

Guardian gods 721

Chapter 721:

She stood and walked toward him with deliberate grace, each step confident yet restrained. There was hesitation in her movement, a lingering expectation of rejection, of being stopped as she had been before. But no resistance came.

She reached him and gently took his face in her hands.

"This face has never lost its beauty," she said with a soft smile, her eyes unwavering. "But my freedom matters far more to me."

Nwadié bube said nothing. He simply kept his gaze on her, steady and unblinking, as though he were trying to strip away every layer she had carefully built around herself.

"So all this," he said at last, his voice calm but edged with something sharper beneath, "was for your freedom."

"Yes," Mei replied without hesitation.

He did not ask why she believed her freedom lay in his hands. There was no need. From what little he knew of the being who stood above her, the master she served.

It was painfully obvious that this was someone far beyond the reach of any single man, king or otherwise. A presence that moved pieces across continents without ever stepping onto the board himself. Yet his actions are able to unnerve the godlings from so far away.

She knew this too. She had to.

And yet, she still stood before him.

"As I am now," Nwadiebube said slowly, deliberately, "I cannot grant you the freedom you seek." There was no bitterness in his tone, only honesty, an acknowledgment of both his authority and its limits.

Mei smiled faintly as she began to circle him, her steps light against the stone floor.

"Indeed," she said, her voice soft, almost indulgent. "As you are now, it is nothing more than a wishful dream on my part." She leaned closer, her breath brushing the shell of his ear. "But you will not always remain as you are."

Nwadiebube did not turn to face her, but his grip on the glass tightened.

"My lord's goals with you," Mei continued, "reach far beyond what either of us have been allowed to see. It is clear he intends to push your kingdom beyond its current borders, to shape it into an empire. An empire where the people of Omadi stand as the sole authority, the singular voice of humanity across the eastern continent."

She stopped then. The confidence she had carried faltered, replaced by hesitation. Uncertainty crept into her expression as though she had reached the edge of her own understanding.

"This is speculation," she admitted. "But even if you rise as an empire... I fail to see how that alone would make you truly useful to my lord." Her fingers curled slightly, betraying her unease. "Which means the true goal lies beyond both of us, beyond what we have been permitted to imagine."

Nwadiébe took a slow sip of his drink. Her theory was dangerous, yet it carried an unsettling logic. For a man of such reach, a mere emperor, even a powerful one was still insufficient.

"Do you have any idea what his final aim might be?" he asked, finally turning to look at her.

Mei's gaze drifted away as she thought, shadows dancing across her face from the firelight "My lord has only one true enemy," she said quietly. "The gods. And everything bound to them."

She lifted her eyes back to him "If we trace his past actions with Björn, how he attempted to mold a newly ascended god into a weapon against the divine, it becomes clear. His involvement with you is no coincidence. He seeks to draw you onto his side, to prepare you for a confrontation that goes far beyond mortal wars."

She tilted her head, her smile returning, faint and enigmatic "But how," she asked softly, "can a human king, no matter how powerful dare to stand against the gods?"

The answer struck Nwadiébe like a blade sliding free from its sheath.

His chair scraped loudly against the floor as he stood, the calm composure he had worn all evening finally cracking. His breath came shallow, his thoughts racing as pieces snapped together with terrifying clarity.

"A god," he murmured, disbelief thick in his voice.

"A god... facing another god."

Mei nodded, her expression solemn. She had arrived at the same conclusion long before he spoke it aloud.

It was this realization, terrifying and intoxicating in equal measure that had made her see Nwadiébe as her possible savior. If he were to become a god, or even wield the authority of one, then freeing her from her master's grasp would no longer be a desperate fantasy. It would be achievable. Plausible.

Nwadiébe, however, had already shut her out.

Her presence faded into the background as his thoughts spiraled inward, consumed by the implications of what he had just pieced together. He had known there would be something to gain in entertaining the female mage's advances and half-truths, but never this. Never something so vast.

For now, it was only speculation, dangerous, unproven speculation. Yet the more he examined it, the more disturbingly reasonable it became. Every careful nudge, every subtle aid, every unseen hand guiding events forward pointed toward a singular outcome.

There was a plan in motion.

And at its center stood him.

Becoming a god.

The word echoed relentlessly in Nwadiiebube's mind, alien and absurd. He had imagined wielding power rivaling the gods, yes. He had dreamed of standing tall enough that even the godlings would be forced to acknowledge him. But never, not once had he envisioned himself becoming a god.

The idea had always felt impossible. In this world, the pantheon lacked human gods. Gods were not born of men. They existed apart from humanity, above it. The closest exception was Björn and even he was no true human, but something else entirely, a demon elevated by circumstance and catastrophe.

Nwadiiebube had once believed that becoming an emperor, forging an empire vast enough to dominate the continent, would be sufficient. That political supremacy alone could place him on equal footing with godlings. Now, that belief felt laughably small.

Empires crumbled. Gods did not.

Without divine power of his own and on his side, all crowns were fragile things.

He looked at Mei then, truly looked at her, and at last understood her desperation. He saw her goal laid bare, the logic behind her faith in him. If anyone could break the chains binding her, it would have to be someone who stood amongs the gods or wield the power of one.

Someone like what she believed he could become.

His breath slowed as he forced himself to regain control. He could not allow his imagination to gallop unchecked. Hope, especially hope this grand was a dangerous indulgence. Every part of this sounded too perfect, too convenient, like bait carefully laid for an ambitious fool.

And yet, traitorously, his mind conjured images of a future where he worked alongside Mei and the others sent with her. A future where this impossible ascent was not only real, but inevitable.

That frightened him more than anything else.

He needed distance. Silence. Counsel.

Most of all, he needed his sister.

Nwadieube knew he could not trust himself alone with these thoughts, not when they shimmered so seductively just out of reach. He needed grounding, someone who would not be blinded by power or flattery.

Drawing a steady breath, he composed his face, forcing calm into his voice.

"Leave."

The single word fell like a blade.

Mei froze, disbelief flickering across her features as the weight of his command settled in.

Mei did not move at first.

The word leave hung between them, heavier than any raised voice or threat. For a fleeting moment, her expression cracked, surprise giving way to something closer to fear.

Fear that she had played all her card and now she was being discarded, fear that her dream was being snuffed out in front of her.

Nwadié bube did not look at her. His gaze was fixed somewhere past the fire, past the walls, as though the room itself had become too small to contain his thoughts.

"Now," he added, his tone even, controlled, almost gentle. That gentleness unsettled her more than anger would have.

Mei inclined her head slowly, masking the tension that tightened her chest. She had expected negotiation, perhaps even fury from her suggestion. But this dismissal, calm and absolute, reminded her that despite everything she had said, she was still standing before a king who had survived by knowing when to pull back from temptation.

"As you command, my king," she said softly.

Her glass lowered itself to the table. She stepped away from him, each movement deliberate, careful not to appear resentful or desperate. At the threshold, she hesitated, just long enough to speak once more.

"What I told you tonight cannot be unheard," she said, not as a warning, but as a quiet truth. "Whether you accept it or not... the path has already begun to open."

Nwadié bube closed his eyes.

"Leave," he repeated.

That was all it took.

The doors shut behind her with a muted finality, and for the first time that night, the room felt truly silent.

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NwadiEbube exhaled, the breath leaving him slower than it had entered. His hand clenched at his side, then relaxed. The fire crackled, indifferent to the weight of revelation it had borne witness to.

A god.

The word no longer felt abstract. It pressed against his thoughts, invasive and dangerous. Empire, conquest, influence, those had once felt like the summit of ambition. Now they seemed like scaffolding around something far greater, something far more terrifying.

He turned sharply and strode from the room, robes whispering against the stone floor.

There was only one person he trusted to anchor him when his mind threatened to spiral. One voice that could cut through illusion without feeding it.

"My sister," he murmured to himself.

Tonight, he would not face these thoughts alone.

Nwadiebube's feet dragged him toward his sister's quarters, each step heavier than the last. The palace corridors were quiet at this hour, lantern light casting long, wavering shadows against the walls. By the time he reached her door, the weight in his chest had settled into something dull and aching.

The guards stationed outside stiffened at his approach. His late appearance unsettled them; the hour alone was enough to give pause. They exchanged brief, uncertain glances, hands hovering near their weapons, torn between duty and decorum. The princess would almost certainly be asleep.

But he was the king.

The words they might have spoken died in their throats. One after the other, they swallowed their hesitation and bowed deeply, stepping aside as he passed. Nwadiebube did not acknowledge them. His mind was elsewhere.

He stopped before the door to his sister's room and lifted his hand. He knocked once, no more. Anything further would have been an intrusion. Sleep, after all, was a luxury for those who lived on their stage; not a necessity, merely a kindness the night sometimes allowed.

He did not have to wait long.

The door opened to reveal his sister standing in the soft light of her chambers, clad in a simple nightgown. A frown tugged at her features, annoyance already forming at being disturbed so late, until her eyes met his. Whatever rebuke she had prepared vanished the instant she took in his expression: the tension in his brow, the weariness etched too deeply to be from the day alone.

Without a word, she reached for him.

Her fingers closed around his hand and she pulled him inside, shutting the door firmly behind them as if to keep the rest of the world out. Only then did she turn to face him fully, her earlier irritation replaced with unmistakable concern.

"Did something happen, brother?" she asked softly, her voice gentle but urgent, as though afraid that if she spoke too loudly, whatever was holding him together might finally break.

Nwadiabube did not answer immediately. He remained where he stood, eyes closed, as though gathering his thoughts or steadying himself against them. The silence stretched.

Nwadiemma did not press him. Silence, in moments like this, was not empty, it was information. She watched him carefully, already piecing together possibilities. Whatever had gone wrong was not a failure of logistics or politics. This was something heavier. Something that had shaken his certainty.

At last, he exhaled and opened his eyes.

"Nothing is wrong, sister," Nwadié bube said, his voice calm yet threaded with something unmistakable. Excitement. "I have simply been exposed to things I once thought impossible."

Her brows drew together slightly at that.

And just like that, he began to speak.

He told her everything of his conversation with Mei, of the patterns they had noticed, the implications drawn from her master's actions, and the speculation that followed. He spoke quickly at first, words tumbling over one another as if he feared the thoughts might slip away if he slowed. As the meaning of it all settled in, his pace steadied.

Nwadimma listened without interruption.

Her expression mirrored his own from earlier that night, disbelief giving way to excitement, excitement edged with fear. The idea was vast, unsettling, and dangerously plausible. For a brief moment, all those emotions warred across her face.

Then they stilled.

The princess's gaze sharpened, her features smoothing into something thoughtful and composed. This was where she excelled, where emotion gave way to clarity. She turned the information over carefully, testing each piece against what little they truly knew.

Finally, she spoke.

"If she and you could reach this conclusion simply by observing her master's actions," Nwadimma said slowly, "then I doubt her master himself has not already considered it."

She lifted her eyes to meet her brother's.

"We know very little of him," she continued, her voice steady, "but what we do know is enough. Enough to tell us that he is neither careless nor shortsighted."

"Mei's defiance, her hopes, even her belief that you could become her salvation... all of that may already be accounted for."

Nwadiabube stiffened slightly.

"I have been thinking" Nwadimma continued. "Her master keeps a tight grip on his pawns. Too tight for her actions to be mere rebellion. It would not be unreasonable to assume that her ambitions, her desire for freedom, her attempts to sway you were anticipated long before she ever set foot in your court."

As the words left his sister's mouth, the earlier excitement that had filled his chest began to fade. The thrill of discovery dulled, replaced by something colder and far more sobering. His sister's reasoning settled in his mind, forcing him to revisit the revelation from a different angle.

If this was true... then none of it was accidental.

"With a plan so obvious," he continued, pacing now, his steps slow and deliberate, "with a move laid so plainly before us, why would we willingly fall into the trap set for us?"

He stopped mid-step.

The answer came unbidden.

A frown carved itself deeply into his face.

Nwadimma saw it at once and nodded, her expression grave. "Indeed, brother. This is a trap we must willingly fall into."

She folded her arms, gaze steady. "If before I was against you accepting these envoys, against taking the helping hand they offered then now I believe we must do the opposite."

Her eyes hardened with resolve.

"We must accept their aid."

Nwadiabube resumed walking, the room suddenly feeling smaller as the pieces fell into place. The hesitation that once clouded his judgment gave way to clarity. His sister was right, painfully so. Avoiding the trap would only place them at a disadvantage.

It was clear now that this master was someone who possessed the knowledge, the secret required for a human to ascend to godhood. In that light, it could almost be called fortune that they had been chosen as the target to receive it.

Almost.

Because such knowledge was not a gift. It was leverage.

It was power in its purest, most dangerous form, and power was something that could never be left beyond their grasp. Nwadiabube began to understand that what lay before them was a naked threat, one not issued by Mei herself, but by her master.

Through Mei, he was speaking to them.

He was showing them his hand while simultaneously reminding them how little they truly mattered to him. Any kingdom of the eastern continent could have been chosen. Any power across the world might have been granted this opportunity or burden.

The fact that it was them carried no special meaning.

And that realization was the most chilling part.

If another kingdom were to obtain this knowledge, their position as a dominant force in the eastern continent would crumble. The balance of power would tilt sharply, and it would do so in a direction profoundly unfavorable to them. Influence, authority, even survival, everything they had built would be placed at risk.

So yes, as his sister had said, this was a trap they must willingly fall into.

Especially now that they were aware of the danger.

To refuse would be to surrender control. To hesitate would be to invite irrelevance. Any other course of action would not be caution, it would be foolishness.

Both of them fell into silence as Nwadiabube let out a long sigh. He truly hated it when the godlings were proven right. Yet there was no denying it now, the caution they had shown, the immediate measures they had taken upon the appearance of the envoys, had all been justified.

The godlings had sensed it long before he had.

They had been wary of this master whose name was still unknown, and now Nwadiabube and his sister were experiencing the reason firsthand. A single, subtle move barely more than a nudge, had left them

with no room to maneuver. There was no counterplay available to them, no path that did not lead into the same camp as him.

And that was what frightened him most.

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Despite understanding the danger, despite recognizing the invisible leash tightening around them, both he and his sister felt something deeply unsettling "Gratitude".

They were thankful for having been chosen.

They understood now what it meant to be overlooked, what it would mean if another power gained access to that knowledge instead. The thought of being excluded was far more terrifying than the risk of stepping into the trap itself.

It was horrifying how everything felt like their own choice. Every decision, every conclusion, seemed born of their own will, yet a closer examination revealed the truth. They were being guided, gently but inexorably, along a path already laid out for them.

They saw it clearly.

And still, they had no choice but to follow.

The secret at the heart of it all was something they could not afford to lose.

After a long moment of contemplation, Nwadimma broke the silence.

"We need Mei," she said quietly. "Now more than ever."

Nwadiabube frowned at once. To him, Mei had already served her purpose. She had delivered the message intentionally or not. There was no need to keep her close any longer.

Nwadimma shook her head, dismissing the thought before it could fully form. "Her value has increased, not diminished, brother. She may be unaware of the game being played around her, but tonight has shown us something important."

Nwadiabube listened in silence as his sister spoke, his expression darkening with each word. He did not like how easily her reasoning dismantled his own instincts. To him, Mei had already served her purpose, revealed too much, stepped too far out of line. She was a liability now, not an asset.

Or so he had thought.

"Think of it this way," she continued calmly. "Mei is not just a pawn. She is a message. A living one."

Nwadiabube exhaled slowly through his nose.

"She believes she is acting on her own ambition," Nwadimma went on, "but tonight proved otherwise. Her master did not need to appear before us, nor did he need to threaten us openly. He allowed her to reach conclusions on her own, knowing she would bring them to you. That alone tells us how confident he is."

Confident enough to reveal his hand just a little, because he knew they could not afford to turn away.

Nwadiabube clenched his jaw. "So you're saying he wanted us to know."

"Yes," Nwadimma replied without hesitation.

Silence fell between them again. The fire crackled softly, its warmth doing nothing to ease the cold settling in Nwadiabube's chest. He had spent years building his kingdom into a force that even the godlings had to acknowledge. And now, with a single unseen move, someone had reminded him just how fragile that power truly was.

Human power had a ceiling.

And he had just glimpsed what lay beyond it.

"We cannot discard Mei," Nwadimma said at last. "Not now. Her value has increased, not diminished."

Nwadiabube finally turned to look at her. "She has already given us everything she knows."

"That is precisely why she is useful," Nwadiabube countered. "She believes she has failed tonight. That she has revealed too much. Which means she will try harder to prove herself to you, and to her master."

She stepped closer, lowering her voice.

"And more importantly... she has taken a liking to you."

That, more than anything else, made Nwadiabube stiffen.

"Emotions are flaws," he said flatly.

"They are leverage," Nwadiabube corrected. "Her master understands this. Now so do we."

She met his eyes, her expression sharp but not unkind.

"Your relationship with her increases her worth in his eyes. A favored pawn is always shown more of the board. Through her, we may learn how he thinks, how far his reach extends."

Nwadiébe looked away, his gaze drifting back to the fire. He hated how logical it all was. Hated even more that he could already see the path unfolding before him.

The discussion between the siblings ended that night, but the atmosphere within the palace began to shift almost immediately. Days passed after Nwadiébe had asked Mei to leave, days that seemed quiet but were charged with an undercurrent of tension. Then, without warning, he took an action that nearly sent the entire palace into a frenzy.

Under the watchful eyes of the court, he made a formal request to see Mei alone. The mere announcement of this request rippled through the corridors and halls like wildfire, igniting whispers and speculation among nobles, attendants, and servants alike. Every corner of the court buzzed with gossip, each voice adding to the swell of intrigue. Rumors threatened to spill beyond the palace walls, reaching ears they were never meant to reach.

But Nwadiébe, ever vigilant and working tirelessly from the shadows, ensured that these words never escaped. Her subtle influence and careful manipulation kept the swirling storm contained within the palace, invisible to the outside world.

Meanwhile, Mei herself was caught entirely off guard. She had been prepared to resist flattery, to steel herself against the king's attention but when he acted, she found herself overwhelmed by the boldness of his move.

She had thought she had failed. After being sent away, after laying herself bare and vulnerable, she had believed he had rejected her. She had begun to accept the disappointment and dismissal.

But this, the king's deliberate summons was not a rejection. It was the opposite.

It was a statement.

A bold declaration, both to her and those paying attention: something was happening between them.

Mei found herself overwhelmed with joy and flattery at the respect she was shown. The carriage and escort sent by the king offered her a glimpse of the power and influence she could wield. No longer was she a shadow moving in the night, cautious and hidden, she was now fully in the open, acknowledged and recognized.

For a time, her presence in the palace became almost casual. She spent more hours with the king, their playful laughter echoing through the halls, softening even the coldest corners of the court. Servants and attendants, once accustomed to secrecy and propriety, began to grow used to the sight of the two together, though whispers still lingered behind closed doors.

Even the queen and the rest of the royal family, though already briefed on Nwadiébé's plans and aware of his calculated actions, found it difficult to maintain calm. There was a tension in the palace that could not be fully masked, an unspoken energy that even the most composed courtiers could feel.

The nobles, too, were unsettled. They watched from their positions of power, unsure of what had shifted in the king's behavior or in Mei's sudden prominence. The air was thick with curiosity, speculation, and a subtle wariness.

Weeks passed, and the moment arrived. Nwadiébé summoned all twelve envoys to the palace. Enough time had passed; it was now necessary to meet them formally, to accept their assistance, and to set plans into motion.

The envoys were visibly taken aback by the sudden summons, their curiosity and caution intertwined. Their gazes instinctively fell on Mei. She smiled and nodded at them, a simple gesture, but one with clear intentions. In that instant, it felt as though she had orchestrated the sudden change in the king herself.

To the envoys, it was a sign, their master's purpose for sending them had not only been acknowledged but was on the verge of being fulfilled. Mei's presence, her connection to the king, had become a bridge between them and their goal.

And so, one of the most unusual court meetings Nwadiabube had ever presided over took place. Nwadiabube sat tall upon his throne, his gaze sweeping over the gathered envoys, including Mei.

"It has been some time since we last convened," he began, his voice calm yet carrying the authority of his station. "Our previous meeting ended under less than ideal circumstances. I trust you do not mind my delayed response."

The envoy with a prominent scar across his face spoke up first, his tone polite yet tinged with amusement. "No apology is necessary, Your Grace. My companions and I took it upon ourselves to remain entertained during the wait."

Nwadiabube chuckled, the sound warm and unrestrained for a king in full court. "I am pleased to hear it," he said. "It brings me joy to know that you found enjoyment among my people."

His eyes shifted toward Mei, softening as they met hers. "One of your companions," he said slowly, "has managed to convince me of the greatness of your master and the benefits that working with you could bring to me, and to my people. Once I have worked with you, of course."

There was a pause as the words hung in the air. It was a statement loaded with promise and expectation, a subtle acknowledgment of trust. The envoys exchanged glances, noting the shift in the king's tone. Mei, meanwhile, felt a quiet thrill at the acknowledgment, not only for herself but for the validation it represented of her master's plan in motion.

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There was a pause as the words hung in the air. It was a statement loaded with promise and expectation, a subtle acknowledgment of trust. The envoys exchanged glances, noting the shift in the king's tone. Mei, meanwhile, felt a quiet thrill at the acknowledgment, not only for herself but for the validation it represented of her master's plan in motion.

"I have been persuaded," Nwadiabube said at last, his voice steady and carrying across the throne room. "I believe an alliance between our kingdoms would be for the best. However, now that I have accepted, I wish to be informed of what comes next."

At his words, every envoy dropped to one knee.

Including Mei.

The sight caught him off guard. Heads bowed in unison, hands pressed to the floor.

"By your word, my lord," the scarred envoy spoke, his voice filled with respect, "we swear ourselves to you. We shall become the greatest sword and spear to strike down Osita and his people, and pave the way for you to ascend to the throne of the emperor."

The declaration sent a ripple through the court.

Nwadié bube did not respond immediately. His gaze lingered on them, sharp and probing. Allegiance given so freely was rarely without chains.

Finally, he spoke.

"You offer much," he said calmly. "But words alone do not win wars. What plans do you have in place to support these claims?"

The envoys bowed even lower, foreheads nearly touching the polished stone floor. After a brief pause, Mei lifted her head and spoke, her voice composed but reverent.

"Based on our understanding of Osita," she said, "and the knowledge and power he wields, the master believes it is best that these plans be carried out without the involvement of you or your people."

Mei continued, "Your kingdom must remain untouched, untainted. The master's intent is to ensure that when Osita acts, no blame, suspicion, or retaliation can be traced back to you."

She lowered her gaze once more. "All actions will be taken by us."

NwadiEbube leaned back slightly on his throne, fingers resting against the armrest, his expression unreadable.

NwadiEbube opened his mouth to speak, to press further, but Mei cut him off before a word could leave his lips.

"Your Highness," she said, her tone firm, "once we swore our allegiance and you accepted, it is already a great risk to you and to the plan, if we continue to speak or linger together."

She rose gracefully, and the other envoys followed her lead, bowing slightly before stepping back.

"Your Highness would understand the plan once it takes place," she continued, her eyes meeting his with quiet intensity. "It would take the entire eastern continent by storm. Now, if you would permit us, we wish to depart."

NwadiEbube regarded them, his expression unreadable. There was something strange, almost unnatural, in their sudden urgency. Their haste to leave, so abrupt, so careful, hinted at more than mere protocol. Every movement suggested that remaining in his presence even for a moment longer might jeopardize everything.

From the little he could discern, it was clear they wanted his hand and the hands of his people entirely clean of the machinations they were about to enact. No trace, no loose end, no opportunity for blame to fall back on him.

By the time the envoys departed, the effects of their visit had already begun to ripple through the kingdom. Within hours, word spread that the representatives from the southern continent had completed their business and were preparing to return to their homeland.

It came as no great surprise. The envoys had remained in Omadi for quite some time, long enough that their eventual departure was expected.

The only oddity was the suddenness of it, the decision seemed to have been made in an instant. Still, the people of the Omadi Kingdom moved swiftly. Preparations for a formal procession were set in motion almost immediately, banners readied and escorts assigned, as custom demanded.

Outwardly, everything appeared orderly.

Inwardly, the weight of what had transpired lingered heavily.

Meanwhile, Nwadieube sat in private council with his sister, the two of them carefully revisiting everything that had transpired in the court.

The only conclusion Nwadieube could draw was a troubling one: Osita likely possessed a spell or some form of power that could trace an event back to its true origin. It was the only explanation that made sense of the envoy's behavior.

Seen through that lens, every action taken by the envoys and by Mei fell neatly into place.

During their very first meeting, they had claimed to possess a method by which Osita could be made to appear as the enemy in the eyes of the world. At the time, the statement had sounded ambitious. Now, it sounded precise.

He and Osita were locked in a delicate stalemate. Neither could act first without condemning themselves. The one who made the initial move would be branded the aggressor, the one who shattered peace and ushered in war.

If Osita truly had the means to reveal the mastermind behind any act of provocation, then the envoy's insistence on distance made perfect sense. Their plan must hinge on forcing Osita's hand, cornering him until he had no choice but to act.

And for that plan to succeed, Nwadié bube's involvement could not be merely hidden, it had to be nonexistent.

Any thread leading back to him, any suggestion of orchestration, would give Osita the very proof he needed to turn the world against Omadi. The envoy's haste, their careful withdrawal, even their refusal to share details, none of it was caution born of secrecy alone.

It was necessity.

"They are not protecting themselves," Nwadié bube said at last, his voice low. "They are protecting us, from what Osita might reveal."

The room fell quiet as the implication settled.

If his deduction was correct, then whatever was about to unfold would not simply be an attack on Osita.

It would be a provocation so clean, so precise, that even truth itself would struggle to point to its true author.

The world outside was anything but calm. A new frenzy ignited almost overnight, spreading like wildfire across nations, cities, and distant settlements alike. Markets stalled, councils adjourned, temples overflowed with rumor and speculation. Whatever quiet maneuvers Osita and the kingdom of Omadi were making were swallowed whole by this rising storm, rendered insignificant beneath the sheer gravity of what was unfolding.

The words that carried the world into upheaval were simple, yet unthinkable:

"The godlings are being taken to court."

Justice was being demanded and not by gods against mortals, but by mortals against those who bore divinity.

No one knew how the news had escaped its sealed confines. Some whispered of a defiant scribe, others of a divine lapse, or perhaps a deliberate leakage from the nobles involved. Regardless of its origin, the truth spread faster than any attempt to suppress it. Each retelling sharpened the edges of the story, and soon the message reached even the most isolated corners of the world.

Humans everywhere were transfixed.

Never before, in all recorded history, had mortals dared to summon godlings to account for their actions. The very notion struck at the foundation of faith, hierarchy, and world order. Fear mingled with exhilaration as people began to wonder: If godlings could be questioned, could they also be condemned?

Questions multiplied as quickly as the rumors.

Where would such a trial even be held? Who possessed the authority to preside over beings touched by divinity? And most importantly, what crimes were grave enough to justify this defiance?

All roads of speculation led to a single name.

Xerosis. Goddess of Justice, the Veiled Arbiter.

Petitions flooded her temples in numbers unseen . Scrolls, prayers, blood-sealed oaths, and desperate pleas piled upon marble steps and sacred halls. Entire communities demanded answers, dates, locations, names of the accused.

Within the temples themselves, the air grew heavy.

The priests and judges sworn to Xerosis knew fragments of the. They were tempted, endlessly so, to speak. To reassure the fearful. To guide the hopeful. To claim some measure of control over the chaos spiraling beyond their walls.

But they did not.

Followers of Xerosis were trained from their first vows to embody neutrality so absolute it bordered on cruelty. Justice, as the Veiled Arbiter taught, could not bend to comfort, nor yield to pressure, not even when the world begged for clarity. To reveal what they knew before the proper hour would be to taint the scales, and the price for such imbalance was never small.

And so they remained silent.

Once one stepped out of boundary, Xerosis herself took swift action, withdrawing her gift and blessing from the offending priest or Judge. There was no warning and no exception. This absolute doctrine was well known among her followers, and it shaped every word they spoke and every action they took in her name.

Because of this, the temples of Xerosis were few, and her worshippers fewer still. No outside power could take advantage of the faith they cultivated, for there was nothing to exploit. Their neutrality made them unsuitable tools for politics, manipulation, or influence.

Chapter 725:

Yet, despite their small numbers, people turned to them when justice was truly sought. Whether one was a commoner or a noble made no difference before Xerosis. That certainty was why her name was invoked when other paths failed.

So when the petitions began arriving in great numbers, demanding answers about the rumored court, the human followers of Xerosis did not announce dates, locations, or judgments. Instead, they took it upon themselves to inform the godlings of the situation unfolding among humanity.

Their response was measured and careful.

In their letters, they made it clear that nothing would proceed without the knowledge and consent of the godlings themselves. The rumors, the unrest, and the calls for justice were acknowledged but no action was claimed beyond that acknowledgment.

Some godlings, like Zephyr, scoffed at this. To them, the actions of humans bordered on arrogance, and their eagerness to speak of courts and justice was almost entertaining. It was clear, in their eyes, that the news of such a court must have been leaked by human nobles, driven by resentment rather than any real authority.

Even if the godlings were to deny any knowledge of the court's location or date, it was clear the information would still find its way into the world through human hands. This was made explicit in their response to the human followers of Xerosis. Silence or refusal would not halt the spread, only delay it.

The followers of Xerosis, many of whom served as judges sought out by the nobles to stand for them during the court session, acted immediately once this became apparent. They moved to clarify their position before misunderstandings could take root.

They addressed the nobles directly.

They made it clear that they would not be drawn into any play of power. Their involvement was not born from allegiance, ambition, or opportunity, but from the belief that what was being attempted was right. That alone was the reason they had agreed to stand in the court.

Just as firmly, they stated what they would not allow.

Their names, their positions, and their goddess would not be used to advance noble agendas or to spread carefully shaped narratives. They were not a private force acting on behalf of wealth or status. They did not stand with titles or banners.

They stood with the people and with the victims.

This response was enough to bring the nobles back into line. It became clear to them that they had begun to overstep their boundaries, mistaking proximity to justice for control over it.

Still, even as they withdrew, many could not deny the feeling that lingered beneath their restraint. There was something almost intoxicating about the way the godlings appeared restrained, even mild, when faced with the presence of Xerosis and the weight her court carried.

It was a realization they did not voice aloud, but one that stayed with them all the same.

Meanwhile, the godlings who had journeyed to the southern continent were already on their return. When word of their imminent arrival reached the others, Zephyr and the remaining godling leaders chose not to withhold the situation any longer. Instead, they informed the returning godlings of the claims being made against them by humans.

The reaction was immediate, and far from amused.

Hearing of courts, accusations, and mortal demands tested the restraint of even the most composed among them. It took considerable effort not to abandon their measured pace and simply finish what had been left undone. The idea that humans would dare invoke justice against beings of divinity was an affront that settled heavily among them.

Their disdain for humanity deepened.

To the godlings, the situation reeked of shamelessness, mortals attempting to shield themselves behind gods, laws, and divine names rather than standing on their own strength. They saw it as another example of humans using divinity as a tool, twisting reverence into leverage for their own ends.

In their eyes, this was cowardice.

The journey home, once anticipated with ease and satisfaction, lost its former lightness. What should have been a return marked by unity and calm was now weighed down by irritation and unresolved tension.

As they gathered, a new dilemma emerged among the godling leaders. None of them possessed knowledge of the specific godlings responsible for the actions described in the accusations. If such acts had truly been carried out, they had been done without their awareness.

And so, a demand was issued.

The godlings responsible were ordered to step forward and reveal themselves.

The accused godlings did not hide, nor did they show fear. When the demand was made, they stepped forward openly, unbothered by the weight of mortal accusations. Yet before any distinction could be drawn, something unexpected occurred.

The godlings, those uninvolved, those who had merely observed began to include themselves among the offenders.

No single voice led it. No agreement was spoken aloud. Yet one by one, they claimed responsibility.

This made it impossible to separate guilt from innocence. What should have been a moment of exposure dissolved into confusion, and the clarity the leaders sought slipped from their grasp. The godlings who had directly carried out the actions grew visibly displeased at this turn. Their intent had not been to share blame, nor to dilute responsibility.

The tension that followed was immediate.

Disagreements flared, words sharpened, and what began as dissent threatened to become open conflict. The unity of the godlings strained under the weight of collective defiance and fractured accountability.

Among them all, only the druids were exempt.

Their absence from the decision was known and undisputed. The actions had been taken without their notice, and they had only been informed after the damage was already done. No one contested this, and no blame was placed upon them.

Still, exemption did not mean absolution for the rest.

Though the acts themselves were carried out by only a few godlings, it could not be denied that the decision had been agreed upon by all. Consent, whether active or passive, bound them together. They had all stood within reach of the moment when restraint could have been exercised.

Some had chosen action.

Others had chosen silence.

That was the difference.

The offenders were those who stirred the elements, who shaped force into catastrophe and brought about the disaster that followed. The rest watched from the side, neither intervening nor objecting, bearing witness as the consequences unfolded.

The returning godlings amongst all this decided to make landfall on a uninhabited island, its black cliffs stark against the churning sea. Hundreds of thousands of godlings, apeling, werewolves, merfolk, and harpies gathered, the sheer scale of their presence sending tremors through the rock and waves alike.

"Thank you all for coming," the towering apeling began. His tone carried respect, but also firmness. "It pleases us, truly to see how you stand together. How each of you, in unison, bears this weight with us. But it is unnecessary for all of us to be condemned. We are here to discuss that."

A merfolk rose from the shallows, water dripping from his scaled shoulders. "You mean... that while we all agreed to the decision, only some of us carried it out?"

"Yes," another offender, a harpy, interjected. "You all chose to stand together. That is admirable but that is why we convened this council."

A werewolf shifted on the rocks, "So... we are not denying our responsibility. We simply want to clarify who acted and who observed?"

The apeling nodded. "Exactly. The line is simple. The offenders moved. We brought about the disaster. The rest, though part of the council that consented stood aside. They observed, but did not touch the elements."

A low murmur began to ripple through the assembly. The merfolk shifted uneasily, the water around sloshing with a faint agitation. The harpy's claws scraped against stone as she leaned forward, eyes narrowed, feathers bristling. Even the werewolf let out a low growl, more of frustration than threat.

One of the older godlings, a harpy figure with wings folded tightly against his back, let out a deep, rumbling voice. "We hear your words, apeling. We understand the distinction you draw... yet it feels hollow. How can it be that only those who touched the elements bear the blame, when we all, every one of us, agreed to this course?"

Another, a merfolk Sharkman, "It is not merely action that binds responsibility. Our consent, our agreement... it allowed this calamity to happen. To sit back and call ourselves observers, while watching others shoulder the consequences... it feels... wrong."

The apeling's massive shoulders shifted, a subtle sign of restraint, but he did not interrupt. His eyes swept across the gathered godlings.

A Werewolf godlings spoke. "We knew what would happen! We deliberated, and yet now you say the blame is yours alone? We stood by, but we were complicit! It is injustice to let the burden fall only upon those who acted while the rest remain unscathed."

"We sought this meeting not to shame, not to divide, but to ensure clarity." The apelings finally spoke up.

The assembly remained silent for a long moment, the wind tugging at feathers and fur alike.

Chapter 726:

From the gathered assembly, fourteen figures slowly moved to the center of the island. They came from every corner of the godling hierarchy apeling, werewolves, merfolk, harpies, and a few others whose presence alone shifted the air. Though they represented different peoples, their steps were in harmony.

When they stopped, the offenders stood shoulder to shoulder, forming a line that stretched across the clearing. One of the apeling, the tallest among them, raised his voice so all could hear.

"We have come forward," he began, "not to boast, nor to seek pity. But to make things easier for our leader and to show the proper respect to Xerosis. Her dignity must remain intact, above all else."

A harpy stepped forward next, wings folding neatly behind her. "We trust our leader fully. They have prepared defenders for us, to show we are not abandoned. We have no fear in our hearts, the weight of our actions rests with us, and we bear it willingly."

A merfolk spoke, voice deep and resonant. "Let it be known, we do not regret what was done. Every element stirred, every disaster brought forth, it was necessary. And if the opportunity arises again, we would act without hesitation."

A werewolf growled low, emphasizing his words. "We are accountable only to ourselves, our leader, and the principles we uphold. The unity of our people is not diminished by this distinction. But we will not allow misunderstanding to obscure the truth."

The apeling gestured to the others. "Fourteen of us. The ones who acted, the ones who shaped what occurred. We claim it fully, and we accept any consequence that comes with it. Let this clarity serve as a sign of our respect and discipline."

A hush fell over the island as the assembly absorbed the words, a shown of respect and recognition of the offenders resolve.

One of the harpies let out a sharp, approving cry. "It pleases me to see such conviction. None of you waver, none of you hide. That is the mark of true strength."

The apeling inclined his head. "Strength, yes, but also trust. Trust in our leader, in Xerosis, and in one another. We acted because it was necessary, and we stand today because our people stood with us. That is all we owe anyone."

The fourteen offenders straightened, voices unified as they spoke their final affirmation:

"We do not regret. We do not hesitate. We act with clarity, with purpose, and with respect. Our deeds are ours alone to bear, but the dignity of Xerosis and the unity of our people comes first."

Zephyr and the others were taken aback when letters arrived bearing the seals of their own people who still were on their journey back. The responses came at the right time. Whatever uncertainty had lingered was swept away by the contents of those letters.

The matter, it seemed, had resolved itself in the best way possible.

The true offenders had stepped forward.

They did not attempt to hide behind intermediaries or denials. Instead, they made their presence known openly, declaring their actions and standing by them with a defiance that left little room for reinterpretation. Their appearance shifted the entire weight of the case, drawing a clear line between the accused and the innocent.

With no time to waste, legal proceedings were set in motion. Lawyers were swiftly assigned to each godling, advocates well-versed not only in mortal law but in the intricate, often merciless precedents of Xerosis's court. Communication was established almost immediately. Across great distances, godlings and their legal representatives conferred, dissecting testimonies, reviewing evidence, and determining which arguments could withstand the scrutiny of a court that answered to no single moral framework.

Xerosis's court was infamous for its unpredictability. Its judgments were not bound by compassion nor restrained by tradition. Punishment could range from reparations to eternal binding and no sentence was ever truly revealed until the final verdict was spoken aloud before all parties.

The outcome would be decided only after every voice had been heard, every account weighed, and every contradiction laid bare.

Amid this growing tension, Erik received his own summons.

He was not named as an accused. No charges had been brought against him, nor was he listed among the offenders. Yet the petition for justice had been filed by his people. Their suffering, their grievances, and their testimonies formed the backbone of the case itself.

More troubling still was the fact that both sides, the godlings and the humans had mentioned Erik repeatedly in their reports. Both parties seem to blame him for all that was taken place.

Whether intentionally or not, Erik stood at the heart of the dispute.

It was only right, then, that he appear before the court, not to defend against an accusation, but to speak for himself.

Since every victim hailed from the Western Continent and it was its people who formally called for justice, it was only fitting that the trial be held on Western soil. To do otherwise would have been seen as another act of dismissal, another decision made about them rather than by them.

The nobles who had taken the victims under their protection spared no expense in preparation. Vast open-air courthouses were erected specifically for the trial, structures of stone and steel designed not only to host proceedings, but to be seen by all. They were places of visibility and declaration, where judgment would be rendered beneath the open sky, witnessed by gods and mortals alike.

Among all the kingdoms of the continent, it was the Sun Kingdom, the current largest, and most militarily formidable that made its position unmistakably clear.

They formally swore to the protection of the victims, not only for the duration of the trial, but for the uncertain days that would follow. Their proclamation was firm and unambiguous: the godlings were no longer to be regarded as nobles in the Sun Kingdom's eyes.

Whatever reverence or privilege they once held had been forfeited. Trust, broken so violently, could not be restored by titles or blood alone especially when there remained the risk that the godlings might lash out again.

This declaration sent ripples across the continent.

Alongside it came a phrase that began as a rallying cry and soon grew into something far larger:

"For humanity."

It appeared on banners, was whispered in markets, and spoken aloud in courts and councils. As the trial date drew closer, the slogan gained momentum, not merely as an accusation against the godlings, but as a statement of unity among mortals who had long lived beneath beings they were expected to revere without question.

Far from the Western Continent, the godlings had all returned to their respective domains.

Shame clung to them like a shadow.

The journey home forced them to confront the weight of their actions in a way distance and authority never could. The looks they received from their people, the unspoken questions, each served as a reminder that they had crossed a line that could not easily be erased.

They had disobeyed a direct order from their leaders.

No matter how justified they believed their actions to be, no matter the reasoning or emotions that drove them, the fact remained unchanged.

Zephyr, alongside the other godling leaders, had addressed their people with unusual severity before all this began. They made it clear that no further action would be tolerated. The matter was to be kept as

far from their people as possible, so that their people would not be dragged into a growing storm of resentment and blame.

Yet the moment they were beyond their leader's sight, some of them did precisely what they had been told not to do.

And that spark became a fuse.

Humans seized upon it without hesitation. Fingers were pointed, accusations appeared, and what little doubt remained about the godlings intentions began to rot away. To the public eye, it was no longer a matter of isolated offenders or poor judgment. It was proof, proof that godlings could not be trusted to restrain themselves, even when commanded by their own.

Their actions did more than worsen public opinion. They placed their own people and their relationship with the Ascended Gods into an impossible position.

Xerosis was forced into a role she had hoped never to occupy. She was now expected to judge her own.

The other Ascended Gods, Flowua, Tide, even Ikem made no effort to hide their displeasure. This was not the direction they wanted events to take.

Some frowned upon the precedent such a trial would set. Others worried about the long-term fracture it could create between divinity and worshippers. None of them liked the growing implication that even gods could be held publicly accountable.

But of them all, it was Xerosis who felt the weight most keenly.

From the very moment of her ascension, it had been made clear that her divinity would be... inconvenient. Her domain was not comfort, nor conquest, nor balance, it was judgment. Her power placed her in direct opposition to complacency, even among the divine.

Conflict with the other gods had never been a question of if, only when.

Chapter 727:

She could have overlooked the situation. She had the authority to bury it beneath discretion, to declare the matter closed and spare her kin the scrutiny of mortals.

But Xerosis did not rule over godlings alone. Her worshippers were human as well.

And she would not favor one over the other.

When humans claimed their right to justice, when they invoked her name and her laws. It was a calling, one she was bound to answer, no matter what comes after.

To turn away now would not preserve peace. It would only prove that divinity stood above accountability.

And that was something Xerosis could never allow.

She understood this and so did the other gods. Yet understanding did little to soften the sting of reality.

They were offended.

Not by the call for justice itself, but by what it represented. By the fact that, because of their divinity, they were now expected to bend to answer mortal voices, to weigh mortal pain, to move in rhythm with mortal demands. To beings who should be above such concerns, it felt like being made to dance to a tune they had not chosen.

At the same time, an the unspoken question lingered in the air.

If Xerosis were to ignore humanity's plea for justice, if she were to turn away now, what would that say to the humans about the Ascended Gods?

That their suffering was secondary? That divinity was merely another word for immunity for the godlings?

Such a message would not fade. It would take root, hardening hearts and reshaping faith into resentment.

And in a world where belief itself carried power, that was a consequence no god could afford.

The fourteen godlings and those who had journeyed to the Southern Continent alongside them were drowning in the consequences of their actions. Shame settled deep within them, heavier than any formal reprimand.

In that moment, the godlings truly grasped how different the Ascended Gods were from the Origin Gods whose mortals' opinion never swayed.

Even though the Ascended had once been kin, beings who walked the same paths, shared the same struggles with them, that bond no longer carried the same weight. The moment they took their place as gods, something fundamental had shifted. Kinship had been replaced by obligation.

Humanity was part of the world now, inseparable from it.

The gaze of the Ascended Gods could no longer fall solely upon godlings. It had to encompass humanity as well, with all its fragility, anger, and demand for fairness. Where Origin Gods ruled by simply being, the Ascended were bound by perception and responsibility.

The godlings had always known this. But knowing and experiencing it were not the same.

Now it struck home with unforgiving clarity: every action they took would be observed, interpreted, and judged. Not just by the gods above them, but by mortals below, mortals who were watching closely, waiting for any reason to confirm their worst fears. Any misstep, any excess, any show of unchecked authority could be twisted into proof that godlings and gods alike were enemies of humanity.

Restraint was now a necessity for them.

Zephyr and the other leaders, who had been fully prepared to relay the punishments already decided upon, found themselves unable to do so.

From the looks of things, it was no longer necessary.

Their people already understood the gravity of what had been done. Shame, regret, and unease had settled in naturally, without the need for public condemnation. Any additional action taken now, any formal display of authority would not reinforce discipline. It would only appear petty, even vindictive, and risk creating an unnecessary divide within their ranks.

In an unexpected way, this realization was a good thing.

It showed that they were, in fact, qualified to hold the leadership positions they now occupied. Authority was not only proven by how harshly one could punish, but by knowing when restraint carried greater strength.

Their words now held more weight among their people. The godlings understood that while their leaders were still new to their roles, their duty was clear: to safeguard their , only from external threats, but from reckless decisions that could endanger them all.

Still, the tension lingered.

In an attempt to ease the atmosphere before the trial, Zephyr and the other godling leaders took a different approach. Across various regions of the world, they hosted gatherings part celebration, part distraction. The offenders of each godling race were given a specific task: to help entertain their people, to redirect restless energy into something communal.

Music, contests, feasts, filled the homeland of the godlings. Those who journeyed to the southern continent were finally given space to boast and speak about their journey, which brought laughter to the soured mood of the godlings.

The day of the trial arrived.

With the exception of the Harpy godlings, whose homelands lay on the Western Continent, the other godlings made use of the gates, stepping through shimmering thresholds that allowed for swift passage across vast distances. What might have taken weeks was reduced to moments, though the weight of the journey remained unchanged.

The number of godlings attending the trial was small.

Those who came were primarily the offenders themselves, accompanied by their families and a handful of close friends. This was not due to a lack of solidarity. Many others had wished to attend, to stand in silent support. But after careful consideration, they chose otherwise.

To sit among humans under such circumstances would not be a neutral act.

They knew too well how the human gaze would linger on them, watchful, suspicious, waiting for any sign of arrogance or misplaced emotion. Every movement, every expression would be scrutinized, not as individuals, but as representatives of their entire kind. One wrong reaction would be enough to confirm every accusation already whispered about them.

The godlings felt no desire to grant humanity that satisfaction.

They would not allow themselves to be paraded as spectacles of disgrace, nor would they risk turning a solemn proceeding into a stage for resentment. This was a trial meant to address specific actions, committed by specific individuals, not an opportunity for collective humiliation.

And so, they stayed away.

The open court raised by the human nobles was a structure unlike any ever built before.

It spanned an area larger than a football field, an immense expanse of stone and white-veined marble laid bare beneath the open sky. There were no walls to shield those within from public view, no ceilings to soften the weight of judgment.

At the heart of it all stood the statue of Xerosis, Goddess of Justice.

She was carved in towering proportion, the Veiled Arbiter, her form rising so high it seemed to pierce the heavens themselves. Her face was hidden beneath layers of sculpted cloth, smooth and unyielding, denying all who looked upon her the comfort of reading mercy or wrath. One hand was raised in still command, the other lowered as though weighing an unseen scale.

From the base of the statue radiated an invisible field.

It could not be seen, yet it was felt the instant one crossed its boundary. Power, divine, arcane, or otherwise fell silent. Magic refused to answer. Divine authority lay dormant. Within the court grounds, no being stood above another. Gods, godlings, and mortals alike were bound by the same enforced stillness, locked equally beneath Xerosis's law.

As proceedings drew near, the servants of the goddess made their appearance.

Priests, judges, and lawyers bearing Xerosis's mark stepped onto the court in measured lines, some human, others godling, all equal in bearing. None wore extravagant regalia. Their garments were restrained, formal, and heavy with symbolism rather than ornamentation.

Yet none of them arrived alone.

Each was accompanied by two corporeal entities.

The first was a veiled woman, her form pale and ethereal, like a banshee given flesh. Her movements were slow and soundless, yet her presence carried a sharp, chilling weight. From her outstretched hand dragged lengths of spectral chains, their metallic clanging echoing across the stone despite no visible force pulling them.

Those chains extended forward, piercing into the body of the second entity.

He was a massive, burly figure clad in ancient, battle-scarred armor, broad as a fortress gate. His stance was immovable, his posture rigid, as though he bore the weight of countless verdicts upon his shoulders. The chains embedded in his form did not wound him, yet they bound him utterly, tethering restraint to strength.

Judgment and enforcement.

Every priest, every judge, every lawyer sworn under Xerosis was accompanied by the same pair. This was a living reminder that justice under Xerosis was not a matter of intent or emotion, but of balance, restraint, and inevitability.

As they took their places around the open court, silence fell.

The court had fallen into an almost sacred silence when the human lawyers stepped forward. They were flanked by the veiled and armored entities, their chains clinking faintly with every measured step. Each word they spoke echoed across the open court.

Chapter 728:

"Your Excellency Xerosis," the first human lawyer began, voice steady but heavy with conviction, "we come today not to challenge the divinity of the godlings, nor to undermine the gods themselves. We seek justice for the innocent, who's homes were destroyed, families lost, livelihoods stolen by those entrusted with power.

He paused, letting his words settle. "Fourteen godlings, acting beyond the command of any ruler, unleashed storms and floods upon the Humanity kingdom. Towns leveled. Children drowned. Entire

villages erased. The survivors left to bear the cost of being alive while having lost everything. Yet the offenders have walked free until now. That is unacceptable."

Murmurs rippled among the human spectators. Some nodded, others pressed their hands over their mouths. The lawyer's gaze swept the godlings in attendance, not a flicker of fear in his eyes. "We demand accountability. Not excuses. Not deflections. Justice must be served, for humanity watches, and history will remember how this day was judged."

Another lawyer stepped forward, her robes heavy, face set in rigid lines. "We do not question that Erik, the human king, has played a part in these events. But he is not the focus here. The godlings wielded power as a weapon. Their actions defy reason, mercy, and law. And for that, they are answerable not to each other, but to survivors, the mortals they endangered."

She let the words hang. A ripple of tension crossed the godlings' ranks. Eyes darted, some avoided contact, others remained cold and unmoving.

From the far side of the court, the godling lawyers rose. Their movement was slower, measured, almost ritualistic. Chains clinked as their veiled entities followed, their presence heavier, more oppressive. The first godling lawyer's voice, when it came, was calm.

"Your Excellency Xerosis," he began, "we do not deny that actions were taken. But the circumstances must be weighed carefully. Our clients were responding to an affront that goes beyond mortal comprehension: the offense committed against one of our own, a being now ascended to godhood, once a kin and leader among us. That offense was committed by Erik, the human king. It was not a simple slight. It was a violation of divine order."

He paused, allowing the weight of the words to fall on both the humans and the court. "The godlings acted in defense of kin and principle. They did not strike recklessly at individuals of their choosing but

responded in a measured, necessary way. Yet the mortals involved directly or indirectly cannot always grasp the full measure of such an offense."

Another godling lawyer took up the mantle. His tone was Milder and softer. "We do not claim immunity. Nor do we seek to evade the consequences of what was done and the storm. But we must also insist that the human side recognize context. When these godlings acted against one who dishonors their own, they are bound by a different moral framework. Judgment cannot ignore that framework without disregarding the very nature of divinity itself."

The air was tense. The humans bristled, ready to object. The godlings stiffened, as if prepared to answer any challenge.

The silence was broken by the rageful voice of one of the human survivors, "What understanding are you talking about? There is nothing to understand here, except that you all killed hundreds thousands of innocent lives in a single night just because you were offended by an action taken by a weak incompetent king?"

"why are we the one's bearing this price, what changed in you targeting us who have not offended you and the one who did is untouched by you all?" The man raging, tearful face cried out in the court.

A middle-aged woman, her eyes hollow from loss stood up. She carried nothing but the remnants of a child's toy, scorched and waterlogged. Each step she took echoed on the stone floor, a fragile rhythm of grief.

"I was asleep when the storms came," she began, voice trembling yet loud enough to carry. "The rain fell like metal from the sky. Houses collapsed. The river swallowed everything. My husband gone. My children gone..." she could not continue speaking as she broken down crying.

Murmurs ran through the crowd. Some spectators wept quietly. Others clenched their fists. The words were raw, unembellished, but carried the unbearable weight of loss.

The room fell into a heavy, suffocating silence as Gram cleared his throat. He didn't look at the group; his gaze was fixed on the middle-aged woman across from him, his eyes glassy with shared trauma.

"My experience was... it was a mirror to yours," he began, his voice barely a rasp. "I was asleep. Deep, dreamless sleep. The kind you only get when you think the world is safe. Then, the ceiling didn't just collapse, it vanished."

He took a shuddering breath, his knuckles whitening as he gripped a small, frayed scrap of blue fabric. "Next thing I knew, I wasn't in my bed. I was being hauled upward by a roar so loud it felt like my bones were vibrating. I woke up in the eye, a hollow, screaming cathedral of wind. It was pitch black, lit only by the constant, flickering strobe of horizontal lightning."

Gram's voice drifted, as if he were back in that sky-high vacuum. "From up there, I watched. I watched as my town, the streets I'd walked for forty years was peeled off the earth like wet paper. Houses, trees... they were just debris, spinning in the dark. And then, as if the storm had grown bored of us, the wind just... stopped."

The woman gasped, her hand flying to her mouth.

"The silence was worse than the noise," Gram whispered. "For a heartbeat, we all just hung there. Me, and hundreds of others. People I knew. People I drink and laugh with. We reached for each other in the air, but gravity is a cruel thing. We fell. We fell from a height no human should ever fall from"

He looked down at his hands, which were shaking uncontrollably. "I hit a body of water close by. That's the only reason I'm breathing. But my wife... my little girl..." He choked back a sob, his fingers digging into the scrap of cloth, a piece of his daughter's favorite sundress. "They didn't find the water. My friends, my neighbors... the wind took them, and the earth took them back. I don't know why I was the one the water caught. I have no idea why I'm here and they aren't."

Tears finally spilled over, carving tracks through the dust still caked on his cheeks. He fell silent, clenching the fabric to his chest as if it were the only thing keeping him anchored to the ground.

A young man with one arm bandaged stepped forward "We trusted our king to protect us," he said, eyes blazing in hatred. "But he failed. And when the godlings came, they punished us as if we were the guilty ones! Entire towns brought to ruins. Crops gone. Livestock dead. Families destroyed. My sister was swept away while I watched."

His words hung in the air like thunder. The godlings shifted, unease flickering across their stoic faces. Even those who had not directly participated felt the sting of accusation, the moral weight pressing down upon them.

The next speaker was an elderly priest from a coastal village "We believed in the gods. We prayed for protection. But our prayers fell silent as the storm came. The godlings acted as if humanity were expendable, as if our lives were no more than pawns in a game we never agreed to play. And when the king failed to play right, we suffered doubly. How are we to trust either of you?"

The murmurs in the crowd turned to whispers of anger. The slogan "For humanity" was spoken more openly now, rising like the tide itself, a low chant that threaded between the spectators.

One of the youngest survivors, a girl of no more than ten was brought forward by two guards. Her small voice, shaking with fear and grief, pierced the silence: "They took everything. Mother. Father. My home. My friends. I don't know why. I didn't do anything wrong, and I still... still feel like I'm bad because they were angry at me and my people."

Her words landed like stones against the godlings' hearts. A Merfolk godling hands clenched briefly at his sides, the only outward sign of the storm of emotion within him. Every godling in attendance felt it, the human suffering they had helped cause, no matter how justified they had believed it to be.

The final witness, a middle-aged farmer, stepped forward, gripping a soaked scroll with names of villages destroyed. "We survived by luck. Many did not. And even those of us who lived... what do we have left? The gods claim us as worshippers, yet we are powerless against their wrath. The godlings were supposed to guide, to protect, to honor humanity... and yet we are here, waiting for judgment from one of their own."

Chapter 729:

He paused, staring across the court at the silent godlings. "We demand that you see us. That you understand our pain. That justice means something more than power. That someone answers for what was done."

The humanity slogan was no longer a mere murmur. What had begun as scattered voices now wove together into a low, unified chant, swelling in strength with every heartbeat. It rippled through the crowd like a rising tide, carrying with it outrage, grief, and a desperate hunger for justice. Among the masses, the nobles stood apart, well-dressed, composed, and smiling brightly.

On the godlings' side, however, silence reigned.

They sat unmoving, unflinching, as though the storm of accusations meant nothing. The chant pressed against them, yet none answered, until one of the lawyers rose from her seat.

She was a female harpy godling.

The moment she stood, attention bent toward her as if compelled by an unseen force. Her beauty was undeniable, but it was not the shallow kind born of symmetry alone. Her wings, folded neatly behind her, shimmered faintly, each feather catching the light in a way that drew the eye without effort. There was charm in her posture, in the effortless confidence with which she regarded the room, and in the sharp intelligence glinting behind her calm expression.

Even the chant faltered.

Voices that had been rising moments before stumbled, then faded, collapsing back into an uneasy murmur. Men found their eyes drifting away from her gaze, some lowering their heads without understanding why, others suddenly aware of their own breathing, their own heartbeat. She had not said a word, yet the room already belonged to her.

She waited.

Only when silence had fully settled did she speak.

Her voice was smooth and clear, carrying effortlessly across the whole place. It did not rise in anger, nor did it plead. It struck with precision, each word chosen to wound.

She turned first toward the human lawyers, then slowly toward the victims, her eyes measuring them with quiet scrutiny.

"How do you know," she asked gently, "that the godlings were the ones who caused this disaster?"

The question landed like a blade.

A wave of frowns spread through the crowd, confusion and irritation bubbling just beneath the surface. Some opened their mouths to protest, but she did not stop there.

"It could," she continued, her tone unchanged, "have been done by any one of the human mages."

Murmurs broke out again, sharper this time, edged with offense. Yet before they could grow, she shifted her attention fully to the victims, her gaze softening just enough to appear sympathetic.

"Did any of you," she asked, "catch even a glimpse of the godlings during these storms and disasters?"

The victims faltered.

Grief had carried them this far, fueled their anger, given them certainty. But the question struck at the fragile foundation beneath it all. One by one, they hesitated, memories scrambling, doubt creeping in where conviction had once stood firm.

Unconsciously, several of them turned their heads.

Their eyes drifted not toward the godlings, but toward the human nobles seated among the crowd.

The movement was small. Instinctive. Yet unmistakable.

The harpy godling saw it.

A faint smile curved her lips. The kind of smile worn by someone who had just shifted the battlefield without lifting a finger, who knew that the seed of doubt had been planted... and that it would grow.

She turned her gaze toward the human lawyers, her wings shifting slightly as she did.

"Where," she asked calmly, "is the proof provided by the victims that accuses these fourteen godlings of the alleged crime?"

The question echoed through the building.

No one answered.

The human lawyers exchanged brief glances, parchment rustling in nervous hands, but none could produce what she demanded. There were no records, no eyewitness accounts, no artifacts imbued with energy residue, nothing that could point directly at the godlings. Only grief, fear, and assumption.

Seeing that the silence had settled firmly in her grasp, the female harpy spoke again.

"This court session," she declared, her voice steady and unyielding, "is a fallacy and a disgrace before the Goddess."

A stir rippled through the hall.

"This gathering was neither properly sanctioned nor lawfully convened. Yet here we stand, attempting not to judge fourteen accused individuals, but to place the entire godling race upon trial for their existence."

Her words cut deeper than outrage ever could.

"Justice is not collective punishment," she continued. "If it were, then no race, human or godlings could ever claim innocence."

A human lawyer could no longer contain himself and rose sharply from his seat.

"How dare you," he snapped, pointing an accusing finger, "call this case a fallacy before the Goddess, before the suffering victims who lost everything!"

The harpy godling did not flinch.

Instead, she turned her attention to the four representative judges seated above, two human, two godling. Her gaze lingered on each of them in turn, measured and deliberate, as though weighing their integrity.

Only then did she look back at the lawyer who had challenged her.

"I would like to believe," she said softly, "that as a fellow servant of the law, one whose profession itself is born of the Goddess's divine gift, you would recognize the fallacy and the clownish nature of this case from the very beginning."

Her words did not rise in volume.

They did not need to.

The insult lay not in mockery, but in implication: that the lawyer either lacked the wisdom to see the truth... or possessed it and chose to ignore it.

She then turned her attention to the human lawyers and the judges alike, her gaze sweeping the chamber with deliberate slowness.

"Have you," she asked, "forgotten the doctrine and the way of the Goddess?"

The very lawyer who had challenged her moments before bowed his head, shoulders stiff, as though the weight of the words had pressed him downward. Around him, several human lawyers and even one of the judges shook their heads in disappointment.

Before the harpy could continue, one of the human judges leaned forward and spoke, his voice smooth and calm.

"Please, sister," he said, "make your words less cryptic for those who do not yet understand."

The harpy godling took in the room, the furrowed brows, the whispers of confusion among the spectators, the sudden shift from righteous fury to uneasy doubt. Recognizing the moment for clarity, she inclined her head and offered a slight bow to the judge who had spoken.

"Of course," she replied evenly.

"To expose the fallacy of this case, we must begin where I first directed my question, to my fellow lawyers, and to the victims themselves."

She stepped forward, wings unfolding just enough to cast long shadows across the polished floor.

"Under the Goddess's doctrine," she continued, "justice is not only promised, it is demanded."

A pause.

"But it is not blind justice shaped by the magnitude of loss, nor by the depth of suffering one party has endured."

Her eyes moved toward the victims.

"Pain does not grant certainty. Grief does not create truth. And loss, no matter how devastating, cannot be allowed to replace proof."

The chamber remained silent, every ear fixed upon her.

"The Goddess teaches balance," she said. "That judgment must be rooted in truth, not in outrage. That justice must be precise, not convenient. And above all, that guilt must be proven, never presumed."

Her gaze returned to the judges.

"To abandon these principles," she concluded, "is not to honor the victims... but to betray the very doctrine we claim to uphold."

"Under the Goddess's doctrine," she continued, her voice unwavering, "this court session should never have taken place."

A stir moved through the chamber.

"The reason is simple. Those who seek justice are not to be brought before judges or crowds. They are guided to the nearest temple of the Goddess, where they meet with her devoted priests and lay bare the injustice they have suffered, while formally pledging their case."

She lifted one hand slightly, as if marking the steps of a sacred ritual.

"During this pledge, it is the victim's duty to be clear, unambiguously about whom they seek justice against."

Her gaze sharpened.

"The victims before us today possess no such clarity. They have no proof of who their offender is or was."

Unease spread through the hall.

"The fourteen godlings deemed responsible in this case," she went on, "cannot even be recognized by the victims as the ones who brought about their pain."

Murmurs rose, laced with doubt and discomfort. Several eyes turned toward her, suspicious, searching for deception.

Sensing this, she raised her voice.

"If there is doubt in my words," she declared, "then let them be tested before all present. No lie can be spoken in the presence of the Goddess."

The chamber froze.

She turned and gestured toward the fourteen godlings.

"Step forward."

The godlings hesitated.

They looked at her, doubt and uncertainty flickering in their eyes. They had come prepared to be punished for their actions. Hearing the victims recount the deaths, the suffering, the devastation they had caused filled them with shame.

Chapter 730:

And now this.

With this female godling, this harpy kin of theirs, it seemed as though escape was being offered.

That was not what they wanted.

Yet they trusted her.

They trusted that whatever path she was leading them down was not one of evasion, but of truth. And so, despite their hesitation, they rose from their seats and walked forward, one by one, until they stood beside her, fourteen figures framed by silence, judgment, and the unspoken weight of divine law.

She nodded once and led the fourteen godlings toward the victims, closing the distance between accusation and truth.

"Before the gaze of the Goddess," she asked, her voice solemn, "do you recognize any of these godlings as the ones who caused your pain and suffering?"

The young man stepped forward, a victim with his arm bound in splints, his face twisted with barely contained rage. He drew in a sharp breath, ready to speak.

Before the words could leave his mouth, something shifted.

The burly corporeal entity standing behind the harpy godling changed, its vast form drawing inward, becoming denser, heavier. Its presence surged forward, not as a threat spoken aloud, but as a crushing awareness that pressed against the young man's senses.

He froze.

His breath caught in his throat. Whatever he had been about to say, the lie he was about to spout out of anger collapsed under the weight of that presence. He swallowed hard, his gaze dropping to the floor as his jaw clenched shut.

Then Gram spoke.

"I don't know about the others," he said quietly, his voice stripped of anger, carrying only exhaustion, "but I saw no godling during the disaster."

He lifted his eyes, hollow and defeated.

"It was like a natural phenomenon," Gram continued. "Something that simply happened... and we were in its path."

The other victims exchanged glances.

One by one, they looked toward Xerosis, who stood unmoving, statuesque, his expression unreadable. When they spoke, there was no hesitation, only weary certainty.

"None of us saw the godlings," one of them said. "Not clearly. Not enough to say it was caused by them."

That was enough.

The humans in the stands erupted.

"What nonsense is this?!" someone shouted.

"Do you take us for fools?!"

"No one here is stupid, every deduction points to the godlings as the ones responsible!"

Voices piled atop one another, outrage drowning out reason as the chamber dissolved into chaos.

The four judges, two human, two godling did not shout. They did not call for order. Instead, they acted in perfect, chilling unison. Each of them gripped their heavy, dark-wood mallets and brought them down on the dais.

THUD.

The first strike hit like a physical blow to the chest. The shouting stopped instantly as the air was sucked out of the room.

THUD.

The second strike sent a ripple of "weird power" through the floorboards. It acted on the bodies of the spectators rather than their minds; knees buckled, and every person standing was suddenly, invisibly pressed back into their seats by a weight that felt like iron.

THUD.

The third strike brought a silence so absolute it was deafening. The ringing in everyone's ears was the only sound left. The humans sat rigid, their mouths closed by a force they couldn't fight, their eyes wide with a mix of awe and terror.

Every spectator sat frozen in their seat, breaths shallow, mouths closed. The court stood silent once more, and beneath that silence lingered the unmistakable sense that something far greater than law was now watching.

One of the judges looked toward the female godling and spoke evenly, "Please continue."

The harpy godling inclined her head, then turned to face the humans seated in the stands.

"You are all correct in one regard," she said. "No one here is foolish enough to fail to recognize the gravity of this situation."

A pause.

"But no lie has been spoken by me under the Goddess's doctrine."

As she said this, she turned her gaze toward the human lawyers.

The lawyers fell silent, the weight of divine law pressing down upon them. After a long moment, one of them rose slowly from his seat.

"Indeed," he admitted, his voice subdued, "no lie has been spoken."

He swallowed before continuing.

"From the very beginning, we possessed no proof or evidence that these godlings were the offenders in this case. What we had were deductions, assumptions drawn to give form to our employers fear, and conclusions made convenient by circumstance."

He turned toward the human spectators.

"The godlings have cooperated with us from the start, despite knowing all of this. Neither we nor the victims can identify which godling, if any, caused the disasters."

His voice lowered.

"It was the godlings themselves who surrendered to the court. They offered themselves for judgment so that this case could even take place."

A murmur spread, not of anger this time, but of discomfort.

The narrative had shifted.

What had once been a trial of monsters now stood revealed as something far more unsettling: a mirror held up to human judgment, and the quiet realization that justice, when built on fear rather than truth, could condemn the innocent just as easily as the guilty.

The lawyer who had initially called the case a fallacy sneered, refusing to let the momentum of the "For Humanity" movement die so easily. He stood tall, his hand resting on a holy relic at his belt. "You speak as if we were helpless without their cooperation," he scoffed. "Even if the godlings had never surrendered, we, the servants of the Goddess, possess the divine spell of "Lex Divina". With the victims as a focus, we could have located the offenders anywhere in the world."

A wave of cheering broke out from the human stands. The nobles leaned forward, their "bright smiles" returning.

The Harpy godling didn't stop smiling. If anything, her expression became more pitying, as if she were a teacher watching a student fail a simple lesson.

"Indeed, such a spell exists," she said, her voice easily cutting through the cheers. "But you seem to have a fundamental misunderstanding of the spell's mechanics in a disaster of this scale. Lex Divina requires a thread of connection, a touch, a gaze, a direct interaction. In these storms, the offenders never came in contact with the victims. They were miles away, or high above the clouds, moving the world with a thought. There is no thread to pull."

She leaned over the railing, her iridescent wings casting a jagged shadow over the lawyer. "And even if you could cast it, do you understand the implications? The repercussions this would have on the Goddess's faith and the stability of the world? To turn the Goddess into a common bounty hunter for every perceived slight? You would break the very faith you claim to protect."

The silence that followed was heavy. The Harpy looked directly at the fourteen godlings, then back to the human lawyers.

"Even now," she continued, "the initial words of my fellow lawyer stand. We godlings perform and act beyond mortal comprehension. We see the ripples of time, the weight of the elements, and the fragility of the spheres. Hence why we think before acting, even if our actions result in tragedies you cannot understand."

The human lawyer who had previously been cut off, the one who had admitted to the lack of evidence looked at his aggressive colleague. His face held a look of profound disgust, not for the godlings, but for the arrogance and ignorance of his colleague.

"The Harpy is right," he said, his voice echoing clearly. "The Goddess's doctrine made it clear: we are no heroes. Our role is to maintain the balance of the Law, not to go around seeking justice like vigilantes and hunting people to be punished for the sake of a crowd's satisfaction."

The "unwanted detail" of this realization was the sudden, visible shame of the human judges. They had allowed this trial to proceed to look like they were appeasing the nobles, like they had knowingly bent the doctrine of "non-interference" that the Goddess had established.

And in that silence, the court began to realize that the greatest threat to justice had never been the godlings at all, but the hands that were too eager to wield it.

The female harpy godling sent a brief, grateful glance toward the human lawyer who had spoken out. It was not approval, but acknowledgment, one servant of the law recognizing another.

"I have said all this," she continued, "not to deny that these fourteen godlings may yet face justice."

Her voice hardened slightly.

"But to reveal the true nature of what is unfolding here."

She turned toward the victims.

"Your leaders do not care for your loss," she said plainly. "It may appear otherwise, after all, see how well they have dressed you, how prominently they have placed you before this court."

A few of the victims shifted uneasily.

"But they do not grieve with you. This is merely another performance. Another calculation."

Her gaze swept the chamber.

"A test to gauge the relationship between gods, godlings, and mankind."