

Guardian gods 281

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Mahu's expression softened slightly, the gravity of Crepuscular's words cutting through her apathy. She understood now that the situation was far more dire than she had realized. "So, what are you suggesting?" she asked, her tone cautious.

"I suggest we allow our children to ascend," Crepuscular replied, his voice firm. "Let them take over the more menial tasks—the day-to-day responsibilities that have become overwhelming in the absence of Ikenga and Keles. We need to focus our attention on the real threat: our counterparts. If they gain a foothold in our world, it won't just be the mortals who suffer. Everything we've built, everything we've protected, could be destroyed."

Jaws nodded in agreement, his mind already racing with the implications. "Crepuscular's right. We can't continue to divide our attention. Our children are capable—strong, wise, and ready for the challenge. By ascending, they can maintain the balance within our world, handling the issues that have arisen in our siblings' absence. Meanwhile, we must turn our focus to the threat from the other side."

Mahu sighed, the weight of the decision pressing down on her. But she knew there was no other choice. "Very well," she conceded. "Let our children ascend. But we must make sure they understand the seriousness of their new roles. They must be prepared for the challenges ahead. Thankfully, over the years, we have breached the problem of communication."

Crepuscular placed a reassuring hand on Mahu's shoulder. "We will guide them, Mahu. Together, we'll prepare them for the task. But we must act quickly. The longer we wait, the more time our counterparts have to exploit our weakness."

While the gods were adjusting and preparing for the ascension of the demigods, down in the abyss, Ikenga and Keles, since their meeting with Zarvok, had been taking it easy, watching and instructing Phantom from behind the scenes.

Back at the outpost of the gargoyles, a whole new sight could be seen as the entire place underwent a huge transformation. New buildings and structures were either under construction or already completed.

An unusual sight could be observed as gargoyles, regardless of their strength or status, worked together to build. Accompanying some of the gargoyles were captured hellhounds. The hellhounds, left without a leader after their previous one met an unfortunate end, were seized as an opportunity by the gargoyles.

A structure different from the others could be seen. Inside this structure was a room with a throne-like seat where a mutant gargoyle sat. Seated around the mutant gargoyle were other normal gargoyles, laying out reports and discussing new strategies.

Among the gathered gargoyles was an inconspicuous one with a yellow glow in its eyes, noticeable only if observed closely. This was Phantom, who had blended in well with the other gargoyles.

After the incident in the valley, where they faced the suppression of the demon kings, many demons retreated, their hearts filled with resentment.

Seeing this moment of weakness, Phantom seized the opportunity to make a bold move. A week after the valley incident, he led his small mutant army to the territory of the hellhounds.

The mutant army was initially frightened, but as the battle progressed and they realized how weak the hellhounds were, they grew bolder. This was because Phantom, from behind the scenes, was interfering with the hounds, limiting their fighting abilities and giving the mutants a fighting chance.

During the fight, Phantom kept a close eye on each mutant gargoyle. One, in particular, caught his attention. Rather than getting carried away by their easy victories, this mutant became more cautious, using its brethren to test the waters before moving in for the kill.

Phantom had no trouble dealing with the hellhound leader, marking the end of the fight as the remaining hellhounds tried to flee, only to find themselves encircled by the gargoyles.

Phantom gave the order for the gargoyles to feast on the corpses of the fallen hounds, and he gave the corpse of the hellhound leader to the gargoyle he found interesting.

This continued for another month, as Phantom led the mutant gargoyles to target other abyssal creatures, feeding on their flesh and souls to grow stronger.

With the innate abilities of the demons, it didn't take long for them to grow "as strong as Phantom." The current Phantom was posing as a third-stage gargoyle, so when the mutants reached that stage, they believed they were already as strong as their leader.

Phantom noticed the changes in the mutants but didn't mind, as he had a card to play. He did so when the mutants all watched, wide-eyed, as Phantom, in his gargoyle form, knelt before a mutant gargoyle sitting atop a huge hellhound.

The mutant gargoyle showed no expression, as if expecting Phantom to kneel, but the smirk at the edge of its lips revealed its satisfaction.

As Phantom knelt before the mutant gargoyle, the atmosphere in the area shifted. The other mutants, initially shocked by Phantom's display of submission, began to murmur among themselves. This unexpected act by their leader—the one who had guided them to power—sent ripples of confusion and curiosity through the ranks.

The mutant gargoyle on the hellhound, now clearly the one in command, let the silence stretch for a few moments, savoring the tension that hung in the air. Its smirk grew slightly wider, revealing jagged teeth as it surveyed the assembled gargoyles.

"So, it seems the time has come for a new order. Phantom, the one who led you all to this strength, now bows to me. Do any of you dare challenge this?"

The mutants shifted uneasily, exchanging glances. Some of the more ambitious ones tightened their fists, the surge of newfound power tempting them to test their might. But Phantom's sudden submission, coupled with the unwavering confidence radiating from the mutant leader, held them in check.

One of the mutants, a particularly large and brutish gargoyle, stepped forward, emboldened by the strength coursing through its veins.

"And what makes you so certain we won't just tear you apart and take control ourselves? We've grown strong—strong enough to crush anything in our path, even you!"

The mutant leader's eyes flashed dangerously, yet he remained seated, exuding an air of calm authority. Phantom, still kneeling, tilted his head slightly to observe the confrontation, a faint smile playing on his lips.

The new mutant leader, Malzor, surveyed the scene with cold, calculating eyes before a heavy pressure emanated from him, spreading across the area and reaching every gathered mutant gargoyle.

The brutish gargoyle took a step back, its eyes widening in horror as it realized the truth. "You're in the fourth stage," it gasped.

Without directly addressing the brute, Malzor spoke. "You've grown strong, yes. But strength without strategy is nothing more than a fool's errand. Do you really think Phantom would bow to someone weaker than himself? There are powers in the abyss beyond brute force, and I aim to be one of them. Challenge me, and you'll learn the hard way why I sit on this throne."

The brutish mutant hesitated, the weight of Malzor's words sinking in. It glanced at Phantom, who remained unmoved, his loyalty apparently unquestionable. The other mutants watched intently, tension palpable as they awaited the brutish gargoyle's next move.

Finally, the brutish gargoyle took a step back, snarling in frustration but unwilling to challenge the leader's authority directly.

Phantom slowly rose from his kneeling position, standing beside the mutant leader with an air of quiet confidence. He addressed the assembled mutants. "You've tasted power, but there's more to gain. Follow us, and we'll lead you to true dominance over the abyss. This is just the beginning."

Malzor nodded, clearly pleased with Phantom's support. "From this moment on, we are no longer just a pack of mutants. We are an army, and together, we will carve out our place in this layer—no matter who stands in our way."

After making his declaration, Malzor gestured for Phantom to accompany him. Sitting atop the hellhound, Malzor led the way, with Phantom floating beside him, his wings keeping him aloft.

"This first step is taken. Now, we must bring those at the outpost under our banner," Malzor said to Phantom, who nodded in agreement but remained silent.

As Phantom floated beside Malzor, the tension between them was palpable, yet it was tempered by a mutual understanding that had deepened since their initial alliance. Malzor, still wary but increasingly intrigued by Phantom's loyalty, halted his hellhound and turned to him with a question that had been gnawing at him for some time.

"Why are you doing all this, Phantom? You had every opportunity to advance to the fourth stage, to solidify your power and rule. Yet, you hold back and submit to me. Why?"

Phantom, still playing his role, allowed his wings to beat slowly as he considered his response. "Because I see something in you, Malzor—something that has the potential to elevate our race beyond mere survival in this abyss. I believe you can lead us to a new era, one where we don't just exist but dominate."

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Malzor's eyes narrowed, trying to gauge the sincerity behind Phantom's words. There was something in the way Phantom spoke, a conviction that was hard to ignore.

When Phantom first noticed Malzor's exceptional behavior, he began subtly and gradually informing him about the demon kings and how they rose to their strength and status.

"And what makes you so certain? What do you see in me that you don't see in yourself?"

Phantom allowed a brief smile to flicker across his lips before it vanished as quickly as it appeared. He knew he had to be careful, to reveal just enough to convince Malzor without betraying his true intentions.

"It's not about what I lack, but what you possess. You have the drive, the ambition, and the charisma to unify our kind in a way that few others can. But more than that, you have the potential to learn and adapt, to see beyond the immediate struggle for power and recognize the long game."

As Malzor's expression softened slightly, Phantom seized the opportunity to plant the seeds he had been carefully cultivating.

"In the abyss, where power is the only currency, individual strength can only take you so far. You might rise quickly, but you'll be alone, and alone, you'll be overwhelmed. But if you gather those around you, if you lead them with a vision—like the demon kings and the spider queen did—you'll create a force that can't be easily toppled."

Malzor listened intently, his earlier suspicion giving way to a contemplative silence. Phantom continued, sensing that he had Malzor's full attention.

"Look at the demon king, Malzor. They didn't rise to power by simply crushing those around them—they unified their kind, spreading the idea that the success of one is the success of all. Their armies are not just made up of loyal followers, but of their own race, who see the benefit of collective strength. By aligning their goals, they've turned themselves into the most formidable forces in the abyss."

Phantom paused, letting his words sink in. He could see the wheels turning in Malzor's mind, the slow realization that there was more to power than brute strength.

"If you continue to see your brethren as rivals, you'll only limit your own growth. But if you see them as assets—those who can push you higher—you'll not only strengthen yourself but also create a legacy that will endure."

Malzor's gaze drifted over the horizon, his mind now contemplating the possibilities that Phantom had laid before him. The idea of transforming his rivals into allies, of using their collective strength to elevate his own status, was enticing. It was a perspective he hadn't fully considered before, but now, it seemed like the key to his ultimate goal.

With this in mind as he new goal, Malzor led his new army together with phantom back to their outpost. As Malzor led his new mutant army back to the outpost, Phantom floated silently beside him, observing the shift in Malzor's demeanor. The newfound determination in Malzor's eyes indicated that Phantom's words had taken root, and now the gargoyle leader was fully committed to his new vision of power through unity.

When they arrived at the outpost, the regular gargoyles stared in disbelief at the approaching mutants. Shock quickly turned into laughter and ridicule, their voices echoing through the stone corridors.

"Look at this! A bunch of weaklings and freaks think they can march in here with swag, To what? claim our territory?" A gargoyle mocked as he pointed at them.

Another Gargoyle laughing "Pathetic! Go back to cooking our meal like before else we will crush you like the vermin you are!"

Phantom and Malzor exchanged a brief, knowing glance. Neither reacted to the taunts, their expressions remaining calm and unbothered. The laughter and jeers continued until Malzor, with a single, deliberate motion, raised his hand. The gesture was subtle, but its effect was immediate.

Malzor's voice was cold and commanding "Silence."

With that, his small mutant army surged forward, descending upon the outpost with brutal efficiency. The regular gargoyles, caught off guard by the sudden attack, scrambled to defend themselves. But despite their individual strength, they were no match for the mutants who fought as a cohesive unit.

"Fight back! Don't let these mutants overpower us!"

But the regular gargoyles found themselves overwhelmed. Each time one tried to assert dominance, another mutant would intervene, working in perfect tandem with their comrades. The mutants' movements were coordinated, their strikes precise, and their tactics flawless—a stark contrast to the disjointed and chaotic efforts of the outpost's defenders.

As the battle raged, Phantom hovered just above the fray, his sharp eyes scanning the battlefield. He observed how the regular gargoyles fought individually, each trying to prove their superiority without regard for the others. This was exactly what he had warned Malzor about—strength without unity was nothing but a fleeting advantage.

Phantom murmuring to himself "Just as I expected..."

Meanwhile, Malzor moved through the battlefield with purpose, his presence alone commanding attention. He didn't need to engage directly; his army did the work, overpowering the outpost's defenders with relative ease.

When the last of the resistance was crushed, Malzor signaled his mutants to halt. They obeyed instantly, stepping back from their fallen foes. The outpost was littered with the defeated, many of whom groaned in pain, their pride wounded more than their bodies.

Malzor began addressing the defeated gargoyles "Listen well. Today, you've seen the strength that unity brings. We could have killed you all, but I have other plans. Those of you willing to submit, to join us, will be spared. Together, we will be stronger than any of us could be alone."

The remaining gargoyles, now silent and humbled, exchanged uncertain glances. They were defeated but still found it hard to listen to a mutant, especially one who used to be their servant.

A defiant Gargoyle spitting blood, still resisting, spoke out "I'll never bow to a mutant freak like you!"

Malzor's eyes narrowed. With a swift motion, he dispatched the defiant gargoyle, his expression unchanging as he wiped the blood from his claws.

"Let this be a lesson. Defiance will be met with death. But those who stand with us will rise."

The rest of the gargoyles quickly lowered. Their heads bowed, their defiance broken. Some still held their heads high, but these were quickly dealt with—their bodies divided and shared among the mutants and other gargoyles. Having witnessed Malzor's power, they now had little choice but to follow.

Phantom landed beside Malzor, speaking quietly, "Well done. They're beginning to see the truth in your leadership. Now, we build them up, train them to fight as one. With every battle, they'll grow stronger, more loyal, until no one in the abyss can stand against us."

Malzor nodded, his gaze sweeping over his newly acquired army. The ridicule and laughter that once filled the air were gone, replaced by respect and fear. He could feel the power he had been seeking, the influence that would only grow as more gargoyles joined his cause.

As Malzor settled into his role as the leader of the gargoyles, the outpost began to transform. New buildings rose from the desolate landscape, and gargoyles, once divided by rivalry, now worked together with a shared purpose. The change was palpable, not just in the physical structures but in the very atmosphere of the place. The outpost, once a chaotic gathering of individuals, was evolving into a well-organized and disciplined stronghold.

However, it wasn't long before Ikenga, Keles, and Phantom noticed something strange about the passage of time in the abyss. What seemed like mere days would stretch into weeks, forcing them to adjust to this irregular flow.

After Malzor ascended to his new throne as the undisputed leader of the gargoyles, both he and Phantom knew that their current forces were insufficient. The gargoyles they had rallied were strong, but they needed more—many more—to form a complete and formidable army.

It was during this time that a disturbing secret was revealed to Phantom and the two gods who watched over him. The population of demons in the abyss had always been a mystery. While it was known that demons rarely mated or formed lasting bonds, the question of how their numbers continued to grow had remained unanswered—until now. This knowledge, while a secret to the gods and Phantom, was no secret among the demons themselves.

One day, as Malzor and Phantom explored the depths of their layer, they came upon the River Styx, a dark, churning body of water that ran through the abyss. The river's black waters seemed to pulse with a malevolent energy, and as they watched, they witnessed something horrifying.

Along the riverbank, with each wave that lapped against the shore, millions of demon eggs were pushed onto the land. The sight was both mesmerizing and grotesque as these eggs, varying in size and appearance, began to hatch.

Phantom, led by Malzor, observed the scene with a mixture of fascination and disgust. The eggs cracked open one by one, and from each emerged a demon, twisted and malformed, already displaying the cruelty and viciousness that would define their lives.

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The hatching process was a brutal race for survival. The first demon to break free from its egg would devour the remains of its shell, absorbing the nutrients it provided. But this was only the beginning.

Driven by primal hunger, these newly hatched demons would turn on the eggs around them, attacking and consuming the still-forming creatures within.

It was a gruesome spectacle, one that laid bare the inherent cruelty of demonkind. The stronger demons feasted on the weaker, growing more powerful with each kill. Those that survived this initial bloodbath were already seasoned killers, their very existence forged in violence and predation.

Phantom, his expression grim, turned to Malzor, speaking quietly, more to himself than to anyone else, "This... this is how they've survived for so long. Not by nurturing their young, but by forcing them to prove their worth from the moment they're born."

Malzor, not noticing Phantom's disturbance, kept his gaze fixed on the carnage before them. There was no pity in his eyes, only a cold understanding of the harsh reality of the abyss.

Watching through Phantom's eyes, Ikenga remarked to Keles, "Survival of the fittest. It's no wonder they're so strong. But this also means that the potential for power here is immense."

As they continued to watch, Phantom and Malzor's attention was caught by a robed imp and a fifth-stage demon flying above the carnage. The newly hatched demons began to gather around the imp, drawn to it as if by instinct.

The imp seemed to sense it was being watched. It turned, locking eyes with Phantom and Malzor, its cold gaze lingering before it looked away and led the young demons away from the riverbank.

Disturbed by the imp's glance, Phantom and Malzor took a heavy breath, only to be shocked once more as a huge humanoid spider appeared at the riverbank, mimicking the imp's actions by gathering all the spider demons around it before leading them away.

After the spider demon retreated, Malzor pointed at the riverbanks, where the leftover newborn demons were still fighting and devouring each other.

"This will be our method to quickly grow our army. There are many unguided gargoyles down there, and since we aim for the position of demon king, we might as well learn from them."

Ikenga and Keles, watching the scene through Phantom, each wore a thoughtful expression. Ikenga was the first to speak to Keles. "Sister, I believe we must be cautious in our actions and ensure that our world can't be traced back to us."

"Avoiding conflict where the safety of our world is at stake should be our top priority," Keles agreed, grimacing as she spoke.

The thought of the abyss invading their world and an endless army pouring out from the enemy's side was something she couldn't bear to imagine.

"Even though this method might serve our immediate goals, we must be mindful of the bigger picture. The scene before us shows that we are at a disadvantage. Who knows how long Zarvok and the Spider Queen have been using this method to bolster their strength?"

"A fifth-stage powerhouse was sent to collect newborns. If that's the level of strength they deploy just for recruitment, who knows how many fifth-stage demons they have on their side? The gargoyles have none at that level—except for Phantom. Given a few more years, it could be different, but we don't have the luxury of time."

"It's been a while since we last communicated with Zarvok. I believe the time is approaching when he'll begin his expedition. We need to be prepared for whatever move he makes next."

After Phantom was shown the sight of the riverbank, changes began taking place in the outpost. The number of gargoyles grew, and many tasks were accomplished. The method Björn used once again came to the forefront for Ikenga and Keles.

To boost the strength of the newborn gargoyles and older demons, a carnival event is occasionally held. Demons grow by devouring souls and strong flesh and blood—the stronger the demon, the stronger its soul and body become.

As a demon advances through the stages, its body and soul accumulate more energy and power. By the time a demon reaches the fourth stage, its energy is highly concentrated and refined. Lower-stage souls, which are less powerful and pure, no longer provide the necessary energy density or quality required for further growth. Essentially, the energy and essence they offer are too diluted or "tainted" to significantly impact a more advanced and refined fourth-stage demon.

The process of devouring souls is most effective when the consumed soul has a comparable or greater level of purity and power. At the fourth stage, the demon's soul is so developed that consuming lesser souls results in minimal gains. The energy extracted from these souls is insufficient to push the demon's body and soul to the next level.

Additionally, the process of extracting pure energy becomes less efficient as the demon grows stronger. The demon's body and soul are already near peak efficiency, making it difficult to assimilate lower-quality energy without significant effort or risk of contamination.

As demons progress through the stages, they become more "tainted" or specialized in their form and energy signature. This tainting is a byproduct of the demonic energy becoming more unique to each individual, creating an incompatibility with the souls of other demons. After the fourth stage, the differences between the soul signatures of different demons become more pronounced. Consuming another demon's soul at this stage could lead to an energy clash, where the foreign energy disrupts the advanced demon's internal balance, making it not only unhelpful but potentially harmful.

To reach the next stage, if not in a hurry, a demon might wait for about a century or less, depending on how diligently they work to naturally break through. If this option is void, the demon would need to find another source of souls apart from other demons—such as beings of an equal stage or beings with a soul different from the rest.

With this, the gargoyles were slowly growing in strength. To avoid attracting the attention of the other two demon kings, they kept a low profile and never overextended themselves.

This continued for another month or so when the large ear given to Ikenga by Zarvok for communication began glowing. Holding the ear, Ikenga heard Zarvok's deep voice: "It is time."

With that, the large ear left Ikenga's hand, floated in mid-air, and began vibrating rapidly. Ikenga and Keles readied themselves, staring at the ear, but after a while, nothing happened.

Zarvok's voice came through the ear once again. "You both need to relax and let it do its work."

Ikenga and Keles looked at each other before shrugging. The ear began vibrating again, and soon a huge red portal opened in the room. Keles walked through the portal, while Ikenga watched as their

surroundings turned to dust. Without hesitation, he followed her through the portal, only to find himself in a vast library.

Ikenga did not see Keles when he emerged from the portal; instead, he saw Zarvok floating in mid-air, reading a massive book in front of him. Ikenga's feet left the ground as he floated over to Zarvok to see what he was reading.

Looking into the book, Ikenga noticed that he didn't understand the language, but he recognized an image. One page depicted a goblin, while the other showed an ogre.

"These are the sons of the world we will be invading," Zarvok said to Ikenga, who raised an eyebrow.

"Where is my sister?" Ikenga asked, reaching for another book and opening it.

"She has been taken to her quarters. I need to finish a few things before we leave," Zarvok replied as the book closed by itself and slid back into the open space from which it came.

Ikenga kept his gaze on Zarvok, trying to read the expression on his face, but Zarvok's eyes remained fixed on the now-closed book.

"And what do you plan to accomplish with these... sons of the world?" Ikenga asked, flipping through the pages of the book he'd picked up. The text was equally unreadable, but the illustrations were vivid—scenes of battle, rituals, and grotesque creatures that made his skin crawl.

Zarvok's voice was calm, almost detached. "The goblins and ogres are not usually known to be the first children of their world. When this does happen, they tend to be exceptional and unusual."

Looking at Ikenga, he continued, "I expected nothing less, as this is a world chosen by the abyss itself for the ascension ritual to demon lord status."

Ikenga's eyes flickered with a mix of curiosity and unease as Zarvok's words sank in. "The abyss itself chose this world?" he echoed, his voice laced with skepticism. "And what makes these goblins and ogres so special? Their kind is usually among the weaker races."

Zarvok nodded slowly, his gaze never leaving Ikenga. "Indeed, they are usually weak, but this world is an anomaly. The fact that goblins and ogres are born as the first children of their world is a rare occurrence. It suggests that their world holds unique power, or there has been some interference or mutation."

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"Knowing this, am I still going to proceed as planned with my sister?" Ikenga asked.

"Of course," Zarvok answered simply as he moved away to pick up another book.

Ikenga closed the book he was holding just as an imp appeared from the shadows. The imp bowed and gestured, "This way, your highness."

Ikenga took one last look at Zarvok before following the imp. After they left the library, Zarvok looked back at the space where Ikenga had been, licking his lips with his serpentine tongue.

"A god would have made a great delicacy. Too bad it was an origin god," he murmured, looking back down at the book he was holding. "Surely this new world will have a god or a strong soul to quench my thirst."

Ikenga followed the imp down the dimly lit corridor, his mind still reeling from his conversation with Zarvok. The imp was small and unassuming, its leathery wings tucked neatly against its back as it scurried ahead. Sensing an opportunity to glean more information, Ikenga decided to make small talk.

"So, how long have you been serving Zarvok?" Ikenga asked casually, keeping pace with the imp.

The imp glanced back, its beady eyes narrowing slightly. "Long enough, your highness," it replied, its voice raspy and low. "Lord Zarvok values those who are... useful to him."

Ikenga nodded, his expression unreadable. "Useful, yes. And what do you know about this world we're about to invade? The one with the goblins and ogres."

The imp hesitated for a moment, as if weighing the wisdom of speaking on the matter. "Not much escapes Lord Zervok's notice, but there are whispers," it finally said. "The goblins and ogres may seem weak, but their world... it's different. Some say the abyss itself watches over it, that it has plans for those who dwell there."

Ikenga raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Plans? Like what?"

The imp shrugged its small shoulders, continuing down the hall. "Who can say? The abyss is a mystery, even to those who serve it. But if Lord Zervok is interested, it must be something significant. Perhaps the goblins and ogres are only the beginning."

Ikenga frowned slightly. "The beginning of what?"

The imp's eyes flickered with something akin to fear, but it quickly masked the emotion. "The beginning of a larger game, your highness. The abyss plays for keeps, and so does Lord Zervok. You and your sister are strong, but even the strong can be pawns in a greater scheme."

Ikenga nodded slowly. "Interesting. You've been helpful, imp."

The imp bowed its head. "Thank you, your highness. I live to serve."

When they reached the door to his quarters, Ikenga paused and looked down at the imp. "One last thing. Have you ever seen Lord Zervok hesitate? Or doubt his course of action?"

The imp's eyes widened slightly, surprised by the question. "No, your highness. Lord Zervok is always certain, always focused. Hesitation is not in his nature."

Ikenga smiled thinly. "Good to know."

With that, he stepped into his quarters, the door closing behind him with a soft thud. Alone, Ikenga allowed his thoughts to swirl freely. It didn't take long before the door to his quarters opened again, and Keles walked in.

Ikenga didn't mind her presence as the room's interior shifted to display a phantom sight. The phantom at this moment was high in the sky, overlooking the entire outpost and its new look.

From the outpost, wisps of yellow light unseen by others were being drawn towards him, absorbed into his body. He noticed that playing roles, setting the background, and putting the spotlight on someone of his choice strengthened him in ways his sight didn't fully understand.

Currently, in the outpost, there was an overwhelming sensation of expectation, a desire to show off and be in the spotlight, emanating from every gargoyle.

The progress they had made in these past months, working together, had the gargoyles looking forward to a future where their race stood at the top of this layer.

This emotion had been strengthening the phantom all this while, but sadly, it would soon end as he had received a message from his god informing him that the expedition was starting soon.

Phantom's eyes glowed a deep yellow as he pondered the emotions that would arise from the gargoyles once they learned they wouldn't be given enough time to grow.

Somewhere in the same abyss, a white castle could be seen. A closer look revealed it had been crafted from resilient spider webs. This area was ruled by the spider queen.

Similar to Zarvok, the spider queen, Vorenza, had a thick book in front of her, showing the picture of a goblin and an ogre. As a competitor for the demon lord throne, she too had been informed that the time for the expedition was near.

Vorenza knew she was already losing to Zarvok, as he had his hands on the two gods. She wasn't sure what Zarvok planned to do with them, but she knew she couldn't let things play out the way he wanted.

Her slender fingers traced the edge of the page as she considered her options. She knew she was losing ground. Zarvok's strength was growing, bolstered by the gods' favor, and her own influence was beginning to wane. The time for subtlety was slipping away, along with the advantage she had always relied upon.

The spider queen knew that Zarvok's alliances made him bold, but they also made him predictable. He would act with the certainty that the gods' favor gave him, and that certainty could be turned against him. Vorenza's strength lay in the unexpected.

As she turned another page of the tome, a new strategy began to take shape in her mind. She wouldn't confront Zarvok directly; that would be folly. Instead, she would weave a trap—a complex and intricate web that would catch him off guard. She would exploit his arrogance, his belief that he was invincible with the gods behind him.

Vorenza could guess what Zarvok had in mind with the gods. It was a strategy she herself might have employed if she had the two deities under her control. The strength of the gods wasn't necessary—strength was something neither of them lacked. Instead, it was the influence, the sway that a divine presence held over mortals, that they, as demons, were deprived of.

Zarvok understood this well. With the gods at his side, he wasn't just gaining power; he was extending his reach into possibilities that had always been just out of their grasp. Mortals would flock to him, drawn not just by fear, but by a misguided hope that the gods offered them protection and purpose. Zarvok would use that to bolster his forces, to make himself indispensable, and in doing so, his ascension would be all but assured.

Vorenza could see the pieces falling into place. Zarvok would move swiftly, using the gods to consolidate his power, perhaps to claim dominion over the mortals and expand his influence in the new world. With the gods' favor, he would craft a narrative of invincibility, one that would draw both allies and sycophants to his side. The bigger the pie he claimed, the closer he would come to securing his place as the demon lord.

But that very boldness, the predictability of his ambition, would be his downfall if Vorenza had anything to do with it. She had learned long ago that the most dangerous enemy was the one who believed they could not be touched. Zarvok's confidence would lead him into her web, where every move he made would tighten the strands around him.

Her strategy began to crystallize. She would not challenge him where he was strongest. Instead, she would undermine the foundations of his plans, striking at the elements he considered secure. The mortals who flocked to him for divine protection would be the first to falter. Vorenza knew that fear and faith were two sides of the same coin, and it would take only a whisper, a shadow, to turn that faith into doubt.

She would sow discord, planting seeds of suspicion and fear. The gods' influence, which Zarvok relied upon so heavily, could be twisted. Mortals were fickle, easily swayed by the unknown, by the suggestion that the gods might not be as omnipotent as they seemed. If Vorenza could fracture the mortals' belief, even slightly, Zarvok's grand strategy would begin to fall apart.

Keles moved silently across the room, her presence a calming contrast to the turbulent thoughts swirling within Ikenga. She was a master at reading his moods, and today was no exception. Her sharp eyes observed the subtle tension in his posture, the way his fingers drummed lightly against the armrest of his chair.

"Phantom grows stronger," she remarked, her voice a soft murmur, barely above a whisper. "The gargoyles' expectations feed him well."

Ikenga nodded, his gaze still fixed on the phantom sight before him. "The gargoyles have found something to rally around. But it's all so fragile. They don't know what's coming."

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Keles crossed her arms, her expression unreadable. "You're worried."

She walked closer, standing beside him as they both watched Phantom's glowing form high above the outpost. "Change is coming, whether we're ready or not. Zarvok's not the only one playing a dangerous game here. The spider queen, whom we know so little about, is surely making her move, and we are caught in the middle."

Keles shrugged slightly, her gaze distant. "She has no choice. Zarvok's ahead in this race. If she doesn't disrupt his plans, she'll lose before she even gets a chance to compete. And that's something she can't afford."

Ikenga frowned, considering the implications. "If the spider queen is truly Zarvok's equal, then when she strikes, she won't do it directly. She's too cunning for that. She'll try to weaken us, destabilize the alliance before we can even set foot in that world, or hamper our progress."

Keles smiled faintly, a rare expression of warmth. "We've come this far together, Ikenga. We'll see this through. But we have to be careful—Zarvok is ambitious, but he's not the only one with ambitions. We have our own goals, and we can't let his desires overshadow ours."

Ikenga turned to look at Keles, his gaze softening as he took in the warmth of her smile. It was a rare sight, one that always seemed to catch him off guard, no matter how many times he'd seen it. There was a strength in her, a quiet resolve that he had always admired. But in moments like this, when her guard was down, he saw something more—something that made his heart beat just a little faster.

"We've always had our own goals," Ikenga said, his voice quieter now, almost intimate. "But it's different this time. The stakes are higher. The risks... greater."

Keles turned her head slightly, her eyes meeting his. There was a flicker of something in her gaze, something that made the air between them feel charged, electric. "We will find our way through it together."

Hearing her words, Ikenga stood up as if compelled, his hand reaching out to the hood covering Keles' head. He hesitated for just a moment, but seeing no resistance from Keles, he gently pulled the hood down.

Ikenga raised a brow at the sight before him. Her skin was as pale as could be, almost translucent, giving her an otherworldly glow that contrasted starkly with the shadows she commanded. Her hair was long, cascading down her back like a waterfall of midnight, deep and dark, absorbing the light around her.

Her eyes were mesmerizing, a deep, inky black that seemed to hold the secrets of the afterlife within them, drawing him in with an unsettling allure. Her lips, a soft shade of crimson, stood out against her pale complexion, like the last drop of life in a dying world.

Her voice, cold but filled with warmth, said, "You are the second person to see the face beneath the hood."

Ikenga, surprised, asked, "Who was the first?"

"Crepuscular," she answered. Ikenga paused for a moment as he looked at her. "We had our moment. We were born earlier than the others, and exploring our bodies was something that naturally occurred."

Ikenga's hands pulled away for a bit, but they were held back by a cold hand. He looked at Keles and said, "If we go any further, we'll both hurt those we care for—Mahu and Crepuscular."

Keles' grip tightened on Ikenga's hand, her cold touch sending a shiver down his spine. A brief silence fell between them, thick with unspoken emotions and the weight of their shared history. Her dark, enigmatic eyes searched his face, as if trying to decipher the thoughts racing through his mind.

"You're right," she finally whispered, her voice barely audible. "We both have ties that bind us to others, and stepping beyond this moment... it would be a betrayal to them."

Ikenga nodded slowly, his heart heavy with the truth of her words. Mahu and Crepuscular were more than just allies; they were partners in a world where bonds were rare and precious. To cross that line would be to risk everything they had built, not just with each other.

"We'll carry this with us," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "But it doesn't have to define us. What we have—our alliance, our friendship—is too important to risk."

Keles nodded, though her expression remained conflicted. "You're right," she said, her voice steadier now. "We can't let our personal feelings get in the way of what needs to be done."

There was a pause, and then she stepped forward, closing the distance between them once more, but this time with a different purpose. "But that doesn't mean we have to forget," she added, her voice barely above a whisper as she looked up at him, her eyes full of unspoken promises. "It just means we have to be careful."

"Careful," he echoed, a faint smile playing on his lips. "That's something we're good at."

Keles returned the smile, though it was tinged with a sadness they both understood. "We'll have to be," she replied. "For the sake of everything we've worked for."

With a final glance that spoke volumes, Keles pulled her hood back up, once again obscuring the face that had only just been revealed to him. The moment passed, and the air between them shifted, returning to the familiar, albeit strained, camaraderie they had always shared.

A week passed after Ikenga and Keles were invited to Zarvok's castle. Ikenga was in his room, floating cross-legged in mid-air with his eyes closed, when suddenly, he frowned and opened his eyes.

He felt the energy fluctuations in the abyss growing stronger. Floating to his window, Ikenga saw, not too far from Zarvok's castle, the air crackled with red lightning.

The lightning was followed by the sound of something being forcibly ripped open. Soon, in the place of the lightning, a huge red portal appeared, similar to the one that had pulled Ikenga and Keles into the abyss.

Ikenga walked out of his room, his senses pinpointing Zarvok's location. Along the way, Keles joined him in silence as they made their way to Zarvok.

Outside his castle, Zarvok stood, surrounded by his entire demon army. Ikenga sensed millions of first and second-stage energy signatures surrounding them, followed by thousands of third-stage entities.

Ikenga and Keles moved swiftly, their expressions grim as they approached Zarvok. The air was thick with the anticipation of battle, the charged energy of the red lightning still crackling ominously in the distance. As they neared Zarvok, the sheer scale of the assembled demon army became even more apparent. The ground trembled beneath the weight of countless demons, all focused intently on the massive red portal that had torn its way into their world.

Zarvok stood at the forefront, his presence commanding as he surveyed the scene. His eyes, glowing with a malevolent light, flicked briefly to Ikenga and Keles as they arrived beside him.

"You're just in time," Zarvok said, his voice a low rumble that carried an edge of satisfaction. "The portal to the goblin and ogre world has opened. The time has come for the invasion."

Ikenga's eyes narrowed as he studied the portal. "I didn't expect it to open so soon. What triggered it?"

Zarvok's lips curled into a smirk. "The abyss moves according to its own will. The portal opened because it was time."

Keles glanced at the portal, her expression unreadable. "And the army? Do you plan to send them all through at once?"

Zarvok glanced at her before shaking his head. "I sometimes forget this would be your first invasion experience."

"If it were possible, I would send out my entire army to start the invasion, but the existence of Order makes things different. When it comes to invasion, the first move is more strategic and focused on 'Erosion.'"

Zarvok anticipated the question that would come from the two gods, so he continued, "Erosion stems from the fact that an invasion is a forceful entry. Just as this abyss layer suppresses you both as foreign entities, so too will the invaded world suppress us."

"When an invasion begins, so does the process of erosion," Zarvok explained, his voice calm yet commanding. "This erosion is carried out by the cannon fodder. They will be sent in first, not to win battles but to reclaim lands and erode those lands with the breath of the abyss."

He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in. "The eroded lands are crucial. They allow us, the invaders, to move forward without being suppressed by the world's will. In those eroded areas, the world's defenses will weaken, making it easier for us to establish our foothold."

Ikenga and Keles listened intently, absorbing Zarvok's words. The concept of "Erosion" was new to them, but it made sense in the context of a world invasion. The idea that the world itself would push back against foreign invaders was a natural defense mechanism, much like how the abyss layer they currently inhabited suppressed them as gods who didn't belong.

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Zarvok continued, his tone taking on a more instructive edge. "The cannon fodder—the first waves—are crucial. They're not meant to win the war but to weaken the world's defenses, wearing down its resistance and allowing the abyss to take root. Once they've done their job, the real invasion begins. The stronger forces can then move in without being heavily suppressed, ensuring we gain a solid foothold in the new world."

Keles nodded thoughtfully, piecing together the strategy. "So, the first wave sacrifices itself to pave the way for the stronger ones. And once the land is eroded, it becomes an extension of the abyss, making it easier for the rest of the army to follow and fight effectively."

"Precisely," Zarvok confirmed, his eyes glinting with a mixture of anticipation and cold calculation. "Every inch of ground they take, every bit of territory they erode, becomes a staging ground for us. The abyss will seep into the very essence of that world, corrupting it, weakening its defenses further with every passing moment."

"The current suppression you both feel now is nothing compared to what you will face once you step through this portal. The abyss is used to foreign existences entering and leaving it, so its suppression isn't as more severe than it should be."

"For a world not accustomed to foreign entities, the suppression is more like a physical body fighting off an illness. The world will instinctively do all it can to push out or eliminate the foreign existence."

Keles's eyes narrowed slightly as she considered the implications. "So, the suppression will be stronger, more aggressive. We won't just be fighting the inhabitants; we'll be battling the very essence of the world itself."

Zarvok nodded, his expression serious. "Exactly. The world will try to reject you, to purge you like a virus. That's why erosion is crucial. As the cannon fodder weakens the world's defenses, it also dulls that instinctive resistance. But until that process takes hold, you'll be facing the full force of the world's rejection."

Ikenga frowned, his mind racing with the possible challenges ahead. "And if we're too slow? If the erosion doesn't happen quickly enough?"

"Then you'll be fighting an uphill battle," Zarvok replied bluntly. "The suppression will drain your strength, sap your power. You might find yourself unable to access even a fraction of your true abilities. That's why timing and strategy are everything in an invasion like this. We need to erode the world's defenses as quickly as possible, or we risk being overwhelmed."

Ikenga crossed his arms, his gaze turning toward the distant portal that now shimmered with an ominous light. "And what of the world's defenders? The goblins and ogres you spoke of—how do they factor into this erosion?"

Zarvok's voice held a confident edge as he continued, his gaze never wavering from the ominous portal. "The goblins and ogres are the wild cards in this invasion. If they lack knowledge of the abyss, their initial reaction will be confusion and chaos, which plays into our hands. But if they are aware, if they understand even a fraction of what's coming, they'll throw everything they have at stopping the erosion process. Their resistance could be formidable, but it's in those first moments of shock where we'll gain our advantage."

Keles considered this, her mind working through the scenarios. "And if they're strong enough to push back immediately? If they rally faster than expected?"

Zarvok's smirk returned, more calculating than before. "Then we adapt. Our forces are not without their own strengths. The cannon fodder may be weaker individually, but they are relentless. They will throw themselves at the enemy until the ground itself bends to the will of the abyss. And once the erosion begins, even the strongest defenders will find their strength waning. Their world will turn against them, just as it does against us."

Ikenga's arms remained crossed, his expression thoughtful as he digested the information. "You're betting on their ignorance. But if they're aware—if they are prepared—our task becomes much harder. We'll need more than brute force to win."

Zarvok gave a slight nod, acknowledging the point. "True. Which is why we won't rely solely on brute force. The abyss has its own ways of undermining a world's defenses. Erosion isn't just a physical process; it's psychological, spiritual. The very presence of the abyss will instill fear, doubt, and despair. These emotions weaken resolve, break down unity. Even if the goblins and ogres are prepared, their world will fight them as much as it fights us once the erosion takes hold."

Zarvok no longer paid any attention to Ikenga and Keles as he focused on his foot soldiers, roaring, "Advance!"

Without fear, the army of weak Imps roared in unison as they rushed into the portal. In front of Ikenga, a view of the other world beyond the portal appeared.

But before they could appreciate the sight, a popping sound followed by explosions and splashes of red blood filled the air. Ikenga and Keles grimaced at the scene and looked over at Zarvok, who remained unphased, as if expecting this to happen.

The Imps that made it through the portal were enveloped by the world's suppression. Whether it was due to their weakness or the sheer strength of the suppression, they were all crushed into meat paste, as if heavy gravity had descended upon them.

"The erosion begins," Zarvok said, as Ikenga and Keles watched. The Imp demons following behind stepped on the blood and flesh of their predecessors. Unlike the first wave, they weren't immediately suppressed, but as soon as they moved beyond that point, the same fate befell them.

While Ikenga observed the scene, his attention was also divided between the view on Phantom's side. When the portal emerged on Zarvok's side, another one had appeared near the gargoyles' new outpost.

Unlike Zarvok, who was pleased with the portal's appearance, the gargoyles were distressed, realizing they no longer had time to progress at their own pace.

Phantom, who had been warned by Ikenga about stepping through the portal, made sure to stay back. Lacking the memory inheritance of the demons, he was surprised when he saw Malzor commanding the weaker gargoyles to do the same as Zarvok.

This meant that on another side of the invaded world, a portal to the Abyss had opened, and the gargoyles were invading. Ikenga, close to Zarvok, began to wonder how many portals had opened in this Abyss layer.

He wanted to share this information with Keles, but couldn't, not even telepathically, as the Abyss layer was suppressing communication. For a while, this continued, with demons pouring into the other world, eroding it.

On the gargoyle side, they were forced to stop sending armies when news came through that they had encountered a unique structure in the new world.

An image was passed to Malzor, who immediately stood up from his throne, pacing around in agitation. Phantom, confused by Malzor's behavior, asked, "What's wrong?"

Malzor waved his hand, and the structure relayed to him hovered in the air for Phantom to see. Phantom, with no idea what he was looking at, was amazed by the structure but had only a superficial understanding of its significance.

Feigning concern, Phantom appeared even more disturbed than Malzor. Neither spoke until Malzor finally asked, "What is a mage tower doing in a world led by goblins and ogres?"

Phantom had no idea what Malzor meant, so he maintained his disturbed appearance, saying nothing, but looking deep in thought. Meanwhile, Ikenga, who received the message, struggled to keep his composure.

"A mage tower?" Ikenga, who had been reborn as a god after so many years began recalling his past world and the fantasy stories from there. In those stories, a mage tower signified a mage's status and strength.

Nana had mentioned that mages or wizards were a civilization to watch out for. Judging by Malzor's reaction, they seemed more troublesome than Ikenga had imagined.

At the gargoyle outpost, Malzor paused for a moment before he started laughing. "Those mad researchers must have been undone by their own experiments."

In the magical tower, a goblin dressed in robes and holding a staff could be seen walking out, glancing at the huge nearby portal. Malzor's laughter was dark and filled with a twisted sense of satisfaction. "You know," he finally said, still chuckling, "those foolish mages might have been powerful, but they underestimated the goblins they toyed with. Their tower is nothing but a mockery of its former glory now."

Phantom raised an eyebrow, pretending to be intrigued. "The goblins took over? How?"

Malzor waved his hand dismissively, the image of the tower still floating before them. "It's quite simple, really. The mages were probably too obsessed with their experiments, creating all manner of creatures

and imbuing them with magic. But in their arrogance, they let the goblins—those filthy, cunning little pests—get too close to their secrets. Now, the goblins control the tower, but they don't even realize the true power they hold. To them, it's just another tool for their petty squabbles."

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Malzor continued, his voice tinged with disdain. "They've turned the tower into a fortress, but without the knowledge to properly wield its power, they're just sitting ducks. It's almost too easy."

Phantom nodded, playing his part. "So, what's the plan?"

Malzor's eyes gleamed with malicious intent. "We'll let the goblins think they're safe for now. Their defenses are nothing compared to what the mages had in place. When the time is right, we'll crush them and take the tower for ourselves. It'll be a valuable asset—once we've purged it of their filth."

Meanwhile, on Ikenga and Zarvok's side, the army continued to pour in, eroding the land. Soon, Imps in the second stage began following behind.

The progress increased as those in the second stage endured the suppression for a short time before exploding, covering more space.

Ikenga, hearing Malzor's words, frowned. If the goblins were as simple as Malzor claimed, Zarvok would have no need to study them. Their conversation indicated Zarvok knew that his world was unique, though he didn't fully understand what made it so.

"What if those mages were more than successful in their experiments, so successful that they were overtaken or killed by the results?"

"What if these goblins know exactly the power they wield?" Ikenga thought to himself as he glanced over at Zarvok.

Zarvok was informed of the Abyss in the world they were facing, while the gargoyles were acting based on their inherited knowledge of goblins, leading Malzor to view them as dumb and useless.

The next action confirmed Ikenga's suspicions. The mage goblin that emerged began chanting and pointing its staff at the portal. From the mage tower, a blue bubble floated out before expanding, halting at the edge of the area that hadn't been eroded yet.

As more gargoyles rushed to break through the bubble, they were turned to ash. The goblin, meanwhile, frowned and muttered something before walking back into the tower.

Malzor, who was watching the scene with Phantom, had his mouth slightly open in shock. "A goblin used a complete spell?"

Looking at Phantom, Malzor ordered, "Tell our armies to fall back immediately. I need all eyes on this tower and the goblin movements."

Phantom nodded, though he was surprised by the panic on Malzor's face. As he was about to leave, Malzor stopped him. "Also, inform the outpost to be ready for a quick evacuation at any moment. The portal goes two ways; they can use it to attack us." Phantom nodded and walked away.

The view on Zarvok's side changed, causing Ikenga to pay close attention. At first, the picture was small, but as it zoomed in, Ikenga realized it was another mage tower.

Surrounding this mage tower was a village filled with ogres and goblins. The attire, buildings, and farmland in the distance indicated that this was not the usual barbaric goblin and mage settlement.

As the invasion unfolded, chaos and panic spread through the goblin ranks on the other side of the portal. Goblins were familiar with war, but this was unlike anything they had faced before. The sky above their village darkened with the ominous presence of the massive abyssal portal, and the ground trembled as waves of imps poured through.

The goblin chieftain, a grizzled warrior with a scar running down his left cheek, barked orders to his warriors, trying to maintain some semblance of order. "Form up! Defend the village!" he shouted, his voice strained but commanding. The goblins scrambled to obey, forming a loose line of spearmen and archers, their eyes wide with fear but also with keen observation as they watched the demons approaching.

Not far from the village, at the mage tower, a message was sent to the tower master, who walked to the balcony and looked off into the distance at the portal.

The goblin mage, similar to the one observed by the gargoyles, raised its staff and began chanting. The air around it crackled with magical energy as a barrier of shimmering green light expanded from the tower, halting before the land that had not yet been eroded by the demons.

Back in the Abyss, Zarvok, seeing the light, immediately ordered, "Stop!" The imp army rushing towards the village halted before they reached the shield.

Zarvok looked at Ikenga and Keles. "There's your answer. It seems they know about us demons."

Keles, aware of the unfolding situation, displayed genuine surprise, while Ikenga had to feign his own.

Zarvok, eyes fixed on the glowing barrier, seemed to come to the same realization. "A mage tower controlled by goblins," he muttered, almost to himself. "It's unthinkable... unless those mages truly did lose control of their creations."

The mage goblin who had cast the barrier returned to the tower's interior and watched the scene unfold from his vantage point. "They've stopped," the tower master noted, a hint of satisfaction in his voice.

"Yes, master," another mage goblin replied, bowing slightly. "But they won't stay stopped for long. The demons are powerful, and they will find a way to breach our defenses if we don't act quickly."

The tower master nodded, his gaze never leaving the abyssal portal. "Prepare the village's defenses. We'll need every resource we have if we're to hold them off. And send a message to the other towers—let them know what's happening here, it may already be happening on their side. We all need to stay communicated right now"

The mage goblin bowed and hurried out of the chamber, his footsteps echoing through the stone halls as he moved with purpose. The tower master remained on the balcony, his eyes locked on the abyssal portal. His mind raced, calculating the odds of survival and the best strategies to employ. The shimmering green barrier was holding for now, but he knew it was only a matter of time before the demons devised a way to penetrate it.

In the village below, the goblins and ogres, initially troubled and frantic, began to calm down as they had a chance to breathe. They all began suiting up in armor, their actions now methodical and focused, while simultaneously creating barricades. Children and elders were quickly evacuated, guided by warriors to safer areas beyond the village. Messenger birds took flight, spreading the word to nearby settlements and other mage towers, the urgency of their task reflected in their swift, purposeful movements.

Meanwhile, Zarvok turned away from the portal's image, his expression thoughtful. "We've underestimated these goblins," he said, pacing slowly. "They've clearly gained enough knowledge from the mages that created them. This changes our approach."

Ikenga nodded, his mind also working through the new developments. "What do you plan on doing about their shield?"

"Watch," was all Zarvok said as he looked back at the image. Ikenga observed as huge, burly demons bearing a similar appearance toimps began pushing a massive, well-crafted slingshot toward the portal.

At the same time, a fifth-stage imp, larger and more menacing than the others, flew closer to the portal. The smaller imps that had retreated earlier were now drawn toward the fifth-stage imp, which began to grow multiple arms. With each imp it touched, Ikenga noticed how the energy within them became turbulent, their forms quivering with barely contained power. As soon as the fifth-stage imp made contact, the smaller imps quickly scurried to the slingshot, curling up tightly before being launched into the sky.

Ikenga watched as the imps, now turned into living projectiles, soared high and then plummeted toward the shimmering green barrier. Unlike before, when they would have disintegrated on contact, these imps managed to resist the shield's power for a brief moment before exploding into a mist of blood, staining the barrier with their sacrifice.

Though he wasn't in the physical world to fully sense what was happening, Ikenga understood the strategy. This was a tactic to weaken the shield through repeated, brutal force. "Quite primitive but effective," Ikenga thought to himself as he watched the scene unfold. Each impact, each explosion, sent ripples through the barrier, and though it still held, he could see faint cracks beginning to form.

Zarvok, noticing Ikenga's contemplative expression, smiled darkly. "The goblins may have learned from the mages, but they are still creatures bound by its limitations. We, on the other hand, are bound by nothing. Their shield will fall, and when it does, their village will be ours and tower is our"

Back in the mage tower, the tower master felt the tremors in the magical barrier and knew their time was running out. "They've begun their assault," he muttered, his eyes flashed green as a message was relayed to the village head.

As his warriors quickly fell into line, the village head pointed toward the distant slingshots being readied by the demons. "That's the target," he said simply, his tone leaving no room for doubt.

Archers took their positions on rooftops, spearmen formed tight ranks near the barricades. Goblin's small holding dagger disappeared into thin air.

The village head, standing tall and resolute, raised his weapon high. "Charge!" he bellowed, his voice a thunderous command that electrified the air.

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With a unified roar, the goblin and ogre warriors surged forward, their feet pounding the earth as they rushed toward the abyssal army. The archers on the rooftops released a volley of arrows that arced through the sky, raining down on the demons with deadly precision. Below, the spearmen advanced with disciplined steps, their formation unbroken as they moved to meet the enemy head-on.

The small goblins, now invisible to the naked eye, slipped past the main forces, their daggers glinting as they closed in on the slingshots and the huge imps defending them.

The tower master, witnessing the scene from afar, stood up with rage-filled eyes. "No, you brute!" he shouted, but it was already too late as the two armies clashed.

The village, with its 10,000 inhabitants, had mustered an army of about 4,000 under the village head's command. The ogres, towering and formidable, tore through the abyssal army with ease, their brute strength and thick hides making the first-stage imps' attacks nearly ineffective. As they moved closer to the slingshots, the imps' only advantage was their overwhelming numbers, as they threw themselves relentlessly at the smaller ogre force.

However, the ogres were relentless. Their high resilience and rapid regeneration made them nearly unstoppable, shrugging off the damage done by the imps as they continued their advance.

Suddenly, the fifth-stage imp demon with multiple hands stopped what it was doing and moved through the portal, appearing in the other world. The land on the other side, already eroded by the abyss, was suitable for the demon to manifest its full power. The ogre army had already stepped into this corrupted land, their presence triggering the demon's response.

The ogres were close to the slingshots when a small goblin emerged from the shadows, its dagger glinting as it plunged through the head of a large imp, killing it instantly. One by one, the imps guarding the slingshots fell, taken out by the goblins' swift and precise strikes.

The village head, a towering figure even among the ogres, was about to bring his heavy sword down on one of the slingshots when the fifth-stage imp appeared before him. The encounter was brief but brutal—before the village head could react, the imp's many hands wrapped around his head, and with a sickening crack, it popped his skull like a grape. The village head's soul was drawn out and devoured by the demon, its eyes glowing with malevolent satisfaction.

The ogres, now seeing their leader slain, became enraged. Their eyes burned with fury as they turned their full attention to the fifth-stage imp. The small goblins, who had been targeting the imps, became the demon's next target, but just as it reached for them, they were enveloped in a green light and teleported back to the safety of the mage tower.

With the goblins gone, the only ones left were the ogres, who, driven by a mix of grief and rage, hurled themselves at the fifth-stage imp.

The first ogre, a hulking brute wielding a massive club, reached the demon and swung with all his might. The weapon, capable of shattering boulders, hurtled toward the demon with tremendous force. But the fifth-stage imp didn't even bother to dodge. Instead, one of its many arms shot out, catching the club mid-swing. The impact was negligible, barely even registering as a shudder through the demon's arm. With a casual flick, it snapped the club in two, sending the ogre stumbling backward in shock; like the village head this ogre met the same end as another hand shot out popping its head.

Right about when he was about to grab the soul, Zarvok said "Leave it, it will be of great need for the children"

The demon stopped its action when another ogre, his eyes blazing with fury, charged in from the side, hoping to catch the demon off-guard. He aimed a vicious slash at the demon's legs, intending to cripple it. But before his blade could connect, another of the demon's hands intercepted, catching the weapon with ease. The imp's grip tightened, and with a sharp twist, it wrenched the blade from the ogre's hands, splitting it in half with the blade and tossing it aside.

The ogres continued to fight with a desperation born of knowing they were outclassed. They lunged and swung, their roars filling the air, but it was like trying to fell a mountain with bare hands. The fifth-stage imp was untouchable, an unstoppable force that none of them could even scratch. Every attack they launched was met with effortless deflection or brutal counterattack.

The demon's laughter, low and rumbling, filled the battlefield as it reveled in its superiority. It caught one ogre by the throat, lifting him off the ground with ease, and squeezed until the life drained from the warrior's eyes. Another ogre, attempting to sneak up from behind, found himself impaled by a spear-like arm that had shot out from the demon's back.

The fifth-stage imp was a whirlwind of death, its many arms a blur as they dispatched ogre after ogre with cold efficiency. The ground beneath its feet was slick with blood, but the demon remained unscathed, untouched by the fury of the ogre assault. The ogres' strength, their resilience, their numbers—none of it mattered against a foe of such overwhelming power.

As the last of the ogres fell, their bodies littering the battlefield, the fifth-stage imp stood victorious, its form towering over the carnage. Not a single scratch marred its red skin; the ogres had been utterly unable to wound it. The demon's eyes, glowing with triumph, turned toward the distant mage tower, its lips curling into a predatory smile.

The tower master watched everything happen with cold eyes, the ogres were nothing but brutes. He had informed them of the sling to see if they could interfere with the demon falling from the sky, not to push towards the demon army.

The tower master held hope that this village would stand before the empire sent out the elite so they could rebuild this village into a strong wall to hold off the demon.

Now the fifth-stage demon was staring at his tower, knowing it was time to retreat. Dealing with a high-tier demon at this early stage of the invasion should be avoided.

Nonetheless, the land around this area would soon belong to the demons. The tower master disappeared from his position, reappearing at the core of the tower, where he placed his hand.

In the eyes of Ikenga and Zarvok, there was a sudden crack in the air before the tower vanished from where it had been.

Zarvok's eyes narrowed as he watched the mage tower disappear from the battlefield. "Interesting," he muttered, his voice laced with curiosity rather than concern. "It seems these goblin mages have more tricks up their sleeves."

Ikenga, standing beside him, observed the now-empty spot where the tower had once stood. His mind raced, calculating the implications of what they had just witnessed. The sudden disappearance of the tower indicated a high level of magical prowess, far beyond what he had expected from goblins, even if they were using knowledge stolen from their former masters.

"They're retreating," Ikenga remarked, his tone measured. "But not out of fear. They're buying time, fortifying their defenses elsewhere."

Zarvok's lips curled into a dark smile. "Let them run. It won't save them. This land and this world are ours."

Ikenga looked at his sister. "It's time we explore this new world."

Keles nodded and followed beside Ikenga as they walked to the portal leading to the other world. Stepping through the portal, Ikenga was greeted with a feeling of instant relaxation.

The suppression of the Abyss was gone, and his power was no longer limited. An instinct immediately kicked in as he tried to connect with the nature around him.

During his time in the Abyss, Ikenga noticed that nature was everywhere; it wasn't limited to plants and trees. Life in any environment or surroundings has its own natural way of working.

This led Ikenga to spend most of his time meditating as he tried to connect with the nature of the Abyss. It was the first challenge Ikenga had faced since his godhood.

The nature of the Abyss wasn't welcoming to him; rather, it found him undeserving of its nature. The nature of the Abyss leaned more towards chaos, while Ikenga's nature leaned more towards balance.

The nature of the Abyss gave Ikenga two options if he was to connect with it: to give up his balance and take one extreme path, specifically a more chaotic side, or to abandon his old world and become the new nature of this Abyss layer.

Neither of these options was acceptable to Ikenga, which was why he spent most of his time meditating, finding it interesting to go back and forth with the nature of the Abyss.

Now he was in another world, specifically touching the ground eroded by the Abyss. He wasn't truly connected with this world's nature but instead with the small nature growing in these eroded grounds.

Because of how small these eroded lands were, the nature had no problem surrendering to Ikenga. Ikenga gestured at the eroded earth his foot was touching.

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A flower grew out of it, unlike a normal magic flower. This one was tainted with the breath of the Abyss, looking like a perfect blend of flesh and plant.

Extending his hand to the flower, a tongue extended from the flower, licking his hand. Keles, who was beside Ikenga, looked at the interaction silently. Unlike Ikenga, who was curious about things and liked change, she preferred things to stay the same. Perhaps it was because of her divinity of death and darkness that she felt this way.

Keles watched as the grotesque flower licked Ikenga's hand, her eyes narrowing slightly. The plant, a bizarre fusion of flesh and flora, was a manifestation of the abyssal influence that had seeped into this world. It was a twisted mockery of nature, a testament to the corruption spreading across the land. Yet, Ikenga seemed intrigued, even pleased by the strange creation, as if it were a curious new specimen to be studied rather than an abomination.

Ikenga's eyes sparkled with interest as he observed the flower, its petals pulsing with a life that was both alien and familiar. "This world," he said, his voice low and contemplative, "still retains its natural essence, even in places touched by the Abyss. There's something resilient about it."

Keles nodded, though her expression remained stoic. "Resilient, perhaps. But fragile. The Abyss will consume it, just as it has countless worlds before. The flower may have surrendered to your influence, but it is still a product of corruption."

Ikenga's smile faded slightly as he considered her words. "True, sister. But within that corruption lies potential. The balance here is delicate, but it exists. If we harness it, we might find a way to reshape this world, not just destroy it."

Keles tilted her head, her gaze drifting to the horizon where the remnants of the goblin village smoldered in the distance. "Reshape it, or dominate it. The difference is subtle, brother, but important. We must not forget why we are here."

Ikenga rose to his full height, the flower wilting as he withdrew his hand. "I haven't forgotten. But domination doesn't preclude understanding."

"True," Keles said as she extended her hand towards the dead bodies of the ogres not too far away. From her feet, dark liquid flowed toward the corpses.

Ikenga glanced at his sister before saying, "I'll be right back."

His words were followed by the sound of a shockwave as he took off into the sky. As he ascended, Ikenga tried to move beyond the distance eroded by the Abyss. "Heavy," he thought to himself as he felt the weight.

He wanted to test more, but there was something else he needed to do, so he kept his flight linear. Soon, he broke through the stratosphere, emerging into space above this new world.

Looking down, Ikenga noted that this world wasn't lacking in size compared to his own. It might even be bigger.

Gazing off into the distance at one of the moons of this world, an impulse Ikenga had been holding back surged up again. Slowly, he raised his hand towards the moon.

His earth manipulation powers activated as he felt the elements that made up the moon. A bright smile spread across Ikenga's face as he made a tugging gesture.

There was slight resistance, but nonetheless, the moon moved. Ikenga looked back down at the planet. If he were not under contract with Zarkov, he was truly curious to see what those goblins would do once he threw this moon at them.

Letting go of his control, the moon slowly shifted back into place. Ikenga turned into a dot of light as he landed on the moon, floating cross-legged with his eyes closed.

Connecting with the moon, plants began growing around Ikenga but quickly died as they weren't compatible with the lunar environment. Soon, the right plant took root on this moon. As Ikenga meditated on the surface, he felt the ebb and flow of the celestial body beneath him. The energy within the moon was ancient and deep, resonating with the lifeforce of the world it orbited. He could sense the veins of minerals and pockets of dormant power hidden deep within its crust. The plant he had successfully rooted began to flourish, adapting quickly to the barren environment. It spread its vines, creating a network of life that pulsed in sync with the lunar rhythms.

The plant had dark, almost obsidian-black vines that wove intricately across the lunar surface, forming a complex network. The vines were thick and twisted, with a rough, stone-like texture, making them resilient against the harsh, lifeless conditions of the moon. Small, jagged thorns ran along the edges of the vines, giving the plant a defensive, almost menacing appearance.

From the vines, large, broad leaves sprouted intermittently. These leaves were deep purple with a faint iridescent sheen, catching the light from the distant sun in a way that made them glow softly. The leaves had a slightly translucent quality, allowing one to see the intricate vein patterns inside, which pulsed with a soft, silvery light, indicating the flow of energy within the plant.

Standing up, Ikenga studied the peculiar plant he had nurtured. The deep purple leaves with their iridescent sheen shimmered in the dim light, the silver veins pulsing rhythmically. It was a creation of power and precision, a living sentinel on this desolate moon. But Ikenga had something more in mind for it—a way to extend his vigilance across the vastness of space.

With a determined expression, he reached up to his face, his hand hovering over his right eye. Without hesitation, he dug his fingers in and plucked out his eyeball. Oddly, no golden ichor spilled from the vacant socket; a testament to his control over his own divine form. The golden blood that flowed within him was something he guarded carefully, aware of the possible consequences if even a drop were to be left uncontrolled.

Holding the plucked eyeball in his hand, Ikenga extended it toward the plant. The vines responded immediately, tenderly wrapping around the eye and lifting it from his grasp. The plant absorbed the eye into its network of vines, the deep purple leaves shifting and twisting as the eye was integrated into the plant's structure.

As the eye was absorbed, the plant began to grow rapidly, spreading across the entire surface of the moon. The vines thickened and expanded, covering craters and valleys, while the leaves multiplied, casting an ethereal glow across the barren landscape. Ikenga's eye, now fused with the plant, grew in size as well, becoming a colossal orb nestled within the heart of the sprawling vegetation.

The massive eye moved with a life of its own, meticulously scanning the vast expanse of space. It was a vigilant guardian, ever-watchful, monitoring the cosmos for any signs of disturbance or danger. This was the purpose Ikenga had envisioned—a sentinel to observe the universe while he focused on the tasks ahead on the new world below.

Ikenga felt a sense of satisfaction as he observed the plant's growth and the seamless integration of his eye. This creation was not just an extension of his power but also a safeguard, a way to ensure that no threat would go unnoticed. Despite his immortality, he was acutely aware of the precariousness of his existence. His experience with Murmur had been a stark reminder that even beings as powerful as himself were not invincible.

His thoughts drifted to the Children of Chaos—ancient, primal entities with insatiable appetites, capable of consuming entire worlds. He knew better than to underestimate the dangers of the cosmos. The thought of one of these beings stumbling upon this world sent a shiver down his spine, but this time, he was prepared. He had no intention of playing a game of chance with forces far beyond even his considerable power.

As the plant continued to spread its roots deep into the moon, Ikenga turned his attention back to the world below. He still had much to do, and now, with his eye watching the skies, he could focus on his tasks without fear of the unknown.

With that, Ikenga launched himself from the moon's surface, his body becoming a streak of light as he re-entered the planet's atmosphere. The descent was swift, and he soon found himself back in the familiar skies, the landscape of this new world stretching out below him.

As he approached the ground, Ikenga could see his sister where he had left her. Her gaze met his as he landed softly beside her, the earth beneath his feet barely disturbed by his arrival. "Sorry for the wait," he said, a hint of satisfaction in his voice.

Keles looked at the empty hole on his face and then up at the sky, specifically at the moon where Ikenga had last been. "What's your plan? Why did you do that?"

"Child of Chaos," Ikenga replied as he looked at his sister's new creation. Keles, hearing his words, raised an eyebrow before whispering, "Thank you."

Chapter 290:

Ikenga waved his hand dismissively, indicating he didn't mind, while his attention was focused on the skeletal structure built by his sister. Ikenga recognized that the bones came from the dead ogres, but the way they were put together was oddly amazing.

She had somehow transformed the two-legged hulking creatures into a four-legged beast. "You've made a mount," Ikenga said, a hint of surprise in his voice. He looked closer at the way the bones were intricately woven together, forming a creature both sturdy and agile. The skeletal frame resembled a great beast, its limbs designed for swift movement across the rugged terrain of the new world.

Keles nodded, a playful tone in her voice. "We needed something to traverse this land quickly. There's so much to see, so much to do. I thought it would be more efficient—and more fun—if we had a means to cover great distances together."

Ikenga's eyes flickered with admiration as he took in the creature's form. The bones of the ogres had been repurposed into a mount that was both functional and elegant, a testament to Keles' resourcefulness. The creature was large enough to carry them both, its spine reinforced to withstand long journeys. Its skull was shaped into a streamlined head, with empty eye sockets that gave it a haunting yet regal appearance.

"And you thought of this while I was busy with the eye," Ikenga said, shaking his head in amusement. "Always one step ahead."

Keles shrugged, chuckling slightly. "We can't always rely on our powers to move from place to place in this new world. Sometimes, it's good to have a more grounded way to explore."

Ikenga nodded and asked, "It is lacking in souls. The demons have made lunch of it. How do you control it?"

Keles placed her hand on the creature and said, "It only takes a small amount to manually control it."

Ikenga shook his head. "Once we move beyond the eroded land, you will need all the power you can muster to bear the pressure until we find our own way to ignore the suppression."

Keles frowned and asked, "What do we do about that?"

Ikenga smiled as he turned to Keles. "That's the easy part, sister. You've already done the hard part."

Ikenga connected with the new nature of this eroded land. From the feet of the skeletal monster, flesh-like plants surged from the ground, climbing along the bones of the mount with purpose and speed. As they wove themselves around the creature's frame, the bare bones were soon covered in a dense, sinewy layer of muscle-like tissue, giving the mount a more lifelike appearance.

The transformation didn't stop there. The plant-based muscles began to harden, their surfaces growing tougher and more resilient. Soon, they morphed into a form of armor, their texture shifting from organic material to something resembling wooden scales. These scales overlapped like those of a reptile, providing the creature with both protection and flexibility.

Ikenga wasn't finished. This eroded land, despite its current state, was still part of the new world. By channeling the life force of this land into the creature, a small will was born within it. No matter how the creature came to be, it was now a life born from the land of this world, and this newfound will would hopefully help it withstand the pressure beyond the eroded land.

Keles' eyes widened in surprise. Though it was faint, she felt a flicker of a soul within the creature. If given a few more years and a fateful encounter, the creature might be able to form a complete soul of its own.

Ikenga wasn't done, and Keles, knowing him well, understood what he had in mind, so she lent her assistance. The energy from the land coalesced, taking shape behind the mount.

The bones of fallen creatures rose from the ground, twisting and merging to form the frame of a carriage. It was a marvel of both practicality and elegance, with smooth lines and reinforced joints. The same plant-like muscles that had armored the mount now spread over the carriage, creating cushioned seats and protective barriers. The wooden scales extended over the top, forming a sturdy roof to shield them from the elements.

When the carriage was complete, it was more than just a vehicle; it was an extension of the mount itself, connected through living tendrils that pulsed with the same energy as the creature. The carriage would move seamlessly with the mount, sharing its will and strength, becoming an integral part of their journey.

Ikenga turned to Keles, extending his hand with a warm, inviting smile. "Come, sister," he said, his voice filled with quiet pride. "Our journey is just beginning."

Keles took his hand, and with a gentle pull, Ikenga helped her into the carriage. As she settled into the seat, she could feel the pulse of life beneath her—the connection between the mount, the carriage, and the land itself. It was as if they were all part of a greater whole, each element supporting and sustaining the others.

As Ikenga and Keles settled into the carriage, preparing to embark on their journey, the atmosphere inside was calm, filled with quiet anticipation. However, that calm was soon interrupted by a presence outside the carriage. Both Ikenga and Keles instinctively looked through the window, their expressions turning serious.

Standing before them was a fifth-stage Imp demon, a creature of significant power, with its head bowed respectfully.

"I go by the name Vaegur," the imp demon said in a gravelly voice, keeping its gaze lowered. "My lord has sent me to accompany you on your journey."

Ikenga studied Vaegur for a moment, his expression unreadable. "Your appearance," Ikenga began, his tone measured, "will make it difficult for us to navigate this new world. Its people already know the visage of their enemies, and you would only draw unwanted attention."

Vaegur seemed to have anticipated this concern. With a snap of its fingers, the imp's form began to shift and blur, shrinking in size as its demonic features softened. Within moments, the creature had transformed into a goblin, though not just any goblin. This one was clad in an expensive, finely tailored suit, looking every bit the part of a dignified butler.

"What do you think of this, your grace?" Vaegur asked, his voice now smoother, almost refined, as he adjusted his suit with a flourish.

Ikenga's eyes narrowed as he examined the transformation, then he nodded approvingly. "Perfect," he said, his voice carrying a tone of finality. "Take on your new station, then."

With that, Ikenga closed the window of the carriage, the matter seemingly settled. Outside, Vaegur—the newly disguised imp—turned his attention to the mount, which was clearly unsettled by his presence. The creature, still newly imbued with life and will, instinctively recoiled from the demon's energy, its movements jittery and uncertain.

Sensing the creature's fear, Vaegur approached it with surprising gentleness. He placed a hand on the creature's side, murmuring something inaudible. Almost instantly, the creature began to calm, its previously tense muscles relaxing under the imp's touch. Vaegur's mastery over his own aura allowed him to suppress the more unsettling aspects of his presence, bringing the creature to a state of ease.

With the creature now steady, a new seat formed beneath Vaegur, crafted seamlessly by the carriage's living tendrils. A thread of connection extended from the carriage to the mount, which Vaegur took in hand. The thread pulsed slightly with a faint glow, a sign of the connection between the imp and the creature.

Vaegur gave the thread a gentle tug, testing the connection. The mount responded immediately, moving forward with a smooth, controlled gait. Satisfied, Vaegur shook the thread slightly, and the creature picked up speed, carrying the carriage with it across the landscape.

In the distance, the demons could be seen further eroding the land before them. Ikenga had a watchful look on his face, waiting to see if his theory would be proven right.

The carriage soon crossed the boundary of the eroded land. Vaegur, driving the mount, expected a massive pressure, but to his surprise, it didn't happen.

Vaegur glanced at the creature he was driving and then looked back at the carriage before shaking his head. Ikenga had a bright smile on his face, feeling no pressure. The creature was doing well in shielding them.

Looking at his sister, Ikenga suggested, "Try putting your hand out of the window." Keles looked at him before doing as he said, only to frown when she noticed the sudden change in the weight of her hand.

"Our little creation is doing a job well done," Ikenga said with a smile.

Keles placed her hand on the carriage wall as she felt the life force flowing through the carriage and the ground it moved upon. "It indeed is," she replied.

Looking at Ikenga, she asked, "Do you have any idea where we should go from here?"

Ikenga had a thoughtful expression as he responded, "I was hoping that when we agreed to help Zarvok, we would at least land in a primitive world. It would make it much easier for them to welcome us as divine beings."