

## Guardian gods 641

Chapter 641:

"They become capable of complex thoughts," Krogan continued, his voice calm but heavy with meaning. "Thoughts that extend far beyond survival or instinct. They begin to understand what it means to be a leader. They gather their race beneath them, not merely as a pack, not merely as a herd, but as a people. They guide them, protect them, nurture their growth, hoping one day their kind might rise higher than themselves."

His golden eyes flicked toward the generals beside him, each one a living testament to that truth.

"Most importantly," he went on, "their very presence transforms those around them. The closer a beast is to a king, the more their own intelligence sharpens. They awaken not only themselves, but their kin."

He leaned forward, resting his chin against his knuckles, his gaze fixed on the godlings "You said something good earlier, that beast kings understand their limitations. This is true. But do you know what those limitations truly are?"

Silence hung in the hall, until Krogan answered his own question.

"They recognize the disparity. Not of individual strength, but of strength in number... and in civilization's growth. By the time they are capable of complex thought, they see it clearly: other intelligent beings have already multiplied, built cities, raised empires. By then, the gap is too vast. Even if a beast king wished to challenge them, the scales would never balance."

His tone dropped lower, the weight of his words pressing on every ear.

"In a way, this world is both a blessing and a curse to beast kings. A blessing, because the richness of its essence allows them to grow into what they are. A curse, because once they have become kings, they find themselves shackled, unable to showcase the fullness of that growth."

Krogan lifted one clawed hand, curling it into a fist before unclenching it again. "This is different in lower worlds. There, it is far harder for a beast to rise to kingship. But when they do... the world bends to them. Their strength is unmatched, their presence undisputed."

He let the contrast hang in the air, his gaze unblinking "And so their limitation matches well with my goal. They cannot grow further alone. And I... I am growth made flesh. That is why I need them." His voice rumbled, and the throne beneath him seemed to vibrate faintly. "And that is why they need me".

Krogan's way of speaking shifted again, his tone no longer aimed solely at the young envoys before him. It was broader, spoken to the unseen listeners whose presence pressed against the very fabric of the hall.

"This world is soon about to undergo a change," he said, every word drawn out like a tolling bell. "A change so profound that everything living within it will be forced to play a role. None shall stand outside it. Not gods. Not mortals. Not even the beasts that roam the wilds."

A ripple of unease passed through the godlings. Even without knowing the full weight of his meaning, they could sense the depth in his words.

"It so happens," Krogan continued, his eyes narrowing, "that I know the role beast kings could play in this change. A role that will, in turn, elevate me, yes. But more than that, a role that will strengthen this world itself. Make it greater. Make it ready."

He paused, studying the gathered youths before him, and then leaned forward. "Tell me, have you ever thought of fighting alongside beast kings? Of wielding their strength, not as trophies or slaves, but as allies?"

The question landed like a stone dropped into still water. The godlings frowned almost in unison, their feathers ruffling, tails twitching, claws flexing. It was absurd on its face, why would they ever need the strength of beast kings, when their own divine blood, their own unity, had always been enough?

And yet... none of them hurried to answer.

The silence stretched, heavier than before, because the absurdity was not so easily brushed aside.

The godlings shook their heads in response to Krogan's question, a mixture of disbelief and uncertainty on their faces. Krogan did not seem offended. Instead, he leaned back slightly, a slow, deliberate smile forming.

"You haven't thought of it because you are strong," he said, his voice calm but edged with weight. "The humans, however... they are not as strong as you. They are eager, willing to expand their view of what strength truly is."

His eyes flicked across the hall, golden light catching off the obsidian and bone of the palace. "Their problem is that they go about it the wrong way. They see the beast kings as nothing more than clever beasts. They try to tame them as they do with their pets, but of course, it never works."

A quiet settled over the hall. Even the generals remained still, the snake-haired woman's serpents barely twitching as they listened. Krogan stayed silent for a moment, letting the weight of his words sink in.

Finally, he spoke again, his tone low and deliberate, carrying through the golden hall like distant thunder. "I plan to ascend to godhood soon. And the beast kings..." His gaze hardened. "...are my ticket. Through them, I will birth a system that spreads across this world, one that will be used by everyone and, I hope, by the godlings as well."

Shock rippled through the godlings. Their eyes widened, their previous confidence faltering. Ascension to godhood was a concept beyond even their understanding in this context. They felt suddenly small in comparison.

Yet, having come this far, they kept their seats, forcing calm over rising fear. One of them spoke, voice steady despite the shock.

"What system is this?"

Krogan's lips curved into a slow smile. His eyes gleamed with amusement and certainty "The Summoner System," he said simply, as though the name itself carried the weight of inevitability.

"It is a system of symbiosis, not servitude," Krogan explained, leaning forward on his throne, the golden light of the palace reflecting off his claws and shoulders. His voice carried with quiet authority, yet underneath it hummed a current of power that made even the generals stiffen.

"The humans in your world," he continued, eyes narrowing slightly, "are trying to enslave the beast kings. They aim to break their spirits, to force obedience. This... is a fool's errand. You cannot contain a force of nature. But you can learn to wield it."

He raised a massive hand, and in the space above the hall, a shimmering, ethereal sigil formed. It was intricate, a beast's silhouette intertwined with a humanoid figure, their forms merging in perfect symmetry. The air around it pulsed faintly, as if alive.

"The Summoner System," Krogan said, letting the words roll over the godlings, "is a magical contract, a pact of equals. A human, or any mortal, can form a profound bond with the beast or beast king in my realm. It is not ownership. It is unity. A fusion of will and spirit, creating a Summoner and a Summoned Monarch."

The hall remained silent, Krogan's gaze swept across the godlings, as if measuring their understanding.

"Through this bond," he continued, "the Summoner can access the immense power of the beast king. And in turn, the beast king gains a direct conduit to the outside world. Every battle fought, every challenge faced by the Summoner, contributes to the beast king's experience and strength, accelerating its journey toward the sixth stage. Their growth becomes exponential, fueled by the countless ambitions, victories, and failures of their mortal partners."

"My city, my kingdom, my Menagerie... it is a training ground," Krogan declared, his voice a low, triumphant roar that resonated through the palace like rolling thunder. "And I am the ultimate arbiter of every pact, the nexus through which this new power flows. It will elevate me. It will make me the creator and master of a new form of godhood."

The godlings remained silent, their feathers ruffling and tails twitching. They realized, as Krogan continued to speak, that his words were no longer directed at them. They were an exposition, a declaration meant for some far larger audience.

"The number of beast kings in this world," Krogan said, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees, "is minuscule compared to the number of races in this world. They number only in the hundreds, which honestly, is not surprising. Magical beast growth is slow, far slower than most other beings."

He paused, letting the silence emphasize the weight of the revelation. Then his eyes glinted with measured intensity. "The current beast kings in this world... they are as old as, or even older than, the first kingdoms that appeared in this world. They grow slowly, yes, but in turn, they are blessed with extraordinarily long lifespans."

Krogan's gaze shifted slightly, sweeping the hall as if counting the potential hidden within it. "My Summoner System is meant not only for the beast kings, but for all magical beasts. The purpose is simple: to shrink the time it takes for them to grow, through the bond with their partner, and to if even briefly glimpse the path to the sixth stage."

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A murmur rippled through the godlings. One of them, unable to contain their curiosity, spoke up cautiously. "Does that mean the Summoner could also glimpse the sixth stage?"

Krogan shook his head slowly, a shadow of a smile touching his lips.

"Not everyone is destined for the sixth stage," he said, voice calm but edged with finality. "But through the Summoner System, one who is not destined can still wield a power akin to it, through their summon. They will touch a fragment of what the beast king embodies, and in doing so, gain abilities far beyond their natural potential."

One of the Harpies, wings folding tightly behind her, finally spoke, her tone careful but measured. "Lord Krogan... now that we understand more of your purpose, we wish to know how our people might be of assistance. Our goal was never to oppose you. We came to learn, and perhaps to help maintain balance."

The Werewolf godling nodded, adding, "And if this Summoner System is to take root, there will need to be contact between your realm and ours. The exchange of knowledge, resources, and guidance. How might we facilitate such a connection?"

Even the merman, her gaze sharp and reflective, leaned slightly forward. "Our peoples are numerous and diverse. We control lands, seas, and skies. Surely there are ways we can be of help to you"

Krogan's golden eyes swept over the godlings, his expression shifting "You now see the potential of the Summoner System," he said, his tone calm but firm, carrying an unmistakable weight. "But there is a

choice to be made. You could attempt to contain it, limit its spread, interfere in its growth... as many would instinctively do when faced with forces they do not fully understand. Or... you could guide it. You could allow it to grow, not as a threat, but as a new pillar of strength for this world."

"Seeing your willingness to walk this path, I ask little of you. Only that you open your borders to my realm, so that I may act openly and recruit Beast Kings without the stain of secrecy. This way, the work can be seen for what it is—not some shadowed plot, but a foundation built in the light."

His eyes narrowed slightly, a glint of fire in their depths.

"I would also ask your aid in contacting the Beast Kings. Some of them will not listen to me. But to the godlings... they might. Speak to them. Tell them of what stands to be gained by joining the menagerie. Tell them of the strength that comes not from domination, but from unity."

Finally, he leaned back, his expression softening to something almost neutral. "Apart from this, I need nothing more of you. The rest is mine to shoulder"

The godlings glanced at one another, silent currents of unease and calculation passing between them. At last, one of the apelings stepped forward, his head tilting slightly toward Krogan. His voice carried the respectful gravity of one treading carefully.

"If we might be so bold, Your Grace... this has grown beyond the authority we hold. Such decisions cannot be made by us alone."

He hesitated briefly, then added with quiet frustration,

"We would have invited our kings to be present, but our means of communication has been blocked since we stepped into the Cursed Lands."

Krogan raised a hand in a casual, almost dismissive motion, his expression unreadable.

"That was a precaution of mine. No message leaves or enters my domain without my awareness. But the wards have been lifted. You may now reach out to your kings as you wish."

The godlings stirred, relief and uncertainty flickering across their faces, but before they could speak further, Krogan's voice cut through the moment, smooth and deliberate.

"Still, I would advise patience. Rooms have already been prepared for you. Stay a while. Walk my streets. Speak with my people. See for yourselves the culture that is beginning to bloom here. In that time, you may share what we have discussed today with your kings, let them hear your words seasoned with your own impressions rather than the haze of suspicion."

He leaned forward slightly, golden eyes glinting.

"When you are ready, we will convene again. Then, together, we may hold our final discussion before you depart. What say you?"

The chamber was still for a moment. The godlings exchanged long, silent looks, weighing unspoken thoughts. Then, one of the apelings stepped forward, placing his palm over his chest in a gesture of respect.

"We would be honored to stay, Lord Krogan. It is not often we journey so far from our realms. To witness this land with our own eyes... it will be a privilege."

Krogan's lips curved into the faintest smile. He rose from his seat, his towering frame casting long reflection across the chamber's carved floor.

"Then it is settled. My attendants will escort you to your quarters. Rest. Observe. Learn. In time, you will find whether this realm is a cage... or a beacon."

With that, he turned and strode from the hall, the heavy air shifting in his wake. The godlings remained silent until the last echo of his steps faded, their unease unspoken but palpable.

They were led into a towering hall carved into the black stone of the cliffs, where chambers had been prepared, each one tailored with uncanny precision to their kind. Pools of saltwater for the Merman, high perches for the Harpies, and wide, reinforced floors for the apelings and wolf-blooded.

One of the apelings muttered, low but audible to the others,

"He prepared for us. Long before this meeting. He knew we would stay."

As the godlings dispersed into their quarters, Krogan's realm did not sleep. From their windows, they could see torchlit processions winding through the streets. Beastkin sang in deep, resonant voices, their chants accompanied by the beat of drums and the call of horns. Statues of legendary Beast Kings, carved in both stone and living wood were paraded, offerings of food and blood laid at their feet.

The Werewolf godling lingered at the balcony, watching. His jaw tightened. "This is not the work of weeks. Nor months. He has been preparing for years."

The Harpy folded her wings tighter, thoughtful. "And we are only now beginning to see the roots."

The godlings held true to their word, moved among the people of Krogan's realm in the days that followed. As told before, the culture here was still in its infancy, more sprout than tree, its shape yet to be decided.

Yet instead of merely observing, the godlings soon discovered themselves becoming participants. Beastkin gathered eagerly around them, their eyes wide, their questions flowing freely. They sought to know of the skies, of the seas, of the forests and the lands beyond. The Harpy found herself teaching flight drills to a flock of winged beastkin, who marveled at her grace. The Werewolf sparred with young warriors, correcting their forms and showing restraint in his strength. The Merman told stories of the tides and showed children how to read currents using a bowl of water and salt.

They had come expecting to watch, yet found themselves participating.

And it was not unwelcome. For the first time in many of their long lives, the godlings felt the weight of true admiration. The beastkin gazed upon them not as rulers or distant deities, but as figures of wonders, teachers, guides, embodiments of possibilities they had never imagined.

A quiet thought began to stir among the godlings: if this admiration could be cultivated, if the young culture of this realm absorbed their values and customs, what seeds might bloom in generations to come? It was a dangerous thought, but not an unpleasant one.

After several days, their kings' responses finally reached them. With Krogan's barriers down, each godling was able to establish contact. Within their chambers, the air shimmered as spectral projections of their monarchs appeared, towering figures of authority, their presence filling the rooms with an entirely different weight than the beastkin's eager gazes.

The moment the images of their rulers took form, the godlings, almost in unison, raised their hands and cautioned quickly "Be mindful of your words."

They spoke in hushed, urgent tones. It was, after all, Krogan's domain. His influence was everywhere, and though he had promised them freedom of contact, none of them dared assume his reach ended at mere barriers.

The kings inclined their heads in understanding. Their voices, softened, carried through the projection "Then speak. Tell us what you have seen."

To no one's surprise, Zephyr and the other monarchs who were called upon hearing of Krogan's ambitions for ascension, began to shift their thinking. What had at first seemed like the designs of a powerful beastlord now revealed itself to be something far greater.

When divinity entered the discussion, personal interest became meaningless. Such matters no longer belonged to individuals or even kingdoms, but to the fate of the world itself.

The calls with their envoys were kept deliberately brief, each side cautious under the possibility of Krogan's unseen reach. The true discussions began only afterward, when the kings and queens withdrew into their own sanctums.

Chapter 643:

"The Summoner System," Zephyr spoke first.

A queen draped in blue veils leaned forward, her projection casting faint ripples across the table "Mana has always been our constant. From birth until death, it defines our limits. Even those who break

through, archmages, ascended warriors, saints they do so within its lattice. People are always finding ways to go past these limitations and ascend to higher power.. Summoners could bridge gaps we have long accepted as walls."

Wulv with a thoughtful look on his face said "Each continent has forged its own system. Our people rise through methods tailored to our lands and traditions. We endure trials, temper bloodlines, shape mana into unique forms. Yet always, always, it converges toward the same end. To walk higher. To grasp power enough to change fate. And now Krogan would place his path alongside ours." Newest update provided by no v elfire.net

Before the Mage System, there had been no shared foundation across the continents. Its introduction had given the world a common language of power, yet even then it had been limited, confined to those with the affinity, talent, or bloodlines to bear it. For many, the Mage's path was forever closed, their lives bound by the ceilings of birth and fate.

Krogan's system was different. Similar in its universality, yes, but frightening in its accessibility. Unlike magic, it did not demand years of study, nor did it bow to talent or lineage. By all appearances, anyone could walk this path. Even those whose potential had long since reached its end, mortals with no spark left to kindle could divert into it, finding a new route forward.

It sounded good. Too good.

And that was the danger.

Such a power, open to all, was not something the godlings nor the kingdoms of men would easily allow. Hierarchies were built on scarcity, on thresholds of worth and ability. To give every commoner a road to greater strength was to invite chaos into every throne and council. What kings could stand unshaken, if the masses no longer needed them to dream of power?

Zephyr's green eyes darkened as he exchanged glances with Wulv, Kael, Drowz, and Raina. For the first time, they all seemed aligned in thought. The path ahead was clear in their coming meeting with Krogan.

They would confront Krogan again, as rulers bearing the weight of nations. They needed to press him, to uncover whether his Summoner System carried boundaries flaws, costs, limitations. If it did not, then for the sake of balance, he would need to forge them.

And if he refused...

The silence between them said what none dared to voice.

The day of the final discussion came swiftly. The palace chamber, vast and echoing, felt strangely hollow without the presence of Krogan's generals or the envoys who had filled it days before. This time, there were no distractions, only the six monarchs, their forms shimmering as projections, standing like pillars of authority before Krogan himself.

Krogan, who had once spoken with the ease of a host entertaining guests, now bore the stern composure of one meeting peers, equals. His eyes burned with quiet intensity as he gazed upon the direct offspring of ascended gods.

It was Drowz, the first son of Tide, who broke the silence.

"We would like to begin by offering congratulations, Lord Krogan. To find a path toward ascension is no small feat. For many of us, it still lies shrouded, more illusion than reality."

The others followed suit, their words of formality and respect joining together in a chorus. Some were sincere, others perfunctory, but all acknowledged what could not be ignored, Krogan had touched upon divinity, and that demanded recognition.

Krogan inclined his head, lips curving in a measured smile. His tone was calm

"I thank you all for your words. But to call ascension illusionary for you is an understatement. You are heirs to the divine. Even if your paths seem unclear, you carry within you a legacy that will open doors others could never reach. To speak plainly, should you choose to climb higher, you will find the steps. They will bend to you."

His eyes swept over them, lingering on each in turn, as if weighing their measure.

"Mine is different. I was not born of that blood. I carved this way myself"

The godlings smiled faintly, a brief silence lingering before Zephyr's calm voice filled the hall.

"We have been informed by our children about your goal, and the new path you aim to bring into this world. We have questions we wish to ask, but before that, can we ask you to show us the full picture of this Summoner Path?"

Krogan's golden eyes swept across them. For a moment he said nothing, then raised his hand. The air rippled, and before all present words began to etch themselves into light. Alongside each word, shifting images took form, scenes that gave shape and meaning to the system he spoke of.

A progression was revealed, from the first stage to the sixth, each step clear in its intent.

Krogan began to speak "The Summoner System is a tiered progression following the path of all power systems, a ladder that practitioners must climb. With each new stage, a summoner forges a pact with a more powerful creature, building a stable of allies that reflect their own growth"

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Stage One: The Companion's Vow. This is the foundational stage. The summoner forms a simple pact with a low-tier magical beast. The growth of the summoner is heavily dependent on the talent of their first companion, making the choice of the first summon crucial. The summoner gains minor physical or magical boosts. This stage decides how far one can go in this system of power.

Stage Two: The Allied Bond. Once the summoner and their first companion reach a certain threshold of power and growth, the summoner can forge a new pact with a more formidable, mid-tier beast. This is where the first bond begins to showcase its strength, if the beast summoned at the stage is stronger than the first summon, the status quo changes meaning growth is no longer accessible for the first summon and the same goes for the summoner. The same can't be said for the second summonest beast as it can still grow but once it perceives the limit of its summoner depending on the bond it can choose to break that bond. This stage allows the summoner to borrow significant magical power for short bursts.

Stage Three: The Primal Conduit. This stage is a critical test of a summoner's dedication. To forge a third pact with a high-tier beast, the summoner must first raise the strength of their first companion to the level of a Stage three creature. If a summoner attempts to bypass this step and summons a new beast before their first companion is strong enough, the new summon will immediately perceive the summoner's lack of leadership. The new beast's immense power will supersede everyone else's, causing the growth of the first two summons to stagnate completely.

By successfully elevating their first two summons, a summoner proves their worth. The third summon will respect their ability to lead and nurture their subordinates. The summoner can then command a powerful trio, each of whom acknowledges their master's strength and vision.

Stage Four: The Soul Weave, at this point, a summoner can forge a fourth pact with a creature that is a step away from being a true beast king. To be successful, the summoner must first elevate, most importantly their first summon or one of their summons to the fourth stage. If they succeed, the bonds between the summoner and all their creatures begin to intertwine, creating a unified power source. This soul weave is possible only because every single summoned beast sees the summoner as a capable and powerful leader. The summoner's consciousness merges with their collective, allowing them to wield their entire stable of creatures as a single, devastating force.

A failure to meet the requirements means the Stage Four creature will not even answer the summoner's call. It will sense the imbalance and weakness within the summoner's existing bonds, deeming them unworthy of the spiritual connection required for a successful pact.

Stage Five: The Monarch's Pact. This is the pinnacle of the system for any mortal. It is the final, most dangerous stage, a direct pact with a Beast King. The beast king, a Fifth Stage being, is immensely powerful and will only consider a bond if the summoner has proven their worth beyond a doubt.

A summoner can only attempt this pact after they have raised all their previous four summons to the level of a Stage Four creature. The beast king's decision is not based on the summoner's individual strength, but on their proven ability to lead and guide their entire stable of creatures to a level of power that rivals the beast king itself. The first companion's immense growth, from a small beast to a colossal force, is the ultimate proof of the summoner's talent.

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Stage Six: This stage is not for the summoner but for the beast king. The accumulation of power, knowledge and experience channeled through their champion allows the beast king to transcend the Fifth Stage and finally ascend to the Sixth Stage, this stage is still not yet clear and that is something that can only be shaped by the beast king and its summoner.

The godlings listened as Krogan spoke, the lighted images of his system still drifting like embers in the air. Their initial dread had eased; now a new, sharper question sat between them: what did Krogan himself stand to gain?

Kael, king of the Harpies, did not hesitate "What is it you gain from this? How does this system serve you in your path to godhood?"

Krogan's expression did not change. He answered plainly, "I do not mean to fight the gods for worship. This is not a bid for altars and priests. The Summoner System is centered on me because belief even a small thread of belief, is what binds the pact. Through me the contract is sealed."

He leaned closer, gaze level "Every step requires my presence. Every bond, each invocation, is a form of prayer, not to a temple, but to me. I do not demand temples or statues. I demand acknowledgment when a summoner calls. That is enough." This text is hosted at [Nove1Fire.net](http://Nove1Fire.net)

Raina, the mermaid queen asked. "And the beasts?" she pressed. "Do you take them from their homes? Are they forced?" "Also how do you guarantee each summoner would get a beast of their own, does your realm have the capacity to uphold that?"

Krogan gave a short, resigned laugh "No. The beasts that are summoned are to be from my realm, i can't control what happens beyond that. That is why I asked for your help, to encourage Beast Kings and their progeny to come here, to be part of the menagerie. Their joining will enrich my realm and allow summoners to draw from that pool."

He let the statement hang a moment, then added "I will not coerce. The call must be answered willingly. But the realm must be theirs to come to, and mine to hold."

There was a brief silence after Krogan's words. Behind their composed projections, the godlings shifted to another line of communication, one shielded from Krogan's ears. The decision between them came quickly.

Nothing would be gained from standing in Krogan's path. To make an enemy of one already stepping toward godhood would be folly.

Their earlier hesitation had come from ignorance, from not knowing what Krogan truly intended, or what change his path heralded. Now the picture was clearer. His cryptic warning about their world shifting was not an empty boast, but something the godlings were expecting with the absence of two origin gods.

They saw no need to doubt his word. If anything, there was much to be learned from him. He was only the second demon in recorded history to stand in good terms with the godlings, and unlike others of his kind, Krogan's beastkin shared traits that mirrored their own races. That familiarity was not lost on them, it was, in fact, quietly appreciated.

Krogan was patient while the gods spoke among themselves, his eyes steady, unblinking. He did not press, did not interrupt. He waited.

At last, Zephyr's projection inclined forward. His voice carried the calm weight of consensus. "Lord Krogan, first, we would like to apologize if we came off as threatening or condescending in our earlier talks."

A pause, then he continued "After a brief discussion amongst ourselves, we have decided to open our lands to your men and your people. In addition, our druids shall lend their aid in your quest to gather beast kings. It would bring them the greatest delight, knowing there is one such as you who shares their reverence for beast and beast kind."

Zephyr's form dipped in a slight bow, a gesture mirrored faintly by a few of the others "With that, we wish you a successful ascension."

Krogan regarded the bowed projections in silence for a heartbeat longer than usual. His expression softened, though his presence remained as commanding as ever.

"Your words honor me," he said at last, his tone formal, deliberate. "I had expected resistance, perhaps even enmity. To be met instead with humility and open hands... this I did not foresee. For that, you have my respect."

He inclined his head slightly, a gesture rarely given, but one that carried weight coming from him "Know this: I do not take your trust lightly. The opening of your borders, the guidance of your druids, the

blessing of your peoples, these are not small gifts. I shall receive them with gratitude, and I will ensure they bear fruit not only for my realm, but for the balance of the world we all share."

Krogan's eyes swept across each of the six monarchs in turn, firm but steady. "Should my path reach its end, and ascension be mine, I will remember who stood in opposition, and who stood in accord. You have chosen wisely, and in that choice, you will find me a friend rather than a rival."

There was the faintest smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"For now, let us walk forward together. May this be the beginning of a bond that endures."

Days after the agreement was reached, the Krogan people and their generals no longer hid themselves from the public eye. Empowered by the promise of the godlings, they now openly roamed the land, seeking out magical beasts to join their cause. For the first time in generations, their strength and ambition could be displayed without fear of reprisal.

Strange figures appeared, beastkin, men and women with the forms of animals woven into their flesh. Some bore wolfish ears and tails, others feathered wings sprouting from their backs, or scales that shimmered like living armor. Their sudden appearance sent ripples of shock across the kingdoms. Many wondered if this was the birth of another godling race, a new divine creation stepping into the world.

Yet as the days passed and more beastkin appeared, diverse in shape and nature, it became clear they were something different, neither human, nor godling, nor beast. A new people, stepping boldly into history.

The silence of the godlings was deafening. No proclamations, no denials, no explanations. To most human kingdoms, this lack of reaction was interpreted as tacit approval, perhaps even a hidden arrangement. With that in mind, many nations hastened to open their gates to the beastkin, greeting them with cautious smiles and eager curiosity. Envoys scrambled to make contact, scholars sought to document their origins, and rulers whispered of alliances. If the godlings accepted their presence, then surely it was safer to welcome than resist.

But the same could not be said for the great kingdoms, the crowned powers that sat atop each continent. To them, the beastkin's arrival was nothing short of an insult. The thought that the godlings

had known of this people, perhaps had even struck an agreement with them, and yet had not informed the highest thrones of the world, stung deeply.

They were no fools. Their spies and councils quickly pieced together the truth: the godlings had simply chosen to bypass them, to treat them as inconsequential children unworthy of explanation. It was a slight that cut sharper than any sword. For centuries, these kingdoms had borne the weight of leadership, had claimed dominion over lands, peoples, and histories. And yet the godlings, immortal, aloof, and ever dismissive continued to overlook them, as though the crowns of men were no more than toys.

Thus, beneath the polite veneer of diplomacy, resentment festered. The appearance of the beastkin became not merely a political shift, but a symbol of humiliation. The animosity that humans already harbored toward the godlings deepened, an old wound torn open once more.

For the common folk, the beastkin were a curiosity, perhaps even a welcome addition. For kings and emperors, however, their sudden emergence was a bitter reminder of humanity's place in the eyes of the divine: not equals, but children, forever expected to obey without question.

And such bitterness, once seeded, was not easily uprooted.

The impact of the beastkin's emergence showed itself most clearly in the eastern continent, within the Omadi Kingdom. Months had passed since the envoy from the southern continent had arrived in the court of Nwadieube and his people. Their presence was no mere gesture of diplomacy, every word, every gift, every act made it clear that they had come with purpose, with a goal they meant to press upon him.

Yet Nwadieube resisted. He listened, but only with half an ear. The southern continent's offer was tempting, too tempting. He feared that should he fully entertain their vision, he would commit too quickly, without the patience his plans demanded. Already, he was trying to mend the frayed alliance with Björn's kingdom in the north. If that alliance could be restored, if Björn's hand was once again at his side, then Omadi could move forward with strength and certainty. To bind himself too hastily to another foreign power risked undermining all of that.

Chapter 645:

But events within his own continent made hesitation all the more dangerous. Yuki, for reasons he could not fathom, had orchestrated a startling transformation among her people. Once infamous for their

unquenchable hunger for blood and war, they had reshaped themselves, shedding that primal ferocity for clarity of thought and discipline. Where once they were predictable tools of chaos, easily manipulated, they had become something altogether different: clever, measured, difficult to sway. To Nwadiébe, this was not progress, but a nuisance. A warhound with simple instincts could be guided; a sharpened mind was far less pliable.

It disturbed him. It frustrated him. And yet there was nothing he could do to reverse it. Yuki had remade her people, and in doing so had denied him the utility he once saw in their savagery.

Then there was Osita. Stronger than Nwadiébe had anticipated, stronger even than many of his own people Osita had become a looming obstacle. The Omadi kingdom, still searching for a clear path forward, lacked the strength to deal with him directly. For this reason, Nwadiébe knew he needed an outside force, a partner he could merge his ambitions with, someone who could help tip the scales against Osita's growing influence.

But to choose poorly, or to choose too soon, would be ruin.

And so, between the envoy's promises, Yuki's unsettling metamorphosis, and Osita's unchecked rise, Nwadiébe found himself caught in a tightening web. Every move forward seemed to demand a concession, every hesitation threatened to leave him outpaced.

The beastkin's arrival may have unsettled the crowns of the world, but here, in the east, it had exposed the fragility of balance and forced a king to decide whether to cling to old alliances or gamble on new, untested powers.

At first, Nwadiébe had been hesitant in dealing with the southern continent envoys. Even before they made their goals clear, he could already sense the weight of their presence. The mere influx of apelings into his kingdom and even into his capital was enough to make him wary. It was a reminder of how little he truly knew of these people and of the reach they seemed to command. Their potential was dangerous, their designs unknowable.

Those were his thoughts months ago, before the appearance of the beastkin. But with the beastkin's sudden emergence, the situation had changed. The balance of the world was shifting, and indecision was no longer a luxury he could afford. The beastkin were proof that the godlings allowed new powers to rise unchecked. If he remained passive, he risked being outpaced, left vulnerable to forces both old and new.

"The human race should not be underestimated," he told himself, a hard edge in his voice as he gave the order for a court meeting. The time had come to speak with the southern envoys properly.

Meanwhile, the envoys themselves were deep in indulgence. The nobles of Omadi, ever eager to strengthen ties with foreign powers, had spared no expense in entertaining them. Within a grand hall of silk drapes and incense, laughter and gasps echoed as the envoys reveled in an orgy arranged for their pleasure. Wine flowed like water, the scent of sweat and perfume mingled in the air, and the nobles competing for their favor watched eagerly, whispering promises of influence in exchange for patronage from the south.

It was in the midst of this decadent scene that a maid entered. Her expression betrayed neither disgust nor embarrassment as she stepped into the haze of lust and excess. Her poise alone set her apart measured steps, eyes lowered, the calm of one on royal business.

Her presence drew the attention of the envoys almost immediately. Naked and flushed from wine, they whistled and jeered, their laughter cutting through the moans of the chamber. One even raised his goblet toward her, as though in invitation.

The maid only smiled faintly. She bowed deeply before speaking, her voice clear, carrying over the din with practiced grace.

"I bring news and an invitation from His Majesty the King. He requires all of your presence at the palace tomorrow."

That was all. She bowed again and withdrew, her movements precise and unhurried, leaving no trace of the debauchery upon her composure.

The envoys, however, grew still. Naked, wine still in hand, they glanced at each other. Whatever levity they had shown a moment ago vanished, replaced by sober expressions. The indulgence around them continued, but none of them were laughing anymore.

For all their carnal appetites, they understood the weight of a king's summons.

Robes flew into their hands, and the envoys clothed themselves swiftly, the revelry dying in their wake. The nobles around them, though visibly intoxicated and lost in their pleasures, did not stir to stop them or question the summons. Outwardly, their laughter continued, their bodies swaying to the rhythm of wine and flesh. Yet their eyes betrayed them clear, sharp, filled with calculations.

The Omadi nobles were not fools. Their kingdom was built on discipline and steel; every citizen, from farmer to soldier, was shaped to endure hardship and wield strength. They knew well of their king's long reluctance to grant the southern envoys audience. And now, suddenly, that stance had shifted. It was a change too significant to dismiss. Still, they were patient. The truth would reach them in time, by decree, by whisper, or by blood.

Meanwhile, the envoys retreated to their chambers. The atmosphere shifted the moment the doors closed. The female mage among them, her eyes glimmering faintly, raised her hand and traced sigils into the air. A wide circle of light bloomed across the floor, its edges curling with runes. With a pulse, it sealed the room, muting every sound, clouding every shadow, shielding them from prying ears and watchful eyes.

Then the true meeting began.

The humans envoys they came along with slumped into chairs and fell into deep, dreamless sleep. The air rippled, and in their place, the monsters revealed themselves. The illusion peeled away, scales glistened, claws flexed, wings twitched in the dim candlelight. Their forms were grotesque and magnificent, unnatural beings barely contained in the shape of men.

"I was beginning to think our mission in this land would bear no fruit," rumbled a burly figure, his voice guttural, resonating with power. His human disguise had been broad and scarred, but in truth, his frame was massive, plated with ridged armor-like hide. His jaw split wider than a man's, teeth like hooked daggers. "I thought we would return home empty-handed. But now..." His slitted eyes glowed faintly. "...it seems our goal may yet be achieved."

The female mage's expression hardened, her brow furrowing as she looked over the others.

"While this turn of events may favor us," she said quietly, "we must question it. Why now? This king has made his distrust clear. For him to summon us so suddenly... it does not sit well with me."

Her words struck a chord, and silence fell across the chamber. The others shifted uneasily, their monstrous forms looming in the dim light of the warded room.

"We are like prisoners here," another finally muttered, his voice low, edged with resentment. "We have no eyes, no ears beyond these walls. Whatever happens in this kingdom, we are the last to know. Perhaps something has occurred that forced this king's hand, something beyond our sight."

All five of them turned to glance at the sleeping human that served alongside them. The humans were useless lost entirely to indulgence, their wits dulled by wine and the pleasures lavished upon them since their arrival. They had surrendered themselves to the nobles' hospitality without once questioning its purpose.

The silence lingered until one of the monsters, a woman with scaled patterns running down her shoulders—broke it. "Should we consult the Master?" she asked. Her voice was steady, but at the name, a faint light sparked in each of their eyes. Reverence, fear, and longing all mingled in that single reaction.

But the moment was cut short as the scarred burly man raised a clawed hand. The scar across his monstrous eye seemed to deepen as he scowled.

"No," he said firmly. "Contacting the Master is no small thing. Her mana fluctuations," he nodded toward the mage, "we can ignore. But summoning His attention? That is a beacon. Even if this king does not act, the apelings who shadow us surely will. And if they interfere..." His teeth flashed in a cruel grin. "...the king's opinion of us will sour further than it already has."

"We have a goal in mind," another envoy said, his voice steady, as though to anchor the unease lingering in the room. "It took us time to reach this land, but our purpose has not shifted. We must only follow the plan laid out for us by the Master. The path is already chosen, we need only walk it."

The others nodded, the glow in their monstrous eyes dimming to resolve.

The next day, the twelve envoys from the southern continent made their appearance in Omadi's royal court.

Chapter 646:

The grand hall stretched wide and austere, its walls lined with banners of crimson and steel, its floor polished to a cold, reflective sheen. At the far end, on the obsidian throne, sat Nwadieube.

His posture was regal, but his expression was sharp with irritation. One hand rested lazily on the throne's armrest, but his fingers tapped against it in a slow, deliberate rhythm, a drumbeat of his mood.

The envoys entered with practiced grace. As they stepped forward, they began the motion of a bow, but Nwadieube raised his hand.

"Stop."

The word rang across the hall like a commandment. The envoys froze mid-motion, the silence heavy enough to suffocate.

With a bored expression and a tone that cut like iron, Nwadieube's gaze slid past the human envoys and fell squarely upon the five monsters wearing human skins.

"I have no time for games." His hand moved in a languid gesture, dismissive, toward the others in the group. "These puppets that call themselves envoys... I have no need of them."

The words struck like a hammer.

The five monsters stiffened, hearts tightening in their chests. For a split second, panic coursed through them. Does he know? The thought screamed in unison across their minds. Had their disguises already been pierced? Had their every move been under watch since they set foot in Omadi?

But then came his next words, and their tension eased.

"I know false weight when I see it," Nwadieube continued, his voice cold and steady. "Those others are nothing more than dead cargo, leeches clinging to your side. I have no patience to waste on them."

The monsters exhaled inwardly, relief disguised as silence. He had not seen through their true forms, only judged the uselessness of their human companions. Yet even so, a sliver of unease remained. His eyes were too sharp, his tone too dismissive, as though he had already peeled back a layer of their deception without knowing how deep it ran.

The seven envoys who had been branded "puppets" exchanged looks of bewilderment. Their faces tightened with indignation, unable to make sense of what was unfolding before them.

Finally, one of them stepped forward, his voice loud and resolute.

"Your Highness, you dishonor our king's authority by calling his envoys mere puppets. Each of us was chosen to tread into your lands, to establish contact, to extend our king's hand of diplomacy. You will do well to respect both us and the crown we serve."

The words rang through the chamber, but Nwadieube did not so much as flick his gaze toward the speaker. His eyes remained locked, unblinking, upon the five who stood with their heads bowed. His fingers drummed once more against the throne's armrest slow, deliberate, like a predator measuring the distance to its prey.

The silence dragged until the female mage exhaled softly. With a flick of her wrist, a gray mist curled across the hall, dissolving almost as quickly as it had appeared. One by one, the seven protesting envoys slumped to the ground, breathing steadily in unnatural sleep.

The monsters stepped forward, their human disguises still intact, but their composure was faltering under the weight of Nwadieube's gaze. Kneeling, they pressed their heads lower.

"It was not our intention to deceive you, Your Grace," the female mage said, her voice low and measured. "Our Master willed this test, to measure the sharpness of your insight... to see if your vision truly matches your reputation."

The court was silent, the soldiers lining the walls watching without expression.

"And if I had not passed?" Nwadieube asked at last.

His words were quiet, but the air shifted with them, heavy and suffocating. The envoys felt it in their bones, a weight pressing down as though the throne itself had become a living beast, its fangs bared, its eyes boring into them.

Their bodies trembled despite themselves, each one shrinking further into submission. None dared to answer at first, their silence betraying the fear that answering wrongly would cost them their lives before their Master's plan could even begin.

"If you had not passed," the burly man with the scar finally rumbled, forcing the words through the weight of the king's presence, "then our identity would have remained hidden from your sight. We would have sought another... someone with vision that stretched farther than yours. At most, you would have secured a superficial treaty with our current king, nothing more."

The air in the hall shifted. The oppressive pressure melted away as Nwadiebube leaned back against his throne, his expression relaxing into something almost casual.

"I take it, then," he said in a lighter tone, "that your Master differs from your king?"

There was a pause, just long enough to measure risk. Then the female mage bowed her head deeper.

"Indeed. But our Master's existence is no secret to the king. On the contrary, it is well known. After all..." her voice lowered, careful, reverent, "...the king is our Master's son."

A ripple of unease flickered through the five as they dared raise their heads slightly, gauging his reaction.

Nwadiebube's lips curved faintly. "I see. That will suffice. Please, take your seats."

The envoys obeyed, rising slowly. Their gazes fell to the unconscious forms of their seven companions, sprawled like discarded dolls on the polished floor. They hesitated for only a moment before stepping past them, each movement cautious, measured, before finding seats at the long table reserved for honored guests.

From the shadows of the great pillars flanking the throne, masked figures emerged silently. They bore the limp bodies of the seven slumbering envoys away with unnerving efficiency, their movements fluid, precise, almost inhuman. Within moments, the pillars swallowed them again, and the court looked untouched, as though the "puppets" had never existed at all.

The five monsters exchanged uneasy glances, faint beads of sweat glistening at their brows.

They had underestimated this king. His eyes were sharper than they had believed, his reach deeper than they had accounted for. What was meant to be a test had turned into a revelation, one not for him, but for them.

"Who is your Master?" Nwadiebube asked, his voice calm, almost conversational.

The envoys exchanged quick glances, but their answer came as one. They shook their heads.

"The Master's name will be known to you only when he wills it. Not before."

Nwadiebube merely nodded. He had expected no less. Having dealt with godlings, creatures who thrived on riddles, half-truths, and labyrinthine schemes, he found nothing surprising in the evasiveness of these five.

"I see." His fingers tapped once against the armrest, then stilled. His eyes narrowed, studying them as one might study a blade.

"I take it, then... that your Master is of the same existence as Osita."

The words fell like stones into a still lake. And then the silence deepened.

No, it was more than silence. It was as though the very sound in the hall had been stolen away. The banners no longer whispered against the walls. Breath itself seemed suspended.

The five envoys lifted their heads, their eyes glowing with an unnatural light, burning in hues not meant for men. Their stares were fixed on Nwadieube, heavy with malice and danger.

But they did not find hesitation or fear in return.

On the throne, Nwadieube's gaze flared, golden light spilling from his eyes like molten fire. It was not simply a glow but a blaze, bright enough to cast their shadows long across the marble floor. His expression was one of cold amusement, his lips curved ever so slightly in mockery.

The message in his gaze was unmistakable.

I know what you are. I know what you guard. And I am daring you to bare your fangs here, before me.

The air grew heavy, thick with power barely restrained. The envoys felt it in their very marrow, that if they so much as bit, if they yielded to the provocation smoldering in those golden eyes, the throne room would become their grave.

They swallowed their rage, their glowing eyes dimming ever so slightly, and bowed their heads once more.

Nwadieube's gaze lingered on them a heartbeat longer before he leaned back, the mocking fire still alive in his eyes.

The tension in the hall lingered like a storm that refused to break. Finally, the female mage lifted her head, a small smile curving her lips.

"We have indeed underestimated you, Your Grace," she said softly, her tone respectful but tinged with something else, acknowledgment. With a graceful bow, she added, "Few mortals would dare to speak such words in our presence without flinching."

Nwadieube said nothing, his golden gaze still burning into them. His silence was not dismissal, but a demand for more.

The mage straightened, her eyes glimmering faintly as she continued.

"Our Master is not the same as Osita. But..." her words slowed, deliberate, "they share the same origin. Osita's existence came as a result of our Master's being. He is not a rival, nor a creation, but rather... a reflection born of inevitability."

Chapter 647:

Nwadieube leaned forward slightly in his throne, his fingers ceasing their tapping. His gaze sharpened, cutting into the mage like a blade.

"There are many secrets behind Osita's existence," he said slowly. "Secrets known only by the godlings... and even then, not shared freely."

The mage's smile did not waver.

"Are you willing to share such secrets with me?" Nwadieube asked. His voice was calm, but beneath it was the weight of a challenge.

The female mage's face remained composed, but within, her thoughts stumbled. So it is true, she realized. The way he sat there, golden eyes alight with hunger and restraint, was exactly as her Master had described.

Commanding, yes but under the command, a quiet desperation. A king starved.

Her Master had spoken often of this man. A ruler of unyielding discipline, yet beneath the steel lay an insatiable thirst for knowledge, knowledge he felt he alone was worthy to wield. And yet, the godlings... they did not agree. To them, this king was not a vessel to be trusted, but a child clawing at forbidden books, one who would mistake a drop of wisdom for mastery of the ocean.

The mage lowered her gaze, recalling her Master's instructions.

"He will ask. He cannot help himself. When he does, you will answer. Not because he deserves it, but because it will shape the path. Whether he rises or destroys himself is no concern of yours. You will feed his thirst, and watch what he does with it."

That was why they had come. Not to win territory. Not to negotiate treaties. But to drip truth like venom into the parched mouth of a king who longed to drink deep.

"But that was only what he wants to know." Her master's words echoed in her mind with quiet severity. They had been instructed carefully: answer only what the king asked, never more, never less. To offer him everything would be to loosen the leash on his curiosity, to widen his vision toward matters that should remain unseen. Their duty was not to enlighten him, but to guide his understanding into a narrow path, one safe for both him and themselves.

She kept this thought like a shield as she regarded Nwadiebeube, who waited, his dark gaze resting heavily upon her. His posture was that of a ruler accustomed to control, yet beneath it she could sense the tension of one who expected resistance.

"We are indeed willing to share this knowledge with you, my king," she said at last, her voice calm, smooth, deliberate. "What is it you would like to know?"

The king blinked, surprised. The note of openness in the mage's tone unsettled him. He had prepared arguments, even gentle threats, anticipating that they would refuse him outright. His words had been sharpened in his mind, ready to cut through their defiance. But now, with their apparent compliance, the edge of his preparation dulled.

Was this their goal? His eyes flicked toward the envoys seated beside her, searching for some sign of hidden intention. Yet their faces were like masks calm, unreadable, devoid of the smallest crack that might reveal what they thought. Not a furrowed brow, not a twitch of the mouth. Silence and stillness were their weapons, and he suddenly felt as though he sat at a table of statues carved from an alien stone.

He leaned back, feigning composure though his heart quickened. "Then you will answer me truthfully," he said, his tone more measured than before. Yet doubt gnawed at him.

"I know about Osita's demon status, but I know not of his goals, origin, and why the godlings keep such watchful eyes on demons. My issue with Osita stems from his action bringing shame to my family name and history. My problem isn't with Osita himself as he is my uncle; my problem is the demon now wearing his skin and name."

The female mage nodded to his words, her expression unreadable, and once again asked in that calm, deliberate tone, "What would you like to know, my lord?"

"Tell me about the demons and their goal for this world?" Nwadiebeube asked, his voice carrying more weight now, though his eyes searched her face for the slightest tremor. The female mage nodded, acknowledging his demand, while the other envoys, as though by silent accord, turned their attention back to the wine and the meal set before them. Their knives cut quietly, cups shifted, but no eyes turned toward their exchange as if the question had been expected, and its answer already rehearsed.

The female mage began to speak, her words steady, as if reciting knowledge sealed and prepared long before this moment. She told the king exactly what he needed to know, no more and no less, her phrasing careful, her tone leaving no room for embellishment.

Nwadiebeube listened intently, but as her account unfolded, his disbelief grew. His fingers tightened against the arm of his seat, his jaw set firm as though to ground himself in the face of such audacity.

"You mean to tell me," he said at last, the weight of his voice pressing into the chamber, "that the runic knowledge we all now share in this world came from the demons? To be more specific " he leaned forward slightly, his eyes narrowing, "from Osita, after his deal with the apelings?"

Nwadiebeube shook his head, the disbelief still clinging to him, before asking, "If the demons' goal were truly this world, why then are Osita's actions so contradictory to this supposed goal?"

For a moment he hesitated, as though the words resisted leaving his mouth. At last he admitted, voice lower, "Osita has been a great leader to his people. If not for my differences with him... I would not have preferred a better neighbour than him."

The female mage inclined her head slightly, her composure calm. "Indeed, his actions have been unlike that of a demon," she replied evenly. "But this stems from his past underestimation of your uncle, the real Osita."

"The current Osita can hardly be called a demon anymore," she continued, her tone almost reflective now. "He is more of a cambion, something caught between. When he took your uncle's body, he underestimated the depth of the man's love for his wife and the unborn child she carried. That bond became his undoing. It was not just a shell he took over, but a vessel filled with ties, memories, and feelings he could not strip away."

Her gaze held steady on Nwadiebeube, as if willing him to understand. "He thought he would gain a human body to rebuild his demon form, but instead he inherited limitations...and feelings. Emotions he could not master, that gnawed at him, reshaped him. And with the passing of decades, those feelings have molded the Osita we now know. A being who wears both faces, but belongs fully to neither."

Nwadiebeube sat in silence upon his throne, the hall echoing faintly with the fading steps of the guards and envoys. The king's eyes lowered, his expression unreadable, but within him raged a storm. His mind was a battlefield torn between ambition and morality, the vision of an empire, his empire, shining bright before him, and the shadow of doubt cast by the truths he had just heard. It seemed so certain, so attainable, and yet it pulled at the very roots of who he believed himself to be.

Meanwhile, in the company of the envoys, unease simmered beneath their controlled exteriors. Their gazes lingered upon the female mage who had dared to test the lion in his den. Most faces were masked with neutrality, but there was a strangeness in their eyes, a mix of reproach, bewilderment, and calculation. Only the other woman among them met her gaze with something different: not judgment, but a quiet understanding, as though she alone had glimpsed the fire that had sparked within her.

The female mage herself was trembling, though not from fear. Excitement coursed through her veins, her heart beating in rhythm with the memory of the king's golden eyes and the sheer force of his presence. But it was not only his power that left her shivering. It was her own. In that moment at his ear, when her words had stirred hesitation into his chest, she had tasted control, real control, the kind reserved for rulers.

For the first time she understood why the human envoys who traveled with them became ensnared in vanity, drunk on the attentions of nobles and kings. This land was intoxicating in its openness.

Her thoughts wandered where they should not. The empire where she had been born, where her master's hand weighed on every breath, had always been too restrictive. Orders bound them, hierarchies caged them, obedience strangled them. It was impossible there to imagine a life unshackled by command.

But here... here was freedom. Too much freedom, she realized, a dangerous excess that could overwhelm the unprepared. Yet instead of recoiling, she felt her spirit lean toward it, hungry. Now she understood why her master's own daughter had rebelled the moment the opportunity presented itself. She had once spat upon that betrayal, scorning it as weakness. But now, standing in this land where ambition was not only permitted but celebrated, she began to see it differently.

#### Chapter 648

For the first time, she entertained the thought that she, too, might one day break the leash. That she might carve her own place, not under her master's shadow, but in the light of her own dominion. And the idea thrilled her more than she dared admit.

Playing with the minds of men was nothing new to her. She had done it countless times before, courtiers with wandering eyes, nobles drunk on their own pride, merchants softened by lust and wine. They were easy prey, eager to be conquered, blind to her strings. But Nwadiebeube was different. He was strong. His will was iron, his presence unshakable, and the memory of his scalding hand clamped around her throat still burned against her skin like a brand.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the weight of a hand on her shoulder. Startled, she turned sharply, anger flashing across her face, ready to lash out. But she met instead the cold, expressionless face of another envoy. He said nothing, only shook his head slowly and tapped two fingers against his temple.

Confusion flickered through her eyes, but it did not last long. Realization struck like a blade, and with it came a surge of anger that hollowed her chest. The seal. Their master's seal, the invisible mark binding them all, a tether against future betrayal. She had been so lost in the taste of freedom, in the intoxicating thought of power, that she had momentarily forgotten the leash still coiled tightly around her neck.

Her face darkened, shadows cutting across her features. The thought of her rebellion shriveled within her. She said nothing, did nothing, only turned away and allowed herself to be led with the others as the soldiers escorted them from the chamber.

Meanwhile, Nwadiebeube remained alone in the vast court. The silence pressed down around him like a weight, broken only by the restless drum of his own thoughts. The mage's words still lingered like smoke in his ears, entwined with his own doubts, each whisper gnawing at the edges of his resolve.

Then the doors of the court slammed open with a violent crack. The sound tore him from his contemplation. He lifted his head sharply, golden eyes narrowing as an intruder stormed into the hall. The figure carried an aura of heat and fury, an anger so sharp it seemed to darken the very air of the court.

He looked up and saw his sister, the princess, stride into the court with fury etched across her face. Her anger was not without cause, he knew it, knew she had every right to confront him after what he had done. But Nwadiebeube was weary, his mind already heavy with battles unseen. He was not in the mood to wrestle with his sister's indignation.

"Not now, sister," he said, his tone clipped, his gaze already drifting past her as though she were an unwelcome distraction.

But Nwadinma was not so easily dismissed. Rarely did she lose her composure, yet now her voice rang through the chamber like the crack of a whip. "If not now, then when?"

Her words struck him, but he gave no reply. His silence only fanned her anger further.

"Why did you deny me access to the court today?" she demanded, her voice trembling with restrained outrage. "Why was I stopped by your men on my way here, even threatened with force should I insist? Do you think I would not notice the insult? Do you think I would accept such treatment quietly?"

Nwadiebeube's jaw clenched, but still he held his tongue. Nwadinma pressed on, her eyes narrowing. "This was not our agreement, brother. We agreed to I—"

Her words cut short as Nwadiebeube's voice thundered through the hall, rage spilling like molten metal.

"I am the King!" His roar echoed off the stone, silencing her instantly. His golden eyes burned, and each syllable came heavy with command. "My orders are not to be questioned. Not by you, not by anyone. You will do well to remember that."

He rose from his throne, his figure towering above her, a looming shadow that cast her in its wake.

His tone only deepened Nwadimma's anger. She strode toward him, her steps sharp against the stone floor, her presence filling the chamber with its own quiet power.

"I am Nwadimma," she declared, her voice steady though her eyes burned, "the first daughter of the first king, Omadi. And I have an image an image I must preserve and uphold, even with you as king."

She stopped a few paces from him, her chin lifted, her fury no longer shouted but carved into every syllable. "An image your rash orders and unwise decisions have tarnished. You made me, a princess of the Omadi kingdom appear as nothing more than a mere woman before the people, before those who should bow to me. Do you not see what you've done?"

Then, her tone shifted. The fire did not leave her words, but it grew colder, calmer, more deliberate. "What do you make of this, brother?"

Nwadiebeube's fists loosened at his side. Her words pierced through the haze of his anger, forcing him to see past his pride. He began to understand her outrage was not rooted in his decision to keep her from the court. It was in how he had done it. His rashness, his heavy-handed display, had struck at her dignity.

He could have pulled her aside, explained to her why he had chosen to bar her from the day's council. He could have given her the courtesy of privacy, the respect her station demanded. Instead, she had been halted at the doors, treated like an intruder, even threatened with force. To her, and to those who had witnessed it, she had been humiliated, made to look hysterical, diminished in the eyes of the very people she was meant to command with her presence.

The realization soured his anger, replacing it with the recognition that his actions had not only wounded his sister's pride, but weakened the image of the royal family itself.

He fell back into his throne, his strength seeming to drain out of him with the motion. His voice was low, weary. "I was not in the right mind when I called for the court meeting with the envoys."

"That is no excuse," Nwadimma snapped, her words cutting sharply across the silence.

For a while neither spoke. The chamber stretched with stillness, heavy as stone. The king's eyes dimmed, and the princess, though still seething, did not press him further. She was not in a rush. She had always known her brother needed time for his words, and so she waited.

At last, Nwadiebeube's voice returned, softer, almost confessional. "I didn't want to be in the right mind when meeting them. After hearing of the godlings' recent move, I needed an outlet. And if I had you by my side... this meeting today would not have occurred."

Nwadimma's face softened, her anger melting into something more fragile. She studied him, the weary slump of his shoulders, the heaviness carved into his brow and for a moment she saw not the king, but her brother, burdened beneath the crown. "I'm guessing it didn't go so well," she said gently.

To her surprise, Nwadiebeube shook his head. "It went well," he admitted. Then, after a pause, his voice grew even quieter. "Too well, in fact."

He lifted his gaze to meet hers. And what she saw there was not triumph or confidence, but the rawer things he tried so hard to hide, hesitation, shame, and guilt.

The realization made her chest tighten. Whatever had transpired in that meeting, it had left scars on his spirit.

Her heart tightened at the sight of him, the weight of his crown reflected in his posture. "What did they say to you, brother?" she asked softly.

Nwadiebeube opened his mouth as if to speak, but no sound came. He looked away, the light of the torches flickering across his face. "Their words should not taint your ears, sister," he said voice low, almost hoarse. "It is all mine to bear."

Nwadimma's brows knit. "Has it reached that point?" she asked.

The king hesitated, his golden eyes dimming before he gave a small, almost imperceptible nod. "Indeed it has."

Silence fell over the court again, deep and heavy. The princess stood with her back straight, her face unreadable. Then, with deliberate grace, she turned her back to him. "Do what you must, brother."

The words cut him more deeply than any blade. His weariness evaporated, replaced by something sharper, urgency and disbelief. "You are not going to ask what it is that was discussed?" he said, his voice breaking the stillness. "You are not going to try to stop me?"

The princess stopped at the edge of the dais, her profile outlined by the light from the high windows. "I also have my pride as a human, brother," she said quietly but firmly. "The godlings' actions this time have gone too far. Something must be done." She glanced back at him over her shoulder, her expression softening for just a heartbeat. "Besides, it pleases me not to see you in such a state."

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"If doing whatever it is you need to do will bring you peace, then do so," she said at last, her voice steady. Then she fell silent and began walking toward the great doors of the palace.

Just as her hand touched the gilded handle, she stopped. Without turning, she asked, "Can I take over the teaching of the crown prince?"

Nwadiebeube, caught off guard, widened his eyes. But after a brief pause, he understood. A slow nod followed. "He is lucky to have you guiding his growth."

The princess inclined her head slightly, though her face remained hidden, and continued her departure. The heavy doors closed behind her, their echo lingering in the vast chamber.

The king sat back on his throne, his expression calmer than it had been all day. The gnawing conflict in his heart eased, if only slightly. His sister was one of the few people he would not allow himself to disappoint, and her words had steadied him more than she could know.

"Pride as a human..." he murmured, letting the phrase roll across his tongue. Then, suddenly, laughter burst from his chest, a deep, unrestrained laughter that filled the court and bounced against its marble pillars.

How strange it was, he thought, that such words came from Nwadinma, who once would never have spoken them, who once found such notions fragile, almost childish. Yet here she was, speaking them with unshakable conviction.

And in that conviction, he found a piece of himself he thought he had lost.

Meanwhile, back when Nwadinma had his maid inform the envoys about the court meeting, the whispers of this decision did not remain confined within the palace walls. The news rippled outward, reaching even the apeling, who in turn carried it swiftly back to Zephyr.

Upon hearing it, Zephyr's first instinct was to act. His blood stirred with the reflex his father, Ikem, had instilled in him to always watch the humans closely, to correct their missteps before they could spiral into disaster.

But he stopped himself.

Unlike Ikem, whose vigilance over humankind had shaped much of their history, Zephyr found the practice increasingly hollow. He had been raised under the same doctrines, taught that humans could never be trusted with their own strength or ambition, yet he found himself questioning it more and more.

Why not let humans deal with human problems? he often asked himself.

It wasn't that he was blind to the truth of his father's caution. He understood well enough that unchecked human ambition could threaten not only themselves but even the balance of the wider world. Still, Zephyr could not shake a restless disdain for the pattern: step in, correct, restrain, and watch the same cycle repeat again and again.

Where Ikem saw duty, Zephyr saw monotony.

To him, it was almost comical. He, the leader of the apeling kingdom, rarely had to interfere with his own people's affairs. The apelings governed themselves with a natural harmony, their disputes never spiraling into the destructive chaos humans so easily courted. Yet somehow, his time and thought were consumed not by his kingdom's wellbeing, but by the endless need to manage humans.

And lately, he had begun to wonder if perhaps the humans needed their mistakes. If perhaps, in shielding them, Ikem had denied them something essential.

Hence, once the news reached him, Zephyr chose not to act. He gave no order to interfere with Nwadiiebube or the meeting. Instead, he instructed his watchers to continue their quiet surveillance of the envoys.

The humans, he decided, could bear the weight of their own choices. But the same could not be said for the envoys and, more importantly, the master who had sent them. If they revealed even the faintest intent to stir trouble among the apelings or bend the balance of the wider world, then he would strike without hesitation. Until that moment, however, he would wait. Let the humans wrestle with the monster they had willingly welcomed into their halls.

His concerns lay elsewhere.

Zephyr's most pressing issue was not the humans but his own people. The apelings were strong, their bodies unmatched, their minds keen, their kingdom overflowing with abundance and stability. But therein lay the problem: they had grown too comfortable. Too wealthy. Too unchallenged. A race born for growth and struggle had become dulled by their own prosperity.

He had seen the same sickness elsewhere, a human kingdom far across the sea, once mighty, now rotting under the weight of its own excess. Its fall was slow but steady, born not of enemies but of its own complacency. Zephyr would not allow his people to share such a fate.

He had already had the foundation of a countermeasure. Measures designed to shake his people and other godlings race from their stupor and awaken their hunger for growth once more. Yet pieces of the design were still missing, elements only the chaos of the wider world could supply.

And in this, perhaps, the humans had their use.

Whatever storm brewed in this continent, whether kings, demons, or envoys. It might well provide the very equation he needed to complete his design.

Down in the western continent lay the Humanity Kingdom, the first human realm to rise from scattered tribes into a unified nation. Once hailed as a beacon of potential, it was believed that this kingdom would serve as the model for all other human domains, a shining example of unity, ambition, and progress.

For a time, it lived up to that expectation. Its scholars reached far in their studies, its warriors pushed back rival powers, and its people carried a fiery determination to expand and strengthen themselves. That fire burned brightest during the great war against their equal, a rival kingdom whose power and influence threatened to snuff out their existence. The conflict was long and bloody, but in the end, the Humanity Kingdom emerged victorious, though at a tremendous cost. Their armies lay shattered, their fields barren, and their population thinned to a fraction of what it once was.

Yet all assumed that from these ashes, the kingdom would rise anew. Many expected the war to be a crucible, forging an even stronger and prouder Humanity Kingdom that would dominate the continent. But the opposite happened.

After the war, something subtle yet profound shifted. The kingdom did not surge forward in conquest or ambition. The drive to grow, to grasp at greatness, seemed to vanish. Instead, a strange new desire took root among its people, a yearning not for glory, but for something quieter, simpler, almost decadent. The hunger to achieve and expand, which had once defined them, was replaced with a hunger to endure, to live comfortably, to never again be consumed by the furnace of war.

It is still debated whether this transformation was born from the will of their sovereign or the soul of the people themselves. Did the king guide them toward this path, weary of sacrifice and loss, or had this yearning always been there, buried beneath ambition, waiting for the king's blessing to bloom? Whatever the truth, with his permission or perhaps his silent approval, the new desire grew.

The Humanity Kingdom no longer chased greatness. Instead, it became a land where ambition turned inward, where strength was no longer a tool for expansion but a means to preserve stability. Their warriors blade dulled, their scholars slowed, and their leaders ceased to dream of empire. Other kingdoms looked upon them with a mix of confusion and disdain, wondering how the once-bright hope of humanity had dulled into something so strange, so alien.

It was difficult to fathom how a kingdom once hailed as the vanguard of humanity's potential had become what it was now after so many years. A forsaken land, shunned and condemned by all. To set foot in the Humanity Kingdom was to sever ties with the rest of the world. Any traveler, merchant, or wanderer who dared cross its borders found themselves branded and banned from every other kingdom. No exceptions. No mercy.

The reason was as clear as it was horrifying: the Humanity Kingdom had become the greatest concentration of cursed beings in existence. What once had been the heart of human ambition was now a breeding ground for cursed spirits and cursed being most prominently, those born of lust.

Unlike other cursed beings, whose birth often twisted flesh into grotesque forms, the ones touched by the cursed spirits of lust manifested differently. Their appearance did not degrade, it intensified. Beauty became sharper, alluring beyond measure, and their presence carried an intoxicating pull. What should have been monstrous became dangerously enchanting, spreading like a plague that was both desired and feared.

To outsiders, the rise of these cursed beings seemed inevitable given the Humanity Kingdom's strange decline and latest hobby. In the wake of their devastating losses, King Erik himself had sowed the seeds of ruin. Faced with empty fields, silent villages, and dwindling numbers, he sought to restore his kingdom through indulgence.

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He decreed a new order: a culture of lust, sanctified under the crown. He preached that through unrestrained pleasure, the lost numbers would be replenished. Procreation was no longer a private duty but a public virtue, woven into festivals, rituals, and the daily lives of his people. What began as desperation soon grew into doctrine.

And Erik's orders did not stop there. He turned to his mages, demanding arcane solutions to hasten this resurgence. They answered with concoctions and enchantments potions that magnified beauty, heightened desire, and sharpened the body's performance beyond natural limits. These gifts, when distributed among the people, only deepened the corruption, for each enhancement of beauty and lust brought them closer to the cursed spirits lurking just beyond the veil.

Now, it was no kingdom at all only a forbidden realm, a place of beauty too dangerous to behold, where cursed spirits multiplied and thrived, and where the line between mortal and cursed being blurred until it vanished entirely.

At first, King Erik's decrees bore the weight of a great leader, and many believed he had found a way to restore what was lost. Though there was hesitation at the beginning, repulsion even, his authority and charisma smoothed over the cracks. The idea of taking multiple partners was seen as a taboo, an affront to long-held traditions of fidelity, family honor, and sacred vows. Yet Erik framed it not as indulgence, but as duty. This is not for pleasure, but for survival, he declared. This is for the future of humanity kingdom.

And slowly, the people bent to that vision. What had been unthinkable became tolerable, then acceptable, then celebrated. Men taking multiple wives was justified as strength of lineage; women taking multiple partners was reframed as devotion to the kingdom's recovery. In time, both sexes seemed to reach a silent agreement, this was for the greater good.

The results appeared undeniable. Within a few short years, the number of children born swelled. Villages rang with the laughter of the young again, and the empty homes once abandoned after the war were filled anew. To ensure the health of both mother and child, the Humanity Kingdom began to venerate Mahu, goddess of the moon and motherhood, with fervor unlike any other realm. Shrines to her were raised in every town square, her name whispered in every household, her blessings sought for every birth. She became the heart of their faith and their hope.

For a time, the kingdom seemed to be healing. The losses of the war no longer hung as heavily, replaced by visions of renewal. When the vision began to take place outsiders believed this was the beginning, the return of the humanity kingdom to power.

But ambition is a restless seed.

Erik, satisfied with the success of his first great project, began to cast his eyes toward a new vision, one far grander, more dangerous, and perhaps born not of necessity but of desire. He spoke less of replenishing numbers and more of shaping a new humanity, greater than any before. He saw his kingdom not just as a people to be restored, but as clay to be reshaped in his image.

And while his focus drifted toward this second, greater project, the system he had built, the fragile balance between duty and indulgence began to crack. Without his strict oversight and the discipline of those who once watched closely, the culture of lust slipped from a structured duty into unchecked excess. What had been for survival became for pleasure. What had been a necessity became addiction.

Finally, when Erik emerged from his lab and beheld the state of his kingdom, he expected some faults and damages which he was ready to handle. Instead, what he found disarmed him "A kingdom of lust and desire"

To his own surprise, he was not angered by the desolate order of things, the indulgence in lust, the warped beauty of cursed flesh, the decadence woven into daily life.

Instead, he felt at peace.

For the first time in his long reign, his people were bearable to look at. More than bearable, they were pleasing, even captivating. The cursed spirits had shaped their forms, refining them, sculpting them in ways that mirrored the perfection Erik had once sought out. They lacked the elven blood he had dreamed of bestowing, but even so, what stood before him filled him with joy.

Something he had labored toward in solitude was now half-completed by another's hand, by the work of curses, by the shadow of Ikenga, the origin god.

So, Erik descended from his palace for the first time in years. He walked openly among his people, not as a king but as a figure rediscovering his realm. And they welcomed him. They smiled with lips too perfect, bowed with bodies sculpted by unnatural allure, and their eyes shimmering with both reverence and desire looked upon him as the monarch who had led them to this new existence.

Weeks passed, and Erik let himself become absorbed in the rhythm of this strange rebirth. He took in the sights, the songs, the dances, and the festivals that sprang like wildfire in every town and court. The kingdom no longer wept for its past nor feared its future; it celebrated the present, endlessly and without restraint. Parties bloomed like flowers in the night, filling halls and streets alike with revelry, and Erik, for the first time in decades, let himself indulge.

The wine flowed. The music throbbed. Beauty surrounded him in every direction, beauty born of corruption, yet more alluring than anything he had ever known. And the king, who once locked himself away chasing an impossible dream, now stood in the center of it all, basking in the half-completed vision that the curses had gifted to him.

For Erik, it no longer mattered whether this beauty came from his blood or from Ikenga's curse. It was enough. More than enough.

But as the weeks turned into months, the glow of indulgence began to dim or rather, Erik's eyes, once dazzled, began to sharpen again. The beauty remained, the parties continued, and the lustful mirth carried on as though it would never end. Yet beneath the glittering surface, Erik noticed something crucial.

He had never minded the lustful and changed nature of his people after all, it was the very thing that had made them bearable to his elven eyes. But Erik had always believed that there was a time for everything: a time for joy, a time for work, a time for revelry, and a time for seriousness. To his growing dismay, he saw that his people no longer recognized such divisions.

They were ruled entirely by lust and desire.

It was not simply their custom, it was their entire existence. Festivals had become endless, duties forgotten, and responsibility mocked. The court itself, once the heart of order and decision, had withered into little more than a stage for excess. When Erik called a council, only a handful even appeared, and of those few, not one came with seriousness in their eyes. They arrived in silks and jewels, whispering of feasts and lovers, eagerly expecting the king to announce yet another orgiastic celebration.

Their disappointment was sharp when Erik instead spoke of politics, of alliances, of neighboring kingdoms watching them with wary eyes. Some yawned openly; others left in disgust, as though betrayed that their king had wasted their time with "dry matters."

It was like a bucket of cold water poured over Erik's head. The haze of satisfaction that had dulled his judgment evaporated in an instant, leaving him face-to-face with the stark reality of what his kingdom had become.

He saw now that his people were not merely indulging in lust, they were enslaved to it. They could no longer stop, no longer balance joy with duty, no longer see beyond their own hunger. They were lost, hollowed out, shadows of humanity wearing beautiful skins shaped by cursed spirits.

And as Erik's sight cleared, so too did his awareness of the danger around him. Beyond his borders, other kingdoms had already turned their backs on Humanity. Rumors of the cursed spreading were growing louder, and watchful eyes in the shadows were waiting for the right moment to strike.

Not all of the Humanity Kingdom had yet been swallowed by lust. There were still many who remained untouched, still living as ordinary men and women, clinging desperately to fragments of normalcy. But their numbers were dwindling fast. For one of the greatest dangers of cursed spirits was not just their strength, but the way their very presence distorted the world around them.

A cursed spirit was a plague made flesh.

Left unchecked, one could rot a village within a single day. In weeks, an entire town would collapse into madness, as the curse seeped into the air itself, warping minds and hearts until nothing remained but indulgence in the sin it embodied. In this case, lust. The cursed beings of lust were not content with their own corruption. They spread it, twisted it, until the ground itself seemed to breathe temptation and the people could think of nothing but their hunger.