

Guardian gods 671

Chapter 671:

Still, it was not only exhaustion that drove their decision.

They knew what the humans were waiting for. The kingdoms of men, especially those touched by Erik's defiance waited like vultures, eager to see how the new godling leaders would respond. Would they lash out in pride, proving mortal fears right? Or would they divide among themselves and weaken?

Zephyr and other leaders already knew their answer. They had a meeting about all this, where they all made it clear what their stand on the situation was.

They would not give the humans what they wanted.

Instead, they would watch and wait.

They understood the current mortal world for what it had become: a powder keg trembling at the edge of its own undoing. The faintest divine spark could ignite it, and the godlings refused to be that spark.

So their silence became their weapon this time.

When the eyes of humankind turned skyward in expectation, hoping to see divine fury, they met only stillness. A stillness that said more than words ever could:

"You have offended the gods, not us. The gods' judgment is their own to give. We do not interfere."

For though the gods themselves had once been godlings, that bond no longer bound them.

The ascended now stood above the laws that governed the lesser divines, their thrones woven into the world's fabric. The godlings, in turn, had learned to live beneath that vast shadow, strong enough to rule the lands below, yet wise enough to respect the order above.

And so they held their peace, not out of fear, but understanding. For the divine hierarchy served all, the gods, the godlings, and even the mortals.

To break that balance would not only doom humankind, but unravel the very structure that sustained the gods themselves.

There was a palpable tension that lingered in the air after Zephyr and the others made their decision. Whispers carried through the godlings cities and forests alike, each one thick with unease. The people could sense it, that something had fractured beneath the calm surface of their leaders' unity.

That tension continued, simmering, unseen but ever-present until something unexpected arrived to tear their attention away.

A message came.

It spread swiftly, reaching the distant tribes of the Harpies, the vast ocean kingdoms of the Merfolk, the werewolf clans in their icy plain, and the proud apefolk dwelling in the highlands. Each received the same announcement, sealed with a familiar.

It was a message from the southern continent, from one of their own kind.

For ages, the youngest of the godling races had remained silent, hidden from the affairs of their divine kin. They were known only in silence and mentioned in a few conversation, they chose seclusion over participation, building their strength hidden from the world. But now, it seemed, they had deemed themselves ready to emerge.

Their message was both bold and ceremonious. They wished to host the next Godlings Competition, the sacred trial where divine bloodlines measured their strength and wisdom against one another.

When Zephyr and the other leaders heard the news, relief washed over them like sunlight breaking through storm clouds. It was exactly what they needed, a distraction powerful enough to unite their people under shared excitement.

Without hesitation, Zephyr commanded that the news be spread far and wide. The southern continent, once spoken of in whispers, became the new beacon of attention.

And then came another decree from the high leaders of each race:

For this event, no gates would be used.

Every godling and chosen representative was permitted to journey across the world by their own means, to see the lands, test their endurance, and rekindle the sense of adventure that had long been dulled by comfort.

It was, of course, no coincidence. Zephyr and the others had orchestrated this permission carefully, knowing full well it would serve as the perfect diversion. The people needed to look forward to something beyond their unrest, beyond Erik and the humans who had quietly unsettled the balance of things.

And it worked.

For the first time in a long while, the hearts of the godlings turned not toward conflict, but toward anticipation.

And in the quiet between celebrations, Zephyr allowed himself a breath of relief.

The four races fell into a frenzy.

From the soaring peaks of the Harpies, to the sunlit waves of the Merfolk kingdoms, from the icy plains of the Werewolves to the towering citadels of the Apelings, excitement spread like wildfire. Communication between the races surged, carried through messengers, enchanted means, and word of mouth through merchants. Friendly rivalries reignited as each sought to outdo the others in preparation and speed.

The grand announcement had done more than unite them, it had awakened their old, competitive spirit. All anyone could talk about now was the journey to the southern continent.

And soon, a new challenge was declared: Who would reach the southern lands first?

It was meant to be a test of endurance and will, not magic. By decree of the godlings themselves, no mana usage was permitted during the journey. No teleportation, no flight enhanced by mana, no sea manipulation. They would rely solely on their bodies, their crafts, and their instincts.

The world was alive again.

Meanwhile, high above all the excitement, Zephyr sat with the godlings' leaders through their communication mirrors. Together they awaited their newest member.

Their meeting had an unfamiliar edge to it, a mixture of curiosity and unease. For the first time in centuries, a new godling was joining their ranks.

The chamber dimmed slightly as the air rippled, and then he appeared.

Ethan, King of the Vampiric Godling, pale as moonlight and regal.

Zephyr regarded him carefully. A new godling race meant new possibilities and new unpredictability.

Far away, in the southern continent. In a land draped in endless mists and thick forests where sunlight filtered through in silver strands stood a dark castle at the heart of it all.

Within its grand hall, Ethan stood before a tall mirror unlike any other. The surface shimmered like living mercury, whispering faint echoes of distant voices.

This was the Mirror of the Godlands, a communication tool common amongst the leaders of the godlings.

When Ethan first proposed to host the next Godlings' Competition, the mirror had been sent to him, not as a single object but in fragments. Each godling race had contributed a large piece of shard, carrying a

piece of their own unique essence. For weeks, his people had gathered those fragments, binding them together through old rites until the mirror reformed and in doing so, multiplied.

Now, before him, the great mirror stood whole and as Ethan gazed upon it, its reflection rippled and split into five, each fragment forming a perfect mirror of its own. Through these, the godlings could see and speak with one another, no matter the distance.

Ethan found himself marveling at it, this masterpiece of craftsmanship, a symbol of connection between races who stood at the peak of this world.

He traced his hand along its edge, feeling the faint hum of ancient energy beneath his fingertips.

"Incredible..." he murmured to himself.

It was then he realized how far the others had come, how deeply their civilizations had advanced while his people remained cloistered in shadow.

For all his pride and the ancient blood that ran through his veins, Ethan could not ignore the truth: they were behind.

And yet, as the mirror pulsed softly in the dim light of his hall, a faint smile crossed his lips.

"No matter," he whispered. "We learn fast."

The southern continent was ready and soon, the world would come to them.

Sighing softly, Ethan straightened his posture and composed himself. The faint unease in his chest lingered, but he forced it down. There was no room for hesitation now. He reached toward the mirror, fingers brushing against its cool surface as he initiated the link.

The mirror shimmered, rippling like disturbed water. Gradually, the silver sheen deepened into a polished reflection and then into five distinct panels of light. Within each, the figures of the godling monarchs appeared, seated upon their thrones in distant lands.

Zephyr, calm with a mischievous look on his face, sat in a throne that sent out a comforting wind breeze that ruffled his furs.

Raina reclined upon a coral dais, surrounded by slow-drifting tendrils of water.

Wulv sat in a throne of ice, littered with star-like dots.

Kael, bright and hawk-eyed, sat in a throne made of cloud, in his background was also an endless expanse of clouds.

And Drowz, ever-smiling, rested in a water filled chamber.

Ethan swallowed.

The contrast was... painful.

He stood alone, the dim light of his castle stretching long shadows behind him. The faint scent of old stone and mist clung to the air, while the others appeared regal, radiant, and composed, monarchs framed by splendor, while he stood in gloom.

For a fleeting moment, Ethan wanted to vanish, to find a hole and sink into it, unseen.

But there was no turning back now.

Silence filled the chamber. None of them spoke. They simply stared, six pairs of eyes studying the newcomer, their expressions ranging from curiosity to scrutiny.

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Ethan cleared his throat, the sound faintly echoing through the chamber. His crimson eyes flickered across each of them, trying to read their thoughts but before he could speak, Drowz leaned forward with that grin of his.

"You really do bear a resemblance to a human," Drowz remarked, voice deep but managed to come off non-threatening.

That single observation broke the stillness.

Zephyr chuckled, nodding with deliberate exaggeration.

"Indeed he does. If not for the divine blood flowing in our veins and his, I might've thought the humans had found some new trick to amuse themselves."

The words stung a little more than Ethan expected. He forced a faint smile, saying nothing for the moment.

Even Wulv, the stoic one who rarely joined in jest, tilted his head curiously.

"Seeing how your kind came to be," he rumbled, "do you also inherit the flaws and complexities of humans?"

The question lingered in the air, neither cruel nor kind, simply honest.

Ethan's gaze lowered for an instant before he met Wulv's piercing eyes again. His lips curved faintly, though his expression held no mirth.

"Perhaps we do," he said quietly. "But flaws are what make us... adaptive. We learn quickly from both mistakes and instinct."

Zephyr's expression softened ever so slightly, though the others exchanged subtle looks.

Finally, Wulv spoke again. His deep voice cut through the uneasy silence.

"This is going to be an issue, don't you all think so?"

His tone was cold, matter-of-fact and to Ethan's surprise, the other godlings nodded in agreement. A faint murmur of assent echoed through the mirrors.

Ethan blinked, taken aback. His brows furrowed slightly as he asked, careful to keep his tone polite,

"What exactly is going to be an issue?"

Kael was the one to respond this time. His expression was unreadable, and his voice carried no warmth, calm, almost detached.

"Everything will be an issue, Ethan."

The words hung heavy in the air, more like a judgment than an explanation.

Kael continued, his gaze unflinching.

"At first impression, you and your kind resemble those we have long avoided allowing into our circle
"humans."

Ethan's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, though his lips held a practiced smile. He said nothing, though the tension in his jaw betrayed the effort it took to remain composed.

Somewhere deep within the castle, beyond the council chamber, a tall figure sat in the shadows of the library, a silhouette bathed in candlelight. The faint sound of pages turning broke the stillness. The figure sighed and muttered under his breath,

"Fool."

Back at the mirror, the tension only grew.

Drowz leaned forward, his tone deeper than before, his sharp eyes gleaming with something between mockery and curiosity. He lifted a hand and pointed a finger at Ethan.

"It is so ingrained in you," Drowz said slowly, "that you don't even notice it yourself."

Ethan frowned slightly, confusion flickering across his face.

"Notice what?" he asked.

Before Drowz could reply, Zephyr raised a hand to still the others. His expression softened slightly out of sympathy.

"Allow me," he said.

Zephyr's voice was calm but firm as he leaned closer toward his mirror.

"Tell me, Ethan. Why do you not speak up when you're clearly offended that we compare you to humans? Why hide behind a smile we can all see through?"

The words struck harder than Ethan expected. His smile faltered for the first time, the faintest crack showing beneath his composed façade. His crimson eyes widened slightly, betraying his surprise.

He hadn't realized they had seen through him so easily.

Before he could gather a reply, Wulv's low voice rumbled once again, heavy with certainty.

"This," he said simply, "is why I asked. Seeing how closely you resemble them... perhaps you've inherited their flaws as well."

Silence followed, thick and heavy, pressing against the air.

Ethan held their gazes one by one, forcing the smile back onto his face. But behind his eyes, the faint flicker of frustration loomed.

Ethan said nothing for a long while after Wulv's words. The silence between them stretched, cold and uncomfortable.

He could feel their gazes pressing down on him from within the mirrors. Each monarch's expression was calm, but there was an edge beneath that calm, the kind that came from centuries of experience, of dealing with those who tried to rise too fast.

He forced a quiet breath through his nose and steadied his voice.

"If it's my resemblance to humans that troubles you," he said at last, "then I'll bear that trouble. I can't change what I look like, nor how my kind came to be."

No one spoke. Only the faint hum of the mirrors filled the silence.

"But," Ethan continued, his tone level, "I wouldn't have proposed to host the next competition if I doubted our place among you. My people have worked hard to catch u, to learn, to understand what we've missed while hidden away."

Zephyr's expression softened slightly, but his eyes remained sharp.

"You misunderstand, Ethan," he said. "It's not your proposal we question. It's you."

Ethan's eyes flicked up, surprise barely masked behind restraint.

Zephyr leaned back, resting an arm against his throne.

"You stand before us and try to look composed. But every movement you make screams discomfort. You try to smile, though your eyes betray the weight behind it. You speak carefully, but not confidently. That's what concerns us."

Kael nodded faintly.

"We're used to those who understand what they represent," he said. "You, however... still carry hesitation. That is dangerous for someone standing among equals."

Ethan stayed silent, listening. The words stung, but he refused to let them sink too deep.

Raina voice came next, sweet and low this time, though not unkind.

"You remind us too much of them, the humans. Always watching, always calculating, but rarely showing what truly sits behind the eyes."

Wulv folded his arms, the sound of leather tightening around muscle echoing faintly.

"That's what I meant by flaws. Not weakness, doubt. The humans second-guess everything. It's in their blood. And I see it in yours."

The truth of those words hit harder than Ethan wanted to admit.

For a moment, he didn't answer. He simply looked at them, these godlings who had centuries of confidence, history, and pride behind them. His people had none of that. The Vampiric Godlings were the youngest, the least experienced. They had lived in the dark too long.

When he finally spoke, his tone was measured, almost quiet.

"Perhaps you're right," he said. "Maybe I do carry some of that doubt. But isn't that the point of this meeting? To learn what we've yet to understand?"

That made Kael pause. Raina glanced toward Zephyr as if to see his reaction.

Ethan continued, his words firmer now.

"You asked why I didn't speak up when you compared me to a human. I didn't because I wanted to see if you'd look beyond that. If you'd treat me as one of your own rather than what I resemble."

The silence that followed wasn't heavy this time, it was thoughtful.

Zephyr tilted his head slightly, studying him anew.

"Careful, Ethan," he said at last. "That kind of honesty can either earn respect... or make enemies."

Ethan nodded faintly.

"Then I'll take whichever comes first."

For a heartbeat, silence reigned. Then laughter.

Soft at first, then fuller, genuine, echoing from each of the mirrors. Ethan blinked, caught off guard. He had expected ridicule, maybe cold dismissal, but not laughter.

Zephyr was the first to speak through his grin.

"That right there is what we're looking for, Ethan."

Ethan's confusion deepened. He looked between their reflections, Zephyr's easy smile, Drowz's eyes gleaming with amusement, even Kael's calm composure softening.

Wulv chuckled lowly, shaking his head. His voice, though still firm, had lost its earlier frost.

"You see, we're leaders. Our actions are restrained by what we can do and cannot do. But even so, we're reflections of our people. The way we carry ourselves shapes how they're seen."

He leaned back slightly, arms folding across his chest.

"We may sound harsh to you, but our people will be harsher still. If we see weakness or hesitation, imagine what they will see."

Drowz nodded in agreement, his grin fading into something more thoughtful.

"Exactly. That's the issue we spoke of earlier. You are the reflection of your race, Ethan. And if you seem uncertain, quiet, and cautious, your people will mirror that."

Kael added simply,

"And in the eyes of the other races, that reflection becomes truth."

The realization hit Ethan like a slow, sinking weight.

He had been so focused on making a good impression, on not offending, not overstepping that he had unknowingly projected the very thing they feared: weakness disguised as politeness.

His silence wasn't seen as discipline. It was seen as hesitation, the same for his restraint. It wasn't seen as composure. It was seen as uncertainty.

He wasn't just representing himself, he was defining how the Vampiric Godlings would be remembered.

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His breath caught slightly. He didn't respond, not immediately. His gaze lowered for a moment as the truth settled into place.

Zephyr, sensing the shift in his expression, smiled faintly.

"It's good that you understand now. No one here expects perfection, Ethan. But you must stand firm even when you doubt. Especially when you doubt."

Raina finally spoke, her tone softer but deliberate.

"Your people have been away from the world for a long time. Their return will be met with curiosity... and suspicion. How you carry yourself will decide which one lasts longer."

Ethan nodded slowly, finally understanding the weight of their earlier words.

He had walked into this meeting trying to appear diplomatic and composed and instead, he had shown them uncertainty. He had thought humility would earn respect. But among godlings, presence mattered more than humility.

He exhaled quietly, meeting their gazes once more, this time without the forced smile.

"Then I'll learn to reflect better."

Drowz smirked.

"Good. Start with that tone, it suits you more than the smile." Their laughter returned, lighter this time, and though Ethan didn't laugh with them, a faint, genuine curve appeared at the corner of his lips.

For the first time since the meeting began, he didn't feel like an outsider, just a newcomer who still had much to learn.

He exhaled quietly, almost relieved, but before he could speak further, Raina's calm voice drifted through the mirror.

"As for the main reason we requested this call," she said, her tone measured, "it was to offer you some help. You may not yet understand what you are truly welcoming into your home."

Ethan blinked. The subtle shift in her tone, from counsel to warning caught his attention immediately.

"I don't follow," he admitted, brows furrowing. "What do you mean?"

This time, it was Wulv who answered. His smooth cold voice carrying through his his mirror.

"Godlings tend to... let loose during competitions like this," he said plainly. "You see, decades sometimes centuries pass without true conflict among us. So when a competition begins, when there's finally a sanctioned outlet for power..."

He paused, a small grunt escaping him.

"They fight without restraint. And the aftermath is never small. The land suffers for it, storms, floods, broken mountains. Even the climate bends for a while before it settles again."

Ethan's fist clenched at this but he still said nothing.

Wulv continued, his tone firm.

"You've likely built an arena, yes? Some colosseum for them to fight in?"

Ethan nodded.

"We have. It's large enough to hold..."

Wulv cut in, not unkindly.

"Then understand this, whatever you've built will be reduced to rubble before the competition even begins."

The words hit heavier than any insult. Ethan's lips parted, but no reply came.

Zephyr leaned forward slightly, taking over the explanation. His voice carried its usual playful authority.

"That's why we reached out. In the past, entire valleys were torn apart because we underestimated what godlings were capable of when left unchecked."

He gestured subtly, and the air before his mirror shimmered. A faint hum resonated as glowing threads of mana intertwined, forming the shape of a sphere.

"To counter this," Zephyr went on, "we created an artifact, a joint effort from all godling races. One of the very few of its kind."

The orb completed its form, hovering before Wulv's reflection, a slowly rotating sphere of light. Within its surface, faint outlines of landmasses and oceans pulsed gently, like a living map.

"It holds the combined magical technologies of our races," Zephyr said. "The result of centuries of cooperation and mistakes. With it, we can control the extent of force during the competition, containing the energy, protecting the surroundings."

Ethan leaned closer instinctively, his eyes fixed on the sphere. The craftsmanship was astonishing, runes of every style imaginable pulsed in harmony, weaving through one another like veins of light.

"This," Zephyr said, "is a world seal. A miniature reflection of the real one that governs balance across the continents. It stabilizes the flow of magic within a designated area, a containment field strong enough to hold the full power of a godling."

Raina added softly,

"It will ensure your forests, your cities, and your people remain untouched. The competition will rage, yes, but only within its bounds."

Ethan remained silent for a long moment, staring at the glowing orb as it spun gently in the air. It reflected faintly against his pale skin, casting tiny shards of light across the dark hall.

He finally spoke, his tone subdued but sincere.

"I didn't realize it was.... ygoing to be this serious. I thought this was just going to be a display, not a war."

Wulv huffed softly.

"You'll find that for godlings, the difference between the two is thin."

Drowz chuckled under his breath.

"But don't let that frighten you, young king. Hosting the competition is an honor, one that will mark your people's place among us. Just... prepare well. The southern continent won't be the same afterward."

"Ownership of this artifact," Zephyr continued, "goes to the godling race that wins the competition. The victor holds it until the next one, which as you may know, takes place every decade."

The orb shimmered faintly, runes crawling across its surface like veins of living light.

Wulv folded his arms and spoke next, his tone prideful this time.

"It so happens my people won the last competition," he said, "but we've decided to share the artifact with you for the upcoming one. You have a few months to study it, to understand how it works, you'll need it when the time comes."

For a moment, Ethan said nothing. He simply exhaled, a quiet sigh of relief escaping his lips before he could restrain it.

He hadn't realized just how heavily this concern had been pressing on him. One of his greatest fears, the collateral damage of hosting such a monumental event had just been resolved in the simplest, most unexpected way.

Truthfully, he had been hesitant to even bring up the subject. It felt presumptuous, almost naïve, to suggest that the elder godlings might limit their people's destructive enthusiasm. He had imagined asking them to instruct restraint, to hold back, just a little but he knew how impossible that was.

He had seen the aftermath of previous competitions through recordings and reports. Vast plains split apart, mountains hollowed, forests reduced to scorched husks, all from what the godlings called "a contest of skill."

Even before the meeting, he had been working tirelessly with his people and builders, strengthening the vast dome that enclosed the colosseum. He had hoped, perhaps foolishly, that it would withstand the intensity of the battles to come. Yet deep down, he wasn't confident.

But now, as he watched the faintly glowing sphere, this artifact hovering in the air before him, his doubts eased.

He could almost feel the power it contained, the harmony of magic woven from five great races. This was no ordinary tool; it was a miracle of unity and craft, the kind of artifact his people has only thought was a possibility but not able to recreate.

And they were entrusting it to him.

Ethan couldn't help but marvel at the strength and confidence it must take for Wulv to share something so valuable, so sacred. It was more than just a gesture of practicality, it was a gesture of trust.

Deep in his mind, Ethan began to take the competition far more seriously.

The realization struck him like a spark catching dry tinder, the artifact wasn't merely a safeguard or a symbol of cooperation. It was knowledge. Centuries of progress, woven into a single creation that embodied everything his people lacked.

His race was still young compared to the others, still fumbling through fragments of inherited power and half-remembered theories. They were learning, yes, adapting quickly but in truth, they were still groping in the dark, trying to find their own path.

If he could secure the artifact... if his people could study its design, its runic systems, its energy harmonics, they could evolve. Advance by generations in a decade.

Ethan's expression hardened slightly, the faintest glimmer of resolve igniting in his crimson eyes. His mind raced with possibilities of what could be.

And that subtle change did not go unnoticed.

Wulv was the first to smirk, his teeth catching the faint light from the mirrors. Then Zephyr let out a low, knowing laugh, and soon, the other godlings followed, a chorus of amused, approving chuckles that filled the space between them.

"Ah, there it is," Zephyr said, his voice carrying that familiar teasing lilt. "That fire in your eyes. We were wondering when it would show itself."

Ethan blinked, caught off guard. "What?"

Raina's laughter was softer, more graceful, but equally pointed.

"We know you want this, Ethan," she said, smiling behind her veil. "And who wouldn't? You've seen what it can do. But don't fool yourself into thinking it'll be handed down so easily."

Drowz leaned forward, his massive frame casting a dark silhouette through the mirror's light.

"Earn it," he rumbled. "Let your people prove they deserve to hold such power."

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Kael's golden eyes gleamed.

"Entertain our children and our people well. Show us the spirit of your race, the strength you've been hiding in that misty forest of yours."

Zephyr leaned back, resting his chin on his hand, grin widening.

"And in return, we'll offer you a proposal you won't refuse."

The tone in his voice carried both promise and challenge, Ethan's pulse quickened. He didn't know what they had in mind, but he could feel it, the weight of expectation.

He met each of their gazes through the mirrored veil, and his lips curved into a faint, daring smile.

"Then I'll make sure you're not disappointed."

The mirrors shimmered with a soft hum as the connection began to fade, their reflections dimming one by one. Yet even as the last image flickered out, the laughter of the godlings lingered faintly in the air, half amusement, half approval.

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Even after the mirror went dark, Ethan didn't move.

He stood there like a statue, eyes fixed on the fading shimmer of the room's reflection.

He didn't even realize how long he had been standing there until the faint hum of the artifact's magic faded completely, leaving only the distant sound of wind brushing against the castle walls.

It was then that he noticed something strange, something different in himself.

A question had quietly taken root in his mind.

"When was the last time I truly showed my face? When was the last time I stopped pretending, stopped performing and simply was?"

He had spent so long building the image of a composed, capable king, the first of his kind, the bridge between the old races and the new. Yet beneath all that polish, he wasn't sure if there was anything left that was real.

And worse... he realized he had helped build that prison himself.

Every decision, every cautious word, every mask worn for the sake of unity, all of it had shaped a world where even he could not be himself.

The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth.

With a quiet breath, Ethan let the shadows rise around him. They curled like ink across the floor, wrapping around his form until his body dissolved into the darkness.

Moments later, he emerged within another chamber, bigger, quieter, its air thick with the scent of dust and candle wax. Rows of books lined the shelves, and at the center of it all sat a tall figure, seated comfortably in a high-backed chair, a thick tome open in his pale hands.

Roth didn't look up. He didn't need to.

Ethan knew he had sensed his arrival, but, as always, chose not to acknowledge it. That was how Roth was, detached, almost uncaring, as if nothing that happened outside his books was worth his attention.

Ethan stepped forward slowly, his voice breaking the still air.

"Did I go wrong?"

Roth didn't respond. The only sound was the soft turn of a page.

Ethan's voice came again, quieter this time, more uncertain.

"Did I go wrong from the beginning?"

He didn't explain further. He didn't need to. Roth understood. He always did.

For a long moment, the silence stretched on. Then, without looking up, Roth finally closed his book with a soft thud.

Roth finally lifted his head from the book, his crimson eyes glinting faintly under the dim candlelight. For a long while, he simply studied Ethan in silence.

When he finally spoke, his voice came out hoarse and dry, as he has not spoken for a long time.

"There is no right or wrong," he said quietly. "But if you need my answer, then no, you did nothing wrong."

The words should have been comforting, but they only left Ethan more restless.

Roth's gaze didn't waver.

"You doubt yourself now because you've seen the others," he continued, his tone calm and unhurried. "You've seen how much you differ from them, in bearing, in instinct, even in presence."

Ethan gave a small, almost imperceptible nod. The truth of that stung more than he wanted to admit.

Roth lowered his eyes briefly, as if recalling something distant, and then spoke again.

"The other godlings were not wrong in what they said. When they look upon your people, they see humans."

He said it plainly, without malice, but the words still hit hard hearing it from him.

"Because of what I am, and how I came to be," Roth continued, "Only you, amongst all your kind can be considered a true godling. The others who came after you..."

He paused opening the book, turning a page absently, though his eyes were no longer on it.

"They are more human than godling. What separates them from the humans is my divine blood, though diluted beyond recognition, still lingers stubbornly in them."

Ethan's eyes widened, disbelief flickering across his face.

"What... what are you saying?"

Roth's tone didn't change "From the beginning, there was never a chance for your people to be the same as the others."

The words settled into the air like lead. Ethan's jaw tightened, and the faint shimmer of mana began to leak from his body, subtle at first, then stronger, spilling across the room in waves. The candles flickered violently, the shadows writhing like smoke.

Chapter 675:

Roth did not flinch. He remained seated, hands resting calmly atop his book, as the disturbed mana brushed past him like a breeze.

"Calm yourself," he said softly. "This is not a judgment or damnation. It is something I've learned over long years of observation."

Ethan's breath came unevenly, the edges of his anger colliding with confusion and hurt.

Roth's voice remained even, almost detached.

"Your people could never be as the other godlings are, because from birth, you already differed. You were born from me hence hold most purity of divine blood, Unlike the others who came from you, inheriting only but a scoop if the divine essence."

He paused, then corrected himself with slow precision.

"To be more exact... the first generation can be called half godlings. But the second generation, those born of your kind are already distant. Their divine nature is faint, drowned in human blood. Diluted, yet not erased."

He finally looked up again, his eyes locking with Ethan's.

"And so, they end up what the others see them as... merely humans with a trace of something greater."

Ethan's hands clenched, the air around him thick with restrained fury. But beneath that anger was something deeper, a quiet understanding he didn't want to face.

Roth's tone didn't waver as he went on.

"The only thing the second generation shares with the other godlings is that they came about through natural birth. That much is the same. But the first generation..."

He lifted a pale hand slightly, gesturing toward Ethan.

"They were not born. They were made, fully grown adults, once human, bitten and turned by you."

Roth leaned forward slightly, the faint gleam in his eyes the only motion in the still air.

"Do you see the picture now?" he asked softly.

He didn't wait for an answer.

"From the beginning, what you dealt with were grown minds — people who had lived entire lives as humans. People shaped by human fears, desires, and instincts. And then, suddenly, they were changed, given power, longevity, and a piece of something divine they could neither understand nor fully contain."

Ethan's lips parted, but no sound came. Roth continued, his tone steady.

"Just that alone was enough to set your kingdom apart, to make your society grow in a direction no other godling race could ever follow. You tried to mirror the godlings' ways, but your foundation was different. Flawed only in that it began with humans trying to imitate gods."

He closed his book again, the soft thud echoing through the quiet chamber.

"The other godlings were born into their nature. Their purity of mind began at birth, their instincts shaped by divinity before reason could interfere. But your people... they were already aware. Already scarred by the mortal world before you ever touched them."

Roth's gaze lifted back to Ethan, cool and steady.

"So how could they ever truly be the same?"

His tone softened slightly, though it still came out cold.

"So, to answer your question. You did nothing wrong, Ethan. You did the best you could with the cards you were dealt."

He leaned back in his chair, his pale fingers resting atop the book once more.

"Besides, your so-called 'radical' actions, cleaning up the court, humbling the noble families, establishing order where there was chaos, those were not mistakes. They are the reason you can now stand tall among the godlings, confident enough to host their competition."

For the first time, a small, uncertain smile tugged at Ethan's lips. His expression softened, almost childlike as if he were a son hearing from a distant father that he had done well.

But Roth's expression didn't mirror his. His crimson eyes remained sharp and cold.

"And yet," he said suddenly, breaking the brief silence, "you, even more godling than most, are still plagued by human flaws."

Ethan's faint smile faltered. His brow furrowed. "What...?"

Roth's gaze didn't waver.

"You find my presence in the mortal world a nuisance," he said evenly. "You believe I stand in your way, that my shadow prevents you from truly holding the vampire race in your hand."

Ethan's face tensed. The accusation or rather, the truth hit too close to deny. He looked away, his silence more honest than any protest.

The quiet stretched long between them before he finally spoke. His voice was low, but steady.

"I do indeed find your presence... unwanted," he admitted. "And limiting for the picture I have in mind for my people."

Roth regarded him for a long moment, and then, to Ethan's surprise, a faint, knowing smile curved his lips.

"You are learning quickly," he said softly. "Before, you would not have spoken such truth to me. You would have hidden behind your mask, that carefully measured civility you wear before your court and your peers."

He looked away, eyes half-lidded as if drifting into thought.

"It seems your meeting with the other godlings has done you some good after all."

Ethan stood there in silence, unsure whether the words were praise or rebuke.

For a fleeting moment, he wondered which Roth preferred, the obedient king he once was, or the one who had just dared to speak to him as an equal.

"Does it amuse you when I do that?" Ethan asked, his tone cold, the mockery turned inward, directed at himself.

Roth's crimson eyes flicked up briefly from his book before returning to the page.

"It does," he said simply. "But it seems I'll be denied that small amusement from here on."

Silence fell between them again, the kind that carried more meaning than words could. The faint rustle of a turning page broke it, soft and final.

Then Roth spoke, his voice quieter, almost contemplative.

"Don't worry. My time in the mortal world is now limited. Soon I'll be out of your neck, and you can do as you please."

Ethan froze, the words cutting through the still air. His eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to speak, to ask what Roth meant, but no words came.

Roth didn't look up.

"Cherish your time with your fellow godling leaders," he said, turning another page. "They're good company to keep in this long, immortal life. They might help you cling to your sanity a little longer... before you lose it."

And with that, Roth's attention was gone, consumed by his book once more.

When Ethan blinked, he was no longer standing in that dimly lit room. He found himself outside the door to his own chambers, as though reality itself had quietly expelled him.

For a long moment, he stood there silent, unmoving, unsure whether the weight in his chest came from Roth's words... or from the strange ache of knowing he would soon be gone.

Ethan stood before his door, hand hovering above the handle, yet he couldn't bring himself to open it. The corridor was silent, too silent and for the first time in years, the air in "his own" castle felt foreign to him.

Roth's words echoed in his mind.

"My time in the mortal world is now limited... Soon I'll be out of neck."

It was a strange way to speak of departure, but that was Roth, always cryptic, always half in jest, yet never wrong. Ethan had never known him to lie, nor to speak without purpose.

He leaned against the cold stone wall, closing his eyes.

Roth's presence had been like a shadow stretching over the kingdom, quiet, oppressive, but oddly reassuring. His existence alone had kept the more ambitious nobles cautious, the restless younglings disciplined. Even Ethan himself, for all his pride, had walked carefully in Roth's sight.

Now, if that presence were to fade... what would become of them?

The vampire kingdom had long balanced on the edge of civility, a thin veneer built from blood, ambition, and the ghost of divine power. Roth was that balance. His word had been law before Ethan's crown ever gleamed. His existence reminded every vampire that their immortality came from something greater, something terrifying and old.

And if that reminder were gone...

Ethan's jaw tightened. Would they still obey? Would they still remember what they are?

For years, he had wanted freedom, the right to rule without Roth's quiet gaze watching from the dark corners of the castle. Yet now that the possibility stood before him, all he felt was an unfamiliar hollowness.

"Freedom," he muttered under his breath, the word tasting bitter.

He could already see it, the noble houses testing his strength, the council whispering in secret meetings, the younger vampires drunk on the illusion of independence. Roth's absence would not be a liberation.

And yet... deep down, a part of him stirred with something dangerously close to anticipation.

Without Roth, the path ahead was entirely his to shape or to destroy.

He finally turned the handle, stepping into his chambers. The mirror across the room reflected his image faintly in the dim light, red eyes weary but burning with a quiet resolve.

"Roth," he whispered, almost to himself. "You've ruled from the shadows long enough. If your time truly ends... then perhaps it's finally time for me to stop hiding in mine."

Chapter 676:

Still, the trait remained a double-edged sword. Few could truly command it, and fewer still could emerge from the depths of bloodlust unscarred by it.

Meanwhile, humanity suffered under centuries of vampire dominion. They lived in fear, subjugated, harvested, and broken. Yet within that fear festered envy and longing. To the weak and desperate, vampirism appeared not as a curse but as deliverance. Many humans begged to be turned, believing that immortality would free them from their chains.

But the truth was crueler. Those turned out of resentment carried their bitterness into undeath. The moment they tasted blood, all that hatred erupted outward. They turned upon those who once tormented them, only to fall into the same cycle of cruelty and dominance. The oppressed became oppressors, their humanity twisted into something far darker.

The vampire court had once been a nest of discord, a place where ambition and arrogance clashed endlessly. The First Generation ruled through fear, and the Second through impulse. Alliances shifted

with the moon, decrees were ignored, and blood was spilled in the name of pride. Chaos reigned beneath the veneer

of nobility.

But Ethan changed that. His intervention shattered years of disarray.

The Second Generation, after completing their rigorous training and demonstrating mastery over their Frenzy, were each assigned to a human settlement. These towns were no longer hunting grounds but territories of stewardship. The vampires were made guardians, shepherds of the human lives that sustained them.

Their task was clear: to oversee the welfare, growth, and stability of the humans under their care. The prosperity of a town became a direct reflection of its overseeing vampire's strength and discipline. If a community faltered, if starvation, rebellion, or despair took root, it was not seen as human failure, but vampire negligence.

And failure came with punishment. Ethan's punishments were not merely physical, they were humiliating, soul-wounding lessons. A vampire who abused their power or indulged in excess could find themselves stripped of rank, bound by blood oath, or even cast into the Misty Forest among the exiled First Generation.

Most severe of all was Ethan's decree forbidding private feeding or mental domination of humans. To influence or enthrall a human mind was a violation of the new law, a return to the old ways he sought to erase. Blood was to be drawn only through sanctioned exchanges, under supervision and mutual understanding.

The decree was met with outrage at first. To many vampires, the right to dominate was their birthright, the essence of what they were. Yet Ethan's authority left no room for defiance. Even the proudest bowed before his will, for they had seen what defiance brought.

Ethan had many reasons for the path he chose. At first, his actions had been driven by instinct and conviction, a personal belief in what needed to be done. But after his most recent conversation with Roth, Ethan understood fully that his decisions had been not only necessary but inevitable.

Roth's words had stripped away any lingering doubt. The Second Generation, though they appeared to be the perfect evolution of their kind, free of the First Generation's weakness to sunlight and endowed with greater adaptability, were in truth, a dead branch on the bloodline. They could live, fight, and rule, but they could not create or rather allowed to create.

The continuation of the vampiric race depended solely on the First Generation and Ethan himself.

The First Generation were born of Ethan's own bite, his divine essence mingled with mortality, transforming those he touched into beings of immense power but bound by sunlight's curse. The Second Generation, on the other hand, were born not from the bite but from the union between a First Generation vampire and a human woman. It was through this mingling that the Second Generation came to be, a more stable hybrid, mortal enough to walk in daylight, yet immortal enough to carry the thirst.

Roth, in his ambition and pride, had once sought to accelerate this process, to replace the First Generation entirely with their supposedly "perfected" offspring. In his obsession, he overlooked a truth that he learned after a few decades back: the bite of a First Generation vampire upon a human produced nothing but a hollow imitation.

These beings, sometimes called the False Turned, were neither divine nor truly undead. They lacked the sacred spark that flowed from Ethan's original gift. They were vampires only in hunger, cursed with the thirst for blood but devoid of the strength, grace, or will of their progenitors. Worse still, the bond of creation bound them completely, their minds enslaved to the will of the one who bit them. They became little more than puppets, shadows of humanity, and reflections of their master's will.

Roth himself had once created many of these False Turned in his experiments. But when he saw what they truly were, soulless, submissive, devoid of divine heritage, he was filled with disgust. He ordered their extermination and forbade the practice outright, branding it an abomination. The creation of such beings was seen as a stain upon the divine legacy that his bite had first bestowed.

It was then that Ethan understood to abandon the First Generation entirely was to risk extinction, not by death, but by dilution.

And so, his decree for the First to withdraw into the Misty Forest and preserve their strength was not only an act of exile. It was an instinctive act of preservation, a safeguard to ensure that the true blood of their kind, the divine heritage born from Roth's own bite, would never fade from the world.

As for the Second Generation, once hailed as the future of their race, they proved to be an unstable and unpredictable lineage. What was thought to be the next step in vampiric evolution became a dangerous variable that could not be ignored.

When two Second Generation vampires conceived a child, the result was uncertain. At times, the offspring would indeed be another Second Generation, strong, adaptable, and capable of surviving sunlight. But there was always a risk, a terrible one: the birth of a human vampire, a being without divine blood found their veins.

Unlike the False Turned created through the First Generation's bite, these beings were not bound by servitude. They retained their free will, their minds unenslaved. Yet their existence was deeply unsettling to the vampiric order. They were anomalies, to the elders, their very existence was heresy, a perversion of divine blood.

Thus, their births were shrouded in secrecy. Such children were quietly taken away, erased from record, and never seen again. Only a handful within the higher courts knew the truth. To the rest of vampire society, the subject was forbidden, spoken of only in whispers, if at all. It became one of the darkest secrets of their kind, buried beneath centuries of silence.

The danger was even greater when a Second Generation vampire lay with a normal human. The likelihood of producing one of these hybrid "human vampires" grew exponentially. As a result, the relationships, pregnancies, and bloodlines of the Second Generation were closely monitored. Entire factions within the court existed solely to oversee and control such unions, ensuring that no abomination of blood ever saw the light of day.

And yet, there was one exception. When a First Generation and a Second Generation mated, the child was always born a true vampire with divine heritage intact, untainted by instability or mortal weakness. These offspring were regarded as blessings, embodiments of perfect balance between the old and new bloodlines.

It was through this fragile union between the generations that Ethan and Roth saw a glimmer of hope, the possibility of preserving the divine blood while allowing evolution to continue.

For now, the Vampiric civilization was on the right path. The reforms and transformations that had taken place over the past years were finally bearing fruit, bringing a sense of stability and pride among Ethan's

people. It was because of these very changes that Ethan now had the confidence to host the upcoming grand competition. At least now, their civilization was more presentable.

Still, a lingering concern gnawed at Ethan's mind: the godlings. Their prideful and often volatile nature clashed sharply with the Vampiric temperament. Where Vampires valued decorum, and quiet superiority, the godlings were brash, radiant, and unrestrained. Ethan knew that if he did not prepare his people properly, a single misstep or provocation could spark disastrous conflict. He needed to ensure that, no matter how tense the air became, no blade would be drawn. It was best to come up with creative trash talk.

Weeks passed swiftly as the other races of godlings made their preparations for the journey to the southern continent. During this time, the artifact, the sacred object tied to the competition's origin, was entrusted to Ethan for safekeeping and ceremonial preparation.

When all preparations were at last complete, the long-awaited journey began. Across the continents, the human settlements gathered to witness what few mortals ever had the chance to see, the convergence of godlings in great numbers. To behold even one of them was considered an event of a lifetime; to see dozens traveling together was an omen of history in the making.

Chapter 677:

The skies above soon stirred with movement and awe. The Apelings, rode upon never seen before creatures, a majestic mounts of Hippogriffs, creatures of feather and fang, half-eagle and half-stallion. They filled the sky in grand formation, wings beating in rhythmic harmony as sunlight danced off their silvery feathers. The air echoed with their cries as they soared southward, carrying their riders toward the southern continent.

Zephyr and the others leaders, upon witnessing such a magnificent sight, breathed a collective sigh of relief. For the first time in months, it seemed that one of their greatest worries had been laid to rest.

Perhaps things would stay that way, they thought. Their people had something else in mind.

Months after the expedition's kicked off, a series of troubling reports arrived, accounts that shattered their brief sense of relief. The documents revealed how deeply they had underestimated the pride and arrogance of their people. It became painfully clear that, though the godlings had played along with their diplomatic display, they had merely waited until no eyes watched them before reverting to their true nature.

The alarming reports came from Erik's lands, territories once known for their fertile

valleys and thriving settlements. What the reports relayed and found there, however, were nothing but ruins. Entire regions had been reduced to rubble and ash, the devastation officially classified and publicly reported as the result of natural disasters.

But Zephyr and the others knew better.

The destruction bore no trace of mortal cause, only the eerie precision of godling's wrath concealed beneath nature's mask. The godlings had been careful, meticulous even in covering their tracks. No witnesses claimed to have seen them, and no mana signatures were detected.

The reports grew more disturbing as they continued. Each account described the same phenomenon: the disasters struck only at night.

When dusk fell over Erik's lands, the skies darkened unnaturally fast, blanketed by thunderclouds that stretched for miles. Winds howled through the valleys, uprooting old trees and hurling them like twigs. Entire roofs were torn from their foundations, the very earth trembling under unseen fury.

Then came the tornadoes, great spiralling columns of chaos that left scars across the land, paths of annihilation that threatened to end the life of those on it's path.

To the humans of the Western Continent, the following months became a recurring nightmare. For several nights each month, Erik's kingdom was ravaged by what were deemed "natural disasters," though everyone knew there was nothing natural about them.

Each cycle of devastation turned Erik's somewhat thriving realm into a place of dread. Neighboring kingdoms, those who had plans for him seeing all this, learned to keep their distance for now. Even the boldest among them dared not approach the borders of Erik's land during those cursed nights, fearful of being caught in the godlings' wrath.

Witnesses described scenes that defied imagination. Bodies, men, women, and livestock alike were sometimes seen flung high into the air, carried by violent winds before crashing down miles away. Entire

districts vanished overnight, torn apart by unseen forces. Fields once lush with crops were left scorched and lifeless, rivers overflowed their banks, and forests were reduced to splinters.

And through it all, no divine figure ever appeared. No godling was seen, no radiant form or thunderous voice declared vengeance. The destruction came in silence, impersonal and unrelenting, as if nature itself had turned into a weapon of divine spite.

The people whispered among themselves, voices trembling as they spoke of what everyone already suspected. They knew who was responsible, at least in their hearts. The timing, the unnatural scale of the storms, the precision with which the disasters struck only Erik's lands, it all pointed to the godlings.

Yet no evidence remained. Not a single trace of their interference could be found.

And so, while the records labeled the events as natural catastrophes, the people of the Western Continent and beyond knew the truth. Zephyr and his fellow leader knew the truth.

Thankfully, the godlings' wrath lasted only a few nights before the skies cleared and the storms subsided. Yet, even as calm returned, the scars of their fury remained, a cruel reminder etched into the land and into the hearts of those who survived. The ruins, the shattered homes, and the broken spirits all stood as silent proof of what it meant to incur their displeasure.

The people were reminded, once again, of the strength and cruelty that the godlings wielded so effortlessly, how little it took for them to destroy.

But none bore the weight of this humiliation more heavily than Erik himself.

Though the godlings had hidden themselves from mortal sight, their presence was as clear as daylight to him. Their consciousnesses burned like blazing stars in his mind's eye, countless divine minds pressing down upon him, suffocating him under an unseen weight.

He could sense them all, circling, watching, locking onto him. Their intent was unmistakable: to suppress, to humiliate, to remind him of his place. The oppressive aura that emanated from them was so overwhelming that it rooted him in place, paralyzing him with dread. Erik knew that if he dared to retaliate, it would mean certain death, not just for him, but for everything that remained of his kingdom.

And so he endured.

Through those long, tormenting nights, Erik stood helplessly as the "natural disasters" tore through his lands. His fists clenched so tightly that his nails pierced his palms, drawing blood. He could only watch, powerless, as his people suffered beneath the godlings' mockery. Every gust of wind that toppled a home, every bolt of lightning that split the earth, it was all orchestrated before his eyes.

Something had to be done. He couldn't go on like this, vulnerable, humiliated, and powerless before beings who toyed with him as they pleased. Something needed to change, and soon.

Erik knew what he had to do. The path was clear in his mind, yet his means to walk it had been stripped away. He no longer had the one thing that once set him apart, the gift of Ikem, the divine blessing that had once allowed him to perceive and command the smallest threads of life itself.

In the days when he still bore Ikem's mark, Erik's understanding of biology had transcended mortal comprehension. He could feel the pulse of life in every cell, hear the silent rhythm of existence flowing through veins, roots, and air. He had conversed with the microcosm, the unseen architects of flesh and vitality, bending them to his will to heal, reshape, and build. His laboratories had thrived with life in its purest form, life that listened, obeyed, and evolved under his guidance.

But now, that connection was gone. The symphony of microscopic voices that once whispered truths to him had fallen silent. He was deaf to the song of life, blind to the intricate dance of creation. And for the first time in years, Erik truly felt... human.

Powerless.

He raked his hands through his hair, frustration simmering beneath exhaustion. The godlings had made their point, he was no longer untouchable. Without Ikem's gift, even his knowledge seemed hollow, like a scholar stripped of language. He had nowhere to turn, no divine patron to restore what was lost.

Then, from the edges of silence, came the whispers again.

"We could help you..."

The voice slithered into his mind, soft yet impossibly clear like a thought his mind birthed yet at the time wasn't his own. For a moment, Erik's vision blurred, the world spinning as if reality itself had tilted. His heart raced, breath shallow.

The first thing he did after he came back was to see if the seals held and if someone had approached during his absence, yet nothing was wrong with the seal, still he noticed the voices had grown louder and clearer each time he entertained them.

For a few seconds, he lost himself in their promise. The words were intoxicating, soothing, familiar. He could feel the pull, the faint temptation to answer.

Then, with a sharp inhale, he forced himself back. His body trembled as a cold shiver ran down his spine.

"The whispers are becoming stronger," he muttered under his breath, staring out toward the horizon where the first light of dawn crept across the land. The rising sun painted the ruins in pale gold, illuminating a kingdom scarred by divine fury and a ruler teetering on the edge of something far darker.

As the warmth touched his face, Erik clenched his jaw. He knew what the whispers wanted and he feared that, before long, he might start wanting it too.

Many were left scarred by the events of those few nights. Among them was Gram, a simple man, a farmer by trade, and a devoted father.

In the days following the disasters, Gram found himself unable to accept the changes that had overtaken his life. He remembered so vividly how peaceful things had once been. Each morning he would rise with the sun to tend to his livestock, his young son and daughter by his side. When dusk came, they would return home, greeted by the warm laughter of his pregnant wife, who always had a hearty meal waiting on the table.

Chapter 678:

For Gram, his family and his small town had been a haven amid the madness spreading across the kingdom, a sanctuary where the shadows of despair dared not linger.

Their town had long prided itself on its vigilance and unity. When the curse began to spread across Erik's kingdom, corrupting the hearts and minds of ordinary people, the townsfolk had taken matters into their own hands. Whenever one among them began to show signs of becoming a cursed being, the town moved swiftly and without hesitation. Together, they would drive the afflicted out, or when mercy was no longer an option, end them.

It was a grim tradition, but it had kept them safe. For years, their town had stood untouched while others fell into ruin. Many even called it blessed, one of the few last refuge for those who still believed in order and sanity.

And through it all, their faith in their ruler, Erik, had withered. His silence, his inaction, his inability to control the growing crisis had turned admiration into resentment. To them, Erik had abandoned his people to madness and ruin.

Yet none of them could have imagined that even their well-guarded town would one day face a horror far beyond any cursed being.

That night, Gram slept deeply, as he always did. His wife rested beside him, their children curled close for warmth. The air was calm, the lull before the storm.

Then came the screams.

They pierced the stillness, sharp and raw, echoing through his dreams. At first, Gram thought he was imagining them, a nightmare brought on by exhaustion. But the sounds grew louder, closer... too real, too desperate.

H

e opened his eyes.

The world was chaos.

Wind howled like a thousand voices crying out in agony. His body was no longer touching the ground, he was floating, suspended high above in the sky, surrounded by flashes of lightning and debris swirling through the sky.

Below him, the town that had once been his sanctuary was no more. Houses splintered, trees tore free from the earth, and fire danced amid the storm's fury.

Gram's mind could not comprehend what was happening. His thoughts blurred, his heart pounded. The cold air cut into his skin as he realized he was at the eye of the tornado, trapped in its terrible calm while destruction spun violently around him.

He opened his mouth to scream, but his voice was swallowed by the roaring wind.

Around him, debris spun wildly, shattered timbers, fragments of stone, and the broken remnants of lives torn from the earth. Amid the chaos, Gram saw faces, familiar faces. His neighbors. His friends. People he had shared meals and laughter with. They were screaming, flailing helplessly as the raging wind carried them higher into the night sky.

It took him a moment to understand that they were his townsfolk, all caught in the same merciless storm. Their voices blended into a single, unending wail of terror, echoing through the churning darkness.

Then, in a moment of sickening realization, Gram's thoughts snapped to his family.

"Lira! Taren! Myra!" he shouted, the names of his wife and children tearing from his throat. His voice was lost to the roar of the wind. The air was so loud it seemed to swallow his cries before they could reach even his own ears. He tried again, screaming until his voice cracked, but the gale only tossed him harder, spinning his body like a rag doll through the sky.

Still, Gram refused to stop. His lungs burned, his throat ached, but he kept calling for them, over and over, clinging to the faint hope that somehow, they could hear him.

Then after a while, suddenly the wind stopped.

The world fell silent.

For one suspended heartbeat, everything hung in stillness. People, trees, pieces of rooftops, even livestock, all floating together in eerie quiet. Gram's breath caught in his chest. Then gravity returned.

Everything began to fall.

The night was torn by the collective scream of hundreds of thousands of voices as the sky rained death. Gram could no longer distinguish his own voice from the others. The terror that consumed him was beyond words; his throat produced only a hoarse, instinctive cry as he plummeted through the storm-torn air.

He caught fleeting glimpses of others falling beside him, arms reaching, mouths open in panic before they vanished into the darkness below. The world became a blur of cold air, rushing wind, and fear.

Then for a while in his view came the brief appearance of water.

He hit it hard. The impact stole his breath and filled his lungs with icy cold water. Pain shot through his body as he sank beneath the surface, limbs flailing uselessly before darkness closed in around him.

When Gram next opened his eyes, he gasped, a ragged, desperate sound that tore through the silence of dawn. For a fleeting moment, he thought it had all been a nightmare.

But he wasn't in his bed. His wife wasn't beside him. There was no scent of breakfast, no sound of his children's laughter echoing through the wooden walls.

Instead, he found himself lying amid green leaves and broken branches, his body aching with every breath.

Gram tried to move. Pain flared instantly, sharp and unforgiving, radiating through his ribs and limbs. He gritted his teeth, biting back a cry as he forced himself to shift.

He had to know, he had to see.

"Where... where am I?" he whispered to no one, his voice hoarse. His heart pounded with one thought, one desperate hope that overpowered all else.

He needed to find his family.

It took some time before Gram managed to sit upright, every movement sending sharp jolts of pain through his battered body. He winced, bracing himself against a rough surface beneath him. When his vision finally cleared and the dizziness faded, he looked around and froze.

He wasn't on solid ground.

Gram was sitting atop the splintered remains of a tree, its massive trunk half-submerged and drifting along what appeared to be a wide, muddy river. The current was slow, but steady, carrying him through a landscape that didn't look familiar anymore.

As his eyes traced the horizon, realization dawned upon him and with it, horror.

The world around him was nothing but ruin. Trees lay uprooted and scattered like broken matchsticks, their roots jutting out toward the sky. What might once have been fields or villages were now just flattened stretches of debris, stretching endlessly in every direction. The stench of damp earth and splintered wood filled the air.

"It was real..." Gram murmured, the words trembling out of him.

That nightmare, the storm, the screaming, the fall. It wasn't a dream and he had somehow truly lived through it. Somehow, impossibly, he had survived.

For a brief, fragile moment, joy flickered in his chest. If he was alive... maybe his family was too. Maybe by some miracle, they had escaped the storm. His heart leapt at the thought, and for a fleeting instant, pain meant nothing.

Ignoring the protest of his wounds, Gram began to move, crawling across the wet bark and broken branches. Every shift sent new stabs of pain through his ribs and arms, but he pressed on, gritting his teeth. The rough bark tore at his skin, leaving shallow cuts across his arms and legs, but he didn't stop, not until his footing slipped and he fell into the river with a heavy splash.

The cold water shocked his system awake. Gasping, Gram kicked with what little strength he had left, pushing himself toward the riverbank. Each stroke was agony, his limbs screaming for rest, but the thought of his wife and children kept him moving. When he finally reached the shore, he dragged himself onto the muddy ground and collapsed, chest heaving.

He lay there for a long while, staring up at the clear blue sky, so calm, so deceptively beautiful. The contrast between the peaceful morning and the devastation around him made it feel unreal.

"Why...?" he whispered. Natural disasters were rare here. Never in his lifetime had he seen a storm of such fury. What could have caused it?

Then a memory surfaced, a few months ago, when heavy rains had battered the kingdom for days. The people had feared flooding then too, until the priests spread the tale: their king, Erik, had angered a god, and the rain had been a sign of divine wrath. The memory tightened something in Gram's chest.

His gaze hardened as he clenched his fist, dirt grinding between his fingers.

"Damn that incompetent king," he spat, his voice trembling with rage and exhaustion.

Maybe Erik had angered another god. Maybe the storm that destroyed everything he loved was the punishment for Erik's arrogance. But whatever the reason, it didn't matter to Gram anymore. His faith in his ruler had long died. No god, no king was coming to save them.

All that mattered now was his family.

If his wife and children were still alive, then that was reason enough to keep moving. The rest, the ruins, the gods and the king, none of it mattered.

Chapter 679:

He rested a moment longer, letting the trembling in his limbs subside. Then, with a groan, he forced himself to his feet. His clothes clung to him, heavy and cold, and his body ached with every step.

But he recognized the lay of the land. He wasn't too far. If he followed the river upstream, he would reach his town, what remained of it.

And so, leaning against a fallen branch for support, Gram began to walk, driven by the faint, desperate hope that somewhere beyond the horizon, his family was waiting for him.

The walk back felt endless. Each step was a battle between pain and will. Gram's legs trembled, his vision swam from exhaustion, but he pressed on, using the sun's position and the familiar curve of the hills to guide him. The river that had carried him slowly narrowed, winding toward the valley where his town once stood.

When he finally reached the outskirts, the silence hit him first.

There were no birds, no rustling leaves, no sound of human voices. Only the soft hiss of the wind moving through ruins. The town that had once echoed with laughter, children's cries, and the sound of hammers and hooves was now swallowed by a stillness too deep to be natural.

Then he saw them.

At first, just one body face down in the mud near what used to be the main road. Then another. And another.

The further he walked, the more he found.

Men and women, some he recognized, their bodies twisted and broken, thrown against walls, crushed beneath collapsed roofs. Livestock lay scattered in the streets, horses, goats, and oxen alike mangled beyond recognition. T

he stench of death and wet blood hung thick in the air, so heavy that it burned his throat when he breathed.

Still, Gram pressed forward.

His heart pounded as he stumbled over debris, calling out hoarsely, "Lira! Taren! Myra!" But only the echo of his own voice answered him, swallowed by the ruins.

Everywhere he looked, there was only death. The houses that once stood tall had been reduced to heaps of splintered wood and stone. The small square where the townsfolk gathered for market was buried under the remains of the clock tower. Even the fields beyond were flattened, as though some great hand had swept them away.

But Gram refused to believe. He couldn't.

Maybe they had fled, he told himself. Maybe they were hiding somewhere, waiting for help. His body screamed for him to stop, but he forced his aching legs to move, clinging to that thin thread of hope.

Hours passed. The sun climbed high, then began to fall again. Gram searched every corner, every shattered home, everywhere his feet led him but the faces he found were all lifeless.

And slowly, doubt began to creep in.

His hands shook as he lifted the broken door of his home, the wood charred and splintered. Inside, everything was gone, walls crushed inward, furniture shattered. The cradle where his unborn child was meant to sleep was overturned, split in half. He sank to his knees, numb, staring at the wreckage in silence.

No voices, no movement, no laughter. Just the wind, whispering through the wreckage like a cruel echo of the life that had been.

For the first time since he'd awakened, Gram felt the hope inside him begin to crack. Fear crept in, cold and sharp as reality began to take shape in his mind. He wanted to scream, to deny what he saw, but no sound came. Only a hollow silence filled the space where his family's laughter once lived.

His knees gave way, and he fell forward, clutching a piece of torn cloth he found among the rubble, his daughter's small tunic, recognizable even through the mud and blood.

Finally Gram found his voice as he let out a cry that sounded like a roar, fears could not stop falling from his face as he continued to cry out finally he reached his limit as he passed out.

The sky was darkening now, the first stars flickering to life overhead. Gram stayed there, unmoving, as the shadows stretched around him.

The town that had once stood as a symbol of unity and safety was now nothing but a graveyard.

And Gram, the man who had once believed in the strength of his people, was now its only survivor, alone with his grief, his rage, and the unbearable silence of the dead.

Gram felt like he was trapped in a nightmare, one that refused to end. No matter how much he tried to wake, he found himself falling again, hearing the same screams, seeing the same faces. His wife's voice, his children's laughter, all fading into the hollow roar of the wind. The nightmare mocked him, whispered of his weakness, his failure to protect what mattered most.

Then, with a strangled gasp, Gram finally woke up.

His body jolted as if pulled from drowning. He screamed, the sound raw and broken, echoing through the still air. For a moment, he didn't recognize where he was. His hands clawed at the earth, eyes wide and wild. The nightmare still clung to him, and for a few seconds, he believed he was still falling.

The shout caught the attention of others nearby.

Voices murmured in alarm, boots crunched on gravel. A few figures emerged from the treeline, adventurers, wrapped in worn cloaks and carrying lanterns that flickered against the ruins. Their armor

was scuffed, their faces marked by fatigue and caution. They were the one's who saved him and managed to nurture him back to health.

They had been moving through the devastated lands for days, ever since the nights of destruction had finally ceased.

They had been hired by nobles from neighboring kingdoms, desperate for answers. The disasters that plagued Erik's lands had shaken even the most distant lords. Entire regions whispered of divine punishment, of a godling's wrath made manifest. And yet, no one truly understood what had happened, why did their punishment come so late and not as they had expected?

So these men and women were sent, to measure the damage, to bury the dead to prevent plague, and to see if anyone had survived.

When they entered what remained of Gram's town, even their seasoned hearts faltered.

The air was thick with decay and ash. Broken homes jutted from the ground like shattered teeth. Corpses, human and beast lay strewn everywhere, some half-buried in mud, others hanging grotesquely from trees. The silence of the place pressed down on them, making even hardened adventurers keep their voices low.

Their leader, a grizzled man named Kael, shook his head as he surveyed the destruction. "They didn't even have a chance," he muttered, voice heavy with pity and dread. "Whatever happened here... it came too fast."

The others nodded, their expressions grim. They had seen villages burned by conflict, towns swallowed by plague but this... this was something else. There were no signs of fire or weapons. It looked as if nature itself had turned against the people.

Sighing and feeling a weight settle in their chests, the group pressed on through the ruins. The smell of blood and rot thickened the air, clinging to their armor and clothes like a curse that refused to leave. None of them spoke for a while, there was nothing left to say. They all understood what kind of tragedy had unfolded here, and none of them wished to imagine it happening to their own homes.

Their leader, Kael, tightened his grip on the handle of his shield and muttered, "Let's finish this quickly. The dead have had enough company."

The mage walking behind him nodded silently, clutching her staff as the crystal embedded at its top began to glow faintly. She whispered an incantation under her breath, her eyes closing as threads of magic expanded outward, scanning the devastated landscape. Her spell, a life-detecting weave was invaluable in missions like this. It could sense even the faintest flicker of life, saving them hours of pointless digging through rubble and corpses.

Still, while they searched, they didn't forget to loot.

It was an unspoken rule among adventurers. Supplies, trinkets, coins, anything useful or valuable was fair game. The dead wouldn't need them, and the living still had mouths to feed. Each one justified it in their own way, though the guilt lingered behind their eyes.

It was during one such quiet moment, as they moved between the broken remains of homes, that a sharp gasp came from the mage. Her staff pulsed with brighter light.

Everyone froze. Instantly, steel whispered from sheaths, bows were drawn, and shields were raised.

"What is it?" Kael demanded, his voice low but firm.

"...Life signs," the mage answered, her tone strained as she focused. "Multiple beast signatures, likely drawn by the smell of blood and decay." She paused, her brows furrowing as the crystal flickered again. "But... there's something else. A faint life sign, weak but steady. Not a beast. Human, presumably a survivor."

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The group exchanged glances, a spark of grim satisfaction passing between them. Finally, a purpose beyond counting corpses.

Kael's lips curved into a small, tired smile as he lowered his shield slightly. "Seems we might actually earn our pay after all."

A few chuckles rippled through the group, breaking the tension for a moment. The leader turned to the mage, his expression hardening again into focus.

"Lead the way," he ordered.

The mage nodded, the glow of her staff flaring brighter as she guided them through the wreckage. The group moved in formation, Kael and two warriors at the front, the mage and the archer in the middle, and the healer watching their backs.

The deeper they went into the ruined town, the more unsettling it became. The streets were silent except for the crunch of debris beneath their boots. Burnt wood, shattered pottery, and unrecognizable remains littered the ground. The faint buzzing of flies was the only reminder that life of a sort still lingered here.

The adventurers followed the mage's lead deeper into the ruins, the light of her staff cutting through the haze of dust and smoke that still hung heavy in the air. The path narrowed between two collapsed buildings, forcing them into a tighter formation. The faint glimmer of life that the mage had sensed grew stronger but so did something else.

The air grew tense, charged, as if the ruins themselves were holding their breath. The faint hum of magic pricked at their skin.

"Hold," Kael ordered, raising a hand.

The group froze. The archer nocked an arrow. The mage's staff pulsed erratically.

And then came the sound, a low, guttural snarl that rolled through the rubble like thunder. From the shadows of a half-toppled barn emerged three shapes, large and sinewy, their bodies matted with fur streaked in black veins of mana corruption. Their eyes glowed faintly violet, the telltale mark of beasts twisted by cursed energy.

"Cursed beasts," the mage hissed. "They don't look newly corrupted."

"Form up!" Kael barked, slamming his shield into the ground. The impact rippled with a faint golden light, his protective ward activating. The others fell into position instantly: two swordsmen flanking him, the archer taking a higher position on the debris, the healer chanting softly behind them.

The first beast lunged, a wolf-like creature the size of a horse, its jaw unhinged wider than nature allowed. It slammed into Kael's shield with bone-rattling force, claws sparking against the barrier of light. Kael grunted but held firm.

"Left flank!" he shouted.

The second beast, smaller but faster, darted toward their side. One of the swordsmen met it head-on, his blade flashing as he slashed across its snout. Black blood hissed against the dirt, smoking where it landed. The creature howled and leapt again, only to meet a follow-up strike that sent it tumbling into the rubble.

The archer loosed a glowing arrow, thunk! straight into the third beast's eye. It shrieked and stumbled, thrashing violently. "Nice shot!" someone called.

"Don't celebrate yet!" Kael grunted as the first beast redoubled its assault. Its maw opened, a sphere of swirling wind forming inside, then burst forth in a compressed blast. The gale slammed into the adventurers, sending dust and pebbles flying.

The mage reacted instantly, thrusting her staff forward. "Aegis Tempus!"

A translucent barrier flared to life, catching the brunt of the attack, though the shockwave still threw them back several paces.

"By the gods, these things shouldn't be this strong," one of the warriors spat, wiping blood from his lip.

"They're feeding on the lingering dense mana residue left from the destruction," the mage replied sharply.

Kael ground his teeth. "Then we finish this fast."

He slammed his shield again, this time channelling light through its runes. "Radiant Bash!" he roared, charging forward. His shield struck the lead beast square in the chest, releasing a blinding flash that sent it yelping back, its body smoking where divine light had seared through corrupted flesh.

The others followed his momentum. Steel met fur, arrows whistled, and magic flared. The group fought with the efficiency of seasoned survivors, quick, coordinated, and brutal. Within minutes, one beast lay twitching on the ground, another fled limping into the forest beyond, and the third, half-blind and burned vanished into the ruins with a haunting wail.

Silence returned, broken only by the group's heavy breathing. The air stank of burnt fur and ozone.

Kael scanned the area, sword still raised. "Status?"

"All alive," the healer confirmed, wiping sweat from her brow. "Minor injuries only."

The mage, still clutching her staff, frowned as she refocused her spell. "The beasts are gone... but the human life sign remains. Faint, very faint. It's close."

Kael nodded, motioning for them to move. They followed the mage's guidance until they reached the base of a half-collapsed wall. There, half-buried under rubble and leaves, lay Gram his face pale, his breathing shallow, but alive.

"By the Light..." one of them whispered.

Kael knelt, brushing dirt from the man's face. "You've survived hell, haven't you?" he muttered.

"Get him up," the healer said quickly, already unpacking salves and bandages. "If we're lucky, he's the only one left to tell us what happened here."

As they lifted Gram from the debris, the group noticed even while out. Gram was holding tightly onto a piece of cloth, meanwhile the mage's light dimmed, flickering softly over the ruins. The battle had ended, but the unease remained.

Back in the present, a sudden scream tore through the night. Gram jolted upright, his voice raw and panicked, shattering the quiet air of the camp. The other adventurers instantly reached for their weapons, eyes darting around for threats. But when they realized the cry came from the wounded man by the fire, their tense shoulders slowly eased.

Kael exhaled, lowering his blade. He gave a nod toward one of his men and said, "Get him some water." His tone was strict, commanding yet calm, and the man obeyed at once.

Gram's breathing came in ragged bursts as his eyes adjusted to the dim glow of the campfire. The flickering light of the oil lamp held by one of the adventurers cast long shadows across their faces, tired, wary, but alert. He blinked, trying to steady his vision, and finally managed to take in his surroundings: a small encampment in the forest clearing, tents pitched in haste, weapons leaning close at hand.

The man who had gone to fetch water returned, hesitating at the edge of the firelight as he sensed the mood. He looked at Kael, who gave a simple nod. Wordlessly, the man approached and knelt beside Gram, offering the wooden cup.

The group remained silent as Gram took the waterskin, his trembling hands struggling to keep it steady.

No one spoke for a while. The only sounds were Gram's shallow breaths and the faint clinking of armor as the adventurers shifted uneasily.

Kael sat a short distance away, his eyes fixed on Gram with the steady patience of someone used to grief, someone who had seen this scene far too many times before.

"Drink," he said quietly.

Gram hesitated, then obeyed. The water was cool, refreshing, but it did nothing to soothe the burning in his chest. After a few gulps, he stopped, his grip tightening around the waterskin.

"You said..." he began, his voice hoarse. "I'm the only one?"

Kael nodded once, his tone even. "Aye. You were the only living soul in what was left of that town."

Gram stared at him, eyes wide with disbelief. Then he laughed, a dry, broken sound that quickly turned into a choked sob. "No... no, you're lying. My wife, my children—they were home. I just need to go back and .."

He tried to stand, but one of the adventurers gently pushed him back down. His body was still too weak, his injuries far from healed.

"Don't," the healer said softly, her voice firm but kind. "You won't find anyone there now. Rest while you can. You've been through enough."

Her words broke something in him. Gram lowered his head, shoulders trembling as he clutched the torn piece of cloth in his hand, the last remnant of his family. It was stained and tattered, but he recognized it: a scrap from his daughter's shawl.

"Why?" he whispered, voice barely audible over the fire. "Why did you save me? You should have let me die there. I've lost everything..."

No one answered. The adventurers exchanged uneasy glances but said nothing. They had all heard words like his before, survivors mourning more than they could bear.

Kael finally sighed and spoke, his tone heavy but calm. "Because the living still matter. The dead tell no tales, and your people deserve to have their story heard. You lived, so you'll carry their memory."

Gram didn't respond. He only stared into the flames, his expression hollow, tears silently trailing down his cheeks.

Kael and his group made no move to further question him. The camp grew quiet once more. They all knew the look of grief when they saw it. No spell, no healing salve, could mend a wound that ran through the soul.