

Guardian gods 711

Chapter 711

It was time for him to throw himself into the game, a gamble with his own life at stake.

If he succeeded, he would reclaim everything, his authority, his people's trust, the stability of the empire. If he failed... then his life, his prestige, even the legitimacy of his reign could be shattered beyond repair.

Chen's plan was bold. Reckless. Perhaps even foolish. But he saw no other path.

He would prove to his people that there was no divine punishment, no wrath of the heavens, no cosmic retribution for detaining the godlings.

Instead, he would show them the truth as he had pieced it together.

The plague of Night, the Thralls, the spreading corruption, it was the work of their so-called neighbors, the Vampire Godlings.

Those pale monsters, half-divine and half-beast, who had long hovered at the edges of the empire. Those who smiled like saints but feasted like devils. Those who were powerful, yes, but still people, beings the empire could quantify, resist, even conquer.

If the people understood that their suffering was caused by godlings,

not gods, their fear could turn to anger. And anger could once again be shaped into loyalty.

But the Vampire Godlings had been careful. Their plans woven in silence. They left no trace, no evidence, no open wound to point to. They made themselves invisible while letting the empire drown.

So Chen decided he would be the proof.

He would go himself. He would enter their lands, an action no emperor had ever taken and drag the truth out of them even if he had to walk through their blood-soaked halls.

He would force them to confess before the empire. Expose their schemes. Tear apart the lie that kept his people in fear.

It was madness and it was desperation. But that was the last card he had to pull right now to force his father out. Also hopefully if the people saw the truth with their own eyes, they would return to him. And he would no longer be alone.

Once Chen made his decision, he acted without hesitation. There was no point waiting, time itself was already his enemy.

When night descended across the empire, he cloaked himself in black, shrouding every trace of imperial regalia. The emperor vanished, and in his place walked a lone shadow slipping out of the capital's gates. He moved without escort, without ceremony, without witnesses.

Only the moon saw him leave.

Chen headed toward the frontier, the regions closest to the Thralls relentless advance.

As someone nearing the sixth-tier stage, traversing the empire posed no challenge. His body cut through the night like wind, his presence dimmed until even trained hunters would overlook him. Every step was measured, every breath controlled.

His consciousness expanded outward like a silent radar, probing, sweeping, seeking. It reached through forests, ravines, ruined villages, and blood-soaked plains, dragging back impressions of anything that felt wrong, foreign, hidden.

When he arrived at the first town under attack, the battle was already underway. Imperial soldiers clashed with the Thralls, steel ringing against bone, screams swallowed by the darkness.

Yet Chen did not rush to help. He had not come here to fight.

His gaze swept past the chaos and carnage, searching not for the monsters tearing into his soldiers, but for the ones guiding them.

He had spent countless nights contemplating the truth, mindless beasts did not act with such precision. Mindless beasts did not coordinate their assaults with perfect timing. Mindless beasts did not leave so few mistakes for the empire to exploit.

No beast, mindless moved in patterns this clean.

So Chen followed a different trail, the trail of intention behind the Thralls, the hidden strings.

The Thralls were never acting alone, there was something above them. Someone keeping them in line and refining their savagery into strategy.

And if Chen was right, then the vampire godlings the ones orchestrating it.

These shadowy puppeteers, those were the ones Chen had been hunting. The Thralls themselves did not interest him. Their violence was loud, obvious, predictable. But the minds behind them... the ones hiding in silence? Those were the threat.

To his surprise, that first night yielded nothing. No foreign aura, no guiding presence and no divine taint.

But Chen was not disappointed. He had expected this. One town meant little; the empire was vast, and the attacks spread across countless regions.

So he continued.

Night after night, he traveled like a ghost across his own land. When darkness blanketed the empire, he hunted. When dawn approached, he returned quietly to the capital, unseen.

He repeated this for days.

Each night, tens of thousands of Thralls spilled across the borders like a tide of shadows, twisting, shrieking, expanding. Yet Chen sensed no mind controlling them. Nothing hidden. Nothing intelligent.

Only their growing numbers.

And that, in itself, was terrifying.

Eventually, his failure began to make a certain sense.

The vampire godlings could not be micromanaging every Thrall.

They were too many. If they were involved and Chen was increasingly certain they were, they would only directly oversee the most important maneuvers. The subtle threads. The key triggers. Not every meaningless slaughter.

Which meant finding them would rely on: luck, experience and deduction.

But deduction failed him.

The vampire godlings motives were too broad, too shapeless. Their goal seemed to stretch across the empire like a net with no center.

Were they aiming to destabilize the land? To provoke panic? To break the emperor's authority? or something deeper?

Every conclusion only spawned more questions.

So Chen continued, driven by stubborn will alone.

A week passed. Seven nights of bloody patrols, seven nights of disappointment.

Then, Luck revealed itself.

On a cold, moonlit night, as Chen swept across a ravine scarred by Thrall footprints, his consciousness brushed against something unusual. A ripple. A mark on reality.

A familiar energy.

Chen froze mid-step.

It was faint, distant, and carefully hidden, but he knew it immediately.

The distinct flavor of divine taint. The same kind he carried within himself. Unmistakably someone touched by divinity was nearby.

Chen's pulse thundered once in his chest.

At last, he had found a thread.

Not far from where Chen stood, a large fortified town was bracing for impact. An entire wave of Thralls surged toward its walls, an unstoppable black tide ready to crash. The night air shook with their shrieks.

And above that chaos, perched casually on the branch of an old tree, sat two young figures.

From Chen's elevated perception, they were unmistakable: tall, slender, unnervingly beautiful, with piercing crimson eyes that glowed faintly even in the dark. Their expressions were uncertain, almost troubled, as if caught between fear and curiosity.

They had felt something, his awareness brushing against them but it was so brief, so precise, that for a moment they assumed it was simply their imagination.

But Chen's own eyes gleamed with a cold, icy blue.

Target acquired.

His body shifted, and in the blink of an eye he vanished, reappearing atop the very tree they sat on. Branches creaked under the sudden weight.

"I found you," he said.

His voice carried no anger, no triumph just the chilling certainty of a man who had been searching too long.

The effect was instantaneous.

Chen raised a brow as the two vampire godlings reacted with startling speed. The world around him exploded into thick black smoke, swallowing the tree, the sky, and even the moonlight.

The darkness was absolute, but not to him.

His senses easily sliced through it. Two signatures. Both closing in rapidly.

One lunged from above, killing intent aimed straight at his skull.

The other shot from below, aiming for his heart with inhuman precision.

Fast. Coordinated. Almost identical to the Thrall attacks and exactly what Chen had been expecting.

A thin smile curved onto his face.

They were fast but not fast enough.

Chen reacted instantly. His icy-blue aura flared, a cold wind slicing through the smoky darkness. He didn't dodge in the conventional sense, he moved through it. His body blurred into a streak of frost, and when he reappeared, the first godling's strike met only air, the blade cutting through frost-laced mist.

"You'll have to do better than that," Chen murmured, his voice calm.

The godlings hissed, a sound like blood over coals, and lunged again. This time, the pair split their attack: the one with dark affinity melded into the shadows, merging with the smoke around. Their bodies blur

as if disappearing from reality itself. The blood-affinity godling surged forward, leaving a trail of glistening red energy behind their claws, sharp as poisoned daggers aimed directly at Chen's heart.

Chen's icy-blue eyes narrowed. Raising his hands, he summoned a ring of frost beneath him, crystals shooting outward in spikes that pinned the ground, freezing the smoke midair and scattering shards of frozen mist toward the blood godling. The red energy collided with the ice, sizzled, and hissed, but it slowed their charge enough for Chen to shift his weight.

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Before they could regroup, Chen vaulted backward, leaving behind a trail of frost. With a flick of his wrist, he sent ice tendrils shooting toward the shadows, probing for the dark godling's form. The shadow pulsed in response, darting unpredictably, trying to flank him from above.

Chen countered creatively: he condensed moisture in the smoke into tiny, spinning ice needles, firing them like a hailstorm in the air around him. The needles pierced through the shadow as it moved, forcing the dark godling into the open. Exposed, their movements became easier to predict.

Seeing the opening, Chen summoned a blade of pure ice, shaping it midair like a jagged spear, and launched it with deadly precision. The dark godling twisted mid-flight, the blade grazing their shoulder and sending a line of frost across their body. Pain flashed in their crimson eyes, but their other hand plunged into the ground, drawing black energy from the earth to create a shadow barrier that absorbed the attack.

The blood godling, meanwhile, had recovered, circling Chen from below. Their red aura coalesced into a whip-like tendril of coagulated blood, snapping at Chen's legs. Chen pivoted on the icy ground, letting the whip slice past harmlessly, then shattered the frozen spikes beneath the godling to destabilize them. They stumbled but immediately retaliated, spinning the whip into a vortex of blood blades, spinning like a deadly carousel, each strike aimed to cut, puncture, and restrain.

Chen reacted with ingenuity. He froze the moisture in the vortex midair, turning the spinning blades into shards of ice that ricocheted back, slashing the godling's exposed sides. The blood godling hissed, stunned.

Both godlings paused, reassessing. They struck simultaneously:

The dark godling plunged forward, forming shadow claws elongated into jagged spears, aiming for Chen's head and shoulders.

The blood godling launched a high-speed dive, transforming their arms into twin bloody blades aimed at his chest.

Chen didn't flinch. He split his icy aura, forming a floating mirror of frost above and below him. When the shadow spears struck, they hit the mirrored ice above his head, shattering into shards. When the blood godling's blades struck his chest, the lower ice mirror absorbed the impact, spraying frozen mist into the air.

He used the momentum to launch himself diagonally, propelling forward with an icy slide along the branches and rooftops. In midair, he condensed his aura into ice projectiles shaped like spinning fans, hurling them at both godlings. The dark godling's shadow absorbed some of the shards, but several pierced their cloak, leaving streaks of frost along their form. The blood godling's blades were cut short as the fans collided, spraying frozen fragments that ripped through their aura.

Chen landed lightly on the ground, frost spreading across his boots. His eyes scanned the battlefield. Both godlings were bleeding, their movements slightly off rhythm now, an opening.

"Your tricks won't save you," Chen said coldly. He raised his palms, summoning a torrent of frozen shards swirling like a miniature blizzard around him. With a flick, the blizzard expanded explosively, slamming into both godlings at once.

The dark godling's shadow fragmented under the icy storm, reforming a moment later but slower, strained. The blood godling's aura faltered as frozen shards pierced their red tendrils, forcing them to retreat.

The forest was a shredded mess of frost-burnt bark and blood-shadow residue by the time Chen decided he'd had enough.

The two godlings landed lightly several meters away, breathing hard. Even exhausted, their red eyes glowed with stubborn ferocity, the boy's eyes a sharp, cutting crimson, the girl's a deeper, thicker shade like coagulated blood.

Chen brushed frost from his sleeve and sighed.

"Fun's over."

The temperature plummeted.

Not gradually, instantly.

A ring of perfectly circular frost cracked outward from Chen's feet, racing across roots and trunks. The godlings' pupils shrank. Their instincts screamed.

They blurred forward.

Dark smoke erupted from the boy, turning him into a streaking silhouette that zig-zagged so rapidly the air warped from the sudden displacement. The girl stepped into a blood sigil beneath her feet, and her body flickered, each heartbeat teleporting her several meters closer, leaving thin streaks of red ribbons suspended in the air.

Chen didn't move.

Instead, the air vibrated as miniature crystals, tiny, needle-shaped slivers of pale blue manifested behind him like a soft, glittering snowfall.

The boy arrived first, stabbing a clawed hand coated in writhing shadow toward Chen's temple.

Chen exhaled.

A twisting helix of cold air wrapped around the boy's arm, slowing it just enough for Chen to catch his wrist between two fingers. Frost spider-webbed across the shadow coating, locking it in place.

The girl appeared behind him, blood-forged blade in hand, thrusting for his heart.

Chen rotated his wrist.

The crystals floating behind him reshaped into a curved frost mirror, sliding between him and her like an icy shield. Her blade pierced the mirror only for the mirror to melt into liquid cold.

The blood blade hissed as the cold chewed it apart.

Her eyes widened.

Chen tapped the boy's forehead with two fingers. "Sleep."

A localized cold concussion burst outward, silent, but devastating up close. The boy's body locked, eyes rolling back as he fell limp like a puppet with cut strings.

The girl gasped and staggered back, clutching her head as the shockwave brushed her mind.

"You what even are you doi...?"

Chen didn't let her finish.

He vanished. No sound, no displacement, simply gone.

She felt something touch the back of her neck.

When she looked down, frost was already spreading across her collarbone, locking her movements. Chen whispered next to her ear:

"Children shouldn't play with the grown ups."

He pressed two fingers against her spine.

Another silent burst.

Her body slumped, unconscious before she hit the ground but Chen caught her casually, lifting her over his shoulder as though she weighed nothing.

The forest quieted.

The frost receded as he released a slow breath, restoring temperature to normal.

Two unconscious vampire godlings, Tier Four dangling from his arms like misbehaving puppies.

Chen looked toward the distant lights of the capital and shook his head.

"Causing trouble on my land...."

His figure blurred.

He stepped and his form dissolved into drifting ice crystals, carried away on a cold wind, racing toward the capital with his prizes.

When Chen made his move to seize the two godlings, something stirred far beyond the palace walls.

An old fisherman walking back from fishing, his basket full of wriggling silver fish, his straw hat casting long shadows over his face halted mid-step. For a brief moment, the world around him seemed to exhale.

His fingers tightened on the wooden handle. Beneath the brim of his hat, his eyes hidden for so long that even his neighbors forgot what they looked like widened by the smallest margin. A faint ripple of emotion crossed his features, one that would have gone entirely unnoticed by any mortal eye.

Then, with a quiet snort, he lowered his chin again.

"...Not yet," he murmured to no one.

And just like that, he resumed walking, slipping back into the rhythm of the evening crowd. He blended seamlessly with the other townsfolk, smiling as one neighbor teased him about the size of his catch, nodding politely at another who wished him a good night. A harmless old man. A familiar face. A background figure.

Meanwhile, far away in the mist-choked forest, in the dark castle, another pair of eyes awakened.

Roth, who was always reading. Roth, whose presence felt like an unmoving pillar in the world.

The moment Chen acted, the quiet in his chamber fractured. His page stopped mid-turn.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, he lifted his gaze from the tome and stared through the stone walls, far beyond the forest, beyond the mountains toward the capital.

A faint, humorless breath left him.

"...You foolish boy."

In the imperial capital, Chen stood in the darkness of his room, the two captured godlings bound by his hand. He had brought them here not to question them, nor to torture them, nor to pry answers from their tongues.

Instead, he sat.

Silent, still. Eyes glowing dim, spectral blue in the pitch-black room.

He waited.

He felt their breaths, their trembling mana, their suppressed power. But he didn't reach for any of it. He didn't speak. He didn't need to.

Because everything he wanted to say, everything he wanted to provoke was wrapped in his gesture alone.

Capturing them was the message.

Chen was not a fool; he understood exactly what line he had crossed. He knew the consequence of laying hands on the children of a demigod. He knew the moment the godlings disappeared, a storm would begin to gather.

And still, he chose this.

It was a challenge, a provocation. A shove at a door that had long remained closed.

His jaw tightened as he stared into the dark.

"Will you stay silent even now... Father?" His voice was almost a whisper.

The night stretched on, like a thread pulled far beyond its natural length. Chen, who had expected an answer, an intrusion, a ripple in the world, received nothing.

No divine presence, no tremor in the air. Not even the faintest whisper of attention.

Just silence.

And that silence... was wrong.

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Hours passed. He could feel them dragging, stretching, bending. The weight of the night only grew heavier. Too heavy. Unnaturally heavy. As if the world itself was being forced to stay asleep.

By the time he realized the unease knotting in his stomach wasn't just paranoia but instinct screaming at him, it was already too late.

Across the empire, the citizens stirred in their homes, yawning, stretching, reaching automatically for morning tasks, yet something felt off.

Their bodies felt awake, their minds felt slightly sluggish. Their hearts... confused.

"Did I wake too early?" "Why is it still dark...?" "Is this a dream?"

Dozens, then hundreds, then thousands stepped out of their houses holding oil lamps, expecting dawn's edge to greet them.

Instead, what greeted them froze their voices in their throats.

The moon hung low and swollen, dyed in a sickly red so dark it looked almost bruised.

Behind them, from every alley and corner, came the sound of slow breathing, like bellows sucking in air through clogged throats.

The citizens turned their lamps and the light fell upon them.

Thralls.

Not moving, not snarling, not attacking. Just standing.

Shoulders slack, limbs doll-like, heads tilted at impossible angles. Like puppets whose strings had been momentarily dropped.

Yet their chests rose and fell in a slow, unnatural rhythm. Alive, awake and Waiting.

A scream finally broke from somewhere near the market district, and the fragile quiet shattered like glass.

Inside the palace, Chen felt the shift the moment he opened his door.

The corridors were drenched in a suffocating silence, not empty, but dense with the thick, stifled breathing of dozens of people paralyzed by fear.

Soldiers hiding behind pillars, servants pressed against walls. Attendants huddled in corners, hands shaking over their own mouths to keep from crying out.

He could hear all of them.

This silence, this breathless dread, this frozen night... It was not the response he expected. And whatever this was, it made the consequences of his own actions feel small in comparison.

He took another step forward, listening to the heavy, frightened breathing around him.

It was only when he stepped fully into the corridor that Chen truly saw what surrounded him.

Through the palace windows, through the high arches and open balcony frames, the red-hued moon hung like a wound in the sky. Its unnatural glow washed over the empire, revealing thralls standing motionless as far as his eyes could reach. They filled the streets. They filled the palace grounds. They stood at the borders of every shadow.

A slow shiver ran through Chen's spine.

He frowned, when all of a sudden fear gripped him so tightly it forced his breath shallow. His legs trembled, not enough to collapse, but enough that he felt each shake in his bones.

And then, footsteps behind him.

The same room he had walked out from moments ago opened again.

Roth emerged.

Impossible beauty wrapped in an unnerving stillness. Tall, taller than any normal man, standing like a small giant under the red light.

His eyes glowed a deep, bleeding red, like the moon itself had poured its color into them.

Behind him stood the two godlings Chen had captured. Awake now.

Heads bowed low. Their attention fixed away from him, as if Chen had become the least significant thing in their world.

Roth walked forward. He didn't spare Chen more than a passing glance, the same way the godlings ignored him entirely. His focus was fixed elsewhere.

Past the palace walls, past the city. Toward the lakeside.

There, the old man who had been walking home earlier continued toward the lake with unbroken routine, as though the world had not changed at all. He sat at the water's edge and cast his fishing rod, the movement calm and practiced.

The old man subtly tilted his hat up and nodded toward Roth, acknowledging the gaze. Roth returned the nod, the motion small yet deliberate, before he finally turned away from the lake and faced Chen.

Silence stretched for one heavy moment.

When Roth spoke, his voice was hoarse, ragged from disuse. He rarely spoke at all, and it showed.

"I now stand before you as you wanted," he said "What manner of plan and design do you have for me now?"

His words held no accusation. No anger, just a direct, heavy question, one Chen now felt dangerously unprepared to answer under the weight of the unmoving night.

Chen opened his mouth to speak, but the words refused to come.

The moment Roth's eyes fell fully on him, those red, bleeding irises that looked as if they saw everything and nothing his throat tightened. The fear that had been quietly gnawing at him surged upward, choking any attempt at explanation.

He forced himself to breathe.

Once, twice.

But under Roth's gaze, even air felt heavy.

"I..." His voice cracked.

The two godlings behind Roth didn't shift at the sound, didn't lift their heads, didn't acknowledge him at all. Their submission, their stillness, only deepened the pressure weighing down on him.

He tried again.

"I wanted...." His tongue stilled.

Because now that Roth stood before him, now that all of this, this night, this red moon, this unnatural stillness had come pressing down at once, Chen realized something terrifying:

He had a lot to say but before the power exuding from the figure he found he had nothing to say.

He had acted thinking it would draw two men, who would go for each other's throats... yet now everything felt off. Wrong. Too much. As if reality itself had shifted in response, and not in the way he intended.

Roth watched him without impatience.

If anything, he looked... hollowly curious. Not expecting a clever scheme and not expecting an elaborate plan.

Just expecting Chen's truth.

Chen swallowed again, his voice trembling despite all his attempts to steady it.

"I wanted you to come to me," he managed, barely above a whisper.

"I thought, if I forced your hand. My father would..." His words faltered, his courage wavering "...would finally confront me."

Another breath, shakier than the last "But this isn't what I expected."

His hands clenched at his sides.

"I don't understand what is happening."

In response to Chen's trembling words, Roth showed no reaction. He simply lifted a single finger.

The nail was long, dark, and sharply pointed almost like an obsidian claw and Roth pointed it directly at Chen's heart.

The gesture was small, the effect was not.

Chen's entire body seized.

He collapsed instantly, knees slamming against the cold stone floor before he even understood what had happened. His hands flew to his chest, fingers curling helplessly as pain exploded through him like a burst of fire.

Just pain raw, merciless, internal.

And he wasn't alone.

Across the entirety of Nana world, every mortal and godlings dropped where they stood.

Farmers in their fields, still half-awake. Merchants unlocking their shops, children rubbing their eyes. Even those still in bed. They all clutched their chests, gasping.

It wasn't agony, not like Chen's but every heart beat in violent, thundering pulses. Like drums hammered by unseen hands. Blood surged through their veins too fast, too hot, as if it wanted to tear free from their bodies entirely.

Cries rose across the cities. A low, collective tremor of fear spread through the empire and world at the same time.

Yet the thralls remained still.

And Roth did not look away from Chen.

"You are a weak, caged bird abandoned by its owner," Roth said, his voice steady and hoarse. "Even with no owner around, you keep yourself locked in the very cage you built using your fear, using your own weakness, pretending it is comfort."

Chen could barely breathe. His vision blurred, his heart felt like it might burst.

"It seems even this fragile comfort has deceived you into believing you have grown bold," Roth continued, his expression empty, the red in his eyes deepening. "Weak and miserable... daring to play games with beings and things so far above you."

Roth's finger shifted.

Not pointing now, lifting.

Chen's body rose from the ground instantly, weightless under Roth's control. His limbs dangled, shaking uncontrollably from the lingering shock of the pain. His chest still throbbed with each forced breath.

The godlings behind Roth who also were clenching their chest did not move. They did not intervene, they simply watched with bowed heads.

"This power," Roth said, tone unchanged, "the one that terrifies you so greatly it freezes your voice and bends your knees..."

He let the words sink in.

"...is a power your father commands with ease."

Chen's eyes widened more in fear than in recognition as he knew the truth in word of the demigod before him.

Roth's head tilted slightly.

"What," he asked, "did you think you would achieve by trying to force him out of his place of hiding?"

"Your father is playing a much more dangerous game," Roth said, his voice low "and has no time for you as you think he does."

Chen's breath trembled in his suspended body. The pain in his chest had dulled, but its echo lingered like a fist still pressed against his heart.

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Roth's eyes did not soften, yet they seemed to drift far past Chen, as if looking at something distant and unseen.

"Your life may be taken by me with just a breath," he continued, matter-of-fact, not threatening but stating reality itself. "But you will live. Because you are more useful alive than dead."

Chen's fingers twitched weakly.

More useful... For what?

Roth lowered his hand slightly, but Chen remained floating, held up not by force but by Roth's will alone.

"There will come a time when the ruler of this land will be decided."

His tone shifted, not dramatic, not grand, simply certain "Only then will you meet your end."

A cold shiver crawled through Chen's spine at the calmness of it.

Death, spoken like a scheduled appointment.

"Until that time," Roth said, "stay your hand. Lead your people. Learn to be a competent leader."

Roth's gaze sharpened, not with anger, but with a cutting expectation.

"I have a son," he said. "So similar to you. Blind, and arrogant, as you are."

There was no fondness in his voice, no regret. Just a resigned acknowledgment.

"I have little time to remain in this world and watch his growth," Roth said, almost to himself. "But you will do."

Chen's breath hitched from the weight of the words landing on him.

"This encounter," Roth finished, "should be a lesson for you. A learning experience for you to grow... to become the obstacle needed for my people and son's growth."

The last sentence hung in the air. Chen felt the air around him tighten, then release as his body began to lower toward the floor, Roth's will loosening but not yet gone. His heart still throbbed painfully. His limbs trembled. His mind spun.

"What you see around you," Roth said, his voice steady and resonant in the unmoving night, "is the sixth stage."

Chen, no longer suspended in the air and fighting for control of his breath, felt the words press down on him more heavily than the pain had.

Roth continued, expression unreadable, eyes faintly glowing like embers behind smoke.

"A stage you are a nitpick away from experiencing yourself."

Chen's eyes widened with confusion and curiosity. And Roth seemed to notice that flicker of confusion, because the next words cut directly through it.

"This tier includes a worldwide domain."

He made no gesture this time, he didn't need to.

"Look around you, Chen. The sky that refuses to change, the breathless silence of your palace, your empire every trembling pulse you and your people feel."

His red eyes flickered, reflecting the crimson moon outside.

"What you see before you is nothing more than a glimpse. A fraction. My domain overlapping with this world's reality."

Only now did Chen finally understand why the night had stretched unnaturally long. Why the moon glowed faintly red even before Roth stepped out. Why the entire empire felt like time itself had been disrupted.

It wasn't a mistake or accident, it was Roth's presence, nothing more.

A domain so vast it brushed against the world without effort, bending the natural order simply because he existed.

Chen's heartbeat thundered again, but this time it was not because Roth forced it, it was fear.

Real fear of once again facing an power beyond his.

Fear at the scale, fear at the realization of how small he was. Fear at how easily Roth's claim of ending him "with a breath" now made perfect, terrifying sense.

Roth watched Chen's expression shift and accepted it with a slight nod, as though this comprehension was one of the necessary steps.

"This is why your actions were foolish," he said calmly. "You cannot grasp the difference between your father's hand and what he commands."

Chen felt his throat tighten.

Roth had not raised his voice once. He had not threatened him, beyond stating the truth. But the weight of his existence was enough to crush pride, plans, and illusions all at once.

"Understand this, Chen," Roth said, lowering his head to look down on the kneeling emperor. "You sought to challenge a being whose shadow alone dwarfs what you have seen tonight."

Chen's knees touched the floor first, then his hands, trembling at his sides.

"And you are not ready."

Roth walked past Chen without slowing, the echo of his steps the only sound in the suffocating palace halls.

As he passed, his voice drifted to Chen's ears "Let go of the guests my son and his people invited over."

It wasn't a command, it wasn't a threat. It was a statement of fact, something that would happen, one way or another.

Before Chen could answer, something shifted behind Roth.

Two wings emerged, dark feathered wings that swallowed the nearby light, bending it inward as if the air itself recoiled. They unfolded slowly, each feather drinking in the glow of the torches until Roth's tall form was encased in a silhouette deeper than shadow.

He was preparing to leave.

Chen felt panic spike through the pain still lingering in his chest. His throat burned as he forced air into it.

"Wait!!"

The word tore itself out of him, raw and shaking.

Roth did not turn but he stopped.

And he granted Chen silence, space, permission to speak, though he himself remained motionless.

Chen's hands tightened on the cold floor. His voice trembled, but something sharper than fear broke through.

"I... I would rather you kill me now!"

His shout cracked, echoing against the stone walls.

"Because your son" Chen's breath hitched, but he pushed through, forcing the words out from somewhere deep, wounded, and angry.

"your son will meet his end by my hands!"

Roth still did not look at him.

But he remained listening.

Chen's voice rose, the last chains of fear loosening as fury and exhaustion mingled.

"I've had enough of being treated like a pawn with no will of my own!"

"I refuse" His voice broke again, but he kept going.

"I refuse to accept being nothing more than a tool to train your son!" The final word left him like a strike, loud and desperate.

Silence followed.

When Roth finally spoke, there was no anger, no amusement just the same calm weight as before, the same factual indifference that made Chen's courage feel small.

"You are so weak," he said, "even your own death and how it comes is no longer a choice you can make for yourself."

Chen's breath stopped in his throat.

But Roth was not finished.

"Also," he added, voice steady, almost dismissively, "you misunderstood me."

Roth shifted slightly, wings lifting with slow, monumental grace.

"If you can defeat my son, then it is a great thing to celebrate."

The simplicity of the statement made Chen falter.

"As I would gain a new son," Roth said, wings beginning their first powerful movement, "and you, in turn... a new father."

With that, Roth's wings flapped.

The pressure of his presence shifted.

And Chen could only stare frozen, breathless, shaken at the meaning of those final words.

In one great sweep of his wings, Roth surged upward, piercing the heavy darkness that had shrouded the empire. His ascent was so sudden, so absolute, that the air itself seemed to rupture around him.

Within moments, his silhouette tall, and crowned with two wings that devoured the very light, rose above the highest clouds.

Across the entire empire, no matter where its people stood at market stalls, at riversides, in mountain villages, in deep forest paths, they all saw him. A solitary figure, suspended between earth and sky, black wings spread wide like the jaws of a great cosmic beast.

And then his wings flapped.

The motion was slow, deliberate, yet the effect was overwhelming. The world below bent. Horizons buckled as though the land itself was cloth being pulled taut by unseen hands. The darkness that had suffocated the empire peeled back like curtains ripped open by the rising sun. Blinding light flooded the world as though day had been restored after a centuries-long eclipse.

And as that light returned, the people realized something else.

The thralls were gone.

The grotesque puppets that had filled their streets, those eyes without will, those bodies without souls had vanished as though they had never existed. Not a trace of them remained.

The people looked up at Roth again, their bodies collapsing to their knees under the weight of instinct, reverence, terror, and awe. They bowed not because he commanded it, but because their hearts remembered what their minds had forgotten.

This was the being whose mere existence had woven terror through their bones.

Yet despite all the fear he inspired, despite the power that made the sky itself yield, he had never once harmed them.

And so they bowed.

Across the southern continent and throughout the empire, Roth's domain had been a night that seemed as if it would never break, an endless veil of shadow and pressure that reminded all who lived under it what true power felt like.

Chapter 715:

But for the rest of the world, enveloped in that same domain, the experience was different. Where it was night for some, it had been day for others, and as his wings lifted him higher, the normal cycle of light returned to them as naturally as if nothing had happened. Only the ripple through the spiritual fabric of the world told the powerful what had transpired.

Roth's display was not vanity, it was not a threat.

It was a reminder. A reminder that a trueborn of the goddess Keles still walked this world.

As Ethan had said: This world knew nothing of his existence or had forgotten.

And more importantly, it was his final gift to the world before he ascended beyond it.

With this single act, he forced open the eyes of every mage, warlord and knights, and hidden master across the continents. For centuries, the powers of this age had been trapped at the peak of the fifth tier, unable to glimpse the next horizon no matter how they struggled.

Roth's domain had shown them, if only for a moment what the sixth tier looked like.

What it felt like.

What it meant for a being to impose their will upon the world itself.

Roth himself had never fully understood how he crossed into the sixth stage. There had been no grand revelation or sign. Instead, his power simply kept rising, quietly, relentlessly long after he had deliberately held himself back from ascending.

For a time, he believed this unstoppable growth was owed entirely to his lineage. A demigod... a trueborn of Keles, a being with one foot already in the realm of divinity.

But even that divine blood had shown its limit. Because once he touched the sixth stage, the impossible happened, his growth slowed.

Not stopped, never stopped but became something else. More deliberate, more demanding, more tied to comprehension than raw strength.

For the first time in an age, Roth could no longer advance through instinct or innate potential alone. He had to learn. He had to research. He had to observe. Power at this level required understanding, not just possession.

And that was precisely why this world needed his parting gift.

Most practioner of mana no matter how brilliant, how gifted, how fortunate would never reach this stage in their lifetime. Not only because they lacked power, but because they lacked something far rarer:

A path, a reference. A glimpse.

Roth knew this well so he gave them exactly that.

When his domain had expanded and overlapped with the world, when the sky bent and the sun vanished and the horizon folded, he had not done it to intimidate or to flaunt his strength. He did it because the sixth stage was nearly impossible to comprehend without seeing it.

Those at the peak of the fifth tier, who felt their cultivation tremble and resonate beneath the weight of his presence, those who had stood at the edge of a bottleneck for decades or centuries, they would now have something to grasp.

A direction, a possibility. Some among them, perhaps only a few, might actually find their way forward from the reverberations of his domain.

And this was not merely charity, nor was it sentiment.

Roth was on the brink of ascension, a privilege most beings would never be offered. And once he left this world, every soul who remembered him, who whispered his name in awe, fear, or longing would feed his growth in the higher realm.

A god without worship was weak. A god without recognition was forgotten. But a god whose name had been carved into the memory of an entire world?

He would ascend with a foundation unmatched.

So this final act served two purposes: To guide the worthy and to be remembered.

The shadowed wings that had eclipsed continents, the night that bent reality itself would become a story carried through generations. A monument not of stone, but of fear, reverence, and undeniable truth.

And as Roth vanished into the horizon, leaving the daylight restored and the world trembling in the aftermath of his power.

Meanwhile, as Roth flew into the distance, another Roth appeared on the lake quietly, without ripples or sound sitting across from an old man who had arranged a small tea table atop the water as if it were solid ground.

Roth studied him. This old man was the only being in existence either mad enough or wise enough to stand against beings like his parents... the Origin Gods themselves.

"Why have you invited me here, Murmur?" Roth asked as he lowered himself into the seat opposite him, the legs of the wooden chair resting impossibly on the mirror-still surface.

Murmur, wrapped in the frailty of an elderly human form, gave a soft laugh, one that did not match the depth of the thing hiding behind it.

"We have kept each other in sight for a long time, young one," Murmur said, pouring tea into both cups with hands that shook only when he wished them to. "Opportunities like this where we can speak face to face without pretense are rare."

Roth didn't touch the tea. He remained silent.

Murmur continued, his voice gaining the faintest edge of amusement.

"You could have killed the boy. I would not have been offended. His rashness delivered his own fate to him."

Roth scoffed, the sound sharp in the still air.

"I don't doubt the truth in your words," he said. "But doing as you suggested would've shifted your attention toward my children. And whatever scheme you're stirring in the shadows... you'd have brought it closer to them."

Murmur waved his hand in a playful, dismissive gesture "You overthink things," he said lightly. "Your people would gain my attention either way once you have ascended."

The last words dropped with a weight that didn't match his joking posture. His eyes old and sharp beneath the facade of an old man—studied Roth's expression with careful interest.

Roth only lifted the tea that had been prepared for him, slowly blowing away the steam before taking a sip.

"That is inevitable," he conceded. "But they are no longer as alone as before. Besides..." His eyes narrowed faintly. "...the Old Deer has never taken his sight off you."

Wardenwild.

The name stirred in Murmur's mind like an unpleasant echo. His lips twisted into a scoff, and he leaned back in his chair with a deliberately lazy, uninterested expression, as though the very mention annoyed him more than he wanted to admit.

Silence spread across the lake. Roth didn't move to leave. As Murmur had said earlier, moments like this were rare. Neither seemed eager to break it.

Eventually, Murmur exhaled, long and slow, staring past Roth at nothing in particular. When he spoke again, his tone had shifted. It was not directed at Roth, more like he was speaking to the air, to himself, or to a memory he could not kill.

"This world... your world... is wrong," he said quietly. "Everything about it is wrong."

His fingers tapped the teacup once, absentmindedly.

"It took me so long to understand that. And once I did..." A faint, humorless smile crept across his lips "...everything finally began to make sense."

Roth frowned not out of irritation but concentration. A part of him knew there was truth in Murmur's words. Before becoming what he was now, Murmur had been a demon older than living memory, older than the first kingdoms, older than the very idea of history in their world. A being who had walked through multiple worlds, watched civilizations rise and burn, and survived gods long forgotten.

If someone like that said this world was wrong... Roth could not simply dismiss it.

He leaned back slightly, letting Murmur's words settle.

Murmur sighed, fingers tensing around his cup.

"It pains and disturbs me that I cannot pinpoint when things went wrong," he said. "But wrong they are. Everything here is the opposite of how it should be. To you and the others born in this world, everything feels normal. Natural."

His eyes lifted, ancient and dissonant.

"But to an outsider like me? Nothing about you all is normal."

The lake remained still. But they were no longer alone.

There was another presence, delicate, vast, and possibly older than both of them. A presence that folded itself into the space between them so perfectly that neither Murmur nor Roth noticed her arrival.

Nana.

Mother of the Origin Gods. The world's will and soul given form. The quiet breath of creation itself.

She had come because Murmur's words struck a familiar chord, one she had tried, for ages, not to acknowledge. He spoke the truth she had long whispered only to herself.

Something was wrong with this world.

But unlike Murmur who stood outside, unable to trace the deviation she knew precisely when the thread had twisted.

She knew who twisted it.

How could she not? He was her child.

Her beloved, her anomaly.

Ikenga.

The name vibrated through her mind with both longing and affection.

Chapter 716

He was the sole abnormality Murmur sensed but could not identify. Ikenga had been different since birth, different in ways had to define. Nana had several theories, many half-formed, many dangerous to even consider.

But they didn't matter.

Because he was hers.

And whatever Ikenga had done, whatever subtle fracture his existence had introduced into the world, it had led to this era, this state, this strange and unpredictable unfolding.

A world Nana watched with fascination, not regret.

Her child's anomaly had reshaped the path meant for their world. And she was... pleased.

Silent and unseen, Nana lingered at the edge of the lake, listening as Murmur unknowingly brushed against the truth she had carried alone for a long time.

The point of change Murmur sensed, the fracture in the world's natural course had begun shortly after Nana birthed Ikenga and Mahu. She remembered the moment vividly, even though her children had long forgotten it. It was such a small event to them, so distant: a simple meeting between siblings to divide the lands and regions of their world, nearly a thousand years ago.

To them, an administrative task. To her, the hinge upon which fate quietly broke.

Crepuscular, Jaus, and Keles her three eldest had called their younger siblings together, intending nothing more than a peaceful discussion of dominion and responsibility.

But they did not understand Ikenga then.

No one did.

What happened in that forgotten meeting, the words spoken and choices made, the small but deliberate action Ikenga took, irreversible now changed the trajectory of the world. It was so subtle, so natural at the time, that none of them noticed the shift.

None except Nana.

Even she could not fully comprehend how deep the consequences would run.

Ikenga had been born with a peculiar awareness, a disposition unlike any of her other children. He did not carry the same naive innocence typically found in newborn gods. He did not stumble, did not make the instinctive errors one expects from a being experiencing existence for the first time.

His siblings grew into their divinity. Ikenga arrived with his already intact.

It was unsettling.

He did not lack pride, far from it. One only needed to meet his gaze for a heartbeat to recognize how fiercely prideful he truly was. But it was a pride hidden beneath perfect restraint. Controlled. Tempered. Leashed.

He had every emotion a god should have desire, ambition, jealousy, curiosity but unlike his siblings who learned wisdom through mistakes, Ikenga's emotions never ruled him. He ruled them. Effortlessly.

This made him appear flawless. The kind of being who should not exist in a world still learning to breathe.

His older siblings never understood him. They often believed he was simply level-headed, unusually wise, gifted with an older soul.

But Nana knew the truth.

There was something different in him since the moment he opened his eyes. A difference that could not have come from her, nor from any cosmic law she recognized.

Ikenga was born in perfect control of himself and his flaws.

Too perfect.

And from that perfection came the single, subtle decision made during that forgotten meeting, a decision that set the world on the path Murmur now felt was "wrong."

The meeting had been intended as a simple matter: to divide the lands of the young world and establish each god's domain of influence so their authorities would not overlap or clash.

But before the meeting began, Crepuscular, Jaus, and Keles the three elder siblings had already chosen regions for themselves. What remained were left for the last-born twins, Ikenga and Mahu.

To the three elders, this felt natural. They were born first, had witnessed more of creation, and believed the area they choose was quite suitable for themselves.

To Mahu, it felt like an insult.

Her divine pride burned hot. She seethed at the idea of being handed leftovers not because the lands themselves were poor or bad, Quite the opposite, but because of what the gesture implied: You two are younger, therefore you matter less.

She recognized the maneuver immediately. They had been cornered. Their choices had been predetermined.

But before she could voice her outrage, Ikenga stepped forward.

Expression calm. A completely unreadable look on his face.

Without a word, he reached for the world map that hovered above the center of the table. The glowing chart of landmasses and seas shifted gently as he pulled it toward himself. He studied it with quiet precision, taking his time, analyzing every region, every potential future.

And then he simply... chose.

Calmly. As if nothing about the elders' prior actions bothered him.

There was no protest. No complaint, no flicker of wounded pride.

Mahu, watching him, felt her anger catch in her throat.

Ikenga's lack of reaction, his effortless composure made her question her own emotions. If her twin brother, who should have been insulted just as deeply as she, showed not even a ripple of irritation, then perhaps she was overreacting. Perhaps this was a test of their character. Perhaps the elders were not belittling them as she thought.

She took a deep breath, swallowed her fury, and made her own choice.

A simple act. Just choosing land, nothing more.

Yet Nana knew that this quiet moment, this tiny, almost invisible shift reshaped the entire future of the world.

Because it was only the first of many.

Again and again, Ikenga displayed a disposition that unsettled and humbled his siblings. Not through dominance, nor confrontation, nor power but through the serene, perfectly measured way he carried himself.

He did not scold. He did not advise. He simply was and by being, he forced the others to reflect.

Gods who should have clashed countless times, beings of immense pride, diverging ideals, and divine ego found themselves hesitating before conflict. Questioning their impulses. Reconsidering their reactions.

They wanted to avoid being the one acting rashly in front of Ikenga.

They wanted to appear wise like him. Measured like him. Composed like him.

Murmur had been right.

This world was not normal.

In any other world, gods would have been locked in endless conflict, shaping and reshaping creation through clashes of will. But here, because of one abnormality, one subtly perfect presence Nana's children instead lived in understanding coexistence, accepting each other's differences more than any pantheon should.

This subtle influence, repeated over centuries, slowly created a new truth: Ikenga was no longer the only anomaly.

Through him, his siblings, gods who should have grown wild, prideful, and volatile began developing dispositions only found in much older deities. Traits that normally took millennia of mistakes, wars, and cosmic upheavals to cultivate began appearing in them within mere centuries.

Because Ikenga shaped them without ever trying to.

Even the creation of cursed spirits, an incident born from Ikenga's own Cursed Divinity, an aspect he had not yet fully mastered failed to sow division the way it should have. The cursed spirits, violent and seemingly hostile toward creation, assaulted the works of his siblings. Threatening the foundations they nurtured with their creation.

Any other pantheon would have entered an age of divine war.

But Ikenga intervened.

He turned a catastrophe into a lesson.

He used the event as an opportunity to explain the nature of divinity, how vast and unpredictable it was, how each god had the potential to manifest aspects beyond their initially chosen domains, how divinity was not a fixed path but an endlessly expanding ocean.

He guided them to see that divinity, even when dangerous or destructive, was not something to fear but something to understand.

Even Crepuscular, the eldest and proudest, did not fully understand the depth of Ikenga's abnormality until that day.

Crepuscular had been furious. Truly furious.

He had decided to clash with Ikenga to assert seniority, to demand responsibility, to punish the younger god for creating beings that dared to touch his creation. His divine aura split the sky; his voice shook the land.

He reached toward Ikenga.

And Ikenga simply... shifted.

With a soft, almost playful application of divinity, he created a situation where Crepuscular could not touch him. The space between their bodies folded, stretched, bent, and looped so that every attempt Crepuscular made to grab him became a harmless chase, an absurd, almost comedic scene of the eldest god lunging and missing, lunging and missing again.

What should have escalated into a calamitous clash instead turned into something bordering on charming: Crepuscular's rage dissolving into exasperation, exasperation into reluctant amusement, and amusement into genuine laughter.

By the end of it, Crepuscular was not Ikenga's enemy. He was closer to him than ever.

Nana remembered watching it all unfold.

Ikenga, with calm and gentle intelligence, guiding his older brother away from conflict and into understanding. Gods who should have torn the world apart instead learning restraint and humility.

This was the world Murmur saw as "wrong." Not broken... But impossibly stable.

And all because of one child who should not have been the way he was.

This stability, it was something Murmur took a long time to understand, and even longer to accept.

Chapter 717

His goal had always been domination. To him, the gods of this world were merely stepping stones, pieces to manipulate, obstacles to overcome. He approached them as one should approach normal gods: proud, ambitious, flawed, driven by ego and the need to assert supremacy.

And yet... he failed.

He failed because there was no gap to exploit. No weakness in the pantheon. No flaw in the structure of the world. Every god, demigod, and godling had been shaped by Ikenga's influence or something like it into beings who could coexist without easily crumbling. Even the mortals, the humans, were accepted as part of the grand order, prancing through their lives with a freedom and dignity that defied Murmur's expectations.

At first, it made no sense to him.

To Murmur, humans should have been beneath the godlings, subservient and expendable, pawns in the endless games of divinity. The godlings themselves should have squabbled, competed, and fought to assert supremacy over each other. That was the natural order. That was the world and life he had known, the way most worlds operated.

But not here.

Here, everything was too... right. Too fair. Too balanced.

And that, to Murmur, was wrong.

The world should not have arrived at harmony and understanding so effortlessly. Stability should be a prize, earned only after centuries of trials, mistakes, and destruction. Conflict should have carved the edges of civilization, bent the wills of gods and mortals alike, and forged the hierarchy of power.

Yet this world... had skipped that process. It had been sculpted by one abnormal being into a state of order and coexistence that should have taken millennia to achieve.

And Murmur, predator by nature, master of manipulation, connoisseur of chaos found himself... lost.

Murmur leaned back in his seat, eyes narrowing as he let the memory of centuries settle around him.

The more he observed, the more he realized the futility of his original approach. He had expected chaos. He had expected cracks, gaps, weaknesses he could pry open to exploit. But the world refused to crack. It refused to bleed. Every plan he had, every manipulation, every subtle provocation, bounced back like water off polished stone.

Even the mortals, fragile and fleeting, were not as fragile as he had assumed. They moved among the godlings with a confidence and acceptance that should have been impossible. They all behaved as though the world belonged to them as much as it did to the high gods. And they were right to do so, because Ikenga had taught them that power did not require cruelty to assert itself.

Murmur had tried to seize control in the shadows. He had tried subtlety, deception, even direct confrontation. And each attempt had failed not because he lacked power, but because there was nothing to break. Nothing to manipulate. No flaw to exploit.

The realization gnawed at him: he was out of step with this world.

It was not that the gods were weak or too strong. Far from it. It was that their strength had been tempered by understanding, patience, and discipline qualities Murmur despised, yet could not deny. The lessons Ikenga had imparted, sometimes directly, sometimes simply through his presence, had cascaded through the pantheon, in subtle ways Murmur could not undo.

The world had been molded into an equilibrium that he could not disturb. Murmur felt something he had never expected: frustration tinged with awe.

It was maddening, infuriating and yet... compelling.

He realized, slowly, that to conquer this world, he would need more than cunning, more than strength, more than the usual tools of a demon king.

He would need to understand it first.

And that was something he had never done before.

Murmur's gaze drifted across the lake, toward the other Roth who had remained silent.

He had lost before, and he knew he could lose again. But this time... he would not fail from ignorance.

The question was simple, though the answer would not be: how do you break a world that refuses to break?

Roth remained silent, allowing Murmur's words to echo within him. He examined them carefully, turning each statement over in his mind, searching for distortion, exaggeration, or deception. Lies were something he had learned to recognize instinctively.

Yet he found none.

What Murmur had spoken was unsettling not because it was provocative, but because it was true.

Before him sat a demon who had made his position unmistakably clear, one who openly declared himself an enemy of this world. Not a hidden adversary, not a whispering corrupter in the dark, but a being who acknowledged his intent without hesitation. He had even gone so far as to set his sights upon Roth's own people.

By every measure, this should have demanded immediate action.

And yet, Roth felt no such impulse.

There was no surge of anger, no instinctive compulsion to strike, no righteous demand to erase the threat before him. Instead, he sat composed, breathing evenly, his presence steady. He even lifted the

teacup Murmur had prepared and drank from it, the warmth spreading through him as though this were an ordinary meeting between equals.

The contradiction did not escape him.

Why? The question surfaced quietly in his thoughts.

Why was he not reacting as expected? Why did the presence of an enemy not provoke immediate violence?

Roth's gaze lingered on the surface of the tea, the faint steam curling upward, and he realized that his calm was not born of ignorance or underestimation. He was fully aware of what Murmur was, and of what he represented.

And still, he remained at ease.

Roth let the questions unfold instead of silencing them.

Was this calm born from foresight?

He realized that he was no longer thinking only of the present moment, the threat seated across from him, the enemy within reach, but of everything that would follow if he acted now. Every action carried weight, and weight cast shadows far into the future.

Murmur was not a beast to be put down on instinct. He was a being of preparation, of contingencies layered upon contingencies. Roth knew this. If Murmur had come this far, if he could sit here so openly and speak as he did, then plans were already in motion threads pulled tight across the world.

If Roth ended him here, what would unravel?

What mechanisms would be left behind, unattended and unseen? What followers, ideas, or catalysts had Murmur already set loose? And more dangerously, what if Murmur expected this meeting to be his end?

The thought unsettled him.

Roth understood that killing Murmur would not be the end of the problem. It might even be the beginning of something worse. An absence could be more destructive than a presence, especially when the one removed was a thinker, a planner, a being who shaped events long before they surfaced.

And then there was the other possibility, one he did not favor, but could not ignore.

What if this meeting did not end in Murmur's death... but in his own?

The thought did not inspire fear, but it sharpened his awareness. If Roth fell here, what future would that leave behind? What consequences would ripple outward from his absence? His people, his designs, the fragile balances he had helped maintain, would they endure, or fracture?

The truth settled in quietly.

This was not hesitation, this was responsibility.

Roth was now a demigod who weighed futures, who measured consequences that stretched far beyond himself. To strike now, without understanding the full scope of Murmur's designs, would be reckless.

And recklessness was something this world had been shaped to avoid.

Roth lifted his gaze from the tea and returned it to Murmur, his calm now carrying intent rather than passivity.

Violence could wait.

Understanding could not.

In that moment, Roth recognized the deeper reason behind his composure, not arrogance, not fear, but the burden of foresight. And in that burden, he saw the quiet influence of the world itself, teaching even its gods to think beyond the present.

A world that had learned, perhaps too early, how costly thoughtless action could be.

Murmur noticed the shift.

It was subtle, the way Roth's gaze steadied, the way his presence settled into something deliberate rather than merely restrained but Murmur had lived long enough to recognize the look immediately.

Understanding.

He clicked his tongue softly and shook his head, a trace of mild annoyance crossing his features.

"You are a young demigod," Murmur said, voice carrying a faint edge now. "That look isn't fitting for you."

He leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowing as they lingered on Roth.

"You should be brash. Rash. Eager to prove yourself through action rather than thought." A humorless chuckle escaped him. "That is how beings like you are meant to behave."

Murmur gestured vaguely toward the world beyond the lake.

"That would be the case if this were a normal world."

His fingers tightened briefly against the arm of the chair before relaxing again.

"But here you are sitting calmly before an enemy, weighing futures instead of swinging power. Thinking instead of reacting." His gaze hardened. "That is not how a young god is forged. That is how an old one thinks."

For a moment, silence stretched between them once more.

Chapter 718:

"This is exactly what I mean," he continued more quietly. "This world strips away the growing pains of divinity. It robs you of the chaos you need to become."

His eyes flicked to the teacup in Roth's hand.

"A god should learn through failure, through conflict, through blood. Instead, you learn through restraint and consequence." Murmur shook his head again, slower this time. "Too early. Far too early."

The lake remained still, reflecting two figures caught between expectation and reality.

Murmur exhaled, gaze unreadable.

"That is why this world is wrong."

He could see now where Murmur was coming from. Truly see it. The demon was not driven by blind malice, but by a worldview shaped through countless worlds, worlds that had torn themselves apart before ever reaching balance. To Murmur, this world was an impossibility, a contradiction that should not exist.

And Roth understood that perspective more than he wanted to admit.

Even with the emperor, the boy who had angered him so deeply. Roth knew he could have ended his life with a single breath. The power to do so had never been in question.

Yet he hadn't.

Not because he lacked the resolve, but because he found it wrong to end a life merely for being inconvenient.

He knew himself well enough to understand that this restraint was conditional. Had the boy proven more than a nuisance, had he shown true cunning, dangerous intelligence, or the potential to undermine Roth's long-term design then Roth would have erased him without hesitation. Mercy had never been guaranteed.

Killing, after all, was sometimes the most efficient path. To refrain from it when necessary would defeat the very purpose of Roth's plans, for the boy, for his people, and for the future Roth intended to shape.

And yet... the fact remained.

Here he was, sharing tea with an enemy of the world, unprovoked and unafraid. Because he had learned to pause, to judge, to weigh, to understand before acting.

A disposition that should not have come so easily.

Roth finished the last of his tea in silence. He set the empty cup down with care, the porcelain making a soft, final sound against the table. For a moment, it seemed as though he would simply stand and leave, the conversation ending as quietly as it had flowed.

But as he rose, he paused.

Without turning back fully, Roth spoke.

"After so many years of living in this world... has your goal not yet changed?"

Murmur's eyes lifted slowly.

"Does the abyss still call so strongly to you?" Roth continued, his voice calm, unaccusatory. There was no judgment in it, only genuine curiosity.

The old man did not answer at once. His fingers traced the rim of his teacup, eyes drifting toward the endless reflection of the lake. When he finally spoke, his tone was softer than before, stripped of mockery.

"The abyss does not call," Murmur said. "It remembers."

He let out a slow breath.

"I was shaped by it long before this world learned how to hold itself together. It is not a voice one simply forgets because the scenery has changed."

His gaze returned to Roth, sharper now.

"This world tempts me," Murmur admitted. "Not with conquest, but with contradiction. With the question of whether I am wrong... or whether it is."

He smiled faintly, though there was no warmth in it.

"But goals born in the abyss do not fade easily. They adapt. They wait."

Roth inclined his head slightly, acknowledging the answer without pressing further. There was nothing more to be gained by lingering.

As he turned to leave, Murmur spoke once more, almost to himself.

"Careful, young one. If you continue to look at the world the way you do... one day the abyss may stop calling me."

Roth did not respond. His form began to fade, leaving the lake undisturbed once more.

Murmur remained seated, staring at the empty chair across from him, his reflection wavering faintly on the water. The abyss felt... distant.

A slow, deliberate smile crossed Murmur's face as the question surfaced once more, uninvited yet welcome.

How do you break a world that refuses to break?

He still lacked an answer. But answers were not found all at once, they were carved out through pressure, contradiction, and ruin. If the world would not fracture on its own, then he would introduce the fault lines himself. The eastern continent would be his starting point.

Murmur could feel it now, a subtle resistance woven into the fabric of reality itself, as though the world had been braced against collapse by an unseen hand. Whether it was a singular architect, a god, or a collective will imposed long ago, he did not yet know. The truth sat just beyond his grasp, obscured by layers of divine interference and self-sustaining belief. But once he understood it, once he named it, the balance would shift. Not just for him, but for the gods who had grown complacent inside this carefully preserved reality.

Far away, Nana had already returned to her realm, the space folding shut behind her like a sealed wound. Before leaving, she had spared Murmur a long, searching glance, one filled not with hatred, but with something far more dangerous: recognition.

This demon was a problem.

Not in the way others were, brutal, reckless, easily contained but in the way he observed. Murmur was no longer lashing out blindly. He was seeing patterns, tracing connections, questioning foundations that were never meant to be questioned. And now that he had begun to see the world as it truly was, Nana knew it was only a matter of time before he reached the truth beneath it.

Her thoughts drifted, unbidden, to her son.

Ikenga.

He needed to return. Soon. Before Murmur narrowed the possibilities any further. There was something about Ikenga's presence, his nature, his unresolved contradictions that complicated things. Distorted them. With Ikenga here, the demon would not move so freely, would not find the answers aligning so easily before him.

For the first time in an age Nana felt something uncomfortably close to urgency.

Because if Murmur succeeded, if he learned why this world refused to break, then the question would no longer be how to shatter it.

It would be whether the gods could survive the attempt.

As the godlings finally made their way toward the mist-shrouded land, the ancestral domain of their godling kin, anticipation hung heavy in the air. It was there that the competition would unfold, a convergence of pride, rivalry, and divine expectation. What transpired during those trials would become a tale unto itself: moments of brilliance and unity followed by hidden animosity, pride, and quite a lot of different view and outlook on things.

Far from that gathering, on the eastern continent, deeper currents stirred beneath a calm surface.

Since Nwadiesbube's last meeting with the empire's hidden envoys, little appeared to have shifted. Trade routes remained open, decrees were enforced, and the Omadi Kingdom functioned with its usual precision. Markets bustled, officials smiled, and order reigned, at least to the untrained eye. But within the royal palace, unease festered. The royal family maintained their composed façade, yet every measured word and guarded glance betrayed a growing tension they could not fully suppress.

Of the imperial envoys, one in particular proved unable or unwilling to heed her companion's warning.

The female mage.

Whatever caution had been impressed upon her had failed to deter her curiosity, or perhaps something more reckless. Under the cover of night, she sought out Nwadieube alone.

When she entered his chambers, she did so without sound, her presence drifting in like a change in pressure rather than a footstep. Nwadieube sensed her before he saw her, even as she slipped behind him, fully aware that he was watching. Her fingers settled on his shoulders, slow and deliberate, kneading the muscle as though she had every right to be there.

He stiffened.

Turning just enough to see her face, Nwadieube felt a brief, sharp spike of surprise. Outwardly, he remained frozen, his expression carefully neutral. Inwardly, his mind was already in motion running through possibility after possibility.

Why had she come alone? Was this seduction, coercion, surveillance... or a test?

Each scenario unfolded and collapsed in rapid succession as he weighed her posture, her breathing, the controlled ease in her movements. Whatever her purpose, it was clear she had crossed a line knowingly.

Nwadieube's mind drifted back to the earlier encounter with the female mage, to his own lack of courtship that would have justified this action. He had been quite harsh with her. He replayed her reaction over and over the brief flicker of surprise, the restrained disappointment, the calculation hidden behind her composure. And then, like a spark in dry tinder, an idea ignited in his mind. Once it had taken root, he acted without hesitation.

He could feel her hand inching downward, testing boundaries, seeking a response. Coldly, deliberately, he spoke.

"Leave."

The single word carried a weight that brooked no argument, reverberating in the quiet of the chamber. He felt her freeze, every muscle taut, as though she had been physically struck. She watched him, waiting for something, an explanation, a softening, a gesture but none came. His attention remained fixed on the rapport before him, every line of text scrutinized, not a single glance spared for her.

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And just like that, she left. Silent as she had arrived, slipping out of his chambers without a word.

Nwadiabube set the rapport aside and rose, pacing the length of his room. The idea that had sparked his action refused to leave him, expanding with every step, every rotation of his thoughts. He traced its implications, ran simulations, and weighed potential outcomes. The truth of it, he realized, would depend entirely on her next move on whether she would confirm or contradict the theory that had now taken hold in his mind.

Night after night passed in silence. The absence of the female mage gnawed at him, casting doubt over his plan. Perhaps the idea had been wrong. Perhaps she had simply retreated, indifferent or cautious. Yet on the third night, the quiet shattered: she returned.

And this time, Nwadiabube was ready.

This time, she did not drift behind him. Instead, she moved deliberately, almost lazily, and settled onto the sofa in his office. Nwadieube said nothing. He did not glance at her, did not acknowledge her presence. His focus remained absolute, anchored to the task before him as if she did not exist even as the air between them thickened with her silent, simmering killing intent.

She shifted, twisted, turned, making faint, unusual noises, scratches, sighs, small provocations meant to draw his attention. Yet Nwadieube remained immovable, an unyielding pillar of indifference.

Finally, she could bear it no longer. Rising, she strode toward him, purpose in every step. The moment her hand reached toward him, or her gaze sought to pierce his, he spoke, voice low and cold, the same as before:

"Leave."

The female mage bit her lip, frustration flickering across her features. She huffed sharply, a sound of both irritation and reluctant acknowledgment, before retreating from the room. Her departure left only the faintest trace of tension in the air and an unmistakable confirmation for Nwadieube.

Satisfied, he quickly called upon his sister, Nwadimma. When she appeared, he began explaining his current actions and the broader plan that had begun to take shape.

"Something is at play here," he said. "This envoy from the southern continent... she has taken a liking to me. Perhaps for some ulterior motive, perhaps for something else entirely. It does not matter. There is advantage to be gained, and I intend to use it."

For reasons unknown, the female mage's attachment or curiosity was an opportunity. Nwadieube's mind raced, mapping possibilities and calculating outcomes. In this subtle contest of wills, he now held the edge, and he intended to exploit it fully.

"If I were to... woo her," Nwadieube murmured, almost to himself, his eyes narrowing as he traced possibilities in his mind, "she might let me in on things hidden from us, secrets of their master, the true purpose behind their missions, what he hopes to achieve by aiding us. There is much to be gained if I play this correctly."

Nwadimma studied him carefully, weighing the implications as she listened. "I understand the potential, brother," she said slowly, "but consider the cost. If this becomes known, it would be a scandal, and a terrible look for a king. Worse, it could deeply unsettle the queen, and our family. Every move you make will be watched not just by her, but by your court, your allies, and your enemies. One misstep..."

Nwadimma could see her brother resisting her advice and so she decided to make it more clear.

Nwadimma's expression was serious as she spoke, "Brother, I understand the advantage this could bring but a king seen pursuing a female envoy, even under the guise of diplomacy... the queen will hear of it, the court will whisper, and the children... they will not understand."

Nwadieube nodded slowly, absorbing her words. "You're right," he admitted, a rare humility threading through his tone. "I had not considered how this might affect them."

"You must," Nwadimma said firmly. "Before this begins, the queen and the children need to know. Even if you cannot share everything, they must understand enough to trust your actions."

He exhaled, not liking the idea but found it a necessity. "Very well. I will speak to them. But only enough to convey the necessity, nothing more."

Later, he gathered his family in the private chamber. His queen, serene yet watchful, regarded him with a quiet intensity. The children, sensing the gravity of the moment, fell silent, their eyes wide.

"I have something important to tell you all," Nwadieube began, choosing each word carefully. "There are... actions I may be seen taking in the coming days that could be misunderstood. They are necessary for the protection of the kingdom and our family."

The queen raised an eyebrow. "Actions that could be seen how, exactly?"

He allowed a brief pause before answering. "I cannot disclose every detail, not yet. But know this: everything I do will serve a purpose greater than appearances. I need you to trust me, even if what you see may alarm you."

One of his children, a young boy with curiosity brimming in his eyes, spoke up. "Father... are you in danger?"

Nwadieube smiled faintly, a gesture meant to reassure. "No, not danger, not yet. But caution and awareness will be required. This is why I am telling you now, so you understand what is coming and are prepared to remain steady."

The queen's gaze softened, though concern lingered. "Very well. I trust you... but remember, we are your family. Do not carry this alone."

"I will not," he promised, bowing his head slightly. "But some burdens must be shared in understanding, not in full disclosure. This is one of them."

A few nights passed in silence before the female mage appeared again. Once more, she made her way to the sofa, moving without sound, her presence almost like a shadow settling into the room. She did not speak, did not fidget, simply sat, her gaze fixed on Nwadieube as he worked, observing him with an intensity that made the air between them taut.

Finally, he set down his quill and leaned back slightly, lifting his gaze toward her. The subtle shift in his posture seemed to take her by surprise; she raised an eyebrow, just the faintest twitch betraying her composure. Nwadieube noticed the quickening of her heartbeat, a rapid, almost imperceptible rhythm he could sense even from where he sat.

He rose from his seat, every movement deliberate, measured, commanding without the need for force. He approached the fireplace, the soft glow casting shadows across his face, and turned toward her. His voice, low and steady, carried a weight she had never heard from him before, an edge of authority tempered with quiet expectation.

"Accompany me for a night walk," he said.

The words hung in the room, impossible to ignore. The female mage blinked, caught off guard by the unfamiliar tone, her eyes widening ever so slightly. For a heartbeat, silence reigned, the only sound the faint crackle of the fire between them.

The door closed behind them with a soft click, and the cool night air greeted them as they stepped out into the quiet corridors of the palace. Moonlight spilled over polished stones, casting long, pale shadows that seemed to stretch toward them. Nwadiebube walked with calm precision, his hands clasped behind his back, and she fell into step beside him, silent for the moment.

For several minutes, neither spoke. The only sound was the soft echo of their footsteps, the distant rustle of leaves, and the faint hiss of the palace guards at their posts. She watched him, the way his posture carried authority effortlessly, how even in stillness there was a weight to him that demanded attention.

Finally, she ventured, her voice low and careful, "You... don't usually invite people for night walks."

He did not answer immediately. Instead, he tilted his head slightly, as though weighing the right words. "No," he said after a pause, voice calm, deliberate. "I do not."

The statement was simple, but the subtle emphasis made it impossible to ignore. She shifted slightly, the fabric of her cloak brushing against the stone, and tried again, curiosity seeping in despite herself. "Then why now?"

Nwadiebube's gaze moved to the moonlit horizon, then back to the path before them. "Perhaps it is time to observe things... without distraction," he said softly.

She considered his words, her hands tightening slightly at her sides. There was a quiet intelligence in his presence, a patience that seemed to measure her very thoughts. It suddenly struck her that she was not well prepared, she felt that whatever game she thought she understood might not be hers to control.

After a long stretch of silence, Nwadieube finally broke it, his voice calm but carrying an unmistakable edge of curiosity.

"Tell me," he said, eyes fixed on the path ahead, "why do you always appear in my chambers?"

The female mage stiffened, her steps faltering just slightly. She tilted her head, meeting his gaze briefly before looking away, as if weighing her answer. "... observe," she said finally, her voice steady, though there was a subtle tightness to it. "You are... unusual and I find you to my liking."

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Nwadieube's lips curved into a faint, almost imperceptible smile. "Unusual?" he repeated, his tone neither mocking nor approving. Just... deliberate, probing.

"Yes," she said, regaining her composure, "in ways that are... difficult to ignore."

They walked on, the sound of their footsteps mingling with the whisper of the night breeze. He did not respond immediately, allowing the silence to stretch, giving weight to her words. When he spoke again, it was softer, quieter.

"And you think observing me... changes anything?"

Her eyes flicked to him, sharp and cautious, though a small spark of intrigue danced there. "Perhaps," she said simply, "or perhaps it is only to understand what others cannot see."

Nwadiebube's gaze drifted to the moonlit path before them, letting the words linger, testing their resonance. Then he said nothing for a long moment, letting her presence, her reasoning, settle in his mind.

Silence stretched between them, and oddly comfortable, until at last Nwadiebube came to a stop.

The female mage blinked, pulled from her thoughts, and realized where they stood. They were in the quarters assigned to her, modest, and removed from the heart of the palace. She had not noticed when their path had changed, nor when the walk had become a destination.

She turned to him.

The king regarded her with a soft smile, one stripped of calculation or at least convincing enough to appear so.

"You should get to sleep now," he said lightly. "Staying awake so late is not a good look for a fine-looking woman like you."

The words struck her with unexpected warmth. Before she could respond, he lifted a hand in a casual wave and turned away, already walking back down the corridor as though the night had concluded on his terms.

She remained where she was, watching his retreating figure, something unfamiliar stirring in her chest.

Then, his voice reached her again, carried by the wind, close enough that she could feel his breath brush against her ear.

"I have come to appreciate your presence in my office. I hope that becomes a normal occurrence."

Her breath caught. She spun around, heart pounding, but the corridor was empty. He was gone as if he had never been there at all.

Slowly, a smile spread across her face, unbidden and genuine.

She was in over her head, she knew that much. Yet hearing those words from him, few and measured as they were gave her a fragile sense of reassurance.

It felt like proof that she wasn't completely stagnant, that even if she was fumbling in the dark, she was still moving forward, however slowly. The life Yuki now live, free, secure, untouched by fear had become her quiet ideal.

Yuki had deserved that peace, and if such a life was possible at all, then she would seize it with both hands. She would endure, adapt, and sacrifice whatever was required to reach it.

And so, almost without ceremony, a strange and subdued relationship took shape between her and the king.

She learned quickly not to interrupt him while he worked; the air around him grew heavy when his focus was broken. Instead, she found ways to be useful without demanding attention, preparing his tea exactly how he preferred it, easing the tension from his shoulders with careful, silent massages, or simply sitting nearby, composed and ornamental, a presence that asked for nothing.

Days folded into one another. A week passed like this, marked only by the soft rhythm of routine and the occasional night walk through quiet corridors or moonlit gardens. No promises were made. No lines were crossed.

She told herself she should have been content.

But she wasn't.

Everything with Nwadié bube remained suspended, unresolved, and the uncertainty gnawed at her. Worse still was the king's ease with the distance between them. He seemed comfortable leaving things exactly as they were, unbothered by the silence, unwilling or uninterested in taking even the smallest step closer.

There was a gap between them she needed to cross, a barrier she could feel but not touch. And the cruel truth was that she had nothing of value to offer in exchange for that closeness. She was not powerful in her own right. She was not indispensable. She was, at her core, merely a pawn of Murmur, one more piece on a board already crowded with them.

And pawns, she realized bitterly, were easily replaced.

Her presence carried no real weight. Not yet.

She was only ever privy to what was permitted to reach her ears, no more, no less. The rest of the truth moved in deeper currents, far beyond her grasp.

She had underestimated Nwadié bube. She thought him easy to handle, believing his open curiosity, his eagerness to know what games were being played beyond his sight would make him reckless, hungry enough to take whatever fragments she offered.

It was an assumption born of familiarity, because she herself was a pawn in those very games. She knew the ache of ignorance, the way it could hollow a person out and leave them grasping at scraps of information.

She believed that would be enough for a king starved of answers.

But Nwadié bube was patient. Far too patient.

He was aware of her troubles, aware of the tension she carried in her posture and the restless edge to her silence, and he did not mind it in the least. In fact, he found a quiet, almost guilty delight in it. Her impatience mirrored his own, or rather, who he used to be. Seeing it reflected in her was like looking into a distorted mirror of himself.

Dealing with godlings had always pushed him into that same state, an unbearable impatience that tempted him toward rash decisions and costly mistakes. It was a cruel position to be in: to be fraying at the edges while the one across from you behaved as though time itself bent in their favor, as though they could afford to wait forever while you bled urgency.

Now, the roles were reversed.

As he dealt with the female mage, Nwadiebube found himself learning from the godlings he so often despised. He recognized the power in stillness, in letting the other party unravel themselves without ever lifting a hand. The sensation was unsettling and intoxicating.

This was what he had always wanted.

To watch events slip neatly into his control with minimal effort, to see his opposition exhaust themselves in a battle of the mind, defeating themselves long before he ever needed to move.

A new night arrived, and just like before, she appeared.

Yet the moment she stepped into the room, Nwadiebube sensed that something had shifted. There was a heaviness to her presence, an air of finality clinging to her like a second skin. It was the kind of stillness that followed surrender, the calm of someone who had already lost and come to terms with it.

He gave no outward sign that he noticed.

Instead, he continued with his work as though nothing had changed, pen gliding steadily across parchment. Still, beneath that practiced composure, he prepared himself. Whatever this was, a conversation was coming, one that would begin the moment he set his pen down.

And eventually, he did.

He placed the pen aside and lifted his gaze to her. Mei stood there with a seriousness that left no room for pretense. After a brief pause, the king spoke, his tone light, almost casual.

"No massage today?"

Mei met his eyes, studying his face carefully, searching for even the faintest trace of mockery or provocation. She found none. If anything, he looked... genuinely disappointed. As though the thought had truly crossed his mind and he had been looking forward to it.

She exhaled softly before answering, a small smile tugging at her lips.

"The day is not yet over," she said, her words hinting that the possibility still lingered.

The king smiled at that.

He rose from his seat and moved toward a nearby shelf, pulling down two glasses. Mei lifted a hand in response, and with a subtle flick of her fingers, ice cubes formed and dropped neatly into both. The sound was sharp in the quiet room.

Nwadiabube uncorked the bottle and poured whisky into the glasses, the amber liquid catching the low light as it settled.

Mei had her glass float effortlessly into her hand as the king carried his toward the hearth. He sat close to the fireplace, gazing into the dancing flames, saying nothing.

She watched him closely, her gaze cool and assessing. She couldn't tell whether his indifference was an act or genuine disinterest but she had already made her decision.

She would lay all her cards on the table.

Breaking the silence, she said, "I approached you because I believed you held the keys to my freedom from my master, the one I serve."

The king turned sharply, surprise flashing across his face. He stared at her, fingers brushing his cheek in an oddly thoughtful gesture. Under his breath, too softly but clear enough for her to hear, he thought out and murmured, "Here I was thinking my face alone made a beautiful woman fall into my lap."

Mei's mouth twitched.