

Guardian gods 731

Chapter 731:

She straightened, wings unfurling just enough to command the room without threat.

"I stand here today not only as a lawyer and defender of these godlings," she declared, "but as an envoy of the Five Godling Races."

A murmur rippled through the hall.

"I am here to inform you," she continued, "and to educate you on the true nature of our relationship with the gods."

She turned once more to the human lawyers, her expression softening for the first time.

"My fellow practitioners have been drawn into this game," she said calmly. "They are not to be blamed. I know that, in their hearts, they seek true justice for the victims before us."

Several lawyers stiffened, some lowering their eyes.

"But it is the nobles who have twisted that purity of purpose," she continued, "warping it into something far uglier, turning a search for justice into a spectacle of racial execution."

A sharp intake of breath rippled through the chamber.

"The godlings wish to make one thing clear," she said, her voice steady and resolute. "While the Ascended Gods were once leaders of our people, they are now gods."

She let the word settle.

"They do not favor us alone. They do not stand only for godlings. They stand for humanity as well."

She gestured toward the fourteen standing behind her.

"Our actions today, bringing these fourteen godlings before you of our own will are proof of that truth."

Her gaze moved to the judges.

"And so, I ask once more: let this trial concern only the fourteen accused before you. Not the godling race as a whole."

With that, she bowed deeply, formally, respectfully and returned to her seat.

The chamber remained silent long after she had sat down, the weight of her words lingering like a verdict yet to be spoken.

Silence held the court in its grip.

No one spoke, not the nobles, not the victims, not even the judges. It was the kind of silence that followed a truth too heavy to be dismissed, yet too dangerous to accept without consequence.

At last, one of the human judges rose. His movements were slower than before, burdened by the awareness that every word spoken now would echo far beyond the chamber.

"This court," he said carefully, "was convened to serve the Goddess's justice."

He hesitated, fingers tightening around the mallet.

"And yet... it cannot be denied that we have strayed from the doctrine that binds us."

A murmur spread, subdued but clear enough.

The godling judge beside him inclined his head in silent agreement.

"The accusation placed before us," the human judge continued, "has grown beyond its lawful scope. What should have been a case against fourteen individuals was allowed to become an indictment of an entire race."

His gaze flicked, briefly, toward the nobles.

"That is a failure of this court."

The words struck harder than any gavel.

One of the nobles rose sharply, silk robes swaying. "If the court withdraws now," he protested, "what do you offer the victims? Words? Apologies? Will that rebuild their homes or return their dead?"

Before the judge could respond, the harpy godling spoke again "Justice delayed by truth is not denial," she said evenly. "But justice rushed by fear is annihilation."

The noble turned toward her, fury flashing across his face, but he found no opening, no contradiction to seize.

The human judge exhaled slowly.

"This court will recess."

Gasps rippled through the chamber.

"During this recess," he declared, "the charges against the godling race as a whole are suspended. When proceedings resume, this trial will concern only the fourteen accused and only crimes that can be proven under the Goddess's doctrine."

He lifted the mallet.

The chamber held its breath.

"Stop!!"

Fourteen voices rang out as one.

The mallet froze mid-air.

The murmur that had only just begun to rise died instantly, strangled by shock. Every gaze in the chamber snapped toward the accused godlings.

From among them, a merfolk stepped forward, a mermaid in her humanoid, land-bound form. Scales shimmered faintly along her skin, catching the light like fractured glass.

"There is no need for a recess," she said calmly.

She lifted her eyes to the judge.

Then she turned toward the victims, toward their hollow expressions, toward grief that had just been denied its outlet.

"They deserve their justice."

A collective gasp swept the hall.

The female harpy godling smiled with quiet approval. This was what she had been waiting for.

Another godling stepped forward, a werewolf, broad-shouldered and imposing even in his restrained form. His eyes did not search the crowd; they settled instead on a single figure among the victims, a small girl clutching the edge of her cloth.

"This may bring you no comfort," he said, his voice low, "but you deserve to know the truth."

His gaze softened.

"Why we took our actions. And why we were never angry at you."

The judge who had spoken moments earlier slowly lowered the mallet and sat back down, recognizing the shift. It seems justice may be served today.

It was a confession freely given.

The nobles stirred, several of them rising instinctively, mouths already forming objections but a sharp glance from one of their own halted them. Reluctantly, they sank back into their seats, sensing that interference now would only expose their hand further.

The chamber leaned inward, caught between dread and anticipation.

Without another word, the fourteen godlings moved as one.

In perfect unison, they raised their hands and extended a single finger, each of them pointing toward the stands where the audience sat.

"The one we are angry at," they said together, their voices overlapping into a single, resonant declaration, "is him."

A ripple of confusion tore through the crowd.

Those seated near the indicated section recoiled instinctively, some pointing at themselves in disbelief, others scrambling to shift away. Benches creaked, garments rustled, and quiet protests broke out, but the godlings' fingers did not waver.

As people moved aside, the invisible line of accusation remained fixed, unerringly centered on a lone cloaked figure who had not moved at all.

Erik.

Hidden beneath his cloak, Erik released a slow, weary sigh.

When the invitation to attend the court had arrived, he had never intended to come. Appearing here would only deepen the stain already clinging to his name, especially when those suffering and crying out for justice were his own people.

It was bad enough that his kingdom had failed to send an official representative. Instead, nobles from other realms had taken the stage, speaking for his people while pursuing their own designs.

If Erik did not appear, it would be read as cowardice. If he appeared openly, it would be read as guilt.

There was no path that preserved his honor.

So he had chosen the lesser cruelty.

He came unannounced, concealed among common folk filing into the court, cloaked and silent. He sat among them from the very beginning, listening, watching, and understanding precisely how events were unfolding long before the truth turned its gaze upon him.

Now, as the crowd shifted away and space opened around him like a widening wound, Erik knew there was no avoiding this.

He had almost believed he was in the clear.

Yet clearly, he was not.

Erik did not understand how the godlings had found him among the thousands gathered within the court, especially beneath the Field of Xerosis, where no form of supernatural perception, divination, or influence was permitted under the Goddess's law. No aura could be read. No fate could be traced. Within this space, all stood equal.

And yet, they had found him.

Keeping his breathing steady, Erik reached up and pushed back his cloak.

The fabric slid away and the court gasped as one.

Before them stood a figure too refined, too flawless, to be mistaken for an ordinary man. His beauty was unnatural, not radiant in the divine sense, but precise, deliberate, and overwhelming. Features sculpted with almost cruel perfection. Eyes sharp with intelligence and restraint. A presence that claimed attention effortlessly.

Many in the western continent knew of him.

Very few had ever seen him.

Fewer still had stood so close.

Whispers rippled through the chamber as recognition dawned.

A king.

Not merely a ruler, but one of the strongest humans alive. The sovereign of a kingdom that had once stood among the most powerful forces in the western continent.

Erik paid no heed to the gasps, nor to the sudden reverence bleeding into fear. His gaze was fixed ahead, on the godlings who pointed him out, and on the victims who stared back at him with raw hatred and burning accusation.

He did not flinch.

The werewolf godling stepped forward once more, his voice carrying with grim certainty.

"He is the one we were angry at," he said.

Silence fell.

"And he is the one," the godling continued, "toward whom all hatred in this chamber should rightfully be directed just as much as we rightfully deserve it."

Chapter 732:

There was a long, fragile silence.

Then someone from the crowd shouted, frustration breaking through their grief.

"If you knew who had angered you," the voice demanded, shaking with emotion, "then why was there so much unnecessary bloodshed? Why were so many innocent lives taken?"

The question tore through the chamber.

The werewolf godling's jaw tightened. His hand curled into a fist, claws biting into his palm.

"If you had asked me this before everything happened," he said slowly, his voice heavy, "I would not have been able to give you an answer."

He lifted his gaze "I could not have put into words what I now understand."

He gestured faintly toward Erik.

"All of your questions," he continued, "and all of the answers we godlings have arrived at since then, point to one truth."

His voice dropped.

"The human king, Erik, is not merely a man. He is a king. More importantly, he is a leader among humans."

The weight of that title pressed down upon the court.

"If we had struck him down," the werewolf went on, "if we had confronted him directly, as so many believe we should have, what then?"

He did not wait for an answer.

"I will not pretend otherwise. His strength is real. He would have taken some of my kin with him before his death."

A murmur rippled through the stands.

"But what would come after that?" he asked quietly.

He turned to the crowd.

"How would our actions be perceived by humanity if we demonstrated that we could choose to strike down your leader at any moment, by our own will?"

"Once that line is crossed," he concluded, "no explanation, no truth, and no restraint would ever be believed again."

The werewolf godling let the silence stretch, allowing the weight of his words to settle fully before continuing.

"A leader does not exist alone," he said. "Every step they take is carried on the backs of those who follow them."

He gestured toward Erik, not accusing him, nor absolving him of his action.

"When a leader errs, it is never just the leader who pays the price. Their people bleed for them. Their children inherit the consequences. Their mistakes echo long after their body is gone."

Another apeling godling stepped forward, her voice calm "To strike down a king or leader means a lot," she said. "It is a declaration."

A murmur rippled through the chamber.

"If we had killed him," the werewolf continued, "humans would not have asked why. They would not have asked how many died, thye would have asked how many godlings stood behind the act? and how many were ready to do it again."

His eyes swept the crowd.

"And your answer after that would have been war."

The word hung in the air, cold and undeniable.

"What should have been simple," another godling added, "the punishment of one who offended another, would have become a banner raised by both sides."

"Your armies would have marched," the werewolf said. "Your faith would have been weaponized. Your children would have been taught that godlings are executioners who strike kings in the night."

"And ours," said the mermaid quietly, "would have been taught that humans will never accept accountability unless it is forced upon them."

The female harpy godling finally rose again, her wings unfurling just enough to command the room.

"This," she said, "is the burden of leadership."

She turned toward the crowd.

"When a common man commits a wrong, the harm ends with him. When a leader commits a wrong, the harm multiplies."

Her gaze shifted to Erik.

"Even when the leader is wrong," she continued, "their position makes retaliation indistinguishable from aggression."

"We chose this path," the werewolf said. "Not because we lacked the strength to act, but because we understood the cost."

"Had we struck down your king, this hall would not be standing today."

"This is why we did what we did," the werewolf godling said. "Hatred for humans was never the reason behind our actions."

He turned his gaze fully upon Erik.

"In your case, King Erik, it was simply the course that made the most sense."

A ripple of unease moved through the chamber.

"Everyone in this court knows what your actions have brought upon your own land," he continued. "A cursed kingdom, quarantined by every neighboring realm. A place abandoned by trade, diplomacy, and hope."

"Your lands roam with cursed beings now," he said flatly, "creatures that were once your people."

A sharp breath escaped someone in the crowd.

He shifted his attention to the victims, his eyes distant, impersonal.

"Even if we had never intervened," he said, "it was only a matter of time before you would have joined them."

The words struck like frost.

"Before your names were forgotten. Before your bodies changed. Before your suffering became another statistic within Erik's borders."

He paused.

"But before that moment," he continued, "your value to him was immense."

The werewolf gestured faintly toward the stands.

"To Erik, the existence of ordinary humans within his kingdom is not trivial. Every untainted soul is a resource. A symbol. A proof that his rule has not yet failed completely."

His eyes hardened.

"Each living, un-cursed human was a candle still burning, a lifeline keeping his kingdom from being declared truly dead."

The chamber was utterly silent now.

"That is why the loss of those innocent lives mattered," he said. "Not because we delight in their death, but because we understood what it would do to him."

He looked back at Erik.

"We knew it would hurt you."

The word hurt felt insufficient.

"We knew it would push you toward despair. Toward desperation. Toward mistakes."

The coldness in his voice sent a shudder through the court.

For in that moment, everyone understood. These beings people who weighed their mortal lives as leverage. Who understood suffering as pressure. Who held countless lives in their hands and chose, deliberately, how tightly to close their fingers.

The werewolf godling drew a slow breath, as though steadying himself.

"My words are not meant only for this court," he said, his voice carrying across the place clear. "Nor are they meant only for those seated here today."

He lifted his gaze, letting it pass over the nobles, the lawyers, the victims, and finally the crowd beyond.

"I hope my words leave this hall. I hope they spread to your cities, your temples, and your homes."

A pause.

"Humans must learn to hold their leaders accountable."

The words were spoken without heat, yet they struck harder than any shout.

"Because when a leader acts, it is never their life placed upon the line."

He gestured toward the victims.

"It is yours. It is your parents'. It is your children's."

A murmur of unease rippled through the chamber.

"Your kings and nobles will speak of honor, necessity, and destiny," he continued. "But when their choices draw the gaze of divinity, it is not their blood that is spilled, it is yours."

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"This court stands as yet another example of that truth. Of a leader's foolishness. Of humanity's willingness to let those in power play with divinity, as though gods and godlings alike exist to dance to their tune."

Silence pressed down, heavy and suffocating.

"That," he said, "is something you must hold each other accountable for."

The werewolf godling straightened, his presence expanding across the place, filling it with wild breath that tingled the spine.

"As for us," he said at last, "we will stand before the Goddess and accept whatever judgment she deems fitting."

His voice did not waver.

"It pains us that unnecessary lives were taken."

A breath.

"But understand this clearly."

He looked once more across the chamber, his gaze unflinching.

"We do not regret our actions."

The air seemed to tighten around him.

"For regret implies doubt."

And with that, he fell silent standing beside his fellow godlings, immovable and imposing, as the court waited for the Goddess herself to pass judgment.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Among the common humans in the stands, reactions fractured. Some sat frozen, faces pale, hands clenched in their laps as the truth clawed its way into their thoughts. Others trembled with rage at the audacity, some had a slow, dawning realization that they had never truly been the ones making decisions about their own fate.

Parents pulled children closer. Old men stared at their hands as if seeing the cost of obedience written into their lines. A few wept silently for the understanding that their suffering had been currency long before it becomes a tragedy.

There were those who hated the godlings still.

But that hatred no longer felt clean.

It tangled with fear, shame, and a quiet, unbearable doubt.

The nobles reacted differently.

Whispers hissed between silk-clad figures, sharp and urgent. Some masked their unease behind practiced disdain, lips curled in scorn at the audacity of beings who aren't humans lecturing humanity. Others had gone very still, eyes narrowed in calculation.

Chapter 733:

There were those who hated the godlings still.

But that hatred no longer felt clean.

It tangled with fear, shame, and a quiet, unbearable doubt.

The nobles reacted differently.

Whispers hissed between silk-clad figures, sharp and urgent. Some masked their unease behind practiced disdain, lips curled in scorn at the audacity of beings who aren't humans lecturing humanity. Others had gone very still, eyes narrowed in calculation.

A few nobles avoided looking at the crowd entirely, sensing that the same people they had once stirred into righteous fury were now beginning to look back.

Erik stood apart from all of them.

He had not moved since the godling finished speaking.

His expression remained composed, regal, controlled but something behind his eyes had fractured. The accusation had not struck him as an enemy's blow, but as a mirror held too close.

He had known the cost of his choices.

What he had not expected was to hear that cost spoken aloud, measured, deliberate, and stripped of all pretense.

The cursed kingdom, the quarantined borders. The dwindling candles of human life in his land.

His fingers curled slowly at his side.

Around him, the victims watched him now with something new in their eyes. The hatred was still there, but it was no longer singular. It fractured, pulling at questions they had never been allowed to ask.

Why had their king acted as he did? Who had truly led them here?

The judges remained silent, their mallets untouched.

They understood what the godlings had done.

They had not begged for mercy. They had not sought absolution.

They had shifted the burden of judgment, away from themselves and back onto humanity.

It seems the godlings had their own plan for coming to this court today, they wanted to stop a repetition of this ever taking place again, human ignorance could be overlooked now but from now on, it no longer would be an excuse.

The relationship between both races and gods have now been made clear, it was no longer something to be speculated on. The gods stand for the humans as much as they stand for the godlings.

If one played their cards right, divinity would serve them well. If the humans had focused on the accused of their fault, the godlings would have lacked material to spin their words on.

This court would have turned out differently as it did today, instead it n ended with humans questioning themselves and their leaders. Who was wrong and who was right became unclear.

The chamber grew still. So still that every whisper, every footstep, seemed amplified.

The four judges suddenly rose together, everyoen turned towards them, mallets resting at their sides, a viel appeared from mid air, covering their faces. Then, without a word, they began to speak, not as themselves, but as the voice of Xerosis.

"The Goddess has heard all that has been spoken in this hall," said the first judge, his voice resonant, echoing in every corner. "She has seen the hearts of those who act, the intentions of those who judge, and the suffering of those who endure."

The second judge's voice followed, deeper and colder "The fourteen godlings before you have acted within the bounds of reason, yet their actions have caused suffering and death. Justice does not absolve those who bear responsibility, no matter their form. Therefore, the godlings shall live among humanity as mortals, stripped of powers, statues, and privileges. They shall rebuild that which they have destroyed and bear the weight of all that has been lost. They are banned from their homelands, until their debt to the living is fulfilled."

With this sentence, a pillar of light from Xerosis statue descended upon the godlings who felt all presence of their power gone. In their palm an empty bown appeared which represnt how much is needed to be filled for their sentence to be complete.

A murmur rose in the chamber. The godlings themselves bowed their heads, accepting the sentence with solemnity, understanding that their freedom would come only through labor, service, and consequence.

The third judge's voice, clear, addressed the humans and the nobles:

"King Erik was not brought before this court, and thus is not to be judged. The nobility, however, are warned: should you attempt to invoke the Goddess's name to serve your own ambitions, to manipulate faith for political gain, it will be met with rightful fury. Know that divine law is not a tool for men to wield, and those who try will face consequences beyond mortal comprehension."

A wave of tension passed through the nobles. Some paled; others remained frozen in place, unable to respond.

The fourth judge spoke last, soft, eyes sweeping the victims "Humanity itself is not judged here. No penalty falls upon the innocent masses, for you were not brought before this court. Yet those who have suffered shall have their voices heard. Speak what you deem justice, within the bounds of life itself. Let your words shape the restitution of what was lost. Let them guide those now made accountable."

The word fell, softly spoken, yet carrying the weight of finality and it took everyone by surprise. Most of all, the nobles.

They had not accounted for this. Not this outcome, not this swiftness. There were so many things they had prepared to say, so many carefully crafted appeals and veiled demands they had intended to funnel through the victims' mouths. They had imagined themselves guiding the pleas, shaping the requests made to the godlings, turning tragedy into leverage.

But before a single thought could fully take form, it was as though their intentions had been laid bare.

The spectral entities, the judges shifted as one. Their indistinct, luminous forms turned, and every hollow gaze fixed squarely upon the nobles. It was not a look of anger, nor judgment in the mortal sense, but something far worse: cold, knowing awareness.

The effect was immediate.

It felt as though icy water had been poured down their spines, seeping into bone and thought alike. Breath caught in throats. Spines stiffened. Whatever schemes had stirred moments ago were extinguished on the spot, strangled before they could even be born. No one dared meet those gazes for long. The nobles lowered their eyes, swallowing their ambitions along with their fear.

Silence reclaimed the hall.

Slowly, inevitably, all attention returned to the victims.

They stood there, small beneath the vastness of the chamber and the presence of beings far beyond them, still reeling from the verdict they had just heard. Fell. The word echoed in their minds, heavy and unreal.

The woman who had spoken first, who had laid her suffering bare before gods and men alike felt the weight of countless eyes settle upon her once more. She could feel their expectations pressing in, hear the unspoken urging for her to speak, to claim what was now being offered.

Her hands trembled.

She was overwhelmed. Fear, disbelief, and a fragile, dangerous hope twisted together in her chest. This might be her only chance perhaps the only one she would ever be given. A chance not just for justice, but for restoration.

So she spoke.

With a shaky voice and a clenched fist, she spoke. Her words came out uneven, some syllables blurring into the next, yet they were filled with a fragile, desperate hope.

"I ask for the godlings to bring back my lost children and my husband," she said. "That is the justice I need from them. Nothing else."

Silence followed.

Not the uneasy silence of hesitation, but a heavy, absolute stillness that pressed down upon the hall. Then the four judges, Xerosis, whose presence carried pressed on everyone in the court spoke.

"All life that has met its end," Xerosis intoned, "belongs to the Lady of Death, Keles. After death, without her consent and her will, your wish must be denied."

The words settled like cold stone.

"Without her consent and her will, no life may be returned," Xerosis continued, voice not changing.
"This court does not possess such authority."

The woman's strength gave out.

Her knees buckled, and she collapsed forward, a broken sob tearing free from her chest. Grief she had held together through sheer will finally spilled over, raw and uncontrollable.

Those beside her moved at once. Gentle hands steadied her arms, pressed reassuringly against her back and shoulders, anchoring her to the present as her cries echoed softly through the chamber.

Xerosis did not hurry her. The judges did not avert their gaze.

The court waited.

When at last the woman managed to draw a shuddering breath and lift her head, her eyes were red, swollen, and unfocused, yet there was no surprise in them.

Truthfully, this was more than she had ever allowed herself to expect.

When the incident had occurred, she had been left utterly alone, surrounded by doubt, swallowed by sorrow, and haunted by fear. Days had blurred into nights until a group had appeared before her, telling her that justice could still be served, that those responsible could still be held to account.

Chapter 734

That fragile promise had carried her here.

Now she looked up at the godlings.

Anger burned in her gaze, sharp and unrestrained, but it was braided tightly with fear. She was only a commoner. To her, godlings had been nothing more than stories and whispered myths her entire life.

Yet here she stood, staring down beings of legend.

And somehow, unthinkably her words alone were now enough to decide their fate.

Yet it was clear to her that she could not ask for their deaths.

What had unfolded within the court today had shown her that more than justice was being sought here, forces were moving beneath the surface, threads being pulled far beyond the suffering of a single family. Whatever this trial truly was, it was not meant to end with simple vengeance.

She understood then what she was.

A pawn, drawn in by the sweet promise of justice, guided forward by hope and grief alike. And now that her place upon the board had become clear, she chose her words with care. She could not bear the thought of her wishes rippling outward, twisting into the suffering of others she did not know.

With a trembling sigh, she turned once more to the judges.

Her voice was quiet, but resolute.

"I would like the bodies of my husband and my children returned to me," she said. "What remains of them after the disaster. I wish to have them back."

Tears streamed freely down her face, but she did not look away.

"I ask for a proper burial, for rites carried out with dignity. And I ask for the restoration of my home... and my garden, which were broken and lost."

The simplicity of her request echoed through the chamber.

For a moment, the stands were taken aback. Whispers stirred, not of outrage or demand, but of surprise, of disbelief at how little she had asked for, given how much had been taken.

Even the godlings paused. Their expressions, unreadable as ever, softened just slightly as they inclined their heads in solemn acknowledgment.

The nobles, however, scoffed quietly among themselves.

To them, it was a wasted opportunity, an offering of power left untouched. Yet outwardly, they wore bright, pleasant smiles, their faces carefully arranged, as though they had just witnessed something admirable rather than inconvenient.

Meanwhile, among the godlings, an apeling stepped forward, his attention fixed upon the sobbing woman. Something in her grief seemed to stir him, and after a moment of silent consideration, he lifted his gaze to the judges. With a small, respectful gesture toward the woman, he spoke.

"May I?"

A pause followed.

Then, one by one, the four judges inclined their heads.

The apeling took a step forward.

At once, the woman recoiled, fear flashing across her face. Those beside her moved instinctively, placing themselves between her and the approaching godling, their bodies tense with protective resolve.

The godling stopped.

His gaze never wavered from the woman, and after a heartbeat, she met it. There was no hostility in his eyes, only something unreadable, yet steady. Slowly, she raised a hand, offering a small, reassuring gesture to those shielding her. Reluctantly, they eased aside as she stepped forward to meet him halfway.

The distance between them closed.

The godling leaned down, lowering his voice until only she could hear. He whispered a few words, quiet, careful advice meant for her alone.

Her eyes widened.

Tears, which had momentarily ceased, welled up once more and spilled freely down her cheeks. Yet anyone watching could tell these were no longer tears of despair. They shone with fragile, trembling hope.

The woman reached out toward him without thinking.

The godling frowned and took a step back, turning away as he returned to his place among the others.

She did not seem to notice his withdrawal.

"Thank you," she cried out, her voice breaking with emotion. "Thank you so much. This means a lot to me. You have given me hope."

The apeling heard her words.

He did not respond.

The godlings, their senses far keener than any mortal's, had heard every word the apelian had whispered to the woman. Several of them turned toward him at once, their expressions questioning.

He noticed.

With a small shrug, he answered calmly, "It is a method created by humans. I merely extended the knowledge to her. It is up to her, who she shares it with, and how she chooses to use or spread that knowledge."

No more explanation followed.

Throughout the court, curiosity stirred. Many wondered what could have been said to draw such a reaction from her—what words could turn despair into hope so swiftly. What promise, what possibility, had been placed in her hands?

Yet as quickly as the questions arose, they were smothered. This was still the court. This was still judgment. Curiosity had no place here.

There would be time later to uncover the truth of it.

With the woman's request settled, the judges shifted their focus.

Judgment and attention moved to Gram.

Just like before, murmurs rippled through the hall. All eyes turned toward him, waiting to hear what he would demand, what grievance he would voice. Yet Gram stood unmoving, a blank expression carved into his face, as though the world around him barely registered. The echoes of the court seemed distant, muted.

When it was finally his turn, he did not speak at once.

He moved.

His steps carried him not toward the judges, nor toward Xerosis, but directly toward the werewolf godling who had spoken earlier. The godling towered over him, a looming figure of muscle and furs. Gram had to crane his neck just to meet his gaze.

Those icy blue eyes looked down at him, eyes that held both wildness and unmistakable divinity in it.

Gram did not flinch.

He did not lower his gaze and when he spoke, he addressed not the court, not the judges, but the godling himself.

Gram drew a slow breath.

When he spoke, his voice was filled with anger, not unwarranted but by years of being unheard.

"I did not like your last words," he said, eyes locked onto the werewolf godling. "The way you spoke of the lives of common folk, as if we were small things, numbers to be weighed and discarded when convenient."

His fingers curled, knuckles whitening.

"But I will not lie to myself," he continued. "My anger does not make you wrong."

A faint murmur passed through the stands.

"If anything, today has proven how true your words are. We live because we are allowed to live. We survive because it costs less to let us breathe than to crush us."

His jaw tightened.

"I need the strength to kill all of you," he said plainly. "The godlings. The human nobles. Anyone, for that matter."

A sharp gasp tore through the stands. Nobles stiffened, faces twisting with fury, their eyes locked onto Gram as though they would strike him down themselves. Among the godlings, brows rose some in surprise, others in quiet intrigue.

He gestured faintly toward the nobles section, not even sparing them a full glance.

"We are told to obey, to endure, to be grateful for scraps. When our homes burn, when our children die, it becomes "regrettable losses." When our labor builds kingdoms, it becomes "the natural order"

Gram lifted his chin.

"You tell us to keep our leaders in check. To rise when they grow cruel. But how?" His voice tightened. "You have known power your entire existence. You speak of restraint from a height we have never reached."

A sharp inhale echoed from the crowd.

"They do not fear us," Gram said. "Not the nobles. Not you. Because fear requires consequence and we have none to offer."

His gaze burned now, unyielding.

"We cannot threaten men who command armies. We cannot oppose beings who shape the world itself. You ask us to act as equals while denying us the tools to stand."

Silence stretched, thick and brittle.

"So yes," Gram said quietly, the words landing heavier than a shout, "in the grand scheme, our lives may be small."

Then his voice hardened.

"But understand this, small does not mean meaningless."

His eyes flicked briefly toward the woman, then back to the godling.

"When pushed far enough, even those with nothing left will reach for something dangerous. And if the world refuses to give us power, we will seek it wherever it can be found."

He straightened fully.

"So my justice is not mercy. It is not forgiveness. It is not your pity."

Gram met the godling's gaze without flinching.

"It is strength. And the knowledge to decide our own fate."

The werewolf godling held the human's stare, icy blue eyes locked onto Gram's with unyielding intensity. Within that gaze churned hatred, raw and barely restrained but beneath it lay something far more, desperation.

At last, the godling looked away.

Gram followed his line of sight as both of them turned toward Erik.

The godling drew in an exaggerated breath, the sound deep and deliberate, pulling every shred of attention in the court toward him. Then he bent down until he was level with Gram, his towering presence folding into something far more intimate and far more threatening.

Chapter 735:

"You misunderstand my words," he said. "Human life, especially the lives of common folk holds great value."

He tilted his head slightly, then gestured toward Erik.

"You can only see him," the godling continued. "But I can smell him."

"In your eyes, he is beautiful, calm, regal, composed. But my nose tells a different story. On him, I smell desperation... fear... uncertainty... and lust."

Each word landed like a blow.

"All of it tangled beneath the mask he presents to the world," the godling said. "And the lives we took? They are the cause of this. They pushed him into such a state."

He straightened slightly, his voice dropping.

"So no," he finished, "your lives are not meaningless."

Gram's fists clenched at his sides, nails biting into his palms. The werewolf godling leaned in closer, his gaze searching Gram's face, waiting, perhaps, for defiance, for anger, for violence.

But Gram did nothing.

Even as rage burned in his chest, his body refused to obey it. Fear rooted him in place, cold and undeniable, reminding him just how vast the gulf between them truly was.

Suddenly, a massive, furred palm settled atop Gram's head.

It was warm. Heavy. And impossibly gentle.

The werewolf godling rubbed his head as one might soothe a child, the gesture jarringly tender for a being of such overwhelming presence.

"I will grant you the knowledge and the strength you seek," the godling said. "How far you grow with it is entirely up to you."

Then his voice rose, carrying effortlessly across the court so that every human in the stands could hear.

"While the nobles hoard knowledge as a means of control," he declared, "they do not withhold religion from you. They do not prevent you from seeking the gods of this world we all share."

Murmurs stirred.

"In the case of men like my new disciple here," the godling continued, gesturing to Gram, "men who seek power not for dominion but to protect what they love, there is a god who answers such purpose."

He paused, letting the name settle.

"Maul," he said. "God of cold vengeance and unyielding protection."

The air itself seemed to tighten.

"He grants strength to those who wish to protect their families and loved ones," the godling went on. "So understand this, your weakness is not always forced upon you. Some of it is self-made."

With that, he drew Gram to his side.

The motion was firm, unquestionable, an act that carried both protection and declaration. Gram stumbled a half-step before steadying himself, now standing among beings whose presence alone shrunk the air around them.

He looked up at the godlings surrounding him.

He had expected resistance. Condemnation. Retribution.

After all, he had just stood in the heart of the court and declared that he sought the strength to one day kill them.

Yet none of them moved to stop it.

Some watched him with wary interest, others with expressions carefully unreadable. A few regarded him with something disturbingly close to approval. Whether it was underestimation, guilt, or the unyielding authority of Xerosis's words that bound them, Gram could not tell.

Perhaps it was all of it.

His fingers tightened around the scrap of cloth clenched in his hand—the only thing grounding him, proof that this moment was real. Whatever they offered him now, he would take it. He would endure it. He would grow.

And when the time came, he would seek justice with his own two hands.

Thus concluded Gram's justice.

The court shifted once more.

The young man with the broken arm, his limb bound in a stiff cast was called forward next. After the last two judgments had veered so violently from expectation, the atmosphere had changed entirely. No one knew what form justice would take now.

All eyes turned to him.

The sudden weight of attention crashed down like a physical force. The young man stiffened as an unseen pressure wrapped around his chest, squeezing tight. He drew in a breath and found it shallow, strained, as though the air itself resisted him.

His heart pounded.

He could not say where the pressure came from, whether it was the judges, the godlings, or the sheer magnitude of the place he stood in. He only knew that his legs felt unsteady, and every instinct in his body screamed that this moment would define him just as surely as it had the others.

And the court waited to see whether he would break or speak.

The silence of the court gnawed at him.

It pressed in from all sides, heavy and suffocating. He could hear his own heartbeat, too loud, too fast and the sound only made the sensation worse. His eyes began to wander, darting aimlessly as though searching for escape, or something solid to hold onto.

Then his gaze crossed with Gram's.

Gram stood among the godlings now, defiant and chosen.

The sight steadied him.

It was as if the young man had found an anchor in the storm. Drawing in a shaky breath, he raised his uninjured arm and pointed.

"I want what he got," he blurted out. "I request all that he did. I want knowledge, how to gain strength, how to gain power, so I can protect myself."

The words rang hollow in the vast chamber.

From the stands came the sound of suppressed disappointment, quiet sighs, faint murmurs, expectations collapsing inward. This was not what many had hoped to hear.

The godlings, meanwhile, regarded the young man in silence.

He could barely hold their gaze. His eyes skittered away, lingering on the floor, the walls, anywhere but on them. Fear clung to him openly, unmasked.

The godlings exchanged glances.

No words were spoken, yet the meaning passed clearly between them. They were deciding who, if anyone would take the young man as a disciple, who would bear the burden of teaching him.

From their expressions alone, the answer was evident.

None of them were interested.

Compared to Gram's fire and fury, this young man offered little more than imitation and fear. There was no defiance in him, no conviction forged by loss, only desire born of envy and survival.

And in the eyes of these godlings, that was far less compelling.

Considering the sentence handed down by Xerosis, to live as mortals and make reparations, the godlings had already resigned themselves to nearly a century bound to fragile flesh and limited time.

If they were to endure such an existence, then how they spent it mattered.

Gram, at the very least, was an interesting figure, sharp-edged, dangerous, driven by conviction. The young man, less so. But this was not a matter of preference. The court had ruled, and rulings were to be obeyed.

So they decided to let him choose.

The fourteen godlings inclined their heads in unison, a silent gesture of acceptance directed toward the judges and Xerosis alike. The young man's request would be granted.

Turning her keen gaze upon him, a harpy godling stepped forward. Her wings folded neatly behind her as she spoke, her voice sweet to the ear.

"Which among us," she asked, "do you wish to impart the knowledge you seek?"

The question placed him once again before a choice, but this time, it did not paralyze him.

Born and raised on the western continent, the harpy godlings had been woven into his childhood stories and local legends. They were said to rule the skies, to watch over the land from above, unseen and untouchable.

He remembered a moment from his youth, standing alone beneath an open sky, swearing he had glimpsed shapes moving among the clouds. Wings. Feathers catching the sun.

No one had believed him. He had been called a liar, a dreamer.

Now, standing in the court of gods, he felt something twist painfully in his chest.

His thoughts drifted to those he had lost, friends who would never see this moment, never hear the truth of it. How they would react if they were here now. How his words would no longer be dismissed as childish fantasy.

His vision blurred. Tears welled and spilled over before he could stop them.

He lifted his arm and pointed.

The female harpy godling.

She is the most beautiful among them, he thought, barely suppressing the smile that tugged at his lips.

And in this small, telling moment, the court saw the difference between a man who sought power to change the world and one who sought it to be admired by it.

The female harpy godling, the one he had pointed to, raised a brow in mild surprise. After a brief pause, she nodded, accepting the sentence without protest.

Just like that, the oppressive pressure vanished.

The young man felt it immediately, as though a heavy weight had been lifted from his chest. Attention shifted away from him, flowing instead toward the oldest figure among the victims.

The elderly man.

When he realized all eyes were now on him, he smiled.

It was not a carefree smile, grief lingered in the lines of his face, etched deep by years and recent loss but he wore it anyway. If this was to be his moment, he would not let it be swallowed by sorrow alone.

Chapter 736:

He even went so far as to break the tension.

Looking up at the gathered godlings, he asked lightly, "Tell me, how old is the oldest among all of you?"

The godlings exchanged glances, momentarily caught off guard. Then, one by one, they pointed toward a beautiful mermaid godling standing among them.

She frowned as she noticed the attention suddenly focused on her.

With genuine curiosity, the old man continued, "And how old might you be, milady?"

The mermaid scoffed.

"Two hundred and forty-five," she replied sharply. "And even at your age, you have not learned not to ask a lady her age."

A collective gasp rippled through the stands.

Even Gram, wrapped in his brooding silence, glanced her way, surprised by the number, then again by the fact that she looked no older than a woman in her twenties.

The old man laughed, the sound warm and unrestrained.

It earned him a glare from the mermaid godling.

"How strange," he said, still smiling, "to no longer be the oldest in the room. To all of you, I might still be considered a child."

He shrugged gently.

"After all, I am only seventy-five."

Turning to the judges, the old man spoke once more.

"In my youth," he said gently, "I dreamed of becoming a scribe. But I never knew where to begin, and life has a way of pulling dreams quietly out of reach. Still... it seems such an opportunity has presented itself at last."

He lifted his gaze to the godlings.

"I believed I understood the gods," he continued. "I thought faith and stories were enough. But you have walked closest to them. You have spoken with them. Lived beside them."

"I wish for you to teach me the truth of the relationship between gods and mortals."

A hush fell.

"At my age," he went on, "it pains me to realize how little worthy knowledge I have to pass on to the young. Knowledge that could save lives. Knowledge that might have lessened the fall, the disaster that brought us all here today."

He drew a slow breath.

"This is my wish: to learn. So that I may teach. So that I may extend that knowledge outward to save lives, to safeguard humanity, and to ensure that ignorance claims fewer souls than it did this day."

For a heartbeat, the court was silent.

Then applause erupted.

Humans in the stands rose to their feet, clapping openly, some bowing toward the old man with deep respect. Others wiped at their eyes, moved not by power or vengeance, but by purpose.

Even the nobles stood.

This time, their smiles were genuine, unforced, unguarded. At last, someone had seen what was truly at play within the court.

The godlings nodded, accepting the old man's wish without hesitation.

And then, at last, it was the turn of a troubling victim.

The smallest among them.

The young girl stood alone at the center of the court, a fragile figure facing a choice that would shape the rest of her life. She did not truly understand what was happening around her, only that her world had ended. Her family was gone. The people who made her feel safe no longer answered when she called.

She was seven years old.

When all eyes turned to her, she froze. The weight of grown gazes, adults, nobles, godlings alike pressed down on her, making her chest tighten. Words would not come easily.

Then, in a small, wavering voice, she spoke.

"I want my family back," she said.

Her brow furrowed, confusion slipping into fear.

"I want my mother back," she whispered. "Where is my mother?"

The question shattered the room.

Even Xerosis, embodiment of cold judgment, did not answer. The truth was too sharp, too final to place in the hands of a child.

Silence fell upon the court.

It was then that one of the godlings moved.

The mermaid, the same one who had earlier announced her age stepped forward. She slowed her approach deliberately, aware that even the tallest human barely reached her shoulder. When she reached the girl, she knelt on one knee, lowering herself until they were nearly eye to eye.

Her voice, when she spoke, was as gentle as she could make it.

"Your family... your mother," she said softly, "they are gone."

The girl shrank back at the words, shoulders trembling.

But a scaled palm reached out and held her.

It was not warm.

It was cool, like deep water, like stillness but that very cold grounded the child. It anchored her to the moment. Slowly, she lifted her gaze to look at the beautiful aunt-like figure before her.

"You may have lost your mother," the mermaid godling said softly, "but you may yet gain another."

The girl's small hands curled into her dress as she listened.

"I can be your mother," the godling continued. "I have borne many children of my own. Raising them has always brought me great joy." Her voice faltered for just a moment. "It may be difficult to believe especially knowing that these hands have also brought death to many children. But it is the truth."

She lowered her head slightly, a gesture of humility rather than shame.

"I and my companions would raise you until you become a woman in your own right. I would swear before the goddess herself to raise you in honesty, never denying you the truth of your life... nor the dreadful day that was stolen from you by my own hands."

The court held its breath.

The girl did not understand everything that had been said. The words were too large, too heavy for someone so young. But she understood enough.

The blue-scaled woman before her was asking to be her new mother. To be her family.

And that frightened her.

Wasn't this woman one of the ones who had hurt her? Who had taken her family away? Why, then, were her eyes filled with such aching kindness, such unmistakable sorrow?

The girl looked up at her, torn between fear and something fragile and unfamiliar.

A murmur rippled through the court, soft at first, then swelling.

"No"

"That cannot be allowed."

"She was one of them."

The whispers grew into open protest.

From the human stands, voices rose in alarm and outrage. Men and women who moments ago had wept now stood rigid, faces pale with disbelief.

"You would give the child to the very one who killed her family?" someone cried.

"Is this what passes for justice?" another demanded.

The sound carried raw, emotional, unrestrained.

Even among the nobles, unrest spread. Though their expressions remained composed, their words were sharp, clipped with unease.

"This is inappropriate," one noble declared, stepping forward. "A godling, one directly responsible for the disaster, cannot be entrusted with the life of a child harmed by it. This borders on mockery."

Others nodded, murmuring assent.

"Justice is meant to protect the innocent," another added. "Not bind them forever to their tragedy."

The girl flinched at the rising volume, her small fingers tightening in the folds of her dress. The mermaid godling felt it immediately. Her grip softened, her body angling subtly to shield the child from the noise.

She did not rise.

Instead, she lifted her gaze to the crowd calm, unflinching.

"I understand your fear," she said, her voice carrying clearly without being loud. "And I do not ask for your forgiveness."

The murmurs did not stop.

"She has no right"

"That child deserves a human life"

A noble turned toward Xerosis. "This court must intervene. The child cannot consent. This decision cannot stand."

The murmurs did not fade.

They thickened, grief turning to outrage, outrage hardening into resolve. Before the sound could swell into chaos, a single figure rose from the noble stands.

He wore the gold-and-crimson of the Sun Kingdom.

The largest, the strongest human kingdom on the western continent. The kingdom whose voice carried weight even here.

The noble moved with deliberate calm, descending from the stands and into the court itself. Each step was measured, unhurried, as though he were approaching not a tribunal of gods, but a frightened child.

When he reached the girl, he did not loom over her.

He knelt. His appearance slowly pulled away the increasing noises and voices.

His voice, when he spoke, was low and warm crafted with care.

"Little one," he said gently, "you are scared. And you have every right to be."

The girl's eyes flicked toward him, uncertain.

"What is being offered to you," he continued softly, "may sound kind. But kindness can sometimes wear a dangerous face."

He turned his head slightly, not glaring at the mermaid godling, but acknowledging her presence all the same.

"This woman admits that her hands took lives," he said. "Including the lives of children. Including the lives of your family."

His gaze returned to the girl.

"To accept her as your mother would be to place your future in the hands of the one who ended your past."

A hush fell over the court.

Chapter 737:

"It would be wrong," he said quietly, "to the memory of your mother. Wrong to the love she gave you. Wrong to the life she fought to protect."

He reached out, not touching the child, but close enough that she could see the sincerity in his eyes.

"You deserve a home untouched by blood," he said. "A place where your memories are honored, not rewritten."

Straightening slightly, he gestured behind him, to the noble stands, to the banners of the Sun Kingdom.

"Come with us," he offered. "With me. I will adopt you as my own. You will have warmth, safety, education, and love. You will grow surrounded by people who will never remind you of the day everything was taken from you."

His voice softened further.

"You do not need to carry the burden of forgiveness. You are too young to be asked to atone for crimes that were never yours."

He bowed his head to her.

"Stay with your own kind," he said. "Let the dead rest knowing their child was protected by the living."

Around them, the nobles watched closely, some nodding, others tense.

And for the first time since the offer had been made, doubt crept unmistakably into the space between the girl and the mermaid godling.

The female godling listened without interruption.

The noble's words washed over her, not as accusation, but as truth spoken from a place she could not claim. She did not argue. She did not defend herself.

Instead, she rose.

Her movement was slow, deliberate, the faint ripple of scales catching the light as she straightened to her full height. Then, in a gesture that carried more weight than any protest, she bowed first to the human noble, and then to the little girl.

"I may have overstepped my bounds," she said quietly.

No justification followed. No plea. Only acknowledgment.

She stepped back, returning to the line of godlings, her expression unreadable, her hands clasped before her. If there was grief in her eyes, she did not let it spill into the court.

The girl watched her go.

Then she looked at the noble.

Small shoulders trembled. Confusion warred with fear, with longing, with the simple need for something solid in a world that had fallen apart. For a heartbeat, the court seemed to hold its breath with her.

Then she made her choice.

With a sudden, desperate motion, the child threw herself into the noble man's arms.

He caught her at once, dropping to one knee as he wrapped her in a firm, protective embrace. One hand cradled the back of her head, the other resting securely against her back as he murmured soft, steady words meant only for her.

"It's all right," he said gently. "You're safe now. You're not alone."

The girl clutched at his robes, burying her face against his chest as quiet sobs shook her small frame.

Her choice had been made.

It was clear to everyone that justice had been found for the little girl.

As the noble of the Sun Kingdom carried her back toward the stands, the court stirred, not with tension this time, but with relief. Applause rose, steady and sincere, following him every step of the way. Voices called out in gratitude, in praise, in affirmation.

Thanking him for his courage. Thanking him for choosing compassion when power could have been exploited.

His actions proved something important, something many had begun to fear was lost.

Humanity was not so far gone.

Not all bore sharpened smiles and hidden schemes. Not all hearts sought advantage in tragedy. Many still carried kindness within them, quiet but resilient, waiting for a moment to be proven real.

When the applause finally faded, attention turned to the last victim.

The middle-aged farmer stood calmly at the center of the court, a faint smile resting on his weathered face. He had watched everything unfold, the grief, the fury, the mercy with the patience of a man long accustomed to the rhythms of loss and renewal.

"Honestly," he said at last, scratching the back of his head, "I find myself lacking grand wishes... and I have no great ambitions either."

A few soft chuckles rippled through the crowd.

"Before all this," he continued, "I was just a farmer. I tilled the land. The food grown from my fields fed many families, and that alone brought me joy."

His smile softened.

"But now, all of that is gone. The land still waits to be worked," he said, voice steady, "but the mouths it once fed are no longer there."

Silence followed.

"I am content with how things have turned out today," he said gently. "So forgive me, everyone, if I've ruined the fun or failed to meet expectations."

He bowed, deeply, sincerely to the court.

For a moment, it seemed as though the crowd might respond with applause or murmurs of reassurance.

They never got the chance.

Xerosis spoke.

Her voice cut cleanly through the air, absolute.

"Justice must be sought."

All sound died.

She turned her gaze upon the farmer.

"Whether you desire it or not," she continued, "justice is owed. Speak of what you believe is deserved for you."

The farmer stood quietly for a moment after Xerosis spoke.

He did not feel threatened by her words. There was no cruelty in them, only certainty. Justice, in this place, was not something one could decline out of humility. It was a balance that had to be answered.

He let out a small breath and nodded.

"I understand," he said simply.

He lifted his head and looked around the court, not just at the judges or the godlings, but at the people in the stands. Commoners. Nobles. Survivors.

"Well then," he continued, voice calm and clear, "if I must speak of justice, I suppose I should speak honestly."

He placed his hands behind his back.

"I don't wish for power," he said. "I don't wish for knowledge beyond my reach, and I don't wish for vengeance. I've lived long enough to know those things grow heavy in a man's hands."

A few heads nodded.

"What I loved was simple," the farmer went on. "Working the land. Watching seeds grow into something that could keep others alive. There's a quiet pride in knowing your hands helped someone see another day."

His gaze lowered briefly.

"The land is still there. The soil wasn't destroyed. It can be worked again." He looked up. "But the people it once fed are gone. That is a loss no justice can truly mend."

He paused, choosing his words with care.

"So my wish is this," he said at last. "Help me return to the land. Let me farm again, but not just for myself."

Murmurs stirred.

"I ask for the means to restore my fields and the freedom to tend them without burden. Let what I grow be given freely to those who have lost their homes, their families, their strength."

His voice did not rise, yet it carried.

"Let my justice be the chance to continue feeding the living."

He bowed his head once more.

"That is enough for me."

The court fell silent in quiet understanding.

In a room where power, vengeance, and destiny had been weighed, the farmer's wish stood grounded and unadorned.

And somehow, it felt complete.

The godlings inclined their heads, one after another, in quiet agreement with the farmer's wish.

There was no hesitation this time.

As they looked upon him more closely, something familiar stirred among them. In his calm resolve, in the way he spoke of land not as property but as responsibility, he reminded them of a peculiar order among their own kind, an eccentric, misunderstood group.

The druids.

Those who found purpose not in dominion or destruction, but in cycles. In growth, decay, and renewal. The godlings knew them well, and many among the druids would have felt unrestrained joy upon hearing a human speak with such intent.

For a fleeting moment, temptation arose.

They could guide him. Whisper a name. Set him upon a path that would deepen his bond with the land beyond mortal limits.

But the thought was dismissed.

Today was not a day for more guiding hands.

They had already reached into mortal lives again and again, shaping futures, offering knowledge, forging bonds that would echo far beyond this court. To do more now would feel wrong. Excessive. As though they were attempting to purchase absolution, to drown the weight of what they had committed beneath acts of generosity.

And that, they would not do.

Justice was not indulgence.

So they remained silent.

They would grant what the farmer had asked for no more, no less. The restoration of his fields. The means to work the land again. The freedom to feed those who yet lived.

If fate wished to lead him further, toward druids, toward deeper truths, then that path would open in its own time.

For now, they chose restraint.

And in that restraint, there was a quiet respect.

Chapter 738:

The last of the wishes had been spoken. The last of the wronged had been heard.

No cries of protest rose to challenge the verdict, no unfinished pleas clung to the air in desperation. Even grief, heavy and earned had settled into stillness, no longer sharp enough to wound, no longer loud enough to demand more. It remained, but it rested.

Then the court felt her.

Xerosis' presence did not arrive with sound or light, nor with any shift that mortal senses could name. Yet it spread through the chamber all the same, an undeniable pressure that tightened the breath and steadied the heart in equal measure. Though unseen, she was unmistakable. The stone beneath their feet seemed to remember her. The air itself grew attentive.

Her gaze moved across the assembled. The victims stood before her, whole in spirit if not in form. Scars remained. Loss remained. Yet their wills were unbroken, their voices uncoerced.

They had spoken not from fear, nor from false hope, but from choice. Their justice had not been perfect, no justice ever was but it had been honest, and it had been freely given.

Xerosis lingered on them for a moment longer, in acknowledgment.

Then her attention shifted.

The godlings stood silent beneath her unseen regard. Once elevated beyond consequence, once shielded by divinity and distance, they now bore the weight of what they had done without resistance. They had accepted their sentence as those who understood at last the cost of their actions.

To walk as mortals, to labor beneath the slow tyranny of time. To live, to age, to fail and to remember their failure.

The punishment had been rendered with the knowledge of all who attended the court. No deception lingered. No doubt remained as to its intent.

At last, Xerosis spoke.

Her voice was measured, neither distant nor kind, carrying no echo beyond the moment it occupied. "Justice has been sought," she said.

"Justice has been given."

No accusation followed, no praise.

"The wronged are satisfied. The offenders have received what they have earned. This court has no further claim upon this matter."

With those words, the immense weight that had pressed upon the hall for so long began to lift. Breath returned. The court, which had stood frozen beneath judgment, was once more allowed to exist.

And just as suddenly as it had come, Xerosis presence receded.

It was not a departure one could follow with the eyes. There was no flash of light, no tear in the air, no echo of divinity withdrawing from the world. Simply, she was no longer there.

The space Xerosis had occupied felt emptier, yet unmistakably lighter, as though a vast pressure had been lifted from every chest in the chamber. Breath came easier. Spines straightened without anyone realizing they had been bent.

Then the four judges followed.

The radiance that had once outlined them began to dim, brilliance folding inward upon itself like a flame deprived of air. The veils that had obscured their faces were gone, leaving them exposed to the court at last. Eyes that had once glowed with borrowed divinity dulled into mortal hues, brown, grey, blue colors that belonged to time and decay.

What remained were figures once more bound to shape, to flesh, to the slow and inevitable passage of years.

They had returned to their normal state.

Mortal enough.

For a fleeting moment, each judge felt the loss keenly, the absence of that ethereal elevation, that sensation of floating above all things, of seeing the court not from within it, but over it. To stand so close to a goddess, to feel divinity brush against their existence, had been intoxicating. A part of them wished it had lasted longer.

But longing did not absolve duty.

There was still a task to complete.

Together, they lifted their wooden mallets once more. No voice rose in protest. No power moved to still their hands. The court, having witnessed judgment in its highest form, now accepted its ending in silence.

The mallet fell.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

The sound was plain and final.

With that, the court was formally ended.

The judges were the first to depart. The whole court watched in silence as the four judges departed, their footsteps unhurried, their backs unbowed. No one spoke. No one moved. It felt improper to do so, as though sound itself might fracture the fragile stillness left behind.

With their departure came another change.

The unseen field radiating from Xerosis statue, ever-present, unquestioned was lifted.

The sensation was immediate.

Every superpowered individual in attendance felt it at once: mana, long suppressed and disciplined beneath divine restraint, surged back through veins and channels like a flood released from a dam. Breath caught. Muscles tensed. A few staggered, unprepared for the sudden return of their full strength.

The effect was visible.

A biological field unique to higher lifeforms bled outward from these individuals, subtle to the eye, yet unmistakable in presence. Power rolled off them in waves, instinctive and uncontrolled in those first moments. Whispers rippled through the hall as many realized, perhaps for the first time, that the person seated beside them was no mere citizen, but someone of status... of danger.

Space was created almost instantly.

Common folk shifted away, chairs scraping softly against stone as distance formed like a reflex. The fear was not loud, but it was real.

The accused godlings felt none this rush of power.

For the first time in their existence, they stood untouched by that rising tide of power. No resonance answered the surge around them. No mana stirred in response.

They felt it then.

Mortality.

Not as an idea. Not as a sentence spoken in court. But as a living truth pressing against their skin.

The sensation of being seen, truly scanned by beings far stronger than themselves sent a chill down their spines. Instinct screamed to respond, to counter, to assert presence.

They could do nothing.

Thankfully, they were not alone.

Family members and loyal friends reacted quickly, extending small protective fields, barriers that hide them, enough to soften the oppressive attention bearing down upon them.

The fourteen godlings exchanged glances.

They could feel it now, weakness threading through their veins, unfamiliar and terrifying. The absence of power was like a wound that had yet to scar over.

This was a life they would have to endure.

A century, or perhaps more.

Time, no longer an abstract concept, stretched before them like a slow, unyielding road.

And for the first time, they understood exactly how long that would feel.

Amid the surging sensations and overlapping waves of power overtaking the court, one presence quietly vanished.

No alarm was raised. No sense reached for him and found absence. In a place saturated with mana and attention, Erik simply slipped between notice and meaning.

Far from the court grounds, high above the world, he sat suspended in the open sky, legs crossed, posture relaxed, eyes distant with thought. The wind passed through him without resistance, clouds drifting lazily below as if the world itself had momentarily forgotten he was there.

When Erik had chosen to attend the court, justice had never been his only purpose.

There had been another goal in mind. One that, in another age, should have already been accomplished, if there were still capable hands in the kingdom, if leadership had not rotted away until only cursed beings and survivors remained to shoulder impossible burdens.

At the beginning of all this, his intent had been simple in concept, in execution: separate the still-normal humans from the cursed, relocate them to a place untouched by corruption, and hold the line until the curses could be dealt with.

But that plan had required manpower. Soldiers. Infrastructure. Stability.

Things he did not have.

Now, however, circumstances had changed.

Erik exhaled slowly.

If he could not move the people with what he previously had. This time, he would act alone.

Rather than relocation, he would raise a magical shield, vast in scale, precise in design, one that would encompass every remaining human settlement within his kingdom. A barrier not merely of force, but of exclusion. Curses would find no purchase upon it. Their influence would slide away, unable to take root.

But a shield alone was not enough.

People were unpredictable. Fear and emotion drove them to flee safety just as often as danger.

So Erik planned a second layer.

A subtle one.

A confusing field woven into the boundary of the barrier, not a command, not domination, but a persistent unease. A gentle wrongness that would stir whenever someone approached the edge. Thoughts would tangle. Resolve would soften. The desire to leave would fade into hesitation, then into indifference.

Those within would still choose to stay.

They simply would not want to go.

It was not kind but cruel, but it was mostly a necessity.

Until the curse problem was resolved, until the world was safe again, this was the only way he could guarantee their survival.

High above the sky, Erik opened his eyes.

The decision had already been made.

Chapter 739

Now, all that remained was to reshape the land to obey it.

As for how to deal with the curses themselves, Erik believed he had found a method.

The flaw was not in the theory.

It was in how to execute it, how to bring the theory to life and guarantee it working.

Long ago, Erik had discovered that his elven blood granted him a rare resistance to cursed energy. It did not merely lessen its effects; in certain circumstances, it allowed him to touch it, to endure its presence without being twisted by it. On rare occasions, he had even found himself able to make use of that energy without suffering corruption.

That discovery had not remained his alone.

His children, his offspring had inherited the elven bloodline from him. Unknowingly, they became proof of his hypothesis. So far, none among his family had succumbed to the curse's influence. No madness. No loss of self.

Encouraged and wary Erik began introducing cursed energy to them without their consent in a controlled measures. Carefully. Gradually.

Just as he had suspected, its effects were diminished.

Unlike him, they could not yet manipulate cursed energy. It remained inert within them, resistant to command. But it also did not rot them from within.

Instead, Erik observed something unexpected.

The cursed energy was changing them.

Not corrupting, refining.

It flowed through their elven blood, stripping away weakness, strengthening what lay dormant. Their appearances began to shift subtly: sharper features, altered hues of hair and eye, the human aspects of them growing indistinct, blurred by something older and less fragile.

They were not becoming monsters.

They were becoming less human.

And stronger for it.

With this realization, Erik found himself at an impasse.

If elven blood could endure cursed energy, if it could adapt, purify, and stabilize it then the solution was clear in principle and terrifying in scope: the bloodline itself would have to change.

Not just for his family.

For his people.

For those already twisted by cursed energy, and for the still-normal folk standing on the brink of it.

If he could find a way to alter the bloodline on a large enough scale, safely, deliberately then those already afflicted might recover on their own. The curse would lose its hold. The unrestrained impulses it induced would no longer dominate them

Erik stared into the open sky, the enormity of the task settling in his chest.

The method existed.

The path did not.

And whatever solution he chose next would decide whether his people survived as themselves... or as something entirely new.

As for Siren... since her departure, Erik found his body betraying him.

It ached for her presence.

His dreams filled with fragments of her, glances exchanged, words left unsaid, the brief moments they had shared replaying themselves with cruel clarity. Every instinct urged him to find her again, to close the distance that now felt far greater than it should have been.

And he hated himself for it.

He knew better. Siren was not merely a complication, she was a problem unto herself. Entangling with her now would endanger more than just his resolve.

With a sharp breath, Erik shook his thoughts loose.

Desire had no place here.

Breaking the sound barrier, he vanished into the distance in a violent rush of displaced air. The sky screamed briefly in protest before falling silent once more.

There was too much to do.

People to save, experiments to conduct. Research that could not wait. Time was the one resource he could not afford to waste.

Back at the court, the crowd slowly began to thin.

Yet before each figure departed, whether noble, superpowered, or common-born they paused before the statue of Xerosis. Some bowed. Some placed a hand over their heart. Others simply stood in silence for a moment longer than necessary.

Respect was paid in many forms.

It was strange, the sense of safety the goddess inspired. Even when their power had been suppressed, none of them had felt threatened. No one had stood on guard. No hand had hovered near a weapon.

Somehow, they had known.

Under her gaze, harm would not be allowed.

And the way her court had been conducted left a lasting mark, especially upon the humans present. Many looked upon Xerosis now with something new, something deeper than reverence or fear.

Trust.

At no point during the proceedings had the goddess spoken in favor of the godlings, nor had she sided with humanity. She had not guided testimony, nor steered emotion.

She had listened.

Every voice had been heard before judgment was rendered. Every grievance weighed without haste, without bias.

Xerosis had stood not as a ruler defending her kind, nor as a protector favoring the weak but as a silent observer until the moment action was required.

And when she spoke, the matter was settled.

The manner in which the court had been handled left many of those watching with an emotion they had not expected.

Envy.

They found themselves wishing it had been them standing among the wronged. Wishing they had been the victims whose voices had carried such undeniable weight.

Through Xerosis, those victims had transcended the fragile category of common folk. Even the little girl, once insignificant in the eyes of the world had stood equal beneath the goddess gaze. Their suffering had been acknowledged, their words made law, their existence affirmed in a way few ever experienced.

They would walk out of this court changed forever, elevated.

It was a transformation the onlookers knew would likely never be afforded to them. For most common folk, lives were lived quietly and ended quietly, injustice swallowed and forgotten.

And so their respect for Xerosis was genuine.

They bowed not out of fear, nor blind worship, but hope, hope that if their time ever came, the goddess would judge as rightly as she had today.

The nobles felt much the same.

Despite their wealth and influence, they too offered sincere respect to Xerosis and her court. They knew the truth of what they had done: they had played a dangerous hand, deliberately testing the goddess, probing to see whether divinity would once again favor its own.

She had answered them.

Justice, she proved, did not belong solely to godlings. It was not the privilege of the ascended alone. It extended to humanity as well.

They could not say the same of the other ascended gods.

But now they knew something vital, some gods cared. Some divinity still reached downward, rather than only outward or above.

As for whether this would be the last time they tested a goddess... they were not so naive.

Time changed everything.

A goddess who was just today might not remain so tomorrow. Power, after all, had a way of reshaping even the most principled of beings.

So they would continue to test her.

And the others.

Not out of malice, nor rebellion but necessity. To ensure safety in a world they were to share with godlings, they needed proof again and again that justice would not drift beyond their reach.

Faith alone was not enough, vigilance was needed.

They could hardly be blamed for their caution.

Humans were the only existence in this world without a direct connection to either the Origin Gods or the Ascended. No divine lineage bound them. No patron god claimed them as their own. It was difficult to feel safe in a world shaped by divinity when humanity stood alone, unclaimed, unshielded.

Until this world gained a human god or gods they had no choice but to keep testing the waters.

To ensure that their existence, fragile and finite, was taken into account alongside beings of far greater power.

This court had taught them much.

Next time, they would be even more prepared. They now understood the contours of such trials, the limits of godling authority, and the ways in which justice could be claimed even when standing against the ascended. Knowledge, once gained, could not be unlearned.

And they would remember.

As for the victims, their existence had been elevated to the highest standing among all human kingdoms of the western continent. What they carried now, knowledge gained through judgment, gifts bestowed through divine recognition was something every kingdom desired a share of.

But this was not something to be seized.

Rushing would only invite resistance.

Instead, the kingdoms would proceed with patience, careful diplomacy, and deliberate humility. They would need to prove they stood with the victims, not against them, that they sought cooperation, not exploitation, if those gifts and truths were ever to be shared freely.

Across the hall, a quieter moment unfolded.

The lawyers, both human and godling exchanged handshakes and measured congratulations. Despite having stood on opposite sides of the court, there was no bitterness between them. In the end, they had all served the same authority.

They had spoken under the same law. They had pleaded beneath the same gaze.

They were, all of them, servants of the goddess Xerosis.

And as everything was done, justice had left no one with cause to contest its outcome.

Chapter 740

The human lawyer who had spoken in defense of the harpy godling approached her as the hall continued to empty. He stopped a respectful distance away and extended his hand.

The female harpy godling studied it for a brief moment before accepting the gesture.

"Well done today," she said, her voice calm, measured.

The human lawyer let out a quiet laugh, scratching the back of his head. "I wouldn't say that. Our side didn't do much once you began to speak. You controlled the court the moment you opened your mouth."

At his words, the godling smiled, faint, knowing.

"Your people were too hasty," she replied. "Too eager. Even before the Goddess' law had been fully invoked, you took it personally. You wanted us to lose." Her grip tightened slightly before relaxing. "That forced my hand. I played the only move left to me."

The human lawyer's smile faded.

"Yes... we were," he admitted. "The godlings were the ones who first introduced us to the Goddess' law and faith. We wanted to prove ourselves—to you, and to our own people. To show them they were in capable hands." He exhaled slowly. "But we were too eager. We left gaps, and you took advantage of them."

He met her gaze again, not resentful only thoughtful.

"That lesson," he added quietly, "won't be forgotten."

The harpy godling inclined her head slightly in acknowledgment.

"Good," she said. "The godlings will see to it that this never happens again"

Silence lingered between them before the human lawyer spoke again.

"Do you think he'll lose the Goddess' favor?" he asked.

Both of them turned their attention to a solitary figure seated apart from the remaining crowd, someone uninvolved in the quiet exchanges around him, staring absentmindedly at the statue of Xerosis as if searching for an answer that would not come.

The female harpy godling shook her head slowly.

"That is between him and the Goddess," she said. "Personally, I would like to believe he was simply too passionate. That he meant no ill will by his words or actions."

The human lawyer glanced back at her. "I envy the godlings," he admitted. "The way you can look at things so cleanly. Even when you are wrong, you stand... right."

Her expression turned serious, wings settling slightly at her sides.

"Humans will understand that someday," she replied. "It may come sooner than either of us expects. And if it does..." Her gaze met his steadily. "I hope to see you again in court."

The human lawyer smiled at that. He stepped closer, lowering his voice.

"If that happens," he said, "may I ask a favor of you?"

The harpy godling raised a brow, curiosity flickering across her features.

"And what would that be?"

He hesitated.

It showed in the way his posture stiffened, in the brief pause where courage wrestled with propriety. Then, finally, he spoke.

"A date," he said simply. "I would like to take you out on a date."

The words took the female godling by surprise. Her brow rose as she turned her gaze on the human standing before her. For a moment, she studied him closely, noting the fire in his eyes, the way he held himself despite the tremor in his voice. Then a small, knowing smile curved her beak.

She extended a hand, lightly pointing it to his chest. "First... live long enough to even see me again," she said.

Without waiting for a response, her figure pivoted gracefully, and she trotted off. Wings tucked slightly, hips swaying with effortless poise, she moved with the natural elegance of a being who had always been untouchable.

The human lawyer remained frozen, not hearing the words of refusal or denial he had braced for. Shock held him in place as he watched her leave, the sight of her disappearing form etching itself into his mind.

Then, unable to restrain himself, he shouted, voice carrying across the nearly empty court. "Then that isn't a no, then?!"

No response came, and none was needed. His fist clenched at his side. A spark of determination ignited in him.

"Let's do this!" he bellowed, turning to his fellow human lawyers. Ambition radiated from his every movement. He would not only survive long enough to see her again, he would rise far above his current station. His place in this world would be stronger, unshakable, worthy of standing before a godling on equal footing.

Behind him, the female godling slowed her pace just enough to hear his shout. A faint tilt of her head, barely noticeable, betrayed her curiosity. "Why had I responded that way?" she wondered. There had been something in his hesitation, the shaking vulnerability in his voice, that had stirred her, excited her, in a way she had not expected. That subtle bravery, that raw honesty... it had prompted her reaction more than she cared to admit.

Off in the distance, she could hear the echo of human voices, laughter, and the rush of ambition, and a small part of her smiled softly. Perhaps, before they met again, he would grow stronger, more composed, worthy of the chance she might yet give him. If he lived, and if time had not dulled the fire she had glimpsed in him, she would not mind, no, she might even welcome the opportunity to see just how far such a brave human could go.

And for now, that was enough.

A few days passed after the court came to its end, and with it, any hope of containing what had transpired vanished entirely.

The tale spread like a plague.

Within days, the whole of the Western Continent had heard of the court of the goddess who presided unseen, of godlings made mortal, of common victims who had stood equal beneath divine judgment. No two retellings were identical. Some embroidered the truth with fear, others with reverence, a few with outright invention.

Yet beneath the distortions, a clear shape emerged.

Everyone could deduce what had truly happened.

Justice had been enacted.

Godlings had been judged.

And humanity had been heard.

From the Western Continent, the story did not slow, it expanded.

Merchants from distant lands, who had known of the court but been unable to attend, devoured every rumor they could find. They listened in taverns, at docks, in counting halls and caravansaries. More importantly, they carried those stories with them across seas, through deserts, over mountain passes bringing the news home to their own continents.

Within weeks, the tale of the court had spread across the world of Nana.

Even the Southern Continent heard of it.

Their reaction, however, differed greatly from the rest.

Where others felt awe or cautious hope, the South felt unease.

It was not too long ago they were holding these godlings "prisoners", restrained not through divine law, but through politics. Surveillance, veiled threats, and imperial authority. They had even been subtly nodding these godlings to take action.

Now, listening to the accounts from the West, they realized something deeply unsettling.

The godlings had been reasonable all along. It dawned on them just how close they had come to catastrophe. Had those godlings chosen to act as the offenders in the court had, the South might have suffered atrocities beyond measure. Instead, they had endured political chains with patience, watching the empire as one might watch mischievous children who did not yet understand the weight of their own authority.

That realization reframed countless memories. The smiles, the indulgent looks and the calm acceptance of restriction. They truly were amusement to these godlings.

Amid all of this, the temples of Xerosis saw unprecedented growth.

The influx was sudden and overwhelming. In a matter of weeks, her following swelled beyond expectation so much so that it eclipsed even the worship of Tide, whose favor recently, many has sought in hopes of earning his grace or receiving his gifts.

Altars were raised in haste. Statues carved overnight. Prayers spoken by mouths that had only recently learned her name.

From the outside, it was a triumph.

From Xerosis' perspective, it was a threat.

Faith was not a simple offering. It was weight, substance, and influence and most of those now directing it toward her knew nothing of her doctrine. They did not worship justice, balance, or restraint. They worshipped outcomes. Safety. Retribution. Power borrowed through reverence.

Their reasons were selfish.

And their faith was impure.

The energy poured into her realm in uncontrolled torrents, thick with expectation and desperation. It pressed against the foundations she had spent last decades refining, threatening to warp what she had carefully shaped.

Her realm was alive with activity.

Xerosis moved through it constantly, cold focus holding back unease as she worked alongside the Arch-Curse, the Tyrannical Juggernaut. Together, they labored to refine and filter the excess faith energy flooding in, stripping away its distortions, its demands, its attempts to imprint mortal desire onto divine form.

It was slow. Painfully slow.

She felt the temptation keenly.

A single response, a whisper answered, a prayer fulfilled would help anchor and refine the incoming faith. Mortals would feel acknowledged. Their devotion would stabilize, becoming easier to process.