

Guardian gods 651

Chapter 651

Other kingdoms knew this well. This was why they had severed all ties with Humanity, why they had marked it as a forbidden land. Stations were set up along the borders, manned by watchful soldiers and priests, their sole duty to ensure that nothing, no person, no animal, not even a traveler's wagon left the kingdom to carry the corruption beyond. To the outside world, Erik's kingdom was not simply decadent. It was a quarantine zone.

When Erik came to truly understand this, the peace he had felt was shattered. His earlier calmness, his strange acceptance of the kingdom's state, evaporated. Panic gnawed at him. If nothing was done, if he let things continue, then every last soul under his crown would be twisted into a cursed being.

The ordinary, untainted citizens who remained were the last hope of the Humanity Kingdom. The future of his people depended on them. They had to be preserved, protected, kept far from the spreading influence of the cursed spirits. But how?

Once, he would have simply commanded his knights and soldiers. He would have sent them riding across the land, gathering those still sane and drawing them back under his watch. But those days were gone. The culture of indulgence had corroded their discipline. Now there were hardly any men left to order. And even if there were, sending them would be more curse than cure, they themselves might fall to temptation and drag down those they were sent to save.

Erik's steps carried him to his lab before he even realized it, as though some instinct had guided him. The heavy doors creaked open, and he wandered inside, his body weary, his mind heavier still. He let himself collapse onto a worn chair, the air thick with the smell of old parchment, tinctures, and iron.

His eyes fixed upon the figure at the center of the room: a statue of a god.

It was no idol of Mahu, the Origin god his people had long revered. No, Erik's gaze rested on a likeness of Ikem, the God of Verdant Communion, or as Erik had come to call him in secret, the God of Microcosm.

Once, Erik had no interest in Ikem. His devotion had not come from faith, but from necessity. When he began his great project, the transformation of Humanity's bloodline into something closer to his own elven heritage, he quickly found himself lost. To alter a single man's blood was daunting enough, but to reshape the destiny of generations? He had no idea where to begin.

In his desperation, he scoured the doctrines of gods, searching for one whose dominion touched upon what he sought. That was when he found Ikem, whose domain reached into the hidden world beneath the world: the cellular, the infinitesimal, the very language of life. A god who could weave communion even between man and the unseen microcosm that formed him.

Ikem's blessing promised insight into the building blocks of blood, flesh, and inheritance. To Erik, this was salvation and so what began as a plea for guidance slowly twisted into reverence. Before long, Erik was no longer merely studying Ikem's doctrine, he was a worshiper, a believer, a man who whispered prayers between experiments and saw the divine hand in his own work.

To Erik, Ikem was not merely a guide but a great god, one who had revealed to him truths hidden from mortal sight. Though his experiments had ended in failure, in a way, he had succeeded. He had uncovered why his dream could not yet be realized.

The answer was twofold.

The first lay in the gentle aspect of his elven blood. It was a bloodline refined, subtle, and delicate yet because of that, it was easily overwhelmed. When forced into the human frame, its finer traits bent,

were swallowed, or pushed aside until only fragments remained. What should have blossomed into beauty withered into frailty.

The second reason was more daunting, and far more damning. Erik's elven bloodline was not of this world. Nana, the living world herself had never known the elven race. To her, they were foreign, invasive. Thus, every attempt to rewrite humanity with elvish essence was met with silent resistance. The world rejected it as though the very soil spat out what was not born of it.

Erik alone was an exception. His body had accepted the merger only because of two unique factors: the dominance of his human counterpart, and the divine artifact he bore, the Last World Spear. Through it, his alien blood had taken root and flourished. But that was his case alone.

Others would not be so fortunate. If he pressed the experiment further, if he tried to seed the same bloodline across his people, the result would not be a reborn race of beauty.

Erik had stumbled upon a new dilemma. Of the two problems weighing on him, he pushed the second to the side, knowing full well it lay beyond his reach. The first, however, he refused to abandon. He had glimpsed a narrow path forward, one born of dangerous compromise: to take the elvish bloodline's most defining trait, their gentle, harmonious nature and twist it into something aggressive.

But in doing so, he would strip the elves of what made them who they were. They would still be elves, yes, but not the kind Erik had once admired, dreamed of, or imagined. Even so, he consoled himself with the thought that they would remain elves in name, and perhaps in form. That small thread of continuity was enough to drive him forward. Sadly, despite his efforts, he had yet to find a way to overwrite or rewrite the elvish gentle aspect.

Alone in his lab, surrounded by faint traces of cursed energy and half-finished experiments, Erik could not help but circle back to another thought, a thought that had been growing in him ever since he began

to dwell among his own people in their cursed state. Weeks of immersion among cursed beings had changed him. He had lived with them, endured the suffocating weight of their pervasive aura, the constant pressure of their corruption seeking to draw him in, to bind him to their hunger and despair. Yet something in him resisted. Not only resisted, it transformed.

Erik discovered he could take that aura, that suffocating miasma, and bend it to his will. Instead of breaking him, it enhanced him. He could turn their cursed presence into a mirror that magnified his beauty, heightening his allure, fueling his desire, sharpening his vitality. What drove others to ruin seemed to nourish him.

It was then the realization struck him: his elvish bloodline. Perhaps it was not just a shield but a bridge. Where others would crumble under the spirit of lust and desire, Erik found he could weave it into his very being, make it serve him. The curse was not a curse to him, it was a gift.

So why not merge the two paths? If he succeeded in reshaping his people into elves, would not their cursed nature find harmony, if not balance within that form?

The thought thrilled him. Two birds with one stone: salvation for his people, and peace for himself.

Erik's mind was a storm, torn between the pressing needs of his kingdom and the memory of countless failed experiments. As his thoughts tangled, a sudden sensation tore him from his reverie. It was faint at first, a whisper brushing against his ear, a pull deep in his chest as though an unseen hand beckoned him.

He froze, frowning, his sharp mind immediately alert. Then, with deliberate steps, he rose from his seat. His boots echoed softly across the cold stone floor as he moved through the dimly lit corridors of his laboratory.

Glass tanks lined the walls, their warped shapes filled with the remnants of experiments that had never borne fruit. Some still contained the husks of malformed attempts faintly twitching, forever trapped in states between life and death. Each one was a monument to years of toil and disappointment. Erik's gaze brushed past them, his focus already fixed elsewhere, drawn inexorably by the whisper.

His steps carried him deeper, until at last he stood before a peculiar door. Unlike the rest of the lab, this threshold was not meant for daily use. Erik had built it with his own hands, every curve of the wood and metal reinforced with sigils only he could decipher. The entire surface was etched with runes, now glowing faintly, pulsing as if responding to a heartbeat from the other side.

This door was his greatest safeguard, and his greatest fear. Behind it lay a mystery he both dreaded but could never abandon. Something he had uncovered years ago, buried where it should have remained hidden. He knew little of its true nature only enough to understand its danger.

The godlings themselves had shown how much they feared this. Erik knew this, for their evasiveness had spoken louder than words. They had not taken it from him, not because they were indifferent, but because they could not. By the twisted bargains of politics, it had been found within his lands, and thus ownership was his. Even the godlings, with all their pride, had no say.

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Through years of fragmented study, Erik had pieced together scraps of knowledge. Whatever lay behind that door bore a deep enmity with the gods. Its conflict with them had been so violent, so absolute, that the remnants of its defeat had left a scar on the world. That scar was known in hushed voices as the Spectacle.

Erik pressed his palm against the door. The runes beneath his hand throbbed, answering his touch, and the whispers surged, no longer faint but insistent, curling around his mind like smoke. He tightened his jaw and forced his hand to the handle. With a deep breath, he turned it, the sound of the mechanism groaning like something reluctant to be disturbed.

The door creaked open, revealing yet another barrier: a wall of reinforced glass, gleaming faintly in the dim light. Erik had built this safeguard himself, layer upon layer of protective wards etched into its frame, for what lay beyond demanded nothing less.

On the other side stood a single object: a wide glass bowl filled with dark, viscous water. The liquid shifted as though alive, undulating in patterns that defied natural law, shadows swimming across its surface as if the water itself were breathing.

The moment Erik's eyes fell upon it, the whispers crescendoed. They no longer scratched faintly at the edge of his hearing; they pressed directly into his skull, weaving into his thoughts. His pulse quickened, his breath hitched. The bowl called to him.

And then, amidst the cacophony, the voice sharpened clear, unmistakable, intimate.

"We could help you with your goal."

The words struck him like a blade of ice, snapping him out of his trance. His eyes darted around the chamber, searching desperately for the source. But there was no one. Only the bowl, waiting, its surface rippling as though amused by his confusion.

Fear spiked through him. Erik's expression hardened, and with a sharp motion he pulled the door shut, cutting off the whispers at once. The runes dimmed, falling quiet.

He collapsed back against the cold stone floor, breath ragged, chest heaving as if he had run a great distance. For a long moment he sat there, eyes wide with lingering dread.

This was not the first time Erik had heard the whispers. It had become a common sight and sound ever since he and Edward had taken possession of the Spectacle of the Lake. Once fiercely guarded by both their armies, it was now left unprotected, because of the whispers and tendency to oull in those around it. Erik and Edward took matter into their own hand and had crafted a great dome of reinforced stone, etched with runes that pulsed faintly in the dark. Around its perimeter stood five towering statues, each carved in the likeness of the origin gods, silent sentinels meant to suppress the entity's influence.

But even with such safeguards, the whispers never ceased. Especially for Erik.

The protections dulled the Spectacle's voice, but they did not silence it. And Erik, who got his hand on some of the spectacle before it was sealed and had handled its samples and studied its essence, was never free of its call. The samples themselves were both boon and curse each one granting knowledge, but each one clawing deeper into his mind. Whenever his resolve wavered, whenever his spirit dipped into doubt or weakness, the voice would stir, pressing against him with insidious promises.

It had worsened of late.

When Erik uncovered the flaw in his grand design, the problem at the heart of his dream to reshape his people the whispers grew bolder. The voice no longer cloaked itself in riddles but spoke plainly.

"We could help you. We could change the elvish bloodline. We could give you what you seek."

The words it carried in his thoughts was Cryotic, though he knew not whether that was truth or deception. The voice claimed it could mend the gentle aspect of the elves, bend it, transform it into something fitting for his vision. There was no mention of cost, no threats, no bargains, only boundless aid offered freely.

Erik was not easily swayed. He prided himself on discipline, on caution. Yet he could not deny the allure of what the whispers offered. Especially now, when his own studies suggested his elvish bloodline might hold the key to resisting the cursed nature of his people. If he could marry that heritage with the Spectacle's promise, he might not only achieve his dream, but end the torment of his kin once and for all.

And still... the fear remained.

The voice never let him go.

It was at this time that a sudden knock pulled Erik away from the dread clawing at his chest. His heart, already burdened with unease, gave a startled thump. Instinctively, he extended his consciousness outward, brushing across the familiar aura just beyond the door. It was his first son, the crown prince.

Erik hurriedly straightened himself, patting down his robes as though such small gestures could disguise the disarray of his spirit. He wanted, at the very least, to look like a king when his heir looked upon him. Slowly, he pulled open the heavy door.

What greeted him was not the proud, bright-eyed boy he remembered, but a weary man whose youth had been devoured by duty. The prince's eyes were sunken, his face drawn tight with exhaustion, and yet there was a quiet fire of resolve that had not gone out. That look pierced Erik far deeper than words ever could. Shame welled in him, shame that twisted his gut and burned in his throat. He knew, without question, that much of his son's hardened appearance was his fault.

It was his children, his son, his daughters, the royal family he had neglected who had held the kingdom together while he turned his back, drowning in despair and detachment. They bore the weight he had abandoned, shouldered the burdens he cast aside. They were the reason the kingdom still stood and had not crumbled into ruin.

Erik opened his mouth, meaning to speak to apologize, to acknowledge, to say something. But before the words could form, his son's voice cut through the air, sharp and cold.

"You have a visitor."

The words were clipped, devoid of warmth, but Erik caught it: beneath the frost, there lingered something else. A shadow of expectation. Perhaps even hope.

The prince turned away before Erik could answer, his back rigid, his pace measured. He did not look at his father again. To him, Erik was no longer worth recognizing. He had already done his part, delivered his message. His duty to the king was fulfilled no more, no less.

Yet as he strode down the corridor, his steps carried a trace of anticipation. He wanted to see how Erik, the king who had abandoned his throne in all but name, would face this unexpected guest. After all, this was the second time one of them had come to visit his people.

And such visits were never without meaning.

Erik's gaze lingered on his son's retreating figure, the prince's back stiff with unspoken judgment. A bitter taste filled his mouth. With a sharp snap of his fingers, a shard of frost shimmered into being before him, twisting and stretching into an icy mirror. His reflection stared back, a tired, hollow-eyed king who had long abandoned his crown in spirit, if not in name.

But Erik was not so weak as to let himself be seen in this state. No, not now. He drew in a deep breath and reached outward, gathering the ambient threads of cursed energy that hung thick in the air. It was the energy of lust, an intoxicating miasma that seemed to saturate the palace itself. He drew it into his veins, feeling it pulse through him, reshaping his image. His features sharpened, his posture straightened, his skin gleamed with unnatural vitality. In moments, the ruin of a man became once more a figure of elegance and dangerous allure.

The mirror fogged, then cracked, as though unable to contain the weight of the glamour he cloaked himself in. Erik dismissed it with a flick of his wrist and left his chamber, closing the heavy door behind him with a final thud.

As he moved through the corridors toward the royal court, something pulled at him. His nose twitched. There was a scent in the air sweet, intoxicating, familiar. A scent he craved, one that tugged at the deepest recesses of his memory. The closer he drew to the court, the stronger it became, until it nearly consumed his thoughts. His steps quickened, his heart pounding with a strange blend of excitement and hunger.

He was eager, desperate, even to meet this visitor.

But as the doors to the court loomed before him, instinct tempered his anticipation. He slowed, each step deliberate, his fingers brushing against the cold handles of the great door. With a slow breath, he pushed them open.

The chamber within was filled with light, and silence heavy enough to press against the skin. Erik stepped inside, his stride carrying him toward the throne as though by habit alone. But midway through the grand hall, his feet froze. His breath caught.

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There before his throne, stood a figure impossible to mistake.

A woman.

No, not a mere woman. A towering giantess, her body sculpted to impossible perfection, every curve and line radiating allure. Her skin glowed faintly, as though the mortal plane itself strained to contain her presence. And she was bare, utterly naked, unashamed, a living embodiment of divine temptation.

Erik's hands trembled at his sides. His mind rebelled against what his eyes beheld, yet the truth was undeniable. He knew that face. That form. That essence.

Impossible.

She had ascended long ago. She was a goddess now, beyond the reach of mortal courts, beyond the confines of flesh and desire. Her presence belonged in the heavens, not here in his hall. And yet here she stood, radiant and terrible, as though she had stepped straight out of memory and into reality.

His lips parted soundlessly. The air felt heavy, thick with the same intoxicating scent that had lured him here.

Why... why would she descend? And why, stripped of all divinity's pretense, would she come to him?

A few hours before the appearance of the giant in Erik's court, far away at one of the border walls built by the neighboring kingdoms, something unnatural stirred.

It began with a mist. Thick, choking, rolling in like a tide from the horizon. The sentries had seen fog before, but never like this. It wasn't the pale, harmless morning kind that drifted lazily across the fields.

This mist was dense, heavy, carrying with it a strange weight. It clung to the skin, seeped into the lungs, and muffled even the sounds from the surrounding.

The watchmen along the wall stiffened, nerves straining. "Mist this thick... here?" one whispered, his hand tightening around the hilt of his spear. Another barked at the younger soldiers, "Grab the lights, mark your positions! Don't lose sight of each other!"

Torches flared to life all along the stone battlements, flickering flames pushing weakly against the creeping veil. Each man stood with his lantern high, their glows like stars scattered in a sea of smoke, lest the mist swallow them whole.

But then movement. Every breath froze as the soldiers peered downward into the shifting fog. A shape emerged, a shadow, vast and indistinct, wavering as though half-formed. It was unclear at first, blurred by the mist, but there was one feature no one could mistake: its size.

The figure towered, impossibly tall, as though one of the forest's ancient trees had uprooted itself and begun to walk. Its outline swayed in rhythm with slow, deliberate steps that drew it closer and closer.

Panic rippled along the wall. "Gods above..." someone whispered.

"On guard!" roared the captain, his voice cracking through the fear like a whip. The stone battlements shook under the thunder of boots as soldiers snapped into formation, shields locking, bows drawn.

The figure loomed ever closer, its shadow stretching long against the mist's glow. Then, without hesitation, one of the magi raised his hands, blue sparks crackling wildly in his palms. With a furious shout, he hurled a ball of lightning down into the fog.

For a heartbeat, the night lit up like day brilliant white arcing downward, illuminating the mist from within. And then impact.

The shadow moved. A colossal arm, vague but vast, rose up through the haze. A fist. The lightning strike disappeared into its grasp, swallowed whole. The light sputtered, crackled... then died.

The mist boiled, and the giant shadow continued forward unharmed.

The shadow drew closer, step by deliberate step, until it loomed at the very edge of the wall. And yet... no matter how near it came, no soldier could discern its true form. It was as though the mist itself conspired to keep its features hidden, rendering the giant nothing more than a towering silhouette, black and unknowable.

Then, for the briefest moment, the veil thinned.

The soldiers saw.

It was only a glimpse, no more than the blink of an eye yet it was enough to shatter them. Shapes, curves, details too perfect, too overwhelming to belong to mortal flesh or divine spirit. Their thoughts ruptured beneath the weight of what their eyes beheld, as though their very minds rejected the image.

And in that stunned silence, the giant simply continued forward.

It did not climb. It did not break, tear, or smash. The towering form walked through the wall, through stone and steel as though such things were no more substantial than smoke. Not a pebble was displaced, not a single stone cracked. It was as though reality itself had parted to make way for its passage.

The defenders stood frozen, locked in place, their weapons slack in trembling hands. Then, slowly, sound returned. A chorus of low, breathless groans half pleasure, half despair escaped their lips. Men and women alike quivered, their bodies betraying them. Eyes glazed, unfocused, they glanced down and realized with mounting horror the damp stains upon their uniforms, the undeniable evidence of their loss of control.

When at last their minds cleared enough to look again, the mist was gone.

The forest lay before them in quiet serenity, just as it always had. The wall stood undisturbed. No rubble. No damage. No proof.

The giant was gone.

And yet every soldier knew, in the pit of their being, that something had passed through. Something that had touched their bodies and souls in a way that left them shaken to the core.

They stood together in silence, each shamed by what they saw in their comrades' eyes, but none daring to speak it aloud.

Meanwhile, the giant continued her steady, unhurried march, undisturbed by the cries and panic she left behind. Her steps were silent, yet each one seemed to reverberate through the land itself, like the pulse of a great heartbeat that only few could hear.

When she crossed into Erik's territory, the air shifted. The mana here was different from the other kingdoms richer, heavier, and tainted by a faint undercurrent of cursed energy. The giant slowed, inhaling deeply, and for the first time since her emergence, she spread her arms wide, as though embracing the invisible currents that flowed around her.

She reveled in it.

The mist that had cloaked her immense silhouette began to thin, drawn back as if in reverence, until the truth of her form was revealed at last.

And what a form it was.

An otherworldly beautiful woman, towering and nude, her figure sculpted into impossible perfection. Every curve, every line was harmony itself, yet laden with danger, with temptation so potent it felt like a weapon. Her skin shimmered faintly, as though it were carved from moonlight; her hair spilled like a dark river down her back; her eyes glowed with an entrancing brilliance that could unmake the will of any mortal who dared meet them.

She was the Enchanting Siren, arch-curse of beauty and of all negative emotion tied to beauty. Whispers spoke of her as the right hand of the Goddess of the Moon, the divine attendant whose allure swayed mortals and gods alike. Others murmured of the secret title she bore in hushed tones: the bride of the ascended god Tide, lord of the Everflowing Treasury, whose riches and oceans were said to tremble at her smile.

To see her walk the mortal plane was to witness a myth step into reality.

And yet, her descent was no accident. For in this world, where the balance of curses was shifting, how could a being such as she remain ignorant? How could she remain idle, when she has to do with her function.

This was her domain. Her function. The task is woven into her very essence by her creator, the God of Curses, Ikenga himself. She had come not by whim.

And Erik, whether he willed it or not, now stood at the center of that purpose.

At first, Erik's kingdom had caught only a passing flicker of her attention, an oddity, a land whose soil and skies grew rich with cursed spirits.

A few drifting there might have been a coincidence, nothing more. Yet as time passed, the anomaly swelled. More and more cursed beings gathered and, curiously, they were not immediately destroyed or cast away. They lingered, tethered to this land and were thriving. This strangeness intrigued her.

Unlike most of her siblings, arch-curses who carved their own realms within the spirit world, thrones and dominions that reflected their essence, she had none. By choice. She had chosen long ago to remain at the side of Mahu, believing that her future lay along the path of the moon goddess.

And yet, now, here in the mortal realm. This kingdom ruled by Erik, something stirred. A shape unseen by mortal eyes, the faint outlines of a realm in the making. Raw, incomplete, but alive with potential. And very much... suited for her.

That was why she had come.

When the mist peeled away from her colossal frame, when her beauty was laid bare to mortal sight, every cursed spirit within Erik's domain felt her at once. The resonance struck them like a thunderclap in the soul. They recognized her. Their leader. Their axis. Their arch.

And so, they bowed.

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A smile touched her lips as she began to walk. Her long strides carried her past villages, where windows shuttered against the overwhelming aura; past towns, where cursed beings emerged from their homes to kneel along the roadside; past great cities, where shadows gathered in vast crowds, their beautiful form bending low in reverence.

Everywhere she passed, mortals trembled and cursed spirits prostrated. A silent procession unfurled before her, stretching across the land like a living hymn.

She did not entirely understand why she came here, only that something compelled her, some pull that gnawed at her essence and whispered of inevitability.

And with each step toward Erik's capital, toward the throne room that awaited her, the compulsion grew stronger, thrumming like a heartbeat.

Until she now stood here, before Erik.

And then she understood.

The instant his eyes fell upon her, the reason revealed itself. The way Erik looked at her, his eyes alight, blazing with hunger, with raw and unashamed desire was enough. That gaze, desperate yet worshipful, reminded her of the very force she embodied. Yes. That was why she had been compelled to come. For she was beauty incarnate, lust made flesh. How could she not answer the call of such yearning?

And yet... her smile held a sadness to it.

The rumors of her belonging to Tide, the god of the Everflowing Treasury, were not false. They simply lacked completion. They were not yet wed, but their bond was undeniable, a thread woven tightly over the years.

She remembered the first time Tide approached her. It had been at the gathering of the gods, when the divine hosts assembled to look upon the newest ascendants. She had danced then, grace and beauty unrestrained, her body moving like water caught in moonlight. Tide's gaze had never left her. When the gathering ended, he invited her into his realm. That was how it began.

Tide had given her something she had not known since her mortal years, something she once believed forever lost to her: love. Not worship. Not fear. Not hollow devotion. But love. Genuine, unyielding, radiant. For he desired her not only as an arch-curse, not only as a jewel in his treasury, but as a woman.

As the god of endless wealth, he lacked nothing in extravagance, and he extended all of it to her. He showered her in rivers of liquid gold, wrapped her in robes spun from gemstones, filled her hands with pearls and treasures beyond mortal imagination. Yet it was not the treasures themselves that bound her to him. It was what lay behind them, the devotion in his gestures, the way he treated her as something precious, not just alluring.

And yet here she stood, before Erik.

His gaze burned with a different hunger than Tide's. Less refined, more primal. It stirred something deep within her, a reminder of her origin, of what she represented.

She loved him for this. Truly, deeply, she loved Tide for his openness, his constancy, his refusal to flinch in the face of her true nature. He knew her not just as the beautiful arch-curse, not just as the embodiment of lust, but as her. And still, his treatment of her never faltered. His devotion was steady as the tides themselves.

And yet, even in the midst of that love, a hollow ache gnawed within her.

Siren felt conflicted. For all of Tide's warmth, for all his lavish gifts and the dreamlike life he had given her, she felt incomplete. Something was missing. Something Tide, with all his wealth and devotion, could never fill.

She knew why. Or at least, she thought she did.

Her life with Tide felt like a story spun from moonlight and gold, a fairytale too pristine, too unreal. It was a love untouched by shadow, unmarred by pain. But she was no goddess of pure affection. She was no spirit born from gentle romance. She was the Arch-Curse of Beauty, and her domain was inseparable from lust, jealousy, and ruin. To her, beauty and love were never only radiant they were sharp, dangerous, filled with edges that cut as often as they caressed.

Her very birth was proof.

She was born not from the joy of beauty, but from its wounds—the bitterness of jealousy, the despair of rejection, the cruelty of comparisons, the venom that turned admiration into spite. She was the incarnation of the darker truths people tried to hide: that beauty could isolate, that love could hurt, that desire could corrode.

She knew the cycle well. A woman admired for her beauty might just as easily be hated for it. A lover who felt unworthy might try to drag their beloved down, crushing their light in order to feel equal, to feel secure. Beauty could lift one up... but it could just as easily destroy it.

And so, when she looked at Tide, his endless generosity, his unwavering love, her heart split. Part of her longed to surrender to it completely, to live forever in the dream he had woven around her. But another part whispered that this love was incomplete, unreal, because it lacked the very darkness that gave her existence weight.

And now, standing before Erik, she saw in his eyes not the gentleness of Tide, but the raw, unrefined hunger of mortals. Desire without restraint. Love without safety. A gaze that reminded her of who she was, and of the part of herself that Tide's devotion had never touched.

For the first time in years, she felt whole.

Erik lost himself at those words. The last thread of restraint snapped as he stepped forward and lifted Siren into his arms. Her laughter, a soft, melodic sound echoed faintly in the chamber, blending with the hum of cursed energy that began to ripple through the air.

But far above, in the boundless expanse of the heavens, Tide sat frozen upon his throne.

His realm, once serene and filled with the endless shimmer of liquid gold and crystalline water, had gone utterly still. The god's eyes were fixed upon the vision unfolding before him his beloved, the Siren, entwined in the arms of another.

When she had left his realm, her parting gaze had been strange gentle, resolute, and heavy with something he had not understood. Her final words lingered in his mind:

"Do not follow me, my love. If you do... you may not like what you find."

He had ignored her warning. Out of love, he told himself. Out of care. But perhaps, deep down, it had been out of fear, fear of losing her. And now that fear had become reality.

Tide's hands clenched upon the arms of his throne, the water around him beginning to shudder. The oceans of his realm trembled, waves rising without wind. The very pillars of his domain quaked as his divine fury began to bleed through the fabric of creation.

He wanted to drown Erik. He wanted to erase this mortal's existence from every corner of the world, to wash away the shame that burned inside him.

But more than that, he wanted to understand why. How could she, the Siren, his cherished one, the woman he had adorned with treasure and love choose to do this? Had he ever truly understood her? Or had he merely fallen in love with the illusion she had let him see?

His anger grew, and with it, his realm convulsed. Rivers in the mortal world surged; the tides turned violent. The worshippers of Tide felt it first, a sudden weight upon their hearts, a divine grief pressing upon their souls.

Across the kingdoms, priests collapsed mid-prayer, temples flooded with saltwater that wept from their walls. The sky above Erik's land darkened, clouds swirling in unnatural motion. There was no thunder, no lightning only the sound of relentless rain.

It began as a whisper, then a murmur, and soon a roaring cascade that drenched the world in the god's sorrow and wrath.

It took only seconds for the Origin Gods to understand what was happening. Their forms manifested above the western continent, beneath the darkened sky that loomed over Erik's kingdom.

Mahu and Crepuscular exchanged silent glances, their expressions grave as their eyes turned toward Jaus. Yet, to their surprise, Jaus stood with his arms folded, unshaken by the turmoil below.

He could feel their questioning gazes and turned slightly, his blowing blue eyes calm as still water.

"They are no longer children," he said. "They are gods now, each capable of facing what comes their way. If I were to act, it would only muddy the waters further, wouldn't it, brother?"

His gaze fell upon Crepuscular, whose form flickered between lights.

Crepuscular held Jaus's eyes for a moment before looking away, his silence speaking louder than any protest. All three of them understood the weight of what he did not say. If Jaus were to intervene, then Crepuscular would have no choice but to respond as well.

For the western continent, the lands now trembling under the ascended god Tide's fury was Crepuscular's claim. And to allow another Origin god, even a sibling, to act freely upon his domain would tarnish his image and call his authority into question before all divine eyes.

Chapter 655:

Jaus turned his gaze back to the mortal plane, his expression thoughtful.

"Besides," he continued, his voice echoing softly through the heavens, "this may yet serve our children well. Björn once warned them of the trials that come with ascension, the burden of divine will, the madness of unchecked faith. Since then, they have grown cautious, afraid to act, afraid to make mistakes... and that fear has stunted their growth."

Mahu, who had remained silent until now, inclined her head slowly. Her form shimmered like moon light as she spoke.

"You may be right," she said. "Perhaps they need this. A wound that teaches them the cost of divinity... and what it truly means to bear power."

For a time, none of them spoke. Only the rain from Tide's grief fell upon the mortal realm below.

Meanwhile, across the higher planes, the ascended gods had gathered, their divine auras rippling like waves across the astral sea. All but two were absent, Ikem and Ursula. The others stood outside the borders of Tide's realm, the entrance sealed in a barrier of roaring water and divine wrath.

They could not enter without invitation, and Tide was in no state to offer one. To force their way in would be a foolish act as Tide may not respond well to that.

But while the others watched in anxious silence, Ikem's fury burned hotter than any storm.

His divine gaze pierced the veil between realms, settling upon the mortal world, upon Erik.

Erik, the mortal he had once favored. The one whose faith had been pure, unwavering, and strong. The one who had built a sanctuary in his honor, who understood the essence of Ikem's dominion and tried to understand the evolution of life.

And now, that same mortal was entwined with a reflection of his wife's form.

The sight made Ikem's temples pulse with restrained rage. The divine glow in his eyes darkened into crimson, and his voice rumbled through his domain, shaking the roots of his realm.

"How dare he... how dare he tarnish the image of my woman?"

Ikem's fury was unlike Tide's sorrow. Where Tide's realm drowned in endless tears, Ikem's domain began to bleed. The once-vibrant roots that adorned his temple walls turned a deep scarlet, dripping with divine anger.

And far below, in the mortal world, inside Erik's laboratory. The statue of Ikem trembled. The air thickened with the scent of iron and soil.

From the base of the statue, blood-red roots began to emerge, curling and twisting like serpents awakened from slumber. The roots pulsed with divine intent, alive and aware.

They slithered across the floor, climbing the shelves, reaching toward the glass chambers where Erik kept the remains of his failed experiments, vessels of half-born creations and decayed flesh preserved by forbidden alchemy.

The roots caressed the glass, then tightened. Cracks began to form, thin at first, then widening with sharp, crystalline sounds.

The roots drilled into the flesh of the failed creation, twisting and fusing with it. The glass shattered in a burst of crimson light as the vines took hold piercing, burrowing, and blooming inside the malformed body.

The corpse convulsed violently, its shape distorting under the invasive growth. Flesh knitted with bark, veins intertwined with roots, and the faint pulse of divine fury began to throb within it.

It was a message, born of wrath.

A response to Erik's desecration.

And far above, in the higher planes, Ikem's rage radiated like a wildfire. The entire temple of his realm pulsed red with each beat of his heart, the roots spreading across his marble floors like veins of molten blood.

But his fury did not go unnoticed.

From the deeper chambers of his divine abode, Ursula, goddess of the Ascendant Hearth and Everflame Bonds, stirred from her slumber.

She stepped into the open, her form radiant and timeless. Over the years her beauty had grown softer and warmer her light of life itself. Yet now, there was something more: her rounded belly, glowing faintly with divine warmth, carrying within it the spark of new life, their child.

Even her presence, however, did not immediately quell Ikem's fury. His anger flared anew as his gaze fell upon her, and the thought tore through him:

She is to bear my child... and they have defiled her image.

The glow in his eyes deepened, turning from scarlet to a searing crimson-gold. His divinity surged outward, rattling the very pillars of his realm.

Ursula, sensing his wrath, raised her hand to her mouth in shock. Her golden eyes widened as her divine sight showed her the source of his fury, the mortal realm below, the rainstorm of Tide, and the image of her likeness entwined with a man she faintly remembered from his constant pestering of her image.

For a moment, sorrow flickered in her eyes. But she understood at once what must be done.

She stepped forward, her movements graceful yet deliberate, and wrapped her arms around Ikem from behind.

Her warmth was immediate. Gentle. Infinite.

Ikem stiffened at her touch, his divine energy roaring against the soothing current of her power. But her embrace was the hearth that no storm could extinguish. The Everflame Bonds, her divinity glowed softly around them, golden threads weaving through his crimson aura, dimming its rage.

He tried to pull away, to resist the calming tide, but then he felt it—the soft, rhythmic pulse within her. The unborn spark of life. Their child.

The world seemed to still.

The greenish-red glow in Ikem's eyes faded, replaced by exhaustion and cold restraint. His divine aura began to recede, the bleeding roots that filled his temple slowing their restless crawl.

He let out a long, quiet breath.

"...I have done enough," he murmured, his voice low, heavy with lingering wrath.

He looked down once more toward the mortal world. The creation he had unleashed still pulsed faintly in Erik's laboratory, a vessel filled with divine anger and corrupted beauty.

"It will carry my message," he said at last, his tone calmer. "Any more, and I would break the bounds that hold us."

Ursula nodded silently, her embrace never loosening. Her glow continued to warm the space between them, warding off the remnants of his fury.

Meanwhile, in the astral sea Tide's rage began to falter.

It wasn't reason that stayed his wrath, nor the pleading of gods beyond his walls, but the faint trembling cry of a child.

Through the divinity of his storm, the god heard it, a little girl's sob, carried on the wind from the coast of Erik's kingdom. Her voice was small, fragile, and terrified, barely piercing the sound of crashing waves.

The realization struck him like cold water. The town where the girl lived,

a seaside settlement that bore his symbol, whose people prayed to him daily, lay directly in the path of his divine fury.

If he let his wrath flow freely for even a moment longer, that town, those people, his worshippers, would be the first to drown beneath the flood.

And so, in the mortal realm, the colossal wave. The crest of his divine anger froze midair.

The sea itself hung suspended, trembling but unmoving, its weight pressing against invisible will. The sky split with the faint shimmer of sunlight as Tide stood from his throne, closing his eyes.

He took in a long, deliberate breath.

When he exhaled, the golden markings along his arms dimmed, and the fury that had rippled through his realm subsided, though it did not vanish. His ocean still seethed beneath the surface, but it was now tempered by thought.

He opened his eyes again, their deep cerulean hue reflecting sorrow rather than rage.

"There are better ways," he murmured to himself, voice. "Better than drowning the innocent to spite the guilty."

He knew the consequences of his wrath, knew that every action of his echoed not only upon mortals, but upon the godlings who he once led and those that revered him. His divinity was their foundation, his discipline their lesson.

He could not allow his grief to devour them too.

Turning his gaze back toward the mortal realm, Tide's attention fell upon Erik's laboratory. What he saw there stilled even the remnants of his storm.

He recognized it immediately, Ikem's handiwork. The living mass of roots and blood pulsing with divine anger, twisting something broken into something alive. Yet it was incomplete, unstable, its form writhing without purpose, its existence lacking structure.

Tide's expression hardened.

"If he wishes to send a message..." he said quietly, "then let it be received with clarity."

He lifted his right hand. The sea beneath his feet responded, opening into a vast pool of shimmering silver water, a gateway to his Everflowing Treasury, the divine armory that held the treasures of his domain.

From the depths of that sacred pool, five weapons emerged, each gleaming with divine craftsmanship and fluid grace.

A trident carved from coral and starlight.

A blade woven from frozen surf.

A chain forged from the spine of a sea serpent.

A staff crowned with a pearl that shimmered like the moon.

And a spear of pure tidewater, its form constantly shifting.

Without a word, Tide gestured.

The weapons descended into the pool, sinking into its still surface and vanishing from sight.

Chapter 656:

Far below, in the mortal world, the stagnant puddles of water upon Erik's laboratory floor began to ripple. The red roots writhed, and from the depths of those shallow waters, the five divine weapons emerged, each drawn to one of the newly transformed creatures.

The moment they made contact, the air split with the sound of divine resonance.

The lab glowed with an eerie light as Erik's failed creations rose, no longer mere experiments of flesh but vessels now bound to the wrath and will of two gods.

The five beasts, once mere constructs of rage and instinct, now pulsed with eerie sentience. The merging with the treasure had changed themgifted them not only strength but awareness. In the stillness of Erik's laboratory, they stirred. Their eyes, once dull now gleamed with purpose, an echo of the divine intent that had birthed them.

Then came the sound.

A roar, neither entirely mortal nor divine, tore through the air like a physical force. It rumbled from the depths of Erik's lab, crashing through the corridors of the palace, rattling windows and shaking foundations. The very air seemed to shudder beneath its weight. Servants dropped what they were holding, guards clutched their weapons, and even those who lived beyond the palace walls froze as the sound reached them low, resonant, and laced with something primal.

It was not just a sound, it was a presence. With it came an undercurrent of fear, faint but undeniable, the kind that gnaws at the edges of reason.

In a secluded chamber, Erik stirred, his consciousness still intertwined with Siren's. His head snapped up, eyes narrowing as the resonance of the roar filled his mind. His heartbeat quickened, not from panic, but from instinctive caution. Something was wrong.

Siren's reaction was different. She sat motionless at first, her gaze distant, as though seeing beyond the walls, beyond the mortal realm itself. Through that echoing roar, she sensed it, two distinct divinities intertwined in its resonance. Her expression changed.

She had expected to provoke one god today. One. But two? That was far beyond her plans.

Her gaze flicked to Erik, whose features had tensed, reflecting the same caution now coiling through her.

She straightened, folding her arms. The matter of Erik and the cursed beings whose fate now intertwined with his would have to wait. Such puzzles were not solved in a day, and she had time. Time to untangle what bound them. Time to understand what she was meant to do.

But first she needed safety. Shelter. A place unseen, untouched by other divine eyes.

Tide's wrath was not something she wished to weather in the open, not now. The god's fury would simmer, perhaps fade, given distance and silence. Ikem, on the other hand, his anger was less direct,

more a ripple born from wounded pride. It was his wife, Ursula, who had been shamed by Siren's actions.

At the thought of Ursula, Siren's face twisted briefly, half in guilt, half in defiance. She had not meant to humiliate the goddess, but neither did she regret it. Her power had expressed itself fully, unrestrained, and in that moment, Siren had felt complete.

There was no remorse in her heart, only a newfound clarity. The world felt sharper now, more vivid. Every sensation, every thought carried weight. She was not the same as before.

Even Tide's anger, heavy as a stormcloud, did not wholly sadden her. Yes, it hurt to feel his wrath pressing against her heart, to sense the weight of disappointment from a god she once sought to please. Yet beneath that ache, Siren felt something truer, something intoxicating.

This was how it should be.

Power was never gentle, and beauty was never meant to be harmless. The idea that her mere presence, her existence, could stir divine emotions, anger, desire, pain filled her with a quiet pride. She was the eye of the storm, the center around which gods and mortals alike now turned. And in that realization bloomed an almost guilty joy.

A faint smile touched her lips as she glanced at Erik.

He stood tense, confusion and caution mixing in his eyes. He was still caught between awe and fear, struggling to understand what he had become entangled with. Summoning his spear, its shaft gleaming with runic light, Erik readied himself for the unknown.

But before he could speak, Siren leaned close. Her voice was silk over steel, her breath warm against his ear. Her tongue traced his earlobe as she whispered, low and deliberate,

"Survive this... I look forward to your growth."

By the time the words reached him fully, she was gone. The air where she had been shimmered faintly, her scent lingering like sea mist soft, salt-sweet, and wild.

For a moment Erik wondered if he had imagined her entirely, a fever dream born of exhaustion and magic. But the trace of her presence in the air, the echo of her voice in his head, told him it was real.

And with that realization came a sting of frustration.

He clenched his jaw. He'd let himself be carried away by her presence, her allure and gained no answers. He still knew nothing of what she truly wanted, or why the cursed beings seemed to gravitate toward her.

His thoughts didn't linger long.

The wall beside him exploded inward with a thunderous crack, stone and dust filling the room as rubble rained down. The force of the impact tore through the silence like lightning. Erik barely managed to bring his spear up before the next blow connected an immense, snarling force slamming into him with

such power that his body was thrown through the palace walls, his figure a blur vanishing into the distance.

The roar that followed was deafening, the same as before beastly, divine, and filled with intent.

Far away, beneath the bruised sky, Siren walked. Each step left faint ripples in the air, the world itself seeming to draw back from her. Above her, clouds gathered dark, heavy, trembling with restrained fury. She didn't look up, but she felt him watching.

Tide.

His presence pressed against her like the weight of the sea itself.

She exhaled slowly, steadying her heart. She had known this would come. His sight was upon her, his wrath gathering in the storm that now coiled above.

Still, she didn't run.

Lightning flared distantly across the clouds, painting her silhouette in silver and shadow. Her lips curved into the faintest smile.

"Watch me, Tide," she murmured. "If I am to fall, let it be by your hand."

With a hopeful heart, Siren whispered her request into the silence an old plea, spoken in the tongue few know of "Grant me passage, O Silver Mother... let me walk beneath your calm light once more."

The air trembled around her, as if considering her words. She continued forward, her every step heavy beneath the unseen weight of divine scrutiny. The sky above had grown thick and oppressive; the clouds no longer just gathered they pressed down. It was as though the heavens themselves sought to crush her beneath their judgment.

Still, she walked.

Then, slowly, the world around her began to shift. The horizon rippled, her path softening at the edges until it blurred completely. Mist curled around her ankles, then her waist, until the air itself became pale and luminous. The crushing weight lifted Tide's gaze slipped from her.

Siren exhaled, her breath visible in the cool, silver air. Relief washed through her like a tide ebbing after a storm. She had made it.

And then she saw it.

A garden stretched out before her, bathed in gentle moonlight. White lilies swayed without wind, their petals shimmering faintly as though made of frost and light. The scent was faintly familiar, clean, cold, and nostalgic. It took her a heartbeat to recognize it.

This was her garden.

A place she had once tended with her own hands, long before her fall into divine infamy. The sight stirred something deep within her an ache that was not quite sorrow, but close. Mahu's realm had grown since she last stood here; the moon goddess's dominion now encompassed the entire lunar sphere, a tranquil ocean of light and shadow.

At its heart stood the castle built together by Mahu and Ikenga.

An ice-crystal palace, flawless and transparent, its walls glowing with soft inner luminescence. It was beauty shaped into permanence, serene and untouchable.

Siren began walking toward it, the sound of her steps echoing faintly against the glass-like path. But before she could take another breath, her vision shifted. The world folded upon itself like silk.

And when her sight cleared, she was no longer in the garden.

She stood before her.

Mahu, the Origin Goddess of Motherhood and the Moon, reclined upon a crescent-shaped sofa, her presence both divine and deeply human. Her body was vast, radiant yet comforting, silver hair cascading like flowing starlight down her shoulders. A lazy, almost bored grace emanated from her as she idly worked a knitting tool in her hands, threads of light weaving and unweaving between her fingers.

Chapter 657:

Her golden eyes lifted only slightly, their glow soft but heavy with quiet power.

Siren froze.

The sight of Mahu unchanged, serene, and untouchably divine brought a thousand memories crashing over her. The warmth of old companionship. The ache of what was lost. The shame of what she had become.

Without a word, she sank to her knees. Her head bowed low, her hands trembling against the polished floor.

"I know," she murmured, her voice fragile but steady. "I know how wrong my actions were..."

The words trembled as it came out, like a confession whispered to a mother's shadow.

"But I do not regret them."

Almost as if she had plucked the thought directly from Siren's heart, Mahu spoke. Her voice was soft, yet it carried through the vast chamber with the quiet authority of one who had seen eons pass.

"Seeing you once again," Mahu began, her eyes half-lidded as she watched Siren kneel, "and hearing of your actions... I can't help but be reminded that you truly are my brother's creation."

Her tone was not cruel, merely factual an observation more than an accusation. Yet the weight of it struck Siren harder than a god's wrath could.

"That greedy, selfish nature of yours," Mahu continued, setting her knitting aside. Threads of silver light unraveled from her fingers, fading into the air. "That endless hunger that drives you forward, never once caring how your actions may be perceived, nor how they wound those around you."

Siren's breath caught. Shame and defiance warred silently within her.

Mahu studied her for a moment longer, her expression unreadable. Then she sighed, the sound soft as moonlight.

"I won't take personal action to protect you," she said finally, "but my brother has left you in my care. That much I cannot ignore. Your safety, then, remains a concern to me."

Her eyes softened just slightly. "You may always return to this realm, child, whenever you feel threatened... or lost."

With a delicate wave of her hand, Mahu's power brushed through the air. The light around Siren shimmered, and in an instant, she was lifted away gently, effortlessly carried by divine will to another corner of the lunar realm.

Silence fell once more.

Mahu sat still for a long while, her knitting tool hovering idly between her fingers. Her gaze turned distant, her thoughts wandering far beyond her celestial garden.

Her brother.

The mere thought of him brought both warmth and unease. She longed for his return, the comfort of his presence, the steady rhythm he once brought to her. But she knew his nature too well. His return would never come quietly. It would bring change... change she believes is not ready for.

A quiet sigh escaped her lips. "You've always been full of surprises," she murmured to the unseen stars.

Her mind drifted next to Ikem, her stepson. The thought alone brought a new weight to her chest. The boy bore the best and worst of his lineage, his father's strength, his mother's pride, and a touch of that same divine restlessness that marked their kind.

The more she thought about it, the more tension coiled within her.

She truly needed Ikenga back. With him beside her, the burdens of divine order had always felt lighter. There were things she never had to think about, choices she never had to make alone. Now, with him gone, even her realm felt colder.

Yet when she thought of Ikem, a faint smile tugged at her lips. Soon, he would be a father. A new generation was stirring, a spark of innocence ready to return to their celestial family.

Her gaze drifted to the silver garden below, the flowers swaying in gentle lunar wind.

"I have missed the laughter of children here," she whispered. "Perhaps... it is time for that sound to return."

Meanwhile, in the mortal world. Erik rose slowly from the rubble, dust and smoke curling around him in the dim light. Chunks of marble and broken tile shifted beneath his boots, but his body bore no mark of injury. Not a single cut, not a bruise, only his clothes, now torn and dirt-streaked, told of the impact he had endured.

He exhaled sharply, the air around him vibrating faintly as his eyes flared with a golden ring of light. Through that divine glow, he sought the source of the attack, the one who had shattered the palace walls.

But before he could focus, the air before him split.

A trident tore through the space like a comet, its three prongs trailing light. It moved too fast to be seen clearly, only the scream of the air and the gleam of starlight announcing its approach.

In the blink of an eye, it was upon him.

Erik bent backward in an almost inhuman motion, his body folding as the trident cleaved through where his head had just been. The weapon passed above him in a radiant arc, close enough that the air burned against his skin.

Then, something stranger happened.

The trident's passage left a trail of shimmering starlight hanging in the air, thin threads that didn't fade but persisted, trembling with cosmic energy. Erik's eyes widened as he realized the light wasn't merely residue, it was rending the space itself.

Within the torn air, he caught a glimpse of something impossible.

His laboratory.

The sight was brief, flickering, like a reflection on water yet clear enough that he saw the five beasts, still stirring within their containment sigils. Their forms seemed distorted through the rift, each one glowing faintly as if aware of his presence.

But that came with a new danger as through the torn air from the Trident. A deep, resonant sound rolled through the air, the heavy, crashing roar of a tide. From above, something descended, swift and merciless: a spear wreathed in fluid, shifting light, its form changing as it fell. It was like watching the ocean take the shape of a weapon.

Erik's own spear vibrated violently in his grip, the metal groaning as if alive. The light in its runes flared, and before he could react, a ghostly figure began to form, an ethereal silhouette pulling itself free from

the weapon. The spirit's translucent hand pressed against Erik's chest, shoving him backward just as the descending spear struck the ground.

The impact was cataclysmic. The air exploded outward in a wave of water-like force, splintering the rubble around him and sending a fine mist cascading through the room.

When the light dimmed, Erik stood several paces away, his spear humming faintly, the spectral guardian fading back into it.

He stared at the ruined floor, breathing heavily, confusion etched deep in his expression.

The pressure, the killing intent that had locked onto him was suddenly gone. Just like that.

The air was still again, save for the soft ringing in his ears.

Erik was about to ask, half to himself, half to the fading echo of the specter what had just happened, when the world answered him in the form of a thunderous explosion.

The sound came from the direction of his castle.

He turned sharply, golden eyes narrowing as the shockwave rippled through the palace grounds. A section of the castle wall crumbled, and from the collapsing stone burst forth a massive construct of water, a towering form shaped like the head of a great shark, its jaws snapping wildly as it rose into the

air. The creature's translucent form shimmered with liquid light, and every movement sent cascades of water crashing down like rain.

Erik's gaze followed its path and then he saw it, the target. His son. The crown prince.

For a heartbeat, time seemed to slow. The young man stood poised on a balcony, his eyes blazing with defiance even as the monstrous maw lunged toward him. He was not weak; Erik knew that. The boy had his own strength, his own pride. But a parent's instincts ran deeper than reason.

The ground beneath Erik's feet cracked. Power surged through him, golden light flashing from his eyes. With an explosive burst, he launched himself forward, shattering the air as he propelled toward the castle. The sonic boom followed a heartbeat later, echoing like thunder through the grounds.

Up above, the prince moved with fluid precision. He twisted away just as the water shark snapped at him, its jaws closing with a roar that sent droplets flying like shards of glass. Landing on the balcony's edge, he leveled his spear toward the creature. The weapon's tip gleamed with azure frost, and with a sharp thrust, he released the spell.

In an instant, the raging water froze solid. The construct crystallized mid-lunge, ice crawling along its body in jagged veins until the entire mass was suspended in the air, motionless, beautiful, and deadly.

The prince leapt lightly onto the frozen structure, his breath steady despite the chaos. From that vantage, he could see everything, his family gathered below, struggling against the red-colored creatures that had poured into the courtyard. Their bodies shimmered faintly from the residue of divine energy.

They had all felt the earlier roar, the one that had shaken the palace to its core. They knew its origin. There was no mistaking it.

Their father's laboratory.

The beasts had burst free, ignoring everything else, every guard, every barrier, every target except his father Erik.

Chapter 658:

The prince's eyes hardened. For a moment, hesitation flickered there. His father was not a man easily loved. Years of harsh words and cold lessons had carved distance between them, a chasm too wide for most bridges to cross.

And yet...

He clenched his jaw, his grip on the spear tightening.

No matter what kind of man Erik was, he was still their father. The foundation of their blood, the source of their strength.

And that was enough.

He remembered it clearly, even as they closed in on the beasts, the creatures barely seemed to acknowledge their presence. They moved single-mindedly, indifferent. Only when struck did they react, and when they did, the counterattacks were brutal.

That, too, was strange.

After their retaliation, they simply stopped. No pursuit. No hunger.

The prince's breath misted in the cold air as he slid down the frozen construct, boots scraping over jagged ice. He landed halfway before pausing, his eyes narrowing.

His father's figure was drawing near cutting through the haze and dust like a blade of gold. But something else caught his attention, something worse.

One of the monsters was gone.

The very one he had struck, the one that had hurled him across the courtyard in return was missing from sight.

A low rumble carried on the wind, followed by the faintest echoes of screams. The prince turned sharply toward the city beyond the castle walls, and what he saw turned his stomach cold.

From his vantage point atop the frozen remains, he could see the streets below erupting in panic. Figures cursed beings, their enhanced forms were fleeing in disarray. They ran through alleys and over bridges, their cries echoing through the city.

Behind them came the missing monster.

Its form was leaner than the others, humanoid yet grotesque, its skin a deep, pulsating red that seemed to drink in the surrounding light. In its hand it carried a staff crowned with a gleaming pearl that pulsed softly, like a heart.

With a slow, deliberate motion, the creature raised its staff.

The pearl flared.

From the ground around it, water burst forth only it was not pure. The liquid was threaded with red, alive, twisting. Water tendrils entwined with what looked like roots, pulsing faintly as they lashed outward like whips.

The first struck a fleeing man.

He didn't even have time to scream properly before his body began to desiccate. The water within him was drawn out in seconds, skin shriveling, eyes sinking, until what hit the ground was a lifeless husk dry and grey.

More tendrils followed, snapping across the street in rhythmic, merciless strikes. Each contact left behind another corpse, brittle as parchment.

The cursed beings, those who might have once believed their new condition made them powerful soon realized the truth, their corruption meant nothing here. Their energy could not touch the red creatures, could not influence them. Their curses offered no protection.

Panic spread like wildfire.

The prince's hands trembled on his spear as he watched the slaughter unfold below, anger flaring beneath his fear. But then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the monster stopped.

Its movements ceased mid-swing.

The tendrils hung motionless in the air before falling away into vapor. It stood still, head tilted slightly as if listening to something distant.

Then, slowly, its gaze shifted.

From the crowded streets to the castle courtyard.

To Erik.

From the prince's vantage point, the world seemed to hold its breath.

The red creature, now eerily still, was not standing freely anymore. From beneath its feet, thick crimson roots erupted from the earth, cracking through stone and soil alike. They coiled and twisted upward, anchoring it firmly in place like the trunk of an ancient, corrupted tree.

The monster raised its staff slowly. The pearl at its tip pulsed once then began to draw in the surrounding moisture. Thin streams of water bled from the air itself, spiraling toward the pearl until a dense sphere of liquid formed at its point. The pressure built visibly; the water compacted tighter and tighter until the air around it trembled.

Then, with a sound like a thunderclap, the pressure was released.

The recoil pushed the creature backward, but its rooted legs held fast, unshaken. The released water tore through the air, a compressed torrent shrieking toward the sky. Its target was clear.

Erik.

He sensed it instantly. The golden glow in his eyes flared brighter as he stopped midair, hovering just beyond arm's reach of his son. He brought his spear up in one smooth motion, both hands gripping it tight.

The weapon began to spin. Slowly at first, then faster, faster, until it became a blur of steel and light. A vortex of energy formed before him, a rotating barrier that met the incoming stream head-on.

The collision was explosive.

The pressurized water struck with the force of a storm, the shockwave rippling outward in expanding rings. The impact sent a deafening roar across the courtyard. Erik gritted his teeth, holding his ground midair, the wind whipping violently around him.

For all his power, the attack did not break him, but the world around them was not so resilient.

The pressure dispersed in all directions, crashing into the nearby walls and shattering stone like glass. The frozen construct beneath the prince groaned, fractures racing through the ice before it collapsed entirely, breaking into shards that rained down like falling stars.

The prince leapt from the crumbling structure just before it gave way, he needed to test something, too.

Without hesitation, the prince tightened his grip on his spear. The cold energy around it pulsed, spreading along the weapon like veins of blue frost.

As the creature maintained its assault, the prince moved.

He launched himself forward, body slicing through the mist and spray. His spear thrust into the path of the water stream, freezing the torrent mid-flight. The sudden shift in temperature sent cracks racing along the frozen column, mist rising from the collision of heat and cold.

Using the frozen stream as a bridge, he vaulted forward, descending toward the red monster with speed born of royal blood and years of training.

The monster didn't flinch as the prince charged.

Its gaze remained fixed on Erik. Whatever awareness lay within it cared little for the young warrior closing in. Instead, it let its current attack fade, then the air shimmered around it.

From the rippling mist, dozens of aquatic shapes began to form. Ethereal fish, each carved from water and threaded with faint red veins, emerged from the creature's body. They darted forward in coordinated motion, a silent school of death. Their forms caught the light as they launched themselves toward Erik, completely ignoring the prince's incoming strike.

The prince reached the monster in the same heartbeat, his spear flashing. He slashed clean through its arm, severing it at the elbow.

For an instant, victory gleamed in his eyes. Then the severed limb melted into water, flowing seamlessly back to the stump and reforming. The creature turned its head toward him at last, its faceless features twisting into what could only be described as recognition.

It roared.

The sound wasn't just loud, it was felt. A deep, resonant vibration that ran through the ground and the prince's bones alike. Before he could strike again, the monster slammed its staff into the earth.

A circle of shimmering water appeared instantly beneath it. From the pool, tendrils of liquid erupted twisting, thrashing each intertwined with pulsating red roots that pulsed like veins.

They lashed toward the prince.

He moved fast, spinning his spear to deflect the first wave, dodging the next. But even the near misses filled him with unease. He had seen what those tendrils could do, drain the life and moisture from anyone they touched until nothing remained but a husk.

As he cut through them, he noticed something shift in the monster's behavior. Its movements changed like a restraint was released.

Then, without warning, it stopped attacking.

The prince, breathing hard, frowned. The creature's head turned away from him, from his father and toward the distant sounds of chaos echoing through the ruined city. Its pearl pulsed again, brighter now, and it took a slow, deliberate step in that direction.

Erik, still midair fending off the spectral fish constructs, caught the shift as well. "It's ignoring us," he muttered under his breath.

And it wasn't just this one.

Across the city, the rest of the royal family was locked in battle with the other red creatures. Each of them noticed the same disturbing pattern: their opponents would engage briefly, then lose interest. As soon as a gap appeared, the monsters turned away, abandoning the fight entirely to target the fleeing citizens.

No matter how much damage they took, swords through hearts, limbs severed, bodies frozen or burned, they simply reformed. Some melted into liquid before stitching themselves together again. Others reconstituted from mist, reforming whole as though their very essence couldn't be undone.

Even decapitation changed nothing. Heads regrew. Wounds closed.

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It was then amid the chaos and screams that a new voice echoed, not through the air, but directly into every mind within the city.

The voice of the crown prince.

"Listen," it began, calm but strained, as if he were speaking while in motion. "These creatures... they're bound by rules. Rules that only we can break not them. Their target is Father and Father alone. To them, we don't exist."

The words resonated in every mind, soldiers, nobles, even Erik himself paused midair, his eyes flicking briefly in the prince's direction.

The prince continued, his tone growing tighter, as if he was forcing the thoughts through sheer will. "But when we attack, when any of us make a move, something changes. It's like a rule is proven, and a new one takes its place. Each time we act, they're granted a kind of... privilege. And when that happens, they turn on the citizens instead."

There was a short silence in the shared link, then the prince's voice came again, quieter now. "Also... I might be wrong, but each citizen they kill, each one they absorb, it's altering them. When I first clashed with them, they were unstable... hastily bound together, like something half-formed. But now..."

He hesitated. Everyone could feel the unease that came with his next words.

"Now they're evolving. Their mangled forms are being... perfected."

The telepathic link fell silent.

For a few heartbeats, all movement stopped. Soldiers and mages who had been readying their next attacks froze where they stood. Even the royal family members, faltered, torn between duty and dread.

Then, slowly, they began to withdraw, stepping back from their monstrous opponents.

And, just as the prince had said, the creatures no longer seemed to notice them. They turned away, their focus shifting once more toward the streets below. Toward the terrified cries of their citizens.

With every lurching step, they smashed through walls and rooftops, clawed through hiding places, dragging out the cursed beings within. Their red tendrils lashed, and each strike left behind withered husks, bodies so dry they cracked like old parchment before collapsing to dust.

The stench of decay filled the air.

The royal family could do nothing but watch, jaws tight and hands trembling with the weight of restraint. Any move would trigger another shift in the monsters' behavior another slaughter.

Then, all at once, the killing stopped.

The streets fell silent.

Every creature froze mid-motion, their heads lifting in eerie unison. Slowly, they turned.

Their collective gaze fixed on a single figure hovering above the shattered remnants of the castle.

Erik.

Suspended midair, his cloak rippling in the wind, he was silent—his golden-ringed eyes glowing faintly as he studied the creatures below. He could see it now: the pattern, the design behind their madness.

They weren't mindless beasts. They were built with purpose.

And whatever that purpose was, it was tied to him.

Erik moved.

The air cracked as he broke through the sound barrier, his form vanishing in a blur of motion that streaked across the sky. The shockwave rippled through the ruined city, rattling debris and shaking what little of the palace still stood.

He wasn't running, he was leading.

Anything to draw those creatures away from his people, from his family.

The red monstrosities reacted instantly. As though bound by invisible strings, their heads snapped toward him, eyes glowing like molten embers. Then came the sound, an ear-splitting chorus of roars that rolled through the air like thunder.

And when one of them moved, the others followed.

The first to act was the creature wielding the trident of coral and starlight. It crouched low, coiling like a spring, and then leapt skyward with terrifying force. The trident arced through the air, tearing open a rift a hole in thin air that shimmered with liquid light.

Without hesitation, the creature plunged through.

One by one, the others followed, slipping into the wound in the sky like beasts returning to the sea. In moments, the rift sealed behind them with a sharp crack, leaving the mortal sky empty once more.

The crown prince, still hovering amid the drifting mist of melted ice and shattered magic, watched in silence. His expression was complicated a m. ix of relief, awe, and something close to resignation.

Finally, he exhaled "Who has Father angered this time?" he murmured, almost to himself.

Meanwhile, in the divine realms...

Two figures watched the unfolding events with visible irritation from their realms.

Tide leaned back in his seat, her expression tight, a hint of saltwater glimmering at the corners of his eyes.

In his own realm, Ikem's usually calm demeanor was marred by a frown.

Both had their arms crossed, lips pressed into identical lines of displeasure.

Their plan, so carefully woven through some restraint, had been exposed.

Erik's son had seen through the design quicker than they thought, understood the pattern of their "rules." The realization stung more than either cared to admit.

For gods, the act of directly influencing the mortal realm came with boundaries, restrictions carved into the very fabric of existence. To intervene too freely was to risk unraveling the balance that separated divine from mortal.

Erik's actions toward the gods, while audacious, had not yet crossed the divine threshold that warranted personal retaliation. Were it otherwise, both Ikem and Tide would have struck him down without hesitation. But divine law was absolute, direct action against a mortal, came with consequences even gods dared not incur.

Still, Ikem was not one to let such insults go unanswered.

Sharp-minded and deliberate, he devised another way.

If his own hands were bound by the rules , then he would forge something that wasn't. The creatures, divine constructs born of his fury were to serve as his instruments. Through them, his wrath could take form in the mortal world without violating the letter of divine law.

He breathed into them a single rule, the foundation of their being:

Attack only Erik.

That constraint was what allowed them to exist, to act freely without divine penalty. They would focus solely on him, ignoring everything else. No collateral destruction. No divine interference. A perfect loophole, surgical, justified, and contained.

Or so Ikem thought.

When Tide learned of his creation, his own emotions flared. His was not the cold precision of Ikem, but the raw, rolling force of the ocean's heart. Erik's action had not only wounded his pride but mocked his dominion.

And worse, those cursed being the source of connection between Erik and Siren, To Tide that was unforgivable and that made his hatred for the cursed being even more potent.

So he interfered.

Into Ikem's creatures, she poured her own essence. He armed them from his treasury and at the same time breathed into them more than the basic instincts Ikem had given.

She gave them will.

But with that will came his own rule, an extension of her wrath, subtle yet devastating "If any mortal being stands in the way of your wrath, you may take a life in recompense. The more you are obstructed, the more life you may claim."

It was vengeance made recursive. A growing tide of consequence.

Each act of resistance by Erik's people would only feed the creatures' license to kill.

Through this rule, Tide ensured his anger would not just be felt, it would spread. Every death, every loss, would echo Erik's defiance back at him, a wound that deepened with every attempt to defend his kingdom.

And it was perfect. A curse masquerading as justice, a rule that was, on paper, detached from Tide himself and yet carried the unmistakable signature of her rage.

But now, their careful balance had been exposed.

The crown prince had seen through the divine design, unraveling in moments what was meant to be a slow and tormenting revelation.

Meanwhile, in their own realms, the actions of Tide and Ikem did not go unnoticed.

The other gods and even the Origin Gods themselves watched with silent fascination. To see two divine beings circumvent the sacred restrictions placed upon them was both audacious and enlightening. What Tide and Ikem had done was not merely vengeance; it was innovation.

Their approach sparked ideas, dangerous, brilliant ideas.

If such loopholes existed, then perhaps divine law was not the unbreakable cage it appeared to be, but rather a system that could be interpreted. And once interpretation entered the equation, so did opportunity.

Of course, the gathered deities understood that several unique factors had allowed Tide and Ikem's anger to manifest so vividly in the mortal world. Their success was not something easily replicated.

For instance, Ikem's influence had reached the mortal plane through a connection, the worshipped statue dedicated to him within Erik's domain. Through that carved effigy, a fragment of his divinity flowed, like roots threading through fertile soil. When his wrath took shape, it merely travelled along that existing pathway.

As for Tide, his circumstances were different. The rule that restricted his divine hand had been straight, it forbade her from taking personal action against Erik a mortal. Erik's action while creating a cause and an effect between them was no quite enough for his personal action to be granted.

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But the same restriction did not extend to the treasures bound to his essence. His treasures each carried his divine signature, yet were not his.

The realization rippled through the divine assembly like a slow-spreading flame.

The thought was intoxicating.

If wrath could be made manifest through loopholes, then perhaps compassion, desire, or ambition could too. The line between restraint had never seemed thinner.

Meanwhile, Erik continued his flight for a few seconds, the wind howling past his ears as he cut through the sky. Below him, the land stretched until he reached a vast, empty field barren, quiet, and untouched by civilization. No buildings. No people. Only the whisper of the grass swaying beneath the sky.

He halted midair, hovering effortlessly, the ethereal hum of his divine spear stabilizing him. For a moment, the adrenaline that clouded his mind began to ebb away, replaced by a heavy, dawning clarity.

He started piecing it together, the sudden appearance of the creatures, their grotesque forms, the way they moved with disturbing precision. They were unmistakably from his lab. But that didn't make sense.

His lab's creations were failures, lifeless, incomplete shells of his intended design. They shouldn't move. They shouldn't think. They shouldn't exist beyond the confines of his containment seals.

Yet during the clash, when their claws met his weapon and their eyes locked with his, Erik had felt something. A faint but undeniable resonance pulsing through them, something divine, and horribly familiar.

As one once blessed by Ikem, Erik knew that divine presence better than anyone. The subtle frequency of power that hummed beneath the surface of reality, the unmistakable pulse of his patron god's essence.

And these creatures... they bore that very same energy.

A chill crawled down his spine.

His thoughts raced, What did I do to anger him? Then it hit him, the truth slamming into his chest like a blade. His expression twisted in disbelief, then frustration.

"Damn it..." he muttered aloud, the weight of realization heavy in his voice.

Before he could unravel the implications further, a sharp vibration ran through his weapon, the divine spear in his grip began to buzz violently, its resonance spiking with warning.

Erik barely had time to react before his body seized, the man current surging through him halted in an instant. The air around him cracked with light as his flight faltered and he plummeted from the sky.

Moments later, high above where he once hovered, the very air split apart. A rip in reality tore open, jagged and seething with divine energy. From within it, a trident thrust forward, aimed precisely where Erik had been floating seconds before.

The weapon pierced only empty air.

Erik from his sudden drop gathered himself as he shifted away to observe the incoming creatures.

From the torn rift in the air, the first creature, the one bearing the trident tumbled through, its figure twisting as it fell. It flailed helplessly, unable to control its descent, slamming into the earth with a thunderous crash that sent dirt and fractured stone scattering.

The wound in the air remained open, rippling like disturbed water. From it, another being emerged, this one far more composed. It stepped out gracefully, clutching a staff crowned with a luminous pearl. Unlike its brutish counterpart, streams of water gathered beneath its feet, forming a spiraling cushion that slowed its fall.

Then came a chain, long and serpentine, snaking out from the still-gaping tear. It latched onto the swirling water conjured by the staff-bearer, tightening and pulling taut. From above, it dragged forth another being, its wielder, bound in shifting mist and fragments of water, forced out by the pull of the chain.

The air rippled violently as the rift began to close, its edges folding inward with a deep hum that resonated through the field. Before it sealed completely, two more figures leapt through. One carried a

spear of liquid water, its form constantly shifting elongating, coiling, and reforming as though alive. The other gripped a blade of frozen crystal, its surface shimmering with frost that hissed in the open air.

Moments later, the rift vanished, leaving only silence and a field scarred by their arrival. The impact of their fall had gouged shallow craters into the earth, muddy water pooling and steaming faintly under their combined presence.

From above, Erik hovered once again. His expression hardened as he surveyed the creatures below. He had thought he'd distanced himself enough to buy time, but seeing them emerge in such coordinated succession sent a chill through him.

These were no mindless experiments anymore.

He narrowed his eyes, letting his enhanced sight pierce through the layers of their forms. What he saw defied reason, no trace of structured energy, no recognizable power system coursing through their bodies. And yet, their very existence radiated a menace, a raw danger that gnawed at his instincts.

Even as a 5th-tier peak being, Erik felt the subtle prickle of unease crawling down his spine. His grip on the spear tightened, his pulse syncing with its hum.

Further insight left him utterly baffled. These were creatures of flesh and blood, yet their insides told a different story, a grotesque map of tangled roots, writhing and knotted together like a twisted forest buried beneath skin. Where muscle and bone should have been, there was only a mangled network of red, pulsating cords that glowed faintly with divine energy.

No... They hadn't always been like this. Erik's eyes widened as realization dawned.

The creatures had once been malformed, broken remnants of his failed experiments, bodies warped beyond repair. But now, something held them together. Ikem's divinity.

The divine essence was repairing his failures, reshaping them into something functional, something far more dangerous. And then he noticed the faint traces of foreign energy lingering within the red glow, human essence.

"...The citizens," Erik muttered under his breath, horror tightening his chest.

The energy of those who had been attacked, his people who had been absorbed by these abominations. The roots were using that stolen essence, breaking it down and repurposing it to perfect the monsters' incomplete forms.

He felt his stomach twist. It was both disturbing and... ingenious.

Ikem had reshaped his abominations into monsters of pure physical traits, entities stripped of magical complexity, yet empowered by the sheer perfection of their flesh and muscle.

The muscular makeup of the creatures was the first thing that made Erik tense. Every movement they made rippled with unnerving precision, layers of corded flesh pulsing in sync with the divine roots beneath their skin. Each motion carried the weight of refined strength, the kind that was not born but engineered.

But his thoughts froze when his gaze shifted to their weapons.

Each creature bore a weapon, impossibly refined, disturbingly fitting for their grotesque frames. The trident shimmered with condensed liquid light; the pearl-topped staff radiated gentle ripples of power; the spear and frozen blade glistened with unnatural sharpness.

Erik's brow furrowed. "Where did those come from?" he whispered.

He knew his lab inside and out. He hadn't crafted or even conceptualized weapons like these. There was no way the creatures could have made or summoned them. They lacked the intellect, the structure, and more importantly, the capacity to wield mana.

He focused deeper, tracing the faint aura emanating from each weapon and his heart sank. There was no magical energy there. No runic pattern, no enchantment, nothing that even remotely resembled mana manipulation.

These weren't forged through any arcane process.

They were manifestations, extensions of some divine interference apart from Ikem.

The realization struck like thunder.

The weapons seemed alive, not merely extensions of their wielders but sentient partners. They were thinking or at least responding as if fused to their users' very essence. Erik could see it clearly: the weapons and the creatures were one.

The creatures shouldn't have been able to channel any form of power, not even basic mana manipulation and yet, the weapons themselves bridged that gap. Mystical abilities flowed through them like instinctive reactions, as if Ikem himself had forged them to bypass mortal limitation.

What made it worse, what truly infuriated him was the sustainability of their unnatural existence. The stolen human essence they'd absorbed was burning away fast, dissolving as their bodies stabilized. By all logic, the divine roots should have lost their fuel, and the creatures should have collapsed back into their mangled forms.

But they didn't.

Instead, the weapons began to drink from the air itself, absorbing the ambient mana like sponges. The process was seamless, a divine substitute for mortal energy. The mending never stopped. The roots continued to knit flesh, the red glow pulsing with renewed vigor as the surrounding mana was drawn in to replace the fading essence.

"Of course it wouldn't be that simple..." Erik hissed, feeling the pressure of divinity thickening the air.

His observation was cut short.

The creatures below had all turned toward him, their gazes cold, unified, purposeful. The air trembled as their malformed throats worked to form sound, their newly restored vocal cords vibrating out of sync. What came next was a chorus of distorted voices, overlapping and jagged:

"Blasphemer!"

The word carried divine weight, more a judgment than an insult. It reverberated through the air, echoing across the empty field like a decree of execution.