

## **Guardian gods 691**

### Chapter 691

Then Ethan shifted his attention to the silver-haired young man from before.

"And you," he said, "have raised an important point."

A brief silence followed, as he intentionally allowed his acknowledgment to settle among them.

"Ebenholz's plan will move forward," Ethan declared at last, "but not recklessly."

The hall grew utterly still.

"The bites," he continued, "must be done carefully and purposefully. Those who initiate a bite will be responsible for keeping their parasite in check. With the connection shared through blood, this should not be difficult."

"We begin slowly," Ethan said. "We observe the Empire's response. The towns and cities closest to our borders will be our first test. Only after we study their reaction will we expand to their larger cities."

He rose from his throne, every step dripping with authority. The vampires instinctively lowered their heads as he walked past the long table of elders. But just before his figure reached one of the pillars, he paused.

"One more thing," he said, his voice calm but commanding. "Send word to the other godling races. Inform them of our decision and our intentions. It is best they know beforehand, rather than mistake our creations for an attack upon them."

Before anyone could bow or speak, Ethan vanished, his form dissolving into a swirl of shadow, carried away by a cold rush of wind.

His disappearance was followed immediately by a wave of sound, roars, hisses, and guttural expressions of excitement that reverberated through the throne room. With Ethan gone, the restraint that had held them taut loosened all at once.

Ethan's command meant one thing, the burden and privilege of action now lay with them.

It was up to the elders and those they appointed to determine who would bite, who would supervise the drones, who would be granted the first taste of blood-soaked opportunity.

And the hunger in the room was palpable.

Nearly every vampire present felt the surge of desire, both personal and political. The outside world, with its cities of warm bodies and unguarded throats, had been nothing more than speculation to many of them. Curiosity had gnawed at them for decades, but the king's laws and their own fear of losing control had kept them confined.

Now? Those walls had cracked.

For the younger ones, the excitement was nearly overwhelming. Their eyes glowed faintly, fangs unconsciously extending. Some swayed on their feet as if drunk on the very idea of feeding.

Blood, real fresh human blood had been denied to them for so long.

Though it sustained their existence, it had also been the greatest source of their downfall in the early years. Ethan's strict control had been necessary. They understood it. They accepted it.

But acceptance did not quench hunger.

Especially not when they often found themselves leading humans and sitting among humans during diplomatic meetings, pretending indifference while the thunder of human heartbeats echoed in their ears... while the scent of warm blood pulsed like a beacon.

Now that restraint was being lifted.

Even if only a little.

And that "little" was enough to drive them nearly mad with anticipation.

But of course, those impulses did not go unnoticed.

The elders and several of the more disciplined second-generation vampires exchanged dark, knowing glances. They could practically smell the intentions bubbling up in the younger ones.

They knew exactly what was brewing in those hungry minds, chaos disguised as opportunity, indulgence disguised as duty and gluttony disguised as service.

And they would not allow it.

Yet at the same time... the elders themselves were not blind to profit.

Those chosen to administer the bite would, inevitably, be brought into contact with fresh blood, blood that had to be "handled," drained, divided, or stored before the parasite stabilized. Supervisors would be required to clean up the aftermath, gather evidence, dispose of remains, manage the new drone.

Even if the drones themselves were mindless, the process around them was not.

And through that process, blood would flow.

The elders shrewd, already saw how this operation could strengthen their houses, deepen their influence, and redistribute power within the court.

Eyes flashed around the hall, some predatory, some calculating, some both. The throne room had become divided into two distinct tensions: The young, trembling with hunger and the old ones filled with ambition.

Meanwhile, back with Ethan, he found himself stepping into Roth's chamber, the one place in the palace where even he instinctively carried himself with humility.

The room was silent, still, yet heavy with a presence far greater than its size. Books lay open on polished tables, maps and star charts scattered like discarded thoughts. But the owner of the room was not in his usual seat of reading or contemplation.

Instead, Roth's tall, imposing figure stood on the balcony, framed by moonlight. His silhouette looked almost carved from the night itself, the pale glow outlining his shoulders and long hair as he stared upward

at the night sky.

Ethan felt a laugh bubble in his chest, quiet, self-deprecating.

For all his ambition, all his carefully cultivated authority, he always found himself reduced to a child in this room. Always found his confidence dissolving before the one being in existence who understood him better than he understood himself.

"You grew too ambitious," Roth said, without turning, his voice a deep rumble that blended seamlessly with the night air. "And for a moment, you lost sight of your goal."

Ethan drew closer, hands clasped behind his back. He said nothing knowing silence was unnecessary around Roth. Everything he thought, everything he hid, was already laid bare.

"You saw," Roth continued, "a convenient opportunity. Humans acting like fools. Your pride stung. Your anger flaring. And you" he finally glanced over his shoulder, eyes glowing faintly, "thought it a perfect excuse to rally the houses under one banner. To make the Empire your unifying enemy."

He scoffed, soft, but still held an edge.

"And I'm certain," he added, "that somewhere in that mind of yours, you entertained the childish belief that the other godlings would extend a hand to you if they witnessed your theatrics."

Ethan winced, though he maintained a respectful posture.

"You forgot," Roth said, turning fully now, his gaze like a weight on Ethan's shoulders, "your duty as king. Your foremost responsibility: protect your people, not gamble with them."

Ethan lowered his eyes. Shame nudged the edges of his pride.

Roth's tone softened by a fraction.

"Fortunately," he said, "you are surrounded by a council that is old, conniving, stubborn and wise enough to stop you before you embarrassed yourself."

That made Ethan chuckle despite himself.

"I do indeed have a great council," he admitted. "Even though those old bastards want nothing more than to watch me make a fool of myself."

A rare smile tugged at Roth's mouth, a fleeting, ghostly thing. Silence settled between them, deep and comfortable in a way only centuries of shared existence could create.

Then Ethan surprised even himself.

"I will miss you, Father," he murmured.

The words hung in the air, raw, vulnerable, unguarded. A sentiment he had never spoken aloud before.

Roth did not step closer. He did not offer comfort. That was not his way.

But he lifted a hand.

Ethan felt a gentle but irresistible force sweep him backward, moving him out of the balcony room and toward the exit as effortlessly as shifting a piece on a board.

"Indulge yourself with your people," Roth said. "Let yourself loosen the chains you've placed around your own throat. With me here" his eyes gleamed with something, "nothing you do is wrong."

The door slid shut between them, and Ethan stood alone in the hallway.

He touched the wooden frame lightly, a faint smile curving his lips.

"Understood... Father," he whispered before turning away.

Meanwhile, among the godlings "stuck" within the Empire, a quiet fracture had formed because of difference in ideology and temperament.

At first, there was excitement. Curiosity. The humans had shown boldness, so bold that some godlings even felt entertained by the mortal emperor's audacity. They came expecting spectacle, expecting challenge, expecting creatures worth observing.

But reality quickly soured the fascination.

For a portion of the godlings, once their curiosity was satisfied, disdain settled in. The proud posture and confident voices of the humans seemed impressive at first until one remembered the glaring truth, they were mortals.

Frail, fleeting creatures whose lives flickered like candles, always counting down to the moment they burned out.

To some godlings, the idea of spending extended time among such beings felt... wrong, unsettling and almost cruel.

How could they form bonds, create memories, or enjoy companionship with those doomed to wither long before a godling's youthful phase was even finished?

Thus, this faction of godlings grew restless. Their unease transformed into irritation especially when the Empire insisted they remain, claiming "formal permission" was needed before they could depart. This bureaucratic obstruction only intensified their displeasure.

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The other half, the ones who seemed far too comfortable among mortals.

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Some of them laughed with humans, played with them, explored the city streets with them completely unaffected by the ticking mortality of their new companions. They found humans amusing, interesting, even charming. They blended effortlessly into human gatherings, festivals, and daily life.

It was infuriating.

"Let them enjoy their toys," one Merfolk muttered darkly.

"They will tire of them soon enough."

The division fueled heated exchanges, sharp tongues, sneers, and pointed remarks but never escalated beyond verbal spats. No godling wanted to spill blood within a foreign empire without cause.

Instead, the disinterested faction acted with quiet dignity.

They simply left.

Not the Empire entirely yet, but far enough to reclaim their peace of mind. They ventured into a large forest bordering the imperial capital, cleared an area with minimal effort, and created a temporary settlement. A resting place. A waiting place.

They reasoned that eventually, their curious companions would exhaust their fascination with mortals and rejoin them. When that time came, they would all depart together, as originally intended.

As for anger toward the Emperor or Empire?

That fire had not yet been lit.

Whatever the Empire was planning... Whatever strange game these humans were playing...It still intrigued the godlings more than it offended them.

And besides, the forest settlement had become its own kind of enjoyable chaos.

It was rare, almost unheard of for Apelings, Harpies, Werewolves, and Merfolk to gather closely in one place without formal purpose. Their races usually kept to their natural environments or ancestral lands. But here, away from the humans and free from the Empire's stiff rules, they mingled freely.

Apelings swung between branches as Harpies tossed them fruit in midair. Werewolves wrestled and matched strength under the moonlight. Merfolk crafted pools and streams using their magic, laughing loudly whenever a land-dweller slipped in.

A small festival atmosphere emerged, one that was spontaneous and entirely their own.

So while one half of the godlings wandered the human capital indulging in mortal amusements...

The other half forged a small, wild haven of their own.

Meanwhile, the godlings who chose to remain among humans quickly became a nuisance, at least in the eyes of the city leaders forced to host them.

Unlike their more reserved counterparts who retreated to the forest settlement, these godlings had a very... twisted understanding of "fun."

They laughed loudly, disrupted routines, ignored rules, and seemed to find great amusement in unraveling the careful order the Empire had built.

And worse, the common citizens adored them for it.

To the city leaders and nobles, it was infuriating.

While the "respectable" godlings kept to themselves in the woods, these troublemakers dove straight into human society and began tugging on every thread they could find.

They interfered with trade routes "for sport." They slipped into noble estates uninvited, making themselves at home. They challenged formal rituals and traditions without hesitation. They stirred up harmless chaos wherever they walked.

The godlings broke the Empire's meticulously crafted lifestyle, yet the common folk found them fascinating instead of frightening.

What made it worse was the undercurrent of envy.

The nobles could see the spark in their citizens' eyes. The desire for the freedom godlings enjoyed. The hunger to escape the rigid structure of Imperial life.

That alone was dangerous.

But the godlings didn't stop there.

They casually revealed truths the Empire had worked centuries to bury.

To humans, mana was a passive, limited thing, an invisible river they absorbed unconsciously until they reached their natural cap. Magic as a profession simply didn't exist for them. Magic was for the Emperor's chosen few, the elite, those who are lucky to have been permitted the knowledge.

But the godlings? They treated magic as casually as breathing.

They talked freely of their homelands, where children learned their first spells before learning to hunt, where anyone could choose a magical profession, where mana was shaped and molded every day.

They spoke of sorcery as though it were a simple household skill.

For humans born in a kingdom that restricted magical education, the idea was intoxicating.

The more the godlings spoke, the more the people listened. The more they listened, the more they dreamed.

The godlings noticed this quickly.

And, delighted by human curiosity, they decided to escalate matters further.

They took on merchant professions.

Merchant.

The very word made the nobles tremble.

They set up stalls in marketplaces, informal, bright, eye-catching stalls that drew attention like magnets. And what did they "sell"?

They pulled out vials of shimmering liquid, magical potions they drank like water in their homeland.

Potions, of course, were not unknown to the humans of the Empire.

They were familiar with them, had heard of them, seen them guarded behind glass in noble pharmacies, or watched wealthy merchants purchase them for emergencies.

But for the average citizen? A single potion cost months of wages.

A luxury item, Something normal people only dreamed of affording.

So when the godlings arrived with mischievous grins and began selling the same potions for the price of one day's work?

The entire cities fell into stunned silence.

And then chaos.

The potions the godlings offered weren't weak, diluted human-made concoctions, either. These were potent, vibrant vials made with techniques humans had never been taught:

potions that boosted strength and speed,

potions that improved one's performance in bed, to the scandal and delight of many, potions that helped vegetation grow rapidly, turning barren soil lush in a day.

The godlings knew exactly what they were doing. They understood the cause and the effect and they enjoyed every moment of it.

Before they ever began mingling with humans, the godlings had already understood the Empire's "game" Maybe not directed at them but it was clear the Empire was betting on them to lash out or act in a certain way.

So the godlings decided to play their own game.

And win it.

They found it absolutely hilarious watching the leader's faces tighten into constipated expressions as they rushed to lecture the godlings about "value."

"These potions are treasures!" the nobles insisted. "You're selling them far below their worth! You're being taken advantage of! This is foolish!"

The godlings blinked innocently, pretending not to understand.

"Ohhh... treasure?"

"Ohhh... value? That stuff means nothing to us!"

"Want one? Here! Take it!"

And they gave potions away for free.

Right into the hands of the very leaders who tried to stop them.

The leaders hesitated just for a moment, but they accepted the gifts. Of course they did. Their pride could only fight temptation for so long.

Watching them take the potions, trying to hide their eagerness, trying to pretend they weren't thrilled... that alone sent the godlings into fits of laughter.

It was a perfect game.

They were turning the Empire's own suppressed desires, its hidden greed, its fragile pride, its rigid hierarchy against itself.

And they weren't even doing it out of malice.

They were doing it because it was fun.

Fun to watch powerful humans squirm. Fun to watch commoners awaken to possibilities forbidden to them. Fun to unravel the Empire's careful balance by simply... being themselves.

The nobility saw a threat. The common people saw a miracle and the godlings saw a playground.

The Empire had always believed its citizens were obedient because they were loyal.

They were about to discover that obedience lasted only until the moment someone showed the people what they had been missing.

Of all the godlings causing havoc, the druids were the ones delivering the deepest wounds to the Empire.

And, ironically, they weren't even trying.

Where the merchants-godlings played mischievous games and the curious ones teased nobles for fun, the druids acted out of pure sincerity. They simply did what druids always did:

teach, heal, guide, nurture.

They moved through the Empire's towns with quiet footsteps and gentle voices, stopping to observe sick crops, injured animals, or overlooked plants growing between the stones. To them, these were silent cries for help. And they responded instinctively.

But their actions had consequences far beyond what they imagined.

A sect began forming around them, humans who eagerly followed, listened, took notes, practiced, experimented. These humans had never been taught that the weeds growing in the gutters had medicinal properties... or that certain herbs mixed together could treat fevers better than noble-sanctioned doctors... or that the way they treated their pets could awaken spiritual bonds.

The druids taught that a loyal pet could grow stronger through affection, that a forest was not a wild danger but a guardian,

that nature had its own language, one humans had simply forgotten.

With every passing day, more humans flocked to them.

And without realizing it, the druids opened the minds of the Empire's people to divinity.

They spoke the names of Krogan and Ikenga, not with reverence or ceremony, but with casual familiarity, like mentioning old friends.

It wasn't that humans were ignorant of the gods. They weren't.

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But in the Empire, worship of gods had become a silent, forbidden practice. A cultural taboo. Something done secretly behind closed doors if done at all. The Empire tolerated no higher authority, not even divine ones.

So when druids openly mentioned gods, shared stories of divine nature...described magical paths one could attain without payment, schooling, or permission...

It was as if they had torn open a sealed vault inside the minds of the people.

For the first time in generations, ordinary humans began to imagine spiritual growth, magical expression, and divine connection outside the control of the Empire.

They dared to wonder, What else has been hidden from us and What else could they have had?

And while the nobles panicked, while officials scrambled to monitor these gatherings, the druids remained blissfully unaware.

They believed they were merely fulfilling their sacred duty.

Helping the land, Helping the creatures and Helping the people.

The idea that they were destabilizing an entire empire never even crossed their minds.

To them, the humans were simply lost children finally learning how to listen to the world again.

And that innocence, more than anything, terrified the Empire's rulers.

Meanwhile, the ease that once softened Chen's expression was gone. Each new report about the godlings chipped away another layer of his composure. He had expected them to be chaotic, unpredictable forces that might stir up trouble here and there, but ultimately harmless and redeemable. What he had not expected was the deliberate unravelling of the empire's structure... the very framework he had spent years maintaining.

And he could not openly go back on his word now. Not after making promises, to his people, and to himself. But as the godlings continued to tug threads loose, Chen felt a different sensation rising inside him. Anticipation that this would draw his father out of hiding.

The empire's social order, its traditions, and even the deeper mechanisms that sustained it... all of it bore his father's influence. His father had been a silent architect, a shadow guiding the empire's shape. Certainly, the old man would not sit back and watch the system he molded crumble.

Especially not now, when the vampires were stirring.

If the vampires made a hostile move against the empire, if they responded to his provocation and decides to act, would his father remain silent? Would he let a future conflict ignite unchecked? Chen doubted it. The humans and the empire on this continent should be important to his father.

Chen needed, desperately to predict his father's next steps. To understand what the old man might do, if only to preserve what little peace of mind he still had. The cursed spirit hovering at the edge of his consciousness was an ever-present reminder of the danger he lived in. A reminder of how fragile his safety was. How fragile his freedom.

His mental state needed to be clear, stable, undisturbed... yet how could it be, with his father hidden from sight and pulling strings? Every day Chen woke half-afraid that he would open his eyes and discover it had all been a dream, that he was still his father's pawn, still trapped in the endless cycle of obedience and fear.

The thought alone made his stomach tighten.

He tore his gaze away from the latest reports. There was nothing more he could do about the godlings, not without risking their ire and creating new enemies he could not afford. Action would only escalate things. And escalation was the last thing he needed.

But he could still plead.

He could appeal to the godling's reasoning, perhaps even their compassion, reminding them that their actions had consequences far beyond their whims. That they were shaking the livelihoods of people who had done them no wrong.

Perhaps, if he spoke carefully enough, they would listen.

Perhaps.

Chen did not approach the godlings himself. That would have been reckless and it was not yet time for them to meet. Instead, he summoned a handful of his most trusted officials men and women seasoned enough to understand the gravity of every word they spoke, yet calm enough to stand before these godlings.

They knelt before him in the dimly lit chamber, the heavy scent of incense mingling with the tension in the air. Chen handed them a sealed decree, its surface marked with the imperial crest and a thin trace of his own mana signature, a subtle signal that the message truly carried the emperor's intent.

"Deliver this with care," he said quietly. "You will not embellish. You will not hesitate. Speak exactly as written."

The eldest official bowed deeply. "As His Majesty commands."

When they departed, Chen felt the weight in his chest grow heavier.

The godlings received the officials in a courtyard that had been reserved and renovated for them according to the godlings needs.

The officials bowed, maintaining the fine line between reverence and dignity. The eldest stepped forward and unfurled the decree.

"In the name of His Imperial Majesty," he began, voice steady, "we humbly relay the emperor's gratitude for your presence and your intent. His Majesty acknowledges your pursuit of greater understanding and your request for passage."

The official continued carefully, "His Majesty asks for your understanding. This request touches upon a law that has not been invoked since its creation. Its procedures are complex, its safeguards numerous. To ensure the integrity of the empire and for your safety as well, it requires preparation."

A Werewolf godling scoffed softly. "Preparation? We are godling. We have no need for your bureaucratic obstacles."

The lead official bowed his head even lower. "We do not doubt your greatness. But the law was crafted not to hinder, but to protect. Even the emperor cannot override it without due process. His Majesty earnestly asks that you grant him time. He swears that permission will be provided... but only once all safeguards are properly aligned. To rush this would endanger both the empire and yourselves."

The courtyard fell silent.

Another official stepped forward, adding gently, "His Majesty also humbly requests that until this process is complete, the godlings refrain from altering imperial structures, political, social, or metaphysical. Your actions ripple far and deep, and the livelihoods of countless people shift with every change. The empire does not wish to constrain you, but to prevent unintended harm."

The officials braced themselves, uncertain how the godlings would react.

A ripple of wind swept across the courtyard, carrying with it the rustle of feathers. From among the godlings, a Harpy stepped forward, tall and regal, wings arched like curved blades beside her. Her talons clicked sharply against the stone as she approached.

Her eyes, cold pinned the officials where they stood.

"Before we proceed any further with you," she said, her voice ringing with an unnatural clarity "there is a matter the empire must address. Why has your emperor interfered with our communication with the outside world?"

She tilted her head slightly, a gesture both curious and threatening.

"It is... difficult not to interpret such actions as an offense."

The other godlings watched in silence. Some were amused, some irritated, some unreadable, yet all were focused on the officials now, waiting to see how they would defend this accusation.

The officials felt sweat gathering at their brows beneath their formal crowns. This they were not prepared for and they certainly had not expected the godlings to confront them about it directly. They believed this was a situation where both knew the truth but chose to be ignorant of it.

The eldest official stepped forward, hands trembling just enough to betray his nerves.

"Honoured one," he began, voice respectful but tight, "we deeply regret any misunderstanding. The empire has not acted with hostility. The interference you speak of is... an unintended consequence of our protective wards."

The Harpy's wings tightened behind her. "Protective," she echoed, dripping with scepticism.

"Yes," the official said quickly, lowering his head even further. "The empire maintains several layers of field, some old, some recent to shield our citizens from external spiritual disturbances like the curses and undead spirits. These wards were not designed to target or impede with your communication. They react to fluctuations of energy and spiritual resonance automatically."

Another official added, cautiously, "Since your arrival, these systems have become strained, confused, if we may say so with unfamiliar mana signatures. They may have responded defensively. This was not... not a directive from His Majesty."

The Harpy godling's gaze sharpened. "Then why," she pressed, "was no effort made to inform us? To warn us? You let us believe we were being purposefully silenced."

A murmur rippled through the godlings, some nodding in agreement, others grumbling, others appearing more annoyed that they had misinterpreted the situation.

The officials exchanged anxious glances. This was exactly the type of misunderstanding Chen had intended: one wrong phrasing, one miscommunication, and the godlings could perceive insults where none were intended. They should be happy for achieving this, but now face to face with it, they realize their life is the one in the line.

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Another official stepped forward, choosing his words with utmost care.

"The emperor received word of the interference only recently. He had hoped to speak on the matter once all the details were understood. His Majesty never intended disrespect. He is deeply concerned that his people's defensive measures have inadvertently hindered you."

The Harpy did not blink.

"And why," she asked slowly, "should we believe this was not deliberate? That your emperor does not have plans for us? Or intend to confine us?"

The courtyard fell silent again.

"Because," he said quietly, "His Majesty sent us to you unguarded. Because he speaks through us with complete transparency. And because if the empire wished to treat you as threats... no barrier crafted by human hands would be enough to stop you. His Majesty knows this. We all know this."

A long pause.

The Harpy's feathers ruffled in a contemplative manner.

"Then tell your emperor," she said at last, "that we will not tolerate being cut off again, intentionally or otherwise."

Her wings flared slightly, stirring the air in a sudden gust.

"And if your empire's "wards" react to us again... we will remove them ourselves."

The officials bowed deeply.

"We will relay your words to His Majesty," they promised.

An Apeling stepped forward then, breaking the tense stillness with a light, almost musical laugh. His presence was immediately distinct from the others, less imposing, more fluid, yet carrying an undertone of wildness. His features bore the unmistakable signs of the Cursed Lands: the mottled blue fur along his arms that shifted in hue, the faint purplish glow in his eyes, the ripple-like patterns that shimmered across his skin with every breath.

A member of the Ripple Clan.

He grinned broadly, sharp canines flashing as he spread his arms in a gesture that was part greeting, part performance.

"Let us ease the air a little," he said, his tail flicking with playful energy. "The emperor says we should not interfere with the empire's social norms, and that we are... how did he phrase it? Affecting the lifestyle of the people? Some positively, some negatively?" He chuckled.

The officials stiffened, unsure whether agreeing or apologizing would be safer.

"Our intention," the Apeling continued, pacing lightly before them, "was never to complicate the lives of your common folk. We merely wished to experience a cultural exchange. To learn. To mingle."

He paused abruptly, his expression tightening as though he had bitten into a thought too sharp to swallow. The struggle was clear on his face, an emotion unfamiliar to most godlings: restraint.

"But," he said slowly, deliberately, "seeing as our curiosity is... causing problems..."

He stopped again, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment and inhaling deeply, the glow across his skin rippling unevenly. The effort it took him to hold back was almost comical. A few godlings rolled their eyes, unimpressed by his theatrics.

Finally, he exhaled and straightened.

"We will cease our... exploratory interactions," he declared, though it sounded like each word physically pained him. "But in return, we would like the empire to indulge a few of our questions. To quench our curiosity about how your people live."

The officials exchanged wary glances. This seemed harmless on the surface, but these group godlings rarely asked questions without hidden weight. After a silent debate conducted through looks alone, the eldest official nodded.

"If the questions are within our authority to answer, we will do so."

The Apeling brightened immediately, as though he had been waiting for that exact line.

"Wonderful!" he chirped, turning dramatically to the other godlings. "See? Cooperation! Not so difficult!"

The Harpy only smacked her lips in annoyance. Another godling sighed. A third rubbed their temples.

Unperturbed, the Apeling faced the officials again.

"First question," he said, his tone suddenly more serious. "Why does the empire keep the supernatural world away from its common folk?"

Before anyone could respond, he pressed further:

"Your land is rich in ambient mana, far more than the average citizen realizes. The potential is everywhere. Yet your people live as if blindfolded. Why shield them from what permeates every grain of soil, every gust of wind, every drop of water?"

He leaned in slightly, eyes narrowing with genuine curiosity.

"Why deny them access to a world that already touches them? Why keep them away from surfaces begging to be scratched?"

The officials froze.

This question, this exact question was one the emperor himself dreaded having to answer. It touched the core philosophy of the empire, a policy rooted in history, plot, sacrifice, and a truth hidden from the vast majority of the population.

The eldest official swallowed carefully.

"Honored one," he began, choosing every word as though crossing a thin blade over ice, "the empire's policies regarding magic and the supernatural... are not meant to deny opportunity. They are meant to prevent calamity."

His hands folded in front of him, knuckles slightly white.

"There is a long history, one buried in wounds and loss that taught the empire the necessity of boundaries. Mana, when freely touched by untrained hands, can reshape lives... and ruin them. Our laws were created to protect the populace from dangers they cannot comprehend."

He hesitated.

"And to prevent the past from repeating."

The Apeling cocked his head. "What past?"

The officials shifted uneasily. One of them mouthed silently, We cannot speak of that, but none dared vocalize it.

The eldest official bowed his head.

"That history is... restricted knowledge. Even many among the nobility are not permitted to know it. Only His Majesty holds the full truth."

The Apeling stared at him.

Then he broke into a broad, toothy grin.

"Oh? A secret so deep even you do not know it? Now that"he wiggled his fingers excitedly "that makes me very curious."

The officials felt their stomachs drop.

Before they could recover, the Apeling's grin sharpened.

"Let me guess about this hidden history." He tapped his chin, pacing lazily in a circle while the ripple patterns on his skin danced like disturbed water. "There must have been a time when such knowledge was not hidden. When mana and the supernatural flowed freely among your people."

He looked up with bright, knowing eyes.

"A time before the empire became what it is."

The officials stiffened, dread pooling in their lungs.

The Apeling continued, amusement dripping from every word:

"I'm imagining a great conflict, one that reshaped your land. A battle in which the empire emerged victorious. And afterward, after so many years, you inherited the culture, the order, the... restraint you have today."

He leaned in, expression almost affectionate.

"And afterward you thought: 'It is hard to rule when everyone is superpowered, isn't it?'"

He smirked, the final jab delivered with a playful flick of his tail.

The officials froze.

Not because he was wrong.

But because he was terrifyingly close to the truth.

The Harpy godling snorted with a mix of irritation and interest. A few of the others murmured, clearly intrigued by the Apeling's deduction.

The eldest official swallowed, throat tight.

"Honored one... we cannot confirm or deny your speculation. The matter is"

"Restricted, yes, yes," the Apeling cut in with a wave of his hand. "You've said that already. But your silence is as telling as any answer."

He narrowed his eyes with mischief, not malice, not yet, but close enough to make the officials sweat.

"You humans always think hiding stories will make them disappear."

His grin returned, wider than before.

"But secrets have weight. And eventually..." he tapped his temple lightly "...someone curious enough will dig them up."

The officials bowed so deeply their robes touched the ground.

"We beg that you refrain from pursuing these matters without His Majesty's guidance. The consequences could be"

"Dangerous?" the Apeling supplied cheerfully. "Unstable? Catastrophic?" He shrugged, entirely unfazed "How exciting."

The officials felt color drain from their faces.

He was enjoying this.

The Harpy stepped forward again, feathers bristling. "Ripple-clan," she said sharply, "stop toying with them. Your speculation is stirring unnecessary tension."

"What?" the Apeling tilted his head innocently. "I'm only trying to understand why this empire keeps its people in a pretty little cage."

"A cage that functions," the Harpy countered coldly.

"That depends on who you ask," the Apeling replied, smile fading into something more thoughtful, more troubling.

Then his eyes flicked back to the officials.

"In the eastern continent where we reside," he began, "there are two human kingdoms nearing the threshold of empirehood. Both allow free knowledge of mana and the supernatural. It is woven into daily life, common, normalized, unhidden."

He tapped his temple lightly.

"And despite that freedom, despite all that power readily at their fingertips, many among their people choose to live simple, ordinary human lives. They achieve on their own what your empire tries so desperately to enforce."

A quiet murmur rippled through the godlings. The officials stiffened.

The Apeling's tone shifted again, growing sharper.

"One of those kingdoms is militaristic. Every citizen, upon coming of age, undergoes mandatory training. Discipline, structure, clarity of purpose." He paused, watching the officials expression closely.

"And if I recall correctly... your empire has sent envoys to that kingdom, before we departed to your land, they were still there."

His smile widened.

"Who knows what they learned upon their return?"

Chapter 695:

As he said this, something in him changed. His eyes glimmered, green and red intertwining like tree roots. The air thickened as Ikem's divinity seeped through the Apeling's body, sharpening his senses a hundredfold.

Every heartbeat, every twitch and every micro-expression.

The officials felt the pressure of that gaze, a godling's perception intensified to the level of an inescapable truth-scan. They tried to keep still, masks neutral, spines straight. But the Apeling wasn't looking for confessions.

He was watching the involuntary reactions and whisper of the microcosm of the body of each official.

A bead of sweat.

A tightening of the jaw.

A pulse quickening under the skin.

Anything.

After a brief but unnerving moment, the glow in his eyes faded. The Apeling blinked, looking almost disappointed.

"Hmph." He crossed his arms. "Their bodily reactions show they know nothing of this." He deliberately didn't hide his voice.

A strange silence followed.

The Apeling looked genuinely puzzled, if not mildly insulted that the officials were so ignorant.

A godling from the side let out a soft laugh.

"So you're interrogating the wrong humans?"

The Apeling scratched his cheek. "Apparently so. Either these ones are useless..." His gaze dropped to the officials, assessing them with blunt honesty "...or the emperor keeps his secrets extraordinarily compartmentalized."

The officials lowered their heads even further, ashamed by the implication even though it wasn't their fault.

The Harpy godling stepped forward again, feathers rustling irritably.

"Ripple-clan, you wasted a divine blessing on that?"

He shrugged. "Curiosity demanded it."

"That curiosity," she snapped, "is going to get you killed one day."

"Not today," he chirped.

But his smirk dissolved into contemplative tension as he glanced back down at the officials.

"...If even imperial envoys weren't briefed about such matters, then the truth must be buried very deep. Your emperor hides something profound. Something foundational."

The officials did not respond.

They could not respond.

Their throats constricted with the weight of unspoken truths and the terror of being perceived, truly perceived in a way far beyond mortal understanding. So they bowed again, deeper this time, robes pooling around their knees like ink spilled on stone.

Their foreheads nearly touched the ground as they trembled at the edges of their composure, each of them silently praying to any power willing to listen.

Please... let the godlings lose interest, Let them not dig further,

Let our emperor not kill us for hearing too much.

Because now they had two fears.

The first was the godlings, whose curiosity or mere whims could reshape the empire by accident. Who could tear down cities simply by following a hunch.

The second, far more personal, was the emperor.

For they had heard things... deductions and implications about the empire. Things they could not unhear. Things no official, no matter how loyal was meant to know.

The empire had strict rules about who could hold certain knowledge.

Breaking that rule accidentally didn't exempt anyone from punishment.

Somewhere deep in their hearts, each official knew:

Returning to the emperor with this report might cost them their heads.

If the emperor chose mercy, they might still be silenced through other means.

Their terror only deepened when the godlings began to disperse.

The Harpy flicked her wrist in a curt, dismissive gesture.

Another godling waved lazily, already losing interest in the humans. A third turned away with a sigh, muttering, "Pointless meeting."

Then, with an almost casual lack of ceremony, the Apeling lifted a hand and waved them off as though concluding a friendly chat.

"You may go," he said lightly "We're done here."

Done.

The word hit the officials like a physical blow.

They remained bowed a moment longer, not out of reverence, but to gather enough courage simply to stand on shaking legs.

Slowly, they lifted themselves, one by one, heads lowered, eyes averted. They dared not look at the godlings expressions, not the Apeling's satisfied curiosity, not the Harpy's cold disdain, not the others unreadable contemplation.

They turned and began the long walk back toward the palace, each step heavier than the last.

Every footfall echoed the same thought:

How do we tell His Majesty what happened?

How do we convey that the godlings sniffed at the empire's secret? How do we explain that they may have conveyed something to the godlings unknowingly?

How do we survive this report?

Their hearts pounded with dread as they neared the gates, the looming silhouette of the imperial palace standing like a mountain of fate before them.

Behind them, the godlings returned to their own discussions.

Chen dismissed the officials with a soft gesture.

They bowed shakily until their foreheads nearly touched the floor, then backed away, their faces pale, their steps uneven. They understood, just as he did that they were already dead men walking. Not because of anything they willed, but because they had heard something they were never meant to. That alone sealed their fate.

Chen watched them go with a tightness in his chest.

They served well. Loyal. Competent. Careful.

And yet... utterly doomed.

The worst part was the helplessness. He was the ruler, the emperor, but in this matter he had no authority, not even the right to spare them. The shadow behind the throne, his father, would not tolerate loose ends.

For the first time in days, however, a strange comfort washed over him.

The report confirmed something, the godlings were also looking for his father and unlike him, they were open with it. They had deliberately spoken the provocation aloud, forcing reactions, forcing attention, tossing bait into a still pond and waiting for the ripples.

His father had not taken it.

Not a single movement.

Not a single shadow stirred.

That, more than anything, unnerved Chen. His father missed nothing. He manipulated everything. Yet this? This he left alone?

"Did he ignore it," Chen whispered to himself, "or... did he know it was bait?"

Both possibilities frightened Chen more than he wished to admit.

Still, the knowledge the godlings hinted at envoys sent beyond the empire, to a kingdom in the eastern continent was not his own doing. He knew of their departure only from fragments of overheard military logs and a few suspiciously redacted reports.

Father acted under his name, with his authority.

Chen clenched his fists.

"That ends," he murmured. "I will drag you out from the shadows, Father. I will not rule a throne I cannot control."

His relief surprised him, he wasn't fighting this alone. Others, even godlings, were also reaching for the same unseen puppet strings.

Maybe he wasn't insane.

Chen moved swiftly as the hold on communication channel reopened for the "Stuck" godlings.

Messages were relayed in rapid succession, carried across the godlings links and mana currents until they reached Zephyr and the others. The response was immediate, a shared frown settling across their faces. Their displeasure was not directed at the crisis itself, but at Ethan, who had been in contact with them moments earlier.

Why had he withheld such crucial information?

In times like these, when uncertainty pressed in from every direction, a single omission carried weight. A heavy weight. Ethan's silence was not something they could easily overlook.

The instinctive reaction was to confront him at once, to demand answers and pry the truth out of him directly. But after exchanging glances, the godlings restrained themselves. This, they realized, was an unexpected opportunity.

A chance to observe Ethan.

A chance to see his true nature.

A chance to learn whether he was truly an ally... or merely pretending to be.

So they chose patience over confrontation, masking their growing unease beneath calm expressions. They would wait for Ethan to speak first, to see if he would reveal what he knew on his own. If he didn't... that alone would be revealing.

Yet beneath their simmering distrust lay another, more immediate concern.

Their people.

Zephyr and the other godling kings had been on edge for the past months due to the happenings and report on their side. Hearing about the activities occurring in the southern continent, where tensions between mortals and divine descendants ran dangerously high. When report finally came through, all of them let out the same quiet breath of relief.

No casualties. Not a single mortal harmed.

Instead, it seemed their people were... enjoying themselves. Causing mischief, yes, but harmless mischief. Laughing. Exploring. Treating the southern lands like a festival rather than a battlefield.

Their mixed reaction, both relief and worry stemmed from the fragile developments unfolding across the continents. The humans had turned their eyes toward the godlings, and under normal circumstances, such scrutiny would have meant little. But this time, the humans came prepared. This time, the humans had evidence, testimonies... and backing.

And the godlings, whether they wished to admit it or not, were clearly in the wrong.

An official court letter had been issued and delivered directly to the godlings council, an unprecedented move. It was written by mortal citizens who claimed to have been harmed by the actions of certain

godlings. At first, Zephyr and the others were inclined to dismiss it as mortal bravado, yet another attempt at elevating their authority in the world.

Chapter 696:

But then they saw the sigil.

The unmistakable emblem of the Goddess of Justice.

And beneath it, the seal of the veiled arbiter, Xerosis.

The moment the symbols came into view, they all fell silent. These were not marks any being dared to forge. Not unless they wished to invoke the wrath of the divine law itself.

This petition was legitimate.

This case was real.

And it was no longer something they could ignore.

The humans had not only gathered their wounded and their witnesses, they had secured divine oversight. Lawyers trained in Xerosis jurisprudence were already waiting on their side. The victims had been vetted. Their accounts are documented. Everything that could be prepared was prepared.

Zephyr and the other godling leaders were instructed to assemble their own legal representatives and bring forth those responsible for the accusations. But fortune or circumstance tilted slightly in their favor. Most of the godlings who could be named in the case were currently in the southern continent, trapped by the same strange interference that had affected all communication and travel.

They were "Stuck" and therefore unable to appear in court.

Thus, the trial was postponed.

For now.

This temporary reprieve, however, did not ease the godling kings tension. If anything, it made them more anxious. Until the trial resumed, every action of their people would be watched closely by mortals, by divine intermediaries, and by the goddess whose seal held the weight of the law itself.

Any reckless act could be twisted into further evidence. Any misstep would strengthen the human court's position. Even the smallest display of power could one day be read aloud as a crime.

That was why the news from the southern continent had struck Zephyr and the others so sharply. Relief washed over them at hearing their people were still behaving still civil, still causing no casualties. But worry lingered beneath that relief, because one moment of carelessness could undo everything.

Despite the pressure, Zephyr and the others chose not to inform the godlings in the southern lands about the looming legal confrontation. The last thing they needed was panic, outrage, or retaliatory pride.

And, on a more personal level, there was Ethan.

If they warned the distant godlings now, many of them—out of loyalty, fear, or strategy—would likely try to return. That would reflect terribly on Ethan, who had invited them as guests. Having one's guests flee at the first sign of trouble was humiliating even in mundane circumstances. For a godling host, it would be a stain that lingered for centuries.

So the leaders held their silence, watching events unfold through clenched hands and guarded breaths.

Every passing minute without an incident was a relief.

Every passing minute with their people still safe and behaving was a blessing.

Their focus now was no longer on the immediate crisis, those pieces were already in motion, and the fallout was inevitable. Instead, Zephyr and the other leaders had shifted their attention to what would come after. Whatever the court decided, whatever punishment or compromise awaited them, one thing was unmistakably clear:

The era of the godlings was about to change.

Lines that had once been firm were beginning to blur. Old systems, traditions that had guided generations were trembling beneath the pressure of mortal defiance and their own people scrutiny. Whether they wished for it or not, a reordering was coming. The only question left was who among the godlings would be prepared for it.

Zephyr retreated to his private chambers, the weight of leadership pressing more heavily than ever. In the dim lamplight, he held a wooden-bound book, simple in appearance, yet heavy with power and legacy. It was the book his father had given him moments before his ascension, a relic passed down from his grandfather Ikenga.

A guidebook of sorts.

A record of warnings.

A chronicle of foresight.

Its pages were filled with outlines of solutions, paths carved from the wisdom of his grandfather. Notes scrawled in the margins by Ikenga, polished and refined by his father, Ikem. Ideas for governance, for unity, for resolving the inevitable growing pains of a people whose strength often outpaced their wisdom.

It was from this book that Zephyr had drawn the foundations of his own long-term plan, a plan meant to address the very challenges now boiling to the surface. A plan he believed would shape a new era for the godlings.

But the plan had not been born from him alone. It was the inheritance of three generations, braided tightly. Ikenga's seed of an idea, then came Ikem's structure and now was the turn of Zephyr's execution.

And yet... the world was not cooperating.

Events were happening both too slowly and too quickly at once.

Slow, because the pieces he needed, alliances, reforms, shifts in perspective were still out of place. Many godlings were stubborn, resistant, distracted. And the humans were not moving as quickly as they should.

Fast, because unexpected, uncontrollable events kept erupting in the gaps between his careful steps. Mortals launching accusations. Divine seals being invoked. Ethan's action of withholding a crucial event from them and the godlings' mischief threatening to spill into catastrophe.

The pace was chaotic, unpredictable. The board was reshaping itself faster than his hand could move the pieces.

Zephyr closed the wooden book, resting his fingers on its carved cover. His chest rose and fell in a slow breath as a new realization settled in.

His plan... might need to change.

The path laid out by his father and grandfather had been built for a different world, one where they could still dictate the balance of power. But this upcoming conflict with the humans, this unexpected confrontation backed by justice itself held the potential to shift public perception, divine judgment, and political power all at once.

It was dangerous but within danger existed opportunity.

If handled correctly, this conflict could become the very catalyst he needed, the spark to reform their slowly fracturing society, towards a new order with clearer laws, clearer leadership, and a clearer future.

Thinking of his plan, Zephyr felt his heartbeat drum heavily against his ribs, a slow, thunderous pulse that dragged memories out of the depths of his past. A past he had never truly understood until now.

He remembered the time when his father Ikem, during his rule had discovered the presence of a demon hidden among their people. A creature wearing the shape of an apeling, mimicking their innocence while weaving its own twisted agenda.

Zephyr had been younger then, still learning, still believing that leaders should act swiftly, decisively, without hesitation.

So when his father allowed the demon to continue its charade, to walk among them and pursue its plan under careful, silent observation, Zephyr had been appalled. Horrified. Outraged. Ikem had explained that to confront the demon too soon would bring no benefit, its secrets lost to them, and forfeit the knowledge it carried, knowledge Ikem believed could strengthen their people.

So the demon was allowed to act and it acted freely.

Even now, the memory made Zephyr's blood run cold.

His fist tightened as the image flashed before him, the day they finally raided the demon's hidden lair. The silence of the chamber. The stench. The stone floor stained with dark, dried blood. And the bodies.

Small bodies, twisted, mangled and thrown aside like broken toys.

Children.

Zephyr had felt his stomach churn, his heart collapse into itself. In that moment, his resentment toward his father flared like a wildfire. How could Ikem have allowed this? How could he have watched and waited while innocence was devoured?

He had not understood then.

But now, standing at the threshold of his own era, his own looming burden, he finally did.

Leadership wasn't clean.

It wasn't noble.

It wasn't painless.

Sometimes the path to securing a future demanded decisions that left scars on the soul. Sometimes protecting one's people meant staining one's hands long before the threat became visible to others.

Zephyr exhaled shakily, his fingers loosening. Unlike his father, he would not face this alone. Once he revealed his plan to the other godling leaders, once they understood the purpose behind it, they would shoulder the same sin, the same responsibility. They would walk this path with him, all for the long-term survival of their kind.

He would not suffer solitude the way Ikem had.

But the time to gather them had not yet come. Ethan remained an essential piece, one that could not be moved or removed prematurely. And Ethan himself was currently under their scrutiny while preparing for the upcoming competition that held its own political weight.

Everything depended on timing. On patience.

On playing the long game.

Zephyr closed the ancestral book and gazed toward the distant horizon beyond his chamber window.

"Humans..." he murmured, a smile curling his lips thin, almost mocking.

"It seems your dreams will soon be realized."

But while his mouth shaped the grin of a man amused by fate, his eyes held something colder.

Chapter 697:

Meanwhile back on the southern continent, the Vampires were about to unleash their planned out plague upon the empire. Under the night sky, tall shadows crept from beyond the border of the Misty land as they made their way to the nearest town under the empire.

The guards never saw them.

Under the starless sky, the silhouettes moved like liquid darkness across the ridgeline tall, lean, and unnervingly silent. Their cloaks fluttered behind them without sound, drinking in what little moonlight filtered through the clouds. These were predators who had memorized every blind spot in this town's patrol routes, who knew the rhythms of human night vigilance better than humans themselves.

As the bell in the eastern watchtower tolled midnight, the first group of five slipped over the wall.

Their feet did not disturb the frost-glazed earth. Their shadows stretched unnaturally long, melding with the cracks in the cobblestone streets as if the town itself wished to swallow them whole.

Tonight, they hunted.

And their prey, any human foolish enough to not understand the night doesn't belong to them. Foolish enough to travel under the night sky, soon rumors spread like rot they are about to unleash, about how the night is hungrier now.

In a narrow alley lit by a single failing lantern, the first scream nearly rose, caught in the throat of a young courier before a pale hand closed over his mouth. His eyes widened in terror as he felt the cold lips brush his neck, the first puncture like a pinprick.

The alley grew quiet once more.

The vampires fed until his skin was dry, until his corpse was an empty husk crumpled like clothes left too long in rain. Then, as ordered by the court, they opened the chest with careful precision. A drop of their own blackened vitae dripped onto the shriveled heart.

The change was immediate.

The corpse spasmed violently, fingers curling, bones cracking as they elongated. A guttural croak vibrated through its hollow lungs. Where once a human lay, now something else clawed its way upright, a newborn thrall, mindless, starved, obedient.

The vampires stepped back, admiring their craft.

"Feed," whispered their leader. "Then follow the scent of blood to the next."

The thrall collapsed into a feral sprint, vanishing into the maze of streets.

Soon there would be more. Dozens. Hundreds. Enough to choke the empire with its own fear.

This night had been centuries in the making.

At the edge of the border, dozens of tall, emaciated figures stepped forward. Their limbs were too long; their shadows stretched across the ground like claws. These were the Plaguebearers, carriers of the first wave.

Under the night sky, they began their march.

No torches. No banners. Just silence, broken only by the wet sound of their footsteps on the dew-drenched soil.

From the hills above, the Vampire nobles watched with patient hunger, the moon reflecting in their crimson eyes.

"At dawn," said one, "the empire wakes to a kingdom of corpses."

"By dusk," replied another, "those corpses will walk."

The humans would wake up to find streets littered with bloods, but no bodies, their loved one's missing. Unaware their loved one's are now reborn in a new form and made a nest under their home, eager for the night sky to come when they would wake up to embrace their loved ones to join them.

Morning came gently like usual.

A soft gold washed over the rooftops, warm and comforting, as if the sun had no idea what had happened beneath its rising. Birds chirped as always. A baker lit his oven. A child yawned and rubbed her eyes.

For a heartbeat, everything was normal.

Until the first shriek split the morning air.

Then another.

And another.

By the time the town bell tolled, the streets were filled with people rushing out of their homes in confusion, worry, and lingering sleep. But what they found froze them in place.

Blood.

Smearred across the cobblestones in long dragged patterns. Splattered on the walls. Dried on doorsteps. Streaks leading into alleys and beneath carts. Everywhere, blood. Yet not a single body.

Not one.

Doors hung open as though someone had fled or been taken.

Mothers called the names of daughters who did not answer. Fathers sprinted from one street corner to another, searching for children who had not come home. Siblings clutched abandoned shoes, home made talismans, bags, hoping their owners would appear around the corner smiling.

But the town remained empty.

"H-Help!" shouted an elderly man near the well. "My wife, my wife is gone! All that's left is... this."

In his trembling hands, he held a torn shawl soaked in blood, the familiar red-and-white embroidery barely visible beneath the stains.

Panic spread fast.

Within minutes, the entire square was filled with grieving, trembling people. Some wept openly. Others stood in shock. The guards meanwhile noticed that some of their own was missing too, yet there was no cry of battle or weapons clash.

A single, dreadful thought crept through every mind:

What monster kills so many... yet leaves no dead?

But no one, not the heartbroken mother clutching her missing son's jacket, not the prayer-murmuring priest, not the captain of the guard staring at the patterns in the blood knew the truth.

Their loved ones were not dead.

They were beneath their feet.

In crawl spaces behind cellar walls. In storm drains and storage basements. In old tunnels left by miners long forgotten. Nests, made in haste during the night, where the newborn thralls lay curled like starving pups, shivering, twitching, adjusting to their new forms.

Their ears now sharp enough to hear every sob above them.

Their noses keen enough to inhale the scent of the living they once loved.

And as the sun climbed higher, the reborn creatures pressed themselves deeper into the cool darkness, instincts guiding them.

But even as they slept, their minds whispered with one desire, one command seeded into them by their vampiric creators:

"Wait until nightfall."

When the sun would vanish and the sky would darken...

When their hunger would outgrow their hesitation...

When they would rise twisted, desperate, forever changed and seek out the voices of the people they once cherished.

To embrace them, to feast upon them and to turn them. Family would join family. Households would become nests and soon the town would become a hive.

The town head, Tenichi Denholt, had seen many weird things in his thirty years of service and leadership but nothing like this.

Blood without bodies.

Dozens missing without a sound.

And an entire night that felt... wrong.

Tenichi's jaw tightened as he watched his people cry and stagger through the streets. He forced himself to stand tall, to project steadiness he did not feel.

"Send riders to Oakfern and Hollowmere," he ordered sharply. "I want to know if this is only happening here or if the entire valley is under attack."

His messengers mounted their horses immediately. The moment they galloped out of town, Tenichi pulled aside his most trusted aide.

"And send this to the county seat," he said, thrusting a sealed letter into the man's hands. "Use the fastest route. Do not stop for anything."

"Yes, sir. What should I tell them?"

"Tell the Countess..." Tenichi hesitated, glancing around at the blood-stained streets and trembling families. "Tell her we need professionals. Hunters. Exorcists. Soldiers. Anyone who understands monsters."

His aide nodded gravely and rushed off.

Tenichi rang the square bell again and again until the crowd finally gathered. Parents clung to children, neighbors held one another, and the air reeked of fear.

"My people," Tenichi began, raising both hands, "we will find your missing families. We do not yet know what caused this attack, but we will uncover it. I have already sent for aid from the county. Help is coming."

"How can you say that?" cried a woman near the front. "My boys never came home! All that's left is their" Her voice broke. "their blood on the doorstep..."

Another man shouted, "What if something is hiding in our homes? What if it comes back tonight?"

A ripple of panic spread through the crowd.

Tenichi slammed the town guard's spear onto the wooden platform. The crack echoed sharply.

"We will not let this town fall into hysteria," he said, forcing steel into his voice. "My men are searching every alley, every stable, every cellar. We will find answers before sunset."

He did not add we must, though the words burned on his tongue.

Guards spread through the town in groups of three, their boots crunching over dried trails of blood. They pried open old basements, crawled into abandoned chicken coops, and combed the graveyard not far from the town.

Everywhere they found evidence of struggle, but never a single corpse.

One guard muttered, "How can so many vanish at once?"

Another whispered, "No beast leaves nothing behind..."

On a rise overlooking the town, hidden among the sparse trees, two figures stood unnaturally still despite the bright daylight. These were the second generations assigned after the bite to keep watch on the thralls and keep them safe during daytime.

Chapter 698:

They were guardians sentinels assigned immediately after the night's hunt to watch over the newborn thralls while the sun rose and forced the lesser creatures into their instinctive hibernation.

The thralls were vulnerable now.

Their intelligence was fractured, their instincts simple: Hide from the sun. Remain still. Wait for the night.

But instinct made poor camouflage.

A thrall curled beneath a cellar floor or crouched behind a thin wall was no better hidden than a sleeping animal. A guard with a sharp eye could find one. A search dog could follow the scent of death. A grieving parent could tear up floorboards in a panic and reveal something monstrous.

Under normal circumstances, discovery would be inevitable.

But today, the humans searched blindly.

Not because they were incompetent but because they were not searching alone.

Before the first light touched the rooftops, several second generation vampires had slipped into the town. Under the cover of night, they cast simple but effective disguise spells, their forms bending and shimmering until they perfectly mimicked the townspeople and the uniformed guards.

One took the shape of a baker's son, mud stains on the boots, flour on the sleeves. Another passed easily as a middle-aged guard with a tired face and red-rimmed eyes from a sleepless night. Yet another became a familiar stable-hand, his hair tied back in the same loose knot he always wore.

By dawn, they were already mingled among the humans.

Marching beside them, comforting frantic mothers. Listening to orders from the Town Head with polite nods. Leading search patrols with practiced concern.

And no one, not a single human questioned their presence.

After all, they looked perfectly ordinary. They smelled human and their voices matched. Their memories carefully stolen from the minds of their victims were flawless.

Trickery of the mind was second nature to these vampire godlings. Ordinary mortals stood no chance of seeing through it.

A pair of disguised vampires walked ahead of a search patrol, the guards following behind in a growing line. They moved through a narrow alley where, beneath a half-rotted barrel, a drained thrall slept like a shriveled corpse, limbs twisted, jaw slack, eyes unfocused in daytime torpor.

A human guard paused, squinting at the strange bulge beneath the barrel.

Something about it looked wrong. Like a body. Or something close to it.

He stepped forward instinctively when a hand landed lightly on his shoulder.

"Don't bother checking that," the disguised vampire said, wearing the face of one of the town's junior officers. "We already cleared this area. It's just debris. Rats must have dragged something under there."

The guard hesitated, glancing between the officer and the barrel.

Another vampire-in-disguise called out from a few paces ahead, "Oi! We got tracks over here! Looks like someone was dragged toward the well!"

Immediately the humans jolted forward, racing to follow the false trail. The guards' minds, nudged gently by the illusion-weavers, ignored the barrel entirely.

The thrall beneath did not stir, its head rested in the dirt like a discarded husk. But its lips twitched faintly in hunger.

None of the humans noticed.

Why would they? Their leaders were leading them astray, and no thought of suspicion dared surface under the vampires mental fog.

Tenichi sent more runners toward the county seat and neighboring villages, praying someone would answer soon. He forced himself to move from family to family, calming wails, steadying shoulders, promising they would find the missing.

But as the noon sun reached its peak, his gut twisted tighter.

Because despite the frantic searches, the barking of detection dogs, the guards crawling through crawlspaces and abandoned wells.

They found nothing.

Each passing hour tightened like a noose around Tenichi's throat.

He had lost friends last night. Neighbors. People he had grown up beside since childhood. The blood in the streets was etched into his memory, as vivid as the sound of screaming that had never come.

Whatever had done this would return and next time, it would not leave more than half the town standing.

"No... something has to be done." Tenichi's voice trembled, though anger steadied it. "We can't just sit here waiting to die."

Fear made people freeze and desperation made them follow.

Tenichi burst into the town square, grabbing every man, every boy who looked old enough to wield a spear, shouting for them to gather. His voice cracked, but his determination pulled attention like a beacon in fog.

"Everyone who can fight, everyone who can lift a blade come with me! Now!"

Within minutes, hundreds surged after him, within twenty, thousands.

The crowd poured toward the town armory, an old stone building meant to equip a militia of a few dozen, not the entire population. But they didn't care. They needed something.

As Tenichi pushed open the reinforced doors, the sight inside nearly stopped his heart.

Racks of spears stood dusty and unused, rows of rusting swords lay half-forgotten. Stacks of old shields leaned in unstable piles.

"This... this isn't enough," one man whispered.

"Doesn't matter," Tenichi snapped. "Take what you can. A blade is still a blade."

The armory quickly became a whirlwind of frantic motion, men passed weapons hand-to-hand. Young boys carried bundles of arrows. Older men searched the crates for anything sharp. Women arrived with farm tools, sickles, axes, sharpened stakes, refusing to be left behind.

Tenichi watched as fathers wrapped cloth around the handles of swords too heavy for their grip. Old veterans tried to instruct groups on how to hold a spear properly. No one knew what they were fighting, but they were willing to stand between their families and the night.

They had the number advantage and they had resolve. They only needed to buy time, hours, a day long enough for reinforcements or professional hunters to arrive from the county.

So they prepared.

Barricades were hammered into place along the main roads. Torches were gathered and oil distributed. Scouts were positioned on rooftops.

The town buzzed with a desperate energy, fear and courage tangled together.

But Tenichi didn't know he was giving orders beside the supposed monsters.

As he shouted instructions, one of the "guards" next to him nodded and echoed his commands, his voice sounding perfectly human.

Another "villager" passed out shields, smiling grimly.

A third helped nail barricades, his hands moving too smoothly, too silently.

Their disguises held flawlessly, their minds pressed against the humans, nudging thoughts, easing suspicion.

Tenichi's courage was admirable, his effort was inspiring. But none of it mattered if they missed the enemy was right beside them without them noticing.

As the sun dipped lower, painting the sky molten orange, Tenichi stood atop the half-reinforced gate and scanned the horizon.

"Tonight," he said under his breath, "we fight for our livelihood and families."

He gripped the spear he had chosen, an old dull-tipped thing, but his knuckles whitened with determination.

Behind him, thousands of villagers took their places, clutching their mismatched weapons.

They didn't know what would come...but they knew it would.

Tenichi closed his eyes for a moment, steeling himself.

Just survive until help arrives. Just one night.

The second night arrived, and the Thralls began to stir. Their bodies twitched first, then tightened, as the last remnants of mortality unraveled within them. A low, collective hiss drifted through their place of hiding as they slowly awakened, hungry, expectant, obedient.

Before the transformation fully settled, the First Generations stepped from the shadows. The Thralls felt their presence like a pressure in the blood, old and commanding.

The first generation got words on the human action, of their boldness, or foolishness, of those who dared act against the coming night.

As the final pair of Thrall eyes snapped open, the First Generations spoke their decree into the mind of each Thrall.

"Snuff out their light," the cloaked voice spoke, neither loud nor soft, simply undeniable. "Let their precious brightness be taken from them, so they may learn that the night has an owner."

A hiss of approval rippled through the Thralls, feral, eager.

"And when darkness has reclaimed what they stole," the order finished, "you will feed... and multiply."

The town was awake long before the sun had fully set. Lines of torches burned along the walls. Lanterns hung from every post. Men, untrained, anxious, gripping spears and farming tools stood shoulder to shoulder at the gates.

Tenichi moved among them, checking placements, forcing his voice to stay steady.

"Hold your ground. Eyes sharp. If anything moves, call it, don't keep silent."

But fear was thick enough to taste, bitter on every breath. Every shadow seemed stretched wrong, bent at angles that didn't exist moments ago. Every rustle of wind snapped nerves tight, triggering a dozen raised weapons and shuddering breaths.

Then, a sudden gust of wind.

One of the torches on the wall sputtered, hissed, and died.

The nearest soldiers flinched as the darkness swallowed that patch of stone. All eyes darted to each other in confusion, a silent question passing between them: Was that just the wind?

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No one believed it.

Weapons were lifted higher. Shields tightened in trembling grips. Step by step, they edged closer to the extinguished torch, glancing around with frantic, jerking motions.

They saw nothing.

Relief, thin and fragile crept in as they went ahead to relight the torch.

That was when the entire stretch of wall they stood on plunged into darkness.

One after another, the torches lining the ramparts winked out as if pinched by invisible fingers, snuffing light from the world in a single sweeping motion. Shadows devoured everything. Sight vanished.

Panic rippled through the line.

Men gasped. Someone whispered a prayer. "Fuck" Someone else cursed through chattering teeth.

They knew then, the enemy was already here as there was nothing natural about what just occurred.

A cold wave of dread surged through the dark as shapes began to move in the darkness before them. At first, it was only the suggestion of motion, soft, crawling, almost liquid.

Then their eyes adjusted just enough to see.

Shadows.

Crawling on all fours at impossible angles, limbs stretching too far, joints bending the wrong way. A cluster of them, slipping forward with spidery, predatory grace.

Slowly, almost deliberately... they rose.

They stood upright in the darkness, tall, wrong, trembling with some internal violence and those gathered shapes opened their eyes.

Blood-red, dozens of them staring directly at the gathered group of common man and soldiers.

The breath left everyone's lungs at once, the horror was confirmed and it was already too late.

One of the villagers let out a scream at the sight of those red eyes,

But the scream was short-lived.

The thralls surged forward in the darkness, their movements almost soundless, perfect predators born for the night. The villagers and guards, robbed of all light, found themselves helpless, unable even to see the full form of the things attacking them.

The scream cut off abruptly.

Tenichi and his men snapped their heads toward the sound. Where a section of the wall had been moments earlier... now only a pool of darkness remained, with a brief glance of figures moving and falling.

Tenichi didn't know what pushed his legs to move, fear, instinct or duty but he was running before he realized it.

"Bring extra torches!" he roared, the order cracking through the air.

His men scrambled after him.

When Tenichi reached the darkened section, his steps faltered.

His people, his own townsfolk and the guards stationed there lay scattered across the stone. Their bodies were collapsed, shriveled, sunken in on themselves as if every drop of moisture, every bit of life, had been sucked out. Skin clung tightly to bone. Eyes were hollow caves. Not a single wound marked them.

And the enemy... was nowhere to be seen.

A cold dread crawled up Tenichi's spine.

The squad behind him finally arrived, thrusting torches forward. Flames flared back to life, pushing back the darkness inch by inch.

Tenichi knelt beside one of the collapsed forms. His hand hovered over the withered chest, unable to touch it.

"This... this happened in seconds," one of the guards whispered behind him, voice trembling.

Another guard squatted to examine a fallen comrade, pushing back brittle skin with shaking fingers. "No blood... no wounds... just dry. Like they were drained."

Tenichi swallowed hard.

They crouched beside the shriveled bodies, hoping, desperately that they might find some clue, something useful that could explain what had happened.

But this night offered no answers, only horror

A sudden scream of fear tore through the air.

Everyone jerked their heads toward the sound. From the height of the wall they stood on, they could overlook the town and what they saw froze the blood in their veins.

Light was dying.

One torch after another flickered out below them, as though a great shadow swept through the streets, devouring every flame in its path. Houses, alleys, and courtyards vanished into darkness in rapid succession.

Then a roar. The same inhuman roar as before... but closer now.

Tenichi and the others whipped their heads back around just in time to see the source of the scream near them.

One of the men who had followed Tenichi was no longer standing. He was lifted off the ground, held tightly in the rigid, clawlike hands of one of the shriveled corpses they had thought dead.

The dried husk clung to the struggling man with impossible strength. Its jaw unhinged slightly, revealing long, needle-like fangs that it sank into the man's throat. A wet choke escaped him, his limbs kicking weakly.

Tenichi watched, frozen, as color drained from the man's face in seconds, his body collapsing inward as though being emptied from the inside. At the same time, the once-dried corpse began to writhe.

Bones snapped sharply into place. Veins pulsed with stolen fluid. The hollow skin stretched and filled as the corpse twisted into a new form becoming a thrall right before their eyes.

Tenichi felt his stomach drop, his mind unable to accept what he was seeing.

Around him, another sound began soft, awful, unmistakable.

The other husks on the ground twitched, then they jerked and started to rise.

A chorus of crackling joints and rasping breaths filled the air.

The men who had come with him stared for a heartbeat too long, then terror ripped through their composure. They dropped their crude weapons with panicked clatters and screamed, stumbling over each other as they tried to flee.

Some couldn't even run. Their legs simply refused to move. They collapsed where they stood, paralyzed by fear as the undead forms shifted toward them.

Tenichi ran too.

But unlike the others, he didn't drop his weapon.

He clutched it tightly... though the look on his face made it clear that he didn't believe it would help. His eyes were wide with despair, with the crushing hopelessness of a man who had just realized the truth.

This was not something a modest town, filled mostly with farmers, craftsmen, and a handful of trained soldiers could ever hope to handle. Even if the county sent reinforcements, Tenichi doubted they would fare any better. Ordinary men were not meant to stand against something like this.

The town was becoming the enemy.

By the time dawn rose, Tenichi feared there would be no living souls left behind at all. Even his life, despite his own training, despite his instincts was nowhere near guaranteed.

Tenichi understood the horror unfolding around him. He understood that these creatures "thralls" spread through feeding. But what he could not comprehend was the speed.

This was not the slow, crawling plague he might have expected from a beastly, mindless monster. The thralls moved with ferocity and intent. Their growth was coordinated, almost strategic. There was no waste, no hesitation. They struck, fed, and rose again in mere seconds.

If they had truly been nothing more than animalistic beasts with no guiding hands, things might have been different. The corpses left behind would have been torn apart, ruined beyond use, barely coherent enough for anything to rise from them. The spread would have been slow, a tragedy, but a containable one.

But these thralls were something far worse.

They killed with precision, leaving the bodies intact, preserving them like empty vessels ready to be filled. Their purpose was clear and horrifying:

Feed. Multiply. Expand.

Before the first hint of sunrise brushed the sky, the screams had stopped. The windows remained dark. The gates stood unmoving. No hurried footsteps. No calls for help.

Only silence, a silence too complete to be natural. The silence of absence.

And then, as the dim blue light of predawn touched the edges of the horizon, the truth of that silence revealed itself.

The streets crawled with them. Thralls, dozens, hundreds moving on all fours like grotesque hunting dogs. Their bodies were unnaturally swollen, distended from the fluid and life they had absorbed. Their skin stretched too tightly over shifting muscle, pulsing in slow, unnatural rhythms.

They sniffed at the air, heads twitching, ears rotating toward the slightest sound. Some skittered along walls. Others prowled abandoned doorways. Their blood-red eyes glowed faintly in the half-light, scanning for any last traces of life.

The town was theirs now.

It was at that moment, all at once that every thrall stopped.

Their bodies froze mid-movement, heads snapping upward in eerie unison. A low rumble rolled through their throats as they turned their glowing red eyes toward the city wall.

Silhouetted against the paling sky stood a line of cloaked figures. Motionless. Watching.

Before them hovered a large bowl, its surface carved with runes that pulsed with a blood-red glow. The light inside the bowl shimmered like liquid blood, swirling slowly as though hungry.

One of the cloaked figures lifted a hand and made a simple, deliberate gesture.

The thralls obeyed instantly.

Their swollen, engorged bodies began to shrink. Skin tightened. Limbs withered. The grotesque fullness drained from their forms until they collapsed inward once more, becoming the shriveled husks they were meant to be.

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But the change did not end there.

From their drying skin seeped blood, not dripping, but lifting from their bodies as though gravity no longer claimed it. Ribbons of blood peeled away, rising into the air in writhing red streams. One by one, thousands of these crimson serpents snaked upward, converging above the town.

The sky filled with blood.

It drifted, pulsing, twisting like a storm of red mist. And then the blood began to flow, drawn rapidly toward the floating bowl. The runes along its rim flared as it drank the blood, its interior swirling faster and faster. The bowl swelled grotesquely, expanding as it consumed the life of the entire town...before shrinking back down as if nothing had happened, its appearance unchanged.

The cloaked figure lowered their hand, looking down at the thousands of waiting thralls.

Another gesture.

The army of dried husks bowed, spines cracking, limbs twitching in submission. Then their bodies rippled. Their forms lengthened, growing lithe and sleek, their limbs sharpening for speed. Without a single sound, they turned and sprinted out of the town, scattering in every direction. They ran like hunting beasts unleashed, guided purely by instinct, seeking their next source of blood.

Behind them followed another group, second-generation godlings. They moved gracefully, easily keeping up to continue their watch. Their role, to keep the first generation in line, to track, to report, to ensure the spread continues in a contained manner.

Back at the wall, several more second-generation who were acting as part of the town emerged from the shadows, appearing before the cloaked figures. Their eyelids fluttered as they gazed at the blood-filled bowl with hunger twisting their faces. One licked its lips, fangs glinting but the moment they remembered the figures standing before them, the craving halted.

They bowed, trembling, forcing their instincts into submission.

The cloaked figure did not speak. Did not move. Only his eyes, faintly visible beneath the heavy folds of his dark hood shifted toward the bowl. Hunger flickered there, a sharp, primal glint not much different from those behind him.

He, too, felt the temptation, the call of the gathered blood.

But indulgence would do him no good, not here, not now. Not with the Court's gaze upon him.

"Continue your good works. The Court appreciates it."

His voice was calm, as the second-generation vampire godlings bowed deeply, understanding the weight behind those words. They stepped closer to the robed figure, fangs faintly exposed in subtle pride.

"Now," one spoke up, eyes never leaving the faintly pulsing bowl, "we wait for the Empire to respond. Hopefully they act quickly."

A faint smile tugged at the corner of one godling's mouth.

"If not," he murmured, "then by the time they do... they will have a handful to deal with."

The cloaked figure did not reply, but his silence carried agreement.

Below them, the last traces of blood mist faded from the sky. The town, once filled with life was now an empty carcass.

The experiment was complete and the harvest successful. The first town erased and the next stage would begin once this rising sun falls back down.

Help from the county arrived at late, a whole day later the town fell. Riding in at dusk with wagons, torches, and soldiers prepared for a minor crisis, a disease outbreak, perhaps, or a bandit raid.

They were not prepared for this.

The moment they rode through the gate, a heavy, suffocating stillness settled over their ranks. No lights. No movement. No sounds of life. Only the faint smell of dried iron lingering in the air.

Houses stood open like empty shells, shops abandoned mid-task. tools lay scattered in the streets and not a single body, living or dead could be found.

The commander dismounted, stepping cautiously into the dead town. His torch flickered, casting long shadows across the hollow streets.

"What... happened here?" one soldier whispered.

No one answered, there was nothing to answer with. No signs of struggle, no corpses and no bloodstains large enough to indicate a massacre, only absence.

Scouts searched from one end of the town to the other, but found nothing, except for deep claw marks on stone walls, scorch marks where torches had been ripped out, and strange dried stains where moisture had once been violently stripped away.

By nightfall, fear of the unknown began creeping into the soldier's voices.

The commander stood in the center of the dead town, torchlight reflecting off the hollow windows around him. The unease among his men had grown thick enough to feel. Even the horses pawed nervously at the ground, ears flicking at every faint sound.

"We camp here for the night," he ordered at last, though his voice carried a tension he tried and failed to hide. "Set up a perimeter. Double watch. No one walks alone."

The soldiers moved quickly, grateful for orders, even if the orders did nothing to ease their dread. Tents were pitched between abandoned homes. Fires were lit but burned low, as though even flame was reluctant to stay in this place.

Once camp was established, the commander called his captains.

"I want scouts outside the town limits," he said. "Spread out. Check the roads, the woods, the river. Anything that might tell us what happened here. Move carefully. Report back before sunrise."

The captains saluted and dispersed. Soon, pairs of scouts moved into the dark, their lanterns bobbing like fireflies in the emptiness.

The commander remained awake long after the camp quieted. He stared down the main road, lit faintly by dying torches, and felt the wrongness of this place claw at his spine. Whatever had happened here, it hadn't ended.

It had simply moved on.

The pale light of dawn crept over the dead rooftops, washing everything in a cold, washed-out grey. The commander was already awake, jaw tight, waiting for reports from the scouts.

Before any man returned, he heard the faint flutter of wings.

A raven descended from the sky, black as obsidian, landing on the edge of a broken fence near the commander's tent. Something small was tied to its leg, a rolled scroll sealed hastily with wax.

The commander felt his stomach tighten. He moved quickly and removed the letter. The raven hopped back once, its beady red-tinged eyes watching him too intently.

Breaking the seal, he unrolled the message.

The moment he saw the first lines, his breath caught.

It was a plea for help.

The same desperate plea that was received from this town two days before it died.

And this message...This one came from a town not far from here.

He read the lines again, feeling his pulse quicken.

The details matched too closely, Lights dying at night. People vanishing. Shadows moving. Something hunting in the dark.

He lowered the scroll, eyes widening. It was happening again.

One of his captains approached, returning from the early patrol. "Sir, we found no survivors. No bodies. Nothing. It's as if..."

"I know," the commander cut in quietly.

He looked toward the northeast, the direction of the second town.

His men followed his gaze.

"Inform the battalion," he said, voice firming with urgency. "We march immediately. We may still have time."

But deep down, beneath the commander's resolve, a terrible fear pulsed "What if they were already too late?"

The plea had been written the morning before yesterday. The message had taken more than a full day to reach him.

Meaning whatever danger this town described...had already arrived.

His jaw tightened.

"Ready the men," he ordered sharply. "We leave within the hour. No matter what we find."

The captain hesitated. "Sir... if the timeline matches what we've seen here, then by the time we arrive"

"I know," the commander cut in. "But we go regardless."

The sun dipped behind distant hills as the commander's forces approached the second town. The sky glowed orange and purple, a peaceful twilight that contrasted horribly with the dread twisting in every soldier's gut.

At first glance, the town seemed intact.

The walls were unbroken, the gate stood open. No smoke, no bodies and no signs of battle.

Just like the first town too much like the first town.

"Hold!" the commander raised his hand.

The soldiers halted in tense silence.

A breeze rolled through the open gate, carrying with it the acrid scent of dried iron. The commander's expression darkened. He motioned for torches.

They stepped inside.

Not a sound greeted them, no dogs barked, no children cried and no doors opened in curiosity.

Emptiness.

Row after row of homes lay still, every window a hollow, watching eye. The fires in the hearths had long gone out. Meals had been left half-prepared. Tools were dropped mid-task.

Just like before.

"Sir..." a scout whispered, pointing at the cobblestones.

Dark stains marked the ground, faint, patchy, as though something had drained into them and dried instantly. Claw marks etched the stone near a well. Doors were cracked at the edges, forced inward with unnatural strength.

The commander said nothing, there was nothing left to say.