolf leaned forward, eyes narrowing "And how do you plan on doing that?"

Rather than answering directly, Krogan's gaze swept across them, sharp and searching. He posed his own question instead, his voice echoing through the golden chamber like a riddle.

"Tell me, what are the beast kings to you godlings? And in a grander scale... what are the beast kings to the world itself?"

The godlings exchanged glances, the question hanging in the air. The Harpy godling stepped forward, her wings rustling with impatience. "They are nothing to us, but the wild and untamed," she stated, her voice sharp with a mix of disdain and hint of respect. "A necessary force of nature to be managed, a threat to be contained so that civilization may flourish. They are the base, the primal, the foundation upon which true power is built, they pose as a great threat to be overcome and they hold within them certain treasures that is of great use"

The other godlings nodded in agreement, their expressions mirroring her condescension and respect.

But a frown made it's way to the face of the generals around. Krogan's deep, resonant chuckle filled the palace. It wasn't a malicious sound, but one of pure, unadulterated amusement.

"And there lies your great misconception," Krogan said, his tone rippling with authority as he sat forward on his throne. "Yes, the beast kings can be a threat. Yes, they are wild, untamed, and primal. But your vision stops there, because that is where your interest ends. You have never looked deeper. You have never asked what they mean beyond the danger they present."

He rose slightly, his shadow stretching across the floor, his presence pressing like a weight on their shoulders.

"You answered me as children of order, civilization, and pride would answer. You think beast kings are obstacles. Resources. Symbols of the chaos you were born to master. But now, having walked my Menagerie, tell me, can you truly still see them as only that?"

The godlings nodded, one of the werewolves spoke up. His voice was steady, but there was a note of humility in it that hadn't been there before. "Indeed. Your actions have pushed us to look deeper at our view of the beast kings and our understanding of them. We have found that perhaps we were wrong... or rather, that we have not been listening."

A few of the others shifted uncomfortably at his words, but none interrupted.

"We have a profession called 'Druids,'" the werewolf continued, his ears twitching slightly as though even speaking the word carried weight. "Godlings who practice this path have made great friends with beast kings, and they have spoken of them in glowing terms. Yet we dismissed their words, brushed them aside as ramblings born from eccentric natures. We thought them outliers, dreamers too close to the wild."

His gaze lowered for a moment, then lifted to meet Krogan's.

"But we have noticed something undeniable in this place. Most beast kings are beings of great intelligence and complex thought. They are not mindless, not savage in the way we once believed. They are smart enough to recognize their own limitations, and perhaps wiser than us for choosing to remain within their territories. And yet we, in our arrogance, intrude upon their lands as if they were nothing more than beasts to be contained."

A murmur ran through the hall, low and uncertain. Even among the godlings, the admission carried a sting.

Krogan nodded slowly, his expression unreadable, though his eyes glimmered faintly with satisfaction "Indeed," he said, his voice rolling like distant thunder. "Beast kings are different from ordinary magical beasts. The sign of a true beast king is when they reach the fifth stage and comprehend a domain. That

is the first sign of their awakening intelligence. But after a beast king takes that step... a profound change takes place. Their former simple nature falls away. They are no longer creatures that act only on instinct and scattered thoughts."