

## **Guardian gods 701**

Chapter 701:

Town B had fallen, almost certainly the following night Town A had.

An entire settlement wiped out between dusk and dawn.

One of the younger soldiers trembled. "Sir... how many days until the next closest town sends a message like this?"

The commander didn't answer immediately.

Because he already knew: Too few, far too few.

The soldiers made camp just outside the town walls, refusing to sleep inside the deathly quiet settlement. Torches ringed their camp in a tight defensive circle, their flames flickering uneasily.

The commander stood at the edge of the firelight, looking back toward the empty town.

Two towns, two nights apart. Both gone.

A sign that the enemy wasn't just spreading, It was accelerating.

And behind it... something far more organized than wild beasts.

The commander's grip tightened on the plea letter from Town B.

If another raven came tomorrow... it might already be too late for that town as well.

He wasn't the only one thinking the same.

Far from the dead, silent town, the Countess sat in her chamber, staring at another urgent letter delivered earlier that morning. The handwriting was frantic, the ink uneven, as if written by trembling hands. Its plea was identical to the last, begging for aid, begging for protection, begging for someone to listen before it was too late.

A cold knot formed in her stomach.

"What is happening under my watch...?" she whispered.

Before she could read the letter a second time, the sound of heavy wings cut through her thoughts. A raven, larger than any of her standard messengers, swooped through her window and landed on her desk. Its black feathers shimmered like oil, this one was unmistakable.

Her commander's bird.

With tense hands she removed the sealed message and unfolded it.

She read.

Then read again.

The commander's observations, his deductions... the disturbing pattern he outlined, towns falling in perfect sequence, each plea arriving a day too late, each site found stripped of life with no signs of battle, no footprints, no scorch marks, no bodies, only silence.

When she finished, the Countess sat down slowly, her knees weakening beneath the weight of realization. She lifted the newest plea-letter again, the one from the town nearest the commander's current location.

If his hypothesis was correct...

By tomorrow morning that town would be gone as well.

And there was nothing, nothing she understood about the threat.

No name, no form, no tracks and no survivors.

Just towns erased in the span of hours.

The Countess pressed a hand against her mouth, her breath shallow. Her instincts screamed at her to send her court mage, to deploy arcane eyes, to unleash fire and barrier magic upon whatever horror lurked in those shadows.

But as soon as the thought surfaced, she crushed it.

Knights and soldiers she could afford to lose. Mages? Never.

Not when she didn't even know what she was sending them to face.

If she lost a mage, her land would be crippled.

If she lost two, the region would be defenseless.

If she lost her court, her entire territory would collapse overnight.

No, she could not gamble with them. Not yet.

Her fingers tightened around the letters.

This no longer felt like the work of mere bandits or rogue beasts. She was a baroness in all but name still beneath the notice of the Empire's Court, still clawing her way toward true recognition. She had very little influence, very few resources, and even fewer allies.

And now something was moving through her lands like a silent plague.

Something her commander believed was already heading toward the rest of her domain.

Her heart hammered as she stared out her window, the evening sun bleeding red across the sky.

This was no matter for a countess. This was something only a viscount or even an earl should be handling.

She needed to alert them immediately. Before her entire region vanished in the same quiet, awful way.

Thinking of this, the Countess stepped away from her desk and walked toward the open window. The cold evening wind brushed past her, carrying the faint scent of pine and distant rain. Her fingers brushed against the metal ring around her upper arm, a conduit for magic, one she rarely needed to use.

She inhaled slowly, letting her mana flow. Her eyes flickered with a pale green glow, then dimmed.

The moment the glow faded, the air in front of her rippled. A soft spiral of wind twisted upward, giving form, shape, and feathers until a white bird materialized, a creature no larger than a hawk, but with faint currents of air constantly swirling around its wings. Its plumage shimmered like polished bone, every feather edged with the pale blue hue of concentrated wind magic.

She exhaled even calling it out, cost her more mana than she wanted to admit.

If she wished for the message to reach the viscount before another town fell, she would need this bird, her most expensive and rarest messenger.

It had been years since she last used it. Years since she had required a delivery this urgent.

The Countess reached for the storage pouch at her waist, a finely-woven dimensional bag gifted to her by her deceased husband. From it, she withdrew two wind-type mana cores, marble-sized spherical gems pulsing with faint energy. She had stocked up on them long ago, back when she imagined her future would be filled with emergencies, magical communications, and noble responsibilities.

Funny how time wears down ambition.

She held the glowing cores out toward the bird. Its bright, intelligent eyes fixed on them, in a swift, elegant motion, it swallowed both cores whole.

The currents around its wings sharpened into clear spirals. It gazed at her, waiting.

The Countess nodded, her throat suddenly tight.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the letter she had written only moments earlier. Sealed with wax, marked with her insignia, containing everything she feared her superiors needed to know. Her handwriting had become unsteady by the end of it, but she hoped the viscount would see past that.

She extended the letter.

The bird took it gently between its beak, securing it within the enchanted clasp that formed around it.

For a lingering moment, it looked at her again, its small, wind-touched form framed by the dying light of the sun.

Then it launched itself forward.

A violent whoosh burst from its wings, blowing her hair back and rattling the shutters. The bird soared upward at a speed no ordinary creature could match, cutting through the air as though the sky itself parted to clear its path.

Within seconds, it was a streak of white and soon a tiny dot in the horizon.

The Countess rested her hands on the window frame, her fingers tightening as the last trace of the creature vanished into the approaching night.

Now all she could do was wait. Wait and pray the viscount responded before everything collapsed around her.

Having handled the wind-bird, the Countess turned her attention to the commander's raven, which had settled on the perch near her desk. The creature tore eagerly into the dried meat she had scattered for it, its black feathers ruffling with each sharp peck. She watched it quietly for a moment, this ordinary creature felt almost fragile compared to the storm-forged messenger she had just sent away.

She envied it, it had no decisions to make. No territory collapsing under its watch, no gnawing dread that every sunrise would bring another disaster.

But she could not allow herself to sit still.

She moved back to her table, spreading out the county map. Pins marked the towns she had already lost, two of them, while others were circled, indicating population size, proximity to forests, and distance from the commander's current location.

It was clear now. The enemy was targeting small, weak towns.

Why? She had no answer but for now it was enough.

The instinctive response would be to pour soldiers into the threatened areas, wait for the pleas, then rush to help. But she now knew that by the time a plea reached her, the town was already gone. What happened in a single night... would continue to repeat itself.

Instead, she would have to think like the enemy.

Rather than reacting to each town's desperate cry, she needed to place her men ahead, in towns that had not yet been struck. Like bait on a hook.

Risky bait.

If she could predict where the enemy would hit next, her soldiers might be able to meet the threat directly, observe it, survive it, bring back something she desperately lacked: Information.

She touched a fingertip to three towns on the map, close enough to watch each other, far enough that losing one wouldn't isolate all.

But the downside... The downside towered over every hope she sketched.

Spreading her men thin meant weakening them. Even if they encountered the enemy, what then? What if the enemy's numbers dwarfed theirs? What if they were devoured before dawn? What if placing them as bait condemned them all?

Chapter 702:

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Spreading her men thin meant weakening them. Even if they encountered the enemy, what then? What if the enemy's numbers dwarfed theirs? What if they were devoured before dawn? What if placing them as bait condemned them all?

She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. Her soldiers were trained, but they were not elite.

Her knights were capable but they were few and her mages, valuable, irreplaceable, she refused to sacrifice until she understood the enemy.

And in the worst case...

She might be sending her men to die blind, unprepared, unaware of what kind of monster awaited them.

She pressed a hand against her forehead, closing her eyes.

She straightened, spine stiffening with resolve.

If she waited for the viscount's response, every town in her domain might fall.

If she acted now, she risked losing the remainder of her forces.

Both choices were wrong, both choices could doom her.

But she didn't have the luxury of choosing the safer path.

Not anymore.

She exhaled, steadying herself.

"Very well," she murmured "We move first. And pray we are not too late."

She did not hesitate any longer.

The Countess tugged sharply on the pull-cord near her desk. A bell chimed once low, muted, the tone reserved only for summons of highest urgency. Within moments, armored footsteps echoed down the corridor.

Three of her captains entered her chamber, each bowing with a troubled expression. They had heard the rumors carried by ravens. They had seen the fear growing in the keep. But none of them expected to be summoned so soon after dusk.

"Milady," the eldest captain said, "we await your command."

The Countess gestured to the map, her fingers landing on the three untouched towns closest to the destruction: Greenford, Laynor, and Coldbridge.

"These towns," she said, her voice level though her hands trembled beneath the table, "will be next. There is no doubt."

Their faces tightened. The captains exchanged uneasy glances.

"Milady..." one began cautiously, "we do not yet know what threatens us. To spread our forces now"

"is dangerous," she finished for him. "Yes. But doing nothing is fatal. The enemy is not waiting politely for us to understand it."

Her eyes drifted toward the raven, still pecking at its meal. The image hardened her resolve.

"You will each take a squad. Twenty men. Ride to these towns and fortify them quietly. Do not alarm the citizens. Do not reveal what is happening unless absolutely necessary."

The eldest captain frowned. "And if the enemy comes before we are prepared?"

"Then you will hold," she said, voice low, "for as long as you can. Long enough to learn what we face. Long enough for one of your ravens to return."

They understood what she truly meant, Long enough to die with purpose.

None of them argued. They bowed as soldiers who seem ready to accept death.

But as they turned to leave, she added one final order:

"And send your fastest riders to every village between here and the border, separate paths, do not travel in pairs. If even one town sends a plea, I want to know before nightfall. We can no longer afford delays."

The captains departed at once, the clatter of their boots fading into the hall.

When silence returned, the Countess released a slow, shaky breath.

She hated this, she hated that she was gambling with the lives of her people. She hated that she could do nothing more until the viscount responded.

She moved to her window again, staring into the cold night sky. Somewhere out there, the wind-bird was already streaking toward the viscount's estate, faster than any horse, faster than any raven.

She prayed it would arrive in time.

Unbeknownst to the Countess, her commander had already acted long before her orders could have reached him. The moment he received the earlier plea, he had understood that waiting meant death. So he drove his men through the night, lanterns held low, horses pushed to exhaustion, hoping, praying, they might reach the next town before the unseen terror did.

But the commander once he reached the town came to a realization the Countess would only uncover much later, when all chances to act decisively were gone.

He arrived at the next town only to find it already dead.

The silence greeted him first, the same hollow, suffocating emptiness as the previous town.

His men spread out with torches, searching homes, alleyways, barns, wells. No bodies, only the strange, unnatural signs of attack. No blood. No struggle. Just the lingering sense of something predatory passing through.

By all logic, he should have encountered the creature responsible. He had traveled through the night; the attack should have been recent.

But the marks told a different story.

The disturbed earth, the stale scent of death and the thick, heavy absence of fresh footprints.

His scouts returned pale-faced.

"Commander... this attack... it wasn't last night."

He turned slowly, his jaw tightening.

"It happened the night before," the scout continued. "Before the plea was even sent. Before we even saw the first town."

A cold, sinking weight settled in the commander's chest.

The conclusion struck him as he realised, this was not one monster. Not a single threat moving from town to town.

There were many and worse, they were growing, multiplying. Spreading faster than messages could travel. Faster than soldiers could ride.

The rate of devastation had doubled overnight.

If they were already dividing their forces... If they were already able to wipe out more than one town in a single night...

Then every assumption made by him and the county was hopelessly wrong.

The enemy was expanding, like a plague.

The commander clenched his fists.

Part of him wanted to immediately set off again, to race toward the next nearest settlement, to try to intercept the slaughter.

But when he turned to his men, he saw the truth. Their horses trembled with exhaustion, their eyes were sunken and their hands shook on their weapons.

They had traveled through the night after the previous horror, and now after hours of searching this town, they were spent.

Even if he drove them onward, they would collapse before reaching the next target.

He hated it, he despised the helplessness in his gut. But he could not throw away lives for the sake of desperation.

"We rest here," he finally said, voice tight with anger he struggled to suppress.

It was moments like this that made the commander wish, truly wishing the Countess had assigned him even a single mage. One competent spellcaster could have washed the exhaustion from their bodies, restored stamina, sharpened their senses, and even propelled them toward the next town with wind-enhanced speed.

A mage could have made all the difference.

But he had none.

And fatigue pressed down on his men like wet mud. Their breath was ragged, their discipline frayed. Even he, strong as he was felt the ache in his bones.

He considered it, truly considered it. Just leaving them behind, charging ahead alone.

He was a peak third-stage knight. At full strength, he could outrun his own horse for hours. If he pushed himself to the limit, he could reach the next town faster than any unit of men.

But then what?

He'd arrive drained, weakened, his aura barely stable. If the monsters were there and he had no reason to believe they wouldn't be, he would die before lifting his sword.

And his death would buy nothing.

So he held back the order forming on his lips, swallowed the frustration, and stepped into his tent.

He sat heavily on the small traveling chair, his armor creaking with the movement. The silence pressed around him or it would have, if not for the strange feeling rising within his chest.

Excitement. It was wrong, so wrong. It horrified him to acknowledge it.

He had marched through empty homes, barren streets, lifeless towns. He had walked past cradles overturned, dinner tables untouched, doors swinging lightly in the wind with no living soul behind them.

Each sight crushed him with grief... But beneath that grief, something else stirred.

Purpose, fulfillment and a reason to act.

For years, ever since the Countess fell from grace and was demoted to a mere baroness, he had followed her out of loyalty and something quieter, more selfish.

Hope, hope for a life fit for a knight.

Not one spent patrolling borders that never saw a fight. Not one spent quelling farmer disputes or chasing off wolves. Not one spent enduring poisonings and assassins from jealous noble wives, who hated the Countess's continued existence.

In truth, most of his years under her felt dull, gray, purposeless.

He had dreamed of danger, of challenges. Of something, anything worthy of drawing his blade.

And now, faced with a horror that could erase entire towns in one night...

He felt alive.

The feeling twisted in his chest, half guilt, half thrill.

"This isn't right," he muttered, rubbing his eyes with calloused fingers. "But... gods forgive me... this is what I've been waiting for."

A real threat, a real war and a real test of his strength.

Chapter 703:

He hated himself for the excitement, yet he couldn't deny it. For the first time in years, he felt like a knight again.

He leaned back, staring at the roof of the tent.

If only he had a mage...

If only he had reinforcements...

If only they weren't already losing this war before they even understood the enemy...

His fingers curled into a fist.

"Tomorrow," he whispered, "I will see this enemy with my own eyes."

And he would no matter the cost.

Unknown to the commander, his enemies were already closer than any of them imagined.

Deep in the forest not far from the dead town, the moonlight sifted through the branches, glinting off hundreds of red, predatory eyes. The thralls moved on all fours, their slick limbs pulling them through foliage with unnatural speed. They were silent except for the faint rustle of leaves disturbed by their passing.

They were heading toward their next destination, another small settlement marked for extinction.

To reach it, they passed through a forest they knew well, a forest familiar to them because they had drained it dry only two nights ago.

But then, all at once, every thrall stopped.

Their bodies stiffened, their heads lifted sharply. Nostrils flared as they drank in the night air.

A chorus of low growls rippled through the horde.

The scent should not exist here anymore. Life, warm, beating and fresh. Something they had not expected.

Ears twitched, turning like hunting animals. The forest was silent, but to the thralls, the sound was bright as thunder:

Heartbeats, blood flowing, strong blood. One Stronger than most. A promising prize.

Confusion flickered among them, how could a living being be inside a territory they had already cleansed? But confusion quickly gave way to instinct.

Hunger, opportunity. The chance to create something stronger among their ranks.

The entire horde let out a deafening, unified roar that sent birds exploding from the trees.

Then they turned.

With terrifying speed, hundreds of thralls barreled toward the town where the commander and his soldiers rested.

The commander jerked upright in his tent. A roar, deep, monstrous, close rolled across the night sky like a shockwave.

He burst outside, sword in hand.

His men were already stumbling out of their tents, eyes wide, armor half-buckled. The moonlit forest at the town's edge seemed impossibly dark now, every tree suddenly menacing.

The commander shouted "Positions! Move! Move!"

Fear was at their heels, but training pushed them forward.

He had no idea how many enemies were coming, only that the roar was not from a pack, or a beast, or a handful.

It was from an army.

The commander made the only choice that gave them any chance of survival.

"Fall back into the town! Defensive formations!"

His men obeyed instantly.

Archers scrambled up the protective walls, nocking arrows with trembling fingers. Foot soldiers rushed into the narrow streets, using buildings and choke points to force enemies into tighter paths.

Shields were raised, torches lit. Barricades dragged into place.

The commander stood at the town gate, blade drawn, aura flaring faintly with third-stage power.

From the forest came the unmistakable sound of hundreds of limbs tearing through brush, growing louder, faster, closer.

And he felt it, a surge of killing intent so immense it made the air feel thicker.

His mouth went dry.

There was no mistaking it now.

"Ready yourselves!" he shouted up to the walls. "They're coming!"

His men braced.

Silence fell over the town as the soldiers waited, their breaths shallow, hearts hammering. At first, it was only an illusion, but then the dark forest before them seemed to shift and pulse with red light. It wasn't stationary; it moved, ever closer, crawling toward them through the trees like living embers.

Someone in the crowd swallowed hard, their spit catching in the dry night air. Hundreds of blood-red eyes glimmered among the shadows, peering from behind trunks and branches. Whatever lurked in the forest made perfect use of the cover, hiding its form entirely. Only the eyes, sharp and predatory, betrayed its presence.

The commander's gaze narrowed. He gave a quick signal to the nearest archer, who immediately released an arrow toward one of the glowing eyes. The projectile flew fast, striking true.

There was silence on both side as a roar tore through the forest, deafening and unnatural, and a thrall stepped into view, a withered, elongated figure on four legs, the arrow still embedded in its neck.

Its gaze locked on the soldier who had fired. Time seemed to slow for a moment, and only the commander reacted. He could see the creature's muscles twitch, its body coiling like a spring. Then, with inhuman speed, it launched itself forward, a blur of claws and snarling teeth. Behind it, the hundreds of other thralls hiding in the forest began to move, their forms indistinguishable in the dark, but their intent unmistakable.

The commander roared a single command: "Release!"

He knew instinctively that his men could not track the thralls' speed individually. No hesitation. Not a second wasted. Arrows flew from every bow, blanketing the night sky with sharp streaks of light. The thralls' cries rang out in unison, half roar, half hiss, and yet the volley of arrows halted their advance, forcing them to pause, claws scrabbling at the earth, bodies recoiling in annoyance.

The soldiers and the commander all swallowed hard, gulping the cold night air as they realized the terrifying truth: the thrall's speed and distance covered were staggering. Within moments, some had already nearly reached the gate and town walls, ready to climb, to overtake, to tear apart anyone who stood before them.

The commander's mind raced. The small reprieve bought by the arrows would last only seconds. Every instant counted. He could see it, the inevitability. Even if he tried to strike at some of them, even if a handful fell to steel, it would only slow the others for a heartbeat.

"Retreat!" he screamed, voice sharp and commanding.

There was no room for doubt, no time for hesitation. Every soldier in the town understood now, this was not something they could fight and survive. This was not a foe they could engage and hope to win.

The commander's heart pounded as he watched the first thralls near the gate. He understood, fully, the danger he faced. He could face some of the creatures, perhaps even destroy a few, but if they jumped him all at once, if even half of the horde struck together, he would fall instantly.

There was no choice left but to abandon the ground they had so recently fought to hold. Survival, not victory, was their only option.

But the moment they turned to run, the commander's instincts screamed at him. His ears twitched and he froze, a pit forming in his stomach.

The thralls were back in action.

In a blur of motion, several creatures had already reached the rear ranks of his men, dragging soldiers down into the shadows. Screams tore through the night, short and filled with fear, cut off as the victims were swallowed by the thrall's speed and savagery.

The commander's mind raced. A sick thought crept in: had he made the wrong choice in ordering a retreat? If they had held their ground, fought as a unit... maybe more could have survived. Maybe fewer would have fallen prey to the relentless, hunting horde.

But there was no time to dwell on it. Hesitation now meant death.

He saw it then: the creatures were not just targeting his men indiscriminately. They were moving with purpose, their red eyes fixed, scanning, calculating.

A large number of thralls, the strongest and fastest, began to surge forward, pushing through the scattered soldiers. Their movements were terrifyingly coordinated, almost intelligent. Every step they took closed the distance between predator and prey.

The commander's hand clenched around his sword hilt, there were too many. Too fast. Too relentless.

Even a single misstep would mean being torn apart.

And yet... some part of him, the part that had felt alive again for the first time in years, burned with anticipation. This was what he had trained for. This was what he had always dreamed a knight's life could be.

But hope alone would not save him. Not here. Not now.

The commander planted his feet, scanning the advancing thralls, calculating the fleeting seconds he had before they were upon him.

There was no turning back.

The commander planted his feet firmly on the cracked cobblestones, gripping his sword with white-knuckled intensity. The air was thick with the stench of sweat, iron, and something far fouler he could not name. From the shadows of the forest, thralls burst forth like a crimson tide, moving with incredible speed, their claws scraping stone and wood as they closed in.

He struck first. A four-limbed creature lunged at him from the corner of a building, jaws snapping. The commander pivoted, sidestepping with near-perfect balance, and drove his sword into the creature's shoulder. A sickening crack echoed through the night as bone splintered. The thrall shrieked, twisting

violently, but he rolled backward, striking its neck in a clean arc. Its body went limp, yet even in death its eyes burned with unnatural light for a moment before finally dimming.

Chapter 704:

Another came, leaping from the wall's edge. The commander met it mid-air with a swing of his blade, feeling the shock of the impact travel up his arms. Claws raked his armor, tearing metal and flesh, but his speed and experience carried him through. With a swift strike, he drove the sword through the creature's chest, feeling its body convulse beneath his blade before dropping.

He was moving constantly, a whirlwind of motion, spinning, striking, retreating, barely catching his breath. The forest and town streets were a blur. Thralls came from every direction, some on rooftops, some from alleys, some seeming to materialize from the darkness itself. The commander's eyes flicked constantly, measuring distance, calculating angles, predicting movements.

He continued to fight when all of a sudden, he noticed something different.

The screams around him had begun to thin. The frantic, chaotic shouts of soldiers calling for help, arrows loosing, and swords clanging on claws and bones, they were fading.

He looked around.

Horror struck him like a physical blow. Most of his men were gone. The ground was littered with their bodies, their lifeless forms half-covered by shadows, torn, broken, or pinned beneath fallen debris. He could see the archers who had manned the walls, now crushed under their own barricades. The foot soldiers he had rallied, scattered and slain.

A cold sweat ran down his back and he realized with grim clarity, he was alone.

He gritted his teeth, pushing panic aside. There was no time for grief. Only action. He swung his sword at the next attacking thrall, slicing through sinew and bone with practiced precision, dodging its counterattack by inches. Each move was perfection born of desperation, but exhaustion began gnawing at him. Even his enhanced stamina could not last forever against such numbers.

Then, something unnatural caught his eye.

A twitching movement from a fallen soldier.

At first, he thought it was a trick of the firelight, a body shifting in the wind. But the twitching grew more pronounced. The fingers curled unnaturally, joints cracking in ways they should not. The face of the fallen soldier contorted, lips peeling back as though his flesh were rearranging itself.

The commander's stomach dropped.

Another body moved, then another. The soldiers he had counted as dead, the ones he had mourned only moments before, were rising.

Their forms convulsed violently, bones cracking, elongating. Limbs bent at impossible angles. Skin stretched and withered, veins dark and pulsing. And then, with a sound that made his blood run cold, the first transformed fully: a thrall, four-legged, eyes burning the same blood-red hue as the creatures attacking him.

He staggered back, horror stealing his breath. One by one, his fallen men twisted and reshaped into the grotesque silhouettes of the enemy. Their jaws elongated, claws sharpened, and their eyes now glowed with feral hunger.

It was at this time he realized the full truth, why no body was found in the previous towns. Once these creatures were done, they assimilated, turning their victims into new thralls to swell their ranks.

The commander's arms shook with exhaustion, each swing of his blade slower than the last. Sweat and blood streaked his face, mingling with grime and tears he refused to shed. Around him, the street was a nightmare of motionless bodies, both thralls and the remnants of his fallen men. Piles of twisted, broken forms littered the cobblestones, their red eyes extinguished as he cleaved through them one by one.

For a moment, it seemed as if he could hold them back. The thralls closest to him fell beneath his relentless assault. His training, his instincts, even the deep well of adrenaline all of it held him upright.

But the numbers never ceased. They came from every direction: emerging from alleyways, falling from rooftops, crawling through broken walls. Each wave seemed more ferocious than the last.

A claw had nicked him, tearing through armor and flesh. He gritted his teeth and ignored it. Another strike hit his shoulder, nearly forcing him to drop his sword.

His legs were heavy now, his lungs burning with every breath.. He spun in a wide arc, cleaving through a thrall, only to see three more in its place, moving with terrifying coordination.

He had fought for what felt like hours, though he knew it could only have been minutes.

Another thrall leaped at him from the shadows. He met it with a swing, cutting through its body, and watched as it hit the ground. But his knees buckled. He had moved through too many bodies, dodged too many attacks, fought too many enemies.

Then it happened.

A claw caught his ankle as he spun to meet another attacker. He fell, hard, chest slamming against the cobblestones. His sword skidded from his grasp. Pain lanced through his side, burning hotter than any he had felt before.

He scrambled to rise, but the thralls were upon him instantly. From every angle, from every shadow, they descended, dragging him to the ground. His vision blurred, red eyes flashing above him from rooftops, from the scattered piles of the fallen.

He fought, striking with fists, kicking, clawing at anything he could reach, but exhaustion claimed him finally. The sword slipped from his grasp, spinning across the stones out of reach. His arms grew heavy, his movements sluggish.

And then he stopped struggling.

The commander collapsed fully, chest heaving, blood mixing with the dirt beneath him. Around him, the once-slaughtered thralls lay in heaps, a grim barricade of death he had built with his own hands.

His thought was short lived as he felt a teeth skin into his throat, drawing out all the blood in his body. The light from the commander eyes dimmed.

The thralls slowly fell back before roaring out loud clearly pleased with their victory. Their eyes turned once again to the commander body waiting for his change, waiting for his new stronger form to join them.

Their wait was not long as the body of the camp began to twitch, true to his strength his figure looked a little different from the otehr thrall, he wasn't as shriveled up and his eyes held some form of intelligence.

Sadly the source and catalyst for his change had no need for his intelligence, he was to join the otehr thralls in their simple goal to feed and multiply so in te blink of an eyes the intelligenece was wiped out.

The thralls all moved out again back to their original goal before this small stop. Bodies left behind for the first time since their birth, it was inevitable as more bodies will pile as they continue to serve their purpose.

After the thralls had vanished from the town, two second-generation godlings appeared atop a shattered rooftop, their eyes sweeping over the remnants of the fight: the bloodied streets, the collapsed buildings, the twisted bodies strewn like rag dolls.

They could have wiped every trace clean in an instant, leaving the empire blind and helpless, uncertain of who or what had struck. But that was not their goal. No, this was about sending a message, a reminder to the empire of how close they truly were to death and children of its lineage. Every body left, every ruin, was meant to whisper fear into the hearts of those who witnessed it, to etch the reality of their vulnerability into the minds of all who saw it.

When the countess and the empire discovered the scene, it finally glimpsed the magnitude of what it faced, but understanding did nothing to change the inevitable. Knowledge offered no protection against horrors that moved faster, struck harder, and vanished without warning.

As towns fell one by one, even the viscount's response in sending trained soldiers, seasoned mages, and specialized squads did little to halt the spread. Each intervention only highlighted the futility of resistance: fewer returned with stories of survival, and those who did were broken, traumatized, and forever drawn to the safety of the light. Shadows became their enemy and their constant companion.

The problem was simple, and terrifying. The thralls were creatures of the night. They vanished with the sun, retreating to places the light could not touch. As they progress, their method of hiding themselves got better, able to bore a hole through the ground and refill it in moments

During the day, only the watchful godlings, tailing them from hidden vantage points, could track their movements and with their occasional disruption, made the thralls almost impossible to locate. And when night fell, they awoke.

The professionals and soldiers were forced to fight under the cover of night, stripped of their usual advantage. Darkness robbed them of sight, limited their strength, and twisted every movement into a perilous gamble. Even the mages, with their glowing orbs of light, could only offer fleeting safety. The thralls would retreat at the edges of illumination, always staying just beyond reach, biding their time. They knew that sooner or later, the mage's mana would wane, and when it did, the hunters would become the hunted.

Chapter 705:

In less than two weeks, the Countess barony was reduced to ruin. Even she, the emblem of noble strength and authority, met her end at the hands of the creatures and was added to its growing number. The existence of thralls, once whispered and doubted, was no longer speculation. While the empire struggled to suppress the news, fearing panic, it spread all the same through whispers and terrified rumors.

The vampire godlings, however, were doing the opposite of the empire. They crept into cities under the cover of darkness, letting fear fester, sowing tales of the creatures of the night. They spoke of towns where light no longer offered protection, of homes that could not keep the darkness at bay. At first, the stories were dismissed as exaggerations, the work of frightened minds or wandering bards.

But as towns fell and survivors returned, some broken, some too terrified to speak clearly, the rumors gained weight. Every recounting painted the same grim picture, bodies disappearing, the night claiming all who were caught unprepared. Slowly, unease became panic, and panic began to harden into ritual.

It was impossible to pinpoint when the change fully took hold, but the effect was undeniable. People began to fear the night itself. Before sunset, most were already behind locked doors, bolting windows and barricading entrances. The streets emptied hours before darkness fell, and the sound of shutters and locks became the new rhythm of daily life. Night was no longer simply a passage of time, it had become a predator, and humanity had learned, all too quickly, to flee from it.

The empire was vast, so vast in fact, that the horrors consuming the outskirts barely felt like a whisper to those in the heartlands. The core cities, surrounded by thick walls, elite garrisons, and the Empire's highest-ranking mages, felt untouchable. Safe. Civilized.

The tragedies happening far beyond their borders were little more than rumors carried by travelers, soldiers, and shaken merchants, stories to gossip about over warm tavern meals. Tales of creatures in the dark, of towns that went silent overnight, of soldiers returning pale and hollow-eyed.

But to the people living through those nightmares, nothing about it was interesting. Nothing was exaggerated. Every night was a trial of survival. Every sunset felt like a dying breath. Panic and fear were sharpening into madness.

Those living near the afflicted territories begged, pleaded, and desperately considered fleeing to the empire's core where light, law, and the emperor's reach offered true protection. Many believed salvation lay there. But what happened to those few who tried shattered that hope.

Travel to the inner regions of the empire took weeks. Weeks meant countless nights. And nights now belonged to the thralls. Once, nighttime was merely a quiet part of the day. Now it was a stretch of hours where every creak, every distant sound, every shifting shadow could be the final warning before death.

Travelers set out in caravans, believing numbers and light would shield them. But the thralls tracked them, learned their patterns, and struck with horrifying precision. Survivors, if any, stumbled back to their towns days later, trembling and incoherent. Some never spoke again. Most never even made it back.

And during the day, new horrors replaced the old. The roads became lined with familiar carriages, ones people recognized from their own towns drifting back with no passengers inside. No drivers. No horses. Just the empty vessels, rolling slowly as if guided by unseen hands or rogue winds.

The absence of bodies told enough.

The news reached Chen's court on a quiet morning, blood-spattered letters, and reports written with shaking hands. Entire baronies vanishing in the night. Caravans returning empty. Survivors losing their sanity to fear.

To the court, it was slightly alarming but to Chen, it was exhilarating.

Genuine joy tugged at the corners of his lips, the vampire godlings had finally chosen to act. He had waited for this, Plotted for this.

But the way they chose to respond... that, he had not anticipated.

Chen had expected them to burst into his palace arrogant, untouchable, demanding their "rights" be restored and ordering him to release their detained kin. It would have been just like them. After all, they were the only godling race protected by a living demigod. Even Chen's own father, could not ignore such figure.

Chen had been counting on that arrogance. He had hoped that if the godlings overplayed their hand, the demigod himself might appear. And if he appeared, perhaps Chen's father would finally stir as well. The balance of power would shift, and Chen could attempt to seize the moment.

But the vampire godlings were not arrogant this time. They were clever, too clever.

They didn't confront him and didn't make demands. Most importantly they didn't expose themselves.

Instead, they unleashed a plague in the shadows, one that destroyed towns, spread panic, and eroded public confidence but without leaving a single trace linking it back to them.

Chen's fingers curled tightly around the arm of his throne. Their strategy left him no room to maneuver.

He couldn't point a finger at them, he couldn't accuse them without evidence. He couldn't drag them into the light where the empire could hate and resent them.

If he did, he would only serve their purpose. He would validate their message: fear the night, fear the shadows, fear what lurks beyond the reach of the empire's power.

And fear, once seeded, would grow turning his people not against the vampire godlings, but toward them. Fear could easily transform into awe, reverence... or surrender.

Chen didn't want his people to fear the godlings. He wanted them to hate them, to resent them. To rally behind him as the one who would stand against divine creatures that thought themselves superior.

But the vampires played the game with infuriating precision.

As it stood now, the plague could have come from anywhere, from rogue magic, a mage experiment, stray monsters from the deeper part of the forest. The empire's territories were large enough for countless threats.

And that was the problem.

The vampire godlings had set the board, made their move, and left Chen powerless to respond. All he could do was watch as fear spread through his people like wildfire, fear that strengthened his enemies instead of weakening them.

There was little he could do.

Chen hated it but it was the truth.

With a single word from him, the entire plague could be purged. Not slowly. Not over weeks. In a single day. His authority, his lineage, and the dormant powers at his command could sweep across the land and burn the corruption away like mist under the sun.

But doing so would undo everything he had built, every maneuver, every careful step in his political war against the godlings and against his own father. If he revealed his hands now, he would have nothing left to bargain with later. His hand would be exposed, his plans would be out in the open. And worst of all, his father would see it... and tighten the leash around Chen's throat once again.

Unacceptable.

Intolerable.

Still, he had a council to appease.

So Chen offered a gesture not a solution. With a single order, he deployed a few of the empire's elite mages and knight-commanders, the ones with enough training to survive in the dark. When questioned why he sent only a handful, he gave a calm, measured answer "We cannot weaken the capital. Should the godlings make a move, we must be prepared."

It was the perfect excuse. Reasonable. Unarguable. And it bought him time.

Time to see if there was anything in this plague he could twist to his advantage.

While Chen hesitated, played politics, and maneuvered in shadows, others moved with far simpler motivations.

The druid godlings arrived at the outskirts.

They had already been warned by their kin, news spread quickly among the godlings about the vampires intentions, their careful movements, their subtle plan to instill fear across the empire. But knowing it was one thing. Witnessing it was another.

And seeing the devastation with their own eyes stirred something unpleasant in their hearts.

The druids had no intention of sabotaging the vampire's strategy. The godling races rarely interfered in each other's affairs unless it threatened all of them. But this? This wasn't about divine politics. This wasn't about territory or pride.

This was about the humans, pitiful, powerless humans who were led, blindfolded and shackled, by an empire too arrogant to teach them the truth.

The druids moved not to oppose their vampire kin, but to alleviate the suffering left in their wake. To offer escape where death seemed inevitable. To give guidance to those who had never been taught how to defend themselves.

The empire's greatest failure was not its inability to stop the plague. It was its obsession with stripping its people of magical knowledge. For generations they had preached that only the imperial court, elites and the noble lines were fit to wield power. Common folk were kept ignorant helpless ornaments to be protected by the throne, never to protect themselves.

And now? Now that ignorance was killing them.

Chapter 706:

When the thralls descended, entire villages found themselves unable to do anything but pray, scream, or wait to die. No spells. No charms. No wards. No flame or blade strong enough to push back the night.

The druids saw it all. Humans weren't weak. The empire made them weak.

And if the empire would not lift them up, then the godlings would.

At least... those who still had compassion left in them.

Many among the godlings did not agree with the druid's compassion. To them, what was happening to the humans was not a tragedy, it was a consequence. A price they had brought upon themselves through arrogance, ignorance, and the decisions of their rulers.

Pity was unnecessary. Responsibility? Even less so.

The humans emperor was the one playing dice with his people's lives, sacrificing town after town in pursuit of political games only he understood. Why should the godlings be the ones to intervene? Why should they carry the burden of benevolence for a species that had repeatedly denied, insulted, and mistrusted them?

None of the godlings were pleased with the devastation occurring. They did not relish the death. They did not find joy in the suffering. But what else were they supposed to do? For centuries they had held their hands back, kept peace, upheld treaties, respected borders. And yet, humans continued to twist kindness into weakness.

Silence was mistaken for fear, patience for submission. Restraint for vulnerability.

Even the vampire godlings, who preferred isolation above all else, had been cornered into this path. They had no desire to clash with humans, nor to involve themselves in mortal politics. But the empire's meddling, its provocations, its relentless attempts to control them... had pushed them here.

The druids, with their gentle hearts and stubborn morals, were seen by many as the ones overstepping now. Their efforts to help humans blurred the boundaries of neutrality the godlings had maintained. It felt like interference, unnecessary interference in a conflict humans had invited upon themselves.

The godlings had come to this southern continent not to be entangled in mortal chaos, but to reconnect with their kin. To experience new lands. To immerse themselves in new cultures. They had no intentions of entertaining human narratives or human illusions of superiority.

And yet, they complied with human laws. They respected human territories. They acted with the civility expected of a race with divine blood flowing through them.

Resorting to conflict over minor grievances brought them no satisfaction. Despite their power, they were not creatures of senseless violence. A good reason was needed, real justification, real harm. Not the petty whims of fragile ego-driven kings.

Erik had been one such reason.

The memory of him stirred a collective bitterness. A human whose desire, arrogance, and actions had crossed lines even the patient godlings could not tolerate. They had paid him a visit before making their way to the southern continent, and the lesson they delivered was one they felt was deserved, fully and completely.

People like him were the ones worthy of the violence the godlings unleashed. The gods knew they tried to avoid it, but some humans made avoidance impossible.

And that was why the druids actions troubled the others. Not because helping humans was wrong but because it disrupted the delicate balance the godlings had been forced into. Compassion was admirable, but in these times... it risked encouraging the same arrogance that had brought mortals to this brink in the first place.

Not all druids agreed with offering help. Even among their kind, known for compassion, neutrality, and balance, opinions diverged sharply.

Those who chose to help did so because the humans trapped in this nightmare were innocent. They were farmers, children, artisans, and wanderers, people who had no influence over imperial decisions, no power to shape policy, no part in provoking the godlings. The sins of their emperor and noble rulers, the selfish choices of those in gilded halls, should not condemn ordinary lives.

On that point, none of the godlings argued.

It was the truth.

But truth did not erase reality.

These seemingly innocent humans were the only targets available, the only ones they could direct their simmering frustration toward without triggering catastrophic consequences. It was unfair. It was unjust. But it was how the world was shaped.

The godlings, of course, would much rather direct their wrath at the people responsible: the emperor, his court, the high nobles, the puppetmasters and schemers who had repeatedly antagonized and manipulated the godling races. If justice were simple, if consequences could be delivered freely, they would have walked into those marble palaces and exacted a reckoning without hesitation.

But they could not.

These figures held political significance far beyond their personal lives. Their deaths were not merely deaths, they were statements, declarations, ripples that could turn into roars. The fall of a lord. The disappearance of a viscount. The death of a royal heir. Each incident was enough to reshape alliances, ignite wars, or fracture the fragile balance between humans and godlings.

The godlings were not afraid of consequences. Fear had nothing to do with their restraint.

What held them back was the knowledge that such actions, while personally satisfying, would become an inconvenience, an unnecessary burden placed upon their leaders and the peaceful majority of their race.

Most godlings preferred harmony. Balance. Minimal conflict. They did not wish to be dragged into the empire's endless politics, nor to escalate tensions that would cause suffering for their own kin across other continents.

Thus the tragic reality settled in: They could not punish those who deserved it and so the only ones left were the powerless. The innocent and the unlucky.

This truth ate at the druids who refused to help. It tormented the ones who wanted justice but were forced into inaction. And it fueled the resolve of the druids who want to help, determined, at the very least, not to let innocent blood be the canvas for political games they had no hand in.

The divide among the godlings widened, unspoken yet undeniable.

Compassion on one side. Resentment and restraint on the other.

Tension spiked the moment the group of druids who insisted on helping the humans departed. Their absence pulled the air taut, killing the appetite of the godlings who had been amusing themselves by

tormenting the nobles. It felt as though their freedom had been stripped away, the empire's cities suddenly smaller, tighter, suffocating.

Frustration churned in them, hot and restless as if their very instincts demanded to roar, to tear through the constraints pressed onto them by politics and human fragility. But they knew better. They chose to be civil, to follow the example set by the first group of their kin, the ones who had seen through the empire's deceit early and built a separate settlement to wait for things to settle without unnecessary entanglement.

So the rest of the godlings left as well, shame burning like a second sun beneath their skin at the thought of the ridicule waiting for them. They expected mockery, jeering, or smug lectures from their wiser kin.

Instead, they were greeted with open arms, save for a few sharp jabs and well-earned remarks. Just like that, the godlings who had been turning noble lives into nightmares vanished from the empire's cities.

The nobles should have been relieved. They should have celebrated.

But they weren't.

Because they remembered the look in the godlings' eyes as they walked away. That quiet disappointment. That subtle, piercing judgment. As if the humans had been expected to rise above all this, to show dignity, courage, clarity and failed.

And somehow, that cut deeper than all the earlier pranks, terrors, and mischief.

When the druids reached the outskirts and saw the first town empty, silent, stripped of all life, they only shook their heads. Without a word, they continued on toward the next settlement, the one whose lights still burned and whose people had survived the night.

They had promised not to interfere with the empire's rules regarding the extraordinary. But if humans learned something from the godling's indirect actions... that was another matter entirely.

Dozens of apelings, druids from every godling lineage arrived at the edge of the living town just as the first hints of dawn crept across the sky. As they watched the horizon brighten, they shared a look, the kind that needed no words. Then, almost in unison, each pulled out a small vial and drank.

Their godling forms shimmered, bones shifting, skin smoothing, features softening until they appeared as ordinary humans. Immediately they began pulling on the human garments they had collected from the previous towns, adjusting cloaks, belts, and torn fabric with deft familiarity.

One approached an ancient tree and placed a hand against its bark. With a soft groan, a thick chunk of wood fell away as the tree gently shrank in size, offering what it could without dying. Another druid stepped forward and dripped a glowing liquid onto the roots. The tree pulsed once in gratitude.

They could have conjured wood from nothing but true druidic teaching demanded otherwise, take only what nature willingly gives, and repay every gift.

Chapter 707:

The godlings sat in a ring, silent. Small, razor-sharp knives formed in their palms as they began to carve. The rhythmic scrape of wood echoed quietly through the dim light.

By the time they finished, the town had fully woken. Doors creaked open. Lanterns flickered. People stepped out with cautious, fearful eyes, still uncertain of what the new day held.

Only then did the disguised druids rise.

Clutching their freshly carved wooden statues the effigies of "gods" they staggered toward the town gates. Their faces twisted with feigned exhaustion, fear, and grief, playing their part to perfection.

And together, they shouted:

"Help! Please, help us! We survived the night!"

The soldiers on the wall stiffened at the sight of the screaming figures stumbling toward the gate. Their armor was still settling on their shoulders; many had only just taken their posts. None expected survivors, certainly not this many, nor this frantic.

One of the younger soldiers leaned toward his captain, voice barely above a breath. "Inform the town head. Now."

At the same time, the captain's voice boomed across the ramparts, loud enough to rattle the shutters of nearby homes.

"Open the gates!"

The great wooden doors groaned as they parted. The disguised godlings pushed forward, clutching their carved statues as if they were lifelines. Dirt smeared their faces. Some pretended to limp. Others let their voices crack with well-practiced despair.

As they crossed the threshold into safety, the soldiers rushed to help them.

"How many of you survived?" one soldier asked, placing an arm around a trembling druid who had feigned exhaustion.

"What happened out there?" barked another, already scanning the horizon as though the plague itself might come sprinting after them.

The druids did not answer at first. They only exchanged glances, fearful, broken, human. It was exactly what they intended.

The town head arrived moments later, still tying the sash of authority around his waist, clearly dragged out of bed by the commotion. His face paled as he took in the sight of the "survivors," their statues clutched like the last memories of the dead.

"What... what befell your village?" the town head asked, voice unsteady.

At that prompt, one of the druids stepped forward. He was the best liar among them, chosen specifically for this moment. His voice shook as he spoke, perfectly mimicking the trembling fear of a man who had witnessed horror.

"We... we hid," he said. "Inside the woods. Those who couldn't run... they..."

His grip tightened around the carved statue, knuckles whitening.

"There was nothing left by morning," another added, wiping at eyes that could not really cry.

The soldiers stiffened. The town head swallowed hard. The air thickened with dread.

The village head's eyes narrowed, doubt clouding his expression.

"I am glad you survived," he said slowly, "but simply hiding is not enough when it comes to these creatures of the night."

His voice dropped, growing heavier with suspicion. The soldiers around him sensed it as well; they drew subtly closer, hands drifting toward hilts, forming a loose circle around the newcomers.

"How," he asked, gaze sharpening, "did you survive?"

The disguised godlings exchanged glances silent, trembling, rehearsed fear. Finally, one of the women stepped forward. She looked small, fragile in the oversized human clothes she wore. Her hands shook as she lifted the statue she clutched.

A carved figurine of Crepuscular, the Origin God of Sun and Sky.

And another in her other hand Keles, Goddess of Death and Darkness.

The town head's brows furrowed. The soldiers stiffened. Some gasps came from townsfolk who had gathered at the edges of the square.

Worship of gods, any gods, was an unspoken taboo under the Empire's rule. Forbidden, ridiculed, erased.

Seeing these icons was like seeing a ghost of a forgotten age.

"We... w-we believe these may have saved us," she whispered, voice quivering.

One of the soldiers barked out a laugh, sharp and scornful "What nonsense are you spouting, woman? You must have lost your mind from fear."

Murmurs rippled through the townspeople. Mockery. Doubt. But most of all, unease.

The godlings did not argue. They didn't even look offended. Instead, they clutched their statues tighter, knuckles paling, as if those hand-carved idols were the only threads anchoring them to sanity.

The soldier who mocked them shifted uncomfortably. The sight of their desperate grip contrasted too sharply with the dismissive words he'd spoken. The villagers noticed.

The town head exhaled through his nose, his frown deepening. He rubbed his temples, weighing the fragile balance between fear, logic, and the growing desperation of his people.

"Enough," he finally said. "You've all endured more than anyone should."

He signaled to a nearby guard. "Find them lodging. Get them washed. Feed them."

Then he looked back at the newcomers, eyes hard but not unkind.

"Rest. Settle yourselves," he said. "Once you've eaten and slept... I expect you to tell me exactly how you survived."

His tone carried the weight of both curiosity and uncertainty. Because part of him refused to believe in gods.

The evening air was cool when the village head summoned the "survivors" to his longhouse. Torches flickered along the walls, casting restless shadows across his stern face. A few trusted soldiers stood at attention behind him, silent but clearly ready for trouble.

The godlings still in their fragile, trembling human disguises sat on low stools before him. The carved idols rested on their laps, worn smooth from hours of anxious handling.

The village head folded his hands "I've been thinking about what you told me," he began slowly. "About these statues... and divine protection."

His eyes narrowed, no hostility in his action, but out of raw, human confusion. "If what you say is true, then answer me this."

His gaze swept across them, heavy as stone.

"You cannot be the only ones in this lands who still whisper the names of the gods. Hidden worship exists. I know it. So why were you spared when so many others died?" His voice grew strained. "Why not the families in the nearby towns? Why not the devout believers? Why only you?"

A long silence followed.

Finally, the same woman who had spoken earlier brought her statue to her chest.

Her voice trembled.

"Maybe..." she whispered, "maybe the others were not devout enough."

The soldiers shifted, some scoffing under their breath.

"Or..." another godling added softly, eyes lowered, "maybe they never had the chance to hold their statues before death came."

The chief's jaw tightened not convinced, but listening.

"It is... very lonely," the first godling continued, "when you are hiding in the dark. When the screams outside fade, and you fear you'll be next. A small statue..." she stroked the wooden idol with a thumb "it becomes the only comfort. Something to cling to. Something to pray to when all hope is lost."

A man behind the chief muttered, "Superstition."

But the godling continued, as if too shaken to stop.

"As the creatures drew closer to our hiding place," she said, "we heard their claws on the walls... their sniffing... their growls. We thought it was the end."

Another godling added, "But they overlooked us. Or recoiled. Like something, someone pushed them away."

Skepticism thickened the air. The soldiers exchanged looks. The chief's brows drew together even tighter.

He leaned forward, voice low.

"You are asking me to believe that a handful of carved wood saved you from monsters that slaughtered entire towns."

The godlings lowered their eyes, perfectly mimicking shame and fragile hope.

"We ask you to believe nothing, village head," the woman whispered. "Only that... we are alive. And those statues were the only things we held when death came close."

The chief exhaled sharply. Annoyance. Doubt. But also fear. The kind that gnaws on a leader forced to confront truths he isn't prepared for.

He waved a hand.

"Leave me," he said tiredly. "I'll think on this."

As the godlings stood and bowed, he added, almost reluctantly:

"And... keep those statues hidden. If the empire learns of this, it will not be my head alone that rolls."

They nodded, clutching their idols as they were escorted out.

Once the door closed, the soldiers murmured.

"Chief... you don't truly believe them, do you?"

The village head rubbed his face, weary and shaken.

"No," he whispered. Then, after a pause that chilled the room "But I can't say I don't want to."

One thing the godlings did not bother clarifying to the village head was the most important truth of all:

Those who met their end truly had no statues with them. Had they held even a crude carving, even one shaped in desperation with shaking hands their fate would have been entirely different.

The godlings knew this. The druids especially knew it.

For though no mortal could claim to fully understand the Origin Gods, the druids at least possessed a deeper comprehension than most. They, unlike humans of the Empire, had never forgotten the ancient truths.

Origin Gods did not seek worship, they did not hunger for prayer. They did not respond to offerings or praise.

They did not need to.

Chapter 708:

Every waking breath in the world, every heartbeat, every step, every life continuing the cycle was already a form of worship. Mortals lived upon their domains, under their skies, upon their land, within their boundaries. That alone was enough. That alone sustained the old divinities.

Because of this, Origin Gods never looked down, never leaned close, never intervened in mortal affairs simply because someone prayed hard enough or believed fiercely enough. Devotion meant nothing to them.

But actions, and especially symbolic actions tied to their essence, did.

And a hand-carved statue made by mortal hands, shaped with reverence or even fear was an action that echoed across divine boundaries.

The moment a human carved the likeness of an Origin God, and the moment that same human clutched it as their protection, that statue ceased being a simple object.

It became a conduit. Not of attention as the Origin Gods did not look.

Not of blessing as the Origin Gods did not bless but of alignment.

A mortal choosing to carry the image of a sun, sky, or death deity

invoked the natural influence that already existed in the world.

Their own beliefs and the gods divinity overlaps and that overlap births a small spark of divine influence.

Nothing showy and nothing visible as the statues would still look as it was made. But It's appearance is enough to turn thralls aside.

Because thralls, creatures of night, recoiled instinctively from realms governed by the Origin beings. Crepuscular was something they avoid and Keles was their mother.

Thus, a mortal possessing such a statue was hidden, protected by a veil of divine resonance.

But that protection came with an unspoken limitations, It must be on their person always.

The Origin Gods would notice a mortal in danger. They would not intervene and they would not extend unseen hands.

If a mortal let go of the statue or forgot it or set it aside even for a moment, the divine resonance faded instantly.

In the eyes of the thralls, they would appear as naked, vulnerable, and appetizing as any other prey.

Back in their rooms, doors shut, windows curtained, hinges barred, the godlings sat in quiet communion. Each wore the same faint, knowing smile as their minds touched one another. Through their telepathic link, images of the villagers' homes came into focus like ripples settling on a pond.

Some mortals, it turned out, had taken it upon themselves to begin crafting statues small, crude effigies meant to resemble the gods. Yet every household reached the same stumbling block: they couldn't identify which godling was which. Their carvings were hesitant, half-formed. The intention was there, but the knowledge was missing.

To the godlings, the next step became obvious: they needed to teach these mortals the bare basics of divinity. Not enough to elevate them, nor enough to bind them, merely enough to let them survive.

So the godlings left their temporary quarters and spent a few days roaming the town. At first, the social tension was palpable. Curious eyes followed them, but questions died in the throats of those who wanted to speak. Even the villagers who had started carving their own statues pretended indifference, feigning ignorance whenever a godling passed by.

And then, after two days, something changed. The villagers realized that somehow their homes had not been attacked. Not once. Not even by the stray thralls that normally prowled the outskirts at dusk.

It was subtle at first: strange looks cast at the godlings disguised as human travelers, suspicious glances at the half-finished statues they carried. A thought began to burrow into the minds of the villagers, soft as moss and just as persistent:

Were the gods truly protecting them? and were these newcomers the reason why?

Rumor turned to speculation, and speculation into timid courage. Those who had been too afraid to speak finally approached. Their questions came cautiously at first, whispers, half-apologies but the godlings answered with deliberate simplicity. Enough truth to strengthen the villagers' resolve. Enough mystery to keep reverence alive.

By the end of the week, the entire tone of the village had shifted. Homes that once displayed nothing now hung small statues beside their doors, tied with twine or ribbon or scraps of cloth. Not every household participated, skepticism still lingered, and doubt was not forbidden but for the first time in generations, there was a unified hope.

A fragile kind of faith had taken root.

It was finally time for the godlings to depart. The villagers were on the right track now slow, hesitant, imperfect, but steadily moving toward the knowledge they would need to survive this disaster. Their homes were safer than they had been in a long time, and if fate was kind, this town would live through the coming darkness.

Night quietly settled over the rooftops as the dozen godlings gathered outside the house assigned to them. From the dimly lit street, they watched the village exhale into rest. Lamps flickered out one by one. Dogs curled against doors. Mothers pulled blankets up to their children's chins. The fragile peace that came only with exhaustion wrapped itself around the settlement.

Only then did the expressions of the godlings shift.

A cold wind swept through the alleys.

In a blink, they vanished from the street.

Their forms reappeared atop the town's outer wall, silhouettes watching the horizon. And there, under the pale smear of moonlight, the horde revealed itself: thralls, dozens upon dozens, surging in a hungry tide toward the village.

The godlings looked back at the place they had spent a week within. They remembered the nervous kindness of its people, their trembling questions, their stubborn attempts at carving statues with shaking hands. They remembered hope struggling to be born.

Their human disguises unraveled like shed skin, dissolving into shimmering motes. Their true godlings forms emerged as they prepared to leave.

If they stayed, they knew what would happen. The urge to intervene would overpower them. The rules that governed their existence would crack. The delicate balance between guidance and interference would collapse entirely.

They had already done all they were allowed to, they had taught, nudged, and prepared. The rest was mortal work.

Still... their gazes lingered on the homes without statues, on the doors left bare out of pride, doubt, or fear. A few of the godlings let out soft sighs—soundless currents of regret carried away by the wind.

Their divine forms fractured into spirals of black feathers.

A murder of crows erupted into the night sky, scattering like smoke, wings beating against the darkness as they flew toward the next town in need of guidance.

Behind them, the sleeping village dreamed unaware of the trial racing toward it.

The moment the last feather vanished into the night sky, the village fell utterly silent.

But only for a breath.

Then the first thrall crawled over the wall.

It moved like a starving animal, its limbs bending wrong, its eyes bright with hunger. It dropped to the ground without a sound, head turning slowly toward the nearest house. Somewhere in the village, a dog lifted its head growling low, uneasy.

More thralls spilled over the wall behind the first.

Dozens.

Then hundreds.

They hit the earth in waves, each landing with a soft thud that was swallowed by the stillness of sleeping homes.

At first, the horde approached cautiously, as they always did sniffing the air, drawn by the warmth of human life. But then something strange happened.

The first thrall reached the door of a house.

A house with a statue tied beside its entrance.

A crude, misshapen carving. A godling whose name the family still wasn't sure of. A face too round, or too sharp, or carved with a trembling hand.

The thrall reached for the door's hinge and recoiled with a snarl, its fingers blistering on contact. It staggered back, hissing, shaking its arm as if stung.

A faint shimmer pulsed across the statue. Imperfect divine likeness or not, the mortals had believed in what they made. That was enough.

The thrall circled the house. Every window. Every wall. Its hunger scratched at the barrier like claws on stone, but the invisible line created by the statue would not break.

The thrall screamed a thin, feral note that made others turn toward it.

And then the pattern became clear.

House after house, protected.

Even the crudest statue emitted a soft, flickering shield. Some glowed bright as lanterns. Others barely flickered at all. But all of them worked.

If the godlings had seen it, they might have smiled.

The villagers who had doubted, who had hesitated, who had taken their time—they were asleep in safety now.

But not every home bore a statue.

And the thralls found them.

It began with the house on the eastern side of the village of an older couple, too stubborn or too proud to adopt any new customs. Their door shuddered once, twice, then burst inward. The scream that followed was short, sudden, and cut off by wet teeth.

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Another home without a statue drew the thralls next, this one belonging to a woman who believed the godlings were pretending, tricking the village for unknown reasons. Her doubts ended in the dark, swallowed quickly by the sound of splintering wood.

A third home, this one held children. The thralls tore through the window, glass scattering across the street. Tiny footsteps pattered. A choked cry. Then nothing.

The screams began to wake the village.

Doors flew open. People stumbled into the streets, terrified, only to freeze as the thralls turned toward them—hungry, jerking, animalistic.

But the protected houses held.

Some statues flared bright enough to push thralls back like gusts of wind. Others created small circles of untouched ground around their homes. Families huddled inside, listening to the monsters claw at invisible barriers.

The thralls were confused.

They were starving.

And they grew frustrated.

But they could do nothing to those home protected by these glowing sticks. The horde released a collective shriek, raw, furious, piercing. Scaring the people hiding in their home.

Just as quietly they came, the horde left as nothing else could be gained from this town.

But scattered throughout the town, little wooden statues glowed like dim stars, standing between life and death.

And above the chaos, far in the distance, a single crow circled back just long enough to watch the first moments unfold.

Then, heart heavy, it turned away.

Morning came quietly, to the sleepless town. They peered through their door as if they feared what the sunlight itself would illuminate.

One by one, doors creaked open. Villagers stepped onto their porches, trembling from the long night. Children clung to their parents' legs. The older folk muttered prayers or simply stared, hollow-eyed, waiting for the next horror to reveal itself.

But the streets were empty.

No thralls.

No corpses.

No blood except for old stains already drying into the dirt.

And that was when the realization fell upon them

Those who had been attacked... were gone.

Their homes were broken into. Their beds overturned. Their clothing left behind. But the people themselves, the victims of the attack had vanished completely.

"They were taken," someone whispered.

"No..." another villager said, voice cracking. "No, they left."

A crowd slowly gathered at the main road leading out of the village. Tracks, hundreds of them scarred the mud. Some were clawed. Some were heavy and dragging. And among them were many... human-sized prints, barefoot, fresh, and unmistakably belonging to the missing villagers.

They had walked out of the village on their own.

Not as themselves.

As thralls.

A woman fell to her knees at the sight.

"That's my son's footprint... gods... he left with them..."

Her husband wrapped his arms around her, but his face was gray, his own eyes hollow.

Another family stared at the trail with horror.

"My father... he refused to make a statue... and now now he's one of them..."

A silence heavier than grief fell over the village.

Every unprotected home had been emptied, its occupants absorbed into the horde. The protected ones were spared, untouched, sealed by belief and carved wood.

And now the horde had grown.

The people stared northward, where the footprints disappeared into the distance, like a river of shadows flowing toward the next town.

Yet even amid the sorrow, the villagers could not ignore one strange, unnerving fact.

The dozen travelers, those odd, soft-spoken strangers who had guided them, taught them, quietly answered their timid questions were gone.

Their assigned house stood empty.

Blankets folded. Room swept. No signs of struggle. No tracks leading away. Not even footprints in the dust.

Almost as if they had never existed.

"Did they flee before the attack?" one man asked.

"No," whispered an elder woman, touching the warm wood of her statue. "No human in this area is capable of that. They... they left as they came. Quietly. Suddenly."

A child tugged on her mother's sleeve and pointed to the sky.

"Look, Mama. Birds."

Far above the village, a thin line of black shapes circled once, almost too high to see then turned away, flying east. A murmur rippled through the people. Some saw only crows. Others saw something more. A few bowed their heads instinctively, not fully knowing why.

One villager spoke what many were thinking:

"They saved us."

Another replied, softer, unsure "Did they? Or... did we save ourselves, with what they taught us?"

No one had an answer.

But one thing became clear as the morning light spread. Their faith was no longer a hopeful experiment, it was survival.

The statues remained warm to the touch, humming faintly like distant echoes of a divine heartbeat.

The druids continued their works, aving who they could, teaching what must be taught, but there were too few of them. Even when they split into lone travelers or pairs, hoping smaller groups might slip more easily into towns unnoticed, their success rate began to crumble.

People listened less, they questioned more. Their warnings were met with squinted eyes and folded arms.

Where once a dozen voices had been enough to stir curiosity, now a single voice was often drowned beneath fear, superstition, or pride. Some villagers mocked them. Others turned them away at their doors. Many simply ignored them entirely, too consumed by daily survival to pay heed to a stranger's strange talk of statues and protection.

The druids felt the weight of every failure.

Some at the edge of tears when they left a stubborn settlement behind, knowing what fate awaited it once night returned. Others grew quiet, carrying their grief like a second skin. Alone or in pairs, they traveled on, hoping the next town might be different.

Often, it wasn't.

And so, heavy-hearted, a small group of druids continued down a rutted forest path toward the next village. The morning air hung thick with dread and a growing sense of helplessness. Their earlier optimism, so bright when the twelve first set out had dimmed almost to an ember.

Until they reached the next town.

And froze.

There, in the central square, surrounded by curious onlookers, stood several figures the druids instantly recognized beneath their human disguises. The way they held themselves, the careful pacing of their explanations, the soft glow of magic flickering behind their eyes, they were unmistakably kin.

More druids and godlings kin disguised as mortals. Doing exactly what the first group had done.

Teaching, guiding. Persuading the humans with patience and quiet urgency.

A couple was helping a family carve crude statues. Another druid knelt beside a child, showing them how to tie a protective charm around their doorway. Yet another was engaged in heated debate with a skeptical farmer, who nevertheless held the half-finished carving with trembling hands.

The group of newcomers watched silently, stunned.

One of the disguised druids paused mid-lesson and lifted their gaze meeting the eyes of the approaching group for a fleeting second. A flash of recognition. A mixture of annoyance, pride, and stubborn affection crossed their expression.

Then they looked away, pretending they had never noticed at all.

It was such a small gesture, but it made the tired druids laugh softly.

"Yes," one whispered. "That's our kin, all right."

"So prideful, so unwilling to admit we were right and yet... here they are." Helping.

Standing exactly where they once declared they would not stand. Offering the same teachings they had doubted, the same protection they once called unnecessary interference.

Despite disagreements, despite arguments, despite pride. They had come.

Perhaps grudgingly and silently. But they had come.

The druids stepped into the square, feeling hope flicker back to life.

Their kin might not say the words aloud, they might never apologize. They might still disagree with methods or motives.

But their actions spoke clearly. "They stood together"

And so, slowly but unmistakably, the outskirts began to change.

People were still afraid of the night, how could they not be, with the memory of screams still echoing in their bones? but they were no longer afraid for their survival. Fear became vigilance. Panic became preparedness. These towns and villages, once brittle and doomed, now glowed with faint protective light every dusk as statues were set by doorways and charms hung from beams.

The thralls, meanwhile, found it increasingly difficult to add new victims to their ranks in these outskirts. Every protected home was a sealed fortress of faith. Every unprotected family was now a rarity rather than the norm. The horde, starving for new flesh, began bypassing these towns altogether.

The Vampire Court noticed this shift.

But contrary to what one might expect, they were not angered by their fellow godlings kin action.

If anything, they watched with a mixture of amusement and adaptive strategy.

The godling kins were helping humans survive and strangely enough, this strengthened the Court's own long-term goals. A living outskirts populace was a shield, a buffer zone between the Court's lands and the Empire's military reach. The Empire would not commit to deep incursions if its peripheral territories were still full of breathing, frightened subjects.

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And more importantly:

A frightened populace is easier to sway.

The humans of the outskirts began seeking meaning in their survival. They studied the statues. They whispered prayers. They pieced together scraps of lore, half-truths, and desperate conclusions.

Their understanding coalesced into something new.

A relationship, a story and a theology born from terror and gratitude.

Keles, the vampire godlings, and the night linked together in a fragile triangle of reverence and fear.

From these whispers, the people drew a single, powerful conclusion:

The Empire must have angered the night itself. Why else would these creatures suddenly appear and began to roam the land at night? Why else would divine protectors appear only after the Empire began enforcing its harsh decrees?

The logic was flawed, tangled, but emotionally perfect. And belief is a weapon that does not need accuracy only force and action.

The rumor spread.

From one village to another, then to traveling traders, then to supply caravans bound for the inner territories and then, inevitably, into the deeper veins of the Empire.

It reached taverns, noble houses, and border garrisons:

"The Empire has angered the divine?."

"The gods send monsters to punish imperial pride."

"Only the outskirts have been forgiven."

The Vampire Court, sensing opportunity, quietly reinforced this narrative.

To give the rumors more credibility, they issued a silent command:

The thralls would no longer hunt the outskirts at night.

Let the protected villages stand untouched, let the story deepen and let the Empire grow paranoid.

It was time for the real strike.

With their numbers swollen to over a million, the thralls surged deeper into the Empire, moving with the same eerie coordination as a spreading wildfire. No longer starved. No longer hesitant. No longer cautious.

Their strategy changed as they divided themselves into groups, instead of attacking as one whole body.

The Empire's outer defenses faltered, confused while the rumors sharpened and the divine anger narrative rooted itself deeply in the minds of its people.

This became a snowball effect on the godlings teaching.

The moment the godlings left the outskirts, they saw that the humans in the other regions needed help, real help, guidance, protection, anything. And as they moved on, they unknowingly set off a chain reaction. More and more of their kind, once distant and aloof, began to quietly mingle back into the mortal world, taking on human guises and slipping into villages and towns as teachers, healers, storytellers, or wandering mystics.

Everywhere, the pattern repeated. A quiet wave of divine intervention rolled over the land, subtle but unmistakable.

And Chen was furious.

The moment reports reached his court, a suffocating silence fell over the imperial hall. His ministers watched him closely, their eyes avoiding his. Chen sat rigid on his throne, jaw clenched so tightly the veins on his neck trembled.

His plans were spiraling out of control.

And worse, they were spiraling in the exact direction he had not intended.

This was never supposed to happen.

The gods were not supposed to turn their attention toward the empire.

The godlings were not supposed to start guiding the mortals under him.

His plan years in the making had been crafted for one purpose, "To draw his father out".

To force the old man, the ever-watchful, ever-absent Emperor Above, into revealing even a flicker of his presence. But even now, even with undead thralls, collapsing villages, divine involvement, there was nothing. No whisper. No omen. No movement.

As if his father was watching in silence, letting the world burn or heal as it pleased.

Chen's fingers curled into fists.

No.

This continent did not need gods. This empire did not need gods. His people were supposed to rely on him their emperor, their protector, their guiding star.

Not outsiders, not divine meddlers. Not these arrogant godlings playing heroes.

The moment he stood, the court immediately bowed.

"Prepare the legions," he commanded, voice sharp as a blade. "Deploy them at once. Every division able to march."

The hall shook with the force of his declaration.

"We will cleanse the land of these creatures of the night."

"We will restore order to the towns."

"And we will show the world" he lifted his chin, eyes glowing with cold imperial fire "that the empire is still strong. That even the so-called anger of the gods is nothing before us."

He paused.

"And that a god is not needed," he said quietly, dangerously, "when they have me."

The courtiers bowed deeper, none daring to meet his gaze.

Chen's deployment should have been a triumph, an act that reassured the people that their emperor stood between them and the horrors of the Night. In another time, it would have been celebrated. But reality was cruel, his intervention came too late, long after the hearts of his subjects had tilted toward a different belief, one that had already begun to show its power before their very eyes.

And mingled with that belief was fear.

So while the imperial forces began, at last, to push back the Thralls, creatures whose numbers grew with every passing day, the people watched Chen's actions not with gratitude, but with dread. If the rumors were true, if the Night was the work of the divine, then Chen's defiance was not bravery. It was blasphemy. To fight the Night was to challenge the gods themselves.

That thought spread like wildfire.

People began to connect the threads back to the godlings who had wandered their towns months before. Everyone remembered it clearly: the uneasy sight of godlings, stripped of dignity, forced to walk the streets because the emperor had denied them passage. The empire's laws were absolute, no soul,

mortal or "divine", could cross imperial skies or land without approval. And these godlings had lacked the proper documents.

So the emperor detained them.

Days turned into weeks. Weeks into months. And still, he did not let them go.

Now, with the sudden transformation of the Night into something far more violent, far more sentient, it was only natural for the people to wonder "were the two events connected?"

Had the emperor offended the heavens? Had detaining the godlings provoked divine wrath?

Thus, instead of the loyal unity Chen expected, he received terrified reports. Streets filled with protestors. Voices rising in desperation, not praise.

Crowds gathered outside imperial halls and barracks, shouting the same demand again and again:

"Release the godlings! Let them go!"

To them, the Night would not end until the empire corrected its sin. And suddenly, Chen found himself at the center of a storm he never intended to create, caught between the Thralls at his gates and a terrified populace who believed their emperor was about to doom them all.

The empire was splitting down invisible lines. Not everyone had suddenly converted to the new belief; in fact, the unbelievers still outnumbered the faithful by a wide margin. But Chen knew numbers meant nothing if fear kept tipping the scales.

Every day brought another grim report, another town lost, another fortress swallowed by the Night. And with each collapse, more people hesitated, more wavered, more began to think that perhaps the believers were right.

Perhaps the heavens truly were angry. Perhaps their emperor had offended something sacred.

Yet through all of this, the Four Great Clans remained still. Unmoving. Unshaken. They attended court as if nothing had changed, their expressions calm, their robes immaculate, their voices polite. Not a hint of worry. Not a hint of support. They gave Chen nothing.

And their silence infuriated him.

Every time he saw them sitting there serene, composed, unreadable, he felt mocked. As if they were watching him struggle, writhing like a fish trapped in a net, while they stood safely on the shore. He could not shake the suspicion that his father, the former emperor, had already whispered to them from whatever shadows he now occupied. If not, why would the clans remain so still while the empire rotted under their feet?

But Chen could do nothing about it.

He did not have the strength to pry open their mouths and force the truth from them. Even here, in his own imperial court, none of the officials stood beside him. Their bows were shallow, their eyes cold, their loyalty thin as rice paper.

He was alone.

His only true ally was the throne beneath him, cold, heavy, and absolute. The one symbol no one dared defy. Regardless of their feelings, regardless of the terror spreading among the people, the court still obeyed his orders. They had to. To disobey would be to admit that the crown no longer held authority.

And that would mean the empire had already fallen.

But as Chen sat upon that lonely throne, he could not shake the chilling thought:

What good was a crown, if every heart beneath it was already slipping away?

Chen understood his situation far too well. He knew the court would not support him, the clans would not move, and the people were slipping from his grasp like sand between fingers. Therefore, for his next action, he did not need anyone. He could not rely on anyone.