

Guardian gods 681

Chapter 681:

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.

The fire crackled softly, throwing wavering shadows across their faces. Somewhere beyond the ring of light, a night bird called out, then fell silent again.

Gram didn't know how long he sat there. The world around him felt distant, as though muffled behind a wall of sorrow. Eventually, he pushed himself to his feet, the motion slow and uncertain. He bowed his head toward the group, his voice rough but steady.

"Thank you for saving me," he said. "I have nothing on me to repay such a debt."

For a heartbeat, no one spoke. Then Kael stood up, his booming laughter breaking the quiet like thunder. "A debt?" he said, striding over and giving Gram's shoulder a firm pat. "You've no need to repay anything, friend. You being alive is enough. Besides," he grinned, flashing teeth in the firelight "we came away with quite the haul from those ruins left behind."

The words made Gram's body go tense. His hand curled into a fist at his side. For a moment, anger flared, a flicker of resentment at the thought of strangers scavenging the resting place of those he'd lost. But just as quickly, the fire inside him dimmed. What good would anger do now?

He exhaled slowly, shoulders sagging as he turned to face Kael. "I see," he said quietly. "Then I take it you weren't sent by the king, nor by the fools who call themselves nobles of this region?"

Kael's grin faded slightly, though he didn't answer.

Gram went on, his tone steady but hollow. "You must be one of those on a quest, hoping to earn the gods' favor, perhaps to gain their blessings."

Before Kael could respond, Gram lifted his gaze, meeting the adventurer's eyes with a look that carried both weariness and something darker.

"Unfortunately," he said, voice low, "I have to inform you that this part of our land holds no cursed beings. You're not the first of your kind to come searching these past months. Many have passed through, hunters, priest's, fools." He paused, then added with quiet bitterness, "But if you insist on chasing damnation, I can tell you where to find it."

The fire popped loudly between them, a spark leaping into the night air before dying out.

Kael said nothing at first. He just stared at Gram, the warmth from before gone, replaced by a steady, unreadable gaze. The firelight danced across his face, casting deep shadows that made his eyes glint like cold steel.

When he finally spoke, his voice was low, even, but there was no trace of his earlier humor.

"You're right," Kael said. "We are among those seeking the gods' favor. But our purpose has... changed."

He straightened slightly, his tone carrying a weight that made even his men glance up.

"After the recent disasters, some lords, maybe even a few nobles worth their salt started paying for people like us. Other regions hit by this disaster may have survivors scattered, hidden, or trapped. Our task is simple."

Kael's eyes never left Gram as he stepped closer, the space between them shrinking.

"We find the survivors," he said quietly, "and we bring them back."

The flickering fire cast their shadows together, one tall and steady, the other trembling. Kael leaned in, close enough that Gram could feel the man's breath and the faint scent of steel oil and smoke.

"You won't make this difficult for us, will you?"

Gram's legs nearly buckled under the weight of that gaze. The other adventurers were watching now, silent but alert, their hands hovering near weapons or charms, not in open threat, but as if expecting him to do something foolish.

His heart pounded in his chest. He could feel the sweat forming at his temples, the tremor in his hands. His fingers brushed against the tattered cloth he still held, the scrap of his daughter's clothing and his breathing steadied for a moment.

He swallowed hard, forcing the words out past the lump in his throat.

"I... I cannot leave with you," he said, his tone trembling but resolute. "I have a score to settle and questions that need answering. Until then..." He drew in a shaky breath. "I can't leave these lands."

The air between them grew taut, thick with unspoken tension. The only sound was the crackling fire and the faint hiss of wind passing through the trees.

Kael's expression didn't change. He simply studied Gram searching, perhaps, for the truth in his eyes. His men shifted uneasily, waiting for an order that didn't come.

Finally, Kael straightened. The faint glint of amusement that once softened his face was gone, replaced by something colder, the authority of a man used to being obeyed.

"I'm afraid," Kael said, his voice calm but carrying the weight of command, "that the choice to leave or not is no longer yours to make. That decision lies with me and with my men."

The statement wasn't shouted. It didn't need to be. The certainty in his tone alone carried the edge of a blade.

Gram felt it, the truth of it. These were not men who made idle threats. They had seen too much, lost too much, to be swayed by sentiment. He could feel the eyes of the others on him: hard, trained, assessing. Men and women who would follow Kael's word without hesitation.

But then again, what did he have left to lose?

A hollow laugh escaped his throat, more a scoff than a sound of humor. He tightened his grip on the torn scrap of cloth in his hand, his daughter's cloth, the last thing left of her until his knuckles turned white.

"Like I said before," Gram muttered, his voice trembling but defiant, "I've met many of your kind. Mercenaries, adventurers, scavengers of tragedy, all the same. Profit drives you. And in this case..." He looked up, his hollow eyes reflecting the firelight. "I'm the profit. I'm the one you need alive to collect your pay."

The camp fell silent again. The fire popped, and for a brief instant the shadows danced over Kael's face, making him look like a man carved from iron.

Gram drew in a slow, shaking breath. "I have a score to settle," he said. "With my king. With the man who promised to protect us, who swore before all that we'd be safe."

His voice grew stronger with every word, his grief sharpening into fury. "The disaster that took my family... that tore my people apart... I know he's behind it, or at least, that he let it happen. I need to meet him — to look him in the eyes and ask him why."

Gram's voice rose, not in volume but in conviction. The trembling was gone now. Only hatred remained, cold and clear. "I doubt I'll live to see that day. But I still have to try. For my family. For the people who died screaming under the weight of a mistake that wasn't theirs."

He was met with the shocked stares of the others, but it was Kael's gaze that froze the space, cold filled with all predatory intent.

Kael's fist came so fast Gram and everyone else barely had time to register it. The punch slammed into Gram's stomach with a sound like a struck bell. He doubled over, the world narrowing to a hot, tearing pain, and bile rose; he retched onto the dirt as the campfire's light trembled over him.

Kael let out a slow breath and crouched until he was eye-level with Gram. He grabbed Gram by the hair and hauled his head up so Gram met his gaze. "Don't pretend you've figured me out," Kael spat, voice

low. "Know your place." His thumb dug into Gram's cheek; the motion was more ownership than cruelty. "Yes, you're the prize. Yes, we'll get paid. But we also took fine things from the ruins, things worth more than your stubbornness. You're useful only so long as you behave. Annoy me, and I'll put you down.

Where Gram had stood bolstered by bravado not a heartbeat earlier, there was only raw, shimmering fear. His bravest posture dissolved; his eyes darted for help and found none. Kael's mouth twitched into something like satisfaction. "That's the kind of thing I like to see, fear. It keeps people where they belong."

Gram's earlier bravado drained out of him like water. Fear sharpened every sense: the sting in his gut, the metallic tang at the back of his tongue, the rasp of Kael's breath. He clutched the scrap of cloth until it bit into his palm; it was the only tether to what he had left. He gagged once more, then sucked in air, trying to steady himself.

When Kael released him, Gram fell forward, hands on the ground, wincing. He tasted dirt and blood and ash, but under it all was a steady, stubborn ember. He forced himself to lift his head, to meet Kael's cold look.

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The words that came were hoarse, almost swallowed by pain, but they were steady. "You can kill me," Gram managed. "You can take your coin and your trinkets. But you'll never take what I need from that man, not while I breathe." He spat the words out like a challenge and, for a moment, the camp felt the pull between two certainties: Kael's control and Gram's desperate purpose.

Kael regarded him for a long, steady beat. Around them, the men shifted uneasily, hands brushing the hilts of blades and the grips of crossbows. The tension in the air was thick, waiting for Kael to make a move.

Then Kael's mouth tilted, not into a smile, but something close. A dry, humorless sound escaped him: a short, restrained laugh.

"Since you're so stubborn," he said at last, his tone almost casual, "clean yourself up. I've got a proposal you might actually be interested in."

He straightened and walked back to his spot near the fire, lowering himself onto a flat rock that served as a seat. One of his men wordlessly handed him a plate piled with roasted meat and vegetables. Kael accepted it without looking up, already dismissing Gram from his immediate concern.

For a moment, Gram just stood there, still half doubled from the pain in his gut, unsure if this was a trick or a reprieve. Kael didn't glance his way again. The man ate with slow, methodical bites, his expression neutral as if the violent outburst moments ago had been nothing more than routine.

Taking the opportunity, Gram gathered what dignity he could. He poured the remaining water from his cup over his hands and face, wiping away the sweat, vomit, and dirt clinging to his skin. The coolness stung, but it grounded him. The pain in his stomach dulled to a low, persistent ache.

When he was done, one of the adventurers wordlessly gestured toward a spare log near the fire. Gram hesitated, then took the seat, the heat warming his face and hands. Across from him, Kael tore another piece of bread and chewed slowly, his sharp eyes fixed on Gram over the rim of his plate.

"First," Kael began, his voice even now, no anger, no mockery, just quiet focus. "Is there anything you can tell us about the disaster that struck your home? Something you saw, heard... anything?"

The shift in tone caught Gram off guard. There was something behind Kael's words, not curiosity alone, but concern. Even the others seemed to listen more closely.

Gram frowned, searching his memory. His mind felt foggy, like a nightmare just out of reach. "I..." He swallowed hard, his throat dry. "I don't remember seeing anything. There was no sign. No warning."

Kael's brow furrowed slightly. "Nothing at all?"

Gram shook his head. "We were asleep," he said quietly. "All of us. The night was calm, peaceful even. Then..." He hesitated, eyes distant as the memory flickered back. "We woke up... and everything was gone."

Kael leaned forward a little. "Gone?"

"Yes," Gram murmured, his voice trembling faintly. "The ground, our homes , everything. It was like the earth had been torn away. We were... in the sky. Among the clouds."

A murmur rippled through Kael's men. Even those hardened by years of strange sightings and battles against the cursed shifted uneasily at the description. Kael didn't move. His eyes narrowed, studying Gram's face for signs of delirium or deceit.

"In the sky," he repeated slowly, as though tasting the words.

Gram nodded, his hands curling tightly around the cloth in his lap. "We fell... one by one. I don't know how I survived. Maybe I wasn't meant to."

The campfire popped loudly, sending a spray of sparks into the night. No one spoke. Even Kael's expression softened, if only for a heartbeat, before the mask returned.

Gram finished recounting his story, the words hanging heavy in the still air. Kael gave a single, thoughtful nod, his expression unreadable. For a long moment, neither spoke. The crackling of the campfire filled the silence, the sound of wood splitting and embers sighing against the cold night.

Gram couldn't stand it. The waiting. The quiet. The way Kael's sharp eyes seemed to look through him rather than at him. His fingers twitched restlessly over the scrap of cloth in his lap. Finally, unable to bear it any longer, he asked, "What proposal do you have for me?"

Kael didn't even look up from his plate. "Let me finish my meal," he said, his tone calm but edged with authority that left no room for argument.

Gram fell silent, frustration simmering beneath his grief. He watched Kael eat, slow, deliberate bites, as though every motion served to buy him time to think. The others around the fire had relaxed somewhat, but their ears remained tuned to the conversation, sensing the weight of something important.

Kael wasn't stalling out of indifference. He was thinking. Turning over every word Gram had said, every possibility that might connect the strange events to the wider pattern he'd begun to notice across the lands. He did have a proposal for the broken man before him, but it rested on fragile ground, little more than his own deduction and what scraps of truth he could piece together.

Finally, after a long silence, Kael pushed aside the empty plate and took a cup of water. He drank, swished it once in his mouth, and swallowed, as though cleansing himself before speaking.

Then he fixed his gaze on Gram. "The disaster that struck your home," Kael began slowly, his tone measured, "was no accident."

Gram froze.

"It was a deliberate act," Kael continued. "A punishment directed at your king for his past transgressions. Everything and everyone else caught in it..." He paused, his eyes darkening. "...were just collateral."

The words hit like stones thrown into still water.

Gram's breath hitched. His hand clenched around the scrap of cloth, the fabric creasing between his fingers. "That useless king," he hissed through gritted teeth. "I knew he was involved... But" He stopped himself. He knew his king's power, his influence, his reach. Who could possibly dare to punish a man like that?

A thought flickered across his mind, a faint, dreadful spark that grew into certainty. His eyes widened as the name, the race, formed in his mind.

Kael caught the change in his expression. He said nothing, only gave a slow, grim nod confirming the suspicion that had just dawned on Gram.

All color drained from Gram's face. His hands trembled. His lips parted, but no words came. The firelight danced weakly across his hollow features, reflecting in eyes now stripped of all defiance.

If before he'd clung to the faint, desperate delusion of standing before his king, of demanding answers, of finding justice, that illusion now shattered completely.

Because now he knew who had truly done it.

And no mortal, no army, no king, could ever hope to stand before the godlings.

The weight of that realization crushed him more surely than Kael's blow ever could. He bowed his head, unable to even speak, the cloth of his daughter's garment trembling in his clenched hands.

A roar threatened to tear itself from Gram's throat, a raw, wordless sound of grief and fury but the cold sharpness in Kael's eyes froze it there. His teeth clenched; his chest heaved with the effort of holding it back.

Why? Why had Kael told him this? It had been easier before, when he'd had his delusion to cling to the fragile, comforting lie that all of it had been the fault of a corrupt king, a man he could hate, confront, maybe even "strike" down. Now that illusion was gone, shattered by the truth Kael had dropped on him like a blade.

Gram's shoulders sagged, his head bowed low. The firelight cast his shadow long and thin, a broken outline trembling against the dirt. Shame pressed down on him like a weight; his weakness, once hidden behind anger and defiance, lay bare for everyone to see.

Kael watched him, but there was no triumph in his gaze. No satisfaction at breaking a man's spirit. His expression was grim, touched with something that looked almost like pity, though his face remained composed. When he finally spoke again, his tone was quieter, and softer.

"All hope is not yet lost for you, Gram."

The words barely reached him. Gram didn't move, didn't even seem to hear. His despair was a heavy fog swallowing every sound. But Kael went on.

"I have... friends," Kael said after a moment, choosing his words carefully. "People in high positions. The ones who employ me and others like me, they're not blind to what's happening. There are whispers of a plan forming... a reckoning. Justice, for those responsible."

He let that hang in the air, his gaze locked on Gram's bowed figure.

"Your king," Kael added softly, "and the ones above, are not beyond reach."

The faint crackle of the fire filled the silence that followed. Slowly, almost painfully, Gram lifted his head. His eyes hollow moments ago now flickered with a faint, desperate spark.

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He couldn't form words. His lips parted once, twice, but only air escaped. Still, his eyes said everything. Is it true? they asked. Can there really be justice?

Kael met that look in silence. He didn't smile, didn't promise. But his steady gaze was enough, an unspoken assurance that, for now, there might still be a thread of purpose left for Gram to hold on to.

The fire between them crackled and hissed, throwing fleeting sparks into the night sky tiny, dying stars against a sea of darkness.

Kael's expression hardened as Gram's question broke the silence.

"Even the godlings?" Gram asked, his voice unsteady, half in fear and half in awe.

Kael held his gaze and nodded once, firm and deliberate.

That single gesture shattered what little restraint Gram had left. He surged forward, dropping to his knees in front of Kael, the firelight catching the moisture in his eyes. "Then, tell me," he said, the words tumbling out between shallow breaths. "What role do I play in this? How can I help?"

For the first time since they met, Kael's stern features softened. A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, not mockery, but approval. He reached out and rested a heavy, calloused hand on Gram's shoulder, the touch grounding and strangely intimate.

"You need not do much," Kael said quietly, his tone carrying the gravity of something sacred. "All that's required of you is to follow us, out of your own will and your own choice. That last part is important. It must be something you want to do... something you decide to do."

For a moment, Gram simply stared, the meaning settling in. Then realization dawned, subtle but sure.

"This is why you didn't force me," he murmured. "Why you threatened my life... but never truly intended to drag me away."

Kael's nod was slow, deliberate. "Your compliance matters more than your body, Gram. The ones who gave the order, they need willing hearts. Not slaves. If all goes as planned..." His eyes turned toward the horizon, his voice dropping low, almost reverent. "We humans will finally stand with our backs straight before the godlings."

The air between them felt heavier than before, the weight of something larger than either of them settling in. Even Kael's men, who had been watching in silence, shifted uneasily at those words. They all knew what it meant to challenge beings like them.

For a heartbeat, nothing moved but the fire, its light flickering across the dirt and faces of men standing on the edge of blasphemy.

Then Gram straightened his back. The despair that had gripped him since the moment he woke was gone, replaced by something sharper, conviction, fierce and alive. His voice was steady, resolute.

"I agree," he said. "I, Gram Maif, agree to follow Kael and his crew of my own will."

Kael's smile widened, though his eyes remained cold and distant, as if already seeing the road ahead. "Good," he said simply. "Then it begins."

The godlings, blissfully unaware of the humans quiet schemes and ambitions for them, continued their journey toward the southern continent. They traveled in scattered flocks and pods radiant, proud, and curious about the uncharted lands that lay ahead.

The first to arrive were the Merfolk godlings, their serpentine forms gliding gracefully through the turquoise waters that bordered the southern coast. The Harpies followed soon after, their wings slicing through the clouds as they descended in dazzling formation. Behind them came the Apelings, their powerful limbs carrying them across the rocky passes and dense jungles with ease, some on their flying mounts. Lastly, under the crimson hue of dusk, came the Werewolves, their howls echoing across the plains like a herald of wild divinity.

But what awaited them was not an untouched paradise they thought it would be. Upon setting fin, claw, or foot upon the continent, the godlings encountered something both amusing and intriguing, a world where humans had grown bold enough to claim dominion not only over the earth but also the heavens.

The godlings' destination was the Misty Forest, a sacred place where the last demigod still reside in. Yet to reach it, they needed to pass through a scattering of human cities and settlements that dotted the landscape like embers in the dark.

It was there, upon nearing those borders, that the unexpected occurred.

Whenever a godling approached, whether soaring high above or striding across the plains, they were swiftly intercepted by human troops. These soldiers were not the frail mortals of old stories; they were organized, disciplined, and armed with strange tools of flight. Humans now commanded winged beasts, their riders clad in armor that gleamed under the sun, circling the skies with practiced precision.

To the godlings amusement, the humans raised banners bearing the seal of their Empire, and shouted proclamations from the ground and sky alike:

"By decree of the Imperial Crown, the lands and skies of the southern continent belong to humankind! Passage through any domain requires authorization from the Empire!"

The audacity of such a declaration made some godlings laugh aloud. Others narrowed their eyes, their divine pride bristling at the thought of mortals daring to dictate their movement.

And yet, there was something captivating in it too, the sight of fragile creatures standing defiant before beings born from the breath of gods. The humans resolve in front of them was not born of ignorance, but of confidence in themselves.

The godlings were amused by the humans bold proclamations, their mortal pride and rigid order a strange contrast to the godlings boundless nature. Yet among them, an eccentric group's interest was piqued, not by the humans themselves, but by the creatures they rode upon.

These were the Druids, the keepers of nature among the godlings. Their curiosity often bordered on obsession, and they had long known of humanity's struggles to tame beasts. The idea that humans had mastered flying mounts, creatures fierce and free by nature was almost unthinkable.

And yet, here they were: humans soaring confidently through the sky, mounted on great feathered or scaled beasts, as though born to rule the air itself.

Ignoring the shouting soldiers and their demands for "permits" and "authorization," the druids drifted closer, their attention fully fixed upon the winged creatures. With gentle gestures and murmured tones of old nature-tongue, they reached out, establishing contact not with the riders, but with the mounts themselves.

The other godlings groaned. They had seen this pattern before.

Among the godlings, it was well-known that druids were terribly naïve and emotionally volatile, quick to marvel, but just as quick to rage when they encountered something they deemed unnatural. Their empathy for beasts often outweighed their sense of restraint.

The druids' eyes darkened as their thoughts intertwined with those of the flying creatures. What they sensed within made their hearts ache and their anger surge.

These mounts were hollow, their minds dulled, their spirits bound. Whatever the humans had done to make such wild creatures so obedient had carved deep scars within their essence. There was no joy in their flight, no freedom in their wings only submission.

The druids' compassion curdled into fury. Their fingers twitched with the beginnings of a spell, one that would awaken the suppressed will of the creatures and turn them against their riders. They imagined the beasts throwing the humans from their saddles, breaking free from their bindings, returning to the wild skies where they belonged.

But before they could act, the other godlings moved.

A flicker of energy flashed through the air, and one by one, the druids collapsed unconscious, their bodies caught mid-incantation.

The humans, confused but unharmed, had no idea how narrowly they had escaped a massacre from above.

The intervention was not an act of mercy. The other godlings had not saved the humans out of compassion, they had simply wanted to avoid unnecessary conflict and, perhaps more importantly, to keep their amusement unspoiled.

One of the Harpies clicked her tongue in irritation as she dragged an unconscious druid out of the air.

"Foolish, sentimental things," she muttered. "Always trying to fix what isn't theirs to mend."

Another godling chuckled, his eyes following the distant human riders.

"Let them play at mastery for now. The sky remembers who it truly belongs to."

The southern continent and its empire were a secluded world unto themselves isolated, self-sufficient, and long withdrawn from the currents of the outside lands. Though whispers of the godlings had reached them, spoken of in texts or carried by the rare traveler, these mortals had never truly seen one. Unlike the other continents, where the godlings' presence was woven into daily life and faith, the people here regarded them with curiosity rather than reverence.

To the godlings, this was something entirely new.

When the imperial soldiers barred their passage and demanded compliance with mortal laws, the godlings did not feel insulted. Instead, they were delighted. The notion that humans, mere mortals would stand before them and dictate terms was unheard of. Not once in all their long histories had humanity dared to challenge their divine will so directly.

It was refreshing.

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Their pride, instead of wounded, was tickled by this audacity. The experience was strange and exhilarating, something that broke the endless monotony of their existence. They began to whisper among themselves, laughter bubbling in their language, amused by the thought of playing along with these mortal rules.

For once, they would be the guests in another's game.

Soon, their original purpose, the journey toward the Misty Forest was all but forgotten. The godlings' curiosity shifted entirely toward the humans and their peculiar way of life. They wanted to see more of them, to walk their streets, to study their customs, to feel the pulse of this empire that had the courage to look gods in the eye.

They imagined the tales they would tell upon returning home: stories of an empire that treated godlings as travelers, not deities; of mortals who dared to govern the sky. The very thought of the envy that would stir among their kin filled them with childlike excitement.

And so, across the southern continent, cities soon found themselves brimming with visitors, godlings strolling through markets, observing rituals, and mingling freely with the curious populace. The air itself seemed charged with a new, strange energy: a mingling of mortal awe and divine amusement.

The roleplay had begun the moment the humans halted their journey. But not all godlings were blinded by mirth. Some among them sharper, more discerning minds noticed the subtle tension underlying the humans actions. The way the soldiers moved. The careful placement of their aerial patrols. The hidden glint of magical wards buried beneath the earth.

This was not mere formality. It was a test, perhaps even a trap. The godlings exchanged knowing glances. The empire was observing them, probing for weakness, perhaps gauging how divine patience might be stretched. The discovery only made the godling's amusement deepen.

"So the humans on this side would play games with us," one murmured with a grin.

"Then let us play with them in return," another replied, eyes glinting with mischief.

And thus, the godlings decided they would dance along to the human's carefully laid plans, but on their own terms. They would twist the game, turn every human maneuver into a story worth remembering.

It had been centuries since they had felt such thrill, the delicious unpredictability of mortals, the joy of a world that did not tremble at their feet.

Whatever scheme the empire had set, the godlings had already chosen their response: they would play, they would learn, and they would have their fun, no matter how dangerous the game beneath it all might be.

Before the godlings ever set foot in the human cities, they decided to amuse themselves by taking on the role of the proud and untouchable beings, the beings that mortals once feared to look upon. When the imperial troops blocked their path, the godlings confronted them with haughty laughter and sharp, disdainful words.

"Do you understand those who stand before you?" one of the godlings asked, her voice resonating like a bell of thunder.

"Do you comprehend the weight of your insolence?" another added, the ground trembling faintly beneath his words.

The humans, however, proved to be even more arrogant than the godlings expected. The soldiers neither cowered nor faltered. Instead, they scoffed.

"The skies and lands of the southern continent belong to the Empire," their captain declared coldly. "No being, divine or otherwise moves through them without the Emperor's sanction."

The audacity of it delighted the godlings. After a short exchange of mock threats and barbed remarks, the godlings decided to play along, adopting the air of elders humoring a child's defiance.

With a few chuckles and deliberately theatrical sighs, they dispersed across the empire, choosing to "abide" by the humans' laws. In truth, they only wished to see what would happen next.

The reaction among the human leaders, however, was far less amused.

The nobles who governed the cities and border settlements watched the godling's arrival with unease. Their mere presence was like a storm disruptive, unpredictable, and impossible to control. Each godling who took residence in a city became the centre of unwanted attention, drawing crowds of curious citizens, scholars, and merchants alike. Order began to fray under the weight of disturbance caused.

This was not what the nobles had anticipated.

Long before the godling's arrival, an imperial decree had already been dispatched across the southern lands. In it, the Emperor warned of the godling's approach and instructed his vassals to block their passage to test their reactions, to provoke their pride if necessary.

The Emperor himself had spoken no words of open conflict, but those who served him understood the unspoken message clearly enough. They believed this was a test, perhaps even a trap. The Emperor, ever shrewd and silent, wished to observe how the godlings would behave when denied reverence.

And his nobles were all too eager to carry out this task.

Their eagerness stemmed from their own festering resentment. For years, a faction of vampire godlings had settled within the empire's borders, beings who had begun to form a nation of their own, building dark spires and gathering followers under the empire's passive gaze. To the nobles, their presence was an insult, a violation of mortal sovereignty.

Yet the Emperor had done nothing.

His silence was infuriating. Many whispered that the vampires' lineage and ancient status had earned them untouchable privilege, and that even the Emperor dared not move against them.

Thus, when the new godlings approached, the nobles saw a chance for vindication. If they could provoke these outsiders, force them to act out, to reveal divine arrogance before mortal eyes it might justify harsher measures not only against the newcomers, but against all godlings under the Empire's watch.

They expected the godlings to rage, to crush their soldiers, to burn the skies with their power.

But instead, the godlings laughed.

They laughed, bowed mockingly, and wandered into the cities like travellers visiting a carnival. Their decision to play along was a humiliation the nobles had not foreseen, a mockery of all their preparation.

Now, as the godlings mingled freely across the continent, the nobles could only seethe behind forced smiles.

While the nobles wrestled with the chaos spreading through their lands, the Emperor himself was far removed from their troubles, laughing softly in the grand marble halls of his palace.

He was playing a game of catch.

The air rang with the delighted shrieks and giggles of the palace maids and a few favoured consorts as they darted around him. The Emperor's eyes were covered by a strip of fine silk, his bare chest gleaming faintly under the golden lantern light.

"Run faster," he teased, reaching out with mock ferocity as the women danced just beyond his reach. The sound of their laughter echoed like chimes through the hall, their joy both genuine and desperate.

Every now and then, an official would approach the great doors, kneeling with reports of unrest the godling's unpredictable behaviour, the nobles' frustration, the growing stir among the cities. The Emperor would listen, head tilted, a faint smile tugging at his lips. Then, with a dismissive wave, he would send the official away and return to his childish game as if nothing in the world concerned him.

The game went on for some time, until at last, the Emperor froze mid-motion.

The laughter died instantly.

"Enough," he said quietly, his tone suddenly cold and stripped of playfulness. "I would like to be alone."

The maids and consorts hesitated, exchanging glances of disappointment. They had hoped to charm him further, to catch his attention long enough to secure his favour or perhaps bear the imperial heir that would lift them from mere attendants to women of power.

But the Emperor's expression made it clear the moment had passed.

They bowed and withdrew in silence, leaving him standing alone in the vast chamber.

Slowly, he reached up and removed the silken blindfold. The strip of cloth slipped from his fingers to the polished floor, revealing eyes that gleamed with something far sharper than the earlier laughter a cold, calculating awareness, the kind that came from a man who had survived too much to ever truly rest.

Gone was the image of a frivolous ruler surrounded by playthings.

In his place stood Emperor Chen, the man the world had almost forgotten.

Once, he had stood on the brink of history. He could have carved his name among this world's record, shaping the fate of nations. But when the world trembled and his moment came, he chose to step back to yield rather than burn. Cowardice, many called it. Yet that very cowardice had kept him alive where countless others, braver and bolder, had perished.

His reflection shimmered faintly in the polished obsidian floor, the faint resemblance unmistakable.

The sharp features. The pale, ageless eyes.

This was Chen, first son of Murmur, and elder brother to Queen Yuki of the people of Björn.

The Emperor had read every report, heard every complaint, listened to every trembling noble who came before him and not once did his expression change.

He had no quarrel with the godlings. Their antics neither bothered nor alarmed him. If anything, their unpredictability pleased him.

Chapter 685:

He could hear the confusion in his officials, whispers echoing through the halls of his palace, the endless speculation about his motives. They believed he had acted against the godlings, that the imperial order to obstruct their path was meant to humble these divine beings, to make them uncomfortable or provoke their wrath.

But they could not have been more wrong.

Chen's actions had never been directed at the godlings.

His true target lay far deeper, the real owner of this so-called great empire.

"Owner" It was the only word that truly fit.

For the throne of the southern continent had never truly belonged to any of its emperors. Every ruler who had sat upon it, every dynasty that had claimed it, had done so under the quiet manipulation of a single, unseen hand, the one who shaped the empire's rise from behind the curtain, pulling strings.

That hand belonged to his father.

To Murmur.

Chen's jaw tightened as the name crossed his mind, the air around him seeming to chill.

His father, the whispering voice, the architect of countless fates in the empire had vanished years ago. No farewell, no sign, not even the faintest ripple in the ambient mana to suggest where he had gone. It was as if the great Murmur had simply ceased to exist.

Maybe for other's, that disappearance was a mystery. For Chen, it was a wound that never closed.

He had lived his entire life beneath Murmur's shadow, half in reverence, half in fear. His father's absence should have freed him, but instead it left a void that festered with unease.

And in that gnawing uncertainty, something else had answered.

His turmoil, his dread, his obsessive longing for the truth all of it drew the attention of cursed spirits, hungry things born from despair and madness. They came to him in whispers, in dreams, in the long hours of his sleepless nights, drawn by the scent of his grief twisted by fear.

But Chen had not fallen. Not yet.

His will was strong. He clung to sanity the way a drowning man clings to driftwood. The cursed spirit that had taken root in him had never fully possessed him, for two reasons.

The first was his strength, the power he trained hard to acquire the past centuries.

The second reason... was the nightmare.

A nightmare that had haunted him for centuries, vivid, relentless, and far too precise to be dismissed as mere imagination. It came to him unbidden, unchanged no matter the era, no matter how far he ran. It clung to him like a brand. It reminded him of the line he must never cross, even as it shielded him from the cursed spirits that forever gnawed at his soul.

For in that nightmare lay a glimpse, just a glimpse of the origin goddess Mahu as she applied a miniscule of her power in the mortal realm.

It was a memory from long ago, buried deep beneath time and regret. The war in which Björn ascended to godhood. Chen had been there, not as a soldier, but as a tool, sent to carry out his father's will. He kept his distance from the main battlefield, remaining in the shadowed fringes with the small escort assigned to him. They believed themselves safe. Hidden. Irrelevant to the greater clash of both opposing kingdoms.

But everything changed when the Silver Kingdom, cornered and desperate in their struggle against Björn, committed the unthinkable. They forced the descent of the origin goddess into the body of their queen.

The moment Mahu's essence touched mortal flesh, the world itself seemed to shudder.

Chen, though far from the front lines, felt her immediately. Her presence did not simply spread, it blanketed. A pressure vast and ancient unfurled across the land like an ocean overturning. It was not directed at him. It wasn't directed at anyone. Yet it revealed them all the same. Every soldier, every hidden watcher, even those who believed themselves beyond notice like him were suddenly, painfully aware that they stood exposed before something that was not meant to walk the mortal plane.

The tiny cavern where Chen hid with the men who accompanied him became meaningless. Their breaths, their heartbeats, their very thoughts reverberated beneath her awareness. Mahu wasn't searching for them, of course she wasn't. They were beneath her concern.

Her might was simply so absolute that hiding became impossible.

And above it all... the goddess's gaze never fell on him. She did not even acknowledge him. Yet that indifference was more terrifying than any hatred.

For in that moment, Chen understood the truth: To a being like Mahu, mortals were not enemies, they were not obstacles, they were not even insects. They were dust in a storm she did not notice she created.

But Chen's nightmare, the true source of it came after what he first witnessed.

Even though the goddess's mere presence had already crushed his courage, it was the moment she acknowledged the mortal shell she wore that shattered something inside him forever. He saw her glance down at the weak vessel the Silver Kingdom had offered her. The queen's body strained, trembling under the impossible weight of divinity. Mahu did not comfort her host nor attempt to stabilize the form. She simply lifted one hand a casual, effortless motion and flicked her wrist.

What followed was a curved, crescent-shaped wave of energy, pale and luminous like a sliver of the moon.

It didn't merely tear through the battlefield, it rewrote it.

Stone turned to dust. Forests folded like paper under a flame. The earth itself curled and peeled away, creating scars in the landscape so deep they were turned to rivers by the world spirits who mended the land. An entire regiment, thousands of warriors ceased to exist between one breath and the next.

And Chen understood, with a clarity more horrifying than any nightmare: This was the enemy his father had told him to confront.

This was the being he was expected to "deal with."

His cowardice did not come slowly. It arrived all at once, he felt his sanity wobble under the strain of comprehending such divine power, power not at its fullest, not even at its focused, purposeful peak, but in a throwaway gesture.

Chen remembered screaming for a full retreat, his voice cracking, his hands shaking. The soldiers with him, men loyal to his father and sister hesitated only for a moment before obeying. They trusted him.

And that trust sealed their fate.

For when the panic in his veins finally settled into a venomous calculation, Chen made a choice that would stain the rest of his life. To hide the truth of his terror, he cut them down. Every man who had witnessed his breakdown, every soldier who had seen his fear, died by his hand. Their bodies were left in the wilderness, and Chen returned home alone.

He told his father a tale polished and deeply false. A tale of tactical errors, of enemy ambushes, of a retreat forced by circumstance.

It was a lie, and both father and son knew it.

But neither spoke of it.

Not long after, his sister Yuki was sent to that same distant land. Unlike him, she did not bend or break. She rose. She thrived. She carved her own name into that foreign soil, freeing herself from their father's shadow and becoming a queen recognized by her own merit.

Chen lived, but he did not escape.

The war lived inside him still. That moment when the goddess used her power was etched into the core of his being, a scar deeper than the wounds carved into the land itself. The memory gnawed at him, eroding his consciousness, driving him to the edge of madness again and again.

There were nights, countless, suffocating nights when Chen felt his soul begin to freeze, as if the divine moonlight from that long-ago gesture had reached across centuries to clasp him by the heart.

And every time he remembered, he shuddered.

He never truly left that battlefield, Part of him is still kneeling there,

broken beneath the shadow of a goddess who didn't even know he existed.

But he held on.

He survived the nights when his soul felt brittle, when the memory of that divine gesture threatened to freeze him from the inside out. He clawed his way through terror, through sleepless eras, through the erosion of his sanity and in enduring that torment, something changed.

The image of the goddess, once a source of suffocating dread, became... a pillar he leaned on. A reminder of scale, beacon and a goal.

And when he finally emerged from those centuries of suffering, when he no longer broke down at the thought of her power, a faint trace remained within him.

A shadow of divinity, not her power, not even a fragment; merely the imprint of her existence but even that was a treasure beyond measure.

He began to study it obsessively, he built his entire philosophy around it. He refined his techniques, reshaped his cultivation, and forged his body and mind according to what he remembered of her overwhelming presence.

And through that relentless pursuit, he climbed higher than he had ever dreamed.

Chapter 686

Now, Chen stood at his current peak, fifth stage mastery, elevated so close to the sixth that he could feel the barrier thinning beneath his fingertips. The next realm was not a distant aspiration. It hovered just within reach, a fragile window separating mortal from transcendent.

So thin.

So infuriatingly thin.

And yet no matter how he pushed, he could not pierce it.

His breath stalled. A cold tremor crawled up his spine.

Because he felt it again.

That presence.

Chen slowly tilted his head, and there it was. The familiar, horrific visage twisted by centuries of resentment: the cursed spirit that had haunted him for so long. Its shape flickered at the edge of vision, its face a grotesque mirror of the fear he once held.

It watched him with hollow, knowing eyes.

Chen's jaw tightened.

He already understood, at least vaguely, that his stagnation had something to do with this spirit. That it anchored him, just as the nightmare had. That something in his soul remained chained to the terror he once felt.

And as the cursed spirit leaned closer, its breath cold. Chen felt the boundary of the sixth stage mock him like a thin sheet of ice, present, fragile, and unbreakable.

For now.

Chen scoffed as a wave of energy emerged from him with his at the center, the cursed spirit sensing the energy howled as its figure blurred as it went back to its constant, everpresent state.

Chen sat down on his throne, his hand tracing the design of the throne. He had long accepted his fate as a puppet king, his crown little more than an ornament, his throne a stage upon which others moved him as they pleased.

For years, he had played his role obediently, bound by invisible strings woven by his father, Murmur, and the Four Great Clans, ancient families whose loyalty to his father stretched back to an age before the empire itself had even drawn breath.

They were not simply nobles; they were the pillars of Murmur's design, entrusted with secrets and power that transcended mortal comprehension. Each clan had once been blessed Murmur himself, bound by a vow of eternal service.

And so it was no surprise these so-called loyalists had hidden things from Chen.

When rumors first reached him of his father's disappearance, the Four Clans acted as though nothing had changed. They continued their duties, issued decrees in Murmur's name, and whispered his praises in the temple halls. To them, the absence of his father who ruled behind the throne was a matter not to be spoken of.

It took every resource Chen possessed, every bribe, threat, and secret channel within the imperial court to uncover the truth. The Four Clans knew, and they had chosen to keep it from him.

That was when Chen finally confirmed what no one dared to say aloud: Murmur was truly gone.

The discovery should have terrified him. Instead, it brought a strange, fleeting joy.

For the first time in his life, the suffocating pressure that had hovered over him, the invisible gaze of his father, the demon who owns everyone and everything was gone.

In the quiet of his chambers, Chen had even smiled.

"So you finally met your end," he had whispered to the shadows. "Perhaps one of the Origin Gods grew tired of your games."

He knew of Murmur's obsession with these beings that preceded divinity, the Origin Gods. His father's fascination with them bordered on madness; he had spent centuries seeking to reach them, to understand them, even to surpass and suppress them.

But the joy did not last.

As the days passed, logic clawed at his fragile hope. Murmur would never vanish quietly. He was too proud, too cunning, too theatrical. If he were to die, the heavens themselves would shatter. The skies would bleed. The world would know.

Chen knew. His father was not dead.

He was merely silent.

Even so, as dread whispered at the edges of his mind, another feeling began to grow within him, one he could neither ignore nor fully embrace.

Freedom.

Each morning he awoke, feeling lighter. The chains he had worn all his life, chains of fear, of obedience, of expectation seemed to fade a little more. The imperial palace, once a gilded cage, felt vast and open. The air he breathed tasted different.

At first, he dismissed it as delusion, a trick of hope. But the feeling only grew stronger with each sunrise.

That constant pressure that had haunted him for centuries, the awareness that he was never alone, that every thought, every emotion was watched was gone.

Gone completely.

And in that emptiness, something else began to bloom.

The thought that had long lurked at the edges of his mind now began to take shape, bold and intoxicating. "What if I never return to the shadow? What if I rebel? What if I am free?"

Chen could not silence it. He did not want to.

Each day, he found himself lingering longer by the windows, watching his wander through the empire, laughing freely, unbound by some command. And deep inside, he envied them.

The fear of Murmur's return still lingered in his heart like a ghost but for the first time, the Emperor began to imagine a life where that fear no longer ruled him.

A life where Chen, not Murmur's son, not the puppet Emperor, but Chen himself, would decide his fate.

His only supposed problem of this coming true now was the Four Great Clans.

Unlike his father, Murmur, who had treated them as his closest instruments, extensions of his will. Chen viewed them as obstacles wearing the guise of allies. They were formidable, yes, each with generations of his father's favor and influence flowing through their bloodlines. But to Chen, they were mortal, not divine.

And mortals, no matter how powerful, could bleed.

He saw no great hope in defeating his father, but the clans? They were another matter. In them, he saw arrogance, complacency, and a blind devotion to something who views them as something less.

Yet things were never so simple.

For even as the thought of breaking his shackles thrilled him, peace remained beyond his reach.

Each year that passed without word of Murmur's whereabouts only deepened the pit within his chest. The silence that had once felt liberating grew heavy, oppressive. Was he dead? Or watching from somewhere unseen?

The uncertainty gnawed at him. Every whisper in the halls, every shadow in the corners of his throne room could have been his father's gaze.

His despair grew, and with it, his mind grew heavier. E

very day he sat upon that throne, he fought a quiet war between sanity and ambition.

To the empire, Emperor Chen was a distant, elegant ruler, a man of strange temper, given to moments of laughter followed by chilling silence. To his officials and subjects, he was the embodiment of imperial dignity.

They feared the Four Great Clans, yes, but they still bowed before him. They still called him Your Majesty, still trembled when he spoke, still sought his favor.

And that tiny fragment of reverence, that sliver of genuine power, poisoned him with desire.

He wanted more.

He wanted to see the Four Great Clans kneel, not in feigned loyalty, but in submission. He wanted to see them stripped of their inherited power, forced to serve him.

Each time he issued a decree, each time his word sent a ripple through the empire, he felt it, the thrill of control. A taste of what true power might feel like if it were fully his.

And that thought, that beautiful, terrible thought, ate at him day and night.

"The day will come", he would whisper to himself. But deep down, even as he dreamed of dominion, fear lingered.

For decades, Chen had been trapped in a stagnant reality. Unable to move against the Four Great Clans, unable to escape the invisible grasp of his father's will. His ambitions simmered beneath the surface, but the weight of Murmur's legacy smothered every spark before it could ignite.

That was, until word reached him, the godlings are on their way to his land.

It was the first moment in years that made his pulse quicken.

His father's voice echoed in his memory, as clear as if Murmur stood beside him even now:

"Never interfere with the godlings, Chen. They are the echoes of the Origin Gods. Their affairs should never cross with ours."

For most of his reign, Chen had obeyed that command, just as he had obeyed all the others. Even when the vampire godlings built their rising domain near the empire's borders, he had remained still, swallowing his anger and pretending it was wisdom. But not this time.

This time, he saw an opening. A chance to strike, not at the godlings, but at the shadow that still ruled his life.

By sending his order for the empire's forces to block the godling's passage, Chen was doing something far greater than an act of defiance. He was baiting a trap.

He wanted to see if his father would respond.

Chapter 687

If Murmur still lived, if his reach still lingered in the unseen corners of the world, surely he would not stay silent while his own son toyed with beings so closely tied to the Origin Gods. Murmur's obsession with the divine was something Chen had witnessed all his life. To risk the ire of such beings and have their attentio turned to this side of the world would be madness and Murmur was not a man who allowed madness to go unpunished.

So Chen waited.

The nobles complained. The officials fretted. The godlings grew unpredictable and strange, wandering into cities, upending the empire's fragile order with their whims and curiosity. But Chen only smiled.

"Let them do as they please," he had told his council. "A little chaos never hurt an empire."

In truth, he welcomed it. Every disruption, every act of godling mischief, blurred the lines of control across the empire, making it easier for him to move unseen.

And as he turned his gaze eastward, toward the horizon where the morning mists clung thick and low, a small grin tugged at his lips.

The Misty Lands. The domain of the Vampire Godlings.

If the chaos of the wandering godlings did not stir his father from hiding, perhaps they would. The vampires had long existed under the wary gaze of the empire, their allegiance uncertain. Their growing power had always been a silent insult to his rule and to his empire.

Now, they would become the next piece in his quiet rebellion.

"Let's see," he murmured to himself, eyes glinting like shards of glass,

"How many can resist being drawn into my game."

On the faraway Misty Land, Ethan stood atop the fortress wall at the border of his kingdom. The early sunlight crept through the fog in thin, sharp strands, each ray irritating his skin but he welcomed the sensation.

For the turmoil churning inside him, even pain felt grounding.

Two weeks had passed since the day the godling's competition was meant to take place, a day that had held immense weight for him, for his people, and for the noble houses who had prepared tirelessly. The significance of that event was not merely ceremonial; it was a statement to the world, and to the vampires themselves, that they were worthy of standing alongside their fellow godlings.

But the godlings had not come.

Every time Ethan thought back to that moment, heat surged up his neck. The image of himself standing before his people, grand arena filled, nobles lined in perfect formation, warriors ready, elders present

only for nothing to happen, made his jaw clench painfully.

He had looked foolish, worse, he had looked naive.

At first, he had convinced himself that the godlings were simply planning a dramatic entrance. Their kind seemed to enjoy theatrics, and their antics were often strange even to other godlings. But even so, they always coordinated, always sent word, always gave notice before any grand display.

This time, there had been nothing. No message, no envoy, no sign. Not even the courtesy of a warning.

Those hours waiting in front of the crowd still burned in Ethan's memory. The anticipation had slowly shifted to confusion, then to irritation, then to something far uglier. He could still recall the looks exchanged among the younger nobles, the raised brows, the whispered assumptions, the sighs hidden behind fans and sleeves.

To them, it wasn't the godlings who had failed, it was Ethan who looked like he'd been played.

Anger and shame seethed together in his chest, tangled so tightly he could no longer separate them.

Were they being underestimated by their fellow godlings? Did the others truly think so little of the vampires? Did they not take him seriously at all?

His fingers dug into the stone railing, leaving small cracks spidering across the surface. Dark Fog swirled around him heavy and cold.

His council, the older ones shared in his humiliation, they had planned meticulously, only to be made into fools before their own people. He could still hear their frustrated murmurs, their attempts to mask embarrassment with anger.

Ethan closed his eyes, letting the burning sunlight prickle along his skin again.

If something had truly delayed the godlings on their way, Ethan could have understood, annoyed, yes, but understanding of the situation. Accidents happened, even to beings as powerful as they were. But what he could not accept was the silence.

The anger returned whenever he thought of it, sharp and visceral yet it faded just as quickly when he remembered the opposite truth, the other godling leaders would never do such a thing.

Ethan himself had been in communication with them for a while. He knew their personalities, their pride, their codes of conduct. Whatever else godlings could be arrogant, playful, whimsical. They were not petty to this degree. They would never humiliate a fellow godling's people so openly.

Which meant only one thing, Zephyr and the others had not known.

They might be as confused as he was.

That certainty settled in only after the mirror-

all he received on the evening of the failed competition. Zephyr, along with the leaders of the other races, contacted him the moment they realized something had gone wrong.

Ethan had immediately sensed something strange in their expressions, like they were dealing with something acute but there was a genuine worry for his situation.

Their first question they asked, had been whether their godlings had reached the Misty Land safely. Their second was why they could not witness the competition on their side, why the viewing rites had failed, as the people on their side was also looking forward to view the competition.

This alone confirmed everything. Zephyr and the others had been expecting the event, anticipating it even, their people had prepared, just as Ethan's had. There had been no intention to miss the event, nor to cause this humiliation.

Something was wrong. Terribly, clearly wrong.

But knowing this and admitting it were two very different things.

Ethan felt a cold weight settle in his chest at the realization. If something had indeed happened, if their godlings had encountered danger on their way to his land. Then it was on his soil, his territory, his responsibility.

How could he tell his fellow godling leaders that danger might have swallowed their people? How could he admit that something beyond his knowledge had unfolded in his land without his awareness?

How could he confess that the Misty Land, the territory he prided himself on controlling, had failed to protect even its invited guests?

Worst of all, this was his people first time hosting. It was not a good look for him and his people to show such incompetence.

He couldn't admit this to them, not with the shame of the failed ceremony still fresh in his veins.

So he chose to conceal it, to cover the truth with the most convenient explanation he could muster.

"A technical failure," he had told them "A simple mistake. It will be corrected soon."

His voice had been steady, but he felt the lie twist uncomfortably inside him.

He told them that the godlings were merely touring the lands for now, getting used to local customs, learning about the mortal world here.

"I will inform you of the new date for the competition," he said before the mirror dimmed, cutting off the call.

And when the light faded from the glass, Ethan was left staring at his reflection, a ruler trapped between humiliation, confusion, and the fear of what he might discover if he sought the truth.

With urgency pressing on him from all sides, Ethan began issuing orders the moment the mirror-call ended. Scouts were dispatched beyond the fog-covered borders. Messengers left under concealment spells.

Ethan had three orders, find out what happened, find out where the godlings were and find out if they were in danger.

For two days, information trickled back inconsistently, fragmented rumors, vague sightings, hints that led nowhere. But on the third day, the reports aligned, forming a truth so infuriating that Ethan had to read them twice before he accepted them.

The godlings had been trying to reach him. Repeatedly, Persistently and Desperately to inform him on their current situation.

And the empire had been stopping them.

That was what brought him to the fortress wall today, standing beneath the irritating rays of sunlight, letting the burn keep him steady as he processed the outrage.

Of all the explanations he had considered, accident, misdirection, internal conflict among the godlings. He had never once imagined that humans of all beings would be the obstacle. That mortals would dare to block the godling's path. That the empire would dare to cut off communication between them.

It was unthinkable.

Yet the intel was undeniable.

The only reason Ethan even knew this much was because he had leveraged one advantage uniquely to his own, the vampires ability to blend in among humans when needed.

They began to take steps they had planned on taking at a later time which was having their own people infiltrate the empire and keep an eye out.

Using that, he had his people slip quietly into the empire as ordinary travelers, merchants, or laborers. It was through these means that they learned of the empire's recent, suspicious behavior.

Chapter 688:

A particular discovery chilled him, all magical communication was being blocked.

The empire had deployed a field, an expansive artificial barrier that interfered with any transmission born of magic. Messages from the wandering godlings never reached the Misty Land. Attempts from Ethan's side were intercepted the moment they left his borders.

The only method still viable through the empire's interference was physical contact, face-to-face communication, passing words through human messengers or vampire agents disguised as such.

This meant the godlings had been signaling to him the entire time.

They had been trying to explain themselves and he had heard nothing.

Worse, they may have likely assumed Ethan was ignoring them.

The thought of it made Ethan's jaw tighten. The godlings had been trying to come to him and the empire had stood in their way. Worse even, there was nothing accidental about it.

The news struck Ethan and his council like a hammer blow.

Just moments before, they had been indulging in a rare moment of amusement, an entertainment born from Ethan's earlier plight. But the message delivered to them wiped those smirks clean. Shock came first, then a rising wave of anger, shame, and something darker beneath it.

How dare the empire disgrace them so openly?

Did their status as godlings, descendants of divinity, embodiments of the night mean nothing to these humans? How could they ever face the other godling races now, knowing that a mortal emperor had

stood before them with such brazen disrespect? It was one thing to be looked down on by the older, more ancient godling tribes. But to be belittled by humans?

The insult sank deeper the more they thought about it.

The truth of the situation now laid bare, was far more humiliating. It was the humans who looked down on them. It was the humans who saw their reluctance for conflict, their reclusive borders, their slow, measured expansion as weakness.

Their youth as a godling race had forced them to be cautious. They had shown a softer face to the empire, preferring diplomacy to violence, preferring patience to conquest. They had believed that as long as they maintained this gentle approach, conflict could be delayed. Perhaps even avoided until their race matured into its full potential.

But the empire... the empire had interpreted this courtesy as cowardice.

And this latest event, this audacity of keeping a guest they themselves invited away from them under some foolish, self-important superstition of "owning the land and sky" was the final straw. It was not merely disrespect to them but a declaration. A statement that the humans believed themselves the rightful apex predators of the continent.

As if godlings were nothing. As if vampires were nothing. As if Ethan's entire lineage, history, and authority were nothing.

Atop the border wall, Ethan gazed past the boundary into the lands of the empire. The wind whipped at his coat, carrying the scent of forests, soil, and faint traces of human arrogance.

Something had to be done.

This matter was no longer about a guest. It was about the dignity of his people. About the reputation of the vampire godlings among the other godling races. About reminding the continent of their lineage, that they had been leaving peacefully with something mortals fear the most "Death"

If the humans wished to test them, then they would learn the cost of underestimating a godling's pride.

"It's time," Ethan whispered. His blood-red eyes glowed brighter, like twin wounds in the darkness.
"Time for a meeting."

His form unraveled into a cloud of dark mist, which was immediately swept away by the wind. With him went the final traces of restraint the vampires had clung to.

A reminder was coming.

And the humans would not forget it soon.

The summons from Ethan had gone out in the dead of night, and none dared to ignore it.

By the time the moon reached its zenith, the throne room of Ethan's palace was filled. The great obsidian doors stood open, allowing the assembled vampires to slip inside like shadows returning to their master.

Ethan's throne hall was a cathedral of darkness. The only light came from the tall iron lamps mounted on each pillar, each flame burning a deep, unnatural red that cast long, blood-tinted shadows across the black marble floor. The walls drank in the light, making the room feel like an endless void. Even for vampires, creatures of night and gloom, this chamber felt... oppressive.

Beneath the steps of the throne sat a long, crescent-shaped table reserved for the most influential figures in the vampire domain. These were the pillars of the old bloodlines, the ones who had survived the longest, endured purges, and proven their strength time and time again.

First sat the head of the Ebenholz family, draped in clothes as dark as their name. Next, the austere leader of the Orpheus lineage, his expression calm but eyes sharp as blades. Beside him, the matriarch of Ravencroft, whose feathered cloak seem

ed to swallow the red light. Then the stern master of Carlisle, broad-shouldered and fierce, his aura heavy like a torchlight amongst the vampires.

Five noble families. Five first-generation survivors. Five whose influence extended far beyond their clans.

There were others among the first generation but they lacked the strength, the influence, or the weight of legacy that these five commanded. And those who once rivaled these families had long since been erased... thinned out after Ethan's brutal cleansing of his court. A reminder that lineage alone could not shield those who grew complacent.

Behind the table, standing in a disciplined formation between each red-lit pillar, were the second-generation vampires and the weaker branches of the old bloodlines. They stood stiff-backed, hands clasped behind them, eyes lowered. Not a single chair had been provided for them.

And that was by design.

The second generation held no seat here, for their blood all traced back to the five seated elders. Outside the palace, perhaps in the outer courts they could command respect and authority. But here, in the presence of the first-born and the throne itself, they were reminded of their place.

This rule had not always existed. It was one of Ethan's reforms, one of the few actions he had taken that earned genuine approval from the five noble houses. Too many upstarts had tried to overstep their station, mistaking youth and ambition for entitlement. Ethan's purge had corrected that.

The standing vampires knew better than to resent it openly. A seat at the council was not impossible for them but it would never be granted without a justification so undeniable that even the five elders could not question it. A feat of strength. A deed of service. A contribution that shifted the balance of the clan.

Anything less was not enough.

Silence permeated the room as they awaited Ethan's arrival. A silence thick with hierarchy, history, and the tension of an entire race on the brink of being forced to reclaim its dignity.

Soft murmurs rippled through the hall, low conversations, whispered theories, and the occasional anxious glance toward the empty throne. The tension was palpable, and even the red flames seemed to

flicker with anticipation. No one knew when Ethan would appear, only that when he did, the air itself would change.

And it did.

The five elders abruptly lifted their heads in perfect unison, their instincts sensing what the others had failed to notice.

There upon the throne sat Ethan.

No dramatic entrance. No sound. One moment the throne was empty; the next, he was simply there, as if he had always been part of the darkness. His posture was relaxed, but his eyes unblinking, predatory tracked every movement below him.

In one hand, he held a silver chalice filled with a thick, deep-red blood. He brought it to his lips, taking a slow, deliberate sip, his gaze never leaving the assembled vampires.

At the sight of him, the five elders reached for their own goblets. In perfect, practiced synchronicity, they lifted their cups toward their liege in a silent salute, then drank. A gesture of loyalty. A gesture of respect. A gesture that reminded everyone present who truly ruled this court.

"Silence."

The command cracked through the hall like a whip. It came not from Ethan, but from one of the standing figures tall, poised, and sharp-eyed. The voice was deep, disciplined, and carried enough authority to jolt even the most inattentive vampires into silence.

Ethan's glowing gaze slid toward the one who spoke.

A name surfaced in his mind.

Dupont.

He recognized the young vampire instantly. Of all the second generation, Dupont was the one Ethan expected to rise into the ranks of the elders within a decade, perhaps even sooner. His strength, composure, and discipline outshone the others of his generation. His features, sharp as carved marble, bore the unmistakable lineage of the Ebenholz family.

Yes. That one had potential.

The hall fell into absolute stillness.

Dozens of eyes turned upward toward Ethan. He rested one hand against his temple, eyes momentarily closed, as though he were gathering himself or suppressing something far more lethal.

When he finally spoke, his voice rumbled through the chamber, deep and resonant. Controlled, but only barely.

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"You all must have heard," he began, "what happened to our guest."

A subtle tremor passed through the room. Even those who already knew the details tightened their grips on their cloaks or shifted uneasily where they stood.

"I have called this meeting," Ethan continued, his voice gaining weight, "to hear what you all have to say... and what action we should take in response to such disrespect."

The last word rattled with restrained fury. His chalice creaked under the pressure of his grip.

The flames dimmed, as if reacting to his anger.

A silence heavier than stone descended upon the throne room. The elders exchanged looks. The younger vampires stood rigid, waiting for whoever would dare speak first.

It was clear to all, tonight would decide how the vampire godlings answered the insult.

And what kind of wrath the humans had unknowingly awakened.

The silence stretched long enough that the red flames began to hiss softly, licking upward as though hungry for the coming conflict.

At last, it was the head of the Darkmoore family who rose slightly in his seat, placing his goblet down with a muted clink. His massive frame cast a long shadow across the table.

"Disrespect?" he rumbled, his voice like grinding stone. "It is beyond that, my lord. The humans mock our lineage. They spit on the blood of our ancestors. This cannot go unanswered."

A few murmurs of agreement rippled from the standing vampires. The Darkmoore were known for their bluntness and their appetite for battle.

The matriarch of Ravencroft leaned forward next, her dark feathers rustling. "Indeed... yet we must not behave as savages," she said, her tone elegant but cold. "The empire watches us closely. If we strike carelessly, we risk giving those long dissatisfied with us a narrative to rally behind."

Ebenholz's leader raised a thin brow. "And if we do nothing," he countered, "we confirm their belief that we are weak."

That struck a nerve. Even the younger vampires stiffened.

The Orpheus patriarch tapped a finger lightly on the table. "Strength without strategy is foolish. But... strategy without the willingness to show fangs is equally laughable."

Ethan listened silently, his expression unreadable, eyes glowing faintly like coals buried in ash.

Then, unexpectedly another voice rose.

Dupont.

He stepped forward from the shadows of the pillars, his posture respectful, but his confidence unmistakable. A few second-generation vampires inhaled sharply; it was bold for one of their rank to interject before all elders had spoken.

But none of the elders stopped him.

"Forgive me for speaking out of turn," he said with a low bow. "But this situation is not merely an insult. It is a test."

His eyes flicked upward to Ethan.

"A deliberate one."

The hall stirred. Even the elder's expressions tightened, considering his words.

"The humans did not hide our guest out of superstition," Dupont continued. "They wished to see how we would react. To measure our resolve. To confirm whether the stories of our restraint are true... or exaggerated."

"Bold claim," the Ravencroft matriarch murmured.

"But not without merit," Orpheus said quietly.

Dupont bowed his head again. "If we respond too mildly, they will press further. If we respond too harshly, they will cry for allies." He lifted his gaze. "Thus, we must give them a response that is neither reckless nor passive."

Ethan's fingers drummed lightly against the arm of his throne.

The entire hall held its breath.

Then Ethan finally spoke.

"Dupont is correct," he said, his voice calm but carrying the weight of certainty, "but he is missing a few points."

A ripple of whispers swept through the ranks, uncertainty, apprehension, curiosity. Even the most disciplined among them could not mask the tension that suddenly gripped the chamber.

Ethan let the murmurs fade before continuing.

"The human's actions are deliberate," he said slowly, each word striking with measured force, "and worse, they appear targeted. It is unclear what game they believe themselves to be playing... but it is clear they have chosen us as their pawns."

The word pawns echoed sharply in the hall.

Several heads lowered. Others exchanged uneasy glances. A few clenched their fists in silent frustration.

Ethan's gaze swept across them, unflinching.

"Look at their choices. Look at the timing," he continued. "Every move they make lacks profit, lacks reason, lacks even the clumsy desperation of those who act without options. The Empire gains nothing by provoking the vampire godlings." His eyes narrowed slightly. "And they gain far less by risking the ire of the other godling race."

Everyone here understood the gravity of such offense. To anger a single godling race was already a peril few would dare. To antagonize two without clear motive? That bordered on madness.

Yet the Humans, no, the Human Emperor persisted. Relentlessly. Purposefully.

"As foolish as their actions appear," Ethan said, his voice now quieter but somehow more ominous, "they act with conviction. That is the part we cannot ignore."

He leaned back slightly, letting the implications settle.

"Someone is moving the humans. Someone with influence. Someone with intent. And whoever they are... they have decided that their plans begin with us."

Ethan descended one step from his throne. The faint echo of his footfall silenced even the flames.

"Think carefully," he said, his voice controlled but laced with venom. "The empire is not foolish. Not reckless. Not ignorant of consequence."

His crimson eyes swept over the hall, pinning each listener like prey.

"They know," he continued, "that disrespecting us risks incurring the wrath of every godling race. They know our kind is young, yes, yet they also know of the one behind us. They know we are... watching."

The last word carried weight, as though it meant far more than it seemed.

The Ravencroft matriarch spoke softly, "To provoke one godling race risks attention. To provoke all... is suicidal."

"Unless," the Ebenholz elder said slowly, "they believe their plan requires this chaos."

A murmur rippled through the ranks.

Dupont frowned slightly, absorbing the new layer of danger behind Ethan's meaning.

"But why us?" the Darkmoore head demanded, his aura flaring. "Why the vampires first?"

Ethan turned towards him "You ask an important question, why us?"

"Maybe because we," he said, "are the most restrained of the godling races."

That statement drew startled looks.

" Maybe because we would not declare war lightly. We do not spiral into frenzy or madness as some older godlings do." His gaze hardened. "We are the easiest target to provoke without unleashing immediate catastrophe."

Orpheus nodded grimly. "Meaning they assume we will... hesitate."

"Meaning they believe," Ethan corrected, "that we will choose diplomacy instead of retaliation or maybe they expect us to retaliate"

Ethan took another step forward. The shadows around him shifted like living things.

"But their actions," he said quietly, "reveal something even more important."

The hall leaned in.

"They are not playing a game with us. They are playing a game with each other."

Confusion flickered through the ranks.

Ethan continued, voice low and certain:

"Someone within the empire perhaps their emperor, perhaps another faction wishes to ignite conflict between godlings. To test alliances. To force reactions. To reshape the continent's balance of power."

"You are saying," the Ravenscroft matriarch breathed, "that we are not the target."

"No," Ethan said. "We are the spark."

Suddenly, Ethan's voice rose, cutting through the hall sending shivers down the spine of the vampires.

"But does that matter?"

The force of the shout made several of the younger vampires flinch.

"Whatever schemes the humans weave, whatever plots or politics they practice, none of it erases the insult they have dealt us! None of it diminishes the shame and disrespect we feel!"

Silence followed his words. The flames wavered, as though startled by his raised voice.

Then Ethan's tone dropped, lower, deeper, resonant enough that made all the vampires subconsciously lean in.

"Our lord's ascension draws closer."

Every head in the chamber turned toward him. Even the ancient elders, who prided themselves on composure, stiffened. The very mention of Him demanded reverence.

Ethan felt their gazes burning into him, demanding explanation, demanding clarity but that only stoked the fire within him.

He continued.

"We are the reason he has delayed his ascension." His eyes shifted from elder to elder, from first generation to second, pressing the weight of his words onto every soul present.

"He waited... because we were not yet ready. Because we were too young. Too fragile. Too unstable. He refused to rise while his children were still weak."

A low, collective murmur rolled through the hall.

Ethan lifted his chin, his presence radiating certainty.

"But we are no longer weak."

The red flames surged in response, casting long shadows across the throne room.

"And more importantly..." Ethan took one step down from the throne, each footfall echoing like a drumbeat, "He has been waiting for a moment like this."

A moment where insult and provocation aligned with divine timing.

"A moment where he has every right, every justification to act. To remind this continent, and the entire world..."

His voice thundered now.

"That the Vampire godlings are not strays, not half-born deviants, not lesser beings"

He raised his hand.

"but a race cultivated, blessed, and raised by the Demigod Roth himself."

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The name hit everyone in the hall with shock.

Several second-generation vampires instinctively bowed. Elders lowered their gazes in solemn acknowledgment. Even the flames dimmed for a heartbeat, as though the very air trembled at the invocation.

Ethan's eyes gleamed like blood-soaked rubies.

"So let the humans play their games," he hissed. "Let them scheme, plot, maneuver. It changes nothing."

He spread his arms slightly, as if embracing the entire throne room in his declaration.

"We will respond. Not out of rage alone, but out of duty. Out of pride. Out of our divine mandate."

His tone hardened into steel.

"And we will do so in a way that ensures the humans think twice or thrice before ever daring to use us as pawns again."

A slow, hungry smile crept across his face.

"Now," he said, voice simmering with quiet promise, "let us decide exactly how we will teach them this lesson."

Ebenholz, who had been silent until now, finally lifted his gaze. His voice cut through the hall.

"Humans once feared the night," he began, each word steady, deliberate. "They feared it because it was unknown, because the darkness held secrets their feeble minds could not grasp. But that fear vanished the moment they discovered light."

A murmur passed through the chamber, but Ebenholz continued, unfazed.

"As the children who bear the blood of the Origin Goddess of Darkness... it is our duty to remind them why night was once a terror whispered even among kings."

All eyes shifted toward him. Even those who disliked him could not look away.

"My proposal," he said, "is something that was once forbidden among our kind. A practice we swore never to use again. But I believe" he placed a hand over his chest in a theatrical, solemn gesture "that it is precisely what this situation demands."

Ethan leaned back upon the throne, "And what proposal is that?" his deep voice rumbled, equal parts curiosity and warning.

A hush fell. Ebenholz let the silence stretch, savoring the tension.

At last, he spoke.

"We give the humans a plague."

The words crashed into the silence like of the waiting audience.

"A plague," he said, "that reveals itself only at night, growing uncontrollably if not swiftly contained. Let the darkness become a living nightmare once more."

He stepped forward, bowing deeply before Ethan.

"I ask that you grant us permission to use our bite. We already whisper of the monstrosities born from it, creatures robbed of reason, driven only by hunger and instinct, spreading their curse with every wound they inflict."

Another bow, lower.

"I pledge that we release these creations upon the empire."

Silence.

A silence that pressed into the bones of everyone present.

Then, a thunderous snarl cut through the hall.

Darkmoore slammed a hand onto the table, rising with all fury and anger.

"What a shameful suggestion, Ebenholz," he boomed, his voice echoing off the pillars. "To let mindless beasts fight our battles for us? To unleash filth that cannot be controlled?"

His eyes glowed with crimson contempt.

"Have you hidden away for so many centuries in your libraries that you have forgotten your own fangs?"

He stepped forward, power radiating off him like heat.

"We are vampires. Children of darkness not cowards who hide behind rabid animals."

Ravencroft's feathers bristled with tension. Orpheus watched with narrowed eyes, calculating. The second generation looked between the elders, unsure whether to recoil or applaud.

Ebenholz, however, did not flinch.

He met Darkmoore's rage with icy calm.

"I have not forgotten my fangs," he said softly. "But I have not forgotten our purpose either."

Darkmoore snarled again, preparing to retort. But Ethan raised a hand.

The entire hall fell silent instantly.

Ethan's gaze was fixed on Ebenholz, not on Darkmoore, not on the murmuring vampires but solely on the one who dared propose a famine of monsters.

His voice, when it came, was quiet.

Too quiet.

"Explain," Ethan said, "why I should allow the return of something we once swore to extinguish."

Ebenholz inhaled slowly, steadying himself.

Ravencroft spoke up, stepping forward with a slow, deliberate grace.

"If I may, my king," she began, placing a fist over her chest. "I believe Ebenholz proposes this not out of cowardice, but out of prudence. A way to strike, while keeping our hands clean of the plague's origin."

The murmurs softened, curiosity beginning to outweigh outrage.

"Like I stated before," Ravencroft continued, "there are many within the empire who would seize any reason, real or fabricated to ignite conflict with us. And judging by the state of things now, such people are no longer on the margins. Their voices grow louder. Their influence grows stronger."

Several elders nodded faintly; this was no exaggeration.

"But we must not," Ravencroft said, voice tightening, "place in their hands a weapon so obvious, so undeniable, that they could rally the entire continent behind their cause."

She gestured subtly toward Ebenholz.

"The empire and the world do not know that our bites can create such monstrosities when we choose to let them. If we follow Ebenholz's plan, the outbreak becomes... a mystery. A calamity with no clear perpetrator. They will suspect us, of course they will but they will have no evidence that the plague is ours."

Ravencroft's expression hardened.

"In these times, my king, speculation is manageable. Rumors can be swayed, redirected, manipulated. But proof?" She shook her head slowly. "Proof is a noose."

She bowed his head deeply toward Ethan.

"For the safety of our race, for the future of our lord's ascension... we cannot allow the world to fear and see us as creators of plagues."

Silence fell again, heavier, more conflicted.

Ebenholz inclined his head slightly, acknowledging Ravencroft's support.

Darkmoore scoffed under his breath but did not interrupt this time. Even he knew Ravencroft's logic held weight.

Across the hall, the lesser clans shifted uneasily. Some stared at Ethan with barely restrained anticipation.

Ethan let the silence loom, his gaze sweeping over the gathered clans below. His voice, when it finally broke the stillness, carried a restrained tone.

"You both have spoken well," Ethan said, inclining his head slightly toward Ravencroft and Ebenholz. "In my anger, I failed to fully comprehend the wider portrait before us. I thank you for your counsel."

A murmur of approval rippled through the elder's seats, short, controlled, but present. It was rare for their king to admit fault so openly, even in such measured fashion.

Then Ethan straightened, turning his attention to the gathered clans with eyes darker than the chalice in his hand.

"Now," he said, voice resonant, "does anyone have anything to say regarding the idea proposed by the elders? And do any among you possess a better alternative?"

His question fell like a stone into deep water.

For a heartbeat, no one dared move.

Then, slowly, the crowd stirred.

Some exchanged cautious glances. Others whispered behind raised hands, unsure whether speaking out would elevate them—or condemn them.

Finally, a figure from the left stepped forward, a tall man from House Orpheus, his silver hair tied back and his eyes sharp like tempered steel.

"If I may, my king," he said, bowing low. "The plague approach... is effective, but it risks uncontrollable spread. There is danger it might reach beyond the Empire if left unchecked. Should the humans falter in containing it, the catastrophe may spill beyond this continent."

He paused, letting the thought settle like a cold fog.

"I do not oppose the intent," he continued. "But I question the mechanism. If we are to instill fear, we should do so with precision, not indiscriminate chaos."

A few murmurs of agreement rose.

But on the opposite side, a young noble from House Thorn snarled softly.

"Fear is chaos," she retorted, stepping forward without waiting for permission. "The humans do not hesitate to provoke us openly, why should we restrain ourselves for their sake? A plague unleashed among them would remind them of their fragility."

Her voice rose, fierce.

"Let them tremble. Let them run to their priests and scholars, begging for salvation. Let them realize the night has teeth."

Some of the younger vampires cheered quietly at her words.

Some of the younger vampires who are kept under strict diet hissed in approval, their blood stirring at the promise of violence. They had long been waiting for a chance to sink their fangs into a pulsing vein and taste blood from its source.

Others frowned, older ones, wiser ones whose memories stretched back to darker times, when uncontrolled hunger nearly destroyed their race from within.

Ethan raised his hand, a single, subtle motion that crushed the noise instantly.

His gaze settled on the young woman who had spoken so boldly. Her eyes were bright, almost feverish, but she bowed her head slightly when his attention found her.

"The enthusiasm and spirit are appreciated, girl," Ethan said, his tone neither harsh nor indulgent, simply firm. "But never forget: the well-being of our race comes first. Any action we take must benefit us all, not satisfy individual cravings."

Shame flickered across her features, but she nodded, shoulders stiff.