

Guardian gods 661

Chapter 661:

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.

Erik barely had a second to react before one of them, the one wielding the frozen blade moved.

One instant, it was standing below, its gaze fixed on him. The next, it was in the sky, right beside him, its form a blur of cold mist and motion. The air where it once stood shattered with a concussive crack, shards of frost spiraling in its wake.

Erik's pupils constricted.

"So fast—!"

The air cracked like ice as the creature's blade carved through it, a jagged blur of frost aimed straight for Erik's throat.

But Erik was no mere warrior. He was a mage, even if the spear in his hands suggested otherwise.

The instant the creature vanished from the ground, Erik's lips were already moving, his voice a low, focused murmur weaving through the rising hum of his mana. Glyphs flickered faintly along the shaft of his weapon, molten runes burning into existence as the air around him shimmered with heat.

By the time the creature swung, the spell was complete.

A serpent of fire erupted from the head of his spear, its molten body twisting and coiling with a hiss like a living flame. The serpent merged with his weapon, the metal glowing red-hot, scales of liquid heat forming along its surface.

Erik thrust forward and the spear struck with predatory intent, alive with wrath.

At the very moment their weapons should have collided, the spear moved on its own, reacting with the fluid grace of a serpent. It curved away from the frozen blade in a smooth arc, bypassing the edge entirely to coil around the creature's arm.

The divine flames bit deep. The smell of burning flesh filled the air as the infernal serpent constricted, its heat searing through even the divinity-woven flesh.

But the creature did not flinch.

With mechanical precision, it simply released the weapon from its injured hand. The frozen blade spun in the air, caught perfectly by its other arm, and before Erik could press his advantage, the monster stabbed forward again its movement raw, brutal, efficient.

Erik's spear trembled. The fire-serpent's form flickered briefly before a phantom image tore free from him, a spectral afterimage that grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him backward, propelling him through the air with impossible speed.

He reappeared several meters away, wind slicing past his face as he steadied his breathing.

Below, the creature's momentum faltered. With no target to meet, it began to fall, a meteor of frost and muscle tumbling toward the ground.

But before it could crash, the staff-bearer below raised its weapon. The pearl at its tip pulsed once, releasing a ring of ripples through the air. Instantly, water gathered beneath the descending creature's feet, a shimmering platform forming midair.

The moment its body touched down, the water froze solid, turning into a platform of glacial blue. The creature planted its foot on it, crouched and with a thunderous crack, launched itself upward again.

The ice shattered beneath it, shards scattering like crystal dust as it rocketed back toward Erik, faster than before.

Erik's eyes narrowed, "Adaptation... even in mid-combat?"

The corners of his lips curled slightly, half in disbelief, half in excitement.

"So be it."

He spun his spear, the serpent's molten body reawakening, ready to meet the second strike.

The other creatures moved almost in unison, their coordination unnervingly precise as if guided by a single will.

The one wielding the trident stepped forward, its grotesque form outlined by rippling currents of divine energy. With a guttural growl, it hurled the weapon skyward. The air shrieked as the trident spun toward Erik but this was no ordinary throw.

Erik twisted his body, narrowly dodging the weapon as it whistled past him, but his eyes widened when he saw what followed.

The trident tore the air open, leaving behind a jagged scar of red divinity in its wake. From that rift, a length of chain burst forth, its links alive, glinting with the same crimson glow as the divine roots he had seen earlier.

The chain slithered forward like a predator, its head guided by the will of the chain-wielder emerging behind it. With a violent crack, it shot toward Erik, lengthening endlessly as it pursued him through the air.

Erik darted away, heat rippling around his frame as he moved, but the creatures gave him no space.

The one bearing the shifting water spear stepped in next, its weapon twisting mid-motion before it slashed horizontally through the air. In response, an enormous wave erupted from the swing, forming midair, defying gravity. The surge of water roared toward Erik, blocking every escape route, a shimmering wall of liquid.

The chain was almost upon him, its jagged end reaching out like a claw.

Erik's expression hardened. He had no time to think. His hand moved instinctively, tracing a sigil in the air before him. He inhaled deeply then blew.

The temperature plummeted instantly. The searing heat that surrounded him inverted into an arctic chill as frost erupted from his breath.

The wave before him froze solid, turning into a mountain of glittering ice. In the same breath, he flooded his limbs with reinforcing mana, his body glowing faintly gold beneath his cloak.

Then he crashed through.

The ice shattered like glass under his charge, shards scattering in every direction. He broke through the frozen barrier just as the pursuing chain lunged at where he had been a heartbeat earlier, its end slamming into the remains of the ice wall.

The impact sent a shockwave rippling across the field, mist and frost swirling together in chaotic patterns.

Erik shot out the other side, smoke and frost trailing behind him as he spun his spear in a defensive arc, searching for an opening.

Below, the trident-wielder caught its weapon as it returned to its grasp with divine precision, the other three regrouping midair in a synchronized motion that made Erik's jaw tighten.

Erik steadied himself midair, the hum of arcane energy roaring in his veins. The five creatures had regrouped below. They weren't weren't even thinking, yet their movements aligned perfectly.

Erik's eyes narrowed. "You want to end me?"

His spear burned brighter, the molten serpent along its length writhing as if eager for more. The runes etched along the weapon pulsed with violent rhythm, three quick beats, then silence before erupting in a flare of crimson-gold light.

"Then let's see how much of the gods will you can withstand."

He thrust his spear downward.

The air split apart with a sonic roar as hundreds of fiery serpents burst from the spear's head, raining toward the creatures like falling stars. Each serpent hissed as it struck, detonating on impact, explosions of searing flame and energy blanketing the field. The shockwaves rolled outward, tearing up earth and air alike, carving molten trenches into the land below.

For a moment, the world became a storm of fire and light.

The trident-wielder was the first to react, thrusting its weapon into the ground as a surge of water erupted upward to counter the inferno. Steam engulfed the area, shrouding everything in blinding mist, but Erik was already moving through it, his spear cutting arcs of flame through the haze.

The pearl-staffed creature tried to raise a barrier of water, but Erik's next strike shattered it cleanly, the molten spear punching through its chest. The impact tore a hole straight through its body, divine roots sizzling and bursting into ash.

The creature staggered back, flames devouring its torso, yet it didn't die. It didn't scream.

The red roots simply moved, tightening and knitting the wound closed as if reversing time. In seconds, the hole in its body sealed, leaving only charred marks that faded soon after.

Erik's eyes widened in disbelief, "Impossible..."

He spun just in time to parry the frozen blade that came streaking toward his head. The clash sent sparks and frost scattering through the air, heat meeting cold.

The monster's attack forced him back, but Erik retaliated with a blast of compressed flame that engulfed his attacker completely. The creature's body burned away only for the red roots beneath its skin to pulse again, regrowing the lost tissue, reshaping its body as if nothing had happened.

He swung his spear in a wide arc, releasing a blazing wave that ripped through the air, sending two of the creatures crashing into the ground. The impact carved deep craters into the field yet, as the smoke cleared, they were already standing again, their movements sharper than before.

It wasn't intelligence that was growing. It was instinct.

Chapter 662:

Each exchange made them faster, more fluid. Their coordination tightened. The spear-wielder no longer hesitated before blocking his strikes; the chain-bearer's aim became precise, almost predictive; the trident's thrown arcs cut closer each time.

They couldn't land a decisive hit, Erik's speed and experience kept him one step ahead but the pressure was unrelenting. Every second he fought, the creatures learned. The divine red roots refined their body, timing improved, and their rhythm became terrifyingly efficient.

The fight dragged on, and with every passing moment, Erik's frustration deepened. His strikes should have ended this long ago, he was stronger, faster, and definitely more skilled than these abominations. Yet no matter how many times he cut them down, the creatures refused to die. Their bodies mended in unnatural ways, torn flesh knitting back together, bones snapping into place with wet cracks.

Realizing brute strength was futile, Erik shifted tactics. He slowed his assault, parried instead of striking, and began to watch. Every twitch, every regeneration, every shimmer of their blood, he studied it all. If their immortality was truly a gift from the gods, he would have felt a trace of divine essence in them, a whisper of higher power. But there was nothing. No light, no blessing, no divine resonance. Just a hollow, unnatural persistence.

His mind raced even as his body bled. Deep cuts marked his arms and chest, each movement a surge of pain. He spat blood into the dirt, eyes narrowing. If not the gods... then what sustains you?

Before he could piece together an answer, one of the creatures lunged forward, the one armed with the trident. It thrust the weapon through the air, and the world itself seemed to scream. Space tore open before as it passed by.

Erik's instincts flared. He barely registered the motion before his spear responded, not to his will, but of its own. It blurred into a streak of light, humming with lethal precision, and in the blink of an eye, the creature was gone, shredded into ribbons of flesh and blood mist.

The rift's backlash came a heartbeat later. Erik's focus snapped toward it, every muscle tensing. He twisted aside as from the torn space emerged a claw water construct that lashed out, the edges of the claw slicing through stone and air alike. The air shuddered around him, the taste of iron thick on his tongue.

He landed heavily, panting, blood dripping down his chin, but his eyes were sharp, alive with new understanding.

Erik's eyes darted toward the creature his spear had shredded moments ago. To his bewilderment, it wasn't healing, at least, not as swiftly as before. The abomination lay crumpled on the ground, its form twitching and convulsing as it tried to regenerate, but the process was sluggish, faltering.

Before he could dwell on it, another strike came crashing in. The blow landed with bone-rattling force, sending Erik hurtling backward through the air. He struck the ground hard, rolling to his feet, blood trailing from his lips.

His spear, sensing his peril, streaked back to him like a flash of light, slapping into his palm with a resonant hum. The moment his fingers closed around it, Erik felt the pulse a connection not of mere steel, but of essence. His eyes widened in sudden realization. He glanced across the battlefield, spotting the trident lying far from its wielder. The creature that had thrown it now fought weaponless... and weakened.

His gaze snapped to the others each one gripping a weapon that seemed almost alive in their grasp.

So that's it...

Erik moved. In an instant, he blurred from sight, reappearing in front of the creature wielding a sword encased in frost. The creature reacted with eerie precision, thrusting its blade forward. The sword pierced through Erik's chest, blood burst from the wound and for a brief, frozen heartbeat, everything stopped.

Then the creature's expression twisted in confusion. The Erik it had impaled began to flicker, his form breaking apart into countless motes of light.

The real Erik emerged from the illusion, already within striking distance. With a deft twist of his wrist, he disarmed the creature before it could even register what was happening. The frozen sword clattered across the ground, and Erik kicked it away in the same motion.

His spear flared in his grip, the runes along its shaft igniting. A serpentine blaze erupted from its tip, a roaring coiling serpent of fire that lunged forward, engulfing the disarmed creature in a storm of heat and fury. When the flames died down, nothing remained but drifting ash.

Erik exhaled sharply, his gaze flicking between the fallen weapon and the slowly regenerating corpse of the first creature. His theory was confirmed. Their immortality was bound not to the gods, not to their flesh but to the weapons they wielded.

And now, he finally had a way to end this.

Erik didn't stop moving. The air behind him trembled as another attack tore through the space he'd just vacated, but his attention stayed locked on the ashes before him. Despite the creature's body having been reduced to dust, he could still feel it that stubborn, pulsing signature of life refusing to fade.

His instincts were right.

From the ashes, thin red roots began to emerge, writhing and twisting like veins searching for flesh. Slowly, almost painfully, they began to rebuild the creature's form sinew first, then bone, then the faint outlines of skin.

Erik's expression hardened. So, you can still crawl back from that...

Seeing he was on the verge of uncovering the truth, he charged forward again, cutting down the remaining creatures with measured precision. The battlefield soon became a grim sight of piles of ash scattered across the scorched ground, each one pulsing faintly with crimson roots that refused to die.

The weapons, however, lay far from their wielders. Erik had kicked them aside, ensuring no creature could reach them. And that was when the full picture became clear.

The weapons were more than tools, they were anchors. The source of the creatures ridiculous vitality. Without them, the beings could still regenerate, but their recovery was sluggish, weak, almost pitiful compared to before.

Erik stood amidst the ruins of the battlefield, spear planted in the earth before him, arms folded. The wind tugged at his blood-stained cloak as he stared down at the twitching remnants trying to reform before him.

A dilemma took root in his mind.

He couldn't simply walk away. If he did, they would rise again slowly, perhaps, but inevitably and eventually find their way back to his kingdom. Leaving them alive would mean unleashing disaster upon his people.

Yet destroying them entirely... that was another matter. The gods themselves had bound these creatures with restrictions, making them both powerful and vulnerable at once. Their strength came from the very curse that limited them.

Erik tightened his grip on his spear, eyes narrowing as the red roots twitched closer together, struggling to reclaim form.

As Erik weighed his options, a single thought surfaced reckless, perhaps, but worth testing. If it failed, he would find another way, perhaps even devise a seal to bind these abominations forever. But first, he needed to test things out.

He exhaled slowly, closing his eyes. The air around him rippled as the boundaries of space bent to his will.

The world twisted.

In an instant, the battlefield dissolved into light, replaced by an ancient forest bathed in ethereal glow, Erik's domain. Towering trees shimmered with veins of silver light, their leaves whispering in a language different from this world. The air was thick with magic, heavy with the breath of life itself.

Once, this place had been beautiful yet mournful a forest of memory and ruin, where the remnants of an ancient elven civilization lay scattered in sorrow. Crumbled statues, fallen spires, and broken bridges had told the story of loss and failure. Ghostly figures of fallen elves drifted among the trees, their presence both protective and tragic.

But now... it was different.

Where ruins once stood, restoration had begun. The broken pillars gleamed anew, woven through with luminous vines. Statues once toppled now stood proud and whole, their stone eyes alight with quiet reverence. The air pulsed with warmth and vitality, and the spectral elves no longer wandered aimlessly they moved with purpose, repairing, nurturing, rebuilding.

This transformation mirrored Erik's victory over Silas, a wound healed, a spirit redeemed. His domain, once a reflection of grief, now pulsed with rebirth.

And into this sacred space, the five creatures were dragged.

They struggled, their forms twisting as if the domain itself rejected them. Their red roots writhed against the soil, sizzling where they touched the luminous ground.

Erik didn't strike. He watched eyes sharp as something new stirred at the edge of his perception, faint at first, then growing stronger. A distortion deep within the heart of his domain like a heartbeat buried beneath the earth.

He turned toward it.

There, half-hidden beyond the veil of trees, he saw something. Not fully, but enough. A massive tree, blood-red and pulsing, its bark slick like flesh, its roots spreading far and wide. They pierced through the fabric of his domain, stretching into an unseen realm and from those roots, he felt it: five distinct lines of connection, each one tethered to the creatures before him.

Chapter 663:

His breath caught.

So this is it... the source.

The tree pulsed again, and the ground beneath his feet trembled faintly. Erik could feel its hunger, its will invasive, alive. The creatures were merely extensions, vessels born of those roots.

With a steady breath, he extended his hand. His will surged through his domain, bending its reality to his command. From the mana, an invisible sword formed, pure formless intent given edge. The air hummed with tension as the blade took shape, and with a single motion of his hand, Erik brought it down.

The sword cleaved through the crimson roots.

A blinding ripple tore through the domain, followed by silence so deep it felt absolute. The threads connecting the creatures to the tree snapped, and immediately, Erik sensed the difference. The oppressive vitality that had radiated from them, the constant pulse of false life was gone. Their bodies collapsed, still and empty, no longer struggling to rise.

But before relief could take hold, Erik felt it.

A vast gaze old, cold, and distant fell upon him. It wasn't sight in the mortal sense, but an awareness that brushed against his very soul. The domain trembled as that unseen presence glanced through the veil, observing him, weighing him... and then, as suddenly as it appeared, it withdrew. The shadow of the blood-red tree faded, dissolving like mist in sunlight.

Erik exhaled slowly, his muscles taut. Whatever that presence was, it was powerful enough to pierce into his domain and yet it had chosen not to act.

Not now, at least.

With a snap of his fingers, flames burst forth, roaring across the battlefield. They swirled around the fallen creatures, engulfing them completely. The fire was not ordinary; it was a purifying blaze, born from his will and domain, consuming not only flesh but essence. When the flames subsided, nothing remained but scorched earth.

Then, something unexpected drew his attention.

The weapons—the trident, the sword of frost, and the others began to shimmer. Their solid forms broke down, melting into glistening pools of water that soaked into the soil, leaving behind only faint puddles that reflected the sky.

Erik watched in silence. Were they ever real?

With the threat gone, he let his domain recede. The ethereal forest dissolved, giving way once more to the devastated battlefield.

He stood amidst the aftermath, the mountains cleaved in half by his and the creatures strikes, a frozen monolith jutting from the earth, a vast body of water formed from melted ice, and a deep ravine tearing across the land.

The destruction was immense.

Moreover, Erik could feel it multiple presences stirring at the edges of his awareness. Countless unseen eyes now turned toward the scarred land. His battle had not gone unnoticed. Neighboring kingdoms, watchful spirits, perhaps even the gods themselves all had felt the tremors of his clash.

He exhaled slowly, the weight of realization pressing against his chest. There will be questions, he thought grimly. And consequences.

There was no concealing what had occurred here. The land itself bore witness the sundered mountain, the frozen monoliths, the lake that had not existed an hour ago. The world would remember this battle, whether he wished it or not.

With a quiet sigh, Erik lifted his spear, its tip glinting faintly in the aftermath's haze. He stepped into the air and, with a burst of power, propelled himself skyward. The sound barrier shattered around him, releasing a thunderous boom that sent ripples of wind sweeping across the battlefield. The scorched ground and the lingering ash below scattered beneath the gust, as if trying to erase the traces of what had transpired.

High above the earth, Erik hovered in silence, the cold wind whipping at his cloak. His mind turned inward. He needed time to think, to reflect, to understand what this fight had revealed about himself, and about his kingdom.

As he soared through the sky, one thought refused to leave him.

That woman.

The one who had come to him moments before this, her presence calm yet unsettling, her words veiled in meaning he hadn't yet grasped. He had dismissed much of what she said then because of her look and charm but now, in the wake of this battle, her recent presence echoed with new weight.

His gaze drifted toward the distant horizon as the memory replayed in his mind.

Then he remembered the puddles of water left behind where the weapons had once been, the same clear, reflective shimmer that had lingered after her departure.

Erik's expression darkened, the wind whipping harder around him.

So it was her, he realized. She's tied to this.

The realization chilled him more than the high-altitude air.

He didn't yet understand her purpose, whether she was an ally, manipulator, or something far worse but one thing was certain: this encounter was not coincidence.

As Erik had expected, there were indeed many eyes watching.

Across the lands, the rulers and scholars of neighboring kingdoms had turned their attention toward him and his realm. His recent battle had been felt far beyond his borders, the shattering echoes of shockwave, the surge of distorted magic, and the ominous silence that followed. To them, Erik and his people were no longer a distant curiosity; they had become a threat that could not be ignored.

Yet, despite their unease, none dared act, not yet.

Erik's strength was one reason. His reputation as both warrior and sovereign was legendary, his power vast enough to turn entire armies to ash. But there was another reason, more insidious and fearsome: the curse.

Few truly understood the nature of curses, and fewer still could defend against them. Those who had studied the phenomenon knew enough to be afraid. To wage war against a king leading millions of cursed beings was not merely to risk defeat, it was to risk corruption.

Before a single blade could meet Erik's forces, the enemy's soldiers would already begin to rot from within, their spirits corroded, their humanity consumed. The taint would spread like wildfire through the ranks, and in the end, all they would achieve was strengthening Erik himself.

Thus, his kingdom was isolated, not conquered, but contained.

A cursed territory best left untouched. Few dared cross its borders, and those who did were made sure not to leave again. The very air around Erik's realm seemed heavy, distorted, whispering to those who approached it. Even the bravest soldiers hesitated when faced with the unseen weight that guarded his lands.

But now... things had changed.

The recent battle, its scale and violence, had broken that uneasy silence. The shockwaves that tore through the skies, the sudden heavy down pour of rain, fluctuations in cursed energy, and the strange magical signatures that followed. all of it had drawn unwanted attention.

In response, the minds of the surrounding kingdoms stirred.

Their scholars pored over ancient texts. Their mages studied the fluctuations in the ley lines. Their rulers convened in secret halls, whispering about what Erik might have done.

It did not take long for patterns to emerge. The clever ones began connecting events, the surge in corrupted energy, the appearance of strange phenomena near Erik's borders. Slowly, theories turned into conclusions.

They did not know everything, but they knew enough to be afraid.

Reports recently began to pour in from the soldiers stationed along the border wall, frantic, shaken accounts of what they had witnessed.

A giantess had appeared near the outer perimeter of Erik's domain, towering and radiant, her presence both mesmerizing and terrifying. Those who caught even a glimpse of her spoke of an overwhelming sense of awe and dread that hollowed their minds and left them trembling long after she vanished. Some described her beauty as divine, others as monstrous. But all agreed on one thing, she was not human.

When these accounts reached the ruling courts of the neighboring kingdoms, panic began to ripple through their councils.

They knew what Erik's lands had become, a cursed kingdom, a haven for the afflicted and the damned. But this... this was different.

The scholars and seers who studied the border incidents began drawing lines between recent events. The timing, the nature of the apparition, the surge in cursed essence emanating from Erik's domain all of it began to fit together.

And then someone uttered the name that sent every chamber into uneasy silence:

The Lady Siren.

The Enchanting Siren, one of the Arch Curse, said to be the unwanted children of the origin god Ikenga. Her influence was said to warp emotion itself, bending desire, and obsession into tools of her will. Wherever she manifested, tragedy followed, people and kings losing their minds to longing.

To think that she had turned her gaze toward Erik's kingdom was enough to unnerve even the most composed of rulers.

Whispers spread like wildfire through the courts:

Has Erik gained her favor?

Had the Siren chosen him or worse, his people?

None wanted to believe it. For if the Lady Siren's attention truly rested on Erik's domain, it would mark a shift in the balance of the entire region. Her favor was no blessing, it was an omen, a curse disguised as grace.

And the timing only deepened the fear.

Chapter 664:

Her appearance coincided precisely with the recent surge of power within Erik's borders. Some speculated Erik had fought her. Others claimed he had summoned her. But those theories were swiftly dismissed by the learned few who understood the nature of Arch Curses.

Such entities were beyond mortal reach. They did not fight humans; they simply observed, whispered, and waited.

Their existence was common knowledge now, though it had not always been so. The study of curses had become a grim necessity, a matter of survival. In this age, cursed beings were no longer rare tragedies but daily realities. Each sunrise brought new cases: a farmer whose envy festered into a curse, a mother whose grief birthed a wailing spirit, a soldier whose hatred consumed a village.

The kingdoms had been forced to adapt. They learned, they categorized, they studied. And through that grim education, the world came to know of the Arch Curses beings like the Enchanting Siren, the despairing virtursoo, and others whose mere existence warped reality around them.

Now, one of them had turned her gaze toward Erik's cursed kingdom. With all they knew about curses, the neighboring kingdoms soon reached an impasse. Their investigations led nowhere certain. None could tell whether Erik had truly fought the Lady Siren herself, or if some unknown third force had intervened.

Desperate for clarity, scholars and mages scoured the old records on Arch Curses, hoping to find precedent. Yet those tomes all agreed on one thing: Arch Curses did not take direct action against mortals. They tempted, influenced, or corrupted but never struck openly. So if the Lady Siren had appeared in Erik's realm, something in the world had changed.

Answers came, unexpectedly, from the temples.

The first to speak were the priests of Tide, followed closely by those devoted to Ikem. How they learned what they did was unclear, whether through divine vision, communion, or rumor carried by spirits but their proclamations spread like wildfire.

They announced that Erik had indeed been visited by the Enchanting Siren, the Arch Curse of Beauty and Desire. According to their account, the cursed beings within Erik's borders were not merely monsters or

victims; they were her chosen, drawn under her song and rule. It was only natural, they said, that she would come to see what her children had become.

But the priests did not stop there. They wove a darker narrative, one of offense and desecration. They claimed that Erik entranced by Siren's beauty forced himself upon her, even forcing her to manifest in the likeness of a goddess. To the priests, this was blasphemy of the highest order: a mortal king daring to bind the form of an Arch Curse to a divine image.

The phrasing of their message was deliberate, vague enough to avoid direct accusation, yet heavy with implication. The clever rulers and their advisors saw through it at once. The priests' words were meant to turn the people's faith and fear against Erik, to cast him as a man who had offended both the divine and the accursed.

Still, beneath the rhetoric, a grain of truth seemed to glimmer.

Among mortals, it was well known that the Enchanting Siren was the consort of the ascended god Tide, while Ursula was the divine wife of Ikem, god of verdant communion. So when the priests' proclamations spread across the kingdoms, the tale took on a life of its own.

According to the version whispered among the common folk, Erik had committed an unforgivable sin, his actions had offended both gods. The battle that had shaken the lands was no clash with the Siren at all, they said, but the divine wrath sent down by Tide and Ikem in retribution for Erik's blasphemy. To the frightened masses, that was truth enough.

But the nobles and the high-born saw the matter differently. They knew Erik's reputation, his pride, his temper, even his lustful nature but none believed him so foolish as to try forcing himself upon the Lady Siren. Even if he had been entranced by her beauty, she was more than capable of ending such insolence in an instant.

That meant something else was at play.

To the shrewder minds among them, this "incident" reeked of deeper, unseen forces. A struggle beyond mortal reach, perhaps even among the gods and Arch Curses themselves. Yet in the end, they asked the question that mattered most:

Did they truly care who was right or wrong?

The answer was simple.

No, they did not.

What mattered was opportunity.

Erik's supposed transgression was a gift wrapped in scandal. Whether he was guilty or not meant nothing; what mattered was that two gods were offended, and the priests had already seized upon that fact. They were spreading their "truths," each one laced with just enough deceit to flatter the divine and justify future action.

The nobles understood perfectly and decided to do the same.

If condemning Erik meant earning the gods' favor, then so be it.

Erik had emerged victorious from the wrath sent down by the gods, and though many sighed at the thought, none were truly surprised. Everyone understood why: the gods, for all their power, were limited in what they could do within the mortal realm. Their divine retribution could only reach so far.

Thus, it fell upon their believers to carry out the will of Tide and Ikem, to finish what their gods had begun. At least, that was what the devout claimed.

For the leaders and nobles, however, piety was little more than a veil for ambition. They saw no holiness in the matter, only opportunity. If offering Erik's head could place them in the good graces of two gods, they would gladly do so, all while tightening their own grip on power.

And so the rumors spread like wildfire across the continent.

Erik, the Cursed King, had angered two gods.

It became the talk of every court, every tavern, every temple. Eyes from every direction now turned toward his kingdom, each gaze heavy with greed and calculation. To many, it was a great feast about to be served, a chance to carve a piece of divine favor for themselves.

As for why such frenzy erupted so quickly, the answer lay in the current relationship between mortals and the ascended gods.

It all began with Björn's counsel to the newly ascended deities, a warning born from experience. He had advised them to be wary of mortal worship, especially that which came from hearts that neither understood nor followed the divine doctrine.

For most mortals, worship was not a bond of faith, but a transaction born of fear or greed. They prayed not to understand the divine, but to gain from it to seek protection, wealth, or miracles. Their devotion burned bright for a moment, only to flicker out when their desires went unanswered. Within weeks, sometimes mere days, they abandoned one god for another, chasing after whichever promise of salvation seemed most convenient.

The ascended gods soon learned that such faith was impure and difficult to refine, its energy unstable and tainted by selfish intent. The more of it they received, the more they risked corruption.

Thus, they began to distance themselves from mortals, limiting their blessings, their miracles, and even their appearances in the mortal realm. To the common people, it seemed the gods had grown silent. But in truth, the gods were simply protecting themselves from mortal fickleness, from tainted devotion, and from the madness that unchecked faith could bring.

Not all mortals were shunned, however. There were still exceptions, those rare individuals who sought true understanding. These few delved deep into the doctrines, embodying the essence of their god's path rather than merely reciting its words.

Erik was one such individual. His research, his discipline, and his pure faith in Ikem made him one of the few mortals the gods still regarded with cautious respect.

Such was the state of things that even decades after the gods' ascension, the number of human believers devoted to any one deity remained few. Yet this scarcity of genuine faith had never stopped

mortals from offering their prayers whenever hardship struck. Desperation, after all, was its own form of devotion.

True worship, however, came not from humans, but from the godlings, the divine offspring and chosen attendants of the gods. Unlike mortals, the godlings practiced worship through doctrine and understanding, following rituals that reflected the will and essence of their patron deity.

At times, these godlings sought to teach such discipline to humans, guiding them in the proper ways of devotion. For a while, it worked, so long as the godlings remained present. But once they withdrew to their sacred lands, mortal hearts began to drift once more. The teachings became hollow recitations; worship turned to bargaining. Soon, humans returned to what they knew best, seeking profit in faith, rather than enlightenment.

But then something changed. The gods themselves had begun to make contact once again. The one to do so was Tide, whose followers long accustomed to divine silence suddenly found their dreams filled with his voice. His words, cryptic yet radiant with divine authority, spread swiftly through his clergy and faithful.

That was how they learned of what had transpired, of Erik's supposed transgression, of the Lady Siren's visit, and of the gods' wrath.

And with that revelation, the world erupted into chaos.

Chapter 665

The same mortals who had once felt abandoned by the gods now saw themselves acknowledged, if only briefly. The silent heavens had spoken again, and even the faintest whisper of divine attention was enough to ignite a continent-wide frenzy.

Among the gods entangled in this upheaval, one was far from pleased.

Ikem, felt his anger flare and fade as quickly as a spark. When the rumors of Erik's supposed transgression reached him, his wrath was immediate but not enduring. After Erik survived, he simply withdrew his blessing.

To Ikem, that was punishment enough.

He knew Erik well his discipline, his intellect, and his relentless pursuit of perfection. Without divine guidance, Erik's great work would falter, his ambitions crumble beneath their own weight. Deprived of the god's favor, Erik's path toward his grand goal would become all but impossible.

With that done, Ikem turned his attention away from mortals. He had more personal matters to attend to.

For the first time in his long existence, he found himself waiting nervously for a child born out of love rather than duty. Ursula, radiant even in her divine calm, carried his child one unlike any he had sired before. Ikem had fathered many offspring across centuries, most born of duty or expectations, but this... this was different.

This time, he truly cared.

He devoted himself to her, his divine realm silent and his presence withdrawn from the mortal world. To ensure order was maintained in his absence, he left Bara, a divine fragment of his own essence, to oversee the workings of his realm.

At least, that was the plan.

Only a few weeks after the mortal incident, a strange disturbance rippled through Ikem's divine domain. Bara called for his attention, unable to contain the sudden flood of faith energy pouring in from the mortal realm.

At first, Ikem was intrigued. Faith had always been the lifeblood of gods, but this surge was different tainted, wild, unrefined. It carried desperation, fear, and obsession rather than reverence.

The sheer volume of it threatened to overwhelm even his ordered realm. And though he felt his power swelling, Ikem's satisfaction quickly turned to disgust.

This was not the clean, purposeful devotion he valued. It defied the careful balance he had spent ages preserving.

Worse still, it made him wonder. Why now?

Why were mortals, who had so long ignored his doctrine, suddenly turning their worship toward him in such fervor?

And so, Ikem turned his gaze toward the mortal realm, seeking to understand the source of the disturbance. What he saw ignited something in him that had long lain dormant.

In all his centuries of existence, the number of times Ikem had felt true anger could be counted on one hand. Yet now, watching the mortals upheaval and seeing Tide's careless interference warp the balance he so carefully maintained and so he erupted in rage.

His expression darkened, his composure shattered. With eyes burning like molten emeralds, he roared, his voice echoing through the very fabric of his divine realm and outside it.

"TIDE!"

Ikem's form burst into motion, his body transfiguring into a greenish-red stream of divine light as he shot out from his throne among the stars. In an instant, he left behind the serenity of his ordered domain, blazing a path through the void between realms.

Since the thrones of the gods floated among the stars, Ikem faced no mortal constraints. Only the void and the paths carved by divine will.

His divine gaze pierced the expanse, and soon he saw it Tide's realm, luminous and vast, its essence churning like a living ocean suspended in the sky.

He did not slow.

As he neared its boundaries, Ikem's form began to change. His flesh hardened, transmuting into living wood, a manifestation of his dominion over growth and creation. His arms lengthened, joints reinforced with divine latticework of bark and sinew, capable of channeling impossible strength.

He drew back his arm, his divine energy coiling like a serpent ready to strike.

And then he struck.

His fist collided with the boundary of Tide's realm. The impact shattered the silence of the cosmos. Space itself splintered, forming great fissures of light and shadow. From those cracks, red roots erupted, latching onto the wounded fabric of reality.

They spread like veins, pulsing with divine fury. Wherever they reached, they induced decay, breaking down the oceanic essence that formed Tide's barrier. The tranquil azure glow of the sea-god's domain began to rot into crimson foam, corrupted by Ikem's divinity.

Ikem flew through the widening crack between realms, though he could barely comprehend what he was seeing. Beyond the veil of torn space lay Tide's domain, the Everflowing Treasury, and true to its name, it shimmered with impossible wealth.

Oceans of liquid gold cascaded down terraces of crystal coral. Islands of pearl floated in the endless tide. The very air hummed with divine abundance, a realm that embodied the ceaseless flow of fortune.

Moments later, Ikem emerged from the rift, the echo of his earlier strike still reverberating across the cosmos. Suspended in the open sky of Tide's world, he took in the gleaming expanse before him, his

expression dark and unreadable. Then, locking onto Tide's life signature, he streaked forward, an emerald-red comet tearing across the gilded horizon.

Ikem no longer cared for ceremony, decorum, or divine dignity.

He crashed through the castle walls, splintering marble and coral as if they were paper. His steps heavy with restrained fury.

And there upon his throne of flowing silver sat Tide. But the sight before Ikem gave him pause.

The god of wealth once radiant, proud, and unshakably smug now sat slouched, his chin resting on his hand. His eyes were weary, his face dimmed by exhaustion and sorrow.

It was a sight Ikem had never thought possible.

The god who had once measured all things in worth now looked as though he found no value in existence itself.

Tide's gaze lifted to meet his. For a heartbeat, neither spoke. Then a faint, almost bitter smile crossed Tide's face.

"Took you long enough to notice," he said softly.

Ikem's jaw tightened, his fists trembling. He knew exactly what Tide meant.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why did you do it? Why go that far? It should have been forgotten by now!"

His voice thundered through the chamber, echoing against the waves of divine energy that rippled from his body.

Tide frowned, his gaze distant. "This is wrong..." he muttered under his breath.

"I can't hear you," Ikem snapped.

Tide's head rose sharply, and when he spoke again, his tone cut through the room like the crash of a wave.

"I said this is wrong!"

He stood, the sea itself stirring around him as the Everflowing Treasury reacted to his rising emotion. Pointing a trembling hand at Ikem, Tide's voice cracked not with anger, but with shame.

"You should have rushed me the moment you saw me! You should have pinned me to the ground and struck me for the disgrace I brought upon you!"

He paused, his tone dropping to something almost fragile.

"So why, Ikem, why are you asking me questions instead?"

Hearing his words took Ikem by surprise. His anger, which had been burning like wildfire, began to ebb away as he truly looked at the cousin standing before him. With a quiet exhale, he gave a mental command, and the roots that had been gnawing at the boundary of Tide's realm halted their advance, withdrawing like serpents retreating into the soil.

He had been so blinded by fury that he hadn't realized, Tide had never once moved to strike back. The realization struck him harder than any blow. Unclenching his fist, Ikem drew in a slow, measured breath before speaking, his voice low and heavy.

"So that's what you wanted?"

At those words, Tide's composure faltered. His gaze dropped, shame flickering across his face like a passing shadow. He knew Ikem had every right to his anger. He had been in the wrong. Erik's reckless actions had cost him not just his dignity and pride, but also the woman he loved.

Tide could have, like Ikem, turned his gaze away from the mortal world and left their affairs behind. Yet his heart had festered with resentment, and that bitterness had corroded what remained of his joy. His realm, once radiant with laughter, music, and waves of vanity had grown dim, the waters still and heavy. The god of vanity had found himself drowning in emotions he could not purge.

In his grief and frustration, Tide had acted. It was he who let the mortal tongues wag, who allowed whispers of the desecration of Ursula's image to spread like wildfire through the human realm. He had known what it would do, how it would shame both Ikem and Ursula, how it would wound the one person who had once trusted him most.

And still, he had done it.

Because beneath all the divine pride and oceanic calm, Tide had been angry, angry that the world had not turned in his favor, that the wound festering in his heart had found no balm.

Chapter 666:

Meanwhile, Ikem's roar echoed shaking the fabric of the divine realms. The other gods turned their gaze toward the source of the sound, only to witness a sight that made even their immortal hearts falter, Ikem forcefully tearing through the boundaries and crashing into Tide's realm.

For a moment, silence reigned. The gods felt an invisible hand clutch their hearts as they beheld the impossible. Conflict, true violent conflict was something foreign to them. Among their divine family, disagreements had always been settled with words, never blows. Even in anger, their restraint was always there.

But now, that sacred peace was shattered.

The tension rippled through every corner of their realms. The gods could no longer remain still; they burst forth from their celestial abodes, streaking through the firmament like stars falling in reverse, racing toward Tide's domain. Yet by the time they arrived, it was already too late.

The rift Ikem had torn between their realms was gone, mended, sealed by Tide. The breach stood closed, its edges gleaming faintly as if marked by divine sorrow.

The gods gathered at its boundary, their powers thrumming in agitation. Some clenched their hands, ready to force their way in; others hesitated, torn between duty and reverence for the sanctity of another's realm. The choice before them weighed heavy, intervene and risk further destruction, or trust their kin to resolve what had already been set in motion.

It was then that Ursula, goddess of the Ascendant Hearth and Everflame Bonds, stepped forward. A soft radiance surrounded her warm, steady, and familiar, like the glow of a fire on a cold night. Her gaze swept over the uneasy assembly, her expression calm yet resolute.

"The Hearth still burns strong," she said gently, her voice carrying like a lullaby through the space. "This is their trial. They need this moment alone."

As her words settled, Ursula's form began to waver, her light scattering like embers caught in a soft breeze. One by one, the stars reclaimed her glow until she vanished entirely, returning to her realm, leaving the others in silent contemplation before the sealed gates of Tide's domain.

Maul, hearing Ursula's words, let out a slow breath. The fire of worry in his chest dimmed, replaced by a calm resolve. He wanted to believe her, that all would be well but if it wasn't, he knew his path. As elder brother, he bore the duty to stand beside Ikem, no matter what storm awaited them.

Flowua stood nearby, her expression mirroring his quiet concern. When their eyes met, no words were needed. Both prayed the matter would resolve without further strife, for they did not wish to be forced into the cruelty of choosing sides between kin.

Within Tide's realm, the air was still heavy. The once-glistening expanse of waters had dimmed into a still, gray mirror that reflected the two gods standing at its heart. For a long while, neither spoke. The sound of shifting waves was the only thing that broke the silence.

Then Ikem finally spoke, his voice low but steady.

"My child will soon be born," he said. "That means you are to be an uncle."

Tide's head remained bowed. "I know that."

"Do you?" Ikem asked, taking a slow step closer. The tension that had once radiated from him was , replaced by something else, disappointment, perhaps even sorrow.

Tide looked up slightly, but Ikem didn't give him the chance to answer.

"I don't think you do," Ikem continued, his tone cutting but not cruel. "Because if you truly understood, if you valued what that meant you wouldn't have done what you did. You were willing to shatter the bond we've built over centuries... all for someone you've known for a few fleeting decades."

Tide's lips parted, but no words came at first. The silence stretched, the weight of Ikem's words pressing down on him.

Finally, Tide whispered, his voice almost trembling, "I don't expect you to understand."

Ikem didn't respond right away. Instead, he walked forward and lowered himself onto the wide marble steps leading up to Tide's throne, the motion slow and deliberate. His back was to his cousin, his gaze fixed on the fractured wall he had burst through moments earlier. The divine barrier was already mending itself, glowing faintly as the cracks sealed with a soft hum.

"Try me," Ikem said, his voice steady, though the sharpness had faded.

Silence lingered between them, heavy but not hostile. It was the kind of silence that invited truth to surface.

At length, Tide exhaled and began to speak. "I've asked myself, over these last few weeks, why she made me act the way I did. I've had partners before consorts, companions. Perhaps not as breathtaking as her, but beauties nonetheless. Women for whom mortal kings would have waged wars for."

A faint, wistful smile tugged at his lips. "And yet, I left them all behind without a second thought as our ascension neared. I didn't even remember them once I took my place as a god. They became like mist, gone with the dawn."

He paused, his expression dimming. "But with Siren... it was different. I don't know if it was her voice, her eyes, or the way she looked at me as if I were just a man, not a god. She made me feel something I thought I'd long outgrown."

He laughed softly, a tired, hollow sound. "And then, in the quiet, I realized why it hurt so much. Why her betrayal cut deeper than any wound I've known. It reminded me of our parents."

Tide's gaze drifted upward, toward the domed ceiling of his realm, where waves of light shimmered faintly. "I'm grateful for what they gave us, the power, the legacy. But gratitude doesn't erase the truth. They were terrible parents, Ikem. Cold. Demanding. Never once did they teach us how to love, only how to endure."

A small, self-deprecating chuckle escaped him. "And I wasn't any better. I wasn't a good parent either, not even close." He rubbed his face with one hand, as if trying to wipe away the weariness clinging to him. "I'm getting off topic," he muttered.

Ikem, still seated, said nothing. He didn't need to. The silence between them spoke louder than any judgment could.

"My coupling with Siren felt... different," Tide said at last, his voice softer, almost uncertain. "Because I wanted her. Not because I had to. Not because I could."

He paused, his eyes unfocused as he stared into the slow ripples spreading across the floor of his realm. "Every action we took before our ascension, every alliance, every bond. It all felt like something we did because we had to. Because that was what our parents demanded of us. They set the rhythm, and we danced to it without question."

Ikem listened in silence, the sound of the waves filling the space between them.

"At the time," Tide continued, "I didn't think much of it. But now, as a god, I've begun to notice how my choices differ. For the first time, I can act, not out of duty or expectation but out of desire. I can, and I do, because I want to. Not because our parents would have wanted me to."

He let out a low, weary sigh. "I married, I expanded the Mermolk, I fathered children, I took consorts all because it was expected of me. Because I could. Power gives us many privileges, cousin, but none of them are freedom."

Tide's expression softened as he spoke her name. "But with Siren, it wasn't like that. I desired her because I wanted her not because the role of the god of tides demanded a consort of grace and beauty, but because she was what I wanted."

A faint smile ghosted across his lips, tinted with both fondness and pain. "When she accepted my chase, it filled me with something I hadn't felt in ages joy, accomplishment. For once, my divinity felt irrelevant. My position, my power none of it mattered. She saw me, me, not the god, not the symbol."

He gave a small laugh, distant but genuine. "She's not divine, but her essence... your father's creation... she's as radiant and proud as any of us. I found myself reversed in my own story. I was the one chasing, striving, trying to make her happy. And strangely, it brought me peace. It brought me joy."

For a moment, that smile lingered on his face soft and wistful, as though remembering a distant sunrise. Then it faded, replaced by a shadow that darkened his features.

"To me," Tide said quietly, "she was a treasure I could never own, but absolutely needed. And when she betrayed that, when she let that mortal, Erik, touch what we built everything I believed in collapsed. It felt as if the ocean within me turned to stone."

He drew in a slow, trembling breath. "And now... I can't even face her. I can't punish her. I can't speak to her. She's hidden, kept safe in Aunt Mahu's realm. Beyond my reach."

Tide's voice broke slightly as he added, "And so, my anger found another shore, Erik. It just ended up crashing into you, Ikem."

Chapter 667:

For a long moment, neither spoke. The only sound was the quiet hum of the realm's waters, endlessly flowing yet somehow still.

Ikem's hands tightened into fists. His nails pressed into his palms, not out of rage, but from the weight of what he was feeling. Tide's confession struck something deep within him, an uncomfortable recognition.

Because he understood.

Tide's longing, his pride, his despair, they mirrored his own. Ikem thought of his unborn child, the life soon to come into the world. It was a child he would father not out of duty, not because of divine expectation, but because he wanted to. Because for the first time in his long existence, he had chosen something purely for himself.

And now, hearing Tide speak, he realized how painfully similar their hearts were. Tide had simply reached for love in the same way Ikem had. but his hand had been burned in the process.

Ikem's jaw tightened as he stared at the mending wall before him. The realization dimmed his anger like a flame starved of air. How could he stay furious when he could see so clearly that, under different circumstances, it could have been him standing in Tide's place?

He exhaled slowly, the tension leaving his shoulders.

He was just a luckier Tide.

Ursula had never betrayed him, had never shattered his faith in her. But if she had? If she had let another despoil what they shared? Ikem wasn't certain he would have fared any better. In truth, he might have done far worse.

He lowered his gaze. For the first time since entering Tide's realm, Ikem found himself without words, because there was nothing left to condemn.

There was a long silence before Ikem finally spoke. His voice was calm, carrying neither judgment nor anger—only weary understanding.

"Do what you must, Tide," he said quietly. "But remember how your actions ripple beyond yourself. They hurt those who care about you... people like us."

Tide remained still, his gaze fixed on the faint patterns in the water at his feet.

Ikem continued, his tone deepening. "You're about to set in motion something unprecedented, dealing with the humans as you plan. I only hope you won't come to regret it when it's too late to turn back."

He rose from the steps. "Ursula and I will look forward to your visit after your nephew is born," he said, a faint smirk softening his expression. "And as the god of treasure and vanity, I expect you to bring something truly worthy of the child."

The teasing note in his voice was gentle, but it struck something within Tide. He blinked, almost startled by the warmth beneath his cousin's words. Slowly, his head lifted, and a faint glow shimmered in his eye.

He opened his mouth, wanting to apologize, but the words caught in his throat. He could only give a small nod before replying, his tone echoing Ikem's teasing warmth.

"Indeed," Tide said, a ghost of a smile on his lips. "As a god with such divinity, I must uphold my image."

With a graceful wave of his hand, the waters before him began to swirl, coalescing into a spiraling portal of rippling light and liquid motion. Now that his anger had passed and clarity had returned, Tide could not allow Ikem to depart the same way he had arrived, violently tearing through divine boundaries. This time, the god of tides himself opened the way.

Ikem stepped toward the portal but paused at its edge. He turned back, meeting Tide's gaze. The weight that had once darkened the god's eyes had lessened, he still looked burdened, but no longer broken.

"Take care of yourself, Tide," Ikem said, his voice quiet but sincere.

For a heartbeat, neither spoke. Then Ikem stepped through the swirling water, his form dissolving into the light. The portal rippled once more before closing, leaving Tide alone in the vast stillness of his realm.

Ikem's return to his realm did not go unnoticed. The other gods, who had been holding their breath since the moment he breached Tide's domain, finally exhaled in relief.

The faint tension that had lingered among them began to fade, though the echo of what had just transpired remained clear. The idea of conflict, true divine conflict still felt foreign to them. Yet, as unsettling as it was, the event had opened their eyes to an unspoken truth.

They were no longer mortals. They were gods. And divinity came not only with power but with burden.

For the first time, they understood that there might come moments when duty would outweigh affection, when even familial bonds could not shield them from the responsibilities their divine natures demanded.

Still, none of them wished to dwell on it. Not yet. The thought of their once-peaceful pantheon being shaken by discord was a wound they were not ready to touch. So they quietly returned to their own realms, each pretending calm while silently wrestling with the new weight of what they had witnessed.

Beyond their awareness, the Origin Gods, their progenitors had seen and heard everything.

Ikem did not know it, but Tide did. The moment Ikem's fury had torn through the boundary between their realms, Tide had felt their consciousness brush against his, a subtle, immense awareness pressing at the edges of his domain.

He could have denied them entry. But he didn't.

So the Origin Gods watched and listened as their children spoke, heard every word, even those spoken about them.

Yet the Origin Gods found themselves unable to react to their children's words. It was not that they were unfeeling, but rather that something within them had begun to change. A quiet shift subtle, yet profound had taken root in their divine essence.

It could be said that this change began after all their children had ascended and taken their places as the new gods. The world no longer needed their constant intervention; their creations now shaped realms of their own. And with that, the Origin Gods felt a strange stillness settling upon them.

They no longer found joy in the same things. Their thoughts wandered, their interest waned. Matters that once commanded their attention now felt distant, unimportant, like faint echoes of a song they could no longer fully recall.

Where this change was leading, they could not say. But they knew an answer would come soon. Their other two siblings who had wandered far would soon return. And perhaps then, this hollow emptiness, this quiet void within their being, would finally be filled.

Tide, meanwhile, sat in silence long after Ikem's departure. The echoes of their conversation still lingered in the waves around him, but the storm within his heart had calmed.

He was still in pain, yes but the guilt that had once gnawed at him now felt lighter. For the first time since his outburst, he felt he could breathe.

Still, he did not let comfort make him careless. Tide knew how fortunate he was that it had been Ikem he had wronged this time. His cousin's temper was fierce, but his heart was steady. Had it been Maul in Ikem's place... Tide doubted the outcome would have been as merciful. Maul would not have paused to speak. He would have struck first, and explanations would have come too late.

A shiver rippled through him at the thought. His moment of anger, born from pain, pride, and resentment could have unraveled centuries of trust, fracturing the family their parents had labored to keep united.

Now, with his mind clear and his emotions stilled, he understood the gravity of what he had risked. He would need to tread carefully from here on, lest his desire for vengeance against the mortal bring ruin not only to himself, but to all his kin.

A darker thought crept into his mind, one that made his scales prickle. Xerosis.

Even the whisper of that name carried weight. She was now under his uncle's protective sight and light. Were Tide to overstep again, and if his actions somehow affected Xerosis's ... not even his father's protection could save him.

He exhaled slowly, pressing a hand over his chest as if to still the pounding of his divine heart. "No more foolishness," he murmured to himself. "Not again."

Tide's thoughts turned dark once more, though this time they were clear and deliberate. His target was "Erik".

The very thought of that mortal still drawing breath made his jaw tighten. Was it not for certain... complications, the godlings themselves would have already descended upon the mortal realm, leaving Erik's kingdom in ruins within mere hours.

But politics bound even gods. And so, for now, Tide's vengeance had to take another form.

His only tools were the mortals, those desperate, fragile creatures who now clamored ceaselessly for his favor. Since his ascension, countless souls had turned to him, praying, sacrificing, pleading for his grace.

He ignored them, only answering to few until Erik's profanity, where he then began to pay them more attention. Before his confrontation with Ikem, he had planned on continuing granting that favor freely, unreservedly, to anyone who invoked his name with sufficient fervor as long as they aimed to end Erik.

Chapter 668:

It had made him stronger. Every new worshipper swelled his power, feeding his divine essence with their faith. But there was a price, a hidden poison in the gift.

The energy that flowed into his realm was raw and unrefined, tainted by mortal greed, fear, and obsession. It thickened the currents of his divinity, darkening them, making it harder to distinguish his will from theirs. His once-pristine ocean had begun to churn with shadows, each wave whispering conflicting desires born from human hearts.

He had ignored it before. Dismissed it as the necessary cost of strength. But now, after speaking with Ikem, he understood the danger more clearly. Power gained without discernment could just as easily become corruption.

His anger toward Erik would not fade, nor would his intent to act, but he would move carefully now.

No longer would he pour his grace so freely into mortal hands. He would choose with precision, ensuring that only those truly worthy or truly useful would receive his blessing. The rest would be left to their own folly, their prayers soon unanswered would stop on its own.

The danger of unrefined faith energy, the chaotic residue of mortal devotion was a constant threat to any ascended god. Left unchecked, it could warp the divine self, eroding the boundary between god and worshipper until even immortality became madness.

Tide looked out over his realm, watching the slow undulation of the waters. The surface shimmered faintly, reflecting his solemn expression back at him.

"I will not fall," he murmured. "Not to mortals. Not to myself."

Months after the frenzy stirred by Erik's defiance, the world was shaken once more. This time by an event that stilled that chaos entirely.

A new god had ascended.

Krogan, the Beast God.

His rise came as a thunderclap, unexpected to most especially those of the western continent, who had been too consumed by Erik's upheaval to notice the quiet gathering of power elsewhere. Yet among the vast Nana civilization, whispers of Krogan's ascension had already spread long before the skies opened for him.

Where Erik's act had been an outrage, a mortal reaching beyond his station. Krogan's was something more deliberate. His ascension had been prepared.

While the world's eyes fixated on Erik, they forgot about the beastfolk who recently made an appearance. Their curiosity only lasted for a while before it was over taken by Curioisty and gossip on Erik's action.

Manye waiting to see how the godlings would react and so the beastfolk continued their mission undisturbed or questioned.

To most, they were a curiosity. To the nobles and scholars, they were an omen.

While others watched the unfoldingdrama with Erik, these nobles kept their gaze steady on the beastfolk, quietly documenting their customs, tracing the strange energy that seemed to hum within their blood. Their vigilance made them among the first to discern the truth, a new god was preparing to ascend.

Before his apotheosis, Krogan had been meticulous. His teachings, rituals, and creeds had already spread like the beastfolk to those willing to listen and understand.

His teachings were no secrets, they were proclamations, etched into stone, carved into bone, and sung by tribes that wandered the wild frontiers. Alongside his growing faith came the revelation that a new race, the beastfolk, had entered the world's fold, a people born of untamed nature yet capable of civilization.

The nobles, understanding the magnitude of this development, did not sit idle. Using their wealth and influence, they extended patronage to the beastfolk, helping them settle, thrive, and integrate within their territories. Their generosity, however, was far from selfless. They sought favor with the god-to-be, hoping that by aiding his people, they would earn his blessing once he ascended.

When Krogan finally rose to godhood, his roar echoed through the World. The mortals called it the Awakening of the Wilds.

Yet even as he received the devotion of thousands, Krogan himself could not rest. The prospect of ascension filled him with restless anticipation. For him, this was not merely a rise to power, it was liberation.

He would finally cast off the demonic taint that had shadowed him since his birth. He would no longer be the fallen fragment of Murmur's consciousness.

For Krogan knew what Murmur truly was, a being of impossible cunning, the very embodiment of temptation and deceit. He had seen, through the shared memory of their essence, the heights Murmur once stood upon.

And he also knew the irony of Murmur's fall, how fortune turned its face from him, how he was devoured by a child of Chaos, his goal which was at an arm's reach denied from him.

And yet, even in ruin, Murmur endured.

Through sheer will and cunning, he carved out a new path for himself. Though far from the monstrous grandeur he once possessed, he was far from weak. Krogan, who had watched him longer and closer than most, knew this truth well, the current Murmur was perhaps even more dangerous than the one who had ruled the Abyss.

The old Murmur had been volatile, cruel, unpredictable, and fueled by endless malice. His strength was raw, terrifying, but scattered. Now, since his fall into this new world, that chaos had condensed into something colder, sharper, and more calculating.

Still, Murmur struggled. Krogan had often watched him be thwarted, time and again by the Origin Gods, who always seemed a step ahead of him. Whenever Murmur plotted too boldly or drew too close to their domains, they crushed him, their power pressing him back into the shadows. It was almost pitiful to watch: the once-great Demon King forced to slink in the dark, his pride gnawed away by humiliation.

Krogan could almost pity him. Almost.

He understood that this defeat cut deeply into Murmur's very being. A creature who once ruled over legions now had to live beneath the feet of gods who treated him as a pest.

But then... everything changed.

Murmur went silent.

The subtle stirrings of his shadow, vanished. Krogan watched, uneasy, as the Demon King withdrew from the world. When next he appeared, it was in a form that none could have predicted: that of an old human man.

It was like a mockery and a disguise, a frail aged body masking an immortal will. Murmur seemed to have abandoned the shadow and instead choose to instead walk among mortals.

Krogan didn't buy this and so he continued to observe, keeping track of his movements through visions and divine scrying.

Until, one day, even that trail went dark.

The old man disappeared. No trace and no whisper. Krogan searched across the mortal continents, through the cracks between realms but found nothing. Murmur was gone.

That absence disturbed him more than Murmur's presence ever had.

For Krogan knew, when Murmur was silent, he was never truly still.

And whatever he was becoming next... it might already be too late to stop.

Hence the disappearance brought no joy to Krogan. When Murmur vanished from his sight, a constant sense of danger took root within him, an invisible weight pressing against his spine. It was as though something was breathing down his neck, unseen yet ever-present.

Not even within his own pocket dimension, his private dominion between worlds did he feel safe. The realm, to the outside world, seemed like a place he created to distance from the chaos of the mortal world, which is mostly true.

But Krogan knew the truth. His realm had been built out of fear.

It was his answer to that gnawing, unrelenting dread, a cocoon to keep the unseen threat at bay. Yet the larger his pocket dimension grew, the more suffocating the dread became. The walls that should have protected him only amplified the sense of danger. The very essence of the place pulsed with unease, as though the dimension itself shared in his terror.

Still, this growth brought with it an unintended gift. The more his realm expanded, the more attuned he became to its feedback, to the faint vibrations of reality that it gathered from every corner of existence.

And then, finally, he understood. The danger did not come from the outside, it came from within.

From something that belonged to him, something he had claimed long ago as his own, and which now pulsed with the same energy that once coursed through Murmur.

It was the source of his power, the wellspring of his strength... and, he realized with dread, the root of his undoing "Murmur's heart"

Once Krogan pinpointed the source of the unease, he had never felt more conflicted or more proud of the bestial body that now housed his consciousness.

For the first time since his awakening, he truly regarded the form he had taken: the great jaguar, the vessel that had become his new self. He had always admired its strength, the raw power that came with every motion, the fluid precision of its muscles, the primal grace that came naturally to the beast.

He had long dismissed many of its peculiarities as mere bestial instinct, the twitch of an ear before unseen danger, the subtle bristle of fur when magic stirred in the air. Such things were common among magical creatures, after all. He thought little of it.

Chapter 669:

He had long dismissed many of its peculiarities as mere bestial instinct, the twitch of an ear before unseen danger, the subtle bristle of fur when magic stirred in the air. Such things were common among magical creatures, after all. He thought little of it.

But now, standing before the heart of his realm with the truth pressing against his divine awareness, Krogan realized how wrong he had been.

Those instincts were not primitive at all. They were refined, intentional latent magical talent, woven into the very nature of his current form.

Even before he had mastered it, the jaguar's senses seemed almost preternatural, able to detect shifts in magic, to feel danger long before it manifested. If it were mere instinct, he would not have picked up a danger yet to come.

Krogan, having traced the source of his constant sense of danger, sighed with relief.

It was the same heart that had once corrupted forests and twisted lands into the cursed, chaotic domains Murmur had claimed. And now... it pulsed at the very core of Krogan's pocket dimension, the center of the domain he had built to shield himself from the world.

For centuries, Krogan had believed himself in complete control. He had sealed the heart away, using its energy to fuel his power, to strengthen his dominion, to construct his defenses, and to elevate himself to a god. Every triumph, every advance, he had assumed was the product of his own will, fueled and safeguarded by the treasure he had guarded so jealously.

But with Murmur's disappearance, the truth revealed itself in stark clarity: he had been wrong.

Krogan's initial instinct had been to destroy it, to sever this living connection to the Demon King. But when he attempted to act, he discovered the horrifying truth: the heart was entwined with his very being. Every thing he had built, every pulse of his pocket dimension, every ounce of his power flowed through it. It was the foundation of everything he had become.

He laughed then, a low, bitter sound, shaking his jaguar body. For centuries he had guarded it like a treasure, never allowing anyone to approach, never questioning the danger he thought he controlled.

Krogan's claws dug into the ground as he paced through the shifting terrain of his domain, his mind racing. If he could not purge or dominate the heart, then how had Murmur who had vanished, who had been lost to him, managed to get control of the heart?

Krogan had no idea where to begin, only that he had to act quickly.

The heart, apart from serving as a source of power and stability, held no other value to him now. It was a parasite disguised as a core, and as long as it remained within him, he would never truly be free.

Yet removing it was no simple matter. The heart had become the keystone of his entire existence, his dimension, his energy reserves, even his magic all revolved around it. To rip it out would be to unravel everything he had built, perhaps even destroy himself in the process.

And there was another concern, one that chilled him more than the rest: Would Murmur, now hidden and operating from some unseen place, allow him to act freely?

Krogan doubted it. The Demon King's silence was a far more dangerous weapon than his rage had ever been.

So Krogan decided to gamble everything on a single act.

He turned his full attention to his coming ascension, a chance not only to rise as a god, but to sever the last tie binding him to Murmur.

If he succeeded, he could kill two birds with one stone.

When a creature ascends, the Will of the World itself manifests to acknowledge the new divinity, presenting the ascendant with a Godthrone, a godhead that serves as the anchor of their realm and the vessel of their true power.

If Krogan could reach that point, he could use the world's own order to his advantage. The Godthrone, a crystallization of divine recognition and cosmic authority would replace Murmur's heart as the core and power source of his domain.

But even as this revelation struck him, Krogan understood what it truly meant. Power never came without price, and in this case, the cost was steep.

Once his divine realm emerged, he would lose sovereignty over his pocket dimension.

It was not merely a personal sacrifice but a consequence of the oldest law that governed the hierarchy of existence:

"The mortal and the divine may not dwell within the same breath of being."

A god's essence distorted mortal reality. Should Krogan's divine realm fuse with his dimension, now home to countless magical beasts and lesser beings. the result would not be coexistence but dirstion of his essence on mortal creatures. His very presence would warp the balance, turning his living sanctuary into a gilded prison of divine will.

And so, the world itself would forbid it. His realm would overlap, not merge, its surface visible to him only through a mirror of divinity. He could watch his generals move, his beasts roam, but never again walk among them as he once did.

The realization struck him with the cold clarity of a blade.

What if this was Murmur's true intention all along?

To force him into this position, isolated, cut off from his court and his people, trapped within the gilded confines of divinity.

The more he thought on it, the more it made sense. The heart, so conveniently compatible with his power; the subtle influence that drove him to expand his dimension; the ease with which the corruption had hidden from his senses.

Murmur's cunning had always been to twist strength into weakness, to turn creation against its master. And now, Krogan could see the trap laid bare before him: To ascend and become strong enough to sever the heart but in doing so, to lose everything that made him who he was.

A snarl escaped his throat, a deep, guttural sound that shook the walls of his growing dimension.

No, He refused to let Murmur decide the terms of his ascension.

If the laws forbade gods from touching the mortal plane, then he would find another way to bind the two through covenant.

And thus, a daring plan began to take root in his mind.

He would offer his realm to the World Will itself. Not surrender it, but consecrate it, turning his pocket dimension into a world-sanctioned plane, beyond the reach of Murmur and those who has an eye for it.

That way, when his Godthrone manifested, it would replace the heart as the realm's core while the dimension itself remained under the World Will's jurisdiction.

He would still draw power from it, still guide it through his divine essence, but he would no longer own it. Instead, it would exist in balance: a realm of beasts sustained by the world's order and empowered through his godhood.

It was a dangerous move, one that no god before him had ever dared.

But as Krogan looked upon the pulsing red light of Murmur's heart, its rhythm echoing like mockery through his domain, he bared his fangs in defiance.

"You would have me caged by my own divinity, Murmur," he growled softly. "But I will make my cage the world itself."

Days before his ascension, Krogan's realm trembled as he made his preparations.

Every living creature within, the scaled, the furred, the winged, and the horned felt the pull of something vast stirring above them.

The skies of his pocket dimension darkened with light threads of golden radiance weaving through the endless canopy of his realm. The beasts grew restless; even his oldest generals bowed their heads in unease. They could feel the coming of something greater, something that was no longer meant for their world alone.

Krogan stood at the heart of it all, upon the great lake where Murmur's heart buried underground, beat faintly beneath layers of enchanted runes. It had once been his prize, the source of his power and creation. Now, it was a curse he would be rid of.

As he raised his clawed hand, the runes blazed to life, forming concentric rings of light and shadow that climbed the air like chains uncoiling toward the sky. The world around him quaked, and for a moment, he felt the Will of the World watching.

"Great Will of this world," Krogan spoke, his voice echoing through the layers of his dimension, reaching every beast that breathed in his realm. "I offer to you my realm, born of mortal soil yet sustained by divine breath. Let it be yours to govern, that balance may endure."

The golden threads of light pulsed in response, descending like rain that shimmered through his fur. He could feel his essence being pulled upward, drawn toward a higher plane. His body shook from the unbearable weight of recognition.

The world itself was answering.

"In exchange," he continued, his voice roughening as the divine energies surged through him, "grant me dominion not over this realm, but through it. Let its life and strength flow to me, as my essence flows to it, so that I may guide without ruling."

Chapter 670:

His words echoed through the trembling air of his dimension, an oath of balance. The skies split open as a vast presence stirred beyond the veil. From within the golden radiance above unseen by mortal eyes, Nana, the World Will and Primordial Mother, turned her gaze toward the beast who dared to bargain with creation itself.

She had watched him long before this day, from the moment Murmur's fallen heart became his curse. She knew the paths of his choices, the anger that fueled his growth, and the fear that shadowed his rise. Yet she did not condemn him, for through Krogan's struggle, her world would also be enriched.

Within the depths of her awareness, she saw what this covenant meant. By accepting his offering, she would gain a new small plane, a living fragment of divinity folded into the structure of her creation, a wild realm, filled with primal essence and raw potential.

Such a gift would strengthen not only her, but also her divine children, the origin gods. Their influence stretching further across existence, giving them a glimpse of what is to come.

And so, she reached out.

Her will manifested as a colossal hand of starlight, descending gently upon Krogan's realm. From his very being, she drew forth a fragment of essence, the crystallized truth of who he was and shaped it with the authority of a creator.

The fragment pulsed, shifting form under her touch until it became a throne, the wild and the divine.

Then, with a gesture, she lifted it high into the heavens.

The throne ascended beyond the veil of the world, joining the constellation of divine thrones suspended among the stars, each representing a god who had transcended mortality.

The moment the throne was set in place, the world screamed as Krogan's divinity was announced to creation "God of the Sovereign Nexus and Divine Hierarchy."

The proclamation rippled across the world, through mortal soil and sky alike. Mountains trembled, rivers bent their flow, and beasts across the land roared in unison as though the world itself acknowledged the birth of a new order.

But deep within Krogan's pocket dimension, the runes binding Murmur's heart began to split open. One by one, their luminous sigils cracked, their seals unraveling as black tendrils of corruption spilled forth. The heart convulsed violently, pulsing with an alien rhythm beating faster, louder, like a trapped beast realizing too late what Krogan had done.

Krogan's claws dug into its vile surface, black ichor searing his forming divine flesh. The air around him screamed, half divine radiance, half abyss radiance as the Godthrone flared to life above him, descending in a spiral of gold and white flame.

The moment it touched him, the throne's essence embedded itself into his soul. A surge of unbearable light tore through him, divine energy flooding every fiber of his being. Krogan roared, a sound that cracked the veil between realms.

The heart thrashed in defiance, trying to cling to him, to root itself deeper into his divine core. It lashed out, desperate to retain dominion. But the feedback of his ascension poured into Krogan like a river of starlight, a tidal wave of sanctified force that purged, cleansed, and reshaped him from within.

His body split apart under the strain. The jaguar's form he had worn for centuries erupted into radiance, dissolving into raw power before reforging anew.

His bones glowed like molten gold; his mane flared like a burning dawn. The black veins of Murmur's corruption sizzled and turned to ash beneath the divine fire coursing through him.

Then, with a roar that shattered what remained of the seals, Krogan struck.

He seized the heart, the cursed relic that had once belonged to him, tainted for him and defined him, he ripped it free.

A shockwave rippled outward. Reality fractured.

Krogan hurled the heart skyward, his golden claws trailing ribbons of light. Above, the air split open, a vast wound revealing the boundary between his pocket dimension and the Cursed Land.

The heart soared into that rift, beating erratically as it crossed the threshold.

And then, A colossal demonic arm, black as void and crowned with runes of crimson flame, tore through the breach. Its claws wrapped around the heart, clutching it tight. For a moment, it lingered, as if mocking him. then it withdrew into the darkness, dragging the heart with it.

The tear sealed shut.

Silence followed.

Krogan staggered, divine light bleeding from every pore. The dimension around him trembled violently, rejecting his presence. The realm that had once been his sanctuary now recognized him as something other, something too divine, too vast to belong within its mortal bounds.

He could feel it pushing him away, its essence no longer his to command.

As the sky above his world fractured into shards of silver light, Krogan lifted his gaze toward the heavens, where his newly forged Godthrone burned among the stars.

He let out a low, resonant growl that spread through out his realm announcing his departure.

The last of his mortal shell broke apart into a thousand golden sparks, ascending toward his throne, leaving behind the trembling pocket dimension, now slowly folding into the weave of the world's order.

Few truly understood what had transpired that day. The world only knew that it had welcomed a new god.

But far from the temples and the celebrations, on the southern continent, an old man sat by a lonely lake. The waters were calm, the surface unbroken save for the soft ripples made by his fishing line. His white robe, pristine and untouched by dust, fluttered faintly in the wind.

In his other hand lay a heart, the same black, pulsing core that Krogan had flung from his realm. It beat weakly now, subdued, like a beast pretending to sleep beneath its master's gaze.

The old man regarded it in silence. His expression was serene, his eyes still as glass. There was no anger in them, no frustration. Only the distant calm of one who had already foreseen the end of this tale.

"Failure," he murmured.

The word slipped from his lips like a sigh. For a fleeting moment, emotion crossed his face, a shadow of weariness, of something almost human before it vanished, swallowed by his composure.

He didn't know when it had begun, but failure had long since become an old companion to him. Familiar. Predictable. Even comforting.

The hand that held the heart began to twist. Veins bulged, bones shifted, and from his palm sprouted a mouth, wet and gleaming with teeth not meant for mortal flesh. Without hesitation, it swallowed the heart whole.

The man closed his eyes. For a moment, the world around him seemed to still. The lake mirrored his form perfectly, an unbroken reflection of quiet horror.

Then he smiled.

A faint curve of the lips, he could feel it the faint pulse of the devoured heart resonating within him. A thread of insight grew with the pulse, an insight that would bring him closer to the surprise he had long prepared for this unsuspecting world.

"Divinity," he whispered, a chuckle threading through his voice. "Doesn't seem all that bad after all."

His gaze lifted toward the horizon, where the light of Krogan's ascension still shimmered faintly in the heavens.

"I'll be joining you all soon," he continued, voice low and amused, "but first..."

He tugged gently on his fishing line, the faint sound of rippling water answering him.

"...the pot needs to be muddied a little more."

As for the godlings, they remained silent through the waves of change that shook the world.

Yet their silence was not born of indifference, it was the silence of restraint, held tightly in place by the hands of their new kings and leaders.

Many among them had clamored for vengeance after Erik's transgression. The thought of a mortal daring to defy their kind, to act without fear, was an affront that burned deep in their pride. Civil unrest had nearly erupted among them.

But their leaders stood firm.

Zephyr, in particular, was unflinching. His voice once known for its lightheartedness carried the weight of command now.

"Any who go against Erik in defiance of my word," he declared before his gathered kin, "will cease to be godlings. You will not speak our name, nor claim our grace. You will walk as mortals do, and your memory among us will be cut away."

His decree spread like cold fire through their ranks. A boundary drawn not only for discipline, but for change.

For the godlings like himself had grown weary.

Zephyr and the others had long grown weary of shepherding humans.

For centuries they had tolerated the burden, quietly tending to mortal civilizations, guiding their kings, all while suppressing the resentment that slowly fermented within their divine hearts.

But now, that restraint has reached its end.

They no longer hid their weariness. Instead, they began to spread it, an idea that flowed from court to court, from the youngest godling to the oldest amongst them. A whisper turned into doctrine:

"The age of shepherds has ended."